ARNOLD SCHOENBERG’S VERKLÄRTE NACHT AND CLAUDE DEBUSSY’S PRELUDE A L’APRES-MIDI D’UN FAUNE: TONE POEMS SHAPED BY CULTURE IN GERMANY AND FRANCE IN THE 1890S

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Précis

Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* (1899) and Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1894) are both musical works inspired by poetry. Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* (*Transfigured Night*) drew from Richard Dehmel’s poem, “Verklärte Nacht,” and Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (*Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*) drew from Stephane Mallarme’s poem “L’apres-midi d’un faune.” While both pieces were written in Europe in the 1890s, they sound drastically different. This research aims to determine whether these aesthetic differences in the musical and literary works can be attributed to social or cultural differences between Germany and France in the 1890s.

Previous research on this topic has not provided a comparison of works from different regions at the time, and usually focused on only one component. Often, musical sources were either solely analysis-based or historically-based. My research combines historical and cultural research as well as literary and musical aesthetic analysis. This research reveals a clear relationship between the works and the cultures in which they were written.

In the 1890s in Germany, both literary and musical arts movements continued to develop traditional German arts aesthetics. The literary movement was greatly influenced by Freudian developments in psychology, while maintaining conventional narrative. In music, Schoenberg intentionally extended the compositional techniques of historically significant and contemporary composers.

In France, both arts movements were affected by France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, and aimed to separate French art culture from German art culture. Consequently, the literary movement moved away from conventional narrative and began to explore perception in lieu of emotions. The music movement turned away from German compositional techniques, drawing
from historical French composers, and in the works of Debussy, contemporary Russian compositions and Indonesian compositional concepts.

Aesthetic differences influenced by cultural factors in *Verklärte Nacht* and *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* reveal the beginnings of a diverging culture in Europe based on nationalism. These two works represent the compositional atmosphere of the end of the nineteenth century, and show national German and French aesthetic trends that continue into the twentieth century.
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PART 1: INTRODUCTION
I. Cultural Trends in 1890s Germany and France

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Europe was flourishing. Technology and medicine were advancing rapidly, new frontiers in science and psychology were being explored, and national identities were developing.¹ These advances stabilized society, allowing the arts more freedom to explore intellectual ideas. In the literary arts, poets were rejecting conventional structure and representational description. In music, composers faced a difficult problem. Published pieces from the composers of the common practice period (1650-1850) were becoming standards in performance repertoire. New compositions not only needed be competitive with compositions by other living composers, but also with the compositions of the dead masters.

In Germany, Sigmund Freud’s development of psychoanalysis (a method of analyzing the subconscious to reveal causes of anxiety in the conscious state) greatly affected German artists who extrapolated upon Freud’s concepts of id, ego, and super ego, resulting in a focus on intense and distorted emotions, drives, and sexuality.

German poet, Richard Dehmel (1863-1920), was exploring emotions that were depicted as more powerful than the characters who exhibited them, and the transcendent powers of love and sex. Dehmel especially explored these ideas in his poem “Verklärte Nacht.” Composer, Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), who later depicted the poem musically, called the issues Dehmel discussed in the work “staggeringly difficult human problem[s]”² involving sexuality, love, forgiveness, and transcendence. Dehmel’s “Verklärte Nacht” maintains traditional syntax while exploring controversial subject matter centered on three different types of love. These

types of love: sexual, cosmic, and maternal, have strong parallels to Freud’s id, ego, and superego.

The German musical movement was polarized at the end of the nineteenth century. One school of thought led by Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms, was trying to expand upon and cultivate the use of structure and thematic development evident in the works of Ludwig van Beethoven. Johannes Brahms created developing variation, a technique where “small motivic fragments are constantly evolving, not only in development sections but throughout a work.”\(^3\) The New German School, led by Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, was moving toward new and unexplored forms and innovative thematic development, believing Beethoven had utilized conventional structures and thematic development to their full potential. Liszt developed thematic transformation, where “a theme is altered and placed in a new context, yet maintains a relationship to the original.”\(^4\) Wagner developed Leitmotif, a technique used in opera in which musical phrases represent objects, people, or emotions, and those themes develop with the plot. Both schools highlighted harmonies that were saturated in chromaticism to increase tension, supporting the Romantic focus on the individual and the emotions of the individuals.

Schoenberg’s tone poem, *Verklärte Nacht* (1899), integrated elements from Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Brahms, and Wagner, uniting German traditions and the New German School. *Verklärte Nacht* reveals Baroque and Romantic contrapuntal textures influenced by the works of Bach and Wagner.\(^5\) Classical era asymmetrical phrases were drawn from the works of Mozart.\(^6\) The technique of phrase development integrated techniques

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\(^3\) Taruskin, 1146.
\(^4\) Ibid., 1158.
from both Brahms and Wagner. Schoenberg created large structure from thematic development, incorporating ideas from Bach and Wagner.

Notably, in France literary artists were also following the works of Freud, but chose to focus on perception and dream and wake states rather than sexual drives. French artists interested in Freud’s work created new pieces that focused on the psychoanalytic exploration of perception and dreams. The Symbolist poets, inspired by the groundbreaking works of Charles Baudelaire, such as Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valery, and Stephan George, aimed to create poetry that did not rely on realistic depictions, but rather created dream-like experiences and sensory experiences through altered syntax and striking symbols and imagery.  

Key features of Mallarmé’s poem, “L’après-midi d’un faune,” are alternating narrative styles that explore the past and present, a focus on the perception of dreams, reality, and memories, and the use of images in place of linear plot.

