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## Original Research Article

## Compositional Characteristics of Debussy's Piano "24 Preludes"

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## ARTICLE INFO

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## ABSTRACT

Debussy was one of the representatives of French Impressionist music at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. He played an important role in the development of European music history. The Impressionism music style he represented was a link between the romantic music of the 19th century and the music of the 20th century. The nexus of modern music in the tenth century. Piano music occupies an important position in Debussy's music creation. Among them, "24 Piano Preludes" was created in the mature period of his Impressionist music style. It is the essence of Debussy's piano works and embodies his music. creative style. An in-depth study of Debussy's "24 Piano Preludes" can deepen our understanding of his piano music creation style and further clarify his prominent position and contribution in the history of French music.

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## Introduction

The piano prelude is a short musical genre with small ups and downs and a consistent structure from beginning to end. It is an improvisational performance in the form of an opening statement. Debussy's piano preludes inherited the traditional composition structure, and most of the music is relatively short. However, Debussy also made certain innovations in the creation of his piano preludes on the basis of inheriting the traditional composition structure. Piano preludes are more novel in musical language and have richer materials than music works of the same genre. Therefore, "24 Piano Preludes" has also been praised by later generations as the essence of piano preludes. "24 Piano Preludes" is Debussy's most mature, creative and representative music work. It is in this work that the impressionistic style emerges. "24 Piano Preludes" is divided into two episodes; each episode contains twelve piano pieces. The music works in the first episode mainly reflect Debussy's own pursuit of sound and color. The creation in the second episode continues and developed this pursuit, but the literary meaning and musical artistic conception are more abstract than the first episode, and the musical language is more mature. Most of Debussy's piano preludes depict natural scenery, such as "Fog", "Withered Leaves", "Anna Capri Hills", etc. There are also ancient mythological genres and genres describing portraits, such as "The Dancing Fairy" ", "Girl with Flaxen Hair" and other music.

The main expression method of impressionist paintings is light and color, using the ever-changing light and color to show fleeting moments. The expression method of symbolist poetry is to use the simple sound and rhythm of poetry to create a vague or instantaneous artistic conception, using symbols Creative techniques such as, hint and so on emphasize the aesthetics of poetry. The creative style of Debussy's "Twenty-Four Piano Preludes" was influenced by French Impressionist painting and Impressionist poetry. It gained a lot from the hazy and colorful landscape painting "Impression Sunrise" and Impressionist poetry. The creative inspiration, the erratic, hazy and fleeting feeling expressed in his piano prelude was influenced by the style of Impressionist paintings and Symbolist poetry. "Debussy was one of the important representatives of French Impressionist music at that time. The main expression method of the Impressionist Piano Prelude is the innovation and application of sound and timbre. It is a milestone in the history of music development and the beginning of modernism. Through enriching Various harmonies and timbres are interwoven to create, depict and express musical language."

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The preludes created by Debussy are another major development of this genre on the basis of inheriting the preludes of Bach and Chopin. Made an outstanding contribution. This article will take the "24 Preludes" created by Debussy as the research object, and discuss their creation background, title characteristics, historical status, and



Debussy's contribution to the expressiveness of the piano, and analyze the performance from various aspects such as the processing of rhythm and beat, the grasp of melody lines, the induction of key touch methods, the use of pedals, etc., so as to improve the depth of one's understanding of Debussy's piano works and strengthen his understanding of his piano music. Understanding, so as to achieve the purpose of improving musical thinking and skills, and correctly interpreting works. This article will take the "Twenty-Four Preludes" created by Debussy as the research object, and analyze their creation background, title characteristics, historical status and Debussy's contribution to the expressiveness of the piano. Discuss and perform performance analysis from various aspects such as the identification of mode and tonality, the grasp of the level of each part and the melody line, the induction of key touch methods, the use of pedals, etc., so as to improve your understanding of Debussy's piano works Deepen the understanding of its piano music, so as to achieve the purpose of improving musical thinking and skills, correctly interpreting works, and allowing players to more accurately grasp the style of impressionist music.

### **1. Research on Piano Preludes**

The history of piano preludes is long, but the academic community has a basically unified view on their origins. In the 15th and 16th centuries, "preludes for organ, lute or harpsichord were often improvisations or free pieces with an improvisational style. The function of this prelude was to try out the instrument, exercise the fingers and prepare for the following music." (Qian, & Wang, 2003). In this context, performers at that time often played some fragments of scales or broken chords quickly and improvised. Over time, these musical fragments evolved into preludes. Shortness, improvisation, and technicality are the most original and significant characteristics of the prelude, and these characteristics have been retained and developed to varying degrees in subsequent historical development.

