

The “Cubism” Element of Polyphony in Debussy's Piano Prelude

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Abstract: Debussy's piano prelude has a novel and original musical style, which opened a new musical style in the 20th century. By analyzing the representative piano preludes in Debussy's works, this paper is based on the historical context of the development of Western polyphony music. This paper is based on the particularity of the polyphonic elements in the piano prelude, and compares it with the cubist style in Western paintings, thus drawing the conclusion that the polyphony of Debussy's piano prelude has the “Cubism” element.

1. Introduction

Debussy, the founder of Impressionist music, his artistic aesthetics, his composing philosophy, the spirit of challenging the tradition and continuous innovation, although far-reaching influence on later generations, have found a new way for Western music creation. But it doesn't take for the world to label his music with impressionism. Because his music has not only the reference to the painting art at that time (not limited to impressionist painting), but also the memory of ancient music, the fascination with oriental art and the absorption of other new music styles. The label of “impressionism” is obviously one-sided. Debussy himself believes that the word “even used on his beloved Tyner is wrong” (“Debussy: A Man and an Artist”): its style includes impressionism but is not limited to it. There are many academic articles on Debussy's musical style, but few of them focus on polyphony. This paper studies and analyses the development history of Debussy's Piano Preludes and Western polyphonic music, and compares polyphonic music elements with Cubism style in Western painting. This article is divided into two chapters: the first chapter is the historical context of the development of polyphony, the second chapter is the “cubism” polyphony of Debussy, which leads to the conclusion that the Polyphony of Debussy's piano prelude has the element of “cubism”.

2. The Historical Context of Polyphony Development

As we all know, polyphonic music is composed of two or more melodic lines which are independent or relatively independent respectively. They are organically combined to flow harmoniously and unfold into a multi-part music. Ancient Greek music had no concept of polyphony. Polyphony originated in the 9th century AD. It was purely religious music, based on Gregorian chant and added a parallel fourths below it to highlight the hollow effect. This is the most primitive polyphony ever recorded, called Organum. After several centuries of slow development, it gradually increased the flexibility of counterpoint, the diversification of the intervals, the complexity of the rhythm, the use of thirds and sixths interval, the addition of seconds and sevenths dissonant intervals and the polyphonic texture, as well as a series of evolutions, such as the creation of new themes, secularization and so on which are not based on Gregorian chants, led the emergence of Discantus, Conductus, Motet and other forms. After the 16th century, polyphonic music became mature, with more balanced voices, richer texture and fuller harmony. Until the 18th century, the great J.S. Bach pushed the polyphonic music to the apex of history through the flamboyant fugue technique, and at the same time ended the Baroque style – just as Wagner was in the Romantic period. During the period of classicism and romanticism, the homophonic music dominated, the polyphonic music passages were merged into the homophonic music, and in the late stage of romanticism, the melody lines became more and more vocalized, and even the polyphonic

alignment became more and more vocal. It even becomes a decoration that breaks down chords. In short, polyphonic music is indispensable, but in a secondary position. The above is the rough context of the development of Western polyphonic music before Debussy.

From the perspective of polyphonic writing techniques, the polyphonic music before Debussy was composed of tonality, harmony, rhythm, melody, texture and other factors, and they were mutually restrained. There were strict methods and routines. Similar to ancient Chinese metrical poetry, it is also called metrical music. For example, there are Fugue, Canon, Cantata, Passacaglia and other forms. It was widely used and developed in the Renaissance and Baroque period. Another is the combination of short melodic sentences and harmony, which are commonly used in the classical and Romantic periods, and the phonetic polyphony developed from the accompaniment part. However, Debussy's polyphonic music is totally different from the two.

3. Debussy's "Cubism" Polyphony

Debussy's music concept is quite different from that of Romanticism. It can be said that it is anti-Romanticism. It is also different from the rationality of classical period and the rhythm of Baroque period. His works have their unique features from form to content, from creation to performance. Among them, polyphonic elements are quite unique in their works. He paid attention to polyphonic music again, but never returned to Baroque style, but created a kind of "Debussy style" polyphonic creation technique. When he used polyphony technology, he abandoned the rhythm and motivation of polyphony, and instead adopted a "flat polyphony" similar to cubism painting. Cubism painting was active in the early 20th century, and its representative figures were Brack and Picasso. The artist pursues the form of fragmentation, analysis and reassembly, forming a separate picture, and taking the collage form of many combinations of fragments as the goal of the artists. Artists describe objects from many angles and place them in the same picture to express the most complete image of objects. The angles of the objects are interlaced to create a number of vertical and parallel line angles. The scattered shadows make the cubist picture have no illusion of three-dimensional space caused by the perspective of traditional Western painting. The background interspersed with the theme of the picture, allowing the Cubist picture to create a two-dimensional painting feature. This fragmentation, analysis, reorganization, collage, and flattening techniques are exactly the same as Debussy's approach to polyphonic music.

