Claude Debussy and Kamasi Washington: “Clair de Lune”

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In spring of 1905, Claude Debussy published his *Suite Bergamasque*, a collection of four pieces for solo piano. The most famous piece of this work is the third, titled “Clair de Lune,” a piece that is instantly recognizable to a wide audience. In 2015, Kamasi Washington, a popular jazz musician, released his interpretation of “Clair de Lune” on his album *The Epic*. By taking into account the context of Debussy’s original piece in the 1900s and comparing the context of Washington’s modern reinterpretation, we may begin to understand the meaning of Washington’s performance and how his interpretation expresses who he is as an artist. Claude Debussy idealized an approach to music that did not necessarily need to involve careful listening; rather, the music could be the inspiration to a person’s imagination or impression, which is considered one reason that the “Clair de Lune” has been reimagined countless times. Ultimately, Kamasi Washington reimagines Debussy’s original composition to carefully express himself and send a message about how he sees himself as compared to Debussy in the context of music and history.

First, Claude Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” can be characterized by a few main musical elements: simple textures, slowly shifting harmony, and a rolling melody. These features come together to form a piece that is characteristic of Impressionism, encouraging the listener’s mind to wander, and also allowing for the piece to be easily interpreted by listeners and adapted by other musical artists. “Clair de Lune” and the entire *Suite Bergamasque* were not particularly popular when they were first published; however, shortly after the piece’s publication, Andre Caplet, a French composer and conductor, transcribed “Clair de Lune” for orchestra. Soon after, “Clair de Lune” was quickly commercialized in popular culture in the United States, especially

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in Hollywood, appearing in films such as Walt Disney’s Fantasia. The piece continued to be
adapted and reimagined, and by the 1960s, when “easy listening” styles of music were becoming
popular, one could say that “Clair de Lune” was integrated fully into American popular culture. Debussy’s impact on music also stretches further than just the “Clair de Lune.” Within his
lifetime, Debussy was championed as the head of a “new school” of French artists, pioneering
music described as “Impressionism.” Composers such as Bela Bartok and Igor Stravinsky
notably took inspiration from him, as well as composers in jazz music; George Gershwin
famously annotated his copies of Debussy’s piano music, and Chick Corea named Claude
Debussy as his “most important influence.”

It comes as no great surprise, then, that an artist such as Kamasi Washington would
reinterpret this piece in the modern era. Washington is a well-known modern jazz musician
famous for fusing together elements of traditional jazz, classical, R&B, and other musical styles
in his performances. In 2015, Kamasi Washington released his first full-length, three-disc album
titled The Epic, which featured his own interpretation of Claude Debussy’s “Clair de Lune.”
why Washington chose “Clair de Lune” for this album is hard to say, but perhaps the listener can
begin by breaking down what Washington is doing in his version of this piece as opposed to the
original score. The entire album The Epic including “Clair de Lune” features over 30
instruments, including Washington’s usual 10-piece band with Washington playing melody on
tenor saxophone. The form of Debussy’s original composition is ternary, or ABA, but

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4 Bhogal, Claude Debussy’s Clair de Lune, 14-18
6 Brown, Debussy Redux, 3.
Claude Debussy and Kamasi Washington: “Clair de Lune”

Washington’s interpretation takes on an entirely new form. The piece begins with solo piano, much like the original, but instead of starting at the beginning of Debussy’s score, this arrangement begins halfway through the original A section of the piece, where the “rubato” begins, the most dissonant-sounding part of the A section, as seen below.\(^1\)\(^2\)

\(^2\) Kamasi Washington, “Clair de Lune”
Once this section finishes, there are a few seconds in which the piano is allowed to fade before a walking bass line leads back into the beginning of the original A section, where the horns, including Washington, take the melody, and the harmonization is mostly kept to the tonic in the keyboard, organ, and choir.
While Debussy’s original composition is rhythmically notated in the time signature 9/8, Washington’s version is heavily felt in 12/8 time due to the strong downbeats, swung rhythms, rhythmic displacements of the melody, and 4-bar phrasing. After now playing the first half of the original A section, this arrangement then moves straight into the B section of the original score, skipping over the second half of the original A section that was used as an introduction. The piano plays the arpeggios that are found in the original score while the saxophone takes the melody. A repeat of the main melody from the first half of the original A section follows the first occurrence of the B section. Washington seems to use this melody from the A section as the

