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Analysing Debussy Today

ABSTRACT

Background

Claude Debussy is generally acknowledged to have enriched our musical language with a wide variety of new devices and new ways of creating musical interest. Much has been written about his use of the pentatonic and diatonic modes from various western and non-western cultures, and the more ‘modern’ modes based on symmetrical divisions of the octave, the hexatonic and octatonic collections. Writers have also pointed at Debussy’s chordal extensions, his parallel harmonies, and his progressions by tritones and thirds. Debussy’s work is also often used to illustrate a perceived more general tendency: the falling apart of the tonal language of the previous centuries. Seemingly in line with this perception, an inclination is noticeable, with a few exceptions, to focus on isolated parameters or on isolated sections in his compositions, and to stay away from any broader harmonic, let alone tonal contextualisation or reading.

William Austin (1966), for instance, consciously starts with the flute solo piece *Syrinx* in order to focus on melody alone. He shows all kinds of interval relationships, but his examples are stripped of the piece’s original key signature. And in the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* he does not recognise the key of E major, clearly established from about two minutes into the piece, until the last page of the score.

Dutch composers Rudolf Escher and Ton de Leeuw, teaching and writing in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, take the parameters of rhythm, melody, harmony, and timbre strictly apart and even plainly deny the presence of any traditional major or minor keys, replacing them with concepts like ‘tone core’ or ‘extended tonality’ at most, but preferring to rely on ‘modality’ and ‘the constructive role of the interval.’

Paul Griffiths (1978) also notes modern music’s — and Debussy’s — ‘lack of dependence on the system of major and minor keys.’

Robert Morgan, in his still much-used *Twentieth-Century Music* (1991), meaningfully files Debussy under ‘Some Transitional Figures (together with Mahler, R. Strauss, and Skryabin a.o.)’ within his Part I (of III), suggestively entitled ‘Beyond Tonality’. And in his analysis of the opening page of ‘La cathédrale engloutie’, he identifies open fifths, pentatonicism, and a few modal scales on E, but — just as Ton de Leeuw — never mentions the clearly audible dominating key of C major — or the form of the piece, for that matter.

In their analysis of ‘Nuages’, Grout and Palisca (1996) rightly mention a Mussorgsky song as a source for Debussy’s opening two-part texture. However, oddly calling it a ‘chordal pattern’, they assure us that ‘Debussy did not use chords to shape a phrase by tension and release’. They admit that ‘Debussy usually maintained a tonal focus — a kind of key center —’, but state that ‘he defied the common tonal relationships between chords to empower them as independent structures with distinctive properties.’

Richard Taruskin (2005), in a chapter aptly entitled ‘Getting Rid of Glue’, talks about the opening of ‘Nuages’ too. Unlike others, however, he hears a weakly articulated cadence already between the end of bar 1 and the beginning of bar 2. But ‘this single unambiguous gesture is characteristically attenuated’, he adds, by ‘the fact that only two voices are in play’, an observation so much closer to human musical perception than the pretentious abstractions of so many other writers. Taruskin is also the only author I have read so far to point at the role of symmetrical interval structures around the tonal centre B in organising the overall structure of the piece, a technique guaranteeing surprise and fresh new perspectives. Taruskin also analyses (parts of) the Sarabande from *Pour le piano* and, more extensively, the prelude ‘Voiles’. Alas, only the latter analysis has made it into the College Edition of his *Oxford History of Western Music*. ‘Voiles’ is particularly liked by analysts, obviously because of its complete reducibility to just two scales — B-flat whole-tone and E-flat minor pentatonic. But both in this extreme limitation of material and in its lack of a key signature, the piece is an exception in Debussy’s work and therefore not representative — connecting, by the way, a piece in B-flat major with a piece in E-flat minor.

In his more purely technical textbook from 2014, Christoph Wünsch dedicates a substantial chapter to Debussy and points at various harmonic and scalar aspects that are new in the literature and certainly insightful. But just like most writers he focuses completely on pitch structure and illustrates his views with isolated segments only.

