

8-16-2016

The Debussy Problem: Debussy the Impressionist, the Neo-Impressionist, the Symbolist

Katherine Knight

Western Kentucky University, katherine.knight652@topper.wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses



Part of the [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), and the [Other Music Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Knight, Katherine, "The Debussy Problem: Debussy the Impressionist, the Neo-Impressionist, the Symbolist" (2016). *Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects*. Paper 603.

http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/stu_hon_theses/603

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Capstone Experience/Thesis Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

THE DEBUSSY PROBLEM: DEBUSSY THE IMPRESSIONIST,
THE NEO-IMPRESSIONIST, THE SYMBOLIST

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Katherine L. Knight

Western Kentucky University
2016

CE/T Committee:

Dr. Ingrid Cartwright, Advisor

Dr. Liza Kelly

Dr. Audra Jennings

Approved By

Advisor
Department of Art

Copyright By
Katherine L. Knight
2016

ABSTRACT

Since the 19th century, many critics and scholars, both of music and the visual arts, have debated about the place of Claude Debussy's oeuvre in relation to the visual arts movements that developed during his career. Attempts have been made in the literature to label Debussy as Impressionist, as Neo-Impressionist, or as Symbolist, each given exclusive ownership of his music by the author, leading one to ask: Why have scholars and critics been so adamant about defining Debussy and his work, especially along the lines of these visual movements?

The purpose of this research is to examine Debussy's relationships to these movements and to identify ways in which the ideals and the people of these movements may have influenced his music. Through a visual analysis of specific works by Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, and Odilon Redon and a musical analysis of selected art songs across Debussy's oeuvre, one sees that these attempts by scholars and critics to label Debussy and his works fall short of fully characterizing him as an artist. Rather, Debussy is better viewed as an artist who resisted such labels and blurred the boundaries between art and music.

Keywords: Claude Debussy, Art History, Music, Interdisciplinary, 19th Century

VITA

May 2, 1991 St. Petersburg, Florida
2009 Warren Central High School,
Bowling Green, Kentucky
2016..... Western Kentucky University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Fields: Music, Art History, and Anthropology

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Abstract.....	ii
Vita.....	iii
Chapters:	
1. Introduction	1
2. Impressionism and Monet	8
3. Neo-Impressionism and Seurat	14
4. Symbolism and Redon	22
5. Discussion and Analysis	29
Bibliography	38

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE DEBUSSY PROBLEM

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Paris witnessed great and swift change. Amidst the political and social upheaval of the Franco-Prussian War, the collapse of Napoleon III's Second Empire and the subsequent beginning of the Third Republic, and the rebellion of the Paris Commune, the city experienced just as turbulent changes within its cultural institutions. Musicians and visual artists alike began to question the power of these institutions and the directions in which they could foresee their respective art forms heading. For the visual arts, movements such as Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Symbolism gradually gained ground as artists allied themselves against the elite, government-controlled institutions in their search for truth. Similarly, in music, musicians felt the strain of keeping with tradition as they worked towards artistic innovation.

Of these musicians, Claude Debussy, the supposed "father" of Impressionist music, was a composer with strong ideas about the meaning and role of music in the world and the means with which one should or should not pursue to achieve his artistic vision. Very independent and, at times, so very alone in his musical pursuits, Debussy was still under the influence, however much, by the strong artistic currents that surged around him, enough that one can spy some common ground between the composer an

his contemporaries in the rebellious visual art movements of the time in regard to philosophy and practice, prompting critics to categorize Debussy and his works utilizing existing terms, such as that of 'Impressionism,' already in use in the visual arts. Since then, scholars have, too, journeyed along the same route, many times to be led to frustration. Since then, attempts by scholars and critics to label and define Debussy as an artist and the works he produced as Impressionist, Neo-Impressionist, and Symbolist, fall short of fully characterizing him as an artist. Rather, Debussy is better viewed as an artist who resisted such labels and blurred the boundaries of art. His style drew from multiple and varied sources of inspiration, all of which share in common an opposition to the strict parameters and narrow ideas of the Académie.

While producing a variety of work, Debussy and the visual artists of his time, defied the rules of the governing artistic institutions while developing unique ways of working. They focused on the importance of how they approached their work and the development of unique philosophies that would lead to a specific type of work, all while managing marginal roles within society, relationships with their respective mainstream institutions, and ongoing events and trends in Paris. As much of Debussy's oeuvre focuses on art song, it is possible that these songs can give us insight into Debussy's own philosophies as he worked along side many well-known visual artists of his time.

Through examination of scholarly literature written on Debussy and an analysis of works of visual artists from the Impressionist, Neo-Impressionist, and Symbolist movements, in the form of "case studies," and of selected art songs from Debussy's oeuvre, we will see evidence of a gradual shift towards greater abstraction in the work and processes of these musical and visual artists presented in a unique light.

Claude Debussy: The “Impressionist” Composer

Achille-Claude Debussy lived most of his creative and social life in 19th century Paris. Born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, outside of Paris, in 1862, Debussy’s life began as one of humble means. There, his parents, both of peasant descent, managed a china shop. In 1870, war broke between France and Germany, known as the Franco-Prussian War, and Young Achille’s family decided it best to retreat to the southern coast of France and to move in with his aunt in Cannes. Unemployed and working in Paris, his father joined the Paris Commune and was summarily imprisoned for his activism, all the while Achille had been transferred to the care of Paul Verlaine’s mother-in-law. While living in Cannes, the young Debussy had began his piano studies, and in spite of the Commune and all of the disruptions in his family’s life, two years later, in 1872, Claude Debussy entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten.¹

While having accomplished the feat of being accepted into the Conservatoire, young Debussy now had to find his way in the French academic world of classical music. Not having had a formal education before entering the Conservatoire, Debussy, possessing a “wilful and experimental nature,”² did not let this perceived hindrance hold him back nor his conflicts with teachers. He questioned teachers constantly and consistently, “already challenging the rigid teachings and conventional harmonies of the day.”³ He wanted to understand what he was learning and why what he was learning supported the status quo of the time. Debussy did not want to just follow what others told

¹ François Lesure and Roy Howat. "Debussy, Claude." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed March 6, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/07353>.

² Simon Trezise, 2003. *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 27.

³ Mary McAuliffe, 2011. *Dawn of the Belle Epoque: The Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and Their Friends*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 59.

him he should do. But in order to see any success at the Conservatoire, within the boundaries set by the Academie, Debussy ended up conforming and following the rules to win.⁴ After 12 years of study, in 1884, young Debussy finally won the Academie des Beaux-Arts' Prix de Rome, a competition that since 1803 awarded a young composer with a period of study in Rome.⁵ For the young composer who won, the Prix de Rome was the ticket to a potential career and with this prize Debussy left Paris in the summer of 1884 for a chance to study music in Rome, one of the greatest capitals of art for any artist, visual or musical.

