

Elena Rovenko\*<sup>1</sup>*\*Tchaikovsky Moscow State Conservatory, Russia*<sup>1</sup>rovenko-lena@mail.ru

## Features of Form Building in Debussy's Music in the Light of Bergson's Conception of 'La durée'

### ABSTRACT

Debussy's equating of musical development to natural laws has led to interpretation of his works according to the natural-science principles (J. H. Webster, R. Howat). It's also necessary to take into consideration the laws that govern the life of the mind, due to the fact that in Debussy's music the 'ordering' of time correlates to specifics of organization of psychological time. Henri Bergson was the first person who has paid attention to this feature. Based on psychology of perception, he characterized Debussy's music as 'music of la durée' and delivered it in compliance to 'a melody of our inner life', which assumed interpenetration of mental conditions and images of consciousness, and unpredictability of every moment. Between the qualities of duration (*la durée*) and features of Debussy's compositions some correlations have been detected: 1) continuous creation of novelty — tendency to non-repeatability of music material in principle; 2) indivisibility of the progressive movement — mitigation of boundaries between sounds by smoothing of attack and damping phases; 3) comprehension of space as a trace of duration (*la durée*) — emergence of musical architectonics in listener's consciousness a post factum; 4) filling of psychological time is conglomerate of unpredictable states and images — filling of musical time is conglomerate of unpredictably interacting motives, themes, accords, etc. For ascertainment of properties of Debussy's art and qualities of la durée comparative method has been used. Investigation of the composer's thinking involves actualizing of the concepts, offered by Bergson relying on T. Ribot — dynamic scheme, intuitive and reflective forms of creative imagination).

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It's well-known that Debussy equated regularities of development of musical material to natural laws. There is the impressive example — the appeal to peer into the gradually changing colors of the sunset, to listen to the changing rhythms of sea waves, etc. Hence the scientists undertake attempts to interpret the composition of Debussy's works in accordance with the natural-science principles. For example, R. Howat, following J. H. Webster, investigates the manifestation of Golden Section progression, one of the most important regulators of growth and ordonnance of living organisms, in *L'isle joyeuse* and *La mer* (Howat 1983, 46–135). The scientist uses not only Golden Section Series, but approximations of Golden numbers by Fibonacci components.

Besides laws of objective reality, in relation to Debussy's art, it is also relevant to take into account the laws governing the subjective life of the psyche and mentality. First, the features of the thinking process of any composer inspire properties of the musical composition. Secondly, in the case of Debussy, the ordering of musical time and ways of its filling with material finds correspondences in the specifics of the organization of psychological time.

Henri Bergson was the first, who had paid his attention to this peculiarity. He declared: 'the music of M. Debussy and his school is a music of duration' ('la musique de M. Debussy et de son école est une musique de la durée', Bergson 1959, 354). Since the philosopher rejects the metaphor as a manifestation of intellectual activity, the correlation of music and pure duration has the status of an ontological correspondence. It is possible to draw an approximate algorithm for establishing such a correlation. The uncovering of the ontological relationship between duration (*la durée*) and music contains four steps.

#### 1.1 First Step

In search of an equivalent of the pure duration (*la durée pure*), the philosopher overrides visual images as appealing to space. He recurses to hearing: the last, without being absolutely free from spatial correlations — sound is always localized in space —, produces the perceived spatial representations in comparison with other sensory abilities in a less degree.

#### 1.2 Second Step

Bergson connects the true duration (*la durée vraie*) with the deep life of the psyche. 'we cannot conceive a time without imagining it as perceived and lived. Duration therefore implies consciousness' (Bergson 1965, 49). Therefore among acoustical phenomena he chooses those that are able to convey the continuity of the work of consciousness, the incessant change of states of mind. The music serves as the correlate of duration in a gnoseological aspect, from the point of view of a person, because it exists insofar as it is perceived by the human consciousness.

