Piano Trio in A minor: I. Modere

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Ravel's *Piano Trio in A minor* (1914) is widely considered to be one of his most important pieces and a masterwork of chamber music repertoire. The piece is both innovative in its language and highly refined in its craftsmanship, while still being incredibly beautiful from a purely aesthetic perspective. Written at the end of Ravel's most productive period, the years just before World War I, the piece blends Basque influence, impressionist language, and classical formal structures. Each of the four movements uses a unique combination of ideas in a highly refined and creative way, however the first movement is particularly worthy of study, as its use of all the aforementioned principles is arguably the most awe-inspiring.

Ravel had been planning to compose the piece as early as 1908, however it was not until 1914, just before the French became involved in World War I, that he began serious work on it (Myers 1960, 181). In the Winter of 1913 he left Paris seeking peace and solitude in St. Jean-de-Luz. The earliest record that he had begun the work is a letter dated March 21, 1914 where he wrote, "I am working at the Trio in spite of the cold and stormy weather, rain and hail," and by the end of that month the first movement was finished (Myers 1960, 182). The rest of the movements were written after a pause, during which time he worked on the piano concerto *Zaspiak-Bat*, which is also influenced by Basque culture. Letters from that summer show his struggle to write the work. The outbreak of World War I in early August, he

motivated him to finish the piece so that he could volunteer for military service; he completed the piece by the end of that month (Myers 1960, 182).

Much like *Zaspiak-Bat*, parts of which were written concurrently, the Trio draws heavily on Basque culture including poetic rhythms, melodic contour, use of the Dorian mode. Ravel came from a Basque background, and like several of his contemporaries, had deep respect for his local heritage; he was not perturbed about using material from this culture (Steen 2003, 692). On the contrary, Ravel describes the first theme as "Basque in Color" (Myers 1960, 183).

The first theme is much more than just Basque in color, it is very closely related to the Basque *zortziko*, a dance rhythm that is also used to accompany sung improvised poetry (Heinzelmann 2011, 160). Poetry that uses *zortziko* as the basis for its meter has eight lines that either alternate between ten and eight syllables (zortziko handia), or seven and six syllables (zortziko txkia) (Heinzelmann 2011, 160). Ravel draws on the latter in creating the first theme, using seven notes in place of seven syllables and using eight measures of the repeated theme to correspond with the eight lines in the poetic structure (Heinzelmann 2011, 160). Rather than alternating the between six note and seven note measures like the poetic form does, which would create a weak melodic line, Ravel stresses the weaker beat on all eight of the measures (Heinzelmann 2011, 160). In doing this, Ravel also changes the typical zortziko meter from 5/8 to 8/8.

Aside from just the number of notes per bar, the first theme also have other Basque features. Its melodic contour is similar to Basque folk tunes as it moves

mostly in seconds and thirds, and rarely leaps more than a fifth (Heinzelmann 2011, 160). Its tempo is also consistent with the culture's singing tradition (Heinzelmann 2011, 161). Finally, Basque melodies are often modal, and particularly use of the Dorian mode; especially in the music of the Lapurdi province near where Ravel was in St. Jean-de-Luz (Heinzelmann 2011, 161).

The use of the Dorian mode is not only derived from his Basque influence, but from his impressionist language and style that relies heavily on modes, as well as other exotic scales, rich chromatisism and colorful chords, and vibrant timbre effects. Ulrich (1966) states, "that [the] work reveals the full development of his impressionism" (348). Not only does "Modere" make abundant use of the Dorian mode in both its melodic lines and elsewhere, but also a wide variety of modes and exotic scales can be found throughout the movement. In addition to its melodic use, another notable place Ravel employs the Dorian mode is at the start of the development section, at rehearsal mark 7, where he uses it in the piano to accompany the strings. The Locrian and minor Locrian modes can both be found; the Locrian mode is present on E in rehearsal mark 3 at measure 31, and on B in the minor form at the start of rehearsal mark 8. The Phrygian mode also makes a brief appearance in measures 28-30, again on E. The movement ends with a very clear Lydian mode on C.

