

ART NOUVEAU & CLAUDE DEBUSSY

The influence of a visual artstyle on music after 1890



Figure 1 Poster for the première of Pelléas et Mélisande (Rochegrosse, n.d.).

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A B S T R A C T

This thesis examines to what extent the principles of Art Nouveau can be found in the music of Claude Debussy after 1890, and whether this visual art style influenced music from that period. Art Nouveau is commonly understood as strictly a visual art style and is not often connected to other artistic disciplines of that time period. Claude Debussy is a composer often associated with Symbolism and Impressionism, known for his music in the same time period as the Art Nouveau movement.

By analysing existing literature on the key characteristics of both Art Nouveau and Claude Debussy's musical language, a basis for comparison is established. This comparison is then supported by a case study of two of Debussy's works, alongside an analysis of two letters clarifying his views on musical composition.

The study identifies three key similarities: a blurred distinction between structure and decoration, a preference for organic forms, and an emphasis on atmosphere and suggestion. In the end, no evidence is found that indicates a direct influence of Art Nouveau on Claude Debussy. However, the shared principles do suggest a similar cultural environment and show how interconnected the arts of the fin-de-siècle period truly were.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Art Nouveau is an artistic movement that started in the late nineteenth century. It is characterized by organic forms, flowing lines, and the combination of structure and ornament (Ashby, 2021). Although it is commonly associated with visual design, its underlying principles extend beyond a single artistic discipline. Claude Debussy is a music composer active during the same time period as Art Nouveau, known for his innovative musical language that moved away from traditional harmonic structures and emphasised atmosphere, timbre, and suggestion (DeVoto, 2003).

This paper studies the extent to which the principles of Art Nouveau can be identified in the music of Claude Debussy after 1890, in order to explore the impact of a visual art style on music. This topic is closely related to the artistic climate of the late nineteenth century, often described as the *fin-de-siècle*. This term is used to describe the broader cultural and artistic context in which movements such as Art Nouveau and Symbolism emerged, and in which artistic disciplines increasingly influenced one another (Ashby, 2021; Lesure, 2019).

This topic is motivated by a personal interest in Art Nouveau as an artistic movement. I have long associated its visual language with a fantasy-like atmosphere and forms of beauty that are not possible in everyday reality, a quality which I rarely experience in other art styles. However, some types of music bring me a similar type of atmosphere, which led me to question whether the principles of Art Nouveau might also be present within a musical context.

While Art Nouveau has been widely studied in architecture and other visual art forms, its relationship to music has received comparatively less attention. By examining music in relation to architecture and visual design within the Art Nouveau movement, this study highlights how interconnected the development of the artistic disciplines was during this period.

Claude Debussy was a French composer active between 1880 and 1918, a period that largely overlaps with the emergence and development of Art Nouveau. His music is often categorised as Impressionistic, although he himself rejected this label (Lesure, 2019). Rather than aligning with a single stylistic movement, Claude Debussy developed a highly individual musical language. Around 1890, his compositional style underwent a clear transformation (Lesure, 2019):

he increasingly moved away from traditional structures and became more interested in organic, non-linear processes, often described as musical arabesque (Venturino & Dunsby, 2025).

In addition, the types of art Claude Debussy found most appealing were often connected to Symbolism, a style that prioritised suggestion, atmosphere, and ambiguity over direct representation (Lesure, 2019). These principles overlap with ideals of Art Nouveau, especially its emphasis on organic lines and decorative structure. This overlap leads to the main research question of this study: to what extent the principles of Art Nouveau can be identified in Debussy's music after 1890, and whether these similarities can be understood as interdisciplinary influence rather than coincidence?

To explore this topic, this study is based on a literature review of existing research on Art Nouveau and the music of Claude Debussy. Musicological and art historical sources are examined and compared to identify shared ideas, aesthetic principles, and interpretations of cross-disciplinary influences. In addition, the study includes case analyses of two works by Claude Debussy, a piano piece and an orchestral composition. Finally, two letters written by Claude Debussy are analysed to determine his opinion about traditional music from his time.

