Musica Academica
Volume 3. Issue 2 (2026): 54-77
DOI: 10.61215/MA.2026.vol.2.iss.2.05

TRANSFORMATIONS OF BELL SONORITY IN FRENCH PIANO MUSIC: FROM LISZT TO DEBUSSY AND RAVEL

MARTINA KAMENSKA

Slovak Academy of Sciences

martina.kamenska@savba.sk

Abstract: *This study examines the transformation of bell sonority in piano music from Franz Liszt to French piano music of the early twentieth century. It proceeds from the premise that Liszt does not treat the bell merely as an illustrative sound effect, but develops several stable compositional models of bell sonority that may be traced through texture, register, intervallic design, harmonic language, repetition, resonance, and semantic function. On this basis, the study analyses Liszt's* Sposalizio *and* Angelus! *as reference types of bell-related sound organisation and sets them primarily in relation to Debussy's* Cloches à travers les feuilles *and* La cathédrale engloutie*. As a brief concluding extension, it also considers Ravel's* La vallée des cloches *as a further refinement of French bell sonority. The analyses show that Debussy and, in a more concentrated way, Ravel do not adopt Lisztian compositional possibilities literally, but transform them into a different poetics of sound: bell sonority shifts from thematically and gesturally articulated imitation towards subtler, more colouristic, and more harmonically open forms of musical space. Whereas in Liszt the bell often remains linked to spiritual, poetic, or symbolic meaning, in French piano music of the early twentieth century its function becomes more closey associated with distance, resonance, spatial organisation, and temporal stasis. The study therefore argues not for a direct linear influence, but for continuities in compositional possibility through which Romantic bell imitation is transformed into a sonorous principle of piano writing.*

Keywords: *Franz Liszt, Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, piano music, bell sonority*

Introduction

The bell is among the most significant sonic and symbolic phenomena in the musical culture of the nineteenth century. It is not merely an acoustic object, but also a cultural sign whose effect is formed at the intersection of sound, space, ritual, and memory. Its presence in art music therefore cannot be reduced to simple tone painting. The bell combines the impulse of the strike, resonant decay, the spatial projection of sound, and at the

same time a whole complex of connotations: sacredness, rituality, remembrance, funereal gravity, distance, expectation, and the suspension of time. In musical stylisation, it thus appears not merely as a striking pictorial element, but as a complex sonorous and semantic structure.[1]
Piano music offers a particularly fertile field for examining this phenomenon. Although the piano cannot reproduce the acoustic spectrum of the bell in its full physical richness, it possesses sufficient means for its artistic stylisation: chordal incisiveness, the richness of sounding tones, ostinato-like recurrence, registral disposition, pedal resonance, and the capacity to create the illusion of several simultaneous layers of sound. As a result, the bell in piano music appears not only as an isolated sound imitation, but also as a model for the organisation of texture, harmonic space, and musical time.[2]

In this context, the work of Franz Liszt assumes particular importance. His bell-inspired piano works show that the bell can be transposed into the pianistic medium in a variety of ways: as a thematic impulse, as an intervallic-harmonic configuration, as an ostinato pulsation, or as a layered sonority distributed across the space of the keyboard. Liszt's music therefore does not rest on a single "sonic marker of the bell", but on several compositional models capable of carrying not only acoustic resemblance, but also spiritual, symbolic, and poetic meaning.[3]

In this sense, Debussy's music constitutes a natural, though not immediate, comparative counterpart. In his piano writing too, the bell occupies a striking position, yet its function and sonic nature change substantially. What in Liszt is still often thematically identifiable, gesturally articulated, and bound up with Romantic expressivity becomes in Debussy's compositions a subtler, more colouristic, and less unequivocally localisable organisation of sonic space. Here the bell no longer tends to function merely as an object of imitation; it operates instead as a principle for the formation of sonic space and as a model of resonance, spatial perspective, and temporal slowing.[4]

The subject of this study is therefore not the search for a linear model of influence, but the tracing of a transformation in compositional

---

[1] Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[2] David Rowland, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Piano* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[3] Konstantin Shamray, "The Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches: Performing and Extending the European Traditions of Bell-Inspired Piano Music" (PhD diss., University of Adelaide, 2020), 64–72.

[4] Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

possibilities. The question is whether Lisztian models of bell sonority are transformed within Debussy's piano poetics and, if so, what is retained, what is weakened, and what is radically altered. In this respect, it proves methodologically more precise to speak of continuities in compositional thought than of straightforward genealogical succession.

The aim of the study is thus to show that, between the work of Liszt and Debussy, one may trace a distinct shift from romantically articulated imitation to a subtler sonorous poetics of sound. The enquiry concentrates on four main questions: which of Liszt's means of bell imitation are transferable as models for the analysis of Debussy's procedures; what is retained and what changes between the compositional approaches of the two composers; whether only the sonic realisation of the bell changes, or also its semantic function; and finally, whether one may speak of continuities in compositional thought even without presupposing direct influence.

The core corpus of the study consists of Liszt's *Sposalizio* and *Angelus!* and Debussy's *Cloches à travers les feuilles* and *La cathédrale engloutie*. *Sposalizio* represents an earlier and relatively legible model in which bell sonority arises from a motivic and pentatonic nucleus and gradually develops into a more broadly conceived texture. *Angelus!*, by contrast, presents a later, more concentrated and layer-resonant type of sonority in which Liszt's approach comes close to sonorous abstraction. On the Debussy side, *Cloches à travers les feuilles* presents bell sonority diffused into a delicate, multilayered, and colouristically open space, whereas *La cathédrale engloutie* offers a monumental, chordal, and sacralised version of the same issue. As a brief concluding extension, the study also takes into account Ravel's *La vallée des cloches*, which, within French piano music, represents a particularly concentrated type of bell sonority and at the same time allows the Debussyan line to be thought through more finely towards a further differentiation of sonic space.
Thus defined, the corpus makes it possible to trace not only the difference between two compositional poetics, but also the internal differentiation of bell sonority itself. In the works analysed, the bell does not appear as a single and unchanging phenomenon. On the contrary, at one point it emerges as a thematic germ, an articulated gesture, or a symbolic sign; at another, as layered resonance, a diffuse sonic environment, or an architectonic principle of musical space.

