Artistic Intersections During The Belle Époque

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Abstract

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The Belle Époque was a period of dazzling artistic endeavor, a buffet for the senses, a nexus for every kind of art and artistic expression. Study of the Belle Époque showcases how one art form enriches another, and shows how the state of society can be profoundly embodied by its art and music. Though we tend to categorize artists by their medium, in fact the different disciplines of art cross-pollinate each other, making each other richer for it and appealing to a variety of audiences. When artists, musicians, and poets of the Belle Époque congregate around specific concepts and ideas, they reveal to us the most formative and influential ideas of the day. We can better understand the framework of the Belle Époque by looking at the symbols and ideas that have attracted artists and musicians from different artistic disciplines; this lens that focuses on the intersections between the arts can also then be turned towards our own current society, allowing us to understand and support the growth of the arts in the modern era.

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Artistic Intersections During the Belle Époque

> Increasing attention has been given in recent years to the subject of relations among the arts. Educators are coming to realize that the study of the arts has been much too specialized. Too many books and articles, too many school and university courses have treated only one art. It is impossible to understand any one art thoroughly if we consider it only in isolation. Every great movement, every great style in art, has expressed itself in all or many of the arts at about the same time. - Thomas Munro (1951)[1]

> Knowledge and perception, and therefore experience, exist only in the relations between things. Perhaps indeed everything that exists does so only in relationships, like mathematics or music… - Iain McGilchrist (2019)[2]

The Belle Époque was a period of dazzling artistic endeavor, a buffet for the senses, a nexus for every kind of art and artistic expression. Study of the Belle Époque showcases how one art form enriches another, and shows how the state of society can be profoundly embodied by its art and music. Though we tend to categorize artists by their medium (music, visual art, poetry, etc.), in fact the different disciplines of art cross-pollinate each other, making each other richer for it and appealing to a variety of audiences. Furthermore, when artists, musicians, and poets of the Belle Époque congregate around specific concepts and ideas, they reveal to us the most formative and influential ideas of the day. To better understand the music that was written during the Belle Époque, we must understand that it displays influences from a variety of disciplines, particularly art and poetry. This paper will examine the overlapping intersections of art, poetry, and music by focusing on the defining characteristics of the arts and culture of the Belle Époque period as seen through the different art forms, and how these characteristics shaped, formed, and inspired the music in Paris between 1880 and 1910.

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[1] Thomas Munro (1951). *"The Afternoon of a Faun" and the Interrelation of the Arts.* The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 10(2), 95-111.

[2] McGilchrist, Iain (2019). "*The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World.*" Germany: Yale University Press, 97.

Chapter 1: Economic, Political, and Cultural Factors

Rising from the ashes

To set the scene for the Belle Époque, one must understand the political and economical soil from which the Belle Époque both took root and bloomed. Paris in the early and mid 1800s went through a time of political turmoil and violence. The last revolt before the Belle Époque, known as the Paris Commune, was particularly violent and gruesome. As Baron Georges Haussman began his renovation of Paris, he displaced the poor and lower class citizens to the outskirts of the city, and from there arose the Commune, a socially conscious, self-created governmental system with armed resistance. Many of the Communards, as they were called, were soldiers who had previously defended Paris during a major siege by the Prussians during 1870, and these disenchanted and angry working class radicals now opposed the current Parisian government and took control of the city for about three months between March and May of 1871. The uprising led by the Commune was met with a violent response by the Parisian government. Many hostages were taken and killed, and old historical buildings were destroyed. The Communards were summarily executed in merciless fashion after fierce fighting and several gun battles during Bloody Week. In the aftermath, many mournfully commented on the smoke that filled the city, which was both a physical and a symbolic cloud of ashes that had settled in after the massive and gruesome violence that had overtaken the city. The outskirts of the city noticeably lacked its population of young men for many years. How was Paris to recover?

It turns out that the Parisians were a resilient bunch, and as the dust, smoke, and ash of the uprising settled, they returned to the city center and reclaimed it as their own. Another surprising contributor to the rebirth and reunification of Paris was financial burden. On the heels

of the suppression of the Commune, Paris along with the rest of France faced a huge payment of war reparations to Germany according to the Treaty of Frankfurt; two billion francs were in order. The stout patriotism and nation-wide effort with which the French people banded together to successfully pay the reparations helped soothe painful memories of the unrest. And after these years, Parisians enjoyed a relatively long stretch of (at least surface-level) peace within their city, as they rebuilt both architecturally and financially. For better or for worse, the lasting fear of a second massacre both discouraged further uprisings and encouraged city officials to crack down immediately and harshly on any potential protest or anarchy.

During the following years, Mary McAuliffe describes Paris's "dizzying rush into mass consumption"[3] in her book *Dawn of the Belle Époque* - this was the time during which the city began to recover from the aforementioned political and financial setbacks. As the economy grew and rebuilding continued, new department stores filled Paris with huge, sparkling display windows that lured the consumer in with promises of the exotic, glamorous, and theatrical. Influential in this rush to consumption was Ernest Cognacq, an enterprising man who planned and executed the *Samaritaine*, a hugely successful and rapidly growing department store that was a part of a new retail revolution. Paris was "awash in opportunity for those who could seize it"[4].

How to understand the taste of this new culture of Paris during the Belle Époque? Catherine Kautsky describes it as intemperance and unabashed excess[5]. The Belle Époque was not centered around understatement or restraint, but around the excitement of the senses, the thrill of novelty, and the flaunting of wealth. These people who flocked to Paris to participate in

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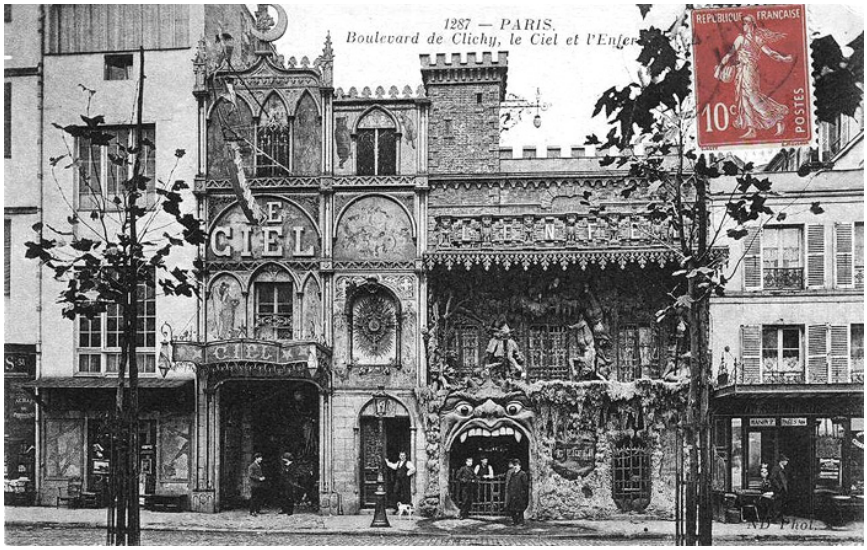
[3] Mary McAuliffe (2011). *Dawn of the Belle époque*. Lanham: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 40.

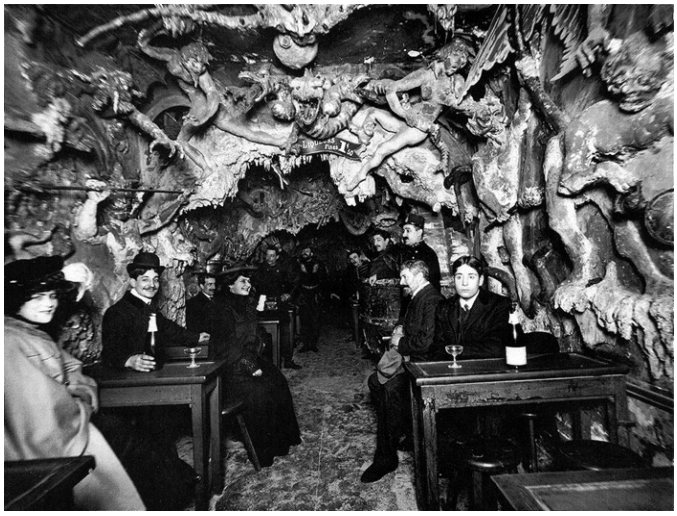
[4] McAuliffe, *Dawn of the Belle époque,* 43.

[5] Catherine Kautsky (2017). *Debussy's Paris : Piano portraits of the Belle Époque*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, xxiii.

and revolutionize the art and music scene were lovers of pleasure, hedonists, dandies, “flâneurs,” the highly sensitive and aesthetic. Elegance was the word of the moment. They loved the exotic, the ironic, the sensual, and the profound.

Below are a few pictures of the *Cabaret de l’Enfer* in 1892. A themed cabinet, it has a grotesque, gargoyle-esque gaping mouth of a door whereby patrons would enter to spend time eating, drinking, and socializing. Inside, appendages of spooky characters reach from the walls as if to tear the patrons to shreds. The irony of finding pleasurable pastime by passing through the gates of hell would not have been lost on the Parisians of the Belle Époque. The front of the business establishment displays pictures of women succumbing to the flames of hell, giving us a visceral snapshot of both the sensuality of the culture and also the extravagant attention to detail.





Sarah Bernhardt is another icon of the dramatic Belle Époque culture. A multi-talented woman, she was at once a painter, sculptor, writer, singer, and actress. Her style of acting was dramatic and poetically emotional, designed to appeal to the romantics of the late nineteenth century, and her lifestyle was equally appealing to the media and the adoring public who kept close tabs on her larger-than-life habits with great interest. She kept a menagerie of animals, would pose for pictures in pants (scandalous for a woman at the time), and revealed to the media that her preferred location to study lines was in a satin-lined coffin, darkly romantic and glamorous. She loved ballooning and persuaded Henry Giffard, who owned a balloon, to take her

up on a free-floating journey. This was a fantastically wild and risky adventure upon which to embark. Writing about it afterwards, she recounted among other stories how she scattered petals over a cemetery as they passed by, and how she and the other two passengers on the balloon enjoyed sandwiches and champagne while floating in the air, merrily throwing the corks overboard[6]. At home she built herself an ornately decorated and extravagant palace, to which she invited her friends and admirers. She dressed in furs and jewels to keep up her luxurious and opulent appearance, took many lovers, and bore an illegitimate child whom she openly adored and made no effort to hide. Eventually, she made several tours to America, where she also met with great success. With such celebrities to look up to and emulate, no wonder the public in Paris during the Belle Époque was so fascinated with the glamorous, the sensual, and the dramatic.

Haussmann's Renovation

One major factor in Paris that rather literally paved the way for the dawn of the Belle Époque was Baron Georges Haussmann's renovation of the city. Haussman directed the wide-reaching renovation himself between 1853 and 1870, and work on the project continued until 1927. Before Haussmann's renovation, the streets of Paris were crowded and narrow, with a high population density in the middle of the city. This led to rampant sickness, including cholera epidemics in 1832 and 1848. Many of the middle and lower class people crowded into small living quarters were unhappy with their lives, which also led to several uprisings during that same time frame. Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables" is a vivid literary illustration of the old Paris which Hugo witnessed himself before the renovations. Narrating the story of a small and tragically unsuccessful political uprising in 1832, "Les Miserables" sketches a gritty visual of the crowded, downtrodden working population of the city and the barricades that rose in the narrow streets during the uprisings. Working-class Parisians barely survived, scraping by and living in

[6] McAuliffe, *Dawn of the Belle époque,* 78.

dirty, rundown housing. The crowded and unhealthy living spaces made it easy for disease to run rampant. As Pinkney puts it, the slums were a place "where misery found a refuge and crime a breeding ground[7]." The clearing of the slums was both public health and political motivation for the city leaders to support Haussmann's renovation. Moving the poor people out of the center of the city seemed like a straightforward clean-up solution that would solve health problems and overcrowding all in one fell swoop; the city created subsidized housing further from the city's center. In addition, it created a construction boom; in the 1860's over twenty percent of the working class had jobs in the building industry[8]. Haussmann cleared out and destroyed the slums in the middle of the city, replacing them with open streets. This resulted in a wider, more open Paris. The wider streets were now also more difficult to barricade by would-be protestors, and they would allow the military to move throughout the city with ease; a shrewd move by the city planners.

