

Pictorial and Literary Evocations in the Programmatic Music of Liszt and Debussy

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Submitted to the graduate degree program in the School of Music and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

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Date Defended: May 16, 2019

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Abstract

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) was extraordinary both as a virtuoso performer and an innovative composer of works in a variety of genres. As a modernist icon bridging the turn of the century, Claude Debussy (1862–1918) had a vast influence on his contemporaries and later generations of composers. Both the piano and society underwent substantial developments and changes during the lives of both Liszt and Debussy. The changes allowed composers to explore new realms of piano sounds. The exploration that Liszt and Debussy sought in their compositions brought a new aesthetic of approaching music and piano playing to audiences. Program music had been written by many composers for the keyboard from the Baroque era until today. Program music as a term refers instrumental music that involves descriptive or narrative effects created through tone painting, musical figurations, and other techniques. Compared to character pieces, which have a similar goal, program music tends to be applied to longer works that feature more complex descriptive or narrative ideas. Pictorial and literary inspirations are two essential non-musical elements in program music and are thus crucial to explore. By analyzing selected programmatic works of Liszt and Debussy, I emphasize how they used and developed pictorial and literary evocations in their program music and how they utilized the piano as a device to provide the sound world of visual and written programmatic sources. Additionally, I discuss and analyze the specific pianistic vocabulary and tools found in the music of Liszt and Debussy.

The research includes two main parts. The first chapter contains three sections: an introduction of Liszt and Debussy, the developments to the instrument, and the social changes during these two composers' lifetime, and the certain pictorial and literary sources that they evoked in their program music. The second chapter is also divided into three sections: a discussion and analysis of how Liszt and Debussy use the piano as a device to reflect certain pictorial and literary sources; a discussion of the new realm of sound and the

piano techniques that they employed; and in the last section, the above materials will be reiterated briefly to reinforce the substance and importance of these works by Liszt and Debussy.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to express heartfelt gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Steven Spooner, for his generous assistance, inspiration, and encouragement during my graduate study. I am also very thankful to my committee members, Dr. Scott Smith, Dr. Colin Roust, Dr. Ingrid Stölzel, and Professor Patrick Suzeau, for their invaluable help, guidance, and expertise. Lastly, I appreciate my family for their tremendous support and belief in me. Also, I thank my friends for their kind assistance and encouragement me during my student life.

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Chapter One

Liszt and Debussy

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) and Claude Debussy (1862–1918) are two major figures in music history. As composers, their works both brought significant changes to piano technique and literature.

Since Liszt lived through most of the Romantic Era, he witnessed and was involved in the social changes of the time, the development of the piano, and new trends in composition. As the first modern pianist, Liszt coined the term recital and explored new possibilities of piano technique. His études incorporated passages to foster the development of multiple techniques at a time—such as finger independence, dexterity, and endurance training—and explored more extensive orchestral color on piano. They demanded pianists involve their body for support while playing, quickly changing between different techniques and orchestral colors. In Liszt’s middle and late periods, he focused more on discovering new possibilities of compositional techniques, in addition to piano virtuosity and colorful transcriptions.

The Piano Sonata in B minor is a masterpiece of formal innovation with four movements cast into one. Liszt transformed the Sonata’s themes through modulation and evoked a fresh, new character in different sections. His late work “Bagatelle ohne Tonart” (Bagatelle without Tonality) was one of several works which could be considered moving towards atonality. Though the piece is not truly atonal, it shows that Liszt was exploring means of disrupting the traditional sense of tonal supremacy in music. Liszt consciously began to experiment with the free and equal use of the twelve tones in the chromatic scale.

Debussy is a representative composer of twentieth-century modernism. He may have composed the most original body of piano music after Liszt.¹ Today he is often described as

¹ Dubal David, *The Art of the Piano: Its Performers, Literature, and Recordings*, 3rd ed. (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2004), 477.

an impressionist; however, he was more closely tied to the symbolist movement. Like other symbolist artists, Debussy's work strives to evoke a mood, feeling, or scene instead of expressing emotion or telling a story in music. Even in his early years as a student at the Paris Conservatoire, Debussy pushed the boundaries of tradition evidenced by this exchange with his teacher Ernest Guiraud:

Debussy: The tonal scale must be enriched by other scales... Music is neither major nor minor. Minor thirds and major thirds should be combined...

Guiraud: What's that?

D: Incomplete chords, floating... One can travel where one wishes and leave by any door. Greater nuances.

G: I'm not saying what you do isn't beautiful, but it's theoretically absurd.

D: There is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law.²

As a composer, Debussy knew conventional music theory, but he strived to create a new musical language of his own. Debussy sometimes strayed from traditional harmonic formulas in his piano works, creating novel musical images through exotic scales, harmony, and motives, in addition to mimicking other instrumental timbres, like Javanese gamelan or harp. He often used chords in a non-functional parallel motion which makes listener focus on the sonority or color of the chord itself. Debussy's mature compositions often employ the pentatonic scale or whole-tone scale in various registers to add color. Those techniques made his music sound distinct and prompted audiences to start paying attention to sonorities instead of melodic lines. A typical characteristic of his piano works is that they often do not demand the brand of virtuosity found in the more challenging works of Liszt, but rather a delicate touch and a refined use of the pedal. Performers need to construct all the elements he wrote as a whole, which requires that a pianist's musicianship be matched by their technical ability.

² Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His life and Mind*, vol. 1 (London: Cassell, 1962), 206-7.

Social Change and the Development of the Piano

Between 1770 and 1815, two profound changes happened in Europe, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. These two important events brought new ideas and new productive capabilities to society. The French Revolution fostered the idea of human rights and composers started focusing on expressing personal emotions instead of pleasing audiences. The Industrial Revolution transformed economic models and brought people from the countryside to the cities in search of jobs in the manufacturing industries. In addition, advances in printing technology made sheet music cheaper and the innovations of manufacturing pianos made them more affordable, leading to the instrument becoming the central focus of middle-class homes.³ As the audience expanded, concerts were no longer limited to small salons but were gradually moved to larger halls. Necessity was the mother of invention.⁴ Since concerts took place in big halls, the piano had to become more durable and sonorous. As composers and pianists kept exploring new possibilities in music, piano manufacturers kept improving the mechanism of the instrument.

