

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF PAGODES FROM  
ESTAMPES POUR LE PIANO  
BY CLAUDE DEBUSSY

by

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B. S., Kansas State University, 1961

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

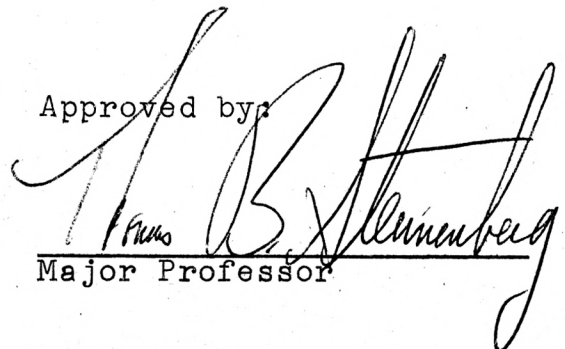
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Music

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1966

Approved by:

  
Major Professor

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## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the report is to increase the understanding of Debussy's music by descriptively analyzing Pagodes from Estampes pour le Piano. The work was found to evoke the mood of its title which characterizes the impressionistic style, a style which resulted as a reaction to Classical-Romantic dominance in the history of European music. The composition represents procedures which had matured by 1903; it is reasonably short and provides an excellent media for the study of the composer's unique use of exotic scale forms which is one of his distinguishing characteristics.

The general extra-musical impression of Pagodes is well described by Elie R. Schmitz.

Pagodés are consecrated temples of the Orient and are found in India, Burma, and Indo-China as well as in China and Japan. Their architecture exhibits the same general tendency as do oriental dances. A stabilized and sober base gives rise to movemented, ornate, sinuous, and shimmering superstructures. It embodies the oriental sense of fixity as well as the incredible teeming surface of the population.<sup>1</sup>

The initial stimulus for the composition was Debussy's visit to the World's Exposition in Paris in 1889.<sup>2</sup> Debussy frequented the gala event because he was attracted by everything exotic and primitive. Cooper accounts that he had heard the Javanese gamelang orchestra there and had become cognizant of

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<sup>1</sup>Elie R. Schmitz, The Piano Works of Claude Debussy, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup>Max Graf, Modern Music, p. 110.

the pentatonic Oriental scale and its sonorities. New rhythmic and melodic ideas, and a generally new approach to musical structure and feeling were revealed to him by these concerts which left a permanent mark on his writing for the piano and the development of his musical ideas.<sup>1</sup>

### Characteristics of Impressionistic Music

In literature, in painting, in music, the aim of the impressionist was to suggest rather than to depict; to mirror not the object but the emotional reaction to the object; to interpret a fugitive impression rather than to seize upon and fix the permanent reality.<sup>2</sup>

Impressionism came into being at a time when composers were beginning to feel that they had exhausted the possibilities of the conventional major-minor scale. Debussy's keen ear explored subtler harmonic relationships and impelled him to seek new sources of inspiration. He was led to develop his natural affinity with the exotic and the old.

By avoiding academic developments of musical ideas, by relaxing some of the conventional indications of tonality, by using harmony largely as a means of coloristic effect, he obtained results strikingly analogous to those of impressionism in painting.<sup>3</sup>

In Pagodes, Debussy used impressionistic methods and devices in this way: melodic activity in which constant reference is

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<sup>1</sup>Martin Cooper, French Music, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup>Oscar Thompson, Debussy: Man and Artist, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>Edward B. Hill, Modern French Music, p. 195.

made to a central pitch replaced syntactic harmony as a means of expressing tonality.

The melodic conception of tonality was so emphasized that the harmonic structures were able to take on a coloristic other than a functional character. This led to the use of harmonic parallelisms so characteristic to this style.

By the abandonment of conventional harmonic progressions, modal melodies became usable. This means that a variety of scale forms are found, with the pentatonic and whole tone scales having great utilitarian value.

Chords are frequently built as open structures to accommodate this type of melodic conception, especially when the placement of a chord third conflicts with the modal intent of the melody. The use of the interval of a major second becomes useful in locating and accentuating certain areas of the modal scales, and in clarifying regions in the pentatonic and whole tone scales.

