Impressionism and the work of debussy

Debussy was a tonal trailblazer; a musical pioneer who revolutionised not only French music at a time when it was stagnating and receding from the world stage, but the entire Western musical tradition as well. Almost all subsequent styles which followed were either directly or indirectly affected by his originality, for example jazz, atonality and minimalism. After Debussy's significant contribution to the repertoire nothing, to iterate a cliché, was ever the same again in musical terms. Nevertheless, it is precisely his striking innovation which has rendered Debussy so difficult to categorise. Musicologists encounter no trouble in labelling Mozart a ' Classical' composer or Liszt a ' Romantic', yet how to catalogue Debussy's oeuvres has presented critics with a conundrum for many decades; and is one, as yet, without a universally accepted solution. The most widely-utilised term in reference to the composer's compositions is without doubt ' Impressionism', and is widely accepted by those who do not study music, and also by some who do, as a sole definition of his works. But can this label really encompass a compositional career that spans so many different styles and innovations? This essay will endeavour to answer this question, and to prove that Impressionism alone is not a fair assessment of Debussy's music; that he is, despite there being characteristics from a number of aesthetic movements found in his works, almost impossible to classify.

Debussy's second envoi de Rome precipitated the first ever appearance of the tag ' Impressionism' regarding his works. In a criticism of his orchestral and vocal piece Printemps (1887), the Secretary to the Académie des Beaux-Arts opined:

‘ One has the feeling of musical colour exaggerated to the point where it causes the composer to forget the importance of precise construction and form. It is to be strongly hoped that he will guard against this vague impressionism, which is one of the most dangerous enemies of truth in works of art.’

This was a gross misunderstanding and misreading of Debussy’s intentions, and one which has stuck tenaciously and erroneously ever since. Before the reasons why this is such a misnomer is discussed, it must be acknowledged that it is possible to describe some of Debussy’s music as Impressionistic.

‘ Impressionism’ was first applied to painting as a label as a consequence of Claude Monet’s painting Impression, soleil levant (1872). Impressionism was a subsidiary of the wider notion of Realism. Stefan Jarocinski encapsulates the movement impeccably, explaining that Impressionists were ‘ concerned with seizing the image of a reality which had not yet been deformed by the intervention of the intelligence’ and wanted to create a ‘ pure impression’; that is, unblemished by the sphere of intellect. The Impressionists, in short, were purveyors of sensuality.

It must be understood that labelling Debussy in such terms is not entirely invalid. Although he was composing largely after the heyday of the Impressionist painters (the 1860s, 70s and 80s), some of his compositions (namely La mer [1903-05] and Images [1904-08]) do display qualities and tendencies associated with this movement. Debussy himself wrote to the editor of the La revue musicale, Emile Vuillermoz, in 1916, saying: ‘ You do me a great honour by calling me a pupil of Claude Monet.’ It is true to say

that a number of the composer's artistic principles correspond to those expressed or implied by the Impressionists. For instance, during a rehearsal for the premiere of La mer (1903-05), in answer to conductor Chevillard who had expressed confusion at Debussy's specified tempo differing from that of the previous day, the composer replied: ' but I don't feel music the same way every day'. On a wider level, this statement can be interpreted as being compatible with the common Impressionist practice of painting the same scene at different times of the day (for example, Monet's Water Lilies or Haystacks).

Several painters of the movement in question were inspired by similar stimuli as Debussy. A prime example of this is their admiration of Japanese artist Hokusai, whose celebrated woodblock print appeared on the cover page of La mer (1903-5), as stipulated by Debussy. Like the Impressionist painters, again, he made frequent use of water as an inspiration for his compositions. See below a juxtaposition of Sisley's Watermill at the Bridge of Moret in Winter (Ex. 1, 1893) and an extract from Debussy's ' Reflets dans l'eau' from the first volume of Images (Ex. 2, 1905). Note how the rising and falling semitone figure is an evocation of the ebbing and flowing movement of the water.

Ex. 1 Ex. 2

In summary, Stefan Jarocinski, despite disagreeing with the application of the term in reference to Debussy, hails Impressionism as ' the supremacy of musical colour over form and design,' an assertion that could certainly describe his musical convictions of other elements' subservience to tone

colour and the rejection of accepted traditional forms and harmonic principles. Even his biographer, Louis Laloy, claims that Debussy's music is ' a purely auditory music, just as Impressionist painting is entirely visual.'

However, even Debussy's so-called ' Impressionist' pieces cannot be described as exclusively affiliated with this movement. For instance La mer (1903-05), although its depiction of the sea is obvious in its music as well as its title, cannot merely be interpreted as an ' entirely visual' sensory experience, without connotation. As pianist Paul Roberts writes, the sea has often been used to represent themes of love and femininity. The time at which it was written was one of emotional upheaval for Debussy, as he left his wife Lilly Texier for another, Emma Bardac. Equipped with this knowledge, it seems that La mer occupied a deeper, psychologically cathartic purpose that lies beyond the intentions of the Impressionist painters.

The Académie's comments on Debussy's Printemps, and by extension, his other works, is an inaccurate, reactionary and narrow evaluation based on musical conservatism. The label, as argued by E. Robert Schmitz, has been detrimental to status of the composer's works ever since. He laments that it has resulted in innumerable flawed and misguided performances with use of excessive pedal. His compositions are in fact anything but vague; they are precise and fastidious. In addition, conversely to the common misconception that his piano pieces are indistinct and laden with pedal use, he actually utilises the piano in a masterly way which shows a deep understanding of the instrument and its parameters. In contradiction to the common misconception as outlined by Schmitz, his music is often percussive rather

than vague, for example the opening bars of ‘ La sérénade interrompue’ (Ex. 3, from Préludes, Book 1, 1909-10), which imitates a Spanish guitar, emphatically staccato. Further analyses of his works reveal the use of Golden Sections, displaying a precision and mathematical element to his compositions that is quite extraordinary.

