

Ondine versus Ondine

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ABSTRACT

This study represents a compared analysis of two works based on the same source of inspiration, *Ondine*, written by two contemporary composers, Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy, very different in compositional style. *Ondine*, a mythological water nymph, is the character inspired from the legend of German author Heinrich Karl de La Motte and represents the fusion between the German myth *Lorelei* and the *Melusine of Lusignan* character created by the French trouvère Jean d'Arras. While Ravel's *Ondine* has a narrative inspiration through its clear dominance of the structure that follows the narrative flow of the main themes, Debussy's *Ondine* evokes glimpses of scenes and images through unexpected changes of texture and colors.

KEYWORDS

Comparative analysis, Impressionism, character, legend, literature

INTRODUCTION

The two compositions written by the French composers Ravel and Debussy around the same period of time, although inspired by the same literary source, the legend of water nymph *Ondine*, feature a highly contrasting compositional approach and temperament. The parallel between the two compositions is a remarkable opportunity for observing the personal touch of each composer. In order to fully understand the two composer's music, it is helpful to explore even if briefly, their shared musical background.

Both Debussy and Ravel, pianists and composers alike, were two of the most outstanding representatives of the Impressionism. They both lived approximately in the same period (The famous *La belle époque*), Debussy, between 1862-1918, and Ravel between 1875-1937, which means that they shared a similar cultural environment. They also shared common influences and experiences, starting with fact that they both lived in Paris and graduated the renowned *Conservatoire de Paris*. They were highly influenced by the literary circle of symbolist poets, and by the impressionist painters. The Parisian cafes and cabarets, at the beginning of the 20th century were the places where artists, poets and writers, coming up from all the corners of Europe, gathered and shared ideas and experiences, all in search of new ways of expressing themselves. Among the places that became famous in that era was *Librairie de L'Art Independent* frequented by men of letters such as André Gide, Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé or *Taverne Weber*, where Debussy met Marcel Proust, *Le Chat Noir* and *Les mardis chez Mallarmé*. The latter was the most outstanding place because of the highest number of cultural personalities who

asserted themselves there, gathering weekly in the house of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. It is here that Debussy allowed himself to be „contaminated” entirely with the idea of Symbolism, his compositional technique embracing the symbolistic principles.

The symbolists wrote intensely metaphorical and suggestive, conveying a certain symbolistic meaning to images or objects. They preferred a poetry of allusion and suggestion to an affirmation or a concrete description, seeking to evoke, not to narrate. The image was the element that marked the poet’s state of mind (Le Symbolisme, 1886).

Those were years of intense speculation, of various interweaving of arts, when musicians were talking about the color of sounds, the paintings were regarded as symphonies and poems were described as music. An example in this respect is *Claire de Lune*, Paul Verlaine’s poem from the *Suite Bergamasque* and *L’après-midi d’un faune*, the poem with the same name by Stéphane Mallarmé that inspired Debussy.

Within the Great World Exhibition of 1889, during the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution as well as the inauguration of the Eiffel Tower, Debussy and Ravel made acquaintance with the Oriental music of the Gamelan Ensemble representing traditional orchestras in Indonesia, Java and Bali, although unknown to the European culture at that time. From here appears the familiarity with the pentatonic scale as well as the new, original, rhythms inspired by this ensemble, inspiration that can be noticed more in Debussy’s music (Morton & Schmunk, 2000, p. 13).

The Russian music that was frequently performed on the Parisian stages also had a powerful influence on both composers’ music, who were strongly influenced by the inflexion of harmonies, modes and ostinato technique from the music of Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin.

The origin of the character

Ondine or *Undine* is a character inspired by the legend belonging to the German writer Heinrich Karl de la Motte (1777-1843). The story of *Ondine*, a mermaid, was inspired by numerous legendary figures. *Ondine* represents the fusion between the German myth *Lorelei* and *Melusine de Lusignan*, character created by the French *trouvère* Jean d’Arras in the 14th century.

