A Study on the Compositional Techniques of Debussy's “Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano”

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Abstract: The birth of Achille-Claude Debussy's (1862~1918) music in the 20th century created the path of development into modern music. Western music history from the romanticism period marked the beginning of the modern music era, and throughout the history of Western music are these very important landmarks. Debussy was not from an affluent family, but this did not stop his keen musical talents. With his inherent rebellious spirit and nobility, his intention to symbolize literature and integration with the characteristics of Impressionist Paintings eventually formed their own exploration in his own unique language and the arts charm. Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano (Première Rhapsodie) is one of the masterpieces of Debussy's successful music career. It is a completely different technique when compared to the classical and romantic periods. This can be called a breakthrough from traditional music into modernism. The analysis of the composition technique of Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano enables us to realize the influence of literary symbolism and impressionist paintings on the creation of impressionist music. Therefore, this article takes Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano as the research object. Form and analysis of music is used for research method, and analyzes the form, melody, harmony, rhythm, and sound from the two aspects of literacy symbolism and impressionist paintings. The research results are as follows. First, although it is a compound ternary, the characteristics of the piece take the form of a sonata. Second, the piece dilutes the melody, abandons the major and minor scales, and adopts the polytonality. It is conducive to the diversified expression of images and emotions in literary symbolism. Third, its harmony uses nine chords, eleventh chords, and thirteenth chords instead of triads and seventh chords. It uses of a large number of appoggiatura and acciaccatura, thus, the functionality of the harmonization is weakened and the color of the harmony is increased. Fourth, it uses the speed of the rhythm and the changes of sound to softly express the contrast changes of various light colors, perceptual imagination, and a kind of mystery.

Keywords: Debussy, Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano, Première Rhapsodie, Literary Symbolism, Impressionist Paintings

1. Introduction

Achille-Claude Debussy (22 August 1862 ~ 25 March 1918) was the founder of Impressionist music. He broke a generation of silence and opened up a new era and became one of the most respected and admired composers of the 20th century. The birth of Debussy's music signalled a leap in the history of Western Music from the Romantic period to the Modern era. It carried an important epoch-making significance to the history of Western Music. Stravinsky once said meaningfully, “My generation and I should be deeply thankful to Debussy and proclaim him as the first true musician of this century”[1]. The creation characteristics and technique of the Impressionist musicians that came after Debussy were quite similar to his own work. In a certain sense, Debussy's musical technique helped open a new path

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in the 20th Century for the development of the 12-tone system, various atonality, etc. in modern music. Thenceforth he became the veritable Father of Impressionism in music.

Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano is one of the masterpieces of Debussy's successful music career. It has a completely different technique when compared to the classical and romantic periods. This can be called a breakthrough from traditional music into modernism.

The current research on Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano is as follows. Hyun Joo Yoon introduced his life and musical characteristics in "A Study of Claude Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie*"[2]. Ji Eun Yang's "A Comparative Study on *Première Rhapsodie* for Clarinet and Piano and *Petite Pièce* of Debussy" showed the simple impressionist features and the 20th-century use of clarinet in Debussy's work, where his pioneering musical attempts were expressed in maturity in harmony with tradition. Even though the melodic motifs were developed in traditional ways such as reducing, enlarging, and retrograding, the use of melody by utilizing mode, pentatonic, hexatonic, and octatonic scale puts key signature to shame. This turned even the traditional methods into Debussy's own persona and tone[3]. Jeffrey Brooks' "A Study of Franz Schubert's *Arpeggione Sonata* and Claude Debussy's *Première Rhapsodie*: A Performer's Perspective" presented topics of discussion on the comparison of selected editions and arrangements, fingerings, tessitura, intonation, ensemble balance, instrumentation, and tempi on the writers' music. Range of volume, rubato, ease of transitions, intonation, and timbre are some of the musical aspects that will need to be considered between the two editions[4]. Prior research focused on the life of the composer through systematic general investigation and macro-analysis approach.

