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Impressions and Symbols: Analysing the Aesthetics of Debussy's Practices
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Impressions and Symbols
Analysing the aesthetics of Debussy's practices within his
***fin-de-siècle* mosaic of inspirations**

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*No, what we must have is more Nuance,
Colour is forbidden, only Nuance!
Nuance alone writes the harmonies
Of dream and dream, of woodwind and brass.¹*

There is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law.²

Achille-Claude Debussy provoked so many musical and critical arguments during his lifetime that it is easy to understand the frequency and force with which he continued provoking arguments even after his death in 1918. He occupies a unique position in Western music history as one of the most significant composers working during the ideological transition from Romanticism to Modernism. As such, it is only to be expected that various critics both during and after his lifetime judged his significance in conflicting ways. One particularly protracted

† This article is dedicated to the memory of three friends: Oliver, Saki and Megs.

¹ Paul Verlaine, “Art Poétique,” (1874) in *Paul Verlaine: Selected Poems*, trans. Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 122-23.

² Claude Debussy, quoted in J. Peter Burkholder, Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 7th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), 783.

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argument concerns his artistic classification. Although retrospectively assigning a remarkably visionary composer to a vague descriptive slot is perhaps not the most useful of tasks, linking Debussy with the relevant aspects of important contemporary cultural movements can enhance our knowledge of his influences and creative processes, and inform our understanding of his music.

Why does the familiar concept of Debussy as an Impressionist retain such a stranglehold on current musical literature? Despite passionate efforts by a number of scholars during the 1960s and 70s to dislodge it in favour of the more ideologically correct association with Symbolism, the fight has apparently been given up. Perhaps rather than forcibly claiming Debussy within the bounds of Impressionism, Symbolism, Modernism or any other number of nineteenth- and twentieth-century "-isms", we could paint a clearer picture of the composer by exploring the cumulative effect of these influences on his own highly individual style.

Debussy cannot be described simply as a Romantic, nor is he a fully-fledged Modernist. We must look beyond the period labels of music history to appreciate the sources from which he drew inspiration. Obscured beneath the tumultuous transition from Romanticism to Modernism were a number of smaller artistic movements emerging from *fin de siècle* France. The two associated most closely with Debussy are Impressionism and Symbolism – the latter primarily a genre of poetry, and the former a genre of art. As there were no clearly distinct schools of composition in France at this time that could be considered to parallel these, commentators have tried to fit Debussy's personality and output into one of the above categories. This exercise has manifested itself through the twentieth century a number of times, usually without considering the opinions of Debussy's contemporaries. It is the driving force behind the early

studies of numerous German musicologists, who were particularly interested in Impressionist harmonic techniques; it appears in the 1962 centennial conferences which presented some of the earliest research arguing for Debussy to be considered as a Symbolist,³ and it manifests itself in Jarocinski's seminal study of 1966.⁴ It appears most recently in several articles in the current New Grove dictionary, in which the reader is encouraged to consider both Debussy and musical Impressionism in terms of the complex cultural environment in which they existed.⁵

Debussy, after all, the primary composer of either Impressionism or Symbolism depending on your view, seems just the kind of artistic rebel to synthesise his own “movement” in music from the major influences of his time. His famously tense relationship with the Paris Conservatoire attests to this. At an early age he realised that the established music vocabulary could not sustain his developing aesthetic⁶ and he was known to vehemently complain to his teachers and fellow students about the restrictions posed by the prescribed harmony and solfège classes. He was also uncomfortable with his 1884 victory in the most prominent French prize for composition, the *Prix de Rome*, presumably because it would associate him with its reputation for academicism. Debussy's reaction upon hearing that he had won the prize was not what the judges might have expected:

³ John Robert Ringgold, *The Linearity of Debussy's Music and its Correspondences with the Symbolist Aesthetic*, Ph.D diss, (University of Southern California, 1972), 6.