In addition to modal pitch collections, other exotic scales can be found throughout the work. A pentatonic collection, a staple of impressionist music, is the basis for the second theme (Heinzelmann 2011, 163). Several octatonic collections

are also present in big rolled chords, such as in measures 46 and 96, however it is unclear if they are intentionally octatonic because similar moments are not octatonic.[1]

While functional harmony may exist on the larger scale, it is rarely found at the micro level. In fact, traditionally tonal chords that function conventionally are a scarcity in the work. Instead, chords based on stacked fourths, harmonies based on parallel use of neighboring triads, added tones like seconds and sixths, and unresolved dissonances are another characteristic that gives the work a distinctly impressionist character (Ulrich 1966, 348). As early as measure 3, there is an example of quartal harmony (the third chord in measure is $F^{\#}$-B-E) mixed among the triads. These otherwise unusual chord structures never stand out of the harmonic fabric of the piece, primarily because they are treated as passing harmonies.

Ravel uses parallel use of neighboring triads throughout the piece to embellish melodic lines and make them stick out from the rest of the texture. The best example of this is in measure 77, where the piano makes use of parallel chords to bring out the melody from the strings runs and create a climatic effect. However, this is not Ravel's only use for neighboring triads, in the beginning of the second theme of the recapitulation, at rehearsal mark 10, he uses them with a completely different effect. Here the composer uses the technique to create a descending chord progression that does not distract the listener from hearing the melody in the cello.

[1] The rolled chord in measure 100 has a similar effect as the octatonic collections but is built on a series of minor thirds.

It is remarkable that Ravel is able to employ the same concept and use it with two completely opposite results, but what is more fascinating is that these two examples occur completely successively.

Ravel's impressionist style is very concerned with color tones in chords, particularly added tones likes seconds and sixths. What is most critical about this is that they never seem out of place or unnecessary, instead they are so tightly sewn into the fabric that their colorful effect is seamless and even obligatory. Just as the quartal harmony blends imperceptibly, so too do these added tones. The introduction of them as early as the third and seventh measure does a lot to subtly introduce them at the onset of the piece so they can be used more perceptibly later. By the time quartal harmony become a fundamental element of the harmonies, which seems to first happen in the transition between themes at rehearsal mark 3, their colors are already engrained in what the listener has heard, and this makes the more opaque use of them seems completely natural.

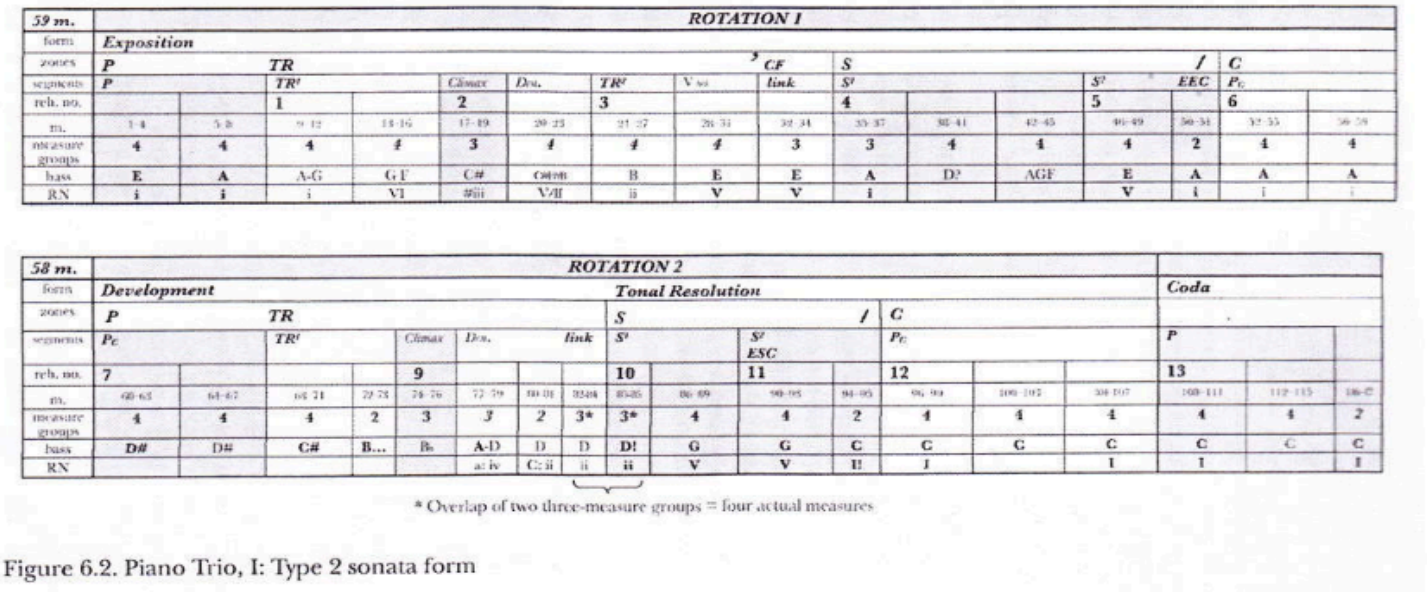
Supplementing the immense harmonic color Ravel imbeds in the first movement, as well as the rest of the work, is array of diverse colors that come out of the texture and timbres of the piece. Ravel employs extreme arpeggio figures, chromatic fast moving passages, rolled chords sustained with the piano pedal, harmonic tones in the strings, rapid repeated notes, and the entire range of all the instruments to create a spectacularly wide-ranging color palette (Ulrich 1966, 348). Ravel's student Alexis Roland-Manuel comments that Ravel initially struggled with balancing the piano with the two strings, but after approaching it as Saint-Saens

