



DR NICHOLAS VINES

COMPOSER, MUSICOLOGIST, EDUCATOR

WEBSITE [WWW.NICHOLASVINES.COM](http://WWW.NICHOLASVINES.COM)

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## *Introduction et Allegro* by Maurice Ravel

### A Structural Analysis

Written in 1905 and scored for “harp with accompaniment from string quartet, flute and clarinet”, *Introduction et Allegro* is essentially a chamber concertino (small concerto) for harp. The title implies two movements, but it is really one, modelled after the first movement of a conventional (late 18<sup>th</sup> century) concerto for solo instrument and orchestra.

#### *Traditional Aspects*

Just like its model, this piece is in sonata form. It has a slow introduction (admittedly more a feature of Haydn’s symphonies); an exposition where the main thematic material is laid out; a development where the composer explores this material in various ways; a cadenza which focuses on the virtuosity of the solo harpist; a recapitulation reiterating the themes much as they were first presented; and a coda, the extended rhetorical flourish which closes the work.

In the exposition, Ravel ignores developments of sonata form over the previous century and returns to a simpler, Classical version: two subject areas, each of which presents one theme (as opposed to several). The ‘keys’ of the subject areas are also traditional, the first theme being in the tonic and the second in its relative minor (only the dominant would be a more obvious choice). In the recapitulation, both themes are effectively reinstated in the tonic – see the table below for more nuance – which again is the traditional standard.

#### *Innovative Aspects*

Ravel’s most obvious innovation here is the reduction of the solo concerto to chamber-music size. Of course, this may have been for practical reasons – the relative softness of the solo instrument, the increased likelihood of performance – but either way, it does create a level of intimacy not often found in virtuosic concerti, traditional or otherwise.

Another striking advance is the way pitch is organised. While Ravel’s key system is ostensibly similar to that of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a closer look and listen reveals significant differences. The musical language in vogue in France around 1905 was Impressionism. While maintaining the basic functions of common practice tonality – tonic/dominant relationships – it had made a sharp move away from the bimodal model of major and minor established in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Major (Ionian) and minor (Aeolian) became just two possible choices among many, including the other five church modes (Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Locrian), the whole-tone scale (made up only of tones), the octatonic scale (a consistent alternation between semitone and tone), the acoustic mode (a collapsing of

the natural harmonic series), the Phrygian dominant scale (constructed by treating the dominant in an harmonic minor as the tonic) and the ubiquitous 'global' pentatonic, as well as the chromatic voice-leadings of High Romanticism.

So the only certainty from labelling *Introduction & Allegro* 'in Gb' is that the tonal centre is Gb; without further scrutiny, there is no way of knowing what mode is articulated around it. What's more, the trend towards added-note chords, which, having gained momentum through Richard Wagner and his followers, found full expression in Impressionism, meant harmonic identity was even more complex. Ravel, for one, plays with the inherent ambiguity of these extended chords. The opening bar of this work, for instance, seems to begin in Gb 'major', but when the lower register is filled in under similar material in bar 100, it is reinterpreted as eb 'minor'. Conversely, the first major harp solo at bar 26, ostensibly in eb, is revealed in bar 63 onwards to be in Gb, with the addition of harmonic components underneath.

Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, Ravel maintains the framework of the traditional key system, with the circle of fifths and tonic/dominant relationships still conceptually and aurally central. This allows *Introduction & Allegro* to enunciate conventional sonata form successfully, but without sounding anything like historical Classicism. Taking into account this paradigmatic friction, the detailed structural outline below loosely divides modes into 'major' – characterised by a major third above the tonic – and 'minor' – characterised by a minor third above the tonic. Particular modal features are identified in 'Specific Notes'.

The other significant difference from the 18<sup>th</sup> century model is the nature of Ravel's themes. In the traditional context, musical ideas are clearly distinct, not just in terms of key (and sometimes mode), but also intervals, rhythm, dynamics and articulation. All the thematic material of *Introduction & Allegro*, in contrast, derives from one 'ur-motif': a four-note (tetrachordal), descending scalar line. The opening material in the first bar – labelled '3' in the outline – is an ornamented chromatic version (look at the line created by the lowest notes). Similarly, the material of bars 3 and 4 ('1') and its variants clearly show a descending diatonic tetrachord, followed by its inversion, an ascending diatonic tetrachord, and rounded off with an upward leap of a perfect 4<sup>th</sup>, outlining yet another tetrachord. The material marked '2', used from b.78 onwards, is also two diatonic tetrachords arranged in a V shape and finished with a perfect 4<sup>th</sup> leap (albeit downwards here). Even the incidental theme ('4') starting in bar 13 is characterised by perfect 4ths skips.

