MAURICE RAVEL’S AFFINITY FOR STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ:
SYMBOLISM AND PRÉCIOSEITÉ IN TROIS POÈMES DE
STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

A Thesis in
Music Theory and History

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2011
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ABSTRACT

The combination of Stéphane Mallarmé’s esoteric poetry and Maurice Ravel’s elusive tonal designs presents a multitude of methodological problems for analysts attempting to study the Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé (1913). While extant analyses of these songs draw on pitch content to make observations about Ravel’s interpretation of the text, they fail to consider the fundamental structural importance of Mallarmé’s poetry. In his autobiographical sketch, Ravel noted that Mallarmé’s “préciosité so full of meaning” inspired him to compose the Trois poèmes. By using the archaic French word préciosité, which carries literary connotations, Ravel suggests that Mallarmé’s poetry provided the primary source of inspiration for the Trois poèmes. After establishing Ravel’s life-long affinity for Mallarmé’s Symbolist structures and formal improprieties, I will demonstrate that Ravel’s understanding of Mallarmé’s préciosité served as the compositional impetus for these songs.

In “Soupir” (“Sigh”), Maurice Ravel employs contrasting pitch areas to construct a palindromic arch form that mirrors the bipartite structure of Mallarmé’s poem. Just as the structure of Mallarmé’s two-part poem symbolizes the inhalation and exhalation of a sigh, so too does Ravel’s rising and falling arch-form capture the symbolic content of Mallarmé’s poetic form. In the second song, “Placet futile” (“Futile Petition”), Ravel uses motivic transformation to depict the personal development of a humble abbé who wishes to become one with the elusive princess painted on his teacup. Here, Ravel’s interest lies in Mallarmé’s irregular gendered rhyme scheme, which suggests gradual male empowerment throughout the poem. Through the use of obscured cadences and
evolving melodic motives, Ravel remains faithful to Mallarmé’s male-empowered rhyme scheme and depicts the abbé’s success at the conclusion of the song.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis represents infinitely more than my two years of study as an M.A. student at Penn State. Instead, it signifies the love and encouragement of countless people who have inspired me throughout my academic journey. To begin, I must thank my parents, whose uncompromising support has allowed me to achieve great success in all my endeavors. I would also like to thank my brother, Andy, for always helping me to keep things in perspective. To my oldest brother, Nick, I would like to thank you for teaching me that hard work and dedication can lead to great accomplishments, no matter what field you choose to pursue.

I must also thank my academic family, who has truly been an inspiration throughout my five years at this fine institution. In particular, I am forever indebted to Meg Pedlow, whose patience and dedication to aural skills teaching forever changed the way I listen to music. My deepest gratitude goes to Marylène Dosse, who guided me during my earliest years at Penn State and instilled in me a love of French music, language, and culture. Many thanks, also, to Enrico Elisi, whose mentorship encouraged me to pursue a wide range of opportunities while at Penn State. To Dr. Maureen Carr, your support and positive outlook has been truly inspirational. Finally, I must express my appreciation to Dr. Taylor Greer, Dr. Charles Youmans, and Dr. Vincent Benitez, whose advice and support throughout this process has been invaluable.
Chapter 1

Maurice Ravel and the Préciosité of Stéphane Mallarmé

The prolific French author Jules Renard once commented that Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry was untranslatable, even into French.1 Maurice Ravel, however, believed that it was translatable into music. In his autobiographical sketch, Ravel discussed his inspiration for the Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé writing, “I wished to transpose Mallarmé’s poetry into music, especially that preciosity so full of meaning and so characteristic of him.”2 Ravel’s choice of the French word préciosité to describe Mallarmé’s poetry will be of particular interest in this study because the term is rarely used in the French language. While it could connote something that is monetarily valuable, the Collins-Robert French Dictionary lists an alternate, more archaic definition of préciosité as being raffinement, implying something that is precise or refined, particularly in a literary sense. In choosing an archaic French word to describe the highly stylized poetry of Mallarmé, Ravel provides insight into his understanding of Mallarmé’s texts. Thus, it is only by studying the préciosité of Mallarmé’s literary techniques that one can uncover the various layers of meaning that Ravel captures in Mallarmé’s poetry.

I will begin this chapter with a discussion of the musical and historical context that surrounded Ravel during the composition of the Trois poèmes. After discussing the genesis of the work and the public reactions following its initial performances, I will

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delve into Ravel’s literary inspiration for the *Trois poèmes*. While Ravel rarely mentions the *Trois poèmes* in his correspondence, the few examples that do exist contain insightful comments that elucidate the characteristics of Mallarmé’s poetry that fascinated Ravel. Once I have established Ravel’s affinity for Mallarmé, I will provide an overview of the Symbolist movement in French poetry and explain Mallarmé’s role in that movement. After analyzing the characteristics of Mallarmé’s poetic aesthetic and establishing Ravel’s interest in the Symbolist movement, it is possible to uncover the similarities between Mallarmé and Ravel and determine the elements of Mallarmé’s poetry that fascinated the composer. First, however, an understanding of the work’s historical context is necessary.

The genesis of Ravel’s *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* corresponds to the composition of two other highly experimental and, in one case, influential song cycles in fin-de-siècle Europe: Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* and Stravinsky’s *Trois poésies de la lyrique japonaise*. Michel Delahaye explains that Ravel was in Clarens, Switzerland with Stravinsky during the spring of 1913, and it was there that Stravinsky introduced his *Japanese Lyric* songs to Ravel. Of all the innovative elements in Stravinsky’s song cycle, Ravel loved the idea of employing a small chamber ensemble to accompany a solo vocalist. Stravinsky explained that his instrumentation was influenced by Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, a piece he recently had heard in Berlin, and which he described to Ravel in great detail. Inspired by the possibilities of an unusual instrumental combination and abstract texts, Ravel immediately began to write his own set of songs, choosing the same

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instrumentation as Stravinsky and Schoenberg and using the elusive symbolist poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé as his inspiration.

 Upon his return to Paris, Ravel dreamt of organizing a *concert scandaleux*\(^4\) during which his Mallarmé poems would be performed alongside Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* and Stravinsky’s *Trois poésies de la lyrique japonaise*. Before the premiere occurred, however, a brief conflict regarding publishing rights arose between Ravel and Debussy. Without any previous knowledge of Ravel’s song cycle, Debussy chose to write his own set of three Mallarmé songs in the same year as Ravel. Even more shocking is that Debussy chose two of the same poems, “Soupir” and “Placet futile,” placing them in the exact same order as Ravel. Commenting on this eerie coincidence, Debussy noted that it was a “phenomenon of autosuggestion worthy of communication to the Academy of Medicine.”\(^5\) While the printing rights for these Mallarmé texts were initially given only to Ravel, he eventually wrote to Durand and requested that Debussy’s songs be published as well.

Finally, in January of 1914, Ravel’s “concert scandaleux” took place. The program, which consisted of Ravel’s Mallarmé songs, Stravinsky’s *Trois poésies de la lyrique japonaise*, and Maurice Delage’s *Quatre poèmes hindous* was surprisingly well-received. In particular, Orenstein observes that the Mallarmé songs were “performed before a sympathetic audience” and “greeted with acclaim.”\(^6\) After their Paris premiere in 1914, however, performances elsewhere received mixed reviews such as the following from the *Westminster Gazette*:

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\(^6\) Ibid., 68.
An attentive audience listened in absolute bewilderment to some of the strangest exercises in ultramodern cacophony which it would be possible to imagine…Now and then the divergence between the voice part and the accompaniment seemed so pronounced as almost to suggest that Mdme. Bathori-Engel was singing one number while the instrumentalists were playing another.  

After the same performance, the *Daily Mail* commented that Ravel’s settings were “among the most recent and interesting examples of modern song.” Having provided the historical context for Ravel’s *Trois Poèmes*, it is now appropriate to discuss Ravel’s lifelong affinity for Mallarmé and the defining characteristics of his poetry.

The 1911 publication of Albert Thibaudet’s *La Poésie de Stéphane Mallarmé* thrust the poet’s work into the Parisian artistic milieu and quickly made him the source of inspiration for many fin-de-siècle French composers. Among these composers was Maurice Ravel, who considered Mallarmé “not merely the greatest French poet, but the only French poet.” When he began writing the *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* in 1913, Ravel embarked on the most experimental compositional journey of his entire oeuvre, employing elusive tonal centers, exploring ethereal instrumental and vocal effects, and adapting musical form to represent Mallarmé’s Symbolist poetry.

Ravel’s compositional aesthetic was greatly influenced by the Symbolist movement in French art. In fact, Ravel even referred to himself as “the little Symbolist” in an 1898 letter to Madame René de Saint-Marceaux. While Ravel was interested in many fields within the Symbolist movement, he drew much of his inspiration from

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7 Ibid., 68.
8 Ibid., 68.
10 Ibid., 53.
literature. Stephen Zank observes that “…though Ravel had personal contact with some of the most important Symbolist painters, literary influences appear to have predominated in his developing thought and style.”¹¹ One can also look to Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit*, which was based on the poetry of Aloysius Bertrand, for another example of literary inspiration in his instrumental music. Above all his compositions, however, Ravel’s *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* reflect most accurately his interest in Symbolist poetry, and he employs unorthodox compositional approaches to capture Mallarmé’s abstract Symbolist aesthetics.

