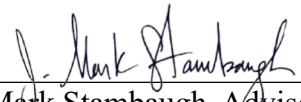
MANHATTAN SCHOOL OF MUSIC

EXPLORING FLORENT SCHMITT'S *OMBRES:*

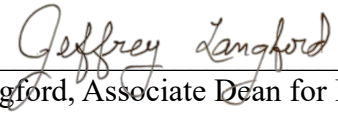
by

ALEXANDER AGATE

A paper submitted in support of a lecture-recital
for the degree
Doctor of Musical Arts
with a major in
Piano Performance
and approved by



Dr. Mark Stambaugh, Advisor



Dr. Jeffrey Langford, Associate Dean for Doctoral Studies

May 2024

ABSTRACT

EXPLORING FLORENT SCHMITT'S *OMBRES*

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This lecture recital explores Florent Schmitt's Op. 64, *Ombres,* the composer's largest solo piano work. Scholarship towards Florent Schmitt often remarks upon the composer's dual tendencies towards both Gallic and Teutonic musical content, but provides very little objective analysis as to what, indeed, such terms translate to. In an attempt to better understand how the musical world decided upon such description of Schmitt's music, the lecture recital will analyze *Ombres* while taking note of any musical content, be it textual, formal, harmonic, melodic, or pianistic, that might betray a loyalty to the so-called Gallic and Teutonic styles.

Following a brief introduction wherein I present Schmitt's current standing in the musical world, I will in the second chapter analyze each of *Ombres'* movements. There will be a formal analysis of some kind (dependent on what kind of analysis fits the movement), and musings upon pianistic style, difficulty, and execution as *Ombres* is a ferociously difficult work to both read and perform. I will consider the fact that during the late 1800s and early 1900s in France, there existed a French piano school, and a Russian and German school, and I will attempt to frame the movements in one of those technical styles.

In the third chapter I will propose my own interpretive reading of *Ombres,* a work that I believe Schmitt wrote specifically to answer the question of his musical identity as a composer caught between two extremes: the old French school of the Conservatoire, and the indulgent romantic school of the contrasting German and Russian schools. To close this paper, I will highlight differing views on what national music actually amounts to, and view Schmitt's work in these various lights.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my private teachers: Robert Thies, Dmitry Rachmanov, and Andre-Michel Schub, as well as my mentors over the years: John Perry, Jeremy Denk, and Conor Hanick. Their guidance led me to pursue music, and eventually explore the repertoire that led me to Florent Schmitt's work.

I would also like to thank Dr. Mark Stambaugh and Dr. Jeffrey Langford for their help and guidance throughout my time at MSM.

To my friends: your loyalty and support for me through the past years helped me find my footing again and I hope that my friendship towards you has reaped similar benefits.

A special thanks to Philip Nones, a wonderfully charming individual whose knowledge on Florent Schmitt proved invaluable towards tracking down elusive quotes about the composer.

To my family: without their love and support my life would be far less filled with joy.

And finally thank you to the Lord and Music, for without you I would not find this existence all that worth the hassle.

Table of Contents

Introduction 3

1: *Ombres*: 5

1.1: Background 5

1.2: *J'entends dans le loitain...* *6*

1.2.1: Background 6

1.2.2: Analysis 7

1.2.3: Pianistic considerations 12

1.3: *Mauresque* 18

1.3.1: Background 18

1.3.2: Analysis 19

1.3.3: Pianistic considerations 24

1.4: *Cette ombre, mon image...* 27

1.4.1: Background 27

1.4.2: Analysis 28

1.4.3: Pianistic considerations 33

2: Gallic and the Teutonic 37

2.1: An interpretive reading 37

2.2: Views on national music 40

Bibliography 45

Introduction

Of the countless numbers of forgotten composers, very few find their way back into the public eye. The path for an obscure composer's reappearance into relevancy remains a difficult one, owing much to luck. There exist a few triumphant reemergence stories; the resurrection of Bach's music by Mendelssohn, and the current rise in the interest of underrepresented composers today. Choosing what composers to investigate, however, poses a difficult problem; where does one begin when surrounded by countless scores? With regards to Florent Schmitt, my exploration began after stumbling upon a recording of *Ombres,* the three-movement work with which the following paper will focus. The harmony and textures immediately captured my attention and began an investigation that led me to the understanding that Schmitt was, in fact, highly respected by musicians such as Stravinsky, Messiaen, Debussy, and Nadia Boulanger, among others. As to why a musician of such reputation and respect fell out of the public eye, one can only speculate. His controversial personality, characterized by—among other things—wild political statements, vicious reviews of fellow musicians, and a biting tongue that his defenders might cite as being sardonic wit rather than the genuine cruelty it appears to be, may have soured the taste for his music, but the list of famous composers who led lives of unblemished virtue strikes me as a short one, indeed. Florent Schmitt's current standing in the musical pantheon might best find summation through a variety of quotes about his music. The towering Nadia Boulanger, in a lecture series covering modern French music, noted Schmitt's "double Latin and Teutonic heredity"[1],

[1] Nadia Boulanger, *Lectures on Modern Music.* (Houston, The Rice Institute Pamphlet, 1926), 138.

referencing the composer's birthplace in Lorraine, a French region situated towards the German border. She continued on to state "clarity and balance of form, sensuous harmonies, acute sensitiveness in matters of sonority—in short, traits which we usually think of as being more or less Gallic—alternate or unite with the more Germanic ideals of ponderous force, of imposing construction and of abundance and depth of feeling."[1] The *Grove Dictionary*, too, cites this combination of styles, writing that "[Schmitt's] music, albeit influenced by Debussy, was admired for its energy, dynamism, grandeur, and virility, for its union of French clarity, and German strength."[2] It is in response to these vague statements on the nature of his music that the following pages are dedicated. I will first focus on objective qualities within *Ombres,* Schmitt's largest and most complicated work for solo piano. I will take note—depending on relevance—of the work's background, textual references, form, harmony, pitch collections, and pianistic difficulties. Given, however, that the small number of writings on Schmitt within the North American sphere currently center around the perceived amalgamation of so-called Gallic and Teutonic aspects, I will allow myself the luxury of adding my perspective into the mix within the final pages of this document.

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1 Boulanger. *Lectures,* 138.
2 Jann Pasler and Jerry Rife, "Schmitt, Florent", *Grove Music Online.* 2001.

1. *Ombres*

1.1. Background

Florent Schmitt (1870-1958) had at the time of completing *Ombres* in 1917*,* solidified his reputation as an important name within the French musical scene. After all, it was in 1900 that he won the Prix de Rome (with important composers such as Saint-Saens and Massenet advocating for him) and subsequently enjoyed financial and critical success.[1] Being a part of *Les Apaches,* an esoteric music club of sorts founded by Maurice Ravel and Ricardo Viñes among others, Schmitt enjoyed the company and conversation of other composers on the cutting edge of musical society.[2] *Les Apaches,* founded in 1903, championed Debussy's (recently premiered) *Pelléas et Mélisande,* viewing it as a French response to the flood of Wagnerian influence in music. Later, after the Wagner-obsessed Vincent d'Indy refused to program a work by the composer Maurice Delage, *Les Apaches* founded the Société Musicale Indépendante in 1909, an organization that premiered many of the group members' works.[3] Over the next few decades, Schmitt secured positions in various occupations including composer, teacher, and music critic.

It was within this period of success that Schmitt composed *Ombres,* his three-movement piano masterpiece, sometime between approximately 1913-1917 (these dates will be explored later in more detail.) The work ranges in style from the ferociously

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1 Pasler, "Schmitt."
2 Jann Pasler, "Les Apaches", *Grove Music Online*. 2001.
3 Ibid. "Les Apaches."

passionate and Romantic first movement, to the charming and clear second movement, and the culmination of both styles in the third.

1.2. *J'entends dans le lointain…*

1.2.1. Background

Schmitt dedicates the first movement of his work to the then 28-year-old Paul Loyonnet, a French pianist and colleague. The text of the title is excerpted from a recurring passage in *Chants de Maldoror,* a French surrealist novel by Le Comte de Lautréamont (pen name of Lucien Ducasse), with the full passage printed before the piece roughly translating to "I hear in the distance prolonged screams of the most poignant anguish."[1]

In this chapter of the novel, a father, mother, and son sit around a table and converse about their thanks and piety to God. A mysterious figure appears at their doorway and peers into their scene, noting that this happy family promises nothing for him (Maldoror, the amoral character the book centers around) to learn from. Upon his departure, however, the family is struck by a sense of unease, and they hear in the distance the aforementioned screams. All of them are unnerved, and the father warns that those screams are a phenomenon that he has heard of, but never experienced first-hand. He suggests that the screams come from a vampire of sorts, banished by God from the heavens due to his pride and now wandering the earth to corrupt and harm others. The screams (and, subsequently, the passage that Schmitt references) re-occur four times, with

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[1] Comte de Lautréamont, *Chants de Maldoror.* (Cambridge, Exact Change, 1994), 44-49.

the family's panic rising with each repetition. The screams are suddenly heard no more, and a new character speaks, beckoning to the son to follow him to a land filled with pleasure. The father and mother warn the son to ignore the horrible phantom and the son responds to this mysterious apparition that he will remain faithful to his God and reject the temptations. In response, the creature rips apart both the son and the mother, leaving the father to promise himself that, should he be granted powers from any source, demonic or not, he would avenge this injustice.[1]

1.2.2. Analysis

J'entends dans le lointain begins with an upward sweep into a massive eleventh chord, with dissonances highlighted in dynamics (*fortissimo*) and texture (tremolos and within the pedal). One might already sense that the writing is orchestral rather than pianistic, and, indeed, Schmitt orchestrated a version of *J'entends dans le lointain* for piano solo and orchestra in 1929, about a decade later.[2] This movement comprises the most expansive keyboard writing (the whole piece is written on three staves), the densest harmony (the work is filled with extended eleventh, thirteenth, chords), as well as the largest formal proportions. A performance of the first movement might run anywhere between thirteen to fifteen minutes, with the second movement being about five to six minutes, and the third being eight to ten minutes.

