A Comparative Study of Schumann's "Scenes of Childhood" and Debussy's "Children's Corner" Based on Spectral Analysis

Shuwen Lei

Center for Art Education, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, Liaoning, 116024, China

Leisw@dlut.edu.cn

Keywords: Scenes of childhood, Children's corner, Music ontology analysis, Performance method

Abstract: Although Schumann's "Childhood" and Debussy's "Children's Corner" are both based on the theme of childhood and childlike interest, they differ in their composition and expression of emotions. In this study, the differences between Schumann's "Scenes of Childhood" and Debussy's "Children's Corner" are studied by using the method of score analysis and documentation. The analysis of Schumann's "Scenes of Childhood" and Debussy's "Children's Corner" is discussed in terms of the analysis of the work in harmonic patterns and the stylistic forms. The results show that the "Scenes of Childhood" is more of a psychological work, with each piece describing a short story, which Schumann recorded in notes and gave each piece a title appropriate to its content. The Children's Corner is a representative work of Debussy's mature impressionism, and these six pieces are highly pictorial, which adds a sense of fantasy and mystery to Debussy's music. By clarifying the differences between these two works in stylistic and harmonic forms, this study will ultimately provide important references for other performers.

1. Introduction

Schumann's "Scenes of Childhood" and Debussy's "Children's Corner" are both based on the theme of childhood and childishness, but they differ in terms of composition and emotion, so the researcher compares and analyzes these two pieces. Schumann was an outstanding composer of the Romantic period, specializing in piano suites, and "Scenes of Childhood" is one of the representative pieces. This piece is significant, not only as a memory of Schumann's childhood, but also as a love letter to his wife Clara[1-3]. Debussy was the founder of Impressionism, and his "Children's Corner" was composed in 1908, a time when Debussy's impressionistic style was maturing. In order to make the performance of these two pieces better, the differences between Schumann's piano suite "Childhood" and Debussy's piano suite "Children's Corner" in terms of analysis and performance methods are studied by using the methods of score analysis and documentation, and finally the emotions that both composers wanted to express are clarified[4,5]. In this essay, not only the analysis of the works and the background of the compositions are studied, but also a larger part is devoted to the comparative analysis of the two works, such as the comparison of the performance techniques by means of pedals and touches, and the comparison of the compositions by means of the harmonic structure[6]. The discussion in this article will help the performer to understand the techniques and methods of playing the work, to understand the background of the period and the intentions and feelings that the composer wanted to express, so that the performer can better grasp the work and have a deeper understanding of it.

2. Comparative Analysis of "Childhood Scenes" and "Children's Corner" in Terms of Musical Ontology

2.1 Comparative Analysis in Terms of Subject Matter

The work "Scenes of Childhood" is a reminiscence of Schumann's childhood, with a special focus on using the language of music to portray the psychological depiction of children, such as the four pieces "The Child's Request", "Incredible Happiness", "Overly Serious" and "Frightening".

The Child's Request: it is a piece of music in one piece, in 2/4 time, with a structure of a-b-c-a and a slow melody[7]. Each phrase consists of a two-bar phrase, with the second phrase weaker than the first. Take the a phrase as an example, as shown in Fig. 1.

Fig.1. Bars 1-4 of "a Child's Request.

The first two measures are a tentative request from the child to the elder, hoping for an affirmative answer, followed by a weaker tone in the second clause, as if the child is a bit shy and apprehensive. In the c section, it moves to A major, returns to D major when it enters the recapitulation of the a section, and ends on the seventh chord, as shown in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. "the Child's Request", Bar 18.

The ending note stays on the seventh chord and is not resolved, as if a child is still expecting an answer from an adult, leaving room for the listener's imagination[8]. Incredible Happiness: is a piece of music in the form of a tune in 2/4 time, consisting of three phrases. The first phrase is 5 bars, in D major, with the main motive, as shown in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. Bars 1-3 of "Incredible Happiness.

