

## Claude Debussy, the Pianist-Pedagogue: possible suggestions from the instrumental piano practice of his time

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**Abstract:** *Claude Debussy, one of the creators of a visionary innovative European Musical Language historically assimilated to the Impressionist stream of the late 19th century - the beginning of the 20th century was also a refined and original pianist who through his constant concern to offer interpretations given either through the remaining documents (correspondence, journal, written articles). Information directly shared with the pianists with whom he collaborated, in order to promote a proper – according to his artistic vision- concert performance of his music, he also defines for posterity qualities as a pianist-pedagogue giving straight or allured clues about the particularities of a new, specific performance. Possible suggestions extracts from the author's piano scores and the instrumental practice of his time might bring more clarity about those aspects, all addressed to a former Post- Romanticism previous generation of pianists and to all time pianists fond of his music performance.*

**Key-words:** *pianist -pedagogue; instrumental practice; concert performance; Debussy's piano scores; famous pianists.*

### 1. Introduction

Since the first musical works published, the originality of the Debussy's compositional language surpasses and impresses generations of musicians and music lovers. In this first 100 years<sup>2</sup> since the physical disappearance of one of the most important composers of the 20th century European musical, the charm of his music, "*the refined boldness of a harmonic language that seems to evade any analysis*", as the distinguished pianist, French essayist and educator Alfred Cortot<sup>3</sup> affirmed, reveals in new facets with every piece of work performed on stage or scientifically investigated by contemporary researchers. A multitude of studies and books are still written, devoted to a good deciphering and understanding of his compositions<sup>4</sup>, which marks in the end of the nineteenth century, the full entrance of music into the sphere of influence of the impressive stylistic stream –generally called, Impressionism (affirmed a few decades earlier in painting and literature)<sup>5</sup>. Through the rigorous analysis of the various musical and non-musical parameters (elements of harmony, shapes, structure, semiology, musical semantics, spectroscopy, etc.) it was demonstrated from the perspectives of the

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<sup>2</sup> Claude-Achille Debussy (22 August 1862 – 25 March 1918)

<sup>3</sup> Translated from Romanian (not original) Cortot, 1966, 9

<sup>4</sup> The composer did not really saw himself an impressionism exponent one and we can deduce it very clearly from the many statements made to known musicians of his time or from his letters.

<sup>5</sup> Impressionism, an European artistic movement whose appearance in France in the field of literature and painting (1867-1886) subsequently transferred its characteristics in music in the next two decades focusing on the mobility of phenomena more than on the conceptual aspect of exploring the imaginary universe of fugitive objects or scenes / contemplated situations.

various directions of contemporary musical research - the compositional particularity of Debussy's musical language. One of the most influential composers of his time, Debussy was extracting the origins of inspiration, as we have learnt from his beliefs and statements, from the symbolic poetry of French Poets, being rather attracted to a way of making the musical sounds universe as *descriptive* as possible, freeing him from the enforced rules imposed by the classic - romantic idiom and, in particular, offering an alternative to his contemporary stylistic musical language of the time, excessively loaded by the spread heavy chromaticism almost atonal of Wagner's formula.<sup>6</sup> Hating to be called impressionism composer eventually he had constructed his own way of thinking music, recommended to others: "*Collect impressions. Don't be in a hurry to write them down. Because that's something music can do better than painting: it can centralizes variations of color and light within a single picture — a truth generally ignored, obvious as it is.*"<sup>7</sup> His orchestral and chamber music creations (devoted to various solo instruments of the era, but especially to the piano) are constantly and predominantly represented on the world stage and are part of the global repertory concert contemporary heritage.

Throughout the last century, all the successful musicians considered as essential to hold at least one Debussy's representative piece in the repertoire, all young musicians are studying from the interpretative point of view in the music schools, at various stages, *the style* of Claude Debussy's music. Of course, as understood from a stylistic point of view, ('musically' read) and assimilated from the point of view of *his sensitive and descriptive musical aesthetics* in many aspects, not always exactly as was presented at his time but as we see it today.

## 2. Issue and Objectives

Do we know how the composer wished to be interpreted, understood the music? How did play it himself? If he still lived in the twenty-first century, as a composer – pianist would felt the need to write and to indicate to today's musicians how should be played this music?

One thing is certain: Debussy, an introvert, exquisite and well-respected performer (for the audience in front of whom he produced himself as a pianist of his own works) had certain and specific views regarding the musical approach of his works.