However, impressionist music is a music genre that emerged under the influence of literary symbolism and impressionist paintings[5]. Under the influence of this music genre creation concept, Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano uses music to describe the transient image of things and inner emotions, which has the characteristics of dreamy, hazy and unpredictable. Therefore, this article takes Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano as the research object. Form and analysis of music is used for research method, and analyzes the form, melody, harmony, rhythm and sound, from the two aspects of literary symbolism and impressionist paintings, attempting to reveal Debussy's compositional techniques during his composing career.

2. Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano by Claude Debussy

Famous French Impressionist composer Debussy was born in Paris in the year 1862 and died at his home on March 25, 1918. With his exceptional musical talents, he was accepted into the Paris Conservatoire when he was 11. He had summer employment stints in Moscow and in 1884 he was also awarded the Grand Prix de Rome. While in Moscow he came into contact with Impressionist pioneer Mussorgsky's music. This would later have a great influence on his musical composition techniques. Together with some of his Symbolist poet and Impressionist painter associates, they would often attend poet Stéphane Mallarmé's (1842~1898) occasional gatherings of intellectuals on Rue de Rome for discussions of poetry, art, and philosophy. His representative piece "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" (1894) prelude was based on the same name Symbolist poetry by Mallarmé[6]. These 2 artistic movements, Impressionism and Symbolism, greatly influenced his artistic views and composition techniques. Debussy not only created the Impressionism music era but developed it to its pinnacle. He was considered as one of the most creative and influential composers of the 20th century.

Like the colors and light in Impressionist painting, the ultimate aims of Impressionist music are the sound and the timbre. The music is just a kind of ambience, mysterious and milky white in substance, impressed with a dreamy mood[7].

In 1910, Debussy was named to Paris Conservatoire Board of Directors and one of his first duties was to supply two works for the next year's clarinet examinations. For that particular examination he created

the clarinet solo with piano accompaniment, Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano (Première Rhapsodie, Composed between December 1909 and January 1910). The work's melody was captivating, and its structure was compact and coherent. Its acoustics were at times thin and transparent, at times hazy like a fog, and at times brilliantly dazzling.

Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano was one of Debussy's most successful works during the capstone of his musical career. The creation of Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano brought the art of clarinet to a whole new level and created a more inspiring way to perform a clarinet.

On January 26, 1911, Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano was first performed by musician Prosper Mimart (1859~1928) as solo clarinetist in Salle Gaveau in Paris. The performance was a huge success. Following which, Debussy transformed the clarinet solo with piano accompaniment piece into an orchestra. In the orchestra he incorporated two harps, three bassoons, and other percussion instruments such as the triangle to infuse vibrancies into the orchestral musical technique. Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano was an exceptional piece that Debussy had created during his musical career peak. In a letter to his friend, he mentioned that this piece was one of the most charming he had written[8]. Although some felt that the adaptation to an orchestra resulted in losing the unique effects of a piano chords performance, the orchestra's rich color variations is far beyond the scope of the piano.

Akin to an Impressionist painting outline, the tonality of Impressionist music was not very clear and the musical form tended towards freedom. "Rhapsody" originated from Greek word "Rhapsōidia", meaning recital of epic poetry. At the end of the 19th century, the word Rhapsody was used as a musical form. Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano that Debussy had carefully created was a rare musical work with multiple characteristics. In terms of musical technique it had the basic features of rhapsody such as being effusive, imaginative, and full of fantasy and strong improvisation. Judging from the genre, it possessed the distinctive structure of Impressionist music such as a unique tonality, freedom of musical arrangement, and strong sound color. In terms of the musical structure, it still had a strict sonata and rondo features. The musical development was logically clear and the ideas were delicate along with a perfect artistic conception.

Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano was mainly formed by introduction, exposition, recapitulation, the contrast between two themes and sub-themes, and using the second interpolation section as a motivational material (see Table 1).

