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# **“Workinonit”: How the Orchestration Techniques of Maurice Ravel Influenced the Production of J Dilla, and How Certain Musical Techniques Have Withstood Changes in Style and Genre**

## **Annotated Bibliography**

**Abstract:** This paper explores the parallels between Classical orchestration techniques and Hip-Hop production. Using the works of producer/composer J Dilla and composer/orchestrator Maurice Ravel, the paper seeks to answer the question: *How might Maurice Ravel’s orchestration and composition techniques have influenced, directly or indirectly, the production and composition techniques of J Dilla?* Various recordings from across Dilla’s career, including selections from *Fantastic, Vol. 2* and *Donuts* serve as a vehicle for looking at music from a technical and process perspective, attempting to put aside aesthetic conventions and analyses to allow vastly “different” musical idioms to be discussed together. Ravel’s work, including *Boléro*, *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, and *Jeau d’eau*, is analysed more for his arrangement and orchestration techniques rather than thematic or melodic content.

### Audio Recordings

1. J Dilla, producer. “Don’t Cry,” track 18 on *Donuts*. Stones Throw Records STH 2126, 2006. Spotify streaming audio.

“Don’t Cry” features one of J Dilla’s most complex and creative arrangements of a sample. Despite being composed virtually on his deathbed, it represents a culmination of many of the techniques that Dilla had pioneered and shows vestiges of many Classical orchestration ideas that will be explored in the paper.

2. ———. *Fantastic, Vol. 2*. GoodVibe Recordings GVR2025-1, 2000. Spotify streaming audio.

*Fantastic, Vol. 2* contains many tracks that are often used as the most obvious examples of the rhythmic innovations that J Dilla brought to music. The signifying characteristics (slightly swung hi-hats played behind the beat, rushed snare hits, and his signature kick and bass sounds) of his sound were crystallizing during this period and discussion of his contributions to music would not be complete without considerable focus on this album. One track in particular, “Get Dis Money,” juxtaposes a seven-bar sample (from Herbie Hancock’s “Come Running to Me”) against the 4/4 pulse of Hip-Hop, which creates a cascading rhythmic and melodic feel that echoes Ravel’s used of uneven phrase lengths that subvert expectations.

3. ———. “Time: The Donut Of The Heart,” track 10 on *Donuts*. Stones Throw Records STH 2126, 2006. Spotify streaming audio.

“Time: The Donut Of The Heart” serves as a foil for Ravel’s *Boléro*; it is composed from a repeating melodic line that continues throughout the entire song, aside from one phrase which

loops the line in half time before cutting off and returning to the main theme. “Time” echoes *Boléro*, which repeats the same phrase many times, briefly modulating the melody to a different key just once before returning to its home key again.

#### Dissertations and Theses

4. D'Errico, Michael A. "Behind the Beat: Technical and Practical Aspects of Instrumental Hip-Hop Composition." MA Thesis, Tufts University, 2011. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

D'Errico's thesis provides crucial technical details surrounding hip-hop production. In order to fully understand the accomplishments and work of J Dilla, the limitations under which most of his output was conceived must be understood. Much like Ravel's work had been informed by the limitations of instrumentation, finance, and time, Dilla's work was informed by the technical limitations that he engaged with as well as other myriad factors. These technological limitations, while not totally unique to hip-hop (technology began to influence Classical music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well), are absolutely part and parcel to the way Hip-Hop is composed and recorded. When dealing with the process and work habits of both Ravel and Dilla, D'Errico's research will help to round out the picture.

5. Diaz, Zachary Bennett Fisher. "Analysis of Sampling Techniques by J Dilla in *Donuts*." MM Thesis, Stephen F. Austin State University, 2018. <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/etds/197>.

This graduate-level analysis of J Dilla's compositional techniques serves as part of the foundation for looking beyond the aesthetic value of his work and exploring the fundamentals of composition as they relate to electronic music production. Diaz also engages with several of the recordings featured in this paper, including “Get Dis Money,” “Time: The Donut of the Heart,” and “Don't Cry.” Comprehensive analysis of sample-based production is still rare in academic discourse; Diaz has laid important groundwork for this project and will help to frame Dilla's compositional prowess in a way that makes it easy to place in conversation with the more studied works of Maurice Ravel.

6. Maxwell, Braden Nathaniel. “Designated Qualities: A New Approach to the Music of Maurice Ravel.” PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2022. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

This recent PhD-level dissertation focuses on the experiential aspects of the listener's interaction with music. While Impressionist (Ravel despised the label but for the purposes of clarity and simplicity it works in this case) Classical music is defined by its ability to evoke complex emotion, that quality in Hip-Hop is not always addressed. J Dilla's work, especially in his final years, is frequently praised for its emotional charge and direct appeals to the listener's emotional faculties. Maxwell's work is helpful in framing the way emotional and evocative

content is discussed in music and offers an excellent foundation for placing Ravel's output in conversation with Dilla's from this perspective.

