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## SOUND AND COLOR SYNESTHESIA: IMPRESSIONISM IN THE MUSIC OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH PAINTING

*Object: the connection between Claude Debussy's musical creativity and impressionism in painting. Results: In the late 19th century, Impressionism emerged as a new movement and the art movement reached a turning point. The Impressionist painting style, a conscious reaction to the over expressionism of the late Romanticism centered in Germany, rejected all existing traditional styles and forms. The movement sought to express sensual nuances through the immediate effects of color or tone and to describe objects, nature, light, etc. Claude Debussy was an important composer of French Impressionism. In the late 19th century, he started the French Impressionist music movement by bringing Impressionism to music. He is called an Impressionist musician because he composed music that combined images with soft tones, sounds, vague compositions and free choice of themes, bringing the Impressionist art form to music. He was introduced to the music of Vietnam, Cambodia and Java, including Javanese gamelan, at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1889. Although he did not visit each of these countries, he sublimated the musical elements of each country into his music and was able to clearly express the oriental flavor and exotic atmosphere of his music. He mainly used the gamelan music of Java as a source of inspiration for his music, and the titles or indications hinted at exoticism and its combination with impressionism. He managed to convey exotic imagery through the use of stylistic freedom, fresh rhythms, musical percussion effects, oriental melodies and folk elements such as traditional rhythms, instruments and modes. Debussy expressed images with the use of symbols, presenting images not through direct imitation but through symbolism. Through these methods, he transformed the senses into impressive arts. These processes were acquired through individual experience and generalize their embodied values as sensory experience and extension of expression. The connection between Debussy's music and the visual arts is more obvious given his familiarity with Eastern painting, which, in contrast, does not strive for realism, an almost photographic reproduction of an object, but rather aims to convey the feeling, the impression of a visual image. Conclusions: This study examines gamelan music, which, among other exotic elements, inspired Debussy and is found in his piano works, and analyzes how he presented and combined these elements in his music.*

**Keywords:** impressionist painting, impressionist music, gamelan, feeling, imagery

**Introduction.** At the end of the 19th century, Parisian art reached a turning point, becoming the center of art with a new aesthetic perspective. The new aesthetic perspective concerns Impressionism. The beginning of this ideology is a new movement in painting that originated in French artists, in

particular Manet, Monet and Renoir, which was a national movement that opposed the excessive expressionism of late Romanticism with a German center. These artists rejected all existing traditional painting techniques and depicted nature in the ever-changing colors of the landscape and the

light that contrasted with it, and tried to accurately and objectively record the world they saw, using the momentary effects of color and tone. According to Gang Ji-hye (2013), that is, instead of directly expressing passionate human emotions, he initiated an independent world that sought to express restrained refinement and sensual nuances, thereby initiating Impressionism.

Impressionism in art gradually spread to many fields, including music. The characteristic features of Impressionism in music include a free choice of subject, unique harmony, sophisticated tone, and sound effects. The tonality is also very ambiguous, and low sustained tones and ostinato are used repeatedly. The rhythm is also irregular. These irregular changes were used as more effective tools to create impressions, which was the goal of Debussy's music.

Claude de Debussy (1862-1918), a French composer and representative of Impressionism, created his own musical style based on the characteristic features of Impressionism. His music usually evokes a mood, feeling, emotion, or scene. As in symbolist poetry, the standard syntax is broken, and our attention is instead directed to individual images that carry the structure and meaning of the work. He composed music by juxtaposing musical images created through motifs, harmonies, exotic scales, and tones of musical instruments, and created his own unique impressionistic music.

The history of Debussy's association with Impressionism in painting is already multifaceted. It was probably first established in 1887, when the 'Journal official' (Lockspeiser, 1980, p. 277) condemned the «vague impressionism» of *Printemps*, a work that the young Debussy completed during his stay at the Villa Medici. This first use of the term «impressionism» is clearly pejorative: the official critic reproached the composer for the same mistake that had been attributed to the Impressionists at their first exhibition (1874), sometimes referring to other music, namely Wagner (Clemenceau, 1990, p. 60). Debussy received praise in 1900 for his *Nocturnes*: «It is impossible to imagine a more refined impressionist symphony. Composed entirely of sound fragments, it does not fit into the sinuousness of definite melodic curves, but its arrangement of timbres and chords – its harmony, as artists would say – still preserves a certain very strict

uniformity, which replaces the line with the same plastic beauty of sonorities, skillfully distributed and logically sustained» (Vallas, 1958, p. 213-214).

