

Piano Music of Claude Debussy

Piano Suite “Images II”

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ABSTRACT

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) is one of the most prominent French Impressionistic composers in the music history. His musical style is innovative and revolutionary and many think that his concept of music writing has been inspired by some of the significant French impressionistic painters of the late nineteenth century such as Monet, Pissarro, Renoir and others. He has developed a highly original system of harmony and musical structure aspired by many impressionists and symbolists of his time. As a prolific piano composer, he composed a great deal of piano music considered to be one of the most important standard repertoires of the early twentieth century. His piano music is so popular that they have been frequently used as teaching materials for students as well as public concert pieces for professional pianists. In this article, we will discuss his musical style and piano works from the following research perspectives, his early life, piano music in general, list of the piano works, and the analysis of the second book of his piano suite “Image”.

Keywords: *Claude Debussy, Piano Music, Impressionism, 20th Century Music, Images II, French Music*

1. EARLY LIFE

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) is one of the most influential French impressionistic composers of the late nineteenth and the twentieth century. He was born to a non-musical middle-class family on the 22 August 1862 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France. His musical talent was recognized by his piano teacher, Madame Maute De Fleurville, who claimed to be a student of F. Chopin, in fact, the mother in law of the French Symbolism poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896). Madame Maute prepared young Debussy for the Paris Conservatory, where he was admitted at the age of eleven. Debussy’s conservatory years were successful, but his individuality led to a troubled relationship with the establishment. At first he would pursue a career as a pianist, but his piano studies with professor Marmontel led only to a second prize (1877). Theory and composition studies with professor Lavignac, Durand, Brazille, Guiraud, and even for a short time with Frank led eventually to a prix de Rome (1884), the prestigious French scholarships allowed the award receiving artists to study in Rome for three to five years, with the cantata *L’Enfant Prodigue*. Since that, Debussy was very much aware of the fact that his direction in musical career has to be different-more as a composer than a pianist [1].

2. PIANO MUSIC IN GENEAL

Debussy is one of the selected composers who have enlarged the piano repertoire not only in the quantitative sense, but also in the qualitative sense of adding a new dimension to the piano literature. If we compare Debussy with the first-class nineteenth century romantic piano composer Robert Schumann (1810-1856), who were both trained as a pianist during their early years but later switched their career to become a composer, Schumann devoted a great deal of his early life composing music for piano, it would seem that Debussy regarded piano composition as a not too important side-line up to about 1896 (age of 34), when he began work on *Pour Le Piano*. Moreover, Schumann was an admirer of traditional structure and content established by previous German legendary masters such as Beethoven and Schubert, yet Debussy was much more into flexible and innovative musical form with new harmonic theories and sounds.

2.1. Musical Style and Content

In the field of piano he developed new techniques that themselves grew out of his highly original and personal attitudes to chords and harmony. In particular

his harmony, with its often shifting, evanescent clouds of sound, with chords melting and merging into each other, disappearing and regrouping in endlessly subtle ways, also involved a completely new appraisal of the functions of the pedals. Debussy utilized compositional techniques that have been documented by many writers, for example, frequent use of harmonies derives from various modes or scales of his own devising, use of the major scale with the raised fourth degree and the lowered seventh degree, use of harmonies derived from the whole tone scale, use of pentatonic scales with five tones functioning as the first, second, third, fifth, and sixth degrees of a major scale, use of ninth and thirteenth chords mostly in dominant function, use of parallel movement of triads or seventh or ninth chords, use of extreme ranges with layers of texture at extreme ranges going on simultaneously with other material placed in mid-range, use of harmonies built on the intervals of fourth and fifth, and use of surrounding sonorities that invite overlapping or mingling, often combining them with long bass pedal points [2].

3. LIST OF THE PIANO WORKS

When discuss about Debussy's piano works, most people like to divide them into 3 periods: First or early (1888-1900); Second or middle (1901-1913); third or late (1914-1918).

