

CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S CREATION RELATED TO THE ARTISTIC CURRENTS OF IMPRESSIONISM AND SYMBOLISM

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ABSTRACT

The need to look through the prism of the extra-musical influences with which Debussy was associated leads us to the richness offered by literature and poetry, but also by other arts, especially painting. Both poetry and painting have borrowed their essence to a musician for whom art is just one, complex. The composer's path was sprinkled with happy events, through which he comes into contact with various art forms, but also with the artists who influenced his time. The special place that nature occupies in Impressionism and the attempt of Symbolism to access a superior reality through the senses are most happily intertwined in Debussy's vision. His creation is the testimony of the composer's affinity for the features of these currents.

Keywords

Claude Debussy, Impressionism, Symbolism, suggestion, poetry, painting, art.

INTRODUCTION

"Debussy had such a perfect gift in fixing visual impressions with the help of sounds, either direct or suggested by imagination, fine arts or literature, that he could give the whole measure of his art in a field of sensations that up to then were inaccessible to music" (Cortot 1966, 13).

The two corresponding currents that influenced Debussy - Impressionism and Symbolism - restore the sensitivity, in the form of complex sensations, of artistic feelings generated by short-term perceptions, opening the door to an authentic art. Both Symbolist poets and Impressionist painters tried to claim Debussy as belonging to their current. However, Debussy kept repeating that he was not an impressionist. He quickly integrated the features of this current and went beyond the broadest boundaries of Symbolism, building an increasingly personal style.

A friend of painters and poets, with whom he had a direct spiritual relationship, Debussy often attended literary exhibitions and circles. Their influence is also imprinted in his music, which detaches itself from traditional academism, breaking the declamatory line of romanticism: "As after the great cataclysms, new species appeared in all the arts: Claude Monet's *Water Lilies*, Cézanne's *Apples*, Odilon Redon's *Pegasus*, Claude Debussy's *Faun and Naiads*. Colors and accords blended, delighting the inhabitants of a land, once again young" (Long 1968, 9).

The main landmarks and influences in the route of the composer Claude Debussy

The French composer Claude Debussy (1868-1918) was one of the greatest revolutionaries of piano art since Chopin, probably not by chance, his first dream being to become a virtuoso pianist.

Childhood years - which he spends discovering nature, wandering through forests, beautiful country paths and near water, catching butterflies or contemplating different species of trees, listening to the marching band, flying and dancing with other children, but also having the revelation of the sea which he always loved - influenced his inner life, giving him the main sources of inspiration for his musical creation.

Born into a modest family, without the necessary possibilities for a higher education, the child Claude has a series of favorable coincidences that facilitate his path to achieve his destiny: the affection of his godfather, the painter Achille Arosa, in whose house he takes his first piano lessons and first contact with the visual arts, then the friendship with Maria Mante de Fleurville, who prepares him for the entrance exam to the Paris Conservatory.

Admitted to the Conservatory at the age of only 10, he attended the courses of Albert Lavignac, Ernest Guiraud, Cezar Franck, Emile Durand, August Bazille, and Antoine François Marmontel. Debussy hardly adapts to strict and uniformed teaching principles and has a rather unusual school evolution. Although he is considered exceptionally talented, he gradually gave up his dream of becoming a pianist and sketched his first compositions.

A special influence in his career was due to the friendly relations with Mrs. Filaretovna de Meck and the Vasnier family, also the travels to Switzerland, Italy, and especially Russia, where he gets in touch with the music of Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Korsakov and Balakirev, composers with great impact in Debussy's style.

In 1884, Debussy obtained an important prize for composition, the *Rome Prize*, followed by a period of time spent at the *Villa de Medici* in Rome, an experience after which he settled permanently in Paris in 1887, where he found an ideological basis for modernist artistic currents: Parnassianism, Naturalism, Impressionism and Symbolism. In this favorable climate, he became the friend of poets and painters.

The discovery of Balinese music through the Gamelan Orchestra at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1889 is another important milestone for the composer's style. Debussy was interested in Asian art before participating in this exhibition, its affinity for exotic music being visible from the first sketches. While a student, he had received a set of gamelan instruments whose timbre was already familiar, without knowing the specific Javanese or Balinese music. His attraction to this music is confirmed in his letters: "There were and still are, despite the evils of civilisation, some delightful native peoples for whom music is as natural as breathing. Their conservatoire is the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind among the leaves and the thousand sounds of nature which they understand without consulting an arbitrary treatise." (Lesure 1977, 278).

His life in Paris was also marked by his marriage to Rosalie Texier and the frequent financial difficulties he encountered, then his separation from her and his marriage to Emma Moyse Bardac, to whom he was linked by a deep love and a little girl, named Chouchou. This new stage of life gives him a much better social status, support and stability to dedicate most of his time to composition.

