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Lessons in Harmony

JONATHAN COE

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Introduction to the manuscript

by Justine La Chasse, editor

May 2026

My grandmother, who died two years ago, had one rather tenuous claim to musical fame. Back in the 1960s, when she was still a young woman, she was employed as housekeeper to Alexandre Taverne.

Now, I have no doubt that most of you – even those of you who have some claim to musical expertise – will already be scratching your heads, and asking yourselves: but who on earth was Alexandre Taverne? To which I can give the simple answer: he was the widower of Jeanne Taverne.

But even this explanation, perhaps, will not be enough to satisfy my readers' curiosity, and the next question they will ask is: well, all right then, but who was Jeanne Taverne? To which I can give another simple answer: she was the woman who, in the late 1950s, was employed as masseuse to Monsieur Édouard Ravel.

Ravel! At last! Here is a name that we can all recognize, and that we can associate with the world of music.

But hold on a moment. Ravel – that is to say, the composer Ravel – surely his first name was Maurice?

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Indeed. The first name of the composer Ravel was Maurice. Édouard Ravel was his younger brother.

Well then, you will say. If your grandmother was employed as housekeeper to the widower of the masseuse of Ravel's younger brother, then your grandmother's claim to musical fame was tenuous indeed.

To which I will answer: not quite as tenuous as you think. Because Maurice Ravel died childless, in 1937, and left all the rights in his music to his younger brother, Édouard. And Édouard, twenty years later, fell in love with his masseuse, Jeanne Taverne, and made her his sole heir and beneficiary. And when he died, and when Jeanne herself died a few years later, she passed on all the rights in Ravel's music to her widower, Alexandre, who up until that point had worked variously as a miner, a chauffeur and a barber, but from now onwards realized that he would never have to work again.

Alexandre, by the way, would go on to marry one more time, so that it was his second wife, Georgette, who would then find herself inheriting the rights to Ravel's music, including the celebrated *Boléro*, and this second wife – just in case things are not yet complicated enough for you – already had a daughter from her own first marriage, and so it was this daughter who would be the next person to inherit the rights to Ravel's music. But that, as they say, is another story.

In the meantime, let us return to Alexandre Taverne, who at the time of my grandmother's service in the mid-1960s was enjoying rather a splendid lifestyle in Hendaye, after his late wife's employer's brother's musical fortune had dropped into his unsuspecting lap. Every day, my grandmother would come to his house in order to dust his furniture and clean his windows and make his beds; and sometimes, during the school holidays, she would have no choice but to bring her five-year-old son,

Xavier (my father), with her. And when this happened, my father – who was an imaginative little boy – would often stave off boredom by sitting in the bay of a window overlooking the sea and making drawings with his pencils and crayons.

And so it chanced, I believe, that one day, Xavier having run short of paper upon which to exercise his pictorial imagination, my grandmother went to her employer and asked him if there was any spare paper in the house that her son could use. And Alexandre, who was still in the process of sorting through all sorts of junk that had been passed on to him as part of his unlikely inheritance, handed her a narrow box, the contents of which he had glanced at that very morning, and found to be lacking in interest. This box was made of stiff cardboard. It had the dimensions of that old-fashioned paper size known in Great Britain as 'foolscap', and it was decorated with a pattern of Scottish tartan. Inside was a manuscript, some two hundred pages long, typed on one side of the pages only, the other sides being blank; which meant, as far as Alexandre was concerned, that my infant father could do what he liked with them. And what's more, I am sorry to say that my grandmother showed not the least curiosity about the contents of the typescript either, but gave the box to her son and sat him down in the bay window with his pencils and his crayons and told him that he could scribble on the blank pages to his heart's content, while she continued with her domestic duties.

There was one stroke of good fortune, however: namely that my grandmother, despite having no regard for musical history, was devoted to her son, and for the rest of her life maintained a deep sentimental reverence for the memory of his childhood. It would never once have occurred to her that she might throw that box of drawings away.

*

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And so, a few weeks after my grandmother's death, my father, Xavier, her only child, began the job of clearing out her house in Hendaye. At the age of sixty-five he was already suffering from arthritis and heart problems, so I knew that he would not be able to do it alone. I live in Paris, where I edit contemporary fiction and memoir for a small publishing house, but work has been quiet lately and my employers were happy for me to take two weeks' leave in order to help him with the task.

The work was quite strenuous, and involved climbing a ladder up into my grandmother's attic to retrieve numerous chests full of paperwork, photographs and family souvenirs, most of which had been sitting there untouched for fifty years or more and were thick with dust, mottled with damp, and seemed to be serving as little more than a catacomb for dead spiders.