⁴ Stefan Jarocinski, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism* (London: Ernst Eulenberg Ltd, 1976).

⁵ See François Lesure and Roy Howat, “Debussy, (Achille-)Claude” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed August 18, 2009); and Jan Pasler, “Impressionism” in *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com> (accessed October 14, 2009).

⁶ Ringgold, *Linearity of Debussy's Music*, 4.

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“People may not believe me, but, nevertheless, it is a fact that all my joy was over. I saw clearly the worries and annoyances that the smallest official position brings in its train. Besides, I felt that I was no longer free.”⁷

As it turned out, the pieces that he was required to compose and send back to the *Prix* panel during his stay in Rome were not regarded particularly highly by the French academics.⁸ Upon his return to France, Debussy shunned the intellectual style represented by the Conservatoire and the *Prix*, and found his niche in a bohemian lifestyle among Parisian artists and poets. His association with Symbolist writers and publishers and Impressionist artists and critics, in addition to the taste for art and poetry he had cultivated from a young age, would ultimately have a vast influence on his compositional style. Crossing between the different art forms, he set out to create musical images: *estampes* (engravings), *esquisses* (sketches), and *aquarelles* (watercolours). His fascination with poetry is evident from his large body of art songs and the vast number of dramatic works that, in many cases, he optimistically began but never completed.⁹

Culturally, Symbolism and Impressionism were reactions that sprang from a world obsessed with material things – from the contemporary political turmoil and the bourgeois obsession with material possessions, to the scientific and technological fixation on achieving mastery over the natural world.¹⁰ Symbolists were dissatisfied intellectuals who turned to the antithesis of materialism: spiritualism (“an aesthetic which

⁷ Claude Debussy, quoted in Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Grace O'Brien (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 30.

⁸ Ringgold, *Linearity of Debussy*, 94.

⁹ Margaret G. Cobb, ed., *The Poetic Debussy: a Collection of his Song Texts and Selected Letters* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 1994), 272-295.

¹⁰ Jarocinski, *Impressionism and Symbolism*, 61.

ignored exterior appearances, accentuating that which was mysterious and invisible”).¹¹ Impressionists became preoccupied with similarly intangible concerns: the nature of perception, the fluidity of time and light. Neither one instigated the other – they developed independently, Impressionism out of the increasing experimentation of Monet and Degas, among other like-minded artists, and Symbolism out of its sibling literary movements of Decadence and Parnassianism, inspired in part by Baudelaire's French translations of Edgar Allan Poe which appeared in the 1850s and captured the attention of many French writers of the time.¹²

The term “Impressionism” was coined in 1873, used as a critical barb by art critic Louis Leroy in his review of an exhibition which featured Monet's new work, “Impression: Sunrise”. Negative criticism from Leroy and others focused on the painting's lack of classical composition and its vague and apparently unfinished state,¹³ which, of course, was a necessary part of its aesthetic goal: capturing an impression, a perception of a fleeting and imperfect moment in time.

Due to its ignoble beginnings, the term was only loosely and grudgingly accepted by artists, and perhaps it is here that some of the confusion lies. “Impressionism” is a remarkably flexible word. It can be a term of criticism (thanks to the initial coinage by Leroy), or it can be used to describe a movement in art, in music, and in literature – a generic term for the avant-garde in the 1880s.¹⁴ It has aesthetic, philosophical, and socio-political

¹¹Jennifer Lea Brown, *Debussy and Symbolism: A Comparative Analysis of the Aesthetics of Claude Debussy and Three French Symbolist Poets*, DMA diss., (Stanford University, 1992), 4.

¹²James Lawler, “Daemons of the Intellect: the Symbolists and Poe,” in *Critical Inquiry* 14 (1987), 97-98.

¹³Grace Seiberling, “Impressionism” in *Grove Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com> (accessed October 14, 2009).

¹⁴Pasler, “Impressionism.”