In spite of winning, young Debussy remained unhappy. While still in Rome, Debussy was already receiving negative reviews, and in a critique of 'Printemps' in 1887, the Academie found fault: they complained that the young composer had "a pronounced tendency—too pronounced—towards an exploration of the strange. One has the feeling of musical colour exaggerated to the point where it causes the composer to forget the importance of precise construction and form. It is strongly to be hoped that he will guard against this vague impressionism, which is one of the most dangerous enemies of truth in works of art."⁶ Basically, the Academie felt the need to reprimand Debussy in order to subdue the threat his ideas and his music posed to the preservation of the institution's teachings and traditions, the "rigid mould" in which Debussy could never "cast" his

⁴ Tresize, 28.

⁵ David Gilbert. "Prix de Rome." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40632>.

⁶ Paul Roberts, 2008. *Claude Debussy*. London: Phaidon Press, 43.

music.⁷ After three long years of study⁸ Debussy left Rome and returned to Paris in 1887.

Two years later⁹ Debussy was living back home with his parents, in the thick of Parisian culture, the Academie's sharp criticism of 'Printemps' behind him, but struggling to discover his own, unique identity "with which to face the adult world."¹⁰ Though a poor, young composer, Debussy spent his days in the cafes and bookshops of Paris with visual artists and writers of the emerging avant-garde.¹¹ He hung out at the Chat Noir, a "hotspot of political radicalism" and "artistic experimentation,"¹² and visited galleries and museums, even the Louvre, experiencing the various, current, and popular trends in visual art of the day. As far as work, Debussy began attending the salons, "those elegant and intimate private gatherings that during these last years of the century offered a vibrant market for piano music and songs,"¹³ hosted by various acquaintances, and for the salons, Debussy produced many of the piano pieces and art songs which continue to define his career long after his death.

As much as Debussy has been acclaimed for his piano music, his art songs, or *melodies*, have proven, through their popularity in performance and scholarly analysis, to have been just as an important part of his oeuvre. Debussy began writing *melodies*, a

⁷ Leon Botstein, "Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy's Break with Tradition," 150. From *Debussy and his World*, ed. Jane Fulcher. Debussy wrote, in 1885, at age 23: "I don't think I'll ever be able to cast my music in a rigid mould ..."

⁸ While studying in Rome, Debussy referred to Villa Medici, where he stayed, as a "prison." Robert Orledge, "Debussy, Claude." *The Oxford Companion to Music. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e1846>.

⁹ Not much is known about the two years in Debussy's life after he returned to Paris from studies in Rome. Roberts, 72.

¹⁰ Roberts, 72.

¹¹ McAuliffe, 200.

¹² Laura Anne Kalba, "Hearing Voices: A Study of the Soundscape and Visual Culture of Debussy's Paris," from *Debussy's Paris: Art, Music, & Sounds of the City* (Linda Muehlig, Smith College Museum of Art, 2012), 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 201.

term used to describe all piano-accompanied songs with French texts,¹⁴ while studying at the Conservatoire and continued to write in this particular genre throughout most of the rest of his life. From his first published song, *Nuit d'étoiles*, in 1800¹⁵ to his last in 1916, one only has to listen to a sampling of songs from throughout his career to get a sense of the depths towards which his style strove and the paths he chose to pursue away from those forms and devices of the Academie. Because of the divergent and dynamic nature of Debussy's melodies, they can possibly serve as subjects through which to explore the relationships of his life and music with those movements of Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Symbolism in the visual arts.

Throughout Debussy's career and since his death, listeners and critics of his music have attempted to define where exactly Debussy's music fit in. They have tried to find its limits, its boundaries, to label it, to put it into boxes. From the Academie's warning and discouragement of Debussy's "vague impressionism" in 1887 to several years later, in 1894, when the composer was "first publicly compared" to the Impressionists, fatefully stamping him as "Debussy, the composer, an 'Impressionist,'"¹⁶ critics and scholars began, slowly, to utilize such terms already "defined" within the public sphere. Since then, countless students of music history have learned about this artist of multiple and diverse influences as "Claude Debussy, the 'Impressionist' composer" and countless scholars have debated—some quite fervently—in academic journals of both art and music about the "true" nature of Debussy's music. What was

¹⁴ Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, 2000. *A French Song Companion*. New York: Oxford University Press, ix. The authors describe the melodie as the "younger and more serious sibling of chanson," a type of song of a "lighter, more popular nature (ix)."

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 93.

¹⁶ Paul Roberts, 1996. *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*. Portland: Amadeus Press, 127.

Debussy? Was he an Impressionist, or not? Would he have better fit in with the Neo-Impressionists or the Symbolists than the Impressionists? Or was Debussy any of these things at all? Over the next three chapters, we will explore what it meant to be a part of the movements of Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Symbolism, and will look at well-known, acclaimed artists like Claude Monet, Georges Seurat, and Odilon Redon as specific “case studies” within each of these movements in order to better understand what visual artists were experiencing, personally, and how they dealt with the powerful institutions and currents of thought that permeated Parisian art throughout the last half of the 19th century. The problem of defining Debussy leads us, next, to the Impressionist movement and to a major figure of this movement, Claude Monet.

CHAPTER 2

IMPRESSIONISM AND MONET

In the mid-nineteenth century the “Impressionist” movement challenged the status quo of visual art, and Claude Monet, as a founder and major figure, helped in leading a group of artists who broke conventions and altered rules of the Academie and the Salon. Living from 1840 until 1926, Monet’s career began as a student of the Academie, but just as the modernization of Paris was taking hold Monet joined a group of artists who, like him, saw the world a little differently and desired to express their vision through compositional techniques that eventually led to “modern” art. Through his emphasis on color¹⁷, his focus on natural light, and in his anti-Academic stance, Claude Monet acted as a catalyst for change within the art world and the “Impressionist” movement, helping to drive visual art towards the “modern.” Found at the cusp of Monet’s first transition towards modernity, his *Impression, Sunrise*, from 1872, currently in the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris, France, could be seen as representative of his early career as painter yet leaning towards full Impressionism, and will serve, in this discussion, to highlight the ideals that went into his work.

Impression, Sunrise, was the noted “dawn” of the “Impressionist” movement, at least in name. Shown in the very first exhibition of the Anonymous Society of Painters,

Sculptors, Printmakers, etc. in 1974, two years after its completion, its unfavorable review by Louis Leroy—criticism that it was merely an “impression,” a sketch, unfinished at best¹⁸—as “legend”¹⁹ has it, coined the term “Impressionist,” a name that, at first objectionable, was gradually accepted by the Salon rebels with great pride.²⁰ This critical work epitomizes the early technique of Monet and that favored by the other “Impressionists.” Through this “impression,” Monet delivers the aesthetic of the Impressionists-to-be as well as that of his own special style, involving natural subjects—landscapes, seascapes, etc.—playing with light and dark, bright and pastel colors, and a lack of definitive line.

As for many of his works, Monet turned to nature for inspiration, especially that found close to home. Monet has been described “an astute observer of natural phenomena,”²¹ and his commitment to *plein-air* painting, sitting outside and creating art in natural, direct light, has been seen as a defining characteristic. Painted on the seacoast of the town of Le Havre, *Impression, Sunrise* depicts sailboats, among other ships, out in the early morning, at the peak of sunrise—the beginning of the workday. Daybreak, hazy blue clouds linger, covering a pinkish sky of a bright, orange sun rising, reflected across the lightly rippling blue water, where a couple sailboats pass by, already starting their day, among the shadows of larger ships. For Monet, his priority as an artist was to serve

¹⁸ Samu, Margaret. "Impressionism: Art and Modernity". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm (October 2004).

