

Reception of European Modernism in America: A Comparative Study of Maurice Ravel and Béla Bartók's 1927–1928 United States Concert Tours

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ABSTRACT

During the 1920s, the Pro-Musica Society sponsored a series of tours for European composers to present their music to the American audience. Two of those composers, who presented their own works at the piano, were Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) and Béla Bartók (1881–1945). Their US tours have been studied individually by Dr. Sarah M. Lucas and Dr. Norman Vance Dunfee, and these studies were both important models for my research. Despite both composers being highly regarded in classical music today, the critical reactions to their music were quite varied during their tours in 1927 and 1928. The difference in their receptions formed the guiding question for this project: What can be learned about the critical responses of European modernists in the United States based on the study of two concurrent tours of major composers? This study aims to explore the varied reception of European modernists in America, through the comparison of Ravel and Bartók's US tours with the Pro-Musica Society. This study adds to the current literature of Ravel, Bartók, and the study of European modernists in twentieth century America.

INTRODUCTION

European composer-pianists Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) and Béla Bartók (1881–1945) were influential figures in twentieth century art music. Both composers can be linked to modernism, but each had his own unique style of composition. Each composer, with the support of the Pro-Musica Society, gave concert tours in the United States during the 1920s. Their receptions by American critics were quite different from one another, with Ravel receiving more positive responses than Bartók. The short time span between their tours, less than one month apart, brought me to my first research question: How did the reception of Ravel compare to that of Bartók? Ravel and Bartók were chosen for this analysis because they both toured during the 1928 Pro-Musica season and their appearances overlapped, sometimes with Ravel appearing before Bartók and vice versa. Both Europeans were also pianist-composers who performed in their own works during their respective recitals. While Ravel and Bartók are the main subjects of this paper, it is important to know that there were other European modernists who also toured America under the auspices of Pro-Musica. Some of these tours included Alfredo Casella (1883–1947), Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953), Darius Milhaud (1892–1974), as well as other musical figures. This surge of European modernism in America brought me to my second research question: What can we learn about the varied reception of European modernists in the United States based on the study of two concurrent tours of major composers?

The individual receptions of Ravel and Bartók can be seen in studies by Dr. Sarah M. Lucas and Dr. Norman V. Dunfee, which were both very important for the synthesis of my research. Using their work as models for this study, a comparison of Ravel and Bartók's US reception is formed through a two means—written analysis and figures. Understanding Ravel and Bartók's receptions in America required an analysis of critical reviews of their performances in the cities that they both made appearances in, for instance—New York City. In addition, timelines are included alongside this paper to compare the receptions of Ravel and Bartók directly to one another. The overall aim of this study is to explore the themes of European modernism in America through the comparison of Maurice Ravel and Béla Bartók's receptions during their US tours.

TIMELINES

Figure 1

Béla Bartók Pro-Musica Chapter Performances

11 January 1928	Los Angeles, California	15 January 1928	New York City, New York
13 January 1928	San Francisco, California	18 January 1928	Chicago, Illinois
15 January 1928	Seattle, Washington	4 February 1928	San Francisco, California
17 January 1928	Portland, Oregon	8 February 1928	Los Angeles, California
21 January 1928	Denver, Colorado	13 February 1928	Seattle, Washington
23 January 1928	Kansas City, Missouri	15 February 1928	Portland, Oregon
25 January 1928	St. Paul, Minnesota	19 February 1928	Denver, Colorado
5 February 1928	New York City, New York	22 February 1928	Minneapolis, Minnesota
19 February 1928	Detroit, Michigan	14 March 1928	Kansas City, Missouri
27 February 1928	Chicago, Illinois	16 March 1928	St. Paul, Minnesota
		28 March 1928	Detroit, Michigan

Figure 2

Maurice Ravel Pro-Musica Chapter Performances

15 January 1928	New York City, New York
18 January 1928	Chicago, Illinois
4 February 1928	San Francisco, California
8 February 1928	Los Angeles, California
13 February 1928	Seattle, Washington
15 February 1928	Portland, Oregon
19 February 1928	Denver, Colorado
22 February 1928	Minneapolis, Minnesota
14 March 1928	Kansas City, Missouri
16 March 1928	St. Paul, Minnesota
28 March 1928	Detroit, Michigan

METHODS

- Read secondary literature
- Listen to compositions by each composer
- Develop a literature review
- Access primary sources through digital databases
- Develop a timeline of the recitals
- Compare the receptions of both composers' individual tours
- Conclude with a written analysis of findings

CONCLUSION

Ravel and Bartók's receptions were varied all the way from their physical appearance to their compositions. Ravel's reception, however, seems to have been more positive than Bartók's. This reception difference is likely attributed to Ravel's ties to Romanticism, which some reviewers found easier to understand than modernist music. Regardless, both composers still gained success from their tours despite their varied reception. Even with negative reviews, their music has stood the test of time, and they are both recognized as influential figures in twentieth-century art music.

Studying Ravel and Bartók's tours also helped to develop new ideas about composer reception in the 1920s and 1930s. Based on the differences in their criticism, it seems likely that one composer's reception might be impacted by another who came before or after them. It is possible that the reception of a composer's own music and performances are not always self-dependent. The limits of my research included the short time to conduct this project, a lack of access to full reviews, focusing primarily on Pro-Musica engagements, and the subjectivity of reception. Future researchers can test these ideas with other sets of composers from this period, as well as expand this concept into different eras of music.

DISCUSSION

Points of Comparison

Physical Appearance	Pianism	Critical Review of Compositions	Programming	Other Details
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correlations between the composer's looks and their musical style • Does the preconceived idea of what a composer's music should sound like affect the reception? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences in piano skills effect on reception • Do differences in musical skill impact a reception of the composer's works? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responses to the compositions performed in the recitals • What musical means have an effect on American reviewers view of modernism? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparing two pieces (one piece from each composer), included in their performances • What was different about these two pieces that garnered different responses from reviewers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Context behind performances and chronology • Inclusion of non-Pro-musica engagements • Collaboration with other musicians at their recitals

REFERENCES