The mechanism of the modern piano mostly developed over the course of the nineteenth century and the development of the instrument expanded the range of possibilities for composers and pianists. Stewart Gordon discussed the evolution of the piano mechanism developments in his book *A History of Keyboard Literature*.⁵ Broadwood introduced the damper and the *una corda* pedals around 1780, and by 1794, the range of the piano had expanded to six octaves and was further extended to seven octaves in 1850.⁶ The metal frame was introduced in England in 1820.⁷ These improvements made the piano more resonant and

³ Grout, Donald Jay, Claude V. Palisca, and Peter Burkholder, *A History of Western Music*. 9th ed (New York: Norton, 2014), 560.

⁴ Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 287.

⁵ Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature: Music for the Piano and Its Forerunners* (New York: Schirmer Books, Prentice Hall International, 1996), 12-13.

⁶ Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 12.

⁷ Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 13.

allowed it to play orchestral effects more convincingly. Henri Pape brought the idea of cross-stringing to the piano in 1828, allowing the bass strings to be longer and more powerful as well as adding a harmonious glow to the resonance of the instrument.⁸ In 1821, the “double escapement” concept was first used by Sebastien Erard.⁹ Erard’s invention permitted the quicker repetition of each key and repeated notes could be more easily played. Felted hammers were introduced by Henri Pape in 1833, enabling pianists to play with wider dynamic range. Claude Montal invented the sostenuto pedal in 1862.¹⁰ The new technology worked inconsistently at first, but Steinway refined it in 1874.¹¹

Non-Musical Elements in the Programmatic Music of Liszt and Debussy

“Programmatic music has a narrative or descriptive content that attempts to represent extra-musical concepts without text. Liszt coined the term in a long essay published serially in Franz Brendel’s *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*.”¹² He did not invent the genre, but he did introduce the term “program music,” as well as the term “symphonic poem,” the most typical nineteenth-century programmatic genre. Liszt used the term to identify his instrumental music with an evocative title, a verbal program, or both, as a programmatic work “draws the listener’s attention in advance toward a specific object.”¹³ Liszt enjoyed how instruments could express literary and pictorial effects. His intention was not just to guide listeners to a specific idea but to provide them a frame of reference. Liszt aimed to intensify the music’s message by use of programmatic means.

Debussy’s aesthetic stemmed from the influences of symbolist art as well as the use of exotic imagery. He used melody and harmony to express an effects. The idea could be

⁸ Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 13.

⁹ Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 12.

¹⁰ Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 13.

¹¹ Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature*, 13.

¹² Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 210.

¹³ Bonds, *Absolute Music*, 211.

compared to symbolist poets like Stephane Mallarme and Charles Baudelaire, as they suggested an image or impression instead of giving that image a name.

Both Liszt and Debussy wrote a large amount of programmatic music and the titles they chose usually suggested pictorial or literary sources. The pictorial effects in their music not only drew from painting but also from scenes in nature (water, storms, air), human activities (funerals, celebrations), and architecture (churches, temples, and palaces). Poetry and tale were two crucial literary sources. Liszt wrote eleven pieces in *Années de pèlerinage*, three pieces in *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, and three piano pieces in set *Liebestraum* that drew upon poetry as a primary source or inspiration for the music. Debussy did not draw upon poetry as a primary source in his instrumental music as frequently as Liszt. However, Debussy wrote some pieces to describe literary figures like “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses” and “Ondine” in *Preludes* Book II and “La danse de Puck” in *Preludes* Book I. Three of his *Préludes* that were inspired by poetry are “Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” and “La fille aux cheveux de lin” in *Preludes* Book I and “Feuilles mortes” in *Preludes* Book II.

This study does not intend to focus on every piece involving pictorial and literary evocations throughout Liszt’s and Debussy’s programmatic music, but rather will take a closer look at selected piano pieces that illustrate the associations between the non-musical elements and the pieces. The pieces selected for discussion are Liszt’s “Vallée d’Obermann” from *Années de pèlerinage: Suisse* and Debussy’s “Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” from *Préludes* Book I.

Chapter Two

Liszt and Debussy on Non-Musical Expressions

In general, program music as a genre could be applied to any piece of music with a narrative title. The consideration of non-musical expressiveness is a crucial aspect of program music that performers and composers need to address. In comparison to words and images, music has disadvantages since it is primarily an abstract artform. The sound cannot give a specific description to the audiences. This leads the audience to interpret musical ideas in various ways. Liszt noticed this problem when expressing a poetic idea through music, as he stated in a letter to French novelist George Sand:

In contrast to the poet who speaks a language common to all and who, moreover, addresses himself to those whose minds have been shaped to some extent by the required study of the classics, the musician speaks a mysterious language that can only be understood after special study or, at the very least, extensive exposure. He is also at a disadvantage compared with the painter and sculptor, in that they address themselves to a feeling for form, which is far more widespread than the intimate understanding of nature and the feeling for the infinite that are the very essence of music.¹⁴

Despite these perceived limitations, Liszt still believed in music as a powerful tool to evoke atmosphere, image, and emotion. As he regarded instrumental music as “a poetic language” capable of expressing “all that defies analysis.”¹⁵ He strived to employ instrumental music as a device to translate pictorial and literary sources. To attain this goal, Liszt used various compositional devices to convey ideas and images.

Like Berlioz with *idée fixes* and Wagner with *leitmotif*, Liszt used thematic transformation by presenting an idea or motive which was then transformed by the use of pulse, reharmonization, counterpoint, and other means to convey spiritual meaning about

¹⁴ Franz Liszt to George Sand, Paris, April 1837, in *An Artist's Journey: Lettres d'un Bachelier ès Musique, 1835–1841*, trans. and annotated by Charles Suttoni (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 34. Charles Suttoni (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 34.

¹⁵ Sonia Tripathi, “Franz Liszt’s ‘Harmonies Poétiques Et Religieuses:’ The Inspiration Derived from the Poetry of Alphonse De Lamartine, with an Analysis of the 1853 Piano Cycle,” (DMA, University of California, Santa Barbara), 2, <http://www2.lib.ku.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/923785335?accountid=14556>.

what the changes mean. Liszt claimed that “the return, change, modification, and modulation of the motifs [were] conditioned by their relation to a poetic idea. All exclusively musical considerations, though they should not be neglected, have to be subordinated to the action of the given subject.”¹⁶ German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus wrote in *Nineteenth-Century Music*:

Liszt himself explicitly drew the conclusion that it is not so much musical themes and motives themselves as the transformations they undergo and the relations made to pertain between them that determine the “speech-like” aspect of instrumental music: “It is precisely the unlimited alterations which a motive may undergo—in rhythm, key (modulation), tempo, accompaniment, instrumentation, transformation, and so forth—that make up the language by means of which one can express thoughts (*Ideen*) and, as it were, dramatic action (*dramatische Handlung*).”¹⁷

Programmatic music does not contain only one meaning. Liszt needed a way to account for more considerations of pairing non-musical materials with musical elements like tonality, certain musical symbols, and specific pianistic writing.

