

GEORGE XIAOYUAN FU



MIRRORS

TRACKLIST

1. *Miroirs, M. 43: I. Noctuelles, Maurice Ravel*
2. *Miroirs, M. 43: II. Oiseaux tristes, Maurice Ravel*
3. *Three Preludes for Piano: III. Les jeu des contraires, Henri Duttileux*
4. *Bad Habit, Freya Waley-Cohen*
5. *Clear and Cold, Timo Andres*
6. *Etude No. 5 'Toccata', Unsuk Chin*
7. *Miroirs, M. 43: III. Une barque sur l'océan, Maurice Ravel*
8. *Miroirs, M. 43: IV. Alborada del gracioso, Maurice Ravel*
9. *Pastorale, Germaine Tailleferre*
10. *Miroirs, M. 43: La vallé des cloches, Maurice Ravel*
11. *Preludes, Op. 32: No. 5 in G Major, Sergei Rachmaninoff*

All pieces recorded on a Steinway & Sons Model D Concert Grand Piano



MIRRORS

My first exposure to the music of Maurice Ravel was in the most unlikely of places: Lawrence, Kansas, the flattest of middle-America. In Lawrence there was a summer piano camp for under-18s, equal parts sleep-away-camp and musical penitentiary, where twelve-year-old me found himself amidst a whirlwind of music, card games, truth-or-dare, and the sticky oppressive Kansan heat. I was told that I must practice for *three hours every day*, which at that time felt like a cruel and unusual punishment. To enforce this rule, counselors patrolled the halls of the music building to check that we were practicing during our allotted times. Most importantly there was a piano recital every evening where we would perform whatever we were working on that summer. It was at these student recitals where I heard Ravel's music for the first time: *Jeux d'eau*, movements from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, *Une barque sur l'océan*, and *Ondine*. I was transfixed by this music, and upon leaving Kansas I immediately asked my teacher to begin studying some Ravel.

My first assignment was the Toccata from *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, a clockwork jewel-box where glittering arrays of repeated notes and chords cascade up and down the keyboard. Despite the difficulty there was a self-effacing quality to this work; somehow Ravel was asking for the pianist to fade into the background, so that the image within the music became alive. I am reminded of the story of the Chinese painter, Wu Daozi (680-759 AD), whose skills were so great that when he died people claimed he had disappeared into his own painting. As I continued learning more of Ravel's music in the following years, this became the lesson that I returned to over and over again.



In 1903 young Maurice Ravel and his friends formed an avant-garde artist group called *Les Apaches* (The Hooligans). The group had an informal and flexible membership, including musicians, artists, poets and critics, and their gatherings were wild affairs that went into the wee hours of the night. When Ravel finished a new suite for piano in 1905, entitled *Miroirs* (French for 'Mirrors'), he dedicated each of the five movements to a fellow member of the Apaches.

A perusal of the score of *Miroirs* will reveal a composer whose writing style is precise and unpretentious. Unlike his Romantic predecessors who would leave behind highly emotional and personal instructions (Robert Schumann immediately comes to mind, whose tempo markings were often florid, as exemplified in his *Fantasie op. 17: Durchaus fantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen* – fantastical throughout and performed with passion), Ravel instead prefers to write simple and succinct directions, such as *très doux* – very soft, *lointain* – far away, *espressif* – expressive. He instead uses the ink on the page to closely detail delicate textures, shapes, dynamics and colors. He is more interested in crafting musical sensations and images than in closely puppeteering the emotional narrative of the interpreter. The personal journey then unfolds in the wake of the musical image, much in the way that intense feelings can be triggered by memories and sensations in the world.

In *Miroirs*, Ravel creates a series of sonic tableaux which are conjured before an observer. I imagine standing in front of a mirror whose reflecting surface is not made from a physical material, but rather time itself; the images appear amidst a flotsam of history, hearsay, emotions and impressions. For me, this is the realm where Ravel's music lives.

The eclecticism of this album reflects the dynamism within *Miroirs*. There are the more traditional French connections (Henri Dutilleux and Germaine Tailleferre) as well as thematic ones (Timo Andres writes that *Clear and Cold* is a 'short fantasia on mid-February New England weather, and on Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan*'); but actually, the real story is that *Miroirs* is possibly Ravel's earliest work for solo piano which defines his unique style and aesthetic — and thus each movement triggers a resonance with another work from a point in the future.

Noctuelles (Moths) recalls one of these midnight Apache gatherings with full moon overhead, beaming eerie light upon fugitive glimmers of moths. As the mood descends into a gentle melancholy, *Oiseaux Tristes* emerges, a piece which Ravel described as "birds lost in the torpor of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer." The following track, Henri Dutilleux's *Le jeu des contraires*, is an abstract painting entirely built on mirror images, composed of notes in inversion (upside down) and retrograde (back to front). Ravel's *Oiseaux Tristes* carries the lazy mood of summer heat, whereas the Dutilleux depicts a subzero stasis punctuated by icy shard-like bells and brilliant passagework. Both works wobble and lurch in irregular intervals, reflecting how our sense of reality can bend depending on our environment. Time continues to warp in Freya Waley-Cohen's *Bad Habit*, where a carefree melody is interrupted by episodes of earthbound stasis. The music starts and staggers, harkening on bad habits which unexpectedly creep into life and knock it off course.

The next set of reflections is between two pairs of pieces: *Une barque sur l'océan* and *Alborada del gracioso*, which stand facing Timo Andres' *Clear and Cold* and Unsuk Chin's *Toccata*. Ravel's *Une barque sur l'océan* depicts the journey of a boat cradled in an immense, undulating ocean. Andres, like Ravel, plays with range,

density and texture: *Clear and Cold* alternates between bare and exposed chords, faster cascading figures, and more tendril-like legato lines, all enshrouded in a veneer of damper pedal. Out of this frosty landscape, Unsuk Chin's *Toccata* begins innocuously, winds itself up into a frenzy, and then scurries away in a wisp of smoke. The *Toccata's* counterpart, *Alborada del gracioso*, is a caricature of a jester who struts while singing a mournful, grotesque serenade.

Germaine Tailleferre's *Pastorale* depicts a verdant passageway, opening a surreal path towards Ravel's *La vallée des cloches*, where time shifts into a new perspective. For the first time we don't just look into the past or the future; we also see the realm of longing, even regret. Where this leaves off, the Rachmaninov Prelude gives bittersweet closure and acceptance for where we find ourselves at present.



At this point I remember Elizabeth Bishop's poem, *To Be Written On The Mirror In Whitewash* –

*I live only here, between your eyes and you,
But I live in your world. What do I do?
– Collect no interest – otherwise what I can;
Above all I am not that staring man.*

This album carries with it a mirror's indifference. It is permanent through time, and unflinchingly impartial; its purpose is to reflect back at the observer. And while you, the listener, may occasionally catch glimpses of different memories floating through time – perhaps the ghosts of the *Apaches*, or the wintry chill of New England, or even echoes of summers in Lawrence – in the end they are the obverse side of fragments within your imagination, impossible to conjure if weren't for the presence of your own experience. This metaphysical connection we find in music is possibly the most magical thing about it.

George Xiaoyuan Fu



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Producer

Matthew Bennett

Sound Engineer

Oscar Torres

Stereo Mixing & Mastering

Matthew Bennett

Atmos Mixing

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