



Impressionistic Thinking—A Study on the Compositional Style and Performance Interpretation of Debussy’s Moonlight

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Abstract

Achille-Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was an outstanding French musician. At the height of the late Romanticism movement, he broke off from traditional composition techniques and sought to depict a hazy mood with colorful sound effects, as a result establishing a unique impressionistic style. “Moonlight” is the third piece in his “Bergamo Suite” and is one of Debussy’s most highly praised works. In particular, it is representative of Debussy’s musical thoughts and characteristics. Taking “Moonlight” as the research objective, this paper integrates Debussy’s life experience and the social-historical background of his time to summarize the characteristics of his work and to provide suggestions on performance interpretation.

Subject Areas

Art, Music

Keywords

Debussy, Impressionism, Bergamo Suite, The Moonlight

1. Introduction

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, monopoly organizations appeared in Europe, which greatly promoted economic development. Political and economic development was unbalanced in western capitalist countries, and social conflicts intensified. In such a social environment, the development of music culture in various countries also presented the phenomenon of different styles. The composers had distinct personalities, and the use of tragic factors in their works was increasing. In order to cater to and satisfy the com-

poser's desire to express and reflect the drama of the work, the orchestra was expanded to pursue strong sound effects; the harmony style and the structure of the work changed; the romantic color gradually disappeared and development into modern music in the 20th century. Debussy was a composer in the important stage of the transition from traditional music in the 19th century to modern music in the 20th century. His works had a special significance for The Times. Under the situation of the diversified development of European music, he not only created his own composition techniques but also contained ingenious aesthetic thoughts. Debussy's subjects included natural scenery, folklife, myths, etc., and covered the piano works, orchestral, operas, and chamber music, such as music genre, rather than logical tonality layout with harmony. He preferred hazy color artistic conception and cast a sound effect, giving a person moments of sensory experience. The Bergamo Suite, composed in 1890 and finally published in 1905 after many twists and turns, is the most representative of Debussy's early piano works. Among them, the third song "Moonlight" is the only title music, which is also the most well-known one. The research on this song can let more people pay attention to and know Debussy. The purpose of this paper is to summarize Debussy's early creation style by analyzing the music ontology of this work, and to put forward suggestions on how to carry out a reasonable performance interpretation of this work by combining the performer and his own practice perception. It is of certain academic value for further study of Debussy and theoretical significance for further study of piano teaching.

2. Creation of the Bergamo Suite by Debussy

2.1. Brief Introduction of Debussy's Life

Debussy was born in a family with five children in Paris, France in 1862. His father engaged in porcelain business and his mother was a housewife. They led an ordinary and busy life, so they did not pay attention to Debussy's early education. At the age of nine, he took piano lessons with Antoinette Maute de Fleurville, one of Chopin's schoolgirls. Soon after, he showed his musical talent and was admitted to the Piano department of the Paris Conservatory in October 1873. At the age of 14, Debussy had been able to make money by teaching piano and reduce the burden for his family, but his father squeezed him, which had a negative impact on his body and mind. During his study in the conservatory, he was a rebellious student with excellent academic performance and his own ideas. He once won the second-class scholarship and the first prize, but he also had disputes and displeasure with many teachers due to differences in music concepts. At the age of 18, he was invited by Tchaikovsky's patron, Nadezhda von Meck, to work as a piano tutor in Moscow and followed her on her travels to Switzerland, Italy and Austria. In 1880, Debussy transferred to the composition class and began his early music creation activities. Four years later, he won the highest honor in the field of music creation at this time—the Rome Prize for cantata "Prodigal Son" and went to Rome for further study. During the study

period, he got to know Liszt, Verdi and other musicians, and greatly praised Liszt's superb use of pedal. Three years later, Debussy returned to Paris and participated in the World Exposition, where he enjoyed works from the Russian "Powerful Group" and the Oriental Gamelan Orchestra. In 1890, he participated in the salon held by the poet Mallarme, and met many like-minded artists, and gradually formed his own musical aesthetics. Debussy's creative stage can be divided into three periods: early (1884-1890), middle (1890-1910), late (1910-1918) [1]. Influenced by the First World War and cancer, he was very weak in physical condition and mentally anxious in his later years, but he still insisted on writing in the fight against the disease, and finally died in the gunfire of the war.