The melody alternates between the left and right hands, giving an enthusiastic sound, and ends on the seventh chord in D major. In the second phrase, bar 8, the melody builds on the motive and also ends on a D major seventh chord. In the third phrase, bar 11, the motive develops further, moving to F major in bar 17, the climax of the piece, and then back to D major in bar 22, ending on the dominant chord. This piece is like the answer to the previous piece "The Child's Request", where the parents grant the child's request and the child's heart feels very satisfied and happy.

Overly Serious" is a single two-part work in 2/8 time, with a weak start. The section consists of two phrases that begin in g minor, pass through B major and end in the dominant chord of d minor. The middle section, in bar 17, consists of two 5-bar phrases[9]. The section and middle section are fully reproduced and have a 5-bar coda. The whole piece has a syncopated rhythm in the right hand and 16th notes in the left hand which also symbolizes the seriousness of the children as they repeatedly think about the problem, as shown in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4. Bars 1-5 of "Overly Serious.

The Scare: is a rondo-style piece with a smooth and quiet melody in the A section, with the melody in the first phrase in the high right hand, switching to the melody in the left hand in the second phrase, with many runic rhythms in the melody, as shown in Fig. 5.

Fig. 5. "Fright" Bars 1-8.

These note rhythms come to the fore in a smooth melody, showing the child's unease after a fright, more like a tremor, as the tune changes from e minor at the beginning to G major. the tempo suddenly increases in the B section, moving from e minor to C major, with a chord of sixteenth notes in the right hand and the melody in the left hand, as shown in Fig. 6.

Fig. 6. Bars 11-12 of "Fright.

At this point, the child's uneasiness increases and becomes frightened, as if seeing some terrible sight. It soon returns to the calmness of paragraph A, followed by paragraph C, which has the function of carrying on, and then returns to paragraphs A and B, with a complete termination at the end, as shown in Fig. 7.

Fig. 7. Bars 45-48 of "Fright.

It shows that the child is gradually relaxing and returning to calm after the shock. The piece "Children's Corner" is a piece in which Debussy participates in his daughter's play, bringing to life all the toys, such as a dancing doll, a shepherd boy sitting on the back of a cow playing a piccolo, a silly little elephant, and a black clown walking in a twisted way, forming a dynamic picture. For example, the piece "Snowflakes Flying" depicts a child lying in front of the window looking at the flying snowflakes, somehow with a faint sadness. The compound triad, the presentation part is a single triad, in D minor, the first bar is the core of the whole piece, as shown in Fig. 8.

Fig. 8. "Snowflake Dance", Bar 1.

In the middle section, the melody appears in both the left and right hand upper voices, and the recapitulation section reproduces the movement. In the middle, a new rhythmic triplet is used and a small syncopation accompanies the melody, which moves to the key of F, as shown in Fig. 9.

Fig. 9. "Snowflake Dance", Bars 34-36.

At this point, it is as if the snowflakes have fallen even more heavily. The transitional 4-bar phrase enters the recapitulation section, and the coda that follows the fully recapitulated presentation section fades and fades, ending the piece with arpeggios as lightly as snowflakes falling.

2.2 Comparison Analysis on Harmonic Tonality

It is easy to see that Schumann's Scenes of Childhood often uses common chords for transposition, in the case of "To Sleep", for example, in the last bar of the middle section, as shown in Fig. 10.

Fig. 10. Bars 23-24 of "Going to Sleep".

In bar 24, the first chord it is both the seventh chord of the genus G major and the leading seventh chord of E minor, so it is transferred to E minor in the recapitulation section. Likewise, in the Fantasia, the common chord is used, in bar 8, both as a second chord in C major and as a sixth chord in F major. Schumann's terminations also often use a seventh or ninth chord back to the dominant chord, such as a seventh or a heavy seventh. For example, the termination in bars 15 to 16 of "Important Event" uses the genus seven to the dominant chord. Debussy differs from Schumann in his frequent use of augmented second intervals and dissonant intervals, such as in Variation 2 of "The Shepherd Boy", as shown in Fig. 11.

