

A STUDY OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S *SUITE BERGAMASQUE*:
PRELUDE, MENUET, CLAIR DE LUNE AND PASSEPIED

By

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Abstract

Suite Bergamasque is one of the best-loved piano compositions by Claude Debussy. It is performed often in recitals and continues to gain popularity in the classical and popular realms.

The focus of this research paper is to present the compositional history of Claude Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque*, to analyze all four movements, with special attention to the music of "Clair de Lune," and to explore the works of art and poetry that inspired it, as well as some of the connections between the music, poetry, and art that influenced Debussy overall.

This paper first explores the complicated compositional history of the suite. *Suite Bergamasque* was first written in 1890, but completed and published in 1905. This study of the historical background will give us an increased understanding of Debussy's compositional development as demonstrated in this work. Then, I will analyze all movements of *Suite Bergamasque*, considering harmonic language, formal structure, and performance practice. I will next focus on analyzing the relationship between "Clair de Lune" and the other movements, compositionally and in relation to the words and paintings that inspired the work. Finally, I will demonstrate the connections between Debussy's music and the poetry of Paul Verlaine, as well as the works of the French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau.

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Introduction

Claude Debussy is one of the most important French composers of the twentieth century. He developed a remarkable harmonic language and new musical structures that can be related to impressionist and symbolist aesthetics.¹ Debussy approached music by focusing on the sound itself, developing innovative ideas of larger form from his own musical ideas, rather than received norms. Debussy's music was greatly influenced by some of the symbolist poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the most influential symbolist poets, Stephane Mallarmé, used musical imagery throughout his poems, further intertwining the two arts.²

Debussy treated chords as individual sounds. He used them coloristically and assembled them in new and untraditional formulations.³ They were not the usual elements of a functional harmonic progression. His music often featured whole tone scales and octatonic scales. The special resonance of these novel devices allowed Debussy's music to explore a new world of sensual sound and structure.

Debussy was also influenced by the impressionist painters.⁴ They developed a technique of thick brush strokes to capture the essence of a subject without overly focusing on the details. They were less concerned about a detailed, realistic depiction of the specific object. Instead, they focused on the depiction of light, shadow, and subtle color. In a similar way, Debussy explores subtle contrasts of timbre, texture, and harmonic language to depict the beauty of nature or tell a story.

¹ Oscar Thompson, *Debussy, man and artist* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1940), 20.

² Thompson, *Debussy*, 21.

³ Frank Dawes, *Debussy piano music* (London: British Broadcasting Corp, 1982), 8

⁴ Paul Roberts, *Images: the piano music of Claude Debussy* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2001), 88.

What he achieved with innovative patterns of motive and harmony is similar to what the impressionist painters achieved with their brush strokes. Debussy is a poet using music to depict the beauty of nature. In the aesthetic of Debussy's music, nature often is the core element.⁵ Nature is like a religion, he said. "When I gaze at a sunset sky and spend hours contemplating its marvelous and ever-changing beauty, an extraordinary emotion overwhelms me. Nature in all its vastness is truthfully reflected in my sincere and feeble soul."⁶

⁵ Thompson, *Debussy*, 22.

⁶ Thompson, *Debussy*, 22.

Historical Background

Suite Bergamasque is one of Claude Debussy's most famous piano solos. He started to compose this collection in 1890 when he was 28, but revised it significantly before its publication in 1905.⁷ It includes works of beauty and charm; it is also an important work of Debussy's early to middle period.

The word *bergamasque* is associated with a sixteenth-century form of improvised Italian street theater called *commedia dell'arte*, in which puppets and live actors play stock characters.⁸ The term itself refers to the Italian city Bergamo, an important center of *commedia dell'arte*. Bergamo is the hometown of the Harlequin character, a witty, cowardly comic servant who is a standard figure in *commedia dell'arte*.⁹ All *commedia dell'arte* characters had a distinctive costume, including a mask and long nose. Their manner can be foolish or sly, and they hide their real feelings under masks. The French poet Paul Verlaine wrote in his poem "Clair de Lune," "they do not seem to believe in their happiness, and their song mingles with the moonlight, with the calm moonlight sad and beautiful."¹⁰ The term *bergamasque* also can be associated with a dance, the *Bergomask*.¹¹ This dance originated in the sixteenth century in the Italian town of Bergamo. This rustic and clumsy dance is characterized by *bergamasca* melodies that used stepwise motion and repeated patterns, with a simple texture and a fixed harmonic progression.¹²

This piano suite originally consisted of a Prelude, a Menuet, a "Promenade

⁷ Victor Lederer, *Debussy: The Quiet Revolutionary* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 2007), 36.

⁸ Lederer, *Debussy: The Quiet Revolutionary*, 37.

⁹ Dawes, *Debussy Piano Music*, 20.

¹⁰ Paul Verlaine, *Fêtes Galantes* (Paris: Les Amies Press, 1869)

¹¹ Robert Orledge. *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 149.

¹² Orledge. *Debussy and the Theatre*, 152.

Sentimentale,” and a Pavane. According to the author Leon Vallas, “in 1904 an advertisement of Fromont’s in the musical papers announced that it was ‘in the press,’ and was to retain its original form. It eventually appeared at the end of June 1905, and consisted of four pieces: *Prelude*, *Menuet*, *Clair de Lune*—which may possibly be the piece originally entitled *Promenade Sentimentale*, and *Passepied* which, in spite of its title which suggests a brisk tempo, is probably very similar to the original *Pavane*, if not identical with it. In the course of fifteen years the ‘Suite Bergamasque’ obviously underwent many alterations.”¹³

The first version of *Suite Bergamasque* was finished around 1890, when Debussy was still a young composer. In March 1905, Debussy revised the earlier versions of the *Prelude*, *Menuet*, and *Pavane*. He changed the original third movement, “*Promenade Sentimentale*,” to “*Clair de Lune*.” Unfortunately, the first sketch of *Suite Bergamasque* is lost. It is thus impossible to know how many alterations he made to the final version, but we still have some important clues that indicate Debussy made several big changes. During the fifteen years from 1890 to 1905, Debussy composed three different versions.

The first version, written in 1890, had four pieces, as noted above. According to the advertisement by Fromont, the second version was written in 1903.¹⁴ At that time Debussy reorganized the suite to include three pieces instead of four. When he changed from four pieces to three, he also changed the names of each work. The first work was called “*Masques*,” the second *Sarabande*, and the last “*L’isle Joyeuse*.”¹⁵

The final version was published in 1905 by Fromont, as a collection of four works.

¹³ Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy, his life and works*, translated by Maire and Grace O’Brien (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 74.

¹⁴ Vallas, *Claude Debussy, his life and works*, 74.

¹⁵ Vallas, *Claude Debussy, his life and works*, 74.

Debussy kept the first two pieces from the 1890 version with the same titles, replaced the third piece with “Clair de Lune” and added the final work, Passepied. There is no evidence that Passepied is the same piece as the Pavane of the first version. “Masque” and “L’isle Joyeuse,” from the second version, eventually were sold to Durand, and published as individual pieces in 1904. These are not the same works as the Prelude and Menuet of the first version. Debussy put 1890 as the date under the title of the 1905 publication; this perhaps meant that he still considered this piano suite to have been one of his early piano compositions.