2.2. The Creation Background of Bergamo Suite

The Bergamo Suite was written between 1890 and 1905, belongs to Debussy's early works. It consists of four pieces, namely "Prelude", "Minuet", "Moonlight" and "Pاسبieres" [2]. Debussy had previously undergone the professional composition teaching of music at the Paris Conservatory, and was influenced by the creative techniques of classicism, romanticism and national music school. In addition, by studying abroad and participating in social music activities, he got to know the local conditions and customs of many countries and developed a strong interest in the composition techniques of eastern music. During his study tour in Italy, Debussy visited Bergamo and was attracted by the beauty and people of the region. Inspired by the poetry of Verlaine, he wrote the Bergamo Suite. But it took fifteen years to publish this work, which experienced many twists and turns and difficulties.

In 1901, when the Bergamo Suite was about to be published, the publishing house was shut down and the publisher was put on the professional blacklist. After working for Eugene Filomont, Hartman wanted to publish the work he had previously recognized, but he died unexpectedly near publication [3]. When the Bergamo Suite was finally published, Debussy was in the heyday of creation and his style was more mature. He once wanted to add "Happy Island" and "Mask" to the suite, but the two works were finally published separately. This shows that for Debussy, he regarded this piece as his early work, which was not simply pieced together, but had special significance. His musical conception and creation style also appeared in the Bergamo Suite.

2.3. Debussy's Musical Style Characteristics

Debussy was the founder of impressionist music. The word "impressionism" first appeared in the field of painting, emphasizing that painters should draw the most intuitive visual feelings brought by objects themselves, such as the effect of light and shadow, rather than the image characteristics of objects themselves. Debussy was deeply influenced by impressionist paintings, from which he gained inspiration and formed his unique musical style characteristics, mainly reflected in rhythm, harmony, timbre and other aspects. As an auditory art, music has its

particularity and cannot represent objects from the visual level. Therefore, impressionist music focuses on depicting a certain atmosphere and artistic conception to bring the audience a pictorial sense, rather than describing specific life scenes.

From the perspective of musical vocabulary, Debussy made bold and innovative use of harmony to render atmosphere and organize music through rich harmony changes. Different from the harmony in traditional music, he used the whole tone scale and the combination of various tone levels to express colorful musical effects and enhance the performance of music. His treatment of melody is different from that of traditional melody, expressing the most intuitive feelings of the moment through discontinuous and asymmetric melodic development. In terms of rhythm and tempo, Debussy likes to use compound rhythm to reflect the continuous melody and break the rhythm through the change of rhythm. At the same time, he is good at using continuous rhythm to express the sense of painting.

3. The Creation Style of Moonlight

3.1. Classical Factors

Moonlight is the third piece of music in the Begamo Suite, which has the attribute of division in the suite. Originated in France in the 16th century, ancient suite refers to an instrumental genre composed of several dance music with comparative style, speed and rhythm. It has different forms and names in different historical periods and different countries. Debussy was influenced by the French harpsichord cycle of the 17th and 18th centuries. "Prelude" was the first piece, which has the nature of religious music. "Minuet" is the second song, which has the style of French court. Allegro "Pاسبieres" is the fourth, while the moonlight, as the third song, also meets the requirements of the aria singing movement in the ancient suite, which reflects the inheritance of classical music. However, Debussy had his own ideas on the selection and arrangement of the pieces, and did not follow the most commonly used dance music in the ancient suite writing method.

Moonlight is a single trilogy structure with a balanced structure of classicism. The exposition (Sections 1-26) is composed of two themes, namely, the first theme (Sections 1-14) and the second theme (Sections 15-26). The emotions of the first theme are relatively restrained, rendering a quiet and beautiful atmosphere, while the second theme uses a series of octave chords, with a large range of left and right tones, reflecting the fluctuation of inner emotions. It ends with four weakened slides, indicating the end of the exposition.