An important aspect of the movement requiring immediate attention is that the piece is structured around several motivic cells. The most obvious one is the dotted

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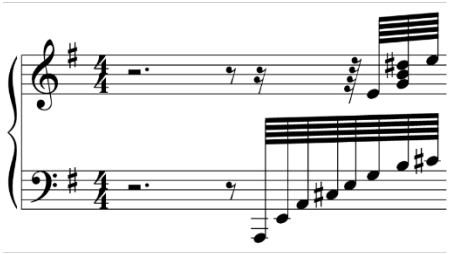
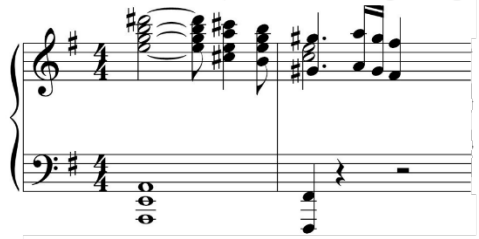
1 Lautréamont, *Chants,* 44-49.
2 Florent Schmitt, *J'entends dans le lointain.* (Paris, Durand, 1929).

rhythm present in the opening theme that appears throughout the movement. However, much, if not all, of the movement is in fact derived from the first thirteen measures.

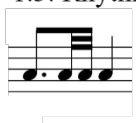
1.1. Sweeping motif, pick-up to measure 1.



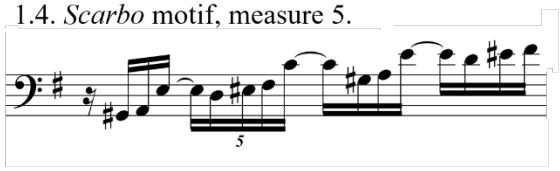
1.2. Chord motif, (reduction of opening theme) measures 1-2.



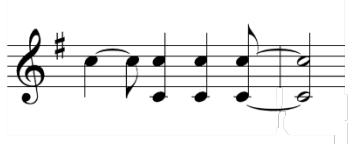
1.3. Rhythmic motif, measure 2, derived from Chord motif.



1.4. *Scarbo* motif, measure 5.



1.5. Bell motif, measures 6-7.



1.6. *lointain* motif, measure 8.

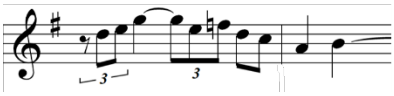


Fig. 1. Listing of motifs.

Measure 15 begins the development of these musical ideas, with the harmony in measure 16 departing from its original form and leading through transitional material derived from the sweeping motif and the rhythmic motif. Measure 21 establishes a new musical section derived from the rhythmic motif, with the sweeping motif, and bell motif, present, as well.

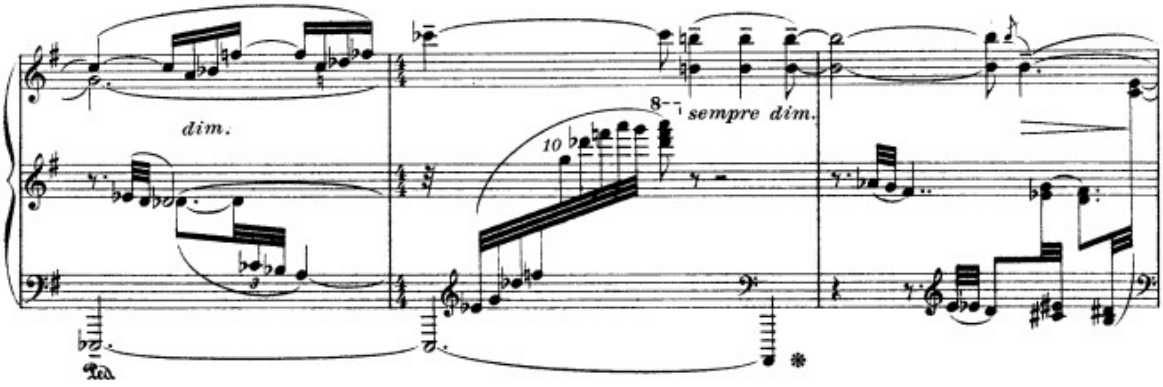


Fig. 2. A combination of motifs (measures 22-24).

The material until measure 28 remains clearly derived from earlier material, but measure 28 introduces a new melody that avoids betraying its relation to previous material so obviously. Upon closer inspection, however, one notes that it is rhythmically and melodically related to the motif in measure 8. Both themes, for example, alternate between triplets and duplets, and both themes utilize stepwise motion with thirds.

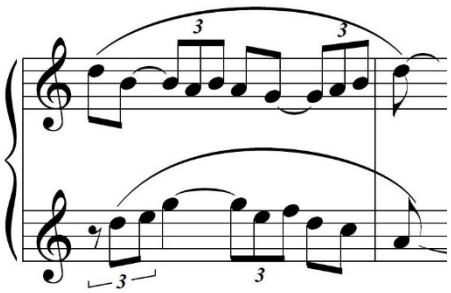


Fig. 3. Comparison of *lointain* theme (below) to theme in measure 28 (above).

The material remains consistent now, though with increasingly dense textures until a climactic moment at measure 44, wherein the sweeping motif erupts into a cataclysmic moment culminating in a presentation of the inverted melodic motif from measure 8.

In measure 47, Schmitt augments the rhythm from what I have labeled the *Scarbo* motif, highlighting it very specifically. While based on a previous motif, this augmented form bears enough structural importance to necessitate differentiation with its predecessor.

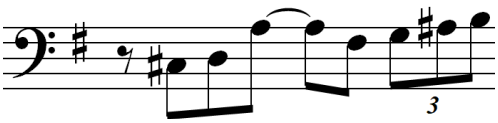


Fig. 4. Augmented *Scarbo* motif – measure 47.

Measure 53 introduces a new texture, though it is based rhythmically off the melodic motif. The music wanders for a while, before finally expanding the melodic motif into a new melody between measures 71 and 74.

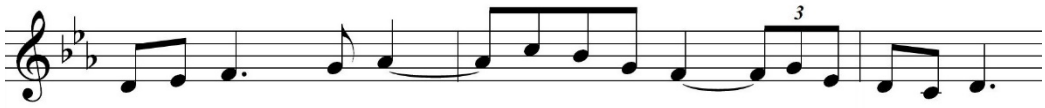


Fig. 5. Expanded *lointain* motif, measures 71-73.

This material in Fig. 5 does not relate as obviously to the motifs listed thus far, but it grows out of the *lointain* theme and bears similarities such as the stepwise motion, modal pitch collection, and the duple to triplet switches in rhythm. The expanded *lointain* motif serves as the basis for the next large section, wherein the theme is developed with increasingly complex accompaniment figures and occasionally interrupted by the original form of the melodic motif (in measures 79, 80, 82, etc.). Measure 90 adds in an interruption from the bell motif, and from this point the original motifs begin reappearing with more frequency. Measure 95 marks the closing section, wherein the musical material begins a varied recapitulation. One noticeable difference, however, is the presence of the augmented *Scarbo* motif, now scattered about the music liberally and with much more highlighted importance. We note that this motif has been augmented yet again, with its form now based on crochets and crochet triplets. As the music fades, there occurs one final complete statement of the melodic motif in measure 141, now marked with the descriptive words *lointain comme un agonie*, perhaps signifying that this particular motif served as a representation of the distant screams of prolonged anguish referenced in the poem (Fig. 6.). The piece closes with the bell motif.

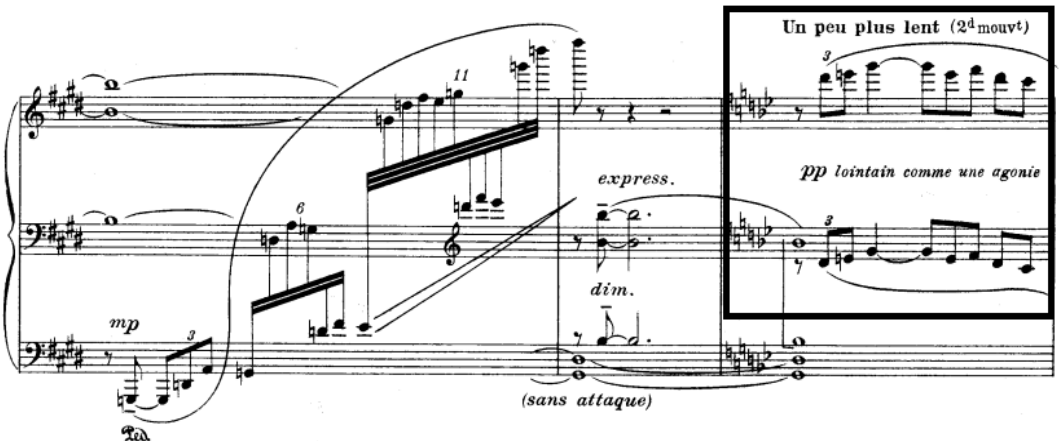
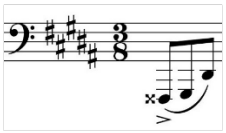


Fig. 6. Schmitt reveals the true nature of the *lointain* motif.

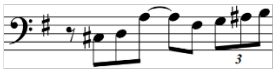
1.2.3. Pianistic considerations

Indeed, as someone who has studied Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* quite intensely, ignoring the similarities between *J'entends dans le lointain* and Ravel's masterpiece proves impossible. There are two motifs that bear striking similarity to Ravel's works.