### **2. Research on Debussy's 24 Piano Preludes**

The Piano Art magazine published Jiang Chen's article "Interpretation of Debussy's Piano Preludes" in 10 issues in 2009-2010. This article is a comprehensive analysis of Debussy's "24 Preludes". The author explains each piece separately, focusing on the background of the creation, terminology, structural points, and performance techniques of the music. For each piece, the author will analyze it in detail according to the bars or phrases, and list the characteristics of the work. There are many similar articles. For example, Yang Wen of Sichuan Normal University analyzed the work "Footprints on the Snow" in his article "The Creation Technique and Performance of Debussy's Prelude "Footprints on the Snow". He said: "The creation technique of the whole work "Footprints on the Snow" deeply reflects the typical characteristics of impressionist music, that is, short musical themes, fragmented melodies, colorful harmonies, and vague modes and tonality." (Yang, 2015). At present, most of the



research on Debussy's "24 Preludes" is conducted in this form, by selecting one or more representative works and then conducting a comprehensive analysis of the works.

### **Research Methodology**

This study will first conduct qualitative research to accurately define the keywords of the article to ensure that the research direction is correct. Secondly, through the literature review, summarize the current research on Debussy's piano "24 Preludes" and what achievements have been made. In addition, this study depends to a certain extent on the selection of new research perspectives and the continuous updating of research methods. In this sense, it is necessary to adopt a variety of research methods and perspectives in order to make the study of Debussy's piano preludes continue to innovate. Of course, various research methods have their own strengths and weaknesses, and there is no question of which is better. Based on this, the author will boldly use the typical preludes of various periods to make a systematic perspective with Debussy's piano preludes, that is, to study from the idea of "point to surface" to explore the meaning of Debussy's piano preludes. The work is both the key point and the difficult point of this study. For this aspect, the author will conduct research by interviewing performers, audiences, music theorists and others.

The second is quantitative research. At this stage, CNKI visual econometric analysis can be used to conduct statistical analysis on the research results, research institutions and the number of publications in the literature review to demonstrate the research ability of this topic. CNKI can also provide data analysis for some issues in Debussy's piano preludes that are concerned by the academic circle, such as creation characteristics, performance techniques, characteristics of the times, aesthetic style and other issues. At the same time, it is also possible to listen to the audience's views on Debussy's piano preludes by distributing questionnaires. The performance audio of representative performers can also be analyzed for data, so as to conduct a multi-angle analysis of Debussy's piano "24 Preludes".

### **Objectives**

This study has two research objectives: First, through the study of Debussy's "24 Piano Preludes", we can deepen our understanding of Debussy's piano music style and performance methods. Second, through the study of Debussy's "24 Piano Preludes", we can clarify Debussy's status and contribution in French music history and Impressionist style.

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## Results

### 1.Title

The title is an important feature of Debussy's preludes. What is very different from the preludes of Bach and Chopin is that Debussy added titles to his preludes. Most of the titles of Debussy's preludes are symbolic, using visual language to express the same connotation. It points out various images in the visual description of scenery in music, and it is allowed to use various hints. Or in a slightly implicit expression, leaving the impression that visual image is more important than emotional description. For example, the title "Fireworks" reminds people of the specific state of natural scenery under special circumstances, such as various images of fireworks flashing in the sky, which reminds people of the visual impression of this specific state. After adding the title, Debussy's piano preludes are like vivid pictures displayed in front of us. The titles have become an important feature of Debussy's piano preludes. It is undeniable that the titles of Debussy's piano preludes are indeed It inspires people in actual performance. Just imagine, if we remove the titles of each piece in Debussy's Preludes, it will still be an excellent pure musical work. However, what the composer wants to express in the music and the rich meaning contained in the music will be greatly lost, and people may not be able to appreciate the essence of the music.



## **2. Melody**

Melody, the soul of music, becomes free and unrestrained in Debussy's writing. His melody is very consistent with the keen feelings he wants to express and the wonderful combination of light and color in nature. Its melody is phonological, and there are asymmetrical melody fragments everywhere. The "Sail" in the prelude is almost entirely based on the whole tone scale. It is short but extremely concise and concise, and it depicts the picture of the ship swaying slightly with the ups and downs of the waves in the harbor, turning the static picture into a vivid scene, allowing people to "watch" the imagined picture with their senses.

Debussy's melody writing is also unique. In his piano preludes, the kind of continuous and long-lasting tunes that are common in romantic music are almost not seen. Instead, they are often replaced by shorter, motive-like, asymmetrical melody fragments that appear in different parts of the texture.

## **3.Chords**

Chords are directly related to the success of Debussy's "24 Preludes" and are the key part of Debussy's piano preludes. On the basis of inheriting the excellent traditional chord technology, Debussy created a new chord organization method that suits his own style.

