

## **Childhood as a musical theme – affectivity and instrumental expressiveness in the works of Schumann, Debussy and Enescu**

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**Abstract:** Childhood is a theme that music does not avoid, and through works such as *Kinderszenen* by Robert Schumann, *Children’s Corner* by Claude Debussy or *Impressions d’enfance (Childhood Impressions)* by George Enescu, is illustrated by various compositional means, determined by epochs or trends with which the creators identify, but also by their personal experiences and their expressive intentions. The affectivity of childhood is the key to decipher the musical message, pursuing the connection between the universe and the way in which the composers chose to lead the sound discourse through instruments, exploring so diversily the possibilities presented by them. The image, the symbol or the instrumental timbre, understood as processes of transmitting the expression, are the elements that the study seeks to define in correlation with the programmatism and the musical specificity of each previously mentioned work. This analytical incursion belongs to the contemporary performer, who, in order to understand and render this theme, uses not only the knowledge in the field, but also the extra-musical insight, belonging to literature or psychology.

**Keywords:** Schumann, Debussy, Enescu, childhood, affectivity.

### **1. Introduction**

Childhood is a recurrent theme in literature and the arts in general, and composers such as Schumann, Mussorgsky, Bizet, Fauré, Debussy, Ravel or Enescu illustrated in their music several aspects of this time in life, dedicating works to various instruments or ensembles. Romanticism and the trends of the twentieth century managed to capture in the most appropriate way this theme, through programme music, which offered suggestions for understanding and interpreting the universe of children. For the contemporary performer, the approach of works that appertain to a theme, but belong to distinct epochs, implies a thorough preparation: from the knowledge of the specific features of the musical language of a period, of a specific composer and more specific, of a work, to the context in which the piece was created and the means that its author used in order to highlight the expression of their work.

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The affective universe of childhood is always a common one, so that the understanding of the artistic message could have as a starting point precisely this fund of affectivity and emotions to which the works included in this thematic fund refer. In this study we will focus on compositions such as *Kinderszenen* by Robert Schumann, *Children's Corner* by Claude Debussy or *Impressions d'enfance* by George Enescu. All three are works of artistic maturity, the first two for solo piano, and the last one for piano and violin; although catalogued differently (*Kinderszenen* – Romantic, *Children's Corner* – Impressionist, and modern, in the case of *Childhood Impressions*), the emotional context of the composition is what defines them: each is dedicated to a loved one (Clara Schumann, daughter Emma – “Chouchou” regarding Debussy and maestro Enescu’s violin teacher, Eduard Caudella).

## 2. Analytical aspects

### 2.1. Robert Schumann – *Kinderszenen op. 15*

This cycle of pieces was composed in 1838 (in the same year as *Kreisleriana*), in response to Clara Wieck’s words to Schumann: “you sometimes seemed like a child to me” (Tranchefort, 1989, p. 725). According to the composer, these miniatures are those of an “immature adult,” thought of as “retrospective glances for adults.” Schumann confesses to Clara, the dedicator of these pieces: “the wings were ripped off this child” (Tranchefort, 1989, p. 725), an expression that betrays the long suffering he carried in his soul, as long as Clara’s father opposed their relationship, but also the hope for a brighter future, in which the idea of a family could materialize; at the same time, the appeal to the world of childhood, one of innocence and simplicity, indicates the composer’s feeling of nostalgia for that protective universe, in which the feelings are sincere, positive and unfettered. Out of 30 designed pieces, Schumann chose 13 for the composition of this work, pieces of small dimensions, but expressive through the melodic and rhythmic variety. The expression of the song *Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (Of Foreign Lands and Peoples)* is an evocative one, through the simple tonality of G Major, through the melody that unfolds in *legato*, as well as through the rhythmic *ostinato* performed in the middle plane (in triplets). *Kuriose Geschichte (A Curious Story)* is a “stylized folk song” (Sandu-Dediu, 2011, p. 61), descriptive, in D Major, written in a 3/4 pattern, and *Hasche-Mann (Blind Man's Bluff)* has an alert tempo, with sixteenths in *staccato*, which give an energetic allure to the piece, and with accents that suggest the surprise moments of the game, but also the joy and pleasure of the children.



Fig. 1 R. Schumann, *Blind Man's Bluff*

The beginning of the piece *Bittendes Kind* (*Pleading Child*) reminds of the original motif of the first piece, and the appearance of the *ritardando* suggests the mystery of the gesture described musically. In *Glückes genug* (*Happy Enough*) the motivic curve transposed on different sounds shows the feelings of the child who tells happy stories, and the plane of the sixteenths captures his exaltation, so – in D Major – the narrative character is outlined. *Wichtige Begebenheit* (*An Important Event*) has a festive air, through the punctuated rhythm and the octaves in the bass, but also through the chosen key – A Major – or through the ternary metric (3/4).