At this point, it must be remembered that the purpose of impressionism was not to evoke a definite picture, but to suggest the mood or emotion which the particular image in question aroused in the artist's mind.<sup>1</sup> It can be seen how deviation from the conventional chord structures and tonal patterns of harmonic tonality would have the effect of blurring the whole musical structure as it was heard by the listener at that time. This is apt to obscure the fact that actual control of materials

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<sup>1</sup>Cecil Gray, A Survey of Contemporary Music, p. 98.

is most definite and precise.

#### AURAL EFFECTS IN PAGODES

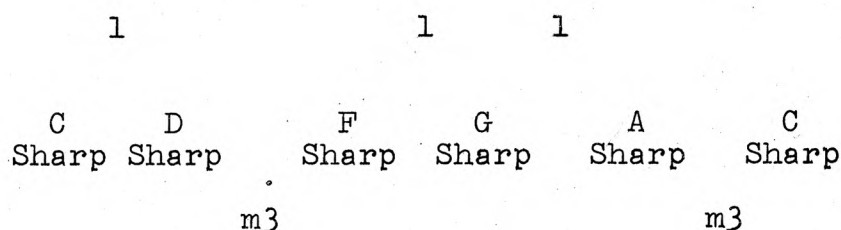
Capturing the sound of temple bells which might be heard coming from a pagoda is done by Debussy's constant use of the interval of the major second between C sharp and D sharp and between F sharp and G sharp. One or both occur in every measure of the composition. Debussy invents constant thematic material which exposes these pitches as well as chord forms in which they are present.

The form of the composition is a three-part form, the first part, largely centering on B, includes mm. 1 - 36; the second part, a contrasting section centering on F sharp, includes mm. 37 - 52; the third part, parallel with the first and centering on B, includes mm. 53 - 77; a coda includes mm. 78 - 98. It is interesting to note that though the second part is a contrasting section, the same major seconds, C sharp - D sharp and F sharp - G sharp, retain their prominence.

The material of the whole composition has its roots in the pentatonic scale. But since in a composition of this length it is necessary to have more than one tonal center, pentatonic scales which have the tones C sharp - D sharp and F sharp - G sharp in common were those used. This occurs in pentatonic scales built on B and F sharp. The C sharp - D sharp relation may also be found in a pentatonic scale built on C sharp.

## PENTATONIC SCALE USAGES

The Pentatonic Scale. The Pentatonic or five-tone scale is the basic structure of the melodic line. Sachs explains the exotic scale as one consisting of a mixture of three whole tones with two minor thirds.<sup>1</sup> The scale can be compared to the series of black keys on a piano.



## SONORITY DERIVED FROM THE PENTATONIC SCALE

Sonorities derived from the pentatonic scales can conveniently expose the interval of the major second.

Example 2 shows the sonority developed in mm. 1 - 6 on the pentatonic scale based on B, exposed in the major second, F sharp - G sharp. Measures 5 - 6 shows an interesting change in sonority caused by the introduction of A natural in that same scale.

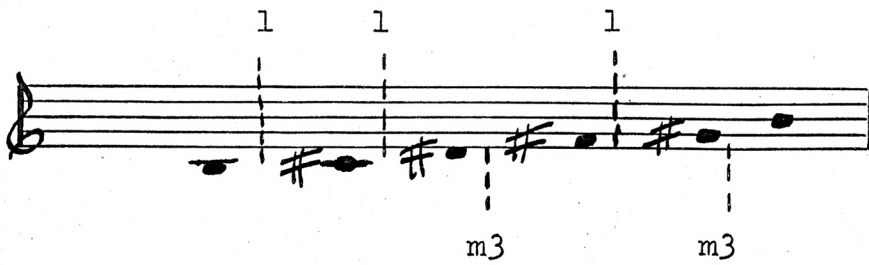
"Debussy placed music importance upon researches in sonorities with the use of the Oriental scales which some term his

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<sup>1</sup>Curt Sachs, Rise of Music in the Ancient World East and West, p. 121.

Ex. 1

Pentatonic I on B.



Pentatonic II on F sharp.



Pentatonic III on C sharp.





