



Analysis of Claude Debussy's Claire de Lune

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Abstract

Debussy's music is very far from classical music. Instead of the strict structure, profound thought and logic of classical music and the rich emotions of romantic music, there are strange fantasy elements, hazy feelings, and magical and unpredictable colors. His harmonies are delicate and complex, his orchestration is novel and colorful, and his melodies are slightly indifferent and evanescent, which are not found in classical and romantic music. Debussy's music was epoch-making, especially his unique "impressionistic" style, which had a direct impact on modern music in the twentieth century. As a result, Debussy was an influential composer and innovator in music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as the originator of modern "impressionist" music, which had a profound influence on music in Europe and America. This paper will be expanded from the following three aspects: the background of Claude Debussy, the context of Suite Bergamasque, and analysis of Claire de Lune.

Keywords

Debussy, modern music, impressionism, Suite Bergamasque, Claire de Lune

1. The Background of Debussy

Debussy received the care of Marie Mauté de Fleurville when he was age of 10 in 1871, who was a former student of Chopin (Lockspeiser Edward, 1972). And Debussy entered the Conservatoire de Paris when he was 11 in 1872, where he studied for 12 years with composition, music theory and history, harmony, piano, organ, almost all of his teacher were well-known musicians of the time. They were Ernest Guiraud, Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray, Émile Durand, Antoine-Francois Marmontel, César Franck, and Albert Lavignac (Lockspeiser Edward, 1972). Debussy played the piano well enough to perform professionally, and he played piano sonatas by Beethoven, Schumann, and Weber. Debussy revealed himself to be an innovative student while studying at the Conservatory. Throughout his own musical studies, he had a strong desire to break stereotypes and explore new territories. In his search for new sound combinations, he often played a series of augmented chords, ninth chords, eleventh chords and whole-tone scales on the piano in succession. The chords he played were not prepared and resolved according to the traditional rules (Lockspeiser Edward, 1972). For this reason, he was often scolded by his teachers.

Debussy went to Russia to be the family pianist of Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck in 1880, who was a close friend of Tchaikovsky (Lockspeiser Edward, 1972). This opportunity benefited him greatly. He thus became exposed to the works of many Russian music masters, especially Mussorgsky. Mussorgsky's characteristic and original harmonies had a profound influence on the young Debussy and laid the foundation for the "impressionistic" music he later pioneered.

In 1888, he attends a music festival in Bayreuth, Germany, where he was fascinated by Wagnerian opera, and he stayed in Bayreuth until 1889, when he returned to Paris. Wagner died as early as 1883, but his musical style influenced the young Debussy (Schmitz E. Robert (Elie Robert) & Virgil Thomson, 1966).

After 1890, Debussy became acquainted with the Symbolist poet – Stéphane Mallarmé, and he joined the Salon

music in Pairs headed by Mallarmé. Debussy met many young artists right here (Schmitz E. Robert (Elie Robert) & Virgil Thomson, 1966). He often attended their artistic discussions, and Debussy was deeply influenced by some of the new artistic perspectives and ideas of these artists. He began to appreciate their poems and to compose music for them. By this time, his music had begun to take on an "impressionistic" tone, which gradually developed into his final general artistic style (Schmitz E. Robert (Elie Robert) & Virgil Thomson, 1966).

These are some of Debussy's experiences on the influence of music, and I will discuss the context of Suite bergamasque in the following paragraph.

2. The Background of Suite Bergamasque

The piano suite composed in 1890 when Debussy was 28, and it consists of four movements: Prélude, Menuet, Clair de lune and Passepiéd, and the popularity of the third movement, and it is one of his most famous works for piano, and one of the most famous musical pieces of all time.

In 1905, he accepted an offer from a publisher who believed that these would be successful, and it is believed that he changed the names of some of these pieces. The names of "Passepiéd" and "Clair de lune" were derived from the title "Pavane" and "Promenade sentimentale" The third movement of the Suite Bergamasque was inspired by Verlaine's poem "Clair de lune." The content is below (Sayang Dibuang, 2011).

<p>Votre âme est un paysage choisi Que vont charmant masques et Bergamasques Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.</p>	<p>Your soul is a chosen landscape On which masks and Bergamasques cast enchantment as they go, Playing the lute, and dancing, and all but Sad beneath their fantasy-disguises.</p>
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Suite Bergamasque is an early work by Debussy, consisting of four pieces, completed in 1890 but not published until 1905, a period of fifteen years, which shows that this suite was written after a long period of deliberation (Schmitz E. Robert (Elie Robert) & Virgil Thomson, 1966). This suite is not only melodic, but also uses extremely colorful harmonies, showing that Debussy was gradually moving towards his own "impressionism", and this work is that Debussy's unique personality was gradually entering a period of maturity (Schmitz E. Robert (Elie Robert) & Virgil Thomson, 1966). I will explain these four of them separately.

The first piece is called Prélude, it is in F major, 4/4, and moderato tempo rubato. It begins with a "Prelude", it shows smooth, and flowing feelings. The second movement of Suite Bergamasque is Menuet, and it is in A minor, 3/4. Instead of imitating the cadences of a Baroque minuet, Claude Debussy focuses on the light and the delicate embellishments throughout the movement. And this movement is quick and more staccato than the first one.