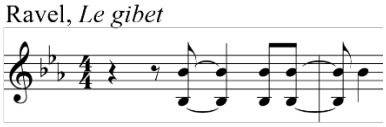
Ravel, *Scarbo*



Schmitt, *Scarbo* reference



Ravel, *Le gibet*



Schmitt, bell motif

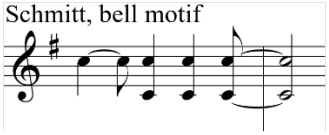
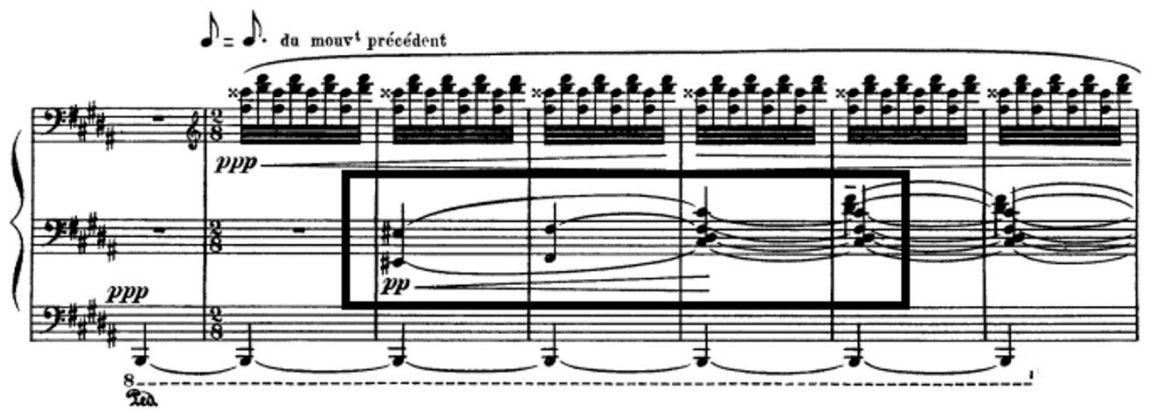


Fig. 7. Referential motifs in *J'entends dans le lointain.*

One also observes that the explosive first theme in *J'entends dans le lointain* bears a few similarities to the melodic theme in *Scarbo,* namely, the sweeping texture, the extremely similar pitch collection, and melodic contour.

There also occurs in *Scarbo* the same rhythmic augmentation of the referenced motif, as well as a similar ending (fluttering off into a *pianissimo.*)

8.1. Ravel, *Scarbo,* augmented motif.



8.2 Schmitt, *J'entends,* augmented *Scarbo* motif.

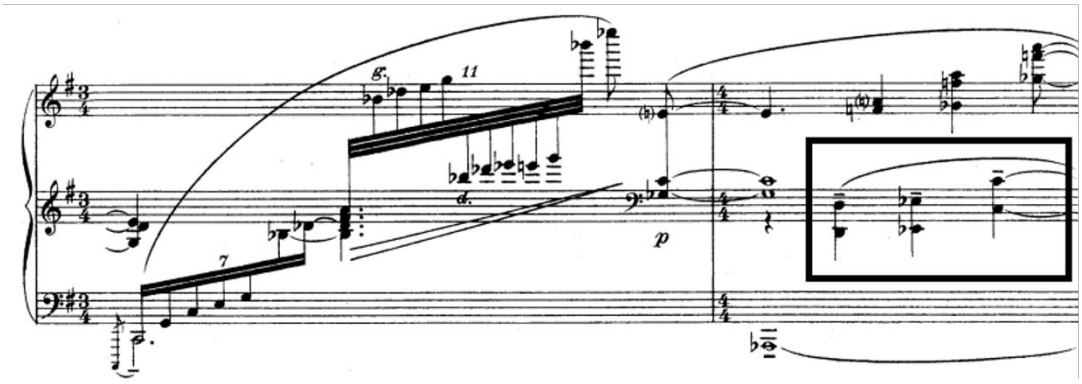
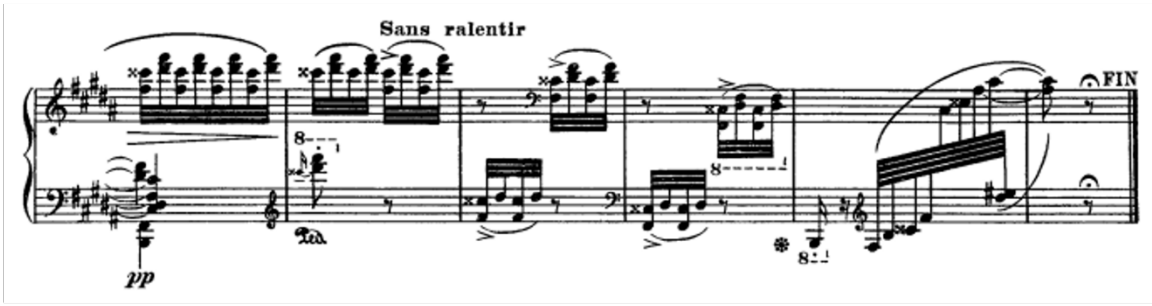


Fig. 8. The ending of Ravel's Scarbo (above), and Schmitt's possible references (below).

8.3. Ravel, *Scarbo,* ending.



8.4. Schmitt, *J'entends,* ending.

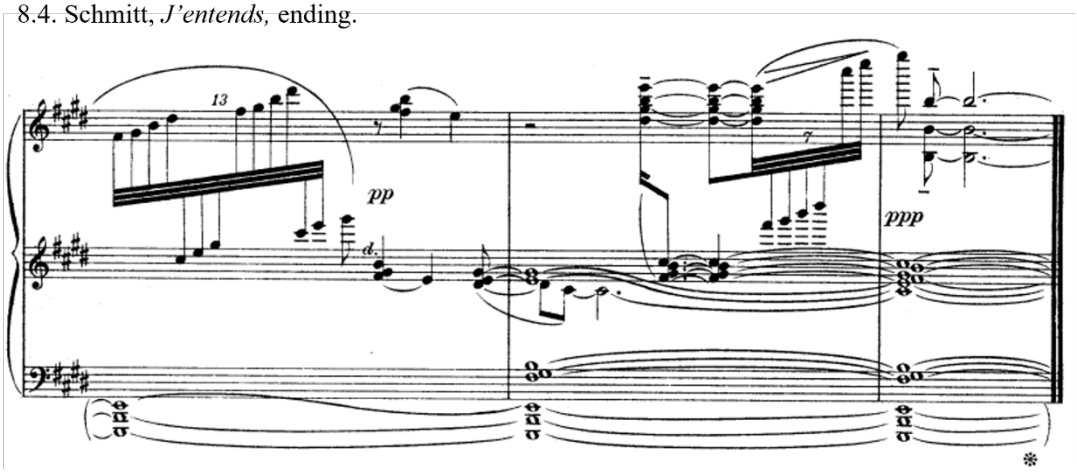


Fig. 8 (cont.). End of Ravel's *Scarbo*, and the end of Schmitt's *J'entends.*

If these similarities are accepted as references to *Scarbo* and *Le gibet,* one must, of course, ponder a few questions.

Firstly, Schmitt's awareness of *Gaspard de la nuit.* One cannot say definitively how well Schmitt was acquainted with *Gaspard,* but given that Ravel and Schmitt were close colleagues and played their compositions for each other regularly,[1] it seems highly probable that Schmitt would have familiar with Ravel's 1908 masterpiece.

[1] Roger Nichols, *Ravel.* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011), 44-49.

Secondly, why might Schmitt have opted for such reference? My answer is twofold. First, the text describes a creature a demonic nature that enters an unsuspecting household, wreaks havoc, and disperses. The story of *Scarbo,* the demonic creature that haunts an individual to madness as they try to sleep before being banished by sunlight, might bear some similarity.

Second, Both composers' relationship to Romanticism. Ravel, while teaching *Scarbo,* allegedly said about the work, "I wished to make a caricature of Romanticism. Perhaps it got the better of me."[1] Schmitt may not have known of this quote, but the sentiment behind the statement is one that Schmitt may have been familiar with, whether from Ravel's own statements or through the music.

Schmitt's training from the Conservatoire comprised an older French style of piano playing that involved less use of the sustain pedal, fingers held close to the keys with the arms and back held still, and an attention to clarity of harmony over the dissonance present in the music of the German romantics (this will be explored more closely in *Mauresque*). *J'entends dans le lointain* does not adhere to those French techniques, as many of the technical acrobatics required to execute the difficult passagework necessitate the greater use of arms and back. Paul Loyonnet, the French pianist for whom the movement was dedicated, was initially trained at the Conservatoire in the older French style by Isidor Philipp, but moved on from the French school to focus primarily on German repertoire. This change in attention resulted in his being shunned, so to speak, by his own teacher for betraying the principles of the Conservatoire and

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[1] Vlado Perlemuter, *Ravel according to Ravel,* (London, G.B., Kahn & Averill,) 35.

studying with Martinus Sieveking, a principal disciple of one of the dreaded representatives of the Romantic school: Theodore Leschetizky. Loyonnet discusses the differences between the schools and Philipp's wrath towards his own student in a fascinating interview dictated to Charles Timbrell for his book on French piano playing in the late 1800's-early 1900's.[1]

The most relevant part of the interview, on the difference between the technical foundation of the respective schools, is as follows:

> The system of Sieveking, derived from Leschetizky, is based on the fact that the different muscular groups are able to be independent. Thus the fingers, the hand, and the forearm are innervated while the upper arm is relaxed...The use of weight and arm was not much cultivated in France, that is true. Today [1940's], of course, the picture has changed. But the Russians and Germans have always used more, and the reason is that their music demands it. For the French, there can be grandeur without heaviness and passion without violence.[2]

J'entends dans le lointain, then, most certainly falls under that category of pieces within which the arm and the back are demanded to execute the music. It also seems, given Schmitt's specific dedication to Loyonnet, and the references to Ravel's own "caricature of Romanticism", that Schmitt was himself aware of the nature of the piece he composed.

