Ravel and ‘The Raven’:

The Realization of an Inherited Aesthetic in Boléro

[Boléro is] the most insolent monstrosity ever perpetuated in the history of music. From the beginning to the end of its 339 measures it is simply the incredible repetition of the same rhythm... and above it the blatant recurrence of an overwhelmingly vulgar cabaret tune that is little removed, in every essential of character, from the wail of an obstreperous back-alley cat.

Edward Robinson

Analyze ‘The Raven’ and you find that its subject is a commonplace and its execution a rhythmical trick. Its rhythm never lives for a moment, never once moves with an emotional life. The whole thing seems to me insincere and vulgar.

William Butler Yeats

In a July 1931 interview for the London Daily Telegraph, Maurice Ravel candidly addressed the matter of Boléro:

I am particularly desirous that there should be no misunderstanding about this work. It constitutes an experiment in a very special and limited direction, and should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything different from, or anything more than, it actually does achieve... The themes are altogether impersonal - folk-tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind, and (whatever may have been said to the contrary) the orchestral
writing is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity...

It is perhaps because of these peculiarities that no single composer likes the *Boléro* - and from their point of view they are quite right. I have carried out exactly what I intended, and it is for the listeners to take it or leave it.\(^{iii}\)

It has been tempting to accept Ravel at face value. Generations of program notes, articles, and books have included this description as the composer’s definitive statement on *Boléro*. One of the most enigmatic pieces of the twentieth century, *Boléro* has long defied traditional methods of musical analysis due to its melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic repetitiveness. Hence, it has been largely neglected by academic scholarship, even though, to many, it is Ravel’s signature piece.

Does *Boléro* deserve a closer look? Or should we follow Ravel’s instructions and simply ‘take it or leave it’? As an example of the danger involved in isolating a single statement by Ravel without deeper interrogation, it is useful to question his assertion that ‘the themes are altogether impersonal’. During a lesser known interview from 1930 that was published in Argentina, Ravel made an interesting contradictory claim:

Both theme and accompaniment were deliberately given a Spanish character. I have always had a predilection for Spanish things. You see, I was born near the Spanish border, and there is also another reason: my parents met in Madrid.\(^{iv}\)

A poignant secondhand account by Manuel de Falla reinforces Ravel’s personal connection with Spain:\(^{v}\)
But how was I to account for the subtly genuine Spanishness of Ravel, knowing, because he had told me so, that the only link he had with my country was to have been born near the border! The mystery was soon explained: Ravel’s was a Spain he had felt in an idealized way through his mother. She was a lady of exquisite conversation. She spoke fluent Spanish, which I enjoyed so much when she evoked the years of her youth, spent in Madrid, an epoch certainly earlier than mine, but traces of its habits that were familiar to me still remained. Then I understood with what fascination her son must have listened to these memories that were undoubtedly intensified by the additional force all reminiscence gets from the song or dance theme inseparably connected with it.\textsuperscript{vi}

It is also well-established that the inspiration for Boléro came from a factory similar to the one in which Ravel’s father, a Swiss civil engineer, worked. Ravel admitted in an unsigned interview that ‘I love going over factories and seeing vast machinery at work. It is awe-inspiring and great. It was a factory which inspired my Boléro. I would like it always to be played with a vast factory in the background.’\textsuperscript{vii}

Finally, in an interview with Olin Downes, Ravel confided that ‘in my childhood I was much interested in mechanisms... I visited factories often, very often, as a small boy with my father. It was these machines, their clicking and roaring, which, with the Spanish folksongs sung to me at night-time as a berceuse by my mother, formed my first instruction in music!’\textsuperscript{viii}

If these statements hold true, Boléro was not as ‘impersonal’ as Ravel’s commentary in the Daily Telegraph would lead us to believe.

This article proposes a reevaluation of Boléro informed by Maurice Ravel’s most cherished aesthetic influences. Once Ravel received his first musical instruction from the
machines of his father’s factory and the Spanish melodies sung by his mother, he progressed to a different source for inspiration: *The Philosophy of Composition* by Edgar Allan Poe. On at least three different published occasions, Ravel testified that ‘my teacher in composition was Edgar Allan Poe, because of his analysis of his wonderful poem “The Raven”. Poe taught me that true art is a perfect balance between pure intellect and emotion.’

The degree to which an artistic work achieved this ‘perfect balance’ became a French aesthetic criterion for excellence. Ravel himself stressed, in a 1927 interview for *The New York Times*, that ‘we in France were quicker to understand [Poe] than you… [His] aesthetic, indeed, has been extremely close and sympathetic with that of modern French art. Very French is the quality of “The Raven” and much else of his verse, and also his essay on the principles of poetry.’ The appropriation of Poe as a ‘French’ author may seem peculiar, yet it is widely accepted that Poe’s literary output has always been held in higher esteem in France than in the United States. Even T. S. Eliot, who classified Poe’s work as ‘slipshod writing, puerile thinking, unsupported by wide reading or profound scholarship, haphazard experiments in various types of writing, chiefly under pressure of financial need, without perfection in any detail’, felt compelled to admit that ‘in France the influence of his poetry and of his poetic theories has been immense’.