[Table 1] Structure is illustrated as follows

Form	Musical material	Measure Numbers	Phrases	Others
Intro		8	5+3	
Exposition		2		Theme Intro
	Theme	10	4+6	
	Sub-Theme	8	4+4	
		7	2	
			5	Passing Line
		4		Theme Intro (Rondo Element)
Development (Two Episodes)	Theme	6		
		12	7+5	Passing Line
	Episode①	18	4+4	
			4+6	Sub-Theme motive augmentation
		8	4+4	Transition
	Episode②	32	8+8+8+8	
			8+8	Sub-Theme and Episode② augmentation
		12	4+4+4	Recapitulation preparation

Recapitulation	Theme	6	4+2	
	Sub-Theme	5		
		6		Tonal unity passing phrase
Coda		28	8+8+8+4	Episode② motive
		10	4+6	Summative

3. Literary Symbolism

For contemporary composers at the time, Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano was considerably influential. A French clarinetist found that the acoustic 'milky mist' could also be applied to the first song in Stravinsky's (1882~1971) Three Pieces for Solo Clarinet (1919) of I (Preferably Clarinet in A)[9]. However, it should not be rigidly applied on the works of other contemporary composers. For instance, the neoclassical composer Francis Poulenc's (1899~1963) Sonate pour clarinette et piano (Clarinet Sonata, 1962) should be played with classical and natural acoustic instead.

The inception of Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano allowed clarinet's timbre change and its expressiveness to become richer. The contrast made it more distinctive. With Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano not only have we been given an additional repertoire on the program list of solo concerts, but it has also become an essential piece in major international competitions. If Debussy's music was hailed as an important link between 19th century music and modern music, then, this study considers Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano the milestone for the clarinetist.

Debussy thought that if symbolism could use metaphorical, suggestive, and scathing poetry to express the feelings people felt spiritually, then, similarly in music subtle and profound musical languages could also be used to express the various situations in real life[6][10]. Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano's skilful use of a variety of Impressionist techniques greatly inspired people's sense of hearing with its vivid and delicate depiction. It creates a visual mirage opening the rich imagination of the audience. These creative ideas were derivations from literary symbolism.

The first two sections of Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano begins with the piano playing an illusionary vessel-like octave melody followed by the clarinet softly playing three quarter notes. These three notes gradually fade and disappear creating a distant, hazy, and dreamy scene (mm.1-2) (see [Fig. 1]).

[Fig. 1] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.1-2

These three notes are often neglected during performance due to the limitations of the instruments' structure. From Bb to C (m.2) (see [Fig. 1]), the volume and timbre does not unify easily. Also, most musical instruments can easily produce a high Bb. However, it does not feel comforting regardless of hearing the lateral music class or through the vertical harmony relationship.

This is because even if this Bb is viewed as a fifth degree of the Eb major or second degree of the Ab major, its tendency is downwards and hence it should be played relatively lower. A more substantial method is to base it on one's performance experience, appropriately use additional keys, and control of the lips, etc. If these three notes are accurately played together with the piano parts then a wonderful

minor 11th chords in F can be produced (mm.1-2) (see [Fig. 1]). The B $\flat$ will aptly be the chord's third, showing the importance of its position (m.2) (see [Fig. 1]).

[Fig. 2] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.1-4

Following, the composer cleverly amends a tone or pitch at the third and fourth sections which completely changes the harmony's colors (m.4) (see [Fig. 2]). This new negative Diminished 11th chord causes the entire artistic conception to be more dreamy and mysterious (mm.1-4). This extremely light stroke is a vague yet hazy change of colors, and this dreamlike artistic conception is like a quote by Debussy's alter ego as Monsieur Croche: "I like some of the sounds produced by Egyptian cowherds using the flute; sounds that can only be heard when cowherds are in contact with nature"[11].

