

“Il pleure dans mon cœur”: Verlaine, Debussy, Kodály

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Abstract: The poetry of Paul Verlaine inspired several songs by Debussy. *Il pleure dans mon cœur* is no. 2 in the cycle *Ariettes oubliées*. The same poem is used as a motto for a short piano piece by Zoltán Kodály: no. 3 in the *Seven Pieces for Piano*, op. 11 (*Esik a városban*). The paper describes the *madrigalesque* word painting of Kodály’s composition on the one hand, and analyzes the modes of its melodic material on the other. In a broader context, the influence of French art (the music of Debussy in particular) on the artistic development of the young Kodály is discussed, as well as the two composers’ mutual estimation of each other.

Keywords: Verlaine, Debussy, Kodály, French Symbolism

The well-known poem by Paul Verlaine, *Il pleure dans mon cœur*, was published in 1874, as no. 3 in the album *Romances sans paroles*. The magician of the words, Verlaine conjures up a metaphor-like simile between weeping and raining: the tears of the heart are compared to the raindrops on the street (see the original text, and the English translation in *Table 1*). The poem was set to music by several composers, including Fauré, Delius, and Florent Schmitt; the most famous setting, nevertheless, is by Debussy.

The literary movement of the French Symbolism informed Debussy’s style to a degree; Verlaine’s poetry was particularly close to him. Apart from some single songs, he set texts by Verlaine in two of his cycles: *Ariettes oubliées* (1888), and *Fêtes galantes I–II* (1892; 1904). *Il pleure dans mon cœur* is no. 2 in the *Ariettes oubliées*. Interestingly, the song bears a motto by Arthur Rimbaud, printed above the score (“Il pleut doucement sur la ville”), showing that the inspiration for the poetic thought originally came from Verlaine’s younger colleague.

TABLE 1 Paul Verlaine: *Il pleure dans mon cœur*
(*Romances sans paroles*, 1874)

<i>Il pleure dans mon cœur</i> <i>Comme il pleut sur la ville ;</i> <i>Quelle est cette langueur</i> <i>Qui pénètre mon cœur ?</i> <i>Ô bruit doux de la pluie</i> <i>Par terre et sur les toits !</i> <i>Pour un cœur qui s'ennuie,</i> <i>Ô le bruit de la pluie !</i> <i>Il pleure sans raison</i> <i>Dans ce cœur qui s'écœure.</i> <i>Quoi ! nulle trahison ?</i> <i>Ce deuil est sans raison.</i> <i>C'est bien la pire peine</i> <i>De ne savoir pourquoi,</i> <i>Sans amour et sans haine</i> <i>Mon cœur a tant de peine.</i>	<p>There is weeping in my heart like the rain falling on the town. What is this languor that pervades my heart?</p> <p>Oh the patter of the rain on the ground and the roofs! For a heart growing weary Oh the song of the rain!</p> <p>There is weeping without cause in this disheartened heart. What! no betrayal? There's no reason for this grief.</p> <p>Truly the worst pain is not knowing why, without love or hatred, my heart feels so much pain.</p> <p>(transl. Richard Stokes)</p>
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It seems that Debussy's song responds to the opening line, rather than the second line of the text. The quiet, *pianissimo* murmur of the right-hand figuration of the piano part, marked *con sord.*, evokes the sound of soft rain, *alias* gentle tears, in the lachrymose key of G-sharp minor. "*Triste et monotone*" reads the performance instruction at the head of the piece. The slow-moving legato melody is in the left hand all through the song, at times together with the sad line of the voice part.

