

EVOCATIONS OF IMPRESSIONISM IN FERENC LISZT'S WORKS  
AS A SOURCE OF STYLISTIC INSPIRATION FOR CLAUDE DEBUSSY

BY

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# Abstract

The goal of this research was to find the first traces of impressionism in Liszt's works, and to examine how Debussy might have drawn some inspiration from Liszt. I explored several concepts, including the use of the sustain pedal (shifting from '*bel canto*' style towards effect-driven use), spatial arrangement of notes on the page (three-stave writing), the role of each of the pianist's hands (breaking up with the tradition of assigning the accompaniment to the left hand and melody to the right hand), and how the two composers perceived nature and expressed it through their pieces. The criteria included composers' selection of topic, the use of texture, harmony, and other musical elements. I tried to illustrate similarities, links, and influences that connect Debussy's sources of philosophical and stylistic inspiration to Liszt's compositions by cross-comparing three pairs of pieces on both a score-base and performance-based analysis. I selected two contrasting modern performances for each piece, which resulted in working with 12 recordings. The pairs of compositions selected for this study proved to have a lot of similarities, and in some respects, Liszt's writing appeared to be more 'impressionistic' than Debussy's.

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# Chapter I: Introduction

## What is impressionism? 'Romantic' and 'impressionistic' performance.

The goal of this thesis is to identify the first traces of impressionism in Liszt's works, and to examine how Debussy might have drawn some inspiration from Liszt. In using the term 'impressionistic', I understand a shift away from the 'romantic' (and 'classical') focus of directing one (or multiple) melodic voices through time, towards a textural merging of sounds in a way that evokes impressions of particular subjects (frequently related to nature: water, wind, light etc.), often in atemporal manners. Because Liszt lived in the romantic period, his works generally tend to be interpreted in a romantic way. However, some of the conceptual approaches and techniques that Liszt uses in his pieces can be seen as precursors of impressionism, such as the hidden melodies emerging from the hands crossing in *Au bord d'une Source* or shimmering tremolos in *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*.

The dominant practice when it comes to piano performance in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was *bel canto* style. *Bel canto* derives its roots from the operatic way of treating the piano. Thanks to the instrument's abilities to play multiple voices at the same time, the two hands of the pianist gained two distinctive roles: right hand leading<sup>1</sup> the main melody, and left hand accompanying. In this study I will try to find the first signs of the changes in thinking about the sound, and the use of the piano to utilise the instrument's full potential.

The romantic style of using the sustain pedal was also associated with leading the main melodic line and imitating the abilities of the human voice<sup>2</sup>, with the objective to create a smooth *legato* sound. Liszt parts with that tradition and introduces an effect-driven use of the pedal. His innovative approach influenced Debussy when the two composers met in Rome. Debussy described Liszt's pedalling 'as a form of breathing'<sup>3</sup>.

The question of whether various types of art are parallel and can express similar ideas was not a new matter in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both Liszt and Debussy were familiar with the developments in orchestral music such as Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* and treating sound as a

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<sup>1</sup> 'singing' with the right hand is still a common way of describing the concept of evoking the romantic sound in the environment of piano lessons.

<sup>2</sup> The popularity of songs (and Lieder) in 19<sup>th</sup> century can be observed in many composers' artistic output: Carl Maria von Weber,, Schubert, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, and others.

<sup>3</sup> Claude Debussy, *Debussy Letters*. ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987), 301.

means to evoke emotional states. The question of whether music was able to express other extra-musical ideas, liberating music from the pool of complementary means of expression contributing to *Gesamtkunstwerk*, became a new concept. Liszt's conceptual writing, heard in *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* and the exploration of the abilities of the piano<sup>4</sup> allowed Debussy to completely disband with the reigning *bel canto* and create a new understanding of sound.

Within the course of this thesis, I will not be questioning whether Debussy was primarily an impressionist or a symbolist. This distinction is of little importance to the main subject matter, especially from the perspective of Liszt's works.

### **The importance of Nature for Liszt and Debussy: expression of the subjective or objective? 'Nature around us and nature within us'<sup>5</sup>.**

Nature was a predominant theme in the Romantic era when many artists started viewing nature as a reflection of their own emotional state, and became interested in their own place within nature. This was contrary to the thinking in the earlier era of Enlightenment, where the intellect drew clearer division between the thinking human and the unregulated wilderness.

In Romanticism, nature played an essential role in the artist's journey of self-discovery and of understanding the deeper levels of the psyche. Nature was seen as a companion in one's journey through life, and was perceived as a God-like force with its ability to expose the artist to the sometimes majestic and beautiful – but sometimes deadly – natural elements. Romantic artists looked to the natural world for answers, enabling them to more deeply explore who they were.

Ferenc Liszt (1811-1886) was a leading proponent of this philosophy. His connection with the natural world is clear to hear – and see – in the cycle of *Années de Pèlerinage*, through which he journeys (literally and metaphorically) towards self-discovery. One of the pieces from this cycle, *Vallée d'Obermann* (which was inspired by Senancour's epistolary novel of the same title), is preceded by a quote taken from the original novel: 'What do I want? Who am I? What do I ask of nature?'<sup>6</sup>. It was not unusual for Liszt to include quotes from poetry and prose in his music, perhaps to help the pianist conceptualise how he would like the music directed. In *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 155., 'most recent discoveries of harmonic chemistry' mentioned by Debussy in his letter to Jacques Durand, 19 August 1905.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Brendel, *Alfred Brendel on Music: His Collected Essays* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2007), 255.

<sup>6</sup> Étienne Pivet de Senancour, *Obermann, selections from letters to a friend. Volume II* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1901), 73.

d'Este he writes: '...the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'. It is likely that the quote points to the texture of running *arpeggios* as a 'heavenly' sonic source.

By the end of the 19th century, the artist's approach to nature had evolved, and Claude Debussy's (1862-1918) main objective was no longer to understand or be understood by the surrounding world. Debussy was looking for a means to communicate<sup>7</sup> with the listener in a way that was least affected by subjective perception. In his view, how we experience the world is volatile and momentary, and he wanted to express this ever-changing world as if we observed it from a distance. Debussy was looking for the tools to express this observation, as a detached witness, with little personalised connection to the subject.

Both composers, Liszt and Debussy, understood and depicted nature in a different philosophical way. Through my selection of repertoire and accompanying thesis, I would like to highlight the crossing point of these two different approaches.

### The importance of spirituality for Liszt and Debussy: Personal vs. 'objective' approaches.

The topic of religion in Liszt's compositions is vast. From the seven pieces of *Années de Pèlerinage: Troisième année*, four are religious and the other three inspired by the gardens at the Villa d'Este. Even the cycle's non-religious piece, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, relates to Christianity through the quote from St. John's Gospel (Fig. 1.)



Fig. 1. Ferenc Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, *Années de pèlerinage, Troisième année*<sup>8</sup>, mm. 144-147. Quote from St John's Gospel added by Liszt.

<sup>7</sup> Preface, *Debussy Images 1<sup>re</sup> série*. (Basel, London, New York, Praha: Bärenreiter Urtext, 2022), XI.

<sup>8</sup> Ferenc Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este, Années de pèlerinage, Troisième année* S. 163. Neue Liszt-Ausgabe, Serie I, Band 8, ed. Imre Mező. (Budapest: Editio Musica, 1975).

Liszt, a follower of Christianity who at the age of 49 received minor orders<sup>9</sup>, believed in a personal relationship with God. That deliberate, deeply philosophical thought can be seen in many different domains, as in his correspondence, or in the inspired titles of his compositions.

Debussy, living in the era of Art Nouveau, submerged himself into the world of the orient, Christianity thus not becoming a philosophy he would explore in his works. In Far Eastern philosophies, a human being is predestined to blend into nothingness, a nirvana, to lose their personality, will, and feelings, and in order to do that one needs to learn to separate themselves from the world around them.

In the interview for *Excelsior* with Henri Malherbe, Debussy said:

*I do not practise religion in accordance with the sacred rites. I have made mysterious Nature my religion. I do not believe that a man is any nearer to God for being clad in priestly garments, nor that one place in a town is better adapted to meditation than another. When I gaze at a sunset sky and spend hours contemplating its marvellous ever---changing beauty, an extraordinary emotion overwhelms me. Nature in all its vastness is truthfully reflected in my sincere though feeble soul. Around me are the trees stretching up their branches to the skies, the perfumed flowers gladdening the meadow, the gentle grass---carpeted earth, ... and my hands unconsciously assume an attitude of adoration. ... To feel the supreme and moving beauty of the spectacle to which Nature invites her ephemeral guests!...that is what I call prayer.*<sup>10</sup>

Debussy seems to be a detached observer of nature, and for that reason the lyrical subject is not as evident and recognisable as in Liszt's works. Debussy's music seems less 'personal'.

### **Selected works.**

While choosing and pairing the compositions to play in my recital, my goal was to capture the beginnings of what we now call 'impressionism' in music. The link between the late Romantic period and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century evocative style was Ferenc Liszt. Unlike many other composers, his musical style did not solidify but rather deconstructed in the later years of his life. This allowed him to become a pioneer of musical impressionism, enabling other composers to expand their impressionist ideas within an environment of artistic decadence that took its root from painting. As a part of this thesis, I will try to depict similarities, links, and influences that connect Debussy's sources of philosophical and stylistic inspiration to Liszt's compositions. I will elaborate on and examine:

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<sup>9</sup> Liszt joined the Third Order of Saint Francis

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in: Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 225.



- Why I chose these particular pieces and recordings;
- What 'impressionistic' qualities can be found in Liszt's compositions;
- Liszt's musical ideas as potential sources of inspiration for Debussy;
- Similarities of musical concepts between the paired pieces;
- Differences and similarities in interpretations by various pianists.

