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Ravel's *Ondine* From the Viewpoint of Bachelard's Essay on Water and Dreams

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Abstract

The theoretical platform on the basis of which *Ondine* – first movement of the program piano cycle *Gaspard de la Nuit* by Maurice Ravel, will be examined is Gaston Bachelard's interpretation and classification of the element of water – provided in the work *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter (L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière)*. In this essay, the author provides psychological and psychoanalytical interpretation (of 'poetic images') of the element of water – the element that is also the subject of Ravel's aforementioned composition. Therefore, the aim of this paper is, following Bachelard's (psycho)analysis of the water element, to explore the meaning of the given 'images' of the water element in Ravel's *Ondine*. Then, it will be pointed out in what way, more precisely, by which compositional methods and musical-expressive means the author interprets the water element and creates (bearing in mind Bertrand's literary 'image' of *Ondine*) now a specific music 'image' of water fairy *Ondine*. The aforementioned problematization will be considered applying analytical, comparative and interpretative methods.

Introduction

In this paper, on the bases of philosophical, psychological, and psychoanalytic interpretation of the element of water of Gaston Bachelard that is a part of his work *Water and Dreams. An essay on the imagination of matter*, the peculiarities and meaning of the given 'image' of the water element in Maurice Ravel's work *Ondine* will be explored.

When it comes to this kind of theoretical approach to music, I would like to emphasize that I was influenced by the research done by the eminent French author Michel Imberty who, among other things, deals with the perception of musical style from a psychological and psy-

choanalytic perspective and who, when examining Claude Debussy's style in *Préludes* for piano, invokes and relies precisely on Gaston Bachelard and his notion of *material imagination* situated in the work *Water and Dreams* (Popović Mladenović, 2009: 306).

I would also like to point out that the French authors, Gaston Bachelard and Maurice Ravel, lived and created at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century – when research on the elements, in the sense of immediate phenomenal reality, elemental processes/changes in nature, psychological interpretation of natural phenomena had intensified and evolved – both in the sciences and in the arts (especially, when it comes to art, in symbolism in literature, impressionism in painting, but also in music from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century). Taking into account all of the above, but also the fact that Gaston Bachelard in his essay on water and dreams deals in detail with the problematization of the element of water, the *water psyche*, the *type of intimacy* the depth of water suggests, the *water morality*, as well as the fact that *Ondine* is not the first Ravel's work concerning the said element, but is continuing on a line of works such as *Water Games (Jeux d'eau)*, *A Boat on the Ocean (Une barque sur l'océan)* – in which the sounding material manifestation of a water element is noticed, in which this element is present in a very specific way, it seems well founded and very important now to directly investigate and understand the relationship between Bachelard's interpretation of the water element and the musical transposition of the same element in Maurice Ravel's piano piece *Ondine*.

Bachelard's Essay on Water and Dreams

One of Gaston Bachelard's main areas of interest and research is the 'space' of imagination. The author is interested in the way imagination works through (literary) art for he believes that what remains hidden to the logic and reason of science, still what is essential for the development of the scientific mind and spirit, is unrestricted and accessible in the field of (literary) art (Zwart, 2019). Bachelard states that scientists, in their research, should also pay attention to the 'genres' of imagination – primarily literary genres (poetry and novels) – for they are for science what dreams and daydreams are for rational consciousness – a window that allows access to the unconscious (Zwart, 2018: 17). In this regard, in order to explore both the conscious and the unconscious 'space' of imagination (through literary art), the author approaches the ontological, phenomenological and hermeneutical understanding of poetic 'images' (Bašlar, 1982, 1996; Башлар, 1942/1998). More precisely, he studies the content of the poetic 'image' before it turns into expression (into a completed written work), contemplates about the origin, root of that poetic 'image' (in imagination) and reaches the assumption that every imagination/concept (ion)/'image' has its root in existence within a substance, that is, within matter. In other words, what the reality of each (imaginative) 'image' is, what connects them, what the 'seal of resistance' in imagination (in relation to psychological development – an old man in a young child and a young child in an old man) is, including what constant and universal in the activity of the imagination (which does not evolve) is – are, in fact, four elements: fire, water, air, and earth. The author concludes that "when it comes to the order of imagination, it is possible to establish a law of four elements that sorts out different material imaginations depending on whether they are related to fire, water, air or earth" (Bachelard, 1983: 3). Simply put, he notes that each element, in accordance with its own substance and rule, has its own poetics that transfers to the works of art. In this sense, we will focus in this paper on Bachelard's interpretation of the

material imagination related to the element of water, in order to, following the author's (psycho)analysis of this element, analyze the given 'image' of water in Ravel's *Ondine*, and then uncover and point out the peculiarities of the new musical language, that is, musical poetics of the element of water.

