

MARCIN TRZĘSIOK (Katowice)

Claude Debussy. A Grammar of Imagination

1.

We shall be considering here the problem of how meaning arises in the instrumental music of Claude Debussy. Let us immediately impose upon ourselves a certain restriction: we will not be interested in intended meaning, that is, we will pass over all imitative elements, such as gusts of wind or rising mists, although it is a singularly rewarding subject. I would like, instead, to deliberate the meaning of some of the structural features of Debussy's music, which he himself placed above the evocative powers of his musical language – be it only due to the continual corrections which he felt obliged to make towards those who defined his music with the epithet *pittoresque*. Let us remember that in the final years of his output, he wrote works which contained increasingly fewer allusions to the extra-musical world. These works – the *Études*, *En blanc et noir*, sonatas – also cast a peculiar light on his earlier output.

Whilst bypassing programmatic meanings, I would not like to isolate Debussy from that which was occurring during his lifetime in other arts. On the contrary, this context is of primary significance, as it allows us to link musical phenomena with others that are easier to interpret, and via this circuitous route to draw closer to an understanding of music. I will, however, maintain the same restriction with regard to those other arts: we are interested in 'distant' meaning, that is, the way in which a work is organised, and we will pass over 'near' meaning, connected with immediate content. Another reference point, which will allow me to crystallise my ideas, will be Leonard B. Meyer's theory of musical emotion and meaning.

2.

Since it is difficult for me to treat language, including musical language, as something other than a phenomenon conditioned by a more primordial, pre-linguistic, more powerful and subtly organised activity of

the mind, in presenting the grammar of Debussy's music I would like immediately to point to its origin in that prelogical world, which for the lack of a better term may be called imagination.

In the context of Debussy's music, the distinction between 'near' (substantial) and 'distant' (structural) meaning is not an arbitrary one, as it constitutes the key to the whole of modernist art. It sprang from the sense of a gap between conventional language and the experienced world. More specifically, between the perfect, objective, impersonal logic of closed artistic form and actual being-in-the-world, delimited by a temporally changeable network of references that by their nature are impossible to grasp. It is easy to show how criticism of the omniscient narrator led to the emergence of modernistic literary styles. It is more difficult to do in music, as we would first have to establish what was the musical equivalent of that narrator. Since there is not the space here to debate that thorny issue, let us simply put forward the following thesis: this narrator came to prominence in pre-modernistic music – on the structural level – as a 'hidden' subjective power organising the formal coherence of the musical work. The absence of such a narrator is manifest in music as the disintegration of form. Debussy is a composer in whose music this effect is as clear as day.

3.

When presenting the grammar of Debussy's language, we should, therefore, draw attention to those features of his style that lead to the tangible loosening of formal ties. The feature which triggers this effect most strongly is the principle of contrast. Debussy's narrative is composed of fragments of varying dimensions which are often morphologically unrelated. We will call them here segments. We have the impression that the elementary narrative segments are first scattered, separately composed, and then intricately brought together, in the same way that a bouquet is composed of flowers which are more or less similar to one another. They possess certain spatial features, giving the impression of lying next to each other. Debussy wrote thus about the process of composing his *Études*: 'The most intricate Japanese engravings are child's play in relation to the graphics of some of my etudes. But it was work well done'.¹ Let us give an example of such a narrative composed of meticulously selected segments:

¹ Cit. after Claude Debussy, *Etiudy* [Études], ed. Bolesław Woytowicz (Kraków, 1978), 66.

The image displays four systems of musical notation for piano, representing bars 1-28 of 'Pour les quarts' from Debussy's *Études I*. Each system consists of a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The first system is marked 'Andantino con moto (♩=120 ca)' and 'p dolce'. The second system includes a soprano line '(sopra)' and features dynamics like 'p', 'pp', and 'più p', along with a 'Rit.' marking. The third system is marked 'Stretto' and 'f sonore martelé', with dynamics ranging from 'f' to 'pp'. The fourth system is marked 'in Tempo 1°' and 'pp murmurando', with a soprano line '(sopra)'. The score is heavily annotated with fingering numbers, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Example 1. 'Pour les quarts', bars 1-28 (*Études I*)

The principle of contrast is complementarily counterbalanced by the principle of duplication. In the above example, almost all the segments are repeated. This repetition has a number of variants. It may occur at once (as is most common) or be separated by another segment. The repetition may be exact or inexact. It can occur once (as is most common) or more times. The repeated segments may be internally uniform or contrastive. Contrastive segments are generally derivative. The lis-

tener perceives them as segments of a higher order, that is, consisting of two primal segments to which repetition imparts a perceptual identity as a new tectonic unit. Such compound segments may then be subjected to the process of decomposition into their original components. Let us see how the principle of repetition functions in the prelude 'Ondine'.