Two books specifically form the foundation for my exploration of the topic: *Art Nouveau: Art, Architecture and Design in Transformation* by Charlotte Ashby and *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography* by François Lesure

***Art Nouveau: Art, Architecture and Design in Transformation* by Charlotte Ashby**

With this book, Charlotte Ashby offers an overview of the Art Nouveau movement. Alongside architecture, she also takes other disciplines of Art Nouveau into account, including graphic design, interior design, and the applied arts. She not only covers the Art Nouveau style from 1890 onwards but also discusses the key factors that led to the emergence of Art Nouveau. This provides insight into the origins of its different aesthetic principles. It also offers a broader basis for comparison with non-visual arts, since the context and motivations of different disciplines can now be compared.

Ashby emphasises Art Nouveau as a unifying artistic language. Within this language, she identifies core aesthetic principles such as organic line, fluid form, the integration of ornament and structure, and inspiration drawn from natural forms. These principles are presented as artistic ideals rather than solely visual traits, which is particularly relevant for studies that aim to extend Art Nouveau beyond the visual arts.

***Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography* by François Lesure**

In this book, Lesure provides a detailed walkthrough of the life, work, and aesthetic development of Claude Debussy. The writing offers insights into Debussy's artistic ideals and opinions, while also showing how these transformed over time.

Lesure's work functions as the basis for the musicological part of this study, addressing Debussy's artistic development and intentions. By identifying his stylistic transformation after 1890, the biography makes a comparison between musical practices and the aesthetic principles of Art Nouveau possible. It can therefore be used as a framework for examining Debussy's music alongside the broader artistic developments of that time.

In addition, extra literature was used to further examine the characteristics of Claude Debussy's music.

***The Debussy Sound: Colour, Texture, Gesture* by Mark Devoto**

This chapter examines key characteristics of Debussy's musical language, with particular focus on harmony. Devoto explains how Debussy moves away from the traditional use of harmony and uses layered textures and sound colour to create musical expression. This paper is relevant to this study since it supports the perspective of harmony as both structural and expressive, a concept similar to the combination of ornament and structure in Art Nouveau.

***Pitch Organization in Debussy: Unordered Sets in "Brouillards"* by Richard S. Parks**

In contrast to a clearly linear structured composition, this paper discusses how some creations of Debussy can be understood better when subdivided into pitch collections. It shows several examples of this type of organisation and explains why it is a more fitting lens for analysing Debussy's music than the more traditional hierarchical way common in his time. This is useful for analysing Debussy's fluid structures, which align with the organic and flexible principles associated with Art Nouveau.

***The Evolution of Claude Debussy's Arabesque Idea* by Stephanie Venturino & Jonathan Dunsby**

In this paper, Venturino and Dunsby explain the different phases of Debussy's development in his arabesque. They describe how Debussy's use of flowing, ornamental melodic structures becomes increasingly complex and significant over time. This study is particularly relevant for understanding the connection between musical arabesque and the organic, flowing line quality of Art Nouveau.

CHAPTER 1

ART NOUVEAU ORIGINS AND AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES

1.1 A BRIEF EMERGENCE OF ART NOUVEAU

There were many influences that led to the Art Nouveau style. According to Charlotte Ashby, there are three factors that had a particularly large influence: the revival of Gothic architecture, the exposure to different art and design cultures, and a range of emerging scientific views on nature and the way it is perceived and represented. The following section is based on Ashby's analysis.

The revival of Gothic architecture

In the nineteenth century, there was a debate about which architectural style was most fitting for the period. At that time, it was common to determine a building's style based on its function. For example, banks were often designed in a classical style, while churches typically followed Gothic architectural principles (Ashby, 2021, pp. 12–13).

Over time, however, Gothic architecture became increasingly preferred over other styles. This was partly because of the belief that a building's effectiveness in fulfilling its function was more important than its appearance (Ashby, 2021, p. 13). Compared to other styles available at that time, Gothic architecture offered greater flexibility in layout, allowing buildings to be more in line with their specific function.

One of the most important figures of the Gothic Revival movement was John Ruskin. His influence grew significantly and, by 1890, his theories had been published internationally and were regarded as an authority on design reform (Ashby, 2021, p. 12).