The impression of «vagueness» persists, but we now discover a new order in Debussy's music, an order whose technical description includes references to Impressionist painting. «This type of commentary enjoyed extraordinary success: since the beginning of the century, the aforementioned association had become firmly established in people's minds and seemed to be confirmed by analyses – mainly of Debussy's harmonies – conducted by French and German musicologists» (Jarocinsky, 1970, p. 33-37).

However, since the post-war period, a turning point has been observed. Although the general public continues to automatically associate Debussy with Impressionism, musicologists have become increasingly skeptical, even openly protesting this association. There are many reasons for this turn. Of course, Debussy was interested in painting, and it is safe to assume that he found some of his inspiration there.

One could even assume that the composer paid attention to Monet's experiments with series of paintings (from the «Gare Saint-Lazare» series, begun in 1877, to the «Nymphéas» series, which continued until his death in 1926), aimed at showing the same object lit differently; but such an assumption is difficult to confirm. At the same time, from the point of view of analyzing the composer's intentions, skeptics have seen no evidence that would indicate his kinship with the Impressionist artists. «Quite the opposite, given the fact that Debussy himself radically rejected this association. But this rejection must be interpreted with moderation: on the one hand, he was terrified of any label; on the other hand, when this association was imposed, Impressionism was on its way to becoming (for the public) the new academicism, and it is difficult to imagine that a non-conformist like Debussy would have reacted otherwise than by this rejection» (Makis, 1994, p. 27).

An objective fact also complicates the comparison; namely the historical gap: «Impressionism as an active movement existed from 1874 to 1886, and, for example, Monet was 22 years older than Debussy» (Lockspeiser, 1980, p. 277). It should also be noted that pictorial impressionism was originally a collective

movement (although only Monet drew definitive conclusions from it), while Debussy was the most important, but also undoubtedly the only true representative of musical impressionism.

It is clear that in Monet the real «subject» of the painting is not (anymore) the depicted object, but the almost physical impressions it evokes. As for Debussy's «La Mer», the extraordinary brevity and fragmentation of the «pictures» that we seem to hear there at first glance clearly indicate that the composer is not «painting» anything, but rather trying to make us experience sensations that are by definition fleeting.

Debussy argued that “art should not meticulously reproduce nature, but should achieve a mystical correspondence between nature and imagination”, and he “tried to convey ‘symbols’ and ‘impressions’ through new harmonies and tones in music” (Gim Ju-won, 2015, p. 14 (50)). More than just a vision, ‘La Mer’ exudes perfume; the connection it establishes with the ear is almost tactile. It is to denote this change of perspective that the term impressionism was coined. But in this sense, nature is no more than a pretext; what is essential is the embodiment of the sensations we experience when we encounter it. Pretext also in a more indirect sense: focusing on nature is the best way to get rid of the subjectivity that Romanticism brought to its culmination.

### **Results and discussion.**

Rodrigo Debussy was born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France, and began his musical education at a young age. He entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 10 and soon learned to play complex piano pieces quite well. However, upon entering the composition department in 1880, he abandoned his dream of becoming a virtuoso pianist and twice won the Grand Prix de Rome for composition. In his youth, he traveled widely, including Italy, Vienna, and Russia, and spent two years in Rome studying music. He was known as a somber person who had difficulty making friends and found it difficult to spend time with strangers, even for short periods of time.

The controversy in assessments regarding the kinship of Debussy's work with Impressionist artists was largely determined by the fact that representatives of different points of view took into account only European artists – mainly French and German, without paying attention to

Debussy's acquaintance with and fascination with Eastern painting and music.

In 1889, at the World Exhibition in Paris, Debussy was introduced to the gamelan music of Vietnam, Cambodia and Java (Bag Sug-lyeon, 1997, p. 12), among other musical works from around the world, and was deeply impressed by the freedom of form, freshness of rhythm, musical effects of percussion instruments and oriental melodies. Although he was unable to visit each country in person, he is a composer who sublimated the characteristic musical elements of each country into his own music, clearly conveying oriental colors and exotic atmosphere.

