
Early Impressionism

— In Debussy's *Nuit D'étoiles* —

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Slide 1

Research Question

What musical markers does Debussy use to show early impressionism in *Nuit D'étoiles* (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'étoiles* 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

8

Soprano Solo

Sous ta bri_____ se et tes par - fums,

Piano

The image displays a musical score for measure 8. The top staff is for the Soprano Solo, featuring a melody in 6/8 time with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics 'Sous ta bri_____ se et tes par - fums,' are written below the notes. The bottom staves are for the Piano accompaniment, consisting of a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The piano part features a series of parallel chords, which are indicated by brackets above and below the staves. The chords are primarily triads and dyads, with some chords spanning across the two staves. The overall texture is characterized by the parallel movement of the piano accompaniment.

Music Analysis 2: Enharmonicism

- m. 87

87

Soprano Solo

Je rêve aux a-mours défunts.

Piano

The musical score for measure 87 consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Soprano Solo, written in 6/8 time. It begins with a half rest, followed by a dotted quarter note G4, then eighth notes A4, B4, and C5, and ends with a half rest. The bottom staff is for the Piano, also in 6/8 time. The treble staff contains chords of Bb4-Db5, Bb4-Db5, Bb4-Db5, and a complex chord with Bb4, Db5, and F#5. The bass staff contains a half note Bb3, a half note Db4, and a half note F#4. A bracket connects the piano accompaniment to the Soprano line, indicating a harmonic relationship. The piano part ends with a fortissimo (pp) marking.

Music Analysis 2a: Enharmonicism

- m. 36

36

Soprano Solo

aux a -

8^{va}

Piano

un poco rit.

un poco rit.

The image shows a musical score for measure 36. The Soprano Solo part is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 6/8 time signature. It contains a melodic line with a slur over the last two notes. The Piano part consists of two staves, both in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 6/8 time signature. The upper staff has a complex chordal texture with a slur over the last two measures. The lower staff has a simpler chordal texture. The tempo marking 'un poco rit.' is present in both parts. The Soprano part has a slur over the last two notes, and the Piano part has a slur over the last two measures. The Soprano part has a slur over the last two notes, and the Piano part has a slur over the last two measures.

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

- m. 17

17 *f* *p* *p*

Soprano Solo

rêve aux a - mours dé funts, Je rêve aux a - mours dé - funts.

Piano

Slide 9

The image shows a musical score for measure 17. The Soprano Solo part begins with a forte (f) dynamic and a crescendo, then shifts to piano (p) for the second phrase. The Piano accompaniment features complex chordal textures with some piano (p) markings and a crescendo. The score is in 6/8 time and B-flat major.

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'étoiles* expand our view of Impressionism?

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