The study therefore examines not only how composers "imitate the bell", but above all how they transform it into a compositional principle.

1. Analytical Parameters of Bell Sonority

In this study, the term "bell sonority" does not refer merely to the literal imitation of a bell strike. It denotes a broader set of compositional

solutions that may evoke sonic colour (generated by upper partials), impact, resonance, decay, the simultaneous sounding of several bells, distance, sacred or ritual space, and in certain cases also the slowing of musical time. Understood in this way, the term makes it possible to capture not only explicit bell gestures, but also those situations in which bell-like quality is recognised not through a single motif, but through the overall mode of organising texture and the sonic field.

Such a broader definition is necessary methodologically as well. If the concept of bell sonority were narrowed solely to the direct imitation of the strike, a large portion of those compositional procedures would remain outside analytical interest which, although they do not sound like a "bell" in an immediately iconic sense, nevertheless work with its resonance, recurrence, acoustic colour, instability, or spatial layering. It is precisely these elements that in piano music are often more compositionally significant than the impulse of the strike itself.[5]

The first analytical parameter is texture. In piano music, bell sonority is often articulated as a relation between chordal writing and arpeggiation, between individual strikes and their decay, and between layers of differing rhythmic density. Bell sonority may be constructed chordally, when the composer privileges vertical multi-note compactness and incisiveness, or figuratively, when sound is distributed into more mobile, smoothly led lines. Of particular importance is multilayered texture, which makes it possible to model the sounding of several bells simultaneously: upper layers may evoke smaller and brighter-sounding bells, middle layers a fuller sonic core, and lower registers large bells or their resonant foundation. In Debussy's music, this category is especially important because the boundary between theme and accompaniment is weakened and texture itself becomes the bearer of musical meaning.

The second parameter is register. In bell sonority, registral disposition determines not only pitch, but also sonic weight, the mode of decay, and spatial effect. The high register may suggest a brighter, subtler, or more distant sound; the low register, by contrast, sonic fullness, richness of tone, monumentality, and longer decay. Register is therefore not a secondary colouristic supplement, but one of the principal bearers of the bell's sonorous identity. Its significance is intensified still further when the composer exploits the extreme ranges of the keyboard. In such cases, register produces not merely a contrast of pitch, but also the illusion of acoustic space in which individual sonic layers assume differing degrees of distance and density.

The third parameter is intervallic content. Bell-like sonority in pianistic stylisation is often associated with open fifths and octaves,

[5] Shamray, "Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches," 64–72.

secundal dissonances, repeated intervallic nuclei, or short configurations that recur as acoustically recognisable models. Liszt's music also repeatedly employs anhemitonic pentatonicism; this functions not merely as a colouristic supplement, but as an organising nucleus of the material. The pentatonic formation has a particular status in this context because it produces a simpler and less harmonically closed sound that is readily associated with bell sonority. In Debussy's music, intervallic relations more often do not appear as independently profiled motivic formations, but operate within a broader sonic context; here too, however, what remains important is which intervallic configurations shape the musical material and how they are distributed across the space of the keyboard.

The fourth parameter is harmonic language. In bell sonority, what is decisive is not only the functional orientation of harmony, but also its sonic quality: harmonic openness, weakened tonal anchorage, the blending of sonorities, and in some cases the intensity of dissonant tensions. In Liszt, bell sonority may be mediated by pentatonic material, chordal formations lacking tertian filling, as well as diminished and half-diminished chords; in Debussy, whole-tone structures, parallelisms, and harmonic fields with weaker directionality towards a functionally unambiguous close come into play. Harmony here does not fulfil merely a functional-syntactic role, but also participates in the formation of timbre and resonance. In this respect, one may observe a certain continuity between the poetics of Liszt and Debussy, although it is manifested in a different compositional context.

The fifth parameter is repetition and ostinato. The bell is an acoustic object whose effect often rests upon the recurrence of strikes. The repetition of a tone, a chord, or a short motivic segment therefore creates an especially persuasive impression of ringing in piano music. Ostinato may model the pulse of a single bell, but also the asymmetrical concurrence of several bells of differing size and rhythmic periodicity. At the same time, it is important to recognise that repetition in bell sonority does not mean merely mechanical recurrence. It may also take the form of gently varied return, in which the same sonic model is repeated with small shifts in register, dynamics, or harmonic context.

The sixth parameter is resonance and pedal. The piano cannot reproduce the sound of the bell in all its complexity, yet through decay, resonance, and the blending of sonorities it can create a convincing sonorous evocation of it. For that reason, what matters in bell sonority is not only the notation itself, but also the way in which sound is allowed to decay and blend. In Debussy's music, this parameter assumes especially central importance, though it is also significant in late Liszt, whose sonic imagination moved towards ever more refined and concentrated handling of decay.

Finally, one must add semantic function. Bell sonority may carry spiritual, ritual, nostalgic, funereal, spatial, or contemplative connotations within a work. It is not methodologically appropriate, however, to conceive the sonic and semantic planes as two separate layers. The meaning of bell sonority is formed on the basis of its musical shaping and at the same time affects the way we perceive it. If the composer works with low register, slow pulsation, and extended decay, the sound may carry connotations of majesty, sacred space, or funereal gravity; if, by contrast, it is distributed into delicate high layers and diffused through space, it may evoke distance, memory, or a fleeting atmosphere. For precisely this reason, the analyses that follow will always examine bell sonority at the intersection of texture, register, intervallic content, harmony, repetition, resonance, and meaning.

