Early Impressionism

In Debussy's Nuit D'etoiles

Natalia Thompson

natalia.thompson@valpo.edu

SOURCE Conference

5/14/2020



What musical markers does Debussy use to show early impressionism in *Nuit D'etoiles* (1880)?

Literature Review

• *Nuit D'etoiles* was Debussy's first vocal solo piece (1880).

• Richard Taruskin and James Hepokoski have investigated Debussy's *mature Impressionism*. Style elements are alternative scales; parallel chords; avoiding fifth-relations (tonic-dominant etc.) and cadences; chordal ambiguity; sensuality and a focus on color and timbre; rhythmic ambiguity (de-emphasizing meter) etc.

• Few scholars have discussed early works (1880 and before) of Debussy as path-defining for his famous Impressionist style

What is Impressionism?

• Impressionism in music compliments Impressionism in Art. Much like Monet in his paintings, composers were conveying mood and emotion through their music.

• Oxford Music Online:

"Impressionism: A philosophical, aesthetic and polemical term borrowed from late 19th-century French painting. [...]. The word 'Impressionism' did not appear in conjunction with a specific musical aesthetic until the 1880s."

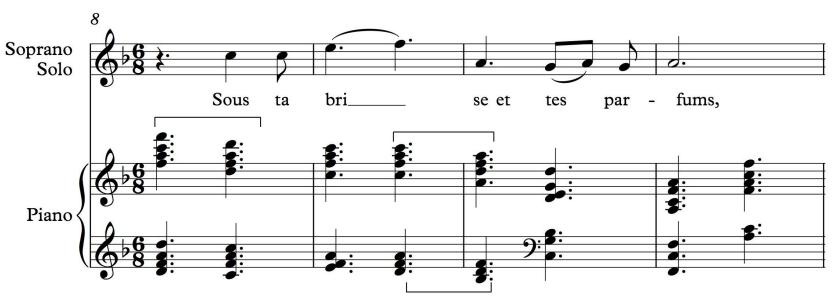
Methods

Investigating *Nuit D'etoiles* for standard markers of impressionism:

- Parallel chords
- Enharmonic shifts as signs of chordal ambiguity (functional ambiguity)
- Avoiding tonic-dominant relationships in favor of other, less used harmonic progressions
- Symbolism in the text; appeal to direct, immediate, physical "sensation": scents, experience through the senses.

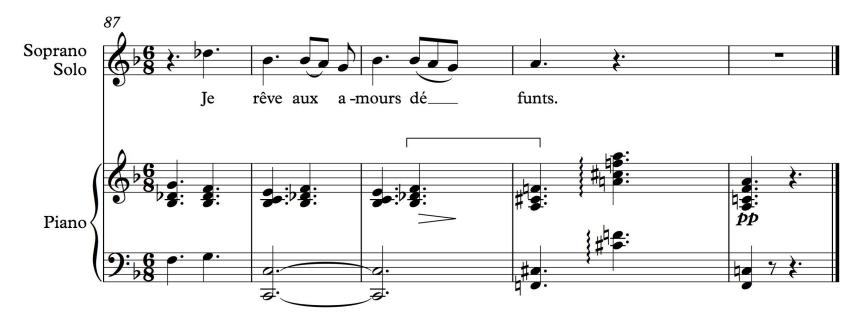
Music Analysis 1: Parallel Chords:

• m. 8



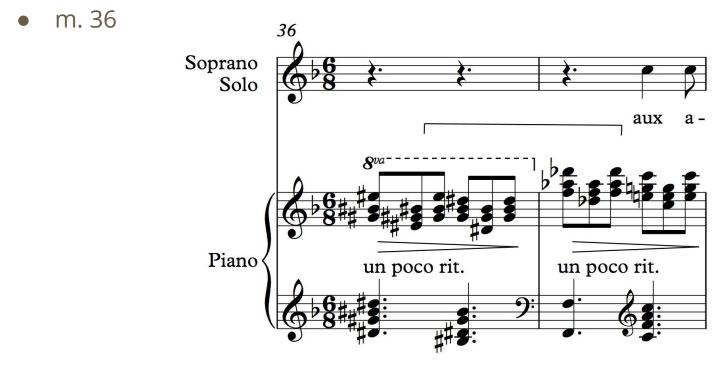
Music Analysis 2: Enharmonicism

• m. 87



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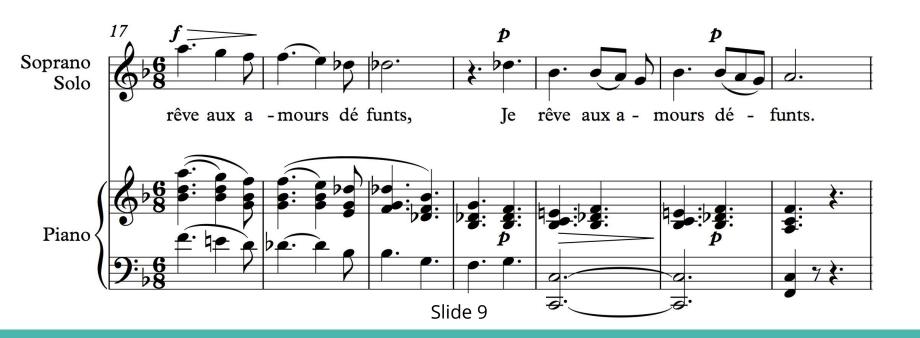
Music Analysis 2a: Enharmonicism



Slide 8

Music Analysis 3: Avoiding tonic-dominant relationships in favor of other, less used harmonic progressions

• m. 17



Music Analysis 4: Symbolism Reference in the Text

• m. 4: Nuit (night)

• m. 10-11:

parfums (perfumes)

• M. 17: rêve (dream)

Conclusion: How does *Nuit D'etoiles* expand our view of Impressionism?

• I have analyzed Debussy's *Nuit D'etoiles* for its use of standard musical markers of impressionism, specifically, the use of parallel chords, the use of enharmonicsm, and the avoidance of direct dominant to tonic harmonic progressions.