At the very beginning of its essay on water and dreams Bachelard emphasizes the difference between the *formal* and *material imagination*, that is, the imagination that gives life to the formal/surface/visible cause and the one that gives life to the material/deep/intimate cause (Bachelard, 1983: 1). Namely, the author points out that these two imaginative powers cannot actually be completely separated because only after studying the formal, surface 'image' (of poetic works), after removing all the suffixes of that visible 'image', the 'image' being shown, can one uncover and study that hidden 'image' that is at the root of imaginative power. The author also highlights that these surface water games are more an ornament of the poet's landscapes than the basis of his reveries, and states that beneath these surface poetic 'images' of water (beneath the *formal imagination*), lies a series of deeper and more persistent 'images' (of *material imagination*) that reveal quite a certain type of intimacy different from the one suggested by the depth of fire or earth (Bachelard, 1983).

What often lies at the heart of surface 'images' of water in poetic works or, as the author calls it, in *surface poetry of reflections* is a form of narcissism. Bachelard refers to the surface 'image' of water as Echo, and what the object of reflection is, i.e., what is reflected in water is Narcissus (Bachelard, 1983: 21). He states – "what Narcissus sees in the water is the Echo. Echo is not a distant nymph. She lives in the basin of the fountain. Echo is always with Narcissus. She is he. She has his voice. She has his face. He does not hear her in a loud shout. He hears her in a murmur, like the murmur of his seductive seducer's voice. In the presence of water, Narcissus receives the revelation of his identity and of his duality; of his double powers, virile and feminine; and, above all, the revelation of his reality and his ideality" (Bachelard, 1983:

22–23). Thus, it is an idealizing narcissism. In addition to narcissism, Bachelard also mentions sublimation, and points out that sublimation is not always the denial of desire; it does not always act against urges. On the contrary, sublimation may also exist for the sake of a certain ideal, Narcissus no longer says “I love myself the way I am” but “I am the way I love myself” (Bachelard, 1983: 23). Specifically, the author also draws attention to the fact that the eye that observes must be beautiful in order to see the beautiful. In other words, the eye has the will to see its own visions. Therefore, observation, as well as seeing certain images, is a will. Interestingly, the author mentions this even when talking about deep images of water (which are related to material imagination). Bachelard states that in deep observation, observation of deep images, the subject becomes aware of its own intimacy, but “before deep water, everyone chooses their own interpretation – one can see a still bottom or a stream; one has the ambiguous right to live with a sailor or with a new breed of diligent fairies, wonderful and conscientious. And the water fairy is the guardian of the deception, holding all the sky birds in her hand” (Башилар, 1942/1998: 71). Thus, if deep images reveal those intimate images and everyone chooses their own interpretation, it means that they choose to see themselves, which seems to be the deepest and quietest intimacy.

Superficial poetry of reflections is often accompanied by meticulous sexualization, that is, an infrequent portrayal of nymphs and naiads. The author emphasizes that in poetic images, the being that comes out of the water is a reflection that materializes gradually, it is an image rather than a being, it is a desire rather than an image. In addition, the author stresses that the image of the swimmer with bright reflection in the water is wrong for the swimmer is blurring the water, breaking her own image, at that moment, there is no reflection (Bachelard, 1983: 33). Imagination, therefore, must complement reality, it then realizes one desire (Bachelard, 1983: 33–35). If our poetry of reflection is correct, the image of a being from water already indicates a certain desire. The being sings as a desire, a nymph song is yet an intimate desire.

Bachelard then highlights that water is such a substance that it can absorb desires and confessions of the dreamer, but once it absorbs his confessions, it becomes slower, melancholic, quiet (Башилар, 1942/1998: 74–75) and then there, in that “silence”, on the other side of the surface/visible ‘image’, a deep ‘image’ – (objective) intimacy – objective view of oneself is revealed.

What is also interesting and what the author notes in the many poetic works analyzed is that water ‘images’ almost always have feminine qualities, except in those intimate moments/‘images’ when each chooses their own interpretation and in moments when the water ‘images’ are strong – it then acquires masculine qualities (Башилар, 1942/1998).

