

The common points between the works of Claude Debussy and Claude Monet (Philosophical reading)

By: Walid Bou Serhal

Music researcher and musicology instructor

Notre Dame university N.D.U Lebanon

Email: bouserhalwalid@gmail.com

Abstract

This research includes a philosophical reading of the common ground between the composer Claude Debussy and the plastic painter Claude Monet. It also includes information about the Impressionist school in Europe and the characteristics of the art of each of the two Claudes, as we made comparisons between the musical extracts taken from Debussy's work through their forms that he adopted and in which Monet expressed his artistic ideas about these extracts, whether in color or in shapes.

Keywords: Debussy, Monet, painting, impressionism, common points, color, music impressionism.

Introduction

During my reading of articles concerning the fields of painting and music, and during my deepening of these two fine arts, and my studies, I found commonalities between the music of Debussy and the paintings of Claude Monet and impressionist paintings in general, I have seen several exhibitions, and I have heard several recordings of Debussy, which helped me to find a resemblance.

I chose Debussy because he happened to be famous among the impressionist composers.

In order to reach my goal, I will start by defining Impressionism in general, then find some important characteristics and elucidate the works of Debussy namely “La Mer”.

The study will be focusing on the scales, the intervals and their aesthetics. In the same spirit, study will be made on the paintings of Monet, and then the comparison will be conducted between the two artists and their work.

Research problem and questions

The main problem is that lovers of painting and music don't know that every fine art, whether painting, music, photography, theater and even architecture, has a link that is related to form or content, in addition that critics ignore and don't give that link the necessary importance.

So, we ask: What is the link between music and painting? What are the elements that make up this link? What form of music is compatible with color and shape? What is the impressionist current and what are its elements?

Goals and importance

The aim of this research is to introduce students of fine arts to the common points between painting and music based on the music of Claude Debussy and Claude Monet's paintings, and through them, the definition of Impressionist art as a whole.

Literature previews

Most of the writers dealt with the Impressionist current of Debussy and Monet, but they dealt with it separately, we mention some references:

1. Simon Trezise dealt with the subject of Impressionism through “la mer” exclusively. (trezise, 1994).
2. Kristin Harney treated the Impressionist school and discussed it through several Monet painting as concrete examples. (harney, 2020).

3. Maurice Hinson Treated the Impressionist influence of Monet and Debussy in the Impressionist era in Europe and mentioned some Impressionist composers. (hinson, 2004).

Impressionist music

Generalities

Impressionist music is a musical style that belongs to the modern era that melted into Europe in the last quarter of the 19th century and whose main representative is Claude Debussy (Katzbichler , 1964). The term *impressionism* in music has long been debated, the composers themselves having expressed in their time a great reluctance to this name.

The first works of Impressionist music are considered to have been composed by Franz Liszt, while the first orchestral work of Impressionist music is the symphonic poem *prélude à l'après midi d'un faune* by Claude Debussy premiered in 1894.

We distinguish some important points by noting that everything related to Impressionist music can be traced to Impressionist painting.

The pillars of impressionist music and painting are: rhythmic audacity, sensitivity, firmness of melodic design, richness and refinement of harmony.

These pillars also contain the creation of different works of art offered by symbolic poets and impressionist painters. This style stands opposite to rhetoric and seeks to act on sensitivity.

His innate nonconformity is that of a poet who, beyond school recipes, no longer intends to collect anything but the lesson of nature, the only one As Debussy once said in one of his letters,¹ « *écoutons les leçons du vent qui passe et qui raconte l'histoire du monde* ».

the Characteristics

The concept of tonality in Impressionist music is based on “pillars of tonality” such as: pseudo-traditional centers (diatonic and triad chord progressions, reminiscent of major-minor modes), tones and progressions other than major-minor (modal patterns, mixed modes, exotic tones) sevenths and ninths of different kinds, and even ambiguous structures, (augmented chords, sounds of the whole tone scale, parallel dissonant structures).

