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Simon B. Needle

Kennesaw State University, sneedle@students.kennesaw.edu

Edward Eanes

Kennesaw State University, eeanes@kennesaw.edu

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Mood and Mode: The Impressionistic Commonalities of Claude Debussy and John Coltrane

**Simon B. Needle and Edward Eanes (Faculty Advisor)
Kennesaw State University**

ABSTRACT

There are marked parallels in scale use, the use of modality and harmonic construction and movement in the music of John Coltrane as compared to impressionist composers like Claude Debussy. The modal harmonic exploration employed in the works of Coltrane is often attributed to the Indian raga and other music, but it can also be likened to Impressionist works by Debussy. A fascination with exoticism and a search for new veins in music to draw from propelled both of these artists forward musically. While Debussy learned medieval modality from the Russians, Coltrane looked further East to the Arab world and India, however, both subjects used modal environments when seeking an exotic and more tonally-freeing sound. Unorthodox scales, especially artificial scales without consecutive semitones are notably present in Coltrane's improvisatory style and in works by Debussy. The exploration of a sound sensation, more visceral than conventionally pleasing, is a uniting factor in both artists, most notably in Coltrane's more avant-garde works. Hazy tonality, often lacking tonal center or possessing a constantly shifting tonal center, for example, the "Coltrane Changes" moving in thirds and Debussy's often tonally indistinct Preludes for piano, is a shared harmonic trait between two musical eras as well.

Keywords: mood, mode, Claude Debussy, John Coltrane, impressionism, jazz, romantic

Both the Late Romantic Period and the Cool Jazz era of music are marked as periods of great sonic exploration and struggle against the musical status quo. Great musicians and composers of these eras were well aware of convention yet strove to tweak or even greatly alter contemporary musical notions. Central contributors to both movements were Claude Debussy in late 19th century France and John Coltrane in post-World War II US.

In their respective times, John Coltrane and Claude Debussy repurposed and utilized symmetrical and exotic scales, employed harmonic modality or ambiguity, and forged previously unprecedented paths in harmonic motion. In this way, ideas that once existed only as elusive theories of sound were

applied to music made for the common man. Debussy lived from 1862 to 1918, while Coltrane lived from 1926 until his untimely death in 1967, and although their lives never overlapped, jazz musicians of Coltrane's time were known to have drawn inspiration from composers of Debussy's era (Kerschbaumer 1999). Indeed, Coltrane studied the works of Debussy and Ravel during his years at the Granoff School in Philadelphia (Barron 2002). He often opened songs like "Chasin' the Trane" with interpretations of Debussy's works. Just as Debussy studied Bach to Rameau, both artists had a strong understanding of their musical forbearers (Hanning 2014).

A common thread between the composers is their use of church modes as both a

harmonic backdrop and a harmonic character. They created these musical settings through the use of harmonic ostinato or as Coltrane would have called it, a harmonic “vamp.” This is apparent in Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faun* in which a recurring flute motive appears multiple times over different modal settings. This sort of indistinct harmonic setting, a hallmark of impressionism, is just as present in Miles Davis’s “So What” (1959), which Davis recorded with Coltrane and impressionist jazz pianist Bill Evans. In his solo, Coltrane plays over a shifting D Dorian to Eb Dorian harmonic backdrop. He also plays motivically, exchanging longing statements interspersed between his signature “sheets of sound” (a term first used by *Downbeat* magazine critic Ira Gitler). Evans’s voicing of quartal Dorian chords beneath the solo is reminiscent of Debussy’s own piano works and adds to the modal (as opposed to key-centered) quality of the tune (Reilly 2010).

Another example of their similarities lies in the use of rhythmic motif throughout a work. In Debussy’s Nocturnes mvt. I, *Nuages* a horn motive in the very beginning of the work is iterated through different instrumentation, yet it is rhythmically intact in every appearance with only slight augmentation or fragmentation. During the Cool Jazz era, great soloists were applauded for their motivic playing, a technique Coltrane learned during his time with Miles Davis. This can be heard on Coltrane’s Village Vanguard recording of “Impressions”, a work that, as the name would imply, was likely inspired by impressionist artists such as Ravel and Debussy.