¹⁹ Tucker, Paul. "The First Impressionist Exhibition and Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*: A Tale of Timing, Commerce and Patriotism." *Art History* 7, no. 4 (1984): 470.

²⁰ Kalitina, Nina, and Nathalia Brodskaja. 2011. *Claude Monet*. New York: Parkstone Press, 83.

²¹ McNamara, Carole. “Monet’s *Vetheuil* Paintings: Site, Subject, and Debacles,” from *Monet at Vetheuil: The Turning Point* (1998), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 72.

truth,²² which meant looking for that “verifiable”²³ truth in nature, in the intersections between nature and the activities of man, and his plein-air technique served as “not an absolute, but a relative conception”²⁴—not “copying nature”²⁵—rather, an approximate translation in color, interpreting “through the eyes ... of the ordinary man, revealing the world of his feelings,”²⁶ within a swiftly-changing industrialized Paris, studying and painting those “facets of nature ... close and familiar to man.”²⁷ Like the other Impressionists, Monet “freed” himself from “traditional subjects”²⁸ by painting contemporary French life—early morning to night, from the coast to the city—in completely new ways.

The new ways through which Monet depicted the new Paris and the countryside of France involved experimentation with color, line, and light never before seen in the Academic art of the Salon. “Painting meant color”²⁹ to Monet, and using only color, no line, color lent itself to “impression.” He used color in ways that captured those found in the world around him, all of the shades of nature, blending, fusing together the way they do in real life. In *Impression, Sunrise*, shades of blue and pink dominate the scene. Color defines the sea, the sky, the sun—the rippling of the water, the reflection of the rising sun, the pink of dawn trying to break through lingering hazy clouds, the floating ships in the distance. And with color, a “microstructure of color, texture, and rhythm” was formed, elements that found “a life of their own.”³⁰ Dashes of darker blue indicate

²² Kalitina, 47.

²³ Rust, 18.

²⁴ Herbert, 178.

²⁵ Schmidt, 32-3.

²⁶ Kalitina and Brodskaia, 64.

²⁷ Kalitina and Brodskaia, 63.

²⁸ Brown, 20.

²⁹ Brown, 24.

³⁰ Rust, 18.

where the water has been disturbed by the boats on their way out to sea, where it ripples in contrast to where it is calm.

Monet's blending and use of color furthermore gives us a sense of light. The study of the effects of light on various forms, especially outdoors, was a special focus of his work in particular. With each work he attempted to capture the moment of particular scene,³¹ like that of working men taking their boats out at the break of dawn. The reflection of the rising sun sparkles in the water, the reflections of sparkling light signified by strategic dashes of white, dissipating with distance. The larger ships in the background block the sun's rays, murky shadows taking form in the water.

This attention to the workings of light, together with true color without lines, transforms Monet's work from merely "impressions" or effects of light to "pure reflections,"³² holding a mirror to the world, to nature, to daily life. *Impression, Sunrise*, is, therefore, not just representation, but includes a commentary on living life. The small boats in the foreground, while attracting the viewer's eye, are not the true focus of the story; they are merely actors, like the dawning sun or the resting ships in the background, in the midst of the greater workings and balances of nature. Through abstractions of color, Monet tells a story of the transience of life and time and light, of life ever-moving, ever-breathing, ever-changing, attempting time and again to harness one fleeting moment of the infinite number that make up a day.

What could these things tell us about Monet within the Impressionist movement and his view of the world through his art? Monet's artistry, in the beginning, was cultivated in the Classical-dominated setting of an Academie favoring historical,

³¹ Rust, 17.

³² Rust, 18.

religious, and mythological subjects, and the “Old Masters.”³³ Yet, by the early 1860s Monet found himself, along with other artist acquaintances, searching for something different, rejecting the strict and narrow ideas of the Salon and “academic clichés,” and looking for a new identity outside the boundaries of the Salon.³⁴ But this search was difficult:

“By no means all young artists find their distinctive creative personality at an early stage. Some can spend years finding themselves as tradition holds them in thrall, inducing a continual sense of dissatisfaction, and Monet did not completely escape such feelings.”³⁵

Still, Monet and others continued the “struggle for new ideals,”³⁶ and Monet found himself ever searching for the true and the authentic for the rest of his life.

In representing truth on the canvas, Monet’s process followed a philosophy focused on capturing the simplicity and the evanescent qualities he witnessed while sitting outside, painting. In discussing his plein-air technique, Monet “felt that the vitality of outdoor sketches suffered from transfer to studio compositions.”³⁷³⁸ For nature represented an “inventiveness,” spontaneity,³⁹ his ideal included a nature ephemeral, passing by, in motion, temporality in the blending of color—an “apprehension of the external world as a succession of momentary shocks of color, each of which is threatened with loss by the inexorable movement of time”⁴⁰—and man was only one small part of

³³ Roe, 8.

³⁴ Kalitina, Nina. 2004. *Claude Monet*. London: Grange Books, 13.

³⁵ Kalitina and Brodskaja, 64.

³⁶ Kalitina (2004), 13.

³⁷ Herbert, 177.

³⁸ McNamara. “In fact, Monet did work up his paintings indoors, bringing the initial “impression” into greater finish and adjusting the chromatic and color balances within the work.” p. 72.

³⁹ Herbert, 304.

⁴⁰ Rust, 21.

the system, “simply one of the indispensable elements of the changing world, without which its harmony would be disrupted.”⁴¹

In an urban, increasingly industrialized 19th century Paris, seemingly to be in constant flux, Monet and others looked to nature as a retreat. As much as Monet focused on painting nature, the subject matter he selected was still less important than the application or process.⁴² He stepped outdoors to sketch, out in the field, life as he saw it, and then went back inside, to his studio, to rework his observations, adding the special touches characteristic of his style, the compositional devices to give the “impression” of spontaneity.⁴³ Like other Impressionists, he was not concerned with the “correctness”⁴⁴ expected by the Academie, the shiny, finished product meant to *tell* the audience what to think, to understand; instead, he left them the “responsibility of interpretation,”⁴⁵ so that they could decide, on their own, what a scene of ships on the coast of Le Havre, under sunrise, meant to them. Monet, in his “new role of one who bears witness to contemporary realities,”⁴⁶ brought forth, in a way never before seen by the audiences and artists of France, a point of view that attempts to objectively present the realities of life and the lessons that can be found in nature in a rapidly changing world.

⁴¹ Kalitina, 13.

⁴² Rust, 21.

⁴³ Rust, 18.

⁴⁴ Brown, 20.

⁴⁵ Rust, 19.

⁴⁶ Rust, 19.

