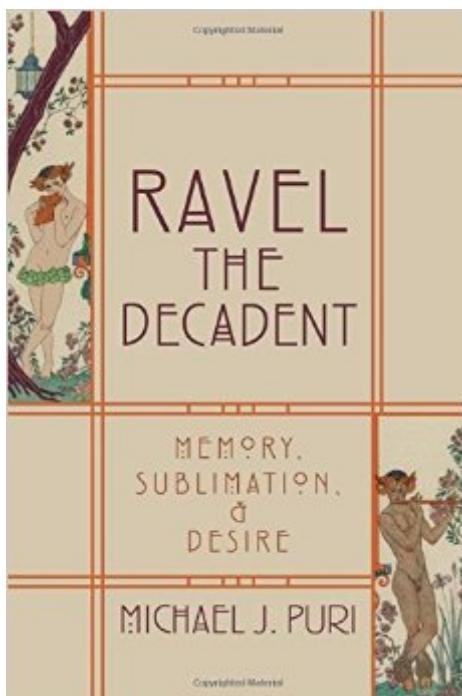


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Ravel The Decadent: Memory, Sublimation, And Desire



Synopsis

The music of Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), beloved by musicians and audiences since its debut, has been a difficult topic for scholars. The traditional stylistic categories of impressionism, symbolism, and neoclassicism, while relevant, have offered too little purchase on this fascinating but enigmatic work. In *Ravel the Decadent*, author Michael Puri provides an innovative and productive solution by locating the aesthetic origins of this music in the French Decadence and demonstrating the extension of this influence across the length of his oeuvre. From an array of Decadent topics Puri selects three--memory, sublimation, and desire--and uses them to delineate the content of this music, pinpoint its overlap with contemporary cultural discourse, and link it to its biographical context, as well as to create new methods altogether for the analysis and interpretation of music. *Ravel the Decadent* opens by defining the main concepts, giving particular attention to memory and decadence. It then stakes out contrasting modes of memory in this music: a nostalgic mode that views the past as forever lost, and a more optimistic one that imagines its resurrection and reanimation. Acknowledging Ravel's lifelong identity as a dandy--a figure that embodies the Decadence and its aspiration toward the sublime--Puri identifies possible moments of musical self-portraiture before stepping back to theorize dandyism in European musical modernism at large. He then addresses the dialectic between desire and its sublimation in the pairing of two genres--the bacchanal and the idyl--and leverages the central trio of concepts to offer provocative readings of Ravel's two waltz sets, the *Valses nobles et sentimentales* and *La valse*. Puri concludes by invoking the same terms to identify a topic of "faun music" that promises to create new common ground between Ravel and Debussy. Rife with close readings that will satisfy the musicologist, *Ravel the Decadent* also suits a more general reader through its broadly humanistic key concepts, immersion in contemporary art and literature, and clarity of language.

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Customer Reviews

Not infrequently writers who attempt to make literal the ethereal music of composers fall into the quandary of 'how can musical meaning be expressed in words?' Most audiences continue to swoon during performances of Maurice Ravel's 'La Valse,' 'Boléro,' 'Gaspard de la nuit,' 'Daphnis and Chloé,' 'Shéhérazade,' 'Ma Mère l'Oye,' 'Valses nobles et sentimentales,' the piano concerti, 'Le Tombeau de Couperin,' etc are inclined to respond to the rapturous moods he created. But in this book by Michael J. Puri the intent is to step into academia and explain the works of the composer in terms of the event and tenor of the times. According to Puri, a graduate of Harvard, Yale, and the Music Academy in Basel, Switzerland, a musicologist and concert pianist who first encountered Ravel through his beautiful but technically challenging music for piano. Puri's research into Ravel grew beyond the piano music to include the composer's entire output, Ravel (1875 - 1937) was a decadent, in that generation of artists - painters, writers and musicians who produced from the end of the 19th century through the years between World Wars I and II - concerned with both internal psychology and external aesthetics. Dandyism, or the adoption of a fashionable public persona that was an artistic expression in itself, was part of this movement. "I saw that there were gaps in the way historians accounted for late 19th- and early 20th-century music. Ravel's music remains very popular for classical musicians and audiences, but for various reasons he's been neglected in these narratives. It occurred to me that I had the opportunity to think new thoughts about a major repertoire.

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