Poe’s reputation among prominent French literary figures has been widely scrutinized, but his equally important influence on twentieth-century French musical aesthetics has only been recently acknowledged as more than an historical curiosity. For instance, Steven Huebner connects Ravel’s interest in ‘[achieving] perfection through both cunning and calculation’ to Poe and *The Philosophy of Composition*. Arguing that ‘Poe’s adoption of a language of mechanistic purposefulness suggests that individual poems or pieces either work properly or do
not’, he further posits that ‘Boléro might be thought of as a tour de force that “works”, much like the “Nevermore” refrain’.xiv Beyond this provocative statement, however, there has not been a systematic attempt to harmonize an analysis of Boléro with Ravel’s aesthetic beliefs.

By first reviewing Charles Baudelaire’s translations of Poe, as well as his initial interpretations of Poe’s work, it is possible to define a ‘Poe Aesthetic’ that is specifically germane to a deeper understanding of Boléro. Afterwards, the dissemination of the ‘Poe Aesthetic’ from Baudelaire to Ravel can be illustrated through their documented reflections on the creative process. To demonstrate the pervasiveness of the nineteenth-century ‘Poe Aesthetic’ in twentieth-century French thought, it is then useful to compare the reactions of Paul Valéry and Maurice Ravel to Richard Wagner’s music from Tristan und Isolde. With this foundation established, an analysis of Boléro informed by the aesthetic ideologies of Ravel and Poe, in addition to a brief overview of the events in Ravel’s life preceding its composition, can shed new light on a piece unfortunately stigmatized by its own composer as ‘orchestral tissue without music’. xv

I. France and the ‘Poe Aesthetic’

Nearly everyone has read that strange piece of prose (The Philosophy of Composition) in which Poe delights in analyzing his Raven, dismantling the poem stanza by stanza in order to explain the mysterious dread and the subtle mechanics of the imagination that seduces our spirits.xvi

Stephane Mallarmé, who spent nearly thirty years to complete the definitive French translation of Poe’s poetry, claimed to have learned English for only one purpose: ‘To read Poe the better’.xvii Likewise, Charles Baudelaire first became acquainted with Poe around the age of
twenty-five and ‘experienced a singular shock... I found poems and short stories that I had thought of, but in a vague, confused, and disorderly way and that Poe had been able to bring together to perfection. It was that that lay behind my enthusiasm and my long years of patience.’

Shortly afterwards, Baudelaire dedicated a substantial portion of his career to translating Poe’s prose stories from 1848, when he published his first Poe translation, ‘Mesmeric Revelation’, until his death in 1867. During that time, Baudelaire also wrote two articles on Poe, endeavoring to combine biographical sketches with general investigations of his works. Whereas the translations continue to serve as an introduction to Poe for the Francophone world, it was Baudelaire’s positive assessment of Poe that arguably had the greatest influence on generations of French readers:

[Poe] has, like conquerors and philosophers, a compelling yearning for unity; he combines the spiritual with the physical. It could be said that he seeks to apply to literature the processes of philosophy, and to philosophy the methods of algebra.

By emphasizing the presence of ‘unity’ and mathematical process in Poe’s writings, Baudelaire, in the words of James Lawler, ‘paid Poe the tribute of reading him as a complex philosophical writer and not in the way our more modern critics have often chosen, as a morbid, dispersed, uneven, shallow talent’.

Moreover, Baudelaire’s appraisals encouraged other readers to critique Poe from a fresh perspective. As a result, while many writers in the United States claimed that The Philosophy of Composition was a cleverly written hoax, French artists like Ravel were willing to accept Poe’s preface that ‘no one point in [“The Raven’s”] composition is referrible (sic.) either to accident or intuition - that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid sequence of a mathematic problem’. Ravel, in fact, dismissed criticism of the Philosophy of Composition’s legitimacy in a July 1931 interview,
stating, ‘the finest treatise on composition, in my opinion, and the one which in any case had the greatest influence upon me was [Poe’s] Philosophy of Composition... I am convinced that Poe indeed wrote his poem “The Raven” in the way that he indicated.’

For Baudelaire, *The Philosophy of Composition* was not merely a forthright narrative of the creative process, it conveyed an aesthetic standard worth emulating. Baudelaire believed that the ‘unity of impression, the totality of effect’ described by Poe endowed a composition ‘a very special superiority… If the first sentence is not written with the idea of preparing this final impression, the work has failed from the start. There must not creep into the entire composition a single word which is not intentional, which does not tend, directly or indirectly, to complete the premeditated design.’ Baudelaire’s commentary was later echoed with remarkable fidelity by Ravel:

I find a long period of conscious gestation, in general, necessary. During this interval, I come gradually to see, and with growing precision, the form and evolution which the subsequent work should have as a whole. I may thus be occupied for years without writing a single note of the work – after which the writing goes relatively rapidly; but there is still much time to be spent in eliminating everything that might be regarded as superfluous, in order to realize as completely as possible the longed-for final clarity.