Ex. 3

It must also be noted that Debussy himself rejected the unfortunate label assigned to him, as expressed in a letter to his publishers in 1908: ‘ I am trying to do ‘ something different’ – in a way, realities – what the imbeciles call ‘ impressionism,’ a term which is as poorly used as possible, particularly by art critics.’ Regarding this, it could be interpreted that the composer disagreed with the label itself rather than the aesthetic, as ‘ reality’ is precisely what the Impressionists hoped to convey. However, one must concede that if the composer wasn’t himself happy with the term, and if his music rarely displays qualities which are characteristic of the movement, then it is accurate to say that defining Debussy as an Impressionist is not a valid categorisation.

Almost as commonly circulated a term in reference to Debussy is Symbolism. This is a much fairer assessment of his music. The movement, which has its origins in the writings of Charles Baudelaire, grew quickly in Paris during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In brief, Symbolism was a reaction against Realism, and can be seen as almost the antithesis of Impressionism. Its followers were concerned with externalising, through the means of art, the internal, and often infernal, world of the mind, dreams and the

supernatural. There is unimpeachable evidence to align Claude Debussy with Symbolism. To begin with, it was a movement rooted in literary origins. Debussy, despite being largely uneducated in any discipline but music, was ‘ well-read’ and had ‘ a passion for literature’ that permeated through to his compositions. His strongest influences were words and writers rather than the visual arts (although Symbolism wasn’t exclusively a literary movement; it existed in art too).

Debussy gravitated towards Symbolist beliefs, and forged close friendships with notable figures associated with the movement, such as Paul Bourget and Stèphane Mallarmé, whose literary salon he was a regular attendee of. Much of his music was overtly Symbolist in character. Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune (1892-94), the orchestral tone poem that took his recognition to a new level entirely, is based on a poem by Mallarmé. Its whimsical flute opening (Ex. 4) is tonally and rhythmically ambiguous, portraying the indistinct dreams of the eponymous faun; a central theme in Symbolist philosophy.

Ex. 4

There is plenty of non-musical evidence to support Debussy’s affiliation with the Symbolist movement. In 1901 he began to write for a Symbolist periodical, La Revue blanche, and his Chansons de Bilitis (1897-8), as well as their words being written by Debussy’s close friend and Symbolist Pierre Louÿs, was published by Librairie de l’art indépendant, a Symbolist publisher.

Mediaevalism, or to be more accurate, pseudo-Mediaevalism, a core Symbolist credence, is prevalent in many works. The imitation of monastic

organum music (Ex. 5) in the opening bars of ‘ La cathédrale engloutie’ (From Préludes, Book 1, 1909-10) is a prime example, as is the fact that Pelléas et Mélisande (1893-5), is set in ‘ Allemonde’ (literally ‘ Other World’), an imagined Mediaeval setting.

Ex. 5

Pelléas et Mélisande (1893-5), Debussy’s only opera, based on a play by writer Maurice Maeterlinck, heralds the zenith of his association with the Symbolist movement. It makes frequent use of symbolism (for example hair to depict eroticism; light and shade to provide conceptual symbols of doomed love). Parallels can be drawn with Wagner, whom Symbolists admired ardently, and who influenced Debussy greatly in the earlier years of his compositional career. Both Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde (1875-9) and Pelléas are tragedies, use leitmotivs and have common themes of love and death. Debussy was as enthusiastic a supporter of his predecessor as any Symbolist, having visited Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889. However, his Wagnerism and Symbolism waned soon after the first performance of Pelléas. Furthermore, in 1893 he declared his intention to write an article entitled ‘ The Futility of Wagnerism’ which, although it never materialised, suggests a marked shift in his values. This is why it is as invalid to describe Debussy’s music exclusively in terms of Symbolism as it is Impressionism. Both labels represent only a fraction of his artistic output and fail to acknowledge that between Pelléas and La mer, a change occurred in his music that was reliant on neither poets nor artists, which could suggest that his own unique voice was finally established after years of musical exploration.

In 1889 Debussy had an experience which was to significantly alter the nature of his compositions. During a visit to the Universal Exposition he encountered the sound of the Javanese gamelan for the first time. The pentatonic tonality he heard was to be incorporated into some of his most celebrated compositions, for instance in ‘ Pagodes’ from the piano triptych Estampes (1903), whose blue and gold cover evoking Japan, as well as music exemplifies the Exoticism that the composer incorporated into so many of his pieces. Debussy’s love of Spain filters through in the second movement, ‘ Soirée dans Grenade’, in which a habanera rhythm underpins the piece (Ex. 6). As well as Exoticism, it can be interpreted that Debussy’s music contains elements of the Pre-Raphaelite movement (La damoiselle élue, 1887-8, the text of which was written by Dante Gabriel Rossetti) and even the Romantics (there are sometimes common themes between their beliefs and ideas expressed in Debussy’s compositions, for example escaping by means of travel and antiquity).

Ex. 6

Debussy himself christened all labels ‘ useful terms of abuse,’ recognising the arbitrary nature of inflicting any sort of category upon his works. As Paul Dukas wrote in 1901: ‘ his music is unclassifiable’. Debussy was a radical who defies classification because he is so different to his predecessors and encompasses so many different styles and movements, which is why musicologist encounter such difficultly in trying to pigeonhole him. Beethoven is often described as being both Classical and Romantic. Debussy was also a ‘ giant’ amongst composers in this sense, constructing a bridge between tradition and modernity and liberating harmonic convention. He

instigated a musical transition; pre-empted the future. His legacy is far too great to describe in such narrow a term as Impressionism.