Besides broad and open streets, other main features of Haussmann's renovation included the addition of four new large parks and renovation of existing parks, and the "*grande croisée de Paris*", which was a large crossroads in the center of the city with theaters on either side. These new projects created more spaces for people to gather, made space for the arts, and improved circulation in the streets. Businesses flourished with easier access to storefronts. The wide walkways were perfect for the *flâneurs*, fine gentlemen of society avid to display carefully selected outfits on their daily strolls.

Although the new Paris brought social and aesthetic benefits, the renovation was not without its detractors. Perhaps idealizing the bohemian and organic inspiration of the old Paris,

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[7] David H. Pinkney (2019). *Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris* (Vol. 5374, Princeton Legacy Library). Princeton University Press, 12.

[8] Pinkney, *Rebuilding of Paris*, 157.

many mourned its loss and found the new Paris to be hard-edged and cold. Victor Hugo mourned the loss of the Gothic architecture which he thought to be the pinnacle of Parisian aesthetic, and commented ironically, "Fascinating. Paris demolishing itself in order to defend itself - a magnificent sight[9]". In addition, the total financial cost of the renovation ended up to be nearly double the estimated amount, costing the city dearly. Whatever the cost, the new heart of Paris was cleared out and polished for the rising upper class, and the streets and parks were expanded and newly remodeled, creating a stage for a new social setting.

Political Stability, Economic Growth and Industrial Revolution

Paris enjoyed relative political stability during the Belle Époque, which was another important factor that provided space and resources for the arts to flourish. This temporary political rest was perhaps especially appreciated considering the political and economic turmoil Paris had just survived. Between 1830 to about 1871, Paris experienced four instances of major civil unrest (the last in 1871 was the aforementioned Paris Commune, the workers' revolt that resulted in a particularly unfortunate and gruesome massacre, leaving over twenty thousand dead), but was relatively peaceful between 1871 to 1910. Although European tensions were beginning to build and would eventually culminate in World War I in 1914, these tensions remained largely under the surface to the public during the period of the Belle Époque. This allowed wealthy property owners the luxury to spend time and money on entertainment and leisure, paving the way for the nurture and growth of the arts.

The Belle Époque also overlapped with the latter part of the second industrial revolution. The invention of railroads and telephones along with increased electrification made the world feel smaller and smaller, and communication across the globe became more straightforward.

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[9] McAuliffe, *Dawn of the Belle époque,* 18.

Along with these inventions, the rise of the automobile and aircraft also made traveling easier. Cinema also was becoming more and more popular, loved particularly by wealthy Parisians who had plenty of time to be entertained by the screen. All of these innovations facilitated the quick and easy spread of ideas and art across the globe. Parisians were exposed to instruments they had never seen, cultures from across the waters, and especially a vast variety of interesting people; intellectuals, great minds, and deep thinkers all came to cross-pollinate the flowers of Paris like busy bees.

The World Expositions and Major Global Influences

The art scene of Paris had a distinctly worldly, metropolitan character, and this was in part due to the two World Expositions that were hosted there in 1889 and 1900, which attracted businessmen, artists, and innovators from around the world. In fact, eight expositions were held in Paris between 1855 and 1937, accelerating Paris's economic growth through the exchange of new ideas from around the world. The two fairs in 1889 and 1900 would have especially contributed to the atmosphere of the Belle Époque as they were held in the middle of this burgeoning artistic developmental time, exposing artists and musicians alike to a smorgasbord of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic influences.

Held to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the French Revolution, the World Exposition of 1889 hosted over 32 million visitors and provided the occasion for the city to build the now famed Eiffel Tower. Claude Debussy is an excellent example of a Belle Époque artist influenced by the expositions. Debussy attended these World Expositions and was exposed to various types of art and music, particularly Javanese music and the Javanese gamelan. Emile Bayard drew Javanese dancers at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1889[10] which Debussy would have attended. Lockspeiser also tells us Debussy was exposed to the Balinese gamelan

[10] Roberts, *Images*, 154.

which he heard at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and which became very influential on his work. The unique rhythmic counterpoint and rich pentatones of the gamelan instruments make their appearances in many of his compositions, such as *Pagodes, Cloches à travers les feuilles,* and *La fille aux cheveux de lin,* some with more overt and others with more subtle references.

Along with the Javanese musical influences, Debussy was a subscriber to the very in-vogue obsession with anything considered "oriental" and "exotic," and he took particular interest in Japanese art styles. The original Japanese block art made its way to Paris on paper wrappings meant to protect pottery that had been shipped over. Printed on the wrappings of the pottery and ceramics were highly detailed and aesthetic Japanese drawings and cartoons which caught the eye of the Parisians. Japanese block prints soon became highly sought-after collectibles amidst the Parisian obsession with the Japanese aesthetic; these paper comics were called "manga." Eventually, the craze for original Japanese art prints, *ukiyo-e* (which literally translated means "pictures of the floating world"), became influential on not only the artists but also the musicians of the Belle Époque; Debussy's *Estampes* is a reference to the block printing that music lovers would have been familiar with.

Along with the craze for the exotic and oriental, with the new sounds of the gamelan and the new art styles of the Japanese woodblock art, there were many other pillars of Parisian culture that influenced and wove their way into the fabric of the art and music of the time. The cultural influences on the music and art of the Belle Époque were numerous and varied. The Parisians loved seemingly contradictory ideas: the obsession with nature and all things natural along with the popularity of the show of the circus, the seeking of immediate, physical pleasure and the search for the sublime and the mysterious. All these concepts found their way into the art and music of the Belle Époque.

Chapter 2: Symbolists of the Belle Epoque

The Symbolist and the Art of Suggestion

"To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the pleasure in the poem which stems from the joy of divining little by little; *to suggest, herein lies the dream.*" - Stéphane Mallarmé (1891)[11].

This quote by Mallarmé is an illustration of a concept that captured the heart of many artists during Belle Époque: the art of suggestion. The Impressionist movement, beginning in the 1860's, soon gave way to the Symbolist movement which was influential in the art and music created during the Belle Époque. Symbolists believed that the most pure and ideal form of art was not to literally capture a picture of an object or scene in a moment, but to capture and express the essence of its effect on the artist through symbols and underlying meanings. The expression of this essence was to be the most pure and sublime form of art, distanced from art that had surface level meaning or merely bore a resemblance to that by which it was inspired. Symbolists were most concerned with what lay behind initial appearances, a mysterious level of thought that they often called "the dream landscape," which they sought to express and capture through visual art and ultimately through music.

Like the Symbolists, Debussy was very attuned to his experience of an object or piece of music. He wanted to discover in music "the various impulses that gave him birth, and what they contain about inner life."[12] Inner life here could be referring to the idea of the dream landscape, the profound level of thought that the Symbolists sought to experience and communicate. He also refers to the seed of music as an impulse, not a specific idea or inspiration necessarily, but something more intuitive. He was acutely aware of the living, breathing quality of a piece of

[11] Roberts, *Images*, 172, italics added.
[12] Vallas, Leon. (1967). *The Theories of Claude Debussy, Musicien Français*. New York: Dover Publications, 1.

music which surpasses what a dissection and deconstruction of the piece could encompass. He chided other music critics and writers for their love of this sort of dissection, which he found to result in a total destruction of the mystery of a piece, an act he condemned as murder. Rather than cold analysis, he preferred to focus on the magic of the experience of music, the ideal Symbolist medium.

One way we can see the Symbolist idea of the art of suggestion in music is in Debussy's *Preludes*. Debussy was notably particular about the pictures, colors, and formats used in the printing editions of his music. He felt strongly that each print edition should express a specific effect that correlated with the music that he had written. In both the first and second books of Debussy's *Preludes* (written 1909-1913), the composer elected to place the "titles", if they can be called such, at the end of each score at the bottom of the page, in parentheses preceded by an ellipsis. He felt that the pieces should be self-explanatory, and the aural symbols that he used (gestures, harmonic colors, rhythmic ebb and flow) communicated the images through his music without needing titles or labels; the "titles" were merely suggestions as an afterthought on the page.

Pagodes is a great example of how Debussy's writing was influenced by the culture of the Belle Époque, by the prevailing artistic movements of the day, and especially by the interest in the "exotic and oriental" that was in vogue at the time. Written in 1903 as the first piece of *Estampes*, *Pagodes* is, as Roberts says, "the obvious example of the gamelan's influence on Debussy's piano music[13]." Debussy, in a rare moment of almost direct imitation, seems to transcribe the pentatonic scales and percussive sounds of the gamelan, which he would have been familiar with from going to the Paris Exposition in 1900 and also from the general interest that the Parisians of the Belle Époque had in exotic oriental music and culture. The name

[13] Roberts, *Images,* 156.

Pagodes doesn't precisely fit the image of the Javanese gamelan, as there are no pagodas in Java. Neither does the piano have the correct tuning to embody the same tonal flavor as the gamelan pitches. Yet the referential title seems to be enough to conjure up the brassy, ringing pentatonic sounds and the vague sense of orientalism that had captured Paris during the time. This piece requires intense and sensitive pianism, and the scalar patterns bring into sharp relief the pentatonic scales that Debussy employs.

Pagodes is an illustration of "the art of suggestion." Debussy's music is structured around the resonance created after playing the keys, not the percussive nature of the striking of the piano key itself, in the same way that the Symbolist ideal was to study the impact of the stimulus on the artist rather than capturing the stimulus itself. The piano cannot and does not need to express the exact sound of the Balinese gamelan that Debussy heard, but it can express the essence of Debussy's experience hearing that gamelan with his western-attuned ear. The pentatonic scale is particularly destructive of the western scale's hierarchy of tones (meaning, for example, in a western scale consisting of do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do, the first, fourth, and fifth tones are more important), suspending this carefully created western hierarchy[14]. Perhaps the pentatonic scale entranced Debussy for precisely this reason - that the western ideals felt worn out and stifling, while the eastern aesthetics provided more freedom, flexibility, and expressivity to his ear and artistic sensibilities.

Symbolists on Visual Art and Music

Debussy was dedicated to sharing ideas and spending time talking not only to other composers but also to poets and painters. Although he often faced significant financial difficulties, he preferred asking for favors from family and friends rather than taking on any sort

[14] Roberts, *Images,* 167.

of regular teaching. With the spare time he always seemed to have, he preferred to instead expose himself to new ideas, to go to world expos (somehow finding the admission fees), and to have deep conversations with the avant-garde literary figures of the day. For example, Mallarmé and Debussy spent frequent time together and would have exchanged many artistic ideas. They both particularly admired Edgar Allan Poe, and as Mallarmé's influence grew in the literary circles, he began to host regular Tuesday night literary meetings which he called *Les Mardis*, to which Debussy scored a regular invitation that was envied by many. It is inevitable that poetry would have had a strong influence on Debussy's artistic ideas. Visual art was also influential in Debussy's conception of his own music. At one time Debussy wrote in his correspondence some rather desultory remarks about finally escaping too many musicians talking about painting and painters talking about music. However, in practice, his work seems to be quite deftly and inextricably woven with all the arts of his time, drawing inspiration from many different arts and cultural influences. Commentators have found and drawn parallels between Debussy's music and the other creative arts since the early 1890's, and several of Debussy's Symbolist painter colleagues such as Gauguin and Whistler claim that their work has connections to Debussy's work.