### Journal Articles

7. Beavers, Jennifer P. "Ravel's Sound: Timbre and Orchestration in His Late Works." *Music Theory Online* 27, no. 1 (March 2021): 16-34. <https://doi.org/10.30535/mto.27.1.2>.

Beavers' piece in *Music Theory Online* focuses strictly on the timbre and orchestration of Ravel's pieces, which are two areas in which Ravel differentiated himself from his contemporaries through his subversion of aesthetic expectations. She explores the manner in which his compositions' textures morphed throughout their duration, and much of the language that she uses to discuss these techniques echo the manner in which both Diaz and D'Errico discuss J Dilla's engagement with texture in his productions. Specifically focusing on his later works allows for a manageable scope of research and promotes the question of whether musical maturity affects the choices made in production and orchestration. J Dilla's later work takes up much of the focus of this paper; having a foundation for comparing the mature work of both composers is helpful.

8. Kajikawa, Lore, Lauren Onkey, and Gayle Wald. "Dilla Time: Dan Charnas, Kelley L. Carter, and Robert Glasper in Conversation about the Life and Afterlife of Hip-Hop Producer J Dilla." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 34, no. 4 (December 2022): 4-18.

Part interview and part scholarly article, this piece puts Charnas, the author of *Dilla Time* in conversation with Robert Glasper—frequently referenced in Charnas' book as a key member of the Dilla diaspora—and Kelley L. Carter, who did work covering the end of Dilla's life and subsequent intellectual property and estate battles. Published ten months on from *Dilla Time's* initial publication, this piece allows Charnas to assess his own work after bringing it to the public and bring key players from the book into the conversation as well. With a figure like Dilla, whose full legacy perhaps has yet to be realized due to the temporal proximity to his peak years, it is helpful to have a musician who has both been influenced by and learned from Dilla discussing some of the technical aspects of his style and production.

9. Shaw, Patricia. "Ravel's *Boléro* Factory: The Orchestration of the Machine Age." *Context* no. 33 (2008): 5-23.

Ravel's *Boléro* is the piece chosen for this paper that presents the fewest hurdles towards drawing concrete parallels between the language of Hip-Hop and Classical music. This article from Patricia Shaw explores Ravel's insistence that *Boléro* is an exercise in orchestration and texture. Shaw's conclusions are very much in conversation with Jennifer Beavers' observations about Ravel's techniques for orchestration, although they both deal with different stylistic mediums in Ravel's catalog. The repetitive nature of the thematic material of the piece forced Ravel to be creative and decisive in his orchestration process, not unlike the way Dilla crafted his beats. This article provides yet another lens through which to look at process and draw larger conclusions about the artists' unique work habits.

## Scores

10. Ravel, Maurice. *Boléro*. Paris: Durand, c1929.

Ravel's *Boléro* is a singular effort in his catalog; it is an exploration of a single theme through texture and orchestration, which will serve as an excellent vehicle for conversation between Classical and Hip-Hop works. The piece's strict adherence to a repeating theme places it squarely in discussion with Hip-Hop production, as most beats rely on a short passage that is repeated throughout and embellished or removed to subvert expectation. Setting up expectation for the repeated motif is a key feature of both *Boléro* and Hip-Hop production. Dilla's productions often mirrored *Boléro* in that he did not simply loop an idea and add drums, but often varied the motif and embellished it or added countermelodies or contrasting sections. *Boléro* is the most obvious route for placing impressionist Classical music in conversation with Hip-Hop.

## Secondary or Tertiary Monographs

11. Charnas, Dan. *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of J Dilla, The Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm*. New York: MCD / Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022.

One of the most comprehensive views into the life and impact of J Dilla, *Dilla Time* intersperses musical analysis with biographical information in its attempt to explain the wider-reaching influence of the producer. In the book, Charnas addresses major misconceptions about the construction of J Dilla's time feel and delves into anecdotal commentary on his process and work habits. To this point, it is one of the only long form musicological inquiries into the work and legacy of J Dilla and for this reason, it is the source that will most often be used in conversation with supplemental information throughout this paper. Because of the absence of notation-based scores for J Dilla's output in comparison to Ravel, much of the musical analysis will rely on Charnas' efforts and the conversations around Dilla's music-making.

12. Schloss, Joseph Glenn. *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.

Perhaps the first or most comprehensive book on Hip-Hop production, *Making Beats* is part ethnography, part musicology. Schloss's work, despite lacking rote musical analysis like some of the other source material included, is important in its scope and breadth. It engages well with the graduate theses and dissertations that were consulted for this paper by filling in important cultural information to supplement the technical analysis. Schloss, however, offers caution to the reader because of his obscuring of the lines between his role as a researcher and active participant, so there is a considerable amount of subjectivity to navigate while mining the book for information.