What set these musical creators apart was their trailblazing harmonic visions. A well-known commonality between romantic composers and jazz musicians is their use of seventh chords and the harmonic extensions

of those chords. In both eras these extensions -- ninths, elevenths and thirteenth— allowed for more complex scalar implications. Debussy was known to use successive unresolved seventh or ninth chords as in his *Tarantelle Styrienne*, allowing the melody to dictate the chordal shifts, making it’s non-functional, parallel harmony sound less abrasive than what might be expected.

Coloristic extensions and the non-functional movement of these extended chords in the Romantic Era served to establish a basis for parallel harmonic movement in Jazz. While based in functional harmony, by the Cool Jazz age (and certainly by the time of Wayne Shorter’s anti-formal, harmonic exploration in the late 1960s), jazz began to accept the lack of seventh resolution in seventh chords. Keys were quickly implied and then disappeared again within a single measure. The use of non-diatonic chords, usually functioning as immediately-cadencing dominant chords, bridging the harmonic space between seemingly unrelated seventh chords, was commonplace by Coltrane’s time. In Coltrane’s song “Crescents”, the harmony moves functionally in fourths, but connects unrelated seventh chords with preceding V or vii diminished chords (Kernfield 2016). Like Debussy, Coltrane explored musical ideas in familiar music of the time by applying new musical approaches. The same way Debussy drew from and struggled against the German Romantic influence of his time, so did Coltrane draw from and elaborate on the popular culture of his time with well-known songs like “My Favorite Things” or “Greensleeves”.

Both artistic movements, Impressionist and Modal Jazz (beginning in 1959 with Coltrane’s bandleader Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue* album) were times of rediscovery and innovation in the area of scale use. The use of the symmetrical whole-tone scale is a fixture

in the output of both Debussy and Coltrane. Debussy used the scale motivically, beginning his Prelude *Voiles* with a whole tone passage creating a lofty musical milieu, starkly contrasting with the quick sonorous pentatonic quotations over which it is played. Coltrane used the floaty nature of the whole tone scale as a “sheet of sound” played over dominant function chords to express an altered V chordal tension. A common application of the whole-tone scale in jazz is to create a dominant sharp five sound just preceding a minor cadence. It was also notably utilized by Coltrane collaborator, Bill Evans, in his opening cadenzas and even in the main melody, or “head”, of charts. In Coltrane’s “One Down, One Up” the melody is comprised almost exclusively of notes from the C# whole tone scale. Coltrane is able to explore this sound for one of his longest ever recorded solos, around 22 minutes.

The symmetrical octatonic scale serves a nearly atonal function as it ascends above harmonic setting, often creating a sense of tonal ambiguity. Debussy used the octatonic scale and whole-tone scale in tandem in many of his piano preludes, especially pieces from Book 2 such as *Brouillards* (Lesure, Howat 2016). The effect of this scale use is a struggle between lofty indistinct symmetrical movement and softer more consonant modal movements against the harmony. Similarly, the chromatic feel of the octatonic scale allowed jazz musicians to bring out more chromatic alterations in the V to I cadence, especially in the years following the bebop era. When Miles Davis began to experiment in modal music, it came upon Coltrane, a member of the Miles Davis Sextet to find new scales to play over the sometimes harmonically static tunes. Around this time, he explored Slonimsky’s *Thesaurus of Scales*, a comprehensive study of unconventional scales produced by mathematical application,

which led him to learn and apply the octatonic (whole-half and half-whole) scale to his own playing (Barron 2002).

A final scalar commonality between both composers was their more abstract fascination with the arabesque and oriental. It is said that the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris led Debussy to the complex pentatonism found in Javanese Gamelan and perhaps many more cultures, such as African syncopated rhythms or even American ragtime, a precursor to jazz (Hanning 2014). The Eastern sounds found in pieces like *Sirenes*, a Nocturne first performed a year after the exhibition, exemplifies the application of these pentatonic scales, especially in his writings for flute, which also evoke a sense of primitivism and exotic instrumentation.