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implications.¹⁵ It can indicate a psychologically compelling movement spearheaded by a number of Parisian artists in the later years of the nineteenth century, and it can mean the derived practice applied by composers and artists which affords them the critical tag “Impressionist^{ti}”. One constantly finds “Debussy and the Impressionists”¹⁶ or “Impressionism – Debussy”¹⁷ in music texts as though the two terms were perfectly interchangeable. Pasler admits that, even though Impressionism is not an ideal term, it has stuck in popular usage as a handy collective title for a group of similar notions, and this is why it has such wide acceptance today.¹⁸

Interestingly, Debussy's music was explicitly labelled “Impressionist” during his lifetime – for example, in the Académie des Beaux-Arts review of his *Printemps*,¹⁹ and with increasing intensity after the premiere of *La Mer*.²⁰ Debussy himself was known to deplore the label and tended to use it ironically.²¹ In 1908 he wrote in a letter to his publisher:

“I'm trying to write 'something else' – realities, in a manner of speaking – what imbeciles call 'impressionism', a term employed with the utmost accuracy, especially by art critics who use it as a label to stick on Turner, the finest creator of mystery in the whole of art!”²²

¹⁵ Pasler, “Impressionism.”

¹⁶ Joseph Machlis, *Introduction to Contemporary Music* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1963), 110.

¹⁷ John Tasker Howard and James Lyons, *Modern Music*, rev. ed. (New York: New American Library, 1957), 47.

¹⁸ Pasler, “Impressionism.”

¹⁹ Ringgold, *Linearity of Debussy*, 9.

²⁰ Lesure and Howat, “Debussy.”

²¹ Jarocinski, *Impressionism and Symbolism*, 91.

²² François Lesure and Roger Nichols, eds, *Debussy Letters* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1987), 188.

Unfortunately this letter was not published until 1927, by which time musicologists had for almost two decades described Debussy's harmonic and technical significance as illustrative of something called Impressionist Harmony, with the composer's absent approval.²³

Conversely, the movement to consider Debussy as a Symbolist has recently garnered a considerable amount of attention. The case for a Symbolist Debussy is strengthened by biographical evidence. The fact is undeniable that Debussy was personally and artistically linked more closely with the Symbolist writers than with any other group of composers or artists. His close friend Paul Dukas had famously said, "the strongest influence which Debussy ever came across was that of the writers of his day, and not of the musicians."²⁴ And indeed, we know from Debussy's letters and other first-hand sources that the composer was well acquainted with Symbolist aesthetic and literary thought: he read the published essays, attended Mallarmé's Tuesday gatherings to discuss poetry,²⁵ and, not least, was friends with many Symbolist poets and frequently set their poems to music with their permission and approval.²⁶

While naturally Impressionism and Symbolism are two distinct movements (their separate beginnings and different mediums making this clear), philosophically they share a number of elements and rarely contradict each other. Artistic Impressionism is notionally about capturing a moment in the constantly shifting light, colour, atmosphere and movement of the world – a resolution that Debussy seems intent on depicting in his orchestral *La Mer*. Conceptually, "[Impressionist] artists shared a concern for finding a technical means to express

²³ Jarocinski, *Impressionism and Symbolism*, 50.

²⁴ Jarocinski, *Impressionism and Symbolism*, 98.

²⁵ Jarocinski, *Impressionism and Symbolism*, 89.

²⁶ Lesure, *Letters*, 58, 60, 75.

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individual sensation.”²⁷ Poetic Symbolism attempts to capture the very inexpressible quality of an artistic ideal by approaching it with suggestion and veiled description, and an often synaesthetic combination of elements from other arts. Mallarmé in particular weaves musical ideas and allusions through his poems to enhance (and obscure?) his unachievable ideal with the inexpressible qualities of music.²⁸ The goal was ultimately to create a sensuous world of ambiguous and evocative psychological experiences and intense sounds in order to evoke rather than depict. Exact depiction is virtually impossible in the translucent and transient world of sound, so using music to weave suggestions around a non-concrete idea seems an irresistible synaesthetic tool for the Symbolist poet and a natural advantage for the Symbolist composer.