The compositions selected for this study are a conglomerate of Liszt's and Debussy's works that appeared to me to be particularly dramatic comparisons for their similarities. The criteria included: composers' selection of topic, the use of texture, harmony, and other musical elements *sensu stricto*, but also the approach to nature, the space, the lyrical subject and the plot. Although some of Liszt's pieces (like *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*) manifest an obvious impressionistic light, many other compositions carry less overt seeds of the new language and musical perspective.

One aspect that played a major role in the process of writing about these pieces was the parallel process of learning to play and perform them. I dedicated myself to thinking about Liszt as I do about Debussy, exploring the possibility of practicing all compositions in an 'impressionistic' way. That included thinking in similar concepts and gestures, using a softer touch and playing more on the surface of the keyboard, layering the pedal in even more deliberate ways, and trying to evoke the shimmering and 'wetness' of the water (the opening measures of *Au bord d'une Source*) and the resemblance to Debussy's special way of thinking musically (the final section – *arpeggios* – of *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este I: Thrénodie*).

Even though the selected six compositions are arranged into three pairs, I will not be limiting the influences solely within those pairs. It goes without saying that the ideas and concepts cross-inspire numerous compositions, and various examples can be sourced to depict the connections.

### **Selected recordings.**

The main reason for selecting the performances listed below was the accessibility of the recordings. Nowadays, internet resources have become the first 'go-to' for musicians, where they can learn and be inspired by both audio and video of other performers. In line with the purpose of this thesis, which is to support pianists who are working with Liszt's and Debussy's compositions, I provide sources that are easy to access.

One difficulty I faced in researching relevant comparisons was to narrow the pianists down to the fewest significant names, and to find their performances of the most musical pieces relevant to this research. Using these criteria, I was able to select the following recordings:

**Pair I:** *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este* (Ferenc Liszt) and *La Cathédrale engloutie* (Claude Debussy) by Sviatoslav Richter and Zoltan Kocsis:

1. *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este I: Thrénodie* by Sviatoslav Richter, live recording, 1958 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H34Lk-gXB5w>),
2. *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este I: Thrénodie* by Zoltan Kocsis, 1986 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXc7kfYpJEg>),
3. *La Cathédrale engloutie* by Sviatoslav Richter, live recording, Tokyo 1984 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5liSvIrR3xk>),
4. *La Cathédrale engloutie* by Zoltan Kocsis, Universal International Music 1998 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKQKUE3vD1I>)

**Pair II:** *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* (Ferenc Liszt) and *Reflets dans l'eau* (Claude Debussy) by Claudio Arrau and Zoltan Kocsis:

1. *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* by Claudio Arrau, live recording, Boston (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DoGOGS3IC8>),
2. *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* by Zoltan Kocsis, Universal International Music B. V. 1987, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6yS5TKNGcU>)
3. *Reflets dans l'eau* by Claudio Arrau, Universal International Music 1981, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWlaF6ftZil>)
4. *Reflets dans l'eau* by Zoltan Kocsis, Universal International Music 1990, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2XTs4LFAw4>)

**Pair III:** *Au bord d'une Source* (Ferenc Liszt) and *Jardins sous la pluie* (Claude Debussy) by Sviatoslav Richter and Daniel Barenboim:

1. *Au bord d'une Source* by Sviatoslav Richter, Naxos Digital Services US, Inc, MNRK Music Group, live recording 1958, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NuMG69AdjIU>),
2. *Au bord d'une Source* by Daniel Barenboim, Deutsche Grammophon, Berlin 1986 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jYul-Rs4Uv0>),
3. *Jardins sous la pluie* by Sviatoslav Richter, live recording, Salzburg 1977 (<https://youtu.be/xHJ-XKBzBMk?t=661>),
4. *Jardins sous la pluie* by Daniel Barenboim, Deutsche Grammophon, Berlin 2018 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vmi1w5A7I4>).

With *saltus fidei*, I am assuming that the information provided by the publishers of the recordings is true and accurate. Even in the case of the contrary, however, many recordings can be found through the record labels online, so this would not influence the outcome of this thesis.

Plenty has been written on Liszt's life as a virtuoso, composer and innovator (fundamental works by Alan Walker, Robert Doran, Claude Rostand, or Paul Merrick); there are many available primary resources for gaining insight into his day-to-day life, his thoughts about the *société* he lived in and greatly contributed to creating; and information on Liszt's relationships are likewise widely available in published letters to Comtesse Marie d'Agoult, Princess Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein and Baroness Olga von Meyendorf. There is similarly much literature on Debussy's life and work, probably examined in even greater detail than Liszt's (Paul Roberts, Stephen Walsh, Léon Vallas, François Lesure, and others). Such information can be found in a range of books, articles, and dissertations.

Particularly relevant to the topic at hand is the recent research (Doctoral Dissertation) by Thomas Hoi-Ning Lee, *Evocations of Nature in the Piano Music of Franz Liszt and the Seeds of Impressionism* (University of Washington 2016). This text provides an invaluable insight into Liszt's musical philosophy; points to the innovations made by Liszt both as a performer and composer; and, most relevant to this study, elaborates extensively on Liszt's influence on the first Impressionists.

## **Chapter II: Pair 1 – *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este I: Thrénodie* and *La Cathédrale engloutie***

The reason for pairing Liszt's *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este* with Debussy's *La Cathédrale engloutie* was to gain insight into the composers' approach to depicting large objects and relative stillness – unlike the rapid movements of water found in another two pairs of compositions to be examined in the following two chapters.

Liszt mentioned working on *Aux Cyprès* in his correspondence with Carolyne Sayn-Wittgenstein, and with Olga von Meyendorf:

*I have spent the last three days entirely beneath the cypresses! It was an obsession, impossible to think of anything else, even of church—their old trunks haunted me and I heard the*

*singing and crying of their branches, burdened with unchanging foliage. So there they are: laid out on music paper.*<sup>11</sup>

*Though I have not yet gone back to work, I have just written a hundred or so measures for the piano. It is a fairly gloomy and disconsolate elegy; illuminated toward the end by a beam of patient resignation. If I publish it, the title will be: Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este*<sup>12</sup>.

The above quotes paint two different pictures of the atmosphere of the place and writing process: the 'obsession' mentioned to Princess Carolyne sounds more passionate and lively than the 'gloomy and disconsolate elegy illuminated towards the end by a beam of patient resignation' discussed in the letter to Baroness Olga. Further in the same letter to the Baroness, Liszt writes:

*These sad pieces won't have much success and can do without it. I shall call them Thrénodies, as the word élégie strikes me as too tender and almost worldly.*<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, Liszt seemed to be absorbed in composing and fascinated by the phenomenon of the trees. The ambiguous beginning of the piece (starting off key: *Aux Cyprès* is in G minor, and the opening notes are Bb – F#), can be related to Liszt's emotional state: at that time, he was going through a depressive episode; Liszt wrote to Baroness:

*My poor brain is very tired; I almost spent these last two days in bed but I'm not sick (...)*<sup>14</sup>

Liszt found a heavy, sorrowful topic to indirectly express his state of mind - the cypresses. Like Debussy's cathedral, the trees are monumental, heavy, and the movement only becoming apparent through the swaying branches of the trees, for the trees themselves do not move.

Liszt starts *Aux Cyprès* from low notes that vibrate through their repetitions, the melody not appearing for the first 32 measures. This technique of repeating pitches and intervals rather than presenting an initial melody reminds one of the ringing notes in Debussy's *La Cathédrale*. Neither of the pieces open with a melodic line. Only in measure 33, Liszt introduces a highly chromaticised melody in the romantic style, with a left-hand accompaniment, perhaps an indication of the lyrical subject or physical presence of the cypresses (in contrast, the cathedral is imaginary). The lyrical

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in: Dolores Pesce, "'Années de Pèlerinage," Book 3: A "Hungarian" Cycle?'. *19th-Century Music*, 13/3 (1990), 218.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Liszt, Letter to Olga von Meyendorff from 13 September 1877. In *The letters of Franz Liszt to Olga von Meyendorff, 1871-1886, in the Mildred Bliss Collection at Dumbarton Oaks*, trans. William R. Tyler (Washington: Harvard University Press, 1979), 292.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Letter from 27 September 1877, 293.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., Letter from 14 October 1877, 295.

subject of *Aux Cyprès* is suggested through the melodic line (lacking in Debussy's *La Cathédrale*). It is shaped by the use of *crescendos*, *diminuendos*, harmonic intensity and other musical means, and might indicate the personalisation of the depiction.

In the culmination (mm. 107-117) Liszt uses tritones that further connect with Debussy's *La Cathédrale*. The two composers use this salient interval to create ambiguity and a sense of confusion. Through the use of tritones in *Aux Cyprès*, Liszt fluctuates between a holistic sound of nature and something more subjective and personal – a means of self-expression.

