

AN ANALYSIS OF
NOCTURNES FOR ORCHESTRA
BY CLAUDE DEBUSSY

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Nocturnes for orchestra, completed in 1899, is a work that shows many aspects of Claude Debussy's writing. Debussy was 37 years old when he completed the Nocturnes and had formed many personal ideas about music and literature. He chose to show correlations between music and literature by composing pieces with literary figures in mind. Debussy was also concerned with the aesthetic value of his music. His techniques and ideas are elegantly shown in the Nocturnes for orchestra.

CHAPTER ONE

A BACKGROUND OF THE NOCTURNES FOR ORCHESTRA

Claude Debussy (1862-1918), composer of Nocturnes, was a musician of expressive ideas. His expressive system pays tribute to neither the elder traditions of diatonic procedure, nor to the ungoverned chromaticism which has dominated the music of the last half-century.¹ Debussy was one of the greatest of French composers, and one of the most important influences on the course of music in the twentieth century. One aspect of his style -- an aspect which is sometimes over-emphasized -- is summed up in the term "impressionism."² In relation to music, impressionism is defined according to Webster's Dictionary: "A style of composition designed to create descriptive impressions by evoking moods through rich and varied harmonies and timbres." Debussy always made his aims of music known: "Music should humbly seek to please; within these limits great beauty may perhaps be found. Extreme complication is contrary to art. Beauty must appeal to the senses, must provide us with immediate enjoyment, must impress us or insinuate itself into us without

¹Lawrence Gilman, Music of Tomorrow (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), p. 25.

²Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, rev. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1960), p. 652.

any effort on our part. . . ."³ This is what Debussy appeared to do with Nocturnes for orchestra, which was completed in final form in 1899. The Nocturnes originally began as Trois Scènes au Crépuscule, inspired by poems of Henri de Régnier in 1892.⁴

This triptych went through a series of transformations before reaching the form we know today as the Nocturnes for orchestra. Although the score of Trois Scènes au Crépuscule has disappeared, a later score appeared in the form of a violin concerto to be played by Eugene Ysaÿe, a Belgian violinist.⁵ This form of the Nocturnes was to be an experiment with different combinations that can be made from one color, as Debussy wrote in a letter to Ysaÿe, like a study in grey in painting.⁶ The orchestra for the first movement, "Nuages," was to consist only of strings; for the second movement, "Fêtes," included flutes, four horns, three trumpets and two harps; for the third movement, "Sirènes," a combination of the two previous groups.⁷ The orchestration of this 1895 version was further revised to make the final 1899 version, however, the instrumentation is similar. The first movement does contain strings, but also other instruments, primarily woodwinds, that are capable of blending well with the string choir. The second movement uses a standard orchestra for this time of the century,

³Leon Vallas, The Theories of Claude Debussy (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 13.

⁴Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 53-54.

⁵Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, p. 128.

⁶Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, p. 128.

⁷Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, p. 128.

shown in Table 1. The third movement uses a standard orchestra also, with the addition of women voices. For unknown reasons Debussy eventually abandoned the violin concerto idea and scored Nocturnes for the orchestra described above.

The form of a nocturne is defined as a piece suggesting night, usually quiet and meditative in character, but not invariably so.⁸ As an elaboration of narrative, or as the consequence of observing set principles of structure, Debussy did not follow the usual character of this definition, but rather defended the right of music to exist in its own right.⁹ For him the experience of music, the impression it made on the senses, was all that mattered.¹⁰ The score has no performance directions included, but Debussy supplied the following "programme":¹¹

The title "Nocturnes" is intended to have here a more general and above all, a more decorative meaning. We, then, are not concerned with the form of the Nocturne, but with everything that this word includes in the way of impressions and special lights.

Clouds: The unchangeable appearance of the sky, with the slow and melancholy march of clouds ending in a gray agony tinted with white.

Festivals: Movement, rhythm dancing in the atmosphere, with bursts of brusque light. Here, also, the episode is of a procession [a wholly impalpable and visionary pageant] passing through the festival and blended with it; but the main idea and substance obstinately remain, -- always the festival and its blended music, -- luminous dust participating in tonal rhythm.

⁸ Stanley Sadie, "Nocturne," The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, XIII, (New York: MacMillan Publishers Limited, 1980), p. 258.

⁹ Percy Marshall Young, Debussy (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1968), p. 39.

¹⁰ Percy Marshall Young, Debussy, p. 39.

¹¹ Lawrence Gilman, Stories of Symphonic Music (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1907), p. 76.

TABLE 1

NOCTURNES

Instrumentation
(combined for all three)

3 Flutes
2 Oboes
English horn
2 Clarinets in B^b
Clainet in A
3 Bassoons
4 Horns in F
3 Trumpets in F
3 Trombones
Tuba
2 Harps
Timpani
Cymbals
Military drum
8 Sopranos
8 Mezzo-sopranos
Violins
Violas
Violoncellos
Double basses

Sirens: The sea and its innumerable rhythms. Then amid the billows silvered by the moon the mysterious song of the sirens is heard; it laughs and passes.¹²

To approach these "Nocturnes," it must be understood that they are dream-pictures, fantasies, rather than mere picturesque transcripts of reality.¹³

As a result of the names given to the individual movements, pictures and visions are formed in the mind as the music progresses, when listening to the Nocturnes. Debussy was evidently excited when he began the concerto version because he talked so much about it, he went against his own rule and revealed the origin of his inspiration. Nuages had its starting point when Debussy was crossing a bridge near the Pont de la Concorde in Paris, and his attention was caught by the clouds of a gathering storm and the sound of a horn from a passing boat. Fêtes had been inspired by a memory of old-time public festivities in the Bois de Boulogne attended by joyous crowds, the former drum and bugle band of the Garde Nationale, beating the tattoo (military signals for recalling soldiers to their quarters at night) as it approached from afar and passed out of sight.¹⁴ Sirènes is a study in 'sea texture,' including a vocalising female chorus depicting the Greek mythological figures.¹⁵ This attempt to capture the passionate visions and dreams of the night

¹²Lawrence Gilman, Stories of Symphonic Music, p. 76.

¹³Lawrence Gilman, Stories of Symphonic music, p. 76.

¹⁴Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy, rev. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1963), pp. 189-190.