Harmonic Language and Formal Structure

Debussy's music often incorporates whole-tone scales. We can find this characteristic element in *Suite Bergamasque*. In the Prelude, Debussy used the whole-tone scale pattern in many places, as shown in Figure 1 below, mm.33-34, in the middle voice; he also used the whole-tone pattern in the second movement, Menuet. The use of the whole-tone scale affects the overall sound of the piece, since it lacks a tonal center and does not have the strong feeling of resolution found in the major and minor key system. Other types of scales and harmonies are used as well. In the Prelude, as shown in Figure 2 below, measure 12, Debussy uses a pentatonic scale in the soprano line in a chorale texture; he also uses the F augmented chord at the end of measure 12 in Prelude. In the Passepied, as shown in Figure 3 below, measure 147, Debussy uses Dorian mode in the coda in this section. Debussy also uses 7th, 9th and 11th chords in the Clair de Lune.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Debussy's Prelude, measures 32-35. The first system shows measures 32 and 33. In measure 32, the right hand plays a whole-tone scale starting on G4 (G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G) with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment. In measure 33, the right hand continues the whole-tone scale, and the left hand features a *piu p* dynamic. The second system shows measures 34 and 35. In measure 34, the right hand continues the whole-tone scale with a *dim.* dynamic. In measure 35, the right hand plays a whole-tone scale starting on G4 (G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G) with a *dim.* dynamic, while the left hand plays a whole-tone scale starting on G3 (G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G) with a *dim.* dynamic.

Figure 1. Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 32-35



Figure 2, Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 10-12



Figure 3, Debussy, *Passepied*, mm. 144-156

The four pieces have a very close connection with each other. The motifs in each piece share the same harmonic language. For instance, in the *Prelude*, as shown in figure 4 below, measure 11, the opening section features thirds in the melody in stepwise motion. The *Menuet*, as shown in figure 5 below, measure 5, uses the same intervals in the opening melody but with different rhythmic values in measure 5. In “*Clair de Lune*”, as shown in figure 6 below, mm. 1-3, Debussy again uses thirds. It is a cyclic motif

throughout this collection.



Figure 4. Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 10-12



Figure 5. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 4-6



Figure 6. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 1-3

Debussy also evokes the baroque dance suite in *Suite Bergamasque*. He uses baroque dance forms in the Menuet and Passepiéd.¹⁶ During the baroque period, the prelude often served as an introductory piece, with an improvisational character. It frequently

¹⁶ Lederer, *Debussy: The Quiet Revolutionary*, 37-38.

alternated improvisatory passages with strict contrapuntal sections. The minuet was in triple meter, in a moderate tempo and with a simple texture. The passepied was a light dance in a faster tempo, starting with an incomplete measure. It is noteworthy that Debussy used baroque dances as models for the second and final pieces of *Suite Bergamasque*, although they may also be analyzed as ternary form. “Clair de Lune” is not based on a dance.

“Clair de Lune” thus stands out from the other movements. It is based on a poem, not a dance form. Paul Verlaine, one of the most important French poets, wrote a poem called “Clair de Lune” in 1869.¹⁷ His poem inspired Debussy’s work, as well as a song Debussy wrote with the same title.

*Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques,
Jouant du luth et dansant, et quasi
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques!*

*Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur
L'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune.
Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur,
Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune.*

*Au calme clair de lune triste et beau,
Qui fait rêver, les oiseaux dans les arbres,
Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau,
Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.*

—Paul Verlaine “Clair de Lune”¹⁸

*Your soul is a chosen landscape
Charmed by maskers and revellers
Playing the lute and dancing and almost
Sad beneath their fanciful disguises!*

¹⁷ Roberts, *Images*, 88.

¹⁸ Roberts, *Images*, 90.

*Even while singing, in a minor key,
Of victorious love and fortunate living
They do not seem to believe in their happiness,
And their song mingles with the moonlight.*

*The calm moonlight, sad and beautiful,
Which sets the birds in the trees dreaming
And makes the fountains sob with ecstasy,
The tall slender fountains among the marble statues!*
—translation by Peter Low¹⁹

Debussy uses both the character of baroque dance and ternary form in Prelude, Menuet, and Passepied, and ternary form in “Clair de Lune.” He applies some distinguishing elements from Baroque dances to the three pieces with dance titles, while using the structure of ternary form.

The Prelude uses ternary form.

- The A section, mm. 1-19, is in improvisational style using scales with small note values in *tempo rubato*.
- The B section, mm. 20-65, can be divided into two different sections.
 - The first section presents a new texture from mm. 20-43. The new subject of this section is written in the Aeolian mode, creating a sense of ancient and delicate feelings.
 - The second section, mm. 44-65, changes from the fragile feeling of the first section to a thick choral texture. It moves from the higher register to the lower register, and then gradually returns to the higher register,

¹⁹ Peter Low, “Fauré’s Cinq Mélodies and the Poet Verlaine,” *Journal of Singing*, vol. 61, no. 4 (2005), 353-358.

increasing tension towards the end of the B section.

- The return of the A section starts in measure 66, returning to the improvisational style of the opening, leading to a brilliant coda in measure 76.

The Menuet has a similar structure using compound ternary form.

- The A section goes to measure 49. It includes a small *aba* form. The first subject, mm. 1-17, has a simple and elegant style. The transition presents a more rhythmic dance feeling from mm. 18-21. In the *b* section, the character changes to become more lyrical and romantic, by using long legato lines instead of staccato. The return of the a section occurs in mm. 41-49.
- The B section, mm. 50-72, suddenly changes character with dramatic fast scales.
- The return of the A section, mm. 73—96, is followed by a short coda.

“Clair de Lune” is also in compound ternary form. The A section, mm. 1-26, begins with a descending main theme in D-flat major. The use of descending thirds is traditionally associated with feelings of loneliness and sadness. In the B section, mm. 27-50, Debussy uses a contrasting ascending style to rise to the highest point of the piece with passionate arpeggiated sixteenth notes and lyrical melodies. The return of the A section back to the sentimental mood of the opening with softer dynamics from measure 51 to the end.

The Passepied is also in ternary form, although, compared to the other pieces, it is much more modulatory. The A section begins in F-sharp minor with a delightful dance character. Debussy writes a constant staccato eighth note accompaniment part throughout

the piece, in a light texture. In the B section, there is a modulation from F-sharp minor to A-flat major in measure 76 and then back to F-sharp minor in measure 106. The return of the A section starts from measure 106 expressing a feeling of lightness by using the same non-legato melody in a higher register, with three against four polyrhythms in measure 125. It concludes with a coda in Dorian mode beginning in measure 147. By raising the 6th degree of the F-sharp minor scale to create the mode, a feeling of brightness is added to the end of this piece.