A final note of significance. While the French school of the time focused on clarity, structure, and the tempered use of the sustain pedal, the Romantic school liberally used the pedal for color and effect, which included the blurring of harmonies.[3] Thus when one observes Schmitt's pedal markings in *J'entends dans le lointain,* one notes that he

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1 Charles Timbrell, *French Pianism a Historical Perspective.* (Portland, Or.: Amadeus Press, 1999), 183-192.
2 Ibid., 191.
3 Ibid., 52-72.

rarely marks the pedal, and when he does it is in the service of dictating a pedal release rather than a depression. Schmitt's aesthetic understanding of the pedal seems to be that it should always be in use and his pedal markings are specifically to designed highlight those moments that require clarity. The moments he chooses to highlight contain the motif that bears a striking resemblance to the bells in *Le gibet,* a motif that will reappear later in the work.[1]

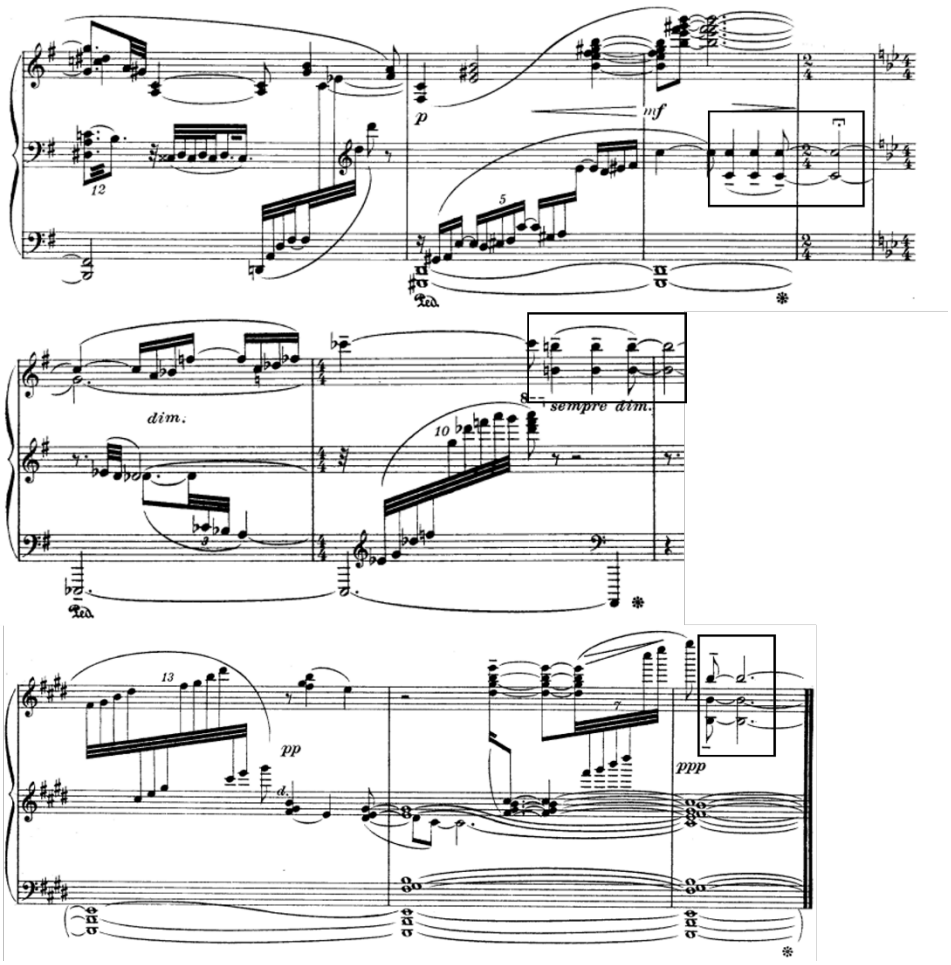

Fig. 9. The three moments in *J'entends* where Schmitt specifies lifting the pedal.

[1] Schmitt, *Ombres,* 1, 3.

1.3. *Mauresque*

1.3.1. Background

As with the other movements, Schmitt dedicated the second to a personal acquaintance: Linette Chalupt, a young woman who also received a dedication from Eric Satie in his *Les trois valses distinguées du précieux dégoûté.* That aside, the set's second movement has attributes that single it out as unique within *Ombres*. First, one might note that its title bears no reference to any literary work, as do the other movements. *Mauresque* translates to "Moorish"—a survey of the printed pages reveals that the work appears to be the most approachable of the movements from a pianistic perspective; while the first and third movements are (in the case of the former) completely, and (in the case of the latter) primarily engraved upon three staves decorated with a myriad number of notes, *Mauresque* returns to the much more standard two stave presentation that pianists remain accustomed to. While Schmitt composed *J'entends dans le loitain* and *Cette ombre, mon image* within a year of each other, (in 1917 and 1916, respectively), the score specifies the date of *Mauresque* only as 19..,[1] with Y. Hucher and M. Raveau dating the movement at 1913 within their catalog of Schmitt's works[2]. *Mauresque* includes the only metronome marking in the entire piece, with the crotchet marked as "*environ,* [approximately] 54."

As to why Schmitt included this very different piece within *Ombres,* one can only speculate, but its individual characteristics might be explained by the gap in time between the composition of this movement and the others.

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1 Florent Schmitt, *Ombres*, *Op. 64 No. 1.* (Paris, Durand, 1918), 25.
2 Yves Hucher and M. Raveau, L'oeuvre *de Florent Schmitt.* (Paris, Durand, 1960), 5.

1.3.2. Analysis

As opposed to the first movement, a piece densely packed with motivic material and an obsession with small musical cells, *Mauresque's* musical material comprises themes and patterns that are connected through an aesthetic decision; the juxtaposition of highly contrasting material. The work begins with 12 measures of introductory filigree that accelerates before the au *Mouvement* (modéré) at measure 13. The acceleration is notated through the numerous directions to increase the tempo (*Accéleréz un peu* in m.7, *Accéleréz davantage* in m. 9), but Schmitt concurrently varies the density of attack, alternating between duplet-based and triplet-based rhythmic patterns, as well as between 2/4 and 3/4 meters. Combined with the swells of dynamic (abiding by the pattern that faster equals a louder dynamic plane) the piece's immediate impression is that of volatility and instability; it is not until the au *Mouvement* marking at measure 13 that the piece's sway is solidified. Another argument for the volatility of the movement presents itself in the melodic and harmonic content; the work begins with primarily whole-step intervals and whole-tone patterns to the climax of the introduction in measures 9 and 10, wherein the dynamic high point (*forte*) is reached, as well as the attack density high point (sextuplets), timbrel high point (the sixth octave of the piano), and rapid-fire mode changes between the major mode and minor mode being dependent upon the high A-natural.

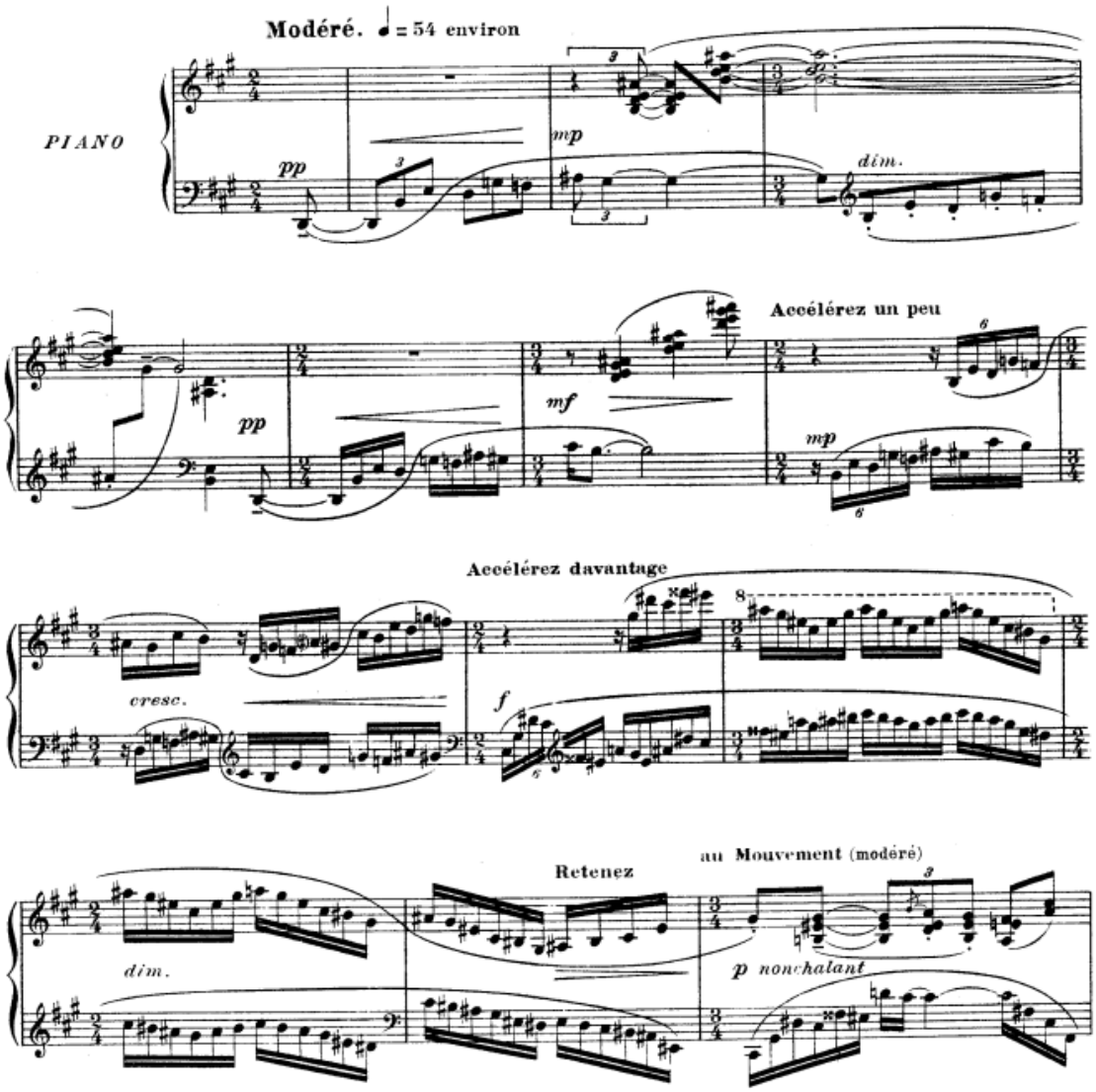

Fig. 10. The opening of *Mauresque.*

Already in the musical introduction, Schmitt has laid bare his intention. *Mauresque* is a piece concerned with the rapid-fire juxtaposition of contrasting material, be it rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, or timbral.