### 2.1 The First Issue

The few indications we have could be collected from the correspondence or the statements made in the memoirs \ books, subsequently published by some concert pianists with whom he collaborated or who showed interest in promoting his music on concert stages.

### 2.2 The Second Issue

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<sup>6</sup> The European musical world suffered a major shock when, on June 10th, 1865, Richard Wagner performed the radical stylistic innovation by the Premiere of "Tristan and Isolde" at the Nationaltheater Munich under the baton of conductor Hans von Bülow. The novelty of the harmonic solutions that by intense chromatic development had conducted to an infinite melody, able to break the barriers of post-romantic bold tone, has led many musicians to be especially inspired (Ernest Chausson in his "King Arthur" Opera and E. Chabrier all though his Creation- epigones or disciples), others have been deeply shaken (Jules Massenet is returning home with intention to destroy his last manuscript- Werther's and G. Verdi is feeling horrified).

<sup>7</sup> From Debussy's Letter to his disciple Raoul Bardac (1906)

The absolute novelty of this particular musical style has aggravated the perceptions of the romantic and post-romantic interpretative virtuosity of the great piano masters, contemporaries of the composer. Not in a few moments Debussy himself considered his instrumental music as a whole very difficult to interpret and to understand, finding these contemporary interpretations to be somehow misplaced, wrongly approached.

The composer demanded observance of the text but also ... the disclosure of - mandatory! - "*l'esprit debussyste*": text and musical context. Just as every musical rendering is interpreting to the same extent, and each interpretation is a constructive situation with the help of a set of 'instructions', that are dictated by the intricate structure and poetics of the text. And rightly so, we can all of us, musicians or auditors of this music, raise the question: to what extent can the performer choose to express, from thousands of musical relationships and patterns contained in the hermetic of Debussy's writing? On the basis of which criteria and to what level of complexity? Targeting a specific conduct of interpretation, how will be perceived the musical work by the audience?

### 3. Material and Methods

Regarding *the imaginative shaping of the musical universe / specific atmosphere*, in the case of a proper piano performance, it seems that Debussy preferred those performers who through the rendering of the text, conveyed more than a correct arid reading, (despite falls happening) of non-observance of impeccable virtuous instrumental accuracy.<sup>8</sup> The dynamics of the music, the authenticity of the meanings contained within the lush harmonies, the fabric of the musical plans, the arpeggio figurines, the arabesques filled in color in different timbre combinations or the arrangements in new sounds unheard until that moment, captured the composer's entire attention when listening the reading the interpreters version of his text. This is obvious by reading the extensive passages of the composer's contemporary pianist *Marguerite Long*<sup>9</sup>, a prominent interpretative presence of the time. But the accuracy and the precise rendering were not the only attributes of his instrumental performing concept.

It's interesting how Debussy, in a trip to the Hungarian lands (like many famous composers did, *Franz Liszt* for example) was in such a deep way captivated by the musicality of local fiddles in order to write back in letters to his friends and editor about that fact, underlying the importance of the authenticity and with some little extent, of the eccentric feeling deducted from the empiric improvisation procedures into instrumental performance. Those particular details, amongst many similar others explain the extent of the performance demanding issue, in the composer's vision.

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<sup>8</sup> Debussy's ironic words: "The attraction of the virtuoso for the public is very like that of the circus for the crowd. There is always the hope that something dangerous may happen" as quoted by Myers, 1948, 99 Debussy was also a refined pianist, not in the virtuoso style but with a special touchée and colorful touch manner developed in a particular fascinating way. Some extraordinary and historical proves remained available to us due to Piano Rolls he recorded between 1903 and 1913 for Welte Mignon.

Example: Claude Debussy plays La soirée dans Grenade, 1913 Welte Mignon recording. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PekrB\\_IuGlc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PekrB_IuGlc) (Youtube.com accessed on 24.05.2018)

<sup>9</sup> Famous figure (1878-1966) French woman pianist and appointed professor at Paris Conservatory (from 1906 to 1940) studied extensively with Debussy in 1914 and 1917 some of his piano works, writing in 1960 also an evocative memoir book "Au piano avec Claude Debussy". Marguerite Long, plays in 1929: *Jardins Sous La Pluie* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CPocQ7YhMo> (Youtube.com Public Domain videos accessed on 24.05.2018)