“Vallée d’Obermann”

This piece was published in Liszt’s early work *Album d’un voyageur* in 1842. Later in 1855, Liszt revised and re-published it in his master piano set *Années de pèlerinage: Suisse*. The inspiration of this music does not refer to a place in Switzerland, but from the novel *Obermann* by the French author Etienne Pivert de Senancour. Another inspiration of this work was the long English poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812), by Lord Byron.

Senancour: *Obermann*, Letter 53 (excerpt)

What do I want? What am I? What should I ask of nature? ... Every cause is invisible, every end is deceptive; every form changes, every time-span works itself out: ... I feel, I exist in order to be consumed by ungovernable desires, to drink in the seductiveness of a fantastical world, to stand aghast at its voluptuous error.

Senancour: *Obermann*, Letter 4 (excerpt)

¹⁶ Grove Music Online, s.v. “Programme Music,” by Roger Scruton, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://doi-org.www2.lib.ku.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.22394>.

¹⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 242.

Unutterable sensitivity, charm and torment of our empty Years: immense awareness of a nature that everywhere Overwhelms and is impenetrable; all-embracing passion, Indifference, advanced wisdom, voluptuous freedom; all the needs and deep sorrows that a mortal heart can hold, I felt, I suffered in that memorable night. I took a dark step towards the age of weakness; I swallowed up ten years of my life.

Byron: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*

Could I embody and unbosom now
 That which is most within me, —could I wreak
 My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
 Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
 All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
 Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe,—into *one* word,
 And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
 But as it is, I live and die unheard,
 With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.
 (stanza 97)¹⁸

Liszt chose to quote these two literary sources as epigraphs presented on the score. His music reflected the emotional quality of Senancour's and Byron's work—the self-doubt of the former, and the hopeful, search for answers of the latter.¹⁹

Liszt wrote “Vallée d'Obermann” in quasi-sonata form with an initial thematic idea presented in the exposition (see Table 1). Bora Lee discusses the form and the thematic transformation based on the three-note pattern in Motive A, Liszt transformed it in each section.²⁰ In the development section (*Recitativo*), he creates drama by the use of diminished, often non-resolved harmonies. In the recapitulation section, the themes are quietly and dreamily restated in the parallel major before transforming into a life-affirming climax.

Table 1. Formal Structure of *Vallée d'Obermann*

Section	Theme	Thematic Transformation	Measures	Key Area
Exposition	Initial thematic area	First thematic transformation	mm. 1–74	E minor
Development (<i>Recitativo</i>)		Second thematic transformation	mm. 75–118	C major
Recapitulation		Series of thematic transformations	mm. 119–169	
Coda			mm. 170–207	E major
			mm. 208–216	E major

¹⁸ Franz Liszt, *Vallée d'Obermann*, ed. Ernst Herttrich, (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 2005), vi.

¹⁹ Bora Lee, Franz “Liszt’s *Vallée d'Obermann* from the *Années de Pèlerinage, Première Année. Suisse: A Poetic Performance Guide*” (DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 2013), 17.

²⁰ Lee, “Liszt’s *Vallée d'Obemann*,” 25.

“Vallée d’Obermann” starts in E minor, but Liszt does not establish the tonic in the first eight measures. The piece moves to G minor in measure 4, and the first 4 measures are then transposed up by a minor third at measure 5. Finally, the music ends in B-flat minor in measure 8. The tonal ambiguity in the first eight bars seems to reflect the epigraph’s initial questions: “What do I want? What am I?”

There are two motives contained within the theme (see Example 1). Motive A begins with three syncopated notes followed by four descending eighth notes and ends on E minor in the second measure. Motive B ascends from A natural to C natural, then resolves a half-step to B natural in a downward motion. Sighing figures could be found in the theme (descending half-step G to F-sharp, C natural to B natural, etc.). Motive A is the first seven notes of the theme, Liszt varies first three descending notes of them by using different keys, harmonies, accompaniments, and textures.

Example 1 *Vallée d’Obermann*, mm. 1–9

The image shows a musical score for the first nine measures of Liszt's "Vallée d'Obermann". The score is in 6/8 time and marked "Lento assai". The first measure is in E minor, the second in G minor, and the third in B-flat minor. The bass line contains two motives: Motive A (measures 1-2) and Motive B (measures 2-3). Motive A is a three-note descending eighth-note pattern. Motive B is a half-step descending motion. The score includes various performance markings such as "espressivo", "sotto voce", and "p".

The first transformation of the three-note descending motive appears in measure 75 and has the same short-long-short pattern, just like in the initial theme. However, this time Liszt transformed it with quarter note, half note, quarter note (see Example 2). The pattern is

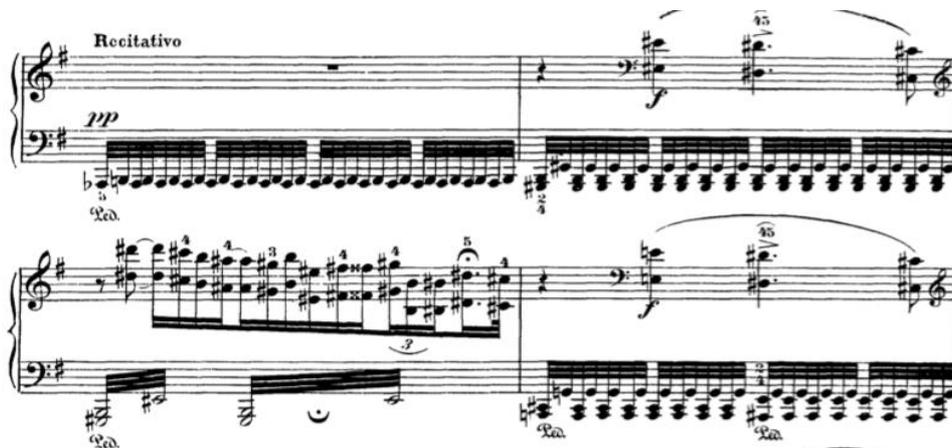
rhythmically augmented from the first three notes of Motive A.²¹ The melody accompanies a quiet chord in the low register, and Liszt uses *dolcissimo* and *pianissimo* to indicate the character and sound quality of this passage.