Thus defined, the analytical framework does not represent a closed set of mutually separate categories, but a flexible way of grasping the material under investigation. In any given work, the individual parameters interact, and their significance changes according to context. In *Sposalizio*, for example, the key issue will be the capacity of the pentatonic motif to grow into texture; in *Angelus!*, by contrast, layering and ostinato organisation. In Debussy's works, the analytical emphasis shifts more towards textural layering, harmonic openness, and the role of resonance in the formation of musical space.[6]

2. Liszt's Compositions as a Point of Departure

From the perspective of bell sonority, Liszt's piano music may be defined through three basic models. The first is the pentatonic-motivic model. Here bell-like sonority does not arise merely as an added effect, but from a narrow motivic nucleus that becomes the basis of the wider construction of the piece. Pentatonicism here does not have merely a colouristic function, but also serves as the bearer of a sonic identity from which theme, accompaniment, and later textural elaboration may grow. Such an organisation of material is essential because bell sonority here does not function as an additional element, but is anchored in the very material construction of the composition.

The second is the intervallic-harmonic model. In works inspired by bells, Liszt repeatedly employed open fifths and octaves, secundal relations, dissonant sonorities, and diminished chords. These procedures do not create harmony merely in the traditional sense, but also participate in the formation of a distinctive sonority. Bell sonority here is therefore not tied to a single thematic figure, but to the very quality of the intervallic and chordal material. What is also important is that such harmonic

[6] Zi-Ling Heah, "Evocations of Nature in Selected Piano Works by Debussy" (DMA research project, West Virginia University, 2022), 31–33.

configurations weaken unequivocal functional orientation and open up a space for a sonically motivated perception of harmony.

The third is the layered-ostinato model. In this case, bell sonority is formed through multilayered texture, a wide registral span, and ostinato pulsation. Such a solution makes it possible to model not only a single bell, but the simultaneous sounding of several bells. Upper layers may evoke smaller bells, while lower positions and longer note-values are associated with the sonic image of larger bells with slower decay. In Liszt's later work, this principle is applied more distinctly and confirms the importance of texture, register, and repetition in the formation of bell sonority.[7]

These three models should not be understood as mutually separate types. In specific works, they often overlap. The pentatonic nucleus may simultaneously carry intervallically characteristic sonority; layered texture may be underpinned by a harmonic model that itself evokes the bell. What matters, however, is that within the piano medium Liszt already developed several distinct ways in which bell sonority could become a compositional principle.

An important methodological conclusion follows from these three models. In Liszt's music, the bell is not merely an object of imitation, but also a principle of organising musical material. Bell sonority may generate theme, participate in the development of texture, motivate registral disposition, and carry symbolic meaning. In this sense, it no longer functions merely as thematically articulated illustration, but as one of the principles of compositional organisation. It is precisely this fact that opens the way for comparison with Debussy's music, in which bell sonority is further detached from a single, readily identifiable gesture and increasingly bound to the organisation of space and time.

Of special significance here is also the semantic plane of bell sonority. Liszt's bell-inspired compositions cannot be understood as purely sonorous studies. In them the bell is often associated with prayer, rituality, sorrow, remembrance, or contemplation. These semantic connotations do not appear alongside the musical material as an independent layer, but are formed in close relation to its compositional shaping. Registral depth, ostinato-like return, the tension between impulse and decay, and a tendency towards a more static sense of time are in Liszt's music closely bound up with the semantic field of spirituality and poetic introspection. For that reason, the transition towards Debussy's music is analytically fruitful, since it makes it possible to trace how the

[7] Shamray, "Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches," 106–107.

same compositional possibility detaches itself from part of its Romantic symbolic framework and is realised within a different poetics of sound.[8]

3. From Romantic Imitation to a French Sonorous Poetics

The transition from Liszt's compositional language to Debussy's cannot be understood as a linear continuation. It is not a simple genealogical line in which the later composer merely took over ready-made techniques from his predecessor. More precisely, one may say that Liszt opened up certain compositional possibilities of bell sonority within piano music, and that Debussy transformed them within a different harmonic, textural, and aesthetic horizon.[9]

Within the French context at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, bell-like sound was associated not only with the image of a specific bell or with its liturgical significance, but increasingly also with colour, distance, memory, resonance, and the slowed flow of musical time. This shift had several causes. It was related to a change in harmonic language, to the weakening of tonal-functional directionality, to the growing importance of colour as a compositional value, and to a new perception of musical space in which sound need not be understood solely as the bearer of thematic expression, but also as an environment, a state, or a principle of organising musical time.[10]

Debussy's piano poetics are especially relevant in this respect. Their essence does not lie merely in "Impressionist colour", but in a deeper transformation of the relationship between sound, gesture, and form. Whereas in Romantic music the expressive and thematic impulse often became the bearer of formal motion, in Debussy's music form may also be carried by the very unfolding of sound, its inner pulsation, its registral stratification, and its resonance. Bell sonority in his piano works therefore ceases to be merely an image attached to the music and becomes one of the principles through which the music is organised at all.[11]

Whereas in Liszt one can still often identify the bell impulse with relative precision as a motif or climactic gesture, in Debussy this sphere is diffused into layers and harmonic fields. Bell sonority thus becomes less locally defined and more dispersed throughout sonic space. Its presence is not weakened; rather, it assumes a different mode of musical articulation. Instead of being concentrated into a single thematic point, it

---

[8] Shamray, "Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches," 106–107.

[9] William W. Austin, *Music in the 20th Century: From Debussy through Stravinsky* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966).

[10] Ton de Leeuw, *Music of the Twentieth Century: A Study of Its Elements and Structure* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).

[11] Norman Demuth, *French Piano Music: A Survey with Notes on Its Performance* (London: Museum Press, 1959).

is dispersed through texture, register, subtle rhythmic-temporal articulations, and colouristic harmonic fields.

This shift cannot be expressed merely through the terminological opposition "Romanticism – Impressionism". More important is to trace what changes in the musical material itself. Debussy's bell sonority is formed through subtle layering, weakened tonal directionality, delicate use of pedal, and registral perspective. The bell here often does not emerge as a separate object, but as a mode of organising musical space. Debussy's music is therefore a logical continuation of the investigation, not in the sense of proving direct influence, but in the sense of transforming one sonorous possibility into a new compositional language.

From a methodological point of view, it is therefore necessary to avoid two extreme interpretations. On the one hand, it would be reductionist to regard Debussy merely as a successor to Lisztian models; on the other, it would be equally inaccurate to understand his bell sonority as a phenomenon without any relevant antecedent. More precisely, one should trace which compositional possibilities Liszt stabilised and how those same possibilities were regrouped, refined, harmonically opened, and semantically displaced in Debussy's music.