In fact, visual art must especially be highlighted in any interdisciplinary study of the Belle Époque. It seems that at the turn of the century, visual art was everywhere one looked, ready to be seen and readily available to influence other art forms of the day. Not only were there posters and paintings hung in galleries and at the salons, but there were beautiful and intricate architectural features on buildings, and paintings that invited the masses to appreciate, displayed in all sorts of venues such as restaurants, bars, clubs, cafes, and foyers. Perhaps more importantly, many major artists moved out from the *atelier* (indoor studio) and began to work

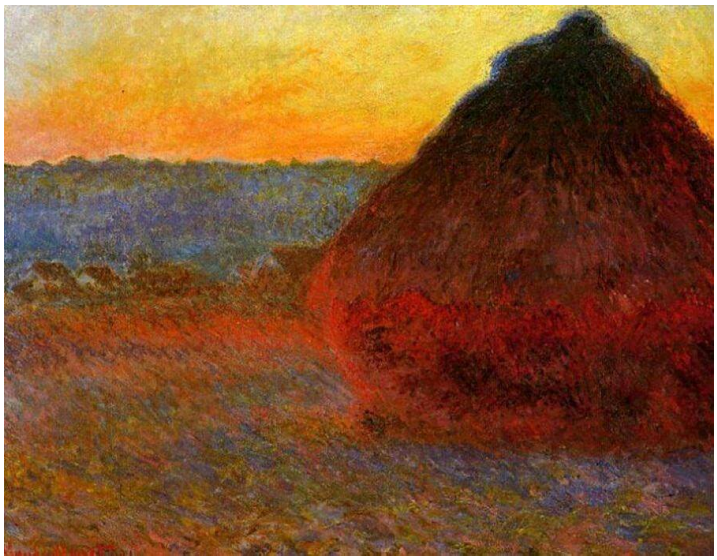
outside, painting directly from nature, immersed in the settings they were painting. This was a major paradigm shift for the painting scene. Painters left the studio for the outside world to be viscerally impacted and inspired by their immediate surroundings. The Parisian public also felt strongly that they knew their art well and not only enjoyed viewing it but participated in creating paintings as well. One often sees the crowds of park-goers in the paintings of Matisse, Manet, and Renoir. As Roberts said, "the painted became painters[15]". During the Belle Époque it became increasingly popular for the public to go out to the park and paint directly onto a canvas in imitation of the habits of the major artists of the time. In truth, art was everywhere, and everyone was a painter. Perhaps this is why Debussy was immediately pinned in the public mindset as an Impressionist, even though this was not his own categorization. It must have been expected in a time during which painting was so much in vogue and the composer himself had even titled a suite with the label *"Images."*

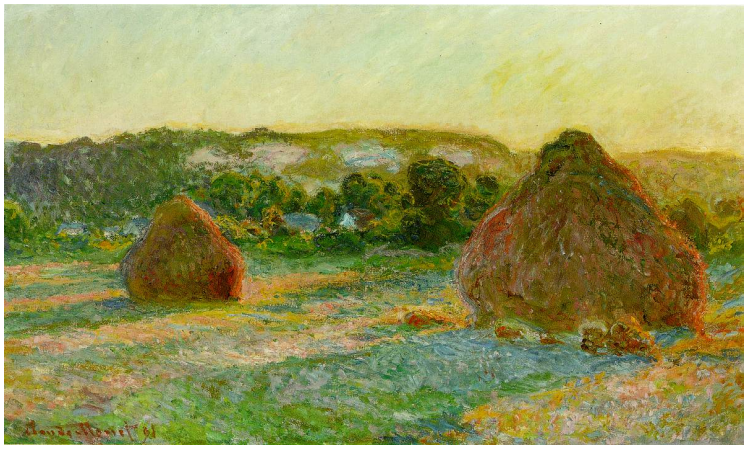
Monet, a leading impressionist, would work on several paintings at once and, in fits of perhaps grandiose idealism, would only work on a given painting when the lighting was exactly the same as the last time he had worked on it. The impressionists, whose ideas were well known and much less revolutionary by the time of the Belle Epoque, sought to capture the subject exactly the way it was at one specific instant. Monet sought to paint from nature one single moment of time, waiting always for the right quality of light to appear before he would continue work on a painting - he wanted to capture the exact essence of the scenery. His famous *Haystacks* series illustrates particularly well his interest in capturing light and the essence of light. He painted many, many different versions of the same haystacks, with various framings and from various angles. These paintings showcased not the simple and pedestrian subject of the haystack but rather the fascinating variations of warmth, coolness, intensity, and angles of the

[15] Roberts, *Images*, 18.

surrounding light. Monet had many, many canvases that he worked on at once, and would work on different canvases depending on which matched the quality of light he saw during the day.

Below, a selection of haystacks from the series Monet painted between 1888 and 1890:





Monet pioneered this impressionist movement, representing ordinary objects with a focus on light. Perhaps Monet's extreme sensitivity to and obsession with light and color temperature was influential on the dandyism of the Belle Époque. Impressionism became the foundation from which the Symbolist ideals evolved. Building upon this idea of representing objects accurately, they now sought to capture the essence of the subject in less literal and more mystical terms.

"My paintings express no idea directly, but they should make you think as music does, without the help of ideas and images, simply by the mysterious relationships existing between our brains and such arrangements of colors and lines." - Paul Gauguin[16]

Gauguin's words illustrate a longing for his paintings to have the same kind of influence on the viewer as music would have on the listener; that certain shapes, colors, and formats could have an immediate, instinctual effect in the same way that music can affect the listener with qualities such as harmony, volume, tempo, and rhythm. He wrote in letters that he dreamt in violent harmonies and then attempted to paint them[17]. Many Symbolist artists believed that music was the ultimate form of art; temporal, impermanent, appealing directly to the senses. In a lecture on Beethoven's "Pastoral" symphony, Leonard Bernstein famously said, "Music, because of its

[16] Kenneth Clark (1949). *Landscape into Art*. London: John Murray, 135

[17] Roberts, *Images*, 22.

specific and far-reaching metaphorical powers, can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable." Music, the Symbolists believed, was the ideal medium to express something so intangible and difficult to capture, being an art bound by time and existing only in duration, not in permanence. In addition to music being the ultimate form of art, the piano specifically was thought to be the ultimate Symbolist instrument. What a perfect medium to express the "dream landscape" of fleeting thoughts and impressions! Charles Morice, an influential theorist of the day, said, "Music knows everything, even how to paint[18]."

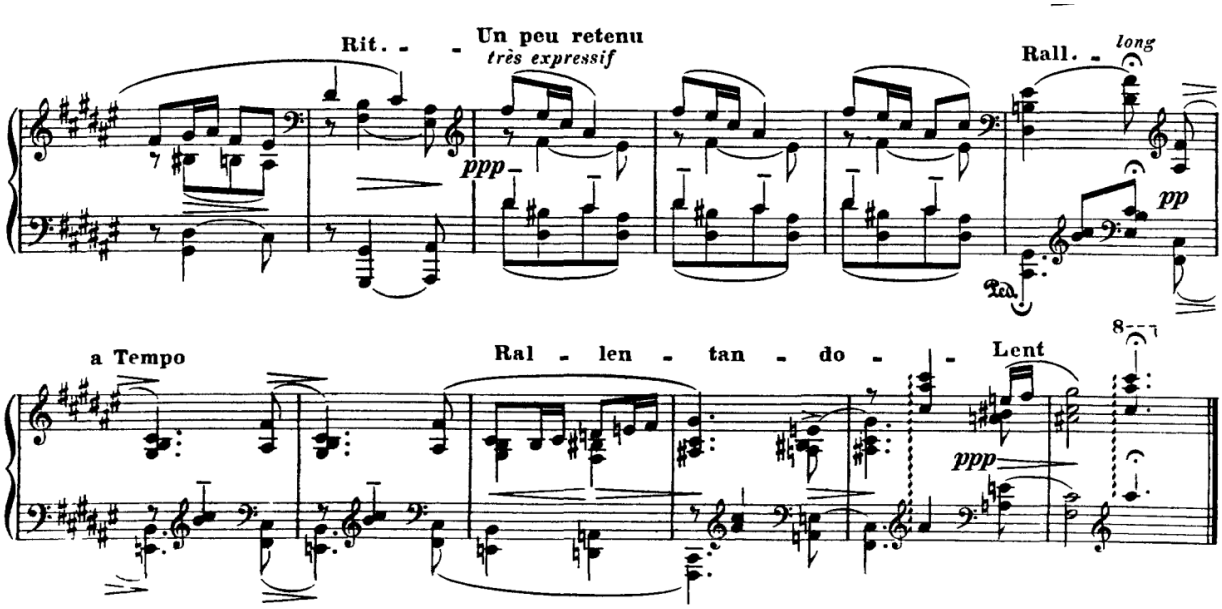
Chapter 3: Prevalent Concepts and Examples

Dandyism and Notation Practices

Dandyism, popular during Belle Époque, was intentionally frivolous, a search for a release from the mundane and "vulgar" common society through a fixation with sensuous pleasure. Many artists and musicians were searching for an escape, seeking something more than what was on the surface of everyday life. Tangentially borrowing the idea of looking beyond the surface from the Symbolists, but taking it in quite a different direction, the rise of Dandyism is also an iconic characteristic of the Belle Époque. Dandyism, a marked devotion to pleasure, came in many different forms: A dandy would often dress carefully and consider his "costume" before promenading proudly in the streets in his decadence (these men were called *flaneurs*, idlers or loafers). Baudelaire would chew his food slowly and meticulously to enjoy it as much and as long as possible. Both Debussy and Ravel were similarly meticulous about their appearance and sensitive to colors and textures; one can also see this detail-oriented tendency in Ravel's scores, which are meticulously and painstakingly marked with directions for the

[18] Roberts, *Images*, 22.

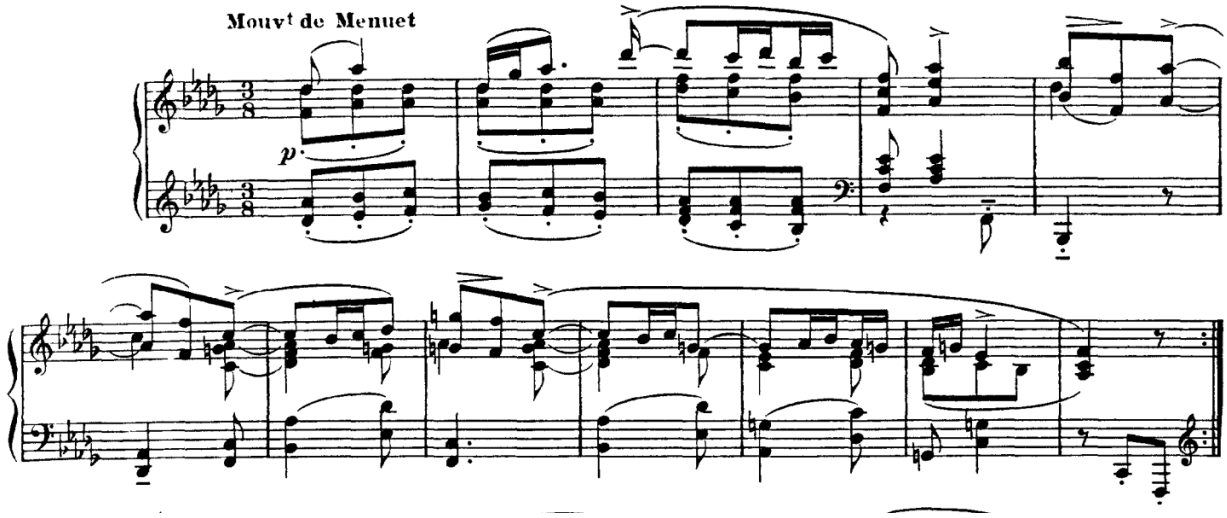
performer about articulation, dynamics, and tone. For example, notice the numerous and varied markings of Ravel's *Sonatine* (score below).



