Ravel Workshop Handout

A study on Ravel's *Introduction et Allegro*

Disclaimers:

1. This analysis is intended to showcase elements in this piece that are idiomatically suited to the double action pedal harp and does not assume these decisions factored into Ravel's creative compositional reasoning.
2. This piece is not the "gold standard" of idiomatic harp writing. Feel free to emulate aspects that you find interesting, but give yourself the room to also explore other concepts and ideas as you continue to compose for the harp.

Background:

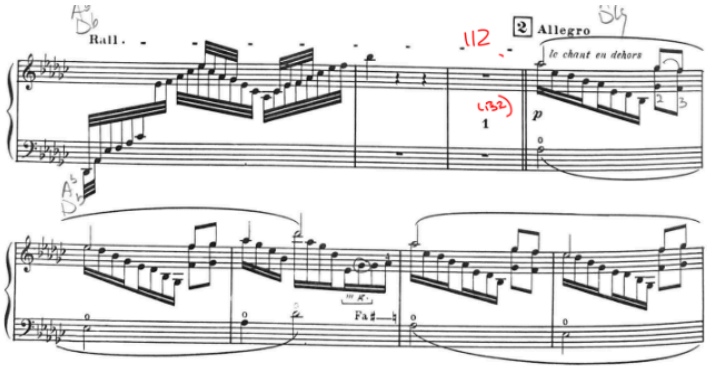
Commissioned by the harp manufacturer Erard in 1907 to showcase the double-action pedal harp as a response to Pleyel's commission of the Debussy Danses. The piece was premiered by harpist Micheline Kahn (a student of Alphonse Hasselmans and mother of composer Jean Damase).

Idiomatic writing concepts for discussion

- Linear writing vs. vertical
- Slower harmonic rhythm
- Hand shape consideration for patterns
- 3 note groups in the lower register
- Mid-range harmonics
- Use of Enharmonics
- Cross-staff beaming
- Warnings

Linear writing vs. vertical

If you scan through the piece, you will notice that much of the writing is linear. Ravel makes extensive use of arpeggios (one note sounding at a time) rather than dense chords (multiple notes played simultaneously). See the main theme at Rehearsal 2 as an example. The overall texture, even in passages with chords, is not particularly dense. This practice allows for the natural resonance of the harp, rather than requiring frequent muffling.



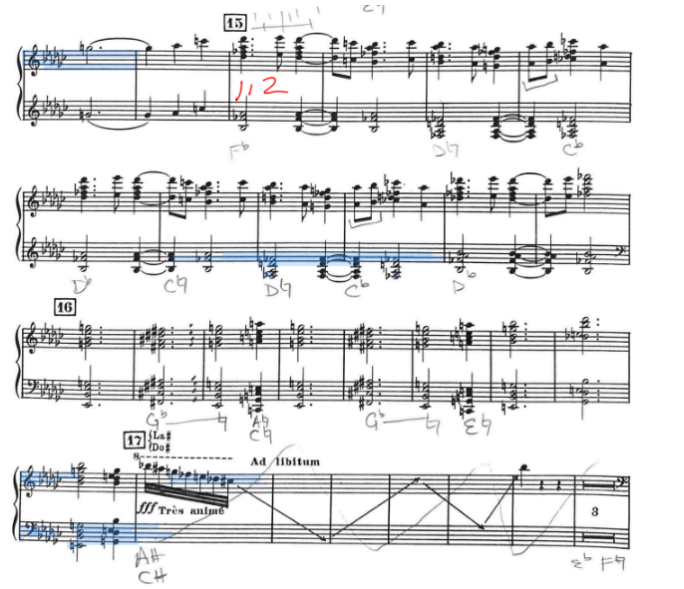
Similarly, Ravel tends to keep the harp voicing simpler, rather than using more pianistic writing with 2-3 (or more) voices. The main theme (Rehearsal 2) is an elaboration with implied polyphony of a single voice.

Slower harmonic rhythm

In order to create a more linear texture, this piece uses slower harmonic rhythm. In the Allegro section, harmonies tend to change every 1-2 measures and no more than once per beat.

While this is not a strict theory analysis, the main theme (Rehearsal 2) explores linear pentatonic harmonies and relationships of 4ths, rather than complex, rapidly changing harmonies.