CHAPTER 3

NEO-IMPRESSIONISM AND SEURAT

Georges Seurat was not a big talker. Quoted from a letter to Signac in August of 1888, “Je ne parle ... pas beaucoup” (“I do not talk ... very much”), this expression written in the margins⁴⁷ to his fellow artist-friend was not an overstatement. Quiet and reserved throughout much of his life, especially noted throughout his career, critics, audience members, and admirers of his work were left to wonder: what was he doing? Where was all of this going? What was he even *thinking*? This artist of the famous expression “Art is Harmony”—harmony with a capital ‘H’—asked of Impressionism things that seemed contrary to its nature. Seurat followed a seemingly “scientific” color theory that led him to create and define a completely new process, Pointillism; he explored new realities and new ways of looking at reality; and he sought to break down barriers between Art, the sensitive artist, the hard-working proletariat, and the effects of the processes of light—all with little dots of paint. While Pointillism was much more than just little dots of paint placed in particular ways, examining a post-1886 work of Seurat’s—like *The Channel at Gravelines, Petit Fort Philippe* (1890, Indianapolis Museum of Art) or *The Eiffel Tower* (1889, Legion of Honor, San Francisco) or even *La Parade* (1887-88, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)—can show us one artist’s attempts

⁴⁷ Smith, Paul. 1997. *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1, 168.

to bring together nature, human beings, art and the processes that lead to his understanding of the world through its creation on canvas in the latter part of his career.

“Dots, dots, and more dots” could be used to describe the “color theory” for which Georges Seurat seems to be so well known, but that would be a gross misunderstanding of what Seurat set out to achieve and of what he himself understood his process to be, in spite of what everyone else thought it was or what it meant. For only a small part of his career, from around 1884 until his death in 1891 at the age of 31, did he even follow this theory’s prescriptions—and, in all seriousness, what was its role? Receiving his education at a municipal art school in Paris and, following, a classical education at the Ecole⁴⁸ Seurat strayed and became a student of the Impressionists, learning from them, his contemporaries, showing his art alongside theirs in their famous, and sometimes scandalous, exhibitions.

Seurat’s earlier works, such *Lisière de boise au printemps* completed between 1882 and 1883 or his 1885 *Ruines à Grandcamp* (both at the Musée d’Orsay) represented the Impressionists well, with their pastel colors, and contrast significantly with those 1886-and-after works he was most known for, those that have garnered the most critical attention. His *Lucerne, Saint-Denis*, also known as *Fields of Alfalfa, Saint-Denis* or *Field of Poppies*, an 1885, pre-*Grande Jatte* work (National Gallery of Scotland, oil on canvas), occurred within the beginnings of his Divisionist technique. Its “pure colour” and “application of paint in small, organised brushstrokes,”⁴⁹ these strokes still differ greatly, larger and seemingly more spontaneous than the measured and deliberate strokes of later works, giving off a much different overall aesthetic vibe, placing this piece still, if

⁴⁸ McAuliffe, 153.

⁴⁹ Christine Dixon. <http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/turnertomonet/Detail.cfm?IRN=167490>

not within, near the realm of the Impressionistic. But Seurat was “not satisfied with the spontaneous, drifting, color-soaked vision of nature” of Impressionism. He strove to organize his sensations for control—but for what: a control of nature, of his emotions, his thoughts?

Seurat ended up rejecting the colors of the classic tradition, of his training and earliest influences, going so far as to reject the so-called “scientific” treatises on color⁵⁰ so popular at the time to which many attribute the source of his process, the unique characteristics of his works. His art, his “Neo-Impressionism,” was termed the “scientific” impressionism of the “Impressionisms,” but was it meant to be “scientific” as we understand the term today, or as they understood it then? How did Seurat understand and apply the theories by which he became so engrossed, in his writings and in his artistic process? Exactly *where* was he trying to go? Away from Impressionism, from anything anyone else was doing at the time? Was he really trying to bring “science” into Art, and if so, did it work? And, last, what separated Seurat’s art from that of the Impressionists?

In May of 1886 Seurat shocked the world—that is, the art world of Paris. At the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition, along with Signac, Pissarro and his son, Seurat introduced *La Grande Jatte* to the critics and scholars in attendance, and, voila, “instant notoriety.”⁵¹ At this very last exhibition of the Impressionists, even his own colleagues were somewhat taken aback.⁵² As Herbert puts it, this painting was a “scandalous eruption within Impressionism, a deliberate challenge to its first practitioners,⁵³ and

⁵⁰ Rich, 3.

⁵¹ Herbert, 22.

⁵² Rich, 2.

⁵³ Herbert 22.

several months later, in September, the term “Neo-Impressionism” appeared in print,⁵⁴ written by art critic Félix Fénéon,⁵⁵ for the first time. No more was Seurat merely an Impressionist, as “Impressionists thrived on improvisation and a suitably spontaneous handling that gave objects, not just air and water, a fluttery and tremulous insubstantiality.” *La Grande Jatte*, as well as his other, especially his later works, did not fit this description at all.

The glimmering colors of Seurat’s post-1886 works could be described as *tremulous* yet they are not the spontaneous, improvisational-like realizations of the natural world in the same manner as those works of the other Impressionists, or those of an earlier stage in his career. A work like *The Channel at Gravelines, Petit Fort Philippe* may contain an essence of this “insubstantiality” but it takes the idea of human sensation in a totally new direction, breaking down the artist’s perceptive impulses so we may better understand the “way[s] in which knowledge is built up and the way[s] in which objective reality can be most usefully represented.”⁵⁶ Colleagues, Signac and the Pissarros all had taken up Divisionism, showing their own works at the exhibition, but to whom did they give all the credit? All gave one artist his due: Seurat, the “leader of a new and rebellious form of Impressionism.”⁵⁷

To Seurat he was not a “Neo-Impressionist” but—though silent on everything else—a self-professed “chromo-luminarist.”⁵⁸ By 1884, Seurat had developed

⁵⁴ Hutton, 17.

⁵⁵ Amory, Dita. "Georges Seurat (1859–1891) and Neo-Impressionism". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/seni/hd_seni.htm (October 2004).

⁵⁶ Ellen Wardwell Lee, 1990. *Seurat at Gravelines: The Last Landscapes*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 62.

⁵⁷ Herbert, Robert L. 2004. *Seurat and the Making of La Grande Jatte*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 22.

⁵⁸ Hutton, 17.

‘divisionism,’⁵⁹ also known as ‘Pointillism’ or ‘petit-point.’⁶⁰ Divisionism—or Seurat’s preferred “chromo-luminarism”—was, basically, the “division” of colors, of light into, not just a million tiny “dots” of color, but the essential particles that, to Seurat and others following this theory, coalesce into the vivid, dynamic, animated elements that, through interpretation of the eye, form the brilliant macrocosm around us we then perceive and analyze into disparate parts. This “aesthetic of the scientific,” obviously a ‘scientific’ Impressionism, focused on simplified, geometrical figures with simple contours⁶¹—what power an outline could have, outlines inspired by Japanese prints⁶²—where the tiny points became more than dots, they were, as the theory goes, connected on a greater level to the very edges of the painting, “coincident points” that created a relation between the surface pattern and the picture frame, doing so with variety and his characteristic discretion.⁶³

On a deeper level, Divisionism was an outlet for Seurat’s emotionally observational ponderings, “a stern, intellectual method of dividing his sensations in front of nature by analysis and a final synthesis,”⁶⁴ of uniting what he saw and what he felt through a language he understood, to achieve insight into the processes of light and its interaction with the mind in allowing one to comprehend the world around him and derive meaning from it. Starkly different from the *Lisière de boise au printemps*, the sequence of colors and hypnotic effects of *The Channel at Gravelines, Petit Fort Philippe*, one of Seurat’s last landscapes, reveal a new understanding of Impressionism—

⁵⁹ McAuliffe, 153.