¹ Translation to English: “let us listen to the lessons of the passing wind which tells the story of the world”.

These sounds serve as organizational strengths and help provide direction and tonal unity by their variation and their recurrence. The tonal organization then depends on the balance and interaction of independent sound effects rather than tonal relationships.

Impressionism through the works of Claude Debussy

In the works of Debussy, we find several musical points which put this famous composer in the first rank among the other impressionist composers between the last quarter of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th century.

Debussy's music is found at the crossroads of tone and tone. Like modal music, musical ideas express, not a tonality, but the habitual character of a mode, and their harmonization comes from the integral resonance of the mode rather than the tonal harmonization, in a way that each idea carries its own. own harmonic system, like the use of parallel chords, absence of preparatory dominant which announces the arrival of the tonic, as well as the absence of succession of chords (not to mention progression) in the presentation of the main theme. (See figures below).

1. Musical idea with its own harmonic personality, the following motif uses the full resonance of the tone mode (extract from “voiles de Debussy”)



extract 1

2. Musical idea based on the chromatic tensions between the first two chords. (Excerpt from “les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” Debussy)



extract 2

3. Musical Idea of using parallels chords. The chord is transposed in semitones regardless of its tonal function. (Extract from the same previous piece).



extract 3

4. Musical Idea of using the integral resonance of the mode of D. This mode gives a past side of the passage (extract from “il était une fois” Debussy). We see the bass playing parallel chords, reinforcing the medieval aspect.



extract 4

Based on these examples, we notice that the impressionist is made of incomplete musical phrases, which explains that it causes impressions or sensations, and this is why this style could be associated with impressionism.

We also note that the cadence is not in any way within the framework of the melodies neither the form and the tonality which are as unstable as the motive. It is evidently all free.

Debussy's music is unrestrained, the themes are fragmented. Color and sensation predominate (often violent: nothing false than the idea of a fuzzy or vague Debussy; his drawing is always crisp and his music powerfully sensual), the dissonance is released. The influence of exotic traditions (pentatonic scale, whole tone scale, etc.) is considerable.

Debussy, like the other Impressionists, uses timber and harmony the same way impressionist painters use color in juxtaposed spots. There is much literature concerning coloring in impressionist music with the use of sounds, chords and timbres.

The dominant ninth chord to which Debussy has added a descriptive and suggestive vocation, (see figure n.5 below) is associated with certain emotional and atmospheric values. The impressionist timbre underwent a refinement of its romantic metamorphoses.

Debussy structures his works. the sake of permanence, his music mentions internal repetitions and parallelisms, pivot notes, pedal notes, pedal designs, constant patterns, long harmonies and melodic symmetries as to make a difference, according to her, Debussy often uses variations and comments with inventiveness in the melodic, harmonic, spatial, dynamic, rhythmic and phonetic domains, as well as the counter-songs and extensions of themes which are new elements.

Note that “*La Mer*” is a true example of what has been above.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the piece "La Mer" by Debussy. Each system consists of a piano accompaniment (Piano or Pno.) and a piano solo part (Pno.). The notation is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first system shows a piano accompaniment with a treble and bass staff, and a piano solo part with a treble staff. The second system includes the instruction "expressif" above the piano solo part. The third system includes the instruction "piu vivo" above the piano solo part and "pp" (pianissimo) above the piano accompaniment. The notation features various musical symbols such as notes, rests, accidentals, and dynamic markings.

Extract 5 “*La Mer*”

Debussy expresses the philosophy of the creation of lyrical prose in which he composes words and music. In the quartet of harmonic and rhythmic writing, it is revolutionary and in the “*prélude de l’après-midi d’un faune*”, we find a sumptuous sound illustration of *Mallarmé’s* poem.

In the concept of harmonic and rhythmic writing, the three nocturnes for orchestra (clouds, parties and sirens) are also born. However, a symbolist drama by “*Palléas et Mélisande*”, offered him the esoteric atmosphere, the independent lyricism that suited his musical conception.