¹⁵Stanley Sadie, "Claude Debussy," The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, V, p. 298.

replaced the gushing lyricism that had characterized many of the nocturnes of John Field and Frederic Chopin.¹⁶

During the time that Debussy began the Nocturnes, he had several other works in progress. Some of these works were completed, yet others never materialized. A few of those that were never finished include Les Noces de Sathan (sonata for violin and piano), 1892; La Danseuse (ballet), 1894; Poème (concerto for violin and orchestra), 1894; and Aphrodite (ballet), 1896-1897.¹⁷ The works that were finished, which we can enjoy today, are Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune, 1892-1893; Pelléas et Melisande (opera), 1893-1902; Quatuor à Cordes, Op. 10 (string quartet), 1893; Proses Lyriques (song on a text by Debussy), 1892-1893; Chansons de Bilitis (song on a text by Pierre Louÿs), 1897-1898; and Pour le Piano, 1894-1901.¹⁸ The number of times Nocturnes had appeared in various forms until the final version, indicates Debussy was continually revising pieces, adding to them, or starting over completely with new ideas. Debussy was a perfectionist, never satisfied with what he produced the first time. Often the first draft was a list of ideas, but occasionally was a completed piece. Some composers feel that a piece should not be revised because it is what the composer felt at that particular time, however, Debussy was constantly seeking the perfect piece.

Although the three movements -- Nuages, Fêtes, Sirènes -- are grouped together as one work, they were not composed together and do not

¹⁶ Stanley Sadie, "Nocturne," The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, XIII, p. 258.

¹⁷ Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy, p. 278.

¹⁸ Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy, pp. 261-271.

necessarily have to be performed together. Nuages and Fêtes were composed before Sirènes and performed on December 9, 1900 at a Concert Lamoureux in Paris.¹⁹ The performance, to Debussy's surprise, was a tremendous success. Reviewers, once antagonistic to his work, changed their opinions and declared the work to be "pure music, conceived beyond the limits of reality, in the world of dreams, amidst the ever-moving architecture that God builds with the mists, the marvelous creations of the impalpable realms. . . ."²⁰

The following season, Nuages and Fêtes were given a repeat performance with the addition of the final movement, Sirènes.²¹ As though the reviewers were quoting Debussy, they stated that "M. Debussy does not demand of Music all that she can give, but rather, that which she alone is capable of suggesting. He looks upon music as the art of the inexpressible, whose role begins where inadequate words fail. . . ."²² Debussy chose ideas or inspirations that could be expressed only through emotion. The Nocturnes are very expressive pieces which say more than any words could ever convey, as is shown through a style of composing known only as Debussy's style.

¹⁹Victor I. Seroff, Debussy: Musician of France (New York: Van Rees Press, 1956), p. 180.

²⁰Victor I. Seroff, Debussy: Musician of France, p. 180.

²¹Percy Marshall Young, Debussy, p. 48.

²²Victor I. Seroff, Debussy: Musician of France, p. 180.

CHAPTER TWO

STYLE CHARACTERISTICS AS APPLIED TO THE NOCTURNES

Debussy's methods, to some extent, were based on: subtle changes of forms in French language and poetry; on the character and length of sound (as opposed to strong metrical and rhythmic accent); and on the flowing and nonsymmetrical organization of French meter, rhythm, accent, and phrase.²³ Debussy used this kind of rhythmical and phrase organization in every aspect of his music; therefore melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, and timbral ideas, blended and unified in essentially new ways, are organized around qualities of sound patterns and relationships rather than around the significance of these in an overall rhythmic, phrase, and contrapuntal scheme.²⁴ These five elements, melody, harmony, rhythm, texture, and timbre, became different features of a single basic conception of sounds and sound patterns that are related to one another by arbitrary and sensual aural gauges rather than by the old necessities of notion and resolution governed by linear, tonal logic.²⁵

²³Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, 2nd ed., (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 20.

²⁴Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, pp. 20-21.

²⁵Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, p. 21.

By an overview of Debussy's music, it is possible to see that he sought to abolish the major-minor system of the classical period. One element that he utilized to achieve this is color, not only through the use of timbre, but also through harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic factors.²⁶ As a master of color effects, the principal means by which Debussy achieved his color was with the use of harmony.²⁷ His harmony is attained by the use of chords (Example 2.1) in a mostly non-functional way: each chord is conceived as a sonorous unit in a phrase where the structure is determined more by the melodic shape or color value than by the movement of chordal progressions.²⁸ For Debussy, this was moving from one "idea" to another, merely hinting at the harmony instead of making a definite statement. By blending tonal combinations, the effect of this subtle harmony creates an atmosphere. A trademark of Debussy's writing is his use of the dominant seventh and ninth chords (Example 2.2), and also his particular use of augmented triads (Example 2.3) and obscure suspensions.²⁹ This trademark is quite prevalent in the Nocturnes.

The melodic element is not as domineering in Debussy's writing as the harmonic element, but what Debussy does with melody certainly gives it an individual quality. Debussy made the whole-tone scale peculiarly his own by the subtlety, variety, and charm of his employment of it

²⁶ Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, p. 653.

²⁷ Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, p. 653.

²⁸ Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, p. 653.

²⁹ Lawrence Gilman, Music of Tomorrow, p. 28.

Example 2.1 Debussy: La Cathédrale engloutie (Engulfed Cathedral)
Preludes, Book I. Non-functional chords.



Example 2.2 Debussy: Sarabande, Pour le Piano.
Dominant seventh chords.



Example 2.3 Debussy: Prelude a l' Apres-Midi d' un Faune.
Augmented triads.



(Example 2.4).³⁰ Other scales that are evident in his music are the modes and pentatonic scales. Debussy's melodies alone are not particularly exciting. However, other musical aspects incorporated into his melodies, such as rhythm and harmony, provide an interest which is attractive to the ear. Debussy's melodies take on a different character once open fifths, dominant ninths, and other harmonic elements are added.

Example 2.4 Debussy: Voiles (Sails), Preludes, Book I.
Whole-tone scale.



One element which is apparent in Debussy's melodies, as stated in the preceding paragraph, is rhythm. But rhythm used here also applies to harmony, especially in the way Debussy uses suspensions. The result of these two relationships (melody and harmony) is that rhythm, phrase, dynamics, accent, and tone color are freed from the dependence of tonal motion.³¹ These gain an importance in musical thought equal to that of melody and harmony. The qualities of the musical ideas are often so interdependent that the various elements of the sound seem to mingle

³⁰ Daniel Mason, Contemporary Composers, (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1973), p. 149.

³¹ Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, p. 23.

with one another. For example: pitch almost functions as color, color takes the place of line (often a clear "rhythm" of color changes [Example 2.5]), dynamics and articulation provide a rhythmic and phrase driving force.³²

Example 2.5 Debussy: Menuet, Suite Bergamasque.
Interdependence of sound.



Debussy's orchestration, like his piano writing, is admirably suited to the musical ideas. A large orchestra is required of his music, but is seldom used to make a loud sound. The strings are frequently divided and muted; harps add a distinctive touch; among the woodwinds, the flute, oboe, and English horn are featured in solos; horns and trumpets, also often muted, are heard in short pianissimo phrases; percussion of many types is yet another source of color.³³ Debussy thought orchestrally in terms of the specific quality of each instrumental timbre. In this manner he reoriented the process of orchestration. No longer is the orchestra split up into strictly segregated compartments of woodwinds, strings and brass with a total

³²Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, p 23.