#### 1.3 Third Step

As a result, the philosopher comes to the idea of the ontological relationship between duration (*la durée*) and music, since the time of sounding of a musical work is identical with the time of its perception — 'perception of change' (*perception du changement*) appealing to Bergson's famous work. The duration reveals itself as 'the continuous melody of our inner life, — a melody which is going on and will go on, indivisible, from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence' (Bergson 1946, 175), and extension of which assumes specific interpenetration of mental conditions and images of consciousness, and also unpredictability of each subsequent moment (see Bergson, 1965, 44–5).

#### 1.4 Fourth Step

Vice versa, from an ontological point of view, the melody, as Bergson thinks about it, is the sounding duration. Bergson's usage is not literally: it is important for the philosopher to emphasize not so much the presence of a melodic line, as the aspect of the audible duration embodying the continuity of an aesthetic-psychological experience. Despite taking delight in

Beethoven, Chopin and Wagner, among composers Bergson chooses the musician with similar understanding of the essence of musical time: it was Debussy who has declared: ‘my music is no other than a melody!’ (Long 1960, 137). Bergson believes that in Debussy’s oeuvre the continuing melody (*la mélodie continue*), expressing ‘a unique, uninterrupted current of emotions’, has found its implementation (Bergson 1959, 354).

## 2. SEVERAL HISTORICAL EVIDENCES

Even Debussy’s and Bergson’s contemporaries have noted the correspondence of the composer’s art and the philosophy of duration (*la durée*) from the gnoseological perspective with aesthetical overtones — the last implies problems of artistic perception. See, for instance, works of Jean Muller and Gaston Picard (Muller and Picard 1913, XXXIV). Subsequently, Émile Vuillermoz, drawing parallels between the phenomena of perception and consciousness, explained Claude Monet and Claude Debussy’s artistic discoveries through the Bergsonian concept (Vuillermoz 1957, 33–9). The ontological aspect of this problem has been designated by Stefan Jarociński — but taking into account treating Debussy as Symbolist. According to the researcher’s thought, in Debussy’s oeuvre there ‘seem to be undeniable links with the Bergsonian theory of duration’ (Jarociński 1976, 107). However, in Jarociński’s investigation the essence of similar connections is rather guessed, than defined exactly.

Continuing on these ideas, this paper is devoted to the philosophical and aesthetic substantiation of the possibility to interpret forms in Debussy’s music as an analogue of the process of thinking and the work of consciousness: that is, in terms of the psychology of perception specified by Bergson’s conception of duration (*la durée*).

## 3. AIMS AND REPERTOIRE STUDIED

1. The main purpose is to find the concrete correspondences between the organization of Debussy’s compositions as a dynamic structures and structure-forming qualities of duration (*la durée*);
2. The complementary aim means to define what features of Debussy’s creative process conduce to the unique organization of musical time and, therefore, of the form in his compositions;
3. The third goal is to offer the synthesizing method of analysis of Debussy’s music, taking into account the psychology of perception, which has been actualized by Bergson in respect to artistic thinking;
4. In consequence of using inductive reasoning from the special to the general, the fourth task arises: to show practical usefulness of correlation between the musical and philosophical conceptions of time, belonging to the same epoch or (and) representing the same world outlook.

The complex of parameters of Debussy’s musical composition, considered in correlation with properties of *duration* (*‘la durée’*), serves as the subject of studying.