Fig. 11. Bars 20-25 of "the Shepherd Boy".

3. Conclusion

The two works, "Scenes of Childhood" and "Children's Corner", are both based on the theme of children's innocence and interest, but the difference in the composer's time makes the two works very different in terms of performance and emotional expression. Scenes of Childhood" is more about psychological descriptions, such as "Foreign Countries and Foreign People" and "Strange Stories", which describe children's curiosity and longing for the

unknown world; "Hide and Seek" and "Incredible Happiness" are about children's happiness, the joy they get from playing games and the joy they get when they ask for permission. In this suite, there is more or less a connection, for example, "Hide and Seek", "The Child's Request" and "Incredible Happiness": the child enjoys the happiness that hide and seek brings them, and after it is over, they fall into their mother's arms and pout to her, maybe they want a candy, maybe they want to go out again because they have not had enough fun, they plead with their mother again and again, and finally their mother agrees, and the child feels very happy. The child's world is very pure and simple, and thinks that this is happiness. The child's world is pure and simple, and he considers it happiness. Schumann recorded the music in notes, as if describing a short story, and gave each piece a title that matched its content. The "Children's Corner" is a representative work of Debussy's mature impressionism, and the six pieces have a strong sense of image, for example, "Dr. Exercise" is like a child sitting at the piano, mechanically playing with a sense of helplessness and boredom; "Little Elephant Lullaby" depicts a child still lying on the couch holding a baby elephant doll, humming a lullaby and drowsing; "Serenade for a Doll" shows a child in a childlike state. The Snowflake Dance" is a scene showing snowflakes falling one by one; "The Shepherd Boy" depicts a shepherd boy playing a flute sitting on the back of a cow while the cow is eating grass and walking on a mountain path; "The Puppet Gait Dance" is a comical and cute image of a puppet walking in a twisted and crooked manner. These images add a sense of fantasy and mystery to Debussy's music.

References

[1] Eita Nakamura, Yasuyuki Saito, and Kazuyoshi Yoshii, "Statistical learning and estimation of piano fingering," Information Sciences, vol.517, pp.68-85, 2020.

[2] Eita Nakamura, Kazuyoshi Yoshii, and Shigeki Sagayama, "Rhythm transcription of polyphonic piano music based on merged-output hmm for multiple voices," IEEE/ACM Transactions on Audio, Speech, and Language Processing, vol.25, no.4, pp.794-806, 2017.

[3] Matteo Balliauw, Dorien Herremans, Daniel Palhazi Cuervo, and Kenneth Sorensen, "A variable neighborhood search al- ¨ gorithm to generate piano fingerings for polyphonic sheet music," International Transactions in Operational Research, vol.24, no.3, pp.509-535, 2017.

[4] C. Traube, "Piano tone control through variation of "weight" applied on the keys," Journal of the Acoustical Society of America, vol.141, no.5, pp.3874, 2017.

[5] P. Azadeh and M. S. Rad, "Analysis and comparison of most popular piano teaching method in Iran," Rast Muzikoloji ¨ Dergisi, vol.10, no.1, pp.43-58, 2022.

[6] K. R. Griffith, A. L. Ramos, K. E. Hill, and C. F. Miguel, "Using equivalence-based instruction to teach piano skills to college students," Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, vol.51, no.2, pp.207-219, 2018.

[7] A. Yonathan, "Organic concept in rolf-dieter arens's piano teaching strategy," Malaysian Journal of Music, vol.11, no.1, pp.1- 13, 2022.

[8] J. Fu, "Analysis on the piano teaching mode of flipped class in higher education," Frontiers in Educational Research, vol.3, no.14, 2020.

[9] N. Takahashi, S. Furuya, and H. Koike, "Soft exoskeleton glove with human anatomical architecture: production of dexterous finger movements and skillful piano performance," IEEE Transactions on Haptics, vol.13, no.4, pp.679-690, 2020