"Analytical Cubism" Polyphony Take the piano prelude "Sail" as an example: This piece mainly uses 4 kinds of independent materials, A: the main material, the sail is floating in the breeze, and the rhythm is characterized by 32nd notes. B: The main material, the singing voice of the person, the rhythm is characterized by 8th notes. C: Background material, fixed bass B, rhythm characteristics of the 4th notes and the 8th notes interlaced use, throughout, small fluctuations of water surface. D: Background material, rhythm characteristics for the point rhythm, like the surge of water. These four kinds of independent material collage together to form the following music:

a 

b 

c 

d 

毕加索：阿维农少女





It can be seen that the basic material of this work does not follow the form of metrics. There is neither the tendency between harmonious and disharmonious intervals nor the need for thematic answers between voices to advance layer by layer, nor the motivational development or the needs of tonic-dominant conversion. The whole piece is filled with mysterious and hazy atmosphere. The four materials of ABCD are combined dynamically and statically to produce a “planar three-dimensional sense of sound”. This results in a kind of auditory polyphonic sensation similar to “anatomical” (rather than “perspective”) - 360 degrees without blind angle. Look at Picasso's painting “Avian Girl”: In the painting, all objects, whether characters or backgrounds, are decomposed into geometric blocks with angles. We can see a way of expressing three-dimensional space on two-dimensional plane. The two images in the center of the picture are face-to-face, but their noses are painted side-to-side. The head on the left side of the image, but the eyes are positive. Different visual angles are combined on the same image. This so-called “simultaneous vision” language is more clearly used in the image of the squat on the right side of the picture. This image, which is three-quarters of the back, is disengaged from the central axis of the spine due to decomposition and splicing. Its legs and arms are stretched, suggesting an extension to the depths. And the head was screwed over and squinted at the viewer. Picasso seems to be around 180 degrees after the image, then the vision of the angles is integrated into this image. This painting belongs to the analysis of cubism in the early stage of Cubism. More emphasis on the pursuit of pure geometric form, the pursuit of the decomposition of the form, rather than focus on the overall reorganization, and the color is relatively simple. This method of painting is very similar to the composition of Debussy's composition in a different way with several melodic music materials.

“Synthetic Cubism” Polyphony This technique has reached a new level in its prelude “Alternating Thirds”. Many people think that this is a single-voice part with a simple Thirds(hypo tone). The author just thinks that this is a very simple but not simple polyphonic work (see the bottom left picture): alternating play of left and right hands, melody notes implied in 16th notes. The way in which the three-line chart is recorded and all the vertical thirds show that this is polyphonic music. If it is monophonic music, it will always be too cumbersome. This piece of work can be understood as a cluster arrangement of many fine materials (the Thirds), like mosaic broken glass, which is highly similar but not identical to the many materials collage into a unity. This special polyphony is represented in music by the rapid changes between different parts, namely vitality. This is similar to the development of Cubist painting to mature “comprehensive cubism” (see the lower right picture):



Painters began to focus on the overall effect of the picture, not just on the partial decomposition.

The still life, scenery and characters in the paintings are thoroughly decomposed so that the viewers are not much concerned about them. Picasso expert Roland Penrose once commented on the painting: "Every time one side is separated, the adjacent part is separated into a plane, which constantly moves backwards and produces direct feelings, which reminds people of the ripples on the water surface. Looking through these ripples, you can catch signs here and there, such as a nose, two eyes, some neatly combed hair, a watch chain and a pair of crossed hands. However, when the line of sight turns from this point to it, it will continue to feel the pleasure of swimming up some surfaces, because these surfaces are convincing by their similar appearance... seeing such a picture will produce imagination. Although this kind of picture is ambiguous, it seems to exist, and under the impetus of this new reality, it will make its own interpretation with joy and joy. ("Western Art Master - Picasso" Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1998). This kind of reorganization of the picture elements, the formation of a number of elements after the reorganization and the Debussy prelude alternately three times in the re-use of the concept of the method is very similar.

4. Conclusion

In summary, the polyphonic structure of Debussy's piano prelude does have a "cubism" element. The academic community has a lot of research results on the harmony, music, tonality, style and other aspects of its music. There is little research on the polyphony technique, and there is no research on the connection between the piano prelude and the cubism. This also confirms Debussy's own view that it is inappropriate to generalize his music style with impressionism. This article is intended to give people a new perspective, or to help later generations to study, play and appreciate Debussy music.

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