Mel Bonis: *Scènes de la forêt* (1928)

Mélanie Bonis (1858-1937) led a life seemingly adapted from the pages of a romance novel, for suppressed talent, celebrity peers, a secret child, and forbidden love all haunted her throughout her life. Despite the drama of her personal life, she maintained her passion for composition until the very end of her long life, though few of these have been absorbed into mainstream repertoire. Her *Scènes de la forêt*, a musical stroll through sun-dappled woods, was originally composed for French horn, flute, and piano and is here revived in the Debussyian guise of viola, flute, and harp.

Bonis was born to a bourgeois Parisian family who, highly conscientious of their social position and conservative Catholic beliefs, were loath to let Bonis pursue music professionally, despite her precocity. It was only in 1874, at the urging of a family friend who was also the cornet professor at the Conservatoire de Paris, M. Maury, that they agreed to send her to the Conservatoire to develop her talents. While at school, Bonis took lessons with César Franck, brushed shoulders with Claude Debussy, and fell in love with a young poet and singer, Amédée Landély Hettich. Her parents, undoubtedly, disapproved immensely and withdrew her from the Conservatoire, ending their passionate fling. Mélanie was soon married off to a wealthy businessman, nearly double her age, Albert Domange. Predictably, Domange *also* disapproved of Mélanie's compositions, and she was forced to put music to the side and turn instead to domestic matters. A decade after her marriage, Bonis met her sweetheart Hettich again, and the two engaged in an affair which led to the birth of a daughter, Madeleine, in 1899. Bonis somehow managed to mask the existence of Madeleine from her husband and family for nearly two decades. After the death of Domange, Bonis took Madeleine under her wing, but her son Édouard Domange began to fall in love with his half-sister. She was forced to reveal the truth of Madeleine's birth to both Madeleine (who still did not know) and Édouard. With this revelation, the most tumultuous phase of Bonis's life finally came to an end, and she lived the last decade and a half of her life in relative tranquility, continuing to compose and to spend time with her first lover, Hettich.

Mélanie Bonis was nonetheless unable to escape the misogyny of the era. Saint-Saëns said – ostensibly in praise of her 1901 piano quartet – "I've never imagined a woman could write such music." Thus, Mélanie adopted for herself the androgynous pseudonym *Mel*, avoiding at least the most outwardly nefarious effects of the public perception towards women in music. Nonetheless, Mel Bonis never received quite the level of public acclaim during her life that one would expect upon hearing her music. It has only been in the decades since, with the dedicated work of her descendants, that her music has seen a revival on concert stages. *Scènes de la forêt,* composed in 1928, is one such work.

The *Nocturne* begins with arpeggiated chords in the highest register of the harp, setting the mood for an ethereal fairy-tale. The harp in this movement takes on the role of the narrator, both setting up the scenes and enacting transitions between them. The viola provides an undulating accompaniment to the flute, which plays the role of an excited young child flitting through the woods, tired parent in tow. In the next movement: *A l'aube* (At Dawn) Bonis gives the harp a shimmering solo that gives the impression of a peaceful stream of water running through the forest. The harp is joined first by the viola and then the flute, who together play a pair of lovers sitting by the water bank. As the two melodic lines weave around each other, it seems that our

couple jumps in the water as the sun rises, a pair of dancing swans reveling in the blossoming of a new day, the relentless ostinato of the harp keeping them afloat.

The third movement, *Invocation*, is as serious as the name suggests. Here the viola takes the lead with a rhapsodic melody that puts even the most ferocious animals of the forest to sleep. Our musical journey leads us to a clearing where the forest's inhabitants indulge in their mid-afternoon nap, basking in the light of the warm sun. Where the two previous movements were full of motion from one location to the next, here the harmonies encourage us to remain stationary and close our eyes alongside a pair of fawns. The piece ends with an ode to the goddess of the hunt, *Pour Artemis,* with a triumphal duet between the viola and harp; the flute is mere filigree atop it all. This movement shows us the full extent of the forest's vivacity under the light of the full moon as we witness the forest's nocturnal activities. The finale calms back down to a serene lull as the forest dwellers return to their homes and we finally reach the end of the forest, the sylvan din receding behind us.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Mel Bonis: Wikimedia Commons

Debussy: *Sonata for flute, viola, and harp* (1915)

“L'effet produit, sans une dissonance, sans une fioriture, même adorable,
qui distrait — voilà ce que je cherche.”