Example 2 *Vallée d'Obermann*, mm. 75–76



The second thematic transformation (see Example 3) coincides with a low tremolo. The three-note motive, in augmentation, is carried by the octaves above the tremolo accompaniment in the left hand, creating a nervous intensity. Moreover, in the following quickly oscillating octave passage (measure 139), he uses *tempestoso* (stormy) to emphasize the emotional quality of the music, which seems to depict Sénancour’s “ungovernable desires.”²²

Example 3 *Vallée d'Obermann*, mm. 119–122



²¹ Lee, “Liszt’s *Vallée d’Obemann*,” 27.

²² Lee, “Liszt’s *Vallée d’Obemann*,” 28.

Recitativo comes from opera, where it generally refers to speech-like singing. Liszt grouped or accented specific notes to evoke a speech-like quality with the rhythm. For example, he accented the third beat and grouped the melodic line into four sixteenth notes, followed by a sextuplet, triplet, then a dotted eighth note in measures 122 and 123. After an ornamented melodic line in measure 127, Liszt inverted the register of the tremolo accompaniment and the three-note transformation in measure 128 (see Example 4). The three-note motive appears in a lower register with shortened note values and is marked *marcato* and *staccato* in measure 128 and measure 130. The different articulations give the motive a stronger declamatory quality.

Example 4 *Vallée d'Obermann*, mm. 128–130

The image shows a musical score for Example 4, measures 128-130 of *Vallée d'Obermann*. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with a tremolo in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. The tempo is marked 'f agitato molto'. The score includes various articulations such as accents, slurs, and dynamic markings like 'f' and 'ff'.

After the *Recitativo*, the principal three-note motive appears five times. In measure 161 and measure 166, the motive is in a high register. After an empty measure, it appears in the moving bass line starting in measure 163 and again measure 167. In the cadenza-like passage, the transformed motive is followed by a sequence of ornamented notes that then end with Motive B. Liszt presents the three-note motive many times with a simple texture in this

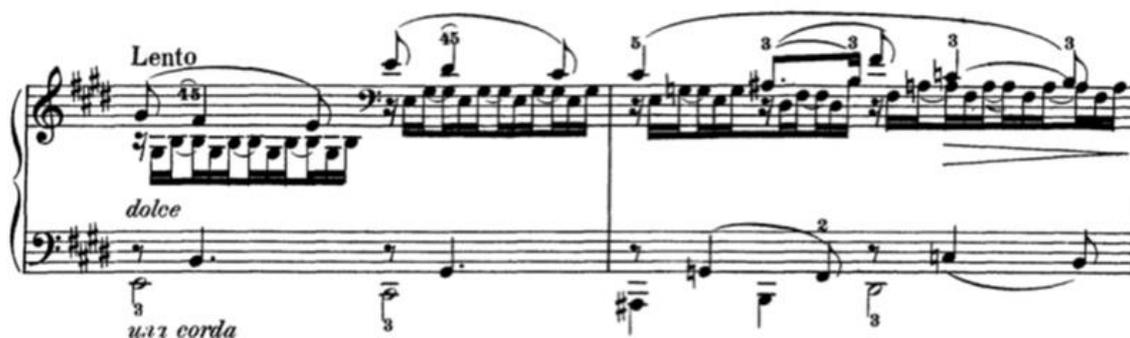
short section. However, the different register and the different harmony intensify the emotional quality—the initial question, “What do I want? What am I?” has returned (see Example 5).

Example 5 *Vallée d’Obermann*, mm. 159–169



For the third thematic transformation, the principal theme is carried by the original syncopated pattern in E major. The sigh figure disappears when Liszt presents Motive A in E major. The melody is accompanied with a slurred triplet and the harmonic support in the left hand (see Example 6).

Example 6 *Vallée d’Obermann*, mm. 170–171



Later in measure 180, Liszt inverted the principal three-note figure and added an arpeggiated sixteenth-note-triplet accompaniment for the fourth transformation. Starting in

measure 188, the theme is presented in octaves, played by both hands. The range spans more than three octaves and, with Liszt's indication *sempre animando sino al fine*, emphasizes intensity and animation (see Example 7). As the texture gets thicker, the music finally reaches triumph and glory. After a fermata in measure 214, the theme returns in last two measures. The descending scale in the final two measures and use of the augmented-E-major triad adds tension and creates a bittersweet feeling for the final gesture of this emotionally wrought work.

Example 7 *Vallée d'Obermann*, m. 180



Liszt's use of symbolic tonality for certain subjects has been the topic of much research. Robert Collet observed that the key of E major was often associated "in Liszt's mind with a serene religious feeling."²³ Like "Vallée d'Obermann," "Sposalizio"—inspired by Raphael's *Lo Sposalizio* (The Marriage of the Virgin)—was also in the key of E major. Gifford observed that almost half of Liszt's twenty-five religious piano works are in the key of E major.²⁴ Paul Merrick, who taught at Liszt Academy in Hungary, noted specific keys correlate to specific objects in Liszt's music: A-flat major represents love, D minor represents death, E major represents religion, B major represents Heaven, and F-sharp major represents

²³ Robert Collet, "Choral and Organ Music," in *Franz Liszt: The Man and His Music*, ed. Alan Walker (London: Barrie & Jenkins 1970; Reprinted London: Redwood Burn Limited, 1976), 323.

²⁴ David E. Gifford, "Religious Elements Implicit and Explicit in the Solo Piano Works of Franz Liszt (DMA diss., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1984), 27.

spiritual contemplation.²⁵ Merrick also argued that Liszt considered the key of C major as the beginning element in many of the composer's first pieces. Several of his piano sets were written in C major, including "Preludio" in the *Transcendental Studies* and "Chapelle de Guillaume Tell" in *Années de Pèlerinage*. He also states that C major is the "human" as opposed to the "divine" side.²⁶ As Table 1 outlines, Liszt began "Vallée d'Obermann" in E minor, then transformed the theme into C major, and finally arrived at E major as the music reaches its climax following the *Recitativo*. Liszt indicated *Fortississimo* (*fff*) at the coda, and he uses common-tone dominant and diminished seventh chords, as well as Neapolitan harmonies—transcend the theme to the tonic E major. Liszt may have used these specific key areas to show the "inner path" of the character.

Besides the symbolic key areas, Liszt also used certain figures or patterns to represent non-musical material. The Hungarian pianist and author Tibor Szász described the opening phrase of Liszt's Piano Sonata in B Minor as being written in a "gypsy manner," with a tritone created between the tonic and the fourth scale degree.²⁷ This could trace back to the Medieval Era, during which the tritone was thought to represent the "devil" in music. Liszt used it to evoke a "diabolic" quality, as in the first thematic area of "Vallée d'Obermann" (see Example 8) and the opening of "Dante sonata" (see Example 9).