Debussy wrote about 80 melodies inspired by symbolist poetry, piano music, symphonic poems, chamber music, two ballets and an opera. The first audition with great success, in 1894, of the symphonic work *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* confirms its

value. This work is followed by other masterpieces: *Three Songs from Bilitis on Poems* by Pierre Louys (1898-1898), *Nocturnes* (1897-1899), *Pour le piano* (1896-1901), culminating in the premiere of *Pelleas and Melisande* (1902) in who invested almost ten years of his life. The consolidation of his style became visible with the symphonic poem *La Mer* (1904).

Starting with 1903, the predominant role in his compositions is played by the piano music, through *Stampe* (1903), *Masks, Isle Joyeux* (1904), *Images* suites (1905-1908), *Children's corner* (1906-1908), *Preludes* (1909-1910, respectively 1910-1912), the work for four hands *En blanc et noir* and the visionary *Studies* (1915). Debussy dedicated to vocal music *Three songs from France*, the second series of *Gallant Celebrations* on poems by Verlaine (1904, the first series dating from 1981), *The Martyr of Saint Sebastian* (1911). The innovative work *Jeux* (1913) belongs to the ballet and the three *Sonatas* (1915-1917) to chamber ensembles.

Debussy, Impressionism and Symbolism. Interferences

The term Impressionism was inspired by Monet's painting, *Impression. Soleil levant*, and manifested itself at first in the fine arts, being represented by the painters Claude Monet, Camille Pissaro, Alfred Sissley, Edouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas and later in music, being considered in many respects the correspondent of literary symbolism. Impressionist paintings captured the mobility of phenomena more than the stable and conceptual aspect of things, through the preference for nature, pure chromatics and fine touches, the lack of precise contours, the painting of fleeting impressions imprinted in the artist's memory, the play of lights at various times of the day. The purpose was to provoke an emotional reaction, an impression, a spontaneous feeling.

Preferring frequent changes and capturing short moments, the impressionist artists enjoyed the richness offered by the elements of nature, starting with the peace and quiet of a serene morning, to the tumult of a storm on the ocean. In such an approach, Debussy found the link to this artistic current, the nucleus "to completely unite the two capital and natural vibrations of his being: the passion for music and the love of nature" (Alexandrescu 1962, 28).

Music should not be limited to describing Nature, more or less accurately, but rather to realizing the mysterious correspondence that links Nature to the Imagination: "Debussy existed before Debussy. It is an edifice that is reflected in the water, clouds that gather and fall apart, branches that fall asleep, rain of leaves, plums that fall, crush and bleed gold. But all this murmured, mumbled, they had not found a voice to express them. Thousands of indistinguishable wonders of nature have finally found their interpreter" (Long 1968, 8). Debussy adopts a magical vision of the world, considering nature as a gateway to a higher reality, seeking the interconnection between immediate reality and subtle worlds: "Over seventy of Debussy's compositions reflect the charms laden with so many indefinite impressions and feelings of nature" (Alexandrescu 1962, 143). Features such as vaporousness, fluidity, ambiguity are present.

Claude Debussy said that he loved images almost as much as music, considering painting and music almost corresponding. His desire to become a painter determined him to keep a great interest in the fine arts. Painting vocabulary was common when talking about his scores. The names of his works testify his constant concern for the transposition of expression from visual to musical: *Estampes (Impressions)*, *Images (Images)*, *En blanc et*

noir (In black and white), Masques (Masks), Nocturnes (Nocturne), Images pour orchestre (Images for orchestra) etc.

After a short look at the artistic events during Debussy's time and the very diverse circles that he frequented, we can establish some landmarks related to the preferences and influences that were manifested in the expression of the composer. Thus, in the museums of the Louvre, Luxembourg, the Durand-Ruel Galleries, Siegfried Bing or Georges Petit, Debussy admires Whistler's *Nocturnes*, Degas's paintings and Claude Monet's first series, Henry Lerolle, Ernest Chausson, Paul Gauguin, Odilon Redon, and Maurice Denis.

Debussy was influenced by artists from Europe and Asia and explored the interaction between light and color, texture and space, also known as *ma* in Japanese. This concept, as part of Japanese aesthetics, is related to the asymmetry and the absence of the center and can only be understood in relation to its context: the present elements delimit the empty space. The most significant influencers were Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissaro and Claude Monet. In preference for the works of Japanese artists Hokusai and Hiroshige, whose prints Debussy collected, he was also influenced by his personal friendship with sculptor Camille Claudel, whose sculptures asserted an interest in oriental art. Among her sculptures, Debussy owned the *Waltz*, a sculpture depicting the light and elegant movement of a couple dancing and twisting, defying the right balance. Camille Claudel's *Wave* (1897), along with Hokusai's *Great Wave*, inspired Debussy to cover the composition of the *Sea*.