4. *Sposalizio*: From Motif to Sonic Field

Within this study, *Sposalizio* functions as a reference model. It shows with exceptional clarity a situation in which bell sonority arises from a narrow motivic nucleus and gradually grows into a wider texture. The programme-related connection of the work with Raphael's painting is well known; for the present analysis, however, what is decisive is not the iconographic background, but the way in which Liszt works with the material in the music itself.[12]

[12] Michele Calella, "Raphael, the Virgin Mary, and Holy Matrimony: Recontextualizing Franz Liszt's Sposalizio," *Studia Musicologica* 59, no. 1 (2018): 3–19.



Figure 1: Liszt – Sposalizio (main theme)

At the opening stage of the piece, the most striking feature is anhemitonic pentatonicism. This pentatonic line does not function merely as a theme in the traditional sense, but as a sonic nucleus from which further material is derived. Its registral deployment and intervallic structure produce a bell effect even before a broader textural and dynamic design is developed.

Here the bell is present as the germ of a sound, not as a finished image. This moment is analytically important because it shows that bell-like quality may take shape already at the level of the initial material nucleus.

What is essential is that Liszt does not allow this material to remain on the level of a local figure. The pentatonic nucleus returns in various forms, enters accompanying layers, and gradually expands into more massive sonic blocks. With this, the compositional status of bell sonority also changes: from an individual sonic impulse, it becomes the principle of growth of the whole sonority. At a certain point, bell sonority is no longer confined merely to a motif, but becomes part of the texture of the piece as a whole.

From the point of view of texture, the passage from the more linearly conceived opening to the climactic passages is important, in which the sound thickens, is reinforced in octaves, and grows more powerful chordally. This gradation does not represent merely Romantic dynamic tension, but also creates the impression of simultaneous ringing, in which individual strikes merge into a compact sonorous mass. This fusion is important because it signals the passage from pure thematicity to a sonic field, since bell sonority here is bound not only to the impulse of the strike itself, but also to its continuing decay.

Pentatonicism plays a particular role here. In Liszt's poetics it does not function merely as an archaic or sonically open element, but as a

structurally essential material supporting the impression of openness and sonic unanchoring without the work sacrificing formal cohesion. In this respect, *Sposalizio* differs from simpler tone painting: its bell quality is not added to an already finished musical structure, but is itself the source of that structure's growth.



Figure 2: Liszt – Sposalizio (climactic passage)

From the perspective of register, it is important that bell quality is not tied to a single position on the keyboard. The opening material may sound gentler and less monumental, yet at climactic points the register expands and the sound acquires greater weight. With this, its semantic effect also changes: from a meditative, almost intimate beginning, the piece moves towards sonic monumentalisation. In this sense too, one may speak of a double nature of Lisztian bell quality — on the one hand capable of delicate, almost chamber-like articulation, on the other capable of becoming a massive, spatially expanded sonority.

It is precisely this movement between intimacy and monumentality that is characteristic of *Sposalizio*. Here the bell appears neither as a purely liturgical sign nor as a neutral sonic figure. It forms part of a shaping of musical time in which the impression of temporal slowing is bound up with the gradual intensification of sound. Repetitiveness and pentatonic simplicity create an impression of constancy, whereas dynamic and registral growth bring formal motion. Bell sonority in this work is therefore both static and developmental.

Such an understanding of *Sposalizio* is crucial for comparison with Debussy's music. The work shows that bell sonority may be not only thematically identifiable, but also compositionally generative. Pentatonicism here is not decorative, but form-generating; gradation signifies not merely intensification, but also the transformation of sound

from an individual gesture into simultaneous sonority. What is here still thematically and gesturally intelligible became in Debussy's music more diffuse and less percussively articulated, yet the principle of sonority arising from a small sonic nucleus remained essential.

5. *Angelus!*: Layering, Ostinato, and Spiritual Concentration

Whereas *Sposalizio* shows Liszt's bell sonority in a model growing from a pentatonic and motivic nucleus, *Angelus!* presents another aspect of the same problem. Here the bell does not appear primarily as the germ of thematic development, but as a concentrated, layered, and spiritually saturated sonority. It is precisely through this work that Liszt approached a type of pianistic thinking in which texture, register, and resonance became bearers of meaning just as strongly as thematic material.



Figure 3: Liszt – Angelus! (opening passage)

The very title *Angelus! Prière aux anges gardiens* directs the listener towards the sphere of prayer, contemplation, and sacred stillness. Bell sonority is therefore shaped from the outset by a spiritual semantic framework, though this does not mean that meaning is simply "preordained" for the music. On the contrary, it is the musical material itself that creates this framework. The layering of sound, ostinato pulsation, registral gradation, and long decay together produce a state of calm yet inwardly concentrated prayerfulness.

Analytically, the most striking aspect of the piece is its multilayeredness. Upper registers may evoke smaller, brighter, and more delicate-sounding bells, the middle layer a fuller tonal centre, and the low registers slower, heavier, and more resonantly sustaining bells. Yet this is not merely an illustration of a "peal of bells". What matters is that the individual layers fulfil different rhythmic and sonorous functions: some carry greater mobility, others create a more stable sonic foundation. Bell

sonority here thus arises from a combination of layers differing in rhythmic activity, registral position, and mode of decay.

Ostinato plays a special role. Its significance lies not only in recurrence, but also in its psychological and semantic effect. In *Angelus!*, ostinato-like return is close to prayerful repetition. Repetition here is associated not with mechanism, but with concentration, with the rhythmic shaping of spiritual time. Bell sonority thus fulfils not only a sonic but also a meaning-bearing function: it co-determines the organisation of musical time, the return of musical material, and the contemplative character of the musical course.

Harmonically, the piece does not employ openness in the same way as Debussy, yet it nevertheless shows a certain distance from strict tonal-functional directionality. In terms of bell sonority, what matters is that harmony here appears not merely as a succession of goal-directed points, but also as a space in which individual layers resonate and differentiate themselves colouristically. Pedalling and decay play an especially important role. The centre of gravity of the work lies not in the articulation of individual strikes, but in the modelling of their decay.