In Ravel's score, one sees that almost every note has an articulation marking, whether it be a tenuto, accent, or slur. There are separate decrescendo markings for each hand, as well as a barrage of tempo markings, including ritardando, rallentando, fermata, un peu retenu, and lent; and this all in just the last two lines of the first movement of the Sonatine. This detailed and precise notation results in a very elegant and airy texture, requiring the performer to dissect and separate several different melodic lines within each hand. The top line should float above the rest, and the bass must speak warmly without overwhelming the other voices. Ravel almost overwhelms the performer with so many markings, and in performance one must prioritize the most important in the context of the overall motion of each phrase; it would be mentally and physically impractical (and musically confusing) to project every single one of the crescendi and decrescendi; it is notoriously difficult to make clear differentiations between the many accents

and tenutos. Yet all this is in pursuit of a detailed, richly embroidered fabric of sound that Ravel creates through his meticulous notation.

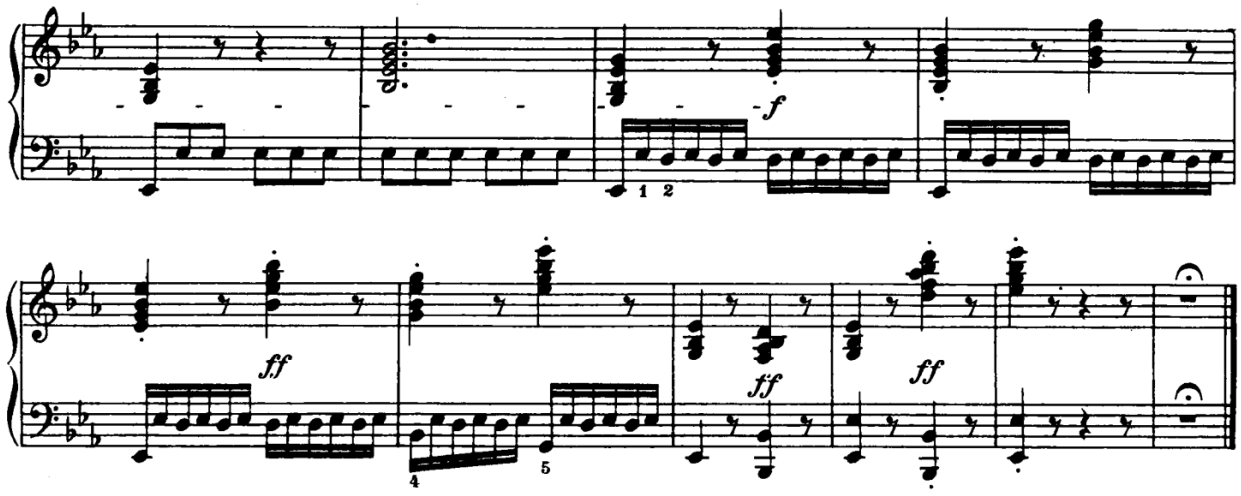
II. Mouvement de Menuet



As a second example, take a look at the first two lines of the second movement and notice the articulation Ravel has indicated. Some of this notation might point to a sense of distrust towards the pianist, as in my opinion many of the articulations marked are relatively intuitive for most sufficiently advanced pianists. Ravel notates portamento for the first three measures, with the top line of the right hand retaining a legato, slurred characteristic. In the fourth measure, although most musicians would naturally know that the quarter note will be slightly more emphasized than the eight note preceding it because of its duration, Ravel nevertheless marks the right hand with an accent mark (although given the light and charming character of the opening bars it should by no means be played as a heavy accent), and then marks the two lower notes in the left hand with both staccato and tenuto, which are seemingly contradictory articulations but might be interpreted as instructions to play the notes separately with a calculated release. In the fifth measure Ravel then marks a decrescendo between the first and second octaves in the right hand, where most musicians would naturally do on a two-note slur, and then also adds accents

for all the tied notes in this measure and the next (mm. 5 and 6). Most sufficiently advanced pianists would know that in order to sustain the tied note the performer must voice it carefully so that the sound is maintained throughout the next beat; Ravel added the accents regardless. This style of manuscript writing and notation speaks to Ravel's need for thorough detail and exact execution from the performer.

In contrast, take a look below at the last two lines of Beethoven's Op. 7 Sonata, first movement:



The dotted line at the beginning marks the end of a crescendo that spans four measures. This excerpt is less harmonically complex than the Ravel, and the comparison also illustrates that the tendency to specify minute and detailed intentions for the performer had markedly increased during the time between Beethoven and Ravel's compositions. Nevertheless, we can still see the clear difference between the composers' styles. Beethoven was most concerned with making sure that the performer retains the *forte* and *fortissimo* dynamic levels, and chooses a scattering of staccati as the only articulation markings for the end of the first movement. Ravel in contrast consistently gives detailed, minute instruction for the pianist throughout this *Sonatine*. This

comparison creates a clear picture of Ravel's penchant for detail, and of the meticulousness and sensitivity with which he both lived his life and wrote his music.

The Belle Époque Artist and Nature

Debussy, like Monet, was enthralled with the magic of nature. Monet painted the magic of nature on canvas based on the light and his own impressions; Debussy also wrote the magic of nature down in words on paper, connecting the magic of nature to the magic of music in colorful and brilliant literary expressions:

> "I had lingered in autumn-filled landscapes, bound by the spell of ancient forests. The golden leaves, as they fell from the agonized trees, and the shrill angelus bell, bidding the fields take their sleep, sent up a sweet persuasive voice that counseled complete forgetfulness. In solitary state the sun sank to rest. Not a single peasant was there to strike a stereotyped attitude in the foreground. Beasts and men went quietly homewards, their humble task accomplished whose beauty had this advantage, that it invited neither praise nor blame… How far away were those discussions on art in which the names of great men sometimes sound like swear-words! Forgotten was the petty fever of first-night performances. I was alone and delightfully concerned. Never, perhaps, did I love music more than at this period when I never heard it mentioned. I saw it entire in its beauty and not in symphonic fragments or feverish and scrappy lyrics.[19]"

It is this idea of beauty in the unspoken, in the experienced and in the mysterious, that further illustrates Debussy's understanding of the popular Belle Époque concept of the art of suggestion. Art and music were not to be dissected and analyzed in a cold and critical way. Instead the listener or observer must always be aware and appreciative of the mystery and nuance of the whole.

Debussy spoke to an Australian journalist about his ideas about nature and music, illustrating the departure of the Symbolist ideas from those of the Realists and Impressionists. He said that music was not intended to "reproduce nature more or less exactly, but to receive the

[19] Vallas, *Life and Works*, 6.

mysterious accord that exists between nature and the imagination[20]". The Realists and Impressionists attempted to capture the essence of everyday nature and to reproduce it on canvas and in their paintings; the Symbolists marked a departure from that way of thought and showed a much greater interest in expressing the imagination and the intimate experience of nature. Later Debussy wrote, "Let us avoid disillusioning anyone by clothing the dream with too much reality. Let us be satisfied with interpretations that are the more consoling because of their undying beauty[21]".

Clair de lune, quite possibly Debussy's most famous piano piece, was a direct reference to Verlaine's poem of the same name. The Verlaine poem includes descriptions of water lilies, a favorite subject of Monet. It also includes a lake mysteriously shrouded in mist, apt imagery for the Symbolist obsessed with the hidden dreamscape. Just as one of the most beautiful features unique to French poetry is the accent, which is gentler and less pronounced than accents of English poetry, Debussy's evenness of line in *Clair de lune* shies away from most accentuation. Debussy allows the melodic line to float, unhindered, across the ever-changing kaleidoscope of underlying chords and harmonic shifts. The undulating rhythms, alternating calmly between duple and triple subdivisions of the beat like waves beating on the shore, further obfuscate and blur the meter and the hierarchy of the beats in each measure. Roberts quotes another Verlaine poem, *Art Poétique,* the English translation of which is below:

> Music above everything,
> And so the uneven line prefers,
> More vague, more soluble in air,
> With no fixity, nor heaviness to weigh
> -Verlaine, *"Art Poétique"*[22]

[20] Vallas, *Life and Works*, 10.

[21] Ibid, 13.

[22] Roberts, *Images*, 94.

What a quintessentially Symbolist concept to use music (the ultimate Symbolist medium) to express something mysterious of the dreamscape in an amorphous, dissolving, ephemeral manner!

The Belle Époque Artist and the Circus

Artists and musicians of the Belle Époque found themselves mirrored in the spectacle of the circus, a philosophically fascinating aspect of the Belle Époque culture that was expressed through many different arts. The traditional live circus is less common nowadays, but during the Belle Époque there were many artists who were in the habit of frequenting the circus nearly every day. Catherine Kautsky writes at length about the circus and the surrounding mystery, fascination, and a sort of horror that drew in artists and audiences at large. Debussy loved to go to the circus, and other artists and musicians such as Touluse-Lautrec, Picasso, Ravel, and Laforgue all made it a habit to attend the circus frequently. That the circus was so in vogue during the Belle Époque reflects a Parisian culture of extravagant entertainment constantly available for any audience. That the Symbolists were all so interested in it perhaps also hints at an irony: the Symbolists were seeking some profound, inexpressible meaning behind their art and yet they adored the circus, something very immediate and visceral. What could be more antithetical to the dreamlike, theoretical, mysterious landscape of the Symbolists than the immediacy and terror of a trapeze artist seemingly leaping to his death, or the brute strength of a strongman? Think of the bearded lady, the fat man, the strong man, and the clowns with their bizarre caricatures, exaggerated faces, and wild actions. The circus by nature showcases the strange, the bizarre, the unusual, the outcasts.

Perhaps, as Roberts suggests, the Symbolist artists and musicians felt a sense of kinship with the circus performers, particularly the clowns[23]. In a conversation with Debussy in the mid 1890's (recounted by friend René Peter), the famous clown Footit introduced himself to the composer, upon which the two spent the evening together talking philosophy and art. Footit deferentially described his job as "making pirouettes and getting knocked down" but Debussy considered Footit an artist and very seriously commented, "We musicians, we make harmonic pirouettes, and we get knocked down too."[24] Picasso also painted scores of circus pictures, more so than most of his counterparts, and frequently both painted himself and identified himself within the pictures.