Measure 13 presents the first theme, one that greets the listener quite innocently, but to the interpreter provides a myriad of directions. Once again, we observe the

dichotomy of the duplet versus triplet figuration in the melody. Schmitt also adds, however, contrasting articulations, with carefully prescribed *detachée,* legato, and staccato markings in rapid succession. The theme, seemingly centered around F-sharp (implied by the dominant to tonic implications every measure), partakes of mode mixture at the end of measure 15, with A-sharp implying F-sharp major. Schmitt travels through drastic tonal and dynamic shifts, (the *pianissimo* G-sharp major centered harmony at measure 20 being a particular effective example) until a return to the introductory *Accéleréz un peu*, passagework that now reveals itself as transitional material that beckons the listener to a new section. The filigree leads us to the second theme, this time at measure 32, marked *Un peu plus lent en commençant*.

The second theme comprises triadic material in the melody line, with an extension of the transitionary material heard in measure 27 (singular notes leaping octaves on the off-beat.) The second theme also presents drastic contrasts, this time between texture (triads versus single notes), rhythm, (Schmitt continues with the juxtaposition of triplet figures to duplet figures), and rapid mixture of chord qualities, with the melody in the right-hand alternating between major and minor chords in quick succession. With regards to articulation, the second theme is much more settled than the first, with both hands playing legato.

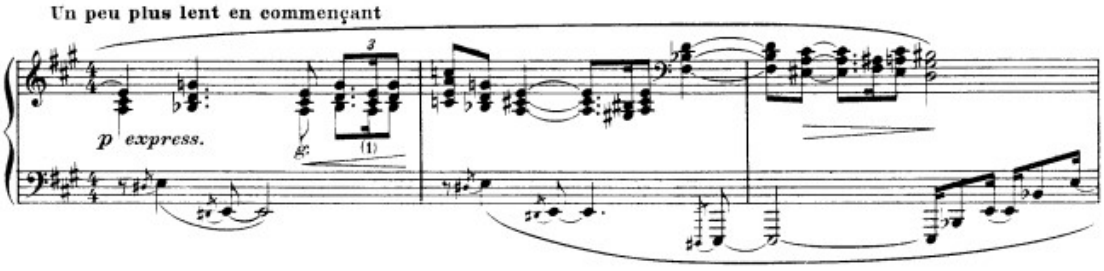

Fig. 11. The second theme.

At measure 38, the music increases in difficulty of execution and material. Schmitt calls for *pianissimo* chords, voiced in such a way that a unison separated by three octaves shines above the rest of the musical material—a difficult passage given the number of notes and the added colorful filigree in between the chords. The timbre itself is a special one that might sound familiar. The unisons (and eventually fifths and fourths) separated by at least two octaves is an effect commonly used in pieces of that era that attempted a (so-called) exotic sound, (a similar moment is found in the "Egyptian" concerto by Camille Saint-Saens).

The movement reaches its climax here, with the richest textures reached in measures 41 through 48, (mm. 43 and 44 comprising quick and tempestuous figurations against dissonant harmonies), which simmer down to familiar transition material at measure 48. The transition leads us back to the first theme, but the music is more dissonant and slightly unfamiliar. While the theme remains the same, there exist disruptive harmonies within; figurations that spell out various ninth and eleventh chords with added suspensions. Often the figurations emphasize minor thirds, perhaps hinting towards the harmonic minor scale and adding to the attempts at an exotic flair. However,

while these measures parallel the first appearance of the first theme, implying a recapitulation of some sort, there exists a marked difference. The measures parallel each other, but their order of appearance is modified. While the first three measures parallel exactly (with added filigree), the subsequent measures are switched; the second and third phrases within the theme are now the third and second phrases, respectively. Why Schmitt decided on such a structural change is certainly intriguing. It is true that, harmonically, the recapitulation differs from the first appearance, and perhaps Schmitt found the change of harmony necessitated a structural change, but as a listener and performer, this particular change seems somewhat jarring. Perhaps Schmitt's aesthetic idea for the movement is expressed here again, and the uneasy sway of the various meters and harmonies is once again employed in order to maximize contrast and highlight the asymmetric feel of the music.

Having now reached measure 64, Schmitt leads us through a rapid series of chromatic harmonic changes (this time a segment of the first theme with thicker four-note chords rather than triads is used to emphasize the dissonance) and the familiar transition material emerges once more. The second theme is presented in the same truncated manner as the first theme was, with modal mixture alternating between F-sharp minor and F-sharp major.

There occurs a moment of complete harmonic ambiguity in measure 78, where the keyboard figurations ascend using patterns centered around C and F-sharp, a tritone apart (reminiscent of the end of Ravel's *Ondine*). Following a measure of fermata rest, Schmitt

writes the second of only two metronome markings, crotchet equal to 50, and we hear the second theme one final time, now firmly solidifying the piece in F-sharp major.

Overall, the work follows a simple structure; with its rapid transitions between thematic material, the overall effect being that of a two-part, ABAB form. Within those A and B sections, there are tonal centers (though the keys are, as mentioned previously, rather ambiguous due to modal mixture) that follow a traditional key scheme for a work in a minor key. The A section is in the tonic, the B in the mediant, and then the final iterations of A and B remain in the tonic.

m.1-12	13-24	25-31	32-47	48-52	53-68	69-71	72-76	77-79	80-82
Intro	A	trans.	B	trans.	A’	trans.	B’	trans.	B’
	F-sharp		A		F-sharp		F-sharp		F-sharp

Fig. 12. Form and key centers of *Mauresque*.

Mauresque, then, represents a fairly traditional style of composition. Apart from the colorful harmonic language, (mainly mode mixture or whole-tone rather than polytonality or atonality), the work is essentially a two-part form, with the rhythmic impetus implying a dance.

1.3.3. Pianistic considerations

Mauresque, while certainly the most pianistically straightforward of the set, poses its own technical issues. Only in specific places does Schmitt specify pedaling. In *Mauresque* it is not until measures 41-51 that he specifies pedal markings of any sort,

wherein he indicates that the pedal be held throughout measures without change. Measures 41-43 are marked in a very intuitive manner, and it seems somewhat curious that Schmitt would specify pedal markings given that pedaling is necessary to execute what is written. There is the possibility of holding the notes in the sostenuto pedal, and perhaps Schmitt wanted to make it clear that such a practice would not satisfy the musical needs of the moment. However, Schmitt did not specify pedaling at other such areas where the middle pedal might suffice. For example, in measure 32, Schmitt recommends that the pianist take the lower notes of the triad melody in the left hand (notating *g* for *gauche*) but provides no pedal markings at all. While the pedal markings may seem intuitive to the modern pianist, a pianist for whom the blurring of harmony is acceptable for the sake of color, Schmitt's pedal markings betray a belief that clarity reigns supreme in execution, and his markings, reminiscent of Haydn and Beethoven's long pedal markings, are solely for the purpose of allowing a blur into the execution of the climactic passagework in measures 41-51. Schmitt's philosophy with regards to pedaling differs in this movement as opposed to *J'entends dans le lointain.* In the previous movement, his pedal markings appeared in the moments he desired clarity; he seemed primarily concerned with noting the lifts of the pedal rather than the depressions. Given that the opposite is true in *Mauresque,* one might consider that the relationship to pedaling within which Schmitt operated changed in the years between the two movements' composition. By 1913, Schmitt had long since graduated from the Conservatoire de Paris, and his studies under Gabriel Fauré. However, while years had passed since his Conservatoire days, one might note that *Mauresque*'s attitude towards pedaling and the focus on clarity

as a sonic foundation seems allied closely with the general view of piano playing from the Conservatoire in the late 1800's and early 1900's. In Charles Timbrell's *French Pianism: a Historical Perspective*—(an overview of the French school of piano playing), he notes that characteristics such as "clarity, delicacy, and precision" have been the "predilections of French composers, teachers, and performers for centuries." [1] Indeed, Camille Saint-Saens, who taught Florent Schmitt's teachers, was prized for his "always pure, clean, rhythmic, and elegantly phrased" playing.[2] Throughout the book, Timbrell remarks that the French school of piano in the late 1800's and early 1900's centered around the *jeu perlé* style of playing, with fingers close to the keys, and the depression of the keys controlled through only the fingers. He highlights Marguerite Long's description of the French piano school as a summation of his findings. "French playing is lucid, precise, and slender. If it concentrates above all on grace rather than force, preserving especially its equilibrium and sense of proportion, it does not bow to any other in its power, profundity, and inner emotion."[3]

Mauresque, very much at odds with *J'entends dan la loitain,* (and *Cette ombres, mon images,* as well) focuses on clarity, as highlighted by Schmitt's philosophy towards pedal marking. As noted before, it is also the only movement completely notated on two staves. It is not because the music is notated on two staves that we might note that the French school of piano playing (close to the keys, with depression of the keys from the fingers rather than wrist or arm) works in the practice of performance. However, the fact

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1 Timbrell, *French,* 25.
2 Ibid., 53.
3 Ibid., 251.

that the music is comfortably presented on two staves is a symptom of the fact that the music is much easier to execute and does not require the performer to leap from the keys regularly and rely on wrist and arm motions for accuracy.

1.4. *Cette ombre, mon image…*

1.4.1. Background

Cette ombre, mon image, written in 1916, is dedicated to Yvonne Müller, pianist and later the wife of Italian composer Alfredo Casella. Like the first movement, its title derives from a work of literature; this time by the American poet Walt Whitman "My shadow, my likeness."[1] The poem reflects on the shadow as a version of the narrator that he does not always recognize as himself. "That shadow, my likeness that goes to and fro seeking a livelihood… How often I find myself standing and looking at where it flits, How often I question and doubt whether that is really me." [2] The short poem ends with the narrator stating "But among my lovers and caroling these songs, O I never doubt whether that is really me."

Of course one cannot assume whether Schmitt's music represents a detailed interpretation of the poem, but in contrast to the imagery *J'entends dan le loitain,* the message behind the Whitman poem seems fairly accessible: even if one questions whether or not one's actions are genuine with regards to making a living or appeasing others, in moments of self-expression one is truly oneself.