³³Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, p. 654.

sound produced out of a general anonymity.³⁴ Every member of Debussy's orchestra has his own individual function to fulfill.³⁵ For instance, the expressive scope of the string body is vastly augmented, with all manner of combinations of arco and pizzicato, divisi part-writing, sul tasto and tremolo -- resulting in a new variety, flexibility and beauty of string sounds.

These orchestral techniques are well illustrated in the Nocturnes; in the second (Fêtes), the clarity of the full ensemble; in the first (Nuages) and third (Sirènes), the rich, subdued instrumentation, supplemented in Sirènes by a wordless chorus of women's voices.³⁶ The Nocturnes for orchestra show many of Debussy's style characteristics, clearly displaying his tremendous use of timbre and sound continuum.

³⁴Christopher Palmer, Impressionism in Music, (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group Ltd., 1973), p. 23.

³⁵Christopher Palmer, Impressionism in Music, p. 23..

³⁶Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, p. 654.

CHAPTER THREE

NUAGES

Debussy's connection with literature and painting had a great impact on his compositions. The poems he sometimes used as guides while composing gave his pieces a sense of direction. If a particular painting was the inspiration, Debussy used his mastery of color and timbre to "paint" that picture through music. It is the latter aspect that Debussy used with Nuages, the first movement of Nocturnes.

Nuages was to be a study in grey in painting. The translation of Nuages is 'Clouds,' which was part of Debussy's inspiration for illustrating grey. Although Debussy was not concerned with classic form, Nuages can be classified as an Introduction ABA Codetta. The following diagram, shown in Table 2, may give some insight into this form. In many of the impressionistic pieces a general three-part form (ABA) is recognizable.³⁷

Debussy was of the era when composers still used a key signature even though it was not adhered to for a key. It was a guide in finding the tonality but not always as correct or as easy as a classical period key signature. This was a result of the transition from classical forms and styles to a new style of writing.

³⁷ Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, p. 653.

TABLE 2

NUAGES

SECTION	Introduction	A	B	A	Codetta
MEASURE	1-20	21-63	64-79	80-93	94-102
TONALITY	b minor	b minor	d [#] minor	b minor	b minor

The beginning motive of alternating fifths and thirds (Example 3.1) sets the atmosphere. Here it occurs in the clarinets and bassoons, while later on it occurs once in the oboes. Near the end, fragments of this motive appear in the bassoons. All other times this motive is in the strings.

Example 3.1 Beginning motive of Nuages.



It is varied by intervals, doubled at the octave, and by rhythms. The variations occur when the strings have the motive, as in measures 11-13 (Example 3.2), where it is doubled and overlapped to form its regular four measure phrase structure. The next time it occurs is measures 21-28 (Example 3.3) when it acts as an ostinato, setting an atmosphere with which the other instruments will blend. Again, this blending idea is Debussy's timbral trademark. This timbral blending happens again in measures 45-56 (Example 3.4) but the composite rhythm has changed from quarter notes to eighth notes for most of these measures. Adding to the blending effect here is the combination of a pizzicato against an arco. To call this a theme would not be entirely wrong because of its recurrence, the transformations it goes through, and the places it occurs. However, to definitely place the label of "theme" to this motive would be confusing in later discussion.

The first melodic theme, the A theme, is featured in the English horn (Example 3.5). The A theme is in B minor with a lowered fifth, indicating a strong preference for the lydian mode.

Example 3.2 Variation of beginning motive.

Violins I
Violins II
Violas
Cellos/Double Basses
Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass

1ère voix
2de voix à 3
ALTOS

pp
p
pp
pp
pp
pp
pp
pp

Example 3.3 Variation of beginning motive
(continued on following page).

Violins I
Violins II
Violas
Cellos/Double Basses
Soprano
Alto
Tenor
Bass

1ère voix
2de voix
ALTOS

pp
p
pp
pp
pp
pp
pp
pp

Example 3.3 (continued from preceeding page).

1st vlins.

2nd vlins.

vlas

Example 3.4 Timbral blending of beginning motive (continued on following page).

1st vlins

2nd vlins

vlas (alto clef)

cellos

basses

Example 3.4 (continued from preceeding page).

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Bass

pizz.

pizz.

arco

pizz.

arco

pp

Example 3.5 The A theme of Nuages.



This theme is stated seven times and is always played by the English horn, one of Debussy's featured soloists. Although the meter of Nuages is 6/4, this theme is in common time. This combining of meters is another blending technique. It misplaces the barline in conjunction with the writing over the barline in the theme. Debussy shows here that music should not be hindered by barlines or meters. This melodic theme has a very narrow range, only that of a tri-tone, and is stated the same way every time with the exception of the last two pitches. The tail of the A theme is extended in measures 51-57 and measures 88-94 (Example 3.6). The meter for this extension is 6/4, the same as the rest of the orchestra. Both these places are nearing the end of an idea, and in the case of the latter, the end of Nuages. It is possible that the reason for the meter change is to slow down the harmonic rhythm for the tonality changes/cadence implications that follow.

Example 3.6 Tail of the A theme.



The second melodic theme, the B theme, occurs in the flute and harp first (Example 3.7) and appears later in these instruments again. The B theme has a wider range than the A theme and is built on an $F\sharp$ pentatonic scale. The pentatonic scale gives the B theme a bright character since essentially there are no dissonant combinations of pitches when pentatonic scales are used. Between the two statements of the B theme in the flute and harp is a trio of soloists from the strings playing a varied statement of the theme a perfect fourth above the original statement (Example 3.8).

Example 3.7 The B theme of Nuages.



Example 3.8 Variation of B theme.



The soloists are from the first violins, the violas, and the cello sections. The last statement of this theme involves harmonics from the harp which add to the timbral aspect of the piece, but like the A theme, it's character is strengthened by the harmony and timbral effects in the other instruments.

Without the preceding or concluding measures of both these themes, along with the instrumental and harmonic activities within them, the themes would not be nearly as effective. In other words, these themes are most effective because of the supporting textural harmony. Debussy is noted for his use of augmented triads, seventh and ninth chords, and blending qualities. The first time the English horn states the A theme, the underlying harmony is a G major seventh with the fifth omitted. This is presented as a stack of dotted whole notes so that the English horn may state the A theme without much rhythmic activity, so it may be recognized later when the texture and rhythm become more complex. Before the second statement of the A theme, Debussy displays his dominant ninths in measure 14 (Example 3.9) using the planing effect -- chords in which all factors or voices move in parallel motion. This is also how Debussy begins to thicken the texture.

The use of open fifths and augmented triads established a tonality and confused it, respectively. Debussy used these two devices, along with his other devices, to achieve certain atmospheric moments. The horns, with the tri-tone (Example 3.10), and the cellos and basses, with the open fifth (Example 3.11) break up the monotony of the quarter note motive underlying the second statement of the A theme.