Scholars have more recently begun to admit that since elements of both Impressionism and Symbolism were folded into the Parisian *fin de siècle* atmosphere, it is finally time to cease “dissociating” Debussy from one style or another and embrace the multiplicity of influences and inspirations that make up the composer’s complex musical language.²⁹ It is important to note that when it comes to actually broaching the musical elements of what makes Debussy an Impressionist or a Symbolist, they turn out to be virtually identical. By conceding that Debussy’s musical language has a mixed heritage, we come a step closer to reconciling his aesthetic and technical practices.³⁰

The 'Debussy as Impressionist/Symbolist' debate can be seen as an example of the fascinating way that ideas move

²⁷ Seiberling, “Impressionism.”

²⁸ Peter Dayen, “On evidence of Mallarmé’s music,” in *Music Writing Literature: from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), 63-78.

²⁹ Pasler, “Impressionism,” Burkholder, *A History of Western Music*, 780.

³⁰ Ringgold, *Linearity of Debussy*, 33. Ringgold (a Debussy-as-Symbolist supporter) did not think this had been achieved at his time of writing, in 1972.

through time – a twentieth-century musicological historiography. Ringgold provides an interesting hypothesis as to why the post-nineteenth century Impressionism vs. Symbolism issue is so clouded: it could be due to a forgivable aesthetic ignorance.³¹ Before the mid-twentieth century no detailed study existed on either Impressionism or Symbolism, and both areas were ripe for confusion and misinterpretation. Any early twentieth-century attempt to categorise Debussy (particularly by those outside of France, such as the group of German musicologists who became intrigued by the concept of Impressionistic music)³² was by nature distorted by an essential and somewhat understandable vagueness over the exact differences between Impressionism and Symbolism. With the publication of important new texts (for example, Lehmann's detailed “The Symbolist Aesthetic in France”)³³ the precise ideological functions of each movement were clarified. At this point, scholars gradually but seriously began deconstructing what had been so far understood about Debussy's artistic classification: in particular, attempting to challenge the existing view that Debussy belonged unquestionably to an “Impressionist” period of music. The revised edition of Grout's *A History of Western Music* from 1973 states that a major aspect of Debussy's style is Impressionism and attributes most elements of his musical language to a shared heritage with the painters (without a mention of Symbolism);³⁴ the *History* from 2006 describes both movements and notes Debussy's close relation to all things Symbolist despite popular depiction of him as a pure Impressionist.³⁵

³¹ Ringgold, *Linearity of Debussy*, 8.

³² Ringgold, *Linearity of Debussy*, 22.

³³ A. G. Lehmann, *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France 1885-1895* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950).

³⁴ Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, rev. ed. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973), 652.

³⁵ Burkholder, *History of Western Music* (2006), 780.

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Musically, one of Debussy's most important contributions to Modernism (and one of the reasons that he is frequently linked with the Modernists today) is his treatment of harmony, specifically his role in the emancipation of dissonance. His use of harmony was primarily non-functional – that is, he did not restrict himself to the common-practice harmonic progressions of the Western tonal tradition. The latter half of the nineteenth century had been a time of harmonic experimentation, however the music produced within its bounds was still deeply imbued with a sense of harmonic function and direction. Debussy, by contrast, removed the expectation of traditional chord functionality, and instead carefully laid out sequences of sonorities that did not resolve or relate to each other in a traditional way. The individual effect of a chord and the overall effect of a section become emphasised at the expense of the familiar pattern of tension and resolution. Harmonic function is not entirely cast away, but cadences become increasingly rare and dissonances tend to resolve to slightly less dissonant chords rather than conventional consonances. The listener idles without harmonic force propelling him to the cadence – the harmony merely suggests, rather than depicts, what it might be representing.