The legend of Lorelei, which refers to the 120-metre rock situated in the waters of the Rhine river, speaks about a virgin who, desperate that her lover has cheated on her, throws herself into the waters and turns into a siren that can be seen on the top of a rock, seducing sailors and fishermen with her beautiful voice and golden hair. Those who are under her spell, by watching her, cannot actually see the rocks on the bottom of the river, thus disappearing while their boats are destroyed (Casler, 2001, p. 232).

Melusine de Lusignan represents a supernatural spirit who gives herself completely to a beloved one, in the hope of acquiring the body and soul of a common mortal. Her perennial existence relies on her beloved person’s love and loyalty. But, as in most legends of this sort, the mortal is not loyal and poor *Melusine* is forced to suffer her entire immortal life (Ibidem).

The story of both *Lorelei* and *Melusine de Lusignan* reunited under the name of *Ondine* has become the subject of several well-known works of the 19th and 20th centuries. Among these we find *Undine* by Ernst Theodor Wilhelm (E.T.A.) Hoffman (1816), Albert Lorzings’ *Undine* (1845), Cesare Pugni’s ballet *Ondine* and the most famous

work of Antonin Dvořak, *Rusalka* (1900), the latter name being the Czech equivalent character of Undine. Paul Gauguin himself has his own painted version of *Ondine* (1889).

In 1836, the French poet Aloysius Bertrand publishes the poem in prose *Gaspard de la Nuit* which becomes the source of inspiration for Ravel's homonymous work. The content of this fantasy about which Ravel sustains that "it puts in musical notes what the poet expresses in words," consists of three standalone pieces: *Ondine*, *Le Gibet* and *Scarbo*. *Ondine* is the poem FROM the third section of the *Le Fantaisies de Gaspard de la Nuit* entitled "La Nuit et ses prestiges" (*The Night and its Magic Spells*). *Le Gibet* and *Scarbo* are not part of these *Fantasies* but they are independent works or *pièces détachées*. These poems were introduced to Ravel by his good friend Ricardo Vinẽs, who also interpreted the first audition of the entire work *Gaspard de la Nuit*. The first performance took place at the *Salle Érard* from the *Société Nationale* on January 9th, 1909 (Bricard, 1990). Ricardo Vinẽs also interpreted Debussy's *Ondine* for the first time.

ANALYSIS

Ondine. Text translation

Je croyez entendre	I thought I heard
Une vague harmonie enchanter mon sommeil	A faint harmony that enchants my sleep.
Et, près de moi, s'épandre un murmure pareil	And close to me radiates an identical murmur
Aux chants entrecoupés d'une voix triste et tendre.	Of songs interrupted by a sad and tender voice.
Ch.Brugnot (The two Spirits)	Ch.Brugnot (The two Spirits)
Ecoute! Ecoute! C'est moi, c' est Ondine qui frôle	Listen! Listen! It is I, it is Ondine who brushes
de ces gouttes d'eau les losanges sonores de ta	drops of water on the resonant panes of your
fenêtre illuminée par les mornes rayons de la	windows lit by the gloomy rays of the moon; and
lune; et voici, en robe de moire, la dame	here in gown of the watered silk, the mistress of the
châtelaine qui contemple à son balcon la belle	chateau gazes from her balcony on the beautiful
nuit étoilée et le beau lac endormi.	starry night and the beautiful sleeping lake.
Chaque flot est un ondin qui nage dans le	Each wave is a water sprite who swims in the
courant, chaque courant est un sentier qui	stream, each stream is a foothpath that winds
serpente vers mon palais, est mon palais est bâti	towards my palace, and my palace is a fluid

fluide, au fond du lac, dans le triangle du feu,
de
la terre et de l'air.

structure, at the bottom of the lake, in a
triangle
of fire, of earth and of air

“Ecoute! Ecoute! Mon père bat l'eau
coassante
d'une branche d'aulne verte, et mes soeurs
carressent de leurs bras d'écume les fraîches
îles
d'herbes, de nénuphars et de glaïeuls, ou se
moquent du saule caduc et barbu qui pêche
à
la ligne.”