⁶⁰ Rich, 4.

⁶¹ Prak, 367.

⁶² Prak, 369.

⁶³ Prak, 372 and 375.

⁶⁴ Rich, 4.

if Seurat even considered it that—that give the illusion of actions, applications of paint spontaneously scientific and measured with care, a mirage, a color breakdown.

With “[La Grande Jatte’s] well-measured forms and technique,” it can be “easy to think of him as master planner who applied rules in a mechanical way, leaving emotion behind.”⁶⁵ But his other works, like the 1990 landscape at Gravelines mentioned, surprisingly refute this way of thinking about his works and his practice. Seurat’s aim was to find completely new ways of seeing reality, being “deeply interested in the modernization and rationalization of perception and aesthetic response.”⁶⁶ He produced studies for each of his major works, several for each, even, and was a proponent of plein-air painting, yet he continued from outdoors to indoors to finish his creations in the studio,⁶⁷ and the influence of the Impressionists on his choice of subjects⁶⁸ shows, the modern scenes of Parisian leisure and luxury, of humans interacting with nature, nature as sole focus.

From his creation of Divisionism Seurat diverged from the Impressionists, “writing” a new aesthetic language, within an increasingly “intellectual” society that, since the industrial revolution, since the most recent and sizeable technological and scientific shift from rural and agricultural to modern and urban, was continuing, as the Impressionists did, to question every line of thought, every ideology that came before, refusing to believe what they were told and taught blindly.

The 1880s were a time when thinkers and researchers from a wide variety of fields were probing the structure of perception, the relation between mind and

⁶⁵ Herbert, 24.

⁶⁶ Lee, 61.

⁶⁷ McAuliffe, 152-3.

⁶⁸ Prak, 375.

sensation, and how the external world could be most usefully represented. These included psychologists, philosophers, poets, physiologists, philologists, and painters. It was a period when the earlier certainties of positivism and realism about the reliability of perception and of realist forms of representation were being profoundly questioned.⁶⁹

Breaking down our perceptions of the world, our reality, visually, may have been a way for Seurat to break down barriers, socially. Here, a major post-*La Grande Jatte*, post-1886 work has been discussed to some depth because:

“It is only after the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition that Seurat’s possible associations with wagnerisme and music, with Charles Henry’s theories of the psychology of art, and with anarchism can be appropriately discussed.”⁷⁰

Seurat was thought to have believed in anarchist socialism, even though there is no written record linking him,⁷¹ only writings of his that scholars such as Eisenman think may contain allusions to ideals and snippets of thoughts that hint of this rebellious stream of intellectual fervor. The ideal of Harmony, Seurat’s belief in the “universal human right to aesthetic pleasure”⁷² drove his work. What was or is Harmony, though, in visual terms and how was it supposed to aid in the breaking down of aesthetic barriers so that all people, not just the intellectual elite, not just the members of the Academy, not just those who make and enforce the “rules” of Art, could fulfill a universal human need.

If the Impressionists practiced representation of nature, Seurat’s style questioned what representation was, what it meant—if what we see is actually real. It was “his

⁶⁹ Lee, 61.

⁷⁰ Herbert, 24.

⁷¹ Eisenman, 211.

⁷² Eisenman, 214.

conscious development of an antirepresentational formal thinking immanent to an emerging modern society based on abstract value and on modes of mechanical mass reproduction”⁷³ that led him to diverge so substantially from the path the Impressionists had tread, his “interest in turning reality into an abstract pattern.”⁷⁴ Looking closer at *Gravelines*, *Petit Fort Phillipe* and then taking a couple of steps back we see the parts, miniscule, and then the radiant whole.

From both perspectives, it is truly a painting “for the eyes,” a veneration of color, of light, of interactions the viewer doesn’t consciously realize. It can be a puzzle: the *Gravelines* were real, *Petit Fort Phillipe* was/is a real place, and Seurat sketched on the shore, documenting it all for us. “Making a painting ... can reveal aspects of the self, or the world, that were previously hidden.”⁷⁵ Closer, the mechanics of sight; further away, the vibration of particles in unity, the dazzling, pulsing life in a moment made visible, evident. Though Seurat was not a big talker, it is possible that he was giving us a subtle nudge, so that we could ask ourselves: what is *real*?

⁷³ Lee, 61.

⁷⁴ Prak, 367.

⁷⁵ Smith, 5.

CHAPTER 4

SYMBOLISM AND REDON

“I have made an art according to myself. I have done it with eyes open to the marvels of the visible world and, whatever anyone might say, always careful to obey the laws of nature and life,”⁷⁶ wrote Odilon Redon in his writings, titled *To Myself: Notes on Life, Art and Artists*. Redon, the infamous “Master of Mystery” among those self-proclaimed Symbolists, produced works of subjects sometimes seemingly otherworldly and, in the last part of his life, of bright color, combining the *real* and the *fantastic* and placing an emphasis on the importance of emotion, yet with careful observation, such as can be seen in works like *Trees on a Yellow Background* (1901), found currently in the Musee d’Orsay, and *Flower Clouds* (c. 1903), residing in the Art Institute of Chicago’s museum, while avoiding and refuting the words of critics attempting to tie him or his work to any one category, “artistic” theory, or even the “Symbolist” camp for that matter.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Symbolism tended to stand for a “sweeping away the jagged and gritty elements of Naturalism and Realism in favor of a distant but approachable ideal,” and this ideal, to the avowed Symbolists was “swathed in mystery, hidden in shadows, and attainable only through images permeated with symbolic meaning.”⁷⁷ Whether or not Redon actually agreed with the philosophies of the

⁷⁶ Redon, 7.

⁷⁷ McAuliffe, 230.

Symbolist movement and those involved, many of his works were borne of artistic beliefs that sought out the Truths of nature, the inherent essences, of the “visible world,” and that which cannot quite be reached, described, touched upon of that visually imperceptible to the sense, probing the depths of the soul through great color or great darkness.

The year of 1880 saw the appearance of a group of visual artists who referred to themselves as “Symbolists” and marked, as well, Redon’s journey into color. From years of works in charcoal, lithographs in black and white, Redon began to move from strict darkness to works in pastels, watercolors, and oil paints that year,⁷⁸ creating vibrant scenes, some filled with colors spanning the spectrum, others leaning towards monochromatic. Redon’s *Trees in a Yellow Background* (*Arbres sur un fond jaune*) is one such example of the latter, with a narrow floral landscape—if one could even describe it as “landscape”—flooded, overwhelmed with golden light, light filling every space, between every branch and flower stretching to the sky, every space on the canvas not occupied by leaf or petal. “Unmodulated color” was a popular device used by the Symbolists, and in this work, for the softness the gold gives to the scene, it has a commanding presence.