3.1. Early Period

Although the keyboard works written between 1889 and 1900 are often referred to as the "early" works of Debussy, they were not really so early either in terms of Debussy's age or his evolution as a composer. Debussy was almost thirty years old before he began to write solo piano music with some continuity. The piano works of Debussy's earliest period are relatively romantic in both their formal design and their harmonic language. Many of the pieces are not much more than song-like salon music. These early works are (display in the chronological order) - *The Dance Bohemienne* (1880), *Two Arabesques* (1889), *Ballade Slav* (1890), *Suit Bergamasque* (1890, revised in 1905), *Pour Le Piano* (1894-1901). Most of this keyboard music is regarded as representing Debussy at period when his mature style had not been formed, but during this period the composer was writing other works considered to be the epitome of his mature style: The opera *Pelleas et Melisande* (1893), for orchestra the *Prelude a l'apres-Midi D'un Faune* (1892-95), and many songs based on texts by Symbolist poets. Thus, it is possible to regard the pieces written around 1890 as significant "forerunners" of Debussy's mature style [3].

3.2. Middle Period

With the exception of *Clair De Lune*, all the pieces belong to the first period have non-pictorial, more or less non-committal titles. However, in the middle period, Debussy composed 45 piano pieces in the decade 1903-13, most of piano pieces are with titles evocative of specific scenes, sound, or even scents. Piano works composed during this period have been considered as mature, representative, and sophisticated style of Debussy's works. Compared with the first period, the piano works from 1903-13 are not only more experimental in terms of harmonies and structures, but more pianistic and virtuosic (Debussy had finally found the right languages for him to express on the piano) in texture and content. These represent works for the period are *Pour Le Piano* (1901), *Estampes* (1903-4), two sets of *Images* (1905 and 1907), *Children's Corner* (1906-8), and *Preludes* (1910-13). Except the *Preludes*, the rest are all sets of piano suites that contain multi-movements to be performed as a whole set [4].

3.3. Late Period

The twelve *Etudes* in 1915, divided into two books of six each, are Debussy's last major works for keyboard, dedicated to Couperin or Chopin. Other smaller pieces written in the late period including *Berceuse Heroque* (1914, was written as a tribute to king Albert I of Belgium and his soldiers), *Six Epigraphes Antiques* (1914), an *Elegie* and an *Album Leaf* written for a war relief organization known as *Le Vetement Du Blesse* (1915). The mature style associated with Debussy's writing at this point is not only in evidence throughout the etudes but also seems to have grown in sophistication, intensity and complexity. The pages of the pieces are dense with passagework and expressive indications of all kinds including dynamic, touch form, and tempo changes. Perhaps the cancer and the First War brought a double tragedy for Debussy, none of the later works has an evocative, impressionistic title. Debussy was entering a "neo-classical" phase in which procedures were stricter, less arbitrary than in the middle-period works in term of structure and harmonic texture [5].

4. THE ANALYSIS OF THE SECOND BOOK OF "IMAGES"

The second set of *Images*, appeared in 1907, is the last of the three-piece suites, Debussy never again returning to this grouping concept. Most writers regard it as a culmination, for each of the pieces is equally strong, and each is polished, inspired example of Debussy's fully formed style. All three pieces are set out on three staves, a great help to the eye in unraveling their complex, elaborate texture. Debussy dedicated this second volume of the *Images* to three of his friends: the

first piece to the painter A. Charpentier (who died the following year), the second to the critic and musicologist L. Laloy, and the third to his preferred pianist R. Vines.

Debussy played the second volume of *Images* on 26 November 1907 at his own premises after dining with two of the work's dedicatees, Laloy and Vines. The score was published by Durand on 7 January 1908, and the first public performance was given by Ricardo Vines in the Circle Musical on the following 21 February. Only "*Poissons D'or*" was accorded a measure of success on this occasion. The composer was not entirely satisfied with Vines's rendition of the work and discreetly sought the intercession of the critic G. Jean Aubry: "Vines must be gently persuaded that he still has much work to do on them. He does not have a clear grasp of their architecture and, for all his uncontestable virtuosity, he distorts their expression". The success of the work with the public is attested by the fact that six thousand copies of the music were printed in Debussy's lifetime. One of the work's major advocates, L. Laloy, did not hesitate to claim that the score marked "a veritable revolution in the art of writing for the piano [6].

4.1. *Cloches A Travers Les Feuilles*

The first piece, *Cloches A Travers Les Feuilles* (Bells Through The Leaves), one of the most beautifully fashioned of all Debussy's pieces, mixes bell-like sustained tones in various registers with textures composed of rapidly moving notes. The first thematic idea is based on whole-tone harmonies, and presented in a particular subtle example of Debussyan counterpoint-it will be seen that two inner parts form a near-canon by augmentation, over them floats a fragment of independent melody. This provides the atmosphere of autumn landscape with an illusion of distant chimes emerging from beyond the screen of rustling. The rustling pattern persists virtually throughout the piece, sometimes more, sometimes less agitated, and the bell sounds, coming into closer focus at the center of the piece, are the constant feature too. In the middle section of the piece, texture becomes pentatonic, and elaborate, rolled chords emphasize intervals of fourths and fifths. In the recapitulation, the open theme re-appears in the manner of rhythmic variation after the pentatonic section, followed by a pensive coda over its descending chromatic bass.