John Coltrane was drawn to Eastern modal music while in Dizzy Gillespie’s band. The band members turned him on to the teachings of yoga and the music of virtuosic Indian musicians like Ravi Shankar, who Coltrane met in 1964 (Barron 2002). Along with being fascinated with the classical Indian style and the drone note which creates the sonic basis for the raga or melody, Coltrane explored the improvisational implications of the genre’s scale structure. Coltrane was intrigued not only with the quarter tones found in their modal ragas, but also the parallels between the raga and modal jazz. In his song “India”, he attempts to bring out a raga sound over a upright bass drone and a swing beat. After “India”’s appearance on his *Impressions* album (1963), Coltrane would carry this eastern influence with him, especially as he travelled further into the avant-garde, where it’s evocations are most notably present in his 1968 one-song release, *Om*.

Another parallel commonality between the two composers is through their tendencies towards the impressionistic style.

Though Claude Debussy often resisted the label of ‘impressionist’ his interaction with the impressionistic visual arts of Paris puts him squarely within the movement’s sphere of influence. His visits with visual artist Paul Gauguin were particularly influential, as Gauguin was a man who likened musical tones and timbres to colors and shades (Pasler 2016). This left a mark on Debussy’s orchestration and coloristic chord construction. In *Images*, a collection of piano pieces published in the 1900s, he creates a vague, obscured sonic setting. These pieces mirror the lush yet indistinct nude paintings by Renoir a patently French impressionist produced in the same decade (Pasler 2016). What the piano piece lacks in clarity it makes up for in pure sonic satiation; Debussy chose chords not for their function, but for their coloristic sonority (Hanning 2014).

For Coltrane, his modal and avant-garde works were often more tumultuous, improvised soundscapes. Moving musical impressions with periodic undercurrents of social discontent. Following the bombings of an African-American Baptist Church in Alabama, Coltrane wrote “Alabama” (Barron 2002). In a symbolistic fashion, this work abstractly mimics Martin Luther King Jr.’s delivery of a speech following the attack, the cadence of King’s own words coinciding with Coltrane’s musical phrasing (Rowland 2001). This socio-impressionistic work evokes a forbidding and deeply-wounded atmosphere, while not quite directly coming out in protest. Its name was, at the time, the only indicator of its dramatic content. This period of experimental works by Coltrane culminated in the *Ascension* album, a free-form collection of reactions and realizations to contemporary times.

Orchestral color was especially important to both artists in composing pieces

with a single unifying “mood”. The orchestral settings and instrumentation of Debussy’s Nocturnes were integral to the mood of his works. Debussy used a wide range of instrumentation that may only ever play one series of notes, one time in a given piece. However, this diversity was imperative in representing different tone colors (Lesure, Howat 2016). Eleventh chords emphasized modal settings bordering on bitonality, giving his pieces an ethereal feel and a weak sense of harmonic center.

The voicings used by McCoy Tyner in Coltrane’s quartet work for Atlantic records are a good example of Coltrane’s creation of modal setting. Tyner often moved rootless chords, with quartal spacing across the keyboard creating a modal backdrop rather than one implying a root or even a harmonic destination. In Coltrane’s work with Bill Evans we hear much of the same and when the chords lack coloristic quality, we find that Coltrane could imply certain extensions such as a sharp eleven in a major seven chord imposing the Lydian mode sound onto that chord. This created a tonal fluidity that, while pleasing, allowed the improviser to dictate the key.

In every prevailing musical era, there exists a musical undercurrent rooted in the conventions of the time, yet seeking uniqueness and the next great musical ideal. Debussy led the search for a new French style in homage to Jean-Philippe Rameau and in spite of Richard Wagner. Similarly, Coltrane forged new paths divergent of Miles Davis and in spite of the popularity of conventional balladeers and the legacies of Duke Ellington and Charlie Parker. Both artists were masters of synthesis, absorbing the styles around them and scouring their surroundings for new musical destinations. Debussy achieved beauty and imagination outside of functional harmony as Coltrane divided the octave in

unconventional ways creating intriguing new sonic colors. They bent mathematical, theoretical, and symmetrical scales to their imaginative musical will. They repurposed church modes to create impressionistic soundscapes inspiring different interpretations to different listeners. However, it is their shared belief in constant musical development and exploration that binds them most closely.

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