



## **Finite Piano Keyboards and Infinite Imagery in Music: On the Imagery of Debussy's Piano Music**

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### **Abstract**

Imagery in music is the combination of the artistic idea and image of music. It emphasizes most on the harmonious unity of the subject's emotion with the aesthetic object. Through the studies on the imagery of piano playing, this paper tries to achieve such a goal: when people create, perform and enjoy piano music, what they can find are not only the excellent skills but also a musical image, not only the dancing notes but also a beautiful musical image. It is no longer just the piano keyboard, but a clear musical image can be seen; it is no longer just the notes of the piano, but a beautiful musical image can be appreciated. This paper clarifies the connotation of the imagery in Debussy's music and five types of "imagery", discusses four characteristics and explains three methods of studying the imagery in Debussy's piano playing.

### **Keywords**

Debussy Piano Imagery in music

The musical style created by Debussy, a renowned French composer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, serves as a bridge that connects the past and the future. Debussy strove for originality and refused the traditional stereotypes with his musical language, building a musical world full of wonderful and moving imagery with the innovations that went against from traditional views and methods.

## I. Imagery and Debussy's Piano Music

Imagery in piano playing is the fusion of the "essence" and the "image". Imagery in piano playing is the transformation of the essence and the image. Imagery is the combination of the artistic thoughts and image of music, which put most emphasis on the harmonious unity between the subject's emotion and the aesthetic object. The "essence" refers to the artistic conception and idea of the art, and the "image" refers to the form of the "essence". In the world of music, however, "essence" represents "a motif" in a piece of music while "image" refers to the demonstration of the "essence". Therefore, "imagery" is the integration of music's emotion and thoughts, sensibility and rationality.

Imagery is the soul of piano playing. In the creation and expression of music, sensibility and rationality are a relationship of dialectical unity. The "essence" and "image" in music intertwine with each other, so do "rationality" and "sensibility". Under certain conditions, they can be transformed into each other. If "sensibility" is compared to "exploration", "rationality" is the "law" through exploration; if "sensibility" is a pen, "rationality" is the work drawn by this pen. "Sensibility" is always filled with human passion, while "rationality" is full of the calmness and contemplation when passion fades away. Sensibility inspires a life of art while "rationality" sparks a life of sanctity by shielding itself from the disturbance of emotion. Only when rationality and sensibility, essence and image are fully combined can piano music be fully appreciated.

The meaning of exploring the aesthetic beauty of Debussy's piano music is not only to deepen the understanding and realization of his music, but also to learn lessons from him. Debussy broke the centuries-old musical tradition of Western Europe and created a new musical style by drawing on the aesthetic ideas of symbolist poetry and impressionist painting. Therefore, a fascinating, ethereal and infinite world of imagery was created with a variety of elegant imagery. His innovation ushered in a new era of the musical development in the 20th century with far-reaching significance.

Debussy's piano music is neither classical nor romantic but is impressionist. His piano works are characterized by hazy, ethereal, ethereal, transparent, quiet, slender, beautiful, elegant features, etc. through the innovation of tonality and harmony, creating a colorful world of imagery, and imposing profound influence on the later development of piano music.

Debussy's music originates from the response and symbolism between the human mind and the natural world. Music is shaped by both essence and image, while the subjective "essence" of music should be implicitly expressed by the objective "image". Debussy's music not only embodies the ideas and emotion of the composer himself, but also has profound value that transcends the finite reality and penetrates into the infinite universe, as well as the human life.

In this way, piano music will not be limited by finite piano keyboards but can reach infinity with imagery.

## **II . The four characteristics of the use of imagery in Debussy's piano music**

The first characteristic is the subjectivity. Musical performance is an activity of interpreting the musical composition and creating art, which requires the performer to comprehend not only the score technically, but also the deep artistic and emotional connotation. To the performers, the process is a reflection on the aesthetic imagery, purely dependent on their own consciousness. In this case, the object of understanding is not only the imagery created by the composer, but also the sublimation of the performer's creative and personal aesthetic experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that the performer's understanding and interpretation of the musical piece must be individualized and cannot be identical to that of the composer (Bertini, 2020; Ceglie, 2020; Jeffrey, 2021).

The second is the inter-subjectivity. There is an intersubjectivity between the composer, the performer and the audience, which is based on similar psychological experiences. It conforms to the basic characteristics of aesthetic imagery in general, but also has the aesthetic characteristics of music art. Because of the particular expression of music, musicians and virtuosi rely more on the psychological way of "homeostatic correspondence" in the generalization and grasp of relevant objects. Thus, imagery used in music is an aesthetic imagery that is organized in a homeostatic (same state of motion) acoustic structure according to the subject's inner experience. It may appear either in a figurative or in a sonic form.

