
Technique and Structure in the First Movement of Maurice Ravel's *Sonatine* for Piano: Comparative Analytic Approaches

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The rigorously fashioned structure and clarity of line in Ravel's 1905 *Sonatine* are mindful of classical style, and indeed are hallmarks of the composer's overall compositional technique. Yet much of Ravel's compositional language is formulated by investing new meaning into traditional compositional materials. There is a freshness imparted, formulated by techniques typically associated with impressionism: namely modality, extended tertian harmony, quartal and quintal harmony, planing, ostinatos, and added tones among others. The genius of the *Sonatine* lies largely in the fusion of these impressionistic elements with more traditional materials. The result is a masterwork of the pianistic repertoire.

As the success of the *Sonatine* is due in part to masterful combination of these more- and less-traditional elements, my analysis attempts to flesh out the fundamental structures while comparing elements of traditional roman numeral analysis and macro-analytical techniques. It combines them with a theoretical discussion of Ravel's impressionist adornment.

The underlying structure of Ravel's *Sonatine* is remarkably traditional, perhaps even simple, and the impressionist components are, more or less, ornamentations of this traditional architecture. The title *Sonatine* is somewhat misleading regarding the form, as the recapitulation is preceded by a brief development of materials derived from the first and second themes. However, the movement is fairly brief and the musical ideas unfold in relative miniature. Moreover, with exception of the coda and the modifications made in accommodation of the formal key scheme, theoretical observations in the exposition apply wholesale to their corresponding contexts in the recapitulation—as the material is nearly identical in every other way.

The structure and harmony of the first theme are not complex. The theme is laid out over a clear i–v–iv–VI–VII–v–i progression (f#–c#–b–D–E–c#–f#) with no chromatic alterations. Much of the appeal of the theme is the melodic invention, transparent texture, undulating accompaniment

and other impressionistic elements that are present. A dearth of leading tone movement colors the F-sharp minor theme with Aeolian modality. The principal melody uses polyphonic technique duplicated in the outer voices, which results in strict parallelism, and the left hand often employs parallel motion by fifths on strong beats as well. Ravel breaks from Aeolian modality in m. 6 with prolonged planing of extended-tertian sonorities, moving dominant ninth/eleventh chords respectively from F-sharp, E, B, to D in parallel motion.

I present both roman numeral and macro analyses not only to illuminate more fully the underlying harmonic structure but also to provide a comparative reference for these two analytical systems, which may help to illustrate their respective strengths and most appropriate didactic applications.

doux et expressif

Modéré

Piano

F# minor:	i	v	iv	VI	VII
	f#	c#	b	D	E

v	i
c#	f#

Example 1. Ravel, *Sonatine, I*, mm. 1–11.

I B.C.

F^{#11}

VII

IV

VI

I B.C.

E¹¹

B¹¹

D¹¹

F^{#11}

VII

IV

VI

VII

IV

VI

E¹¹

B¹¹

D¹¹

E¹¹

B¹¹

D¹¹

E¹³ (A major: V¹³)

Example 1, continued.

Repetition is also a critical component of the construction of the *Sonatine*. Measures 4 and 5 repeat the material in mm. 1 and 2, and mm. 8 and 9 are identical to mm. 6 and 7 in every way except for surface-level variation. Functional expectation is gradually eroded, as planing and repetition form the basis of harmonic movement. The general lack of circle progressions throughout often replaces functional expectation and is, moreover, a hallmark of Ravel's Impressionist harmonic language. But Ravel judiciously punctuates nontraditional harmonic movement with circle progressions—resulting in a traditional harmonic syntax, but one infused with exoticism.

Measure 12 is also a repetition of m. 11, these two measures concluding the aforementioned extended-tertian planing by comparatively functional resolution of the final V^{13} (E^{13})—though Ravel avoids a straightforward tonic—to the tonal center of A major in m. 13 (theme two).