would, he treated each instrument so that they would outline and enhance the melody (Roland-Manuel 1972, 75).

While the melodic and harmonic content are both significant, and the textures and colors Ravel uses to bring the piece to life are interesting, no aspect is more fascinating or imperative to understand than the work's formal structure. Ravel viewed composition as a craft, and was obsessed with achieving technical perfection in his music. He was at times very mechanical in how he constructed his music; Stravinsky once described him as a "Swiss Watchmaker" (Kelly n.d.). He believed that in order to achieve the highest level of technical perfection, one must imitate good models (Ornstein 1967, 469). One of the composers Ravel frequently encouraged his students to use as a model was Mozart, and it was his output of music in sonata form that likely influenced to an extent the formal structure of the Trio's first movement (Ornstein 1967, 470). However, Ravel's interpretation of sonata form is strikingly unconventional and bares little direct resemblance to Mozart's music.

The first movement of the Trio is a highly condensed "Type 2" double-rotational sonata form (Heinzelmann 2011, 166). However what makes the piece so exceptional is that in the exposition, instead of the second theme following the typical harmonic path and going to the relative major, it remains in the minor tonic. The music only arrives at the expected relative major at measure 94 – halfway into the essential structural closure (ESC) (Heinzelmann 2011, 166). This turns the standard formula for sonata form on its head, as not only is the second theme of the

exposition in the same key as the first, but now the ESC and the coda are both in the relative major instead the original key. The following table by Heinzelmann provides an overview of the details, and is included so that larger concepts can be discussed.[2]



59 m.	ROTATION 1															
form	Exposition															
zones	P		TR						CF	S				/	C	
segments	P		TR¹		Climax	Dev.	TR²	V vs	link	S¹			S²	EEC	P_C	
reh. no.			1		2		3			4			5		6	
m.	1-4	5-8	9-12	13-16	17-20	20-25	25-29	29-33	33-34	35-37	38-41	42-45	46-49	50-51	52-55	56-59
measure groups	4	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	2	4	4
bass	E	A	A-G	G F	C#	c#m	B	E	E	A	D?	AGF	E	A	A	A
RN	i	i	i	VI	#iii	V/ii	ii	V	V	i			V	i	i	i

58 m.	ROTATION 2																
form	Development							Tonal Resolution							Coda		
zones	P		TR					S			/	C					
segments	P_C		TR¹		Climax	Dev.	link	S¹		S² ESC		P_C			P		
reh. no.	7				9			10		11		12			13		
m.	60-63	64-67	68-71	72-75	76-76	77-79	80-81	82-84	85-85	86-89	90-93	94-95	96-99	100-103	104-107	108-111	112-115	116-[illegible]
measure groups	4	4	4	2	3	3	2	3*	3*	4	4	2	4	4	4	4	4	2
bass	D#	D#	C#	B...	B♮	A-D	D	D	D!	G	G	C	C	C	C	C	C	C
RN						ac iv	C: ii	ii	ii	V	V	I!	I		I	I		I

* Overlap of two three-measure groups = four actual measures

Figure 6.2. Piano Trio, I: Type 2 sonata form

Looking at the exposition, the first item to consider is the measure groupings. The measures are primarily in groups of four, except at specific segments such as: the climax (three measures), the link between the transition and the second theme (three measures), the opening of the first theme (three measures), and the essential expositional closure (EEC)(two measures). The first pattern that stands out is that

[2] Heinzelmann marks the transition at rehearsal mark 1, however in my analysis I came to the decision that rehearsal mark 1 is still part of the primary theme and in fact the transition is at rehearsal mark 2. Heinzelmann also omits that rehearsal mark 8 occurs in measure 68, where again the transition is mislabeled and should occur in rehearsal mark 9.