Example 3.9 Dominant ninth chords in a planing effect.

1st vlns

2nd vlns

vlns
(alto clef)

pp

Example 3.10 Tri-tone

Example 3.11 Open fifth

The third statement of the A theme is concluded by a descending pattern of tri-tones. The tonality, questionable here because of the tri-tones, is then taken over by an ascending chromatic movement. In this chromatic movement Debussy's exceptional instrumental blending qualities are found: one instrument begins an ascension and fades out as another instrument picks up where the first ended (Example 3.12). While the instruments are blending linearly, and the chromatic movement rises, the dynamics add to the atmosphere with a crescendo ending the retransition and beginning the fourth statement of the A theme.

Example 3.12 Blending of instruments.

The image shows two staves of handwritten musical notation. The top staff is labeled 'OBOE' and the bottom staff is labeled 'CLAR.'. Both staves are in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The Oboe staff begins with a whole note G4, followed by a half note A4, and then a series of eighth notes: B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F#6, G6, A6, B6, C7. The Clarinet staff begins with a whole note G3, followed by a half note A3, and then a series of eighth notes: B3, C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6. A large slur connects the first note of the Oboe staff (G4) to the last note of the Clarinet staff (C6).

Up to this time the strings have all been using the bow. Now they are divided. Half the string section is using a pizzicato while the other half continues to use the bow. This combination of special effects (the strings have been muted from the beginning) provides a string sound new to Debussy's time of the century. The only time Debussy calls for the mutes to be taken off are on the string solos.

The texture surrounding the B theme is much more chordal, containing dotted whole notes and dotted half notes. There is no need to add the rhythmic activity here as before since this theme is stated in more than one instrument at a time. It has such a different character so it can stand on its own more than the A theme.

The return to the last two statements of the A theme has a very sparse texture, but yet is very effective. The clarinets divide and hold an interval of a second while the bassoon provides the tri-tone. The strings add to the special effects by a tremolo over the fingerboard. Tension mounts as the timpani is added with a roll, and the strings continue their tremolo. Debussy softens the agitation by muting the horns after the flute issues a fragment from the B theme (Example 3.13).

Example 3.13 Fragment from the B theme.



The dynamic level diminishes to a ppp with a string pizzicato, and the storm has passed. Thus, Debussy has completed his vision of the stormy greys and created an expressive piece.

Nuages is a fairly simple piece where form is concerned and the sections are quite distinct. Nuages seems to be almost a prelude to the second movement, Fêtes, of the Nocturnes.

CHAPTER FOUR

FÊTES

Fêtes or 'festivals' is indeed a festival of sounds. A festival much like the Mardi Gras comes to mind when listening to the music. It is with this movement of the Nocturnes that Debussy shows his mastery of blending timbres. Vividly demonstrated is his ability to produce melodies and ideas that never lose the attention of the listener even though this movement is more than twice as many measures as Nuages.

There are many notable melodies in Fêtes that will be discussed in this chapter. The most notable feature about each one is its rhythm. Other features worth noting concerning Debussy's melodic material are the types of scales used and the harmonic material in other instrumental lines.

As Nuages previously, the form of Fêtes is also an Introduction ABA Coda. The following diagram, Table 3, shows the breakdown of sections. The A section could be called an exposition; the B section a development; and the last A section a recapitulation. The development section in Fêtes, however, develops new material in a different manner from the usual way of developing themes from the exposition. In the development section more than anywhere else, the composer is free to use his ingenuity and imagination. Occasionally new themes and material are used in the development (Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 2, No. 1, last

TABLE 3

FÊTES

SECTION	Introduction	A	B	A	Coda
MEASURE	1-26	27-69	70-208	209-252	253-280
TONALITY	f minor	A major	f# minor Ab	A major	A

movement; Symphonies Nos. 3 and 4, first movements), but this is an exceptional procedure.³⁸

Debussy does something else unusual with Fêtes. He begins in F minor and ends with A major. Only the introduction is in F minor, and the A section begins with A major. This is another way Debussy sought to be free of a form in the classical style. Debussy used trumpets in F for this movement, and like the horns in F, used no key signature. Instead he placed accidentals as the notes came in the score. This was commonly done with horns but not with trumpets.

In Fêtes there are five different themes. The first of these themes, the A theme, is the most recurrent of all. Most of the time when this theme appears, it uses the dorian mode. It occurs in original form or in some variation ten times throughout the movement. The first statement (Example 4.1) is the longest, being six measures in length. This first statement is in the English horn and clarinet. The second statement is in the flute and oboe, and begins a third higher. Since the meter is common time, Debussy uses triplet figures in variation of a strict quarter note or duple pattern for interest. The next few statements are duets between the bassoons and cellos while the strings work out the tail of the original statement, keeping the rhythm flowing. Then the first variation of the theme (Example 4.2) is set in the flute and oboe. The meter has been changed to 9/8 but the triplet figuration is still felt.

³⁸Willi Apel, "Sonata form," Harvard Dictionary of Music, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969, p. 792.

Example 4.1 The A theme of Fêtes.



Example 4.2 First variation of the A theme.



Much later in Fêtes comes a fragment of the A theme that is repeated in two bar phrases four times, then repeats one measure four times, measures 156-168, in the strings. The scales used for this repeated section are phrygian, mixolydian, and locrian (Example 4.3). The last four statements of this theme are in the flute, and flute and oboe, beginning on A^b and A, respectively.

Example 4.3 Locrian scale.

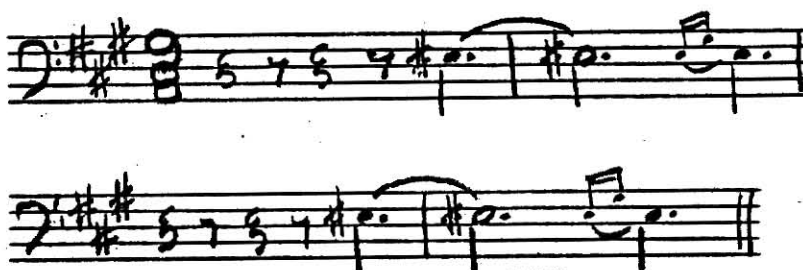


The second theme, the B theme, (Example 4.4) appears six times and is also in the woodwinds. This theme is built mostly of thirds, and is in A minor with a raised fourth. The meter for this theme is 3/4, and the triplet figuration is still in use. There are fragments of this theme used nearing the end of this movement (Example 4.5) that are played by the bassoon and oboe. Now the meter is 9/8.

Example 4.4 The B theme of Fêtes.



Example 4.5 Fragments of the B theme.



