

Power of Art and Enthusiasm for Inspiration: A Musical Analysis on Debussy's Firework

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Abstract

As the founder of impressionism, Claude Debussy endows his works with new musical language in aspects of melody, harmony, and texture, which functioned as a connection role between tonal and atonal music, and later influenced on the development of atonal music. His program music even exploited a new horizon for western music, and the innovation in his works was gradually accepted by more and more musicians. In this paper, using a Prelude written for solo piano "Fireworks" as an example, the colorimetric principle was employed to examine how the musicality of the piano works of Debussy is achieved through the applying of impressionism. In addition, its musical form, harmony, texture and other musical features and performing skills were analyzed explicitly. Besides theoretical discussion, the author attempted to reproduce how the musicality of the piano works of Debussy is achieved through the applying the method of impressionism and illustrate Debussy's innermost emotions in his Fireworks.

Key words: Debussy; Piano music; Firework; Colorimetric principle; Piano performance

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INTRODUCTION

As the founder of impressionist piano music, the famous French composer Achille-Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

is always on the controversial point about his musical works and his ideas of art. Such controversy began more than one century ago and continues into the present time when modern piano music has greatly developed. Critiques on his methods of musical composition and his musical features are lingering our ears and criticism keep occurring in newspapers. Debussy used to say, "If there was a day—which I believe not far away—when I could no longer remain a controversial object, I would feel guiltily painful." (Brook, 1980) However, when his works became more comprehensible, his innovation points on account of creation are gradually accepted by his peers in the musical field. Many musicians try to enter his innermost state through their analysis of his works composed in distinctive periods of his life, focusing on his style and covering such aspects as his melody, rhythm, musical mode, tonality, texture and musical form. These analyses have provided us with convincing theoretical supports whereby we can better understand his works.

Of these critical papers, the majority are those dealing with Debussy's ideas of art based on nature as the source of music and those commenting on his attempts to innovate the existing harmonic language. From his musical creation and others' comments on his works, we can realize that Debussy frequently emphasizes listening to nature. He is able to turn a simple psychological portrayal into a description of a natural context, to depict the beauty of nature with musical colors, and to touch people's heart with scenes or colors that seem abstract and discontinuous. His innovation in the harmonic language of the piano enables him to capture the mercurial light and shadow by virtue of his painting method, to display musical colors through harmony variations, to treat harmony as the vital elements of his music palette, and to depict the mythical scenes of his inner mind.

Firework, a prelude composed in 1913, is the last piece of the second episode in Debussy's late works called *Preludes*. Its vivid and exquisite creation method leaves us a strong vision impression and offers us an infinite space of imagination. It represents what Debussy used to say to Gillot: "There's no theory at all. You just listen to it. Nothing but beautiful sound is our discipline". (Pisel, 1992) Taking this piece of music as an example, this paper is to focus on the recurrence of the shocking scenes within the composer's mind that turn themselves out from behind my imagination and comprehension during the course of my performance. By using colorimetric common sense to present the colorful tones, this paper attempts to analyze the musical form, the texture and the performance skills of the given piece, to further our comprehension of it, and to achieve a mind collision with the composer.

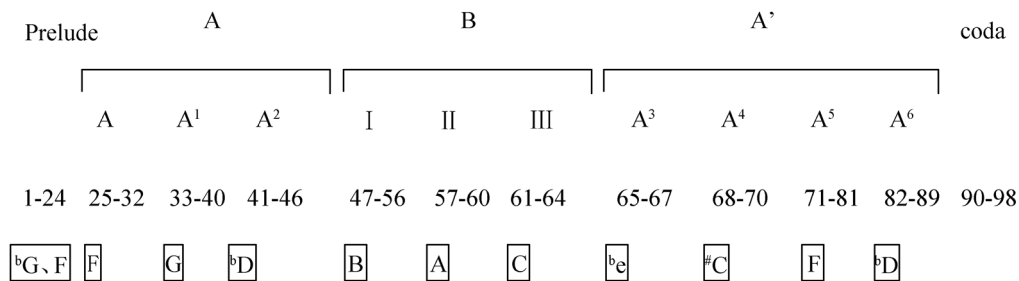
1. THE PRESENTATION OF MUSICAL COLORS

The most outstanding feature of Debussy's piano music, just like a poem without full expression and complete