Wünsch’s limited focus is symptomatic for the problems in most of the literature: a) a lack of attention for melody and phrase structure, b) neglect — with the exception of Taruskin — of the context of the complete composition, c) a failure to notice — again with the exception of Taruskin — influences of numerous genres and styles of tonal music that play such an important role in Debussy’s art, d) a failure to notice topics, possibly outer-musical ones, sometimes implied by (often understated) references and (semi-)quotes.

Who noticed, for instance, the *Dies irae* quote that forms the beginning of ‘Nuages’, a third higher in its key/mode as Berlioz did in the ‘*Songe d’une nuit de Sabbat*’ of his *Symphonie fantastique* — after the bells —, however now in B minor, accompanied by a counterpoint curling itself half-chromatically — and in contrary motion — around the tonic B? Who noticed the juxtaposition of the B-minor tonic harmony and its common-tone augmented sixth chord (spelled as G⁷/B) as the piece’s second-most important harmony? It is an extremely suggestive tonal harmonic combination, much loved by nineteenth-century composers ever since Schubert’s ‘Am Meer’ — the song’s opening and closing ‘mantra’ —, especially by Mussorgsky, who used it to full ‘ominous’ effect in, for instance, the ‘Coronation Scene’ from his opera *Boris Godunov* — the German sixth chord alternated with its tritone relative V⁷/V —, and in the central section — after ca. 1 minute — of the song ‘The Noisy Feast Day is Over’ (*Sunless*, No. 3), the often-acknowledged inspiration for

the opening of Debussy's 'Nuages'.

Also rarely discussed is the fact that Debussy and Ravel used the traditional key signatures in almost all of their works. Of course, this does not at all mean that they limited themselves to traditional tonal procedures. But apparently they did not have major problems using traditional major and minor as the basic constellation of their musical language. Their groundbreaking innovations apparently could take place within a broadened and very flexible conception of tonality. Within this framework, they embraced and accommodated the colours of modes from all periods of history and from all kinds of 'exotic' cultures known to them. In addition, they made full use of, and developed further, the symmetrical orderings of the tonal material already explored by Schubert, Liszt, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and other predecessors. But they did so without losing the tonal anchors guaranteeing an overall sense of ebb and flow, of tension and release, and endless varieties of shades of consonance and dissonance.

For gaining an understanding of the way they did this, it does not suffice to study isolated segments or parameters. It is necessary to study complete compositions in all aspects we could think of, and with as much attention as possible to their historical contexts. Only this way, it seems, we can avoid the music-theoretical pitfall for which Debussy himself already warned René Lenormand, when asked to comment on the latter's 1912 *Study of Modern Harmony*: 'It is all quite correct and almost mercilessly logical. [...] Whether you mean it or not, your essay is a severe censure of modern harmony. There is something almost barbarous about your quotation of passages which, [...] detached from their context, can no longer justify their 'curiousness'.' (Cited from Austin 1966, 19.)

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The aim of this paper is to find a new balance in appraising Debussy's achievement, analysing his music in a more comprehensive way, from a broad range of both historical and music-analytical perspectives. As an example, the piece 'Nuages' is chosen, used in many books for illustrating the newness of Debussy's art. Other works by Debussy, Ravel, and early Stravinsky, may be referred to in passing.

Methods

The paper combines historical contextualisation and technical analysis. With respect to history, the paper attempts to trace influences on Debussy's musical thinking, both by looking for possible clues in the music itself and by researching musical influences throughout his life. Analytically, it tries to take all parameters into account and judge them in coherence and in the context of the whole composition. In that light, it also evaluates critically what textbooks have to say.

Implications

The essence of Debussy's achievement seems to be his masterly balance between the tradition he came from and new ways of challenging it and stretching up our perception of music's tonal and formal coherence. It is time to seriously reconsider one-sidedly 'modernist' framings of Debussy's music. Labels like 'post-tonal' and concepts like 'beyond tonality', with their silent implication of progress, may have had their best times. We can do with less glue without losing anchors.

Keywords

Debussy, Ravel, Tonality, Extended Tonality, Post-Tonal

Music, Analytical Theory, Musical perception.

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