

Giants of French Impressionism in Music and Visual Art

As a style of great power, impressionism represented an entire cultural scene that involved visual arts, music and poetry, etc. Visual arts and music seem to have connections that are influential for both. By inspiring each other, the greatest French composers were using new techniques that are presented in the best paintings of French artists of the same period of time.

The proposed paper is based on drawing parallels between the String Quartets by Ravel and Debussy and paintings of Renoir and Monet. This presentation includes: an analysis of specific techniques used in the impressionistic style and how sounds in music represent visual art; a demonstration of different techniques, analysis of musical forms in comparison to different paintings of the French masters, as well as a synthesis of teaching techniques, using visual painting as a tonal concept and developing imagination for creating musical images.

In my own performing and teaching experiences, I often refer to colors (specific tonal choices, using a particular string on a string instrument), textures and dimensions. For the performing artist, it is crucial to be able to use rich imagination and knowledge about ties and similarities from different art forms.

Famous paintings of Monet and Renoir inspired many artists. Definite connections between Impressionism in visual arts and music give us tools for deep understanding in the application of specific techniques and in setting new interpretational connections for our performances.

Both visual arts and music represent expressiveness that comes from creative lines or different shapes in visual art and presents itself in melodic wonders, shapes and motivic structures. The shapes of melodies have their own direction, and like the repetitive strokes of a paintbrush, the repetitive patterns of sequences and tonal changes bring about colorful displays of different images.

The intensity of colors is another tool of expression used so masterfully in impressionistic works. In art, choices of shade, primary, secondary, intermediate, warm or cool, light or dark, correspond to timbre, tonal shade and the specific tone of different musical instruments.

The textures, combinations of colors and dimensions are reflected in the **String Quartets of Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy**, giants of Impressionism in Music.

The brush stroke transforms into bow strokes of different articulations.

Colors are represented in coloristic articulations: tremolo-like figures, pizzicatos, harmonics, *sul tasto* (playing close to the fingerboard, an area for special transparency of sound, creating a particular timbre). Textures of harmony come in the form of chords and double stops, combinations of intervals in melodic leaps and interchanges between the four instruments. The usage of non-traditional harmonic principles and modal tonalities in music create a special atmosphere and depth, as well as bring a very exotic and colorful sense to the overall picture.

Impressionism is the name given to the school of painting that started in France in the second half of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth Century. In 1874, a group of young artists that included Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, Pissarro, Degas and Morisot held the first independent Impressionist exhibition in Paris.

Monet's *Impression Sunrise* (1873) brought the defining name to an entire style. It was Monet's sensory response to the sun, as seen through the mist at Le Havre Harbor at dawn, painted with broad, dabbing brush strokes. This technique was not so readily embraced. Rather than well-defined lines, the brushstrokes were somewhat vague. The colors did not represent a typical palette. The natural light of outdoor painting, new brush stroke techniques and pure bright colors brought about a very new concept of light and effect of reflection (water motive so well known from paintings and so much created in musical textures), as well as intensive sensitivity of light, form and color. Impressionists were intrigued with color theory. Rather than using a dark or black background on their canvases and blending and applying paints with carefully defined brushstrokes, they chose instead to use a white or light background and a palette of bolder, lighter colors, specifically the three prismatic colors of red, blue and yellow which were applied with bold and diffused brushstrokes. Similar to the nature of water, which can't be tamed in strict shapes, impressionistic images don't have defined lines and direct shapes, creating dream-like reflective shapes that are carried through the edge of the frame in imaginary continuity.

The Impressionist painters, ...tried to capture the movement of color and light. Music is predominantly the art of abstract movement. For this reason, the favorite images of the Impressionist paintings – the play of light on water, clouds, gardens in the rain, sunlight through the leaves – lent themselves readily to musical expression. Such descriptive titles as “Reflections on the Water”, “The Snow is Dancing”, “Sounds and Perfumes Swirl in the Evening Air”, reveal composers as poets and painters in addition to being musicians (Kauble)¹.