This conscious act of elimination to achieve structural clarity was but one aspect of Poe’s writing admired by Baudelaire and Ravel. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe also disclosed the process by which he formulated ‘subjects’ for his prose and poetry, writing that ‘two things are invariably required - first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness – some under-current, however indefinite, of
meaning.” In other words, Poe endeavored to make his themes enigmatic, requiring continued engagement and reinterpretation from the reader, even though the composition’s overall design should be free from extraneous material. Poe’s notion of ‘indefinite meaning’ was not solely a literary concept; he also considered it from the standpoint of music:

Give to music any undue decision, imbue it with any very determinate tone, and you deprive it, at once, of its ethereal, its ideal, and, [I] sincerely believe, of its intrinsic and essential character... It then becomes a tangible and easily appreciable idea – a conception of the earth, earthy. It will not, indeed, lose all its power to please, but all which [I] consider the distinctiveness of that power.

Therefore, an explanation of the ‘Poe Aesthetic’ must affiliate Poe’s concepts of ‘compositional precision’ and ‘indefinite meaning’ with what Baudelaire characterized as ‘the physical and the spiritual’ and Ravel delineated as a ‘perfect balance between pure intellect and emotion’. To reconcile these ideas, I propose that the ‘Poe Aesthetic’ is the deliberate implementation of an artistic language to articulate a mastery of compositional structure, with a minimum of superfluous elements, while expressing an ineffable, yet universally comprehensible, theme.

This working definition of the ‘Poe Aesthetic’ allows for a reexamination of Ravel’s most cited statement about Boléro: the July 1931 interview from the London Daily Telegraph. Ravel’s claims that ‘the themes are altogether impersonal’ and ‘the orchestral writing is simple and straightforward throughout’ have encouraged assumptions that Boléro was a work without personal meaning or aesthetic influence. However, the aesthetic influence of the Philosophy of Composition is categorically encapsulated by Ravel’s seemingly dispassionate summary. If
Ravel professed that the themes had personal, tangible significance, their ineffability would be diminished. Hence, the music in *Boléro* would, to borrow Poe’s words, be ‘[deprived]’ of ‘its ethereal… intrinsic and essential character’. Furthermore, the ‘definitive clarity’ that Ravel, Baudelaire, and Poe each treasured is most easily realized through music with transparent orchestration and an audible progression of events. Finally, through the use of thematic repetition, Ravel clearly delineated *Boléro*’s form and structure while providing the ‘suggestiveness’ necessary for dramatic tension. For these reasons, Ravel could reasonably declare that he had ‘carried out exactly what [he] intended’, if indeed one of his objectives was to create a musical work that adhered to Poe’s guidelines in the *Philosophy of Composition*.

**II. Evaluating ‘Tristan’**

I was twenty and believed in the might of human thought... I had faith in a few ideas that had come to me... I guarded these ghosts of ideas as my state secrets. I was ashamed of their strangeness; I feared they might be absurd; I knew they were absurd, and yet not so... I had ceased writing verse and almost given up reading… That was the point I had reached when *Eureka* fell into my hands.xxvii

Like Baudelaire and Ravel,xxviii Paul Valéry fell in love with Poe at an early age. After his first exposure to *Eureka*, Valéry came to believe that Poe was ‘absolutely the only writer who had the intuition to connect literature with the mind’,xxix combining abstract poetry with scientifically-based contemplations of the ‘material and spiritual universe’.xxx Intriguingly, Valéry believed that only two other figures, Leonardo da Vinci and Richard Wagner, had successfully managed to express this aesthetic balance through art.xxxi During a lecture before the French Philosophical Society, Valéry explained why he held Wagner in such high regard:
As you know, Wagner conceived *Tristan* at a time when he was passionately in love; so far nothing unusual, this has been true of a good many works of art, some of them quite mediocre. But Wagner adds:

‘I composed *Tristan* under the stress of a great passion and *after several months of theoretical meditation.*’

Consider, gentlemen, these two conditions, or rather, the one and the other, for they cannot be added together. They form a kind of antinomy...

What, I wondered, could be more rare and enviable than this strange coordination between two modes of vital activity that are generally regarded as independent if not incompatible? On the one hand, a profound agitation of ‘feeling’, an overpowering emotional turmoil, the sensual exaltation of a psychological *idol*; on the other hand, a complex *theoretical meditation*, compounded of technique and metaphysics and combining new solutions to the problems of harmony with ideas about man and the universe, drawn from Schopenhaur but intensely refelt and rethought by a prodigious artist.