From the semantic point of view, *Angelus!* is important for this study because it shows how closely bell sonority may be bound up with spiritual function in Liszt's music. Here the bell is not merely an acoustic sign: it is a medium of prayer, a sign of transcendence, and at the same time a means of inward concentration. This bond between sound and spiritual meaning is especially important for comparison with Debussy's music, because it shows that the same compositional possibilities are indeed preserved there, but their semantic field changes.

If *Sposalizio* offers a model of growth from motif to sonic field, *Angelus!* offers a model in which bell sonority is organised from the outset as a layered space. In this sense, it represents an important comparative intermediate stage on the way to Debussy's procedures. Not because Debussy directly adopted such a texture from Liszt, but because here bell sonority already ceases to function primarily as a gesturally legible expressive element and instead becomes a constitutive quality of sonic space.

6. Debussy: *Cloches à travers les feuilles*

In *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, bell-like quality appears in a substantially different form. The title itself already suggests that the object of musical evocation is not the bell understood as an autonomous sonic object, but sound perceived through the space in which it spreads. What is at issue, then, is ringing mediated by distance, spatial environment, and auditory perspective. This circumstance is analytically important: Debussy does

not place a specific bell at the centre, but rather the very mode of spatial sound perception.[13]

Heah relates the piece to Laloy's account of the impression of village bells sounding through the forest on All Saints' Day. Whatever the extent to which this connection may be understood as a programme-related impulse, it captures the sonorous logic of the work well. Bell-like quality does not function here as a clearly articulated striking gesture, but as a sound quality diffused through the texture, in which sound assumes the character of an environment rather than that of a self-contained object.

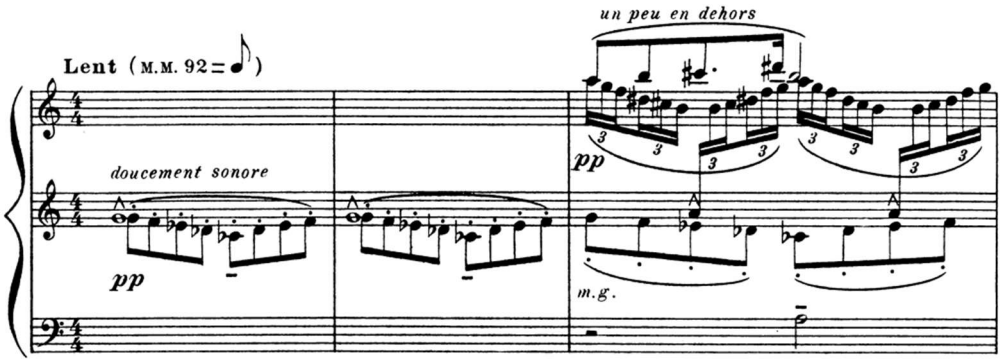


Figure 4: Debussy – Cloches à travers les feuilles (central motif)

From the opening bars it is clear that Debussy proceeds differently here from Liszt in *Sposalizio*. The sonority of the opening is built from rapidly moving whole-tone configurations appearing in several registers and creating an impression of motion without stronger directionality. Motion takes place within the texture and does not lead towards a strongly felt cadential goal. Harmonic stasis therefore does not signify emptiness, but a particular mode of musical duration. The impression of slowed temporal flow arises not from the cessation of musical activity, but from the spreading-out of sound and the weakening of movement towards an unambiguous goal.

From the point of view of texture, multilayeredness is decisive. In *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, the three-stave notation has an important analytical and meaning-bearing function. It facilitates the perception of layered sounds and at the same time suggests that the individual lines cannot simply be understood as melody and accompaniment. This is especially important in this piece: bell sonority is distributed across several layers and cannot be tied to any single one of them.[14] It is here that Debussy's solution reveals itself as analytically distinctive. Whereas in Liszt's solutions it was still relatively easy to determine where the bell

[13] Heah, "Evocations of Nature," 32–33.
[14] Heah, "Evocations of Nature," 31–33.

impulse appeared and how it grew into a broader sonic context, in Debussy's music its presence becomes less unequivocally localisable. Bell quality is not concentrated in a single thematic location, but is distributed throughout the whole texture. Some lines lie closer to bell-like articulation, others to a resonant underpinning, and others again create a colouristic sonic layer in which individual tones partly blend and mutually modify one another in colour.

The registral arrangement is also significant. Higher positions function not only as brighter sounds of "smaller bells", but also as distant reverberations. The middle register creates a more compact textural layer, and the lower tones partly fulfil the function of a muted resonant foundation. Debussy does not construct a hierarchy of registers as unequivocally as Liszt. Here register articulates sonic perspective more than the size of the bell. The music thus does not sound as though it proceeded from a single fixed source, but rather from several spatially distributed sound layers overlapping one another.

The question of pentatonicism is particularly important. In certain passages of the piece, pentatonically organised formations appear which may be understood as a transformation of Western European bell harmony, though they do not constitute a stable nucleus of the *Sposalizio* type. In Debussy's music, the pentatonic field is mutable, merges with whole-tone colour, and does not fulfil the function of a single fixed motivic nucleus. Whereas Liszt often generated structure from pentatonicism, Debussy employed it rather as a mobile component of a larger sonorous environment.[15]

This diffusion also has important consequences for the formal perception of the piece. Sonic events do indeed follow one another, but they do not create a clearly directed dramatic development. Debussy achieves formal effect more through changes in the density of musical material, registral perspective, colour, and resonance than through traditional thematic-motivic development. Bell sonority thus participates in the very logic of form, while form does not stand outside sonority, but arises through it.