Also worthy of note is the closing section of *Aux Cyprès*, (Fig. 2.) separated by the time signature change, where bass chords give a broad and profound depth of background for the illumination of the angelic *arpeggios*. The combination creates the impression of spatial vastness, and finds its echo in Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* (Fig. 3.):

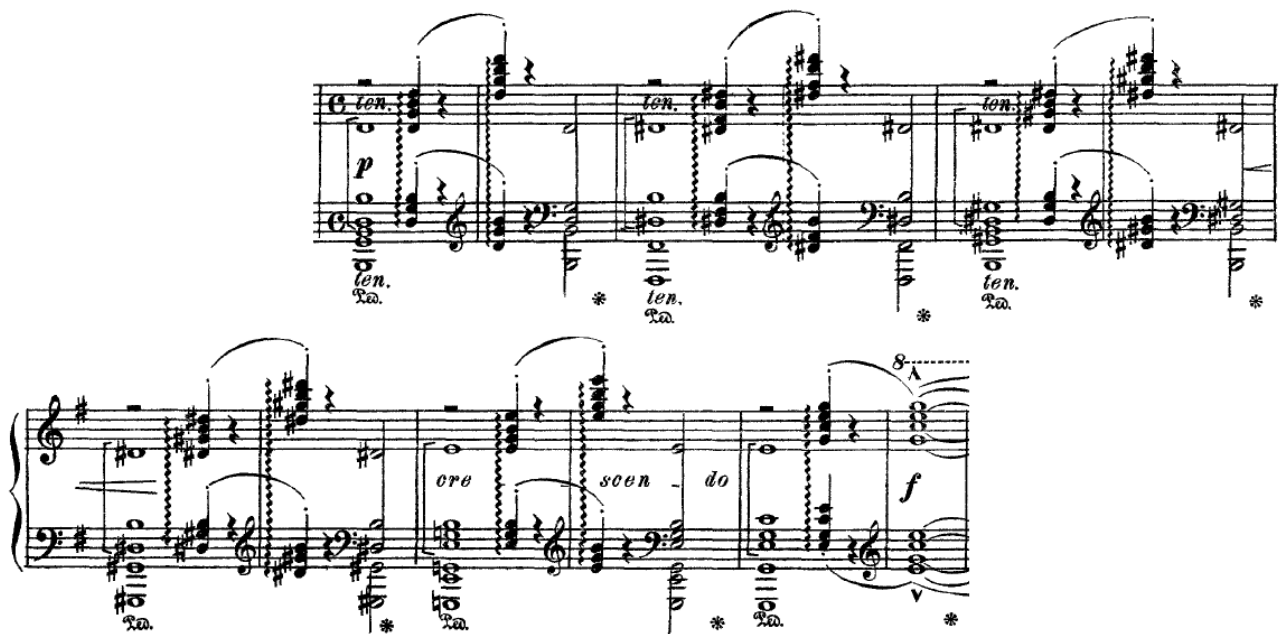


Fig. 2. Ferenc Liszt, *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este I: Threnodie, Années de pèlerinage, Troisième année*<sup>15</sup>, mm. 192-203.

<sup>15</sup> Ferenc Liszt, *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este I: Threnodie, Années de pèlerinage, Troisième année* S. 163. Franz Liszts Musicalische Werke. Serie II, Band 6, ed. José Vianna da Motta (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1916).

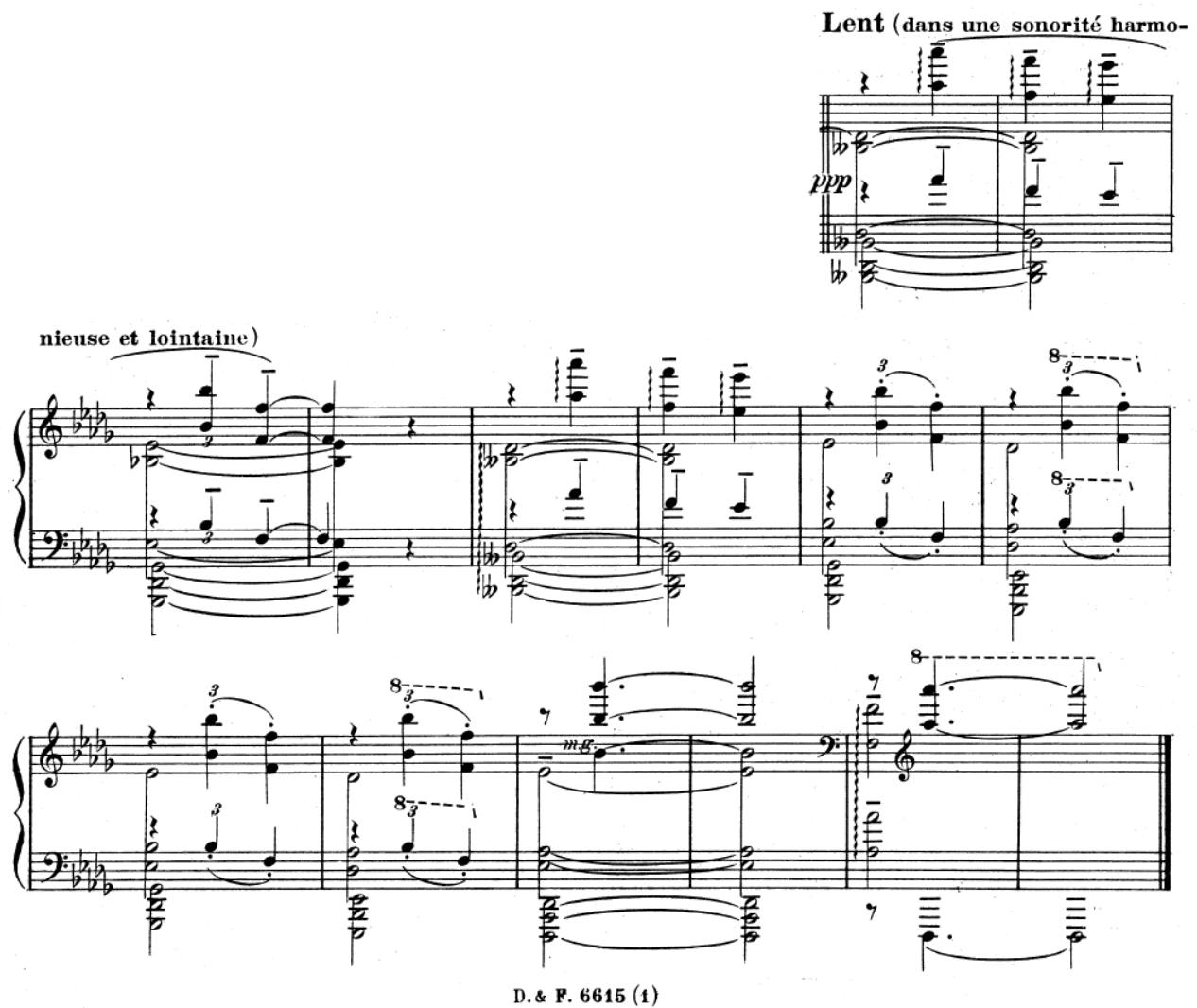


Fig. 3. Claude Debussy, *Reflets dans l'eau*<sup>16</sup>, mm. 81 - end.

In both cases, the physical advantage – or the spatial plan – of the keyboard allows the pianist to create different perspectives and musical thoughts. In this forward thinking, Liszt's writing became a precursor for the orchestral use of the piano, and for the appreciation of the instrument's complex abilities regarding colour, various uses of pedal (controlling how much of which sound to keep or let go), and registers.

Careful spatial thinking was also employed by Debussy to open *La Cathédrale*. Debussy first plays with distance both on the physical and metaphorical levels, as the cathedral exists far away and is sunken into the water. Starting from the split chords marked *pp*, through the remote, vibrating bass and treble notes, and then adding ripples in the middle register, Debussy creates the illusion of

<sup>16</sup> . Claude Debussy, *Reflets dans l'eau*, *Images 1<sup>re</sup> série*. Claude Debussy, *Images 1<sup>re</sup> Série* pour Piano à 2 mains, ed. A. Durand & Fils (Paris: Durand & Fils., 1905)

different spatial layers of sound. The physical distance of the cathedral is depicted by the physical distance on the keyboard. The low sounds that can be heard from afar are like murmurs. In the orchestral setting, the timpani's low-pitched sound is used to create a similar effect. As one of the versions of the legend about the mystical city of Ys in Brittany goes, the cathedral once submerged underwater will rise, and the first person who hears its bells will become the king of the city. While the cathedral rises, the bells' ringing can be heard from afar, and to capture the idea of physical distance Debussy uses the remote end of the keyboard. The musical difficulty lays in the concept that bells are made of hard tin-copper alloy and their sound is naturally loud. The impressionistic approach, in which one would like to resemble the quality, character and timbre, would suggest mimicking the loud, remote object in *piano* dynamics. That can only be achieved through the most sophisticated use of touch and pedalling.

To describe something large that is too big to embrace, Debussy purposefully gives up on the idea of presentational melody (which has a clear beginning and end), instead engaging the continuum of repeated pitches. This creates a world of sound, without movement or direction. The cathedral is monumental, static and the movement is barely noticeable, movement starting only from measure 16. Wide jumps, stretched chords, and *pp* dynamics combined are challenging to execute for the pianist, just as the rising cathedral requires effort to appear above the surface. Debussy avoids highlighting the melody and instead repeats the pitches to remove melodic interest. The whole section is harmonically driven, creating an impression of the 'still movement' of the cathedral.

Interestingly, the object is in motion and remains completely still itself, but the water washing off the cathedral does move. There is no movement, but nor is there a single rest, the slow steady progression ending only with the double bar line, encouraging the pianist to engage with the music in full capacity from the beginning to end. Measure 68 brings an unexpected change to the bass line through introducing a dissonant tritone, perhaps associated with the water creature but also depicting timelessness. The tritone is the largest real interval, and derives from the whole tone scale which creates no tensions nor resolutions. The tritone divides the octave into two equal parts creating an illusion of the mirror, perhaps the reflection in the water. Repeated tritones play with the imagination, take the listener into the world of dreams and legends, and create a motion without direction – a landscape rather than a story.

From measure 72 to the end, the left hand is shaped in irregular figurations, resembling waves or gothic cathedral's arches, in a misleading time signature. It seems that Debussy is purposely avoiding the division of time, losing the pulse to, yet again, introduce a sense of timelessness. When

performing *La Cathédrale*, I like thinking that Debussy is trying to depict the contrast and the abstraction of the moving cathedral. He uses many extra-musical means, and plays with oxymorons from outside of the musical world. These include being breathless (the object is still, and it's submerged in the water); finding movement in the water but stillness in the cathedral; telling a story and yet expressing timelessness; hearing quiet echoes of the nonetheless loud distanced sounds; and leaving the spectator with awe and disbelief.

