

Eighteenth-Century Musical Rhetoric and Late Debussy

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Abstract

The complex relationship between Debussy's late compositions and 18th-century musical rhetoric challenges the prevailing notions that associating both traditions, often seen as irrelevant to Debussy's French style. However, historical sources suggest otherwise. A look into 18th-century literature underscores musical rhetoric as predominantly Germanic, potentially relevant to Debussy's works. The complex relationship between Debussy's late pieces and 18th-century musical rhetoric calls into question long-held beliefs that such rhetoric is exclusively associated with Germanic heritage, which is frequently viewed as incompatible with Debussy's French manner. However, historical records indicate differently. An examination of 18th-century literature reveals that musical rhetoric is largely Germanic, which might be pertinent to Debussy's compositions. Moreover, Henry Prunière's posthumous dedication to Debussy, emphasizing his French modernist identity while sidelining his late works, prompts a reevaluation. This discrepancy between the legacy Debussy had intended for himself and what was given to him, at least in the years immediately following his death, invites reconsideration of the significance of 18th-century musical rhetoric in understanding the structural intricacies of his compositions. Through analysis of historical documents and his late works, a more nuanced understanding of his compositional techniques can emerge. It highlights the importance of incorporating 18th-century musical rhetoric to decipher the inherent structural complexities in his late works.

Keywords: Eighteenth-century Musical Rhetoric, Debussy Late Style, French Modernism, Nationalism In Music, Structural Fragmentation.

Introduction

Music and words had always had an inseparable relationship. It was set to poetic texts to be sung. In many cases, the structure of vocal music would parallel that of the poetry being set to music, with musical elements reflecting the formal organization and tonal inflection of the poetic text. As the concept of rhetoric began to be applied to poetry, it impacted the structure

of music as well as the presentation of musical performances. Just as how rhetorical techniques were used in public speaking to influence listeners, they were also employed in poetry in hopes to have similar effects over its audience. This in turn influenced the structure and performance of music when composers and performers sought to create musical works that would have also have similar impact on their listeners (Wilson et al., 2014).

Instrumental music was only limited to support vocal music or to accompany dances and other entertainment purposes. At most, variations were created on popular vocal melodies to be played on instruments. However, when its status rose, genres with their respective unique characteristics started to be developed. Since instrumental music was detached from words, the question of whether instrumental music could convey any expressive meaning became one of the most heated debates among music theorists of the time. This situation eventually led to the development of new approaches to composition and performance that relied on oratory rhetoric to provide for musical meaning (Wilson et al., 2014).

Rhetoric is the art of using words to influence an audience. In the context of music, the emotional ebb and flow of the listeners is created by using rhetorical devices such as phrasal or motivic repetition, textural and dynamic contrasts and melodic variations. By using these devices borrowed from oratory, composers could create instrumental music that was able to convey meaning (Banciu & Banciu, 2018; Golomb, 2005; Rubinoff, 2014). As instrumental music continued to evolve, its reliance on rhetoric intensified till it reached its peak in the 18th century. Baroque theorists saw the need to categorize rhetorical terminologies into table to enhance control over the emotional impact on the listeners. They started to equate definitions of these rhetorical devices, which are in Latin, to musical figures, and systematically categorizing them into long lists in accordance with their emotional impact on listeners (Farnsworth, 1991). In doing so, they created the Doctrine of Affection (*Affektenlehre*) and developed extensive theories on the use of musical figures. However, second half of the 18th century saw a noticeable decline in the study of rhetorical use in music. The gradual shift of emphasis on musical individualism led to a diminished concern for the art of persuasion in music. Instead, the expression of personal emotions and imaginative creativity became increasingly important and gradually replacing the older aesthetics in music (Wilson et al., 2014).

Justification of Using Eighteenth-century Rhetorical Principles in Late Debussy

The literature from the 18th century reveals that musical rhetoric was essentially a Germanic phenomenon, as indicated by the prevalence of German music theorists versed in its practice (Bartel, 2003). Given Debussy's status as a French composer and the historical association of musical rhetoric with Germanic art, there has been a tendency to dismiss its relevance to Debussy's music.