The world of the Symbolists was a world of contrasts, the sublime and the true wrapped in a dreamscape, a fog of mystery. In the same way, the circus creates scenes of contrasts, oxymorons, impossibilities in a way that the real world does not allow. "Animals are both wild and tame. Clowns are simultaneously happy and sad. Acrobats are both human and superhuman,[25]" writes Kautsky. In the same way, a piece of music can be happy and sad; I've heard an empathetic listener ask, "This piece is in a major key, so why do I feel so sad listening to it?" A seemingly "happy" resolution at the end of a performance can bring an empathetic listener to tears of nostalgia, yearning, or loss. Pieces written by conflicted composers bring tragedy, humor, and hope all at once, and often tragedy and comedy can crouch in the same corner, so to speak. The Symbolists particularly felt that they operated on a different spiritual and artistic level than the masses. This sentiment gave them a taste of the sublime but could simultaneously instill a disconnect from society, making it difficult for them to relate to the

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[23] Roberts, *Images*, 225.
[24] Roberts, *Images*, 225

[25] Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris*, 17.

"normal" world. Perhaps the artists and musicians of the Belle Époque felt bound to the circus performers in the mutual pursuit of the impossible, the incredible, the transcendent, at the cost of a regular life with a steady job and income.

The influence of the circus on Debussy's music can clearly be seen in *General Lavine - eccentric*. The titular clown General Lavine performed in Paris around the turn of the century. The only piece that Debussy wrote with an explicit reference to a person, *General Lavine* bears the tempo marking "Dans le style et le Mouvement d'un Cake-Walk" - with the style of a cakewalk. Harmonically and texturally impulsive, the piece opens in a key signature of one flat (ostensibly F Major) but with a horn call of a broken C Major chord in the left immediately followed by an unexpected and harmonically jarring Eb Major chord in the right. Interrupting each other, the two hands argue back and forth like two clowns in a slapstick act, culminating quickly in what might easily be described as a fall on one's rear end in measure 10; a single low C marked "sec", meaning dry. Later in measures 51 and 52, we hear a decorated and ornamented rendition of "Camptown Races" which bounces between the two hands. This is Debussy's slapstick comedy all dressed up in fancy clothes like an imposter *flaneur* - a common and familiar tune hidden in what looks like serious music but is undoubtedly tongue-in-cheek.

Art and Poetry Intersections in Two Ondines

Debussy's friend Richard Godet once gave Debussy's beloved daughter (nicknamed Chouchou) a book by which she was particularly enchanted; according to Roberts the book from Godet was most likely Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. Debussy was especially taken by the illustrations done by Arthur Rackham, and later wrote and titled the prelude "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses" (The fairies are exquisite dancers) as a reference to the book. Arthur

Rackham also illustrated Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's book titled *Undine* (an English translation of an old fairytale novella published in 1809), and his illustrations here show a departure from older art forms, a departure that is in line with many of the ideas of the Belle Époque. Below is one such illustration, titled "Undine outside the window."

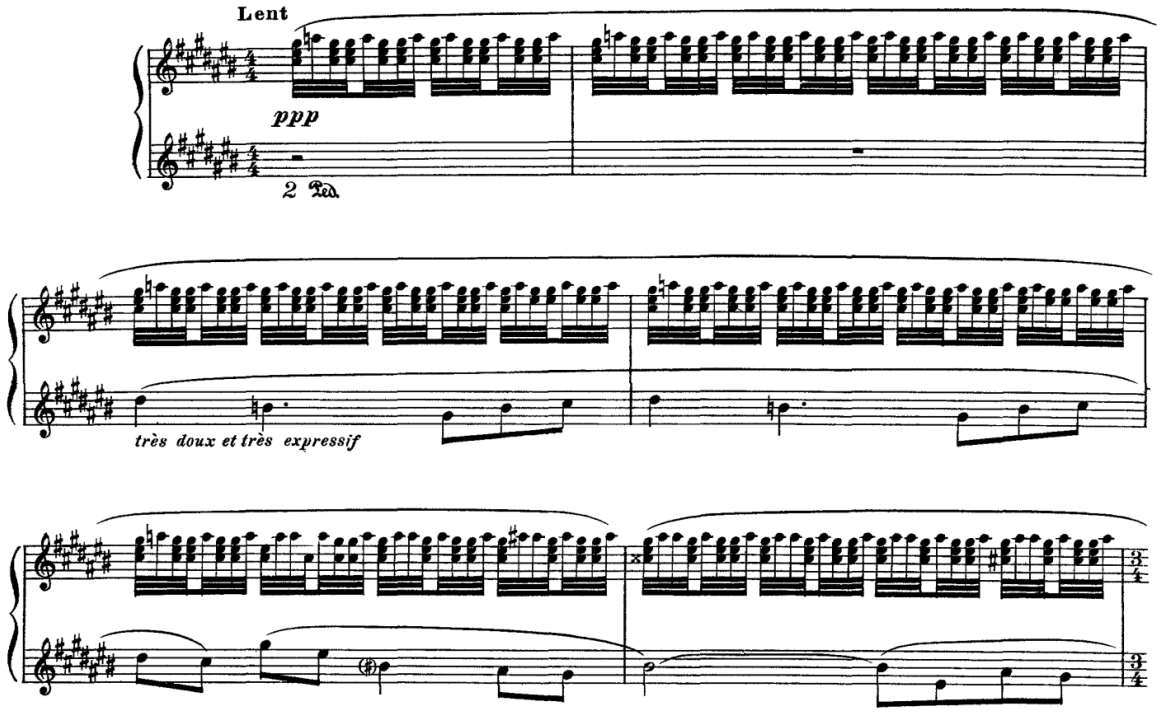
Note the water sprite grinning in the bottom right corner, and the suggestive neckline of the dress falling from Ondine's shoulders. Rather than occupying the middle of the illustration, a windswept Ondine seems to make direct eye contact with the viewer off to the left side, suggesting that something outside of the frame of the illustration has captured her attention. The face in particular has the most lifelike detail, drawing the most attention, and the rest of the scene is in bold lines that create movement, swirling from the top of the page down to the bottom right hand corner. The fencepost is the darkest object in the foreground, an unassuming and surprising object to take up so much visual space; the straight vertical lines and horizontal lines of the fence and the fence post contrast with the swirling, wild lines of Ondine herself and the water from whence she came.

The story of *Ondine* - or *Undine*, the German spelling; both are used interchangeably - has old origins in the folktales and legends of many different cultures. Aloysius Bertrand's book *Gaspard de la Nuit,* written and then published in 1842, was a small book comprising fifty-three prose poems, containing among them *Ondine*, inspired by De la Motte Fouqué's novella translation. The original story from Friedrich De la Motte Fouqué's book tells of Undine, left by her father at the door of an old couple's cottage and raised as a human in order to escape the fate of all sprites, dissolution into the elements. This ethereal beauty grows up almost-human, finding love and even gaining a soul through marriage, but alas! Undine cannot escape her fate and is forced to return back to the sea, fated to end in nothingness. No wonder this passing, temporal existence of Undine captivated the Symbolists, who always sought the most fleeting of thoughts and expressions in order to capture reality.

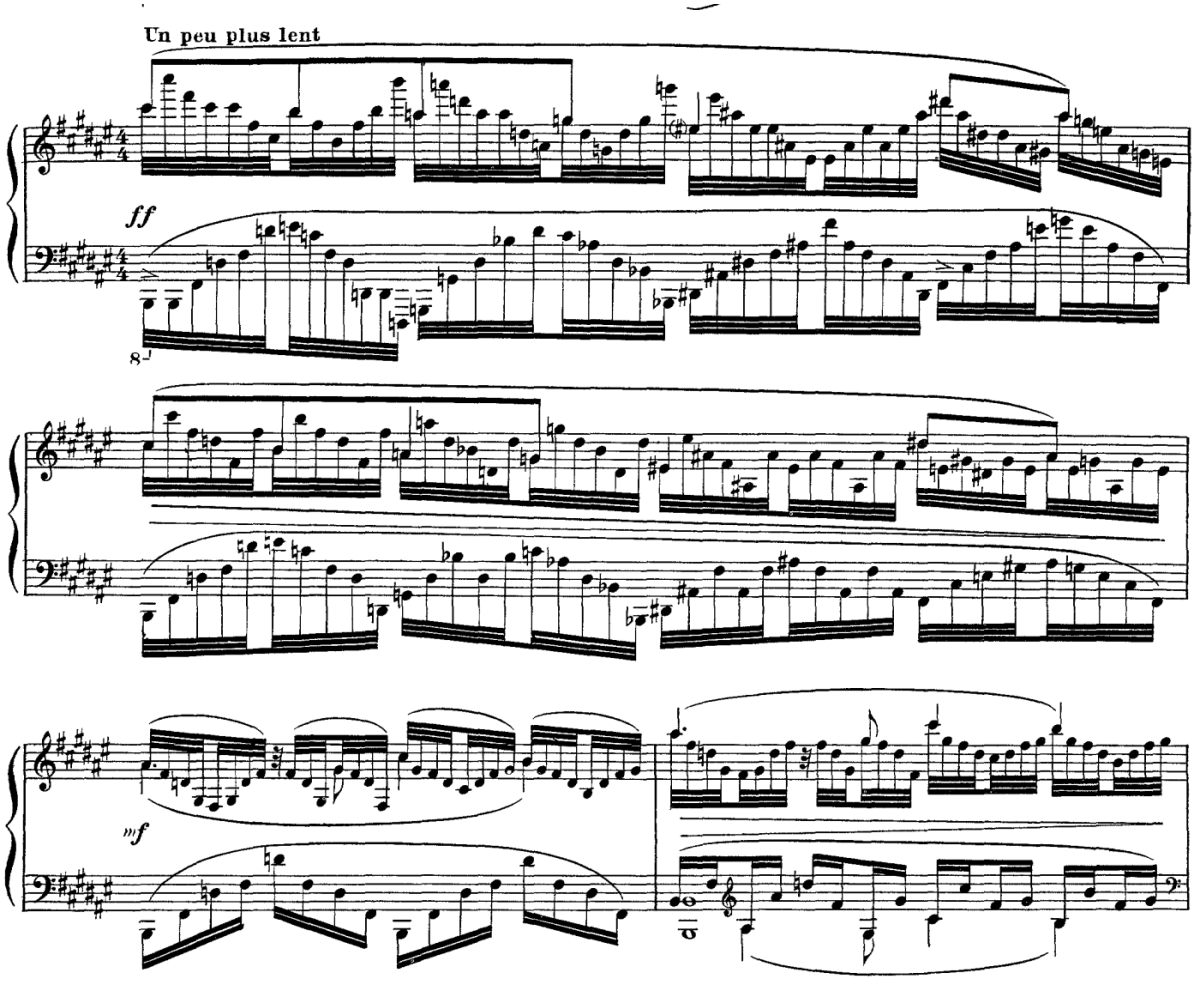
It was Baudelaire and Mallarmé who rediscovered *Ondine* and championed it, and it was Ravel's good friend Ricardo Viñes who introduced Ravel to Bertrand's book. It was the book

Gaspard de la Nuit from which Ravel selected three poems on which to base his similarly titled piano suite; the three poems selected were Ondine, Le Gibet, and Scarbo. The printed edition of *Gaspard* by Ravel included the poems alongside the scores, indicating Ravel's desire that the pieces should be interpreted in light of Bertrand's poems. Debussy also wrote his own *Ondine* in his second book of Preludes (number 8), and while he did not include Bertrand's poem or Rackham's illustration in the score, he would have been familiar with both.

In Ravel's *Ondine*, the right hand begins with a devilishly difficult trill figuration, consisting of a C# Major chord alternating with an A natural that augments it. Like the swirling waters in the background of Rackham's picture, this creates a limpid background for the left hand's mysterious and haunting melody which is based on the descending third from D# to B. Neither D# nor B has a home in the C# major chord, and so the left hand melody destabilizes the chord trill in the right hand which is already made unstable by the addition of the A natural. The left hand, which uses single notes for the entirety of the first theme, shares a register with the trill, making it clear that we don't have two equal players in the hands, but rather a background player in the right hand and a foreground character in the left. In fact, the shimmering rhythmic background of the thirty-second notes remains consistent throughout almost the entire piece, with few exceptions, while the melodies are developed both above and below those lines.



