David Walther: *Short Story for Viola and Harp*

Let us dream together for a few short moments, letting our minds wander into greener pastures beyond the world we inhabit. Our guides on this journey will be the harpist (Marcia Dickstein) and violist (David Walther), who will describe the sights and sounds of the verdant wood through the interplay of their musical voices. The gentle undulation of the harp's opening ostinato set the scene for this *Short Story* narrated by the mellifluous voice of the viola. As you listen, open your ears to the sonorities of the viola—which so rarely takes on the melodic role in chamber repertoire—as it weaves in and out of the harp's embrace.

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