'Good God,' my father said, when he found that tartan box, and saw the drawings that he had made as a five-year-old boy. 'I can't believe that she kept these.' He leafed through the pages, looking at the lurid sunsets and brightly coloured seascapes that his childish imagination had conjured up, the skies dotted with kites and aeroplanes, the water densely thronged with mermaids and sea-serpents. 'Why didn't she throw them away years ago? Anyone could see that I had no talent.'

'A mother's love is the blindest of all,' I told him. 'Anyway, I'd like to have a look at these, if I may.'

We carried the box downstairs and installed ourselves at the kitchen table. My father had also brought an old photograph album down from the attic, and for a while he occupied himself with looking at the pictures: mainly photographs of his mother in a bathing suit on some long-forgotten family holiday.

Meanwhile I took the pages out of the box and started glancing through his drawings. They were quite bad, to tell the truth: but of course, it's always touching to be allowed a glimpse of the children your parents once were. After just a few moments' perusal of my father's artwork, however, something else caught my attention: the typed sentences which filled up the reverse of the pages.

'Wait a moment,' I said. 'What is this, exactly?'

I realized that I was looking at a lengthy, continuous manuscript. It was in English, a language in which I'm pretty fluent, after studying in London for a few years in my twenties.

The first page that caught my attention made me think that perhaps I'd stumbled on the typescript of some forgotten novel about the love affair between an elderly couple:

tenderly, feeling the bone there, the thin, brittle bone that he knew so well. Perhaps he would begin to knead her shoulders with the lightest of touches, conscious as always of his wife's terrible thinness, her angularity, the sharpness and fragility of her bones, the tension in her muscles and ligaments which would never diminish, never go away. Beneath his moving fingertips he would have felt a tiny, almost imperceptible loosening, a sign of relaxation so subtle that only he, thanks to his ancient intimacy with her body, would ever notice. Encouraged, he would have continued to massage her shoulders, and she would have sighed wearily and her head would have tilted back, and she would have looked up at him, a grateful, adoring look, and she may even have closed her eyes upon the tears that would have started to form there.

First the flute entered, then the oboe, then the clarinet. Strings, too, but strings so hushed and fragile that only a magician of the orchestra could have imagined them that way.

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When she next spoke her voice was quiet and low; but she spoke clearly enough that I could hear every word.

'You wouldn't leave me, would you?' she said. 'You wouldn't ever do that.'

And he must have shaken his head, as he answered in a voice almost as quiet:

'Never.'

But then I started flipping through the other pages, and noticed that there was one word – one name, to be more precise – which seemed to occur repeatedly: *Ravel*. It appeared dozens of times on almost every page: *Ravel, Ravel, Ravel*. I skimmed through more of the pages at random and there it was, again and again: *Ravel, Ravel, Ravel, Ravel*.

'You know, this looks pretty interesting,' I said. 'Do you think these pages could have come from Alexandre's house?'

I had learned, only quite recently, the full story of how my grandmother had worked as housekeeper for Maurice Ravel's younger brother's masseuse's widower. Over the last few years there had been stories in the French newspapers about a long-running court case between SACEM (the Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique) and the heirs of a Russian set designer who had collaborated with Ravel on the *Boléro*. Their dispute concerned the duration of copyright in this famous piece of music and, not surprisingly, the name of Alexandre Taverne cropped up in many of the reports, causing my grandmother to exclaim: 'Look at this! It's incredible. You know, I was his housekeeper once. He lived in a big house by the sea and he was worth an absolute fortune because his wife used to work for Ravel's brother and he fell in love with her and left her everything in his will. Everything! All the money from his brother's music. It's amazing, no?'

So, yes, I knew about my grandmother's tenuous claim to musical fame, and my own family's remote connection to one of France's greatest composers. And when I saw his name appearing so often in these dust-covered pages which had lain unread for so many years, I could feel my heart beginning to beat hard with excitement.

'Where did this box come from?' I asked my father again. 'Did it come from Alexandre's house?'

He shrugged and said: 'I suppose it's possible. I think Mum used to take me there sometimes, when she was working. How am I supposed to remember? I was just a tiny boy.'