Analysis of Claude Debussy's *Suite Bergamasque*

Prelude

Debussy uses diverse styles in this opening work. At the opening, the style is improvisational and marked “tempo rubato,” with big dynamic contrasts, and in ternary form. Debussy uses stepwise motion in the right hand's sixteenth-note passage in F major at m. 2, marked “tempo rubato” to capture the feelings of spontaneous performance. In the Prelude, as shown in figure 7 below, mm.1-6, references the baroque arabesque style.²⁰ Arabesque style is an ornamental shape found in Baroque music or the Baroque visual arts work. It is characterized by using many lines that curve and cross each other in a decorative arts work.



Figure 7. Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 1-6

²⁰ Dawes, *Debussy piano music*, 21.

It can be used many different parameters of music, including melodic, contrapuntal or harmonic passages. This characteristic style can be found in the music of François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau.²¹ Rameau's suite in A minor from the *Pièces de Clavecin*, as shown in figure 8 below, mm. 5-6, can be considered applied Arabesque style.



Figure 8. Rameau, *Suite in A Minor*, mm. 1-6

For the first ten measures of the Prelude, there is a broad range of expression. Measures 1, 2, 7, and 8 have brilliant passages, contrasting strongly with measures 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, and 10. In these measures the character is elegant with soft dynamics. Debussy also incorporated multiple voices in these latter measures to make a fuller tonal texture. In the Prelude, as shown in figure 9 below, mm. 1-3, the opening harmony is special for its time, with an added ninth above the tonic and dominant chords in F major on the third beat of measure 1 and the first beat of measure 3.

²¹ Lederer, *Debussy: The Quiet Revolutionary*, 37.

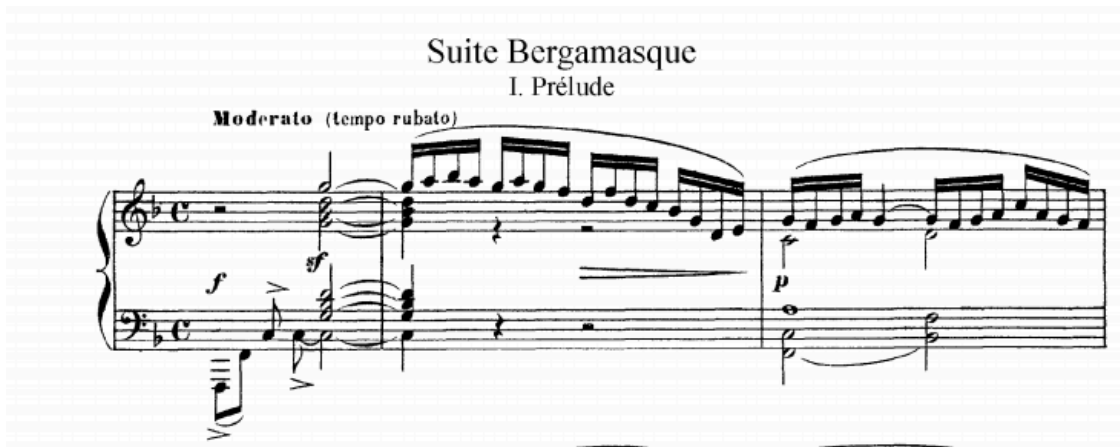


Figure 9. Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 1-3

The harmonic language, tonal texture, and rhythmic elements in *Prelude* are innovative. Although there is a noticeable feeling of tonic and dominant in mm. 1-4, the second theme of the opening section, measure 12, uses a pentatonic scale in the soprano line in a chorale texture. In addition, in the *Prelude*, as shown in figure 10 below, measure 12, Debussy uses parallel fifths the end of measure 12. Debussy also uses an F augmented chord at the end of measure 12.



Figure 9. Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 10-12

This again contrasts with the opening improvisatory passage: the chorale section tempo is stricter and the mood could be described as spiritual. In the Prelude, as shown in figure 11 below, mm. 20-29, the second subject introduces a new scale, the Aeolian mode. This provides contrast between the brilliant passionate feelings of the opening section (up to m.19) with a more inner sentimental feeling, fragile and dreamy.

The image shows a musical score for Debussy's Prelude, measures 20-27. The score is written for piano and consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 20-22) is marked 'a tempo' and 'p'. The second system (measures 23-25) is marked 'piu p'. The third system (measures 26-27) is marked 'm.g.'. The music features a variety of textures and sonorities, including parallel fifth motion and the Aeolian mode.

Figure 11. Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 20-27

In these first two sections, Debussy uses many different textures and sonorities, utilizing new harmonies and a variety of compositional techniques, including parallel fifth motion and the Aeolian mode. In the return of the A section, he uses the first theme

to build an even more brilliant section with the expressive coda. The coda starts in measure 76; the mood is passionate creating a rich sound by combining the first theme with the choral texture. Ascending sequences continue to the end of the piece.

Menuet

The second work, Menuet, is inspired by baroque dance and the arabesque motif.²² Debussy applies the arabesque style in the main theme of this piece, using delicate embellishments and ornaments in the first few measures to decorate the melody line. Debussy uses compound ternary form in the Menuet.

The Menuet is written in A minor. In the middle voice is a melody which starts on the tonic of A minor in the first beat of measure 1, but the tonic chord of A minor does not occur until after measure 18, as shown in Figure 12 below. The main theme has a very playful mood. In contrast, the middle section establishes a mysterious atmosphere by using very long slurs. Debussy used short slurs in the main theme, as shown in figure 13, with staccati and soft dynamics, but in the middle section, as shown in figure 14, he uses longer slurs to make a lyrical long line in the melody and long pedal notes in the bass to create a soothing feeling.

²² Dawes, *Debussy piano music*, 21.



Figure 12. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 18-21

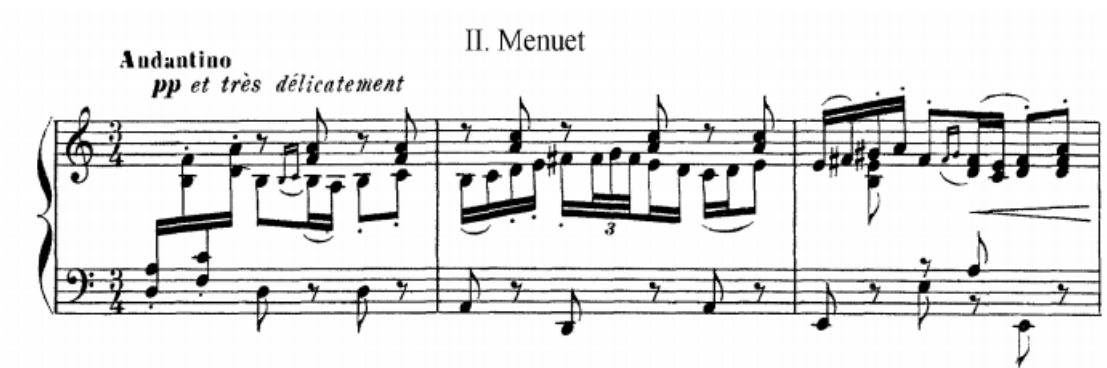


Figure 13. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 1-3



Figure 14. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 28-30

Debussy uses the traditional 3/4 time signature of a minuet, but there is no accent on the first beat. As shown in figure 15, mm. 1-3, there is no written accent on the second beat in measure 1, 2 and 3, but the added ornaments there serve to highlight the beat. The first theme is presented in simple and elegantly different ways from measure 1 to measure

3.

