

HKDSE Music – Listening (Form 4)

Week 14 – Impressionism

Impressionism

- A term derived from art, used for music that evokes moods and visual imagery through colorful harmony and instrumental timbre.
- moods are evoked through suggestion, connotation, and indirection rather than expressing them directly
- the artworks offer an impression of vague, hazy outlines, and emphasizes the play of light and movement
- Impressionism in music is thought to begin with Debussy's *Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun) in 1894
 - notable composers: **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918) and **Maurice Ravel** (1875–1937)
 - notable painters: **Claude Monet** (1840–1926) and **Auguste Renoir** (1841–1915)
 - notable writers: **Charles Baudelaire** (1821–1867), **Stéphane Mallarmé** (1842–1898), **Paul Verlaine** (1844–1896), and **Arthur Rimbaud** (1854–1891)

Characteristics of Impressionism in Music

- ***Fluid, flexible and non-teleological form***

Impressionist music for the most part avoids the kind of goal-oriented structures that had dominated music of the preceding century or more. These works flow instead from one moment to the next, building and receding in tension but without the same sense of striving toward resolution.
- ***Extended chords and non-diatonic scales***

Although impressionist composers never abandoned tonality, they used **extended chords** (that is, chords with ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth added) to an unprecedented degree. They also drew occasionally on **non-diatonic/modal scales** such as the **whole tone scale** and **pentatonic scale**, creating sounds evocative of East Asia.
- ***Parallel voice leading***

Individual voices often move without strict regard to the traditional rules of voice leading. Parallel fourths, fifths, and octaves contribute to the distinctive sound of impressionism.
- ***Fluid rhythm***

The rhythms of impressionist music tend to be fluid, often avoiding any definite sense of meter and preferring instead an elusive sense of motion that at times moves forward and at times seems to hang in suspension.

- ***Emphasis on timbre and tone color***

Debussy and Ravel were both renowned for their orchestrations, which rely frequently on techniques that distribute thematic ideas throughout the entire fabric of the orchestra.

Debussy treats the piano as an “instrument without hammers,” with a tone that is more lyrical, intimate, and sensuous.

Characteristics of Debussy’s musical style

- avoidance of traditional harmonic syntax; using harmonies for expressive effects
- free and spontaneous, almost improvised
- explore a wide range of instrumental timbres (muted strings and brass)
- use of non-diatonic scales such as pentatonic scale, whole-tone scale, and octatonic scale
- dissonances need not resolve but as part of the sonic quality of the chord
- parallel chords up or down the scale

“Music is the arithmetic of sounds as optics is the geometry of light.”
(Claude Debussy)

Characteristics of Ravel’s musical style

- Use of a **wide variety of musical styles** and influences
 - *Baroque*: Menuet antique (1895), Pavane pour une infante défunte (Pavane for a Dead Princess, 1899), and Le tombeau de Couperin (Memorial for Couperin, 1914–17)
 - *Classical*: Sonatine for piano (1903–5), String Quartet in F (1902–3), Piano Trio (1914), and Violin Sonata (1923–27)
 - *Spanish* style: Bolero (1928) and Rapsodie espagnole (Spanish Rhapsody, 1907–8)
 - *Viennese* style: La valse (1919–20)
 - *Romani (Gypsy)* style: Tzigane for violin and piano or orchestra (1924)
 - *Blue (Jazz)* style: Piano Concerto in G (1929–31) and the Piano Concerto for the Left Hand (1929–30)
- **Colourful orchestration**: he is renowned for handling instrumental timbres and using the orchestra to produce an imaginative array of tone colors.
- Besides some complex harmonies, Ravel often uses **traditional forms and diatonic melodies** in his compositions.

“I did my work slowly, drop by drop. I tore it out of me by pieces.”
(Maurice Ravel)