Art Nouveau later retained several of the values associated with Gothic architecture, particularly its emphasis on functional flexibility, its connection to national traditions, and the integration of natural growth into architectural form and ornament. However, it differed in its rejection of strict adherence to historical models (Ashby, 2021, p. 14).

The exposure to a different set of art and design cultures

In 1853, Japanese goods saw a dramatic increase in global export, which led to a growing fascination with Japanese art in Europe. An important difference between European and Japanese artists was their perspective on nature and representation. Japanese artists observed nature closely and were more sensitive to form as a means of expression (Ashby, 2021, p. 17).

This led to the emergence of multiple art movements with differing ideological positions. On the one hand, there was Aestheticism, an art movement that strove for beauty without being limited by external factors, often described as “Art for art’s sake”. By distancing itself from political concerns, focusing purely on aesthetic value, it became associated with exclusivity and was often only available to the elite. On the other hand, there was the Arts and Crafts movement, whose followers believed that art should be accessible to all social classes. They aimed to return to handcrafted production in a way that simplified and democratized material culture (Ashby, 2021, p. 17).

Both movements influenced the development of Art Nouveau, creating a certain tension within the style.

New scientific views on nature and our perception of the world

In the nineteenth century, perspective on nature and humanity’s place within the world were challenged in several ways. In addition to the influence of Japanese art, other developments also affected how nature was perceived and represented.

One of these developments was Naturalism, a style that moved away from classical academic painting. It focused on the beauty of everyday scenes, with particular attention to light, weather effects, and landscape. Rather than relying on historical authority, Naturalism emphasised observation of the contemporary world (Ashby, 2021, p. 21).

In 1859, this changing perspective was further reinforced by Charles Darwin and the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. This work introduced the concept of natural selection and challenged traditional views of nature as fixed and divinely

ordered. As a result, nature came to be understood as dynamic, unstable, and complex (Ashby, 2021, p. 22).

These developments contributed to the emergence of new and experimental forms of art that aligned better with contemporary ideas and discoveries (Ashby, 2021, p. 23).

Key synonyms

Art Nouveau has many names depending on the region. Some of the most commonly used terms include Jugendstil in Germany and the Vienna Secession in Austria. Even though these movements started in different contexts, they share similar aesthetic principles and are considered part of the broader Art Nouveau movement. Therefore, the principles discussed in this study may also be applicable to these related movements.

1.2 CORE AESTHETIC PRINCIPLES

Art Nouveau is identified by several core aesthetic principles that can be found across multiple artistic disciplines. These principles can be seen as a shared visual language rather than a strict set of rules, allowing for differences between artists while still maintaining a recognisable style.

Nature and Ornament

Within Art Nouveau, nature and ornament are deeply connected through their aesthetic function. Forms found in nature are abstracted into shapes that express growth, movement and organic continuity. Plants, flowers, and other natural elements become part of a new visual vocabulary developed by artists as an alternative to historical ornament. Rather than functioning as separate decorative additions, ornament is integrated into the structure itself. Because of this, decorative elements often follow the logic of natural growth. This approach blurs the traditional distinction between structure and decoration, allowing both to function as one unified whole (Ashby, 2021, pp. 24, 130).

Symbolism and suggestion

Art Nouveau emerged in close relation to Symbolism. It prioritises atmosphere, emotion and inner experience over direct representation. The aim is to evoke moods and associations while keeping the meaning open to interpretation. This emphasis on suggestion aligns with the broader fin-de-siècle tendency to move away from rationalism and academic structures (Ashby, 2021, pp. 17, 88–89).

Rejection of rigid form

A key principle of Art Nouveau is the rejection of rigid classical forms. The movement distances itself from strict symmetry and hierarchical structures, favouring more flexible and asymmetrical compositions.

This rejection aligns with the desire for a contemporary art style and reflects the changed perspective on nature and ornaments. Structural elements were now designed to complement aesthetics and unify the design of a building, instead of being placed with only their load-bearing function in mind (Ashby, 2021, p. 36).

Organic line and fluidity

One of the most distinctive aspects of Art Nouveau is its use of organic, flowing lines. These curved forms, inspired by nature, create a sense of movement and continuity within the design. The line plays an essential role in the visual flow of the composition, contributing to a sense of continuous organic movement (Ashby, 2021, p. 35).