²⁵ Paul Merrick, "The Rôle of Tonality in the Swiss Book of *Années De Pèlerinage*," *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 39, no. 3-4 (1998): 367-68, <https://doi-org.www2.lib.ku.edu/10.2307/902543>.

²⁶ Paul Merrick, "Liszt's Music in C Major," *The Musical Times* 149, no. 1903 (Summer 2008):78.

²⁷ Lee, "Franz Liszt's *Vallée d'Obermann*," 39.

Example 8 *Vallée d'Obermann*, mm. 66–69



Example 9 *Dante Sonata*, mm. 1–2



Ascending or descending lines or intervals have been used by composers to express a text or program from the Renaissance to the present.²⁸ “This is possible because the musical device is isomorphic with the physical or metaphorical action.”²⁹ Indeed, the ascending lines, descending lines, and intervals can evoke imagery or associate emotions with music. For example, in the opening of the “Dante Sonata,” Liszt used a descending line to accommodate the “diabolic” character with tritones, as seen in Example 9. In “Vallée d’Obermann,” the music starts with a descending melodic line in E minor. It also serves as a prominent idea reappearing throughout the piece. Later in the first thematic transformation area, the theme starts with a G and ascends to an E in the key of C major. The music then immediately shifts to the “ethereal” from the descending line which seems express a feeling of “depression.” In

²⁸ Judy Sharon Lively. “Extra-musical Associations in Selected Pieces from *Années de Pèlerinage–Troisième Année* by Franz Liszt: A Lecture Recital, Together with Three Recitals of Selected Works of D. Scarlatti, F.J. Haydn, L.V. Beethoven, F. Schubert, F. Chopin, J. Brahms, R. Schumann, and Others.” DMA diss., University of North Texas, 1990, 38.

²⁹ Peter Kivy, *Sound Sentiment: An Essay on the Musical Emotions, including the Complete Text of The Corded Shell* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 75.

the second thematic transformation, the theme is cast in downward motion with the turbulent tremolo accompaniment. In the third thematic transformation, Liszt inverted the three-note group in stepwise motion with arpeggiated accompaniment. Beginning in measure 188, Liszt thickened the texture and built tension by adding notes, expanding the range with contrary motion. The emotion of the music starts to expand, which provides for the glorious coda. The music seems as if it should end in measure 214, but Liszt extended the work with a descending scale containing a tritone. The piece finally ends in the religious E major.

Musicologist Ben Arnold gives us the following summary:

While moments of ecstasy are present, this joy is cut tragically short by a dramatic pause and an abrupt descending restatement of the opening theme. This epiphany proves to be an illusion, since the final descending statement harmonized with two augmented chords creates a heartbreaking close to this incredible pursuit. Liszt as Obermann almost finds life's answer and the happiness he seeks, only to realize that it is a mirage... In the end, this work of trials, tribulations, hope, and jubilation, ends in tragedy, or in Byron's words in the preface, "But as it is, I live and die unheard, / With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword."³⁰

Besides the thematic process, tonality, and musical symbolism, Liszt also employed a wide array of pianistic figures to evoke vivid imagery like storm, wind, and water. Liszt used specific indicators, such as "hairpins" and dynamic markings to create a swell, mimicking the motion of water or wind, and virtuoso pianistic figurations, evoking the image of those natural elements. The piano as an instrument gained some advantage over the text and visual art because motion could be represented in rhythms with a series of notes or chords to produce a vivid image to the listener. Liszt wrote many pieces that exploit those materials including chromatic runs, arpeggiated chords, and tremolos—common devices for expressing storms, wind, and water.

Liszt's storm pieces feature intense and violent moods. The chromatic run and the tremolo are common devices shown in his music that feature "storm" and "wind" as

³⁰ Ben Arnold, *Liszt Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 82.

characters. In “Orage” (Storm) the chromatic octave run is prevalent throughout the piece. He uses it to build tension and it is then followed by tremolo in a higher register to create a chaotic tempestuous soundscape. Liszt also used tremolos and chromatic octave runs in the *Recitativo* of “Vallée d’Obermann,” to perhaps evoke the “ungovernable desire” and *tempestoso* (stormy) quality of a soul in turmoil.

“Les Jeux d’eau à Villa d’Este” is one of the most impressionistically representative works of “water” by Liszt. The arpeggiated opening chords obviously imitate the surging fountain (e.g. the opening, and measure 108), with double-note tremolos (measures 43 and 44), and waves of thirds and fourths (measure 53). These are not the motions of gently undulating waves, but depictions of the one-way motion of energetic motions of water in a fountain.³¹

The usage of musical language for depicting non-musical sources shows Liszt’s interest in blurry boundaries of different art forms. He uses sound for pictorial purpose, tonality for emotional states, and a series of sonorous expressing states of mind.³² Those experiments for exploring the descriptive level of the music, and his idea of drawing inspiration from visual and literary art seems to foreshadow the programmatic music of Debussy.

Debussy

Debussy’s music embodies both impressionism and symbolism, though he preferred to be associated with symbolism. Joseph Auner clarified that Debussy shared similarities both with impressionism in painting and symbolism in literature in his book *Music in The*

³¹ Thomas Hoi-Ning Lee, “Evocations of Nature in the Piano Music of Franz Liszt and the Seeds of Impressionism.” (DMA diss., University of Washington, 2016), 101, <http://www2.lib.ku.edu/docview/1804413883?accountid=14556>.

³² Leslie Orrey, *Programme Music: A Brief Survey from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975), 95-96.

Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries.³³ As Claude Abravanel argued, impressionism and symbolism share some common concepts:

Regardless of numerous variations and even great divergence in their understanding of their art, the adherents of impressionism and symbolism nonetheless agreed on certain principles: reality is modified by the affective perception of the human being; the goal of art consists in describing that perception; a new technique must be created based on the fundamental element of each art. That is, the element of color exists as fundamental for painting, word for literature, and sounds for music. If these common principles are found in every symbolist art form, each art by contrast differs in its essence.³⁴

Later he further discussed the characteristics of impressionism and symbolism in his article:

Impressionism above all is an art of nature... [it] is characterized by visual sensation. The object or landscape is recognizable, albeit modified. "The drawing is not the form; it is the manner of seeing the form" as Degas stated.

Literary symbolism strives to reproduce the affective is of words and ideas... As Mallarme clarifies, "To name an object to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which is meant to unfold little by little". Thus, symbolist poetry accustoms us to a usage of words in which the idea expressed largely surpasses the one that seems to be stated.