The pages were all out of order, and it took me some time to locate the title page of the manuscript. When I found it, this was what I saw:

LESSONS IN HARMONY
a memoir of the friendship between
MAURICE RAVEL
and
RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
as recalled by the man who introduced them,
P. V. Mylonas

Now, two of these names, I must admit, were entirely unfamiliar to me. I had never heard of Monsieur Mylonas. I soon discovered from Wikipedia that he was a music critic and musicologist (I will be honest – I don't really understand the difference between these two terms), that he was born in Lyon to Greek and Spanish parents, and that he spoke nine or ten languages. He had been a friend of Ravel's in Paris in the early years of the twentieth century, then moved to London during the First World War, and had spent the rest

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of his life there. A fairly obscure figure, one would have to admit. I didn't feel too guilty that I had never seen his name before.

When it came to Ralph Vaughan Williams, however, I was rather ashamed that I had to Google him too. It seems he was a British composer, and a pretty famous one, by the sound of it. It's true that I don't listen to much classical music, and anyway Mr Vaughan Williams, as I've learned from asking around some of my friends, is not very well known in France. But in the UK, it turns out that he is very popular. A 'national treasure', one might almost say.

More than a little intrigued by the title of the manuscript, I now looked at the box itself more closely, and soon made another important discovery. The inside of the lid was white, and my father had drawn on it: a dramatic picture of an ocean liner sinking into the turquoise sea, from which it protruded at a forty-five-degree angle, while oversized passengers stood on the deck looking down into the alarmingly shark-infested waters. But where my father had drawn the horizontal line which divided water from sky, there was actually an incision: yes, the lid of the box contained a pocket, and there was something inside this pocket. I could feel this something quite distinctly, and when I reached my fingers inside and took hold of it and pulled it out, I found that I was looking at a thick, cream-coloured envelope.

'Look at this!' I said. 'And look who it's addressed to: *Monsieur Édouard Ravel!*'

I turned the envelope over. It was sealed with a small circle of red wax, about the size of a one-euro coin. The seal was unbroken.

'This letter has never been opened,' I said.

My father was showing surprisingly little curiosity about

any of this. It seemed he was more interested in ancient holiday snaps than rare manuscripts.

'So open it now,' he grunted.

'I can't do that. It's not addressed to me.'

'The person it's addressed to is dead. Besides, how is anyone going to know that you were the one who opened it?'

This, I had to admit, was a perfectly valid point. In a matter of seconds, I had retrieved a fruit knife from my grandmother's cutlery drawer, and I sliced the envelope open in a clean movement. Inside was a single sheet of writing paper of the same buttery colour. I glanced at it quickly and said to my father, in a breathless voice:

'This is a letter to Édouard Ravel. The date at the top is –' I squinted at the handwriting – 'December, nineteen forty-three.'

Even this did not impress him. 'That attic is full of old letters,' was his laconic response. But I proceeded to read the letter aloud to him anyway. It was written in French, and in handwriting which was elaborate, elegant and not particularly easy to decipher.

'It was posted from London,' I said.

'*My dear Édouard, I am sending this manuscript to you, out of courtesy, since you are the custodian of all your late brother's affairs. It concerns the friendship that existed between your brother and another distinguished composer, and as such might offer some points of interest to scholars of musical history on both sides of the Channel. I have already sent a copy to my publisher here in London, with the caveat that it should not be published within the lifetimes of any of the principal characters concerned.*

'*Of course,*' I continued, '*since I have chosen to write this account in English, you will not be able to read it yourself until you engage the services of a translator. But let me assure you that I have*

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taken pains to reveal no intimate details of your brother's life. On occasion, I have referred to certain private conversations at which I was present, and which I have attempted to recall to the best of my ability. However, I am satisfied that I have betrayed no confidences in compiling this faithful and well-intentioned memoir.'

I couldn't even tell if my father was listening. He was still flicking through the photographs of his parents on some beach or another.

'I was inspired to take up my pen after hearing a musical performance in London which is described in the opening pages. The task has occupied me for several months, during which time, I am afraid to say, my health has deteriorated somewhat. Since it does not seem likely that I will see you again, I take this opportunity to bid you the fondest of farewells.

'With my sincerest good wishes,' I concluded, *'P. V. Mylonas.'*

I laid down the sheet of paper, stared into space for a moment or two, and said: 'I can't believe it.'

'Can't believe what?'

'That he never even opened this letter.'

'Who didn't open it? Alexandre?'

'No. Édouard. It was sent to him by a dying man.'

My father shrugged. 'It was during the war. He probably had a lot of things on his mind, and forgot all about it.'

'Maybe.'

I watched my father as he closed the photograph album and went to put the kettle on to make coffee. It really did seem as though the discovery of this lost manuscript was of no concern to him at all. And it did turn out, by the way, to have been genuinely lost: in the coming months, I would make enquiries at all of the British publishers with whom Monsieur Mylonas had had dealings (and there were many) and none of them could find any trace of this manuscript,

or any record of the names of the editors to whom he might have sent it. It became clear that the pages which had, purely by chance, fallen into the hands of my family, constituted the one and only true surviving copy.