## Ex. 2

Musical notation for Example 2, showing two staves (treble and bass clef) with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The notation is divided into three measures labeled 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6. The treble staff contains a melodic line with notes and rests, and the bass staff contains a corresponding line. Brackets and labels 'd/c' are used to indicate specific intervals or chords between the staves.

music as being experimental."<sup>1</sup> In mm. 7 - 10, Pentatonic I is treated contrapuntally in contrary motion against a modal-like scale. This is shown in Example 3. The direction of the melodic

## Ex. 3

Musical notation for Example 3, showing two staves (treble and bass clef) with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The notation is labeled 7-10. The treble staff contains a melodic line with notes and rests, and the bass staff contains a corresponding line. A bracket and label 'd' are used to indicate a specific interval or chord between the staves.

<sup>1</sup>Norman Demuth, Musical Trends in the 20th Century, p. 34.

contour appears vague and without scope. Apel remarks that the preference of a zigzag design is characteristic of impressionistic music.<sup>1</sup> This is true in Pagodes.

Sonorities can be reduced to basic contrapuntal lines with no supporting chords whatsoever.

Pentatonic II: F sharp, G sharp, B, C sharp, D sharp, is introduced in mm. 11 - 14 as the counterpoint in contrary motion. This is illustrated in Example 4. Reti says that Debussy has imbued shapes conceived in melodic tonality with a touch of the old overtone phenomenon with the blending of the two different pentatonic scales.<sup>2</sup>

Ex. 4

<sup>1</sup>Willi Apel, Harvard Dictionary of Music, P. 350.

<sup>2</sup>Rudolph Reti, Tonality Atonality Pantonality, p. 26.

## Ex. 5

31-32    33-36    37-44

45    46-49    50-52    8 va - - - - -

In Example 5, mm. 31 - 52, Pentatonic III is used. The contrapuntal device of contrary motion is apparent in mm. 37 - 42. It is noticed that the major second, F sharp - G sharp, is retained.

Sonority patterns, built up from two voice structures over a single bass tone by octave duplication, are commonly found in the style. This is shown in Example 6.

Pentatonic sonorities coming from accompanying figures are found in Example 7.

## Ex. 6

Upper Plane

Hollow Octave

Lower Plane

Tone Gap

The musical score for Ex. 6 consists of two staves, Treble and Bass clef, both in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The music is divided into two sections by a vertical dashed line. The first section is labeled 'Upper Plane' and 'Lower Plane'. The second section is labeled 'Hollow Octave' and 'Tone Gap'. The 'Hollow Octave' section shows a significant interval between the two planes. The 'Tone Gap' section shows a period where the lower plane has no notes while the upper plane continues.

Note the "hollow" octave between the upper and lower planes.

## Ex. 7

80-81

The musical score for Ex. 7 consists of two staves, Treble and Bass clef, both in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The music is divided into two sections by a vertical dashed line. The first section is labeled '80-81'. The second section is labeled '80-81'. The music is written in a style that suggests a specific performance technique, with some notes marked with 'p' (piano) and 'f' (forte). The notation includes various rhythmic values and articulation marks.

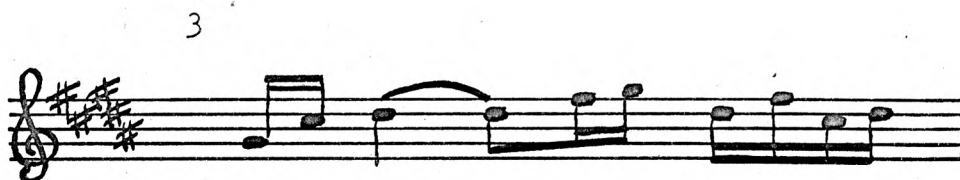
Here, the accompanying figure is based on Pentatonic II, while the melodic line is based on Pentatonic I.

MELODIC MATERIAL DERIVED FROM THE  
PENTATONIC SCALE

The composition is permeated by short melodic fragments which continually expose the major seconds already mentioned-- C sharp - D sharp and F sharp - G sharp.<sup>1</sup> These short melodies, even more than the sonorities already discussed, give the impression of bells sounding continuously throughout the composition as though, perhaps, they were freely swinging in the breeze.