The image shows the first three measures of Debussy's 'Menuet'. The tempo is marked 'Andantino' and the dynamics are 'pp et très délicatement'. The music is in 3/4 time. The right hand features a melodic line with grace notes and a triplet of eighth notes in the second measure. The left hand provides a simple harmonic accompaniment.

Figure 15. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 1-3

The second theme, mm. 5-9, is more lyrical; as shown in figure 16 below, mm. 18-21, it is preceded by a section of staccato sixteenth notes. The transition, figure 17 below, mm. 22-25, changes to a lyrical and romantic style with no use of staccato.

This excerpt shows measures 18-21, characterized by staccato sixteenth-note patterns. The right hand plays chords with a staccato effect, while the left hand plays a rhythmic accompaniment. Dynamics include 'sf' and 'p'.

Figure 16. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 18-21

This excerpt shows measures 22-24, featuring a more lyrical and romantic style. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs, and the left hand has a harmonic accompaniment. Dynamics include 'mf' and 'dim.', with 'più dim.' appearing in the final measure.

Figure 17. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 22-24

The B section starts at m. 50; the first theme comes back in the last few measures of the A section, mm.44-49, and suddenly changes, using dramatic and expressive long passages. In the Menuet, as shown in Figure 18 below, mm. 43-51, Debussy actually used the first theme to precede this passage in the B section.

The image shows a musical score for Debussy's Menuet, measures 43-51. It consists of three systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system (measures 43-45) features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a simple accompaniment. The second system (measures 46-48) includes the dynamic marking 'pp' in the bass staff. The third system (measures 49-51) features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a simple accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Figure 18. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 43-51.

In measure 73 (figure 19,) the key signature changes to three flats. The lower B flat serves as a pedal tone in the accompaniment, and the first theme returns in E-flat major.



Figure 19. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 73-79

Before ending, *Menuet* modulates from E-flat major to A major, more brilliant passages achieved by transposing up a half step from measure 79 to measure 80, as shown in figure 19 and figure 20.



Figure 20. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 80-88

A strong cadence is expected on A major at m. 96, but there is a surprise key change to A minor (figure 21).

The image shows a musical score for Debussy's Menuet, measures 92-97. The score is written for piano and consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 92-94) features a treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 3/4 time signature. The right hand plays a series of eighth-note chords, while the left hand plays a bass line with some rests. A dynamic marking of *f* (forte) is present at the start of measure 94. The second system (measures 95-97) continues the piece. The right hand plays a similar eighth-note chordal pattern. The left hand has a more active bass line. A dynamic marking of *dim.* (diminuendo) is placed over measures 95 and 96, and *pp* (pianissimo) is marked at the beginning of measure 97. The key signature changes to one sharp (F#) at the start of measure 97, indicating a key change to A minor. The piece concludes with a final cadence in A minor.

Figure 21. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 92-97

In the compound ternary form of the A section, there is a diminuendo to pianissimo, using elements of the A section. In the Menuet, figure 22, mm. 95-104, the final cadence moves from an E minor chord to an A minor chord.



Figure 22. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 95-104

“Clair de Lune”

The third piece has the poetic title “Clair de Lune,” and it contrasts with the other three movements and their dance titles. According to the scholar Roy Howat, “if it really was written at the same time as the other movements, it shows Debussy being more adventurous than ever before in his piano music.”²³

It is in ternary form with a coda. Compared with the other three movements of *Suite Bergamasque*, the tonal structure of the “Clair de Lune” is mainly based on the tonic

²³ Roy Howat, *Debussy in proportion, a musical analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 41.

harmony. Debussy's music does not use modulate in the A section, but the key signature changes in the middle of the B section.

The tonal center of "Clair de Lune" is D-flat major, except mm. 37 to 42 as shown in figure 23 below, where Debussy modulates to C-sharp minor. It is the enharmonic parallel minor, so the tonal center is the same, unvarying throughout the section. He also uses different dynamics. Measure 41 is marked *forte*, the only such marking in the piece. Debussy also marked *piu cresc.* and *En animant* to increase the level of energy and excitement in measure 37.

The image displays a musical score for measures 37 to 42 of Debussy's "Clair de Lune". The score is written for piano and consists of three systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The key signature is D-flat major (two flats). The first system (measures 37-38) is marked "En animant" and "piu cresc.". The second system (measures 39-40) continues the melodic and harmonic development. The third system (measures 41-42) features a dynamic marking of "f" (forte) in measure 41 and "dim." (diminuendo) in measure 42. The key signature changes to C-sharp minor (three sharps) at the end of measure 42. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

Figure 23. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 37-42

In *Clair de Lune*, Debussy presents a dramatic contrast between the shadowy parts and the light parts by using different dynamic and rhythmic changes. There are two contrasting sets of thematic materials that highlight the contrast. The first theme is the descending third figure in the opening section, as shown in figure 24 below. This figure represents the feeling of a sigh.



Figure 24. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 1-3

The softer dynamics include a rising three-note motive in the melody in the B section, as shown in figure 25, accompanied by flowing sixteenth notes. The rising motion creates great intensity.



Figure 25. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 27-28

Melodic and harmonic rhythm play an important role in *Clair de Lune*. At the beginning of the A section, Debussy writes eighth notes, dotted quarter notes, and dotted

half notes in the melody. For the accompaniment, the harmonic rhythm is slow; each interval holds for the entire measure, perhaps depicting a sigh of regret in the fading moonlight. The A section, mm. 1-13, is associated with the descending motive in which the first note is often a suspension. Debussy uses the descending line and the sighing gesture to express what could be considered a feeling of grief.

In the contrasting B section, Debussy uses a new three-note motive, with arpeggiated harmony. The first three-note motive in *Clair de Lune*, as shown in figure 26 below, measure 27 has A-flat, C-flat and D-flat, which rises a whole step higher with an alteration as shown in figure 27, mm. 31 - 32, and then recurring with the original notes an octave higher, as shown in figure 28, mm. 35-36.



Figure 26. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, m. 27



Figure 27. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, m. 31



Figure 28. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, m. 35

In the return of the A, in the *Clair de Lune*, as shown in figure 29, mm. 51-65, Debussy uses the same descending third motive from the opening, played an octave higher. An arpeggiated accompaniment embellishes the opening motive.