After the B theme, there are two themes that appear simultaneously, the C theme and the D theme (Example 4.6 and 4.7). These themes are built on an F# dorian scale. Both of these are played in the woodwinds, however, there are exceptions. When these two themes begin, the strings

have a variation of the D theme (Example 4.8) which is in 9/8, contrary to the English horn which has it in 3/4. The C theme is the more domineering of the two, being stated seven times to the D theme only being stated three times.

Example 4.6 The C theme of Fêtes.



Example 4.7 The D theme of Fêtes.



Example 4.8 Variation of the D theme.



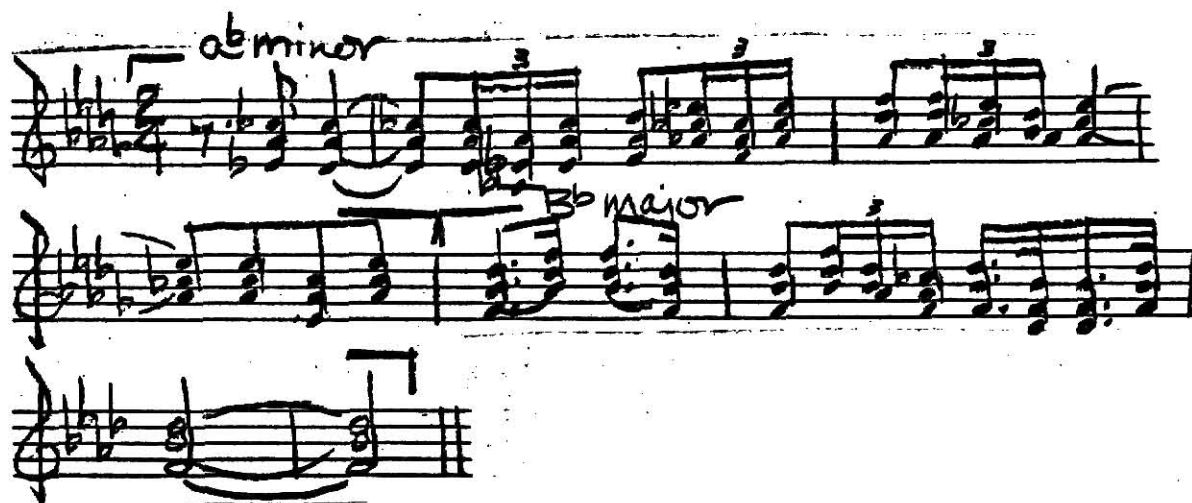
The C theme also appears in the strings, which is the last statement of it before the next theme, however, the D theme also appears in the strings, but it is an augmented version of sorts (Example 4.9). The meter is again different, 6/8, and the scale used is E^b minor.

Example 4.9 Augmented version of the D theme.



The next theme, or the E theme, is different from any of the previous themes in that it is stated the first two times in the brass. This theme is a fanfare theme (Example 4.10). The meter for this theme is 2/4, a typical duple fanfare meter. This theme begins in A^b minor and modulates to B^b major. The following statement in the brass begins in B minor and remains there to the end of that statement.

Example 4.10 The E theme of Fêtes.



After the brass state this fanfare, the woodwinds have a complete statement in triads with a very full sound. The brass and woodwinds exchange a fragment (Example 4.11), then the brass gives a final full statement in the original form. The next time the E theme is seen is as a fragment in an exchange between the brass and the flutes, measures

237-240 and measures 245-248. Thus, the end has come of what will be called themes.

Example 4.11 Fragment of the E theme.

Fêtes depicts scenes or sounds by the way Debussy blends these themes together. Of course, there are other motives that add to these themes to give them their character. For instance, open fifths dominate this movement throughout. The beginning motive consists of open fifths (Example 4.12). The rhythm of this beginning motive is a rhythm seen throughout most of Fêtes and is derived from the tail of the A theme (Example 4.1). Many times this rhythmic motive is only the triplet figure repeated, giving the movement its drive and direction. Seconds and thirds are other prominent intervals, as seen from material in the

themes (Example 4.2, 4.4, and 4.10). But Debussy also used these seconds to brighten the sonority of certain passages as seen in measures 15-22.

Example 4.12 Beginning motive of open fifths.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of a piece. The score is for Violins, Altos, Violoncelles, and Contrebasses. The Violins part is marked 'ff très marqué' and features a rapid, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The other parts (Altos, Violoncelles, and Contrebasses) are marked 'ff' and play sustained chords. The tempo is 'Allegro et très rythmé'.

The harmonic elements in this movement and the way Debussy blends them all together is remarkable. To separate melody, rhythm, harmony, and timbre, and discuss each singularly is nearly impossible. One element cannot be discussed without the other three. The reason being that even with the five different themes, everything is blended so well and effectively that from beginning to end there are no breaks in this festival of sounds. Debussy combines rhythmic patterns, scalar passages, meters, harmonies, and creates timbral effects continually in his search to portray a festival. Debussy changes meters 24 times in the 280 measures and changes tempos 11 times; uses at least six different scales, beginning each type of scale many times on different notes; uses almost every interval possible; and harmonizes with seventh and ninth chords, added note chords, and masses of sound continuum. Combinations of special effects such as dividing the violins into six parts, stopping on the horns and brassy tones, pizzicato and arco of the

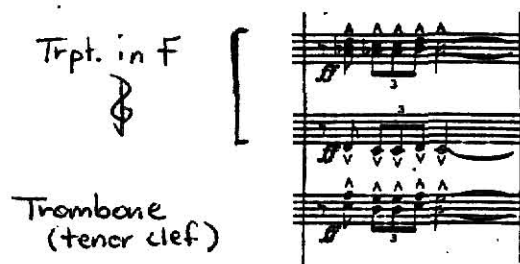
strings, glissandos on the harps, muted trumpets, and effective use of dynamics all add to this tremendous piece.

Attracting the attention of the audience is one of the more desirable effects a composer wishes for his piece, much like the opening attraction at a parade. Debussy captures this attention by the fortissimo marking of the open fifths in the first measure (Example 4.12). This is softened to a forte as the A theme takes over. The driving rhythm continues as an occasional new sound appears, as in the trumpets, measure 6 and 8 (Example 4.13). This continues while other instruments enter, then stops abruptly for a short fanfare from the trumpets (Example 4.14). A new attraction in the parade is arriving. The harps begin the "confusion" to a new meter with a D^b mixolydian glissando, measure 26.

Example 4.13 Trumpet motive.