3.2. Romantic Color

The popularity of romantic music is related to other things, such as philosophy, drama, literature and so on. "Moonlight" was inspired by the study tour in Bergamo and the appreciation of Verlaine's poetry. The title of the song contains

autobiographical and literary characteristics, reflecting the romantic color. This work is also a nocturne. It is a representative musical genre of romanticism. The suite follows the logical thinking of “fast slow fast”, which makes the whole song reached a delicate harmonious state.

The musical term “Andante tres expressif” at the beginning of the piece, meaning “walking” or “very expressive”, does not give a clear indication of the speed of the exposition. **Figure 1** is Section 2 and Section 3 of the music. In Section 3, there are three eighth notes and two disjunctions and the use of lines, which makes the melody free and dynamic. The left hand only uses chords, without strict accompaniment texture, reflecting the traditional romantic composition techniques.

3.3. Pioneers of Impressionism

As the founder of impressionist music, Debussy used colorful harmony and a variety of modes and other innovative composition techniques at that time in Moonlight to depict the quiet and bright image of the moon and the moving picture of dark night.

In traditional composition, harmony was functional, mostly to retain a voice part, or the voice part is carried out in the opposite direction. In Moonlight, parallel intervals and chords are widely used to make harmony colorful. **Figure 2** is the 24th to 26th bar of the piece, which uses parallel cubic column texture and parallel triad slide to construct thick, solid, flexible and light sound effect respectively. The beat of the music is 9/8. In the fifth bar, it can be seen that the eighth note is one beat, and there are nine beats in total. There are three quavers in a group, and there are three groups in total, which reflects the writing method of compound meter. The continuous off-key chords (F flat, A flat, C flat) beginning in the 27th bar are equal chords with the main chords (E, G sharp, b) in the 37th



Figure 1. Section 2 and Section 3 of the music.



Figure 2. The 24th to 26th bar of the piece.

of colors. The left hand uses the dynamic decomposition chord and the beautiful bar, indicating the transition from D flat major to E major, enhancing the diversity main melody of the right hand, which seems to express people's thoughts and strong emotions at night. Debussy's division of phrases is very arbitrary, not confined to the classical square structure writing method, giving people the impression of an instant, with a sense of freehand. The difference between the recapitulation part and the exposition part is that the color exposition part uses column chords alternately, while the left hand part of the recapitulation part has broken chords, making the colors more subtle and obscure. A large number of polyrhythms are used in the exposition, and homophonic lines are used at the end of each section, resulting in continuous melodies in auditory sense.

4. Analysis of the Performance of Moonlight

4.1. Touch the Key

In his early years, Debussy constantly explored the sound effect of the impressionist style, rendering the artistic mood through hazy and colorful timbre, which made the problem of the player's touch key become a big challenge. The French piano school pursues clean and clear key touching and elegant and dreamy syntax, and mainly applies the key touching method of legato and stress in Moonlight.

The first theme of the exposition uses a lot of lines, implying that the player needs to connect the chords while playing them clearly. When the key is down, the shape of the fingers can be fixed first, and the strength of the wrist can be vertically dropped to the keyboard. In bars 2-4, when the third chord is repeated in the right hand, the raised finger can be used to ensure that the chord progresses clearly. At the same time, we should also pay attention to the continuous sense of melody. Fingers can be close to the keyboard and press the keys slowly, with the movement of the wrist to express the rhythm of the line, and the movement should be as gentle as possible. For octaves or chords with large spans, the palm can maintain a certain tension and use the power of the arm to transfer to the wrist to push the chord deeper into the keyboard.

The second theme of the exposition has a large number of block-shaped parallel chords marked with an accent, which should have a contrasting sound effect with the bass octave chord of the left hand. Because of the huge span of the musical range, the chord progression contains the melody, which is difficult to play. The left hand should keep the octave hand shape and gently send it in with the power of wrist and arm close to the keyboard. Then the left hand should be positioned quickly and firmly fall into the key with the right hand by using wrist and fingers. The hand shape should not be changed in the interval between chords and chords, and the distance from the key should not be too high, so as to create a thick and majestic acoustic effect. In the glissando at the end of the exposition, the independence of the fingers should be used reasonably, and the keys should be pressed against the belly to obtain the continuity of the sound.