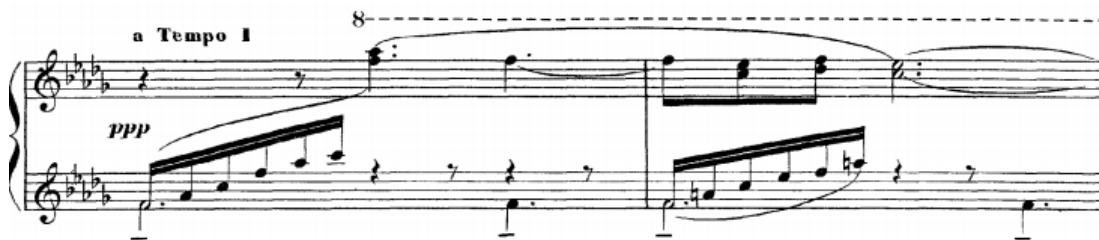


Figure 29. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 51-52

There is a variety of tempo markings in this piece, creating a romantic and sensitive feeling. The opening is marked *Andante tres expressif*, a moderately slow but flowing tempo. In measures 15 to 20, Debussy uses *tempo rubato* and *peu a peu cresc et animé* markings to encourage the performer to bring out the first climax in measure 25 in a free but excited fashion. The *un poco mosso* marking indicates increased forward movement, though still basically slow. The dramatic climax is marked *En animant* and *accelerando* in measure 37, creating passionate feelings. Afterwards, the tempo changes to *Calmato* and returns to Tempo I in the return of A section. All the excitement has faded to peaceful and nostalgic feelings.

“Clair de Lune” has become extraordinarily popular. Perhaps the reason is that this piece contains a simple texture filled with delicate and romantic feelings depicting the beauty of the moonlight. Debussy said: “It is inscribed in Nature. It must be in intimate accord with the scenery.”²⁴

²⁴ E. Robert Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (New York: Sloan & Pearce, Inc. 1950), 53.

Passepied

The final work of *Suite Bergamasque* is Passepied. Debussy follows the norm in traditional baroque dance suites by ending with a lively dance movement.²⁵ However, compared with the passepied of the seventeenth century, Debussy's tempo is slower. The seventeenth-century passepied was characterized by some use of syncopation.²⁶ In the Passepied, as shown in figure 30 below, mm. 1-7, Debussy did not follow this model; he uses very regular rhythmic patterns in *alla breva* time. A constant staccato eighth-note accompaniment is maintained throughout. Rhythmical dance sections alternate with romantic lyrical passages, as shown in figure 31 below, in the Passepied, mm. 39-59.



Figure 30. Debussy, *Passepied*, mm. 1-7

²⁵ Lederer, *Debussy: The Quiet Revolutionary*, 38.

²⁶ Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J.S. Bach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 90.



Figure 31. Debussy, *Passepied*, mm. 40-47

Debussy uses Aeolian mode for almost the entire movement. Multiple voices are added to make subtle color changes with a fuller texture, as shown in figure 32 below, in the *Passepied*, mm.16-23. There is a feeling of pure joy without sentimentality.



Figure 32. Debussy, *Passepied*, mm. 16-23

Later, Debussy introduces a 3 against 4 polyrhythm, as shown in figure 33, in the *Passepied*, mm. 24-30. The melody continues a consistent lyricism against the steady unchanging rhythmic pattern in the accompaniment part.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Debussy's *Passepied*, measures 24-31. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is written for piano. The right hand (treble clef) features a melodic line with triplets and a 'dim.' marking. The left hand (bass clef) features a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include 'mf' and 'p'.

Figure 33. Debussy, *Passepied*, mm. 24-31

In the coda, Debussy uses Dorian mode to conclude, as shown in figure 34 below, in the *Passepied*, mm. 147-156. *Passepied* combines a lively dance motion with a very simple and naïve melody line. It creates a great contrast with the third movement, “Clair de Lune.”

The image displays a musical score for Debussy's 'Passepied', measures 144-156. The score is written for piano and consists of three systems of music. Each system features a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system (measures 144-146) includes dynamic markings of *pp* and *ppp*. The second system (measures 147-150) features a *rit.* marking. The third system (measures 151-156) includes a *ppp* marking and concludes with a double bar line. The notation includes various melodic lines, chords, and articulation marks such as slurs and accents.

Figure 34, Debussy, *Passepied*, mm. 144-156

Performance Aspects of *Suite Bergamasque*

Suite Bergamasque is not a challenging piece technically, but it is difficult to give a brilliant performance in a proper style.

At the beginning of the first movement, as shown in figure 35 below, in the Prelude, mm. 1-6, Debussy marked *tempo rubato* for the first few measures from measure 1 to measure 19.

The image shows a musical score for the first movement of Debussy's Suite Bergamasque, titled 'I. Prélude'. The tempo is marked 'Moderato (tempo rubato)'. The score is written for piano in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of two systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system shows measures 1 and 2. Measure 1 begins with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a forte (f) dynamic. The right hand plays a series of chords, while the left hand plays a single note. Measure 2 features a fast sixteenth-note scale in the right hand, starting on G4 and ascending to G5. The second system shows measures 3, 4, and 5. Measure 3 continues the sixteenth-note scale in the right hand, while the left hand plays a series of chords. Measure 4 features a series of chords in the right hand, while the left hand plays a series of chords. Measure 5 features a series of chords in the right hand, while the left hand plays a series of chords. The score is marked with various dynamics, including forte (f), fortissimo (ff), and piano (p).

Figure 35. Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 1-6

The mood of measure 1 is grand, followed by a fast sixteenth-note scale through the second measure. It is challenging for pianists to change the mood in just two measures. I suggest performing the first measure like a sincere and important announcement in a slower tempo; however, the sixteenth notes in the second measure should have the feeling of running to the following measures with a slight rush.

Another interesting spot of the Prelude is found in measure 20. Debussy used appoggiaturas in the right hand, evoking sensitive feelings on the first beat in measures 20, 21, 25 and 26. In the Prelude, as shown in figure 36 below, mm. 19-27, the B in measure 20 at the *a tempo*, is slurred to the resolution on A. It is important to give a little bit more weight on the B to emphasize the resolution. From measure 26, the hands cross. This must be performed delicately and quickly linked to the resolution notes. In the Prelude, as shown in figure 37, mm. 44-51, measure 44 has the feeling of a chorale setting, and the pianist needs to hold the notes as long as possible and play each voice with a very legato touch.

The image displays a musical score for Debussy's Prelude, measures 19-27. The score is written for piano and consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 19-21) features a right-hand melody with appoggiaturas and a left-hand accompaniment. The second system (measures 22-24) continues the right-hand melody and includes a *piu p* dynamic marking. The third system (measures 25-27) shows the hands crossing, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand playing a more active accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, appoggiaturas, and dynamic markings like *a tempo*, *p*, and *piu p*.

Figure 36, Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 19-27



Figure 37. Debussy, *Prelude*, mm. 44-51

Menuet has contrasting phrasing between the first thematic pattern from measures 1 through 3, and the longer slurs of measures 5 through 9. The sections contrast in character within a rhythmic dance feeling. For example, Debussy uses short slurs in the main theme from measures 1-4 mixed with staccatos in a soft dynamic, but in the middle section from measures 26-41, he uses longer slurs to create a lyrical long line in the create soothing feelings.

