

Debussy's Love Affair with Impressionism in *Ariettes oubliées*

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Abstract: When the audience mentions impressionist composers, many remember Claude Debussy (1862–1918) as the first icon. To this day, his vocal works remain one of the most popular choices of French music for singers. It is also frequently featured in recitals, auditions, and competitions. Critics have insisted on associating Debussy with impressionism even though he did not agree with the label. Critics claim that Debussy's alternations of major, minor, augmented, and diminished chords in conjunction with Verlaine's impressionistic poetry produced the same novel effect as the contrast between light and shadow in the painting, which provides one answer. This paper will explore which elements of Debussy's first published song cycle, *Ariettes oubliées*, embody characteristics of impressionistic music.

Keywords: Impressionism; Claude Debussy; *Ariettes oubliées*; Paul Verlaine; Chromaticism; Harmony

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1. Introduction

When the symbolist movement became popular in France in 1885, impressionism entered the public eye. The same year, Debussy began composing *Ariettes oubliées*, a song cycle Debussy composed when he was going through an unease period in Rome. Despite his plight at the time, the song cycle became a masterpiece of impressionism in Debussy's vocal works. The ongoing movement influenced the creation of the songs, leading to a development that was associated with impressionistic lines ^[1]. One of the general features of this song cycle is that it focuses on making audiences feel submerged in the atmosphere rather than having them focus on the specific story being told, which is the central idea of impressionism (**Example 1**). Debussy's musical career spanned the Romantic and Contemporary periods, but the timing and characteristics of *Ariettes Oubliées* proved to be an impressionistic work belonging to the Romantic period ^[2].

The image shows a musical score for Claude Debussy's "C'est l'extase langoureuse," measures 23-26. It features a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes the lyrics: "nato et su - su - re Ce - la res - gent - ly swirl - ing. A voice thro' the di - mi - nu - en - a - semble au cri doux Que l'herbe a - gi - dark - ness is call - ing, plaint of pet - als." The piano accompaniment consists of two staves, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand providing harmonic support. The score is written in a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a common time signature.

Example 1. Claude Debussy, "C'est l'extase langoureuse," mm. 23–26

Throughout Debussy's life, he never received any systematic instruction. His life experiences, combined with a particular interest in popular literature, resulted in his unwillingness to submit to rules that are bound by music. When the cultural movement of impressionism occurred, it struck Debussy. He wanted to create music that could break from the conventions of the time. Therefore, he applied artistic ideas derived from painter Édouard Manet and sculptor Camille Claudel to his music, attempting to create an ununiform piece. In his letters to Eugène Vasnier, Debussy described the musical effect he wanted to pursue as novel, unencumbered by the orchestra, and complimentary to the stretch of the soul^[3]. This letter suggests that Debussy's ideas were in line with the artistic philosophy of impressionism. not to be too specific, but always to remain mysterious^[4-6].

2. Background of composing *Ariettes Oubliées*

Debussy did not have any musical background nor did any elders in his family guide him in the creation of music. His towering talents were self-explanatory, and the lack of musical background allowed him to become more courageous in exploring revolutionary musical styles rather than following traditional pathways. In 1884, Debussy began a relationship with Marie-Blanche Vasnier, who became Debussy's muse in the subsequent years. Unfortunately, this festive period did not last long, and Debussy was temporarily separated from his lover after attending the Prix de Rome. When he lived in Rome, he complained more than once in letters to Vasnier that the weather, the house, and the relationships were not to his liking. Amid such troubles, he conceived *Ariettes oubliées*, and the trials and tribulations of life gave this work even more profundity. The more dissatisfied Debussy was with his life in Rome, the more he looked forward to returning to France. At the same time, he also yearned for the Impressionist movement, which played out in France^[7].