Almost every aspect of music, melody, harmony, color, rhythm, and form, became the malleable tonal palette for the composer. The piano was favored because vibrating harmonies could be suspended by use of the damper pedal. Reed instruments used low registers, while the violins played in the higher register. The harp or celeste accentuates the pitched percussive effects, while the metal percussion instruments add touches of light. Phrases are fragmented and overlapped to give a flowing effect. The meter is varied to allow for rhythmic freedom, a non-specificity of beat. The major/minor scale systems, upon which melodies and harmonies are derived, replace the medieval modes. In art, the primary tones of the color spectrum are used, while in music, the primary intervals of octaves, fourths, and fifths are written in parallel motion. This practice echoed a medieval technique known as organum, harmonizing one melody at a parallel distance of a fourth, fifth or octave by another melody, giving the feeling of openness in the sound.

The novelty of Japonisme that attracted the artists also attracted the musicians. Oriental music employs the whole tone scale, which is a combination of major/minor by the use of avoiding half steps, as well as the pentatonic scale, which includes only the first, second, third, fifth, and sixth tones of the major scale. As a group, the modes, whole tone scale, octatonic scale and pentatonic scale all lack a leading tone, which is the tone that tends to lead the ear to a resolution point, or the tonic. By avoiding the resolution point, melodies supported by harmonic sonorities could remain fluid and adrift.

It was the harmonies and harmonic structures, or chords, which took on an especially significant role in Impressionistic music. No longer utilized solely as a function to support harmonic structure, the chord became a function of movement within a melody. The chord or harmony now could exist as an entity by itself, and float in a parallel motion, either diatonically or chromatically. This concept of parallel motion was not an accepted practice during the Classical era. There were also harmonies called escaped chords, which gave the impression of shifting the tonality to a new key. However, they were neither prepared nor resolved in the traditional sense. They simply evaporated. “Harmonies were also more richly constructed, such as 9th, 11th, and 13th chords, or were constructed in fourths – quartal harmonies, or fifths – quintal harmonies, rather than thirds – tertian harmonies” (Magnuson)².

“Just as the form of a painting begins to take shape as the artist’s brush touches the canvas, musical form begins with rhythm: its canvas is silence; its space is time” (Reichert)³.

In Impressionist music, the strong beats, which normally are the focal point and mainstay of music, were disguised with ties, syncopations, or hemiolas – the practice of placing the emphasis off the regular downbeat to a weaker one. The use of compound meters and cross-rhythms were commonly used.

The stylistic innovations of Impressionism opened the doors for imagination to discover, explore and create from a fresh perspective. “Impressionists favored delicate sensuality, immediacy and the idea of art as an invitation to pleasure. They sought to renew a sense of the mystery of life and the beauty of the world through perception itself, using art to reveal the deep intuitions of the unconscious” (Pasler)⁴.

There is a common vocabulary between the language of the disciplines of art and music, as well as an historical link in the development of the two genres. In addition, there is a link between Claude Monet (1840–1926) and Claude Debussy (1862–1918), the principal figures of the era. They were contemporaries, born of the bourgeoisie class, but reference has been made to suggest that they were synaesthetes, that is, they had the ability to transpose sensory cognitive processes, which could explain how their artistic perceptions were manifested.

“Synaesthesia exists among many artists and composers, and is characterized by a transposition of the senses, a cross modal sensory way of perceiving the world in which we live, a virtual combining of the senses” (Hubbard)⁵.

¹ Kauble M. *Music History – The Impressionistic Period (1870–1920)*.

² Magnuson, P. “MICROCOSMS: Impressionism.”

³ Reichert, H. “An Essay on Meaning in Music”. Audio Note N.Y. C. 25 June, 2005.

⁴ Pasler J. “Impressionism. (§2.) Stylistic Innovation”, *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 May 2005).

⁵ Hubbard, Edward M 13 February, 2005.