Pianists need to express all of these different characters. The main theme uses staccato notes with a short slur on the second half of the second beat. Debussy uses these to emphasize the two-note slur, as shown in figure 38 below, in the Menuet, mm. 1-3.

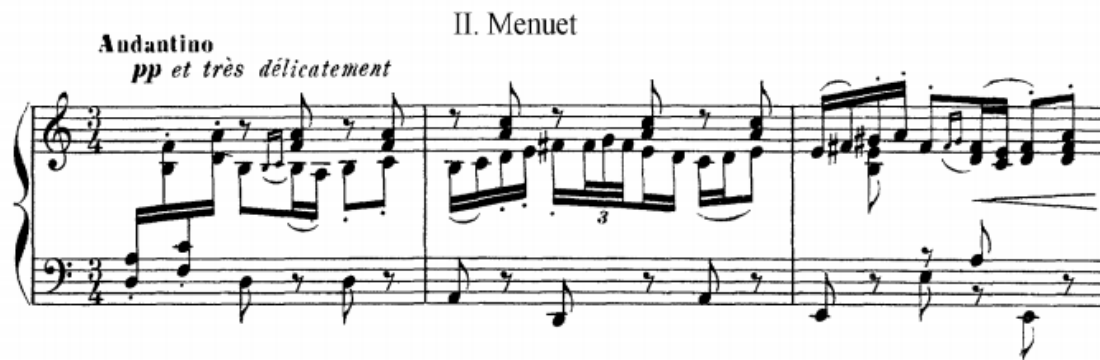


Figure 38. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 1-3

The pianist needs to be specific about following Debussy's articulation marks. In the second theme, Debussy changes the lively mood to a lyrical mood. Here again, he uses the chorale style to make the texture fuller. It is difficult for the pianist to sing out the top melody line but also let the audience hear the full texture of the harmony, as shown in figure 39 below, in the *Menuet*, mm. 5-7. Pianists are asked to play the double thirds of the melody as legato as possible.

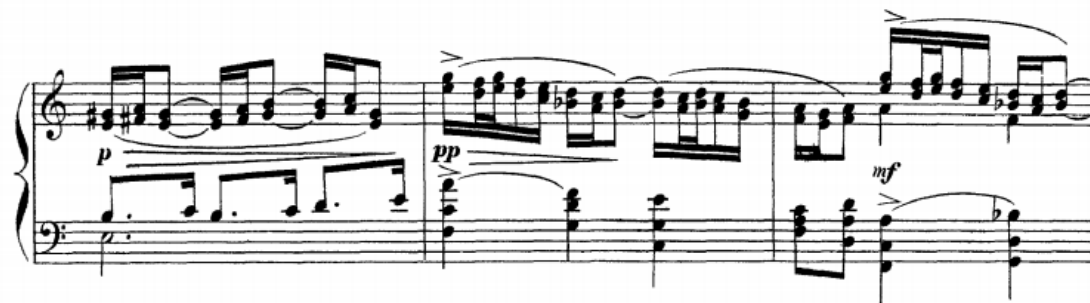


Figure 39. Debussy, *Menuet*, mm. 4-6

In this *Menuet*, Debussy did not use the marking *tempo rubato*, so keeping a steady tempo is important. The minuet dance rhythm is the unifying element throughout the work.

“Clair de Lune” is the most significant movement of the entire suite. Compared with the other pieces from *Suite Bergamasque*, “Clair de Lune” does not use a baroque dance form and it is the only piece that can be related to a poem, “Clair de Lune,” by the French poet Paul Verlaine. According to the scholar Paul Roberts, Debussy intended to mimic Verlaine’s poetic style in the piece “Clair de Lune.”²⁷ It is essential to create a sentimental and romantic mood through lyrical singing lines and rich harmonies. The soft and transparent moonlight is expressed by the mysterious melody using the descending thirds and stepwise motion, as shown in figure 40, in the *Clair de Lune*, mm. 1-7.

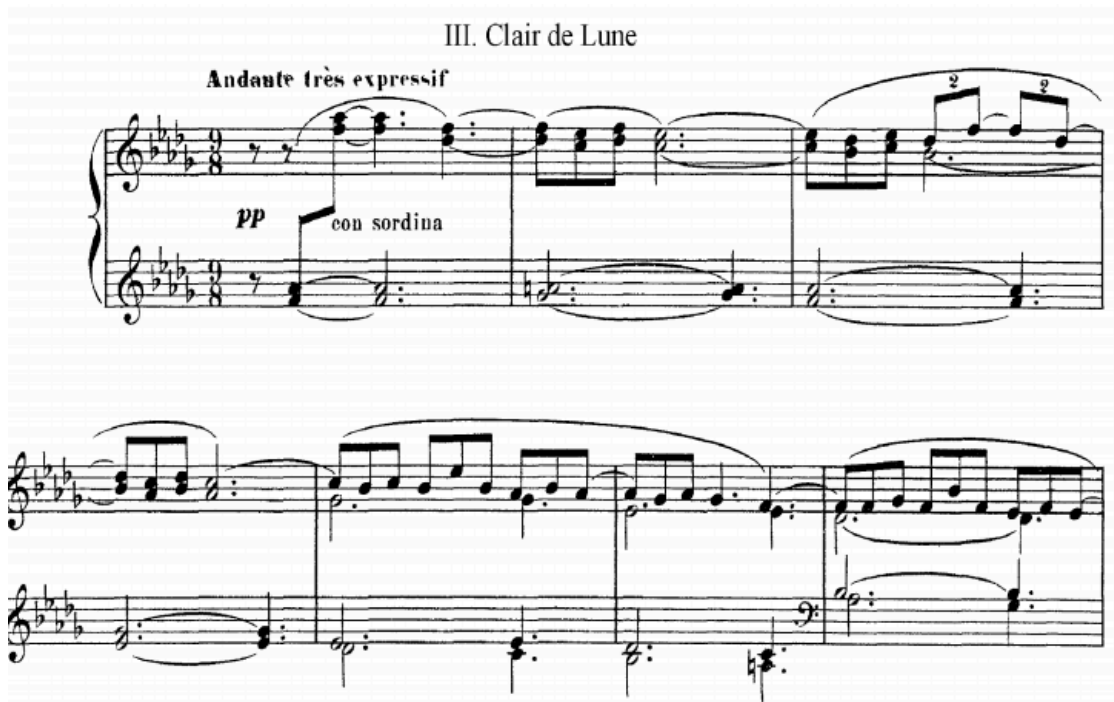


Figure 40. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 1-7.

The opening has a spacious atmosphere achieved through the use of held notes and large relaxed intervals. From mm. 1 to 14, the hands are far apart. He captures the

²⁷ Roberts, *Images*, 92-93.

peace of transparent moonlight and the feeling of loneliness by using a slow tempo, descending thirds, and the “sighing figure.” It is imperative that pianists perform this mysterious opening theme in a slow tempo but with a very flowing feeling.

However, Debussy used fast sixteenth notes in the left hand accompaniment part to increase intensity in the B section, as shown in figure 41 below, in the *Clair de Lune*, mm. 27-32, creating a feeling of intensity and passion.