Ravel’s affinity for Mallarmé predates the *Trois poèmes*. During his days as a student at the conservatoire, Ravel read Mallarmé extensively. Alfred Cortot, a schoolmate of Ravel, once commented that he was a “young man, readily-mocking, argumentative, and a little bit distant, who would read Mallarmé and frequently visit Erik Satie.”¹² Upon entering adulthood, Ravel’s excitement for Mallarmé flourished during his regular meetings with “Les Apaches,” a progressive group of French composers, artists, and intellectuals who met regularly at the apartment of Paul Sordes.¹³ Thus, Ravel clearly admired Mallarmé’s poetry throughout his life, and the *Trois poèmes* represent a natural outgrowth of this artistic fascination.

Ravel’s first musical exploration of Mallarmé’s poetry came while he was still a student at the Conservatoire. In 1896, Ravel chose to set “Sainte,” an early Mallarmé poem, for voice and piano as part of his composition class with Fauré. Not long after Ravel finished “Sainte,” his professor, Gabriel Fauré, concluded that his compositional

¹³ Ibid., 18.
style was “too recherché, overly refined.” Fauré’s use of the word refined, or raffiné, recalls the definition of “préciosité” established at the beginning of this chapter and indicates that even from an early age, Ravel’s compositions were attuned to the “refined” expressive devices of Mallarmé’s poetry. In his Trois poèmes, Ravel takes the juvenile, yet promising compositional techniques employed in “Sainte” to a new level. By using musical form to represent Mallarmé’s deviations from traditional poetic structure, Ravel clearly continues his “refined” interpretation of Mallarmé’s literary elements.

While it is impossible to know the exact elements of Mallarmé’s poetry that fascinated Ravel, several comments about the Trois poèmes provide insightful clues that suggest Ravel’s interest in Mallarmé’s subtle literary procedures and broad formal schemes. For example, after Ravel composed the Trois poèmes, he discussed the importance of emulating Mallarmé’s literary devices in a 1924 interview, saying

I have a predilection for my Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé, which obviously will never be a popular work, since in it I transposed the literary procedures of Mallarmé, whom I personally consider France’s greatest poet.”

In a later interview, Ravel went on to explain that “[Mallarmé] made the French language, not designed for poetry, poetical. It is a feat in which he stands alone.”

Contemporary critics and composers in fin-de-siècle Paris also observed Ravel’s fascination with Mallarmé’s formal procedures. In a 1925 issue of La Revue musicale that was dedicated to Maurice Ravel, René Chalupt contributed an article discussing the importance of Ravel’s literary influences. In particular, he discusses Mallarmé’s

14 Orenstein, Ravel: Man and Musician, 27.
15 Orenstein, A Ravel Reader, 433.
16 Ibid., 450.
influence on Ravel, writing “Ravel’s art is in essence the same as that of Mallarmé.”

He goes on to explain that “For [Ravel] as well as for [Mallarmé], their craft knows nothing of failure and the idea resonates with the perfect form that it assumes.”

Chalupt’s reference to the ability of a “perfect form” to capture an idea will be of particular interest in this study, since Mallarmé’s subtle deviations from traditional formal procedures provided Ravel with his fundamental compositional strategy in these songs.

In the same issue, Tristan Klingsor, a close friend of Ravel, noted that when the composer discussed the poems of Mallarmé, it was “less because of their Parnassian form than because of their mysterious character.” Importantly, Klingsor also refers to form as an element that interested Ravel. This time, however, he claims that it was not the traditional forms in Mallarmé’s poetry that interested the composer. In fact, Ravel became disenchanted with the canon of French poets whose works invariably fit within standard poetic forms. While Ravel did admire many French poets, composing songs based on texts by authors such as Paul Verlaine, Leconte de Lisle, and Jules Renard, he felt that in limiting themselves to traditional forms, they also limited their art. Discussing his frustration with the overly conventional approach of these poets, Ravel observed that

17 “L’art de Ravel est d’une essence semblable à celui de Mallarmé.” Translation mine, René Chalupt, “Maurice Ravel et les Prétextes littéraires de sa musique,” La Revue musicale 6, no. 6 (April 1925): 69.
18 Ibid., 69.
19 “moins à cause de leur forme parnassienne qu’à cause de leur caractère mystérieux.” Translation mine, Tristan Klingsor, “Ravel et l’art de son temps,” La Revue musicale 6, no. 6 (April 1925): 11.
Thus, Ravel’s perception of these poets clearly revolved around his belief in the expressive possibilities of poetic form. As we will see, Mallarmé abandons traditional formal schemes for expressive purposes in both “Soupir” and “Placet futile.” In fact, of Mallarmé’s entire output, they offer some of the richest examples of the way in which he adapts form to enhance the meaning of a poem. Given the previous discussion regarding Ravel’s interest in the formal characteristics of a poem, it is not a coincidence that he chose to set these particular texts. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assert that Ravel’s musical settings of “Soupir” and “Placet futile” transpose Mallarmé’s unique adaptations of form into music.

Robert Craft agreed with Ravel’s contemporaries regarding the importance of Mallarmé’s poetry in Ravel’s Trois poèmes. Craft believed that an intimate understanding of Mallarmé’s texts was crucial before undertaking any musical analysis of Ravel’s Mallarmé settings. In fact, on the centenary of Ravel’s birth, Craft described the Trois poèmes as being among the greatest compositions Ravel ever wrote, and that the poetry is the primary element in Ravel’s music, above melody, harmony, instrumentation. He crystallizes each syllable and gives each line and word musical rhythms that preserve Mallarmé’s—at the same time sparing him any vulgar melisma or false agogic.21

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Craft’s observations, along with the contemporary accounts of Ravel’s intimate rapport with Mallarmé’s texts, are telling. Given Ravel’s clear emphasis on the primacy of Mallarmé’s texts, it seems that a detailed analysis of Mallarmé’s aesthetic approach to poetry and the préciosité of his literary techniques is essential in order to understand how Ravel converts these nuances into music. In the following section, I will give a brief overview of the Symbolist movement in French poetry, paying particular attention to the elements of Symbolism that are evident in Ravel’s Trois poèmes.

Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry represents a turning point in French literary history. At a time when Romanticism and Parnassianism were flourishing in Paris, Mallarmé strove to create a new aesthetic that countered the overly sentimental poetry of the Romantics and the strict verse structure of the Parnassians. With its subtlety and suggestion, Mallarmé’s poetry must also be viewed as a rejection of Naturalism and Realism, aesthetics that attempted to convey nature and everyday objects with the utmost precision. Thus, Mallarmé can be described as the quintessential Symbolist poet, and he is often deemed the father of Symbolist poets because his ideas and poems were extremely influential among Parisian literary circles of the mid-nineteenth century.

For Mallarmé, the goal of Symbolism was not simply to recreate an object or idea through words but rather to suggest it. Robert Neely discusses the subtlety of Mallarmé’s Symbolism, writing “emotions and ideas are purposely muted in [Mallarmé’s] poems.”

Mallarmé himself described his fascination with the art of suggestion, explaining:

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“To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the pleasure in the poem which stems from the joy of divining little by little; to suggest, there is the dream. It is the perfect use of this mystery which constitutes the symbol: to evoke an object little by little in order to show a state of soul…”

By subtly “suggesting” objects and emotions rather than “naming” them, Mallarmé constructs various layers of meaning in his poems. In the forthcoming literary and musical analyses of “Soupir” and “Placet futile,” we will see that Ravel captures the ambiguity and suggestion in Mallarmé’s poems, creating musical settings that suggest multiple levels of meaning, just like Mallarmé’s poetry.

One way in which Symbolist poets, particularly Mallarmé, suggested objects in their poetry was through careful attention to the aural properties of their poems. In particular, the synaesthetic goal of creating music through poetry was absolutely fundamental to the Symbolist aesthetic, and poets often suggested meaning in their writing by imbuing it with musical qualities. There were numerous ideas among French Symbolist poets regarding what constituted musicality in poetry. Paul Verlaine believed musicality existed in the vague and impressionistic qualities of a verse while René Ghil stretched the idea of musicality so far as to say that specific vowel sounds could represent specific musical instruments. More than all the Symbolist poets, however, Stéphane Mallarmé aspired to create a certain musicality in his poetry that, when performed aloud, could enhance the meaning of the text. Despite Mallarmé’s aspirations, creating

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musicality in poetry is quite a lofty goal for any poet, and a problem of subjectivity invariably arises when one considers what exactly makes a poem musical.

Mallarmé addresses this problem in *La Musique et les Lettres* (1894). An “artistic manifesto” of sorts, *La Musique et les Lettres* was initially presented by Mallarmé as a lecture at Oxford and Cambridge in 1894 before it was published in *La Revue Blanche*. In this seminal work, Mallarmé describes the interaction of culture and poetry and the importance of performing poetry aloud. As we will see, the idea of poetic performance was of particular importance to Mallarmé. The majority of *La Musique et les Lettres*, however, discusses Mallarmé’s attempts to “fait à l’idéal” in his poetry by fusing art, music, and literature. From this manifesto, we can determine that Mallarmé strived to create an almost metaphysical work of art by combining music and poetry in an entirely original way.

By focusing primarily on the aural sound of his poems (i.e. phrase rhythm and vowel quality), Mallarmé attempted to transcend reality through poetry. Mary Shaw demonstrates that the aural sound of Mallarmé’s poems was of the utmost importance to him because he intended his poems to be performed aloud, most likely during the Tuesday evening soirées he hosted called “Les Mardis.” These gatherings brought together composers, writers, painters, and other Parisian socialites who shared a passion for the artistic avant-garde. To be sure, Mallarmé’s experimentation with the aural qualities of his poetry developed from the performances of his poetry at these soirées.