4.2. *Et Le Lune Descend Sur Le Temple Qui Fut*

The title of the second piece, *Et Le Lune Descend Sur Le Temple Qui Fut* (The Moon Descends On The Temple), has been said and suggested by the dedicatee Louis Laloy after the piece was composed. The idea derives from Chinese poetry. There are suggestions of

antiquity, nighttime and ruins. A recurring gamelan-like, pentatonic theme suggests the Orient. Long pedal points in the low registers of the keyboard written to be sustained through a choral-like series of major and minor chord, challenge the performance to achieve a balance between mixed sonorities and intelligible clarity.

The structure of the piece is free, through-composed, and improvisatory like, an assemblage of sonorous fragments that form themselves into enough of developmental extension to suggest a middle section and that return near the end of the piece with enough recognition to suggest a closing. Harmonically speaking, the piece largely consists of slowly moving parallel chords, triads, or triads with an interval fourth replacing the third, as well as tri-tone sonorities that bring a feeling of stillness, of vagueness even.

4.3. *Poissons D'or*

The "*Poissons D'or*" of the last piece can be variously translated as "Goldfish In A Bowl". According to several of Debussy's early biographers, "Goldfish" may have been inspired by a piece of Chinese art depicting goldfish instead of the real thing, either a piece of lacquer or an embroidery [7]. At all events, fish they are, whatever kind, and Debussy brings them to darting, quivering movement, sometimes lazily hovering, in one of the most popular of the pieces. Fluttering fins rippling water are suggested by a wealth of trills and tremolos. After the presentation of two themes, a development-like section leads to a glorious climax near the end of the piece. The coda is a cadenza-like section with rapid scales in a chromatic manner that ends the entire work in a mysterious musical atmosphere.

Poissons D'or shows yet another facet of Debussy's toccata style and is, apart from its pictorial aspects, a searching technical study. Much of the piece is diatonic or nearly so, and the periodic shifts into more sophisticated harmonic waters suggest the twists and convolutions of the fish in their very restricted sphere of activity. Compared with first two movements, the tonality of this movement is much easier to be identified by listeners since most parts of the piece are tonal with their keys indicated by key signatures. Beside this piece is so beautifully conceived for the keyboard in terms of colors and sonorities, it also requires virtuosity for performers to be able to demonstrate the physical consistency and excitement. The particular movement, famous for its showy effects and attractive themes, is not only considered the monumental work that represents the peak of the composer's musical achievement but one of the most popular works among piano literature.

5. CONCLUSION

Debussy is a historically transitional figure between late romantic and early twentieth century period, so the concept of his piano writings combines distinctive attributes from both eras. He was able to create beautiful and musically expressive melodies supported by unconventional harmonic devices. His innovative use of long pedal, in order to sustain the long bass line, often mixes chords from different series or qualities together to create dissonant and colorful sonorities. He is fond of using parallel intervals or chords put together in an untraditional manner to illustrate some beautiful outdoor scenes such as reflection of light or flows of water. Although most of his music shows ambiguous tonalities, unlike other composers from the twentieth century expressionistic school, he hardly composed music that is completely atonal. For most of the piano students, Debussy's piano works have been frequently selected as teaching pieces in the category of music in the twentieth century. His piano pieces, with great varieties in musical styles and levels of performing difficulty, usually work well for students from different ages and backgrounds. Also, his character pieces are short and appealing, which make them suitable to be programmed in any musical occasions. As an excellent pianist, he knows the instrument extremely well to create musical textures that are pianistic and effective, yet still technically accessible and manageable for both intermediate and advanced piano players [8]. In addition to his newly invented harmonic ideas, he has also adopted harmonic features from the traditional folk music of far easts to add more erotic and mysterious flavors to his musical compositions. He is also one of the earliest musical masters who shows great interest in pop (jazz) music by utilizing jazz theory to his serious works. These are the qualities that make Debussy's piano music so remarkable and unique, even a century after his death, his piano music still remains a fashion in every corner of the globe.

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