Introduced Bachelard’s (brief) psychoanalysis of certain ‘images’ of the water element greatly helps the interpretation of the ‘image’ of water in Ravel’s *Ondine*.

Analysis of Ravel’s *Ondine* from the Viewpoint of Bachelard’s Essay on Water and Dreams

For the textual template of the work, Ravel chose Aloysius Bertrand’s poem of the same name – *Ondine*. Based on the very title, and then on the content of the poem itself, it is clear that the element of water permeates both poetic and musical work – since it is the ‘world’ of *Ondine* – the water fairy/seductive nymph.

After listening to Ravel’s piece for the first time it becomes quite clear that the composition suggests a ‘space’ of the water element. The composer, through a fluid, continuous accompaniment in thirty-seconds/demisemiquavers, compacted/condensed in some places and stretched in others, present from the beginning to the end of the work, creates this sounding material manifestation of the water element (Figure 1).

Namely, that fluid, continuous, constantly present accompaniment seems to be the surface ‘image’ of the water that Bachelard speaks of. At the beginning of Bertrand’s poem *Ondine* describes a starry night and a dormant lake while Ravel’s composition begins with a pedal on the tonic triad given in demisemiquavers – where

the continuous vibration of a tonic chord interrupts the popping into the added sixth as if the tonic chord given in the demisemi-quavers represents that vibrancy of the water, that is, of the lake, and then popping into the resolved, small sixth represents the reflection of stars in

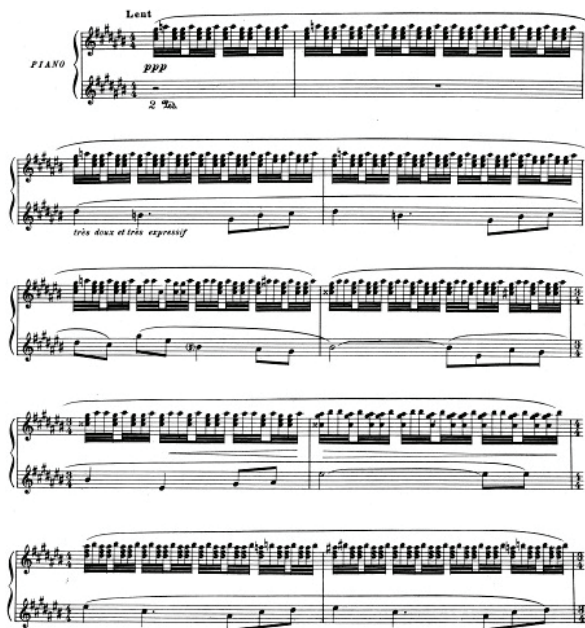


Figure 1. Maurice Ravel, *Ondine*, *Lent*, (water 'space' and Ondine's melody) mm. 1-9*.

the water (see Figure 1). Hence Ravel begins the composition by representing the 'space' of the action – the space of the water, i.e. the lake (see also Eccles, 2004: 12). Specifically, Bachelard, on the basis of numerous analyzes of poetic works, reveals that these surface water 'images'/games are more an ornament to the poet's landscapes than are the basis of reveries. And this seems to be exactly the case with Ravel's composition, and it is clear at the very beginning of the piece – since after this introduction, after portraying the night surface water landscape, the composer introduces Ondine's melody very expressively. In other words, he presents the protagonist –

suggesting that surface 'images' of water are not the essential basis neither of the poet's nor of the composer's work, and that beneath such 'images' of water those more permanent 'images' that will show the true basis of the subject's imagination/thoughts about water, or as Bachelard calls it, the basis of the *water psyche*, should be revealed.

Ondine's melody (from m. 2), compared to the repetitive accompaniment in demisemi-quavers, is more stable as it is given in quarters, extended/dotted quarters and eighths, and its presentation is therefore very clearly perceived. Ondine is represented by a round, circular, gentle melody in the soprano-alto register in *ppp* dynamics, indicating *very sweet and very expressive* (*très doux et très expressif*). Thus, the musical (sound) 'image', as well as the poetic one, is, in a way a seductive water fairy. It seems that even in this segment of the music flow, one can read the aforementioned Bachelard's interpretation that the being coming out of the water is an image rather than a being, it is a desire rather than an image. Simply put, Bachelard's psychoanalysis suggests that the image of the seductive water fairy is more a reflection/Echo of the subject's desire than it is the main subject of the action. This is also supported by his belief that a being emerging from water gradually materializes for it has no reflection in the water, it breaks and blurs its own image, and then the imagination completes, creates, materializes the image, that is, as Bachelard states, the imagination then fulfills a desire – hence, the subject's desire is to see Ondine – the seductive water fairy. This Bachelard's interpretation also underlines the musical flow of Ravel's composition, since there is no place in the composition where we can see the reflection of Ondine's character, that is, the reflection of the Ondine's melody in the water (as, for example, Claude Debussy portrays in his piano prelude *Ondine* – see Simonović, 2018: 266–277). On the contrary, in Ravel's work, the layer/line of Ondine's melody in music facture seems to contradict/resist to what "signifies" the element, that is, the space of water. In other