To this mutability is added a delicate handling of micro-dynamics and pedal. Performance indications such as *presque rien* or *très égal – comme une buée irisée* are aimed at ensuring that sound does not lose its delicacy and colouristic variability. Bell quality here arises not only from the material itself, but also from the way tones are allowed to resonate, decay, and overlap. It is precisely at this point that Debussy moves furthest away from the Lisztian gesture of ringing as a thematically articulated event. Bell sonority does not operate here as a separately articulated

[15] Heah, "Evocations of Nature," 32–33.

object, but as part of the organisation of sonic space, and this is connected with a semantic transformation as well. Whereas Liszt often associated the bell with prayer, remembrance, or a more readily legible symbolic meaning, in *Cloches à travers les feuilles* the semantic function of bell sonority shifts towards distance, space, acoustic memory, and the mode of sonic perception. This is not sound devoid of semantic function; rather, the semantic function of bell sonority is not tied to an explicitly formulated symbolic reference, but to the formation of sonic space itself. The bell therefore does not emerge as a discrete object of musical evocation, but as part of the overall sonorous organisation of the piece.

Compared with *Sposalizio*, the transformation operates on several levels. Thematic identifiability of the bell is weakened, the harmonic language opens up, texture becomes differentiated, and semantic function shifts towards distance, space, and acoustic memory. Debussy thus did not exclude the bell topos; he transformed it into an organisation of musical space. In this sense, *Cloches à travers les feuilles* is a paradigmatic example of the transition from "the bell as figure" to "the bell as sonorous environment".

7. Debussy: *La cathédrale engloutie*

In contrast to the diffuse, delicate, and distantly filtered form of bell sonority in Debussy's *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, *La cathédrale engloutie* represents its more monumental and more architectonically shaped aspect, connected with sacred space. Here bell sonority is not diffused through a woodland atmosphere, but participates in the creation of the image of a massive, slowly emerging sonic object.

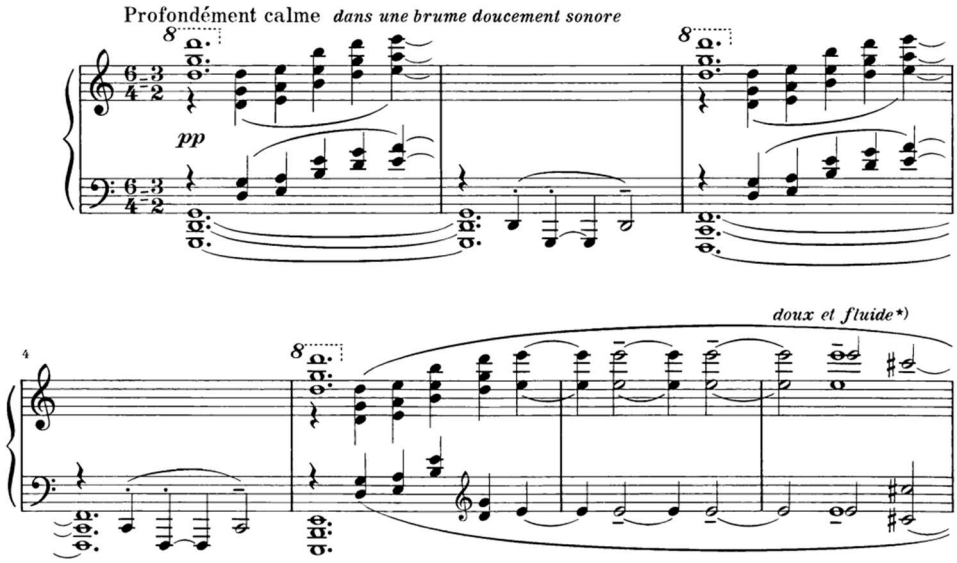


Figure 5: Debussy – La cathédrale engloutie (opening passage)

For the analysis of this work, the relationship between low register, chordal blocks, and resonance is crucial. The low tones do not merely carry bass support, but create an acoustic foundation over which a vertically organised sonic mass develops. Shamray points to the place where "various parallel harmonies hang over a striking low C".[16] This characterisation is apposite, because it captures the basic sonorous mechanism of the piece: a deep foundation and above it layered harmonic formations whose function is not primarily to create directionality, but sonic volume and resonance.[17]

In this context, the textural organisation also changes. Whereas in *Sposalizio* the sonic mass grows out of a motivic nucleus and its gradual expansion, in *La cathédrale engloutie* greater weight already from the outset is given to block-like, chordal construction. Bell-like quality here is therefore not modelled as a succession of strikes, but as an architectonically articulated sonic space. It is less a matter of imitating the mechanics of ringing than of sounding a monument.

Time is of particular importance in this work. Debussy creates the impression of monumentalisation not only through low register and full chords, but also through a slowed musical breath. Chordal formations remain present in space for longer, their resonance overlaps, and time seems to lose its ordinary linear flow. Musical activity does not appear as a sequence of individual events, but as a gradually emerging sonic object. Bell sonority here is therefore associated not only with the strike, but also with the process of emergence and disappearance.

Harmonic language also plays an important role. Parallel chordal procedures, pedal tones, and the deliberate retention of blending resonances weaken tonal-functional directionality. Harmony behaves like a substance spread through space, not like a sequence of harmonic functions moving towards a single tonal goal. The time of the piece is thus slowed not only by tempo, but also by the fact that harmonic events remain "suspended" in space for longer. As in *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, what is at issue here is a particular kind of stasis, though it no longer takes the form of delicately layered and colouristically mutable sonority, but rather of monumental, chordally thickened sound.

Register has a special significance in this piece. Low positions evoke weight, depth, and sonic fullness. Unlike the delicately graded registral disposition of *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, what is involved here is a monumental use of register. The sound does not act like a distant reflection, but like a massive whole slowly rising into view. Bell sonority

[16] Shamray, "Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches," 84–86.
[17] Shamray, "Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches," 84–86.

thus becomes associated with sacred space not through explicit illustration, but through architectonically organised sound.

The semantic plane is also different. In *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, bell sonority was associated chiefly with distance, a woodland setting, and a muted acoustic atmosphere. In *La cathédrale engloutie*, by contrast, it is bound up with monumentality, rituality, and an archaic space. Both works make use of resonance and a more open harmonic language, yet they move towards different types of meaning. One creates the spatial diffusion of sound, the other its vertical and architectonically organised thickening. Compared with Liszt's music, the sonic mass here is less dependent on the articulation of individual strikes and more on the architectonic modelling of sonority. Whereas Liszt often still allowed the gestural impulse of ringing to be heard, Debussy in this work transformed bell sonority into a monumental sonic object in which the bell is no longer merely a sign or an imitated thing, but a principle of constructing musical space. It is precisely here that the second form of Debussy's bell sonority becomes evident: not diffuse and colouristically mutable, but massive, sacred, and unfolded in a slowed temporal flow.