## 4. METHODS

1. Comparative method is employed for research and correlation of properties of Debussy’s compositions and qualities of duration (*la durée*);

2. An additional way of observation on Debussy’s works is the complex analysis of means of expression in music. Similarly, it is necessary to apply contextual approach in regards to duration (*la durée*) as it exists not separately, but in connection with such phenomena as consciousness, memory, vital impetus (*élan vital*), intuition, spirit, matter, etc;
3. The most specific method is the psychophysiological principle of analysis of the artist’s thinking, offered by Bergson relying on Théodule Ribot — the originator of an experimental direction in French psychology. The most important adoption is the concept of the dynamic scheme (*un schema dynamique*), which is something like a holistic mental image of an artwork in the phase before inventing the concrete material. The specification of the dynamic scheme comes in the process of composing and depends on the type of creative imagination which is possessed by the master of art: the reflective type moves from details to unity, the intuitive one moves on the contrary (Ribot 1900, 133). Extrapolation of above mentioned concepts on Debussy’s oeuvre allows partly explaining unique properties of form building in his works.

## 5. ONTOLOGICAL CORRESPONDENCES

The most important correlations between the qualities of *la durée* and some features of Debussy’s compositions are the following, as it has been detected.

1. The first correlation is constituted by Bergson himself and has its foundation in the category of *absolute indivisibility* (*absolue indivisibilité*), immanent for duration (*la durée*) (see Bergson 1946, 172; 1911, 24). Bergson thinks that Debussy’s music is ‘simple and indivisible as an Absolute’ (Bergson 2002, 1558). According to the philosopher, in order to rediscover ‘immediately perceived duration’ (the basic time — *le temps fondamental*), ‘we must first efface the difference among the sounds, [...] retaining [...] only the continuation of what precedes into what follows and the uninterrupted transition’ (Bergson 1965, 44–45). In orchestral music, the composer models the duration of the attack phase and saturates it with overtones — for example, the beginnings of all movements of *La mer*, and of the *Gigues*. In order to accentuate the phase of sound stabilization, he often does not neglect the mention ‘let vibrate’ (*laissez vibrer*) even in piano pieces. The duration of the damping phase is emphasized graphically by means of ties stretching out to nowhere — in preludes *Les collines d’Anacapri* and *Bruyères*, and in the piece *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* (*Images*, serie 2). So, boundaries between sounds are mitigated;
2. Sounds, interpenetrating each other, form a unity at the level of submotive, motive, and then a musical phrase — this could be interpreted as a correlate of Bergson’s mental and qualitative synthesis —, a mental synthesis, qualitative (*une synthèse mentale, qualitative*), which assumes ‘a gradual organization of our successive sensations, a unity resembling that of a phrase in a melody’ (see Bergson 1912, 111). The philosopher writes:

if these notes succeed one another, [...] we perceive them in one another, and [...] their totality may be compared to a living being whose parts, although distinct, permeate one another just because they are so closely connected. (Bergson 1912, 100.)

In Debussy oeuvre, motives often represent, let's say, indivisible wholes, perceived by hearing rather as indivisible motives than as groups of clearly articulate notes. In such cases, we don't fix individual tones, but capture the overall configuration of the motive, of its elevating and toning down at last. Only with deliberated reflexion the pitch level of each sound is fixed. The duration of sound is de facto approximate: the sound 'slips', 'flows' into the next. Such, for example, is the melody of the flute that opens *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* or *Syrinx*;

3. Such mental synthesis is caused by dialectics of the self-value of what moves — notes, chords in Debussy's case — and the intrinsic value of motion, that is *an absolute movement* (*movement absolu*) or the substantial changing (*le changement substantiel*), prevailing to itself (see Bergson 1969, 10; Bergson 1911, 24, 26, 35; Bergson 1946, 14, 172–174). This feature is most clearly manifested in the aspect of harmony, in all-sufficient presence of coloristic juxtaposition and iridescence of chords, which are independent of tonal functions. The composer asked his friends in 1883:

Do you not able to understand the chords without reference to their marital status and their covering letter? (Quoted in Kremlev 1965, 113.)

Where they come? Where they are going? — Debussy exclaimed, tormenting Maurice Emmanuel by 'strange', 'chromatic' harmonies. — Do you want to know this? So listen: they are sufficient themselves. (Quoted in *French Musical Aesthetic of the 19th Century* 1974, 276.)