Below is the climax of Ravel's *Ondine*, which both visually and aurally conjures up images of the swirling storm, pelting rains, and rolling waves. The notation, *Un peu plus lent*, is a clear direction to hold back the tempo, creating an immutable, unstoppable wave of sound that crashes over the listener. Rather than rushing forward into wild panic and chaos, this musical storm portrays an inevitable and unrepentant force of nature.



Ravel's piece follows the poem of Bertrand quite closely, showing that Ravel intended *Ondine* to be a direct reference to Bertrand's poem which was printed in the original edition of *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Bertrand's poem is reproduced below in English[26] (an approximate translation by Bruhn):

[26] Siglind Bruhn, (1997). *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen*. New York: Pendragon, 183.

"Listen! - Listen! - It's me, it's Ondine who brushes with these drops of water the resonant diamonds of your window lit by the gloomy moonlight; and there in her silken robe is the lady of the manor contemplating from her balcony the lovely star-bright night and the beautiful, sleeping lake.

"Each ripple is a 'child of the waves' swimming with the current, each current is a path winding towards my palace, and my palace is built fluid, at the bottom of the lake, in the triangle of fire, earth and air.

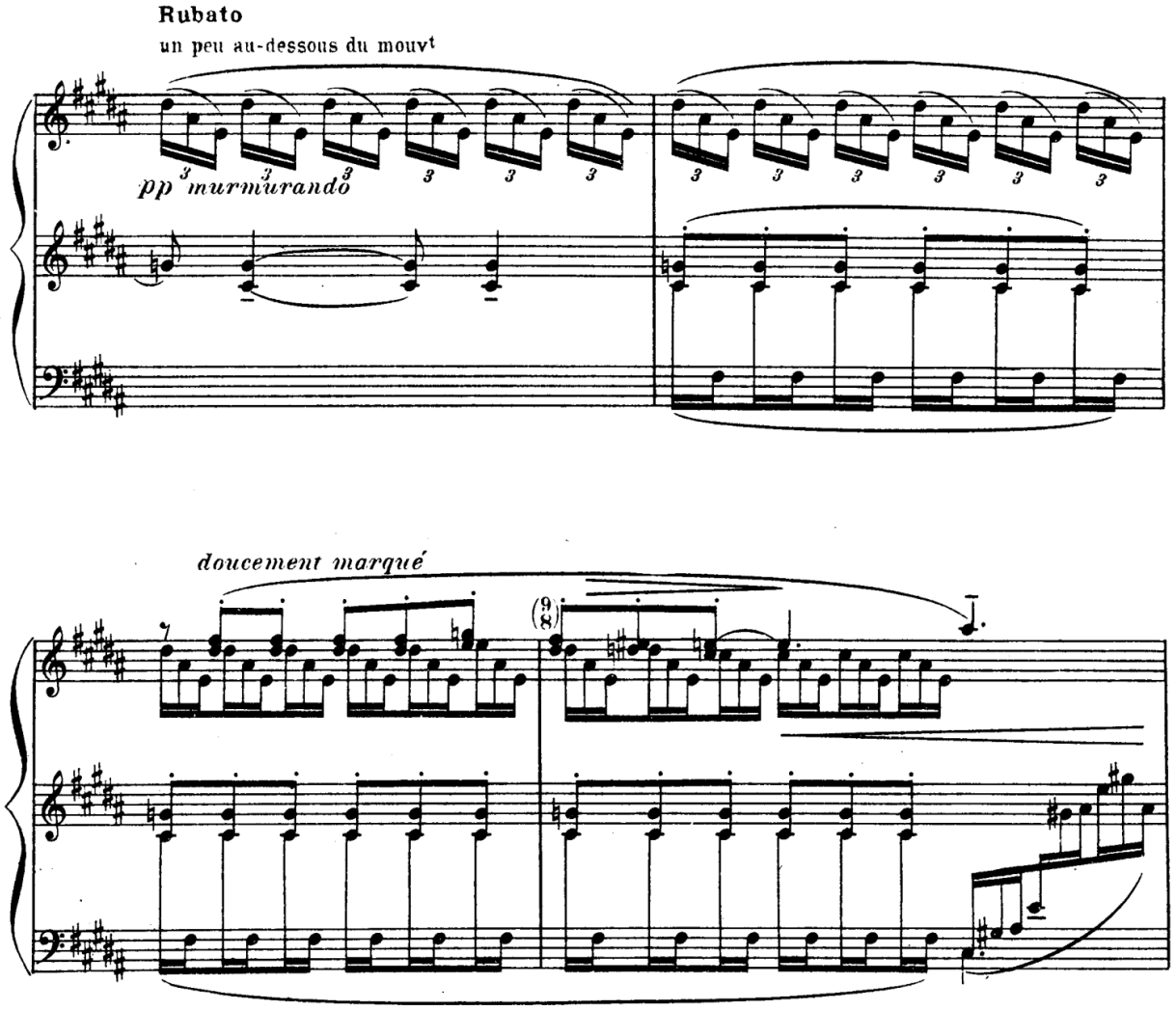
"Listen! - Listen! - My father beats the croaking water with a branch of green alder, and my sisters caress with their arms of foam the cool islands of herbs, water lilies and gladioli, or make fun of the sickly, bearded willow that is fishing with rod and line."

*

Having murmured her song, she begged me to accept her ring on my finger, so that I would be the husband of an Ondine, and to visit her palace with her, so that I would be king of the lakes.

And when I replied that I loved a mortal woman, she wept a few tears, sulking and peevish, then broke into laughter, and vanished in showers of rain that drizzled white across my blue window pane.

Debussy's *Ondine* is less literal to the poem yet also features swirling, wild lines contrasted with more somber, driving, rhythmic sections. Below is an excerpt from 44-47 of the prelude, showing similar textural techniques of consistent, arpeggiating notes with a melody floating above it.

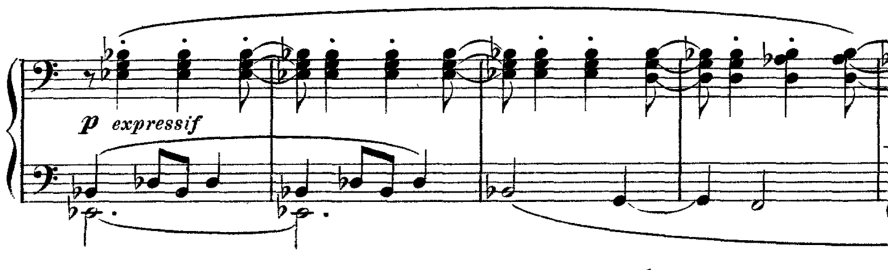


Ondine perfectly fits the brief for a Symbolist object of interest; it's no wonder that both Ravel and Debussy were enthralled enough by her charms to compose music to suit. She comes from water, from nature, that magical source of beauty and inspiration for both Ravel and Debussy. Glamorous and sensual, she gazes at the night from her castle balcony or emerges from the waters to the shore, her robe slipping off her shoulders. She is human in form and yet exotic and strange, a mystical being who has a fleeting and temporal existence, whose essence cannot be captured through cold prose but only through poetry and music.

Masks and Veils in Belle Époque Culture and Music

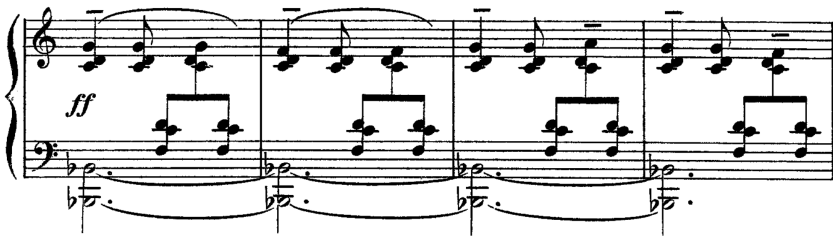
The idea of the mask was prominent in Belle Époque culture, making its social debut in the masked balls that were held and attended every day by the wealthy and well-connected. The appeal of a masked ball was that one could assume any sort of alternate identity behind the mask. A respectable and hardworking businessman could at night shed his persona under the safety of a mask, and indulge in whatever pleasure or promiscuity he chose. This dichotomy of duplicity and temporality showcases yet another marker of the Symbolist way of thought; the Symbolists delighted in paradox - to be a certain way one moment and to change in the next, to put on an identity and then to switch at will. Philosophically speaking, masks both conceal and reveal. A mask can conceal one's identity and actions, but behind a mask one may act more truly to his or her nature. The mask reveals that the truth of oneself is complex and irreducible. Perhaps under the protection of a mask, a person's true nature is shown through their actions; perhaps without a physical mask one may still be concealing their true self. The Symbolists loved the idea of the mask along with its representation of duplicity and paradox.

Debussy wrote a piece for piano titled *Masques*, which is one of his most mysterious and cryptic pieces. It is an improvisatory piece filled with hemiolas and shifting accentuation, written in 6/8 meter but flirting consistently with 3/4. Below are two examples of hemiola and shifting accentuation; in the first, the left hand is written to suggest 3/4 for two measures, and then 3/2 for two measures. The right hand chords remain syncopated, lending little rhythmic stability to the phrase.



(Masques, mm. 22-25)

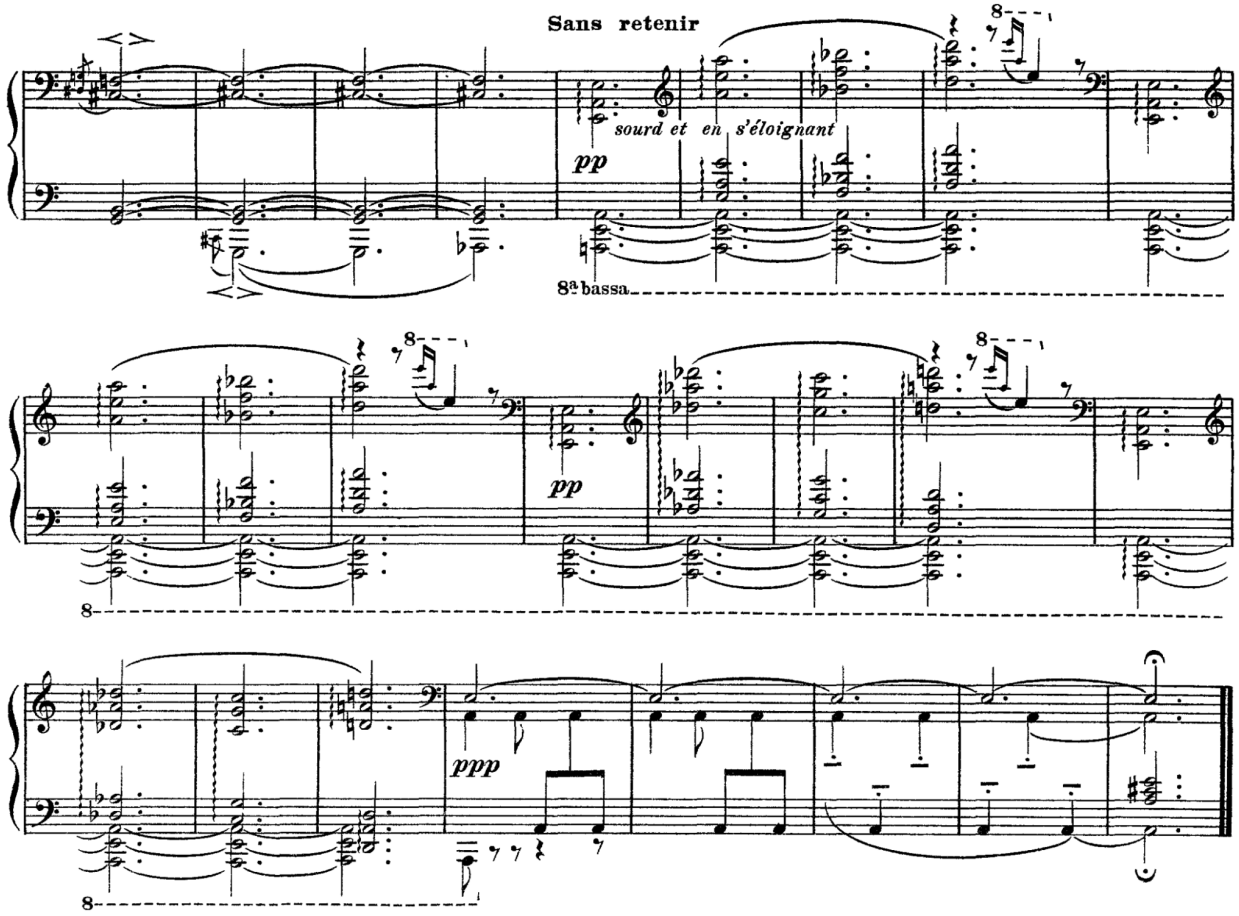
In the second example below, the accentuation and barring of the notes strongly suggest 6/8 in the first two measures but with the addition of the tenuto on the third eighth note chord, the pianist must switch to feeling three beats in each measure even though the texture remains consistent and the notes only change peripherally.