Impressionism through the works of Claude Monet

The characteristic of this movement is that the subject to be painted consists of landscapes and scenes of everyday life (the painter paints on the spot not in paint shops. Monet was the first among the impressionist painters who came out to paint thanks to the innovations of the time. (monteiro, 2010-2011)

“His painting” was “packaged in tubes”. The “easel” was “portable.” “The train was a 'tool of travel' for painting new landscapes, in new regions (new places: suburbs, Normandy, etc.) By the fact that Monet “goes directly outside to paint, there is a “break” with tradition.

Monet, like all impressionist painters, considered light as the essential element, discarding dark hues in favor of pure colors.

Consequently, the painting was very pure. It was a juxtaposition of painterly touches. Complementary colors were used to enhance the contrast: yellow-purple; Red Green; blue-orange etc.

His paintings are made up of patterns. The essence of these motifs is the water mirror, the appearance of which is altered every moment, due to the scraps of sky that are reflected there and which give it its light and its movement. It is the body of water, receptacle of the incessant mobility of the sky, the object of his pictorial quest (See the figure below).

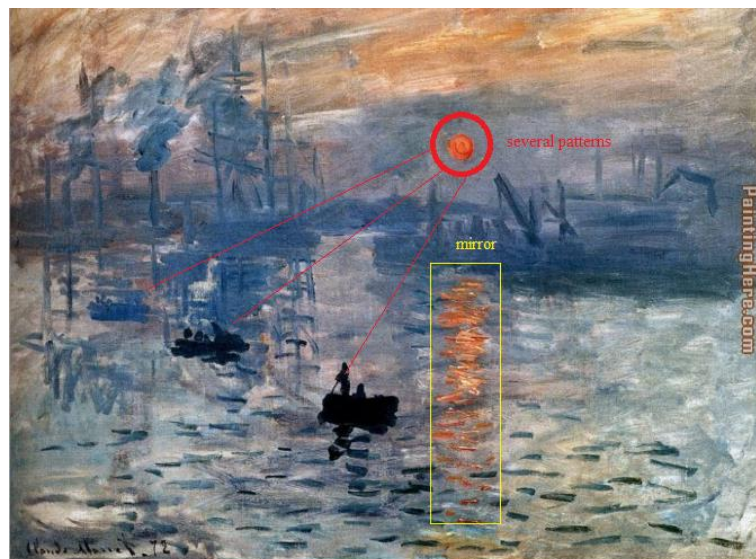


Figure 1 “Impression Sunrise Painting”

Common points in the impressionist music of Debussy and the painting of Claude Monet

With both artists, the revolution in antecedent norms is noted in a very salient way.

With Debussy, Debussy resolutions take on an entirely different scope from the classical style. Ex: the resolutions already known are undermined and these resolutions tend to raise awareness to unexpected degrees sometimes, and at other times to idiosyncratic expectations in non-neighboring ranges to translate an idea or some ideological form.

With Monet, as well, the absence of nuances and the use of color ranges reflects the strangeness of his style. In professional language, this style is called “non-patinated” (use of color ranges.)

The patina exists in the small particles but it is broken in the whole of the particles, what is called “aplomb”.

By making the comparison with Debussy, we find a resemblance between the two styles. Monet's particles resemble Debussy's little motifs, they contain musical nuances within them like the patina of Monet's particles.

The musical motifs that make up the piece are cut out and juxtaposed in an almost sudden and unexpected way.

