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THE COLOR OF SOUND IN 20TH- CENTURY FRENCH MUSIC BY DEBUSSY AND MESSIAEN

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Title:

The Color of Sound in 20th-century French Music by Debussy and Messiaen

Synopsis:

The presentation will focus on 20th-century French music, reflecting the piano works of Debussy and Messiaen. Debussy and Messiaen developed their own unique ways of creating colors in their music. This presentation will discuss the compositional techniques of Debussy and Messiaen and how they were able to create these colors in sound. The format will include a powerpoint presentation, short demonstrations at the piano, and a full live performance of selected pieces by Debussy and Messiaen.

The Color of Sound in 20th-century French Music by Debussy and Messiaen

By Dr. Young-Hyun Cho

The presentation will focus on 20th-century French music, reflecting on the lives and piano works of Claude Debussy and Olivier Messiaen. Debussy and Messiaen both developed their own unique ways of creating colors in their music. This presentation will discuss the compositional techniques of Debussy and Messiaen and how they were able to create these colors in sound. The format will include a powerpoint presentation, short demonstrations at the piano, and a full live performance of selected pieces from *Estampes* by Debussy and *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus* by Messiaen.

Debussy (1862-1918) freed dissonances and chromatic harmonies from their usual functional role and used various modes and scales of his own design. He used the whole-tone, pentatonic and octatonic scales, as well as traditional major and minor scales. He also expanded the vocabulary of keyboard playing by using layers of texture, long pedal tones, and parallel movements of triads, seventh, or ninth chords in conjunct steps. Debussy took elements external to music as the inspiration for many of his compositions. These included art, poetry, nature, legend, popular culture, and exotic scenes and instruments. One representative solo piano work which demonstrates many elements of Debussy's fully-developed style is *Estampes* (1903).

Messiaen (1908-1992) continued Debussy's compositional experiments and integrated new innovations into his compositions. One of the primary sources of inspiration for Messiaen was his devout Catholicism, and he incorporated his belief in everlasting life into his music. He also often included numerology such as the trinity, 13-14th century compositional techniques, ancient Greek and Indian rhythms, palindrome rhythms, and modal relationships called modes of limited transposition. Most of Messiaen's music has no meter, no key signature, no typical primary melodic line, no functional harmonies, and no transitions. Instead it is full of dissonances, chromatic harmonies without no resolution, and many juxtaposed layers of lines. The music tends to be very dense and complex. However all of those musical innovations create sounds and colors which are uniquely Messiaen. The *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus* (1944) is an excellent example which demonstrates Messiaen's unique harmonic language.