The passage with the quickest harmonic changes is Rehearsals 15-16, which is still relatively slow.

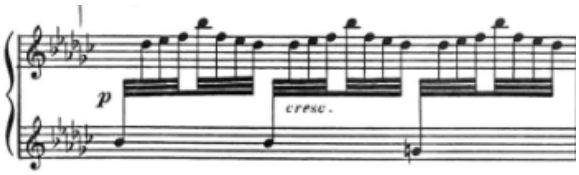


Hand shape consideration for patterns

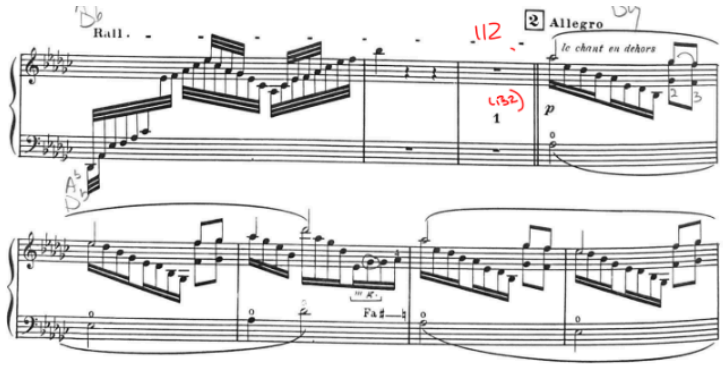
When writing for the harp, patterns (groups of notes that are played together) should ideally align with the natural spacing of the harpist's hands.

On the harp, the hands are oriented in the same direction, ascending from finger 4 to the thumb. Generally, the most comfortable spacing uses larger intervals at the top of the pattern (between the thumb and finger 2) and smaller intervals between the other fingers, especially between fingers 3 and 4.

Ravel predominantly utilizes these idiomatic patterns throughout the entire piece, with a few exceptions that will be addressed later. See 4 after Rehearsal 1



When the overall pattern span is under an octave, the inner intervals are less critical. However, if the span is an octave or more, the hand shape consideration should be considered. Observe the difference between the first two measures of rehearsal 2.



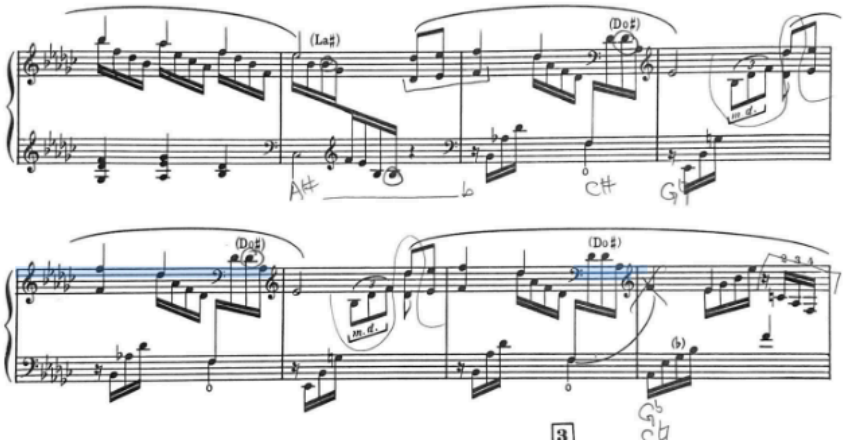
For more examples of the layout, study the patterns in Rehearsal 4 and 24

3 Note Groups in the Lower Register

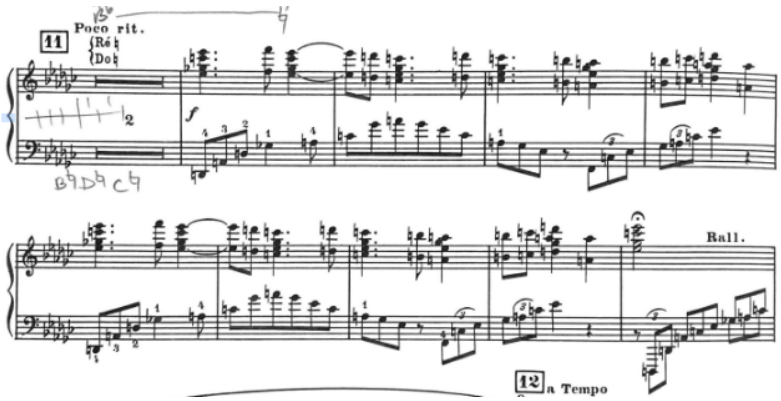
The primary exception to the hand shape guideline is when writing in the lower register. Generally, writing close intervals lacks clarity and increases the risk of buzzing. Best practices on the harp require larger interval spans, especially between the lowest two notes.