A dissertation by Marvin Weinberger on the linguistic implications in Mallarmé’s poetry elucidates the interpretive importance of Mallarmé’s attention to the aural

properties of his poems and offers a starting point from which one can explore the nature of Ravel’s interest in Mallarmé’s poetry. Weinberger carefully studies the most frequent vowel types in Mallarmé’s poetry in order to demonstrate that Mallarmé may in fact have carefully chosen specific words based on vowel quality to create an aural effect that intensified the meaning of the poem. After analyzing a large majority of Mallarmé’s works for patterns in vowel types, Weinberger discovered that “Soupir,” the first poem Ravel sets in his Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé, has an extreme nasal/oral vowel ratio of ¼, higher than in any of Mallarmé’s other works. Also, back vowels such as (u) and (o) occur significantly more frequently in this poem than front vowels. This is particularly significant when one considers that nasal vowels and back vowels are considered by linguists to have a softer and darker sound than other vowels. In fact, back vowels are sometimes referred to as “dark vowels.” Since “Soupir” attempts to depict a subdued “rêverie automnal,” it seems very appropriate that Mallarmé chooses warm, soft vowels to heighten the aural impression of this melancholy autumn scene, and Weinberger concludes this study by noting that “this poem serves probably as our best example of how Mallarmé manipulated the sounds of a poem to fit the meaning.”

The synaesthetic nature of Mallarmé’s art aligned perfectly with the growing interest in synaesthesia among fin-de-siècle artists and composers, and Ravel clearly expressed his interest in the synaesthetic possibilities of poetry when he described Mallarmé’s poetry as containing “unbounded visions, yet precise in design, enclosed in a mystery of somber abstractions—an art where all the elements are so intimately bound up

27 Ibid, 165.
together that one cannot analyze, but only sense, its effect.” As I have demonstrated, this idea of synaesthesia was not unique to fin-de-siècle French composers. Instead, it was rooted in the aesthetic theories of the Symbolist poets, who were more interested in the aural qualities of their works than the written word.

Ravel’s philosophical interests also demonstrate his fascination with the synaesthetic potential of art. Writing about Ravel’s interest in literature, Roland-Manuel writes “his literary interests, although not very wide, reached fastidious depths and corresponded surprisingly with his aesthetic views…” In particular, Ravel was greatly inspired by the writings of the classical French philosopher Étienne de Condillac, and Roland-Manuel has noted that Condillac’s *Traité des Sensations* was fundamental to Ravel’s philosophical readings. In this work, Condillac reasons that all of our sensations are intimately related, much like the synaesthetic goals of the symbolist poets, who attempted to create a total work of art by fusing literary, visual, and aural components in their poetry. While a more thorough summary of this treatise is not within the scope of this paper, this brief explanation offers a useful entry point from which one can begin to understand Ravel’s interest in the synaesthetic goals of Mallarmé’s poetry.

In the final section of this chapter, we will observe that Mallarmé’s esoteric poetry, combined with the elusive tonal language of Ravel’s music, presents a multitude of methodological problems for any analyst who attempts to study Ravel’s *Trois poèmes*. In fact, only a handful of analyses exist for these songs. The two analysts who have

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29 Maurice Ravel, “Contemporary Music,” (lecture, Rice Institute, Houston, TX, April 7, 1928), in Orenstein, *A Ravel Reader*, 46.
31 Ibid., 25.
studied this music in detail, Peter Kaminsky and Robert Gronquist, provide enlightening perspectives regarding pitch content, but they fail to consider the fundamental structural importance of Mallarmé’s texts. Now that I have demonstrated Ravel’s affinity for Mallarmé’s poetry, it is evident that any analysis of these Mallarmé settings must begin with a thorough understanding of the original text.

My approach for “Soupir” and “Placet futile” will consist of a two-part analytical process. I will begin each study with a detailed literary analysis, examining Mallarmé’s use of expressive poetic techniques such as enjambment, foreshadowing, and gendered rhymes to create multiple layers of meaning within each poem. Using the results of the detailed literary analysis, I will then discuss the broad formal construction of each song, demonstrating how Mallarmé’s small details contribute to an overall formal scheme that enhances the poem’s content. The last component of each chapter will consist of a detailed musical analysis of Ravel’s setting. Because each song represents such a remarkably different compositional experiment, a unified theoretical approach cannot be applied. Rather, the musical analysis will rely on the literary discoveries as a starting point from which observations regarding the interaction between the text and music can be made. By taking such an interdisciplinary approach, one can begin to grasp how Ravel’s compositional techniques transpose Mallarmé’s abstract Symbolist aesthetic into music.

Though Ravel chose to set three of Mallarmé’s poems in his Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé, the final poem, “Surgi de la croupe et du bond,” will not be an

integral part of my thesis. “Surgi de la croupe et du bond” is one of Mallarmé’s most
abstract poems. Ravel composed this song nearly a year after “Soupir” and “Placet
futile” were completed, indicating that he did not originally intend it to be part of his
Mallarmé set.\textsuperscript{33} Besides the unifying element of Mallarmé’s text, Ravel’s setting
suggests little continuity with the first two songs. With its atonal sonorities and angular
melodic lines, “Surgi de la croupe et du bond” clearly demonstrates the influence of
Schoenberg’s \textit{Pierrot Lunaire}. In fact, Ravel himself described “Surgi de la croupe et du
bond” as “the strangest, if not the most hermetic of [Mallarmé’s] sonnets. I used for this
work almost the same instrumental devices of Schoenberg’s \textit{Pierrot Lunaire}.”\textsuperscript{34} Thus,
given the distinctly different poetic and musical characteristics of “Surgi de la croupe et
du bond” compared to the first two songs, it seems logical to omit it from this study.

In the scholarly literature that refers to Ravel’s \textit{Trois poèmes}, most theorists and
musicologists conclude that these songs represent the pinnacle of Ravel’s creative output
both in terms of their adventurous harmonic schemes and innovative use of
instrumentation. Even Igor Stravinsky commented on Ravel’s songs after spending time
with him in Switzerland. Discussing his opinion of Ravel’s song cycle, Stravinsky said
“I composed my \textit{Three Japanese Lyrics} and Ravel his \textit{Trois Poèmes de Mallarmé} which I
still prefer to any music of his.”\textsuperscript{35} Few scholars, however, have noted Ravel’s careful
attention to Mallarmé’s texts and the structural implications they have for Ravel’s
musical settings. Considering the critical acclaim of both Ravel’s contemporaries as well

\textsuperscript{33} Roland Manuel, \textit{Maurice Ravel}, 72.
\textsuperscript{34} “le plus étrange, sinon le plus hermétique de ses sonnets. J’ai pris à peu près pour cette
oeuvre l’appareil instrumental du \textit{Pierrot lunaire} de Schönberg.” Translation mine,
as modern critics, theorists, and musicologists, it seems odd that so few people have attempted a detailed analysis rooted in a thorough understanding of Mallarmé’s texts.

Now that I have established the importance of this literary element, however, we can examine “Soupir” and “Placet futile” in an attempt to elucidate the ways in which they capture the “préciosité” of Mallarmé’s poetry.
Chapter 2
Symbolic Songwriting in “Soupir”

Maurice Ravel’s setting of “Soupir”\textsuperscript{36} from \textit{Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé} (1913) stands at the pinnacle of his songwriting output both in terms of its compositional design and its attention to the intricacies of Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetry. In particular, “Soupir” demonstrates Ravel’s attention to the symbolic formal scheme of Mallarmé’s poem as well as the subtle, yet meaningful literary devices such as enjambment, alliteration, and versification that pervade Mallarmé’s text. In order to elucidate both Mallarmé’s abstract poem and Ravel’s complex musical setting, my approach to this song will begin with a detailed literary analysis of the text. Once I have explained the symbolic structure and meaningful \textit{préciosité} of the poem, I will conclude with a detailed musical analysis, demonstrating how Ravel interprets, from the smallest of details to the broadest formal scheme of the song, the “preciosity so full of meaning”\textsuperscript{37} in Mallarmé’s poem. First, however, it is necessary to begin with a summary of the musical scholarship surrounding “Soupir.”

While very few musical analyses of Ravel’s “Soupir” exist, they are certainly worth considering before beginning our study. These analyses prove problematic, however, because they fail to demonstrate accurately the intimate rapport between Mallarmé’s text and Ravel’s musical setting. In particular, they overlook the various levels of \textit{préciosité} that Ravel captures in terms of the overall musical form and the

\textsuperscript{36} For the sake of clarity throughout the following chapters, I will use quotation marks when referring to Ravel’s musical setting and italics when discussing Mallarmé’s poem.

