

The Piano Art in Claude Debussy's Sonorities *Beau Soir – Lied*

Lăcrămioara NAIE¹

“This music is not learnt but it is felt”
Claude Debussy

Abstract: *Claude Debussy (22.08.1862 – 25.03.1918), “a French musician”, who had become “Claude de France” for the French, is the creator of the Impressionism in music. He is undoubtedly a Rimbaud, a Verlaine and a Cézanne of music. The art of this musical genre is the art of an unrivalled unmistakable singular French spirit that happily and ideally accomplished the triumvirate in the art by the fusion of music with poetry and painting.*

The pianistic art of Debussy is to the same extent the art of the inner inspiration and intuition. As the composer he stated: “this music is not learnt but it is felt” in a symphony of nuances and colours and in an improvisation that observes the rules of “the order and discipline” of the musical grammar in a totally different way than his classical predecessors.

Key-words: *The fusion of music with poetry and painting, symphony of nuances and colours*

1. Claude Debussy, the creator of the musical impressionism

France with “the Latin light and the North’s fog” knows a real “renouveau” (novelty) in philosophy, poetry, music and painting at the end of the 19th century. Claude Debussy, “the French musician” who had become “Claude de France” for the French, is the creator of the Impressionism in music. There is no doubt that he is a Rimbaud, Verlaine and Cezanne of music.

The art of Debussy is an unmistakable unrivalled singular French spirit which happily and ideally accomplished the triumviri in art by the fusion of music with poetry and painting. And that is because his musical jewels with transparent and mysterious texture have the preciousness of “paintings for the ears and for the eyes” (Bernstein 1982, 178).

¹ *George Enescu*, University of Arts, Iaşi, Romania, lacramioara.naie@yahoo.com

2. Debussy and the immaterial sonority

Debussy lends to his works plastic names such as: *Sketches, Images, Engravings* and *Masks*, just like Whistler's paintings suggestively called "harmonies" (in grey, black or white), "symphonies", "variations" and "nocturnes".

Moreover, the tones and the colour touches of Claude Monet proved to be as suitable for the "glamour" of Debussy and this fact contributed to his being labelled as "a Claude Monet of music". "We paint just as the bird sings. We do not make paintings with doctrines", said Claude Monet. All the painters manifest a predilection for vaporous landscapes, for the diversity of nuances and intensities of lights and shadows, for an iridescent atmosphere. In the Impressionism nature speaks to everybody, says Cézanne. [And that is because the Impressionism] is the optical mixture of colours, the division of tones on the canvas and their reconstruction on the retina" (Iliut 1997, 18-19).

Obvious affinities and juxtapositions are created between the pictorial technique and the sonorous art. "The sonorous paradise of colours" reaches the logic and the sonorous transcendental – impressionist emotion. "Monet, Sisley and Pissaro were especially landscape painters, Renoir was a painter of figures, having the cult of light, of serene candid expression whereas Degas was searching for the movement of the human being or of a horse, and Cezanne was the master of nuances and of subtle landscapes" (Iliut 1997, 20).

Claude Debussy created his own "Impressionist school of pictorial – sonorous colours" by the novelty, the beauty and the unique elegance in movement of the new harmonies and iridescences of nuances, and without thinking of "the apostolate with international consequences" (Ciomac 1974, 165).

He showed a splendid experience of life and intellectual feelings in the spirit of that "French renouveau / novelty" in literature, philosophy in general and in painting, music especially. In Stephane Mallarme's literary club, the master of the Impressionist music met the crème of the French intellectual elite: Stuart Merrill, Pierre Louys, Paul Verlaine, François Vielé-Griffin, Henri de Régnier and others.

3. The pianistic poetics of the *Beau Soir* lied

We chose for our dissertation one of the most beautiful vocal – instrumental cameral pages of Debussy. It is the lied called "*Beau soir*" (*Nice Evening*) on lyrics by Paul Bourget (1852 – 1935), a very well-known lied, loved and appreciated by the spectators.

This musical poem belongs to the collection of cameral works that were signed by important persons such as: Théodore de Banville (*She Is Still Sleeping, Starry Night*), Alfred de Musset (*Moon's Ballad, Rondo, Let Us Love Each Other*), Paul Bourget (*Nice Evening, Sentimental Landscape, Here Is the Spring, Music, Regrets, Bells, Romance*), Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle (*The Girl with Fair*

Hair, Egloga), Charles Baudelaire (*Balcony, An Evening Harmony, Recollection, Lovers' Death*), Stéphane Mallarmé (*Apparition, Sigh, Fan, Groundless Argument*), Paul Verlaine (*In an Undertone, Mandolin, Weathercock, Moonlight Night, The Shadow of the Trees, Green, Wooden Horses, Sentimental Colloquia, The Faun*), Charles d'Orléans (*Renewal*), François Villon (*Three Ballads*), François Tristan l'Hermite (*The Walking Place of Three Lovers*). We should also mention lied's on own lyrics (*Four Melodies*).

