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TRADITIONALISM AND INNOVATIVE SPIRIT
ANALYSIS OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S
PRÉLUDES FOR PIANO

by

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I. Reviewing History of Research

As the literature on Debussy is rather large internationally, I limit myself to mentioning here only a few fundamental works. Of the biographies let me highlight three. First, *Claude Debussy et son temps* by Léon Vallas. Second, *Debussy: His Life and Mind I-II* by Edward Lockspeiser. Third, *Claude Debussy. Biographie critique* by François Lesure.

Literature analysing Debussy's compositions is also extensive. I therefore list below some subjectively selected works and researchers. The treatise *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, published by Simon Trezise, has thought-provoking details of Debussy's music in general, and therein I have found the writings of Mark DeVoto, Boyd Pomeroy, Caroline Potter and Arnold Whittall especially interesting. In his book *Debussy in proportion* Roy Howat suggests that a number of Debussy's pieces reflect the Golden Section ratio. The publication of the two books of *Préludes* as part of the latest complete edition of Debussy we owe to Howat. In his work *The Music of Claude Debussy* Richard S. Parks analyses Debussy's art by methods used for serial music. The treatise *Debussy and the Octatonic* by Allen Forte was written in that same spirit. The book *Debussy. Impressionisme et symbolisme* by Stefan Jarocinski has a special place in the literature on Debussy. That work is an ideal mixture

of biography, history of art, aesthetics and analysis. Vladimir Jankélévitch in his book *Debussy et le mystère de l'instant* examines Debussy's music and its multiple significance primarily from the aesthetic perspective. The publication *Claude Debussy: Lettres 1884-1918* compiled and published by François Lesure can be of interest to those interested in Debussy.

Since 1959, the year when the composer's biography by József Ujfalussy was published, no comprehensive monograph of Debussy has been written in Hungarian. The lack of it is keenly felt now, at the beginning of the 21st century. Some of Debussy's writings and music criticism as a selection of articles (*Monsieur Croche antidilettante*) is known for the Hungarian reader as *Croche úr, a műkedvelők réme*, translated by László Fábián. József Ujfalussy, of course, discusses the art of Debussy not only in his book but also in his numerous publications. It was he and Gergely Fazekas who most recently published some of Debussy's letters and interviews in the periodical *Muzsika*. The musicological thesis and treatise *Egy arabeszkfogalom és zenei konzekvenciái* (2005) by Gergely Fazekas has added new colour to Debussy research in Hungary.

II. Sources Used

In Hungary to date only a few researchers – István Szelényi, József Ujfalussy, Mária Póczyonyi and Oszkár Frank – have given detailed analyses of Debussy's *Piano Préludes*. Indeed, Szelényi back in the early 1940's already published his analysis of *Préludes, Book I*. The work *Játékdoboz. Debussy zenéjéről* by Mária Póczyonyi is to this day the most comprehensive analysis of Debussy's *Préludes* in Hungarian. In his book *Debussy harmóniák* Oszkár Frank published the analysis of four préludes by Debussy. Frank's analysis had an inspirational effect on my own.

Of the rich literature examining Debussy's Piano Works I have relied mainly on *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* by E. Robert Schmitz and on *Debussy Piano Music* by Frank Dawes. As to the analyses published in different periodicals and volumes of treatises I consider essential the essay *Debussy's Piano Music* by Robert Orledge. In the new complete edition of Debussy Roy Howat's writing as Foreword to *Préludes* provides equally important information. Of the more recent literature the book *Images. The Piano Music of Debussy* by Paul Roberts must be mentioned.

III. *Method of Research*

For one thing, what makes it difficult to analyse Debussy's music is that for all its apparent stylistic unity his harmonic vocabulary is rather heterogeneous, embracing various systems. Debussy's harmonic language springs from a blending of functional-tonal, modal and other elements. He uses many kinds of scales. Though his forms grew out from the realm of classical forms, he in a totally independent way re-created all that he had made his own from the past. True, his music is tonal throughout, but in relation to his predecessors he considerably expanded and enriched the concept of tonality.

Another problem is that the closer a composition we analyse is to our time, there are more theories and approaches regarding that particular composer's music. Terminology used in theory of music and in formal analysis has usually proved to be poor to describe all the phenomena we hear in compositions in general. This is especially the case with music of composers closer to our time.

During my research I relied on my school studies and on my own experiences gained in two decades of being a music theory teacher. Of course I could not ignore the accomplishments of the above-mentioned Hungarian and foreign analysts.

A significant part of literature on Debussy's *Préludes*, like concert guides, discusses merely the titles given by the composer or the mood and inspirational background of specific pieces. Few analyse in detail the individual notes and the musical forms. Fewer still are those who try to explain Debussy's notes and forms by using traditional terminology of harmonic and formal analysis on the basis of music prior to Debussy. My work was intended to fill that relative void.

In the first chapter of my dissertation I study what role Debussy's piano pieces have in his life's work, and within these what weight the 24 pieces of the two books of *Préludes* carry. In the next chapter first I try to survey the inspirational sources and stylistic levels of Debussy's *Préludes*, then with the help of examples taken from sheet music I want to spotlight Debussy's way of composing for the piano. In the third chapter I analyse his *Préludes* in detail, mainly focusing on the circumstances of their composition and discussing their features from the aspect of form and harmony. In the fourth chapter I arrange my observations in order and compare them with results of research by others. The fifth chapter is a short review.

IV. Results

The principal purpose of my dissertation was to define as accurately as possible to what extent Debussy's formation, rhythm, harmonic and melodic world, concept of tonality etc. are connected to musical traditions of older times, and to what extent or in what respects he had departed from those.

I wanted to know whether the stereotypes related to his music are correct. Though considering only a part of his piano music I desired to survey from what sources his music derives inspiration, how and to what extent it is connected to the past of music and what it holds for the future.

The results of my research could be summarized this way:

1. Debussy's pieces for piano play a very significant role in his life's work.
2. The two books of *Préludes* have a prominent place among the piano pieces.
3. The two books of *Préludes* contain on a small scale all the important elements of Debussy's musical style.
4. The pieces of *Préludes* derive inspiration from many sources – that of music, literature and fine art.
5. Various musical effects are reflected in them.

6. Debussy's compositions are built on musical traditions, but innovative spirit is also powerfully present.
7. His harmonies consist to a large degree of traditional tertial chords; the *Préludes* have definite tonality.
8. Debussy's melodic world is multifaceted one where there is room for the arabesque as well as for the more traditional melodiousness.
9. His rhythm is not obscure but very plastic and refined. He uses mainly traditional musical metres.
10. His forms in *Préludes* do not reject classical traditions, but develop them in a unique way with extraordinary freedom. At the same time more modern tendencies are also discernible.
11. Debussy's two sets of *Préludes* are not without precedent in music literature.
12. The two books of *Préludes* proved to be essential compositions in the history of 20th-century piano music.

V. Activity of Research

So far I have had no opportunities to make known the results of my research to the public verbally or in written form. Parts of it however I have presented in my lectures at higher education institutions in Szeged, Győr and Szombathely.