

Analysis Of Debussy's Sonata For Cello And Piano

Claude Debussy, a French Impressionist composer who lived from 1862 to 1918, composed his Sonata for Cello and Piano in 1915, within the last few years of his life. Along with two other later sonatas, the 1915 Sonata for Cello and Piano was written while Debussy was struggling against the cancer that would kill him during World War I. Most striking at first glance is the piece's brevity; clocking in at less than thirteen minutes (often eleven or twelve), the austerity and complete efficiency of Debussy's musical ideas and plans are immediately apparent. His complete lack of indulgence coupled with a contrasting maintenance of Romantic-like sweeping melodies and intense emotion (albeit in an unembellished primal form) creates a remarkable level of intensity and concentration throughout the entire piece.

Following in his past footsteps and the modern era's overall trend of halting thematic development, Debussy constantly produces one fragmented theme after the other, connecting seemingly disparate ideas as soon as the listener becomes accustomed to the previous phrase. Often, the cello and piano will crescendo simultaneously at the climax of these individual fragmented themes, but not in order to complete and resolve the idea, but to break off and suddenly simmer down into something new. An example occurs between measures 29-35 (marked largement déclamé), after the intense build in dynamics of the short and fast repeating cello motive. This quality adds to the overall sadness and austerity of the piece, as if expressing unfulfilled expectations at every turn.

The sonata is divided into three short movements. In the performance I listened to, Jean Francaix (piano) and Maurice Gendron's (cello) 1964 recording, the first movement lasts 5:00 minutes, the second 4:00 minutes, and the last around 3:00 minutes.

Thus, each movement is shorter than the last, surely done on purpose to add to the agitated, anxious and futile atmosphere generated during my listening experience. As first presented in the first movement, Prologue: Lent, Sostenuto E Molto Risoluto, the second movement, Serenade: Moderement Anime, continues with rising themes, frequently marked by a faster and faster cello line that often simply alternates between two or three notes at an increasingly rapid pace and dynamic level. The texture is, as a whole, homophonic. Though the cello is the “lead”, in the sense that it, as common practice, plays the melodic lines and the piano the accompaniment, the two instruments interact very often, especially around measures 21-29. Each is about equally busy regarding density of notes played and harmonic importance. Further, whenever the cello becomes extremely active (usually during its statements of increasingly fast two-three note rounded motives), the piano follows suit and plays rapid chords and/or scales. Similarly, when the cello is calm, mournful and wistful, the piano maintains its mood; they are in sync throughout the entire sonata. From measures 53-63 (the last ten) of the second movement, Serenade Et Finale, a dialogue between the cello and piano is heard most starkly, as the piano answers the cello’s phrase in a high tinkling-like register.

The second and third movements are played without pause (joined by an *attaca*), each opening with aggressive pizzicato cello motives, which of course, break off or rather, dissolve into stringed motion. The pizzicato motive opening the 2nd movement returns in different permutations throughout the movement, often morphing into a fast two-three note repeated and rapidly accelerating motive (as first exemplified in the first movement, in measures 20-29). The movement is indeed moderately animated but I can’t say I experienced any serenading qualities. Often, the piano seems to be using pentatonic

(such as in measures 4,10, 31 and 32) and whole-tone scales (such as in measures 6-7 and 15-16 of the second movement). Beyond the use of those scales, diatonic harmony appears to be neglected in favor of modal scales, shown, for example, in measures 9-14 and 21-22 of the last movement with its raised 6th (B-natural) and natural 7th (C). However, the modal scales often, for a few short notes, resemble a diatonic scale, only to unhinge the listener in its following imminent diatonic departure. This push and pull of sorts between scales also lends itself to the unfulfilled expectations mood shared by the undeveloped short motivic fragments/themes throughout the piece.

The third movement, Finale: Animé, Leger et Nerveux, begins with an almost joyful theme that, despite its power and prominence, reverts quickly back to the undeniably minor themed atmosphere of the sonata as a whole, albeit with more energy and gusto than heard previously. Debussy doesn't appear to use the structure of sonata form (that is, most broadly, fast-slow-fast three movement structure and with an exposition and recapitulation, etc). Rather, the sonata as a whole is monothematic, and builds upon itself in an extremely restrained and almost stagnant manner, as if it can't get out of its self-imposed bindings. Despite this analysis, Debussy still imbues the sonata with intense passion, emotion and excitement perhaps due to, rather than in spite of, the binds, intense focus and concentration he pours into the sonata. I believe this is due to the mania of the piece contrasted with its monothematic structure; there are abrupt tempo, dynamic and mood changes everywhere (as mentioned before, at measure 29 in the first movement, and also at measures 38 and 42, a few of several points throughout the sonata). Debussy also often marks these changes rather explicitly, for example with directions to play Meno Mosso Poco shortly after Vivace in measure 37 of the second

movement; successive tempo and dynamic changes in a short amount of tie occur often. Likewise, phrases and themes are unprepared and unannounced in those and among other measures. Lastly, the piece is held together by the recurrences of disparate, albeit short motives, (for example, the piano's opening phrase and the cello's often similar two-three note rapid attack motives) which lend emotional and structural power to a seemingly disjunctive piece. The first movement ends in D Major, with a prominent F# in the last two measures (though c-naturals are present in the third to last measure, perhaps indicating the ultimate end of the piece in minor). As so, the last movement does end in the true key of d minor, though the last chord is merely a fortissimo and accented eighth note articulation of the single note d. D acts as a pedal under the dominant 7th chords preceding the final measure as well (with f-naturals abounding in both parts), further anchoring the tonic key, allowing for the final beat's curt and biting sparseness.