The recordings selected for this pair of compositions are by Sviatoslav Richter and Zoltan Kocsis. My main objective while listening and analysing the interpretations was to examine how the two pianists express vastness, depth and distance, as means to depict monumental objects (trees and the cathedral). The paradox of movement was also important. In the case of the cypresses, the trees are rooted but their branches wave in the air. Large, heavy buildings, like a cathedral, do not move unless in a setting of a legend or a myth. Richter opens both compositions, *Aux Cyprès de la Villa d'Este* and *La Cathédrale engloutie* slower than Kocsis. His *Aux Cyprès* starts with an uneven and somewhat confused beat. The octaves of the left hand are stomping and heavy, and from the very beginning the two voices, the bass and the melody, are separated. Richter creates space by allowing the bass to murmur in the lowest register, and by highlighting the top notes of the right-hand chords. That can be heard at the beginning of the piece, in mm. 107 onwards, and again in mm. 131 onwards. The clear separation of low and high registers creates an impression of a physical distance and broadness. A similar spatial effect is achieved by Richter in *La Cathédrale* but through use of a different technique. Instead of distancing low and high notes, he creates space by playing the chords slowly, focusing rather on each individual colour than on the shape of the melodic line. This horizontal rather than vertical expression of timelessness invites the listener to appreciate all the intervals of each chord, like noticing architectural details of a cathedral. Several times Richter gains the momentum, and just before the climax he abruptly stops the phrase (e.g., mm. 21-22), which gives an impression of a well-like sound that fills in the empty space of the cathedral with its echoes and reverbs.

Kocsis's interpretations of both compositions are faster and more energetic than Richter's. From the very opening of *Aux Cyprès* the listener is carried along with the strong, forceful beat and movement of the left-hand octaves. In Kocsis's version of *Aux Cyprès* all voices are equally exposed and pronounced, resulting in a thicker texture and stronger sensation of turbulence. A similar sense of forward momentum can be heard in Kocsis's *La Cathédrale*. The chords of the opening measures give a sensation of floating upwards. This can be compared to a sound disappearing into the high



ceilings of a cathedral. Kocsis closes the slurs of mm. 84-85 with the bar line clearly separating two voices (crotchets vs. dotted semibreves). This has a beautiful effect of upward moving chords vanishing into the heavenly space. Another example of excellent distinction of the sonic layers is in mm. 6 - 13. Here, Kocsis highlights the notoriously ringing *tenuto* E's throughout the whole section and evokes an impression of ringing bells.

## Chapter III: Pair 2 – *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* and *Reflets dans l'eau*

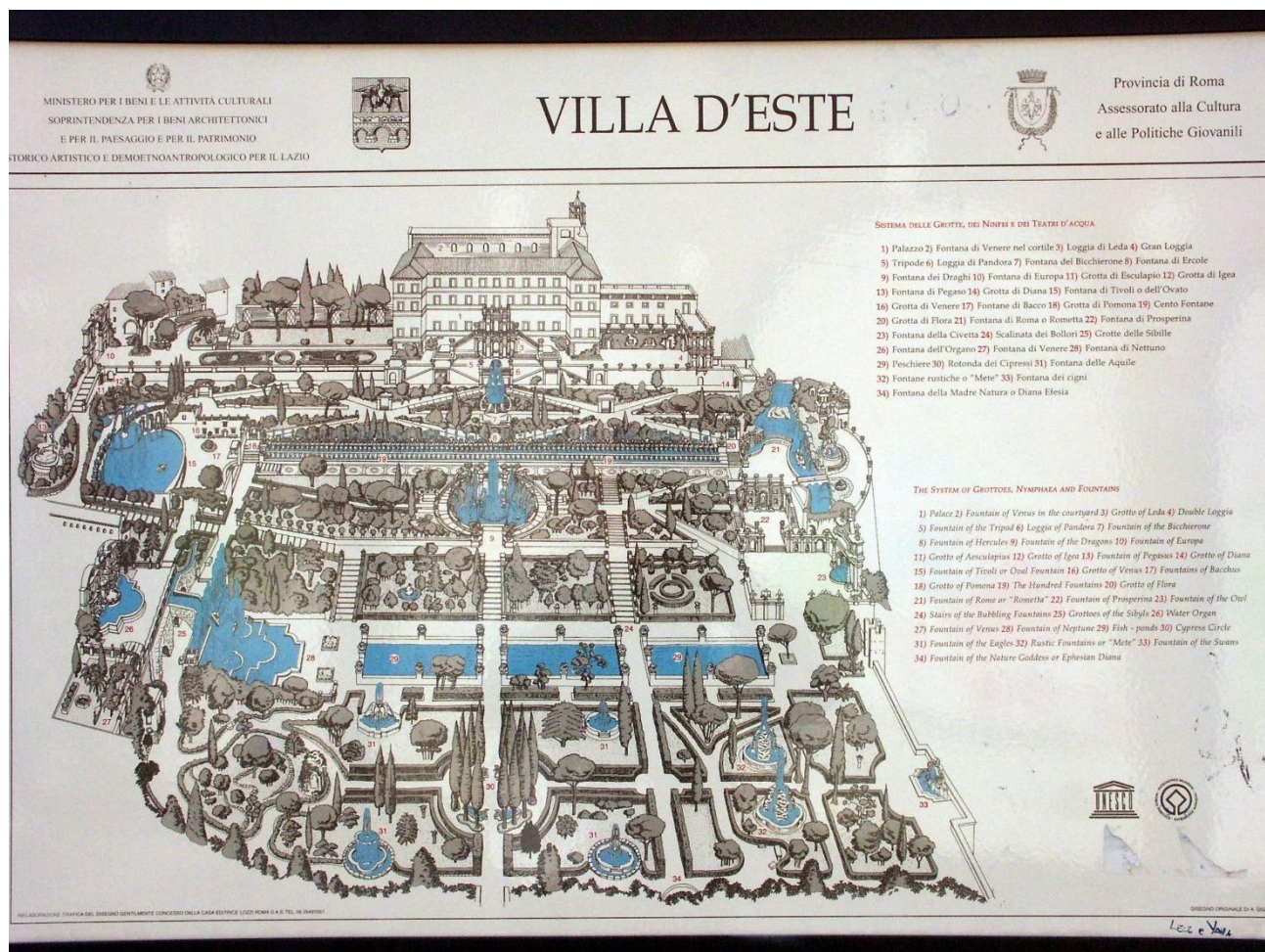


Fig. 4. Map of the gardens of Villa d'Este, Tivoli, Italy.

Liszt's *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* is perhaps the first composition that comes to mind as a precursor of impressionism in music. It is not known whether Liszt saw any artwork from the First Impressionist Exhibition in 1874, but because he was an active participant of the cultural life, it would not be risky to assume that he at least heard about the artistic *credo* and innovations

introduced by the painters. Liszt had already worked with the topic of water in *Au bord d'une Source* among others, but *Les Jeux d'eau* is different to anything written before, either from Liszt's own artistic output, or from any other contemporary composer. In *Les Jeux d'eau*, ideas or images are presented in concepts and effects, not in imitations or texture. The inspiration came from the gardens at Villa d'Este, near Tivoli, which Liszt visited several times between 1865-1885. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century villa is surrounded by 4,5 ha of gardens designed by Pirro Ligorio, also responsible for the visual aspect of the decorations (such as frescos), and Tommaso Chiruchi, hydraulic engineer. The flow of water in the Villa is regulated by Chiruchi's mindful calculations, supplied by The Aniene River, and originally worked entirely without pumps<sup>17</sup>.

The design of the fountains, which is important for this thesis, includes musical features. There were at least two musical fountains: the first of its kind, the famous *Fontana dell'Organo* (The Fountain of the Organ, fig. 5.), which was written about and imitated around Europe, and the *Fontana della Civetta* (The Fountain of the Owl). They both had mechanisms that used water pressure and air to create music, making them masterpieces of 16<sup>th</sup>-century engineering. Due to their delicate nature which required constant maintenance, and the poor conditions of the gardens in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (d'Este family were not able to support the high cost of maintaining the Villa), the mechanisms deteriorated and stopped working by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is unlikely that Liszt heard the music coming out of either of the fountains, but he might have been aware of their original abilities. By the time he became a regular guest at the Villa, the estate had changed owners several times. Finally, Cardinal Gustav von Hohenlohe bought the property and brought the overgrown gardens back to life which became very appealing to the romantic mindset of mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century artists.

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<sup>17</sup> 'The fame and glory of the Villa d'Este was above all established by its extraordinary system of fountains; fifty-one fountains and nymphaeums, 398 spouts, 364 water jets, 64 waterfalls, and 220 basins, fed by 875 metres of canals, channels and cascades, and all working entirely by the force of gravity, without pumps.' Source: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa\\_d%27Este#:~:text=The%20fame%20and,gravity%2C%20without%20pumps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_d%27Este#:~:text=The%20fame%20and,gravity%2C%20without%20pumps)>. Visited 26 July 2022.





Fig. 5. The Fountain of the Organ, Villa d'Este, Tivoli, Italy.

The resemblance between musical figurations on the one hand, and the water running in the fountains at the gardens of Villa d'Este on the other, is depicted in various ways: fast, light, and high-pitched runs on the keyboard, and a lot of shimmers evoked by *tremolos*. There are more than a dozen different types of decorative features throughout the piece. Here are some examples:

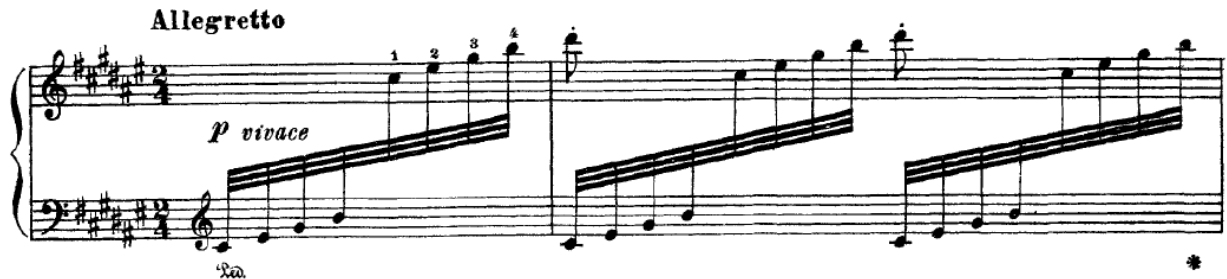


Fig. 6. Ferenc Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este, Années de pèlerinage, Troisième année*<sup>18</sup>, opening measures.