The rule of resolution of chord means for the composer to give rein to conformity and seeming necessity. The freedom of choosing different consonances and dissonances should appear to replace this conventionality: that's why in Debussy's oeuvre the movement of chords is justifiably to call arbitrary, in terms of Bergson. The unpredictability of harmonic development is increasing, that determines the effect of novelty and constant creation of both the structure and the 'paint' of the chords; every sonance is invented.

4. The continuous development of musical material, giving rise to the impression of spontaneity and unpredictability, correlates with Bergsonian phenomenon of continuous creation of novelty. The well-known vital impetus (*élan vital*) presupposes a mind-energy (*l'énergie spirituelle*), 'a conscious force whose main purpose appears to be the ceaseless bringing of something new into the world' (Bergson 1920, 39);

Having marked the tendency to non-repeatability of music material in principle, Debussy declared: 'I'll arrive at a music truly free of motives, or formed by the single continuous motive, which nothing interrupts and which never returns to itself' (quoted in Wenk 1976, 164). As it was said by the researcher:

Already in Beethoven the art of development consists of incessant repetitions of identical phrases. And Wagner has exaggerated this procedure almost to the point of caricature.... (Jarociński 1976, 103.)

The most important means of 'germination' of the motive is its rhythmic renewal: musical time, immanent to the original version of the motive, is transformed in the process of its modifications and generates ('порождает') capriciousness of rhythmic pulsation, explained by Debussy

through the concept of arabesque with appeal to Gregorian chant, Palestrina, and Bach. It suffices calling to mind the rhythmic transformations of the original phrase-impulse in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Therefore, music time, is characterized by heterogeneity of its stream — this quality is inherent in the Bergsonian time-invention (*temps-invention*), changing its tempo and pulsation depending on the specific filling;

5. On the other hand, the increase in information, which is characteristic of the time-invention, or the true duration, is impossible without the accumulation of this information, without Bergsonian causality of the present by the past: 'Then we shall have a logical development, concise and deductive' (Jarociński 1976, 103). Straight from the Debussy's mouth, deduction means nothing more than the gradual derivation of the whole from the initial motive and, moreover, the same gradual growth of the nucleus-motive itself from the first notes — for example, the germination of the original motive in the prelude *Des pas sur la neige* or in the Nocturne *Sirènes*. As the philosopher noticed, 'oeuvre [...] is entirely in the process of development' (Bergson 1959, 194–196);
6. The result of this development is the dialectical perception of the musical form. In the same way as by Bergson space is interpreted as a trace of duration (*la durée*) and its inversion — in Debussy musical architectonics is composed in a listener's consciousness a post factum, as a trace of development of material. As for Bergson, 'all form has its origin in a movement which outlines it: form is only recorded movement' (Bergson 1946, 287).

Perhaps, an additional factor of realization of specified dialectics is the synthesis of two types of creative imagination, reflective and intuitive, that could be established as the distinctive feature of Debussy's thinking. At listening, impression of unpredictability and at the same time logicity of form building is reached. Debussy, considering himself to be able 'to conduct the Music of the Spheres' (quoted in Vallas 1933, 269), commensurated the number of bars and the proportion of sections, that is confirmed by the mathematical analysis of his works. But architectonics arises in the process of material-making — it is gradual clarification of 'vague vision of the unity' (Ribot 1900, 133). Consequently, the original proportional structure of the whole is whimsically corrected.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Everything has been told causes an opportunity: 1) to use the offered interdisciplinary approach in analysing the music of other authors, styles and eras; 2) to reinterpret the problem of the relation between phenomena of musical time, time of perception of artwork and psychological time per se; 3) to consider the musical form as a correlate of duration (*la durée*), especially in music, in which Debussy's discoveries are developed (Webern, Messiaen, Boulez, Stockhausen).

## KEYWORDS

Psychology of Music, Debussy, Bergson, Musical Time.

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