(Masques, mm. 64-67)

This is an excellent example of Debussy's understanding of masks through the popular culture of Paris at the time. The duality and constant shifting of the masked balls are represented here through the meter and rhythmic features, changing quickly and subtly over just two or four measures. The last few lines are an interpretive challenge, as the pulsating rhythms suddenly

disappear, leaving glacial and empty chords in both hands:



Debussy marks the last section *sans retenir*, without slowing, intending to give us no respite from the harmonies that are relentlessly laid down over the measures. The word *s'éloignant,* rarely seen as a music indicator, is translated as distancing oneself from something, or moving away from something. This unusual indicator is appropriate for a piece titled *Masques*, since a mask by design separates one from the rest of society. The chords are cold and empty because each lacks the third chord tone in its harmony. With the pulsing motif gone, the rhythm is no longer richly flushed out within each measure. The familiar pulsing motif from the opening returns only for a breath at the end, changing again between 6/8 and 3/4 even in the last four measures. Although we get one tonal A Major chord at the very end, it remains an unsettling and

odd way to end the piece, giving the listener a sense of a stop, but not of resolution. Cryptic indeed, and emblematic of the paradox that the mask represents.

Along with and related to the mask, veils were also a subject of interest and fascination in the Belle Époque culture, creating ambiguity and mystery. A veil hides and obscures in a similar way to a mask, but the excitement and allure of a veil lies in its removal. The fascination with the veil stemmed from interest in the "oriental and exotic" Eastern cultures, a fascination that unfortunately often crossed the line into racism. Parisians of the Belle Époque took interest in Islamic women who habitually veiled their faces and bodies, as well as Japanese geishas who wore veils.

In a letter to Andre Poniatowski in 1983, Debussy wrote "But music, don't you know, is a dream from which the veils have been lifted. It's not even the expression of a feeling, it's the feeling itself[27]". In Debussy's first book of preludes, the second prelude has the word "voiles" written at the end of the score. As mentioned before, this idea of "titling" the preludes at the end turns this word into less of a title and more of a suggestion, a thought. Not only is *voiles* gently tagged onto the end of the score as a suggestion, but the word *voiles* itself is also mysteriously ambiguous, translatable as either "sails" or "veils," each of which could infuse very different connotations to the piece.

Veils were also associated with sensuality. The biblical story in Matthew 14 of the beheading of John the Baptist recounts King Herod's young niece dancing for Herod. The girl, traditionally named Salome, danced so sensually that Herod promised her anything she wished. Salome's mother persuaded her to ask for the head of John the Baptist, whom her mother strongly disliked. Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* written in 1893 tells the same story, and includes a

[27] Claude Debussy, François Lesure, & Roger Nichols (1987). *Debussy Letters*. London: Faber, 41.

short stage direction reading “Salome dances the dance of the seven veils.” Wilde seems to have coined this name for the dance, which captivated several writers, artists, and musicians of the time. Armond Point liked the idea of the veils, and his painting titled “Dance of the Seven Veils” (1890) can be seen below.

Salome here is seen with an outstretched leg, hair flowing, sensuously leaning her torso back. Notice the strict horizontal lines of the table cloth, and the cool blue clothing tones of Herod and Salome’s mother as they sit at the table, contrasting with the seductive curves of Salome’s fiery orange hair, red dress, and green veil. The curves of her dress and waist piece highlight her bosom and the outline of her legs are seen clearly. The light illuminates her as

Herod sits in the shadow; though he is at the center of the portrait as befits a king, Salome has commanded all attention with her dance. Even the windows look like eyes, watching from behind with drooping eyelids.

These renditions in prose, painting, and music illustrate how the writers, artists, and musicians of the Belle Époque tended to congregate around symbols that embodied the popular art philosophies and concepts of the day. Salome and the Dance of the Seven Veils captivated the artists of the Belle Époque because they were already so interested in the sensuousness of the veil as well as the serpentine shapes and lines that the dance evoked.

Falling Gestures in Belle Époque Culture and Music

The idea of unveiling also relates to another common theme found in the art and music of the Belle Époque - the falling gesture. In older styles of art, a woman's hair was usually painted tied up or pinned back; free-flowing hair would have been reserved only for intimate settings. Below is Madame Récamier by Jacques-Louis David (1800). Notice the older style of framing with the reclining chair and the lampstand fully in frame, and the curly hair restrained neatly with a headband, falling in neat ringlets evenly across her forehead. The gentle curve of Madame Récamier's arm mirrors the curve of the bed frame. Only a woman's husband would see her with her hair uncoiled, flowing, unbound.

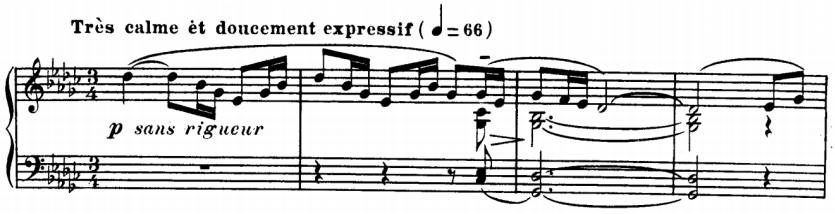
In contrast, here is Alphonse Mucha's stylized poster for an evening of theater honoring the Belle Époque celebrity Sarah Bernhardt, drawn in 1896:

Mucha was a Czech artist living in Paris during the Art Nouveau period who painted this promotional poster of Sarah Bernhardt in 1896. Although the colors of Madame Récamier and Sarah Bernhardt both include warm brown tones, the energy and movement could not be more different. Notice Mucha depicts Bernhardt's hair curling wildly down, cascading in fluid swirls. These curlicues draw the eye across the poster from the flowers at the top towards the printing of Ms. Bernhardt's name at the bottom of the poster. The white circle with the lettering frames her face but does not constrain it. Instead her hair and face burst forth from the white ring towards the viewer as if she were coming out of the poster. Rather than a neat ribbon headband, Bernhardt's hair is adorned with flowers, gently blooming from her fiery red hair. Bernhardt's red hair here is even reminiscent of Armand Point's *Salome*'s curly red hair, the Bernhardt poster making its appearance just six years after Point's *Salome*.

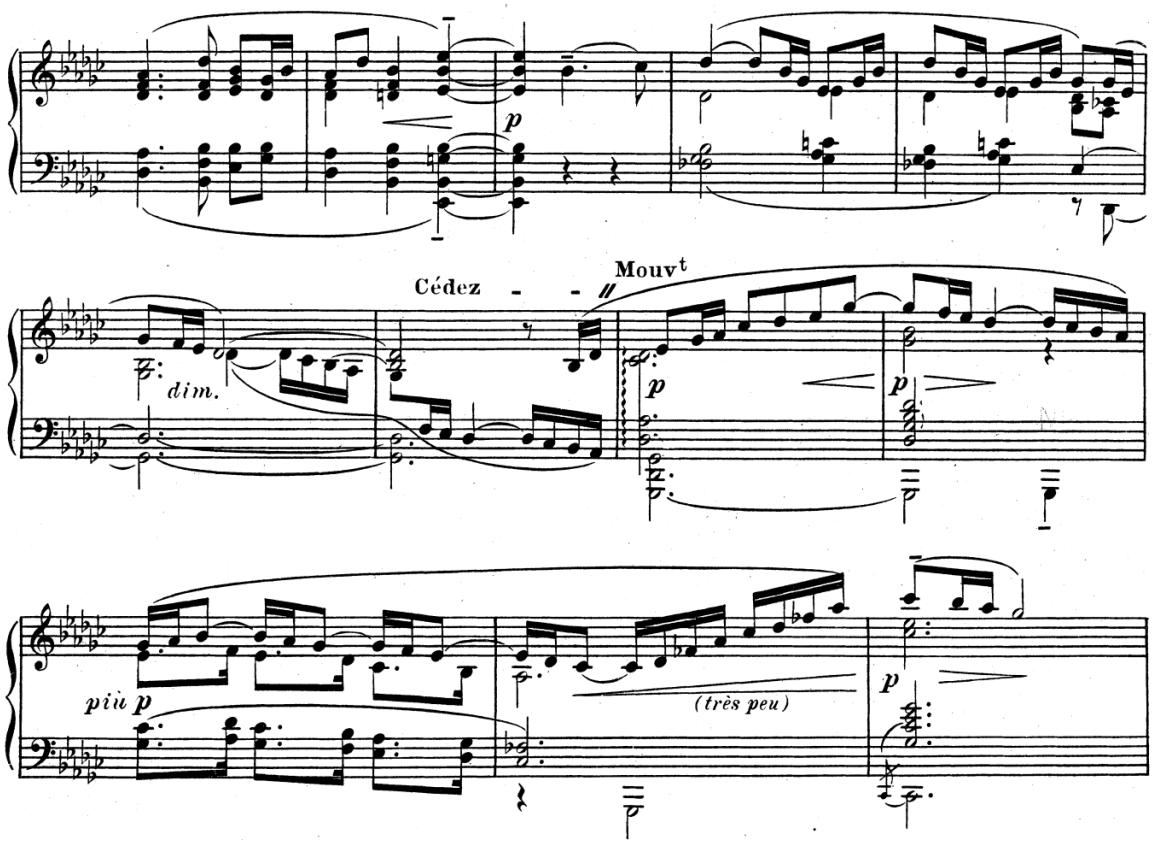
The Art Nouveau movement, popular during the Belle Époque, emphasized fluidity of lines, natural, flowing shapes, and dynamic movements, as well as imagery of plants and flowers. This again mirrors the fascination that artists like Monet and musicians like Debussy had with the mystical allure of nature. One might interpret Mucha's poster of Bernhardt as a picture of flowers and roots, the hair curling organically towards the ground so that the flowers might bloom upwards. In botany, this downward momentum of rooting towards the earth, is understood as geotropism. Geotropism is the natural phenomenon which allows seeds and roots to grow towards the earth with a downward moving force. Not only must a seed fall downwards to the ground, but it must also put out roots that go deep into the earth's surface before it can expand and grow upwards. Edward Lockspeiser draws a correlation between Debussy's falling gestures and geotropism, highlighting Debussy's tendency to write lines and shapes that fall

towards the ground in their contour, putting forth roots before they can expand upwards towards the sky.