Each of these melodic fragments will be identified as Melody 1, Melody 2, and Melody 3. Melody 1 is shown in Example 8.

Ex. 8



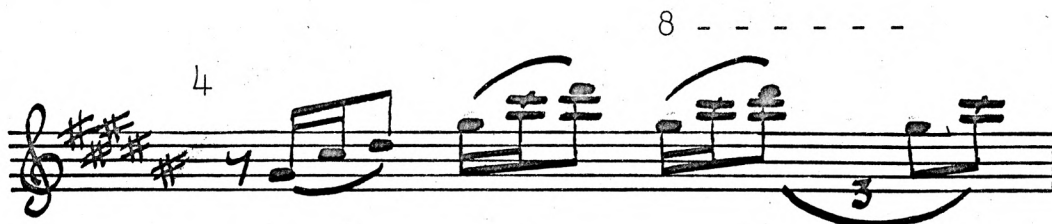

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<sup>1</sup>From here on, each will be referred to from its lower to its upper member, regardless of which comes first in the pattern; The first figure may be D sharp - D sharp, and the second, G sharp - F sharp, but reference will be made as indicated above.

It is founded on Pentatonic I. Though both the major second, C sharp - D sharp and F sharp - G sharp, are exposed, the chief emphasis is on the first.

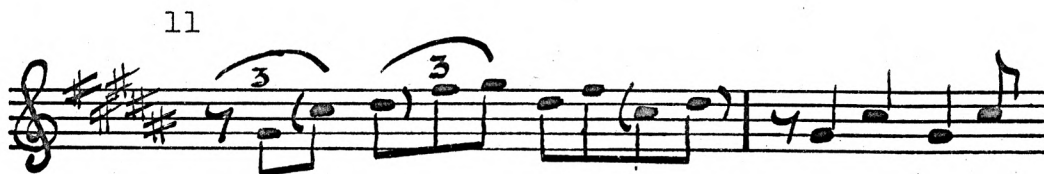
Melody 1 undergoes an interesting metamorphosis. It is derived from the first figure developed, as is shown in Example 9.

Ex. 9



In mm. 11, Melody 1 is treated in this manner. Notice the emphasis placed on the C sharp - D sharp interval in Example 10.

Ex. 10



In mm. 13 - 14, intervals of Melody 2 are suggested in counter-melody shown in Example 11.

Ex. 11

13-14

Musical notation for Example 11, measures 13-14. The notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The melody consists of eighth notes with triplet markings above them. The counter-melody is shown as a single eighth note in the lower register of the staff.

Melody 3, found in mm. 15 - 18, is built on a pentatonic scale based on F sharp and still preserves the C sharp - D sharp interval. See Example 12.

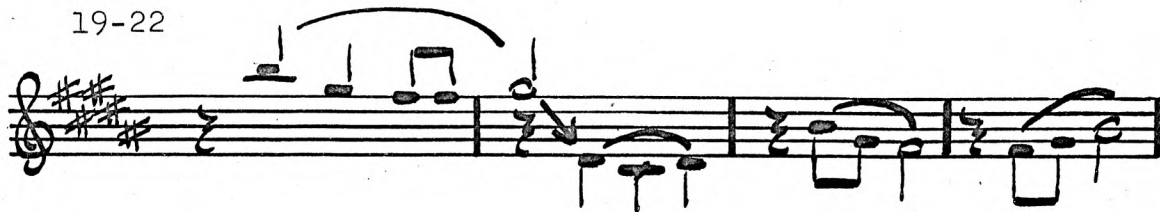
Ex. 12

15-18

Musical notation for Example 12, measures 15-18. The notation is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The melody is a pentatonic scale starting on F# and ending on D#. The counter-melody is shown as a single eighth note in the lower register of the staff.

In Example 13, Melody 2 is re-rhythmicized in mm. 19 - 22 and passed to a different register.

Ex. 13



The contrapuntal devices of canonical imitation and contrary motion are used in the treatment of Melody 1. This is followed by the pentatonic scale in parallel motion which results in the intervals of fourths and fifths. Example 14 illustrates this.

New melodic material evolved from C sharp - D sharp and F sharp - G sharp in mm. 27 - 36 as shown in Example 15.