Scherzando (J. 72)

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (bars 1-3) shows a right-hand melody with a trill and a left-hand accompaniment of eighth notes, marked *pp*. The second system (bars 4-6) continues the melody with trills and includes dynamic markings *mf* and *pp*. The third system (bars 7-9) features a 'Retenu' section with a long note in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand, marked *p* and *pp*. Fingerings and articulation marks are clearly indicated throughout.

Example 2. 'Ondine', bars 1-19 (*Préludes II*)

4.

These two grammatical principles – contrast and repetition – are part of the cognitive equipment of our minds, and as such are not specific to the music of Debussy. What is specific is the way in which he employs these principles. They do not lead – as, for example, in classical style – to the ordering of the musical material. The repetitions do not serve, here, good continuation, but act rather in a static manner, as if they were aimed at a clearer tracing of the contour of a given segment. In short, contrast and repetition are introduced in order to harness our perceptual tendencies to an experiment in which the anticipated order is unable to crystallise. So what happens then? In Leonard B. Meyer's opinion:

If the musical patterns are less clear than expected [...] if our expectations are continually mistaken or inhibited, then doubt and uncertainty as to the general significance, function and outcome of the passage will result. [...] the mind rejects and reacts against such uncomfortable states and, if they are more than momentary, looks forward to and expects a return to the certainty of regularity and clarity.²

Meyer explains the aptness of such anticipation with a pointed statement: 'the experience of suspense is aesthetically valueless unless it is followed by a release which is understandable in the given context'.³ And what is Debussy's view on this? Let us quote: 'What I wanted to do was something utterly diffuse, diversified, disconnected, elusive, something inorganic, and yet in essence organised'.⁴

These quotations place our problem back within the sphere of the modernist revolution, since Meyer's theory contains the hidden assertion that it is only pre-modernist music which takes account of our natural perceptual tendencies. And thus, that musical modernism, even as refined as Debussy's, does not respect the nature of human hearing. With Meyer, this assertion has a particular meaning. It should be asked, however, whether some value is not produced when departing from coherent narration. Is this value not comparable to the value of classical form? What makes Debussy's music, in spite of its apparent lack of order, aesthetically so exceptionally rich?

This question, as yet unanswered, contains one crucial clue. The richness of Debussy's music proves that musical meaning cannot be reduced to emotions. More specifically, to emotions perceived, in Meyer's understanding, as a directional flow of tensions and releases. The mosaic

² Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago, 1961), 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴ Cit. after Stefan Jarociński, *Debussy a impresjonizm i symbolizm* [Debussy and impressionism and symbolism] (Kraków, 1966), 127.

of contrasts and repetitions in Debussy bring the listener to a state in which those emotions are relegated to the background and extinguished. The mind is not led from note to note; it is not drawn to the next phrase. Sounds appear as an acoustic, rather than emotional, phenomenon. They are not implicated in an aspiration to further solutions, and so the mind seems unmoved.

And now for a paradox: being unmoved, the mind is active in a way that is not accounted for by Meyer's theory. In order to understand this, we will be well served by a digression on the subject of Ezra Pound – a contemporary of Debussy's.

5.

Let us acquaint ourselves with a short poem from Pound's collection *Lustra* (1917).

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.⁵

As in Debussy's music, the link between consecutive segments – images of faces in a crowd and petals on a branch – is not clear. And yet out of this contrasting, there radiates meaning, which is the result of the juxtaposition of two images.⁶ But can this meaning be defined more concretely? With this in mind, let us turn first to Pound's theoretical writings. In his opinion, poetry ought to employ precise images: 'use

⁵ Ezra Pound, *Lustra* (New York, 1917), 83.