4.2. Pedal

Debussy creatively used different pedals to depict sound effects in a hierarchical way. Based on the fact that Chopin's female disciple was his first teacher, Chopin's concept of pedal influenced Debussy to a great extent. At the same time, Liszt's superb pedal skills also deeply attracted him during his study tour, which was later called "breathing pedal". Such experience makes him require the player to use his hearing and rich imagination to give full play to his innovative music language when using the pedal carefully.

The strength mark "PP" at the beginning of the piece suggests that the overall volume is light, and the musical term "con sordina" means "to soften the pedal". In the first theme of the presentation, the front pedal should be pressed before the first chord enters, so that the damper is fully opened, and the tone becomes fuller and the atmosphere is created in advance. After that, the continuous use of the muted pedal seems to cover the sound with a layer of gauze, so that people cannot see the whole picture, dreamily outline the melody, setting off the quiet and hazy atmosphere under the moonlight. Debussy also used a large number of lines in this theme to make the melody continuous, which needs to use the pedal to achieve. The player needs to step on the pedals after the chord falls to ensure the harmony is connected and the melody is singing. Because the fingers are played down while the foot is raised up to release the pedal, it takes practice to make the hands and feet work together.

When playing the block chord in the second theme of the exposition section, the pedal is used to fade away. The harmonies of parallel chords change frequently, and if the pedal changes with each change, it will weaken the beauty of the horizontal development of timbre and make the emotion contained in the phrase dull. So pedal deep into the first parallel chord at the beginning of each phrase, and then slowly loosen the pedal as the melody progresses, creating a sense of foggy mood.

4.3. Technical Difficulties

In the first theme of the exposition part, homophonic finger-switching is needed to ensure the continuity of the breath of the phrase. **Figure 3** is the 5th to 7th bar of the music. The second G flat in the 6th bar applies the second finger when the key is dropped. It should be switched to three fingers before connecting to the second major chord (E flat and F), so that the chord is played with one finger and two fingers.

In Bergamo Suite, Debussy used multi-voice writing. Taking the first theme of the development part as an example (**Figure 4**), the low part is the accompaniment texture of decomposing chord, the middle part is hidden in the right hand chord, and the high part is the melody direction. Since left and right hands are interwoven in the last beat of each bar, each part can be singled out for practice at the beginning of learning to feel the direction of the part first. The volume of the low part is relatively light, and the melody of the high part needs to be



Figure 3. The 5th to 7th bar of the music.



Figure 4. The first theme of the development part.



Figure 5. Both left and right hands play the same decomposed chord.

emphasized, while the middle part cannot be weakened. When hearing can distinguish three different parts, you can press the key of F flat and D flat with your right hand at the same time in the first bar. After that, you can also use your right hand in a flat, which should belong to the broken chord, but you should plan the volume and sound effect in advance in your mind. When the key falls at the same time, in order to reflect two different timbre, the palm can tilt a bit slightly, five points fall a bit deeper key. The last a flat in the second bar is both a broken chord and a high-pitched melody, so it can be played with the right hand along with the F flat.

There are also many paragraphs in which both left and right hands play the same decomposed chord. For example (**Figure 5**), the first three notes of each decomposed chord can be played with the left hand, while the last three notes can be played with the right hand, so as to reduce wrist activity. When the fingers are close to the keys, the keys under the abdomen are used to make the transition between the left and right hands more coherent.

5. Conclusion

The Impressionist music represented by Debussy is like a sign on the broad road of western music history. Through the analysis of the creative style of moonlight, it can be seen that the development of Impressionist music is not separated from

classical and romantic music, but innovates unique musical thinking on the basis of inheritance and development. The specific performance is the change from harmony function to color, the use of complex beat and complex rhythm, the rich change of mode, etc., pays attention to the intuitive instantaneous impression description, and focuses on rendering the quiet atmosphere in the change of light and color. Although there are many studies on this music, the innovation of this paper is to summarize Debussy's most important creative feature—Impressionist pioneer, and take this as a perspective and basis to make a reasonable analysis of the performance interpretation of the music, such as using key touch skills to depict colorful timbre, making harmony hazy through pedals, etc. To sum up, Debussy showed his unique music to the world, created a new school of music with innovative musical language, and laid a certain foundation for the vigorous development of music in the 20th century.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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