In mm. 33 new thematic material appears as a second theme centering on F sharp, the V relation to the tonal center. The major second, F sharp - G sharp, is still retained so that these two pitches still permeate the structure. The melody, built in the upper tetrachord of the F sharp major scale, is still pentatonic because the E sharp is never melodically related to the F sharp. Example 16 illustrates this. Harmonically, however, it strongly suggests the new tonal center, but never is committed to it by resolution.



## Ex. 14

23-25                      24-26

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piano exercise. It consists of two systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system covers measures 23-25 and 24-26. The second system covers measures 27-30. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first system is divided into four measures. Measures 23 and 24 are grouped under the label '23-25', and measures 25 and 26 are grouped under '24-26'. The first measure (23) has a treble clef staff with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass clef staff with a triplet of eighth notes, both labeled 'B'. The second measure (24) has a treble clef staff with a quarter note and a bass clef staff with a triplet of eighth notes, both labeled 'A'. The third measure (25) has a treble clef staff with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass clef staff with a triplet of eighth notes, both labeled 'B'. The fourth measure (26) has a treble clef staff with a triplet of eighth notes and a bass clef staff with a triplet of eighth notes, both labeled 'B'. The second system covers measures 27-30. The treble clef staff has a triplet of eighth notes in each of the four measures, labeled '3'. The bass clef staff has a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure, a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure, a triplet of eighth notes in the third measure, and a triplet of eighth notes in the fourth measure, all labeled '3'. The bass clef staff also has a circled note in the fourth measure.

Ex. 15

27-30

Musical notation for Ex. 15, measures 27-30, bass clef. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The notation consists of two staves. The first staff contains measures 27 and 28, and the second staff contains measures 29 and 30. The notes are: G2 (half), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C3 (half) in measure 27; D3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), F3 (quarter), G3 (half) in measure 28; A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C3 (half), D3 (quarter) in measure 29; E3 (quarter), F3 (quarter), G3 (half), A2 (quarter) in measure 30. All notes have a fermata above them.

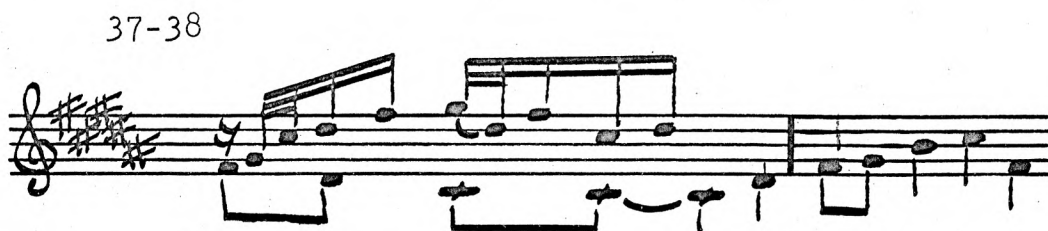
Ex. 16

33-36

Musical notation for Ex. 16, measures 33-36, treble clef. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The notation consists of two staves. The first staff contains measures 33 and 34, and the second staff contains measures 35 and 36. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (half) in measure 33; D5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), G5 (half) in measure 34; G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (half) in measure 35; D5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), G5 (half) in measure 36. All notes have a fermata above them.

New melodic material found in m. 37 is suggestive of intervals used in the second theme, but is transposed from B to F sharp. See Example 17. This material is still exposing the intervals, C sharp - D sharp and F sharp - G sharp. The interval B - C sharp is added over a figuration, creating a new rhythmic form of Melody 1 in original pitches.

Ex. 17



After m. 53, where part three begins, there is no new material. This section in general parallels part one until m. 78 where the coda occurs. The coda exposes the interval C sharp - D sharp marked (a) in Example 18. It is set against a figure which is built on the interval figure which characterizes the second theme (B), but at the same time, retains the emphasis on C sharp - D sharp. The passage lies in the pentatonic scale on F sharp.

## Ex. 18



## TREATMENT OF TONALITY

## Pedal Points

A characteristic device of the composer is the frequent use of lengthy pedal points which appear in the bass line.