Musical symbolism (falsely termed impressionism) aims at exactly the same goal but its state of being is completely indeterminate. Sounds are neither landscape, nor object nor idea; they have no significance if not that of producing affective or emotional states in the listener.³⁵

Besides impressionism and symbolism, the borrowed idea of exoticism—this might come from the influence of symbolism, as symbolists also like to draw from exotic elements to their works—and the technical ideas culled from oriental arts in his music are the essential elements that made Debussy's music sound unique. In the *New Grove Dictionary* article on subject, Ralph Locke provides a definition of exoticism, there were several compositional techniques that composers use to evoke "a place, people or social milieu: modes and harmonies, unharmonized unisons or octaves, parallel motions, drones and static harmonies;

³³ Joseph Henry Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013), 27.

³⁴ C. Abravanel, "Symbolism and Performance" in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 29.

³⁵ Abravanel, "Symbolism and Performance," 29-30.

distinctive repeated rhythmic or melodic patterns; and unusual musical instruments (especially percussion) or performing.”³⁶

Another important phrase associated with Debussy would be the *fin-de-siècle* (the end of century). “The [*fin-de-siècle*] in Paris was a period of great artistic change and achievement. It was a fertile time for artists who were gradually breaking away from established traditions and forging a path into a new century, artists across disciplines knew one another.”³⁷ In this period, Debussy absorbed ideas emanating from visual and literary arts and he “talked freely of sounds as color, paintings as symphonies, and poetry as music with his poet and painter friends.”³⁸ Debussy fancied the Japanese art of *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world) during the *fin-de-siècle* period. As he wrote to his publisher, “I am boundlessly grateful to you for humoring my cover mania,” because of the Japanese blue and pale gold that he wanted for the title lettering on his first edition of *Estampes*.³⁹

Debussy’s desire for the fusion of arts is perfectly presented in his *Estampes* as the work includes both exotic elements and the concept of Japanese painting. The three pieces contained in this set are “Pagodes” (Pagodas), “La soirée dans Grenade” (Evening in Granada), and “Jardins sous la pluie” (Gardens in the Rain). In *Estampes*, he used the exotic elements and the tangible ideas of Japanese print to evoke the “inexpressible titles.”⁴⁰

The title of “Pagodes” is somewhat abstract in terms of its title; pagodas might exist in any Asian or Southeast Asian country. Debussy did not give any more characteristic description of it besides the title “Pagodes,” but evoked the image by imitating the resonance of Javanese gamelan ensemble and pentatonic scales (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Also, the clearly recurring patterns inspired by the structural idea of Japanese print is clearly shown in this piece.⁴¹ Debussy uses two-measure and four-measure phrases in different configurations to structure the music. Also,

³⁶ Grove Music Online, s.v. “Exoticism,” by Ralph P. Locke, April 15th, 2019, <https://doi-org.www1.lib.ku.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.S45644>.

³⁷ Brenda Lynne Leach, *Looking and Listening: Conversations Between Modern Art and Music* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 117.

³⁸ Roberts, *Images*, 3.

³⁹ Roberts, *Images*, 46-47.

⁴⁰ Roberts stated one of the arts of symbolism is expressing “the inexpressible.”

⁴¹ Roberts, *Images*, 62.

“La soirée dans Grenade” (Evening in Granada) clearly featured guitar figuration and habanera dance rhythm (see Example 11 “La soirée dans Grenade,” mm. 1–4

délicatement et presque sans nuances

Modérément animé

m.g.

pp m.d.

2 Red.

a Tempo

Rit.

Rit.

) to depict the “Spanish” quality of the music.

Example 10 “Pagodes,” mm. 1–6

Mouvement de Habanera

Commencer lentement dans un rythme nonchalamment gracieux

ppp

Example 11 “La soirée dans Grenade,” mm. 1–4

The image shows the first four measures of the piano piece "La soirée dans Grenade" by Debussy. The score is written for piano in 3/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The tempo is marked "Modérément animé" and the performance instruction is "délicatement et presque sans nuances". The first measure is marked "pp" (pianissimo) and "m.d." (mezzo-dolce). The second measure is marked "m.g." (mezzo-gioioso). The third measure is marked "a Tempo". The fourth measure is marked "Rit." (ritardando). The score features a prominent melodic line in the right hand, often marked with an "8" and a dashed line, indicating an eighth-note pattern. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The piece is in a 3/4 time signature.

An actual technique of picture-making supports Debussy’s interest in visual art becoming translated into musical terms.⁴² The idea of decorative melodic line featured in “Pagodes,” and recurring patterns in “La soirée dans Grenade” and “Jardins sous la pluie” might come from the idea of Japanese painting also.⁴³ According to the definition of exoticism given above, pentatonic and whole tone scales, as well as the aural imitation of unusual instruments from other countries (Javanese gamelan) in this piece urge the listener to connect the experience on their own. The images that are evoked by this music might differ for each listener; symbolists merely suggest the image.

Debussy’s symbolist tendencies may have inspired him to express light, color, and the five senses in his music, just like symbolist poets drew from those elements in their poems. Traditional musical language cannot be the only tool to evoke those “inexpressible” elements in music, therefore, Debussy explored and blended musical language from exotic countries and techniques that come from oriental arts to create his musical symbolist world.

⁴² Roberts, *Images*, 65.

⁴³ Roberts, *Images*, 66.

“Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” (Sounds and Scents Swirl in the Evening Air) is the fourth Prelude in Debussy’s *Preludes*, Book I. The title is taken from the third line of Charles Baudelaire’s poem “Harmonie du soir” (Evening Harmony). It is possibly one of the most representative works for evoking the senses and pictures through music.

Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige
Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!

Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu'on afflige;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.
Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu'on afflige,
Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir;
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige.

Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige...
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor!

Now is the time when trembling on its stem
Each flower fades away like incense;
Sounds and scents turn in the evening air;
A melancholy waltz, a soft and giddy dizziness!

Each flower fades away like incense;
The violin thrills like a tortured heart;
A melancholy waltz, a soft and giddy dizziness!
The sky is sad and beautiful like some great resting-place.

The violin thrills like a tortured heart,
A tender heart, hating the wide black void.
The sky is sad and beautiful like some great resting-place;
The sun drowns itself in its own clotting blood.

A tender heart, boring the wide black void,
Gathers all trace from the pellucid past.
The sun drowns itself in clotting blood.