French music was still largely connected with politics in the second half of the nineteenth century, following trends set in the seventeenth century. Many musical institutions, such as the Paris Conservatoire, were funded by the government, and followed political and social trends through programming. From the 1850s to the 1870s, programs of works performed in Paris included equal numbers of German standards and new French compositions. The Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) impacted French politics and identity, and consequently, French music. The French were outraged after being swiftly defeated by the Prussians and a movement

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8 Burkholder, 751.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
towards strengthening and distinguishing French art from German art commenced.\textsuperscript{11} German works disappeared from concerts, and instead concerts began to feature only French works.\textsuperscript{12}

A revival of earlier French composers sought to separate and define French music. Concerts featured the works of Baroque composer Jean-Phillipe Rameau (1683-1764), and late-Baroque composer Francois Couperin (1668-1733). French traditions such as a focus on elegance and strength, Gregorian chant and church modes, weakened pulse, and simplified textures with a focus on the melody became prominent features in French compositions. A move away from German chromaticism resulted in a focus on stasis, harmonically, melodically, and formally. The Exposition Universelle of 1889 was crucial for foreign (non-Western European) influence that combined with the new direction of French music, including the influence of Russian folk scales and rhythms as well as Indonesian gamelan structure and tonality.

Claude Debussy’s orchestra work, \textit{Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune} (1894) showcased trends in Paris in the 1890s. \textit{Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune} features both French and foreign techniques. Debussy applied church modes from French tradition, and alternative scales, such as the whole-tone scales and the pentatonic scale from Russian and gamelan traditions. Rhythm in \textit{Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune} emphasized the freedom of melodic lines through rhythms that weakened the pulse. Chromaticism ornamented the melody and created stasis rather than enhancing harmonic dissonance and motion. The texture was simple and clear, emphasizing the melody.

By examining Schoenberg’s \textit{Verklärte Nacht} and Debussy’s \textit{Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune}, (both tone poems written in the 1890s), French and German musical and literary aesthetics can be revealed. In \textit{Verklärte Nacht}, German aesthetics are exaggerated, as Schoenberg fits into a

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
German lineage, using historically German compositional techniques. In *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, Debussy’s interaction with Parisian musical culture and foreign musical techniques show an alternative musical culture. The German and French aesthetics in *Verklärte Nacht* and *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* contrast, and the contrast evident in the music of Schoenberg and Debussy in the 1890s was one that revealed the beginnings of contrasting musical movements that continued into the twentieth century.
PART 2: GERMANY
A German Psychoanalytic Culture

German psychologists were fascinated with the subconscious mind in the late nineteenth century, and German artists also began to explore what Sigmund Freud called the id, the superego, and the ego. Freud defined the id as the drives and impulses to satisfy biological needs, including hunger and sex drive.13 At the other extreme was the superego, which included moral conscience and social expectations.14 The ego was the result of an individual balancing the drives of the id with the social expectations of the superego. German poets in the 1890s explored the outcome of an unbalanced ego, often detailing individuals who sacrificed social expectations (superego) for individual satisfaction (id). The works of German poet, Richard Dehmel, showcased individuals whose egos were distorted by love. Percival Pollard, literary and aesthetic critic, argued that Dehmel approached these drives to elucidate spiritual growth by “[concealing] nothing, but [making] noble and beautiful even the darkest places of the soul.”15

Dehmel’s Three Concepts of Love

In Richard Dehmel’s poetry, three different types of love were explored: amorous (sexual) love, maternal love, and spiritual love. Amorous love included lust, and according to Otto Eduard Lessing, German literary specialist, the “brutal” side of eroticism.16 This concept parallels Freud’s concept of the id. Lessing argues that in Dehmel’s works, the need for spiritual connection allows one to “conquer those very instincts in some way.”17 Maternal love, a

14Ibid.
17Ibid.
mother’s love for her child, was an unselfish love in Dehmel’s eyes. One could argue that maternal love parallels the superego (social expectations) because of maternal sacrifice for a child’s wellbeing. Dehmel thought that spiritual love would never be attained if any part of the self was denied, similar to the idea in psychoanalysis that drives of the id must be recognized, not suppressed in order to attain a balanced ego.

To Dehmel, the most important type of love was spiritual. Lessing defines spiritual love as “the continuous interrelation between universe and individual” in which sexual love is a vital part of spiritual love. Dehmel believed that sexual love, especially between man and wife, is the joining of the cosmos and the individual. The union between man and woman with the contribution of sexual love satisfies the individual’s needs and cosmic needs, or fate. Using Freud’s terminology, the result of the union is a healthy ego that balances the id’s sexual drive and the superego’s social and spiritual needs.

**Love in “Verklärte Nacht”**

Richard Dehmel’s poem “Verklärte Nacht” showcases maternal, sexual, and spiritual love. The poetic “Verklärte Nacht” was originally published in 1896 in the set Weib und Welt (Woman and World), and was published later in Zwei Menschen (Two People) in 1903. “Verklärte Nacht” explored a highly controversial topic involving an illegitimate pregnancy. The characters in the poem remain nameless and there is no dramatic plot development, though

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18 Lessing, 70.  
19 Ibid., 68.  
20 Ibid., 69.  
22 Though literally translated “Wife and World,” the collection of poems is commonly translated as “Woman and World”  
Dehmel features the emotions of the characters and the cosmic implications of the love between the man and the woman. The poem depicts a man and a woman walking together in the moonlight. The woman tells the man that she has sinned. Longing for motherhood, the woman gave herself to a man that she did not love. Now that she is pregnant, she has found love in the man that she walks with. The man tells her that his love for her will transfigure the child so that the child is his, not the strange man’s.

Dehmel’s concept of maternal love can be seen in the second stanza as the woman tells the man the reason why she wanted to become pregnant:

\[\text{und hatte doch ein schwer Verlangen}\]
\[\text{nach Lebensinhalf, nach Mutterglück}\]
\[\text{und Pflicht}\]

And yet I had a strong yearning
For something to fill my life, for the joys of motherhood
And for duty\(^\text{24}\)

This maternal love parallels Freud’s superego, as the woman explains her need to fulfill personal and social obligations, “for duty.”