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1 Walt Whitman, "That shadow, my likeness," Whitman archive, accessed March 2, 2024. https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1891/poems/83

2 Ibid., "That shadow."

1.4.2. Analysis

"—*Calme",* Schmitt writes, as the work opens with soft rolled chords outlining perfect fifths and fourths. A five-tone melody with a pentatonic flavor arises out of this haze in the third measure and highlights F-sharp as a tonal center. Seemingly in response to the first melody, a second musical idea appears in measure 6: unison triads alternating between major and minor harmonies and spaced three octaves apart. Measure 9 continues with an extension of the first melody and solidifies the pattern for this first section of the piece: call and response of these two separate musical themes.

The first theme comprises a single note, primarily step-wise melodic line, rhythmic simplicity, straightforward dynamics and articulation, and pentatonic outlines. It is separated into two parts: the first two measures contain the moving notes described above, while the remaining measures repeat a singular note. The second theme comprises triadic harmonies often progressing by thirds, unpredictable dynamic directions, rhythmic ambiguity (note the accents on the offbeat), and modal harmonies. As Schmitt seems to enjoy two contrasting musical ideas, we find here again that form at the heart of the musical content.

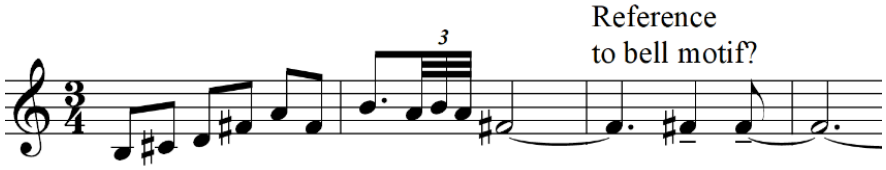

Fig. 13. *Cette ombre*, *mon image* first theme.

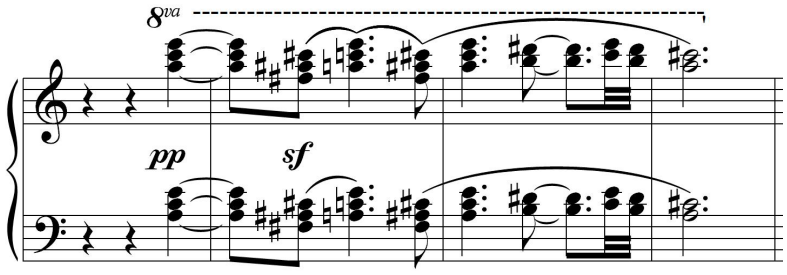

Fig. 14. *Cette ombre* second theme.

Measures 1-23 are composed of this call-and-response between the themes as they travel through different tonal centers. Note, however, that while the first theme began without triadic harmonies (thus preserving its pentatonic sound), by measure 9 Schmitt adds in harmonies, and by measure 23, while the melody line—if isolated—remains pentatonic, it is accompanied by full chordal textures. Beginning at measure 24 is transitional material, ultimately leading to the next large section at measure 29

The transition is an outgrowth of the first theme's representation in measure 21-23. We note at this point that the music has changed in a few important ways. The first theme, initially contrasted by the second theme in a variety of musical attributes, has adopted a few aspects that initially differentiated it. The second musical idea flitted back and forth between triadic modal harmonies, (in its first presentation, between major and minor.) In measure 24, the first theme is accompanied by clear triadic harmonies, and the transition makes use of alternating major and minor triads. In measures 26-28, there occurs a combination of the previously contrasting musical content: the harmonies are triadic and employ mode mixture as did the second theme, but alternate between major

and augmented forms and are primarily stepwise, with simple rhythms and articulations, as in the first theme.

At measure 29, the second large section of the work begins, and the musical content seems derived from the second theme based on the melody's (middle voice) rhythm.[1]

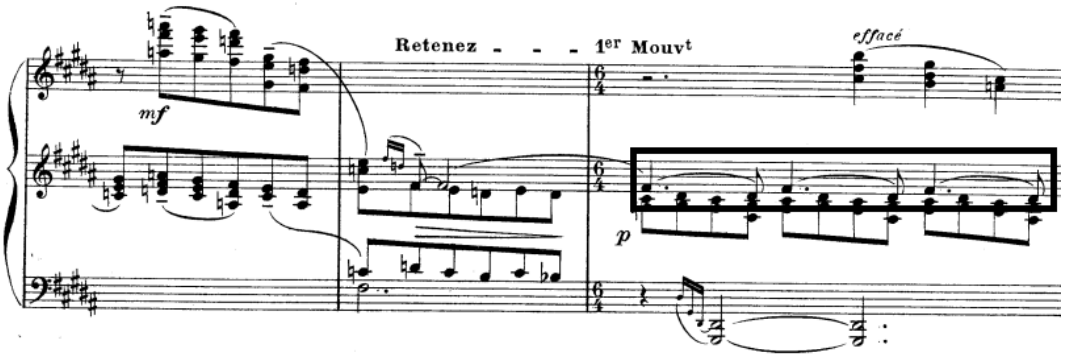

Fig. 15. Variation on second theme.

From measures 29-45, Schmitt explores a trancelike musical state wherein a repetitive accompanying figure increases in intensity and volume until the energy boils over into measure 41, a *forte* statement of the second theme, though now extended beyond its initial form. As the music tapers back there occurs an extremely clear statement of the first theme in measures 46-47. It is, in fact, this first theme that leads into measure 51.

Measures 51-80 comprise a faster section of the work that bears less resemblance to any previous music. However, this section is parallel to the previous section in that it is a variation of sorts with one of the original themes. While measures 29-45 expanded upon

[1] Schmitt, *Ombres,* 28.

the second theme, measures 51-80 are an expansion of the first. There is first, the obvious, that the section grows from the transitional measures 49-50 which are direct representations of the first theme. However, less obviously, the melody line beginning in measure 56 is mostly step-wise, presented in single notes with that small rhythmic "flick" at the end of it. If there were any doubts as to whether this section is related to the first theme, Schmitt alleviates them at measure 60, wherein he parallels both the motion and harmony of measure 9.

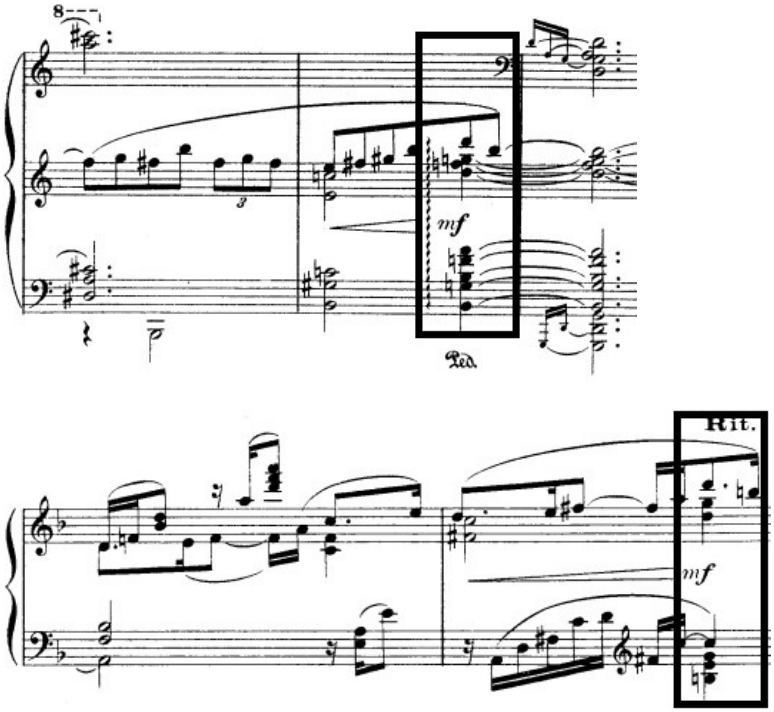

Fig. 16. Parallels between measure 9 (above) and measure 60 (below).

This variation on the first theme ends at measure 80, where Schmitt writes a transition back into the variation on the second theme, though the textures in this occurrence are far denser with inner filigree.

At measure 107, the movement reaches an important structural point, where the aforementioned musical ideas are juxtaposed in very quick succession. In 107 we hear the variation on the first theme, in 108 the variation on the second theme, in 109-112 the variation on the first theme, and in 113-114, a combination of the second theme (in the top stave) and the variation on the first theme in the bottom stave. The final bars of the piece, measures 118-121 comprise a return to the original form of the second theme (triadic, switching between modes, etc.) and the tail end of the first theme, paralleling measures 14-16. The last section parallels the very beginning of the piece, where the musical ideas were presented one after another, though in this final section, having explored variations of the original themes the musical content involved has expanded.

Structurally the movement can be represented as follows:

A	trans.	B	trans.	C	trans.	B’	A’
1-24	25-28	29-45	46-50	51-77	78-90	91-106	107-121
Theme 1 Theme 2	Material from both themes	Variation Theme 2	Material from both themes	Variation Theme 1	Material from both themes	Variation Theme 2	Theme 1 Theme 1 var. Theme 2 Theme 2 var.

Fig. 17. Form and thematic content in *Cette ombre, mon image...*

Viewing the work on this broader level, one might note that it seems to be in arch form: ABCBA.

While the syntax of *J’entends dans la lointain* seemed somewhat obsessed at times with the examination and manipulation of musical cells, *Cette ombre, mon image* treats the musical ideas much more loosely, more akin to *Mauresque*.

1.4.3. Pianistic considerations

Predictably, perhaps, we begin again with a focus upon the use of pedal markings in the movement. Schmitt barely dictates any pedal markings, and, as in *J'entends dans la lointain,* the pedal indications often revolve around the lifting, rather than depression, of the pedal. For example, the first pedal marking occurs in measure 10, where it only seems to be indicated to make certain that the pianist clears the pedal for the change in harmony midway through measure 12. A second pedal marking occurs at measure 14, where, again, it seems that the printed pedal markings are added to highlight the lift of the pedal at measure 16. There occurs a striking similarity not only in the philosophy of the pedal markings, but in the content. In particular, the lift of the pedal to allow for the clarity of the single held D natural in measure 16 bears striking resemblance to the bell motif pedal lifts in measure 7 and measure 23 from *J'entends dans le lointain.* (Refer to Fig. 9 on page 17.)