with the exception of the link, all three-measure groups are followed by three successive groups of four, and the two-measure EEC is followed by two groups of four in the closing of the exposition. The other notable connection is that this material, with the same exception, is always in a different tonal area (as indicated by the Roman numerals) than the section that precedes it.[3]

The bass motion in the exposition is also worthy of study. Aside from the obvious second theme that is in the "wrong" key, there are two other interesting moments in the bass motion. First is the climax at rehearsal mark 2, where the bass is C♯ in the first measure group and then descends in fourths in following group. This is worth mentioning as it teases at that the piece will go to a tonality on the third scale degree as expected, in this case an altered one, and then the piece surprisingly and rather importantly withholds that expectation. The second moment is the last measure group of rehearsal mark 4 (measures 42-45), where the bass motion moves from A to G to F. This is interesting as it a diminution of the bass motion in rehearsal mark 1.

The final aspect of the exposition to consider is Heinzelmann's reductive Roman numeral analysis. This reductive look at the overall progression over the course of the fifty-nine-measure exposition shows that on a macro-level Ravel is thinking very tonally. From this vantage point, most of the progressions are dominant to tonic. The only exceptions are the previously mentioned tease of #iii with a VI preceding it, and eight measures in rehearsal mark 4, where the tonality is

[3] Where this is not the case, the link, the mode does change from E Phrygian to E Locrian.

too ambigious to have a Roman numeral. In that area, Ravel is implying both A minor and C major by having D as the bass note that is both the subdominant of A and the supertonic of C (Heinzelmann 2011, 163). If Ravel had just been in C major here instead of just barely implying it, the work would not be nearly as remarkable as it would just be a normal "Type 2" sonata.

The development section, which in performance starts just less than halfway into the movement, requires the same attention as the exposition, though smaller in scale (Beaux Arts Trio 2000). Its phrases at the onset match what has been typical in the exposition; the first three are all four bars. However, just before the climax at rehearsal mark 9 the phrases change to "2, 3,3,2,3,3." Under the assumption made in the discussion of phrases in the exposition, this is also a pattern where the length of the two-measure phrases determines the number of three-measure phrases. It is hard to imagine that Ravel, being the master craftsman, would do this by coincidence; especially because it occurs twice and both times are connected with a thematically similar climax. The bass motion in the development section is interesting in that it moves mostly by increasingly small intervals, $D^{\#}$ to $C^{\#}$ to B are whole steps, and B to $B^{\flat}$ to A are half steps. The leap down of a fifth confirms that the otherwise atonal section completely back to being tonal. The bass tones immediacy preceding the leap to D are very gradually directing the music towards A minor; the $B^{\flat}$ is an altered Neapolitan, and reference to the Neapolitan is made in the fourth measure of the movement. The A minor following it is not strong enough to imply the key on its own. The first firm tonal center is D (or a: iv), which as mentioned in the previous paragraph, is an indication that the relative major that

was kidnapped from the exposition is about to finally be released. The D serves as the pivot point, just as it was prophesized in rehearsal mark 4, bringing the piece finally into C major for the tonal resolution.

Finally, just as the recapitulation appears, the piece pivots to its long awaited relative major, well, mostly. While Ravel almost gives the listener all they expect, writing harmonies over a pedal of the supertonic that is definitely not the subdominant, he withholds putting the music firmly in C for just a little longer by keeping the melody of the secondary theme untransposed. As the sonata inches closer to its close, he moves the bass pedal to the dominant, casting out any final doubt that the movement may not end in C. He even emphasizes it in the orchestration by thinning out the texture and using the cello to hold the G in measures 88 and 89, while the piano enjoys a rare solo moment with both hands in treble clef. At last, in the essential structural close (ESC) C major finally breaks out in measure 94, just as the violin hands the cello the melody. In performance this is almost seven and a half minutes into the movement (Beaux Arts Trio 2000). During the final somber moments, he uses color chords and rich chromatisism to make the C major ending seem almost minor in its expression, until the coda where the Lydian mode ends the piece.

While Ravel is often know for his use of color in large orchestral works, the first movement of the *Piano Trio in A minor* is a stunning example of his craftsmanship condensed into a hundred-seventeen measures. His inventive use of sonata form in the first movement allows him to balance artistic expression with

structural excellence. His impressionist language blended with Basque influence culminates in a breathtaking masterwork, particularly in first movement.

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