Dehmel reveals his concept of sexual love immediately after the maternal love section in the second stanza:

\[\text{da liess ich schaundernd mein Geschlecht}\]
\[\text{von einem fremden Mann umfangen,}\]

So, shuddering, I allowed my sex
To be embraced by a strange man\(^\text{25}\)

The depiction of sexual love here involves “shuddering,” a concrete physical description that could correspond with the sexual drives of the id.

The man accepts the woman and her unborn child, taking the child as his own, as Dehmel highlights the power of spiritual, or cosmic, love. This emotional development takes place in the fourth stanza:

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\(^\text{25}\) Ibid., Preface.

May the child you conceived Be no burden to your soul; Just see how brightly the universe is gleming! There’s a glow around everything; You are floating with me on a cold ocean, But a special warmth flickers From you into me, from me into you. It will transfigure the strange man’s child. You will bear the child for me, as if it were mine; You have brought the glow into me, You have made me like a child myself.26

The “special warmth” could be cosmic love. The man’s forgiveness can remove the sin of sex outside of love or wedlock. In Freudian terms, this parallels a balanced ego because the woman’s social need for motherhood (superego) is balanced with her amorous needs (id).

**Schoenberg and German Lineage**

German techniques of composition, especially of the nineteenth century, culminate in Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht*, which displayed techniques from the New German School as well as traditional German compositional methods. In his article, “Brahms the Progressive,” Schoenberg described the changing attitudes towards the formerly polarized atmosphere created by the appearance of New German School, the ideas of Richard Wagner, opposing traditional German trends emphasized by Brahms that followed the example of Beethoven. This new attitude promoted a combination of both schools.

“What in 1883 seemed an impassable gulf was in 1897 no longer a problem. The greatest musicians of that time, Mahler, Strauss, Reger, and many others had grown up under the influence of both these masters. They all reflected the spiritual, emotional, stylistic, and technical achievements of the preceding period. What then had been an object of dispute had been reduced into the difference between two personalities, between two styles of

26Dehmel, Preface.
expression, not contradictory enough to prevent the inclusion of qualities of both in one work.”

In the 1890s, Schoenberg worked not only to integrate New German school ideas and German traditions, but also ideas from extended German lineage. In the collection of essays, “Style and Idea,” Schoenberg detailed the influences of Bach, Mozart, and Brahms on his musical works. Schoenberg attributes contrapuntal texture and an entire work’s derivation from a single idea or phrase to J.S. Bach, ideas also reflected in the works of Wagner. Mozart influenced Schoenberg’s view of asymmetrical phrase lengths. Brahms contributed “economy, yet richness,” “odd barring, and extension and abbreviation of phrases,” and “[carrying] every figure through to the end” (Schoenberg, Style and Idea 173). In Verklärte Nacht, Schoenberg’s emphasis on a German lineage can be seen through the use of the techniques he describes in his essays. Through these German techniques, Verklärte Nacht exemplifies a culmination and elaboration of German musical language implemented through the 1890s.

Schoenberg’s Verklärte Nacht

Contrapuntal Texture

Bach’s and Wagner’s contrapuntal influence is crucial in Verklärte Nacht. Throughout the work, motives are layered in different instrumental lines, each functioning melodically, not harmonically. Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne, music theorists, describe Wagner’s influence on compositions written at the end of the nineteenth century, citing passages of Tristan und

28 Walter Frisch, Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation, 169.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Isolde as examples of counterpoint saturated in chromaticism. Kostka and Payne argue that chromatically-driven linear movement in the late nineteenth-century counterpoint can “obscure, or even misrepresent, vertical harmonies.”

A particularly contrapuntal section of Verklärte Nacht that utilizes both Bach’s and Wagner’s techniques occurs in measures 161-168. Generally, rhythm is not homorhythmic, rather, parts are independent. Throughout the passage, imitation with variation in different parts occurs. The descending line in the violin in measure 161, 163, 165 and 167 is imitated in the first viola line in measure 162 and 164, and the first cello in measure 166 and 168. Another contrapuntal technique is inversion (with variation), which can be seen in the second viola line in measure 162, 164, 166, and 168, and the first viola in measure 165, 166, 167, and 168. As in Baroque counterpoint, these lines function melodically and independently. Unlike Baroque counterpoint, the vertical harmonies are not conventional, similar to Wagner’s counterpoint.


33 Schoenberg, Verklärte Nacht, 20.
34 Ibid.
A similar contrapuntal texture can be observed in measure 236-243. Throughout this section, different units, or motives, move independently and function melodically. In measures 236 and 237 in the first violin part, a motive of four notes appears on the last sixteenth of beat three through beat four. A different texture is through measures 236-238, where the second violin plays an ascending chromatic line. The first viola plays a similar line with a reversed rhythm. Another texture appears in the second viola which utilizes half notes tied to two triplet figures in measures 236, 237, 240, and 241. The second cello has the simplest texture, moving by fourths on half notes.

The first cello uses a different recurring melodic unit. This figure can be seen in measure 236, 237, and 238 in the first cello part, and again in the first violin part in measures 240, 241, and 242, and the first viola in measures 240, 241, and 242. The first cello texture switches to a triplet-tied figure in measures 240, 241, and 242, similar to the second viola line in measure 236. Schoenberg uses repetition of small motivic units in independent melodic lines to create a “contrapuntally saturated texture.”

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Schoenberg attributed asymmetrical phrase lengths to Mozart and “extension and abbreviation of phrases” to Brahms in his collection of essays, “Style and Idea,” and expanded upon this idea in his article “Brahms the Progressive.” Schoenberg discussed the function of these examples of nineteenth-century contrapuntal textures show the way that Schoenberg actively interacted with both the German counterpoint techniques from the Baroque era, as well as with the Romantic counterpoint techniques that emphasized melody at the expense of conventional harmony.