* All figures in the paper are downloaded from the website: [https://imslp.org/wiki/Gaspard_de_la_nuit_\(Ravel%2C_Maurice\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Gaspard_de_la_nuit_(Ravel%2C_Maurice)). It is Durand and Fils (1909) publication.

words, Ondine's melody, like the aforementioned accompaniment in demisemiquavers, moves in the domain of in C\# major , however, looking vertically, the tones of Ondine's melody are, at the moment of their appearance, in a dissonant relationship with the accompaniment representing the flow of the water element. It can even be noted that its melody is given on the base of the tone d , while the fluidity of the water/lake element is represented by the vibrating, repetitive rendition of the tonic triad – c\# e\# g\# . Thus, not only is there no reflection of Ondine in the water but the melody does not seem to belong to what the flow, the space of water is – underlying the belief that she is the reflection/desire/Echo of the subject – the mortal.

In Bertrand's poem, *Ondine* then states that each wave is an elf swimming in the water and each stream is a path leading to her palace, and her palace is fluidly built at the bottom of the lake, at the triangle of fire, earth, and air. Indeed, the music flow that follows, after the part previously discussed, the waves line up (from m. 17, Figure 2), that is, the composer, by creating passages and arpeggios from one layer of the facture to another, from one hand to another and vice versa, creates sound waves.



Figure 2. Maurice Ravel, *Ondine*, *Lent*, ('image' of waves) mm. 16–23.

Also, in this (and further) part of the music flow, there is no stable tonal base, no tonal center, the harmony moves in the areas *in c\# minor*, *in d\# minor*, *in g\# minor*, but the music flow just passes through these areas and continues, and we get a weightless feeling, as if they were waves that could not be caught, that really had no strongholds (Radeta, 2019: 201–202). What is also interesting is that Bachelard, when interpreting images of deep water in poetry, discovers a castle built by four great builders, four great masters of oneiric elements (Башилар, 1942/1998: 71) – and Bachelard (corresponding to Bertrand's poem) also seems to be referring here to a fluid structure (as he dwells upon images of deep water) made of fire, water, air, and earth. All of this can be "read" in Ravel's composition as well – the aforementioned (sound) waves slowly lower the musical flow, which is primarily in soprano and alto, but now slowly take over the tenor and bass sections – so that at one point (in the development part of the composition) in m. 45 all layers of facture (there are three layers) would "occupy" the bass section – that being the case as if it were the very bottom of the lake (Figure 3) where Ondine's palace "rests". Numerous music analyses of Ravel's *Ondine* suggest that the line of the middle layer (in m. 45) is actually the melody of Ondine's father– since in the further course of Ravel's composition this theme (the 'theme of Ondine's father') and Ondine's theme alternate, contradict each other and almost struggle for "dominance" – which corresponds to one interpretation of Bertrand's poem saying that Ondine's father opposes her relationship with the mortal (Radeta, 2019: 203–204).

However, following Bachelard's (psycho)analysis of the water element in which Bachelard points out that the 'images' of water almost always have feminine qualities, except when it comes to cruel, strong, powerful waters – Bachelard highlights that water then takes on masculine features, masculine traits, that is, indicates a male identity (Башилар, 1942/1998: 23). This



Figure 3. Maurice Ravel, *Ondine*, *Lent*, mm. 45–46.



Figure 4. Maurice Ravel, *Ondine*, *Lent*, ('image' of violent water/male identity) mm. 66–71.

seems to be in line with Ravel's composition because the whole time we see a female character – Ondine – who is represented, as we mentioned above, by a gentle, soft, quiet melody, and from the moment when all the parts are in the bass when the bottom of the lake is represented, the music flow ascends and an image of violent water is created. From the bass, the music flow moves upwards towards the high registers and goes up to c^4 , the ascent is also achieved in a dynamic sense – the dynamics range from p via mf and f to ff (while the dynamic range of the previous music flow was ppp – p), and a more frequent harmonic progression of *in C major*, *in A major*, *in C# major*, *in Bb major*, *in e minor*, *in b minor*, also takes place. Indeed, it truly is an 'image' of violent water that points to a male identity, a male trait (see Figure 4).