The third is generality. The "intuitive analogy" in the art of piano music means that the composer often think in a general way to grasp the correspondence between the expressive and the acoustic form of composing. For example, the downward tone is associated with a low mood, the upward tone with a high spirit, and the low register symbolizes darkness and gloominess, etc. As "intuitive analogy" has a tendency to generalize, so does the imagery, forming the third characteristic of Debussy's application of imagery. It makes the aesthetic imagery perceived between the composer and the performer less of an unity of specific perceptual images but more of a similarity of basic features. In this way, the performer's perception of the image of a musical piece may diversify. And there are two important ways of thinking involved.

First, speculative thinking. The speculative thinking of imagery is rather theoretical. The essence of the speculative approach is rationalism. Rationalism assumes that reason is the most essential and the most reliable human ability to discern and seek for true knowledge. Sensory experience can't not be trusted as the source of knowledge; only reason can provide knowledge that is correct and universally applied. The speculative nature of imagery is sound in three ways: logical, historical, and self-contained. It suggests that what we bring to music becomes what music is, making the music that we created a reflection of ourselves. It is we that create musical experiences, not the music itself.

Second, transcendental thinking. Using imagery in composing as the artistic activity transforms the finite into the infinite, making the transcendental characteristic become an indispensable feature. This characteristic indicates that there can be an insurmountable distance between two things, but there is always a way to get from one shore to the other. It emphasizes the intentional value of the subject's cognitive activity. With that said, it affirms the objectivity of the cognitive activity itself on the one hand, and the objective reality of the object on the other. It analyzes human subjectivity and intends to discover the content of human consciousness and the basis of this consciousness outside the human mind. Transcendental existence refers to "existence" beyond concrete sensual beings, such as fate, love, friendship, misfortune, happiness, morality, and so on. The "apprehension" of transcendental existence is perceptual, rather than conceptual. However, despite being conceptual, it describes things that are imperceptible. Human's need for transcendence is an instinctive need for self-realization and enriching humanity.

Musical art could bring the audience a "transcendental" experience, or a "transcendental transformation" in its own unique way. And the transcendental characteristic of imagery plays a key role in this process.

The fourth characteristic is diversity. Within the concept of diversity there is a point of convergence, or a "meeting point" of "homomorphic correspondence". Despite the tendency of being diversified, musical works will always converge at one point, namely, the "meeting point" of "homeostatic correspondence" between the psychological experiences of the composer, the performer and the audience. (Mainly in the similarity of movement, but not in the similarity of specific episodes of life or artistic experience.) At the same time, the movement of music is very similar to the way human emotions operate. Therefore, music expresses human emotions in the most direct and straightforward way. As a result, imagery used in music contains the most emotional states, which becomes the biggest difference between imagery used in music and other aesthetic imagery used in other artistic forms.

### **III. The main methods of studying the imagery of Debussy's piano music**

Understanding the world of imagery in the art of piano music requires documentary analysis, speculative and transcendental approaches.

The first method used in this paper for the study of imagery used in music is documentary analysis. It is a method of analyzing the collected documents on the theory of imagery used in music. The goal is to find out the nature and status of the object of piano music research and to derive one's own viewpoint from it. The definition of piano music art documentation is "all piano music art carriers that have been published, or unpublished but have been organized and reported." The term "all piano music art documentation" includes not only books, journals, dissertations, reports and archives, but also includes electronic carriers and all

forms of physical documentation.

The documentary analysis method includes literature review. The literature review is short for comprehensive literature review, which refers to a systematic and comprehensive description and review of the research results and progress of the piano music discipline in various historical periods based on a comprehensive collection of relevant literature summarized, analyzed and identified. The literature review is characterized by an in-depth analysis of past and present research results, pointing out the current level, dynamics, problems that should be solved and the direction of future development, and putting forward one's own views, opinions and suggestions. It also provides a review of various research results based on relevant theories, research conditions and practical needs, and set the ground for current research.

The second method I use is speculation. Speculation is a method that situates aesthetic activity within a general philosophical framework and uses theoretical speculation or conceptual reasoning to find the connotations, laws, and characteristics of the imagery. The speculative approach to imagery is a more theoretical one. The word speculation is derived from the Latin word *speculari*, which means to reflect, to inquire, and to make sense of. In philosophical terms, one interpretation of speculating imagery is that of the mind thinking about itself or its spiritual self, i.e., a priori intuition; another is that of abstract discourse; yet another is that of theoretical thinking with the help of concepts in order to understand the totality of all categories. The essence of the speculative approach is rationalism. Rationalism assumes that reason is the most essential and the most reliable human ability to discern and seek for true knowledge. Sensory experience can't not be trusted as the source of knowledge; only reason can provide knowledge that is correct and universally applied.