Debussy deeply admired Mallarmé (1842~1898), Paul Verlaine (1844~1896), and other Symbolist poets' literary works and out of his infatuation with these Symbolist poetries, turned them into musical compositions. As such Debussy's musical creations took reference from Symbolist literary works. The Symbolism which Debussy so worshipped suggests that, "Literary and artistic works should not express reality, but that of which consciousness cannot achieve, a hyperspace, metamaterials, an extrasensory other world. It is only through symbols that the extraordinary feel of such objects can be expressed"[12]. Hence, Symbolist poetries has never expressed poems in a lyrical way, but rather through association or in an implied manner to express elusive illusions. Such works often render the readers as well as creators. Also, Symbolist poetries demand "The aesthetic union of form, music and art"[13]. Essentially, Symbolist poetries were attempting to create works that would break the boundaries of human visual and aural senses.

From Debussy's lifetime of creations, we could also see that his music did not really show a profound ideological content or the so-called 'theme'. Rather, they exhibited the characteristics of fantasy, and can be associated with the sea, fogs, reflection of water, silence of the church, etc. In his compositions, there were usage of strange unprecedented keyboard skills, chords, musical structures and tonality techniques, just as how symbolist poets could add color to music as well. He did a service to art by opening up a domain in which no man had yet explored.

4. Impressionist Paintings

Impressionist art started in the latter half of the 19th century with France being at the heart of it. It first became famous as a result of Claude Monet's (1840~1926) "Impression, Sunrise (1872)" which was decided as impressionist. Even then, the artists were not angered and instead accepted the title, naming their school of painting as such. Impressionism stood out from the classical era of realism, drawing out what the heart thought, how lights change, the first feel. This epoch-making breakthrough changes heralded the arrival of the next painting century[14].

The young Debussy loved interacting with artists and had also attended many art exhibitions. Also, the conceptions for Debussy's works were in line with the principles of Impressionist creations. Debussy sought to use the speed and sound of rhythm, and the soft changes of timbre and performance of a variety of changes in the contrast of light and color, to evoke emotional imagination and mystery. He once said:

"Music is not able to reproduce nature but tends to make nature and imagination attain a mysterious consistence... Capturing the quality of a certain object's scene at that instant and matching its changing appearance with that of the flow of music"[6].

Impressionism, on the other hand, captures light and shadows, and colors and changes, to lead people into the mysterious transformations of light and color. All his works, though different, were made with the same purpose of that in Impressionist art.

Influenced by Impressionist Art, Debussy's music also carried the colors of art. In Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano, with the theme of soft yet penetrating tones and using 'pp (pianissimo)' volume to serenely play, one can feel the sunrise in the morning mist. The accompaniment part is a series of triplets consisting of 9th chords decompositions (mm.9-11) (see [Fig. 3]). Following this, the two subsections that lead into the theme play first, as if the ocean waves are gently hitting on the sandy beach. If we play this solo theme quietly and smoothly, then the piano's upper structure triplets play somewhat vague and weak, the left hand bass's syncopation will emerge relatively clearer and brighter (mm.9-11) (see [Fig. 3]). This will therefore seem to establish a sense of movement in the dimness, just like the unstable water surface full of floating duckweeds. Some also called this the 'fuzzy' movement[15].