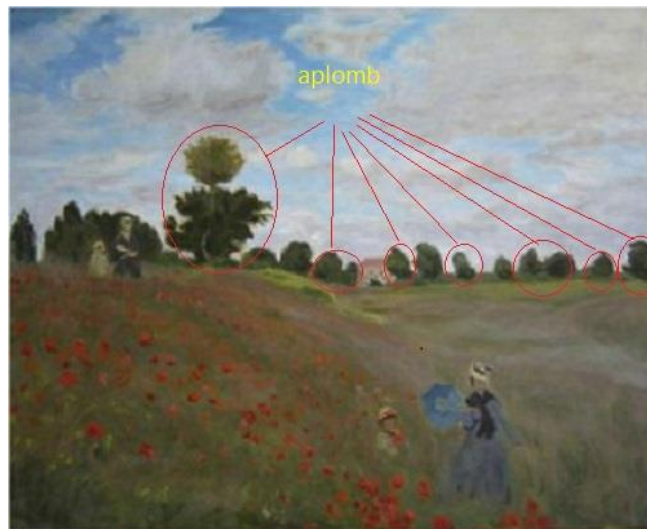


Figure 1 “Les coquelicots”

Comparison of the visual effect of Monet's colors with the sound effect of musical intervals in Debussy.

It is possible that the colors can hold together in the same way as the chords of music, colors which are in proportions corresponding to musical consonances and dissonances which seem to be more pleasant.

The consonant intervals produce a feeling of stability, while the dissonant intervals create a feeling of tension. (lubart, 2013, p. 127)

In all forms of compositions in music and painting, (symbolic and impressionist), the forms can have different dimensions: sometimes they are ascending (in crescendo), at other times they are descending (in decrescendo), following a line they may be vertical, horizontal, or diagonal movement.

The minor and major second

This interval is considered dissonant. In color it doesn't look too dissonant, it is used in conjunction with another color which is more distant. The contrast between the A block and the green background resembles clearly the dissonant chord of a major second or minor second.

The image displays a musical score for two instruments, labeled 'Piano' and 'Pno.' (Piano). The score is written in 6/8 time and features a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The 'Piano' part begins with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, both featuring triplets. The 'Pno.' part follows with a similar structure, also using triplets. The score includes a dynamic marking 'p' (piano) and a fermata over the final measure of the 'Piano' part. The overall texture is characterized by the use of triplets and a dissonant interval, likely a major second or minor second, as mentioned in the text.

extract 6

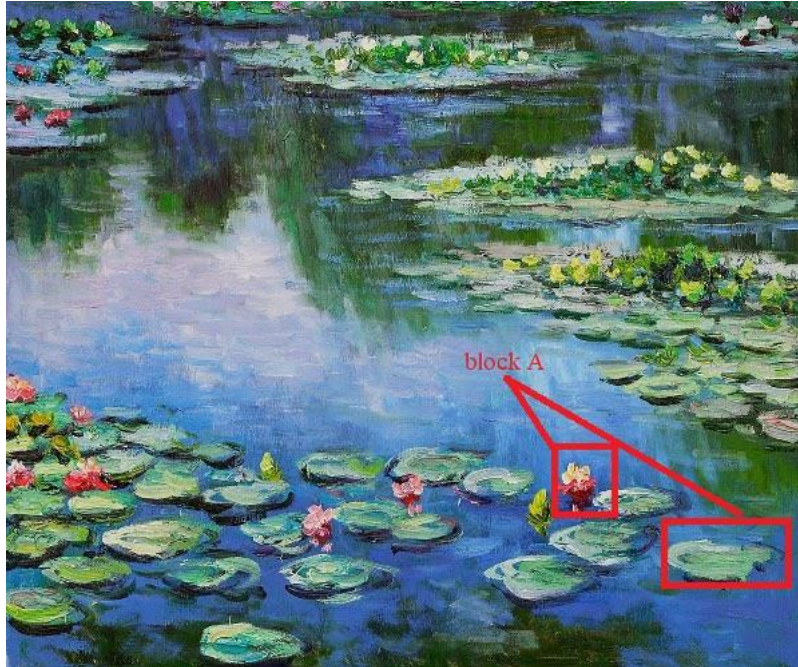


Figure 2 “art et glam”