\textsuperscript{37} “préciosité plein de profondeur,” Translated in Orenstein, \textit{A Ravel Reader}, 32.
careful treatment of Mallarmé’s poetic devices such as enjambment, foreshadowing, and versification. Instead, these analyses rely on pitch content as the starting point for understanding Ravel’s interpretation of Mallarmé’s poem. For example, Michel Delahaye argues for a synaesthetic interpretation of Ravel’s setting, and he attempts to attach specific colors to specific pitch areas throughout the song, citing the influence of Scriabin and Kandinsky as being fundamental to Ravel’s conception of the work.\(^{38}\) This reading is highly speculative, and there is no evidence to suggest that Ravel adhered to the synaesthetic philosophies of Scriabin and Kandinsky. Furthermore, this type of analysis fails to give the performer or listener any practical insight into Ravel’s understanding of the poem. Robert Gronquist\(^ {39} \) and Peter Kaminsky\(^ {40} \) provide enlightening structural analyses of the work, however these interpretations fail to consider the extraordinary level of detail Ravel captures by imitating the refined poetic devices of Mallarmé.

Having discussed the brief scholarly debates surrounding this song, a literary analysis of *Soupir* is now appropriate. *Soupir* consists of ten lines divided clearly into two equal parts of five lines each by the key phrase “Vers l’Azur.” This phrase provides


the central turning point, or axis, around which Mallarmé constructs his “autumnal reverie.”

Mon âme vers ton front où rêve, ô calme soeur
Un automne jonché de taches de rousseur
Et vers le ciel errant de ton oeil angélique
Monte, comme dans un jardin mélancolique,
Fidèle, un blanc jet d’eau soupiré vers l’Azur!
--Vers l’Azur attendri d’Octobre pâle et pur
Qui mire aux grands bassins sa langueur infinie
Et laisse, sur l’eau morte où la fauve agonie
Des feuilles erre au vent et creuse un froid sillon,
    Se traîner le soleil jaune d’un long rayon.

My soul towards your brow where dreams, my calm sister,
    An autumn scattered with freckles of russet
And the wandering heaven of your angelic eye
Mounts up as in some melancholical gardens
Faithful, a white jet sighs towards the Azure!
--Towards October’s tender, pure and pale Azure
Which reflects in great basins its infinite languor
And lets, on dead water where the tawny death-throes
Of leaves wander windswept and scoop a cold furrow,
    The yellow sun creep of a long-drawn-out ray.

(translated Roger Fry)

Roger Pearson correctly notes that *Soupir* is a “mirror-poem,” and other examples of this poetic form abound in Mallarmé’s oeuvre during this period. The concept of a “mirror-poem” suggests that while Mallarmé explicitly depicts his “autumnal reverie” through the use of poetic techniques such as enjambment, alliteration, and foreshadowing, he implicitly crafts the underlying sentiment of the title through the use of poetic form.

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Ramón Salvídar suggests that *Soupir* creates an alternation between a dream-like state and reality, and the first stanza also represents the poet’s desire (perhaps sexual) to reconcile or become one with the “calm sister” who is mentioned in the opening line. The female figure remains anonymous, but Salvídar seems correct in saying that this character refers to a universal feminine essence. The first stanza also provides a clear sense of rising action, and Mallarmé employs words and phrases such as “angélique,” “ciel,” “âme,” “rêve,” and “vers l’Azure” to solidify this sentiment. Furthermore, the first half of the poem contains only one conjugated verb: “monte” (“climbs” or “mounts”). This verb clearly implies an upward ascent and directs the steady intensification in the first half of the poem. By conveying a constant sensation of rising in the first stanza, Mallarmé’s poem becomes a symbol of the protagonist’s inhalation.

The second half of the poem serves as an extended apposition to the first stanza and marks the end of the ascending imagery in the opening. Here the protagonist, represented by “mon âme” (“my soul”), realizes his failure to reconcile with the anonymous “calme soeur” (“calm sister”), and Mallarmé creates a vivid image of death and stasis by using the verb “se trainer” (“to drag”) and writing phrases such as “langueur infinie” (“infinite languor”). The use of alliteration on the hard consonant /p/ also contributes to the haunting imagery of the “pâle et pur” (“pale and pure”) October. Because Mallarmé focuses on images of ascension and rising in the first stanza and regresses into the realm of death and stagnation in the second stanza, many literary scholars analyze the poem as being symbolic of the inhalation and exhalation of the sigh itself.

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David Lewin’s approach to the text-music relationship in Schubert’s song “Auf dem Flusse” from Die Wintereisse provides an excellent paradigm for approaching the structural analysis of “Soupir.” He writes, “A...song takes as structural premises not only musical syntax, as it was understood at the time, but also the structure of the individual text at hand.” Ravel clearly demonstrates his sensitivity to the symbolic structure of Mallarmé’s poem. By precisely transferring the multi-layered meaning of Mallarmé’s subtle literary devices and symbolist poetic aesthetic into music, Ravel accurately captures the essence of this elusive text on the structural level by creating a palindromic five-part arch form based on pitch content (see Table 2.1). In doing so, the arch form mimics the “mirror-poem” structure of Soupir, and the song represents the inhalation and exhalation of the protagonist’s sigh. Thus, Ravel recreates Mallarmé’s symbolic formal scheme through music.

Table 2.1: Arch form structure of “Soupir”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length (mm.)</th>
<th>Pitch Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. 17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. 21</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. 31</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. 35</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A close analysis of the pitch areas throughout the song reveals Ravel’s careful adaptation of Mallarmé’s poetic form. As seen in Table 2.1, Ravel divides the song into five distinct sections based on pitch content. Measures 1-16 consist of an extended E minor pentatonic section, conveyed mostly through the use of harmonic arpeggios in the strings:

Example 2.1: “Soupir” m. 1

By employing the E minor pentatonic scale in the opening of the song, Ravel invokes a dark feeling of nature and creates a haunting image of the autumnal dream that both the poem and song depict. The combined use of harmonics and glissandi in the strings also creates an ethereal, muted effect that demonstrates Ravel’s attention to Mallarmé’s meticulous selection of soft vowels throughout the poem.

Beginning in measure 17, a wildly new chromatic texture emerges from the airy pentatonic opening and marks the second part of Ravel’s arch form. Here, the string
quartet initiates a sinking chromatic line that unsuccessfully struggles to ascend back to its original pitch. This defiant sliding line represents the protagonist’s struggle to avoid slipping into a “langueur infinie” now that his ambition to reconcile with the anonymous feminine figure has been thwarted. Example 2.2 depicts the sliding chromatic line in the strings.

Example 2.2: Chromaticism in “Soupir” mm. 17-20

While this chromatic section lasts only four measures, another chromatic section that is also four measures appears in the descending segment of the arch form (m. 31-34). Thus, it seems that Ravel carefully planned a symmetrical palindromic structure.

The third section of the song begins on the downbeat of measure 21, where Ravel combines every instrument in the ensemble and writes an incredibly dissonant octatonic chord. Broadly speaking, Ravel’s use of the octatonic scale, with its implications of harmonic stasis, represents the protagonist’s “langueur infinie” in this section of the poem. The octatonic section also serves as the central axis in the musical form and
“reflects” the rising sentiment in the first stanza, just as the protagonist’s soul is reflected in the basins of the fountain in the second half of the poem.\(^\text{45}\) Adding to the sense of unending misery is the vocalist, who sings a high “E” for the longest duration of any vocal note in the song. On a localized level, the octatonic chord in measure 21 also marks the use of an important poetic device in the text. At the same moment Mallarmé incorporates alliteration (pâle et pur), Ravel writes a striking octatonic sonority to emphasize Mallarmé’s technique. Example 2.3 depicts the opening of the octatonic section, which corresponds to the alliteration on the word “pur.”

Example 2.3: Octatonicism in “Soupir” mm. 21-24

\(^{45}\) Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, 47.
The octatonic passage continues until measure 30, where Ravel reinstates a slow chromatic descent, which now pervades the entire ensemble. This passage undoubtedly parallels the similar chromatic descent in the strings that occurred in measures 17-20, and it signifies the beginning of the fourth tonal area. During its final descent, however, the chromatic line meets little resistance, perhaps because the protagonist has accepted his failure to reconcile with the elusive female figure.

In the final measures of the song, Ravel suggests a return to the opening and thus another inhalation by combining the E minor pentatonic of the opening section with a rising motive in the piano (Example 2.4). This motive first appeared during the climax of the song on the word “fidèle” (“faithful”). Because it represents the only audible motive in the song, this piano figure is particularly helpful when considering Ravel’s interpretation of Mallarmé’s poem. By introducing a “faithful” motive at the climax of the song and insistently repeating it in the piano, Ravel suggests an optimistic reading of the poem in which the protagonist will remain faithful in his attempt to reconcile with the female figure. In fact, the voice attempts to continue the faithful motive in measure 19 during the exhalation, but it quickly disintegrates into a jagged chromatic line. Thus, when this recognizable rising motive returns at the end of the song with the same accompaniment as the opening, it clearly recalls the hopeful first stanza. The recurrence of this motive also rounds out the form, thus making the palindrome complete and signaling the beginning of another inhalation.
While this tonal analysis provides an understanding of Ravel’s broad conception of “Soupir,” a more detailed study of both Mallarmé’s poem and Ravel’s setting reveals the compositional techniques Ravel employs to convey Mallarmé’s préciosité throughout the song.

For example, line two of the poem is crucial because in addition to describing the “front” (“brow”) of the “calme soeur,” it foreshadows the autumnal scene which arrives in the second stanza. By giving the reader a glimpse into the decaying autumnal world in the second half of the poem, Mallarmé interrupts the steady rhythmic stream of ideas and experiments with the musical concept of rhythm in his poetry.  