Redon’s *Flower Clouds*, created in 1903 and the focus of the rest of this chapter’s discussion, is an example of the earlier, a pastel work on paper depicting two figures, “perhaps two saintly women,” in a small sailboat, “a dreamlike skiff,” living “a timeless journey” under a “fantastic, phosphorescent sea and sky,”⁷⁹ an unbelievably multi-colored, fanciful, phantasmagorical sky full of yellows, blues, and reds. Compared to sky above, the figures in the boat are bland, looking opaque, maybe even translucent, sailing

⁷⁸ Berger, 85.

⁷⁹ Entry, *Essential Guide*, 2013, p. 321, <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/76395>.

through a world greatly impacted by and full of flux and metamorphosis, the world Redon set out to depict and chose to through color.⁸⁰ The great *Flower Clouds* of Redon's sky, one can imagine them bursting, blooming like fireworks, transforming, changing from one vibrant color to another, and then fading back into dark. So striking their reflections on the surface of the open water one has trouble telling where the horizon exists.

With this, Redon explored the depths of nature, and of the human connection with nature, through color. But exactly how does Redon embody the essence of nature and the depths of the mind through color? How does he utilize color in not merely representing or mimicking nature but tell of subjective Truths, of universals? What could some themes across Redon's oeuvre be? "The transformation of nature into dream-like images, suggesting indefinite states of mind and expressed in sumptuous textures, remained his central concern, and the exploratory freedom with which he investigated the suggestive potential of colour,"⁸¹ coupled with the careful observation he found so important to his art, helped him to reach new depths of the real and the personal in visual form.⁸²

Joining the *real* with the *fantastic* was a specialty of Redon's, whether in black and white or sumptuous color. Aesthetic fragments of the Romantic movement made a comeback in the second half of the 19th century, with artists introducing dreams, the "supernatural," the "mystical" and the "occult," and the inner workings of the mind⁸³ to their audiences. With these elements and theories from the then-present and on-going

⁸⁰ Hauptman, 40.

⁸¹ Richard Hobbs, from Grove Art Online, Source: Oxford University Press, http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=4840.

⁸² Include information about chiaroscuro. <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/around-redon.html#c52117>.

⁸³ Hauptman, 22.

Decadence movement, such as the rejection of the idea that art has an obligation to “represent reality faithfully” and that reality goes through transformation,⁸⁴ a reality that it is dynamic and ever-changing, the Symbolists, especially Redon, found their artistic ground in exploring levels of realities, without and within the human body.

Redon explored a variety of subjects, verging on the border of multiple realities, those between reality and non-reality, or the fantastic: religious subjects, like the Buddha; those of the mythological, such as Pandora, Pegasus, Mephistopheles. He painted portraits of patrons, but even these were not one’s standard 18th-century portrait; his subject, within the borders of the canvas, found him or herself, like Baronne de Domecy, off in a small part of the world, of a strange, floating world, without depth, one of Redon’s imagination, sometimes surrounded by large, blossoming flowers and always by a cosmos of color.

Even seemingly innocent and straightforward nature scenes are infused with the fantastical. Redon merges the natural world with that of the human psyche, throwing together nature and humans and searching for the places where the two meet, to “envision something far outside of reality.”⁸⁵ When it came to his art, “[i]nstead of choosing between imagination and mimesis, fantasy and nature,” Redon chose both. He “deployed one to get to the other: he closely examined nature in inventing his fantasies, he carefully observed reality as a way to take flights of the imagination.”⁸⁶

Believing the Realist theories to be too “narrow,” he expanded on Realism-with-a-capital-‘R,’ giving the art scene of late 19th century Paris a new definition, taking his

⁸⁴ Hauptman, 23.

⁸⁵ Hauptman, 49.

⁸⁶ Hauptman, Jodi. 2005. *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 24.

ideas from the “most fertile sources” of artistic reflection: “thought, inspiration, genius—in a word—and all that it reveals to us.”⁸⁷ In *Flower Clouds*, one hardly notices the two figures in the boat for the polychromatic sky. In a way, despite all the technological and intellectual advances of the current century, Redon and his figures in the sailboat submit to the wonders of the natural world, to the glorious, grandness of all that surrounds them, to all that they understand and to all they still do not.

In a catalogue note from July 1910, Redon remarked, “I address those who surrender docilely, without the help of sterile explanations to the secret and mysterious laws of sensitivity and of the heart.”⁸⁸ For the length of his career Redon relied on his inner nature, emphasizing instinct and intuition above imagination, trusting them and letting these guide his art much more than the fancies of his mind. Many Symbolist artists “shut themselves away inside their inner worlds” in order to “discover . . . the realities of the unconscious” through feeling and the “exquisite refinements of sensation.”⁸⁹ Stressing the personal and the subjective, especially the use of dreams, at the same time, from the same note, Redon spoke of an artist who “scrutinizes,”⁹⁰ who peers at the world, at nature, with such inquisitive eyes, so as to try to glimpse its very essence, to create an art “always supported by observation,” believing that “the formless and the shaded must be juxtaposed with the carefully described.”⁹¹ His art was a “suggestive art,”⁹² an art, with all of the observation and scrutiny, that represented the

⁸⁷ Hauptman, 32.

⁸⁸ Redon, 95-6.

⁸⁹ Hauptman, 23.

⁹⁰ Redon, 95-6.

⁹¹ Hauptman, 34.

⁹² Hauptman, 27.

ephemerality and feelings of existing within the world, among nature, rather than the “concrete” details of what things are or were.

So, how does *Flowers Clouds* reflect the scrutiny, the observation Redon utilized and so believed in? How does this work embody the balance between Redon’s belief in art from one’s deep, emotional core and that of art from careful observation of nature, the physical world, through the artist’s human eye? How is this work a “suggestive art”?

“Art is a flower which opens freely outside of all rules ...”⁹³ and Redon was an artist who subverted, freely and candidly, the rules. Not so popular at first, Redon took an “in-between path” that eventually won him admirers and supporters.⁹⁴ While the Impressionists were his contemporaries, a part of his generation, there was but little in common between the two.⁹⁵ He worked on his art, in isolation,⁹⁶ between the theories and philosophies of groups to which he did not quite see himself, or his art, belonging. Even when he finally received recognition and the subjects, colors, artistic beliefs, and technique of his works became a source for the declared Symbolists, he continued to stay away from their formulas and theories.⁹⁷

Still, Redon continued to be misunderstood by critics who repeatedly failed to really *see* his art for their dire need to define it, or as Redon put it: “... they did not see that there was no need to define anything, to understand anything, to imitate anything, to be precise about anything, because everything that is sincerely and gently new—just as beauty—carries its meaning in itself.”⁹⁸ Other artists saw this misunderstanding, too, as

⁹³ Redon, 64.

⁹⁴ Hauptman, 24.

⁹⁵ Berger, 10.

⁹⁶ Rewald, 224.

⁹⁷ Rewald, 225.

⁹⁸ Rewald, 219.

Gauguin once commented, “Odilon Redon, that extraordinary artist whom they persist in not understanding, will they someday give him his due?”⁹⁹ Redon and his *Flower Clouds*, and his numerous other mysterious works in shadow and color, carries meaning, not through application of terms and labels, but through witnessing nature, beholding its transience, the incomprehensible, and listening to what it tells your inner mind and self.