An example in which Impressionist painting had a major influence is the *Nocturnes Orchestra Suite* (composed 1897-1899). The name of the suite was taken from the series of works by the American artist James McNeill Whistler. The shrouded, blurred atmosphere without direct light characterizes both his paintings and Debussy's suite. Debussy's intention related to the first part, *Nuages (Clouds)*, was noted in the premiere program: "to capture the unchanging appearance of the sky with the slow and melancholy progress of the clouds, ending in a gray dissolution gently tinged with white" (Reich, M.). The third musical poem in the suite, *Sirènes (Sirene)*, describes the sea at night, as Debussy noted in the same program: "*Sirènes depicts the sea and its countless rhythms and presently, amongst the waves silvered by the moonlight, is heard the mysterious song of the Sirens as they laugh and pass on*" (Reich, M.).

Debussy's popularity grows when he wins the *Rome Prize* in 1884. The nearly three years he spent at Villa Medici, a place where he could not accommodate, gave him the framework to study literature (especially Shakespeare), theater, philosophy, and to get closer to the art of symbolists through literary magazines from Paris.

The label of Impressionist followed Debussy after he sent to the commission of the French Academy, according to the conditions of his stay in Villa Medici, the symphonic poem *Les printemps*, composed during this period. The jury's response, still unprepared for the new direction Debussy is proposing, gives him this label: "Mr. Debussy sins, of course, neither by platitude nor by banality. He has, on the contrary, a pronounced tendency, too pronounced even, towards the search for the strange. It would be desirable to be warn against this vague impressionism, which is one of the most dangerous enemies of truth in the work of art." (Alexandrescu 1962, 27). Of course, after a few years, when his music begins to be understood, this lack of form proves only apparent, and Debussy is recognized as a true creator.

Once he leaves the Medici Villa and returns to Paris, Debussy embarks on the true path of his assertion. France had been a starting point for Parnassianism, Impressionism and

Symbolism, considered an "avant-garde point" (Alexandrescu 1962, 30) also for Naturalism and Expressionism, and Debussy's desire to know everything related to art and poetry finds its nursery here. Symbolism arouses his greatest interest.

The symbolist movement gained momentum in 1886, following the publication of a manifesto in the newspaper *Le Figaro*, by the poet Jean Moreas. Symbolism was represented in literature by Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé. The purpose of poetry becomes to suggest, not to describe, to express feelings and moods, accepting that the rules that govern feelings are not logical. Symbolist poetry addresses imagination and spirit, the tone is intimate and confessional, the surrounding reality becomes secondary and the meaning of the word, less important: "True feelings cannot be expressed in words more than a perfume, or a harmony. True poetry will be the direct revelation of the world of the senses, undistorted by the intervention of reason" (Mornet 1935, 280).

The three Ss that define Symbolism are: suggestion (atmosphere and states are not defined, but suggested), symbol (gives words a different meaning than usual) and synesthesia (correspondence between different sensations: auditory, visual, olfactory and motor). As reference are the poems *Les Voyelles (Vowels)* by Arthur Rimbaud and *Correspondances (Correspondences)* by Charles Baudelaire. Returning to Paris in 1887, Debussy spent much time with Symbolist writers and began attending several literary circles with his close friend Pierre Louÿs, most notably the *Librairie de l'Art Indépendant* at Taverna Weber. Also, the meetings every Tuesday in the house of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, where personalities from the artistic and intellectual world met under the name of *Les Mardistes* to discuss philosophy, art and literature, were for Debussy the opportunity to be connected with some of the most influential artists of the time: Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Verlaine, Stefan George, Paul Valéry, Oscar Wilde, WB Yeats, Edouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas and, occasionally, Claude Monet. This group had a special influence on Debussy's music, deeply rooted in the ideas and ideals shared here.

Many of the poets associated with Symbolism showed a special interest in the works of the German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883). Moreover, in the mid-1880s there was a true cult of Wagner, although the interpretation of his works had been banned in France. Wagner imagined musical dramas as *Gesamtkunstwerke* (total works of art), in which all the arts would be combined to provide a transcendental experience. Baudelaire described his experience of *Lohengrin* (1848) as ecstatic, instigating an involuntary dream state, relating it to the synesthetic ideal he described in *Correspondence*. For 4 years (1885-1888), Édouard Dujardin, one of Mallarmé's disciples, published a symbolist journal dedicated to Wagnerianism, *La revue wagnérienne*.