Still, this image does not have to represent the anger and fury of Ondine's father/king of the lake. There is no explicit reference in Bertrand's poem neither to the anger of the father nor to the argument between him and Ondine. This alteration of Ondine's melody, that is, of the female melody and the male melody, can also be an internal struggle of the subject, a struggle with oneself. In other words, both Bertrand's poem and Ravel's *Ondine* appear to correspond to Bachelard's interpretation of Narcissus and Echo – in which Narcissus sees Echo in the image of water, but that Echo, as Bachelard points out, is not some distant nymph, she lives in the spring. Echo is always with Narcissus. She has his seductive voice. She is him. More precisely, she (we now refer to the musical 'image' of Ondine) is his deep, inner, intimate desire, her round, circular, seductive melody is the appearance of his desired seductive melody, Ondine's constructed image is his Echo, his inner image. The sad thought crystallizes more and more like the flow of Ravel's composition is followed – in the repetition, after repeated presentation of Ondine's melody, a complete reduction of the structure follows, and a four-measure (instrumental) monodic recitative is presented (see Figure 5).

What is truly very specific and interesting is that it is only during these four measures that the fluid, continuous accompaniment, that "signifies" the space of the lake and water, is interrupted.

This moment of musical flow seems to correspond to the image that Bachelard points to when he says that only after all the suffixes of the surface 'image' of water have been removed,



Figure 5. Maurice Ravel, *Ondine*, *Lent*, mm. 83–87.

that deep, intimate ‘image’ – the one that underlies the imagination/thoughts of the water/water psyche – is revealed. More precisely, during these four measures, there are no “signifiers”, no indication of the element of water, no superficial ‘images’ of water – suggesting that this four-measure ‘image’ is that of a deep/intimate ‘image’ of a mortal. Even Bachelard himself points out that water is such a substance that it can take in the desires and confessions of a dreamer, but then it becomes melodic, quiet, slower and that is where that deep, intimate image is revealed – this (melancholy, quietness, slowness) fully describes the recitative four-measure melody. Besides, we can notice the close proximity/similarity of his melody to the Ondine’s melody, and it now becomes clear why from the very beginning her melody resisted, contrasting with the line that represents the element of water – because from the very beginning she has been an image/reflection/Echo of the mortal. It should also be mentioned that this reduction of facture followed the strong image of water and climax, as well as the re-rendition of Ondine’s melody (in the repetition) – as if (during the strong ‘image’ of the water) the subject struggled with what the Ondine’s melody represented, the call of the seductive water fairy, with desire, but then sublimation ensued – the one of which Bachelard also speaks of. Sublimation, which is not the denial of desire, which does not act against the urge, it is the acceptance and transformation for the sake of certain ideals – for Narcissus no longer says “I love myself the way I am” but “I am the way I love myself”, thus, for the sake of ideals, for being the way he loves himself, he rejects Ondine because he loves a mortal – cross and angry. In the final ‘image’ (code) of the composition, the “signifier” of the water element is re-activated, but now both voices/both lines of the facture/both ‘images’ are uniform, harmonious – there has been a unification, more precisely, reconciliation, sublimation of Narcissus and Echo, the subject and its (internal) reflection.

Conclusion

We have shown that on the basis of Bachelard’s psychoanalysis of ‘poetic images’ of the water element the meaning of a given ‘image’ of

the element of water in music composition (in this case Ravel’s *Ondine*) can be both interpreted and revealed. Besides, what Bachelard points out seems to be proven (by this paper) – that the poetics of a piece, in this case, musical poetics, receive the properties/peculiarities of the material essence with which it actually resonates all the time. More specifically, the analysis showed that fluidity prevailed in all the parameters and elements of the composition – we noticed that even the pedal is not used as static, in long note values, but as repetitive, vibrant. Fluidity is also reflected in the harmonic flow in recurrent (often polar) shifts of tonal areas, in frequent shifts/changes of meter, registers, in passages and arpeggios which overflow from one layer of the facture to another, from one hand to another and so on. Therefore, every parameter of composition takes on the characteristics of the fluid, flowing, transient, passing – in other words of everything “symbolizes” the element of water.

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