In order to work with the hand shape, composers should think in 3-note groups in the lower register, rather than the traditional 4. This allows the harpist to place these patterns with fingers 1, 2, and 4, thus avoiding the awkwardness of a large interval between fingers 3 and 4.

Throughout this piece, Ravel makes frequent use of this 3-note strategy. See 8 after Rehearsal 2.

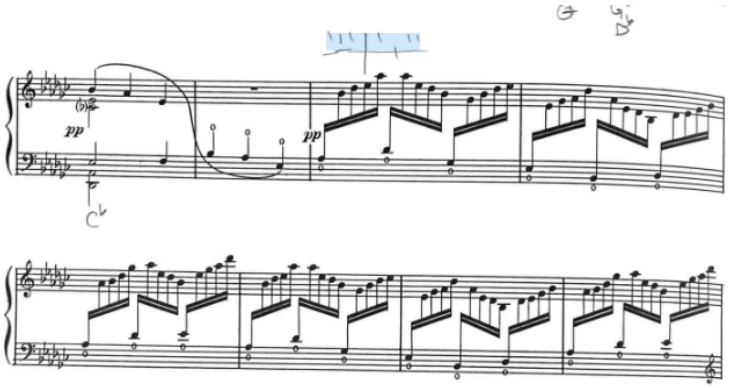


Now, Ravel does make occasional use of 4 finger patterns in the lower register, particularly during the cadenza sections, but periodically throughout. As long as awkward patterns are not constant in a piece, a harpist can work around them. See Rehearsal 11.



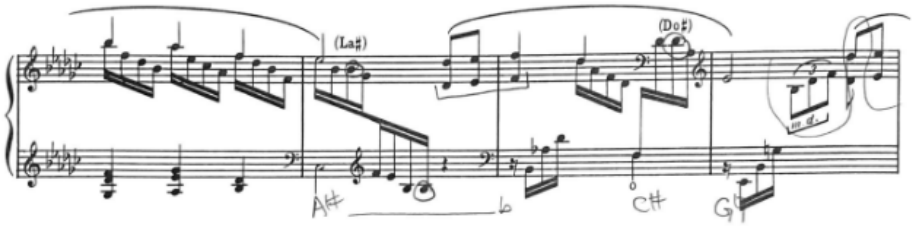
Mid-range harmonics

This piece makes frequent use of left hand harmonics, particularly in the main theme. Note that the harmonics are found in the mid-range of the harp, between B2-A4. This is the most resonant range for harmonics. See this example at Rehearsal 4.

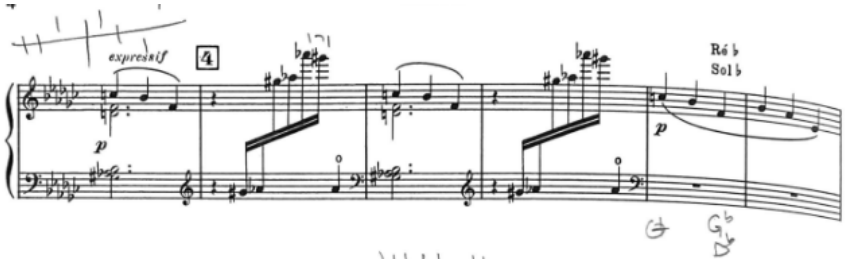


Use of Enharmonics

In keeping with late 19th century harp writing practice (ex. Parish-Alvars), Ravel makes occasional use of enharmonics (or doubled notes). The mostly flat key (Gb major) allows for maximum enharmonic options while requiring minimal pedal changes. See 10 after Rehearsal 2.