„Listen! Listen! My father whips the
croaking
water with a branch of a green alder tree,
and my
sisters caress with their arms of foam the
cool
islands of herbs, of water lilies, and of corn
flowers, or laugh at the decrepit and
bearded
willow who fishes at the line.”

Sa chanson murmurée, elle me supplia de
recevoir son anneau à mon doigt, pour être
l'époux d'une Ondine, et de visiter avec elle
son
palais, pour être le roi des lacs.

Her song murmured, she beseeches me
to accept
her ring on my finger, and be the
husband of an
Ondine, and to visit with her, her palace
and be
the king of the lakes.

Et comme je lui répondais que j'aimais une
mortelle, boudeuse et dépitée, elle pleura
quelques larmes, poussa un éclat de rire, et
s'évanouit en giboulées qui ruisselèrent
blanches
le long de mes vitraux bleus

And I was replying to her that I loved a
mortal, sullen and spiteful, she wept
some tears,
uttered a burst of laughter, and vanished
in a
shower that streamed white down the
length of
my stained glass windows

Ravel's *Ondine* is a piece of great virtuosity which requires great technical skills and also needs a special sensitivity from the interpreter. From a formal point of view, due to the fact that the work was inspired from a literary source and due to its narrative character, it is built on the narrative character of the literary support. Nevertheless, if we study the presentation of the themes, an arch form can be discerned, in the spirit of the ABA lied form, where two main themes, A and B, can be taken into consideration. Since Ravel respects the storyline, he does not follow the patterns of classical forms.

Section A introduces and develops the first musical theme while section B presents the second theme. It is worth mentioning that both themes have a similar character. In the order of theme appearance, the following succession is to be noted (Table 1):

Table 1. Succession of themes

Section	A	B	A	B	A	Coda
Bar	1-32	33-42	43-52	53-80	81-84	85-92
Tonalities	C sharp major	G sharp major	D sharp major	D minor	G sharp minor	D minor and C sharp major

The key signatures in the table are at the beginning of each theme displayed above. The resemblance to the classical sonata form resides only in the fact that the former musical idea appears at the dominant G sharp melodic major. It is worth mentioning that Ravel promotes remote keys once considered theoretical (C sharp, G sharp and D sharp) also using the melodic major variant; he also uses modulations at distant keys.

In conclusion we can observe an atypical form due to the fact that Ravel transcribes Bertrand's poem in a musical medium. There is a resemblance to a sonata form and an ABA form, but as we cannot incorporate the musical text into any of those directly as their structure is not replicated entirely.

Another compositional characteristic is the emphasis put on the main themes. They are clear, reoccur systematically almost identically and are similar in character. The piece is based on two main themes. They are both modal, introduced by the left hand, moving at short intervals in a sinuous way and they have the tendency to gravitate towards a central note. Also the clarity that accompanies the themes reveals a balanced structure (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Theme I, labeled *Ondine*, appears in measures 3-6

Both themes are permanently present in dynamics of *piano* or *pianissimo*, including the in the high register. Theme I appears five times and each time it preserves the same register of the left hand, but with different accompanimental figures. Theme II has a rather developing role during the entire piece. It does not have the typical character of a 2nd theme, especially because its first occurrence is rather late, in measure 33 after the *Ondine* theme has been displayed repeatedly.



Figure 2. Theme II

The figurative accompaniment extends in register, the dynamic plan is full development and, although the theme remains clearly outlined and the left hand alternates with the right hand, the pianist still encounters difficulties from a technical point of view.