The speculation of imagery is a movement of thought, often compared to practice. There is a difference in time between the active side and the passive side of the practice. Doing it and getting it done are not simultaneous. In speculative thinking the active side and the passive side are united in terms of time. Thinking happens simultaneously with thought. The speculative approach is sound in three ways: logical, historical, and self-contained. Therefore, speculation is called the most advanced movement. Speculative thinking of imagery in music is also the best movement of thinking, and therefore the best method of research. Using the speculative approach to the study of imagery, I have experienced that music, education and philosophy are aligned with the magic of thinking. With a speculative approach, we can reach new realms of mastery based on imagery used in music. The music we listen to is so deep that it is not heard at all. But you are that music, and the music lives for eternity. When you listen, what you hear is you.

From a speculative perspective, imagery is the soul of musical art. Imagery is a perceptual image formed on the basis of perception and expressed in memory and thinking activities and is a mental representation of the current object when it does not exist. Imagery is a subconscious mental tendency, which characterizes

the individual's impressions and accumulation of past things. It is an important method of guiding current behavior and understanding. Thinking is a process that the human brain reflects and recognizes objective things with the help of language or other media and speculates about unknown things with the help of existing knowledge and experience and known conditions. The generality of thinking is expressed in its rejection of the non-essential properties of a class of things and its reflection of their common essential features. In the discussion of the relationship between ideas and imagery, people wrestle with the question of whether it is the use of thought that brings ideas to imagery? Or is it the reflection of imagery that leads to ideas? Or are the two essentially a complementary unity? In view of this, different philosophers and philosophical schools have put forward their own opinions.

The third method used for the study of imagery is the transcendental method. Using imagery in composing as the artistic activity transforms the finite into the infinite, making the transcendental characteristic becomes an indispensable feature. The word transcendence comes from the Latin *transcendere* (meaning to exceed, or to climb over). It describes the relationship between two things, such as concept and experience, gods and the mundane, animals and plants, and the observer and the observed, where one is external to the other. It implies that there is an incoherence, or a discontinuity, or an insurmountable distance between these two things. Nevertheless, there can be a way to get from one shore to the other, and this transition is done either physically or cognitively.

The transcendental approach, whether in aesthetics, theology, or in philosophical discussions, is a fundamental one. Transcendence as a cognitive methodology in our theoretical studies means that thought has as its object of cognition what lies outside of it. And this object can be something beyond the senses, such as an entity under the senses and events, or a being beyond the world, such as gods. The transcendence of phenomena emphasizes the value of that intentionality within the cognitive activity of the subject. With that said, it affirms the objectivity of the cognitive activity itself on the one hand, and the objective reality of the object on the other. It analyzes human subjectivity and intends to discover the content of human consciousness and the basis of this consciousness outside the human mind. Transcendental existence refers to "existence" beyond concrete sensual beings, such as fate, love, friendship, misfortune, happiness, morality, and so on. The "apprehension" of transcendental existence is perceptual, rather than conceptual. However, despite being conceptual, it describes things that are imperceptible. Human's need for transcendence is an instinctive need for self-realization and enriching humanity. The transcendental approach goes beyond experience to concept, beyond practice to theory, beyond the mundane to aesthetics, beyond appreciation to imagery. It is an artistic approach to the need for self-realization and the enrichment of humanity.

Musical art could bring the audience a "transcendental" experience, or a "transcendental transformation" in its own unique way. This should be an important

way in which we can understand imagery in music. Whenever, wherever, and within whatever the culture, music brings the experience of human individuals and groups transcendentally into an exclusive meaning that can be created and shared by those who participate in that specific musical culture. And the key code for this is imagery. In other words, only with a transcendental approach can one truly grasp the imagery that pervades the art of music.

Impressionist music led by Debussy has finally become a form of art that has been enshrined in the history of human culture and art, the reason of which is that he showed a stunning artistic vision and highlighted the aesthetic dimension of imagery. The piano music he composed is a vibrant and unified world of sound, an infinitely wide poetic realm that combines natural imagery with aesthetic creation. It is a gift to us as a great heritage of human culture and art. The unusually fresh musical language is full of His deep poetic feeling of nature. His imagery wanders with a hint of deep and mysterious haze. The delicate microscopic perspective reveals the intense and fascinating meaning of nature. The charming sound and mottled imagery are wonderfully combined on both macro and micro levels. Although created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, far away from our present time, his work has survived the vicissitudes of history and still shines as brightly as ever.

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