Some people can see certain colors or shapes when listening to music, or when viewing a painting, they may make a connection between a particular melody and artwork. To see colors when hearing sounds or certain frequencies, to see numbers in color, to cross-reference colors with words, all contribute to a broader way of sensing the world around us.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919) was a leading painter in the development of the French Impressionistic style. As a celebrator of beauty, and especially feminine sensuality, it has been said “Renoir is the final representative of a tradition which runs directly from Rubens to Watteau.”⁶

Renoir’s paintings are notable for their vibrant light and saturated color, most often focusing on people in intimate and candid compositions. The female nude was one of his primary subjects. In a characteristic Impressionist style, Renoir suggested the details of a scene through freely brushed touches of color, so that his figures softly fuse with one another and their surroundings.

For artists like Renoir, the brush stroke actually became the artist’s signature. The difference for Monet was that he sought, through a hand movement, to suggest the vibrations of light just as his eye perceived it. When viewing Monet’s paintings close up, the brush strokes seem to manifest disorder. However, when viewed from a distance, the picture comes together as a whole, integrating form, color and light. The brush strokes express form by their direction with decreased width indicating depth. The heavier or lighter strokes modeled reliefs.

In music and art, Impressionism is concerned with the creation of a mood, a feeling (an impression) through simple but elusive means. Claude Debussy, like Monet, was able to capture the elusive qualities of music and transform them into tonal images, which paralleled the artistry of the period.

Claude-Achille Debussy (1862–1918) was one of the greatest of French composers, and one of the most potent influences on the course of music in the twentieth century (Grout 672). Debussy was deeply interested in the relation of music to the other arts and was an admirer not only of the manifestations of the contemporary Art Nouveau, but also of the Japanese prints of Hokusai and the paintings of Turner – one of the greatest landscape artists of the early 19th century. “The paintings of the French Impressionists Monet, Manet, and Renoir, and the refined poetry of Verlaine, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé suggested to Debussy a new type of music, eminently French in character. The music hints rather than states, in which successions of colors take the place of dynamic development, and ‘atmospheric’ sensations supersede heroic pathos; a music that is vague and intangible as the changing light of day” (Apel 403)⁷.

The term *impressionism* has become synonymous with the music of Debussy, although the composer was unhappy with it. “Light and its changing effects in the visual world play an important role in impressionistic music. Since music allows action in time, it is especially suited to the portrayal of changing patterns of light” (Manoff 321). One of Debussy’s famous piano compositions, *La Mer* (1905), can be considered a study of light interacting with the motion of the sea, light evoked in sound. Debussy chose a painting by the Japanese artist, Hokusai, for the cover page. He was not suggesting that his piece was a musical version of the painting, but that both the painting and his piece shared a similar region of aesthetic experience. “In reference to his composition, Debussy said, ‘What I am doing might be like painting a landscape in a studio.’ It is in the spirit of Debussy’s intentions for us to let music suggest visual images. Sound, sight, light, and imagination are all invited into the musical experience” (Manoff 321). In fact, throughout his life Debussy jotted down projects and sketches, which may be compared to the drawings of some of the old masters. From the ‘black and white’ of the piano, as Debussy himself put it, he extracted the maximum amount of color.

The compositional techniques Debussy used had an immediate impact on musical tradition. Debussy’s harmonies seem to float along, using chord progressions that seem to be circular. He created harmonic moods that blended into each other within a long-range harmonic plan. He used modes and the whole-tone scale to avoid a tonal center. Textures were like a collage of many diverse elements. “Melody, rhythm, harmony, and timbre, create a continuous interplay in which no single element is consistently more important than another” (Manoff 323)⁸.

⁶ Okada, M. “Music-Picture Noe Form of Synthetic Art Education.” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, V. 37 No. 4 (Winter 2003), p. 73–84.

⁷ Apel, Willi. *Harvard Dictionary of Music*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1972.

⁸ Manoff, Tom. *Music: a Living Language*. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1982.

Debussy's interest in music extended beyond the European traditions in that he utilized the Medieval harmonic techniques, such as organum – the practice of parallel fourths and fifths in harmony with each other. He included non-European folk music as well. “Other influences I would mention are the Javanese Gamelan, which impressed Debussy at the Exposition Universelle de Paris in 1889, and his love of Japanese art, owning a large collection of Japanese vases and prints (Enget 2)⁹.