Asymmetry, Phrase Lengths, Development, and Phrase Entrances

Asymmetry

Schoenberg attributed asymmetrical phrase lengths to Mozart and “extension and abbreviation of phrases” to Brahms in his collection of essays, “Style and Idea,” and expanded upon this idea in his article “Brahms the Progressive.” Schoenberg discussed the function of

\[\text{Schoenberg, Verklärte Nacht, 26.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 27.}\]
symmetrical phrases in much of common practice period music, arguing that symmetry is derived from dance music or serves to enhance phrases by making them more recognizable or familiar. \( ^{40} \) Schoenberg argued that symmetrical phrasing often resulted in phrases that are two, four, or eight measures long. Schoenberg attributed the most striking phrases in Mozart’s works to be those that were “of unequal length.” \( ^{41} \)

Staying true to common practice period expectations of symmetrical phrases, Schoenberg examined phrases that as a whole are eight measures long, but are constructed with smaller units that are not symmetrical, for example, phrase units of 3, 1, 1, 3. \( ^{42} \) Schoenberg argued that the irregularity was “produced by extension of a segment, by internal repetitions or by reductions and condensations.” \( ^{43} \) These techniques are used throughout Verklärte Nacht, though the units are reduced, no longer one or three measures long, but that consist of beats that don’t fulfill an entire measure. These fragments are combined to create phrases that are not of standard length, adding to asymmetry in the work. In this way, Schoenberg took the idea of asymmetrical phrasing from Mozart, and while maintaining asymmetry, condensed the phrases from measures to fragments of measures, continuing and modernizing German compositional techniques.

One unit that is altered throughout the work first appears in measure 63 in the first cello. On beat one, three quarter notes descend chromatically and are followed by a sixteenth-note fivelet of chromatic-neighbor-tone motion.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{measure 63} \\
\text{measure 79, in the first violin this fivelet has been altered and condensed into a thirty-second-note fivelet, and here the three-note descent is eighth notes. A pickup eighth note has been added}
\end{align*}
\]

\( ^{40} \)Schoenberg, “Brahms the Progressive,” 65.  
\( ^{41} \)Ibid., 66.  
\( ^{42} \)Ibid., 67.  
\( ^{45} \)Ibid., 66.  
\( ^{44} \)Schoenberg, Verklärte Nacht, 8.
to create a leap of a major sixth, and the set has been displaced, beginning on the upbeat of beat one. What had once filled a full measure of 4/4, now occupies two and a half beats in 3/4.

In measure 111, the time signature has changed to 9/8, and the unit in the first violin resembles the condensed unit from measure 79. In this same section, in measure 113 and 114, the fivelet has been elongated and the rhythm has been slightly altered. The first note is an eighth note which is followed by two duple-eighth-note pairs.

In the first violin in measures 75 and 76, a new unit is introduced, consisting of five beats within a 3/4 meter. Intervallically, the leap of a minor third in measure 76 is flexible, appearing in measure 78 as a minor seventh.

This four-measure phrase can be seen again in measures 83-86.

The phrase is condensed in measure 91, now only taking three and a half beats in the second violin, and the dotted-quarter eighth note descending second at the end of measure 76 has been changed to equal length eighth notes in measure 91. Instead of being paired immediately with the repetition with the minor seventh, the same phrase is exactly repeated an octave higher in the

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46 Ibid., 13.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 10.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., 11.
first violin in measure 92. The repetition with the minor seventh does not appear until measure 93 in the second violin, also condensed, and also repeated in measure 94 in the first violin. A fragment of this phrase appears in measure 95 on beats one and two in the second violin, omitting the first half of the phrase. This fragment is repeated twice each measure in measures 95-97.

The way that these phrases are altered throughout the work showcase Schoenberg’s attention to Mozart’s development of phrases, though these phrases in Schoenberg’s works exhibit thematic development more typical of nineteenth-century German thematic development than that of Classical thematic development.

*Phrase Lengths and Development*

The briefness of units in *Verklärte Nacht* allows variation in phrase lengths and individual unit entrances to create metric dissonance (placing accents or emphasis on weaker beats to violate meter) throughout the work. Metric dissonance parallels harmonic dissonance, contributing to a German aesthetic centered on a violation of expectation. In measure 50, a five

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52 Arnold Schoenberg, *Verklärte Nacht*, 11.
53 Ibid.
54 Arnold Schoenberg, *Verklärte Nacht*, 12.
note unit is introduced in the first cello, beginning on the downbeat. In measure 51, this unit repeats, and in measure 52, the unit is truncated to four notes but adds four descending notes that span a measure and a half followed by an ascending line of the same rhythm as the unit. With repetitions and the extension, the larger phrase occupies five measures.

In measure 55, the phrase appears again, this time repeating the unit three times, and then repeating the three-note descending figure five times without the ascending figure, lasting eight measures.

The phrase appears again in measure 69, this time lasting six measures.

\[\text{Arnold Schoenberg, } Verklärte Nacht, 7.\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Arnold Schoenberg, } Verklärte Nacht, 8.\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Arnold Schoenberg, } Verklärte Nacht, 9.\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}\]
The unit from measure 50 appears again in measures 128-130 in the second violin, and in measure 131, it is repeated on each beat in the first violin and first viola. These units create an unpredictable texture due to their length and their entrances.

Phrase Entrances

Displacement in meter occurs in measure 141. The unit enters in the first violin on beat two. In measure 143, the unit enters on beat one and on beat four, spilling over into measure 143.

Similarly, in measure 150 in the first violin the unit enters on beat two, and in measure 151 on beat one and four.

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63 Ibid, 15.
64 Ibid.
65 Arnold Schoenberg, Verklärte Nacht, 17.
66 Ibid.
Schoenberg’s phrases display his development and integration of Mozart’s asymmetrical phrases. Schoenberg worked with the concept shortening or lengthening phrases to create interesting asymmetry. Schoenberg shortened this phrase unit, enabling him to support harmonic dissonance with metric dissonance and unpredictable phrase development, an idea that also influenced the structure of *Verklärte Nacht*.

