

About a musical response technique of Debussy

Some notes on Debussy's 'Les Sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir'

In 1686, Isaac Newton gave one of the most influential laws in the world, his law of motion or action-reaction:

'To every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.'

According to this law, forces always act in pairs - known as "action-reaction force pairs."

Listening to Debussy's fourth Prelude of Book I, 'Les Sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir' (Sounds and perfumes swirl in the evening air, inspired by the poem by Charles Baudelaire, 'Harmonie du soir' -Evening Harmony), I wondered if Debussy was playing with a action-reaction idea ala Newton's law. The middle section, the bars 24-40, of this Prelude is in this respect most remarkable.

One can distinguish phrases of this section very easily because Debussy define them with tempo fluctuations clearly:

- phrase 1, bar 24-28: A tempo (modéré) - Plus lent
- phrase 2, bar 29-31: En animant - Cédez - Rubato
- phrase 3, bar 31/32-33: Serrez - Rubato
- phrase 4, bar 33/34-37: Serrez - Rubato
- phrase 5, bar 37/38-40: Serrez - Cédez

The English translation of these terms is:

- *Cédez* = *going a little slower*
- *Serrez* = *getting a little quicker*
- *En animant* = *quickenning*
- *Rubato* = *to be interpreted here (after Serrez) as slowing down the pace, as easing up towards the end*

So all phrases are separated by tempo differences: a faster, more lively beginning and a slower and/or more free ending. Debussy underlines these tempo fluctuations -among other techniques, see below- with motivic decisions. One could say that all phrases start with a head-motif, an opening idea, a rhetorical gesture (sometimes varied). In our action-reaction-pair idea this motif always attracts our attention and is always a form of action. This active motif is always followed by a different and a relatively relaxed music, that seems to be more ore free as we look at its content.

First we analyse the head-motif and the five reactions on it. Notice that I gave only a short description of the most important, contrasting feature.

Action: the head-motif



head-motif, bar 25

Analysis head-motif:

- ascending, active gesture (intervals: 4-2-5) with an ambitus of a none
- a closing gesture with the descending interval fourth f#-c#
- tone repetition of c# brings some but not complete stability
- overall character: action

Action-Reaction 1:

Action: head-motif, bar 25

Reaction 1: echo, bar 26, 27

Plus lent

Analysis reaction 1:

- lower register
- repercussion of a single head-motif element: the descending fourth = less melodic activity
- repetition of head-motif in a reduced action form: slower (plus lent), lower register, less harmony.
- overall character: a sort of echo, memories of the head-motif

Action-Reaction 2:

Reaction 2: fourth interval echo

Cédez

Action

bar 28 expanded head-motif

bar 29

bar 30 modified head-motif

Rubato

bar 31

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Analysis reaction 2:

- bar 29: again an echo technique, however in a light, dancing context (staccato)
- bar 30: head-motif in a weak, less active form (rhythmical less active; tone repetition = no drive)
- bar 31: two closing tones (one part) in a lower register with an descending arpeggio in rubato context

Action-Reaction 3:

Two staves of music in G-flat major. The top staff (treble clef) shows a melodic line starting in bar 28, labeled 'Action', with notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, and F5. The bottom staff (bass clef) shows a corresponding line starting in bar 31, labeled 'Rubato', with notes G3, A3, Bb3, C4, D4, E4, and F4. A slur covers the entire bottom staff line. A '6' is written below the bottom staff in bar 31.

bar 28
expanded head-motif

Rubato

bar 31

Analysis reaction 3:

- comprised version of reaction 2

Action-Reaction 4:

Two staves of music in G-flat major. The top staff (treble clef) shows a melodic line starting in bar 34, labeled 'Action', with notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, and F5. The bottom staff (bass clef) shows a corresponding line starting in bar 35, labeled 'Reaction', with notes G3, A3, Bb3, C4, D4, E4, and F4. A slur covers the entire bottom staff line. A '6' is written below the bottom staff in bar 35.

bar 34
reduced head-motif

bar 35

Analysis reaction 4:

- bar 35: playful (staccato) succession of thirds, in a lower register (descending and ascending)
- bar 37: repetition of the arpeggio figure of bar 33

Action-Reaction 5:

Two staves of music in G-flat major. The top staff (treble clef) shows a melodic line starting in bar 38, labeled 'Action', with notes G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, and F5. The bottom staff (bass clef) shows a corresponding line starting in bar 39, labeled 'Reaction Cédéz', with notes G3, A3, Bb3, C4, D4, E4, and F4. A slur covers the entire bottom staff line. A '6' is written below the bottom staff in bar 39.

bar 38
reduced head-motif

bar 39
modified head-motif

bar 40

Analysis reaction 5:

- bar 40: descending succession of thirds, slowing down, piano dynamics

Note on bar 39: the modified head-motif is more stressful: mf as dynamics

Conclusion

In response to our strict head-motif actions, that works as a guide in the prelude, Debussy wrote a reaction music in an other style, that is more loose, less compact, more playful and less demanding. In addition, Debussy uses a lower octave register for these musical responses.

Maybe a reflection of his psychological attitude towards outer and inner world as an action-reaction pair:

"Debussy was the poet of mists and fountains, clouds and rain, of dusk and of glints of sunlight through the leaves... All his senses were tributary to his musical inspi-ration. He felt faint vibrations as he heard the overtones of distant bells. He was conscious of the perfumes of a summer's day and he could scent in fancy the odors of an Andalusian night." (Oscar Thompson (1967). Debussy: Man and Artist, p.22,83)

How to perform?

"It is necessary to abandon yourself completely, and let the music do as it will with you - to be a vessel through which it passes." (Roger Nichols (2003). The life of Debussy, p. 167)

And to his former teacher Ernest Guiraud, Debussy spoke about a new kind of music, explaining his idea of a flowing rhythm:

"Rhythms cannot be contained within bars. It is nonsense to speak of 'simple' and 'composed' time. There should be an interminable flow of them both without seeking to bury the rhythmic patterns." (Lockspeiser (1962). His Life and Mind, p. 206)

Think about these quotes, the action-reaction-idea, your ideal performance and do some research on YouTube if your ideal performance can be found.

About the author:

Reinier Maliepaard, psychologist, software engineer, organist and teacher at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands (music theory and music history).

His freeware music notation programm MC Musiceditor (Windows) can be downloaded at www.mcmusiceditor.com This article has been typeset with MC Musiceditor 8.4.2 (www.mcmusiceditor.com).
