

## DEBUSSY'S SONATA FOR FLUTE, VIOLA AND HARP

ASHAN PILLAI, violist with the Zukerman Chamber Players and Barcelona Symphony, shows how the viola part of this chamber masterwork uses a detailed palette of Impressionist colour



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The 1918 Sonata for flute, viola and harp by Claude Debussy occupies a special place within the repertoire of chamber music with viola. Its constant changes of character, its colours and its inspirational, inventive writing have firmly

placed it as a classic chamber work of the 20th century and established the genre of writing for these three instruments. Debussy said of the work, 'It is terribly sad, and I do not know whether one ought to laugh or cry at it. Perhaps both.' These poignant words lay down a clear challenge to the players as to the emotional scope they should cover in little less than 20 minutes of music.

The use of colour in music is rarely analysed owing to its ambiguous nature. The comparison

between art and music (especially Impressionism) in this case is obvious. At a distance, the great masterworks of Monet possess a simple and effortless beauty, as does this great sonata of Debussy on its first hearing, but as one draws closer to the picture and the score one sees how complex are the brushstrokes and how detailed are Debussy's indications regarding specific colours. For string players, our palate is provided by a series of technical tools such as variation of bow speed, the contact point with the string, the angle of bow hair used, the type of bow stroke, the speed of vibrato, and fingerings. This Debussy sonata displays perhaps the clearest example of use of colour in one of the greatest chamber works for viola. The sudden changes of shade and the constant demands of blending in and out of the flute sound make it highly challenging.

### NEUTRAL COLOUR – ON THE FINGERBOARD – ON THE BRIDGE – SUBTLETIES – HARMONICS – FINGERING COLOUR

#### NEUTRAL COLOUR

Before presenting various examples, it is very important that the player realises the importance of a focused contact point with the string, which we can call a 'neutral' colour: the sound one might use when practising scales. Always be conscious of the flatter bow-hair angle that this demands. The extreme contrasts of *sul tasto* ('on the fingerboard') and *sul ponticello* ('on the bridge') only project well if the player can firstly dominate their own neutral sound and then change the point of contact with string and the angle of the bow hair in the bat of an eyelid. Suppleness of the fingers and thumb of the bow hand is a critical prerequisite for the best colour changes. A violist who constantly plays too near to the fingerboard with a tilted bow will not achieve sufficient contrast between their brilliant red and their pastel white (that is, between their forte and their flautando).

#### ON THE FINGERBOARD

I would like to begin with the marking '*sur la touche*' (or '*sul tasto*'). This term is commonly associated by string players with French Impressionist repertoire and as a result it is often used irrespective of the composer's indications. It is usually understood to require a floating, whispering sound, created with a fast bow speed at a contact point with the string just where the fingerboard begins. The angle of the bow hair is of the utmost importance: the bow should be tilted away from the player. The vibrato that usually accompanies this colour is fast and thin, as would be appropriate four bars before figure 9 in the second movement, Interlude (**example 1**). The need for a variant of the same contact point and shade in order to create a stagnant effect is demonstrated nine bars from the start of the first movement, Pastorale (**example 2**). A slower bow speed is required with almost non-existent, thin vibrato so as not to lose the intonation of the double-stopped 5ths. Another interesting point about example 1 is the indication 'position natural' in the second bar, which asks for the player to return to a normal contact point within a split second in order to achieve the crescendo Debussy wants: another delicately detailed change of colour.

examples 1 & 2 >

Interlude, 4 bars before figure 9  
solo  
sur la touche  
*pp* *sensibile* *mf* *dim.* *rit.*

pastorale, 9 bars from the start  
sur la touche  
*p* *soutenu*

Final, 10 bars before figure 16  
sur le chevalet  
arco  
*molto marcato*

pastorale, 4 bars before figure 1  
sul ponticello  
*p* *pp*

pastorale, 3 bars from the start  
*p* *doux et pénétrant* *più p*

Interlude, 4 bars after figure 7  
*p* *marcato leggiermente*

**examples 3 & 4 >** **ON THE BRIDGE**  
The indication 'sur le chevalet' (or 'sul ponticello') takes many by surprise because of the relatively harsh sound produced, and many violists shy away from this effect. It is, needless to say, an important colour that gives at times an ominously sinister character and at others an almost ethereal feel to the music. Ten bars before figure 16 in the third movement, Final, we see the forceful side of *sul ponticello* (example 3); the player draws the bow very close to the bridge with full hair and natural bow-arm weight to achieve the forte indicated, accompanied by an intense vibrato. In contrast, a piano passage where Debussy looks for a touch of otherworldliness in a pastoral and gentle setting is demonstrated four bars before figure 1 in the first movement (example 4). This example is especially demanding – the player has to maintain the ponticello contact point during rapid changes of string.