Like the Host shines O your memory in me!⁴⁴

The poem follows the structure of *pantoum*, a Malaysian poetic form in French and English. The *pantoum* consists of a series of quatrains with the rhyme scheme ABAB, in which the second and fourth lines of a quatrain recur as the first and third lines in the succeeding quatrain.⁴⁵ This means the fifth line is the same as the second line, the seventh line parallels the fourth line, and so forth. Debussy's preludes have four sections and the theme acts as the refrain in each section: Section I (mm. 1–8), Section II (mm. 9–17), Bridge (mm. 18–23), Section III (mm. 24–30), Bridge (mm. 31–40), and Section IV (mm. 41–49). These seem to correspond to the four sections of the poem. Moreover, two dominant intervals are found throughout this Prelude, the perfect fourth and the tritone, just as the poem only contains two rhyme sounds.⁴⁶ Section I is shown in Example 12.

Example 12 “Les sons et las parfums tournent dans l’air du soir,” mm. 1–8

The theme is presented in the opening two bars, while the melody is built with a perfect fourth (E–A), a half-step (A–B-flat), and a descending tritone (B-flat–E). Besides the melody,

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Wagner, “Charles Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal*/Flowers of Evil,” from *Selected Poems of Charles Baudelaire* (NY: Grove Press, 1974), accessed April 10, 2019, <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/142>.

⁴⁵ *Britannica Online Academic Ed Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir ition*, s.v. “Pantoum,” accessed April 10th, 2019, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.

⁴⁶ Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music: The Extra-musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon, 1997), 161.

Debussy constructed the chords using a perfect fourth and tritone (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). The structure of the chords is divided into two types: a tritone with a perfect fourth (m. 1: B-flat to E with a D to G) and a perfect fourth with a tritone (m. 3: F to B-flat with an A-flat to D). Debussy used these two types of chords in the rest of the piece as well. A tritone with a perfect fourth exists in measures 39, 40, and 45 and a perfect fourth with a tritone appears in measures 40, 41, and 45 (see Example 13).⁴⁷

Moreover, As Baudelaire recontextualized the repeated line in various ways, Debussy used the Theme A, Theme B, and the chord 4-27 (0258) distinctively throughout this prelude.⁴⁸ For example, Debussy initially presented these two themes and chord in the opening two bars, then used them in measures 24 and 25 to serve as a refrain, corresponding to the structural idea of the poem. However, in measure 27, he transposed Theme B down a major third and augmented the lower voices. In measure 31, the chord appears a semitone lower with the last beat missing.⁴⁹ Debussy also developed the chord 4-27 (0258) parallel to the structural idea of the poem. After the opening two measures, Debussy placed the 4-27 chord in series of parallel motion and continues use it as a vertical entity in measure 5. Bringing the sonority into a new context, he then wrote a series of minor thirds to interrupt the chord 4-27 (0258) in measures 6 and 7.⁵⁰ Another example is found in measures 37 through 40. The chord 4-27 (0258) is followed by a shortened version of Theme B and the same three chords 4-27 (0258).⁵¹

⁴⁷ Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, 162.

⁴⁸ Jayson Smith, "Memory, Repetition, and Recontextualization in Debussy's 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir'" in *Harmonia*, 12 (2013–2014): 4-5, <https://music.indiana.edu/departments/academic/music-theory/GTA/GTA%20Symposium%202016%20program.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Smith "Memory, Repetition, and Recontextualization," 9.

⁵⁰ Smith "Memory, Repetition, and Recontextualization," 11.

⁵¹ Smith "Memory, Repetition, and Recontextualization," 11.

Example 13 “Les sons et las parfums tournent dans l’air du soir,” mm. 38–41



The opening two bars have apparent rhythmic ambiguities. The time signature in the opening creates confusion with irregular beats and the dynamic markings stress the moving tempo, while the “hairpin” marking makes the stress fall on the third beat of the first measure (see Example 12).⁵² Moreover, the two-note slur on the fifth beat of the first measure and the first beat of the second measure make the stress falls on the fifth beat of the first measure.

The harmonies of the two opening bars remain unresolved. The music begins with an A major triad, then moves towards a striking E-half diminished-seventh chord, perfect fourth, a diminished second followed by a tritone. The first phrase ends on an A-major thirteenth chord in measure 3. The rhythm and the harmonies suggest a waltz feel with strange, broken bar lines.⁵³ This seems to reflect the “melancholy waltz” and also create a feeling of “sweet-drunkness.” A similar harmonic passage later reappears in measure 27 in A-flat (see Example 14).

Example 14 “Les sons et las parfums tournent dans l’air du soir,” m. 27



⁵² Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1996), 76.

⁵³ Roberts, *Images*, 76.

Debussy seems to desire that his harmonies are left unresolved. He also sometimes resolves them unexpectedly to create an “inexpressible” sense, like in the final measure where the cadential progression suggests a resolution of the leading tone G-sharp to the tonic A. When the A is not there, but the ear has been anticipating it, it follows Debussy’s instruction of “like a distant ringing of horns” (see Example 15).⁵⁴ Along with his use of parallel motion, Debussy created a transparent sound picture which properly accommodates the “pellucid past” in Baudelaire’s poem.

Example 15 “Les sons et las parfums tournent dans l’air du soir,” mm. 51–54



Debussy reflected the structure and imagery of the poem through harmonic language, texture, and musical indications, including dynamics and musical terms in this piece. He gives a specific marking to indicate the tempo, like *En retenant* (holding back) followed by *à tempo* (original tempo); *serrez un peu* (quicker) followed by *retenu* (held back); *cédez* (relax the speed) and *rubato* followed by *Serrez* (tighten), then *rubato*. Those markings seem to imitate the fading of air and scents, while the sound of pentatonic scales and parallel motions create a mystical image. As Paul Roberts argued “To appreciate ‘Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir’ is to hold the key to a central aspect of Debussy’s genius.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Roberts, *Images*, 324.

⁵⁵ Roberts, *Images*, 71.

Piano as an Evocative Device

The standardization of the modern piano benefited from the evolution of the piano's mechanical developments in nineteenth century. The double-escapement allowed the keys to have a faster reaction or rebound; the cast-iron frame, cross-stringing, sostenuto pedal, and felted hammers enabled the piano to have a richer resonance and a blended, more harmonized sound throughout its range.