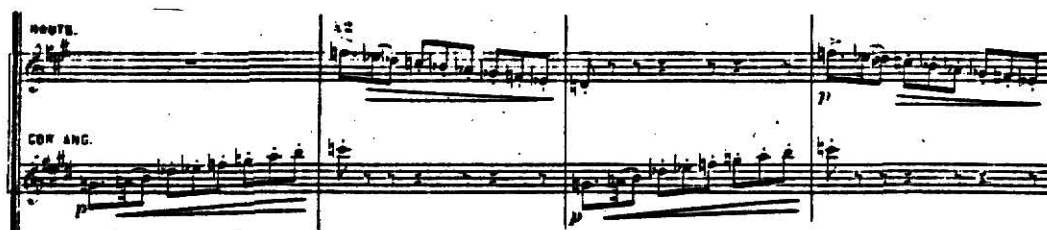
Example 4.14 Fanfare from trumpets.



The new meter, however, is not the same for all instruments, and from here begins a combination of meters which is part of Debussy's

blending technique. As in Nuages, Debussy again blends instrumental lines together in Fêtes (Example 4.15) between the oboe and English horn.

Example 4.15 Blending of oboe and English horn lines.



As the B theme takes over after the transition from the A theme, another new sound is announced from the trumpets (Example 4.16) on the dominant of A major. The meter for the trumpets here has changed to 3/4, to join the flutes, oboe, and clarinet, while all others remain in 9/8. In measure 70, all instruments except the strings convert to 3/4.

Example 4.16 Trumpet motive.



This is the section comprising themes C and D, while the woodwinds and brass battle the strings with their rhythms. Its as if two bands in the parade can be heard simultaneously while both are playing different tunes. The sounds increase dynamically as each theme fights to be heard

over the other. The B theme returns and alternates with the C theme. The dynamics crescendo as the themes end and a mass of sound at a fortissimo ends abruptly once again.

The E theme (Example 4.10) has a pedal point of an A^b in the double bass, reinforced by the cellos and timpani. Here the harp adds seventh and half-diminished seventh chords. The E theme begins distantly, and by the fifth statement is louder and more vibrant, joined by the fragments of the A theme which blend with the woodwind material. This grows to a fortissimo, and ends abruptly with the A theme picking up with a dynamic level of pianissimo.

Only the flute has the A theme with the other woodwinds and cellos playing the beginning rhythmic pattern accompanying this theme. But instead of being in 9/8 as before when this thematic material appeared, it is in 6/8 and Debussy reserves the 9/8 theme for a sort of recapitulation. In the meantime, he brings back the D theme in the augmented variation (Example 4.9). This is stated twice with an extension of the last two bars. An extension on E^b brings a key and meter change for material which is similar to measures 27 and those that follow.

This recapitulation of sorts beginning in measure 209, is not an exact repeat. The chord progressions are the same but in different inversions and the harp has been added along with the cymbals and military drum. The B theme also recurs, but is stated a third lower than before. In measure 233 the extension of the B theme begins (Example 4.5), and fragments of the E theme are exchanged between the horns (Example 4.17) and the flutes (Example 4.18).

Example 4.17 Fragment of the E theme in the horns.



Example 4.18 Fragment of the E theme in the flutes.

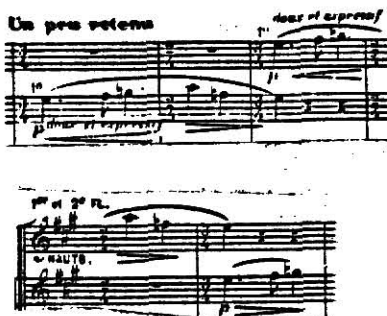


The texture has thinned out to the bassoon playing the extension of the B theme and a repeated bar in the cellos and basses of C[#], C^b, B^b.

Now comes a coda with material that has not appeared before. The oboe and flute alternate a dotted quarter note motive (Example 4.19), while A major, E major, G minor, D major, and F minor triads are repeated as quarter notes.

Example 4.19 Dotted quarter note motive.

Flute
Oboe



This coda is extended by a repeated bar of A, A^b, G for three measures, then begins a similar chromatic passage, until reaching an A. The timpani alternates an A with the pizzicato A major triad of the cellos and basses, ending on a triple p dynamic level.

There are many ingenious techniques in Fêtes that Debussy displays, and displays very well. In Fêtes, the transformations used of various motives, as well as themes, is prominent in every section. The combinations of meters is part of this transformation, blending together so well that it is not readily noticeable when listening to Fêtes.

Fêtes is a good contrast of character to follow Nuages. Nuages is illustrative of greys while Fêtes displays many bright colors and tones. The third movement of the Nocturnes, Sirènes, conveys yet another character.

CHAPTER FIVE

SIRÈNES

The subject of Sirènes is from Greek mythology. Sirens were the beautiful women lying on the shores of islands singing out to sailors as the ships passed. The Sirens' song and the ripples of water can be imagined as this movement of Nocturnes progresses. The sailors' contemplation of going ashore can be heard several times.

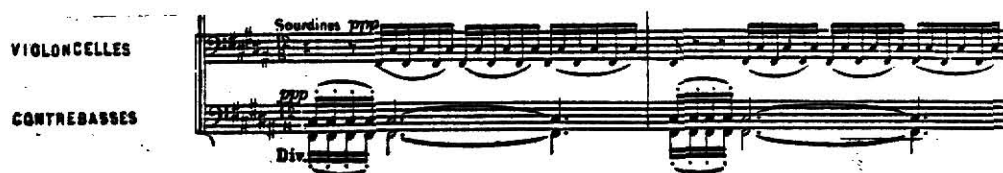
Sirènes begins with a meter of 12/8 and has five meter changes. The tempo is changed twelve times. The form of Sirènes is very much like the form of the previous movements: Introduction ABA Coda. It can be compared to a sonata-allegro form also, because it appears to have an exposition, development, and recapitulation. The following diagram, Table 4, shows the sections and tonal relationships. Debussy has written a key signature of five sharps, which indicates either B major or G[#] minor, however, the beginning tonality is F[#] which is typical of introductions to begin on the dominant (F[#]) of the key (B). This can be seen by the opening material in the cellos and basses (Example 5.1) with the open fifths of F[#] and C[#]. Debussy does reach the tonality of B in measure 26 when the A section begins following a strong V - I cadence in B. Harmonic material of the A section is based on only two chords, I and bVI.

TABLE 4

SIRENES

SECTION	Introduction	A	B	A	Coda
MEASURE	1-25	26-55	56-110	111-130	131-146
TONALITY	F [#] , A, C, E ^b 5 [#] 's, (BM)	B, D ^b 6 ^b 's (GM)	D ^b , A, D ^b , C [#] No [#] 's or b's (CM)	B 5 [#] 's (BM)	B

Example 5.1 Open fifths of opening material.



This progression would also be true somewhat for the last A section. The B section centers around the tonalities of D^b and A.

There are two themes in Sirènes. Both themes have several full statements and many fragmented statements. The first theme, the A theme (Example 5.2), uses a B lydian scale. It is first stated by the sopranos and then by the mezzo-sopranos using a B minor scale. The sopranos and mezzo-sopranos alternate stating the theme through the A sections. The fragments of this theme are in almost every instrument in the B section. It often appears in a longer form (Example 5.3) in one instrument or split between the horns (Example 5.4).