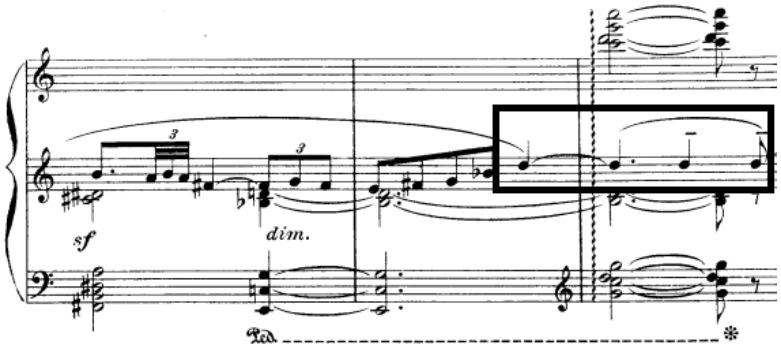

Figure 18: Pedaling in *Cette ombre, mon image,* measure 17. Bell motif.

The bell-like motif from the first movement seems to have found its way into the third movement, and it is particularly striking that throughout the whole work. Schmitt notates only six pedal lifts (three in the first movement, one in the second, and two in the third movement). Of the six pedal lifts, one in the second movement does not have any relation to the rhythmic motif, but the other five all highlight that displaced eighth note. The first and third movements of *Ombres* seem connected in at least the one way, and it is in fact the same displaced eighth-note in the form of ringing unison octaves that ends both movements.

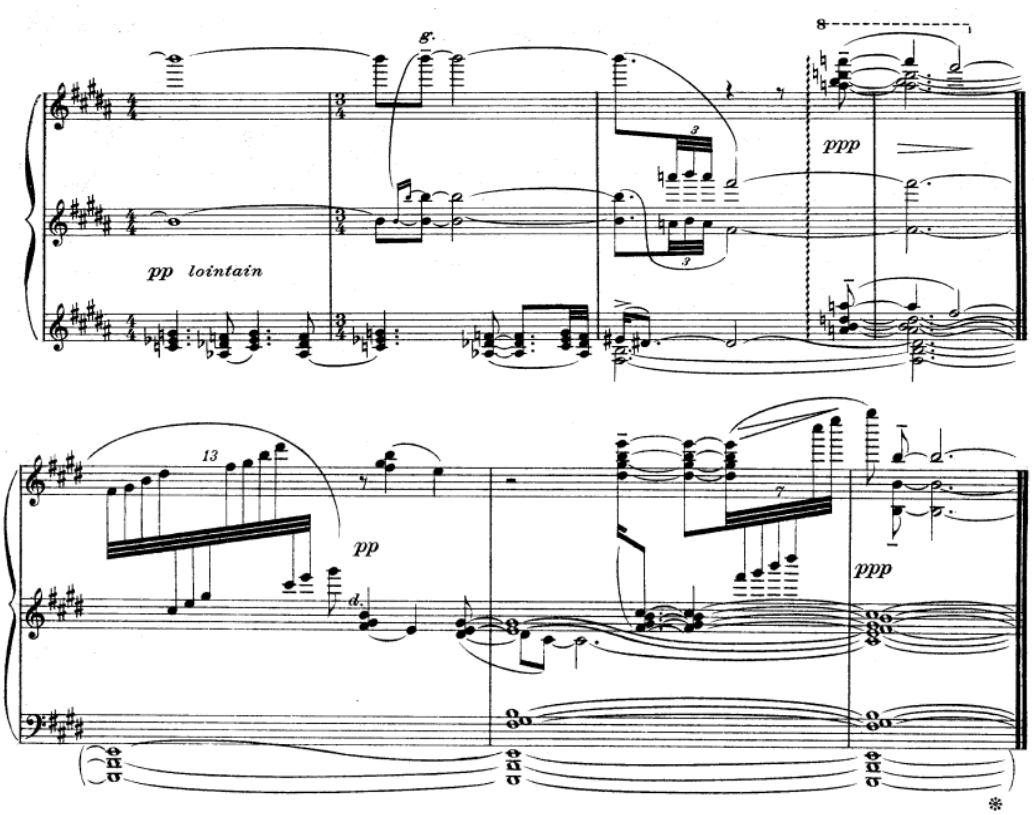

Fig. 19. Comparison of endings. *Cette ombre, mon image...* (above), and *J'entends dans le lointain...* (below).

One might also note that the melodic content of the first theme in *Cette ombre, mon image* bears some resemblance to the opening theme of *J'entends dans la lointain*; both use primarily stepwise motion and involve a rapid-fire rhythmic turn ending on an F-sharp.

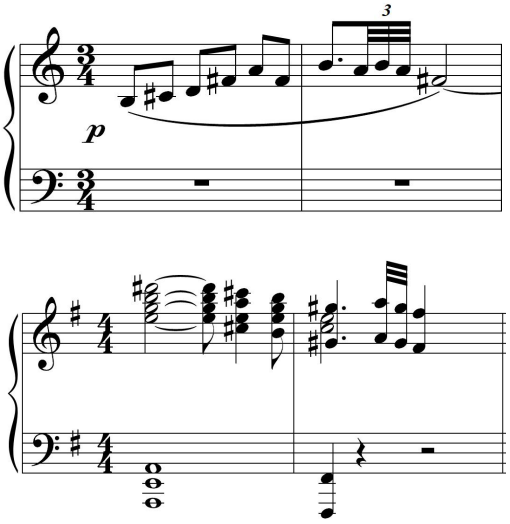

Fig. 20. First themes in *Cette ombre, mon image…* (above), and *J'entends das la lointain...*(below).

Of course, one might inquire about the second theme of *Cette ombre, mon image*. There, the triadic, mode-mixing, passage separated by three octaves bears a striking resemblance to measures 38-39 in *Mauresque.* There occurs that special timbre of unison chords separated by three octaves, block triad voicing, and the same rapid-fire exchange of mode, though while the theme in *Mauresque* begins with a major triad and alternates to the minor, the theme in *Cette ombre, mon image* begins with the minor triad.

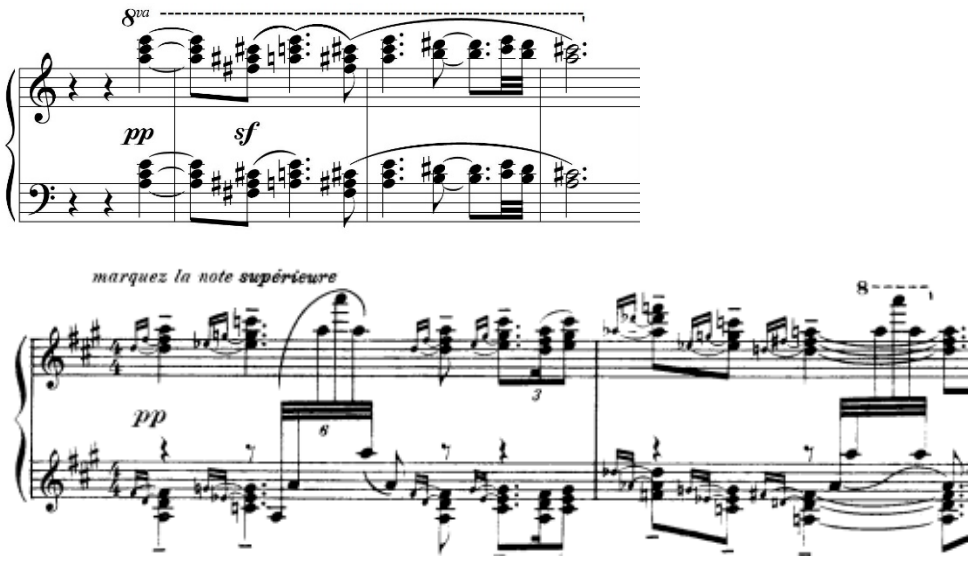

Fig 21: The second theme of *Cette ombre, mon image…,* (above) and the second theme of *Mauresque* in measures 38-39 (below).

The pianistic execution of *Cette ombre, mon image,* from a technical standpoint requires a nuanced discussion. Given the similarities between musical content, one might assume that themes of *J'entends dans la lointain* should be performed with that virtuosic, arm-weight-centered piano technique of the Lisztian school, and the themes relating to *Mauresque* with the old French piano school technique. However, *Cette ombre, mon image* does not divulge its secrets as readily as the other two movements. The physical impossibility of using only close-to-the-key finger technique for the massive chords of *J'entends dans la lointain* and various rapid hand-crossings do not exist within this movement. Neither does the perfectly suited voicing and clarity-centered philosophy towards pedal from *Mauresque* appear. Most likely, the piano technique assumed is that of *J'entends dans la lointain.* It is clear that Schmitt's perspective on pedaling within this movement mirrors that of the style of the first movement, and the hand-crossing athletics

of measures 56-64 are undoubtedly easier (though not impossible) with a hand more far removed from the keys than the old French school. Ultimately, the decision to opt for the more Lisztian style of piano playing arises from measures 96-102, the climax of the movement with grand chords played accented at a *fortissimo* dynamic. This passage seems to require, for me, the use of the arm and back to fully express the markings that Schmitt desired.

2. Gallic and Teutonic

2.1. An interpretive reading

The need for a programmatic or narrative reading of these musical moments is certainly not an objective fact. However, the similarities between various themes seem too purposeful to be coincidence, and given the alleged time-frame of composition, one cannot help but notice that there must have occurred a purposeful process of composition. *Mauresque,* the outlier of the and a piece that seems almost thrown into the mix to complete a three-movement work, can no longer be understood as an inserted afterthought if, indeed, the thematic connections between the movements are references. The second theme from *Cette ombre, mon image* found its conception with *Mauresque* in mind. Given that *Cette ombre, mon image* also references *J'entends dans la lointain* but was, firstly, composed earlier, and, secondly, placed as the final movement even with its earlier conception, might imply that *J'entends dans la lointain* was composed with a specific goal in mind: to expand on musical motifs first presented in *Cette ombre, mon image.* Only in *J'entends dans la lointain,* after-all, does Schmitt give a month as well as

a year for completion: September, 1917, implying at least nine-months of work solely on *J'entends dans la lointain* after the completion of *Cette ombre, mon image* in 1916.[1]

The question remains, why? Why include that strange work (*Mauresque*) so far removed stylistically from the other two movements into *Ombres?* Why place the most musically dense, difficult, and climactic music first? Why reference the overall title of the work in the title of the final movement?

