

Debussy's lasting impact on flute composition



Kaitlin Lee
University of Central Oklahoma



Introduction

The solo flute can create a wide range of sounds, yet there was limited repertoire available for it before the 20th Century, perhaps due to physical limitations of the earlier instrument and musical trends of the time. In fact, after the Baroque period, there was an almost 200-year gap before composer Claude Debussy penned *Syrinx for solo flute*. It should be noted that “solo flute” in this project refers to an unaccompanied solo. Debussy was well set up to create a beautiful solo piece because of the significant developments in the construction of the flute that occurred during the 19th Century. These changes, made most notably by Theobald Boehm, had created an instrument capable of playing a vast range of compositions. In “Trevor Wye: Flute Secrets,” Wye mentions how composers of that time “took advantage of the greater technical freedom and wider range of dynamics” made available by these new developments in the flute’s construction. The addition of more keys, experimentation of key hole sizes, and the use of different materials, e.g. silver, was the origin of today’s modern flute.¹ The exciting new capability created the perfect arena to compose new pieces for the flute, especially unaccompanied works. *Syrinx* explored the new tone colors that could be created and became a showcase for the expressive capabilities of the modern silver flute.

Final Thoughts

It’s hard to say what unaccompanied flute repertoire would be if *Syrinx* had never been written. Because of improvements in tonality, color, and technique, it seems likely that someone would have started a renaissance in solo flute composition if Debussy had not. In a book by Thomas Skeffington, “The Flute in its Transition State,” he details the inevitable reaction to the changes made in the flute’s construction: “...but as new effects sprung forth, new music was written to embody these effects.” If not *Syrinx*, what would that first unaccompanied piece have sounded like? Would modern unaccompanied pieces resemble the reality of today’s pieces? While interesting to explore the hypothetical, Debussy did, in fact, take that first step. He saw the capabilities of the flute and wrote a piece that demonstrated its new sound. There is no doubt that the style of *Syrinx* made a lasting impression on the genre. Solo flute music is often descriptive of a scene or story and has loose meter and beat. Many pieces utilize whole tone scales as a part of the alluring sound, as Debussy did. Most unaccompanied flute pieces have a poetic style that seems to emanate from the 20th Century solo flute piece, *Syrinx*.

Debussy's Impact

Claude Debussy was born on August 22, 1862 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France. The arts of his day were filled with Impressionism and Symbolism, and the music he composed was the aural counterpart. Major works of Debussy’s include *Clair de Lune*, *La Mer*, and *Prelude a l’apres- midi d’un faune*.² Looking specifically at his impact on flute composition, we will begin to investigate *Syrinx*. Composed in 1913, *Syrinx* was not published until 1927, after Debussy’s death.³

There are a few origin stories for *Syrinx*. One significant story details how Debussy quickly improvised the piece for Marcel Moyse at a party. Performers may want to keep this improvisatory feel. Debussy did not utilize any bar lines or phrase markings, giving freedom of interpretation.⁴ The melodic structure is based on whole tone scales.³

The name *Syrinx* came from a nymph that Pan, the Greek god of music, lusted after. *Syrinx* did not share feelings toward him, yet he pursued her. As she hid, she perished, transforming into a reed, which Pan used to make his flute.³ *Syrinx* then became the instrument he would use to entice nymphs, depicted in the play by Gabriel Mourey, *Psyche*.⁵ The piece *Syrinx* was used as incidental music to *Psyche*.³

References

- ¹Wye, Trevor. *Trevor Wye: Flute Secrets*. London: Novello & Co Ltd., 2017. Print.
- ²Lockspeiser, Edward. “Claude Debussy.” *Britannica*. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 02 March 2017. Web. 07 March 2018.
- ³Debussy, Claude. *Syrinx*. 1913. *Editions Jobert*, 1927. Print.
- ⁴Ernst, Roy and Green, Douglass. *Structure and Performance*. Fairport, NY: Ergo Publications, 1978. Print.
- ⁵Treize, Simon, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*. Cambridge University Press, 2003. Print.
- ⁶McDermott, Dennette Derby. “Jindrich Feld’s *Introduzione, Toccata E Fuga Per Flauto Solo* With Three Recitals of Selected Works Of J.S. Bach, Mozart, Messiaen, Berio, Martinu, Persichetti, And Others.” Diss. U of North Texas, 1992. Web. 08 March 2018.
- ⁷“*Scrive in Vento* for flute.” *ElliottCarter*. The Amphion Foundation, Inc., 2018. Web. 08 March 2018.
- ⁸Cook, Nicholas and Everist, Mark, ed. *Rethinking Music*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010. Print.

Works that Followed

The impact that *Syrinx* had on 20th and 21st Century flute composition is demonstrated by the long line of solo flute works which followed. Many pieces written for solo flute demonstrate a compositional relationship to *Syrinx*. Jindrich Feld made use of rhythmic freedom in his *Contrasts* written in 1973. Both *Syrinx* and *Contrasts* give off an improvisatory impression.⁶ *Scrive in Vento* by Elliott Carter premiered in 1991.⁷ Like *Syrinx*, it seeks to portray a scene, in this case, a poem by Petrarch, and utilizes tetrachords and the different registers of the flute to evoke the underlying story.⁸ The biggest influence *Syrinx* may have had on future solo flute composition may be using the music to tell a specific story or scene, improvisatory sound, and the use of tone colors to relay the scene more believably than was possible before the silver flute. Debussy utilized tone colors, which were relatively new, whereas following composers would begin exploring other capabilities of the flute, like flutter tonguing and multiphonics. Here are just a few of the many solo flute pieces to follow *Syrinx*:

- Danse de la Chevre*, Arthur Honegger, 1921
- Oiseaux tendres*, Jean Rivier, 1935
- Image*, Eugene Bozza, 1940
- Sequenza*, Luciano Berio, 1958
- Fantasy Op. 89*, Malcolm Arnold, 1966
- Icicle*, Robert Aitken, 1977
- L’Oiseau Blesse*, Denis Gougeon, 1987
- Charanga*, Michael Colquhoun, 1993
- Entre Funerailles*, Mark Applebaum, 2001
- Single Voice*, Ayala Asherov, 2010
- Death of Pan*, Marcos Balter, 2017