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13 Washington, “Clair de Lune”.
Claude Debussy and Kamasi Washington: “Clair de Lune”

“head,” which is standard practice for jazz musicians, demonstrating Washington’s clear musical background. This tradition is continued in a series of improvised solos in the piece over the harmony for the first half of the A section. Toward the end of the piece, the main melody from the first half of the A section is repeated for a final time, but with a significant decrescendo, and the instruments drop out until finally only the piano is playing, which abruptly shifts into a repeat of the introduction. The listener is left with a final chord from the piano, a clear connection between the beginning of the piece and the end, as well as a clear connection between this arrangement and Claude Debussy’s original composition.14

Immediately, the listener’s attention can be drawn to this clear line between Debussy and Washington that occurs in the introduction and conclusion of the piece, the second half of the original A section. These two sections seem to be acting as bookends to the piece, keeping Washington’s expression contained within the walls of Debussy, almost as if Washington is having a sort of jazz reimagination of “Clair de Lune” in the middle of these two sections. Silence, or musical space, is also utilized in the moments in between sections, which is directly representative of Debussy’s compositional style of expression15. Debussy described his own use of silence in his opera Pelléas et Mélisande: “Silence is a beautiful thing . . . The empty bars in Pelléas are evidence of my love of this sort of musical expression.”16 By using silence in his arrangement, Washington demonstrates a keen understanding of Debussy’s compositional style as well as a desire to use Debussy’s style of expression in this arrangement.

Furthermore, Washington’s “Clair de Lune” seems to be an intentional juxtaposition of past and present, a historical fusion of genres. The album *The Epic* contains three volumes;

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14 Washington, “Clair de Lune”.
15 Washington, “Clair de Lune”.
16 Bhogal, *Claude Debussy’s Clair de Lune*, 4
Claude Debussy and Kamasi Washington: “Clair de Lune”

“Clair de Lune” appears in the third volume, titled “The Historic Repetition,” following a recording of “Cherokee,” a jazz standard originally by Ray Noble. This context is valuable when one considers Washington’s intent, which is similar to Debussy’s “Clair de Lune” in the context of the Suite Bergamasque. The other movements in the Suite Bergamasque, the “Prelude,” “Menuet,” and “Passepied,” reference the styles and traditions of 18th Century composers François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau not only in title, for Debussy clearly alludes to 18th Century ornamentation, counterpoint, and voice leading while infusing modern musical characteristics. “Clair de Lune” is both inherently representative of the material used throughout the Suite Bergamasque and isolated from the other movements in that the piece itself was not composed in a traditional style. In the same way, Washington further alludes to Debussy’s original score in a historical nod to the piece’s context, surrounded by pieces that are considered historical.

All of these elements found in Washington’s reinterpretation of “Clair de Lune” seem to be pure expressions of Washington as an artist. As a part of his first full-length album, he seems to be using this piece as a way to define both himself as a musician and also what jazz means to him historically and contemporarily. Washington interprets this piece as one might a jazz standard referencing his own musical background, similar to the way that Debussy incorporated elements of Couperin and Rameau, and infuses musical elements that may be considered historical while also saying something new. A quote from Washington on the creation of his album The Epic seems fitting here: “We’ve never tried to recreate, never tried to copy. It’s about our lives, our experiences. We’re just being ourselves.”

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17 Washington, “Clair de Lune”.
18 Bhogal, Claude Debussy’s Clair de Lune, 61-62
Claude Debussy and Kamasi Washington: “Clair de Lune”

In conclusion, Kamasi Washington uses the “Clair de Lune” in the context of his album *The Epic* as a way to express who he is as an artist and what his style of music is in comparison to Claude Debussy and a familiar concert piano piece. He expresses himself first by clearly outlining the differences between the original composition and his work in the introduction and conclusion of the piece. Furthermore, Washington incorporates his own background as a jazz musician in this interpretation, treating this piece as more of a jazz standard in terms of form and orchestration, but he does not completely abandon Debussy’s ideas. Rather, he is historical in incorporating Debussy’s ideas into his own throughout this piece. In performing this arrangement, Kamasi Washington clearly defines who he is and what he uniquely has to offer as an artist inspired by Claude Debussy; a musician who is here to combine historical elements of music to push music forward into something that has not been heard before.
Bibliography