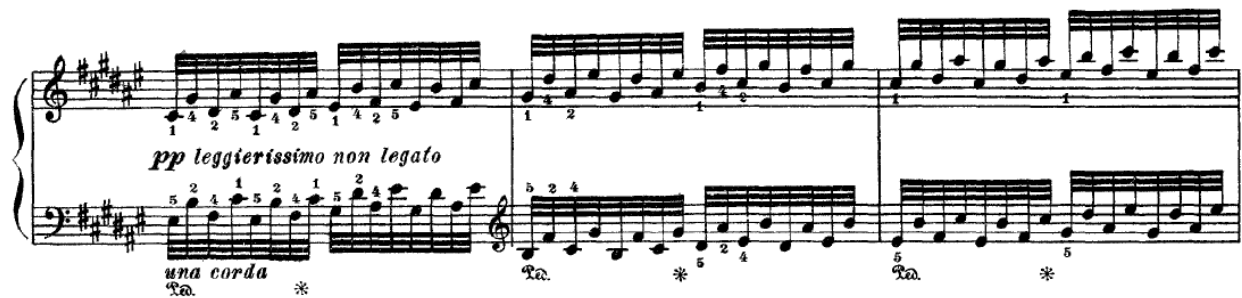


Fig. 7. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 14-16.



Fig. 8. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 26-28.

<sup>18</sup> Ferenc Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este, Années de pèlerinage, Troisième année* S. 163. Franz Liszts Musicalische Werke. Serie II, Band 6, ed. José Vianna da Motta (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1916).



Fig. 9. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 78-82.

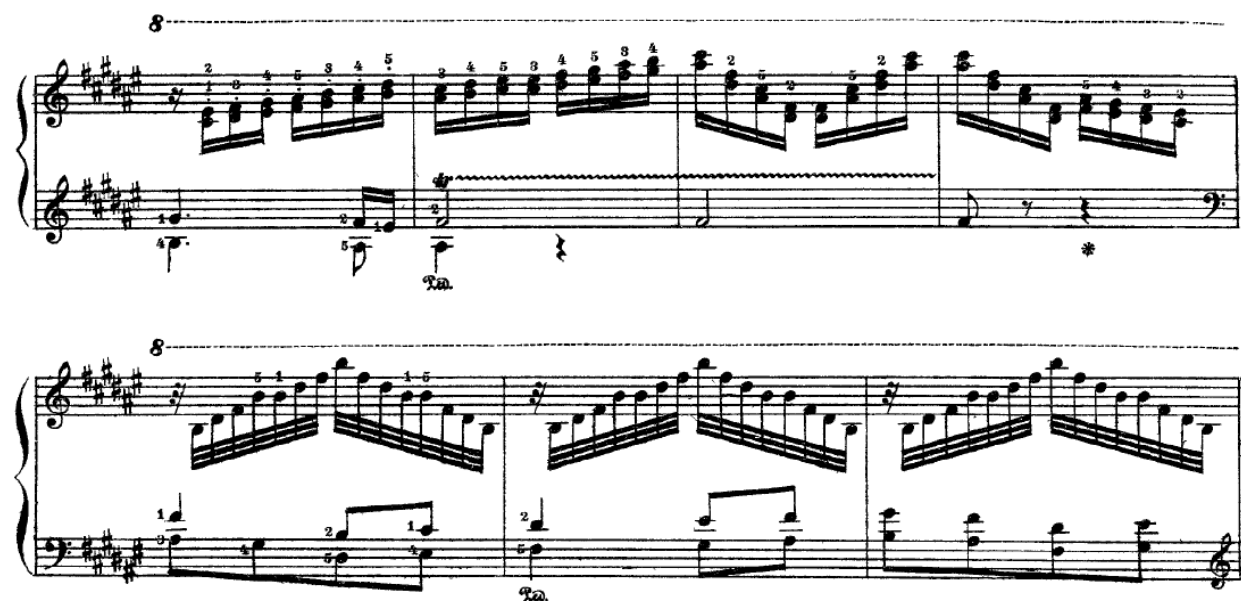


Fig. 10. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 116-122.





Fig. 11. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 126-137.

The above examples illustrate multiple types of shimmers, movements and embellishments through the whole piece. The figurations are joined into and through the thematic melody, as if the water fountains were on display depicting various directions of water flow and pressure. Water becomes directed and artistic.

The last example (Fig. 11.) depicts a variety of *tremolos*, *arpeggios*, jumps, shakes, repeated notes, and other techniques. It displays the densest accumulation of musical ornaments in the whole piece, changing every 4 measures. Looking at the plan of the Villa's gardens, one can picture Liszt wandering between the aisles and imagining different types of fountains where the water had been playing for centuries before the gardens went into ruin.

In the opening of the composition, the features of the real or imagined water fountains, jets and springs are evoked by highlighting top notes that emerge out of the texture rather than outline the texture. Liszt treats the piano as a means to produce impressions of water running in various directions, and to achieve that he thinks in concepts and effects rather than in imitations or musical rules. The subject that Liszt chose was to capture the paradox of a regulated flow of water. Water in the fountains is to some extent tamed, engineered and controlled by people, but nevertheless its natural way of flowing belongs to Mother Nature. Therefore, the ornaments look as if written according to beats, but when played one can sense something unnatural. Here is an example of starting the run of the *arpeggio* on the lowest note from the second demisemiquaver after the main beat (Fig. 12.).

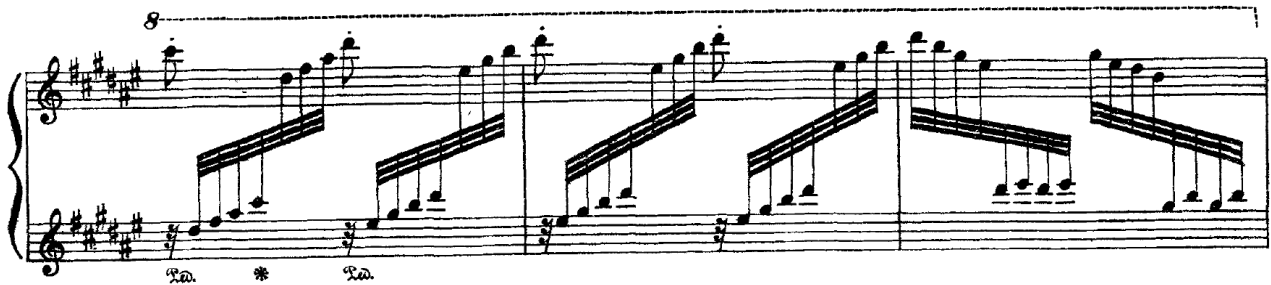


Fig. 12. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 8-10.

Liszt uses the piano in an illustrative way, creating a light and playful<sup>19</sup> atmosphere by using a middle-to-high compass of the piano for the majority of the piece, and introducing lower notes only in measure 182. The use of *canon* in the A major section creates a three-dimensional picture or peripheral vision effect. One can not only hear but also see different layers, as this part is written across three staves (Fig. 13.)

<sup>19</sup> The impression of playfulness may be enhanced by the fact that the original title translated from French literally means 'water games'.

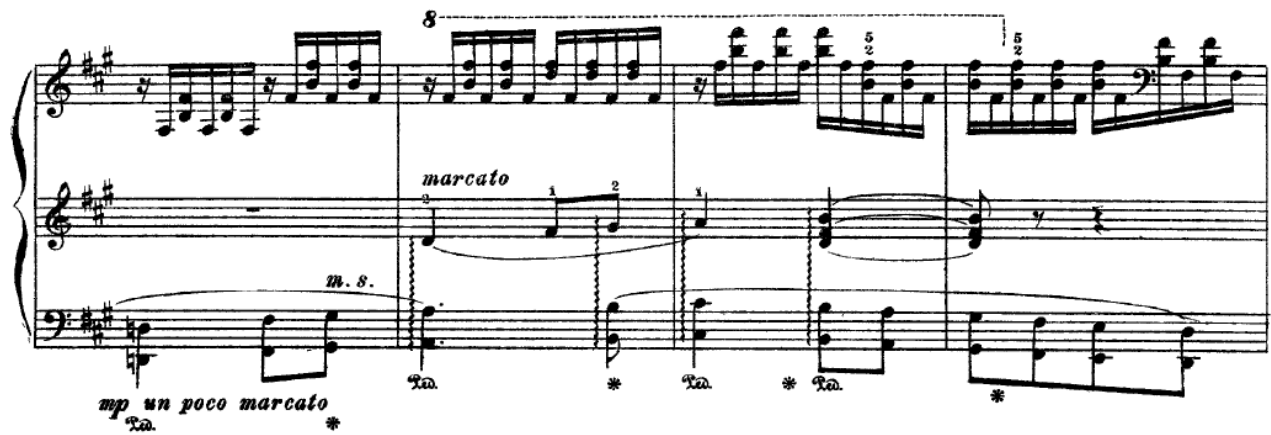


Fig. 13. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 182-185.

The final section, mm. 252-268, is built on a succession of the chords: E flat major–G major–C major–A flat major, shimmering in the highest register, and on the melody in the middle register. The choice of chords is based on the connection between the colours of the sounds, and breaks with traditional functional harmony. Every following chord is a surprise to the listener and the effect of a kaleidoscope is enhanced by the vibrant tremolos in the right hand:

Fig. 14. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 252-268.



This new way of perceiving the sound was later widely used by Debussy and other Impressionists and led to the development of sonoristic movements in music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The focus became oriented towards creating certain moods and feelings, evoking impressions rather than following the rules of traditional harmony. Chords became independent and composers organised them into sequences that follow subjective taste rather than external rules.