More interesting facts can certainly be provided by *Maurice Dumesnil*,<sup>10</sup> pupil of the composer, previously trained at the Conservatory of Paris (graduated in 1905) and one of the appreciated concert performers of his music in the era, in his memoirs "*How to play and teach Debussy*" (1932). In that book he is writing about Debussy's main beliefs and pedagogical concerns, offering some storytelling exemplification from his private lesson with the Maestro. Clarity of the text and maintaining simplicity in rendering expression were the majors ones. And the most important, without no doubt: ...[It does not work the emphatic playing], '*no exaggeration, no mannerisms.*'<sup>11</sup> The composer always pointed in front of his pupils as Dumesnil reveals, the importance of going beyond the fingers, standard technique acquired during the training years in conservatories in search of a superior manner of touching the keyboard for developing an unrestrained type of playing always pointing to listen to us (our playing) with creative purposes instead of rendering only brilliant flawless fingers action playing.

Himself as student had experimented by himself new harmonic "colors" by chords progression scales included in his daily piano exercises with From the same pianist who studied with Debussy we know today that the composer intended to publish someday a Piano method, so deeply attracted to the performing art was connected all of his life, but his perfectionist temper slowed down his wish, always finding more important instrumental aspects to reflect about.

Regarding *the rhythmic pulse / concept of rubato*, Debussy preferred some flexibility and freedom, but only to avoid mechanized renderings, lacking of expressive musical content. In the context of preserving this pulsation, the accuracy of observing the multitude of punctuation marks, the pursuit of simplicity and natural expression, it is clear that one cannot talk about that 'romanticism type of rubato' where the tempo changes often occur where the impulsiveness or accentuation of a certain phrases can rebalance the entire content in a fairly different manner, from interpreter to interpreter. Dumesnil points out the importance of accurate, perfectly rhythmic rendering of triplets and extraordinary divisive formulas such as *Ballade Slave*, *Poissons d'or* but in a flexible, living graceful structure.



Fig.1. Fragment of *Ballade Slave* L.70

<sup>10</sup> French Pianist (1886-1974), extended tour virtuoso (Europe, USA), and chamber music pianist, active in the first half of the XX century. He studied in Paris Conservatory with prof. *Isidore Philipp* and in private with *Claude Debussy*, lately publishing several books about this pedagogical experience ('*How to play and teach Debussy*'- 1932; '*Claude Debussy: Master of Dreams*' -1940)

<sup>11</sup> Dumesnil, 1932, 12



Fig.2 Fragment of Poissons d'Or

Other pianists performing in the same directions, for example those of *Ricardo Viñes y Roda*<sup>12</sup> a famous pianist of his time with a large repertoire and versatile technique who premiered many new style works, including some Debussy's ones. Playing very strict (especially ostinato type sections) with a special care to not over shorten the dotted rhythm formulas (as somehow the late post Romanticism performing manner happened to develop into virtuoso standard style approach), in a descriptive, modern vision manner so appreciated by the composer who dedicated to him many piano works.

We can hardly identify the meaning of certain statements or indications in this sense of the author, and yet I believe that today, 100 years after the disappearance of the composer, we can understand the need for fluidity, the hermetic expression, the natural pulsation of the text, recommendations he made to each interpreter. In the same direction, the conclusions of Alfred Cortot, prolific pianist, teacher and essayist of the first half of the 20th century are: "*Virtuosity is the element, I say, atmospheric, which envelops and bathes, attenuates or crystallizes the relations of sounds and rhythms. This concept so new about the character and power of the instrument, gives Debussy's pianistic techniques a poetic personality that tends to not be confused, in any situation with Liszt's inventive virtuosity, or Chopin's, of which it was born.*"<sup>13</sup>

*E. Robert Schmitz*<sup>14</sup> tells us in more detail about the dynamic complexity of the works studied with Debussy and about the subtle color effects that the composer is looking for crescendos and des crescendos in order to avoid mannerism and exaggerated emphases of the declamatory type (attributed to the Post-Romanticism manner of playing) by the performers at the time was for Debussy one of his obsessions in the musical performance of his works. *[...] So many pianists were pushing the intensity scale! He did not want his music to sound, but rather to be delicate, flowing and understandable, a music of deep substance.*"<sup>15</sup>

Along with his repertoire, the panel of intermediate shades used in instrumental practice has been considerably diversified: especially in the intermediate spectrum, from extremely

<sup>12</sup> Spanish Pianist (1875-1943), successful pianist virtuoso of the last decade of XIX century and first half of the XX century. He premiered many works of *Debussy, Ravel, Albeniz, Satie, Granados, de Falla*. The piano teacher of the composer and pianist *Francis Poulenc*.