Perhaps the answer to these questions might be solved with an interpretive reading of the piece, the final movement being the key, and in particular, the Walt Whitman poem connected to it.

At its essence, the Whitman poem deals with an existential problem. Only in moments of self-expression, in "caroling these songs" does the narrator "never doubt whether that is really me."[2] The shadow, aiming to please others and make a living is ostensibly so different from the inner feelings of the narrator that he wonders if it is, indeed, really him.

Schmitt titles the whole work *Ombres,* literally, "shadows." If we take each movement, then, to be a shadow of sorts, of something Schmitt is not exactly sure is genuine, we observe the following: in the opening movement, a gargantuan, motivic fueled masterpiece of Lisztian techniques, grandeur, containing possible references to Ravel's so-called "attempt at a caricature of Romanticism," and dedicated to a colleague who specialized in the interpretation of German music; in the middle movement, a small and charming dance movement best suited to the Old French style of playing; and a final

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1 Schmitt, *Ombres*, 18.
2 Whitman, "That shadow."

movement, closer in style to the first, that references both other movements in an arch form, ending as the first movement did, but with the references to the second movement juxtaposed.

Schmitt, perhaps just as much as his colleagues and modern scholars, wanted to understand his music in such a way that one might be able to categorize it. In a particularly touching tribute to the recently passed composer, Schmitt's friend of more than sixty years, Émile Vuillermoz wrote the following in an essay titled "The True Face of Florent Schmitt."

> He was never sure of the value of what he wrote—and it is in this, perhaps, that he differed most profoundly from other composers of his time who were rarely tormented by such scruples. This heir to the noblest German Romantics—this creator who "dreamed big," this passionate lyrical artist, this dazzling orchestrator, this painter of violently colored frescoes – every day experienced around him attempts to discredit everything he loved, instead exalting intellectualism and cerebral "systems" of writing while attempting to excommunicate sensitivity, human emotion, palpitation and tenderness.[1]

Perhaps, then, *Ombres,* is Schmitt's response to the exact question of this lecture recital. He is all-of-the-above: he is the composer of highly complex, motivic music that some would likely label as Teutonic, and also of that clear old style that some would contribute to a Gallic composer. Given that the final movement references the title of the overall work and the other two movements, I like to think of the final movement as an epilogue of sorts, a meditation akin to the Whitman poem, wherein it is during the "caroling of these songs, O I never doubt whether that is really me."[2] I like to imagine

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1 Émile Vuillermoz, "*Le vrai visage de Florent Schmitt,*" *Journal musical français,* (September 1958). My translation from the original French.

2 Whitman, "That shadow."

that Schmitt, though Vuillermoz might disagree, found a moment of confidence in himself and considered the composition of the final movement, his caroling of songs.

2.2. Views on national music

As a final inquiry, one might inquire as to whether or not these "Teutonic" and "Gallic" values exist in a meaningful way outside of tradition. There exist, of course, differing opinions on this matter. It is true, for example, that there existed a French school of piano playing that differed in both its physical manner and philosophy from the so-called German and Russian schools of piano playing. However, the presence of the French school of thought only points to the fact that in halls of the Paris Conservatoire there existed a style and attitude towards composition, not that "all of France" collectively agreed on certain generic musical qualities as being representative. In Francis Toye's "A Case for Musical Nationalism", Toye states that

> —everybody, more or less, feels that it [nationalism] postulates something to do with race, something to do with traditional songs and dances, something to do with environment; but the term undoubtedly represents a vague feeling rather than a definition. Now the object of this article...is to suggest that the racial significance of the word is untenable and the "folk-song" significance not of primary importance. The only sense in which the world has any real musical meaning is as signifying music and musicians in relation to the particular community wherein they exist.[1]

[1] Francis Toye, "A Case for Musical Nationalism," *The Musical Quarterly* IV, no. 1 (1918): 12, https://doi.org/10.1093/mq/iv.1.12.

For Toye, music can only be described as national in some way if it serves a social purpose. “The only broad, general basis for nationalism is, I think, not aesthetic at all, but social, economic.”[1]

He argues that national music is music that “insists, other things proving equal, preference be shown to the home product.” In this way, he argues, it serves a social purpose; supporting a nation’s artists financially. “Could any Utopia possibly be called complete, that was unable to provide music sufficiently for its own needs?”[2]

From his utilitarian perspective, the Paris Conservatoire’s perpetual hiring of solely those who followed the old French style of piano playing likely represented nationalism, and Schmitt might indeed be called a French nationalist composer, regardless of his musical content. Schmitt, after all, dedicated his works to French performers, premiered many of his works within the Société Musicale Indépendante, and worked within France rather than anywhere else. Whether or not there occurred instances of music that some might not identify as “French” remains irrelevant to Toye; what solidifies a work as nationalist is simply its role in society. Schmitt dedicated *Ombres* to three French pianists, and the work was premiered in France. In this sense, the work served French society more than others.

In Reginald De Koven’s article “Nationalism in Music”, a similar train of thought appears, though Koven adds that “It is national pride as well as national feeling that begets national art. France is today the centre of the art-producing world. That she is so remains largely due to the fact that French people prefer to hear French music, to see

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1 Toye., “A Case,” 18.
2 Ibid., “A Case,” 19.

French pictures and statuary, and go to the theatre to hear French plays—meaning, in each instance, the works of a born Frenchman—than those of any other nationality."[1]

Again, there is the avoidance of any nationalism related to musical content, and the focus is rather on the practical effects of the works on society, though Koven seems to imply that while the eventual benefit may indeed be financial, it is the "national pride and national feeling" behind the support of the work that truly defines it as nationalist. In this way, a work is nationalist based on its audience rather than the composer. Schmitt's music was somewhat popular in France, though divided. Perhaps Koven would argue that Schmitt's music did not reach enough universal audience praise for it to be French nationalist.

By contrast, there exists the view that it is within the musical content of a work that one might identify national music. Annegret Fauser, in "Gendering the Nations: The Ideologies of French Discourse on Music (1870-1914)" proposes the following argument. Firstly, she states "The French defeat in 1871 was a pivotal event in the forging of cultural identity in nineteenth-century France."[2] She goes on to note that there arose a "reciprocal connection made between women's emancipation and the loss of the war, calling into question the virility both of France and of Frenchmen."[3] Given this national identity crisis, there grew an effort to bring so-called masculine traits back into daily life, including, she states, "virility, strength, structure, logic, concision, and restraint."[4] These

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1 Reginald De Koven, "Nationalism in Music," *The North American Review* 189, no. 640 (March 1909): 396.

2 Annegrete Fauser, "Gendering the Nations: The Ideologies of French Discourse on Music (1870-1914)," *Musical Constructions of Nationalism.* (Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2001), 72–103, 78.

3 Ibid., *Musical,* 74.

4 Ibid., *Musical,* 74.

qualities in music were at odds with the music of Germany (Wagner) which, according to naysayers at the time, represented weakness and emotional-indulgence.

How those qualities (strength, structure, logic, etc.) found representation in music, Fauser does not explain. However, she does believe in a musical nationalism for French music in the late 1800's based on what she viewed as a nation-wide crisis of identity. Does Schmitt's *Ombres* represent strength, structure, logic, etc.? Undoubtedly the application of these words to music remains extremely subjective, and while some might argue for the lack of restraint in *J'entends dans le lointain…,* another might just as easily attempt to argue for its use of restraint. If, however, one were to view the movements in the context of the old French piano school (as occurred earlier in this paper), then one might recognize that Schmitt's *Ombres* would likely trigger alarm-bells in the minds of composers like Albert Lavignac, who stated that "the characteristic style of our [French] national art, which has always been its glory, which one finds in all great eras, and which are clarity, elegance, and sincerity of expression."[1]

Schmitt's work, especially the first movement, strays away from any regular definition of elegance and clarity. If one considers Schmitt's musical content, then, it seems likely that Fauser would not view Schmitt as a French nationalist composer.

As a testament to the subjective nature of music's effect on each individual, however, we might consider Pierre-Octave Ferroud's ferocious defense of his teacher as a strictly French composer, writing in his biography on Schmitt's life: "Florent Schmitt's character has every quality of the eastern Frenchman; verve, energy, tenacity, breadth of

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1 Fauser., *Musical,* 86.

conception, and the ability to realize. There is nothing in him for that taste of mythology– that hunger for false metaphysics which controls German art."[1]

Ultimately, the idea of nation-specific qualities in music seems an elusive goal. Florent Schmitt's music is to different individuals varying shades of Teutonic and Gallic, and perhaps to some not a shade of either. Be that as it may, I hope that this paper might convince those new listeners and learners of Schmitt's music to judge his music, not based on the ofttimes vague and subjective so-called national characteristics, but as a work of self-expression from a fellow complex and layered human.

[1] Pierre-Octave Ferroud, *Autor de Florent Schmitt.* (Paris: Durand, 1927), 6.

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Vita

Alexander Agate

1994 Born in Westlake Village, California
2012 Entered California State University as a Piano Performance Major under Dr. Dmitry Rachmanov
2016 Entered Manhattan School of Music as a MM Student under André-Michel Schub
2017 Won First Prize in the Munz Chopin Competition and the Artur Balsam Duo Competition
2018 MM Manhattan School of Music
2018 Continued at Manhattan School of Music as a DMA candidate under André-Michel Schub
2020 Semi-finalist at the National Chopin Competition
2022 Second Prize at the American International Paderewski Piano Competition and Third Prize at the Dallas International Piano Competition, tours in Italy, England.
2023 Special Prize in the Sicily International Piano Festival and Competition, Concert engagements throughout the U.S.A., England, China, Japan.
2024 DMA Manhattan School of Music