Debussy opened up the music of Western Europe to the rest of the world. He absorbed a profound influence from the Indonesian gamelan, a percussion ensemble of pitched and non-pitched percussion instruments, and occasionally made use of Afro-American ragtime influences in his compositions. What he learned from exotic music helped him to loosen European conventions, and to promote a further free give-and-take, not only of influence but also of values, among people sensitive to music all over the world (Austin 2)¹⁰.

Claude Debussy wrote his **String Quartet in g minor, Op. 10** in 1893. The Quartet was premiered in December of the same year by the Ysaye Quartet in Paris and received mixed reactions. Its sensuality and impressionistic tonal shifts make it a piece absolutely of its own time and place while, with its cyclic structure, constitutes a final divorce from the rules of classical harmony and points the way ahead.

“Any sounds in any combination and in any succession are henceforth free to be used in a musical continuity”, Debussy wrote. Pierre Boulez said that Debussy freed chamber music from “rigid structure, frozen rhetoric and rigid aesthetics.”¹¹

The piece is written in traditional sonata form, if we can refer to it as “traditional”, since that comes through the view of Debussy. The methods of theme development are based on repetition, sequence modulation, rhythmic transformation (mm. 13, mm. 39), contrapuntal imitation, short melodic figures, sustained trills, colorful tremolos and repeated notes. The use of a constant pulse and fluctuation of the speed of the rhythm by usage of triplets and sixteenths creates a kind of flowing music, and gives great potential for accelerandos and decelerandos later in the piece. It gives out a feeling of rain coming; it is more or less melancholic. Debussy is translating keys into modes (Dorian, Phrygian, Aeolian, Ionian, Mixolydian) and is using whole tones and mode-like keys.

The beginning of the first movement, **Animé et très décidé**, comes in firm and precise character with a syncopated willful theme, binding all four instruments in rhythmic unison. Using the same motive, Debussy transforms creatively the shaped line, played by first violin, dissolving the edge in diminuendo. From mm.13, the second violin, viola and cello join in “braded” movement of 16ths, creating a sense of a continuous, lively and moving image. Solo material (*expressif et soutenu*) is given to first violin and shifts into cello part just a few bars later. Rehearsal [1] pronounces the rhythmic unification between the four voices and takes it to maturity of the original theme in dynamic Forte. The development colorfully presents “visual” elements of rocking triplets (mm. 14 of rehearsal [1]). Usage of double stops in each voice brings dimensions and a ringing overtone effect. Continuous excitement of the animato build up brings us to Coda (*Trés animé*), where unity of the unison leads to the fantastic ending, splashing with bright colors and longevity.

Second movement, Assez vif et bien rythmé, is an excellent example of sound/visual combinations of tone, shape, texture and dimensions. Pizzicato, as a special articulation for string instruments, is related to quick, dotted stroke of the paintbrush, as well as presenting a colorful mosaic of tones. Debussy is using pizzicato not only in linear progression. It appears in strong unison chords between first violin and cello, developing into creative combinations of articulation techniques and instrumental involvement. At the top of the texturized material, the viola carries a very intriguing repetitive motive, taken later by the first violin. Waives of 16th “arco” are combined with “sparkling” *pizzicato* chords in viola and cello.

⁹ Enget, Diane. “Litart Spring 2004 Debussy in New Jersey.” 1904-2004 25 March 2005

¹⁰ Austin, William F. *Music in the Twentieth Century, from Debussy through Stravinsky*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1966.

¹¹ Robert Orledge to Recording of the Quartet by Belcea Quartet

The first system of the musical score consists of four staves. The top two staves (treble clef) and the bottom two staves (bass clef) contain melodic lines with repetitive sixteenth-note patterns. Dynamic markings include *dim.* (diminuendo) and *più dim.* (more diminuendo) across the system.

By using the specific articulations of spiccato, legato, pizzicato, trills and repetitive 16ths, Debussy completes the image of this mysterious and untouchable character that just disappears in front of our eyes.

The second system of the musical score consists of two systems of four staves each. The first system includes dynamic markings *dim.*, *p* (piano), and *f* (forte), along with trill markings (*tr*). The second system continues with *f* markings and trills. Vertical dashed lines indicate structural divisions within the system.

