



September 23, 2020

## A Needle in the Haystack: Attributing the Awakening in Modernism

How does one define modernism in music? Pierre Boulez describes Claude Debussy's "Preludé à l'après-midi d'un faune" as an awakening or beginning to modern music. I disagree with Boulez's belief that Debussy's "Prelude" is the seed of modern music; although I will acknowledge that Debussy's music does show modernistic characteristics such as his use of tonality and timbre, I do not believe that to be enough to earn him the title as the awakening of modernism in music. In this essay I will review the historical context and influences that pertain to shaping Debussy's compositions, as well as, suggesting who I believe to plant the seeds of modernism. Furthermore, I examine the topics of modernism in the context of Western music at the turn of the 20th century, and compare these topics to Debussy's "Prelude". Finally, I will examine Debussy's "Prelude" in connection with Stéphane Mallarmé's poem "L'après-midi d'un faune" and both works' overall role in modernism.

Context plays an important role in the scope of defining modernism: the focus in this essay will be on the La Belle Époque in France ranging from the late 1880s to the start of World War 1. Examples of composers active during this period in France include Claude Debussy, Gabriel Fauré, Camille Saint-Saëns, and Théodore Dubois. La Belle Époque is considered to be a golden age that followed the end of the Franco-Prussian war which resulted in a period of stability and peace that allowed that arts, sciences, and industries to reach new innovative heights (Wilde, 2019). This shift to stability and prosperity laid the groundwork for modernism in the arts. A young Claude Debussy was shaped by the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé whose work was full of symbolism; he defined his poetry as a hermetic practice saying, "Everything that is sacred and that wishes to remain so must envelope itself in mystery" this resonated with Debussy who wrote in 1893, "Music really ought to have been a hermetical science, enshrined in texts so hard and laborious to decipher as to discourage the herd of people who treat it as casually as they do a handkerchief" (Ross, 2007, p. 43). However, this idea was not particularly

new or revolutionary, another French poet, Charles Baudelaire who died in the mid-1800s had embraced this same mindset proclaiming the idea of “the artist in opposition to society” where the lifestyle of an artist was all encompassing (Ross, 2007). With this in mind, I cannot view Debussy as the true awakening of modern music when there are others who laid the foundation for him. Foremost, Franz Liszt, a prominent Hungarian composer and musician who died in 1886, who explored atonality in his later years - questioning the pillars of harmony and resolution as were and (to an extent) still are commonly perceived. I argue that it was Liszt, who gradually moved from traditional Romanticism towards questioning traditional harmony, that ignited the unconventional treatment of musical settings and compositions to become widespread throughout Western Europe eventually working its way into favor in France.

Within the scope of Western music at the turn of the 20th century, one of the most striking elements of modernism that emerges is tonality. The transition through music eras from strictly tonic and dominant, to expanding with extensions of each, adding predominant chords, and topping it all off with embellishments morphed over time into this formula for Western tonal harmony. The public had become accustomed to resolution and dissonance in a tonal sense. In Thomas Johnson’s article “Tonality as Topic: Opening A World of Analysis for Early Twentieth-Century Modernist Music”, Johnson aims to provide a quasi-definition to modernism in the early 1900s; in his writing, acknowledges that tonality (or lack thereof) is commonly perceived as defining genres such as Debussy’s frequent use of whole tone and octatonic scales. However, Johnson resolves that tonality is just a topic in modernism and not representative of modernism as a genre:

Tonality becomes-topic as the increase of both tonal references and sociocultural meanings - generated by the markedness gain of tonal figurae - produces a malleable network of signification, and a spectrum of potential tonal-topicality emerges during this era... The archaizing notion of tonality has proven durable throughout the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries as composers recurrently employ tonal figurae to evoke pastness and the expansive codes involved therein. (Johnson, 2017, p. 13)