The work follows the narrative flow of Bertrand’s poem: the melodic thread evolves together with the development of the subject. In the beginning the tune is poetic and melodic; it is the call of the nymph where the melody is simple, transparent and flowing. As the music continues, her tune becomes more and more sensual: it is the moment when *Ondine* is ready to seduce a mortal and the climax is musically illustrated by an intense, dramatic effect. After the continuous waves of 32^{nds} which are presented along the entire piece, at a certain moment, the melody is stripped of any harmony or figuration, making place for a single melodic line, very simple and melancholic; this important moment is marked by the sudden change of the key; all sharps of the key signature are cancelled out, while the meter changes as well. This moment of great sadness represents in fact *Ondine*’s disappointment at finding out that the young man she wants to seduce is in love with someone else. This dramatic turn to D minor could be taken as an illustration of *Ondine*’s lost state upon hearing the disappointing news. This very moment may be considered to take the form of a mere recitative which Ravel marks: *Tres lent* (bars 85-88). This is the moment, according to some experts, when the composer reaches the peak of literary expression in his music for piano (Simms, 1996).

The finale is also very suggestive: immediately after this recitative, after this moment of deep sadness, a subito crescendo appears, revealed by the rapid and brilliant arpeggios,

musically marked as *Rapide et brillant*, which suggest the nymph's bursting into laughter, followed by the waves (arpeggios) calming down as the shade dims and the nymph disappears:

Et comme je lui répondais que j'aimais une mortelle, boudeuse et dépitée, elle pleura quelques larmes, poussa un éclat de rire, et s'évanouit en giboulées qui ruisselèrent blanches le long de mes vitraux bleus. (When I replied to her that I loved a mere mortal, grumpy and hateful, she wept some tears bursting into laughter and vanished in the waters leaving white streams on my stained glass windows (Bertrand, 1842).

A unique feature of Ravel's music is found in the rhythm which, in this work, is characterized by an ostinato, a rhythmical continuity of the 32nd notes in the accompaniment. These 32^{nds} depict the waves of water which undulate continuously. The rhythmic continuity and drive of the waves are never interrupted for ninety measures except for the recitative of four bars (measures 85-88). Such similarities connected to the water theme can be found in other Ravel works such as *Jeux d'eau* and *Une barque sur l'océan*. The rhythmical unity and continuity that characterizes an entire section or composition are characteristic attributes of Ravel's music.

In contrast to Ravel's *Ondine*, Debussy's composition presents a completely different approach. *Ondine* is the eight *Prelude* out of twelve, from the second book of the piano *Preludes* composed during 1910-1913. Compared by length, Debussy's *Ondine* is much shorter; it has a more intimate character and does not need such a high level of technique. Although the work is structured in several sections, based on themes and motivic gestures, it offers a unitary perspective.

As in Ravel's case, the form is not clearly defined, however, in a larger vision, the structure can be considered as a two-part form with an introduction and two sections: A and B. Within each section, Debussy introduces contrasting themes and motives. One can even refer to a collage of themes and motives that move from one section to the other in a systematic and unitary manner. Regarding the succession of sections, the work can be seen as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. Order of sections

Section	A	B	A	B	Coda
Bars	16-29	30-37	38-41	42-61	62 – final
Key signatures	D major	E flat major	E flat major	B major and E flat major	D major

If in Ravel's case, the narrative aspect is present, not the same thing can be said about Debussy. Debussy's musical esthetics is a replica of a symbolical ideal, whose only goal is to suggest, not to illustrate; therefore we can speak about a rather suggestive nature of the work. As in Ravel's piece, we have two main themes which Debussy treats in a different manner. If in Ravel's *Ondine* the main themes were dominant throughout the entire piece, in Debussy's piece the themes have a rather motivic character. Unlike the

longer, continuous themes, these are short, of only two measures and they do not have continuity and are often interrupted. Theme I is static, reoccurring almost always in the same form, indicating its unchanging quality. The second theme shows each time a new display recurring with different accompanimental figures and character, although it does not contain the coherence of the second theme in Ravel's *Ondine*.

As a stylistic particularity, it is interesting that Debussy starts with those abrupt motivic gestures without an apparent relation between them, after which it is only in bar sixteen that he introduces the first theme/motif. It is the moment where the tonality of D Major is finally established, although the theme is a Lydian pentatonic motif. The first theme consists of a rising and descending line in Lydian mode on D, moving at the interval of seconds, doubled by the left hand (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Theme I, bars 16-17

The second theme/motif is presented much later, only in bar 30; it is also a short one of two bars (Figure 4). This contrasts sharply with the former, having a single melodic line, without any harmonic embellishment, with a chromatic line in staccato and the interval of a fourth in the end that gives it a darker and more mysterious character.