1.3 DISCUSSION: CAN ART NOUVEAU BE APPLIED TO MUSIC?

Although Art Nouveau is most often understood as a visual art style, its underlying principles can be applied to a broader range of disciplines. Concepts such as fluidity, organic form, and the integration of structure and decoration can be seen as aesthetic principles rather than purely visual characteristics.

However, directly applying a visual art style to music does come with certain problems. Music is based on a different sensory experience, operating through sound instead of form. This makes direct comparisons difficult. Therefore, any connections between Art Nouveau and music should be approached with caution, as it is possible that similarities point towards the broader artistic tendencies of that time instead of direct influence.

Nevertheless, looking at Art Nouveau as a set of artistic concepts instead of a style that is strictly visual makes it possible to identify parallels between different disciplines.

CHAPTER 2

DEBUSSY'S MUSICAL LANGUAGE AFTER 1890

2.1 DEBUSSY' STYLISTIC SHIFT POST 1890

Around 1890, Claude Debussy began to distance himself from the traditional academic style that had shaped his early development. During his time at the Paris Conservatoire, he was exposed to many conventional compositions based on formal harmonic progressions. However, he increasingly moved towards a more flexible and less structured approach to composition (Lesure, 2019).

This shift is also visible in his correspondence. In a letter to Ernest Chausson (2 October 1893), Debussy expresses his dissatisfaction with certain aspects of traditional composition; in particular, Wagner is mentioned. Criticising a section of his own work *Pelléas et Mélisande*, he writes “and worst of all the ghost of old Klingsor, alias R. Wagner, kept appearing in the corner of a bar, so I've torn the whole thing up.” (Debussy, 1987, p. 54). This remark shows his rejection of Wagnerian influence and his desire to distance himself from traditional compositional models. In addition, he emphasises the importance of artistic freedom in musical creation (Debussy, 1987, pp. 54–57).

In another letter to Ernest Chausson (23 October 1893), he advises his friend to focus more on the central idea of a piece instead of being overly occupied with texture and formal structure. Here again, he criticises Richard Wagner for making this a common tendency (Debussy, 1987, pp. 57–59).

This can be interpreted as Debussy being more concerned with the musical essence, rather than the broader structure of the composition. These findings suggest early developments of what would later become key characteristics of Debussy's musical language, particularly his approach to harmony and form, where colour, suggestion, and fluid organisation are preferred over structural clarity.

During the same period, he came into contact with artists associated with Symbolism, such as the writer Stéphane Mallarmé. These artists focused on atmosphere and ambiguity rather than direct representation. Debussy was influenced by these ideas and showed a clear preference for this type of art. As a result, his music increasingly favoured fluid forms and continuity over clear linear organisation (Lesure, 2019, pp. 93–94).

2.2 KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF DEBUSSY'S MUSICAL STYLE

Harmony

One of the most distinctive elements of Claude Debussy's music is the way he applies harmony. Instead of creating directional movement, he often uses harmony to introduce colour and atmosphere. The chords in Debussy's compositions function less as steps within a functional progression and more as independent sounds that add to the overall experience of the music (DeVoto, 2003, p. 183).

This approach differs from the traditional harmonic system dominant in the nineteenth century. For example, dominant chords, which were usually used to create tension that then resolves, are frequently altered or moved in such a way that they instead create an ambiguous atmosphere (DeVoto, 2003, p. 189). As a result, harmonic movement becomes less goal-directed and instead contributes to a more fluid and ambiguous musical experience.

Form

This type of harmony is directly related to the way Debussy structured his music. Music theorists have shown that his harmonic language is often organized within pitch collections instead of traditional tonal progressions. This makes it possible for a piece to still be coherent without relying on typical traditional structures.

In other words, where most music of that time can be divided in a hierarchical way, Debussy's structure can instead be understood through recurring motifs and musical ideas. Richard S. Parks notes, however, that these organisational methods were not part of a strict system but rather functioned as flexible tools that Debussy used within his compositions (Parks, 1980, p. 134).