> ‘The effect produced – without a single dissonance nor any ornamentation which distracts, no matter how adorable – that is precisely what I am looking for.’
>
> -Stéphane Mallarmé in a letter to Henri Cazalis, January 1864

Music is a temporal art, in which the unfolding of sounds over time forms the crux of artistic communication. In his *Sonata for flute, viola, and harp,* Claude Debussy (1862-1918) shows how music can be both spatial and visual in addition to temporal. Though there is no explicit or singular visual translation of his music (i.e., it is not programmatic), in true *symboliste* fashion, Debussy’s music grasps our hands and leads us, through the powers of metaphoric association, to experience a musical journey alongside him. In the *Sonata*, the opening harp and flute duet is as cinematic as a camera panning over a still body of water with the sun slowly rising in the background. The high register of the flute’s melody, its quick dip down and swift ascent back up all mimic the motion of a bird as it flies high over the sea. The serene mood of the harp’s opening chords draws associations with the sunrise, the quietest moment of the day. Yet, despite these clear links we can draw between images of the world and movement through it, the music inherently carries none of it. In fact, it is only through the effects of a long history of acculturation and collective association that these musical gestures can succeed in painting such a clear picture for us. More importantly, our vantage point in 2024 cannot be equated to the way that Debussy or his contemporaries would have heard this piece, for we stand divided by a century full of cinema, the most potent marriage of the visual and audial arts.

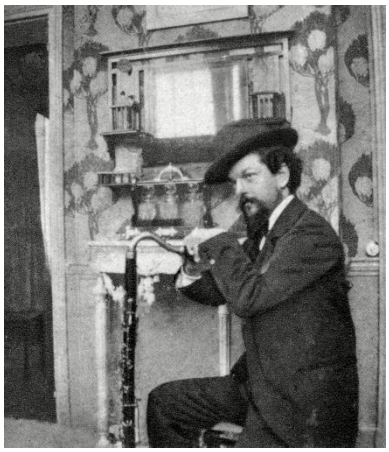
The key for *symboliste* artists, as Stéphane Mallarmé succinctly summarized above, was to capture the “effect produced” by the thing, not the thing itself, and let the audience realize this, not getting bogged down in the ornamentation or in finding 1:1 semantic mapping. Debussy, as evidenced by his penchant for *symboliste* poetry, certainly counted himself among their ranks. Indeed, the visual aspects of Debussy’s work are not contained solely in the metaphoric realm of music, but envelope the physical score itself. Interlocking motifs, a technique that he used to great advantage in his orchestral score for *La Mer*, show up all over the *Sonata* as small snippets of musical material find themselves passed between the three instruments continuously. In the vertical space of the score, this gives the effect of patterns that repeat themselves across the different instruments, tying everything together on even a visual level.

Debussy wrote the *Sonata for flute, viola, and harp* as part of a larger collection of *Six sonates pour divers instruments.* However, he died in 1918 before this project would see its completion, having only composed three of the six (this, a sonata for violin and piano, and one for cello and piano). There are even rumors he first intended this to be for flute, oboe, and harp, but decided to substitute viola for oboe because of its unique nasal timbre. The three movements of the *Sonata* play out as a larger scene, with no clear disjunction between movements. Indeed, though they are marked separately as: *Pastorale, Interlude, Finale*, the movements flow from one into the other, each one a musical continuation of the last. The true beauty of Debussy *Sonata* lies in the journey of making one’s own associations with the music and letting it transport us from our seats to a world of our own imagination. So, we shall leave the music be with its vague titles and return to the man whose mind dreamt this musical journey.

Claude Debussy's parents intended to enroll their son in a naval academy, to become a sailor of the wide-open seas before his musical talent was discovered by the piano teacher (and former pupil of Chopin) Mme. Mauté de Fleurville. It is perhaps no small coincidence that Mauté de Fleurville was also the mother-in-law of the symboliste poet, Paul Verlaine, whose work Debussy clearly influenced Debussy's musical philosophy. Though his calling was in music, Debussy never forgot the summers he spent in the Côte d'Azur as a child. Debussy thus held a deep fascination with not only the sea but also with Japanese culture, and it is no secret that he asked for the frontispiece of *La Mer* to be a print of Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. For the *Sonata*, that fascination plays out in his use of hexachord harmonies that mimic the sounds of Japanese traditional music. Tōru Takemitsu, a twentieth century composer of Japanese origin, in fact found inspiration to compose similar works featuring Japanese harmonies from Debussy and John Cage.