“The development of the piano found a champion with young Liszt.”⁵⁶ As mentioned before, Liszt started to give concerts in bigger halls due to the number of audiences being extended. However, necessity brings invention. Liszt chose a seven-octave Érard piano to perform in front of three thousand people at La Scala Opera House in 1837. The piano allowed Liszt to create a powerful sound effect on the concert stage and he wrote to Sebastian Érard after the performance:

Let them not tell me anymore that the piano is not a suitable instrument for a big hall, that the sounds are lost in it, that the nuances disappear, etc. I bring as witnesses the three thousand people who filled the immense Scala theatre yesterday evening from the pit to the gods on the seventh balcony (for there are seven tiers of boxes here), all of whom heard and admired down to the smallest details, your instrument. Never before has a piano created such an effect.⁵⁷

Piano's mechanical developments brings Liszt a broader view on piano and encourages him to explore more possibilities of varies sound on this instrument. Many years later, he wrote to Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein: “The piano is the microcosm of music... Singers, flautists and bassoonists, even cornetists and bassoonists... have to learn the piano if they want to find their bearings intelligently in their own field.”⁵⁸

Charles Rosen noted that Liszt's etudes brought the invention of Romantic piano sound.⁵⁹ “The real invention concerns texture, density, tone color, and intensity—the various

⁵⁶ Thomas Hoi-Ning Lee, “Evocations of Nature in the Piano Music of Franz Liszt,” 12.

⁵⁷ Walker, *Franz Liszt*, 316.

⁵⁸ Alan Walker, *Reflections on Liszt*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 227.

⁵⁹ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 491.

noises that can be made with a piano—and it is startlingly original. The piano was taught to make new sounds.”⁶⁰ In Liszt’s piano music, the performance techniques and the use of the different textures brings his music richer resonance and a distinctive timbre. This seems to make Liszt’s piano music sound like an entire symphony.

Debussy was not as famous as Liszt as a performer, but Debussy’s playing received many acclaims because of his artistry:

We hear what appears to be a spontaneous and effortless flow of musical ideas emanating from the instrument. Debussy’s velvety touch truly creates a sound that seems to float away from a piano “without hammers.” The sensual chords gently envelop the simple melodic line in a homogeneous halo of harmony.⁶¹

In speaking of the chorus of the opéra comique “Le Diable dans le beffroi,” he expressed: “What I would like to realize is something more divided, detached, and impalpable—inorganic in appearance, and yet fundamentally organized; a real human crowd in which each voice is free, and where all the voices together nevertheless create an impression of a real, living ensemble.”⁶²

The two descriptions presented above show the stylistic playing of the composer, and his concept of sound. They both show that delicate touch and the layering of sound are two important concepts for playing Debussy’s music. Liszt and Debussy, as two explorers, both expanded and elevated the possibility of sound. They made the piano a powerful device, evoking pictorial and literary sources in music.

Liszt and Debussy met each other after Debussy won the Prix de Rome. Liszt’s remarkable pedaling technique made a lifelong impression made Debussy.⁶³ Other evidence

⁶⁰ Rosen, *The Romantic Generation*, 492.

⁶¹ C. Dunoyer, “Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano,” in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 94.

⁶² Stefan Jarociński, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism* (London: Eulenberg Books, 1976), 104.

⁶³ Thomas Hoi-Ning Lee, 137 quoted from François Lesure & Roger Nichols, ed., *Debussy Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 301.

that connects Liszt and Debussy might be the shared pianistic figurations in their music. For example, in Debussy's water piece, "Jardin sous la pluie," there is some Lisztian figuration as shown in Example 16 and Example 17. A similar figuration appeared in Liszt's "Les jeux d'eaux à la villa d'este," as shown in Example 18 and Example 19.

Example 16 *Jardin sous la pluie*, mm. 126–127



Example 17 *Jardin sous la pluie*, mm. 117–120



Example 18 *Les jeux d'eaux à la villa d'este*, mm. 1–2



Example 19 *Les jeux d'eaux à la villa d'este*, mm. 44–47



“Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” is a good example to compare with Liszt’s storm music. Debussy uses similar materials as those found in Liszt’s storm pieces, such as trills, tremolos, chromatic scales, appreciated chords, and harshly dissonant chords. However, there is definitely a distinction between Liszt’s storm pieces and Debussy’s storm pieces. Liszt tended to evoke suffering and tragedy from a first-person point of view, while Debussy drew the “storm” pictures in a third-person point of view.⁶⁴ Besides this, the raw materials that they uses might be similar, but the different treatment of tonality, harmonies, dynamics, and tempos create different effects.

Debussy may have borrowed the textures and certain pianistic figuration of Liszt. However, the distinction of their sound is obvious. Besides narrative, the subjects being from different perspectives, and the use of the raw material differently, Debussy’s symbolist tendency, and the influence that comes from impressionism and exoticism make him explore more possibilities of touch, pedaling, and drawing from the sound of ensembles from other countries in his music. As Paul Roberts noted:

Debussy exploits the softer resonances and vibrations of the instrument, drawing our ear to the point where resonance fades, where the different elements of a sound shift and transform themselves—just as a visible object appears to change shape and substance under different aspects of light.⁶⁵

After Liszt brought the sound of piano to the symphonic scale and evoked orchestral color in piano music, Debussy explored new possibilities that made the piano capable of

⁶⁴ Thomas Hoi-Ning Lee, “Evocations of Nature in the Piano Music of Franz Liszt,” 187.

⁶⁵ Roberts, *Images*, 34.

evoking an “inexpressive” effect. The exploration of piano playing and piano writing that these two composers achieved brought a new realm of sound to the piano.

Conclusion

Liszt possibly provided a model for Debussy because his concept of piano writing and texture settings brought the music orchestral color. The concept of blurring the boundary of art form—which lies behind programmatic music—becomes a bridge to connect him with Debussy, who began his compositional career several decades later.

Compared to when they interpret absolute music, pianists have one significant advantage with programmatic music. The title can provide performers some inspiration and clues that will bring them closer to the composer's idea before reading the music. The pianist is an interpreter who recreates the music by their own relative imaginative experience, which is inevitably shaped by a programmatic title as much as by the composer's written symbols and instructions.

We have discussed how Liszt and Debussy evoke the non-musical elements through their compositional techniques. However, when we are interpreting the music, those techniques might need to be treated case by case. For example, a descending line in the key of E minor might evoke a “dark downward step,” whereas a descending line in the key of E major might be something different. A pianist should not be governed solely by inspiration nor intelligence when they are interpreting the music. As Heinrich Neuhaus said in *The Art of Piano Playing*, a pianist should “finds meaning in sounds, the poetic content of music, its regular structure and harmony.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ K. Leibovitch, *Heinrich Neuhaus: The Art of Piano Playing* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 61.

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