For example, below is Debussy's "*La fille aux cheveux de lin*" (Girl with the flaxen hair):



Notice how in the opening phrase, the melodic line is drawn downwards; in "*La fille aux cheveux de lin*," we traverse an entire octave from top to bottom in curling motions, and end with further falling gestures even after we reach the tonic note, Gb. In "Girl with the Flaxen Hair," after the melodic seed has gently settled into the ground and put out roots, we then have several light and airy upward sprouts of growth. This can be seen clearly in the excerpt below (showing mm. 5-16). In measure 8 Debussy begins the main theme again, this time descending further into the ground. Once the musical seed has established its roots, it sends trailing, airy vines up to the sky, starting at the pickup to measure 13, climaxing on G5, and growing even higher in measure 16 which reaches to C6:



Debussy's "Girl with the Flaxen Hair" and Mucha's depiction of Bernhardt help to expand our understanding of the falling gesture and its role during the Belle Époque, closely related to the concept of veiling and unveiling as with *Salome* and the Dance of the Seven Veils. The falling gesture must come before the flowers can bloom upwards.

Afternoon of a Faun: A Compound Work of the Belle Époque

We now turn our attention to the most multi-faceted work yet to be discussed, the ballet titled "The Afternoon of a Faun." Thomas Munro labels this ballet a "compound work of art," because it is a synthesis of Mallarmé's poem, Manet's illustrations for the poem, Debussy's musical composition, Nijinski's choreography, Bakst's decor, costumes, and setting, and Diaghileff's production and direction. The ballet is particularly useful for examining intersections between the arts especially because so many high quality and influential names

collaborated to create this ballet. It also highlights the Symbolist conviction that the five senses are deeply intertwined, and thus one should be able to clearly translate a feeling, expression, or emotion easily from one art form to the next. The Symbolists believed this so much so that they used terms such as "colored hearing" and "orchestrated verse" to refer to music as aural painting and musical poetry, respectively.

Mallarmé's poem was written in 1876, from the perspective of a faun (a mythical creature said to be part man, part animal) who thinks he sees a group of beautiful nymphs in the distance. He cannot distinguish whether they are real or a dream. Perhaps the nymphs are a figment of his imagination, stirred by his desires, or maybe they are apparitions that his song has created. As this experience fades into memory, he drinks wine and falls asleep, wondering if he will be able to pursue them further in his dreams.

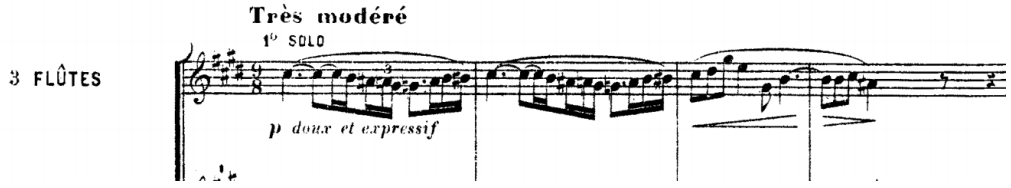
Just as with *Ondine*, one can see how the poem's content must have captured the hearts and imaginations of the Symbolist artists during the Belle Époque. The mermaid Ondine and the faun are both mystical, half-human characters who have a fleeting existence. *Afternoon of a Faun* explores the ambiguity of the nymphs, whom the faun senses abstractly and yet wonders if they could also exist in his physical reality. In the same way, the story of Ondine is a story of the mermaid who longs to escape the fate of water sprites, to be human and to love and to have a soul rather than dissolve into nothingness. Much of the poem by Mallarmé expands not on the event itself but on the faun's impression of the nymphs and his clouding, quickly fading memory of it.

The poem evokes a very specific mood and image, and yet also unpacks the complexity and paradox of reality. As a mask or a veil simultaneously covers and reveals the true reality of one's nature, the outer reality and the inner dream and desire likewise alternately conceal and

reveal what truly exists. The real world and the dream world have no clear delineation between them; at times one might be unsure about which reality they are experiencing. What a treasure trove of artistic inspiration this poem was for the Symbolist. Remember that Symbolists believed the most pure and ideal form of art was not literally to capture a picture of an object or scene in a moment, but to capture and express the essence of its effect on the artist. They sought not to do this literally but through symbols and gestures, and especially through music, the most pure and sublime form of Symbolist art. *Afternoon of a Faun* is the embodiment of this idea — an entire ballet dedicated to expressing the nymphs' effect on the Faun through gestures and symbols of dancing and music, in collaboration with the set and costumes.

Debussy originally intended to write two more pieces after "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" and planned to call them "Interlude" and "Paraphrase." Later he dropped the ideas and made edits to the prelude; it is unclear if he put ideas from the Interlude and Paraphrase into the Prelude. He did not intend "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" to follow the entirety of Mallarmé poem but to represent the first part of the poem, the faun's initial, clouded memory. The ballet follows suit, and Munro considers the ballet and Debussy's composition both to be "preludes" to Mallarmé's poem.

Below is the opening statement of Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" heard in the flute:



This melodic opening statement drops quite dramatically at the end of the phrase from G#5 to G#4 in just three notes after meandering around in half steps in the beginning, again

exemplifying the curling shapes and the falling gesture required before an upwards lift. Debussy evokes a pastoral scene by using the soft tones of solo flute. The melodic line retains rhythmic ambiguity by using varying note lengths and subdivisions. Glissandos from the harp create a shimmering texture along with the melting, shifting harmonies in the strings.

One finds another reference to the Symbolist concept of the veil upon reading descriptions of Nijinsky's choreography of the ballet (Munro quotes an anonymous writer in his article who describes the story and scene)[28]. The ballet and Debussy's orchestral composition primarily depict the initial impression of the nymphs upon the faun. The faun is startled from his reverie by the arrival of the nymphs, who flee upon seeing him but return again. Emboldened by their second approach, he rises to woo them, but they are startled and run away, save for one nymph who stays to catch a glimpse of him. He catches her arm but she escapes, leaving only a filmy scarf which he picks up and keeps. Here the veil symbolizes (and perhaps is the catalyst for) desire and arousal, a vestige and reminder of the one who wore it previously. The veil is not mentioned in Mallarmé's poem but was an addition for the sake of performance and visual detail, an addition of which the Symbolist artist surely would have approved!

Leon Bakst, who created the decor, costumes, and backdrop, painted the picture below in 1912. He based the backdrop of the ballet as well as the costumes on this picture and style. Notice the curving, drooping contours. There is no horizon line to orient the painting; the foliage obscures the hills so that we have only a hint of the topography of the scene. The generous use of deep aquas and blue tones rather than just greens in the leaves and tree shapes creates an otherworldly feeling. The rolling hills guide the viewer's eyes downwards in a falling gesture from the top of the page to the bottom, upon which we are greeted by the nymphs. The faun, in

[28] Thomas Munro. (1951). *"The Afternoon of a Faun" and the Interrelation of the Arts.* The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 10(2), 95-111.

muted tan colors, is easily forgettable and blends in with his surroundings; we are less concerned with the faun himself than with the impression that the nymphs make upon him. The nymphs are dressed in gently flowing garments that fall to the ground sensuously; perhaps the extra length of fabric on the blue nymph is the veil which the faun grasps at the end of the ballet.

Bakst's illustration of the faun seems to be closely based upon Manet's illustrations for the original poem, shown below:

In a similar state of passion and infatuation, Manet's faun leans forward to get the best view he can, blending in with the rocks and brush around him. He is unshaven, hairy-legged and grotesque in comparison to the beautiful nymphs. Manet's additional illustrations of the nymphs show them bathing with their hair flowing down. Again, the hair cascades down as a sign of sensuality along with full frontal nudity, which Bakst had to avoid in his set for the sake of the public. (Even the scene of the faun grasping the veil was too graphic and coarse for some ballet-goers.)

The Symbolist concepts of the veil, flowing hair, falling gestures, and ambiguity are woven throughout *Afternoon of a Faun* in all the varied art forms. The original poem most strongly highlights the ambiguity of the story, the faun's quickly fading memory and the effect of the nymphs that created an impression on him. Debussy's music is full of falling gestures along with rhythmic and tonal ambiguity; Bakst's set design again echos the flowing hair and falling gestures, and Nijinsky's choreography literally brings a veil to the forefront of the stage, symbolizing sensuality and impermanence. The ballet is all the richer and all the more unified for displaying these intersecting ideas and concepts that express central ideas of the Belle Époque.

Conclusion

In an article published in 1951, Munro concluded his study of *Afternoon of a Faun* by speculating on the merits of combining the arts. He discussed how a singular form of art can be easier to digest; for example, a reader of Mallarme's poem can focus solely on the words, or a listener to Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" can focus solely on the aural experience of listening to the piece. However, his opinion was that a compound work of art, like the ballet discussed here, explores the subject's possibilities much more thoroughly, and offers more varied stimuli for the audience. One then has the choice to study a subject more broadly and completely by consuming different types of arts at the same time (as in ballet or opera), or one may choose to zoom in intensely by focusing on one singular form of art (such as poetry).

Besides offering more varied stimuli and thorough exploration of a topic, the study of intersection between the arts also reveals to the Belle Époque scholar which thoughts and ideas were formative of the time period. When a story like Ondine, Afternoon of a Faun, or Salome captures the attention of not only musicians but also poets, artists, and playwrights, we can then draw conclusions about the flavor and climate of the artistic culture overall during the Belle Époque. These stories are just a sampling of the many ways in which Belle Époque artists expressed themselves. Among other concepts, they contend with sensuality, desire, ambiguity, and with obscuring and revealing. We can see this mirrored in the music of the Belle Époque with the falling gestures, serpentine phrases, and hidden meanings that pervade it.

We know that art and music do not exist in a vacuum. The quality of art and the topics with which it concerns itself are reflections of, and reactions to, the characteristics of the culture and society that surrounds it. Art and music then can be used as a sort of litmus test: what are the popular concepts and topics that different artistic disciplines have been drawn towards? What

does this say about society? During the Belle Époque, the tropes and topics that artists, poets, and musicians were drawn towards paint a picture of a new Paris facing the future with a sense of ambiguity and paradox. The Paris of the Belle Époque was a city that found itself rising from the ashes of tragedy into a dizzying storm of consumerism, innovation, and sensuality. With such sudden change, no wonder so many artists and musicians from the various artistic disciplines found themselves searching for the ultimate Symbolists' dreamscape. No wonder they were so intent on searching for what truths a mask could both conceal and reveal, searching for all these ideas which promised an ultimate and underlying truth amidst the rapid cultural whirlwind.

In the same way, we can turn this artistic intersectional lens towards our own current society. Artistic intersections can serve as a heat map — what are the important ideas right now and how are artists expressing them? What ideas are being expressed and what ideas are being reacted against? What might this say about what our society is valuing at the moment? In addition, when it comes to supporting and encouraging the arts to grow and flourish, we must understand that we must take a multi-pronged approach. Just as multiple factors needed to be in place to allow the Belle Époque to rise, multiple financial, social, and political factors will affect the rise and fall of the arts in our current times. We can better understand our current society, and better support the growth of the arts, by looking at the symbols and ideas that have attracted artists and musicians from different artistic disciplines.

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