The third system of the musical score consists of four staves. It features dynamic markings *ppp* (pianissimo) and *pp* (piano), along with *pizz.* (pizzicato) markings. The notation includes repetitive sixteenth-note patterns and some rests.

Third movement Andantino, doucement expressif requires the usage of a colorful tone palette, applying different types of vibrato and using varied bow speeds. The texture of the sound changes from silk-like transparency to a warm and rich velvety quality. The *Sul Tasto* technique used in sections of *pp* and *ppp* as well in *diminuendos* creates a feeling of fragility and uncertainty. Repeated figures create a dreamy atmosphere with a very expressive and vocal melody inserted into suspended textural material that creates the sense of a wavy and pulsating feeling.

The main theme's element is presented first in the second violin part and shared with viola and the first violin transforms into a heart-warming beauty in the final appearance of the complete melody in the first violin part.

14 1^{er} Mouvt

mettez la sourdine

pp et retenu

pp

pp

pp

pp

p

p

p

p

The Forth movement, *Très modéré – En animant peu à peu – Très mouvementé et avec passion*, is in many ways representing the freedom in the shape of phrasing, by bringing elements of rubato in recitatives and agogic accents. The introduction takes us into the “story telling” mode and after the double bar line, the composer masterfully uses a similar triplet motive to create a new character (*En animant peu á peu*), which in ecstatic crescendo and magnification of the articulations (from the spiccato to marcato with accents), arrives into a passionate theme (*Très mouvementé et avec passion*). This theme is continuously developing the material of repetitive rhythmic structures, which taken through serials of metamorphosis, completing the arch of the entire piece, by bringing back the main theme from the first movement.

92 Très animé 138 = ♩

ff

ff

ff

ff

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) was strongly influenced by the Impressionists, and in particular by Debussy. Maurice Ravel has a very unique style of music! It's kind of “impressionist”, since it has a floating and vague feeling to it most of the time. The most obvious aspects are intense beauty and refined elegance. Ravel was also a master orchestrator. His orchestral works have lavish and complex instrumentations, full of bursting, dazzling colors and vivid images. As a composer of Impressionist music, Ravel was known for the gentle depth and intensity of his melodies, orchestral and instrumental textures, and dramatic outcomes.

The Quartet in F major was Ravel's final submission to the Prix de Rome and the Conservatoire de Paris. The composition was rejected by both institutions soon after its premier on March 5, 1904. The quartet received mixed reviews from the Parisian press and local academia. Gabriel Fauré, to whom the work is dedicated, described the last movement as “stunted, badly balanced, in fact a failure.” Ravel himself commented on the work, “My Quartet in F major responds to a desire for musical construction, which undoubtedly is inadequately realized but which emerges much more clearly than in my preceding compositions.” As a result of major criticism and rejection, a frustrated Ravel left the Conservatoire in 1905 following what was later called the Ravel Affair.¹²

Ravel's loss during the 1904 Prix de Rome and rejection from the Conservatoire de Paris catapulted his career forward: a sympathetic public rallied behind his compositions and musical style. In 1905, Claude Debussy wrote to Ravel: “In the name of the gods of music and in my own, do not touch a single note you have written in your Quartet.” Ravel's string Quartet in F major stands as one of the most widely performed chamber music works in the classical repertoire, representing Ravel's early achievements and rise from obscurity. On a CD, it is often coupled with Debussy's own string quartet.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato. Très doux*, is in Sonata form with two contrasting themes. It is full of lovely melodies. This movement is built on two distinct theme-groups. The calm first subject is heard immediately in the first violin over a rising accompaniment in the other voices, and this leads, after some spirited extension, to the haunting second theme, announced by the first violin and viola, two octaves apart. The relatively brief development rises to a huge climax-Ravel marks it triple forte-before the movement subsides to close with its opening theme, now gracefully elongated, fading gently into silence.