The minor third

It is considered a little less stable than the major, it has a sad sound. In painting, the 3rd minor is a beautiful combination: harmonious but quite subtle. There is a feeling of sadness and gentleness. The succession of minor 3ces in the circled locations resembles the succession of thirds in the score of Debussy. As elsewhere in the majority of the painting we find three similar ones to express the gloom and serenity of the show.

expressif

p

Piano

expressif

p

Pno.

extract 7

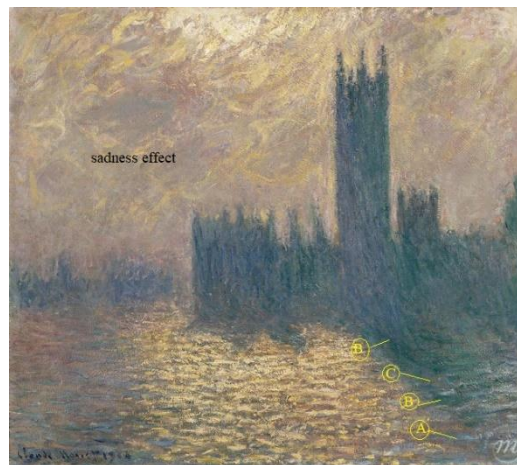


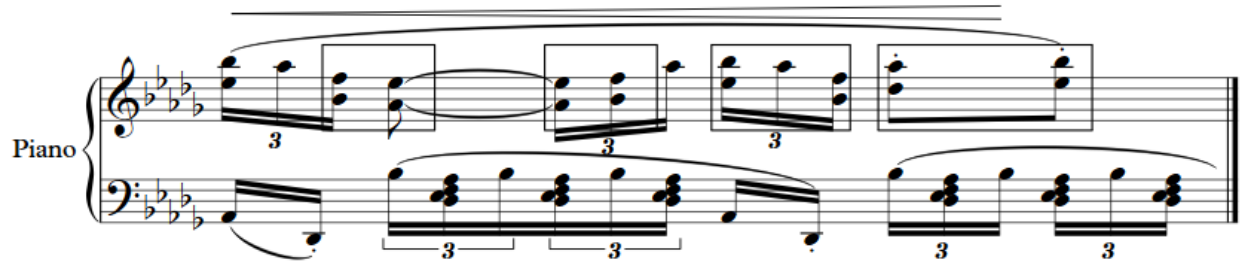
Figure 3 “le parlement de Londres”

The perfect fourth and the perfect fifth

They are not considered very dissonant²; they are stable intervals.

² They are dissonant when they follow one another consecutively, especially they become awkward when the repetition is long.

In painting, it is precisely a step far from being a complementary interval, and thus creates a movement in the colors as they strive to reach their true complement. Letters A, B, C, patterns representing parallel fifths. The letters D and E represent the two parallel fourths.