I found in these words a high intellectual excitement. I found an almost intoxicating justification of what I had so often thought about the role of *theoretical meditation*, that is to say... all the implements of the scientific mind applied to an order of facts that seem at first sight to exist only in the realm of emotional, intuitive life..xxxii

Ravel was less likely than Valéry to express personal feelings so passionately in a public forum. Observations concerning Ravel’s detached nature permeate musical scholarship, leading Roger Nichols, in his introduction to *Ravel Remembered*, to state that ‘an image survives in some
quarters of Ravel as a cold-hearted, cynical, self-absorbed person who had no life outside his work.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} This image is attributable, at least in part, to Ravel’s dandyism, described by Lloyd Whitesell as ‘a modernist empty sign – obscure, tantalizing, all probing deflected by the burnished surface’.\textsuperscript{xxxiv} Alexis Roland-Manuel, a student of Ravel’s who later became Professor of Aesthetics at the Paris Conservatoire, avowed that ‘the Ravel we knew corresponded in almost every detail with Baudelaire’s definition of the dandy: an elegant coldness, discreet refinement in dress, a horror of triviality... apart from his family and his student friends Ricardo Viñes, Marcel Chadeigne and Charles Levadé, Ravel addressed no one as “tu”.’\textsuperscript{xxxv}

Nevertheless, there were apparently moments when Ravel let his guard down. A personal account by Ricardo Viñes (the Catalan pianist who Roland-Manuel singles out as Ravel’s close friend) tempers the prevailing view of Ravel as ‘cold-hearted’ and presents him in a more nuanced context:

Ravel and I went to the \emph{Concerts Lamoureux} where we heard a singer very much of the Spanish type, Alba Chrétien, in an aria from \emph{Oberon} and in ‘Isolde’s Liebestod’. No need to add that before that we heard the \emph{Tristan} Prelude. By a strange coincidence, at the very moment when, feeling deeply moved, I was thinking to myself there was nothing in the whole of creation as sublime and divine as this superb Prelude, at that moment Ravel touched me on the hand and said: ‘That’s how it always is, every time I hear...’ and in fact he who looks so cold and cynical, Ravel the super-eccentric decadent, was trembling convulsively and crying like a child, really deeply too because every now and then I heard him sobbing.\textsuperscript{xxxvi}
It is not too great of a leap to infer that Ravel and Valéry were responding to similar conceptions of beauty in Wagner’s Tristan Prelude. Ricardo Viñes’s choice of the words ‘sublime’ and ‘divine’ insinuates the requisite combination of the material and spiritual that marks the French appraisal of Poe.

With these testimonials in mind, let us proceed from Maurice Ravel’s assurance that he embarked upon a rather bold ‘experiment, in a very special and limited direction’ shortly after visiting the Bronx home of Edgar Allan Poe in 1928. Utilizing the precepts laid out in Poe’s Philosophy of Composition and brought to fruition in ‘The Raven’, Ravel composed Boléro, a piece that incorporates ‘strange’ or ‘fantastic’ elements as significant motifs, includes thematic intimations of death, relies on repetition to highlight key motives and ideas, and juxtaposes structural clarity with ineffability in musical language. Moreover, Boléro exemplifies the delicate balance between meticulous organization and emotional inspiration that is a hallmark of Poe’s Philosophy of Composition and of Ravel’s mature compositional style.

III. ‘Orchestral Tissue without Music’, or The Emulation of an Archetype?

[Ravel’s] general culture, which was exquisite without being particularly broad, had given him exactly the right materials to suit his aesthetic, providing Baudelaire as his friend and counsellor (sic.) and, through Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe - the Poe of The Poetic Principle and The Philosophy of Composition. How many times have I heard him recite his Baudelairean catechism: ‘To create an archetype, that is genius’ or ‘Inspiration is merely the reward for working every day’.

Initially, Ravel’s Boléro was apparently not a bolero. Instead, we know, through a letter to Robert Casadesus, that Ravel originally referred to his new composition as ‘Fandango’.
This leads to a fundamental question: to what extent is Boléro a replication, a reinterpretation, or simply an approximation, of the Spanish bolero? Ravel’s answer was quite candid:

As far as the Boléro is concerned, if it interests you, I would like to say, to avoid any misunderstanding, that in reality there is no such bolero, that is, I have not given this piece the typical nature of this Spanish dance, intentionally so.\textsuperscript{xxxix}

If Ravel deliberately avoided giving Boléro ‘the typical nature of the Spanish dance’, was he, more accurately, trying to distance his piece from the long tradition of the bolero in Paris? James Parakilas, in his survey of the Spanish styles utilized and refashioned by French composers, persuasively contends that ‘Parisians [knew] the bolero... already by 1800, in Boieldieu’s \textit{Le calife de Bagdad}, they were expected to recognize “Spain” when a character picked up a guitar and strummed a bolero rhythm in a catalog aria of national styles.’\textsuperscript{xl} Ergo, one major difference between Ravel’s Boléro and the bolero familiar to early twentieth-century French audiences is evident at the opening of the piece: the rhythmic ostinato in Boléro is not realized by a strumming instrument ‘long associated with the Spanish aristocrat serenading his lady from below her balcony’,\textsuperscript{xli} but by a pair of snare drums. There are many percussion instruments, such as castanets, which could suggest an intimate connection with Spain. For a country only nine years removed from the horrors of World War I, however, snare drums, especially in tandem, would more likely evoke memories of military combat, destruction, and death.