⁶ This capturing of the elusive in a net of juxtaposition is a typical procedure of modernism. The literary critic Robert Shattuck, seeking 'to give an idea of how the elements of a contemporary work of art form a whole', writes that 'the twentieth century refers to the art of juxtaposition, whereas formerly the art of transferring was dominant' (Robert Shattuck, *The Banquet Years* (New York, 1968), 332. Cit. after Charles Taylor, *Źródła podmiotowości. Narodziny tożsamości nowoczesnej*, trans. Marcin Gruszczyński, Olga Latek, Adam Lipszyc, Agnieszka Michalak, Agnieszka Rostkowska, Marcin Rychter and Łukasz Sommer (Warsaw, 2001), 857 [Eng. orig. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1989)]. Bolesław Leśmian, in a poem entitled 'Poeta' [The poet], from the volume *Napój cienisty* [Shadowy drink], described the creative process thus: 'I z zachłanną radością maści mu się głowa, / gdy ujmie niepochwytność w dwa przyległe słowa! / A słowa się po niebie włóczą i łajdaczą / I udają, że znaczą coś więcej, niż znaczą!' ['And his head reels with avid joy / at expressing the elusive in two adjoining words! / And the words roam and carouse / And pretend they mean more than they mean!'].

absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation'.⁷ One should 'produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite'.⁸ [...] the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object'.⁹ (Similar sound bites were uttered by Debussy: 'Let's purify our music. Let's try to free it from excess baggage. Let's try to make it more naked'.¹⁰ 'Beauty must be visible').¹¹ This sounds like a manifesto of extremely positivistic art. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. For between those calligraphic images there should emerge something more – and it is this which is the essence of poetry. [...] the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radio-activity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying. A force rather like water when it spurts up through very bright sand and sets it in swift motion'.¹² And more: 'three or four words in exact juxtaposition are capable of radiating this energy at a very high potentiality'.¹³ (Debussy also did not want to purify music to deprive it of mystery. Just the opposite: he stated that the point of music was 'the emotional transposing of that which is "invisible" in nature').¹⁴

Now let us try to put these poetical images into a more abstract language. Above all, let us note that the problem of meaning was treated by Pound in a completely asemiotic way, immediately bringing poetry closer to music. There is no talk of sign and designatum. Meaning is a special act of perception, the condition of which is an expansion of perceptual skills. It is a direct experience – a feeling of energy – not subjected to interpretational processing. The idea is to feel something which is primal in respect to the act of interpretation, and which the act of interpretation inevitably renders unclear. In this sense, it is even possible to state that we are dealing with a procedure that is, in spite of everything, realistic. And indeed, Pound gives expression to a specific feeling which occurred on his leaving a carriage of the Paris Metro. Except that this is a realism that corresponds to a modern sense of reality, which arises where the individual self emerges from something more voluminous, sub-subjective.

⁷ Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. Thomas Stearns Eliot (New York, 1935), 3–14.

⁸ Preface in *Some Imagist Poets* (Boston and New York, 1915).

⁹ Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect'.

¹⁰ Cit. after Stefan Jarociński, *Debussy a impresjonizm i symbolizm*, 119.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹² Ezra Pound, 'The Serious Artist', in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. Thomas Stearns Eliot (New York, 1935), 49.

¹³ *Ezra Pound: Selected Prose 1909–1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York, 1973), 34.

¹⁴ Cit. after Stefan Jarociński, *Debussy a impresjonizm i symbolizm*, 118.

This area, inaccessible to traditional logical enquiry, should find expression in a controlled way in aesthetic experience.

And this is the very purpose served by a form based on contrasts. Its essential meaning lies not in the contrasted images themselves – taken separately or together. The meaning is like water moving the sand of these images. Water is colourless and shapeless, and so imperceptible to the senses (the reference here is always the sense of sight). The presence of water is noticeable in that it sets this sand, the object of our perception, in motion. That which is imperceptible cannot be indicated by the substance of art, be it directly or by means of traditional metaphor, since the starting point of every metaphor is the ‘ordinary’ sensory world. If we wish to point to the ampler meaning of this world, which ripples like water breaking up through the bright sand of forms, we cannot transfer the features of the sensory world to the sub-sensory domain, as we would be once again covering that hidden meaning. In order to reveal that hidden shaping force, we have to create the conditions in which it could manifest itself in experience without naming it, that is, without identifying it with any image. The juxtaposition of images is just such a means: the images are drawn to one another by a hidden force, which manifests itself as that ampler, uniting motion. This motion by no means negates the sensory world contained in the images, nor does it soften their contrast. It brings to the sensory world something more, which completely alters its perceived meaning.

Let us read once again:

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Now we can return to Debussy’s music.

6.