For the master of the musical Impressionism, nature is an inexhaustible source of inspiration becoming “the only one capable of capturing all the poetry of the night and of the day, of the Earth and of the sky, in order to reconstruct their atmosphere and to rhythm the immense palpitations” (Alexandrescu 1967, 183).

The lied *Beau Soir* on lyrics by Paul Bourget helps us penetrate the climate of the meditative – philosophical confessions related to the passage and irreversibility of time (“*Nous nous en allons / Comme s'en va cette onde / Elle à la mer, nous au tombeau*”).

This lied that seems to be the echo of *Nocturnal* and *Barcaroles* written by Faure's conquers us completely ever since the first sounds by its discrete confessional tone of an extraordinary pictorial plasticity. Nature omnipresent in his creation “embraced” him and talked to him in every way. “The poet of the waters” understood it and talked to it by means of music. The whole meditative tone is being pronounced around the tonality of major *Mi*.

His art is unique and very special. He ordered it by himself by searching, by poking, by meditating, by listening and by looking for answers to fundamental questions about the secret of life and of the surrounding reality.

*“Lorsque au soleil couchant les rivières sont roses,
et qu'un tiède frisson court sur les champs de blé,
un conseil d'être heureux semble sortir des choses
et monter vers le cœur trouble,
un conseil de goûter le charme d'être au monde
pendant qu'on est jeune et que le soir est beau,
car nous nous en allons, comme s'en va cette onde,
elle à la mer, nous au tombeau.”*

*“When the rivers are pink at sunset
And a warm shiver runs in the fields of wheat
An advice of being happy seems to come out of things
And go up to the troubled heart,
An advice of tasting the charm of being in the world
Especially that we are young and the evening is beautiful,
As we are going away, just like this wave,
It is going towards the sea
Whereas we are going towards the tomb.”*

The words succeed each other in a melodic drawing of triolets, as if they were known for ever. And the metrics $\frac{3}{4}$ is fully compliant with the suppleness of the poetic discourse. The vocal sonorous canvases in a relatively cosy ambitus (undecimal) describe their own ... walking, independent from the pianistic “voice”.

The naturalness and the distinction of the emotional feelings betray the composer’s intuition and geniality while symphonising the human feelings. The piano obliges to its laws the interior poem of the entire poetic – musical thought.

The pianistic accompaniment is the result of endless series of identical or repetitive – varied arpeggios (in a spaced writing of fourths, fifths or sixths that exceed the distance of the octave most of the times) which seem to imitate the murmur of the water in the solar reflexes (for example the measures: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 35, 37 or the measures 10, 11, 16, 17, 20, 24, 26).

The secret in the interpretation of this cameral page consists in the very technique of an impeccable *lego*, by a total adherence to the keyboards. Debussy said: “You must do so that everyone forgets that the piano has small hammers, and the hands [fingers] should enter it, not stay in the air or on the piano”. According to the opinion of the musical critic Harold C. Schonberg, “Debussy made the pianists think more than any other composer since Chopin”, and that because the pianistic art of Debussy is the art of inspiration and of interior intuition, as the composer himself said: “**this music is not learned, but it is felt**” in a symphony of nuances and colours and in an improvisation that observes the rules of “the order and discipline” of the musical grammar in a totally different way than his classical predecessors.

“The music of Debussy possesses that simplicity which is so hard to reach. His savant art finds instinctually the nature itself from which it seems to appear ... the nature which sometimes is discretely sensual and tender” (Long 1968, 101). This very special music of a distinct elegance and grace should be re-doubled by the interpreter’s personal intuition in a *rubato* (of nuance, colour, timbre, expressive meaning that has been searched for a long time, studied rigorously “controlled” during the many hours of individual study).

The hands of the piano interpreters are tuned to the sensibility diapason that belongs to the master of the Impressionist music. In a total adherence to the piano keys, these hands will feel and support to the smallest detail the “ladder” of the expressive nuances (*legato*, *pp*, *animato poco a poco e cresc.*, *dim.molto*, *piu p*, *morendo*), and thus they leave the impression of a spontaneous improvisation, in a permitted “complicity” with the pedal that shall ennoble and confer a poetic aura to the piano. The poem of Debussy’s sound invokes a style of interiorised chant, timbre and intelligent in the distribution of the pictorial – poetic tones.