Figure 4. Theme II, bars 30-31

The first theme/motif appears three times throughout the work, without any notable changes. On the other hand, the second theme appears several times and each time in a different manner. Pertinent examples are the augmentation of the motif in bars 46-47 or the augmentation of the motif *le double plus lent* so that the 16th notes take the values of 8th notes in bars 42-43. As in the case of Ravel, the second theme suggests the idea of a thematic development although the themes in this piece change very little. They are often restated in a similar manner, without any well-directed harmonic progression or a climax, as they are accompanied by an ostinato rhythm which anchors the harmony in different

places. In this prelude the interplay between the themes and motivic gestures, the gradual change of timbres and color is the dominant feature. It is to be mentioned that the absence of well-defined themes led to the absence of a rhythmic continuity as well and, as mentioned afore, to the absence of a harmonic progression as compared to the homonymous work by Ravel.

Although the source of inspiration is merely speculative, from an performer's point of view, the following approach may be considered: the *introduction* and the *coda* of this prelude symbolize the movement of water, then the first theme/motif would be the human participation while the second theme/motif (more extended) would be that of the mermaid *Ondine* and the different feelings connected to her.

Debussy's compositional technique of overlapping various motives obstructs the rhythmic fluidity of the work; as a result, the motivic gestures are responsible for the lack of continuity. They are represented in such a manner that, by their sudden appearance, they interrupt, intervene and break the continuity of any element, be it melodic, harmonic or rhythmic. At a first glance, the score reveals a difference in register: Ravel's piece starts with the interwoven hands in the higher register while Debussy's piece is spread across three staves in order to cover the area of four octaves.

In Ravel's *Ondine*, the prevailing element is a homophone texture of an accompanied melody, while Debussy displays a counterpointing technique, in layers of exposition and juxtaposition of the sonorous material: the pedal tone appears several times during the work together with the ostinato rhythm.

Although the inspirational medium may have played a role in the different approaches - Ravel's version inspired by a literary source, the other *Ondine* evokes glimpses from scenes and images, by sudden changes of texture, color and timbre.

CONCLUSIONS

Ravel, due to the fact that he included the text of Aloysius Bertrand's poem in the published suite *Gaspard de la Nuit* (Mawer 2000, 201), acknowledges him as a source of inspiration. Ravel's piece was printed in 1908, eleven years after he had set eyes on these poems.

As far as Debussy's *Ondine* is concerned, the source of inspiration for is less known. Nevertheless, we can speculate the source due to the fact that in one edition of La Motte's novel *Undine*, fifteen illustrations belonging to Arthur Rackham were published. He was a prolific caricaturist in sketches for children. It is known that Debussy was inspired by this artist because some of his preludes refer to these sketches, such as *Les Fées sont d'exquises danseuses* for children, Prelude no. 4 from Book II that preserves identically the title of Rackham's sketch, as well as *La danse de Puck* no. 11 in the 1st Book of preludes. Thus, if Debussy did not find inspiration in La Motte's, novel, he definitely found it in Rackham's illustrations (Casler, 2001, p. 232).

Ravel's *Ondine* is a work of great virtuosity compared to Debussy's composition, which doesn't require such a complex technique. Because of the narrative character, structurally speaking, the form is obscure in both cases, although two musical ideas can be still distinguished in both cases.

Debussy's *Ondine* reveals a completely different vision. The length of the piece is greatly reduced, and although the piece is structured in several sections based on motivic themes and gestures, it offers a unitary perspective. As in Ravel's case, the form does not

follow a standard formal pattern. If in Ravel's *Ondine* the dominant element is a homophonic texture and melody with accompaniment, in Debussy's case we can distinguish a counterpoint layer technique of exposition and juxtaposition of the sonorous material: the pedal-tone which appears several times during the piece together with the *ostinato* rhythm.

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