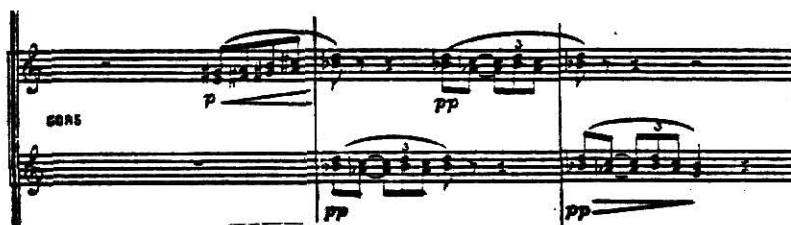
Example 5.2 The A theme of Sirènes.



Example 5.3 Longer form of A theme.



Example 5.4 The A theme split between the horns.



The second theme, the B theme, has many more fragments than the first, and are varied much more. The B theme appears in four ways (Examples 5.5-5.8). The main statement (Example 5.5) is in the sopranos only, until before the coda where the mezzo-sopranos have two statements. When the voices have the B theme it begins on A^b , then on B^b , and the last statements are on A. Since these appear in the B section the tonalities are changing every few measures.

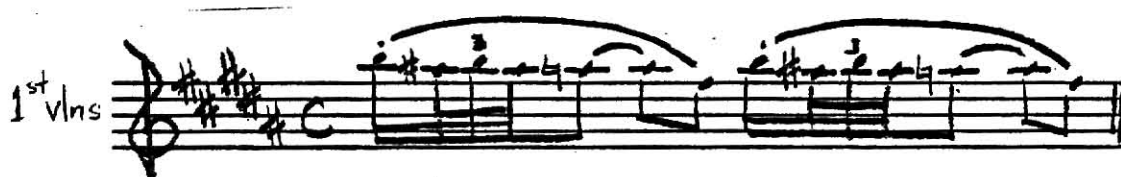
Examples 5.5 The main statement of the B theme of Sirènes.



Example 5.6 Fragment of the B theme.



Example 5.7 Fragment of the B theme.



Example 5.8 Fragment of the B theme.



One of the fragments of the B theme (Example 5.6), appears in the English horn and also appears later in the English horn but in another type of fragment. This fragment (Example 5.7) is also heard in the strings and other woodwinds. The fragment in Example 5.6 is in a transitional area where ninth chords are constructed, and the number of instruments is such that the English horn is heard as a solo instrument which Debussy is known for in his orchestral writing. The other fragment (Example 5.7) begins the same time as the A theme (Example 5.2). The last of the fragments from the B theme are much the same as the others, but are not as long, or repeated as consecutively (Example 5.8). These fragments appear in the transitional sections, and in the A section.

In addition to the themes are several other motives. Once again, the open fifths so often seen in Debussy's works permeate Sirènes. There are very few measures that do not have any open fifths. One of the motives used in the beginning to simulate ripples in the water is built on a quartal chord and a major chord (Example 5.9). The motive

then employs major chords with the same rhythm in the A section, with the addition of a similar major chord construction in eighth notes. Debussy uses triplets throughout this movement, which can be seen in the themes and motives. One motive which does not use triplets consists of quarter notes and eighth notes (Example 5.10). It appears mostly in the strings, but also in the bassoons and the harp. The strings usually have a tremolo with this figure. These passages make up a series of ninth chords and major chords. In measure 49, the violins begin a C phrygian scale that modulates into the key change preparing for the B section. The harps have a series of arpeggiated seventh chords in the last A section (Example 5.11).

Example 5.9 Motive built on quartal and major chords.



Example 5.10 Motive of quarter notes and eighth notes.

Example 5.11 Arpeggiated seventh chords in harps.



Debussy also uses the blending of instruments in *Sirènes*. The woodwinds begin blending in measure 103 in the flutes (Example 5.12), and continue in the clarinet and flutes in measure 107 (Example 5.13). The voices also are blended extremely well, so well that it appears that the line continues without a break. This is seen in connection with the A theme, where one voice ends and the other picks up on the last beat of the first voice and continues. This is also true with the voices in the B theme. However, here there is more overlapping (Example 5.14).

Example 5.12 Blending in the flutes, measure 103.



Example 5.13 Blending in the clarinet and flutes, measure 107.



Example 5.14 Overlapping in the B theme in the voices.

The image shows a musical score for two vocal parts. The top part is labeled 'Sop.' and the bottom part is labeled 'SOPRANI'. Both parts are written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The Soprano part has a melodic line with a slur over it, and the Sopranos part has a similar melodic line. The lyrics 'p expressif et soutenu' are written below the Soprano staff, and 'expressif et soutenu' is written below the Sopranos staff. The two parts overlap in time, with the Soprano part starting slightly earlier than the Sopranos part.

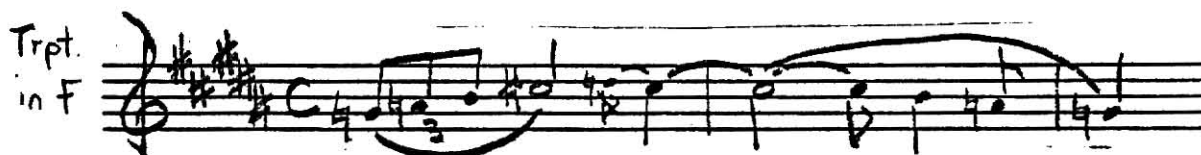
Special effects are also abundant in Sirènes. The strings are sometimes muted. They use a tremolo in a normal bowing position and also over the fingerboard. The strings use the point of the bow and the string section combines the use of pizzicato and arco. The horns are sometimes muted, and sometimes played stopped or brassy. The harps use glissandos and harmonics. The voices have no words, but are used as instruments, and in two instances, use the effect of à bouche fermée. This means to sing with a closed mouth, or at least, closed teeth. This effect is used to obtain a different kind of color, which Debussy is so famous for using in his pieces.

There are two motives that have not yet been discussed in connection with Sirènes. These motives are very similar to themes from Nuages. The first of these (Example 5.15) is the Sirènes derivation from the A theme of Nuages. In Sirènes, it appears in the English horn and then in the trumpet three measures later (Example 5.16). This is an almost exact statement of the Nuages version. The other motive appears in the last five measures of Sirènes in the harps (Example 5.17), and is very much like the pentatonic theme, the B theme, of Nuages.

Example 5.15 Sirènes derivation of the A theme of Nuages.



Example 5.16 Sirènes derivation of the A theme of Nuages.



Example 5.17 Sirènes derivation of the B theme of Nuages.