Apel says: The pedal point or simply, pedal means a long held note, normally in the bass, sounding against changing harmonies in the other parts. From the harmonic point of view, the interesting feature of the pedal point is that it represents one of the most natural sources of dissonance, inasmuch as the held note blends easily with every chordal combination.

The pedal point is one of the earliest devices of polyphony as may already be concluded from its extended use in Oriental and primitive music.<sup>1</sup>

But pedal points also act as focal points over which melodic and harmonic material of this kind can be stabilized; in other words, each creates an area which in itself influences the organization of all material used during the time in which it sounds.

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<sup>1</sup>Apel, op. cit., p. 562.

Reti says that the pedal points act as focal points on which the melodic shape hinges, the result being that tonics always sound through.<sup>1</sup>

Tonality-wise, Debussy begins and ends Pagodes in the Key of B. The system of pedal points from mm. 1 - 18 is shown in Example 19.

Ex. 19

1-10    11-14   15-18   19   20   21    22   23-26

The musical notation shows a bass line on a five-line staff with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The notes are: G# (measures 1-10), D# (measures 11-14), C# (measures 15-18), B (measures 19-22), and G# (measures 23-26). A bracket labeled 'M3' spans measures 11-14, and another bracket labeled 'm3' spans measures 15-18.

The focal point, B, is extensive. Debussy uses 10 measures as an area of stability in B. G sharp is given a 4 measure focus; D sharp, a 4 measure focus; then a movement of measure durations occurs through mm. 19 - 22, ending in a 3 measure focus on B.

The organization of the whole composition in terms of its bass tones is seen in Example 20.

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<sup>1</sup>Reti, op. cit., p. 22.



## CONCLUSION

As has been mentioned, the impressionistic style became possible because of a new approach to tonality. If certain tones in the musical structure are emphasized enough, all other tones will assume a relationship to them, regardless of whether these are in terms of conventional harmonic syntax or not. Debussy, by giving certain tones prominence in melodies, pedal points, and other stationary tonal features, such as the C sharp - D sharp and F sharp - G sharp intervals in this case, is able to ignore any conventional syntactic implications of the chord structures. For instance, since harmony is freed of key implications, there is no need for major seconds to resolve; this is also true of seventh chords.

Because of the free approach to tonality, a new kind of melody has developed. In music dominated by harmonic syntax, melodic movement is pretty well dominated by the movement of the active scale degrees to the inactive, i.e., those scale degrees making up the harmonic triad; this creates a melodic manifestation of conventional harmonic progression. However, freedom from harmonic restorations make the use of any reasonable scale form feasible for melodic purposes. In this particular work, the pentatonic scale forms serve melodic ends, except in one small melodic fragment, which alone contains an ascending leading tone.

When the dictates of harmony are relaxed, melodic mutation becomes much more practical. True melodic imitation is one of

the essential elements in this composition. Harmonic relaxation also makes the counterpointing of melodic fragments much more supple, especially when both are in pentatonic scales.

Impressionism supposedly is vague. So it seems to a listener, mostly because conventional syntax and treatment of dissonance is disregarded in quite conventionally constructed chords. But the technique of impressionism is anything but vague; it is a highly disciplined technique which is controlled by the concise use of pattern in ways which are always logical.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to acknowledge the important role Professor Thomas Steunenberg, head, graduate studies for the Department of Music, played in the conception of this report, and is deeply grateful to him for his untiring efforts in providing the stimulus for me to complete it.

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## APPENDIX A

Complete Analysis of the Work

Handwritten musical score system 1, featuring a treble and bass staff with notes and rests, and a series of rhythmic markings below the bass staff.

Handwritten musical score system 2, featuring a treble and bass staff with notes and rests, and a series of rhythmic markings below the bass staff.

Handwritten musical score system 3, featuring a treble and bass staff with notes and rests, and a series of rhythmic markings below the bass staff.

## APPENDIX B

Analysis of the Lineal Movement  
of the Bass



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The initial stimulus for the composition was Debussy's visit to the World's Exposition in Paris in 1889. There he became cognizant of the pentatonic Oriental scale and its sonorities. New rhythmic and melodic ideas, and a generally new approach to musical structure and feeling were revealed to him by these concerts which left a permanent mark on his writing for the piano and the development of his musical ideas.

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