embodiment, has no concrete time, place or occasion to modify its atmosphere; rather it highlights certain scenes of nature by way of suitable harmonic methods. *Firework* shows an excellent performance at the aspect of musical colors. Through the application of the harmonic method, the fantastic transformation between sound and light is realized and endless imagination from listeners is reproduced along with the gorgeous stage lights that seem to be able to change in line with the wonderful scenes of nature the music embodies. Though it is only a piano prelude, it makes me able to watch a multi-scene drama with fluctuated moods when I perform it.

1.1 Overture

As far as its musical structure is concerned, *Firework* contains 98 sections whose derivative changes are carefully presented to observe the principle of trilogy for its overall structure. From its beginning to its end, the musical thought and motivation is single and centralized. Part B is divided from part A and it does not emphasize striking contrast or periodic changes like traditional trilogy structure. Below is the structure of its musical form:



The introduction part is from section 1 to section 19. The intensive notes of its superimposed bitonality and triplet texture of the alteration of both hands seem to subtly depict a blue sky dotted with stars and an obscure silhouette of a crowd of people. The octave and two-degree sound appearing occasionally in the high-pitch area represents something crimson under the blue sky and, functioning as a highlight light, and the sparks between the crowd and the sky. The tone is yet to finish, but the sense of layer is already vivid. Whispers from the crowd sounds like a strong desire for gorgeous fireworks. The glissando, which leaps six octaves and appears in section 17, seem to draw a mysterious veil like a strong light which turns these mysterious colors into warm colors and the wonder fireworks appear, too. Sections 20-24 are a small link whose sound type is toccata, featuring a gradual intensification of the middle-pitch area to the high-pitch area and preparing for the theme motivation to come.

1.2 Scene 1: Range Upon Range of Pinnacles

From section 25, the entire work enters the first stage to show a continuation of its intro atmosphere and

the change of nature. Both hands rapidly repeat the quintuplets of the 64th-notes, making the sound current rapid. The harp-like sound turns into a flame in the giant fire tub, whose fire core is blue, the flare orange and the smoke bluish white appearing in front of the eyesight. The curtain is up for a mysterious night. Section 27 displays the theme motivation that is particularly prominent from among people's whispers and it is also combined with the quintuplet of the 64th-notes skillfully treated to resemble some pearls inlaid on a lint cloth. From section 33 to section 40, the theme turns to the right hand and the single tone turns to octave. A¹ is always on the G tone and hence the tonality is defined as G major. The color changes from discontinuous and leaping accent to jade green. The strong light reflects the remote lake and the crowd of people resemble ranges upon ranges of green mountains. Then sections 39-40 functions as a linkage and a preparation for the A² part and transit into ^bD major. From the beginning of section 41, the quintuplet of the 32nd-note becomes septuplet. At the same time, the motivation of the French national


anthem of *Marseillaise* is implied in the right-hand sound part that is in combination with this theme.

1.3 Scene 2: Flying Pavilions and Bright Colors

Along with the decline of blaze, in section 45-46, it enters the second part B. This part is further divided into 3 phases. Phase I (47-56) adopts a triplet rhythm, with the right hand playing the triad and the left hand a second sound. In these short 10 sections, there are *pp* and strident *f*. The musical color also becomes warm, changing into red from the first section's green color. In sections 45-52,

the composer adopts a columnar chord texture and has it combined with the second sound to form a unique sound effect. (See Music Score 1). The colors become variable and the red light column rushes into the sky and stops as a palace covered by rosy clouds. The musical method is very much like a pallet that instantly inserts these colorful flags on top of this palace. The gorgeous firework and the shadow in the water produce a magnificent scene, which, all of a sudden, seems to dance like the sands under our feet, able to arouse our inner joy to change along with the changes of colors.