Thus, Ravel’s decision to use the snare drum as an initiator of the ostinato thoroughly dehumanizes one of the most sensuously connotative aspects of the bolero. And with the arrival of the melody after four bars of introductory material, humanity and machinery should be
instantly thrown into opposition. The normal function of the melodic line in a bolero, as described by Parakilas, is to ‘convey... the sexually charged atmosphere, the liberating experience of the dance, the arch tone of the role playing’\textsuperscript{xlii} A study of how well Boléro’s melodic material succeeds at fulfilling these loaded cultural markers must first canvass the form of the piece.

\textit{Boléro} essentially consists of the mixture of two sixteen bar themes which are repeated, without development or variation, until the ending, when a modulation to E Major leads to the coda. And yet, in a strange twist, the first sixteen bar theme in \textit{Boléro} (hereafter referred to as ‘Theme A’) is strictly diatonic, with no dissonance to disturb the harmonic sovereignty of tonic and dominant in C Major (See Example 1). Initially, the melody, like the rhythmic ostinato, has been stripped bare of ‘exoticisms’ and decontextualized. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a melody less evocative of Spain, due to the complete lack of chromatic embellishment and triplet turns. At this early point in the piece, \textit{Boléro} forces the listener to confront unadorned musical structure, with a melody and a rhythmic ostinato that hint at extramusical meanings without providing the ‘authentic’ version recognized by nineteenth- and twentieth-century European audiences.

Example 1. Maurice Ravel, \textit{Boléro}, bars 5-12.

Despite the placid disposition of the melodic line, a single, crucial conflict is instigated within these opening bars. The rhythmic opposition of the duple-oriented melody against the triplet-oriented snare drum pattern creates tension, hinting at further divisive elements to come. Through her translation and interpretation of the work of Vladimir Jankélévitch, Carolyn Abbate has proposed that ‘Ravel’s capacity to enchant his listeners cannot be defeated by an exposure of
mechanism, but rather is founded in a fundamental way upon it.\textsuperscript{xliii} In this instance, the dual mechanisms of a machine-like ostinato and a relentless harmonic formula insure that listener interest will be maintained even though very little traditional musical development is occurring. Furthermore, when the second flute takes up the snare drum rhythm in bar 21, \textit{Boléro} ceases to be a simple evocation of a dance (See Example 2). There is an added drama as instruments with the capacity for melodic expression mimic the machinery, lending credence to Ronald Woodley’s observation that ‘\textit{Boléro} is at some level concerned with the individual versus the collective, and the gradual but inexorable assimilation of the former into the latter.’\textsuperscript{xliv}


Therefore, the straightforward character of Theme A offers a jumble of ambiguities and contradictions. Through the use of compositional devices which negate more than one-hundred years of established Spanish musical tropes and resist the preconceptions of a conditioned European audience, Ravel sustains, through the first forty bars, a thematic ineffability essential to the ‘Poe Aesthetic’. He also manages to imply an ‘under-current of meaning’ which becomes more foreboding as the piece progresses.

The second sixteen bar theme (‘Theme B’) is immediately distinguished from its predecessor by the presence of a dissonant tone (a B-flat), as set forth in Example 3. This note, the first accidental in the piece, colors the C Major harmony into a seventh chord and undercuts the sense of diatonic stability created by Theme A. Stephen Baur has observed that ‘Ravel emphasizes points of intersection between diatonic and nondiatonic pitch fields.’\textsuperscript{xlv} Accordingly, with the juxtaposition of a diatonic sixteen bar theme against another sixteen bar theme with non-diatonic pitch collections, tension in \textit{Boléro} is pushed even farther.

As if to imply that this B-flat is not a mistake, the melody circles around it twice more before arriving at a rather striking exclamation on the second beat of bar 42. This is the first accent in the entire work, and it serves as a catalyst for greater tension as the melody rises to the D-flat. The effect of this unprepared arrival on D-flat at the end of bar 44, and its subsequent, accented repetition against a C Major harmonic background would be startling enough if it were produced by any instrument. Until now, though, it has gone unremarked that these notes are performed in an exceptionally high, strained bassoon range, very similar to the range of the opening bassoon melody in *The Rite of Spring* that startled audiences and inspired whistling at its premiere only fifteen years previously.\textsuperscript{xlvi}


Ravel was assuredly sensitive to this timbral effect, and, by making the bassoon the first instrument to execute Theme B, he insures that it will stand in direct contrast to the amenable, diatonic first theme performed by the flute and clarinet in comfortable, sonorous ranges. Nonetheless, the bassoon does not carry the conspicuous nineteenth-century baggage of other woodwind instruments, such as the oboe or the English horn. If Ravel had chosen either of those two instruments to initiate Theme B, the associations with exoticism would be obvious, possibly even cliché, to a twentieth-century European audience. The rough sound of the bassoon, combined with the chromatic inflections found in Theme B, resultantly demands a personal, engaged interpretation from the listener.