In 1870-71, France lost the Franco-Prussian War against Germany. The humiliation set off an explosive nationalistic reaction in France. Composers reacted by forming *Société Nationale* (1871) to promote French music. Many were writing pieces that recall French Baroque titles as a way to reinforce the sense of national identity, even though they may not have necessarily forged out a musical language that was uniquely French or that was free of Germanic influences (Babyak, 2014).

In the early part of his career, Debussy, like many other composers at the time, also fell under the spell of Wagner's music. It was not until *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1894) that he managed to create a new musical language that came to be recognised as "specifically French" (Lockspeiser, 1978 as cited in Kelly, 2003, p. 36). His early works such as *Diane au bois* (1886),

La damoiselle elue (1888) showed traces of Wagnerian influences. Upon visiting to Bayreuth Festival in 1888 and 1889, Wagner's music made a huge impact on him, so much so that even in the early 20th century, when writing *Pélleas et Mélisandse* (1902), Debussy felt the need to intentionally avoid any German traces (Nichols & Smith, 1989).

He eventually did turn away from Wagner, stating that French music was what everything Germanic music was not: elegant, tender and delicate (Babyak, 2014) and put forward a sharp remark that "Wagner is a wonderful sunset that had been mistaken for a dawn" (Lockspeiser, 2022). His early admiration for Wagner had turned into a lifelong campaign against the German composer. Babyak (2014) noted that this sentiment of anti-Germanic culture in Debussy was very much connected to the sense of French nationalism. Though on a positive note, Wagnerian influences were causing the French composers to start looking into their roots, and that in turn, brought forward a Neo-Baroque revival that lasted well into the early part of the 20th century (Babyak, 2014) and to strengthen his attack, Debussy used Rameau as a figurehead (Suschitzky, 2002). Suschitzky argues that one of the main reasons Rameau was put to the forefront in the campaign against Wagner, is to satisfy Debussy's public persona for being the bearer to the French musical tradition. Debussy's fervent effort in establishing a link with the past, had more political and nationalistic undertone than relevance to his music. By making Rameau the musical icon of French tradition, which he emphasized, stood for restraint, elegance and sensibility, Debussy had created a modern national identity for himself against Wagner, who represented Germanic Romanticism of bombast and excess (Suschitzky, 2002).

In 1908, Debussy took up editorial work of Rameau's *Les fêtes de Polymnie*. Even though the new edition claimed that its primary objective of the edition was to "restore the initial thinking of the author and to give, if possible, the version that was used at the first performance of the work" (as cited in Suschitzky, 2002, p. 414), fidelity was never Debussy's priority. He forged the identity of French musical tradition tempering the original texts in his editorial work of the old master. Changes were made intentionally to fit into the ideals of French musical characteristics, traits that were advocated by Debussy himself. One of such alterations, was to achieve clarity of declamation that was deemed a desirable French characteristic. In a passage where two texts were treated polyphonically, the texture was reduced to one text in homophony, with the orchestral parts enhanced, even though Debussy was well aware of that Rameau was musically excessive in his own time. In short, *Polymnie* simply became "a creation of Debussy's historical imagination" (p. 431) and a political tool in his anti-German campaign.

Despite Debussy's effort to be associated with the French Baroque masters of the 18th century (Babyak, 2014), after his death, the association was met with uncertainty and even denial. In 1920, two years following the composer's death, Henry Prunière, the editor of the French music journal *La Revue Musicale*, dedicated an entire issue to Debussy's achievements. However, possibly due to their perceived archaic association with the past, Prunière largely ignored Debussy's late works, such as the Piano Etudes and the Sonatas, in which Debussy claimed to have drawn inspiration from the 18th century. By doing so, Debussy's identity as a French modernist was emphasized. While this dedication undoubtedly solidified Debussy's posthumous reputation as a French composer, it also had subtle yet significant implications. It created a divide between the legacy Debussy intended for himself and the one ultimately conferred upon him: despite his lifelong efforts to be recognized as a 20th-century French composer continuing the musical tradition dating back to Rameau and Couperin. Debussy's aspirations were basically denied (Wheeldon, 2011).