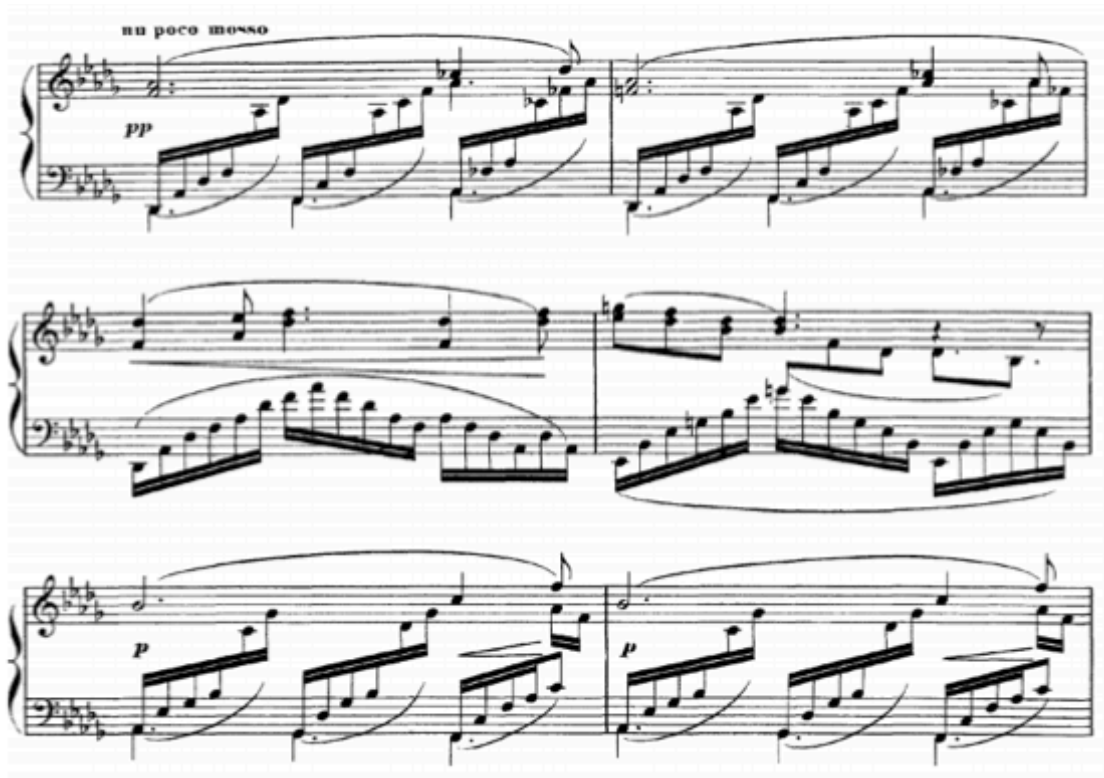


Figure 41. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 27-32

The melody maintains its lyrical and dreaming character in the B section, but compared with the melody in the exposition, it changes direction to create rising lines instead descending thirds. There are many tempo changes in the development; it is essential perform these changes smoothly and not let the mysterious feelings disappear. The left hand accompaniment needs to be played as evenly as possible to imitate the sound of a

flowing river in the evening.

In the return of the A section, the mood returns to the simple and peaceful style. The left hand part features continuous arpeggios to create a fluid feeling. Most of the work is in minor, but Debussy ends in D-flat major, a “happy ending.” It is important for pianists to make tonal contrast to make the minor-major change clearly audible. Pianists need to bring out the brighter sound in the very last passage of the piece, each note of the D-flat major passage presenting a sparkling crystal-like sound.

The use of the damper pedal is an essential part in this movement. Even though Debussy did not write any pedal markings, pianists must use the pedal to create subtle and gently blurred sounds to imitate the shimmering light created by the moonlight. For example, in the beginning of the piece, pianists need to change the pedal in each measure following the left-hand part, as shown in figure 42 below, in the *Clair de Lune*, mm. 1-7.

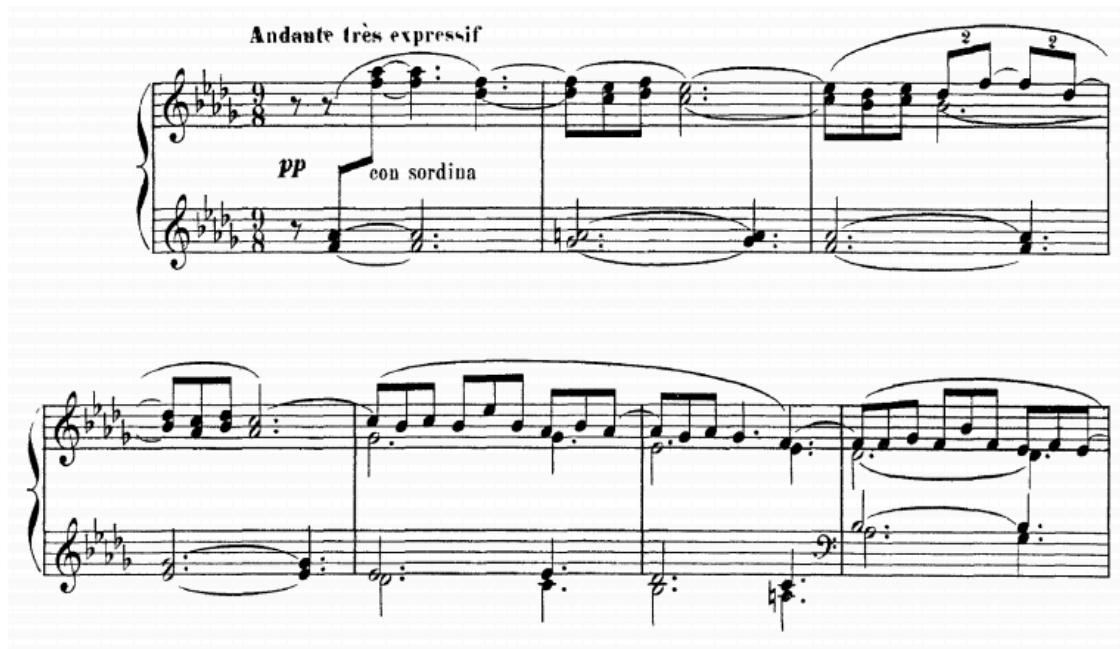


Figure 42. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 1-7

In addition, as shown in figure 43 below, in the *Clair de Lune*, mm. 15-16, in my

suggestion, pianists can either apply the sostenuto pedal to hold the bass note longer and change the pedal to make the upper parts sound clear or only use the damper pedal to make the upper parts sound legato. It's important to note that Debussy's own piano did not have a sostenuto pedal.