Music Score 1



The image shows a musical score for Music Score 1. It consists of two staves: a piano part on the bottom and a right-hand part on the top. The piano part features a series of chords, with some marked with a '12' and a slur. The right-hand part features a series of chords, with some marked with a '3' and a slur. The score includes dynamic markings such as *mf* and *f*, and a tempo marking of $\frac{4}{8}$. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Then it enters the second phase (57-60), which shows another visual effect. The octuplet of the 64th note performs fluently just like the beautiful optical marks in the sky on the base of keeping its *pp* power. Only the third phase of section 4 (61-64) is the transitory stage that is linked to part 3. This link is very special (see Music score 2) and the tempo and structure of the four sections are

same, with the first two sections applying the major triad and the latter two applying the minor triad, whose sound is much lighter resembling the sound of some remote bell. In between is the glissando through the latter two sections become pentatonic scale of glissandos, making the sound even more obscure in its context and more mysteriously oriental.

Music Score 2



The image shows a musical score for Music Score 2. It consists of two staves: a piano part on the bottom and a right-hand part on the top. The piano part features a series of chords, with some marked with a 'pp' and a slur. The right-hand part features a series of chords, with some marked with a 'pp' and a slur. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* and *m.g.*, and a tempo marking of *Rubato*. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

1.4 Scene 3: Purple Lightning and Green Frost

From section 65, it enters the third part and the theme motivation appears for a fourth time, which is A³. The background music becomes a ninth liaison whose movement is from the top to the bottom. Section 67 is a paragraph based on bitonality and the color of the work becomes purple that, accompanied with its bright tonality,

looks like flares in the sky. Sections 68-70 repeat the theme once more and sections 71-78 serves as a linking paragraph (see Music Score 3) with its own extension feature. Because it cuts out the latter part of the theme motivation, the left hand changes to a tremolos texture alternated by a major second and a minor second. The whole part focuses on the interweaving of light and shadow and bright tonality.

Music Score 3

Parts A⁵ and A⁶ are the climax of the whole piece. Here the rhythm is a tercet constituted of a septuplet of the 32th-notes moving from the low sound area to the high sound area and the theme motivation appears again in the high sound area in the form of an octave. The initial purple lightening moves up and down and the shining lights curvet just like dragons. In section 85, four FF (see Music Score 4) appear and they cross six

octave areas and three levels. The firework blossoming in the sky and the bright colors supporting each other leave people strong sensory stimuli. In section 87 (see Music Score 5), the glissando of the minor second constructed by both hands allows the music flow down from the highest point with a slow speed and gradual reduction in strength. Hence, the emotion is slowly relieved.

Music Score 4

Music Score 4 is a piano score for a section of Debussy's 'Firework'. It features a treble and bass clef. The music is characterized by a complex rhythmic pattern of septuplets, indicated by a '7' over a bracketed group of notes. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'piu f e cresc.' and 'ff'. The notation is dense, with many notes and accidentals, and includes some slurs and phrasing marks.

Music score 5

Music Score 5 is a piano score for a section of Debussy's 'Firework'. It features a treble and bass clef. The score includes glissando markings, dynamic markings such as 'ff', 'mf', 'p', 'piu p', and 'pp', and tempo markings 'Plus lent' and 'Très retenu'. The notation is dense, with many notes and accidentals, and includes some slurs and phrasing marks.

1.5 End: The Smoke Is Thick and the Mountain Is Green

Under the background of a continuous tremolo constructed by ^bD and ^bA with the left hand, the entire piece moves to its end (section 90-98), (see Music Score 6). Here the combination of *Marseillaise* and the theme motivation

occurs again. It is so soft and the peak olive green speaks of the composer's love for his nation. Gradually, the scene changes from peak green to green and it is like the blue smoke fading away slowly. The scene returns to a quiet and mysterious night when the work ends and people walk away.

Music Score 6

The image displays two systems of a piano score. The first system is marked "Encore plus lent" and "de très loin". It features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a supporting line. The second system is marked "8: basso" and "aussi léger et pp que possible". It continues the melodic and supporting lines, with dynamic markings like "pp" and "m. s.". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

2. SKILLS OF PIANO PERFORMANCE

Firework is an extremely difficult piano work to perform. It requires that the performer has strong basic skills, acute hearing and rich imagination. However, every performer is different in her control of strength in performing, in her understanding of musical scenes, and in many other aspects. Based on the above analysis, I shall attempt to discuss the key-touch method and pedal-use in my performance of *Firework*, to show how we can expect to display the emotions and variable colors the composer has wonderfully put into his work.