Returning to Example 3 for a moment, the D-flats in bars 43-46 depict the height, both figuratively and aurally, to which the melody aspires. This D-flat, with its insistent repetition and
accentuated character, interrupts the relative serenity that the overtly diatonic theme previously engendered. Rhythmically, these notes are also notable for the way in which they mimic the triplet ostinato pattern. This is the first indication of the melody adopting a triplet rhythmic pattern dictated by the machine. Once again, this simulates a weakening of the individual, a tragic and pivotal point in the piece. From there, the melody begins a breathtaking descent of over two octaves, as the next example illustrates:

Example 5. *Boléro*, bars 49-56.

A composer as meticulous as Ravel could not have failed to realize the effect he was creating with these final four bars of the *Boléro* melody. For the first time in the entire melody, the pitches E and D are flattened (see bars 54-56); this moment is underscored by a syncopated rhythmic pattern in which both notes, the E-flat and the D-flat, are stretched for over two beats across bar lines. Thus, at the completion of the two octave descent, an audible four-note descending tetrachord is demarcated by the sustained pitches F, E-flat, D-flat, and C. The descending tetrachord has traditionally been associated with feelings of lament, deep sorrow, or even death, as shown in the following example from John Dowland:


Therefore, Ravel is infusing music supposedly free of extra-musical connotations with a known, widely used, symbol that dates at least back to the late Renaissance. With each repetition of the descending tetrachord in *Boléro*, a greater sense of anxiety and discomfort is created, especially since there is a lack of musical development. Ravel quite possibly came to this effect by way of Poe, who describes in his *Philosophy of Composition* the search for ‘some pivot upon which the whole structure might turn’.\textsuperscript{xlvii}
In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects... I did not fail to perceive immediately that no one had been so universally employed as that of the refrain. The universality of its employment sufficed to assure me of its intrinsic value...

That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt: and these considerations inevitably led me to the long o as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with r as the most producible consonant.

The sound of the refrain being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem. In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word ‘Nevermore’.xlviii

Poe’s resolution to use the word ‘Nevermore’ as a refrain is remarkable for his primary concern with the word’s musical qualities of ‘sonority’ and ‘protracted emphasis’. Ravel’s similar decision to conclude Theme B with the descending tetrachord figure outlined in Example 5 has the value of highlighting a series of sonorities which are easily recognizable, regardless of context. Additionally, Ravel elects to imbue the descending tetrachord with ‘protracted emphasis’ by surrounding the accented notes of F, E-flat, D-flat, and C with rhythmically-ephemeral pitches that at once ornament and augment the compelling series of descending sonorities. If at any point the Boléro melody takes on the characteristics of the Spanish dance, it is with these last five bars of Theme B. The numerous implications of death as a thematic device - its tragic character when associated with youth and/or beauty, its unavoidability, its metaphoric relationship with sex - are front and center, much like they are with each repetition of the word ‘nevermore’ in ‘The Raven’.
Poe’s influence can be felt in other aspects of Boléro. In the Philosophy of Composition, Poe describes a moment in the middle of ‘The Raven’ where he ‘availed [himself] of the force of contrast, with a view of deepening the ultimate impression... I immediately drop the fantastic for a tone of the most profound seriousness.’xlix According to Poe, this moment was necessary for two reasons. First, from a dramatic standpoint, it was imperative to adjust the protagonist’s opinion of the raven from wonderment to horror. Secondly, Poe wanted to ‘(bring) the reader’s mind... into a proper frame for the denouement’.1 This idea must have resonated with Ravel, for a similar moment can be found slightly past midway through Boléro when the trombone takes center stage. During its account of the Boléro melody, the trombone executes playful slides and flourishes. After a mere eighteen bars, however, the trombone gives way to a grotesque choir of woodwinds, restating the B section of the melody in a completely different manner, with great austerity and urgency in a forte dynamic. It should be noted that the trombone is the last soloist to carry a melody in Boléro. After its solo is complete, there is no opportunity for expressive license. Instead, there is an unflagging drive towards the conclusion of the piece as each instrument is gradually assimilated into the collective whole. Through such a stark musical transition, Ravel readjusts the listener’s expectations for a tragic ending.

