

PERCEPTUAL SALIENCE OF GROUPING STRUCTURE BY VARIOUS PERFORMERS OF “LA TERRASSE DES AUDIENCES DU CLAIR DE LUNE” BY DEBUSSY

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Background

Debussy's „La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune“ is a piece that presents multiple viewpoints with respect to grouping structure and climax. Performers of this work have considerable freedom to shape a listener's perception of grouping structure and arrival, based on a number of plausible structural interpretations.

Aims

The purpose of this investigation is to examine listeners' perception of salience-near moments in the piece open to multivalent interpretations. The musical issues of bipartite or tripartite form, and arrival or delay are raised. We considered the interpretive choices available to performers, how performers shape significant moments in the piece particularly with respect to dynamics and timing, and how listeners perceive emphases made by different pianists.

Method

Music graduate students listened to the entire piece, then to an excerpt performed by three different recording artists. They then evaluated strength of emphasis at predetermined grouping boundaries. These boundaries divide the piece into two or three parts, as well as influence a sense of climax and arrival. After each trial, subjects described their observations in a brief interview.

Results

Listeners responded most readily to dynamics, tempo, and articulation as performance indicators of salience. They agreed upon varying emphasis in interpretations by certain recorded artists, and also upon the significant role of the performer in communicating an interpretation.

Conclusions

In a piece with open-ended interpretive possibilities, particularly with respect to grouping structure and arrival, the performer appears to have significant influence over the perceived architecture of the piece.