The right pedal is a factor of sonorous poem for the Romantics whereas it represents much more for the Impressionists; it embodies the poetical emotion in pictorial tones. Its inventiveness is unmeasured as the harmonies flow in a magical game of colour effects whose vibration seems to whisper chromatic inflexions under the high richness of a unique palette. Its masterly use in a perfect tandem with the

undertone will lead to wonderful resonant effects, to melodic coverings of a great refinement, to the poeticizing of nuances by interweaving and agglomerating the sonorous harmonic masses. The two pedals became so indispensable and essential for the expression of Impressionist tones and “touches” that Dieter Hildebrandt said that “The piano is not actually played with the fingers, with the arms either, nor with the upper part of the body, and not even with the ears, but with the feet”.

This music is completely refined and it has a subtle originality; it is vaporous, covering, transparent, mysterious and profoundly meditative. Therefore it is equally incumbent to both the science of touch and to the art of pedalling. The music of this French genius surrounds us, overwhelms us and slips down into the valley of our sensations. A rainbow appears out of its quietness... It is the joy of Debussy's combinations.

We are mentioning the words of the master Cella Delavrancea (1887-1991), *the great lady* of the beautiful in the multiple artistic hypostases: “The colouring created by the pedal in its different uses can resemble the range of green tones in a drop. The paintings are suitable for the science of plans and for rich nuances, and they can communicate us the sensational of the air, of the breathing, therefore of the vibration.

The image displays a musical score for the song "Beau Soir" by Claude Debussy. It consists of two systems of music. Each system has a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The first system includes the lyrics: "В ти - хий ве - чер - ний час, ко - гда ре - ки пы - ла - ют / Lorsque au so - leil cou - chant les ri - viè - res sont ro - ses,". The second system includes the lyrics: "и на - пол - нен теп - лом про - стор по - лей и нив, / et qu'un tiè - de fris - son court sur les champs de blé,". The piano part features a prominent, flowing arpeggiated accompaniment. Dynamic markings include *p* (piano) at the beginning, *pp* (pianissimo) in the piano part of the first system, and *pp* and *più pp* in the second system.

The same happens to the pedal, tuned to the sonorous vocabulary, its fluid passes on and it emphasizes the musical murmur or on the contrary it lets the sonorous moisture go down on the phrase which loses its contour in the fog and becomes the atmosphere

of an idea. The pedal creates perspectives in the sonorous plans, which means that it introduces the space between intervals and it connects them. It melts and it blends the arpeggios. When the pedal is prolonged, it makes us discern the dimension of the infinity within an instant". (Delavrancea 1988, 197- 198).

The master of the musical Impressionism knows how to adapt its instrumental incantation to the prosody of the French language inferring its interior musicality. (In spite of the *r* pronounced guttural, rolled and of the nasalized diphthongs, the French language seems to have a lot of affinities with the art of the lyric chant, by supporting its modulations and linguistic chromatics (the prolongation of vowels and emphasizing of dramaturgical details).

The succession of the harmonic changes on parallel structures of plagal type.

A musical example – the two systems ... have the gift of happily serving “the echo sonorities” and the transparency of the solar vibrations into the wave of the running water.

4. Final revelations...

On the elastic background of the piano accompaniment, the voice with a vibration of divine soul, by a calmness of the sonorous flow “drops” the last moments of earthly contemplation. Thus, the secret of death awakens unwonted acoustic images ... (“*Nous nous en allons / Comme s’en va cette onde / Elle a la mer, nous au tombeau*”).

References

- Alexandrescu, Romeo. 1967. *Claude Debussy – The Life and the Work*. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House.
- Bernstein, Leonard. 1982. *How to Understand Music*. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House.
- Ciomac, Emanoil. 1974. *The Poets of the Harmony*. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House.
- Delavrancea, Cella. 1988. *From a Life’s Century*. Bucharest: Eminescu Publishing House.
- Iliuț, Vasile. 1997. *From Wagner up to the Contemporaries*, 3rd volume. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House.
- Long, Marguerite. 1968. *At the Piano with Claude Debussy*. Bucharest: Musical Publishing House.
- Naie, Lăcrămioara. 2006. *The Art of Piano Accompaniment Reflected in the Romanian Lied of the 20th Century*. Iasi: Artes Publishing House.