This is the evocative atmosphere that Debussy is able to create with his interpretation of harmony – a reliance on the psychology of allusion, rather than an attempt at the clear depiction of a programmatic theme. Adding to this are the “special effects”³⁶ so characteristic of him that can often be found listed in textbooks as “Impressionist Techniques”.³⁷ These elements of his musical palette include the use of unusual scales

³⁶ Brown, *Debussy and Symbolism*, 93.

³⁷ Machlis, *Contemporary Music*, 116.

(the exotic whole-tone, octatonic and pentatonic collections),³⁸ extended harmonies (frequent parallel chords for colouring, use of seventh, ninth and eleventh chords) and unusual timbres (exploitation of certain ranges of instruments – high strings, the warm lower register of flutes and clarinets, and specialised percussion like the glockenspiel and celesta).³⁹ The two works analysed below both involve solo piano but Debussy uses the possibilities from the instrument's range to create timbral juxtapositions: the deep, dramatic bass register is contrasted with the sparkling upper range in both of these pieces, and indeed, through most of his piano repertoire.⁴⁰

We can easily analyse one of Debussy's Symbolist song settings by drawing on some of the musical features discussed above. All of the mature songs can be ideologically linked to both Impressionism and Symbolism in their fluid musical capturing of fleeting images and moods, and their creation of an atmosphere of suggestion out of evocative sounds. *Apparition*, a setting of a poem by Mallarmé, was composed in 1884 at a time when Debussy had just begun to develop a taste for Symbolist poetry and was leaving the Parnassian period of his youth behind him.

³⁸ Debussy would have heard some of these colourful pitches and sounds at the 1889 Paris exhibition that featured a performance by a group of “authentic” Indonesian musicians.

³⁹ Machlis, *Contemporary Music*, 121.

⁴⁰ Debussy's own Blüthner piano had a particular reverberating sonority due to the sympathetic resonating system of its upper registers, and this no doubt affected his timbral experimentations on the instrument. See Lesure and Howat, “Debussy.”

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Figure 1: “Apparition”, m. 5-8.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Apparition" by Claude Debussy, measures 5-8. The score is written in E major and consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part is characterized by arpeggiated chords. The lyrics are: "pleurs Ré - vant, l'ar - chet aux doigts, dans le cal - me des fleurs Va - po - reu - ses,". The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* and *f*, and articulation marks like accents and slurs. The piano accompaniment features a complex harmonic structure with non-functional chords.

“Apparition” by Claude Debussy
© 1926 by *La Revue Musicale*
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Debussy sets the array of Symbolist tropes that make up the poem (the sad moon, the dying viols, the perfumed stars) in E major, though the tonality is disturbed by series of non-functional chords. For example, from measures 5-8 (figure 1), the chords of F major, D minor and Bb major are linked together but their collectively totally alien relationship to the tonic E is never resolved. The dream-like setting of the poem – a text where we are never quite certain if the poet is in the past or the present – is evoked immediately by the shimmering timbre of the arpeggiated piano harmony. Measures 29-32 (figure 2) are a rare example of a dissonance growing in intensity before being resolved, though the dissonant chords retain a moody presence

through the mostly consonant harmonies up until they are reflected without resolution in the climax at measure 40.

Figure 2: “Apparition”, m. 29-32.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Apparition" by Claude Debussy, measures 29-32. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in G major and 3/4 time, marked *pp*. The lyrics are: "J'er-rais donc, l'œil ri - vé sur le pa - vé vieil - li". The piano accompaniment features a right hand with a continuous eighth-note pattern and a left hand with a Bb pedal point and chords. The key signature is one flat (Bb), and the time signature is 3/4.

“Apparition” by Claude Debussy
 © 1926 by *La Revue Musicale*
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A Bb pedal from measures 32-39 beneath increasingly unstable fluttering harmonies anticipates the dissonance at measure 40 but instead of resolving into any recognisable consonance, measure 41 falls immediately into the new and totally unrelated key of Gb major (see figure 3). This example demonstrates an aspect of Debussy's harmonic practice linked to both Impressionism and Symbolism, in which a stable tonality is not explicitly expressed but only hinted at in order to create an impression rather than a reality; a suggestion rather than a fact.