**Thematic Structure**

Both J. S. Bach and Richard Wagner manipulate a single phrase to create an entire work. In Bach, this concept can be seen in fugue or invention subjects. In fugue and invention, the layering of the subject creates harmony, and the countersubject is often thematically related to

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67 Ibid., 18.
the subject. In Wagner, this concept can be seen in his development of Leitmotiv, in which phrases represent objects, characters, or emotions that are developed musically throughout the work as the object, character, or emotion develops in the dramatic plot. In “Brahms the Progressive,” Schoenberg presents the idea that themes do not rely on formal structure, but rather, the structure is created through the use of a single idea.69

“and this idea must look in construction and in thematic content as if it were not there to fulfill a structural task. In other words, a transition, a codetta, an elaboration, etc., should not be considered as a thing in its own end. It should not appear at all if it does not develop, modify, intensify, clarify, or throw light or color on the idea of the piece.”70

This development of thematic content created structure that was new and separate from common practice period forms. Schoenberg believed that while Leitmotiv fulfilled thematic development, it also “[fulfilled] another task, an organizational task, which shows the formalistic side of Wagner’s genius.”71 In this way, Schoenberg constructed the form of Verklärte Nacht through the development of themes outside of traditional Classical development of themes, drawing from techniques of the New German School, in which themes create the structure completely.

In Verklärte Nacht, formal structure and division of the work is controversial, and Schoenberg did not provide structural analysis. He did provide program notes that identify different units that develop throughout the work which corresponded with the plot of the poem. This idea is similar to that of Leitmotiv, in that different units represent different characters’ emotions, though it is different because Schoenberg’s Verklärte Nacht contains no sung text. Furthermore, Richard Dehmel’s poem, “Verklärte Nacht” is not a dramatic work, and does not have a substantial dramatic plot. Alan Philip Lessem argues that Schoenberg chose a tone poem because was not comfortable allowing the drama of the opera stage completely control the

69Frisch, Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation, 169.
70Schoenberg, “Brahms the Progressive,” 63-64.
71Ibid., 61.
Although the poem has five stanzas, Schoenberg wrote a one-movement tone poem, utilizing techniques of thematic transformation and developing variation to create an entire work from one single idea.

Structurally, Schoenberg reflected the New German School’s approach to freely developed thematic structure, though Schoenberg’s choice of ensemble separated Verklärte Nacht from the dramatic nature of Wagner’s Leitmotif.

Through Schoenberg’s homage to J.S. Bach, Mozart, Brahms, and Wagner, Schoenberg created music that fit into the German aesthetic that embraced new thematic development and motivic layering. Because Schoenberg was concerned with lineage, Verklärte Nacht is an excellent example of the progression of German tonal music. Written in 1899, Verklärte Nacht shows German compositional techniques stretched and elaborated upon immediately before conventional tonality began to break down (as in Schoenberg’s later compositions). Not only does Schoenberg’s Verklärte Nacht show the musical extremes of German Romantic aesthetics, but the subject matter in the Dehmel’s “Verklärte Nacht” also shows the extremes of German Romantic individualism in literature which has been stretched through the exploration the individual’s subconscious.

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PART 3: FRANCE
A French Symbolist Culture

While German culture emphasized an introverted look into the subconscious and embraced tension, French culture emphasized sensory perception, dream states, and clarity. In France, poets were dissatisfied with conventional representational and highly emotional writing. Charles Pierre Baudelaire pioneered a new type of poetry in which words were not chosen for their connotations. Instead, Symbolist poets, such as Baudelaire, Paul-Marie Verlaine, Paul Valéry, and Stéphane Mallarmé, aimed to engage their audience’s senses (sight, smell, hearing) through use of imagery as opposed to traditional narrative literary forms. The resulting poetry featured words chosen for their aural effects, and often sought to describe ambiguous perceptions of reality, such as dream states. By replacing linear plots and prose with unconventional syntax describing lucid images, Symbolists created more static works that eschewed the need for traditional emotional responses (tension and resolution). French poets moved away from German Romantic aesthetics, though Freud’s exploration of dream and wake states and the perception of reality was key in Symbolist subject matter.

Stéphane Mallarmé’s “L’après-midi d’un faune”

In his poem, “L’après-midi d’un faune,” Stéphane Mallarmé explores a faun’s perception of reality and dreaming using innovative narration styles and imagery. “L’après-midi d’un faune” details the memories of the nymphs, in dreams or reality, that the faun tries to remember and recreate. The faun wakes from sleep in the afternoon, recalling a sexual encounter with two nymphs. The faun tries to remember the encounter more vividly, though he is unnerved by the fact that he has no proof of the experience, and begins to wonder if this tryst was simply a dream. After questioning his reality repeatedly, the faun decides to play a reed as a flute to relieve his
anxiety over his unclear perception of reality. He then returns to trying to recreate the encounter, remembering images, though they do not aid him in his uncertainty of reality, and he returns to sleep.

The structure of the poem involves a distinction in typography. Sections of the poem are italicized with quotation marks. These sections occur in the past, and describe the faun’s experiences with the nymphs. The non-italicized sections occur in present tense and are written from the faun’s perspective as he tries to reconcile whether his memories are of reality or of dream. These passages also describe the faun playing a reed as he tries to reconcile the situation. As Debussy scholar, Arthur B. Wenk argues, the proportion and the sequence of these two types of sections “weakens the distinction between reality and fantasy.”

Narrative Style, Reality and Dreams, and Images in Mallarmé’s “L’après-midi d’un faune”

Throughout the poem, the faun struggles to decipher dreams from reality. The second half of the third line clearly articulates the faun’s struggle, “Aimai-je un rêve?” (Was it a dream I loved?). This is reinforced in lines 8 and 9:

Réfléchissons… ou si les femmes don’t tug loses
Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux!

Let’s think… might not the girls you are describing be
Wishful fragments of your mythopoetic senses?