Because of all these intertwined issues, the association of musical rhetoric and the late works of Debussy is often clouded or even ignored. Undoubtedly, Debussy was a composer of great precision and exactness. With the traditional tonal system collapsing around him, he must have felt the need to establish some sort of compositional method in which he could work with in his musical creation. And as his character had it, it would always remain a secret even when the idea of a compositional method was present in his creative process. His music from the earlier symbolist period was still somehow governed by a sense of tonality, but the same cannot be said of his late period. Debussy's late style saw a drastic shift in compositional aesthetics and emotional concern. "Fragmentary nature of the material, the frequent changes of tempo, the non-developmental form, the transformation of material, the discontinuities" (Kramer, 1978, p.189) not only describes *Jeux*, but also the overall characteristics of Debussy's late style.

Wheeldon (2004) believes that, as supported by Herbert Eimert and Piere Boulez, the traditional formal analysis is insufficient to understand Debussy's late works. Over the years, there have been several attempts to theorize the formal discontinuity in late Debussy: the fragmented structure has been compared to Messiaen's collage technique by Robert Sherlaw Johnson (2009), it has also been coined mosaic construction by Robert Orledge (1982), block construction by Roy Howat (1983) and additive structure by Morgan (1991), although they are not the first attempts in understanding Debussy's late works. Debussy's formal discontinuity, especially with *Jeux*, was discussed extensively in Karlheinz Stockhausen's article from 1960 "Moment Form – New Relations between Durations of Performance and Work and Moment". The idea of moment form was further elaborated in Jonathan D. Kramer's 1978 article "Moment Form in the Twentieth Century" and his 1988 book *The Time of Music*.

The common trait among all these approaches is that they look at these works from the perspective of structure that is driven by tonality (Kramer, 1978). Which they would not be useful in analysing structure that is inherently non-tonal. This peculiar discord reflects the complexity and sophistication of the composer's compositional techniques. Therefore, while these approaches are important in analysing Debussy's late works, further exploration into the musical rhetoric of the music can still deepen our understanding and can possibly offer a fresh perspective into looking at the structural issues of Debussy's late style.

Two Proposed Analytical Methods

This musicological research aims to investigate into the structural fragmentation observed in the late works of Debussy with specific focus on his set of twelve piano etudes. Through score analysis of the set of etudes and a thorough examination of historical documentation, the research aims to uncover the underlying structural logic in the structural fragmentation of the etudes and relating that seemingly chaotic structural phenomenon to the principals of 18th century musical rhetoric. It is anticipated that the research will not only advance our understanding of Debussy's late style, but will also offer a fresh perspective in the reception of the composer's late works.

Two methods are proposed. The first one uses rhetorical analysis (a specific form of score analysis) to investigate the concealed structural logic in the twelve piano etudes. The second method involves analysis of historical documentation to identify the Baroque tendencies in late Debussy to support the hypothetical proposition of 18th century musical rhetoric elements in these late works. Both methods are necessary to further substantiate the claim.

1. Rhetorical Analysis

Two aspects of rhetorical analysis in musical works are involved (Banciu & Banciu, 2018):

a. Analysis of the musical figures and tropes

This method focuses on the emotive meaning of the music through analysing the musical figures. Most musical figures and tropes are adapted from oratory or literary rhetorical devices, which can be used to express a variety of meaning and emotions in music. Analysis of these rhetorical devices will illuminate the expressive and communicative strategies used by the composer and therefore providing an in depth understanding into the composer's musical design and intended meaning of the work.

b. Analysis of parts of a discourse

This method focuses on the organization of musical figures within the music. It involves analysis of how the morphological and syntactic components interact in the music.

By looking at the way in which musical materials are organized in a work, it becomes possible to determine how other musical elements such as motivic ideas, rhythm, harmony, and part-writing interact. The method allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the work, considering the interconnectedness of different components and how they work together to deliver meaningful expression.