Debussy spent more than a decade at the Conservatoire acquiring many traditional compositional ideas from composers such as Handel and Bach. Around 1881, Debussy spent a few months in Russia and was fascinated by the musical culture there. While he was positively influenced by some musical elements, he disliked others, such as Wagner's series of ideas about the symphony. In Debussy's music, the aim is to collide instruments to produce new colors, to create one that is sufficiently prominent and contains unpredictable melodies, and to dismantle the short motives. Debussy had an attitude toward composing music that was not bound by any outside opinions^[8].

3. *Ariettes oubliées*

Debussy's thoughts towards France negatively affected his mentality and caused his days in Italy to darken. Despite his efforts in pursuing multiple attempts to leave Italy, the organizing Prix de Rome committee created a high bar for him and discouraged him from doing so. Despite those turbulent years, Debussy maintained a solid

musical aesthetic. This song cycle displays rapid key changes, mingled instruments, and incomplete chords ^[9]. Although these characteristics might seem natural today, the music of impressionists was a controversial and unknown style in those days, and even the title “impressionist” may have been a slam on Debussy’s music by critics. Fortunately, Debussy soon got over this dilemma, and upon his return to France in the first half of 1887, a climate of tolerance gave Debussy the confidence to publish this song cycle. Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) is a representative French poet who played an essential role in the literary movement associated with impressionism. Debussy was one of the first composers to use Verlaine’s poetry for vocal music, and the lyrics of *Ariettes oubliées* are from Verlaine’s 1874 collection *Romances sans paroles* ^[10].

The first song, “*C’est l’extase langoureuse*” (It is languorous rapture), compares various subtle sounds of the forest to the humble hymn of love, and the poem embodies the conflicting emotions of love—exhaustion and longing. The key for this song is a C-sharp minor, but the tonality was blurred from the second half of the first phrase. The alternations of major and minor and the blurring of boundaries are associated with the contrast of light and shadow in impressionistic paintings. The chromatic progression in the melody from mm. 8–9 established a transition from bright to dark so that audiences would not feel an abrupt change in the melody (**Example 2**). This is aligned with the fact that impressionism does not describe the image of each word through melody. The flat passage on mm. 11–18 contrasts with the two singable sections separated by the intervals before and after it which is the same method for the contrast between light and shadow mentioned above (**Example 3**).

nato
et su-su-re Ce-la res-gent-ly swirl-ing. A voice thro'the

Example 2. Claude Debussy, “*C’est l’extase langoureuse*,” mm. 8–9

Un poco mosso
pp
C'est tous les frissons des bois Par-mi l'attente des brises C'est vers les frissons. Love is near; now the forest gently waxes in the breeze. Hark, a choir of
-mures gri-ses, Le chœur des petites voix O le frère et ti-ny voic-es ti-mid.ly sings in the trees. O cool murmur

2
pp molto rit. a Tempo p

Example 3. Claude Debussy, “*C’est l’extase langoureuse*,” mm. 11–20

The seventh and ninth chords descending from mm. 1–3 create a melancholic atmosphere throughout the piece (**Example 4**). One of the philosophies of impressionism, the idea of expressing a certain mood instead of conveying a specific event was showcased in this section. Debussy favored this compositional technique of a harmonic descent in the piano part followed by an echo in the vocal part, a technique that also appears in his later composition, “En sourdine” from *Fête Galantes*. The continuation of this compositional technique marked Debussy’s character as a composer and provided evidence of impressionism that can be seen consistently throughout his work. While classicism pursues regularity and modernism pursues intensity, impressionism seeks unity in emotion and harmony in tone, a claim reflected in this song’s rhythm and voice range ^[11].

The image shows a musical score for the vocal and piano parts of the song "C'est l'extase langoureuse" by Claude Debussy. The vocal part is labeled "CHANT" and the piano part is labeled "PIANO". The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line has lyrics: "Lent et caressant" and "C'est l'ex - Lon - gueur". The piano part features a descending harmonic sequence in the right hand, with a dynamic marking of *pp*. Above the piano part, there are markings "(F#vart)" and "rêveusemen".