⁹⁹ Rewald, 225.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

“Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent,”¹⁰⁰ Charles Baudelaire expresses the very sense of an idea many artists, musicians, poets, and writers strove to explain, to depict, and to describe in the last half of the 19th century. The French poet and writer, the “Father of Modernity,” in his essay, “The Painter of Modern Life,” published in 1864, summarizes, even in this one thought, so succinctly a sentiment, for which artists of all kinds gathered around tables in cafes, convened in bookstores, and united—or didn’t—upon common ideological grounds into movements such as those discussed in the previous chapters—Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Symbolism.

This “modernity,” it was an *ideal* for which one was always grasping yet was ever out of one’s reach. For the moment one began to perceive of its forms, its texture, its color, in that moment it was already gone. It was an elusive goal, alluring to industrialists and artists alike, the ultimate sophistication of technology, culture, and society. All of the artists examined here contemplated how to represent a fleeting life—human perception—questioning reality as they searched for an ideal balance of nature and human emotion and turning away from the bustling industrialized, “modern” cities, while subverting the expectations their institutions laid out for them.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Baudelaire. 1964. *Painter of Modern Life*. Ed. and Trans. Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press, 13.

When it comes to Debussy, none of the labels, or movements, of previous chapters are sufficient to define the work of a composer whose style drew from varied sources of inspiration. He is better viewed as an artist who resisted all labels and shared with his visual art contemporaries an opposition to the strict boundaries and narrow ideas of the Academie and the Conservatoire—the overarching rule-makers of visual art and music—and an ability to re-envision the natural world, even reality, in ways which had never before been seen. In the following, I will examine three art songs across Debussy’s oeuvre—*Nuit d’etoiles*, *C’est l’extase*, and *La flûte de Pan*—from major cycles or sets of his career, and look at how each may, or may not, reveal the ways in which Debussy stretched limitations and the variety of artistic thought and ideas that affected his work.

Why art song? Being among Debussy’s earliest compositions, art song, a work for voice and piano, made up the bulk of his creative output as well as his most popular works and well-known works, even to this day. Art song combines text and music, and as Debussy produced *mélodies*, or French song, throughout his career, it provides a possible avenue for observing the *imagery* in which he found inspiration, over time. Further, the voice in the 19th century “continued to be valued as a vehicle for truthful expression”¹⁰¹ and human speech was seen as pure, authentic expression.¹⁰² Naturally, it became a vehicle for poets and composers to express the heights of human emotion, its language for artists, visual and musical, to attempt to transcend, and one-half of a genre for this research to look at the ways in which Debussy may have shared certain artistic

¹⁰¹ Laura Anne Kalba. “Hearing Voices: A Study of the Soundscape and Visual Culture of Debussy’s Paris,” from *Debussy’s Paris: Art, Music, & Sounds of the City*, ed. and published by Linda Muehlig, Smith College Museum of Art, 20.

¹⁰² Kalba, 29.

qualities with those who identified with Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Symbolism.

Sound is hard to describe. Its ephemeral and transient nature—what you have heard, as soon as you think you have grasped it, it is gone. In contrast, the paintings, drawings, and watercolors of the Impressionists, Neo-Impressionists, and Symbolists examined earlier, exist on canvas and paper, carefully conserved in museums and still visible and available to the human eye and mind. Music only lasts on the page; it is a contrived representation, a culturally constructed system of symbols and signs given meaning within and by a Euro-centered musical world; and its performance merely an approximation of those black marks on the copy of the composer's score.

Simon Shaw-Miller, in his book *Visible Deeds of Music*, does not see the differences in visual art and music's basic natures, though, as any kind of barrier to interdisciplinary analysis. Shaw-Miller, instead, states this: "I begin with the premise that there is no essential or *sufficient* defining difference between them, although that is not to say that there are not necessary characteristics." He continues on to argue that the differences between visual art and music are only a "matter of *degree*, not of *kind*," meaning that visual art and music both belong to a *continuum* of art; therefore, the perceived boundaries between them are open to cross-comparison.¹⁰³ How do we make these comparisons, then? How do we talk about these two seemingly different expressions?

These artists, their works, the critics and their critiques are a "product of an age in which critical discourse on painting and music shared the same vocabulary," a

¹⁰³ Simon Shaw-Miller. 2002. *Visible Deeds of Music: Art and Music from Wagner to Cage*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 5.

vocabulary of basic elements such as line, color, tone, form, etc., and since the early 1890s there has been a search for parallels between Debussy's music and the visual arts¹⁰⁴: this tradition continues today. Critics and scholars have used this common vocabulary to critique and attempt to form connections between them. Further, we can view art and music through shared cultural and historical contexts, examining practices, lines of thought, and events that led to creative product.

Shaw-Miller defines for us the period of modernism as circa 1860-1960 and within this period we find the movements of Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Symbolism and the entirety of Debussy's life and career. It is also this period of time that is "marked by rapid and intense economic, social, and political transformation," and within this era that artists and society witnessed the formation and creation of many new artistic movements within a relatively short period of time¹⁰⁵ Shaw-Miller understands that this time was

marked by an attempt to (re)establish the 'essential identity of each branch of cultural practice, each art form ... a strong sense of censure was (is) attached to the project: that through the 'self evident truth' of the 'natural' boundaries between the arts, the issue becomes as much a moral one—that the arts *should* only 'concern themselves with certain formal characteristics'—as it was a merely neutral formal requirement—that they 'can only express certain things within these essential borders.'

"Within the span of scarcely two decades Impressionism became a generally accepted term in the field of musicology ... hastily and carelessly brought forward in an

¹⁰⁴ Roberts (2008), 20.

¹⁰⁵ Muehlig, 10.

attempt to account for the newness and strangeness of Debussy's music." But there are dangers to "Debussy, the Impressionist." Brynside, in his critique, goes on to say, "The resistance with which the term met in its early history, the looseness with which it was so often applied to Debussy's music, and the failure of most of those who used it to define precisely its meaning or its attributes"—failing to understand or define the term they were using—should greatly concern us today, for much is at stake."¹⁰⁶ Many have sought to understand Debussy's works through painting; Botstein asks—in "Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy's Break with Tradition"—"Was the way out of the past shown to Debussy by the manner in which traditions and viewer expectations in painting had been challenged successfully by contemporaries?"¹⁰⁷ By contemporaries like Monet, Seurat, Redon and others?

But "Impressionism" has not been the only label or category to be thrown around so carelessly in regard to Debussy. Since Debussy's time, other scholars and critics have made cases for a "Debussy, the Neo-Impressionist" and, even more so, a "Debussy, the Symbolist." Alex Hargreaves Ashworth, in his article, "Twentieth-Century Painting: the Approach Through Music," from 1939, counts the ways in which Debussy was Impressionist-like, but then turns, instead, towards Neo-Impressionism, while attempting to refute the popular critique of "vagueness" made against Debussy's music:

The charge of vagueness can be made against Debussy only by those who fail to appreciate the distinction between a profound sense of design and a marked feeling for pattern. And it is this sense of design which rather strains the analogy

¹⁰⁶ Ronald L. Brynside. "Musical Impressionism: The Early History of the Term." *The Musical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (Oct. 1980), 536-7.