I asked earlier what value was possessed by the disruption of linear musical narrative in Debussy. Now I can answer thus: the grammar that is regulated by the principle of contrast and repetition enables the creation of something which Charles Taylor calls ‘a force field which can capture a more intensive energy’.¹⁵ As in Pound, this force field in-

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1989), 475.

clines the imagination to work in a mode other than the registering of the linear oscillation of tension and release. The impossibility of synthesising sensory data on the surface level of musical shapes need not – as Meyer posited – result in the escaping of energy, that is, the distraction of the mind.¹⁶ The capturing of a ‘more intense energy’ – more intense than the Meyerian energy flow – is possible because music is not so much the provider of this energy, as its catalyst. And the source of this energy released by music does not lie on the surface of our perception, in the sounds immediately heard. It lies in those layers of the mind which accumulate beneath the layer of Meyerian emotions. We gain access to these layers of awareness thanks to the juxtaposition of segments, which – as in Pound – provoke this more intense energy into activity that manifests itself as the bonding of the elements of a mosaic. It is a concentrated, latent energy, set low down, but open upwards to diversity, since only such an energy can effect a synthesis of the diffuse surface of a work. This energy may be symbolised by the image of colourless water, which moves the perceived shapes/segments as it rises to the surface, thus making its presence felt. Debussy used the image of wind, but the sense is the same as in Pound’s water: ‘Listen to nobody’s counsel, perhaps only the wind that blows and tells the story of the world’.¹⁷ This wind is also invisible, and it also manifests itself as a mover of visible forms. In Debussy’s opinion, the aim of music is ‘the emotional transposing of that which is “invisible” in nature’.¹⁸ Hence my earlier remark that the mind remains unmoved by specific sensory emotions, and at the same time active in a way not accounted for by Meyer’s theory – active like water shifting sand or wind blowing leaves.

7.

I am attempting to describe here something which is experienced quite simply, yet is very difficult to put into words. Perhaps the whole problem could be explained most succinctly by means of the no-

¹⁶ Whilst imagination still discharges here the Kantian function of synthesising sensory data, and so theoretically we have not strayed from Leonard B. Meyer’s neo-Kantian stance, what has altered is the scope of the action of the senses, and so also the sphere of sensory objects. We are entering an area in which that which is sensory (subjective) and that which is objective are blurred in a much more radical way than in Kant and Meyer.

¹⁷ Cit. after Stefan Jarociński, *Debussy a impresjonizm i symbolizm*, 115.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

tions of 'surface' and 'depth'. Meyer's theory (and pre-modernist music) is 'superficial', in the sense that it regards only that which is actually heard and the subjective correlative of those sounds – the dynamic of emotions – as aesthetically significant. Yet the theoretical description of Debussy's style requires the acknowledgement of an extra dimension, which may be called 'depth', understood as the recognition of the fact that the constitutive elements of aesthetic experience go beyond the phenomena of immediate sensory perception, and so their subjective correlative also lies 'deeper' than emotions – there, where emotions arise and of which they are the form.¹⁹ Meyer's 'superficial' aesthetic ideal is entirely Cartesian – the mind ultimately 'expects a return to the certainty of regularity and clarity'. Meanwhile, the whole 'deep-lying' aesthetic of Debussy could be derived from the sentence that acknowledges the value of that which by nature is unclear: 'I would like music to give the impression that it issues out of shade and occasionally returns there; to be almost always someone discreet'.²⁰ This same idea is contained in his famous opinion on *Pelléas*, the 'most beautiful pages of which', according to the composer, 'are filled with silence'.

But what is the meaning of this 'silence'? What does Debussy's 'shade' signify? Why should 'wind' tell us the story of the world? What is indicated by these terms which all treat something extrasensory and non-substantial as a condition for the manifestation of that which is clear and distinctive to our perception?

At this point I would like to cite the interesting classification of musical silence given by Olivier Messiaen in the first part of his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*. He distinguishes three kinds of musical silence. First he mentions the 'silence of prolonging' (*silence de prolongation*), which is a universal phenomenon – the period of physical silence that follows when a sound fades away. The second is the 'silence of preparation' (*silence de préparation*). This could almost be called Meyerian silence. 'If a repeated passage is suddenly broken off, falls silent during its repetition, and is then continued after that momentary suspension, the silence will be filled with the expectation of what is to follow, and what we already know thanks to our memory'.²¹ The third sort of si-

¹⁹ Spatial terms are employed here with a metaphoric function: this is a mental 'space', which appears to be 'boundless', and about which, generally speaking, nothing is known. We usually experience this 'space' as centralised and closed within our psyche, yet there also occur other experiences, when we sense that our 'deepened' awareness at some 'stage' (in one of a succession of 'transformations', on some 'level' or in some 'layer') infinitely transcends our unitary existence.

²⁰ Cit. after George Gourdet, *Claude Debussy*, trans. Elżbieta Bekierowa (Kraków, 1978), 82 [Fr. orig. Paris, 1970].