What a find! I returned to the attic and brought down some more family relics – enough to keep my father occupied for the next hour or two. And then I took the coffee he had made for me, carried it with me into my grandmother's little sitting room and then, settling into her old armchair by the window, carefully began to put the disordered pages back into their proper sequence, and to read them from beginning to end.

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Lessons in Harmony

a memoir of the friendship between

MAURICE RAVEL

and

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

as recalled by the man who introduced them,
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Prologue

London, 1943

Nothing can quite compare with the excitement one feels while sitting in the concert hall, waiting to hear the first few notes of a new work by a major composer. On the evening of 24th June this year, that feeling was especially acute. It was the first night of the Promenade concerts, always a thrilling moment in itself. For the second year in a row, this concert series was being held in the Royal Albert Hall – following the devastation of the Queen's Hall by Hitler's bombs two years earlier – and there was not an empty seat in the whole place. Britain had been at war for almost four years; the nation was weary and demoralized. Tonight, on a hot, even clammy summer evening, five thousand men and women had gathered for a celebration of music. The Hall presented a sea of grey serge and floral dresses: and yet, even in this dense, expectant crowd my wife, sitting beside me, was able to pick out a familiar figure taking his place five rows ahead of us in the stalls. It was the hat that gave him away. Nobody else in London wore such a hat: the wideness of its brim, and the devilish angle at which it was worn, 'seemed to exhale –' as a keen observer once put it '– in some subtle way the atmosphere of Bohemia and the Boulevards'. Elinor recognized him immediately.

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'Look!' she cried. 'It's Edwin! Surely that is Edwin?'

'I do believe it is,' I said, craning forward.

'He must be covering it for the *Mail*.'

'Unlikely. He retired from reviewing . . . perhaps ten years ago?'

But I was wrong, and Elinor was right. For one night only, the great Edwin Evans – almost seventy years old now – had emerged from retirement and was poised, pencil and notebook in hand, to deliver his verdict on the symphony we were all about to encounter for the first time.

We were given a less-than-electrifying performance of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture, after which the London Philharmonic's conductor, Basil Cameron, left the stage. It was on the stroke of seven-fifteen that the composer of tonight's premiere strode out from the wings, stage right, and – after acknowledging the audience's passionate applause with the briefest of smiles and nods – ascended to his place at the podium. There he paused and, turning to face the crowd again, he bowed and smiled many times in succession, with an air of diffidence – even embarrassment – as the applause intensified, became louder, became mingled with cheers and whistles, and continued on and on. Only when the ovation had faded away and the very last person in the auditorium had finished clapping (it was probably myself) did a rapt and perfect silence descend.

My gaze was fixed on the figure at the podium. This was the first time I had set eyes on Ralph Vaughan Williams for more than five years. There had been several opportunities for us to meet in the meantime, but we had avoided them, by a sort of mutual consent. I will explain why in the fullness of time. So I had not attended any of the many parties which had been thrown to celebrate his seventieth birthday the previous

October. RVW was an old man now, undeniably. And yet this evening, there seemed to be a sprightliness and a vigour about him that I had rarely seen before. He had never – let us be frank about this – cut an especially elegant figure. His conductor's white tie and tails clung tightly around some parts of his body, and hung loosely around others: I don't think anyone had ever managed to tailor a suit that would fit his peculiar physique. He had put on a lot of weight since our first meeting thirty-five years earlier (as had I), his hair was white, and of course there was a stoop in his back from all that desk-work. No, no one could call him elegant. But he was impressive, all the same. Impressive, too, was the palpable feeling of affection that flowed towards him from the audience in those few moments of stillness before the music began. Here was a figure who was no longer merely admired, respected, revered: that could all be taken for granted. The more striking fact was that the public had accepted him into their hearts and he was now, quite simply, loved.

Bringing an end to the hush, RVW raised his baton, and coaxed the orchestra into action. Its first utterance was a low, sustained C natural from the cellos and basses, and above it, a quiet figure played on the horns – like the gentlest and most lilting of hunting calls. This was the first we heard of that sublime assortment of notes, frequencies and timbres that the mind of Ralph Vaughan Williams had arranged into his fifth symphony, in D major.

Before hinting at my own response to this work, I should like to quote some lines from Evans's review, which appeared the next morning.

Friday 25th June was another day of bright sunshine. There was no let-up in our current heatwave. Elinor and I set