8. Ravel: La vallée des cloches as a Concluding Extension

If Debussy's piano music revealed two different forms of modern bell sonority — a diffuse, spatially filtered sonic world in *Cloches à travers les feuilles* and a monumental, architectonically shaped sonority in *La cathédrale engloutie* — Ravel's *La vallée des cloches* represents a further distinctive refinement of this poetics. Within French piano music, it is a work in which bell sonority becomes an especially concentrated principle of textural, harmonic, and temporal organisation.

Unlike Debussy's *La cathédrale engloutie*, the sound here does not grow out of massive blocks and a deep foundation, but from more finely graded layers whose mutual relation creates the impression of distant, simultaneously sounding, and differently resonating bells. Registral disposition is particularly important here. The individual sound layers do not function as variants of a single bell gesture, but as relatively autonomous sonorous fields distinguished from one another across the space of the keyboard. Ravel's bell sonority thus moves towards a more precise gradation of sonic layers, rather than towards thematic articulation in the Lisztian sense.

From a harmonic point of view, it is striking that Ravel's bell sonority does not function merely as a generally "open" sonority, but as an exceptionally balanced field of resonances in which the individual sonorities do not operate primarily as bearers of functional directionality,

but as colouristically differentiated sound qualities.[18] Here too, then, one finds confirmation of the shift already observable in Debussy: the bell ceases to emerge as a locally identifiable object and increasingly functions as a principle of organising musical space.

The relationship between repetition and time is likewise of special significance. If in Liszt's music repetition was often tied to gestural impulse or prayerful recurrence, and in Debussy's music it became a delicate pulsation diffused through texture, in Ravel repetition acquires an even more finely calibrated and less expressively exposed form. The result is a musical time that does not move dramatically forwards, but unfolds delicately through a series of sonic distances, returns, and resonant layers.

Compared with Debussy, then, Ravel does not introduce a fundamentally new type of bell sonority, but rather a further refinement of it. Whereas Debussy's *Cloches à travers les feuilles* move towards a sonorous environment and *La cathédrale engloutie* towards a monumentalised architectonic sound, Ravel's *La vallée des cloches* concentrates attention on a more exact balancing of registral layers, cultivated resonance, and an exceptionally sensitive grading of sonic distance. In doing so, it suggests that the French line of bell sonority after Debussy did not continue by repeating the same model, but by further differentiating it.

9. Comparative Synthesis: Continuities and Transformations

A comparison of Liszt's and Debussy's approaches first reveals what persisted between the two composers. In both poetics, bell sonority is bound up with register, layering, repetition, and resonance. In neither composer is it a purely melodic phenomenon. Bell sonority arises from the interplay of vertical and horizontal organisation, from the relation between high and low layers, and from the way in which sound is allowed to decay. In this respect, one may speak of a certain continuity of compositional solutions. What also persisted is that, in both poetics, the bell exceeded the bounds of a simple tone-painting effect. In Liszt's music, the bell was more often thematically and gesturally articulated, whereas in Debussy's music it assumed a more diffuse and less unequivocally localisable form. In both cases, however, it was a musical phenomenon that decisively affected the organisation of texture, harmonic space, and musical time. Bell sonority was therefore not a supplementary component of the composition, but one of the principles of its construction.

[18] Shamray, "Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches," 32–33.

Equally clear, however, is what changed. In Liszt's music, the bell remained more often tied to thematically recognisable and gesturally highlighted forms. Even where his music approached a sonic field, it often retained a trace of the original impulse. Debussy shifted the same sphere towards a more diffuse model. The bell is not less present there, but present in a different way: less as gesture, more as a quality of space. In *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, this means sound diffused through texture; in *La cathédrale engloutie*, an architectonically organised sonic mass.

A substantial change also occurred in harmonic language. Liszt used pentatonic and intervallically characteristic gestures to stylise bell sonority; Debussy worked to a greater degree with harmonically open colouristic fields, parallelisms, and weakened tonal directionality. The shift therefore did not lead from a "simpler" to a "more complex" harmony, but from a characteristic bell gesture to a sonic space in which bell sonority was diffused. Whereas in Liszt harmony often served as a medium of thematic or gestural articulation, in Debussy it became a sonic environment within which gestural distinctness was weakened.

Equally important is the transformation of semantic function. Liszt more often tied the bell to prayer, remembrance, sorrow, ritual, or symbolically-poetic semantic emphasis. Debussy transferred meaning to a greater extent into the realm of space, resonance, and contemplative musical time. He did not deprive the bell of meaning; rather, its meaning changed from being more narrative and symbolic to being more sonic-spatial and state-like. This transformation is especially clear when comparing *Angelus!* and *Cloches à travers les feuilles*: in the former, the bell is closely bound to prayerful concentration, in the latter to acoustic distance and a spatial mode of sonic perception.

Another important difference concerns the relationship between motif and texture. In Liszt's music, one can generally trace a path from the motivic nucleus to an expanded sonority. Even where the result may be a powerful sonic space, the original impulse usually remains legible. In Debussy's music, this relationship is inverted, or at least significantly weakened: texture often precedes any clearly identifiable motif, and bell sonority is born from the very mode of layering, colour, and resonance. Debussy thus shifted bell sonority from a model growing out of a motivic nucleus to a model based on the formation of a sonic environment. A brief glance at Ravel's *La vallée des cloches* suggests that the French line of bell sonority did not end with Debussy, but continued to differentiate further. Whereas Debussy worked either with a diffuse sonorous environment or with monumentalised architectonic sound, Ravel distributed bell sonority even more finely across registral layers and cultivated resonance. This did not amount to a return to thematic articulation, but to a further deepening

of the model in which the bell became a principle of organising pianistic sonic space.