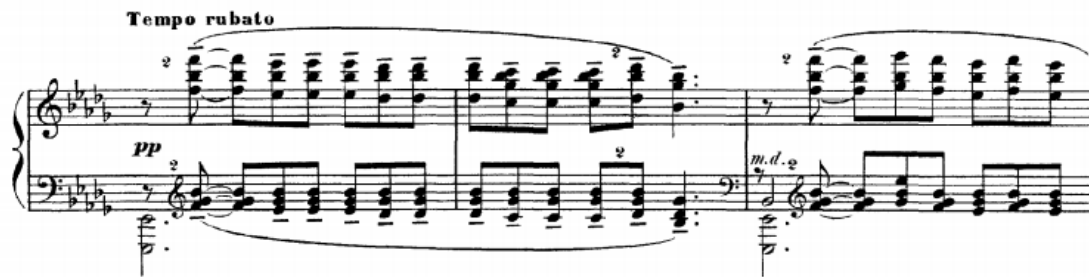


Figure 43. Debussy, *Clair de Lune*, mm. 15-16

The last movement, Passepied, reverts back to the lively dance character. In the Passepied, as shown in figure 44 below, mm. 1-7, the most characteristic element is the accompaniment part in the left hand, a staccato eighth-note pattern that creates a feeling of constant motion.

IV. Passapied

Allegretto ma non troppo

p

p

simili

Figure 44. Debussy, *Passapied*, mm. 1-7

The melody part expresses varied moods, sometimes performed with rubato, emphasizing the lyrical character. For example, in the *Passapied*, as shown in figure 45 below, mm. 40-47, Debussy marks *cédez un peu* to let the pianist gradually slow down, and then back to tempo in measure 44.



Figure 45. Debussy, *Passepied*, mm. 40-47

The tempo of this last movement is *Allegretto ma non troppo*. For pianists, in my suggestion, it is essential to set up a proper fast tempo (half note equal to 80) and maintain it throughout the movement, because this tempo permits the performer to play the left hand part clearly. The left hand should maintain a steady pulse and precise staccato, contrasting with the right hand's lyrical melody. The use of the damper pedal in *Passepied* is very challenging. The pianist needs use half pedal to keep the relatively dry sonority in the left hand accompaniment clear, while the melody needs to be played legato. For example, in mm. 24-31, as shown in figure 46 below, pianists should use the half pedal carefully to a create an impression of a smooth melody without distorting the staccato in the left hand.



Figure 46. Debussy, *Passepied*, mm. 24-31

The relationship between poetry, art and music

Debussy was inspired by Paul Verlaine's poem "Clair de Lune," in which he created a mysterious fantasy that depicted dreaming birds and masked actors singing sadly in the moonlight.²⁸ "Clair de Lune" translates to English as "Moonlight." Debussy followed Verlaine's fantasy to create a similar atmosphere. Verlaine begins the final stanza with "*Au calme clair de lune triste et beau*" (in the calm moonlight, sad and beautiful).²⁹ Debussy associates these three adjectives in his music by utilizing a moderately slow tempo, a melodic pattern with descending thirds and sighing melodic figures, and a relatively simple overall sonority.

In the first version of the poem "Clair de Lune," Verlaine indicated that he was inspired by the paintings by the famous French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau. He wrote it in the line "*Au calme clair de lune de Watteau*"³⁰, which is the final stanza in the first version of the poem. This translates into English as "in the calm moonlight of Watteau." Watteau was one of the most important French painters. He created the *fête galante* style, featuring charming nature scenes with an element of mystery.³¹ In the first stanza of Verlaine's "Clair de Lune," he depicts people hiding their sad feelings beneath their masks as "*Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques!*"³² The lonely person is trying to find solace in moonlight and fountains as Verlaine described that "*Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur, Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune.*"³³ The translation is "*They do not seem to believe in their happiness, And their song mingles with the*

²⁸ Roberts, *Images*, 94.

²⁹ Roberts, *Images*, 90.

³⁰ Roberts, *Images*, 90.

³¹ Roberts, *Images*, 88-89.

³² Roberts, *Images*, 90.

³³ Roberts, *Images*, 90.

moonlight.”³⁴

According to the scholar Alfred Cutler, “Verlaine establishes the keynotes of an atmosphere, perhaps implicit in Watteau, but made explicit in the impressionist interpretation. Verlaine creates a symbolic portrait of his love in the subtle art of Watteau.”³⁵ According to Paul Roberts,

in broad terms the *fête galante* genre expresses the enchantment of love, reflected in an idealized landscape of twilit parks and gardens where young people saunter among the trees and fountains. Often Watteau presents his characters at a masquerade. Revelers would dress in the costumes and masks of the old Italian comedy, the *commedia dell’arte* --- the world of the comic Harlequin and Pierrot and the amorous Colombine and Leander---in which buffoonery and love, joy and pathos, went hand in hand.³⁶

The inspiration from the great French painter Watteau is significant for both Paul Verlaine and Claude Debussy.

In the first version of *Suite Bergamasque*, the third piece was entitled “Promenade Sentimentale,” which was inspired by another of Paul Verlaine’s poems from his early period, “Promenade Sentimentale.”³⁷ The title translated to English is “Sentimental Stroll.” It represents the themes of loneliness and sadness. The English translation of this poem is:³⁸

The setting sun beamed its last rays
And the wind rocked the pale water-lilies.
The large water-lilies among the reeds
Sadly glistened on the calm waters.

Me, I wandered along, taking my wound with me
Along the lake, among the willows
Where the vague mist conjured up

³⁴ Low, *Journal of Singing*, 353-358.

³⁵ Alfred E. Cater, *Verlaine: A Study in Parallels* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969), 103.

³⁶ Roberts, *Images*, 89.

³⁷ Paul Verlaine, *Fêtes Galantes*

³⁸ Corinne Orde’s translation of Paul Verlaine’s *Promenade Sentimentale*. It is available online at the LiederNet Archive, http://www.lieder.net/get_text.html?TextId=34365, accessed May 10, 2019.

A great milky ghost, and despairing,
And tearfully crying with the voice of the teals
That called one another while beating their wings
Among the willows where I wandered alone,
Taking my wound with me; and the thick shroud
Of darkness drowned the last
Rays of the setting sun in the blanched waves
And the water-lilies among the reeds,
The large water-lilies on the calm waters.”

—Paul Verlaine “Promenade Sentimentale”³⁹

I believe that Debussy’s title change to “Clair de Lune” indicates Debussy’s inspiration by the Watteauesque nocturnal landscape. They both have the essential elements of fantasy to express loneliness and mystery.

³⁹ Paul Verlaine, *Fêtes Galantes*

Conclusion

In *Suite Bergamasque*, Debussy integrated baroque dance music into his own style of harmonic and melodic writing, utilizing imagery relating to painting and poetry. Debussy uses diverse styles throughout the work. The harmonic language, tonal texture, and rhythmic elements are innovative. The third piece has the poetic title “Clair de Lune,” and it contrasts with the other three movements and their dance titles. I like this suite very much, because each piece has a distinctive character and much contrast. It is both fun and challenging for pianists to explore different styles and different sounds in this suite. “Clair de lune” is deservedly one of the most popular and famous pieces in the realm of Western classical music. *Suite Bergamasque* is an outstanding example of Debussy’s early style and an effective piece for today’s piano recitals.

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