Choreographers have generally interpreted Boléro’s ending in a highly-dramatic fashion, perhaps most famously in the 1984 Olympic ice dancing performance by Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean.11 The first performance of Boléro was even accompanied by a ballet in which, at the moment of the key shift to E major, knives were drawn and there was a violent tavern brawl. An examination of the music before the modulation to E Major reveals that Theme B is interrupted during its two octave descent just before arriving on F. Consequently, the descending tetrachord is, for the first time, delayed, and the familiar pattern of funereal refrains is
interrupted, creating suspense as hope is offered for a different concluding cadence in the new key.\textsuperscript{iii} Six bars from the end, however, the melody disappears entirely, giving way to a raucous celebration of rhythmic propulsion and harmonic monotony in C Major, as illustrated by the first four bars of Example 7.

Example 7. \textit{Boléro}, orchestral reduction of strings and snare drum, last six bars.

For the ending of ‘The Raven’, Poe’s \textit{modus operandi} was to ‘[add] the two concluding stanzas of the poem’ only when ‘their suggestiveness [was] made to pervade all the narrative which [had] preceded them.’\textsuperscript{iii} Similarly, Ravel vividly recapitulates the victory of machinery over humanity, as well as the attendant struggle between life and death, in the final six bars of \textit{Boléro}. Not only is the primacy of the rhythmic ostinato reinforced over melodic expression, but the descending tetrachord returns in the final notes of the largest, most audibly prominent instrumental group in the orchestra (Violins 1), from F to C.

\textbf{IV. ‘The Most Poetical Topic in the World’}

Because I feel that, in the Heavens above,

The angels, whispering to one another,

Can find, among their burning terms of love,

None so devotional as that of ‘Mother’...\textsuperscript{liv}

Returning to \textit{The Philosophy of Composition} for a final time, Poe revealed the following concerning the topic and locale for ‘The Raven’:
Now, never losing sight of the object *supremeness*, or perfection, at all points, I asked myself – ‘Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?’ Death – was the obvious reply. ‘And when’, I said, ‘is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?’ From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious – ‘When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.’

I had now to combine the two ideas, of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word ‘Nevermore’...

I determined, then, to place the lover in his chamber - in a chamber rendered sacred to him by memories of her who had frequented it.^lv

Is it any wonder, then, that Ravel chose, as his locale for *Boléro*, those ‘machines, their clicking and roaring, which, with the Spanish folksongs sung to (him) at night-time as a berceuse by (his) mother formed (his) first instruction in music’? It is commonly suspected that Ravel’s relationship with his parents, particularly his mother, was the closest of his entire life. After experiencing the death and destruction of World War II firsthand as a truck driver for the Thirteenth Artillery Regiment, Ravel was hit with ‘the deepest grief of his entire life’^lvvi when his mother passed away on January 5, 1917. In a revealing letter from December 27, 1919, Ravel wrote ‘I’m thinking that it will soon be three years since she has departed, and my despair increases daily. I’m thinking about it even more, since I have resumed work, that I no longer have this dear silent presence enveloping me with her infinite tenderness, which was, I see it now more than ever, my only reason for living.’^lvii
A provocative similarity between Ravel and Poe thus concerns the persistent, deep sense of loss each felt after their mothers’ deaths. Edward Davidson observes that ‘one of the major themes in Poe’s whole corpus of writing is his longing for the mother, for a kind of female nightshape, who is never there and will never come’. Ravel’s continued interest in Poe through the 1920’s may be partially explained by his own personal loss. Certainly, the memories conjured by Spanish folksongs similar to the melody in Boléro were treasured by Ravel, perhaps even personal enough for him to want to obscure their original meaning.

Now that the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic characteristics of Boléro have been discussed, and an hermeneutic reading has been advanced, a final mystery remains concerning the form. Without a musical precedent, how did Ravel determine the exact point in which the repetitions of the two themes in Boléro should be terminated to avoid a numbing sense of redundancy? Arbie Orenstein points out that Ravel was ‘convinced that composers should learn their craft like painters – by imitating good models’. This viewpoint was apparently held by Valéry as well, for he commented that ‘nothing is more “original”, nothing more “oneself” than to feed on others. But one has to digest them. A lion is made of assimilated sheep.’ The most complete recollection comes from Roland-Manuel:

If it is true that all art involves imitation, then no artist believed the dictum more than Ravel did. Both to Maurice Delage and to myself he expounded the principle that a composer had only to place himself in front of a masterpiece like a copyist in the Louvre in front of a Titian or, to be less severe, a landscape painter in front of a clump of trees. He never tired of saying that one must not be afraid of continual imitation: ‘If you have nothing to say, you cannot do better, while waiting for the ultimate silence, than repeat
what has been well said. If you do have something to say, that something will never be more clearly seen than in your unwitting infidelity to the model.\textsuperscript{10xi}

To this end, Ravel frequently employed Mozart as a model, testifying that ‘for me it is Mozart. Mozart is perfection.’\textsuperscript{11xii} On one occasion, Ravel confided to the French pianist Margeurite Long that he ‘composed the slow movement of [his] piano concerto “two measures at a time”, with the assistance of Mozart’s Clarinet Quintet’.\textsuperscript{12xiii} For a piece as distinctively novel as Boléro, though, there were certainly not any Classical models of form from which to choose.