To investigate the correlation between rhetorical figures and the structure in Debussy's Twelve Etudes, musical figures in the music are to be collected through rhetorical analysis of musical scores. Consider the following hypothetical scenario in which three sections of musically unrelated events, labelled as A-B-C. Through rhetorical analysis of the musical gestures, these three sections can be rearranged as *Interrogatio-Abruptio-Interrogatio*, thereby revealing an underlying ternary structure. In other words, the three rhetorical figures arranged in an X-Y-Z demonstrate a ternary structure of *Interrogatio-Abruptio-Interrogatio*, despite the three sections consisting of apparently unrelated musical events. This hypothetical scenario can be summarized into the following diagram:

Musical Materials	A	B	C
Rhetorical Figures	<i>Interrogatio</i>	<i>Abruptio</i>	<i>Interrogatio</i>
Hidden Structure	X	Y	X

According to Bartel (1997), the musical figure *abruptio* denotes a sudden interruption or break within a musical passage. It differs in that it emphasizes the actual breaking off of a musical phrase rather than mere silence. This interruption may involve the premature ending of a melody line or the interruption of a note by a rest (pp. 167-170). And the musical figure *interrogatio* embodies a form of musical questioning, expressed through a range of techniques such as strategic pauses, melodic rises at the end of phrases, or the utilization of imperfect or Phrygian cadences (p. 312).

2. Analysis of Historical Document

Debussy is one of the few composers who left behind a vast collection of personal writings on music in reviews and personal letters. These written sources by the composer himself reveal much of his musical thought and the cultural environment that surrounded his life. To date,

the most complete publication of Debussy's letters is found in the volume *Correspondence 1872 – 1918*. It encompasses over 3,000 letters and contracts, more than 2,500 of that were authored by the composer himself. Among the numerous correspondents who exchanged letters with him, prominent musicians such as Ysaÿe, Messager, Caplet, Chausson, Dukas, Stravinsky, and Varèse, as well as writers like Louÿs, Toulet, Segalen, and D'Annunzio, stand out. This publication of letters will be used as the main source for the examination of Debussy's letters. Rhetorical analysis of the scores could be further substantiated by examination of the composer's published collection of reviews and essays in the book *Debussy on Music: The Critical Writings of the Great French Composer*. This book will be used as the main source for the examination of Debussy's reviews and essays to reinforce the composer's inclination towards 18th century aesthetics.

It is therefore necessary to carry out a thorough examination of the published letters and musical reviews of Debussy, in order to investigate into his thoughts on 18th century musical aesthetics to support the hypothesis for the use of Baroque rhetorical principles in the structure of the set of twelve etudes. The importance of source reading in musicological and historical research cannot be overstated (Strunk, 1998). Keeping in mind that historical accounts are ultimately a dynamic process and are not facts set in stone (Brundage, 2017), examination of historical documents can often shed new light and offer different perspectives to the interpretation of historical accounts to the extent that it could potentially alter the mainstream historical views of Debussy's aesthetics as a composer.

The study by Djupdal (2018) demonstrates the importance of historical documents for musicology research. By using books, articles, and reminiscences of Debussy's pupils and friends, Djupdal managed to reconstruct a detailed narrative on Debussy's approach to piano playing, which he later called "A Piano Method by Claude Debussy" (Djupdal, 2018).

The study emphasizes the importance of using documents to piece together a picture of musical practices and cultural contexts from the past. Similarly, by analysing historical documents, musicologists can gain a better understanding of the evolution of musical styles, genres, and forms over time.

It also allows the examination into the social and political issues of the time that influenced musical creation, consumption and performance practices. In summary, analysis of historical documents is an essential component of any serious musicology research, as it provides a priceless window into the musical world of the past (Strunk, 1998).

Conclusion

Associating musical rhetoric with Debussy's late works is a disputable topic and is usually disregarded owing to a multitude of intertwined issues. Despite Debussy's efforts to link himself with the French Baroque heritage, his posthumous reputation was largely shaped by a focus on his identification as a French modernist, with his late works neglected. However, his late style witnessed a significant break from traditional tonality, it is characterized by a fragmented nature and structural discontinuity. Traditional formal analysis struggles to understand the complexities of Debussy's late compositions because they go against the concept of conventional tonal structures that has governed classical for more than two hundred years. While different analytical approaches have been proposed throughout the years, they may not fully capture the non-tonal essence of Debussy's late works. Exploring the influence of musical rhetoric in Debussy's late compositions offers a promising avenue for further understanding, potentially shedding light on the cryptic nature of these works and providing fresh perspectives on their interpretation for performers.

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