After being introduced to the music of other countries, he became interested in elements of their folk music and created his own world of composition, introducing folk elements and techniques to describe the images and atmosphere of other countries in his works. Among the music of various countries around the world, he was greatly influenced by Javanese gamelan music, and he incorporated gamelan styles into his own music.

He mainly composed works depicting Javanese gamelan music in India and Spain, and to combine impressionism, the titles alluded to exotic images. He managed to depict the images of each country by using folkloric elements such as freedom of form, freshness of rhythm, musical effects of percussion instruments, oriental melodies or traditional Spanish rhythms, instruments and modes. Debussy's music combines literary and pictorial elements. Debussy wanted to convey the feeling and image of an object without expressing them specifically. For this reason, the key words to understand his music are melody, rhythm and harmony, as in traditional music.

In 1892 he began work on one of his most representative works, ‘Prelude a l'après-midi d'un faune’. At its premiere, the audience went wild and demanded the encore, and today the work is considered to have opened up new horizons in music due to its «impressionistic harmony». Based on a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé describing the dreams and desires of a faun dozing under the midday sun, this work depicts the erotic content of the original work in an almost painterly mosaic of beautiful and sensual melodies.

In 1893 he completed his only and greatest

opera, 'Pelléas et Mélisande'. This work, which took almost ten years to create, premiered at the Opéra-Comique in 1902. The work is dramatic, but unlike Wagner's operas with their turbulent passions, it is largely restrained, and the dialogue is always delivered clearly. The intoxicating music transports the audience into an ecstasy of deep sounds.

«The works 'La Mer', 'Jardins sous la pluie' and 'Brouillards' describe visual images, 'Cloches à travers les feuilles' and 'Chansons de Bilitis' describe auditory images, and 'Désir du ciel' and 'Melancholy' describe emotional states. In addition, he also simultaneously conveys emotions and different sensations, as in 'Paysage sentimental' and 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir'» (Gim Eun-su, 2023, p. 7).

Debussy allows himself to be immersed in dreams because his music rejects linearity and, even more, because it tends towards the dissolution of form. The impressionist composer no longer has any tangible form. Form dissolves into mists or clouds ('Brouillards' of the second book of 'Préludes' for piano, 'Nuages' of the three 'Nocturnes' for orchestra), plunging the listener into a trance: unable to follow the formal unfolding of the work, the listener seeks refuge in sleep.

In Debussy's work, not only form but also material dissolves. It would be more accurate, recalling certain rather numerous titles of Debussy ('En bateau', 'Jardins sous la pluie', 'L'Isle joyeuse', 'Reflets dans l'eau', 'La Cathédrale engloutie', 'Ondine', 'Pour merci la pluie au matin', not forgetting 'La Mer'), to cause a rarefaction of the material (Jankelevitch, 1989, p. 76-77). This is probably what the critics meant when they called Debussy's impressionism synonymous with vagueness: the contours of the themes blur, the rhythms become imprecise, the orchestration strives for a fusion of timbres, to name only the most striking elements. The opening theme of the prelude to 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune' (1912-14) is eloquent enough that there is no need to dwell on this issue. Its first two measures are, strictly speaking, imperceptible (though they will become more perceptible due to the very large number of their repetitions): the extraordinary fluidity comes from the chromaticism (it is almost a glide), from the tritonal relationship between the two extreme notes (C#-G), from the very undulating

rhythm (Makis, 1994, p. 10).

Debussy's piano works can be divided into three parts. The works belonging to the early period were written between 1888 and 1903, in particular the 'Arabesque'. Some examples include the 'Suite Bergamasque', the 'Nocturne' and the 'Estampes'. During this period, Debussy was influenced by Massenet (J. Massenet, 1842-1912), Grieg (E. G. Grieg, 1843-1907) and Saint-Saëns (C. C. Saint-Saëns, 1835-1921), and his unique features gradually emerged. Piano works of the middle period include 'Le coin des enfants', which demonstrates a wealth of harmony and free fingerwork that skillfully changes the mood, as well as the lyrical poem 'Reflets dans l'eau', based on dizzyingly dazzling harmony, the solemn and solemn 'Sarabande' with strong formal characteristics. 'Cloches à travers les feuilles' is known for its mixed strong and weak tone, reminiscent of orchestral sounds, and 'Clair de lune' is a heavy and solemn piece that acts as a kind of nocturne and contains more than forty pianissimo notes. 'Le coin des enfants' was influenced by Mussorgsky's 'The Children's Room' (M.P. Mussorgsky, 1889 - 1881). In this work, Debussy himself becomes a child and expresses the intuitive and sensual world of children. It is a work that exudes playfulness, refinement, innocence and sweetness. The last is 'Douze Études', written in 1915. This work avoids expressive elements and instead deals with objective and technical techniques (Gang Ji-hye, 2013, p. 14).