Ravel notes this foreshadowing in his musical setting by giving the listener a brief glimpse into the harmonic world of the autumn scene described in the second half of the poem. In measure 5, there is a non-diatonic C-sharp in the vocal line on the words “un automne” (“an autumn”). This C-sharp is the only chromatically inflected note in the first half of the song, and it clearly stands out amidst the E minor pentatonic pitch collection in which the listener is immersed. The reappearance of the C-sharp in the vocal line occurs in measure 20 and corresponds to the word “Octobre.” This note is immediately

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recognizable due to its striking chromatic effect in the opening stanza. Thus, at the same moment Mallarmé interrupts the flow of the narrative by incorporating a preview of the autumn scene in the second line of the poem, Ravel also interrupts the diatonicism of the vocal line to foreshadow the tonal direction the song will take in its depiction of Mallarmé’s autumnal scene.

Ravel’s treatment of enjambment, the withholding of punctuation at the end of a poetic line until the start of the next line, provides further insight into his detailed interpretation of Mallarmé’s text. Enjambment occurs three times throughout the poem (lines four, five, and eight), and each time, Ravel’s setting indicates his understanding of Mallarmé’s technique. For example, the word “monte” in line four is noteworthy not only because it represents the first occurrence of enjambment, but also because it is the first conjugated verb in the poem. After providing the subject “mon âme” (“my soul”) in the opening line, Mallarmé withholds the verb by means of apposition all the way until “monte” in line four. Although the reader and listener expect the verb to come immediately after the subject, Mallarmé makes us wait four lines, using enjambment to emphasize the long-awaited arrival of this important verb.

Ravel imitates this striking literary device by using the common songwriting technique of text painting. However, instead of using traditional text painting, where the vocal line might be expected to make a dramatic leap on a word like “monte,” the voice drops a minor seventh. This ironic descent conflicts with the otherwise “faithful” upward motion in the rest of the ensemble (particularly the flute) and propels the listener back into the narrative of the poem after an extended diversion in the first three lines. By coupling an unexpected drop in the vocal line with the first conjugated verb of the poem,
Ravel foreshadows the exhalation of the sigh and suggests that the protagonist’s attempt to rise “vers l’Azur” will be a failure.

While less important, there is an example of traditional text painting in the song in measure 30 on the word “creuse” (“scoop” or “dig”). Here the vocalist sings a D, inflected down from the D-sharp-oriented vocal line that precedes it. Adding to this sense of “digging” is the G major #9 chord Ravel uses to create a poignant dissonance as the protagonist exhalates. This downward chromatic inflection in the vocal line also initiates the final chromatic descent back to the concluding pentatonic section, thus completing Ravel’s arch form.

The next instance of enjambment occurs in line 5 on the word “fidèle.” Ravel emphasizes the importance of this word by writing a clear climax in the music and giving the vocalist her highest note of the song (F-sharp). Additionally, Ravel’s instrumentation demonstrates his precise planning of this moment in the text. Beginning in measure 9, the flute enters the texture for the first time and begins to play a slow rising line, symbolizing the soul’s attempt to rise “vers l’Azur.” This vocal line weaves above and below the flute, but they never meet. Finally, the flute converges with the voice in measures 12-13 on the word “fidèle,” and both the poem and music reach their climax, suggesting that Ravel viewed this word as being central to the poem’s meaning. Example 2.5 depicts the relationship between the flute and vocal line.
Example 2.5: “Soupir” mm. 9-13

Ravel treats Mallarmé’s enjambment similarly in line eight on the word “laisse.” Once again, the vocalist sings a striking F-sharp, the highest vocal note in the song, recalling the F-sharp that was previously sung on the word “fidèle.” Considering these three examples, Ravel’s attention to the underlying meaning of Mallarmé’s expressive use of enjambment becomes obvious.

Ravel also conveys the free versification of Mallarmé’s poem by avoiding the use of cadences at key points in the song. Throughout its ten lines, “Soupir” contains merely two sentences divided equally into five lines each. Ravel remains faithful to Mallarmé’s poetic intent to create an uninterrupted inhalation and exhalation by avoiding cadences in order to continue the musical flow. In fact, Ravel even avoids a cadence at the end of the first sentence in line five. Instead, he uses sustained tones in the clarinets to bridge the two halves of the poem. Furthermore, the final measure of the piece does not present a conclusive cadence. Rather, it ends on an open-sounding pentatonic sonority that offers
no real conclusion to the work, just as the fate of the dreaming protagonist remains unknown from Mallarmé’s text.

The final phrase of the song provides the most compelling evidence that Ravel was attuned to both the free versification and metrical precision in Mallarmé’s poetry. In this phrase, Robert Craft’s observation that “…[Ravel] crystallizes each syllable and gives each line and word musical rhythms that preserve Mallarmé’s…” is accurate.\(^\text{47}\)

When Mallarmé wrote *Soupir*, the tradition in French poetry was to write alexandrines, which are verses composed of strictly twelve syllables with accents on syllables three, seven, ten, and twelve. As discussed earlier, Mallarmé avoids the strict rhythmic pattern of alexandrines throughout *Soupir* in order to create an uninterrupted inhalation and exhalation. In the final line of his poem, however, Mallarmé suddenly reverts back to the strict pattern of syllabic stress. Interestingly, he also creates a subtle variation on the alexandrine by elongating the final quarter of the line (last three syllables) through the use of assonance, which is the repetition of a vowel sound in nonrhyming stressed syllables. In this case, the word *long* on syllable 10 is in assonance with the final syllable of the word *rayon*. Both syllables would be stressed in a performance of the poem, and they effectively enhance the meaning of the text, which describes a (“long-drawn-out ray”) of sun. Through the use of these long /o/ vowels, Albert Thibaudet, the first scholar to produce a thorough study of Mallarmé’s work, concludes that Mallarmé is able to elongate the final line of the poem and thus create a natural ritard in the rhythm of the text.\(^\text{48}\)

\(^47\) Robert Craft, “The Nostalgic Kingdom of Maurice Ravel,” 2.

Ravel clearly sensed Mallarmé’s goal, and he employs rapidly changing time signatures and long note durations throughout the final phrase to give metric emphasis to the same syllables that Mallarmé accentuated in his poem. By creating a downbeat on every metrically accented syllable of the alexandrine, Ravel also emphasizes the distinct long /o/ vowel that Mallarmé used to create assonance and effectively crafts a natural ritard in the music. Thus, through the use of rhythm, Ravel’s setting enhances the text by doing what words cannot. The following example provides Ravel’s setting of the final line in “Soupir” as well as the original text of line 10 with the normal metrically accented syllables underlined for clarity.

Example 2.6: Line 10 of Soupir and mm. 31-35 of the score

Example 2.7 demonstrates that the poem’s final line also recalls the long /o/ vowel that permeated the opening line, adding to the mirror structure of the poem and suggesting the beginning of another inhalation. As we have already seen, Ravel also suggests a return to the opening of the song by returning to the E minor pentatonic. This time, however, the protagonist has been transformed based on the musical events throughout the song, and he is now given the rising “faithful” motive as he prepares for another inhalation.

Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, 47.
Example 2.7: Line 1 and line 10 of *Soupir*, emphasizing the long /o/

Line 1: Mon âme vers ton front où rêve, ô calme soeur

Line 10: Se traîner le soleil jaune d’un long rayon

Although Ravel clearly possessed an affinity for Mallarmé’s poetry, the *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* were his last foray into the subtle complexities of the poet’s texts. Thus, “Soupir” offers an extraordinary opportunity to study Ravel’s understanding of Mallarmé’s Symbolist poetry. In creating a new kind of text-music relationship that no composer before him had ever explored, Ravel’s “Soupir” demonstrates his ability to convey préciosité through music. As we have seen, not only did Ravel capture the various layers of meaning in Mallarmé’s intricate literary devices, but he also uses music to convey the underlying sentiment of Mallarmé’s poem in ways that words could not. The result is a fascinating example of Symbolist sensibility that marks a turning point in Ravel’s compositional career.
Chapter 3

Motivic Transformation and Character Development in “Placet futile”

The next component of my thesis will examine “Placet futile” (“Futile Petition”), the second song of Ravel’s Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé. Although Mallarmé wrote the poem in 1862, well before the complex and subtle poems of his Symbolist period, it still presented many interpretive challenges for Ravel. Struggling with the composition of this song, the composer wrote:

“…Indeed, Placet futile was completed, but I retouched it. I fully realize the great audacity of having attempted to interpret this sonnet in music. It was necessary that the melodic contour, the modulations, and the rhythms be as precious, as properly contoured as the sentiment and the images of the text. In spite of that, it was necessary to maintain the elegant deportment of the poem. Above all, it was necessary to maintain the profound and exquisite tenderness which suffuses all of this. Now that it’s done, I’m a bit nervous about it.”

Ravel’s use of the uncommon French word maintien (“deportment”) suggests his interest in the structural nature of Mallarmé’s sonnet. As with Soupir, Mallarmé’s structural design in Placet futile plays a crucial role in Ravel’s setting of this text. However, Ravel’s compositional approach in “Placet futile” differs dramatically from “Soupir,”

reflecting his nuanced understanding of the stylistic differences between this early poem and the more abstract *Soupir*.