extract 8

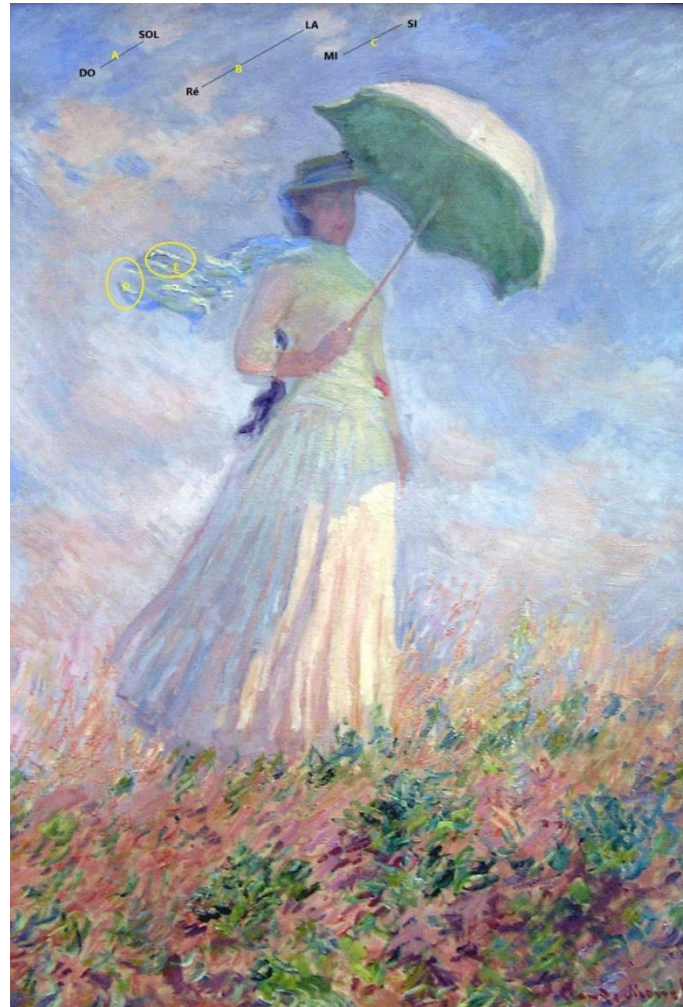


Figure 4 “woman with parasol”

The triton

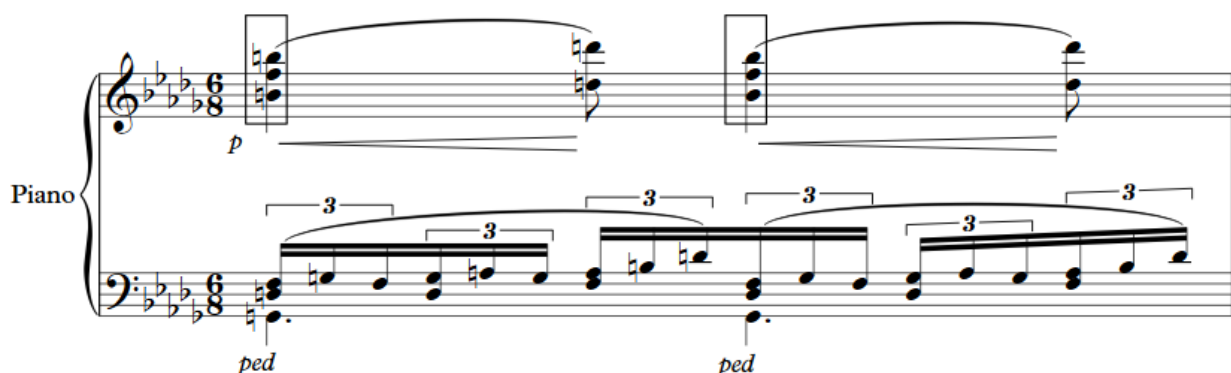
It is a special interval. It is in the middle of the scale of 12 tones. Cutting the octave into two. It is difficult to relate it to a musical equivalent.

He is in dissonant music and in consonantal painting. But maybe these are just the two places in the same corner. The combination of complementary colors is more striking. It contains a lot of energy and dynamism.

Despite the theoretical definitions attribute to Triton as a feeling of discomfort and inconvenience, Triton can sometimes, depending on its location in the musical phrase, give a relaxing feeling rather full and aesthetics. As in painting it can have the same effect.

Equivalent is represented by the glow of SI followed by the glow of MI and augmented by the MI # (FA).

The equivalent of the triton (diminished fifth), is presented by the glow of SI followed by the glow of FA # and diminished by the natural FA.