Debussy's imagery can be classified and interpreted in different ways depending on the perspective of understanding, but in terms of the method of expression, they can be broadly divided into four perspectives: «descriptive imagery», which focuses on the depiction of images, «metaphorical imagery», which is based on the title of the work and instructions for performance, «symbolic imagery», which refers to the poetry of symbolist poets, and «dynamic imagery», which refers to dynamic movement (Gim Eun-su, 2023, p. 10).

Very often Debussy builds a sequence using two processes: repetition and juxtaposition. The best illustration of music that is undoubtedly deliberately archaic is the beginning of the prelude to 'Pelléas et Mélisande' (1893-1902). There are three themes: the 'forest' theme in bars 1-4 and 8-11 (whose parallel fifths reinforce the archaic

character of the prelude), the ‘de Golaud’ theme (bars 5-6 and 12-13) and the ‘de Mélisande’ (which begins in bar 14). Each of these three themes is already built up by repetition (the ‘de Golaud’ theme, a real incantation, contains only two different notes). But, moreover, their presentation ignores any transition: they appear and reappear by means of collage. «Debussy strives for impressionistic hypnosis: in his work, repetition brings into play successive, changing and disintegrated visions of the original scheme, like a sphere that rotates and which, like itself, presents different facets and aspects. As for juxtaposition, it determines the transition from one moment to another» (Makis, 1994, p. 14).

The song ‘Le coin des enfants’ was written in 1908 and dedicated to his daughter. ‘Le coin des enfants’ is particularly famous for ‘Golliwog’s Cake-Walk’, in which the playful melody seems to lightly mock the first movement of Wagner’s opera ‘Tristan und Isolde’. In 1910 and 1913 he completed two sets of ‘Overtures’ for piano, and in 1915 a collection of ‘Études’, also for piano, was published. Debussy’s last major orchestral work was the ballet ‘Jeux’, which some have called a «beautiful nightmare» (Gang Ji-hye, 2013, p. 14).

Instead of a fixed form, Debussy followed a form that naturally derived from a theme and a shortened form, and he liked to compose short lyrical works. In other words, he broke away from the grandiose structures of Classicism and Romanticism and sought a flexible form that could express the fluid feeling and charm of improvisation. The elements of balance, proportion, and harmony in this loose structure contributed to Debussy’s own uniqueness. «Also, due to the influence of Baroque keyboard music,

he used a simple and balanced form that lacked the traditional method of thematic development, which means that Debussy did not rely on form or simply imitate it, but used it from the perspective of recomposition» (Gim Nan-hui, 1989, p. 58). Each motif is associated with a specific sound pattern, chord or series of chords, scale type, strength and range on the piano, and as they appear one after the other they create a series of images that are clearly distinct from each other. As one moves from one section to the next, some notes remain unchanged while others change, creating an effect similar to a harmonic progression. Debussy’s use of chromatic and whole-tone chords was influenced by the harmonic styles of Wagner and Liszt, but Debussy’s chords lack the urgency that demands their resolution. All we need to do is enjoy each moment that is given to us. Debussy generally maintained a tonal focus but ignored traditional tonal relationships between chords, allowing each chord a certain independence. He gave his music a sense of detached observation, encouraging us to enjoy the events themselves rather than seek solutions. Debussy once said of his music: «There is no such thing as theory. Just listen. If you like it, it is law» (Gang Ji-hye, 2013, p. 16). Of course, pleasure can eventually turn into enthusiasm or even ecstasy, and so one should not think that Debussy’s music lacks emotion.