Another novelty that was later developed by the Impressionists is the way Liszt uses the pedals – the sustain pedal and *una corda*. In the following example (Fig. 15.), the sustain pedal is used to produce an unusual effect, as if Liszt was playing with various ‘impressions’ of the parallel fifths:

Fig. 15. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 14-22. Highlighted pedal markings.

The above example also illustrates a new way of understanding the registers of the instrument: climbing in shaking parallel fifths from the middle of the keyboard and starting in *pianissimo*; and finishing in the highest register with *rinforzando* after *crescendo molto*, where the piano's sounds become weaker the higher they go. Liszt equips the pianist with a lot of details about how the sound

should be produced: *pianissimo, leggero non legato, una corda*, alternating sustain pedal (on the first group, and off the second group in each measure to begin with, then each group with a new pedal, followed by a two-measure-long pedal leading up to the *rinforzando*). This resembles a modernistic approach to music, later found in Bartók's compositions.

There are several places in *Les Jeux* where Liszt asks for *una corda* (for example Fig. 15, m. 14) and a few bars later repeats the indication to maintain the effect (*sempre una corda*, m. 40). Because the middle part of that section includes a vibrant culmination *rinforzando* (m. 22), using *una corda* is not a means of playing *piano*. This may suggest that the use of the soft pedal is to create a new stylistic effect.

Other times, the indication of the sustain pedal deliberately creates a special effect, in this case a mist of lasting sounds (Fig. 16.). This only became common practice with the abandonment of the Romantic *bel canto* use of the pedal, as the means of playing *legato*.



Fig. 16. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 141-151. Highlighted pedal markings.

The sustain pedal in this example lasts for eight measures and overlaps two different sections including not only the change of key from E major to D major, but also the change in texture (from repeated notes and cascading chords in the right hand against short chords in the left hand, to broad rolling chords in the left hand filling in open, majestic *arpeggiated* chords in the right hand).

A close connection between Liszt's and Debussy's impressionistic manners of evoking ideas can be witnessed in the figurations in *Les Jeux* in mm. 54 onwards (Fig. 17). This may have served as inspiration for Debussy to open his *Reflets dans l'eau* (Fig. 18):

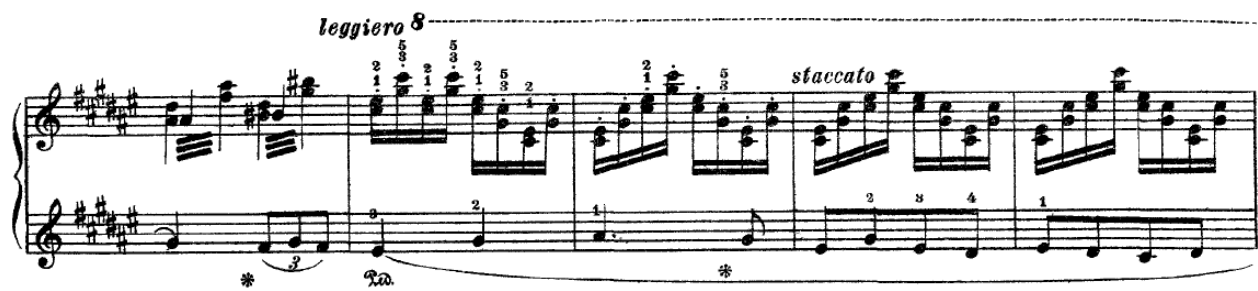


Fig. 17. Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 53-57.

Fig. 18. Claude Debussy, *Reflets dans l'eau*<sup>20</sup>, opening measures.

In both examples the ascending and descending chords are built upon rather humble melodies, and the chords move between the middle and high parts of the keyboard. The highest note of each arch is never played on the main beat of the measure. Liszt places the highest note on the fourth semiquavers (the last semiquaver of the group) of the first beat in 2/4. Debussy's group lasts two measures, and the highest note is placed at the second semiquaver of the second measure in 4/8 time.

<sup>20</sup> Claude Debussy, *Reflets dans l'eau*, *Images 1<sup>re</sup> série*. Claude Debussy, *Images 1<sup>re</sup> Série pour Piano à 2 mains*, ed. A. Durand & Fils (Paris: Durand & Fils., 1905).

Another inspiration or 'quote' from Liszt that can be found in Debussy's music is the structure and the motif of the left hand from *Les Jeux* mm. 44-45 (Fig. 19), used in Debussy's *l'isle Joyeuse*, mm. 7 onwards (Fig. 20).



Fig. 19. Ferenc Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, mm. 42-52.



Fig. 20. Claude Debussy, *L'isle Joyeuse*<sup>21</sup>, mm. 5-9.

<sup>21</sup> Claude Debussy, *L'isle Joyeuse*. Claude Debussy, Oeuvres pour le Piano, ed. A. Durand & Fils (Paris: Durand & Fils., 1904).

It goes without saying that the melodic and rhythmical shapes of the left hand are strikingly similar, as well as the placement of the motif within the measures. Debussy's measure is twice as long but it does not influence the understanding of the musical gesture. In both pieces, the right hand accompanies the motif with *trillo*, and both sections contain an indication of *pianissimo*.

While learning to play and perform this pair of compositions, the image that led me through the process of creating musical gestures was to imagine *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* as a display of upwards shooting jets, and vertical movement of water, and to balance it with layered and horizontal movement in *Reflets dans l'eau* resembling various currents of water in streams or rivers.

*Reflets dans l'eau* opens and closes with an image that is not defined, like water that is wild and unregulated and distorts its potential shapes. Objects reflect in the moving surface of water, increasing and decreasing in size, and changing shape and proportions. For the opening chords Debussy uses ringing 4ths and 5ths. This creates the sense of openness and spatial abundance. Debussy abandons melody in the traditional sense, and instead uses colours and energy of the chords to provide a background for the leading series of three *tenuto* notes, A flat, F, and E flat in the left hand. These three notes bring a new quality, a sense of something more tangible and more materialised than the vague and remotely sounding chords of the right hand.

In the case of the opening of *Reflets*, it would be more precise to talk about a 'top' or 'bottom' stave rather than a 'right' or 'left' hand. The contrast between what is written and what the music should sound like (plentiful of notes in the chords that ought to be played *pianissimo*, in comparison to leading voice constructed of only three *tenuto* notes) somewhat encourages the pianist to take some of the chord's notes into the left hand. From personal experience in the classroom and watching various pianists online, it seems that the 'take-over' happens *ad libitum*, and there does not seem to be any common practice, nor did Debussy indicate anything<sup>22</sup>. It gives pianists an opportunity to interact with the piece on an individual basis.

The chords written in semiquavers in the first eight measures, give an impression of ripples in the water, bigger or smaller arches to distract the attention away from the melody. After the opening waves of chords, a new thought-reflection appears: four chords moving upwards followed by four

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<sup>22</sup> Preface, *Debussy Images 1<sup>re</sup> série*. (Basel, London, New York, Praha: Bärenreiter Urtext, 2022), XV.

Tamara Stefanovich wrote: 'Do we really need fingering marks when the composer called them undesirable? Though Debussy was not partial to fingering marks, at the end of his preface to the *Douze Études* (1915) he nevertheless wrote "Cherchons nos doigtés!" (Let us find our own fingerings!) — an invitation to define a personal navigation system.'

notes dropping down; six chords moving upwards followed by six notes dropping down (Fig. 21, mm. 9-11). These two groups are not aligned with the bar lines and the meter is distorted, like playful waterdrops free from human intervention.

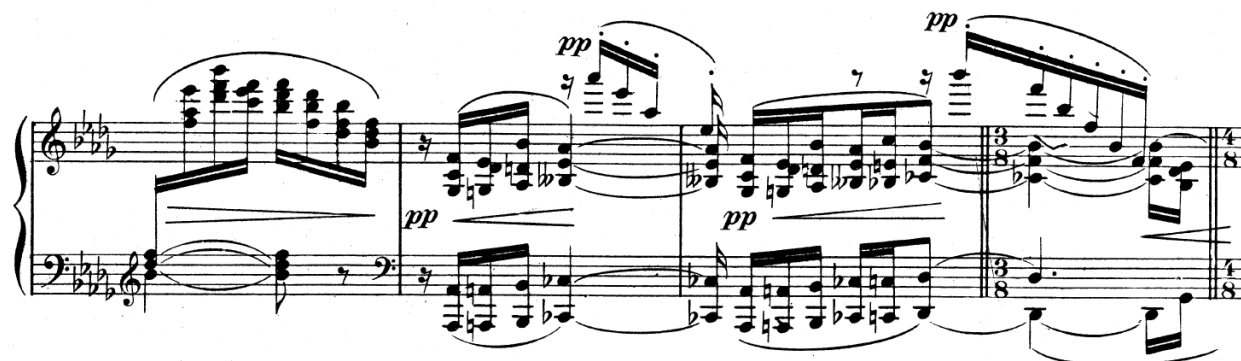


Fig. 21. Claude Debussy, *Reflets dans l'eau*, mm. 8-11.

The *Quasi cadenza* section introduces a big increase of energy and momentum. The score takes a leap into a new world of bubbling and vibrating abundance of hemidemisemiquavers that create a wave of slushing sound. Here again, in a similar approach to the concepts in Liszt's *Les Jeux*, the main voice appears as if from the background, with very few notes of the melody against the rushing minute ornamental notes in the higher register.

Debussy, similar to Liszt, often uses the whole tone scale. There is no centre of gravity within that scale, and using it introduces confusion and abandons the sense of reality or time. This can be observed several times throughout *Reflets*. Debussy moves back and forth between major/minor and whole tone scales as if the listener were being hypnotised and were gradually losing touch with reality to travel to a dream-like land of imagination. The sections of music blend from one to another, various voices emerge and hide, one idea gradually takes the listener to another idea. Memories, reflections, and the flow of consciousness meander along with the music. When finally the whole tone scale is interrupted by the empty sounding G#-A-C#-G# in measure 65, the listener wakes up and doubts if all this has actually happened – or whether it were just a dream.

