

French *mélodie* through Debussy and Mary Garden recordings: Poetic and symbolic musical performance

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Aim

My aim is to analyze the performances of Mary Garden and Debussy in the four recordings they made for Gramophone and Typewriter in 1904. Several articles that refer to these recordings shed light on some discrepancies between Debussy's score and their performance; yet some questions remain. The freedom between the voice and the piano part, for example, which do not always perfectly line up with each other, could be an intentional process to deliver other implications, to place the audience in an indeterminate mindset that reflects a symbolist aesthetic.

Context

The expectations we have today from listening to these pieces must be placed in context of historical performance practice. While Debussy expressed concern that his musical notation be followed precisely, his own performances reveal departures from the printed score. As Robert Philip wrote in his book *Early Recordings and Musical Style*: "The performances of the early twenty century are... volatile, energetic, flexible, vigorously projected in broad outline but rhythmically informal in detail. Modern performances are, by comparison, accurate, orderly, restrained, deliberate, and even in emphasis."¹

Debussy strives to reflect the poetic structure in his songs, which were meticulously notated, as one can see in his manuscripts. Growing up in Paris, Debussy was exposed to the leading poets of the time, and developed an especially keen sympathy for symbolist writers. Along with other cultivated artists, Debussy experienced musical salon where one could hear poetry declaimed, experience theatrical productions, and admire recent paintings. Parallels between the arts were common, and this was reported in the contemporary revues. Merely reading the musical score does not represent the reality of the performance of the time; we must consider historical performances the composer/performers themselves did – as if the songs were poetic declamations.

Historical recordings are important not only for the understanding of musical performance practice at this time, but also because they bear testimony to the declamation of the poetry. They reflect the importance of new musical devices in the poetry at the end of the nineteenth century, including features such as internal rhyme of sonorities, internal accentuation with the length of the words, etc. These recordings allow us to hear the new poetic rhythm of

¹ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 234.

the symbolist movement. The links between the sonorities enlighten the meaning of the words, and place the understanding on a symbolic level.

Methodology

A careful hearing of the recordings –the constraints of acoustical recordings of this epoch notwithstanding– directs our analysis, referring to the printed score the performers used. To study these recordings, I first connect them with remarks on performance of the past, and then consider the relationship between the music and the poetry. Finally, I relate the tradition of poetic declamation of this time, by studying Sarah Bernhardt's recordings and comparing her delivery with the poetic declamation in the songs.

My first question refers to the freedom of Mary Garden's rhythm. If these slight changes really 'distort' the piece as one might think today, how could the composer himself have let Mary Garden misperform his own work? Comparing the words she stretches or shortens, and the accentuations her performance imply, I find an intentional reading of the text that matches the important words of the poem, and of its own declamatory rhythm that connects to symbolist issues.

Secondly, Mary Garden's diction, while delivered in perfect French, is a straight declamation of the text without any affect on the syllables as one could expect; however, her performance conveys a deeper understanding of the text. It is immediately apparent that her use of *portamento* is not the result of technical problem, but rather brings attention to specific words and poetic constructs. If her operatic training has an influence, it is only in the way she chooses to express some particular words and instants. What was her basis for making decisions about when to use the portamento device? I propose that her choices were not based on musical concepts alone, but were text-related, revealing a link between poetic declamation and expression in singing at the turn of the twentieth century.

Verlaine's sophisticated symbolist poetry interested Debussy a great deal during his first years as a young composer (from 1882 to 1902, when *Pelléas et Mélisande* was premiered). Debussy's very precise scores were annotated over time – or even revised entirely several times (for example, *En sourdine* or *Clair de lune*); for that reason they illustrate the development of Debussy's musical language. Debussy takes up a real challenge by working on the poems of Paul Verlaine, who, already in his own art, attempts a new poetic discourse by playing with sonorities, with irregularities, and new prosodic rhythms. Therefore, every composition creates a unique solution, and not a preconceived "model" of setting in music.

Finally, I assert that Debussy's melodies are a recreation of the declamation of the poem in its own structure through the enunciation of the piano and the voice. Thus the part of interpretation in musical performance is an essential element which I am dealing with while also studying poetic and theatric declamation testimonies that remain either written, reported by performers, or recorded. I develop a study on vocality that includes not only the voice but the entire composition, through the piano enunciation and the texture – in other words, the total soundscape.

Conclusions

The poetic text conveys many elements. Of course the words themselves can imply multiple meanings. In addition, the stresses and lengths of the syllables are not only captured in Debussy's scores but intensified in Mary Garden's performances. Dynamics and articulation markings in the score are integrally linked with her delivery of the poem.

Sources: references of the recordings

Debussy accompanying Mary Garden, soprano (1874–1967) Gramophone and Typewriter Limited, Paris, 1904

1. PELLÉAS ET MÉLISANDE: Mes longs cheveux descendent 1:47 (3078F) 33447
2. Il pleure dans mon coeur (Ariettes oubliées No. 2) 2:15 (3075F) 33449
3. L'ombre des arbres (Ariettes oubliées No. 3) 2:24 (3076F) 33450
4. Aquarelles-Green (Ariettes oubliées No. 5) 1:39 (3077F) 33451

Legendary piano recordings: the complete Grieg, Saint-Saens, Pugno, and Diémer and other G & T rarities. Imprint: [Swarthmore, Pa.]: Marston, p2008. CD 2 (79:50) CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862–1918), tracks 1-4

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