Texture and timbre

Debussy used several instruments as layers to create more complex textures. This is different from the more traditional approach, in which layers are separated to create clear voicing. By blending these musical lines together in subtle ways, it became a central element through which Debussy shaped musical atmosphere (DeVoto, 2003, p. 183).

With this approach, timbre, or sound colour, became a very important aspect of the music. Changes in dynamics and instrumentation therefore play a significant role in how the music is experienced.

Rhythm

In addition to altering harmony and melody, Debussy is also recognisable for his treatment of rhythm. The tempo in his music often shifts, making the composition more flexible. This contributes to a sense of fluidity and can blur clear musical boundaries (DeVoto, 2003, p. 194).

2.3 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUSICAL ARABESQUE

The history of arabesque

The idea of arabesque first came to life during the Renaissance period. At this time, it was strictly seen as a visual phenomenon. However, in the late eighteenth century, it evolved into a more ornamental concept. It became detached from meaning and only had a decorative function. This development didn't occur without any resistance. For example, Adolf Riem described arabesques as "veritable monsters of the unbridled imagination" (Venturino & Dunsby, 2025, p. 67).

In 1854, Eduard Hanslick detached arabesque from the restriction of genre and linked it to melody. He compared the beauty of visual forms without a specific feeling to the tonally moving from within music and supported the lines and curves within arabesque. This definition of arabesque would later play a role in Debussy's type of arabesque (Venturino & Dunsby, 2025, p. 69).

Debussy's arabesque

Within Claude Debussy's decades as an active composer, he continuously developed his use of the arabesque. His development began with what can be described as 'proto-arabesques', flowing melodic forms that are still constrained by harmonic rhythm. His early music shows traces of arabesque, and he was clearly experimenting with it. However, it was not until later that he fully developed this approach (Venturino & Dunsby, 2025, pp. 70–71).

During his work on the three large Prix de Rome compositions, his use of the arabesque evolved into a more intermediate stage. Its qualities became lengthier and more structurally complete. In addition, he increasingly introduced arabesque at the beginning of pieces or sections (Venturino & Dunsby, 2025, p. 75). These early large works still contained some form of metrical clarity and lacked the short, irregular rhythms found in his later style (Venturino & Dunsby, 2025, p. 78).

In the piece *Jeux* (1912), there is a clear example of Debussy's later development of the arabesque. In contrast to his earlier forms, melodic fragments now combine to create fully formed arabesques. These fragments merge into a more continuous and fluid melodic line (Venturino & Dunsby, 2025, pp. 81–82).

2.4 THE FRAMEWORK FOR COMPARISON WITH ART NOUVEAU

The principles and developments discussed in this chapter show that Claude Debussy's style after 1890 cannot be fully understood within traditional systems. In contrast to linear form and functional harmony, his music is characterised by fluid structures, complex textures, and recurring motifs, often linked to the arabesque.

Where traditional music is based on clear progression through tension and resolution, Debussy's music is more suggestive. His compositions can often be better understood through tonal collections instead of a hierarchical order. Rhythm and tempo avoid strict regularity, making the music feel more flexible and organic. This results in structures that are less rigidly defined and instead based on recurring gestures and textures.

Overall, this results in a musical language that prioritises fluid continuity and expressive detail over clearly defined progressions and formal structure. Melody, harmony, and texture often overlap, creating a more complex and colour-based musical experience.

CHAPTER 3

RECOGNISING ART NOUVEAU IN DEBUSSY'S MUSIC

3.1 DIRECT PARALLELS BETWEEN ART NOUVEAU PRINCIPLES AND DEBUSSY'S MUSIC

Although Art Nouveau is regarded as a visual art style, the aesthetic principles behind the movement overlap with qualities found in Claude Debussy's music. Both are associated with organic forms, fluidity, and decorative structures.

Debussy gradually distanced himself from the rigid structures of traditional music of his time. Instead, his music is organised in a more flexible way, focusing on experience without being bound to a clear hierarchical order. Likewise, Art Nouveau moved away from symmetry and strict formal organisation, favouring more flexible and organic designs.