2.1 Key-Touch

For different tones and scenes, the performer's different methods of key-touch are required. The introduction part should be even and obscure, and therefore fingertip should be used to touch the keys in order to make the sound even and unified. The 16th-notes should be pressed harder for the tone to be acute and transparent to represent the beauty of the obscure colors. Starting from section 25, abundant musical scales appear rapidly and fluently. The performer then should flat his hands and cling to the keys in order to produce the sound naturally. Fingertips should perform the theme motivation and a stable hand shape should function as a holder to produce the sound with the strength of both arms. For section 35 in which the theme is intensified with an octave, it even needs more strength from the arms.

At section 39, the strength has arrived off and the piano needs to make an even deeper sound by the strength, which is driven by the arms under the natural alteration of both hands. When reaching sections 45-52, the right hand is always the major chord and the arm should be fixed. The forearm and the elbow are relaxed and the sound is to be produced naturally. There are three glissandos in the whole music. The first and second joints of the first and second fingers should be fixed as well as the hand shape. The carpus should be relaxed and the strength should not be changed.

2.2 Use of Pedals

Firework contains a variety of forms and tones; hence the pedal should be used in accordance with its related situations. In the introduction part, the right pedal is only used when the right hand needs to stress certain sound effects, while the tercet needs to be linked only by the interchange of both hands. The left pedal can be used simultaneously to produce a soft and exquisite sound. The use of the left pedal depends on the comprehension of this music by performer. In my comprehension, the left pedal can be relieved at section 7. For those places where the theme motivation occurs, the right pedal should be stepped to the bottom.

The writing method of three-score can help us clarify Debussy's distribution of sound areas and the senses of arrangement level. Those low sounds with a long time, for

example, are always invariable even under the frequent changes of other chords, causing the accumulation of disharmonious chords, leading to both arrangement sense and stereoscopic sense at the aspect of acoustics. At these places, the performer should be cautious of the pedals that not only embody every sound but also produce a sense of orderly. Therefore, the use of the right pedal and the middle pedal is absolutely necessary.

2.3 Strength

Debussy has fully dug out the various possibilities within a relatively narrow and weak range of space for a profound expression of strength. The strength range he uses is limited, but the achievement he obtains is great as is represented by the expression possibility that is ignored or not fully-used by his predecessors. (Xu, 2003) Strength plays a significant role in the works of Debussy. In his music, color is his expression purpose, the change of strength brings the change of color, and different levels of strength resemble the brightness and darkness of colors in the palette of a painter, though a painter works through the changes of vision while Debussy works through the changes of sound. Therefore, with Debussy's music, different colors must be reproduced even though the mark of strength is the same.

The strong purpose of a composer cannot be fully expressed through the printed scores, which means that a performer has to dig out the strong expression of different levels by his own performance. Debussy, for instance, may express different colors with the same pp marks, and those colors may refer to light smokes or people's whispers or something else. Yet they all need the performer to cultivate his good imagination and performing skills.

CONCLUSION

The above attempts to reproduce *Firework* in terms of scenes and colors are a personal response to Debussy,

by which this paper aims to reveal the creative emotion the composer, hopes to embody in vivid natural scenes. Though profound studies and analyses of *Firework* have been conducted, this paper is among the first to use the theories of sound and color to analyze the changes of cold and warm tones in this work and the vision impact that it presents. Though Debussy's musical features are as impressionist as caprice, this paper has illustrated that this piano prelude is built upon the change of color so that it appears loose but deep inside it remains focused. This confirms what he has said that he hopes to write his musical dream with an absolute objective spirit and that he hopes to let sing his inner imago with a childlike honesty. My reason to exemplify my receipt of this classical work written almost a century ago is to try an interior dialogue with the composer, to truly understand the meaning of his musical significance, and, as a piano performer myself, to help the audience enjoy the beauty of sound that the composer intends to express.

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