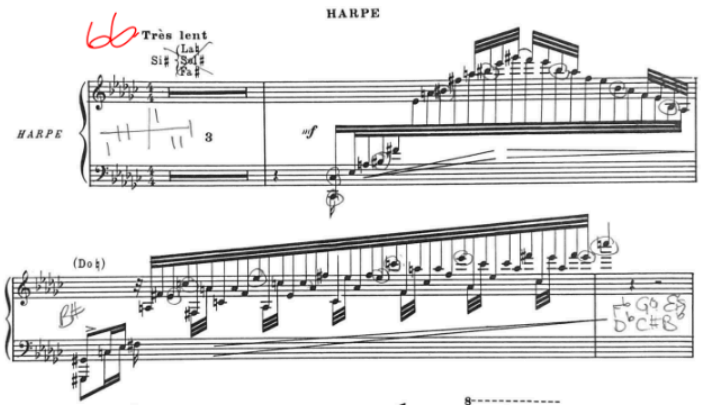


Note that Ravel notated most of the enharmonics as doubled notes (see above). However, in Rehearsal 4, he respells the enharmonic note.



Cross-Staff Beaming

This piece is one of the best printed examples of cross-staff beaming. While there are some inconsistencies, the printed music clearly shows how the voices move both between the staves and between the hands. For instance, the Introduction uses stem directions to show which hand plays which notes while also splitting the notes by register, not by hand.

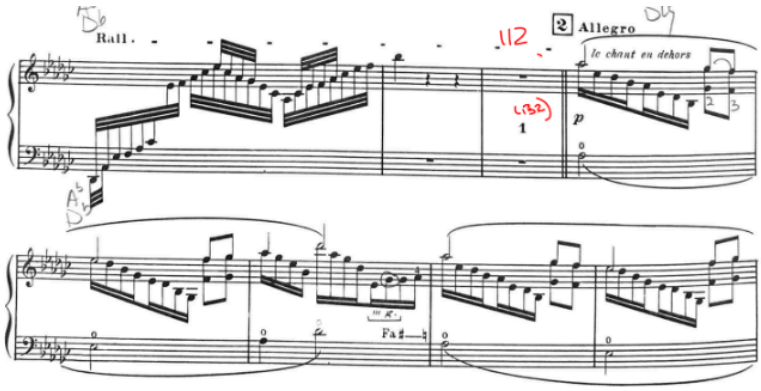


Warnings

While this piece is highly idiomatic, it does include some quite difficult elements. These elements are part of what makes it an advanced-level harp piece.

Quick jumps in both hands

The main theme at Rehearsal 2 is quite tricky to play at full tempo due to quick register shifts in both hands. In the first measure, the left hand quickly shifts from the harmonic up to catch the descending arpeggio. In the third measure, the right hand shifts quickly to play the two 16th note descending arpeggios. The left hand plays the final group of 16th notes and then jumps back down to catch the harmonic.



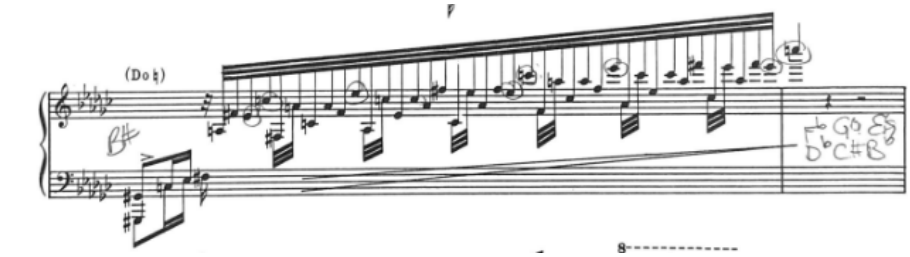
Thumb slides

This piece uses the advanced thumb slide technique throughout. This technique allows a harpist to combine two adjacent notes into a single motion. This is predominantly found in the main theme at Rehearsal 2 and whenever that motif returns. This technique requires a little extra time to place the first note, which is allowed by the left hand taking the previous 16th notes.