Ricardo Viñes plays Debussy's *Poissons d'Or* in 1930 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2EWuW6MM\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2EWuW6MM_4) (Youtube.com Public Domain videos accessed on 24.05.2018)

<sup>13</sup> Translated from Romanian (not original) Cortot, 1966, 19

<sup>14</sup> French\ USA Pianist *E. Robert Schmitz* (1889-1949) successfully studied with *Louis Diémer* at Paris Conservatory was appreciated as interpreter by *Saint Saens* and *Debussy* piano works. Pupil of Debussy for some period, he toured in 1919 the USA been the promoter and initiator of the Franco-American Music Society in New York. He writes a technical analysis book about his mentor's works performing style "*The piano works of Claude Debussy*" published shortly after his death (1950). *E Robert Schmitz* plays Debussy's *Reverie* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zizmpU-Sz6k> (Youtube Public Domain videos accessed on 25.05.2018)

<sup>15</sup> Schmitz 1950,55

delicate grades of *pianissisimo* (*ppp*) to *pianissimo* (*pp*) or even wider from *piano* (*p*) to *mezzo piano* (*mp*), going up to a *mezzoforte* (*mf*) at most. The ample sonorities of the *forte* (*f*) type, which he rarely indicated, are never sharp or incisive. They are trained in a long, dynamic, colorful intensive labor, sounding full of warmth and richness.

*Sound and instrumental colors are a whole imaginative universe.* Like never before, the musical songs evoked and by the successful choices of titles - capable of inducing in a programmatic style a state, a fugitive image, a gesture, an allusion - opened a new world of sound. The series of Preludes (for example titles: "*Des pas sur la neige*", "*Qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest*", "*La Cathedrale engloutie*", "*Voiles*", etc.) induce the perfect status and visualization of the musical content to be played. The concept of sonority in Debussy's vision, as confirmed both by *R. Dumesnil* and *Marguerite Long*, cannot be disconnected or thought apart from just using the pedals and sometimes intelligent thinking in rendering rhythmic pulse in resonance or retention, but through innovative and deep experimentation of the *touchée's* expressive capability.

*Marguerite Long* writes in her book how the composer insisted that the last two pairs of the *Jardin sous la pluie* to be used as a particular way to touch the keys by positioning the left hand on the accords, sticking the fingers as well as their ivory, directly attacking the keyboard not through ample arm movements with an elk and high falling, from the outside or how Debussy was tormenting himself an entire night thinking to change in the next lesson to her the dynamic scale of... just one chord (The third piece- *Mouvement of Images* book)

*Le jeu perlé* through rapid, fluid and crystalline performance could not climb on the mannerism of movements or the almost mechanized performance type *Gradus ad Parnasum!* Pedaling style should also be, in turn, a creative act to support the sound effects. That indispensable tool with which in a totally unusual way, multiple sound plans could be distinguished. All this complex technical and interpretive construction of music, is subjected to the natural and the pursuit of the essence: "*Faites confiance à votre oreille!*"<sup>16</sup>

Advice suited, so difficult to follow at the same time.

#### 4. Conclusions

From a certain point of view, the piano evolution of the 21st century through its professional peaks in stage and pedagogical performance is quite close to these exigencies. There are more and more wonderful performers specializing in the impressive music of Claude Debussy's creation, which are able to highlight the particularities of these styles. What tends to be lost in the era of super technical, almost computerized rendition, is perhaps that intimate communication of the performer with the audience, of an evocative transmission that unthinkingly touches the public's emotionality, a precious feature and so met in the pianism of lost generations of pianists performers.

In this sense, in an attempt to understand Debussy's piano music and his exigencies in the spirit of the proper text and stylistic reading, we can safely conclude citing the composer daring belief:

*I feel that, without descending to the level of the gossip column or the novel, it should be possible to solve the problem somehow. There's no need either for music to make people think! ... It would be enough if music could make people listen to, despite themselves*

<sup>16</sup> Translated in English: "Have trust in your hearing!"

*and despite their petty mundane troubles, and never mind if they're incapable of expressing anything resembling an opinion. It would be enough if they could no longer recognize their own grey, dull faces, if they felt that for a moment they had been dreaming of an imaginary country, that's to say, one that can't be found on the map.*'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Fragment of one Debussy's Letter to Paul Dukas (1901), Myers, 1948 p. 144