In Art Nouveau, ornament has more than only a decorative function; it is integrated into the structure. This idea is reflected in Debussy's harmonic language, where chords function not only as structural elements but also as a source of colour and atmosphere.

In addition, the musical arabesque in Debussy's work is similar to the organic lines and fluidity of Art Nouveau. His melodies, often consisting of continuous and flexible lines, create a sense of motion and continuity that contributes to the character of the music.

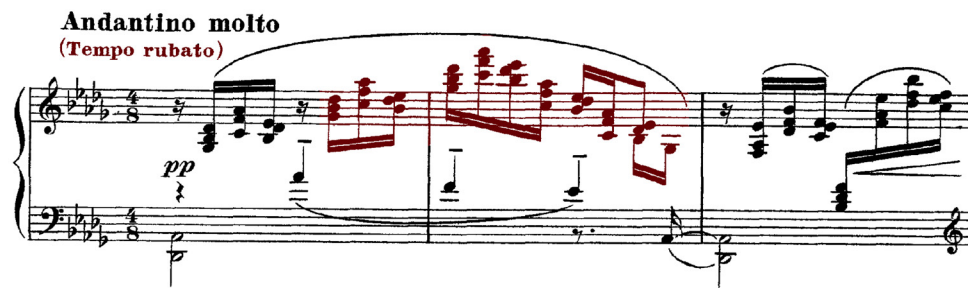
Finally, both Art Nouveau and Debussy's music place a strong emphasis on suggestion and atmosphere. Similar to Symbolist ideas, instead of clear meanings they emphasise ambiguity in order to evoke an emotional response. In Debussy's music, this is created through the combination of texture, timbre, harmony, and rhythm, which together create a rich and immersive musical experience.

3.2 CASE STUDY: REFLETS DANS L'EAU AND PRÉLUDE À L'APRÈS-MIDI D'UN FAUNE

To show the parallels between Art Nouveau and Claude Debussy's musical style, this paper includes an examination of two works from Debussy. Reflets dans l'eau, a piano composition from his first book Images (1905), is analysed because it contains many of the key characteristics of Debussy's musical language discussed in the previous chapter. For instance, the piece uses fluid forms and places a strong emphasis on texture and timbre. In addition, the orchestral work Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1894) is examined to determine whether these principles also appear in other types of his compositions.

Example 1.1, Opening arabesque texture in Reflets dans l'eau (bars 1-3)

Images, Book I
I. Reflets dans l'Eau



At the start of Reflets dans l'eau, Debussy uses the indication tempo rubato. This term instructs the performer to temporarily abandon consistent tempo in favour of expressive, flexible rhythm, creating a sense of spontaneity.

The opening section begins with arpeggios moving in both upward and downward motion, forming a flowing, continuous arabesque-like line. This line does not have a separate melody; instead, multiple tones are blended together into a single texture, blurring the distinction between structural and decorative elements.

This approach closely reflects the principles of Art Nouveau, where organic lines and decorative elements are merged with the structure itself, resulting in a more unified and organic design.

Example 1.2, Colouristic harmonic passage in Reflets dans l'eau (bars 16–19)

In the passage around bar 16, the sense of tonal direction becomes noticeably less clear. A bigger variety of colouristic harmonies is introduced, and short, discontinuous melodic fragments replace a continuous melodic line.

This creates a sense of fluidity and suggestion, focusing on the overall experience instead of having a clearly defined formal direction. This approach aligns with a key principle of Art Nouveau, in which organic flow, suggestion, and atmosphere are prioritised over strict structural clarity.

Example 1.3, Climactic wave in Reflets dans l'eau (bars 40–44)

Between bars 40 and 44, the piece reaches a more expansive moment. The texture becomes fuller by increasing the amount and melodic movement of musical notes, creating a sense of growth and intensity. Momentarily, the music becomes more stabilised, giving a feeling of radiance, before the texture gradually dissolves again.

This also relates to another aspect of Art Nouveau. The idea of organic growth towards a peak, before gradually dissolving again, is similar to natural processes such as waves or plant growth.

These examples show how Debussy's musical language aligns with principles that are also central to Art Nouveau, particularly qualities like fluidity, organic growth, and the integration of structure and decoration.