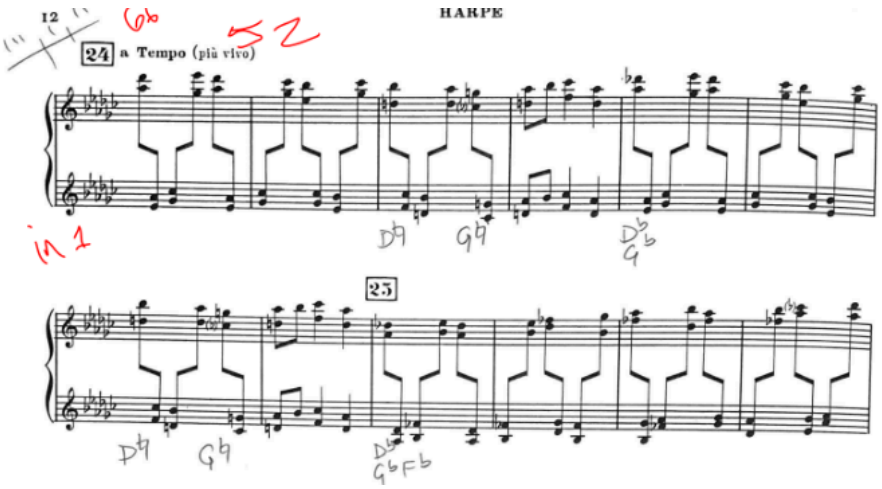
Cross-placed patterns

While harpists generally place notes in the order played ("directional placing"), advanced harp music can make use of cross-placed patterns. With these patterns, groups of four notes will be placed together, but played out of order with stronger fingers paired together. The most common finger pairing is 2-4 and 3-1, although 1-4 and 2-3 is also possible.

The Introduction et Allegro uses cross-placed patterns in two main sections: first in the second of the opening arpeggios, and second at rehearsal 24.



The section at Rehearsal 24 is particularly difficult, since the pattern is inconsistent.

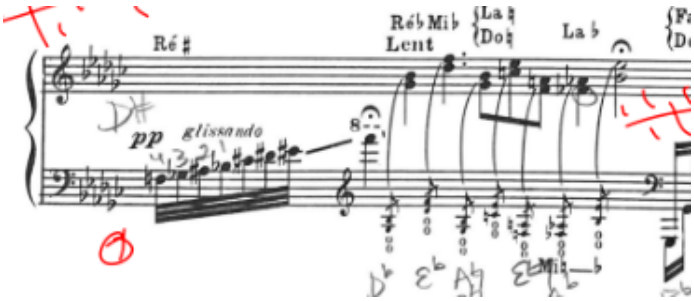


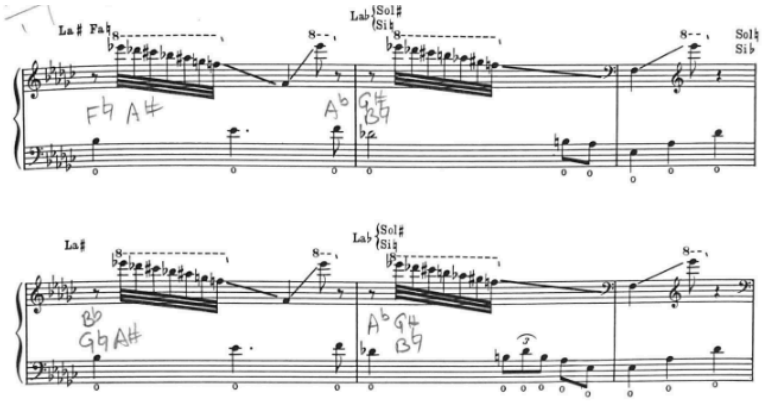
Inconsistent pedal markings

In keeping with historic practices, the pedals are only marked in the score for enharmonic notes or if a pedal change is needed far in advance. Current practices dictate that all pedals should be marked (or none marked). It would also be appropriate to include pedal charts at each rehearsal number and/or the start of new sections.

Quick pedal changes in the cadenza

The cadenza (see page 8) requires extremely quick pedal changes during the two harmonic sections. Perhaps this section worked better on the historic harps. However, on the modern harp, both of these sections have a high risk of pedal noise. However, since this section is during the solo cadenza, extra time can be taken if needed.





Conclusion

Although this piece is well-written for the modern double-action pedal harp, it is not a comprehensive manual on effective harp writing techniques. It relies on traditional arpeggios and minimal chromaticism to be effective. It also pushes the boundaries of technique with some larger chord patterns, cross-placed patterns, and other techniques. This piece is useful for study, but don't be afraid to try your own strategies as well!

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