Example 4. Claude Debussy, “C’est l’extase langoureuse,” mm. 1–3

The second song, “Il pleure dans mon cœur” (Tears Fall in My Heart), continues the sadness, but Debussy adopted a different approach to expressing it. The sixteenth notes of the piano’s right-hand part were played without interruption, changing into long-duration chords only at mm. 47–56 and mm. 65–70 (**Example 5** and **Example 6**). This sudden change in the accompaniment texture is often seen in works of the era, a technique that symbolizes the individuality sought by impressionism, and highlights the contrast between the two timbres. This rapid rhythm mimics falling tears that are as intense as raindrops striking the heart, creating a tense atmosphere throughout the piece.

The image shows a musical score for the vocal and piano parts of the song "Il pleure dans mon cœur" by Claude Debussy. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal part has lyrics: "- re me?", "Quoi? What?", and "nul.le tra.hi. Has there been no". The piano part features a rapid sixteenth-note accompaniment in the right hand, with a dynamic marking of *p*. Above the piano part, there are markings "Plus lent" and "p. ad libitum". Below the piano part, there is a marking "E. 1422 P. (2)".

Example 5. Claude Debussy, “Il pleure dans mon cœur,” mm. 46–48

The image shows a musical score for the vocal and piano parts of the song "Il pleure dans mon cœur" by Claude Debussy. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal part has lyrics: "- ne," and "Mon cœur a tant de And yet deep is my". The piano part features a rapid sixteenth-note accompaniment in the right hand, with a dynamic marking of *più p*. Above the piano part, there is a marking "molto rallentando".

Example 6. Claude Debussy, “Il pleure dans mon cœur,” mm. 64–66

At the same time, the melody of the piano part constantly switches between the left and right hands and echoes them, like a collision between two thoughts inside one's mind. This seemingly random switch helped listeners quickly grasp onto story's central idea, which is what impressionistic paintings sought to do, allowing viewers to recognize the object immediately in an abstract picture. The song continues the tonal instability and the frequent occurrence of chromatic scales. In the song's opening, the right-hand part of the piano uses the tonic chord of B major, while the left hand appears with G-sharp notes that are not present in the key. Even though the tempo and content have changed, Debussy's compositional ideas have remained consistent.

The third song, "L'ombre des arbres" (The Shadow of Trees), is one of the most distinctive pieces of this vocal suite. Debussy's use of unpredictable chords moved infinitely closer to atonality. In the interval from B natural to F sharp in m. 9, for instance, there are both alterations and the contrast between the previous measure's triplets and the rhythm of the duple meter in this measure (**Example 7**). This unusual design in melody and rhythm is one of Debussy's innovations in the idea of music composition. From another perspective, Debussy's harmony enriched the musical world's understanding of the use of harmony, just as the impressionist painters accomplished something in the use of color that classical oil painting had not reached.



Example 7. Claude Debussy, "L'ombre des arbres," mm. 8–9

This song was a setting to a short poem, and in two music pages, Debussy amplifies the contrast between the shadows of the trees and the landscape in the traveler's eyes in the lyrics through harmonic changes, wide leaps in voice part, and dynamics to the extreme. At the same time, Debussy's music broke the traditional impressions of the audience about classical music, just as the impressionist painters allowed the audience to develop new ways of observation mode.

The fourth song, "Chevaux de bois" (Merry-go-round), is particularly accessible because of its brisk rhythm and consistently reoccurring melody. Nevertheless, each reappearance of the melody is not the same. Perhaps the key changes or a longer rhythm and slower tempo prevail, as Debussy used subtle changes to create the wooden horse spinning from a fast start to a gradual stop at the end, thus matching the lively start of the lyrics to the tranquility of the crowd dispersing at the end. For example, the augmented triads in mm. 11–12 are a fantasy for children, while the diminished triads on A sharp in m. 96, with the *pianississimo* dynamic, is a perfect match for the night scene (**Example 8** and **Example 9**). This idea of using color combinations to convey information is consistent with impressionist painters. Byrnside said: "His feeling for musical color is so strong that he is apt to forget the importance of accuracy of line and form. He should beware this vague impressionism which is one of the most dangerous enemies of artistic truth" ^[12]. This comment proves that Debussy's emphasis on harmonic color was an essential factor in the critics' classification of his music as impressionistic.