The selection of recordings for this pair of compositions is by Claudio Arrau and Zoltán Kocsis. The two pianists interpret the pieces in strikingly different ways, especially *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*. In Arrau's interpretation, *Les Jeux* becomes a story with a strong lyrical subject. He clearly exposes the melody through the piece, to the extent that in mm. 48-53 and similar, the right hand harmonic changes disappear and the various colours of figurations blend into one. Often the ornaments are also played melodically, with much attention to each note, and hence the trills and

other minute notes are relatively slow. For the coherency of the interpretation, Arrau plays *ritardando* even where Liszt only wrote *diminuendo* (for example mm. 58-62, 176-178). Arrau's touch seems to be rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, romantic manner. He carries long phrases, sometimes at the cost of musical rests (for example mm. 34-35, 36-39, or 272-end).

Arrau's *Reflets dans l'eau* offers an interesting insight into articulation in mm. 37-38 and 41-42. The left-hand B flat minor chords written *staccato tenuto* and are not slurred together with the right-hand demisemiquavers and Arrau executes that very clearly.

Kocsis's way of playing, in comparison to Arrau, is more forceful and energetic. His trills are rigid and mechanical, sometimes creating an impression of hail, given what can be heard as aggressive playing. It leads to an effect-driven interpretation, which can be heard from the beginning. Kocsis opens *Les Jeux* with a shower of fast, well-articulated notes slushing up and down. He then exposes each type of ornament and treats the background (trills, shakes etc.) as just as important as the main voice. Measures 48-53 introduce an excellent example of a harmonic kaleidoscope created by exposing the minute changes of different sounds. One can appreciate the ever-changing shades and colours of the right hand's trills led in parallel with the main theme, as if the subject and the environment were one.

Kocsis's interpretation is like an impressionistic painting in one more aspect. When listening to his recording of *Les Jeux*, one can focus or de-focus at any point, in a similar manner to moving closer or further away from a painting. If one pays close attention, an abundance of details emerges: all the notes are well articulated and give an impression of a pre-calculated structure. However, if 'listened' from far, a bigger picture effect is created, and the ear can follow long phrases built on main notes. This way of performing is clear both in *Les Jeux* and in *Reflets*, and the best example is his interpretation of mm. 48-56 of *Reflets* (Fig. 22.). Not only does Kocsis lead the top voice-melody when it emerges, but also the demisemi- and hemidemisemiquavers, and the bottom notes—minims: a sequence of six B's, A, G sharp and eventually E flat.



*f*  
*f*  
*f*  
*p*  
*mf cresc. molto*  
*f*

*au Mouvt*  
*en dehors*

8 7

D. &amp; F. 6615 (1)

Fig. 21. Claude Debussy, *Reflets dans l'eau*, mm. 47-56.

Typically, the final jump of the walking bass line carries the function of a dominant-tonic resolution, but here (G sharp – E flat) is an augmented 3<sup>rd</sup>, which sounds like a 4<sup>th</sup> – a reflection of a 5<sup>th</sup>. Kocsis reveals what Debussy hid in a dream-like turbulence.

## Chapter IV: Pair 3 – *Au bord d’une Source* and *Jardins sous la pluie*

The main reason for including *Au bord d’une Source* into the programme is that the piece is the one tangible link between the two composers. Liszt and Debussy met one time, in Rome. While Debussy was on his *Prix de Rome* scholarship between 1885-87, Liszt came to visit the scholarship students and played for them *Au bord d’une Source* among other pieces<sup>23</sup>. Debussy was especially impressed with Liszt’s way of using the pedal (as if Liszt was breathing). That experience, meeting and hearing Liszt play, had a long-lasting influence on Debussy.

The reason for pairing *Au bord d’une Source* with *Jardins sous la pluie* is found in the visual aspect of the scores.

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<sup>23</sup> Claude Debussy, *Debussy Letters*. ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987), 301.

4. Am Rand einer Quelle.  
Au Bord d'une Source. Beside a Spring.  
 Forrás mellett.

In säuselnder Kühle  
 Beginnen die Spiele  
 Der jungen Natur.  
 Schiller.

(Komponiert 1835/36, umgearbeitet 1855.)

*Allegretto grazioso.*

*dolce tranquillo*

*sempre staccato*

Fig. 23. Ferenc Liszt, *Au bord d'une Source*, *Années de pèlerinage, Première année: Suisse*<sup>24</sup>, opening measures.

Jardins sous la pluie.

*Net et vif*

*PIANO*

*pp*

Fig. 24. Claude Debussy, *Jardins sous la pluie*<sup>25</sup>, opening measures.

<sup>24</sup> Ferenc Liszt, *Au bord d'une Source*, *Années de pèlerinage, Première année: Suisse* S. 160. Franz Liszts Musicalische Werke. Serie II, Band 6, ed. José Vianna da Motta (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1916).

<sup>25</sup> Claude Debussy, *Jardins sous la pluie*<sup>25</sup>, *Estampes*. Claude Debussy, *Estampes Pour le Piano*, ed. A. Durand & Fils (Paris: Durand & Fils, 1903).

In both compositions, the notes contributing to the melody that the listener can ‘hum along’ emerge from the texture of numerous semiquavers. In *Jardins sous la pluie* the aural effect is as clear as the visual expression of the music on the physical score, but in *Au bord d’une Source* pianists can be fooled by the neat-looking notes of the top stave. Only when approached physically in performance does the melody appear a surprise emergence out of the other notes, coming from both the top and bottom stave. Single ‘pinged’ notes appear out of the texture from equally the right and the left hand. Just like an impressionistic painting reveals its sense to the spectator only when viewed from afar, the faster the music is played, the easier the melody is likely to be comprehended. The constant movement of semiquavers also reminds one of an impressionistic painting and its endless, minuscule brushstrokes. Only some of the notes – the more important ones – ring out to the surface, emerging from the homogenous background. The learning process of *Au bord* is somewhat impressionistic as well. Liszt continuously introduces a new emergence, and at first the melody is lost within the process of deciphering the rich enharmonic changes in the score (Fig. 25).



Fig. 25. Ferenc Liszt, *Au bord d’une Source*, mm. 4-7.

It is difficult to recognise the melody at first sight. However, it becomes clearer with time, when one familiarises themselves with the piece. Because *Au bord* is in the form of variations, embracing longer phrases and sections of the piece helps understand the melodic changes and fluctuations. Each ‘variation’ sounds similar but is very different in detail. This creates confusion and makes the initial learning process challenging. One could imagine that when it comes to technique, mimicking all the brushstrokes while duplicating an impressionistic painting would be more difficult than copying still nature. In that respect, *Au bord d’une Source*, with its mesmerizing texture, can render

the learning process demanding. This also influences the listener: *Au bord d'une Source* sounds very impressionistic in the sense that Liszt effortlessly shifts between modes and key signatures. The whole musical picture is on the one hand enjoyable to follow and appreciate the playfulness of springing water, but on the other hand puzzling in its inner structure. That playfulness and joy, for the player and the observer, also comes from hand - crossing and - swapping. The refined chromatic shifts in semiquavers allow the listener to hear the melody in various lights, like water flow being affected by subtle wind changes. This concept can be interestingly compared to the large impressionistic experiment of the *Haystacks Series*, where Monet paints stacks of hay at different times of day, and in different season, lights, and weather conditions etc., gaining an insight into the forever changing moods of the natural world that, despite its cycles, never repeats itself.

Liszt's forward-thinking in *Au bord d'une Source* can be seen in the way he treats the pianists' hands. Parts of the right and left hands are deeply intertwined, the hands swapping the melodic and the accompanimental roles as if everything were written for a one-minded – rather than two-handed – person. This technique is later adapted by Debussy, for example in *Reflets dans l'eau* (Fig. 26)

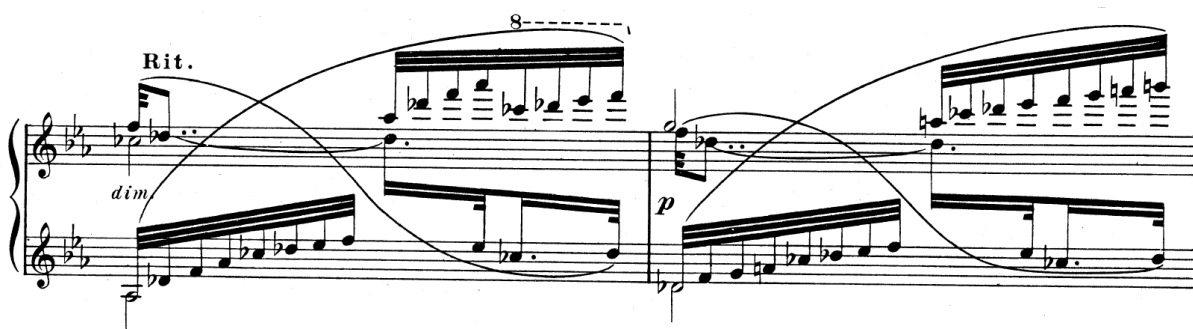


Fig. 26. Claude Debussy, *Reflets dans l'eau*, mm. 62-63.

Because the harmonic fluctuations are much more subtle in *Au bord d'une Source* than in *Jardins sous la pluie*, one may risk concluding that within this pair of compositions Liszt is more impressionistic than Debussy. Looking at the formal structure of the two compositions, *Au bord d'une Source* resembles the form of variations, with each section finishing with a cadence. In each variation Liszt introduces not only technical changes, such as the ripple effect, virtuosic jumps on arpeggiated chords, crossing the hands, repeated notes, but also harmonic colours, modulations, and other means to disturb the surface and create the impression of a kaleidoscope. These subtle changes do not appear as obviously to the listener as to the pianist, and this makes the learning process arduous, but the listener can somewhat unconsciously appreciate the minute variations in the musical structure (this brings us back to the idea of Monet's *Haystacks*).