Even so, thanks to a surprising similarity between ‘The Raven’ and Boléro, a possible archetype does exist. Not counting the four bar introduction and the coda, there are exactly eighteen repetitions of the two melodies in Boléro. Equivalently, ‘The Raven’ contains eighteen stanzas. If the previous relationships introduced in this article are valid, and the ideas offered by Poe in the Philosophy of Composition were a guiding force behind the composition of Boléro, it follows that Ravel likely applied Poe’s structural foundation from ‘The Raven’ as well.

Boléro may never receive the same level of adoration within the academic community that it has with the general public. Nevertheless, it does stand as the embodiment of the ‘Poe Aesthetic’ embraced by Ravel, Valéry, Baudelaire and countless other French intellectuals: the expression of ethereal thematic material through a scrupulous attention to detail during the compositional process. Ravel created in Boléro an extraordinarily original work that is at once intimate and universal, simultaneously disclosing Ravel’s most cherished musical influences while remaining elusive on precise correlations to real-life events. Judged on that basis alone, Boléro may legitimately be Ravel’s most emblematic composition, and, despite the objections of its composer, his most personal work.
Preliminary versions of this article were read at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Society (Chicago, December 2007) and the Fifth Biennial International Conference on Music Since 1900 (York, July 2007).


iv Ravel, ‘Maurice Ravel y su Boléro’, interview with José André, La Nacion, 15 March 1930: A Ravel Reader, p. 468.

v Manuel de Falla, a celebrated Spanish composer who lived in Paris from 1907 to 1914, was introduced to Ravel by Ricardo Viñes.


Huebner, p. 24.

Ibid., p. 24.


Ravel, ‘Contemporary Music’, *The Rice Institute Pamphlet* 15 (April 1928): reprint *A Ravel Reader*, p. 46. Ravel originally gave this lecture in French on 7 April 1928 at the Rice Institute in Houston, yet it has been published in English by several sources. Orenstein discloses that ‘it is clear that [Ravel] had an English translation with him. The archives of the Cleveland Museum of Art... contain a condensed version of his speech (in English), which was read on several occasions during the North American tour.’ See *A Ravel Reader*, p. 49. Also see Marguerite Long, ‘Contemporary Music: A Lecture by Ravel’, in *At the Piano with Ravel*, ed. Pierre Laumonier and trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London 1973) pp. 72-73.


In this quote, and subsequent quotes, the emphasized words in italics are by Poe. Edgar Allan Poe, review of *National Melodies of America, Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine and American Monthly Review* 5 (December 1839) p. 332. This review has also been published under the title of ‘On Suggestiveness and Precision in Poetry and Music’. See, for instance, *Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Robert L. Hough (Lincoln 1965) p. 9.


Evidence exists of Ravel’s interest in Poe at the age of seventeen: ‘In August 1892, Maurice showed Ricardo Viñes two very dark and somber drawings that he had made, based on Poe’s
short stories “A Descent into the Maelstrom” and “MS. Found in a Bottle’.’ See Orenstein, introduction to A Ravel Reader, p. 22.


xxx Valéry’s full quote is ‘[Poe] has built an abstract poem, one of the rare modern examples of a total explanation of the material and spiritual universe, a cosmogony.’ See Valéry, ‘On Poe’s Eureka’, pp. 169-70.


xxiii Roger Nichols, introduction to Ravel Remembered, p. ix.


Roland-Manuel, p. 143.

Ravel wrote ‘the only thing I’m sure of is that at the end of November I will be in Spain, and simultaneously at the Opéra, where Ida Rubinstein will present *La Valse* and “Fandango”, a new work which perhaps will be finished.’ See Maurice Ravel, letter to Robert Casadesus, 10 August 1928, in *A Ravel Reader*, p. 296.

Ravel, ‘Maurice Ravel y su Boléro’: *A Ravel Reader*, pp. 467-68.


Ibid., p. 141.

Parakilas defines this as the ‘self-conscious exoticism of the Parisian bolero’. Ibid., p. 150.


Ibid., pp. 164, 165.

Ibid., p. 166.
A public space outside the National Ice Center in Nottingham, England, where Torvill and Dean both trained, has been named ‘Bolero Square’.

Many of the Romantic works Ravel adored, especially those by Liszt, use the key of E Major to depict salvation and/or heaven.


Ibid., pp. 165, 166.

Orenstein, introduction to A Ravel Reader, p. 7.

Ibid., pp. 1-2.


Roland-Manuel, p. 143.


See footnote six by Orenstein, A Ravel Reader, p. 495.