Example 8. Claude Debussy, “Chevaux de bois,” mm. 11–12

Example 9. Claude Debussy, “Chevaux de bois,” m. 96

In the fifth song, “Green” (Green), Debussy also uses the same technique as in the fourth song. Debussy uses the same musical combination in mm. 1–8 and several interludes but changes the block chords of the left-hand part (**Example 10** and **Example 11**). Grove Music Online’s article on Debussy mentioned this compositional technique: “Like Fauré, Debussy often juxtaposes the same basic material in different modes or with a strategically shifted bass—arguably his most literal approach to true Impressionist technique, the equivalent of Monet’s fixed object (be it cathedral or haystack) illuminated from different angles”^[13].

Example 10. Claude Debussy, “Green,” mm. 1–4

Example 11. Claude Debussy, “Green,” mm. 21–24

In the piano part, Debussy uses many perfect fourths and fifths, contrasting with the complex harmonic language of the previous songs and creating the purity and freshness of love in poetry with bright harmonic colors. Moreover, instead of chromatic progressions, the melodic parts of the voice feature thirds or whole-tone ascending scales to match the glorious accompaniment. The piano and voice together enable the audience to grasp the composer’s understanding of love quickly.

The sixth song, “Spleen” (Spleen), is the most complex in the entire cycle in terms of harmonic language.

The frequent shifts between keys or chords that are outside the key range in the short section made those who were learning the song wonder about the need for the key signature to exist. However, the composer had his intentions with this arrangement. First, it is the end of the whole song cycle, and it is necessary to vent all the emotions accumulated before so that the music reaches a climax and makes the listener feel overwhelmed. Secondly, the text's theme is the contradiction between the poet's love for his beloved and his fear of losing her, and Debussy used harmonic shifts to bring this contradiction to the audience. Every time a new color appears in the lyrics, like the red of flowers, the black of vines, or the blue of the sky, the weaving of the accompaniment changes from intervals to block chords to octaves (Examples 12, 13, and 14). Debussy made excellent use of aural effects to make the listener feel the shift in mood and object, learning from the impressionistic means of painters who use color to influence the audience.



Example 12. Claude Debussy, "Spleen," m. 6



Example 13. Claude Debussy, "Spleen," m. 15



Example 14. Claude Debussy, "Spleen," m. 18

This song cycle set the basic rules for all future pieces Debussy would compose for solo voice, and the compositional techniques used in his vocal works appeared in this cycle. Therefore, analyzing the impressionistic elements that came out in *Ariettes oubliées* allowed audiences to grasp similar details in Debussy's other voice pieces rapidly.

4. Conclusion

More than one scholar, including François Lesure, has said that Debussy's music is full of mystery. His pieces followed along with impressionism's desire to obscure the concrete image of the subject. Through the details of the composition in *Ariettes oubliées*, researchers sensed the presence of impressionistic elements in Debussy's music. Furthermore, this work was the first song cycle Debussy completed, and many of the compositional techniques in his subsequent vocal pieces follow the principles that appeared in this cycle, such as chromatic melody and unpredictable harmonic language. Thus, by analyzing *Ariettes oubliées*, researchers acquire a general understanding of Debussy's vocal music philosophy and are better able to understand this piece as the start of Debussy's impressionistic music^[14].

Eric Frederick Jensen describes Debussy as "liking to exaggerate to make a point," but listeners recognize Debussy as a man who hated all the pompous elements of classical music and thus adopted an out-of-the-box approach to composition. From this point of view, different audiences will have different feelings when confronted with Debussy and his music. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that, regardless of whether Debussy's music should be classified as impressionistic, the composer deserves to be remembered for the changes he made in his music. As Byrnside stated: "Debussy is referred to as an Impressionist and a "great harmonic inventor "and

an unsurpassed poet in mysticism.”

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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