The first is dissonant chords. Dissonant chords are the most commonly used chords in Debussy's piano preludes. The extensive use of dissonant chords greatly enhances the tension of the piano prelude and highlights the color and artistic conception of the prelude. Dissonant chords have their own unique preparation and resolution process in the traditional chord application process, but Debussy's piano preludes broke the previous preparation rules of dissonant chords in traditional chords. The method used is to directly transition from one dissonant chord to another dissonant chord at will, omitting the preparation and resolution process in the middle. In the prelude, there are many places where dissonant chords appear in parallel and continuously.

The second is non-thirds superimposed chords. Non-third-degree overlapping chords include two basic tones: second-fourth-degree overlapping chords and fourth-fifth-degree overlapping chords. The second-fourth-degree overlapping chord structure adds color to Debussy's piano prelude, weakens part of the harmonic function, and achieves a sense of emptiness. "Dead Leaves" uses a non-third-degree overlapping chord structure, showing the audience a sad picture of leaves being blown by the wind and falling to the ground. The fourth-fifth-degree overlapping chord creates an unconventional sound, and the emotions expressed give people a mysterious feeling. "The Sunken Cathedral" uses a large number of fourth-fifth-degree overlapping chord structures to create a mysterious atmosphere.





#### **4. Debug**

The basis of music creation from the Classical Period to the Romantic Period is mostly the major and minor scales. Debussy's piano preludes completely get rid of the constraints of the major and minor scales in the creation and application of the mode, and create a new mode scale, such as the whole tone scale, the pentatonic mode, etc. These new modes scales give the piano prelude a dreamy color, and the traditional major and minor scales become blurred in the piano prelude area.

The whole tone mode is an artificial mode. In the process of music creation, the composer divides an octave into six major second intervals. There will be no semitone in the whole tone scale. Therefore, there will be no major and minor scale division in the mode. The characteristics of this mode are hazy and erratic. The use of the whole tone scale in Debussy's piano preludes has reached a perfect state. The whole song "Sail" uses the whole tone scale. The music shows the audience a quiet and hazy harbor beauty under the sunset.

Debussy created the pentatonic mode under the influence of the pursuit of exoticism in France in the late 19th century, and found new creative materials from the oriental folk music culture. "The Wind on the Plain" and "The Girl with Flaxen Hair" started with the pentatonic mode, which made the prelude full of the color and charm of oriental music.

#### **5. Dynamics, Sound, Timbre**

Debussy likes to use dynamic levels in the weak range. In the soft range, he makes countless contrasts in levels and timbre, or extreme dynamics of sudden and extra-strong, with very few intermediate dynamic markings, but this does not mean that all "p" or "pp" should be played in the same way. On the contrary, within the range of "p" and "pp", according to the needs of the music, as many changes and contrasts in levels and colors as possible should be made. For example, the flickering "PP" in "Sail" and the colorful "pp" in "Fireworks" are definitely not the same. The overall dynamic style of Debussy's piano preludes is: "In the weak dynamic range, countless delicate contrasts and changes in levels are made, and the change of dynamics has a high frequency." (Zhang Bin, 2011). Strong force often lasts for a short time, intermediate force rarely appears, and symbols such as sudden strength and extra strong force appear occasionally.

Debussy's rhythms are rich and varied, and he never sticks to one pattern. "He made extensive use of the rhythms of Spanish dance music such as the Habanera, jazz-style syncopated rhythms, and compound rhythms of three to two and five to four, disrupting the fixed accents of the beat and setting off a revolution in the use of rhythm." (Zhang, 2011). His extensive use of rhythm makes the music more flexible and elegant. It cannot be sped up or slowed down as frequently as in romantic-style



works, and the rhythm cannot be slowed down or sped up too much, and must be played faithfully according to the markings on the score.

## 6. Pedals

The use of pedals is also extremely critical. The three pedals of the piano have been fully demonstrated in Debussy's works. The correct use of pedals can add the finishing touch to the timbre. The use of the sustain pedal cannot be done by pressing it all the way down as in the past, but should be used scientifically and flexibly. It should be pressed lightly and shallowly for a part of the time, and the flexibility of the ankle should be used to effectively control it. At the same time, because the pedal pressed in this way produces fewer overtones, it is necessary to use a "tremolo pedal" when fast phrases or when more overtones are needed, that is, to tremble the pedal very lightly and quickly, so that the music will not be dry. The soft pedal is also often used. By using different ways of pressing it, such as pressing it all the way down or halfway, and combining it with the different touch methods of the performer, the timbre changes will be richer. The sustain pedal in the middle is also used in some repertoires to enhance the effect of color changes.