For connoisseurs of painting and music in Ukraine, the first association with Debussy’s work is probably with Arkhip Kuindzhi’s painting “Night on the Dnieper” (Fig. 1).

The affinity of Debussy’s musical work with the arts of the East has found its reverse reflection to some extent. Perhaps the most famous example is the film ‘Seven Years in Tibet’, in which Debussy’s



**Figure 1.** Night over the Dnieper (A. Kuindzhi)

'Clair de Lune' is played several times.

The spiritual aspect of the beginning of 'Clair de Lune' sets the mood when the music box, which plays the first few bars, is given to the Dalai Lama as a gift when he is very young. Fascinated by the box, he later learns a little about Heinrich Harrer (Brad Pitts) and then gives the box to Harrer to take to Austria to his own son, who has never seen his father (Top Ten movies that use Clair de Lune).

**Conclusion.** Claude Debussy delicately depicted not only visual phenomena such as nature, people, objects and space, but also lyrical and dynamic emotions such as feelings, states and movements through music, and even depicted poetic nuances through metaphors and symbols as an auditory art. By carefully separating beats and rhythm, introducing exotic scales and using various instrumental tones, he tried to express subtle colors while providing detailed performance instructions. In this way, Debussy perceived objects through a sense different from music, that is, vision originating from the body, and transferred the imagination and creativity generated by sensory

experience into metaphysical auditory art. In other words, what Debussy wanted to express was an artistic practice of the body in which objects are recognized and embodied as bodies and depicted through two or more complex senses.

With respect to readers who would like to get acquainted with the Korean primary sources listed here in more detail, and given the imperfection of the Korean-Latin transliteration, which does not allow authentically restoring the original name in Korean, we provide the text, after placing it in the GOOGLE search box, a list is displayed, the first of which contains a link to the relevant source:

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**СИНЕСТЕЗІЯ ЗВУКУ І КОЛЬОРУ: ІМПРЕСІОНІЗМ У МУЗИЦІ КЛОДА ДЕБЮСІ ТА ЙОГО ЗВ'ЯЗОК ІЗ ЖИВОПИСОМ**

У статті розкрито зв'язок музичної творчості Клода Дебюссі з імпресіонізмом у живописі.

Результати показали, що наприкінці 19 століття імпресіонізм з'явився як новий напрямок, що став переломним у художньому русі. Імпресіоністський стиль живопису, цілеспрямована протидія надмірному експресіонізму, що спостерігався у пізньому романтизмі, зосередженому в Німеччині, відкидав усі існуючі традиційні техніки живопису. Це був тренд, який намагався виразити чуттєві нюанси за допомогою миттєвих ефектів кольору чи відтінку та описував об'єкти, природу, світло тощо. Клод Дебюссі був провідним композитором французького імпресіонізму. Він започаткував французький музичний імпресіоністичний рух наприкінці 19 століття шляхом перенесення імпресіонізму в музику. Його називають музикантом-імпресіоністом, бо він складав музику, яка поєднує образи з тонкими тонами, звуками, розпливчастими композиціями та вільним вибором тем, переносячи імпресіоністичну форму мистецтва в музику. Він познайомився з музикою В'єтнаму, Камбоджі та Яви, включаючи яванську гамелан (музику гамелан), на Всесвітній виставці, що відбулася в Парижі в 1889 році. Хоча він не відвідав кожен з цих країн, він сублімував музичні елементи кожної країни у власну музику та зміг чітко виразити східні кольори та екзотичну атмосферу у своїй музиці. Він здебільшого використовував музику гамелан острова Ява, щоб вплинути на свою музику, а назви чи вказівки натякали на екзотику та її поєднання з імпресіонізмом. Йому вдалося передати екзотичні образи, використовуючи свободу стилів, свіжі ритми, музичні ударні ефекти, східні мелодії та фольклорні елементи, такі як ритми, інструменти та традиційні лади. Висновок: У цьому дослідженні вивчалися музика гамелан, яка, зокрема серед екзотичних елементів, надихала Дебюссі та зустрічається в його фортепіанних творах, а також досліджувалося, як він зображував ці елементи та поєднував їх у своїй музиці.

**Ключові слова:** імпресіоністський живопис, імпресіоністська музика, гамелан, відчуття, образність

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