My two-part interpretive approach will begin with a literary analysis of what Walter Fowlie considers to be one of Mallarmé’s “early love poems,” in which there is a “double intent of amorous wooing and poetic enjoyment.” Fowlie’s idea of amorous wooing is evident in the text itself, and Mallarmé’s affinity for poetic enjoyment is clear in his irreverent approach to the traditional French sonnet, particularly in the use of irregular rhyme schemes as a means of setting up and resolving the poem’s central conflict. Thus, as in *Soupir*, Mallarmé’s literary improprieties in *Placet futile* allow him to use poetic structure as a means of enhancing the underlying meaning of the poem.

In the second part of this chapter, my analytical approach will focus on Ravel’s use of harmonic ambiguity and motivic transformation in order to demonstrate that the crux of Mallarmé’s poem is, as the title suggests, the petition itself. For example, Ravel’s harmonic language in “Placet futile” borders on atonality, but underlying fifth motion in the bass pervades the entire song. This blend of non-functional chords supported by functional root motion in the bass teases the listener’s perception of tonality. I assert that after analyzing the text, one recognizes that Ravel purposefully obscures the harmonic syntax on the musical surface in order to avoid conclusive cadences and create a constantly evolving tonal center that represents the man’s repeated, yet futile attempts to utter his request to the elusive princess.

Also, by tracking the transformations of motivic material in “Placet futile,” we can follow the fate of the dreaming man throughout the song until he begs “Princess,

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appoint me shepherd of your smiles.” By assigning motives to each of the characters in the opening of the song, Ravel creates a musical dialogue that mimics the interaction between the man and the princess in Mallarmé’s poem. Thus, just as *Placet futile* represents an earlier, more traditional poem than *Soupir*, Ravel’s use of motivic transformation and elusive chromatic harmony as a means of depicting character development in Mallarmé’s poem can also be seen as a more traditional approach to composition as compared with the more avant-garde Symbolist approach in “Soupir.”

In order to provide a detailed harmonic and motivic analysis of Ravel’s song, we must first have an understanding of the poem itself. Dating from 1862, *Placet futile* comes well before Mallarmé’s Symbolist period. In fact, it was Mallarmé’s first published poem, appearing in the February 1862 issue of *Le Papillon*. Many literary scholars believe it inaugurated Mallarmé’s reputation as a prominent figure in fin-de-siècle French artistic circles. From a literary standpoint, *Placet futile* differs from *Soupir* in a variety of ways. Instead of creating an arch form that mimics the structure of the poem, *Placet futile* adheres to the more traditional form of the sonnet. Mallarmé’s oeuvre contains fifty-three sonnets, a form that he admired for its expressive potential, as we see in the following excerpt from his correspondence with another poet, Henri Cazalis:

> You will laugh because of my obsession for sonnets – not because you made this delightful one – but for me it is a large poem in small form: the quatrains and the tercets seem to me to be entire songs, and I spend three

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days sometimes balancing the parts in advance, in order that the whole thing be harmonious and approach Beauty.  

Having discussed Mallarmé’s predilection for this traditional literary form, it is now appropriate to take a more detailed look at Placet futile and explore its significant departures from regular sonnet form. Placet futile chronicles the fantastical daydream of a man who wishes to become one with the exotic princess who is painted on his teacup:

Princesse! à jalouer le destin d’une Hébé  
Qui point sur cette tasse au baiser de vos lèvres  
J’use mes feux mais n’ai rang discret que d’abbé  
Et ne figurei même nu sur le Sèvres.

Comme je ne suis pas ton bichon embarbé,  
Ni la pastille, ni du rouge, ni jeux mièvres  
Et que sur moi je sais ton regard clos tombé  
Blonde dont les coiffeurs divins sont des orfèvres!

Nommez-nous…toi de qui tant de ris framboisés  
Se joignent en troupeau d’agneaux apprivoisés  
Chez tous broutant les voeux et bélant aux délires,

Nommez-nous…pour qu’Amour ailé d’un éventail  
M’y peigne flûte aux doigts endormant ce bercail,  
Princesse, nommez-nous berger de vos sourires.

Princess! in envying the fate of a Hebe,  
Who appears on this cup at the kiss of your lips,  
I use up my ardor, but my modest station is only that of abbé  
And I won’t even appear nude on the Sévres porcelain.

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Since I am not your bewhiskered lapdog,
Nor lozenge, nor rouge, nor affected games,
And since I know that you look on me with indifferent eyes,
Blonde whose divine hairdressers are goldsmiths!---

Appoint me…you whose many raspberried laughs
Are gathered into flocks of docile lambs,
Nibbling at all vows and bleating deliriously,

Appoint me…in order that Love, with a fan as his wings,
May paint me fingering a flute and lulling this sheepfold,
Princess, appoint me shepherd of your smiles.

(translated by Arbie Orenstein)\textsuperscript{55}

With its overtly sensual imagery, the text clearly insinuates the man’s desire for some kind of physical relationship with the fictional princess. Discussing \textit{Placet futile}, Hasye Cooperman writes that Mallarmé’s placement of “jalouser” next to “le destin” in the opening line is a strategy he frequently uses to denote a dream, a crisis, or an attainment…\textsuperscript{56} This interpretation contains many parallels with Ravel’s setting. By assigning evolving motives to the two characters throughout the song, Ravel depicts the man’s journey through his “dream” or crisis” until he finally “attains” his goal of requesting the princess’s companionship.

Before the man successfully utters his petition, there are two failed attempts that clearly suggest his need to undergo a personal transformation throughout the poem. Mallarmé’s text begins by depicting the man as insecure and lacking confidence, writing such lines as “my modest station is only that of abbé” and “I know that you look on me with indifferent eyes.” After belittling himself, which resulted in two failed attempts to

\textsuperscript{55} Arbie Orenstein, ed., \textit{Maurice Ravel: Songs 1896-1914} (New York: Dover, 1990), xxv.
\textsuperscript{56} Hasye Cooperman, \textit{The Aesthetics of Stéphane Mallarmé} (New York: Russell and Russell, 1971), 75.
utter his “futile petition,” the abbé finally overcomes his fear in the final line of the poem, saying “Princess, appoint me shepherd of your smiles.” Mallarmé leaves the fate of the narrator unknown, however, and there is no indication from the princess regarding the success or failure of the man’s petition. Thus, the crux of the poem is not about the man’s fate. Rather, as the title suggests, it revolves around his struggle to utter the petition.

Although Mallarmé admired the sonnet for its poetic form, Roger Pearson notes that “variation and experimentation” seemed to be Mallarmé’s goals in his early sonnets. In fact, of the sixteen sonnets composed through 1871, fifteen contained atypical rhyme schemes. Upon the 1872 publication of Théodore de Banville’s *Petit traité de poésie française*, however, Mallarmé began to rethink his experimentation. In his book, Banville notes that the correct rhyme scheme for a Petrarchan sonnet should be ABBA ABBA CCD EDE. After the publication of Banville’s book, Mallarmé wrote another twenty-one sonnets, each of which adhered to Banville’s strict rhyming principles. In preparing several early works for publication in a collection, Mallarmé even revised some of his early sonnets in an attempt to make them more “regular” according to Banville’s guidelines. Four sonnets, however, remained unchanged with respect to Banville’s rhyme scheme. One of these was *Placet futile*, and Mallarmé acknowledges its discrepancies in the book’s table of contents, referring to it as a “sonnet irrégulier.”

Mallarmé’s refusal to alter *Placet futile* according to Banville’s strict rhyme scheme demonstrates the expressive importance of his deviations.

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57 Pearson, *Mallarmé and Circumstance*, 147.
As mentioned before, Banville notes that a sonnet should have five different rhymes, two in the quatrains (AB) and three in the tercets (CDE). Thus, a typical rhyme scheme for a sonnet would have been ABBA ABBA CCD EDE. As seen in Table 3.1, the rhyme scheme in *Placet futile* creates an irregular pattern of four rhymes that results in the scheme ABAB ABAB AAC DDC. It should be noted that from a visual standpoint, the rhyme scheme would be ABAB ABAB CCD EED because the “s” technically constitutes a plural noun in lines nine and ten. From a purely aural standpoint, however, the plural rhyme is indistinguishable from the singular. Given Mallarmé’s interest in the aural quality of his poetry, it is reasonable to assume that this rhyme was intended to serve as a prolongation of the “A” rhyme in the quatrains.

![Table 3.1: Rhyming and gender patterns in *Placet futile*](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Rhyme</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mallarmé’s rhyme scheme breaks with tradition in both the quatrains and the tercets. In the quatrains, Mallarmé employs “rimes croisées,” (“crossed rhymes”) that
alternate every other line (ABAB). In the tercets, Mallarmé’s break with tradition involves rhyming the third line of the first tercet with the third line of the second tercet (AAC DDC). This irregular rhyme scheme not only demonstrates one way in which Mallarmé rejects traditional sonnet form, but it also serves as a means of representing the conflict between the man and the princess. Mallarmé’s break with tradition reaches beyond the rhyme scheme, however, providing even more evidence that his deviations represent deliberate structural choices that enhance the poem’s meaning. According to tradition, a sonnet can begin with either a masculine rhyme or a feminine rhyme, but the poet must alternate masculine and feminine rhymes according to the traditional rhyme scheme of the sonnet. Since Mallarmé purposefully alters the rhyme scheme in *Placet futile*, he is able to create an interesting dynamic concerning gender roles throughout the poem. For example, Mallarmé’s use of “crossed rhymes” (ABAB ABAB) in the quatrains sets up a conflict between the struggling abbé (masculine rhyme) and the elusive princess (feminine rhyme) that must be resolved in the following tercets.