The words of Verlaine's poem are used rather unexpectedly as a motto for a short piano piece written in 1910: the composer is Zoltán Kodály. Actually, the motto or title in the printed editions produces a garbled history. (Unfortunately, no autograph by Kodály's hand survives.)¹ The first edition by Universal bears the title *Il pleut dans la ville*, without the name of Verlaine. The subsequent Universal editions, and all the later Hungarian editions are titled *Il pleut dans mon cœur / comme il pleut sur la ville*, and print the name of Verlaine in parenthesis, underneath. This is, however, a corrupted version of Verlaine's text: the initial "Il pleut," instead of "Il pleure," abolishes the poetic parallel of "weeping" and "raining." Whether Kodály deliberately changed the crucial verb or not, is impossible to

1. There is contradictory data about this in the Kodály literature. For the clarification of the sources I owe thanks to Teréz Kapronyi, archivist of the Kodály Archives, Budapest.

say now. At any rate, the original title of the first edition (*Il pleut dans la ville*) explains the generally used Hungarian title of the piece, *Esik a városban*. Indeed, the persistent staccato “drops” of the right hand on the unaccented beats illustrate the patter of the rain on the pavement. The melodic line, as in Debussy’s song, is carried by the left hand; the tempo indication is *Allegretto malinconico* (see the content of Debussy’s song cycle and Kodály’s op. 11 set in *Table 2*).

TABLE 2 *Il pleure dans mon coeur* in the cycles of Debussy and Kodály

Claude Debussy: <i>Ariettes oubliées</i> (1886–1888; publ. 1888)	Zoltán Kodály: <i>7 Pieces for Piano, op. 11</i> (1910; 1917–1918; publ. 1921)
<i>1 C’est l’extase languoreuse</i>	<i>1 Lento</i>
<i>2 Il pleure dans mon coeur</i>	<i>2 Székely keserves (Transylvanian lament)</i>
<i>3 L’ombre des arbres</i>	<i>3 Allegretto malinconico</i> (“<i>Il pleut [sic] dans mon coeur</i> <i>comme il pleut sur la ville</i>”)
<i>4 Paysages Belges: Chevaux de bois</i>	<i>4 Épitaphe</i>
<i>5 Green (Aquarelles 1)</i>	<i>5 Tranquillo</i>
<i>6 Spleen (Aquarelles 2)</i>	<i>6 Székely nóta (Transylvanian song)</i>
	<i>7 Rubato</i>

The poetic motto makes clear the inspiration behind the piece. Owing to a scholarship, the 24-year old Kodály spent several months in Paris in 1907, and the impressions of French art – the music of Debussy in particular – acted as a revelation for his artistic development. “Keep this name in your mind: Claude Monet. The greatest landscape painter in the world,” he wrote to Emma Gruber in a letter from Paris, in June 1907.² In another letter to Emma, from later in the year, he imparts: “After I had read through this Verlaine volume, strange distant sounds arose in me.”³ The liberating influence of Paris, with its musical, literary, and painterly experiences, was a decisive factor in the career of many young Hungarian artists of the period – Csók, Rippl-Rónai, Ady, and others.

At the time of his last visit to the French capital, the 83-year old Kodály remembered his youthful experiences in an interview for the *Phonotèque Nationale*; the reporter of the conversation was Mária Kőrösi:

2. Kodály Zoltán levelei, ed. Dezső Legány (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1982), 37.

3. Ibid., 40.

MK: As far as I know, you visited Paris already at the beginning of the century as a student, and participated in the classes of Widor at the Conservatoire.

ZK: Yes, nearly 60 years ago, in 1906 [sic]. I spent only a few months in Paris, but it was a great experience. Everything. Decisive experience, for a lifetime. ... Previously, we had known nothing about French music. ... I brought the first Debussy scores to Hungary.

MK: In your opinion, had French music a very big influence on your compositional work?