[Fig. 3] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.9-11

The timbre of the solo theme should not be too bright, yet it should also not be as colorless as jazz's 'subtone (an undertone, an underlying, low or subordinate tone).' Rather one should use gentle, yet penetrating tone to perform it. This may seem abstract, but if we explain it from the perspective of an Impressionist artist like Édouard Manet (1832~1883) and his way of painting, it is the most exact explanation. Manet using his bright way of drawing confirmed his status among the Impressionist artists. When he drew clouds or fog, he would first add a bright layer of color, and after they dried, he would add a layer of dark color on top. This kind of drawing technique would become clarinet's timbre that strengthens its thickness and causes resonance on the bright timbre's foundation. This mainly used more 'hot' air streams, and thicker reeds, at the same time relatively increased the control of the lip's movements, to adjust the fundamental and harmonic's strength contrast within the timbre, in order to attain a fuzzy and penetrating timbre. From an acoustic theory's point of view, every tone is based on a fundamental frequency and its movement that becomes multiple series of harmonic compositions. However, in actuality, a pure tone is supported by a few natural harmonics (consonant harmonics). This is due to the fact that if a tone contains a fundamental frequency, which is not in harmony with the harmonics, it will surely become rough and fuzzy, like an inferior bell that will surely give out a turbid sound[16]. As such, we can see that the distribution and intensity ratio of the harmonics and tone has an important relationship. The production of each tone does not solely rely on the quality of the instrument, but also causes the vibration, namely the technique of blowing the instrument, while every tone is formed based on the groupings of certain harmonics. Debussy was therefore unanimously agreed as the master of dark suggestive whisper-like music.

As the theme ends, Debussy cleverly used decomposed augmented triads (mm.18-20) (see [Fig. 4]), actually using a bar to finish from six flat to a two sharp, transposing the distant relationship to a near one.

[Fig. 4] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.18-20

The ambience of the music suddenly changed from that of a dreamy theme to that of a smooth elegant second tonal area. As if the sun dispersed the fog, the tones instantly turned warmer. It is as if one could suddenly see light, giving a sense of vitality. The sudden change in light and color, presents an Impressionist's ability to capture and reflect moments in the artistic characteristics of Impressionism. This is also exactly Impressionist master, Debussy's exclusive abilities. This elegant melodic motive second tonal area used different tonalities at two different times in its development, in which the former being the connector between two episodes (Rondo, mm.76-83) (see [Fig. 5]), and the latter cleverly intertwining with the 2nd episode's melodic motives (mm.124-137) (see [Fig. 6]), representing a synthetic development. In the recapitulation, the second tonal area reappears, returning to the original tune. Although at the beginning three median tones were lowered, in recent modern compositions, musicians have looked upon minors as the tonality already being restored. Based on the principles of restoring the tonality in recapitulation of the second tonal area, we have sufficient reason to say that it possesses the unique musical characteristics of a Sonata.

[Fig. 5] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.70-86

[Fig. 6] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.121-141

The theme reappears again in [Fig. 3]. The structure has been reduced, and the tone region has been raised an octave. The accompaniment texture also has some changes, with the 9th chords and 11th chords forming a harmonic scale that continuously changes as the solo melody progresses (Tempo I, mm.40-41) (see [Fig. 7]). The ambience of the music presents the exposition theme as more erratic, mysterious and refreshing. As we flip open the orchestra's score, we will discover that in this part, Debussy made use of two harps.

[Fig. 7] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.40-41

The recapitulation theme, when listened to, seems quieter and fuzzier than the exposition yet the piano bass's semiquaver, major 2nd pedal point, and sostenuto sounds like distant thunder, foreseeing an incoming storm (mm.152-154) (see [Fig. 8]). From the theme's third appearance, we can see that the same melody, due to different accompaniment texture's servitude as a foil, which is similar to Impressionist paintings in series. Impressionist artists liked to use the same object under different lightings as the group painting's set object. The main purpose is to capture the ever-changing light and colors' movement impressions[17]. In impressionist music, Debussy used a series of different textured dissonant chords to present the previous chord. We can also see Debussy's technique in dealing with dissonant chords, changing the uses of dissonant chords. Before him, dissonant chords were used to accompany emotions and anxiety, strengthening dramatic expressiveness. Now, it is instead used to add colors. His ambiguous harmonies stem from a score full of rich acoustics.