extract 9

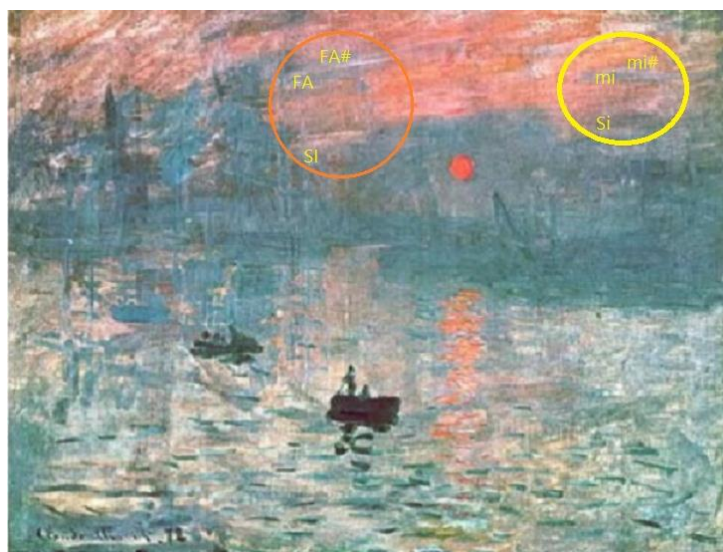


Figure 5 "Impression Sunrise Painting"

The octave

The octave is the interval between one note is its similar with the sum of six tones.

In Debussy's work, the sequence of the octaves is very salient, with Monet, too, the succession of octaves is easily visible.

Piano

2

p *express*

Pno.

5

dim

ped

extract 10

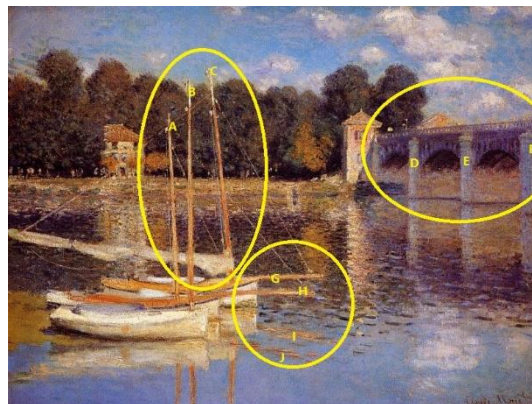


Figure 6

The consecution A B C in the figure 6 gives the impression that the octaves are different and unequal, but in reality, the visual inequality is due to the standards of the three dimensions (3D). The movement of consecutive octaves A B C is horizontal.

The movement of the D E F octaves is also horizontal, while the movement of the G H I J octaves is vertical.

The scale

As for the “pentatonic” scale, it is also composed of six tones, but the semitones are not expressed: in the pentatonic scale we have tones and tones and a half.

The absence of semitones, extracts awareness of melodies and chords at the same time denies and undermines all the data and rules of harmony, counterpoint and classical composition.



extract 11

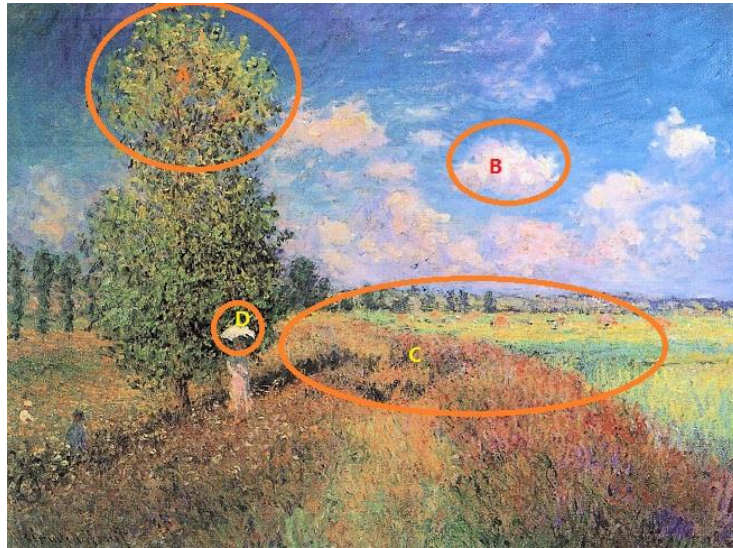


Figure 7

The absence of patina, is the equivalent of the absence of sensitive notes in the musical score. This absence is reflected by the unpredictable jumps translated by the aplomb. Obviously, this effect is defined by the term “contrast” which characterizes this style of art par excellence.