²¹ Olivier Messiaen. *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* (Paris, 1994), 48.

lence Messiaen calls 'empty silence' (*silence vide*). This occurs when 'a break appears between two phrases and we do not yet know what will happen when the silence stops'.²²

'Empty silence' is closest to Debussy's silence. And yet the notion of silence in Debussy seems fundamentally different. This silence does not stand in opposition to sound. It is that shade from which music issues and to which it occasionally returns. Silence and sound complement one another. More than that, they define one another. They permeate one another, as if they were of one substance. This is a sense of silence close to that which we find in the *Tao-Te-Ching*, where we read: 'Great music is soundless'. Or, if we prefer to look for closer references, in Saint John of the Cross, who writes in *Spiritual Canticle*: '[My beloved is] The tranquil night / at the approaches of the dawn, / The silent music, / The murmuring solitude'. And he comments on this stanza thus: 'This is the silent music, because it is knowledge tranquil and calm, without audible voice; and thus the sweetness of music and the repose of silence are enjoyed in it'. The silence of St John is not empty, but 'songful'. In it resounds 'the spiritual impression of the majesty of God in Himself and in His creatures'.²³ Close (even closer, given its non-theological language) to the silence of Debussy is Rainer Maria Rilke, who writes in the first *Duino Elegy* about 'the unbroken message that creates itself from the silence'. And elsewhere: 'Though the living all make the error of drawing too sharp a distinction'.²⁴ Thus the silence of which we speak constitutes a doubtless universal, albeit rare, human experience.

It would be possible to show in detail how Debussy introduces the dimension of silence into his music. It is a wonderful subject, but there is not the space here to elaborate on it. For this reason, I shall confine myself to enumerating a few technical means that introduce the quality of silence into the sound of music. Firstly, there are the breaks, sometimes very brief, that occur between successive segments. These breaks are sometimes marked in a score with commas, and sometimes even furnished with a fermata, at the end of a segment. This corresponds to the colon in Pound's poem:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

²² Ibid., 49.

²³ St John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ*, trans. David Lewis (Kessinger, 1995).

²⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. Tony Kline (2001). <http://www.tony-kline.co.uk/PITBR/German/Rilke.htm#_Toc509812215> accessed 10 May 2008.

The performance of Debussy's music requires an excellent feel for this nuance, which animates form like that wind recounting the history of the world (e.g. at the beginning of the Sonata for flute, viola and harp).

Secondly, we encounter places in Debussy in which a sound complex or even a single note is exposed for a longer time. In such instances we have the impression of vibration, oscillation, internal resonance; these are phenomena suggesting some silent space, in which the field of this vibration can oscillate. We hear this silence now as a natural milieu of the sound.

The image displays a musical score for 'Les cloches à travers les feuilles' (Images II) by Debussy. The score is in G major and 3/4 time, marked 'Lent (MM 92 - ♩)'. It consists of three systems of piano and harp parts. The first system includes markings 'douxment sonore', 'pp', and 'un peu en dehors'. The second system includes 'simile'. The third system includes 'Cédez' and 'au Mouvt'.

Example 3. 'Les cloches à travers les feuilles' (*Images II*)

Thirdly, the presence of silence is sometimes marked by means of a dynamic, the use of which results from spatial imagination. How often, instead of *subito piano*, does Debussy write *lointain* (from afar). In such cases we hear, not so much a difference in the intensity of the sound, as a difference in its location. Between these places there extends a space of silence.

Example 4. 'Les sons et les parfums...' (Préludes I)

Fourthly, Debussy's sound – above all in his piano works – often re-sounds for a long time, even to the very end. In this way, the boundary between sound and silence is naturally blurred. One of Debussy's most typical performance markings is *laissez vibrer*.

Example 5. 'Les collines d'Anacapri' (Préludes I)

8.

The problem of communication in Debussy possesses a certain aspect which goes beyond the scope of traditional semiotic or cognitive enquiry. This music opens up for us a space of spiritual experience, which can only occur when our perception takes in more than that which is positively audible. It is meaning sensed at the moment when our minds open themselves up to a purely phenomenological perception of sound, relinquishing efforts at interpretation, which in this context constitutes unnecessary ballast. The formal structure – the grammar of the contrasting and repeating of segments – serves this kind of perception. This spiritual meaning is wholly subjective (although, if we agree that the disintegration of surface formal coherence is a correlative of an insight into the non-substantiality of a subject, it is better to speak of a ‘transpersonal’, rather than ‘subjective’, experience. It is possible, however, that more people could experience it in a similar way. By its very nature, a description of this meaning cannot satisfy the traditional rigours of scholarly expression.

Translated by John Comber