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Timbre and form in Debussy's *Nuages*

ABSTRACT

Background

Starting from a short review of the history of timbre analysis, the opening section of this paper probes the status of the exploration of timbre within music analysis as well as in recent reception-oriented research. In theoretical writings of the 18th and 19th century, matters of timbre were widely neglected. The term timbre (in German: 'Klangfarbe') was used ca. from 1822. Some decades later, scholars like Carl Stumpf and Hermann Helmholtz started to explore the properties of timbre. Around 1910, composers and music theorists like Arnold Schoenberg and Ernst Kurth began to reflect matters of timbre theoretically. All these approaches were vitally important, even though they were sporadic and not thoroughly interconnected. Since the 1950s, the investigation of timbre was steadily intensified – not only in musicology and philosophy (f.e. Theodor W. Adorno), but also in Klangforschung and *recherche musicale* (f.e. Pierre Schaeffer). Today, timbre analysis is part of different branches of music analysis, although there are no standardized analytical methods. Due to the complexity of this field of research, a coherent methodology still has to be developed.

One of the crucial questions which shall be discussed in the scope of this paper, is the relation between timbre analysis, musical form and conventional analytical approaches like f.e. 'Formenlehre'.

Aims and repertoire studied

Nuages, the first movement of the *Nocturnes* for orchestra (1897–99), can be regarded as one of the important steps in Debussy's preoccupation with timbre – from the early *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* to the *Nocturnes*, *La Mer*, the *Images* and finally *Jeux*. In the case of *Nuages*, the relevancy of timbre was confirmed by Debussy himself. In the original program booklet from 1900–01 Debussy cited the piece's affinity with 'the unchanging aspect of the sky with the slow and melancholy movement of the clouds, extinguishing in a gray softly tinted with white' ('C'est l'aspect immuable du ciel avec la marche lente et mélancolique des nuages, finissant dans une agonie grise doucement teintée de blanc'). On another occasion, in conversation with his friend Paul Poujaud, the composer also mentioned that he associated this movement with the experience of 'the effects of clouds on the Seine at the Place de la Concorde' (Herlin 1999). In a further well-known statement which is familiar to most of us, Debussy said that music consists of 'rhythmicized colors and time' (Lesure and Nichols 1987, 184). This underlines the major importance of color to Debussy's music. Therefore, it seems obvious that *Nuages* can be interpreted not only from the perspectives of form and structure. *Nuages* is a study about the different nuances of colors, and – if we accept this analogue – a study about musical timbre. It is our

task to develop the theoretical tools which might enable us to approach this dimension.

Nevertheless, the fact that Debussy's compositions are not only studies about timbre, but also take a relevant position in the history of musical form and structure, poses manifold questions which provoke controversial discussions: How can we interpret the formal design of his music? Due to a well-known fact, the composer not only denied any reference to traditional forms, but he also refused to give us hints concerning formal innovations in his music.

This problem can also be retraced by analysing *Nuages*: On the one hand, some listeners might perceive a kind of tripartite form: departure, journey and return. A quiet opening intensifies step by step and finally leads into the enigmatic colors of the last bars. On the other hand, Debussy himself would probably have rejected to freeze this mode of listening as a formal model.

Without doubt, there are expedient alternatives to the tripartite model. Analysis shows that the ABA'-design is merely a part of a complex network of formal and structural strategies. One aspect of this network was discussed by James Hepokoski: 'The conventional ABA'-impression is present only secondarily, albeit significantly, as a telling side-effect of the more generating rotational principle' (Hepokoski 2010, 14). This sounds plausible, but the problem persists that for many listeners it's the A-B-A'-form which remains in the foreground. Therefore, it is more productive to interpret Debussy's musical forms as a superposition of conflicting strategies.

In this somewhat confusing situation, it surely makes sense to consider the structure of timbre as an additional factor. If we do that, we might be able to implement a critical discussion about the 'inner life and structure' of Debussy's musical forms.

Methods

The quest for a methodology which might enable us to relate timbre to form, is not merely a matter of the 21st century. In the 1950s and 60s, it was one of the main research areas of integral serialism. And in the 80s, Fred Lerdahl suggested to analyse the timbres of certain pieces hierarchically, using the paradigm of treelike ramification. This approach was taken on and discussed by other authors. However, in the context of the multiperspectivity and refinement of Debussy's music, it seems to me quite problematic to establish a hierarchy of timbres.

In the 1980s, another promising approach was suggested by Robert Cogan. In his theory of *Sonic Design*, he prefers a mode of analysis 'that accounts for the complete sound of music. It recognizes sound's many supranotational elements (...) like 'spectra, attack and incidental noise, interference phenomena, and tone modulation' (Cogan 1984, 397). In his book, Cogan also presents an extensive analysis of *Nuages*. He considers the process of registral change, the aspects of spectral brightness, interference, attack noise and many other factors which lead to a global view of the piece from the perspective of timbre.

In the scope of this paper, Cogan's approach will be complemented with timbre analyses generated with the help of the software MIRtoolbox. Since a couple of decades, sonogram analyses are used for different purposes – f.e. in ethnomusicology, in interpretation research or in analysis of art music or popular music. Benefits and handicaps of this method are discussed controversially. Some scholars criticized that sonogram analyses depend on so many factors that one can see what one wants to see. However, scholars who disclaim musical software, must rely on the human ear. Listening can be a powerful tool. But if we rely only on listening, the consequence can be that we hear what we want to hear. In this situation, a combination of close listening and software seems to be a versatile tool which can be used to explore the rich world of timbre.

Implications

In order to manage the complexities of sonogram analysis and to exclude accidental interpretations, four different recordings of Debussy's *Nuages* by Vladimir Ashkenazy, Pierre Boulez, Roger Désormière and Arturo Toscanini are analysed and compared. This leads to the following results: In the beginning and in the end of *Nuages*, a specific quality of sound is dominating which can be called ambivalent or even enigmatic.

The initial and final stages of the musical process present a superposition of two different tonal orientations (G, B). Neither of these tonal poles is given any stable preference. This ambivalence is supported by the refined use of timbres. In the middle stages of the piece, other sound qualities are dominating.

This kind of 'sound design' brings Wagner's *Tristan prelude* into mind, where the beginning and end are also dominated by enigmatic woodwind sounds (flute, French horn, clarinet and bassoon) while the middle part prefers other colors (a big upsurge of the whole orchestra, dominated by strings and brass instruments).

Altogether, these results of timbre analysis can lead to a new reflection of the formal design of *Nuages*. The tripartite ABA'-form is not passé if we re-evaluate it by connecting its conventional outside design to the inner structure of timbre. By doing that, we recognize that specific sound qualities and their relationship to form and listening are at the core of Debussy's music.

However, there are aesthetic conclusions which reach even further. Timbre analysis also makes possible to re-evaluate the term 'impressionism' in its misinterpretation as 'static pointillism'. Timbre is not something we should evaluate superficially (as a kind of 'sensual atmosphere'). By establishing relations between timbre, structure and form we are enabled to reach a deeper understanding of musical form.

Keywords

Form, Musical Perception, Musical Praxis, Psychology of Music, Timbre.

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