Music was a source of inspiration for symbolist poetry, just as the symbolist movement was a source of inspiration for Debussy's music. Symbolist poetry emphasizes the musicality of the word and the lyrics, focusing on the emotion and inner musicality of the idea. The poetic language is renewed with refined metaphors, rare words and even the invention of new words. The symbolists stated that all the arts must aspire to the condition of music, which of all, has the most direct emotional impact. In their view, music is the most appropriate environment to express the intangible and the multiple meanings. The saying "De la musique avant toute chose" (Music before all) started with Paul Verlaine in *Art poétique* (1884) and was taken to an even higher level in Mallarmé's poem, *Un coup de dés*

(1897). The poem was compared to a musical score, due to the text gaps, meaningful like breaks in music.

Debussy compared his desire for essentialization to the linguistic economy of Mallarmé's poems. Another common point of them was the metamorphosis of pauses into meaningful elements. Mallarmé's poem *Afternoon of a Faun*, which Debussy discovers during the meetings of the group *Les mardistes*, is the source of his work for orchestra, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (premiere in 1894). The poem describes the memory, or perhaps the dream of a faun, a mythological creature that symbolizes fertility. He plays the panpipe in an attempt to capture a visceral experience with two nymphs, but fails and abandons attempts in favor of a sleep laden with dreams and visions. Similar to the poem, where the normal meaning of the words is shrouded in metaphors and multiple meanings, Debussy's prelude is fluid, mysterious and timeless, personifying the ambiguity of this poem. Music flows from one idea to another, bringing the listener into a dream-like state, inaugurating a new way, both delicate and sensual, of feeling and listening.

Regarding the relationship between music and words, Debussy said: "I conceive a new dramatic force: that of a music that begins where the expressive force of words ends; music exists to express what cannot be expressed" (Poige 2014, 37). Symbolist poetry leaves open meanings, corresponding to the tonal and structural ambiguity in Debussy's music. Like the symbolists, who gave up the classical meter of poetry, the composer abandoned the precise structures of meter and rhythm.

Debussy is not intrusive with his music, however, he sets out his ideas clearly, with a well-mastered and outlined language, full of imagination and convincing. He probes the realm in the mind and soul of the listener, until he finds that common point where he plants the idea, the melody, which then develops personally and reaches fulfillment only with the input of the listener.

Symbolist poetry was inspiration for eighty songs written by Debussy. The first song to be a great success was *The Fountain*, composed in 1890, with lyrics by Charles Baudelaire. Debussy also composed several songs on the lyrics of Stéphane Mallarmé and three songs on lyrics by Pierre Louys, entitled *Chansons de bilitis*. Paul Verlaine's lyrics inspire him for *The Sound of the Horn saddens*, *The String of Fences*, *Mandolin*, but also for *Moonlight* (1890) from the *Bergamasque Suite*, in which he creates a perfect combination of sadness and beauty that the poem of the same name expresses.

One of the most interesting ways in which Debussy's attraction for poetry was manifested is the fact that he also composed his own texts, for *Lyrical Prose*, *About Dreaming*, *Shores*, *Flowers and Evenings* and *The Carol of Children Without a Home*.

In one of his conversations with his composition teacher, Ernest Guiraud, Debussy was asked which of the poets could offer him a "poem." His answer is proof of embracing the characteristics of Symbolism: "The one who, half-saying, will allow me to include my own dream; who will project characters whose stories do not belong to a certain time and place; which will not despotically impose images on me and will leave me free, sometimes, to create more art and to complete his work. I dream of poems that offer me changing scenes, with various places and characters; in which the characters do not quarrel, but allow life and fate" (Dumesnil, R.).⁽¹⁾

CONCLUSIONS

The two artistic currents, Impressionism in painting and Symbolism in literature, had a major importance in the artistic formation of the composer Claude Debussy. What they have in common is that they suggest a mood or ambiance, rather than expressing strong emotions or telling a narrative. The influence of Impressionist art in Debussy's music starts primarily from the reaction against formal academism. The strong connection is found in the preference for nature, the attempt to arouse spontaneous emotional reactions, the adoption of a vocabulary that highlights the expression from visual toward the musical. In the perception of Debussy's music, the role of the listener receives new valences, specific to Symbolism, the suggestion becoming the main mode of expression. Debussy offers a synesthetic experience by combining suggestion, specific to Symbolism, with the rendering of nature imagery, peculiar to Impressionism.

NOTES

⁽¹⁾ Dumesnil, R. *Portraits de musiciens français*: „Celui qui, disant les choses à demi, me permettra de greffer mon rêve sur le sien; qui concevra des personnages dont l'histoire et la demeure ne seront d'aucun temps et d'aucun lieu; qui ne m'imposera pas despotiquement de scène à faire, et me laissera libre, ici ou là, d'avoir plus d'art que lui, et de parachever son ouvrage. (...) Je rêve de poèmes qui me fournissent des scènes mobiles diverses par les lieux et le caractère; où les personnages ne discutent pas, mais subissent la vie et le sort.” (https://www.musicologie.org/theses/dumesnil_claude_debussy.html).

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