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Ravel is known as much as a Neo-Classical as an Impressionist. As the Neo-Classical movement only took off in the mid-teens, the retro aspects of this work suggest the composer's interests were well ahead of the curve. Certainly it is intriguing to observe how he balances the bewildering possibilities of contemporaneous musical language with the clarity of Classical form.

Below is a table outlining in detail the structure of *Introduction & Allegro*, with reference to the above discussion.

Section	Bars	Thematic Material (number & variant)	Tonal Centre & General Mode (Major, minor)	Function	Specific Notes	
INTRODUCTION	bb.1-3	3a	Gb [eb]	I	parallelism; ambiguous without lower parts	parallelism, structural sequence
	bb.3-6	1a	eb	relative minor	Aeolian/natural minor	
	bb.7-9	3a	E [c#]	subtonic of I	parallelism; ambiguous without lower parts	
	bb.9-12	1a	c#	subtonic of relative minor	Aeolian/natural minor	
	bb.13-18 [Fig.1 onwards]	4a	Eb	tonic major of relative minor	acoustic mode	circle of 5ths
	bb.19-25	4a	Db-Ab-Db-Ab-Db	V-V of V- V- V of V- V	dominant 7ths	
EXPOSITION 1 <sup>st</sup> Subject Area	bb.26-43 [Fig.2 onwards]	1b	Gb, eb [Gb]	I	ambiguous without lower parts	traditional tonal centre for 1 <sup>st</sup> Subject Area in Expo.
	bb.44-54	1c	Db + transition	V		
	bb.55-62	1c	(Bb), Ab, Db	V of V, V	parallelism; circle of 5ths	
	bb.63-77	1d	Gb + transition	I		
2 <sup>nd</sup> Subject Area	bb.78-99 [Fig.6 onwards]	2a	(Bb)-eb(-Bb)	(V of) of relative minor	Phrygian dominant, chromatic inflections	traditional option for tonal centre of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Subject Area in Expo.
DEVELOPMENT	bb.100-118	conflation of 1e & 3a	eb	relative minor	chromatic/whole-tone inflections	
	bb.119-136	2a	eb	relative minor + transition		
	bb.137-146	2b	D/d	relative minor substitute	octatonic	
	bb.147-160 [Fig.12 onwards]	2a	transition			
	bb.161-190	conflation of 1f + 2a	Bb pedal	V of relative minor		

	bb.191-199	conflation of 3b/1g + 2a	transition		octatonic & chromaticism	3 <sup>rd</sup> relations
	bb.200-208	3b/1g				
CADENZA	bb.209-223	sequence of 1a, 3a, 4b	Gb, eb, Db et al.			
RECAPITULATION 1 <sup>st</sup> Subject Area	bb.224-239 [Fig.18 onwards]	1g	Gb	I		traditional tonal centre for 1 <sup>st</sup> Subject Area in Recap.
	bb.240-256	1b	Db + transition	V		
	bb.257-264 [Fig.21 onwards]	conflation of 1 & 3	Bb, Ab, Gb		parallelism, Phrygian cadence into F	
2 <sup>nd</sup> Subject Area	bb.266-285	2d	F	I substitute	Phrygian dominant	traditional option for tonal centre of 2 <sup>nd</sup> Subject Area in Recap.
	bb.286-291	2d	Db	V	octatonic	
CODA	bb.292-310 [Fig.24 onwards]	2e	Ab(-Db-transition)	V of V(-V)	octatonic	3 <sup>rd</sup> relations; inversion of 2
	bb.311-322 [Fig.26 onwards]	2e	Ab(-Db-Bb-Eb-Ab)	V of V(-V-V of V of V of V-V of V of V-V of V)		circle of 5ths; inversion of 2
	bb.323-330	2f	Db	V	octatonic	fragmentation
	bb.331-end	1h	Gb	I	hexachord (cb missing)	