Clair de Lune, the third movement of Suite Bergamasque, and it is in D flat major, and in 9/8 meter. And it has many expressive melodic lines. The beautiful melody of this piece suggesting the impression of moonlight. The light arpeggios depict the shimmering colors of the moonlight, as if in a clear and quiet night atmosphere. This movement provides an elegant contrast to the second one and the fourth one. Its use of chord progressions is already initially typical of Debussy's later works (Schmitz E. Robert (Elie Robert) & Virgil Thomson, 1966).

The final movement is Passepiéd, it is in F sharp minor, and is in 4/4 meter, marked *allegretto ma non troppo*. Passepiéd is a lively 17th and 18th century dance of French peasant origin resembling the minuet and beginning on the last beat of the measure. It is fast and light, and it features the use of multiple polyrhythms. The left hand plays an almost continuous accompaniment, and this movement use of 3 against 4 polyrhythms.

This is a general analysis of the four movements. In the following section, I will use Roman Numeral to analyze the third movement - Clair de lune, which is one of the most famous piano music of Debussy.

3. Clair de lune - Harmonic and Structural Analysis

Clair de lune has quiet and gentle sound, which gives the audience that one can see the moonlight rippling on the surface of the lake, while the flowing sound of the cadenza leads the listener on a gentle and leisurely tour. This delicate sound still fascinates countless people, not only is it a superb piece of impression music, but also a favorite soundtrack of pop culture media. For example, in the movie - Seven years in Tibet used this movement to set the mood for the night (Bhagal Gurminder Kaur, 2018).

This piece is D^b major, because the key signature, I will select some measures I want to talk about.

The first measure is I_6 , it includes $(D^b F A^b)$ because the root note is F, so it should be the first inversion of tonic. In the measure 2, there is natural A, so the key signature changed to B^b minor, and we know B^b is scale degree of sixth of D^b , and we see there has accidental, it should be secondary chords, and the chord is $A C E^b G^b$, natural A is scale degree of seventh in B^b minor, and we know $A C E^b G^b$ is diminished chord, so it should be vii^{07}/vi .

In the measure 6, the originally chord is $G^b B^b D^b F$, but B^b is in the bass, so it should be iv_3^4 , and then chord change to $F A^b C E^b$, because there is A^b , so the key signature change to the B^b minor, and we know B^b is the scale degree of sixth in D^b major, and the root note is F, F is fifth degree of B^b minor, so this chord is $V7/vi$.

In the measure 10, the chord is $G^b D^b B^b$, so it should be $G^b B^b D^b$, and G^b is the fourth degree of D^b , so it would IV.

In the measure 14, the chord is $B^b D^b F$, so we know the B^b is the scale degree of sixth in the D^b major, and we see it is the figure bass, and it is dissonance, it should be dissolved, we can see the tenor voice are E^b and D^b , the bass note is B^b , the bass note B^b to E^b has fourth degree, and bass note B^b to D^b is third degree, so this chord is VI^{4-3} see Figure 1 in red circle below.



Figure 1. Claire de Lune.

The chord in the first beat of the measure 19 is $A^b C E^b G^b$, A^b is the scale degree fifth of D^b , so it should be V_7 , and then progress to $A^b C E^b G^b B^b$, so it is V_9 . In the measure 20, the chord is $A^b C E^b G^b$, because there is natural A, so the key signature change to B^b minor, and B^b minor is scale degree sixth of D^b major. The rest of note $C E^b G^b$ are same as previous chord in the measure 19 ($A^b C E^b G^b B^b$), the different is A^b , so the chord is common tone, we should write as CT^{07}/vi . And the chord of fifth beat is $A^b C E^b$, because A^b is the scale degree fifth. so, it progresses to V.

The seventh beat of measure 36, the chord is $E^b G^b B^b$, we can consider it as $F^b A^b$

C^b , so in the D^b major, it should be III, and it is major triad chord, so it will capital III, and it flat the root note, so it should be bIII . And when we see the later measure, the key signature change to $F^b C^b G^b D^b$, so it would be E major or C^b minor, and when I see the score; I think it should be C^b minor. So, $E^b G^b B^b$ in the minor would be III. In the measure 43, the chord is $A^b C E^b G^b A^b$, because the root note, so it should be V in the D^b major, so it should be V^{11th} . See Figure 2 below.

The first beat of the measure 67, the chord is $F A^b C$, it is minor triad in the D^b major, so it regarded as iii, and then progressed to $F^b A^b C^b$ in the fourth beat, it is the major triad, and the root note is flat, so it marked as bIII .

In the following paragraph, I would like to talk about this piece from melody and texture. When I analysis this piece, almost all parts were in smooth stepwise motion. And in the measure 9 to measure 13 is repeating the first few bars (bars 1-3), and this is a new direction leading to the next different phrase (measure 15), and these chords have thick texture from measure 15 to 25. And the bass chords from measure 15 to 24 should play very solid sound.