While it might seem unreasonable to assign gendered rhymes to particular characters in a poem, many literary scholars have argued that deviations from traditional rhyme schemes in French poetry can be used as a means of enhancing the poem’s content. For example, Graham Chesters notes that instances of gendered rhyming in French poetry can be found in works such as Baudelaire’s “La Chevelure,” in which Baudelaire purposefully begins with a feminine rhyme to ensure that every three of the five rhyme endings are feminine, suggesting a female domination. Clive Scott also argues that for the French Romantic poet, “rhyme becomes the vehicle of personal

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aspiration, the privileged site of wish-fulfillment…,”\(^60\) and the ABAB scheme can, as in the case of Alphonse de Lamartine’s poem “L’Isolement,” embody a “forward progression with hesitation….”\(^61\) In the same way, Mallarmé capitalizes on the ABAB rhyme scheme’s ability to represent forward progress with hesitation by writing a poem that depicts a man who desperately tries to attain his goal but continually undermines himself through belittling digressions.

Furthermore, by creating a conflict of “crossed rhymes” in the quatrains, Mallarmé prepares the reader for the resolution of this conflict in the tercets, when the abbé finally overcomes his fear. Thus, when Mallarmé breaks tradition by continuing to use the masculine rhyme from the quatrains in the first tercet, he pushes the feminine rhyme to the end of the tercets, suggesting the beginning of the man’s gradual empowerment in the second half of the sonnet. As Clive Scott has noted, the ABAB scheme is “a scheme of change with a small dose of recurrence built into it, sufficient recurrence to give courage.”\(^62\) Considering the nature of Mallarmé’s poem, in which the abbé gains confidence after several repeated attempts to utter the request, Mallarmé seems to have capitalized on the inherent expressive nature of this irregular rhyme scheme.

As we have already noted in Chapter 1, Ravel read French literature and poetry extensively, and he was particularly fond of Mallarmé’s work. Thus, when he uses a word such as “maintien,” which carries significant connotations of structure, he likely understood the expressive importance of Mallarmé’s deviations from traditional sonnet

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 133.
\(^{62}\) Ibid., 134.
form. After reading such a wide variety of poetry and attending countless performances of poetic works, he certainly would have known the standard rhyme scheme of a sonnet as well as the tradition of alternating masculine and feminine rhymes. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that Ravel would respond to Mallarmé’s poetic improprieties in his own setting of “Placet futile.” In the following musical analysis, I will explore the ways in which Ravel’s instrumentation, elusive harmonies, and motivic transformation dramatize the character development that Mallarmé creates through irregular gendered rhyme patterns. In doing so, I will prove that the abbé’s ability to utter his request results in a transformation, both for himself and the princess. First, however, a summary of the extant analyses of this song is necessary.

While Peter Kaminsky uses a harmonic analysis to assert that the poem represents a successful petition resulting in the fulfillment of the man’s desires, there is no evidence in the poem to support this claim. Kaminsky argues that only the princess has the capacity to uplift the man’s humble state into a position of power. By demonstrating Ravel’s use of harmonic sub-positioning, Kaminsky argues that Ravel empowers the princess to decide the man’s fate at the end of the song. Kaminsky’s idea that the man undergoes a transformation throughout the poem is accurate, but the idea that the princess is able to empower him harmonically seems unmerited. On the contrary, the man’s final successful attempt to utter his petition at the end of the song suggests that it is he who becomes empowered in Ravel’s setting. Robert Gronquist’s interpretation of the song correctly stresses the importance of melodic motives, but he fails to explain what they mean in the context of Ravel’s rich harmonic framework or in conjunction with

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Mallarmé’s character development. As with “Soupir,” these analyses fail to consider fully the extent to which Ravel understood Mallarmé’s complex poetic style.

Ravel builds “Placet futile” on the two melodic motives that are depicted in Examples 3.1 and 3.2. Example 3.1, heard in the opening measure, represents the princess while Example 3.2 represents the abbé. The transformation of these motives throughout the song will correspond to the personal change the abbé undergoes as well as the transformative effect he has on the princess.

Example 3.1: Princess motive

![Example 3.1: Princess motive](image)

Example 3.2: Abbé motive

![Example 3.2: Abbé motive](image)

Both the placement of these melodic motives with respect to Mallarmé’s text as well as Ravel’s consistent choice of instrumentation provide clear evidence for assigning these motives to particular characters. For example, the princess motive always occurs in close proximity to an invocation of her character in the text, and it figures prominently into the musical texture two times before the first word of text (“Princesse!”) is even sung. When

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the narrator finally invokes the princess’s name in measure 5, this thirty-second note motive is the only melodic idea the listener has heard. Thus, given the close proximity of the motive’s entrance to the princess’s name, it seems natural to associate this melodic idea with her character. This motive also returns at several key points throughout the song when the abbé refers to the princess. For example, in measures 12-14, the narrator says to the princess “I am not your bewhiskered lapdog…” In measures 26-27, the motive appears again, though greatly altered, when the abbé finally utters, “Princess, appoint me shepherd of your smiles.”

The same logic holds true for the abbé’s motive, which also appears when he refers to himself in the first person. For example, the abbé’s rising motive first enters in measures 7-9 when he discusses his envy of the princess, lamenting “I use up my ardor, but my modest station is only that of abbé.” The motive also appears in conjunction with the princess in measures 12-14 on the line “I am not your bewhiskered lapdog…” As we will see, this simultaneous presentation of the two motives in Ravel’s setting creates an interesting parallel that corresponds to Mallarmé’s conflicting use of crossed rhymes in his sonnet. Finally, the rising motive occurs in measure 16 when the abbé states “And since I know that you look on me with indifferent eyes…” Thus, a close analysis of the text in conjunction with Ravel’s setting provides evidence that these motives are meant to represent the male and female protagonists.

Ravel’s consistent use of instrumentation for these motives also suggests that he intended to associate them not only with a particular character in the text, but also with a specific instrument, making their appearances more recognizable. For example, both occurrences of the princess motive in the opening measures take place in the clarinet, and
when the princess overtakes the abbé’s motive in measure 10, the melody shifts from the flute back to the clarinet, allowing the listener to make a timbral connection with the princess. Furthermore, the altered version of the princess’s motive in measure 27 once again appears in the clarinet, suggesting that this instrument signals her presence. The use of specific instrumentation to depict the abbé is strikingly similar. When the rising motive first enters, Ravel scores it in the strings and flutes. In its subsequent appearances, it remains in the strings, providing a marked contrast from the clarinet motive and making the two characters easy to distinguish.

Having assigned the two main melodic motives to the two characters in Mallarmé’s poem, we can now analyze the intervallic content of these motives in order to understand how Ravel transforms them throughout the song. As seen in Example 3.1, the princess motive consists of a brief, angular melodic fragment played in rapid thirty-second notes. The intervallic structure of the princess’s motive, a falling major seventh followed by a rising minor sixth and falling perfect fifth, will become particularly important as we trace its development throughout the song. Without any harmonic context to support this motive in the opening measures, this seemingly arbitrary collection of pitches sounds atonal. However, these pitches will appear again at several key points throughout the song’s development, and their transformation in the final measures will provide some of the clearest evidence that Ravel uses thematic transformation and harmonic contextualization to depict character development throughout the song. The resulting musical effect resonates with Mallarmé’s deviations from traditional sonnet form.
Following the presentation of the opening thematic material, a series of falling perfect fourths and fifths occurs in the first violins. At this point, the entire string quartet enters, creating a harmonic backdrop for the song. In measures 3-4, Ravel provides the first sign of the elusive harmonic motion that pervades the song. Here, he builds an A major\(^9\) chord in root position. During the final eighth-note pulse, however, the upper pitches shift chromatically, creating an F-sharp major/minor chord with an A in the bass. The downbeat of the next measure is an unmistakable D minor sonority, but due to the quickly changing harmony in the measure before, Ravel avoids a conclusive cadence. This type of elusive cadence serves as a metaphor for the narrator’s repeated, yet failed attempts to utter his request to the princess and embodies the “forward progression with hesitation” that Clive Scott observes in ABAB rhyme schemes.

Immediately following the obscured cadence in measure 4, the princess motive enters in the clarinet, this time supported by a vague sense of D minor. In measure 5, the man calls to the princess, singing the same rising minor sixth contained in her motive. The use of this striking interval for the invocation of the princess offers further evidence that Ravel intended the angular motive from the opening to represent her. After the man calls out to the princess, his motive enters in measure 7. This motivic entrance foreshadows his presence in the text in the same way that the princess’s motive signaled her entrance. The abbé’s motive first begins in the violin before climbing higher in the texture to the flutes in measures 8-9. Unlike the jagged, unpredictable motive given to the princess, this melody is a slow rising line that deliberately ascends through the texture.
and embodies what Guy Michaud refers to in Mallarmé’s early works as a “discrete and veiled eroticism.”

In measure 10, Ravel suggests a continuation of the abbé’s rising line, this time in the clarinet. His attempt to enter into the timbral realm of the princess is futile, however, and the rising motive quickly falters, descending nearly two octaves. At this point, the princess demonstrates her power over the man as her falling melodic line imitates and ultimately overcomes his vocal line. Fittingly, the abbé’s motivic failure corresponds to his belittling digression during which he admits, “And I won’t even appear nude on the Sèvres porcelain.” Ravel’s choice to have the princess take over the man’s motive at this point clearly reflects Mallarmé’s poetic improprieties. Just as Ravel’s setting suggests that the princess overcomes the abbé at this point in the narrative, so too does Mallarmé strategically depart from traditional sonnet form in this line by employing a feminine rhyme where a masculine rhyme would have been expected.