Tonal and modal center

From the point of view of tonal center and modal center, these are the main motifs which translate, as we see into the Monet’s painting “the magpie”.



Figure 8 “the magpie”

We also find several tonal or modal centers in Monet like “the rising sun” this figure contains two tonal centers.

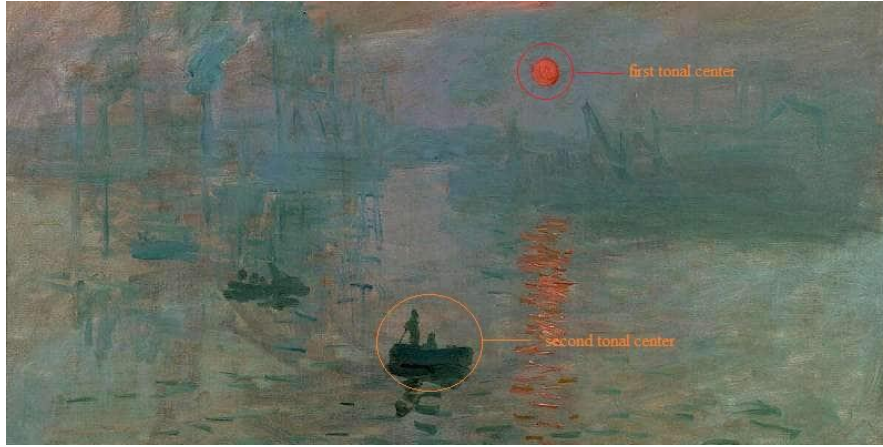


Figure 9

Table showing examples of the relationship between Debussy music and Monet's painting	
Musical expression	Figurative expression
Hight beat, tonic	Horizontal, light.
Low beat, cadence, melodic rise, dissonance	Vertical, dark colors, fluctuating or messy path.
Melody, tonal timbre.	Figure, drawing.
Sound at indeterminate pitch, chord not marking a precise tone, melodic motif without originality.	Gray color, common shapes, no drawing.
Rhythm causing the Hight beat to be lost.	Line drawing not too discontinuous.
Rhythm marking the Hight beat, long chord range.	Continuous line drawing, continuity in colors.
Ambitus significant melodic nuance strong.	Large vertical, strong light.
Modulation with sharps, treble timbres.	Tints with whiter or saturation.
Development by elimination.	Spiral around a point, gradually decrease in proportions around a point.
Polyphony, independence of voices.	Multiplicity of figures, character, motif
Development by superposition.	Multiple designs as assembled into one.
Atonality, arrhythmia.	Abstraction.
Melodic ornament.	Drawings with many details.
Development of a cell by varying its rhythmic supports.	Masses getting lost in verticality.
Harmony centered on the tonic.	The figures or shapes are based on the horizontal

Conclusion

Although Debussy's art was qualified as impressionistic, his revolution is deeper; it must be sought in the structure of the work in an original conception of harmony and rhythm. He substitutes for the notion of chord that of “complex note” by applying it to create an impression of improvisation through the fluidity of the sequences. He initiated the instability in continuity itself ... the tangle of themes and motifs, and aroused a new aural sensuality.

Monet, on the other hand wanted to originate a moment of consciousness in the world and to cross the magic mirror of reality.

References

- harney, k. (2020). *integrating music across the elementary curriculom*. new york: oxford university press.
- hinson, m. (2004). *Anthology of impressionistic piano music:* . U.S.A: Alfred publishing.
- Katzbichler , M. b. (1964). claud debussy (1862-1962): livre d'or. *revue musicale*(258).
- lubart, k. (2013). applying concept of musical consonance and dissonance to color. *leonardo*, 37(2).
- monteiro, d. (2010-2011). *l'impressionisme, definition (mise en context)*. paris: college calvin.
- trezise, s. (1994). *debussy, La mer*. new york: cambrige university press.