Example 2.1: Opening Flute in Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (bars 1-4)

1^{re} et 2^e Flûtes

The image shows a musical score for the opening of 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune' by Debussy. The score is for the first and second flutes. The tempo is 'Très modéré' and the dynamics are 'p doux et expressif'. The first flute part is marked '1^{er} SOLO' and features a wavy red line above it, indicating a fluid, organic melodic line. The second flute part is marked 'COR' and '1^{er} FL. SOLO'. The music is in 3/8 time and D major.

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune begins with a flute solo which, instead of showing a clear tonal centre, is based on a fluid melodic motion. Consequently, a clear harmonic direction is avoided, creating an ambiguous atmosphere rather than a linear, structured musical passage. In addition, the rhythm also contributes to this effect; by not following a strict tempo, it gives the impression of flexibility.

The melody can be understood as a continuous organic line, similar to the flowing curves found in Art Nouveau design. Furthermore, the lack of explicit tonal direction aligns with the rejection of rigid structure and emphasis on suggestion instead of clarity

Between bars 13 and 19, the texture expands by gradually introducing more timbral layers into the piece, creating a musical development primarily through changes in timbre and harmonic colour, rather than harmonic progression. This is particularly noticeable in the melodic line from the eighteenth and nineteenth bars, where the same notes are repeated multiple times while still creating a sense of growth.

Instead of having a clearly separate melody, the instrumental lines blend together into a unified texture.

This approach is comparable to the principles of Art Nouveau, where ornament and structure are merged into a single whole. The emphasis on timbre and atmosphere over clear progression also reflects the movement's focus on suggestion and experience.

CONCLUSION

ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF ART NOUVEAU ON
DEBUSSY

DID ART NOUVEAU HAVE AN IMPACT ON CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S MUSIC?

Research question and main findings

The goal of this study was to examine to what extent the principles of Art Nouveau can be identified in the music of Claude Debussy after 1890. The analysis shows that Debussy's music shares several aesthetic principles with the movement. The key similarities include fluidity, the rejection of rigid structures, organic growth, and an emphasis on atmosphere. These parallels, together with the overlap in time period, suggest that Debussy's style took form in the same cultural environment as Art Nouveau, but do not provide evidence of a direct influence on his music.

Key comparative findings

Within this study, three key similarities stand out. First, Debussy's harmonic approach: the use of non-functional progressions and pitch collections to both colour the music and structure it closely resembles the Art Nouveau principle of ornament functioning as both decoration and structure.

Second, his treatment of form as a continuous line aligns with the preference for organic shapes rather than symmetrical, hierarchical designs.

Third, Debussy's emphasis on timbre, texture, and suggestion is comparable to the focus on atmosphere found within the Art Nouveau movement.

In both the case studies, these ideas are illustrated throughout the compositions, from the opening with the arabesque-like textures of *Reflets dans l'eau* to the instrumental blending found in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. These can be understood as musical counterparts to the curved lines and natural forms characteristic of Art Nouveau.

Critical reflection on the Art Nouveau framework

Even though multiple aesthetic similarities can be identified between Art Nouveau and the music of Claude Debussy, these parallels need to be interpreted with caution. Art Nouveau was primarily a visual style, and applying its terminology to music might lead to forced comparisons between media that are based on fundamentally different sensory experiences.

In addition, I have found no evidence of Debussy mentioning the Art Nouveau movement, let alone that he intentionally aligned himself with its aesthetic principles. It is therefore possible that these similarities are better understood as part of the broader fin-de-siècle artistic tendencies.

Nevertheless, linking Debussy's music to Art Nouveau can still be valuable. It highlights aspects of his style that, through the lens of Symbolism or Impressionism, may not be fully captured. Furthermore, it helps to situate his musical development within the broader interdisciplinary artistic context of his time.

In conclusion, while Debussy cannot be placed within the Art Nouveau movement, his music after 1890 shows meaningful similarities with its aesthetic principles. These parallels point towards a shared artistic perspective on fluidity, organic form, and the importance of atmosphere. Understanding these connections expands our view of Debussy's music and shows how interconnected the arts of the fin-de-siècle period truly were.

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