*Jardins sous la pluie* in its *toccata*-like form, is much more transparent: each key change brings a new, four- to -eight-bar long section, and this way of structuring the piece renders it easier to follow in the learning process. The dominant forces in *Jardins* are harmony and momentum. Again, one may ask if Liszt proved to be more impressionistic, fluid, and flexible in his approach to form than Debussy. Liszt's composition suggests less regularity and structure. The subtle changes between major and minor modes, including the extensions sounding in the interval of the seconds (major or minor accordingly, Fig. 25) create a landscape of constant change and movement, sparkling through the thick texture of the impressionistic canvas of semiquavers. The fluctuations are irregular and escape the listener's attention easily, unlike in *Jardins sous la pluie* where the rhythm and regularly grouped notes are more obvious and easier to recognise. Both Liszt and Debussy create a 'ripple effect' in their compositions, but in a different manner: Debussy escalates certain melodic lines through using repetitions and the whole tone scale. These two solely give a space for the music to tangibly express the rain, waves, and perhaps wind blowing, and other natural elements. Liszt does that through spacing the hands and 'bouncing' between octaves: the left hand jumps over the right hand on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> quaver of every beat, where the second quaver is below the right hand, and the third is above it. These notes spring above the right-hand continuum of arpeggiated semiquavers. In this textural maze of notes in *Au bord d'une Source*, the changes are blurred, and the keys of the chords are not as easy to recognise at first sight as in *Jardins sous la pluie*.

The 12/8 time signature of *Au bord* creates a dance-like, playful beat which is crucial for the formation of the beginning of each variation. Liszt abandons the beat at the end of each variation and creates the contrast to free-flowing *cadenzas* at the end of each section. In *Jardins sous la pluie* the beat is more unforgiving. Such motoric music is distinct for Debussy. However, Debussy uses the beat in a slightly different manner: his beats carry the listener along, lead to the next phrase, and create a rapid and unstoppable momentum. The continuity of semiquavers is distorted by the way Debussy places the highest-pitched note, on the weakest part of each group (on the second semiquaver). It strikes that Debussy plays with the metrics and creates a counterforce against the main beat.

Several innovations can be observed in *Au bord d'une Source* that Liszt founded for the following generations of composers; the sonoristic way of thinking about the aural effect of the music, and momentum-driven writing that overrides the harmony-based form of musical composition. Late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century French composers build on that by putting more emphasis on the 'moment', the surface sounds, various instruments' colours and timbres, and

searching for sonority (vs. the quality of sound). Liszt also clearly breaks with the German music tradition that favours the hierarchy of beats. He opens space for reverberation, his crossing creates ripples, and he multiplies the energy by transferring it between the hands and beats.

A stone thrown into the water creates waves, and Debussy develops this concept in *Jardins sous la pluie*. Through the murmur of semiquavers only selected notes stand out, and not necessarily the highest ones. This approach resulted in separating the French Impressionists from utilising harmonic structures to create the form of a musical piece. It can be observed in *Jardins sous la pluie*, where Debussy treats chords and harmonies as a pool of sounds without arranging them in structures according to functional harmony. What makes it easier to follow the melodic line of *Au bord d'une Source* amid fluctuating semiquavers, is the strong and obvious beat. This aspect of the piece creates a clear connection to *Jardins sous la pluie*, reminding one of the virtuosic *toccata* technique: a motoric continuum of fast, light notes.

For the final pair, *Au bord d'une Source* and *Jardins sous la pluie* I selected recordings by Sviatoslav Richter and Daniel Barenboim. Unfortunately, the recordings by Richter are live from his concerts in 1958 and 1977, and hence the quality of Richter's recordings is not as good as that of Barenboim's whose studio recordings were published by Deutsche Grammophon. While listening to Richter's *Au bord*, one can be drawn to the melody created by the crotchets and quavers in the first half of the composition. From the beginning, Richter embraces large phrases, and the first musical thought lasts for twelve measures. In the second half, from measure 33, Richter exposes not only the melodic notes (crotchets and quavers) but also the chromatic changes in the right hand's continuously running semiquavers. This change lasts only for five measures, and the section finishes with a third *cadenza* where Richter comes back to the sparkling character of the beginning. From m. 38 to the end, Richter again plays in large musical thoughts of following the 'bigger' notes and allowing the 'smaller' ones to create a background of the movement of water. *Au bord d'une Source* in Richter's interpretation becomes *brillante*, fast and sparkling but on the other hand a somewhat forceful and *con fuoco* piece.

Barenboim's attention to detail and exposure of the chromatic changes in decorative semiquavers might suggest the 'whispering coolness' from Schiller's quote<sup>26</sup>. Within the first twelve measures, the first section, Barenboim shows several shorter phrases by opening and closing them in a romantic way using *crescendos* and *diminuendos* as well as *ritardandos* at the end of each phrase.

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<sup>26</sup> 'In the whispering coolness begins young nature's play', Liszt adds a quote from a poem by Schiller, *The lively morning breeze wafts freshly*.

That allows him to change the colour of each phrase along with the key change; from A flat major to D flat minor, B major and B flat major, leading to the first *cadenza*. This *cadenza* highlights an interesting aspect of rhythm and articulation, as Barenboim plays it not only in hemiolas, but also more *secco* making the first, and similarly third *cadenza* (mm. 38-40) unlike the rest of the composition. Barenboim layers all three voices as equally important and one can follow each of them throughout the whole piece, the sparkling embellishments perhaps evoking the ‘young Nature’s play’ from Schiller’s quote. *Au Bord* is written in a form of variations, and Barenboim separates each of the ‘variations’ by permitting the accumulation of sound of *cadenzas* to reverberate under a strict control of the sustain pedal. He also differentiates various sections of *Jardins sous la pluie* with the help of the sustain pedal, depending on which and how many layers he wants to expose. After a *secco* beginning, Barenboim starts blurring various voices with the sustain pedal to pronounce other voices, adding more of the blur along with the lower registers of the piano. In visual terms, it could suggest watching individual raindrops in the air that accumulate into puddles once they reach the ground. Richter also opens the piece *secco* and he uses very little pedal for the first 46 measures, building gradually to a big pour of water in m. 47 (D flat and A flat are held in the bass for three measures).

The concept of *Jardins sous la pluie* is based on repetitions, reverberations, ripples, echoing notes and bouncing sounds. Each pianist plays it differently, but the differences in interpretation do not affect the impressionistic side of the piece. On the contrary to *Au bord d’une Source* that potentially can be played more romantically or more impressionistically, *Jardins* constitutes the essence of impressionistic writing.

## Chapter V: Conclusion and Closing

The three pairs of compositions selected for this thesis are only a fraction of the repertoire that could serve to examine the influence that Liszt had on Debussy. One of the obvious examples which is not included in this study is Liszt’s *Orage* and Debussy’s *Ce qu’a vu le vent d’Ouest*. These two pieces strongly correlate on various textural, formal, conceptual plans and without doubt Debussy studied the style and the ideas that shine through in Liszt’s artistic and philosophical legacy.

My hope while working on this thesis and the repertoire was to explore less obvious commonalities between the two composers. Constructs such as spatial arrangement of the notes



on the keyboard relating to the physical location of the object (walking between the fountains of the gardens at the Villa d'Este), space within the object (*La Cathédrale engloutie*), or physical motion of the pianist relating to the character of the piece (playfulness of *Au bord d'une Source*) which constitute extra-musical environment of the piece, all demonstrate new approaches to musical expression. The incorporation of means primarily not related to the art of creating music resulted in broadening the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and opened opportunities for Debussy to explore non-traditional sonorities, experiment with dissonances and free transitions, and find new 'harmonic chemistry'<sup>27</sup>. This, however, is only one aspect of Liszt's and Debussy's enormous legacy and their musical and philosophical thought.

For my Master of Musical Arts final recital repertoire, I included 10 pieces:

1. *Aux cyprès de la Villa d'Este: Threnodie I* – Ferenc Liszt
2. *La cathédrale engloutie* – Claude Debussy
3. *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* – Ferenc Liszt
4. *Reflets dans l'eau* – Claude Debussy
5. *Au bord d'une Source* – Ferenc Liszt
6. *Jardins sous la pluie* – Claude Debussy

\*\*\* interval \*\*\*

7. *Storm* – Ferenc Liszt
8. *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* – Claude Debussy
9. *Cloches à travers les feuilles* – Claude Debussy
10. *Vallée d'Obermann* – Ferenc Liszt

The first six pieces were organised into three pairs for comparison and constituted the material for this thesis. The other four hold potential seeds for further comparison research, such as just mentioned as *Orage* by Liszt and *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest* by Debussy; or *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* and *Cloches à travers les feuilles* by Debussy with one of the late works by Liszt, *Nuages gris*. Without going into further details, Liszt's *Vallée d'Obermann* may hold strong

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<sup>27</sup> Claude Debussy, *Debussy Letters*. ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987), 155.

conceptual connections with Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* in the way that both composers dis-establish the tonal centre throughout the piece and present the ever-reoccurring topic in various colours of different key signatures (of in case of Debussy's orchestral work also timbres). Both of these works are also programmatic.

I hope that my research may inspire pianists and musicologists to further explore the topic of impressionism in the works of Ferenc Liszt and his extraordinarily innovative thinking. As shown during the course of this thesis, Liszt may have established a foundation for Debussy's musical genius to flourish which has enriched the world through creative destruction in harmonic and melodic thinking.

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Fig. 6-17. Ferenc Liszt, *Les Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este, Années de pèlerinage, Troisième année* S. 163. Franz Liszts Musicalische Werke. Serie II, Band 6, ed. José Vianna da Motta (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1916).

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## Internet Materials

Debussy Claude. *Jardins sous la pluie*, pianist Daniel Barenboim, Deutsche Grammophon, Berlin 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vmi1w5A7l4>>. 31 July 2022.

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