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74 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
In lines 4-41, the faun recalls images from the night and tries to examine them using the reality that surrounds him as he is waking from his slumber. He compares the characteristics of the nymphs and of his surroundings. As Wenk analyzes, one of the nymphs had eyes that were cold and blue, like a spring, though as the faun observes his surroundings, there is no water to be confused with the nymph’s eyes, leaving the Faun still confused about the reality of his reminiscences. As the faun recounts the encounter, even his memory of it is ambiguous:

“Ondoe une blancheur animale au repos:
“Et qu’au prelude lent où naissent les pipeaux,
“Ce vol de cygnes, non! de naiad se sauve
“Ou plonge…”

“a live whiteness at rest: now with the slow prelude
In which the pipes warm up, this flight of swans—I mean, Of Naiads—evanesces or goes under…”

The faun is uncertain about a bite on his chest and the cause of this bite.

Mon sein, vierge de prevue, atteste une masure
Mystérieuse, due à quelque august dent;

My breast, though virginal of proof, betrays a mystery—
The bite of some proud tooth.

Mallarmé depicted images in the poem instead of providing a strictly linear narrative.

Images pervade the last section, from line 62-109. An image occurs in lines 68-70 in italics to indicate that it happened in the past, and details the faun finding the two virgins:

“J’accours; quand, à mes pieds, s’entrejoignent (meurtries
“De la langueur goûtée à ce mal d’être deux)
“Des dormeuses parmi leurs seuls bras hasardeux”:

“I run closer; now at my feet lie interlocked
(Felled by the languid misery of being two)

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77 Wenk, 157.
78 Ibid.
79 Mallarmé, 24.
80 Ibid., 25.
81 Ibid., 26.
Girls sleeping, with their reckless arms around each other.”82

Another image looks toward the future, using fruit imagery to describe his future sexual encounters.

Tu sais, ma passion, que, pourpre et déjà mûre,
Chaque grenade éclate et d’abeilles murmure;
Et notre sang, épris de qui le va saisir,
Coule pour tout l’essaim éternel du désir.83

You know, my libido, that every pomegranate
When it grows ripe and red must burst and buzz with bees;
Just so our blood, stirred by someone about to grasp it,
Will flow for all the endless hive of appetite.84

Through innovative narrative, an exploration of perceptions of reality, and images,
Mallarmé created a Symbolist work that exemplified French Symbolist aesthetics. The narrative style’s alteration emphasizes the lack of clarity in the faun’s perception. Both “Verklärte Nacht” and “L’après-midi d’un faune” use passages of monologue, though “L’après-midi d’un faune” layers these passages in between images, rather than progressing relatively linearly like in “Verklärte Nacht.” The focus on perception and dream and wake cycles shows the French aesthetic preference of ambiguity and uncertainty, rather than the highly emotional German preference of the id, ego, and superego in poetry.

**Debussy and French Traditions**

An emphasis on music written by French composers began with the foundation of the Société National de Musique in 1871.85 The Société National de Musique was a musical

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82 Mallarmé, 27.
83 Ibid., 28.
84 Ibid., 29.
85 Burkholder, 751.
association founded by Camille Saint-Saëns\textsuperscript{86} that aimed to reshape contemporary French music by emphasizing French traditions and moving against harmonically-driven chromaticism in the German Romantic movement. Robert P. Morgan, musicologist, argued that chromaticism “represented an intensification of purely Germanic aspects of musical Romanticism that were essentially alien to the French temperament.”\textsuperscript{87} Highly chromatic functional harmonies were not as entrenched in French music, because “functional tonality had never been so strongly anchored as in Germany.”\textsuperscript{88} French composers rejected the highly chromatic functional harmonies that were prevalent in German works, relying more heavily on static harmony.

By changing the function of chromaticism from enhancing tonal dissonance and resolution (Germanic) to ornamentation of a melodic line, Debussy and other French composers, removed the need for progression, resulting in static harmony. Sevenths (non-progressive) and ninths were added to chords so that they were harmonically stable, making harmonic motion static.\textsuperscript{89} This move toward ambiguity was supported by the Symbolist movement, and in Debussy’s music Morgan argues that “in place of Wagner’s complex and highly developed system of explicit musical references, Debussy favored a more generalized poetic evocation of moods, impressions, and atmospheric landscapes…”\textsuperscript{90}

Members of the Société National de Musique looked toward French opera and the repertoires of François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau as examples of French music to revive French ties with nationalism. Clarity, small forms, economy of texture, and textures in which the melody is the most important component became the focus of French composers. The

\textsuperscript{86} Taruskin, 760.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Taruskin, 825.
\textsuperscript{90} Morgan, 40.
importance of clarity and economy of texture stemmed from the elegance, order, and restraint essential in music composed under the rule of Louis XVI (1754-1793). Small forms were influenced by Jean-Baptiste Lully, much of whose writing was dance music. An emphasis on melody came from French opera traditions. Composers were also affected by church music traditions, and conservatories turned toward Gregorian chant and modal harmony and melodies.

Debussy was also influenced by musical sources outside of Western Europe. Debussy spent summers in Russia in 1881 and 1882, where he worked for Nadezhda von Meck, a patron of Tchaikovsky’s. While there, Debussy was exposed to the music of Modest Musorgsky. From Musorgsky’s music, Debussy was exposed to modes and untraditional scales. Another influence was Debussy’s exposure to a Javanese gamelan at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1889. Debussy’s use of the pentatonic scale is related to the larger divisions of the octave prevalent in Javanese gamelan scales.

**Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune**

*Alternative Scales and Foreign Influences*

Russian influence in *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* can be seen in the occurrence of whole tone scales. In the clarinet line in measure 32, a whole tone scale ascends and descends from F-natural to E-sharp. In measure 33 the flute repeats the same whole tone passage.

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91 Burkholder, 752.
92 Ibid., 751.
93 Taruskin, 826.
94 Ibid.
95 Morgan, 42.
A similar passage can be seen in measures 35-36. The clarinet ascends from A-flat to G-sharp and back down to A-flat, also repeated in the flute.