## Discussion

Discussion Question 1: The artistic characteristics of Debussy's piano "24 Preludes" are one of the core issues explored in this study. The research conclusions reveal that these preludes integrate Debussy's innovative thinking in music conception, harmony application, rhythm control, timbre creation and structural design. From a harmonic perspective, Debussy broke the boundaries of traditional harmony through the whole tone scale and ambiguous interval relationship, and introduced a new auditory experience, which is particularly prominent in the preludes. The artistic characteristics of Debussy's 24 Preludes highlight his radical departure from traditional forms and his pursuit of impressionistic ideals. Unlike Bach and Chopin, who treated the prelude as an abstract musical exercise, Debussy incorporated programmatic elements by adding evocative titles. These titles guide the listener's imagination toward visual and emotional imagery, reinforcing the idea that his preludes function as musical "paintings" (Lockspeiser, 1962). This emphasis on imagery illustrates the impressionist concern with atmosphere and suggestion rather than structural rigor.

Harmonically, Debussy's use of dissonant chords, unresolved progressions, and modal innovation reflects his challenge to Western tonal hierarchy. The whole-tone and pentatonic scales, in particular, create a sense of ambiguity and dreamlike sonority, which helped liberate 20th-century composers from the dominance of tonal gravity (Trezise, 1994). His exploration of quartal and quintal harmonies further enhanced this sense of openness, allowing harmonic color to function more as a timbral and atmospheric device than as a structural necessity (Howat, 2009).





Discussion Question 2: The performance of Debussy's piano "24 Preludes" requires the performer to have a deep understanding of its musical characteristics and artistic connotations in order to achieve the emotional depth and expressiveness of the work. This study explored in depth how to play these preludes and found that successful performance requires not only technical precision and control, but also a deep understanding of Debussy's musical language. From a performance perspective, Debussy's Preludes demand interpretive sensitivity. The performer must not only navigate complex rhythms, extended harmonic sonorities, and pedal techniques but also embody the visual and poetic imagery embedded in the titles. As Howat (2009) argues, Debussy expected pianists to "paint with sound," balancing subtle dynamic nuances and timbral shifts. The dynamic contrasts within the pianissimo and piano range particularly require mastery of touch and pedal control, distinguishing Debussy's idiom from the more straightforward dynamic shaping of Romantic predecessors.

Rhythmically, Debussy drew inspiration from non-Western music and popular idioms such as Spanish dances and jazz syncopations. This infusion of cultural elements aligns with France's fascination with exoticism in the late 19th century (Pasler, 2000). By destabilizing metric accents and layering rhythmic patterns, Debussy initiated a rhythmic revolution that anticipated later 20th-century experimentation by Stravinsky and Bartók.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that Debussy's 24 Preludes represent a synthesis of visual art, poetry, and sound. They exemplify impressionist aesthetics in their emphasis on suggestion, atmosphere, and timbral color, while simultaneously laying the foundation for modernist innovations. This dual role confirms Debussy's pivotal place as a bridge between Romanticism and 20th-century modernism.

## Conclusion

As the founder of Impressionism in the history of music, Debussy occupies a very important position; at the same time, he is also one of the important innovators and has made indelible contributions to the development of piano music and even the entire musical art. "24 Preludes" is his pinnacle work. It can be said that he paved the way for the development of 20th century music, polytonal and atonal music, Schoenberg's serialism, Bartók's creation and neoclassical music. Many famous composers of the 20th century were influenced by him and gave him high praise. Stravinsky once said that I and the musicians of my generation should be deeply grateful to Germany.

Bussy, he can be said to be the first real musician of this century. All in all, Debussy's piano music is a huge treasure in the musical treasure house. Through in-depth study of his creative expression techniques and artistic skills, it will help us further understand the Impressionism School, truly improve our understanding of Impressionist music, and achieve the purpose of correctly interpreting the works.



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## Recommendations

### 1. Pedagogical Application

Music educators should emphasize Debussy's Preludes as essential repertoire for advanced piano students, not only for technical development but also for cultivating interpretive imagination. Incorporating interdisciplinary teaching methods—such as linking musical analysis with impressionist painting and poetry—could deepen students' understanding of Debussy's aesthetic world (Howat, 2009).

### 2. Performance Practice Research

Future research should focus on historically informed performance of Debussy's piano music. Examining Debussy's own performance markings and early recordings could provide valuable insights into his intended sound ideals (Roberts, 1996).

### 3. Cross-Cultural Studies

Since Debussy drew from Javanese gamelan, Spanish dance, and other non-Western traditions, further studies could explore cross-cultural dialogues in his Preludes. This would contribute to broader discussions on musical exoticism and cultural hybridity in late 19th-century France (Pasler, 2000).

### 4. Comparative Analysis

Comparing Debussy's Preludes with those of Bach and Chopin could provide a clearer understanding of how he both inherited and transformed the prelude form. Such studies could also examine audience reception, highlighting shifts in expectations for piano miniatures.

### 5. Technological Approaches

Advances in digital sound analysis could be used to study timbre, pedal effects, and micro-dynamics in performances of the Preludes. This would enrich the field of performance studies by offering objective insights into interpretive practices.

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