



Impressionism – Lili Boulanger

Impressionism is a term borrowed from a style of French painting at the end of the 19th century. This style aimed not at exact representation (as in a photograph) but in capturing an *impression* of a scene, particularly through the subtle interplay of colours and light. It is characterized by vague, blurred outlines, and often captures a particular mood or atmosphere. Neither of its most famous composers (**Debussy** and **Ravel**) liked the term but there is no doubt that there are some similarities between the ambiguous harmonies and blurred structures of this music and impressionist painting.

Listen out for: colourful and often lush instrumentation, rich harmonies with added notes, exotic harmonies such as those based on whole-tone scales, traditional harmony, rhythm and melody is often quite blurred by these features

Many French composers at the turn of the century were looking for an alternative to the influence of German music, particularly the harmonic anguish Richard Wagner's operas. Lili Boulanger's musical education was spent in the company of composers who shared this outlook including Fauré (who directed her studies), Debussy and Saint-Saens.

Like Debussy, Boulanger identified with the Symbolist (rather than the Impressionist) movement, which valued indirect suggestion and the mystical power of art. The author Baudelaire, for example, scorned the use of description in poetry, writing that 'by describing what is, the poet degrades himself and is reduced to the rank of schoolmaster'. Debussy similarly stresses the importance of not succumbing to intellect or formalism, writing that 'beauty must appeal to the senses ... must impress us or insinuate itself into us without any effort on our part'. He famously said that 'there is no theory ... pleasure is the law', but in reality Debussy's music is carefully calculated – the sensual freedom of his music is hard won. He might have quietly agreed with Lili's sister, the renowned composition teacher Nadia Boulanger, who stated that 'a great work is made out of a combination of obedience and liberty'.

Lili Boulanger's musical style

Even in her earliest works, Boulanger established a strong sense of style, heavily influenced though it is by both Wagner and her French teachers and mentors. Although Debussy is an obvious point of reference, Caroline Potter considers Fauré to be even more important.

The following traits can be seen in her early body of work (and to a lesser extent her post-Prix de Rome oeuvre):

- Melody and harmony with strong modal inflections
- Unusual cadential progressions involving secondary chords (particularly II and VII)
- Parallel extended chords (primarily sevenths of various kinds)
- Pedal points (complex chromatic progressions are often anchored over long tonic and dominant pedals)
- Enharmonic and sudden modulations
- Sharp changes of texture and instrumental/vocal forces to distinguish sections
- Occasional use of harmony and melodic lines based on the whole tone scale



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Lili Boulanger: a brief biography

Biographical thumbnails of Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) inevitably focus on the fact that her life was cut tragically short at the age of just 24. She suffered with chronic illness, starting with bronchial pneumonia at age two and ending with intestinal tuberculosis (today she would probably be diagnosed with Crohn's disease). Her brief life, further restricted by constant illness, brings into even sharper relief her astonishing talent, which even eclipsed that of Nadia, her prodigiously gifted older sister.

Lili Boulanger was born in Paris to Ernest, a successful composer and teacher, and Raissa, purportedly an émigré Russian princess. Her mother organised frequent soirees that were attended by Debussy, Fauré and Saint-Saens, and she was brought up in an intensely musical environment. Lili was quickly identified as a musical prodigy, learning singing, violin, piano, cello and harp, as well as attending many of her older sister Nadia's classes at the Paris Conservatoire as an observer.

Both Nadia and Lili were incredibly driven, determined to procure the best possible start to their careers as composers by winning the prestigious Prix de Rome. This prize had previously been won by Berlioz, Gounod, Bizet and Massenet, a cast list of first-rate composers that the sisters were keen to join. The competition was a tough one with a preliminary round in which candidates submitted a chorus and a vocal fugue before up to six students were chosen to progress to the second round. The competitors then had three weeks to write a cantata from scratch in a studio without a piano, meeting only at mealtimes. Nadia competed unsuccessfully in three competitions from 1906-8 but came close at her last attempt, during which she probably didn't help her cause when she infuriated Saint-Saens by scoring the preliminary round fugue for string quartet rather than for chorus.

In 1913, after five attempts between them, Lili finally became the first woman to be awarded the Prix de Rome for her setting of a text entitled *Faust et Hélène*. One of the conditions of being awarded the prize was to live and work in the Villa Medici in Rome but this was cut short by the advent of World War I.

This freed Lili to branch out compositionally and also to devote herself to charity work related to the war effort, distributing a newspaper to conservatoire students fighting on the front. She worked on an opera *La Princesse Maleine* (based on a Maeterlink play of the same name), but her health worsened and she died in 1918 with the work unfinished and before the conclusion of the war. Nadia Boulanger was devastated by the death of her sister and, partly as a result, she curtailed her own composition activities, devoting most of the rest of her life to teaching (an incredible array of talent passed through her hands including Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, Astor Piazzola, Daniel Barenboim and Quincy Jones).



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Core Wider Listening Work: IMPRESSIONISM		
Composer	Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)	
Work	'D'un jardin clair' from <i>Trois Morceaux pour piano</i>	
<i>Introduction</i>		
<p>'D'un jardin clair' is one of three piano pieces published in the year Boulanger died. The work is clearly influenced by the piano music of Debussy but its gentle simplicity also recalls Faure and Satie.</p>		
<i>Structure</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expands and develops the initial eight bars over four sections Sections three and four are developments of sections 1 and 2, so the piece could be understood as a kind of binary. Because the structure is one of continuous development, the form is quite ambiguous and could be interpreted differently. The tonal structure is simple, starting and ending in B major with changes being more to do with colour (different modes and scales) rather than modulations 		
For reference, this is the form		
1	Section 1	Introduces the main idea of the piece in b. 1-2, immediately developing and extending
9	Section 2	Development of section 1 with interjection of new descending chords idea in b. 17
32	Section 1B	Return of section 1 with some small changes
40	Section 2B	Expansion of developments from section 2 leading into a coda at b. 56
<i>Harmony and tonality</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The music is clearly centred about B but uses modes and scales to create a variety of colours (rather than modulations) For example, the fifth bar is heavily inflected by the Phrygian mode. There are many extended chords (7ths and 9ths), for example at the end of the first section (bar 8) where Boulanger builds up a F# dominant 9th chord. This resolves back onto a B at the beginning of the second section. Boulanger uses whole tone inflections to create harmonic colour and ambiguity in the second section The end of the piece is all based on the B pentatonic scale, creating quite a static harmony. 		
<i>Melody</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The melody is highly motivic with the initial fragment being extended over the first eight bars in a rising sequence. Many of the melodic ideas are based on modes and unusual scales. For example ... there is a whole tone scale in bar 17. the melody on the last page based on the pentatonic scale 		



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Rhythm

- The rhythm and metre is based on a simple 3/4, with most of the rhythms based on crotchets and minims
- There are many examples of gentle syncopations, with crotchets often tied over the bar.
- The rhythm is quite flexible with many markings that suggest small variations such as 'animez un peu' and 'plus lent'.
- The harmonic rhythm is very variable with quite quick chord changes in the parallel motion at the end of the first section but then the same chord held on for the last seven bars.

Texture and sonority

- As you might expect in an Impressionist work, the emphasis is on colour
- The end is a good example, as Boulanger asks for the pedal to be held while the piano moves in pentatonic chords over a very wide range written on three staves.
- Boulanger makes regular use of chords moving in parallel (the whole tone passage at the end of the first page)
- Boulanger also uses descending series of chords that arpeggiate chords such as and E with an added sixth (e.g. bars 54-55)