Debussy thought of his music not as definitive objects of dramatic import, but rather as "sketches," an important label that helped him differentiate himself from the *impressioniste* label then in vogue for the visual arts. Though he makes extensive use of the techniques leveraged by so-called "musical impressionism" –disregard for tonal harmony and Common Practice counterpoint, exploration of timbral colors through unorthodox orchestration, embrace of modal harmony and non-traditional scales – Debussy self-consciously disavowed the label in 1908: "Imbeciles call [what I am trying to write in Images] 'impressionism', a term employed with the utmost inaccuracy, especially by art critics who use it as a label to stick on Turner, the finest creator of mystery in the whole of art!" To Debussy, this *Sonata* was more like a series of pencil sketches with the extreme visual and spatial depth afforded by the monochrome nature of the medium. Just like Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Debussy hoped the images he drew were not matter-of-face descriptions, but rather "veiled reflections of the senses pointing to archetypal meanings through their esoteric connections" (as described by Jean Moréas in the Symbolist Manifesto).

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Claude Debussy, Britannica

Takemitsu: *And Then I Knew 'twas* *Wind* (1992)

Tōru Takemitsu (1930-1996) was a Japanese composer who held a deeply bittersweet relationship with his country. At the early age of fourteen, he was conscripted into the Japanese military during the height of the Second World War. Although he described the experience as being "very bitter" and troubling, it was during his military service that he was first exposed to European classical

music, in particular the French song, *Parlez-moi d'amour* (Tell me about love). After the war, Takemitsu worked for the US Armed Forces during their military occupation of Japan, but the memories of war's atrocities drove him further and further away from the cultural history of Japan. He studied briefly in 1948 with Yasuji Kiyose, he became known as a self-taught composer free from the shackles of academia. Indeed, in 1951, he became a founding member of the Jikken Kōbō (実験工房, or 'experimental workshop') which was a music composition group that focused on the development of electronic music *outside* of the academy.

Due to his unhappy experiences with his homeland in the early part of his life, Takemitsu developed a sound that was (to his ear) fully free of Japanese cultural influences. While Western composers were obsessed with the hexachord and mimicking Eastern harmonies in their compositions, Takemitsu sought to do exactly the opposite. Stravinsky, upon hearing his *Requiem for string orchestra*, was deeply impressed by the young Takemitsu and a lunch meeting between the two left the younger composer deeply impressed. Takemitsu was also greatly inspired by the music and techniques of John Cage. In fact, he wrote that it was Cage whose music and interest in Zen Buddhism brought him to accept his own cultural tradition and attempt to incorporate these elements into his works. Takemitsu's music after the 1960s is thus starkly different, incorporating a wide variety of Japanese instruments, harmonies, and forms. This transformation is key to understanding Takemitsu's music; the young man witnessed a Japan equated with wartime horror while the older Takemitsu saw the peace and serenity that Japanese culture could offer after meeting John Cage. He even started playing the *biwa*, a native Japanese instrument similar to a lute.

Beyond the music of Cage and Stravinsky, Takemitsu was also inspired by another name on this concert's program, Claude Debussy. He referred to Debussy as his "great mentor." Though Debussy's own fascination with Japanese history likely played no small part in Takemitsu's admiration, it is truly the form and structure of Debussy's music that Takemitsu most clearly embraced. Takemitsu composed *And Then I Knew 'twas Wind* as a response to Debussy's *Sonata for flute, viola, and harp*, one of the few works directly composed for this unique ensemble. Where Debussy employed hexachords in his *Sonata*, Takemitsu takes it a step further, giving two hexachords (F-G-A-C-C#-E and D#-F#-G-Bb-B-D) a serialist treatment, walking through all the notes of the chord before repeating any of them.

Just like Bonis's *Scènes de la forêt*, Takemitsu's *And Then I Knew 'twas Wind* is a musical journey, taking us as listeners through different corners of the human psyche in a series of four episodes. The title is extracted from a Dickinson poem: "Like rain it sounded 'till it curved… And then I knew 'twas wind." The evocation of wind and rain are all throughout this work for the musical gestures evoke exactly the sensations we experience during a summer rainstorm. The piece is in one continuous movement and is marked by Takemitsu's mastery over instrumental timbres. While listening, it is sometimes nearly impossible to tell where one instrument begins and the other ends, even in an ensemble composed of instruments taken from three completely different families.