[Fig. 8] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.149-154

Following the reappearance of the second tonal area, the emotions of the composition gradually become nervous and agitated, seeing that the climax is before the audience, yet the composer deliberately used an ascending chromatic scale to push it to the conclusion formed by second episode motive (mm.195-196) (see [Fig. 9]). The nervous, agitated emotions are then again immediately changed into the playful yet quick scherzo. Only genuine French instrumentalist possesses this humor. The composers mold the scherzo's basic motives and the quick chromatic scales of the solo parts, into the piano parts, pushing the music into the climax of the entire tune. The consecutive last ten bars are the Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano's highest climax (mm.197-206) (see [Fig. 9]). When the music is marked with only two forte 'ff (fortissimo)' dynamics and ends with a major 3th chord (m.206) (see [Fig. 9]), it gives listeners an aural sense of satisfaction.

[Fig. 9] "Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano," mm.195-206

The above is akin to appreciating a famous Impressionist drawing, and having a clear impression of its composition and basic color tones. If we were to say Impressionist artists were to be addressed as Impressionism, then Debussy's music should be addressed as "Impressionist music." Impressionist music has opened up a captivating world of music that is dreamlike as well.

5. Conclusion

Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano questioned conventions, brought new topics to the technique of playing the clarinet, and hence prompts us to think and explore. Through the analysis of this work, we have also deepened our knowledge and understanding of Impressionist music. Debussy's musical creations can be said as having established the essence of Impressionist music, combining the aesthetic principles of Impressionism and techniques of compositions harmoniously and perfectly. His Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano clearly demonstrated the special characteristics of the said musical composition, the strong pursuit of the color aesthetics of the music as well as the strong desire to vividly describe it.

This article analyzes Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano from the two aspects of literary symbolism and impressionist paintings. Form and analysis of music is used for research method, through the form, melody, harmony, rhythm, and sound. The research results are as follows. First, although it is a compound ternary, the characteristics of the piece take the form of a sonata. Second, it dilutes the melody, abandons the major and minor scales, and adopts the polytonality. It is conducive to the diversified expression of images and emotions in literary symbolism. Third, the harmony uses nine chords, eleventh chords, and thirteenth chords instead of triads and seventh chords. It used of a large number of appoggiatura and acciaccatura, thus, the functionality of the harmonization is weakened and the color of the harmony is increased. Fourth, it uses the speed of the rhythm and the changes of sound to softly express the contrast changes of various light colors, perceptual imagination, and a kind of mystery.

The creative principles of classical music are rigorous and regular, while romantic music focuses on emotional expression and passion. Compared with it, Debussy advocated texture, colors, and the weakening of the strength in the music to replace the traditional principles of modal tonality, and the rules of sound and the developmental form of classical music. He also specialized in creating unexpected dissonant chords and cleverly connected episodes, using them to display specific images or artistic conceptions. Looking from the surface, Debussy's music is often less passionate, and has also mostly abandoned literary narrative, metaphor, hints, and is more associated with forthright expressions. On the concept of sound, Debussy seems to be carrying out a revolution. He places great emphasis on the clarity of the sound, softness, and the sense of color, breaking out of the tranquility, slender, and elegant techniques of composers before him. Therefore, impressionist music does not directly portray pictures in real life through music, but rather describes the feeling or impression that those pictures give us, rendering a mysterious, hazy, looming atmosphere and tone.

Today's composers can try to integrate Debussy's composing techniques while creating popular music, and use color techniques to create new sounds. The use of this new sound effects creates a kind of auditory and psychological color perception, to regulate people's emotions and improve their psychological state, so as to achieve the purpose of music therapy. Debussy's Rhapsody No.1 for Clarinet and Piano is certainly a successful example among musical creations. Drawing the rich nutrients from this valuable musical heritage will greatly expand our artistic horizons and increase our artistic accumulation. The analysis of Debussy's composition technique enables us to realize the influence of literary symbolism and impressionist paintings on the creation of impressionist music, so that we can better understand impressionist music, and the great influence of impressionist music on the development of music in the 20th-century.

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