These two motives are the only indications of any kind of cyclic intentions in the Nocturnes. All other material in the three movements stands alone within each, not being connected to any other movement. Since these last two motives appear at the end of Sirènes, it is possible that Debussy left these as a hint that Nocturnes may be cyclic, not necessarily in thematic material alone, but in form. All the movements of the Nocturnes have the form of Introduction ABA Coda (Codetta in the case of Nuages). Debussy was not concerned with form in his music, but these forms came out of his music in an inconspicuous way.

As seen in the Nocturnes, much of Debussy's style is evident. Many of these style characteristics in the Nocturnes, as well as many other works of Debussy, prompted other composers to explore and develop the five elements of music. Debussy's works, such as the Nocturnes, were quite an influence to many composers.

CHAPTER SIX

INFLUENCE OF DEBUSSY ON LATER COMPOSERS

The music of Claude Debussy influenced a great number of twentieth-century composers. To list all of these who were at one time or another under his influence would make a rather exhaustive list. Some of the main or better known composers who would be included on that list are: Ravel, Messian, Bartok, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, Puccini, Respighi, and Ernest Bloch.³⁹ By this list alone it can be seen that almost every nationality was influenced by this French composer.

The long-range influence of Debussy has been very profound. The changes Debussy introduced, especially in the harmonic system, made him one of the great sources in the history of music.⁴⁰ The new Debussyian vocabulary offered a set of expressive and formal resources in a way of establishing some kind of new tonal-modal style that broke the bonds of classical tonality by presenting a variety of ideas and materials which could be expanded, integrated, and made expressive in terms of a high artistic style.⁴¹ The free harmonic techniques, which Debussy exploited, could be combined with modal melodic tradition, suggesting a

³⁹Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, p. 656.

⁴⁰Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, p. 656.

⁴¹Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, p. 25.

natural way of using folk material without squeezing it into pre-cut tonal patterns.⁴² This is evident in the music of Stravinsky, Ravel, Messian, Boulez, and Bartok. Other important twentieth-century ideas which come back to the original work of Debussy are the disassociation of the individual sound event, the elevation of timbre and articulation to a point equal to harmony and melody, the use of constructions free from tonal patterns and based on symmetry, and the consequent building up of new static and associative forms.⁴³

Debussy developed tightly bound relationships of pitch, duration, intensity, and color. Webern elaborated on these concepts, expressed in terms of maximum differentiation within the most minimal, economic sequence of events in the briefest, most compressed structural time span.⁴⁴ Webern reduced the experience of sound to its essentials, especially in his twelve-tone works. In this more general view, Debussy's influence can be seen in the developing ideas of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern as well as in the work of certain latter-day avant-gardists, notably Olivier Messian and Pierre Boulez.⁴⁵

Debussy abolished the interdependence of melody and harmony, and by combining these two produced a sort of free melody, and a harmony which was non-functional, atonal and athematic, without producing a disordered

⁴² Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, p. 25.

⁴³ Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, p. 25.

⁴⁴ Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, p. 42.

⁴⁵ Eric Salzman, Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction, p. 25.

chromaticism.⁴⁶ Debussy created many effects by this method which most often defied a regular form. Quoting Pierre Boulez:

All his life was a quest for everything that defies analysis and for a development which by its very nature, incorporates the surprises that arise from our imagination. He distrusts architecture, in the old-fashioned sense of the term, and prefers structures that mingle rigour and freedom of choice. That is why, with him, those words, those keys with which we are saturated in our schools and academies have no meaning or purpose: the habitual mental categories of a worn-out tradition could never be applied to his works, even if we tried to adjust them by twisting them here and there.⁴⁷

Debussy never really intended for his music to be thoroughly analyzed, but rather for his music to be enjoyed when heard. Above all, Debussy brought music out of the salon and the concert hall and into the open air, even to an immaterial existence, independent of place or space.⁴⁸

Debussy's techniques made a profound impression on a growing number of composers during the early 1900s. He represents a transition between classical techniques of composition and a path to atonality. Debussy became a big influence in this new era which showed a new kind of freedom in music.

⁴⁶ Stefan Jarocinski, Debussy: Impressionism & Symbolism, Trans. by Rollo Myers (London: Ernst Eulenburg Ltd., 1966), p. 163.

⁴⁷ Stefan Jarocinski, Debussy: Impressionism & Symbolism, p. 159.

⁴⁸ Stanley Sadie, The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, p. 310.

SUMMARY

The Nocturnes for orchestra went through several revisions to become the work which is enjoyed by many today. It shows how an inspiration can be transformed into an expressive piece of music.

Debussy's connection with poetry and literature had a great impact on his music. As seen in Nocturnes, he organized the five elements of music in a way that created a new kind of system away from the classical major-minor tradition. The Nocturnes illustrate his orchestral techniques very well: the clarity of the full ensemble and the rich, subdued instrumentation.

Because Debussy was a master of color effects, there were several ways with which he created color in Nocturnes. The instruments he featured as soloists were utilized in achieving the effects he desired. Special effects play an important part in Nocturnes. The strings are muted for much of Nuages and Sirènes; pizzicato and arco are combined many times; the brass are often muted; and the use of a female chorus without words is extremely effective in Sirènes.

Debussy's harmony supports his melodies with dominant seventh and ninth chords, open fifths, and many seconds and augmented triads. His melodies alone are built on various scales -- modes, pentatonic, and whole tone.

The music of Claude Debussy influenced a great number of twentieth-century composers. A few of the composers influenced were Ravel.

Stravinsky, Messian, and Boulez. The changes Debussy introduced made him one of the greatest masters in the history of music.

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AN ANALYSIS OF
NOCTURNES FOR ORCHESTRA
BY CLAUDE DEBUSSY

by

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B.M.E., Kansas State University, 1981

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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MASTER OF MUSIC

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The purpose of this report was to analyze the Nocturnes for orchestra and the style of Claude Debussy.

The Nocturnes for orchestra began as Trois Scènes au Crépuscule in 1892 and went through a series of transformations before reaching the final form in 1899. Debussy does not follow the usual character of a nocturne, but defended the right of music to exist in its own right, and not as an elaboration of narrative, nor as the consequence of observing set principles of structure.

Through the analysis of the Nocturnes it was found that each of the three movements (Nuages, Fêtes, and Sirènes), had a form of Introduction ABA Coda. However, each is a totally individual piece by character and sound. All the movements make use of the modes, pentatonic scales, and whole tones. His use of dominant sevenths and ninths, and blended timbres are also in all three movements. Debussy's orchestral techniques are wonderfully displayed in Nocturnes.

The long-range influence of Debussy has been profound. Some of those composers who were influenced are Ravel, Stravinsky, Messian, and Boulez. The changes Debussy introduced has made him one of the great sources in the history of music. Debussy never really intended for his music to be thoroughly analyzed, but rather for his music to be enjoyed when heard.