

After four failed attempts to win a coveted Prix de Rome from the Paris Conservatoire, Ravel was comforted by an invitation in 1905. His friends, Alfred Edwards, journalist, and his Russian wife and pianist, Misia, invited him to join them on their yacht, Aimée, for a seven-week canal cruise. The couple was well known in Paris, and their apartment on the Rue de Rivoli was a special gathering place for writers, artist, and musicians. That same year, Ravel was also working on his *Miroirs* suite for piano solo, which included a third piece titled “Une barque sur l'océan” [A Boat On The Ocean]. It is quite likely that he was influenced in his writing by his observations and feelings generated by the cruise. Ravel wrote; “What music there is in all of this! I mean to make good use of it...” His vision of water was also fed by a little automatic toy, which sat on his piano. Within a glass bell was a little boat on cardboard waves, which would toss the boat about when turning a hand crank. Among his large collection of toys, this was said to be one of his favorites.

Ravel said; “The title *Miroirs* (Reflections), five piano pieces composed in 1905, has authorized my critics to consider this collection as being among those works that belong to the Impressionist movement. I do not contradict this at all, if one understands the term by analogy. A rather fleeting analogy, at that, since Impressionism does not seem to have any precise meaning outside the domain of painting. In any case, the word ‘Mirror’ should not lead one to assume that I want to affirm a subjectivist theory of art. A sentence by Shakespeare helped me to formulate a completely opposite position—‘the eye sees not itself/but by reflection by some other things.’ (*Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene 2)”

Ravel paints the ocean on a vast canvas, sweeping across enormous areas of the keyboard, reflecting the endless space of the ocean. Throughout, the boat (represented by the theme), rocks and sways on top of or within fluid, expressive textures and changing harmonies.

*Une barque sur l'océan* is the third movement of *Miroirs*, a suite for solo piano that Ravel composed in 1904 and 1905. Each movement of the suite is named in a highly concrete way, for something vividly sensual that can be imagined for the way it looks, or sounds, or both. This movement was one of two that Ravel later orchestrated himself, the other was the fourth, *Alborada del gracioso* [morning song of the jester], which is the more commonly performed of the two by orchestras.

*Une barque sur l'océan* was dedicated to his friend, the painter Paul Sordes. Water is continually and immediately evidenced by constantly flowing arpeggios, later including tremolos and glissandi blended by sustained pedals. Adding to the swaying effect is Ravel's direction for a flexible (*souple*), rhythm for the theme and the accompaniment. Midpoint, the ocean stirs from its opening serenity into a storm, leading to a huge, overwhelming, dissonant climax. Dynamics are used to illustrate the unpredictability of the ocean: at one point, Ravel writes *pp* for a single measure, followed by *ff*, followed by *pp*, followed by *ff*—sudden behavioral contrasts. The boat survives the storm in a slower paced section, set within a lower register of the piano, sounding over an ostinato G sharp. A soft recollection of the opening brings *Une barque sur l'océan* to a peaceful closing.

One year after the piano version, Ravel orchestrated his piece. The only time the orchestral version was performed in the composer's lifetime, the critic Gaston Carruad of *La Liberte* noted; “It was

like a succession of colors imposed on a drawing barely sketched... the view changes every moment. It is a confusing kaleidoscope and we cannot even tell what kind of weather prevails on the ocean." This ambiguity is exactly what Ravel intended.

"Motility" is one of those impressive terms that musicologists have borrowed from the more precise sciences. In zoology, botany and neurology it relates to the biological capability of motion; in music, it is applied to the work of composers such as Ravel and Debussy, who loved the sea and excelled in evoking a nuanced sense of water's movement...the movement of vessels and animals floating upon the surface of the waves...the serenity or violence of water's ebbs and swells in all kinds of places and conditions. *Une barque sur l'océan* is a prime example of Ravel's mastery of motility. It depicts the progress of a boat as it sails on the ocean. Sweeping lines and arpeggiated phrases provide an almost palpable sense of the boat's motion as it bobs, entirely subordinated to the ocean's power and the swooping arabesques of marine currents. This is the longest of *Miroirs'* five movements.

The orchestral version opens quietly with the theme given to paired flutes, floating atop clarinets and bassoons. They hold a steady chord, while divided strings provide fast 32nd note fast moving passages (undercurrents) which surge and regress. Note also his use of two harps which share rippling glissandi and arpeggios throughout the score. His use of natural and artificial string harmonics also add mystery. Occasionally low tones and heavy brass emerge, adding a fearsome dimension to the power of the water. The ending takes us back to where he began. All is quiet, with a tinkling goodbye (*ppp*) from the celesta, and the final measure marked *s'enteignant* [*snuffed out*].

The colorful 7-minute work is scored for 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, crash cymbals, glockenspiel, suspended cymbal, tam-tam (gong), triangle, bass drum, jeu de timbres (glockenspiel), celesta, and strings.

--Stephen Larmore