ZK: By all means. If not to the extent asserted by some critics. I had spent several mornings in the Bibliothèque nationale, reading the large, beautiful score of the Pelléas. I had learnt a great deal here, in general.⁴

Kodály's immediate response to the Debussy-effect was the *Méditation sur un motif de Claude Debussy* for piano, composed in 1907, the very year of the Paris sojourn. How the "strange distant sounds" of the Verlaine poem arose in his mind three years later, we do not know. Neither do we know whether he was acquainted or not with Debussy's song *Il pleure dans mon coeur* from the *Ariettes oubliées*. The manuscript of the little piece *Esik a városban* must have remained in the drawer for a decade, until Kodály placed it in a series with six other piano works, composed in 1917–1918, and offered the whole set to Universal for publication. The complete cycle appeared in 1921 as *7 Pieces for Piano*, op. 11, and was premiered (with the exception of no. 7) by Béla Bartók on 12 November 1921 in the Fővárosi Vigadó. (Selections from the series remained on the concert programs of Bartók throughout his career: he played no. 3 in Szeged, Kolozsvár, also in Paris, London, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Copenhagen.)⁵

The *7 Pieces for Piano* is not really a cycle, in the strict sense of the word. The heterogeneous collection contains short, sketch-like studies (Nos. 1, 5), arrangements of Transylvanian folk melodies (nos. 2, 6), two "program pieces" presumably inspired by Debussy (nos. 3, 4), and a rather substantial, fantasy-like closing piece. The album as a whole reflects the diverse musical universe of a young composer, in which personal ideas are mingled with the fresh discovery of Hungarian folklore on the one hand, and the novel sound of Western art music on the other. In the opinion of Kodály's biographer, Percy M. Young, "[the pieces of op. 11] are a useful index to the composer's style, and more interesting on this account than for their intrinsic qualities."⁶

4. *Visszatekintés III*, ed. Ferenc Bónis (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1989), 576–577.

5. For a complete list of the concerts which included pieces from the op. 11 of Kodály, I owe thanks to Csilla Pintér.

6. Percy M. Young, *Zoltán Kodály: A Hungarian Musician* (London: Ernest Benn, 1964), 71.

Of the seven pieces, *Esik a városban* (*Il pleut sur la ville*) is certainly the closest to the world of Debussy; but there are elements that betray French influence in some of the other compositions as well. *Épitaphe*, the central and longest piece of the set, written in December 1918, might have been intended as a farewell to Debussy, who died that year. The soft color of the chorale-like, six-part parallel chords in the middle section (marked *lontano* in the score) evoke the eerie atmosphere of *La Cathédrale engloutie*. But one recognizes Debussy's whole-tone scale in the starting motif of no. 7 (*Rubato*), or in the parallel thirds of the theme of no. 5 (*Tranquillo*) as well.

As far as *Esik a városban* is concerned, the music depicts the pattering rain in an almost *madrigalesque* manner. The first regular, then irregular tap of the raindrops appear in single *staccatos*, quick *arpeggios*, then in groups of three staccato quaver-notes in the right hand. *Accelerandos* and *rallentandos* reflect the pickup, or the weakening of the rainfall. Against the word painting of the right hand the left hand draws a long legato melody, structured in a symmetrical order. A four-

EXAMPLE 1

The musical notation for Example 1 consists of four staves, labeled a, a', b, and b'. Staves a and a' are in 4/4 time, while staves b and b' are in 3/4 time. Staves a and a' show a melody with a crescendo and a decrescendo. Staves b and b' show a melody with a crescendo and a decrescendo. A dashed line connects the end of staff b to the beginning of staff b'.

line stanza of *aa'bb'* construction is presented twice, the only difference being in register, since the restatement of the material sounds an octave lower (*Example 1*).

The two halves of the melody are molded in different modes. The first half is an amalgam of Aeolian and Dorian, spiced with the augmented second step of the so-called "Gypsy scale"; the octatonic scale of the first presentation is expanded into a nine-degree scale in the variant (*a'*). Material *b* is simpler: it follows the 1:2 model, that is, the alternation of major and minor second intervals, with the exception of the closing augmented second, which suggests an incomplete harmonic minor scale. The hexatonic set of the first presentation is expanded again into a

seven-degree scale in the variant (*b'*): through the inserted bar a top G flat note is added to the melody.

