

Debussy's Piano Music: Style Characteristics in Three Categories

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Abstract : Claude Debussy's piano works can be divided into three categories in terms of style characteristics. The first category includes works which are strongly impressionistic, evoking a mood or an atmosphere, rather than making a direct, clear statement. These works often depict nature, and they are descriptive and sensitive in their character. Harmonic vocabulary is often complex, and the sense of tonality is often ambiguous in those works. Examples which belong to this category are 'Clair de lune' from Suite Bergamasque, Deux Arabesques, and 'Reflets dans l'eau' from Images Book 2. The second category shows little or no trace of impressionism. Works are not descriptive; rather, they are classical or absolute. Examples which belong to this category are Pour le Piano, 'Hommage à Rameau' and 'Movement' from Images Book 1 and Etudes. The third category can be called exotic. Debussy had a great interest in foreign lands such as the Far and Near East, and Spain. He employs pentatonic and quartal harmonies to describe the Orient, occasionally using the effect of the Javanese gamelan, which impressed him at the Paris Exhibition. His compositions in the Spanish style evoke the atmosphere of Spain. Though he borrowed some techniques from Spanish composers whom he knew, the tonal experimentation which occurs in these works sets them apart. Examples which belong to this category are 'Pagodes' and 'la Soiree dans Grenade' from Estampes, 'la Puerta del Vino' from Preludes Book 2.

Keywords : music, piano, Debussy, style

Conference Title : ICMPC 2021 : International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition

Conference Location : Madrid, Spain

Conference Dates : March 25-26, 2021