**example 5 >** **SUBTLITIES**  
Having covered the two extremes of colour Debussy requires, we should explore the enormous subtleties that exist between these two extremes. The very first viola phrase of the work, three bars from the start of the first movement (example 5), is notoriously delicate for the player, but Debussy, in writing 'piano, doux et pénétrant', gives us all the clues we need to execute the line well. 'Doux' or 'dolce' normally implies a fast, thinner vibrato, and 'pénétrant' implies a contact point a little more focused than a normal piano, and a faster speed of bow.

**examples 6 & 7 >**  
Although there is an abundance of lyrical writing in this work, the diversity of bow strokes found throughout (*spiccato*, *détaché*, *staccato*) also adds to the montage of colours. Debussy's references to troubadour and Renaissance motifs and his use of progressive 5ths provide us with two examples of *spiccato* (four bars after figure 7 in the second movement – example 6) and *détaché* (figure 8 in the same movement – example 7 on page 71) bow strokes. In example 6, his indication 'marcato leggiermente' ▶

7] Interlude, figure 8

8] Final, figure 22

22 **Meno mosso ma con moto**

9] Final, 4 bars after figure 18

**Un poco più mosso, poco a poco**

10] Interlude, figure 9

9 **au Mouvt**

implies the use of a more vertical spiccato, almost percussive – a pre-Renaissance drummer. In example 7, a broad but defined détaché stroke is required to project a sound closer to two violas da gamba. Spiccato and détaché are both basic string strokes but one has to be able to adapt each of them well enough to define the specific colour and setting Debussy had in his mind.

**example 8 >**

**HARMONICS**

As with many French Impressionist works, the use of harmonics – natural and artificial – here gives us yet another angle on colour. Although many of these passages are marked piano or pianissimo, the player should keep up a fairly focused contact point in order to maintain the artificial harmonic; however, natural harmonics do not demand the same control of bow speed. Figure 22 in the third movement (**example 8**) shows the difficulties of changing rapidly between artificial harmonics and normal stopped notes. Here, one has to maintain the same contact point and not use too much bow speed, biting each harmonic with the index finger of the bowing hand to add clarity.

**example 9 >**

An ingenious example of how Debussy alternates between colours by varying bow strokes and using pizzicato is found four bars after figure 18 in the last movement (**example 9**). Within four bars the player has to move from an aggressive, short, détaché stroke in the lower half of the bow to a broader détaché stroke and then to a shorter spiccato stroke, finishing this wonderful transition diminuendo with pizzicato.

**example 10 >**

**FINGERING COLOUR**

An example of how to change colour by varying the fingering can be found at figure 9 in the second movement (**example 10**). In this phrase, Debussy marks the third bar 'molto sensibile', but two bars later, when this bar is repeated, it is marked 'sospirare'. The player must find a sighing, echo colour. One idea would be to begin the passage in third position (playing the C natural with the first finger) before climbing to the G string in sixth position (using the first finger for the E flat in the third bar), all the time with a slower, more intense bow speed. Then come down to the first position on the D string (using the second or third finger for the G flat) in the fifth bar, playing with a faster bow speed and quicker, thinner vibrato for a *sul tasto* echo.

One could expound endlessly about colour in music, but with this masterwork of Debussy's it is clear that the more technical control of the bow and left hand one has, the greater the possibility of painting and mixing the colours that he had in mind. We cannot forget that, even with a complete technical guidebook to creating colours for a string player, nothing replaces the originality, imagination and artistry of the player, which ideally should go hand-in-hand with every delicate shading. In experimenting with colours we not only enter the soul of the composer but also keep on defining our own sensibilities. ■