And there has rising by step or half-step to create increasing tension from measure 19-24, and there have more repetition from measure 19-24 as well. And there has a cadence in measure 26, it should be imperfect authentic cadence (IAC), because the first upper note in measure 27 is A^b , not the D^b , so it should be imperfect.

There almost exact repeat in measure 27 and measure 28, and bass note in left hand moves by thirds for the first time, so it gives a different character. In the measure 31 to measure 32 is the exact repeat, and the bassline moves by step to lend to different character from measure 31 to measure 33. For example, there have colorful augmented chords in measure 33 and measure 34. And in measure 35 and measure 36 are the exact same as bars 27 and 28, but up an octave. See Figure 3 below.

Figure 2. Claire de Lune.

Figure 3. Claire de Lune.

Key signature change to $C^\#$ minor in the measure 37, the chord is $C^\# E G^\# B$, and when we see the root note, the first is B, the second is $C^\#$, and third is E, so these chords are inversions of $C^\#m_7$, and from measure 38 to measure 40, the bass note is descending stepwise motion in the left hand.

The melodic line circle in red of Measure 43 is same as measure 47 ($E^b G^b B^b$) and ($G^b A^b B^b D^b C$), and measure 43 and measure 44 is exact repeat. Measure 45 and measure 46 is exact repeat, measure 47 and measure 48 is exact repeat. See Figures 4 and 5 below.

In measure 51, the pedal F for 3 bars, I think this pedal note feels mysterious with no particular direction, because a dominant pedal would build tension and anticipation. ($F - A^b - C - E^b$ is the minor 7th chord) Measure 59 and measure 9 has same thing - $D^b A^b$, but in measure 59 is down to an octave, Debussy wants to create a dramatic effect. It shows the same melodic shape is repeated three times with the increasing register and moving the phrases forward from measure 63 to measure 65, These two groups from Measure 66-67 and measure 68-69 are almost the same but an octave up.

In the measure 70 in the bottom line - A^b to D^b in the next measure, it is 5-1 movement, it makes feel conclusive and satisfying. And the upper note $F A^b$ is back to the distinctive minor third from the very beginning. See Figure 6 below.

Figure 4. Claire de Lune.

Figure 5. Claire de Lune.

Figure 6. Claire de Lune.

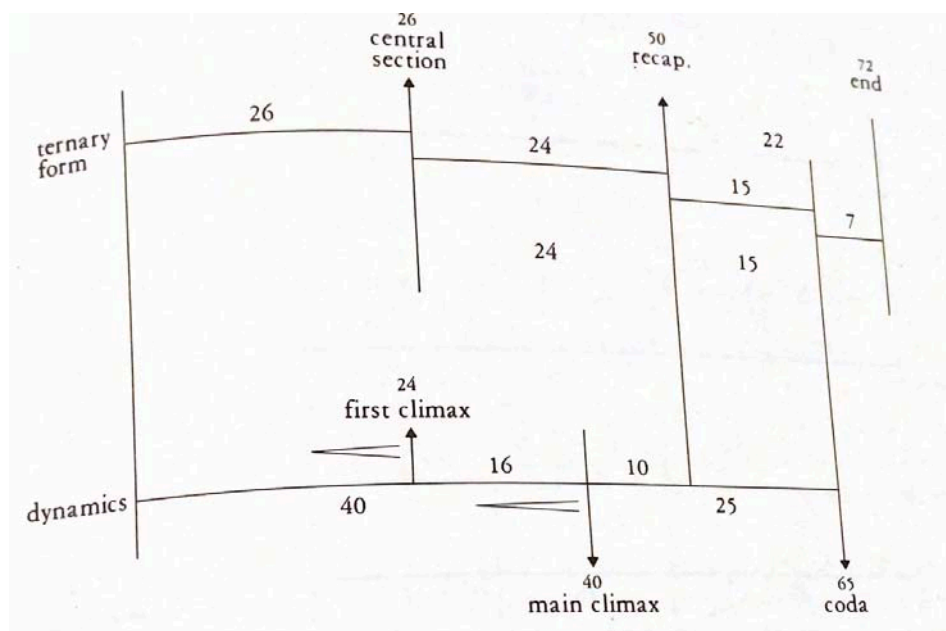


Figure 7. *Claire de Lune* (Howat Roy, 1983).

This piece is ternary form, measure 1 to measure 26 is A, measure 26 to measure 50 is B, and Measure 51 to measure 65 is A, and measure 65 to measure 72 is coda. Like the picture above, in the measure 24, the piece is climb to the first climax, and in measure 40 is main climax. See Figure 7 above.

4. Conclusion

The four short pieces of Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque* seem to be independent, but in fact, there is an inner connection between each piece. The composition of this suite as a whole is based on the tradition suites, but it makes a bold and innovative breakthrough in terms of composition content and technique. The novel rhythms, rich layers, and colorful harmonies in the work pose a greater challenge to the performer's musical sensibility. Only by fully understanding Debussy's "impressionistic" style and appreciating the pure, soft, mysterious and hazy mood can perform perfectly.

For more than a century, through the brilliant interpretations of countless performers, *Suite Bergamasque*, an exemplary work that perfectly combines the romantic and impressionistic styles, has been blossoming on the stage and last forever.

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