The influence of the Exposition Universelle of 1889 can be seen in Debussy’s use of the pentatonic scale and through oscillatory melodic contour. At the Exposition, Debussy heard a Javanese gamelan ensemble. Though Javanese gamelan does not use a pentatonic scale, ensembles use scales of wider spaced intervals. Debussy used the pentatonic scale to depict wider pitch intervals within a western scale. In measures 37 and 38, and the beginning of measure 39, the oboe solo uses a pentatonic scale. In these measures, the oboe uses an oscillation that spans a B scale between F-sharp and G-sharp. Gamelan also introduced Debussy to

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97 Ibid., 10.
perpetual oscillation of pitches, or as François Lesure puts it, he was “spellbound to the ‘infinite arabesque’ of the Javanese gamelan.”

Ambiguity and Pulse

Stasis is emphasized in Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune not only on a harmonic level, but also through diminishment of pulse. Often, this is shown through tied notes. In the opening four measures, the flute plays the main theme. The first note of the main theme consists of a dotted-quarter note tied to an eighth note which is also tied to a sixteenth note. This pitch is not accompanied by anything to indicate the relative duration of the note. Furthermore, the rest of the measure shows subtle differences between three triplet-sixteenth notes and three sixteenth notes. Tied rhythmic durations are frequent throughout the piece, and they often obscure the downbeat or the more significant beats. One example of this can be seen in French horn in measure 74 (meter is 3/4) which includes a tie from the eighth-note on the second half of beat one tied to a sixteenth-note on beat two.


Debussy, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 10.

Ibid., 11.

In measure 102, (meter is 9/8) there is a tie from the second half of beat one to beat two, and similarly on the second half of beat four to beat five, and the second half of beat seven to beat eight.

The two-note slurs in measures 63-70 in the flute part obscure the meter by dividing a triple compound meter into duple divisions, so each measure appears as $4\frac{1}{2}$ quarter-note beats.

Chromaticism, Contour, and Stasis

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102 Ibid., 30.
103 Ibid., 17.
104 Ibid., 18.
105 Ibid., 19.
The opening theme of the piece explores a chromatic oscillation from a C-sharp descending a tritone and then returning back to C-sharp.

The intervals, contour, and pitch center in measure 1 use chromaticism and the tritone in an unconventional manner. While the movement from C-sharp to G and back are chromatic and span a tritone, a traditionally tense interval, this chromatic movement creates a sense of stasis rather than tension. The tritone avoids traditional connotations of dissonance because it is not leapt into or harmonic. Although this phrase is saturated with chromaticism and spans a tritone (in German music, both features would intensify harmonic tension), here, these features exist in a symmetrical oscillating pattern that returns to the original pitch level, reinforcing a sense of stasis. In terms of a tonal center, the flute is unaccompanied and tonic has not been introduced yet, so harmonically, this interval does not increase tension. As Roy Howat, French music specialist, argues, Debussy was moving away from defined key areas, and “according to Maurice Emmanuel, Debussy was claiming in 1889–90 that ‘music is neither major nor minor.’”

The influence of Gregorian chant can be seen through Debussy’s description of this oscillating contour as “arabesque.” Though this term has a number of meanings, the traditional term in the arts implies “a sinuous, spiraling, undulating, or serpentine line or linear motif.” As Morgan argues, Debussy recognized the source of the arabesque in what he described as the

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106 Debussy, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 1.
“delicate tracery” of Gregorian chant, which he felt could provide an archetype for the modern composer seeking new expressive life and freedom in his music.”

Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune shows Debussy’s use of one prominent theme throughout an entire work. Debussy specialist, Arthur B. Wenk argued that Debussy frequently derived an entire work from a single motive or phrase, as seen in Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune. Repetition of the theme in Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune remains consistent, often holding the same exact note values or intervals and maintaining rhythmic proportions, though repetitions often employ different ornamentation (typically at the end of the phrase), paying homage to Couperin’s distinctive ornamentation style. As Roy Howat observes, “the first three musical paragraphs open with the same flute arabesque at the same pitch, but to totally different effect each time by virtue of the opening C♯ first being unharmonized, then sounded over a D major chord and finally over an E major.”

While melodic repetition is largely consistent, a lack of melodic contrast or development and use of direct repetition of melodic material serves to create a sense of stasis within the work.

Whereas German music aimed to increase tension and harmonic motion through chromaticism and dissonance, Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune displays chromaticism that creates oscillatory nonprogressive contour, and consequently, stasis, creating a distinctly French piece of music.

Clarity and Texture

109 Morgan, 43.
110 Wenk, 164.
111 Howat, “Debussy, Claude: Musical Language.”
Textural clarity can be seen throughout *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* in the presentation of the melody. The opening theme appears unaccompanied in the first four bars. Not only is this flute part unaccompanied, but it is also a solo flute, emphasizing clarity and allowing a freer melodic line.

The next time this melody appears, in measure 11, the solo flute is accompanied, but the texture that accompanies it consists of clarinet and strings, and the movement in those parts is relatively static, moving generally in the larger beats of the compound 9/8 meter.

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In measure 21 and 26, the solo flute appears, this time accompanied by a whole note in the French horn and textural flourishes in the harp. While the flute is accompanied, the

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113 Claude Debussy, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 3.
accompanimental texture is static, still emphasizing the melody.

Another feature that is characterized by clarity is the use of homorhythm between parts.

Instrumental lines often move in parallel motion and with the same rhythmic durations,

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114 Claude Debussy, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 5.
115 Claude Debussy, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 7.
effectively simplifying the texture. An example of this can be seen in measures 40-43. In measure 40, the oboe, clarinet, and cello parts move in descending stepwise motions with quarter notes. The first and second violin parts move in parallel motion with the same rhythmic durations for both measure 40 and 41.