And Then I Knew 'twas Wind begins with a harp solo which outlines both the timbral range of the instrument and the outer bounds of this piece. The viola and flute enter together, each one so keyed into the other's resonance that the divisions between them are blurred, no small feat considering that one is the shrillest woodwind and the other the most nasal of the strings. After the introduction, Takemitsu quotes directly from Debussy's *Sonata*, marking the work as an homage to his French predecessor. Though the work is one movement, it unfolds over a series of short episodes, each

about a minute or so long, like a theme and variations. The air is given ample time to clear between these micro-movements, but the flow of the music remains uninterrupted.

What Takemitsu so successfully achieves in his work is the navigation between the natural harmonic resonances and overtones of the three instruments at play: the flute, viola, and harp. He knew very well that the viola's upper registers sound closest to the flute when it plays a harmonic, and he dovetails the two parts at exactly that moment. The harp, meanwhile, blends best in its lower register, and the flute matches the viola in moments of trilling. These slightest of details, alongside his knowledge of the overtone series allowed Takemitsu to stitch together these three disparate elements in seamless motion from one to the other. Takemitsu also weaves together thematic citations of his other compositions treating water and wind into the work.

Halfway through, the harp enacts the effects of a *glissando* by tuning the A string up and down by a minor third, clearly mimicking the sound of a Japanese *biwa*. Towards the end, a viola and flute interlude in complete homophony with each other controls the texture for the entire episode and though they play in parallel sixths, the effect achieved is nearly one of perfect octaves. In *And Then I Knew 'twas Wind*, Takemitsu has found the exact textures which allow the three instruments to blend into one, a fundamental tenet of Zen Buddhism, in which the ultimate goal of life is to achieve reunion with the primal force of the world.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Toru Takemitsu, BBC Radio 3

Aguila: *Submerged* (2013)

Written in 2013, *Submerged* was commissioned by Hat Trick and Brigham Young University. It is based on Alfonsina Storni's romantic, surrealist poem "Yo en el fondo del mar." On the surface, both the poem and music seem innocent and light-hearted, but one feels differently when the author's fascination with the sea, and her later suicide by drowning in it, are taken into

consideration. The piece follows the form of the poem except for the lively introduction and a coda which illustrate the poet's childhood near her native Argentine Andes, and in Switzerland. With six harp loud chords, the piece "falls" deep underwater: this slow middle section is mysterious, intimate, and magical. It recreates the poem's isolated submerged world where fish with flowers, octopus, and sirens dance while birds chirp happily far above water. The harp uses unusual extended techniques, some stemming from Paraguayan harp playing. The viola adds a rhythmic edge by playing constant multiple stop pizzicati imitating a *Charango*. The flute is the *Quena* of the ensemble and it uses often extended techniques as well. "In my interpretation of Storni's poem this underwater world is that special place of isolation where many artists withdraw to create, a place and mood that can easily turn into depression. A place that ultimately Alfonsina chose to remain, and which became her death. In my *Submerged*, I continued the events of the poem and made the listener return to the real world above water. This return is triggered by the memories of her childhood played by the harp and viola as a music box Ländler which turns into a Vidalita, both music which Alfonsina would have heard in her childhood.
-Miguel del Aguila

Yo en el fondo del mar from *Mundo de siete pozos* (1934) Alfonsina Storni (1892 – 1937)	**Me at the Bottom of the Sea** from *World of Seven Wells* (1934) Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938)
En el fondo del mar hay una casa de cristal. A una avenida de madréporas da. Un gran pez de oro, a las cinco, me viene a saludar. Me trae un rojo ramo de flores de coral. Duermo en una cama un poco más azul que el mar. Un pulpo me hace guiños a través del cristal. En el bosque verde que me circunda —din don…din dan…— se balancean y cantan las sirenas de nácar verdemar. Y sobre mi cabeza arden, en el crepúsculo, las erizadas puntas del mar.	At the bottom of the sea there is a house made of glass, at the edge of a coral-lined road. A big golden fish comes to greet me at five; it brings me a red bouquet of coral as flowers. I sleep on a bed somewhat bluer than the sea. An octopus now winks at me through the glass. In the green forest that surrounds me swaying mermaids sing —ding, dong … ding, ding— in their nacre and aquamarine. And above my head glow in the twilight the prickling pins of the sea.

Translation by M. del Aguila (2013)

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