Ravel also employs elusive harmonic motion in the bass that corresponds to the abbé’s motivic failure. When his seemingly confident and assured rising line enters in measure 7, the underlying harmonic motion undermines its power, creating instability and a failed cadence that represents the abbé’s failure to utter his request. Between measures 8 and 9, the bass line moves by fifth from C to F. Given that the key signature contains one flat, one might expect the arrival of the F major chord to be the first tonic chord in the song. As with the obscured cadence in measures 3-4, however, the C in the bass supports a flat 6/3 chord on the surface. Thus, there is little harmonic closure when the bass moves to F in measure 9. Furthermore, in measures 9-11, just as the man admits

“my modest station is only that of abbé and I won’t even appear nude on the Sèvres porcelain,” Ravel creates root motion that is inconsistent with the pattern of fifth motion used thus far. Instead, the F major harmony slides down chromatically to E major. This constitutes the first break in the pervasive fifth motion in the bass, and it marks the beginning of not only a new quatrain in Mallarmé’s sonnet, but also a new section in Ravel’s setting.

The second section of “Placet futile” demonstrates that just as there is a conflict between the “crossed” masculine and feminine endings in this “sonnet irrégulier,” there is also a struggle between the motives of the princess and abbé. Ravel depicts this struggle by superimposing the motives of the princess and abbé in this developmental section. Beginning in measure 12, the piano enters the texture for the first time with a flourish of thirty-second notes. Hidden within these notes is the princess’s angular motive as well as the abbé’s melodic line, which again ascends through the texture in slow rising eighth notes. The use of the piano for both motives suggests that Ravel is beginning to equalize the power between the princess and abbé in measures 12-13 by eliminating their instrumental associations. Example 3.3 depicts the piano’s entrance, which contains the conflicting presentation of both melodic motives.

Example 3.3: “Placet futile” m. 12
Beginning in measure 13, the altered motive from measure 10, during which the princess gained control of the abbé’s rising line and transformed it into a distinct falling gesture, enters the piano texture. Example 3.4a depicts the original motive from measure 10 while Example 3.4b shows the transformed motive in the piano. Instead of descending a perfect fourth, the transformed motive is expanded to a falling minor sixth, suggesting an inversion of the princess’s striking rising minor sixth in the opening. This motive will continue to change in the next section of the song, where the abbé regains control and attempts to make his request.

Example 3.4: Descending princess motive

(a) Clarinet, m. 10-11

(b) Piano transformation, m. 13
In an attempt to regain control, the princess motive invades the instrumental realm of the abbé in measure 14. Her attempt is futile, however, since this section concludes with the abbé’s motive re-emerging victoriously in the strings in measure 16. Ravel’s conclusion to this conflicted motivic section suggests that the man is beginning to regain control of his ambitions. Just as the abbé states “And since I know that you look on me…,” Ravel brings back his determined rising motive. As we know, however, there cannot be any closure since the man has yet to utter his request to the princess. Thus, Ravel’s setting once again mimics Mallarmé’s unresolved crossed rhymes by avoiding cadential resolution. As with the end of the first section of “Placet futile,” Ravel once again breaks the fifth motion in the bass to signal a structural shift, writing a B minor\(^9\) chord that moves down a minor third to a G-sharp\(^7\) chord in measure 17.

Measure 19 marks the third section of the song as well as the beginning of the tercets. Here, the text clearly provides evidence of the abbé’s increased confidence since he finally begins his petition, saying “appoint me…” Furthermore, Mallarmé’s irregular rhyme scheme at this moment suggests male empowerment by continuing the same masculine rhyme from the quatrains in the tercets. In his musical setting, Ravel also conveys the abbé’s increased confidence by inverting the princess’s motive and assigning it to the abbé. This inverted motive serves as a musical counterpart to Mallarmé’s male empowerment and sets up the man’s first attempt at making his petition.

While the abbé’s words “appoint me” represent his first attempt to formulate some sort of request, he falters once again, preventing him from attaining his goal. In the music, Ravel represents the abbé’s increased confidence by assigning him the princess
motive from the vocal line in measure 10. Example 3.5 compares the vocal descent in measure 10 with the abbé’s “appointment” motive.

Example 3.5: Comparison of “princess” and “abbé” motives

(a) Vocal line, m. 10

The intervallic content of these motives is identical, but the order of them is reversed, suggesting a transformed, more confident man. Thus, just as the masculine rhyme invades the tercets, pushing the feminine rhyme to the end, so too does Ravel’s inversion and reassignment of the Princess’s motive suggest the man’s empowerment.

Even though the abbé finally begins his request in measure 19, Ravel still avoids harmonic closure because the request is not yet complete. In measure 21, the C# to F# motion in the bass is obscured by the incongruous pitches on the surface. Measure 22 marks the beginning of the final tercet as well as the man’s second attempt to make his
request. Ravel employs the “appointment” motive once again, this time sequenced down a whole step. The musical setting for the man’s second attempt is essentially identical to that of the first, except for a soaring flute line in measure 23 that corresponds to the abbé’s request to be painted on a fan “fingering a flute.” The use of the flute and pentatonic scale undoubtedly evokes images of the Orient and the pastoral mood that Mallarmé’s text creates.

The climax of the song occurs during the final line of Mallarmé’s second tercet, when the abbé finally utters his complete petition: “Princess, appoint me shepherd of your smiles” without any digressions or belittling appositions. In the music, this corresponds to the final four measures, during which there is an apotheosis of the harmonic, motivic, and instrumental devices that Ravel used throughout the song. As with other structurally important events in Mallarmé’s text, Ravel once again breaks the underlying fifth motion in measures 25-26 in order to signal an equally important moment in the musical setting. In measure 25, the A major$^9$ chord shifts down a minor third to a C major$^9$ chord, recalling the third motion from B to G-sharp in measures 17-18. Unlike previous dominant chords that provided no clear cadential resolution, the pitches in this C major$^9$ chord do not shift chromatically at the last minute. Instead, they resolve properly to an F major$^6$ chord, providing the first sense of tonal closure in the song. This corresponds to the text as well, since the abbé has finally completed his petition.

Mallarmé’s last line of text finally pairs the subject with the verb, creating a strong declamatory statement without the belittling digressions that characterized the poem’s opening. Furthermore, Mallarmé’s apotheosis recalls and combines words and
phrases such as “Princess” and “Appoint me” that occurred earlier in the sonnet. In the same way, Ravel’s setting brings back the motives previously associated with these words in the song, allowing him to make a declamatory musical statement about the abbé. The only motive that is missing, however, is the abbé’s slow rising motive that represented his repeated, yet failed attempts to make his request. The absence of this motive fits perfectly into Mallarmé’s text, however, because the successful completion of his request now renders the motive that previously suggested his struggle useless.

Thus, the melodic motives that remain are the original “Princess” motive, with its jagged contour and the man’s new “appointment” motive, which the listener is now familiar with due to its repetition and stepwise descent throughout the final section of the song. It is here that Clive Scott’s theory of the ABAB rhyme scheme’s “changing in order to recur” applies to Ravel’s melodic motives. This time, the man’s bold request takes the princess by surprise, and her motive is skewed almost beyond recognition. The rhythmic precision of her motive is greatly distorted during the words “berger de vos sourires,” and both the intervallic content and the order of pitches have been altered. Example 3.6 shows the apotheosis of Mallarmé’s text as well as Ravel’s musical counterpart. Notice the rising minor sixth that signals the princess, followed by the “appoint me” motive and the distorted princess figure. The transformation of these motives, combined with the sense of tonal closure when the C major⁹ chord resolves to F, suggests that the abbé’s petition is complete.
Example 3.6: Apotheosis of “Placet futile” mm. 25-26

In “Placet futile,” Ravel rejects the symbolic compositional approach that he took in “Soupir” and uses more traditional means such as harmony and motivic development to uphold the *maintien* of Mallarmé’s poem. By examining Mallarmé’s treatment of gendered rhymes and departures from traditional sonnet form, we found yet another aspect of Mallarmé’s *préciosité* that Ravel translated into music. While Ravel’s compositional approach in “Placet futile” appears to be more conservative than in “Soupir,” they are in fact unified by one key element. In both settings, Ravel’s interest in Mallarmé’s formal ambiguities and deviations from traditional poetic form provide the impetus for his musical setting. Because of his respect for Mallarmé’s precise poetic designs, Ravel creates two musical settings that capture the *préciosité plein de profondeur* of Mallarmé’s poetry.
Appendix A: “Soupir”

I. Soupir

à Igor Strawinsky
Et vers le ciel errant

p sourdine

à jusqu'à 20

de ton œil asté.
sur l'aumône ou la fauvèe genie.Daisfeul, les erre au vent et creuse un froid lun.
Appendix B: “Placet futile”
au Mouv! Très ralenti au Mouv! Très ralenti au Mouv!

Retenez - - - 1 Un peu plus lent

Retenez - - - 1 Un peu plus lent
Ralentissez

peu

à

Ni la pas til le, ni du rou ge, ni jeux

Très lent

pp

Très lent. \( \cdot \cdot \cdot \) 72
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