¹⁰⁷ Botstein, 141-2.

between Debussy and the Impressionists. But for the fact that he followed his instinct rather than working to a theory, one might class him with the Neo-impressionists, who developed pointillisme as a scientific system and brought back design into painting: not for realistic but for decorative ends.

It could even be said that “Debussy, the Symbolist” has fared far better. In Burkholder, Grout, and Palisca’s 8th Edition of *A History of Western Music*, there is a paragraph devoted to his alleged Impressionist and Symbolist ties, in his music and his life. The authors acknowledge that his music is “often called *impressionist*, by analogy to the impressionist painters” and continue on to counter with: “but it is closer to symbolism, a connection reinforced by his friendships with symbolist poets and his use of their texts for songs and dramatic works.” The authors then briefly summarize the characteristics other scholars and critics have written articles and books about that connect Debussy to Symbolism and its artists.

Nuit d’étoiles (Night of stars)

Historically, Debussy’s *Nuit d’étoiles* could be one of Debussy’s most “Impressionistic” pieces. With a text by Theodore de Banville, it was composed and published in 1880 during the height of the Impressionists’ struggle with the Academie. By 1886, Impressionism, for the most part, was a half-way acceptable form of expression, yet it was in 1887 when the Conservatoire critiqued a piano piece of his as consisting of “vague Impressionism” and that he possessed “a pronounced tendency ... towards an exploration of the strange.”

The piano glistens and glimmers (attributes unacceptable at the time) as if speaking for the stars on a clear night—a representation, maybe even an “impression” of

this sky—while the voice stands in wonder at what she sees above. While it is possible that *Nuit d'étoiles* was under a greater “Impressionistic” influence than Debussy’s later works, in his use of nature to express deeper emotions of *l’ame*, the soul, do we already see some Symbolist influences?

“Impressionist”: this term “originally summed up everything that was outrageous, beyond the pale, and modern.”¹⁰⁸ Roberts, in *Images*, thinks that there were “tendencies” of the Impressionists technique in Debussy’s style from the very beginning. Non-conformity and “oppose the establishment”¹⁰⁹ ideas was part of Debussy’s whole ethos. It was a satirical essay character, Monsieur Croche, Debussy’s alter ego, who said, “Remain unique!”¹¹⁰—a sentiment that echoed opinions that the Ecole’s teaching was “completely out of touch with the real, everyday world.”¹¹¹ For it was at the Ecole, in a conversation with his composition teacher, Debussy the student boldly told his professor, “Music cannot be learned.”¹¹²

C’est l’extase (This is ecstasy)

In *C’est l’extase*, the voice declares: “C’est l’extase langoureuse, c’est la fatigue amoureuse”—“This is languorous rapture, this is amorous fatigue.” *C’est l’extase* represents a considerable change in style by 1888. In a letter from June, 1885, Debussy wrote: “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to cast my music in a rigid mould”—that he would “always rather deal with something where the passage of events is subordinated to a thorough and extended portrayal of human feelings.”

¹⁰⁸ Roberts (2008), 113.

¹⁰⁹ Roberts (2008), 115.

¹¹⁰ Roberts (2006), 121.

¹¹¹ Roberts (2008), 116.

¹¹² Roberts (2006), 121.

“That way,” he says, “I think, music can become more personal, more true to life.”

Throughout his career Debussy sought to fill the page with rich, color harmonies, pairing them with soaring musical lines, achieving a moment of heightened emotion. Debussy, here, uses nature and subjective feeling to further explore the depths of human emotion.

La flute de Pan (The flute of Pan)

La flute de pan, or The flute of Pan, from Debussy’s cycle *Chansons de Bilitis*, published in 1899, could be the most Symbolist of these three examples. By 1893 Debussy was already spending time with the Symbolist poets in the cafes, salons, and bookstores of Paris, and letters between Debussy and Redon tell us of their shared “artistic sympathies.” Debussy was “searching for the Inexpressible which is the ideal of all art”—similar to the Symbolists’ ideal—though, note, it was in 1894 when he was publicly declared as an “Impressionist” by a critic.

It was in 1895 when he wrote this example here. Debussy’s musical writing is spare. The vocal line is ever more so conversational-like, but still subtly expressing depths of emotion. Most of all, the listener has no idea where the music is going—a great mystery Debussy has given all of us.

Conclusion

What we learn here is 1) Debussy shared motivations, practices, emotions, and ideas with the artists of these three movements with an emphasis on bringing together nature and human emotion and perception; 2) it does not suffice to keep referring to Debussy as the “Impressionist” composer, when his work found multiple avenues of inspiration; and 3) labels and categorizations are only good as long as we continue to

question. Rather than view these movements with static beginnings and endings, we need to understand them as dynamic, flowing progressions of ideas.

It is our tendency as human beings to define, to categorize, to label. The “Debussy problem” provides an interesting case—and lessons—about the ways in which we discuss the musical and visual arts. It warns us to be careful of the potential impact of categorization made too soon. The interpretations that could be made of Debussy’s music have been somewhat hampered by a label that continues to be debated. It encourages us, instead, to wait and listen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baudelaire, Charles. 1964. *Painter of Modern Life*. Ed. and Trans. Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press, 13.
- Botstein, Leon. "Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy's Break with Tradition," 150. From *Debussy and his World*, ed. Jane Fulcher.
- Brynside, Ronald L. "Musical Impressionism: The Early History of the Term." *The Musical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (Oct. 1980), 536-7.
- Gilbert, David. "Prix de Rome." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed April 15, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40632>.
- Hauptman, Jodi. 2005. *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 24.
- Herbert, Robert L. 2004. *Seurat and the Making of La Grande Jatte*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 22.
- Johnson, Graham, and Richard Stokes, 2000. *A French Song Companion*. New York: Oxford University Press, ix, 93.
- Kalba, Laura Anne. "Hearing Voices: A Study of the Soundscape and Visual Culture of Debussy's Paris," from *Debussy's Paris: Art, Music, & Sounds of the City* (Linda Muehlig, Smith College Museum of Art, 2012), 16, 201.
- Kalitina, Nina, and Nathalia Brodskaja. 2011. *Claude Monet*. New York: Parkstone Press, 47, 83.
- Lee, Ellen Wardwell. 1990. *Seurat at Gravelines: The Last Landscapes*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 62.
- Lesure, François, and Roy Howat. "Debussy, Claude." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed March 6, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/07353>.

- McNamara, Carole. "Monet's Vetheuil Paintings: Site, Subject, and Debacles," from *Monet at Vetheuil: The Turning Point* (1998), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 72.
- Roberts, Paul. 1996. *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*. Portland: Amadeus Press, 127.
- Roberts, Paul. 2008. *Claude Debussy*. London: Phaidon Press, 43, 72.
- Samu, Margaret. "Impressionism: Art and Modernity". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm (October 2004).
- Shaw-Miller, Simon. 2002. *Visible Deeds of Music: Art and Music from Wagner to Cage*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 5.
- Smith, Paul. 1997. *Seurat and the Avant-Garde*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1, 168.
- Tresize, Simon. 2003. *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 27-28.
- Tucker, Paul. "The First Impressionist Exhibition and Monet's Impression, Sunrise: A Tale of Timing, Commerce and Patriotism." *Art History* 7, no. 4 (1984): 47.