The relation between repetition and time changed in a similar way. In Liszt, repetition was often associated with pulsation, recurrence, and a concentration on gestural or prayerful meaning. Debussy more often diffused repetition into delicate modifications, inner pulsation, and an impression of slowed time. The same compositional device thus changed its effect: instead of creating a distinctly articulated return, it created flow and the spatial expansion of sound.

A methodological consequence also follows from these observations. Between Liszt's music and Debussy's, one may speak of a continuity of compositional possibilities, but not of a simple identity of compositional solutions. Debussy did not take over Lisztian models as ready-made patterns. Rather, he transformed them within a different aesthetic context in which sonic colour, space, resonance, and the organisation of musical time function as autonomous compositional values.

10. Conclusions

The analysis has shown that Liszt's piano music, in the sphere of bell sonority, may be understood as a field of several compositional models rather than as a set of isolated illustrative effects. The pentatonic-motivic model, the intervallic-harmonic model, and the layered-ostinato model represent three basic ways in which Liszt transformed the culturally and acoustically highly charged phenomenon of the bell into the pianistic medium. Already within this framework, the bell exceeded the boundaries of a local effect and became a structurally active element of texture, harmony, and musical time.

The analysis of *Sposalizio* showed that bell sonority may grow in Liszt's music from a narrow motivic and pentatonic nucleus, which then generates a broader texture and formal motion. The analysis of *Angelus!* in turn confirmed that Liszt was also able to work with a more concentrated, layer-resonant model in which bell sonority became an organising principle of sonic space and a bearer of spiritual meaning. Both works thus showed that Lisztian bell sonority is not uniform, but internally differentiated.

In Debussy's music, these possibilities did not appear as a literally adopted pattern, but as a transformation into a different sonorous context. *Cloches à travers les feuilles* shows that bell sonority may be transformed into a diffuse textural environment based on colour, multilayeredness, distance, and resonance. *La cathédrale engloutie*, by contrast, shows the other pole of the same tendency: bell sonority as an architectonically shaped, monumental, and sacred sonic mass. In both cases, the bell is

detached from the one-off striking gesture and enters the sphere of the spatial organisation of sound.

A brief consideration of Ravel's *La vallée des cloches* further showed that this development became still more differentiated within French piano music. Ravel no longer worked either with Lisztian thematic articulation or with the Debussyan duality between a diffuse sonorous environment and a monumental architectonic sound, but with an exceptionally cultivated balancing of registral layers and resonance. Bell sonority thus manifested itself here as an even more finely graded principle of pianistic sound.

The most precise musicological formulation of the conclusion, therefore, is not the statement that Liszt "influenced" Debussy in a straightforward sense. It is more appropriate to state that continuities of compositional possibility existed between the two composers. In piano music, Liszt stabilised several models of bell sonority that already in his own work moved towards sonorous thinking; Debussy transformed them into a more harmonically open, texturally subtler, and more temporally static poetics of sound. What was involved, then, was a shift from thematised imitation towards a subtler organisation of musical space.

In a broader musicological sense, one may thus speak of a transition from the Romantic representation of the bell to a more modern understanding of sound as space and duration. In this transition, Liszt figures not merely as the composer of individual bell-inspired works, but as a composer who, within the piano medium, formulated several possibilities for thinking about sound beyond a purely thematic logic. Debussy then moved these possibilities into a different aesthetic horizon in which the bell no longer functioned primarily as an autonomous object of evocation, but as a mode of forming sonic space.

It is precisely in this sense that Debussy may be understood not as a straightforward successor, but as a composer who transformed Lisztian possibilities into a new sonorous poetics of the piano. Bell sonority changed between the two composers not only quantitatively, in the degree of distinctness or sonic saturation, but qualitatively: its relation to theme, texture, harmony, space, and meaning changed. It is this qualitative transformation that the present study has sought to present as its principal result.

Bibliography

Austin, William W. *Music in the 20th Century: From Debussy through Stravinsky*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1966.

Boutin, Aimée. "'Ring out the Old, Ring in the New': The Symbolism of Bells in Nineteenth-Century French Poetry." *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 30, nos. 3–4 (2002): 267–281.

Bruhn, Siglind. *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen*. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997.

Calella, Michele. "Raphael, the Virgin Mary, and Holy Matrimony: Recontextualizing Franz Liszt's Sposalizio." *Studia Musicologica* 59, no. 1 (2018): 3–19.

Cook, Nicholas, and Anthony Pople, eds. *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Corbin, Alain. *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Dahlhaus, Carl. *Nineteenth-Century Music*. Translated by J. Bradford Robinson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

De Leeuw, Ton. *Music of the Twentieth Century: A Study of Its Elements and Structure*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005.

Demuth, Norman. *French Piano Music: A Survey with Notes on Its Performance*. London: Museum Press, 1959.

Ellis, Mildred Katharine. "The French Piano Character Piece of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries." PhD diss., Indiana University, 1969.

Frisch, Walter. *Music in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013.

Gillespie, John. *Five Centuries of Keyboard Music*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2013.

Good, Edwin M. *Giraffes, Black Dragons, and Other Pianos: A Technological History from Cristofori to the Modern Concert Grand*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Heah, Zi-Ling. "Evocations of Nature in Selected Piano Works by Debussy." DMA research project, West Virginia University, 2022.

Howat, Roy. *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009.

Roberts, Paul. *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1996.

Rowland, David, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Piano*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Samson, Jim, ed. *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Schmitz, E. Robert. *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950.

Shamray, Konstantin. "The Piano as Kolokola, Glocken and Cloches: Performing and Extending the European Traditions of Bell-Inspired Piano Music." PhD diss., University of Adelaide, 2020.

Zoltek, Maureen A. "The Piano Music of Debussy and Ravel: A Comparative Study of Their Conservatoire Experiences as Pianist-Composers, Musical Philosophies, Influences Pertaining to Their Piano Works, and Individual Pianistic Styles." Master's thesis, Roosevelt University, 2007.

© 2026 Martina Kamenska. This is an Open Access article published in journal *Musica Academica* by University of Oradea Publishing House and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). The full terms