What relates Kodály's piece to the world of Debussy is the sensitivity of the nuances, intimations, and the small quivers of the musical gestures. Various manifestations of water play a special role in Debussy's music: clouds, fountains, the waves of the sea, tears, rainfall assume almost pictorial representation in his piano works, songs, and orchestral compositions. The dim softness of the *Nuages* in the *Nocturnes*, the scurrying sound of the rain in *Jardins sous la pluie* are impressions of Nature; the symbolic association of weeping and raining, on the other hand, creates pure musical *poésie*. As commented above, Kodály's vision calls forth the patter of the rain on the keys of the piano, but the finely penciled shape of the composition conveys a spiritual mood as well.

When analyzing the relationship between the music of Debussy, the "musicien français," and Kodály, the "musicien hongrois," we might take a look at the artistic credo, and musical judgement of the two composers. Both had strong opinions and principles in the matters of their art, and their estimation of each other shows an understanding and sympathy towards one another.

Less information survives from Debussy, of course, since he could know but slightly the work of the young Kodály. He must have known, however, that Kodály, after his trip to Paris, became a cultural ambassador of his music in Hungary. When Debussy visited Budapest in December 1910, and gave a concert in the Vigadó, he was surprised to discover that his works – as he told a journalist – "were better known here than in Paris."⁷ Four years later, in an interview given to the music writer and critic Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, he mentions the names of Bartók and Kodály with recognition. The section of the article actually concerns "the evil of premature judgment," and Debussy sets forth his views as follows:

A point that I really wish to emphasize is, that I consider it almost a crime to judge prematurely. I esteem, for instance, that, tempting as the thing may be, the moment has not yet come to judge the young Hungarians like Bartók and Kodály. Those two are extremely interesting and deserving young artists, eagerly seeking their way; no doubt about that. They are pretty sure to find it. And a noteworthy feature of their music is the obvious affinity between its spirit and that of the modern French. But further I shall not go.⁸

7. A[ndor] Adorján, "Beszélgetés Debussyvel," *Az Est* (6 December 1910).

8. Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, "An Appreciation of Contemporary Music: Claude Debussy," *The Etude* 32/6 (June 1914), 407.

A cautious, but deferential acknowledgement.

Kodály commented on the art of Debussy, and the strong influence of it on his own music on more occasions. His most substantial evaluation of the great predecessor is formulated in the Obituary written on Debussy’s death, published in the *Nyugat* in 1918.⁹ This remarkable essay is an evidence of the penetrating wisdom of the still fairly young Zoltán Kodály. Apart from the appraisal of Debussy’s significance, Kodály’s observations on the phenomena of the changes of style in music history deserve to be quoted here:

[Debussy’s] homophony is dilettantish for those who grasp not, that each new master knows less than his predecessors in certain things, because he knows more in others. Haydn’s polyphony is dilettantish compared to Bach’s, and Bach himself is simpler than the art of the Netherlanders. Neither shall we find “*thematische Arbeit*” in Debussy, for it was not a suitable expressive tool for his purposes. ... To capture a mood in a precise, suggestive picture; to follow the development of a feeling; to draw the undulating line of the spirit: this is what he wanted, and knew.

The closing section of the Obituary is objective as well as prophetic: a typical Kodályian declaration.

Someone who goes so much his own way, will not please at once, and it is possible, that the music of Debussy will be for the chosen only for a long time – or for always. But his influence is already wide-ranging, and beneficial. Perhaps he bequeathed less accomplished values than incitements. His educational effect might be greater than all his works. ...

He set out on a road that leads to freedom and beauty. It is of no importance, how big a portion he possesses of the new world. His realm is not large, not even comparable to that of the greatest. But he is a poet in his own world, and no one could be more than that.

Even today, 100 years later, no one could give a more appropriate estimation of Debussy’s position in the history of Western music.

9. Zoltán Kodály, “Claude Debussy,” *Nyugat* 11/8 (11 April 1918), 640–642.