The second movement, *Assez vif. Très rythmé*, features rhythmic complexity and pizzicato. The opening is a *tour de force* of purely pizzicato writing that makes the quartet sound like a massive guitar. The 1st violin and the cello play in 3/4 time broken down into 3 groups of two eighth notes (2+2+2), while the 2nd violin and viola play in 6/8 time (3+3), so that each measure contains six eighth notes, but because of their groupings, they are stressed differently. There is a contrasting slow middle section and a shortened reprise of the opening section. Some of this movement's rhythmic complexity comes from Ravel's use of multiple meters. The tempo indication is 6/8 (3/4), and while the first violin is accented in 3/4 throughout, the other voices are frequently accented in 6/8, with the resulting cross-rhythms giving the music a pleasing vitality. The slow center section is a subtle transformation of the first movement's second theme. At the conclusion of this section comes one of the quartet's most brilliant passages, the bridge back to the opening material. Here the pizzicato resumes quietly, gathers speed and force, and races upward to launch the return of the movement's opening theme. This is wonderful writing for quartet, and the scherzo drives straight to its explosive pizzicato cadence.

The slow third movement, *Très lent*, also uses melodic material from the first movement and displays Ravel's gift for achieving a remarkably wide range of tone colors from the four-string instrument. This movement is in free form, and perhaps the best way to understand this movement is to approach it as a rhapsody based loosely on themes from the first movement. Beneath these themes, Ravel sets a rhythmic cell of three notes that repeats constantly, but it remains an accompaniment figure rather than becoming an active thematic participant. The movement's impression of freedom results in no small part from its frequent changes of both key and meter.

The finale, *Vif et agité*, contains another interesting rhythm. After the serene close of the third movement, the *Agité* leaps almost abrasively to life. Agitated it certainly is, an effect that comes from its steadily driving double-stroked passages, and this mood continues across the span of the movement. The basic metric unit here is the rapid 5/8 heard at the beginning, though Ravel changes meter frequently, with excursions into 3/4 and 5/4. Once again, material from the first movement returns, and after several lyric interludes the finale takes on once again the aggressive mood of its opening and powers its way to the close.

Both pieces are favorite works in the chamber music repertoire and are challenging not only technically and musically, but require extremely skillful navigating through the rhythmic complexities and harmonic changes. Special attention for the performers should be drawn to changing the colorful palette of different keys and modes, used by Debussy and Ravel. Applying tonal identity to each of them and working through the areas of modulations, as well as providing quick reactive sound for dynamic and harmony changes would help create the most meaningful pictures in sounds.

¹² Orledge, Robert. Liner notes. www.allmusic.com/artist/robert-orledge-mn0001635528, 2001.

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Santrauka

Prancūzų impresionizmo milžinai muzikoje ir dailėje

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami Ravelio ir Debussy styginių kvartetai bei garsūs Renoire'o ir Monet paveikslai: muzikos ir dailės sąsajos; spalvomis, faktūromis, vaizdiniais, tūriais ir dimensijomis pagrįstos technikos ir jų taikymas atlikimo mene.

Galingo poveikio stilius – impresionizmas – atstovavo plačiai kultūrinei terpei, apimančiai vaizduojamuosius menus, muziką, poeziją ir t. t. Dailė ir muzika, regis, turi sąsajų, kurios daro įtaką abiem šioms meno sritims. Vienas kitą įkvėpdami, didieji prancūzų kompozitoriai naudojo naujas technikas, būdingas garsiausiems to laikotarpio prancūzų dailininkų paveikslams.

Straipsnyje siekiama išvesti paraleles tarp Ravelio ir Debussy styginių kvartetų bei Renoire'o ir Monet paveikslų, analizuojamos specifinės impresionizmo stiliaus technikos, nagrinėjama, kaip muzikos garsai gali perteikti vaizduojamojo meno kūrinių, demonstruojamos įvairios technikos, analizuojamos muzikinės formos lyginant jas su prancūzų meistrų paveikslais, nagrinėjama mokymo technikų sintezė, kai vaizduojamasis menas pasitelkiamas kaip garso koncepcija, o vaizduotės ugdymo tikslas yra muzikinių vaizdinių kūrimas.