Debussy’s use of the whole tone and octatonic scales were used as tonal references to evoke a feeling of exoticness, and take the listener out of their accustomed tonal palette. The figurae that Johnson refers to is an idea borrowed from Stephen Rumph indicating a musical figure or structure used to symbolize or represent ideas or image; I will return to the idea of figurae in the

next section as it connects Debussy to Mallarmé. Nonetheless, modernism cannot simply just be a means of different tonality. Thomas Johnson's article also supports this by repeating that tonality is just a topic within the larger picture of modernism. Comparatively, in previous periods of transition, such as from Baroque to Classical, other topics attributed to change included form, ensemble size and instrumentation, and finally, timbre and specific instrument setting. Of these topics, Debussy's "Prelude" only expands on one other topic outside of tonality that being timbre. Debussy explores different timbres by pairing the solo flute with different instruments each time: the initial solo starts alone and is followed by an arpeggiating harp and block chord from the oboe, clarinet, and horn; the second time, the solo is with the clarinet and strings; and the third time, the solo is with the harp and strings. Robert Langevin compared the treatment of timbres in Debussy's "Prelude" to Monet's impressionist painting, *Haystacks*, as it represents light through different seasons and times of the day - such as Debussy is altering the filter of the flute solo with the variety in accompanying instruments (W. Stern, personal communication, September 14, 2020). Without a doubt, Debussy exemplifies modernism through his use of tonality and timbre, however, these two topics are not enough to convince me that he sparked the awakening of modernism.

Admittedly, I have less contextual knowledge to analyze Mallarmé's poem than Debussy's music, the poem exemplifies what I consider to be within the realm of modernism. As aforementioned, in the Ross text, Mallarmé shared the same mindset of artistry being shrouded in complete elusiveness to outsiders which a young Debussy adopted as well. The symbolism and allusion is present - something I came to expect with my limited knowledge of literary modernism - one example being the line "Syrinx by the lake where you await me, to flower again!" which is a reference to the nymph Syrinx who had been turned into river reeds to escape the affections of Pan. Code elaborates on this symbolism:

The divided body of this "character" an obvious symbol of the mind-body duality he experiences in his pursuit of two elusive nymphs, can suggest more interesting possibilities... the faun's lower body, symbol of his sexual desire, can also be seen as a metaphor for the motivating concern of the entire form... on the other hand, the faun's human upper body, perhaps more directly symbolic of the mental processes that intervene between desire and its complete, animal satisfaction, can represent a divided experience of reading. (Code, 2014, pp. 499-500)

Returning to *figurae*, Debussy's prelude uses a famous tonality to evoke the dissonance between the faun's upper and lower body in his setting of the Mallarmé "L'après-midi d'un faune". The use of *figurae* is present from the opening of the piece which is an allusion echoing Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde" symbolic half-diminished seventh chord. David Code provides a further analysis linking the *figurae* to both the Mallarmé text and Wagner's chord, "Debussy's opening flute solo, perhaps the obvious timbre to represent the faun's initial solitude in his world, is answered by harp arpeggiations of a half diminished seventh chord up and down through four octaves - a clear sonorous equivalent to the opening vision of "rosy flesh" that "vaults into the air"" (Code, 2014, p. 517). While Debussy is using modernist elements in his music - such as using tonality to evoke ideas and timbre to represent the passage of time - this allusion is not revolutionary as he is referencing Wagner's famous "Tristan chord" to evoke the same leitmotif representing desire for the Mallarmé poem. Certainly, La Belle Époque allowed artists of all kinds - art, writing, music - to explore new means of expression; adding Mallarmé and Debussy to form this "trio" of modernity during this time in France I will not dispute that their contributions shaped the larger picture of modernism. However, I argue there is a distinction in regards to Mallarmé and Debussy - where Mallarmé alluded to other works, he transformed his poem "L'après-midi d'un faune" into a work that transcends past the referenced work rather than simply building upon it such as I regard Debussy. In conclusion, France's La Belle Époque gave way for artists to go beyond the traditional mold and both the poet, Stéphane Mallarmé, and composer, Claude Debussy, represented modernism; however, I disagree with Pierre Boulez's claim that Debussy's "Prelude" was the awakening of modernism and rather was just a cog in the wheel of transition from romanticism towards 20th century modernism through exploration of the topics, specifically, tonality and timbre within modernism.