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Figure 3: “Apparition”, m. 38-43.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Apparition" by Claude Debussy, measures 38-43. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in G-flat major and 3/4 time. The lyrics are: "ru - - e ap - - pa - ru - - e" and "Et j'ai cru voir la fête au cha-peau de clar-". The piano accompaniment consists of chords and a moving bass line. Performance instructions include "dim." and "en se calmant".

“Apparition” by Claude Debussy
© 1926 by *La Revue Musicale*
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La Cathédrale engloutie (“The Sunken Cathedral”) is in the first of two books of Debussy's highly programmatic preludes. The opening (figure 4) is reminiscent of medieval organum, with languorous chains of parallel stacked fifths flowing in a manner totally contrary to the rules of nineteenth century harmony but ideal for evoking the quiet austerity that the title suggests. Combining these haunting harmonies with the deep sustained pedal point underneath creates a rich and evocative soundscape, perhaps suggestive of the ancient sinking stones themselves.

Figure 4: “La Cathédrale Engloutie”, m. 1-3.



“La Cathédrale Engloutie” by Claude Debussy
© 1910 by Durand & Cie.
Public domain.

Up to measure 15 the slow tempo and touches of hemiola make the rhythm seem highly flexible; there is no emphasis on the barline (particularly from measures 7-12, see figure 5) which serves to unobtrusively sustain the delicate sonority rather than dictate its movement.

Figure 5: “La Cathédrale Engloutie”, m. 7-10.



“La Cathédrale Engloutie” by Claude Debussy
© 1910 by Durand & Cie.
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Key areas melt into each other (for example in bar 7): what Machlis refers to as “escaped” chords simply evaporate into

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another key.⁴¹ This technique (along with the reliance on unconventional harmonies built only from perfect intervals) makes the absence of functional harmony in *La cathédrale engloutie* quite clear: its chords are isolated colours rather than a progression, to be appreciated for their individual vertical sonorities rather than their eventual horizontal destination. Impressionistically, we witness the colouristic effects that are brushed out into the air and we experience the atmosphere of a musically sketched moment in time. Symbolistically, the restrained musical effects and medieval allusions evoke suggestions of the piece's concept – but they are fleeting and vague, for music can never fully express a concrete idea but simply guide us towards an internal awareness of its intended content.

Debussy was personally associated with the Symbolists rather than the Impressionists, and the concept of Impressionism in art and music has intermittently been critically attacked since its inception. But the bohemian artistic climate at the close of the nineteenth century in France (to which these movements, among others, belong) shared the common goal of pursuing a spiritual artistic vocation; a break away from Romanticism in favour of a more subtle and sensuous art. The Impressionists prized perception where the Symbolists prized suggestion, but their different means of achieving their ultimate yet inexpressible goal corresponded on some levels. Debussy seems intent on capturing an Impressionist moment in time in some of the pictorial instrumental pieces – *La Mer*, *Images*, *Estampes*. When he sets Symbolist poems he embraces the musicality of Verlaine and Mallarmé and uses inexplicable piano harmonies to suggest the inexpressible against the clear sonority of the human voice and the hazy dreams of the text. Though piece by piece his intentions

⁴¹ Machlis, *Contemporary Music*, 121.

may have been emphatically different, he used the same sensuous atmosphere and the same basic vocabulary of techniques (that can ultimately only be classified as “Debussian”) to convey both Impressionistic and Symbolistic meaning. The two movements are distinct, and Debussy would have gained differing inspiration from each; however, the fact that in his music he synthesised the philosophies and techniques behind both means that we can never rigidly classify him as a sole adherent of either – rather, we must accept Debussy as a visionary as well as a product of his times.

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