116Claude Debussy, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 11.
The oboe, French horn, and English horn move again in parallel motion with the same rhythm in a stepwise descent, with the cello echoing the same motion with a simplified rhythm. In measures 42 and 43, the first flute and the clarinet move in parallel motion with the same rhythmic duration. The cello part splits into two and both parts move parallel to one another. In measure 43, the first and second violins also move parallel and homorhythmically, while the French horn section uses chord planing with the same rhythm.
In measures 63-70, the different instrument groups emphasize clarity of texture through distinctive homorhythmic textures in different instrument families. For example, the woodwinds move mostly in two-note slurred gestures of eighth notes. The first and second harp parts play sixteenth-note textures. The string section moves with different divisions of sixteenth-, eighth-,
and triplet-sixteenth-note tied rhythms. Chord planing is evident in this section as the contour is parallel and the interval is consistent.

Claude Debussy, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 18.
The textural clarity in *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* emphasizes the melody. Unlike the German contrapuntal texture, Debussy chooses French clarity that aims to highlight a single line and melody. Debussy’s clarity draws from French traditions of elegance in music. This

elegance contrasts with the German trend of increased tension to create more emotional tension, resulting in a clearer texture.

Claude Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* showcases the musical cultural elements in Paris in the 1890s—a revitalization of French traditions, foreign influences from Russia and Indonesia, and a rejection of German techniques. Debussy draws upon the French ideals of restraint and elegance by using a simplified texture and focusing on the melody, and uses church modes and ornamentation central to French traditions. The alternative scales and arabesque reveal foreign influences: modal and whole tone sections from Musorgsky and pentatonic sections and oscillation from Javanese gamelan. Chromaticism does not function harmonically to increase tension as in the German tradition, but rather facilitates oscillation and melodic freedom, creating stasis. These French elements facilitated in the formation of French nationalism in music. Debussy embraced French and non-Germanic musical techniques, creating a new and distinctly French musical aesthetic, completely separate from the Romantic chromatically-saturated German aesthetic in the 1890s.
PART 4: CONCLUSION

Reflections of Culture through Art
German art in the 1890s delved into individualism and form on a new level: in psychology, the subconscious and drives, in music, chromaticism and a focus on motivic manipulation. French art in the 1890s rebelled against German aesthetics, focusing instead on French traditions, and static situations void of plot and progression: in the literary arts, perception and the use of images, in music, unconventional chromaticism and oscillation.

The poem that Arnold Schoenberg chose to depict aptly illustrates issues that were becoming discussed in the arts in Germany due to advances in the field of psychology. Richard Dehmel’s focus on different types of love represents a cultural change in perception of the different philosophical elements of sexuality, whether through Freud’s discussion of the id or through Dehmel’s spiritual love. Dehmel’s “Verklärte Nacht” was not just a model for his later poems structurally; it also showed a move toward darker subject matter with an intense focus on complicated and socially unacceptable human issues, issues that would soon be accompanied by more disjunct syntax typical of the Expressionist movement. The emotional distortion showed a new search into the subconscious and a focus on emotions removed from character development, taking Romantic ideals of individualism to an extreme.

Arnold Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* represents German musical development in the 1890; musically through Schoenberg’s integration of German techniques, socially through the interaction with Dehmel’s poem. Schoenberg’s integration of traditional German techniques showcases the development of German musical culture, and Schoenberg’s extension of those techniques illustrates the condensation of phrases that would grow into musical Expressionism. Schoenberg was able to refer to text without directly stating the words because he chose an instrumental chamber ensemble. *Verklärte Nacht*’s intimate ensemble of a string sextet not only
pays homage to Johannes Brahms’s string sextet, but also is representative of the text’s intimate subject matter.

Stéphane Mallarmé’s “L’après-midi d’un faune” was a monumental work that influenced the Symbolist movement. Mallarmé’s use of images, untraditional narratives, sensory description, and the observation of ambiguity in the perception of reality, were innovative, creating a style that was central to Parisian poetry. Questioning perception allowed a new spectrum of non-linear narrative poetry. The removal of a linear plot allowed Symbolist poets to explore sensory description, even on an aural level (through spoken poetry), also allowing Symbolist poets to create descriptive images. Imagery enabled Symbolist poets to more accurately describe the sensations of dreams and reality.

Claude Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune represents the new French identity and the Symbolist movement in 1890s France. The use of unconventional chromaticism and an emphasis on stasis reflected the anti-German sentiments felt in France in the 1890s. Debussy’s combination of French Baroque traditions and scales new to France from Russia and Indonesia provided an alternative to German musical traditions.

Many of Debussy’s musical features highlight elements of French music from the Baroque period. Debussy’s emphasis on melody and a simplified texture were crucial in creating a French sound. Clarity, elegance, and ornamentation showed the traditions of Jean-Baptiste Lully. The use of whole tone, pentatonic, and modal scales, married French traditions with other world musics. The oscillation of melody created a sense of stasis in lieu of tension and resolution. Chromaticism, so prevalent in German harmony, was now served to create melodic ornamentation or stasis.
Verklärte Nacht and Prélude à l’après-midi d'un faune were significant pieces, both as landmarks in the oeuvres of the artists themselves, and as landmarks in western music history. Similarities and differences between these two works have the capacity to reflect cultural and artistic differences of their composers and the respective movements and regions.

The 1890s in Europe were tumultuous. Introversion that began in the Romantic era in German art intensified exponentially. German art embraced socially controversial situations and severe emotions. French art and culture sought to separate itself from German culture. France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war powerfully effected French national identity and the arts. Verklärte Nacht and Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune show a divide in aesthetics that was the beginnings of polarized musical cultures in Germany and France that intensified in the twentieth century. Schoenberg’s condensation of phrase length continued into the twentieth century; Debussy’s stasis and programmatic depictions of images only intensified. The 1890s represent, in German music and poetry, the last instance of conventional tonality and narrative of the century, in French music, the instigation of a new and distinctively French aesthetic.
Works Cited


Bibliography


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