E^{13} (A major: V^{13})
 (Theme Two)

Example 2. Ravel, *Sonatine*, I, mm. 11–14.

The melody of theme two is accompanied by hollow parallel fifths, and there is interplay between E-natural and E-sharp; thus, the tonality oscillates ambiguously between A major and F-sharp Aeolian minor. As I consider the E natural to be the more structural of the two pitches, I view their function as dominant to A major tonality. This labeling is in keeping with typical key relationships in traditional sonata form. Nevertheless, Ravel cadences the material with conclusive iv–v–i (b–c#–f#) in F-sharp minor in mm. 19 and 20, reaffirming F-sharp Aeolian modality. Continued use of modal material is seen in the closing theme as well. For example, the G-naturals in mm. 23 through 26 impart Mixolydian coloring. Likewise, mm. 29 and 34 amount to ornamented prolongation of the more fundamental, Phrygian-half cadential formula. These measures constitute a dominant, F-sharp anticipation of the B minor tonality in m. 34; the E-naturals and G-naturals in the bass and soprano lines expand outward to

meet it. The resolution of the G-naturals in the bass is delayed, so there is an ornamental misalignment of the resolution, but both pitches resolve to F sharp (example 3). After exposing this more fundamental structure, clausula-like expansion of the E-naturals and G-naturals is clearly reminiscent of Renaissance and baroque Phrygian cadential formulas. Moreover, the G-naturals in the following measures (mm. 32 and 33, left-hand) emphasize and embellish the continuation of this Phrygian cadential sound—as the E- and G-naturals prolong the context, which had been established in the preceding measures. The proof is the B minor (Aeolian), circle progression resolution in m. 34.

29 30 31

B minor: iv^6 V iv^6 V Phrygian Half Cadence →
 e F# e F#

32 33 34

Dominant Prolongation i b

Example 3. Ravel, *Sonatine*, I, mm. 29–34.

The B Aeolian modality moves gradually toward D tonic tonality, eventually cadencing on V^{13} (A^{13}) in D major in mm. 41 and 42. However, resolution to the D tonic is arrested in mm. 43–47 by quartal sonorities unfolded over an E pedal. Using material derived from theme two, these measures begin planing by fourths. The material in the treble of mm. 44 and 45 is planed up a fourth, formulating the material in the treble of mm. 46 and 47, and the subsequent planing up a fourth in mm. 48 and 49 con-

summates the delayed D tonality, which had been interrupted by the previous five measures! Planing by fourths continues through mm. 49, 50 and 51, though the rhythmic pace quickens to a change per measure. The E pedal tone in the bass underlines this entire process and continues just two measures short of the recapitulation.

Poco rit. - - a Tempo

D major: V¹³
A¹³ E Pedal →

cre - - scen - - do e acce -

Up a fourth Up a fourth
D Resolution

- le - ran - do **Animé**

Up a fourth Up a fourth Up a fourth Up a fourth

Example 4. Ravel, *Sonatine*, I, mm. 41–52.

As mentioned earlier, analytical observations made in the exposition apply to their corresponding contexts in the recapitulation. Excep-

tions are the coda and the second theme, which is now in F-sharp Mixolydian in accommodation of sonata principle. The coda concludes the piece in F-sharp Mixolydian and includes colorful references to the now chromatic A natural, which had featured prominently in the first and second themes.

Ravel's *Sonatine* is representative of his powerful and unique creative process. It possesses the elusive and personal quality of his creative genius—a quality that defies description and analysis. I should mention that, in my opinion, a calculated perfectionism pervades the work. There is a subsurface austerity in technique, which contrasts with the beauty of Ravel's ideas and with the warmth of his impressionist style. I suspect this is a by-product of Ravel's precisionist technique, and I suspect it is unintentional. Nevertheless, the *Sonatine* is stunning. The invention is remarkable and the music is highly expressive and ultimately very moving.