Fig. 2 R. Schumann, *An Important Event*

*Träumerei* (*Dreaming*) is one of the famous pieces of the piano repertoire, with a great emotional load, encompassing positive feelings such as: peace, love, fulfilment, security; the characteristic tempo of a chorale, imagined in 4/4, expresses an ideal of purity, and the key of F Major conveys

serenity. *Am Kamin (At the Fireside)* continues the tonal plane and texture, but changes the tempo and metrics (2/4), bringing the fascination of stories and storytelling to the forefront. *Ritter vom Steckenpferd (Knight of the Hobbyhorse)* features an extremely expressive rhythm in 3/4, with syncopes that suggest the rocking of the child on the wooden horse. *Fast zu Ernst (Almost Too Serious)* contains small note values, in 2/4 metre, and *Fürchtenmachen (Frightening)* describes the state of restlessness through the chromatisms in the median counterpoint plane and the agogic change (fragments noted *Schneller*). The piece *Kind im Einschlummern (Child Falling Asleep)* is entrusted to a 2/4 pattern, with a rhythm defined by syncopation, dactyl formulas or dotted formulas. *Der Dichter spricht (The Poet Speaks)* ends the cycle, constituting a chorale (in the measure of 2/2, the key of G Major), with a recitative aspect in some places, realised through insertions of ornaments or cadences with vocal specifics.

## 2.2. Claude Debussy – *Children’s Corner*

This suite, composed in 1908, contains on the cover the dedication to “my dear little Chouchou, with tender apologies from her father for what is to follow,” the program consisting of the six titles and drawings of the composer. Often resembling Mussorgsky’s *Chambre d’enfant*, the suite captures the universe of a Parisian girl in the care of a Miss (English nanny), resembling this way Mussorgsky’s work in theme and delicacy of the described affectivity, but not in the character of the pieces; the difference is given by the nature of the child, concretely defined by the environment to which it belongs: rural, respectively urban.

Paul Dukas, after hearing *Pelléas*, stated that he could not separate the purely musical analysis of a work from the poem that inspired it (Cortot, 1981, pp. 10-11), and this remark could be a premise that does not allow us to detach the music from the program after which it was conceived.

*Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* makes an ironic reference to the technique of Clementi’s works, through tempos that suggest the states of the child studying an instrument: from involvement (*egal et sans sécheresse*) to fatigue or desire to evade (in the middle section) and, eventually, to the joy or even the jubilation felt towards the end of the study time (*en animant peu à peu* being the indication of the last section). The nuances describe the same emotional path of the child, so we find: *p* at the opening of the piece, *pp* at the reprise of the initial section and *f* or *ff* at the end. We can understand the composer’s restraint regarding the technical training proposed by Clementi if we follow Marguerita Long’s appreciations on Debussy’s own way of playing music. The pianist noticed the suppleness, the delicacy and the depth of the touch, with controlled and refined accents and a pedalization similar to Chopin, both regarding the pedal to be “like a breath” (Tranchefort, 1989, p. 289); in addition, she states: “he almost always

played in a semi-nuance, but with a full and intense sonority, without any harshness of attack, [...] the scale of his nuances extended from the triple *pianissimo* to *forte*, without ever reaching disordered sounds or the loss of the subtlety of harmonies.” In *Jimbo’s Lullaby*, written in 2/2, the composer delves into the low register at the beginning, suggesting the elephant’s song, more precisely the specificity of the movement; we find here the procedure of prolonging the sonorities (measure 9 contains the indication *les 2 Ped.*). The melody is played again in the middle octave in measure 19 (*un peu en dehors*), being an indication of the vocal song, a sign of the girl’s presence. The appearance of the *staccato* eighths in the bass, in the section *Un peu plus mouvementé*, could suggest the game: the elephant is a toy one. *Serenade for the Doll*, in 3/4, represents a child’s song, played using *staccato* and *apogiaturas* in the melody; the *staccato* is present in almost the entire piece and renders the feeling of a playful atmosphere, in which the girl’s tenderness (*léger et gracieux*) is unravelled. In *The Snow is Dancing*, the image of the flakes becomes very suggestive through *staccato*, repetitions of gradual notes and accents, through agogics (*ritenuto* and returning *a tempo*) and decreased dynamics; all these are elements that reflect the state of delight and contemplation of the child. *The Little Shepherd* makes a clear pictorial reference, the image of the shepherd being rendered through the melody, which indicates a wind instrument and a free performance, as we can see from the agogic indications.

V.. The little Shepherd

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the piece 'The Little Shepherd' by Debussy. The first system is marked 'Très modéré' and 'PIANO', with dynamics *p* and *très doux et délicatement expressif*. The second system is marked 'Plus mouvementé' and features dynamics *p* and *p < poco*. The third system is marked 'au Mouvt' and includes dynamics *p*, *piu p*, *pp*, and *ppp*, along with the instruction 'Cédez - - //'. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of two sharps (D major), and various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 3 Cl. Debussy, *The Little Shepherd*

Marguerite Long listened to little Emma play the piece and described the moment as “very emotional,” “reminiscent of Debussy” (Tranchefort, 1989, p. 306). *Golliwogg’s Cakewalk* is an *allegro* with ironic notes and jazz sounds, which imprint a lively movement through syncopes, setbacks and pauses that suddenly interrupt the discourse. We can distinguish the child’s fascination with the dance of a doll, this being the symbol of the clowns, to whom Debussy pays homage through this musical gesture (Tranchefort, 1989, p. 306).

### 2.3. George Enescu – *Impressions d’enfance*

*Childhood Impressions*, a composition dating from 1940, is a ten-piece suite with a programme, explained by the composer himself in his *Memoirs* (Gavoty, 1982, pp. 24-25), the titles being noted in French. The work was published in 1952 at the Salabert Publishing House in Paris, and is dedicated “à la mémoire d’Eduard Caudella” (his first violin teacher, who encouraged him to continue his studies in Vienna). Here we encounter a complex compositional vision, one of maturity, but with a bright theme. There are analogies with important writings of Romanian literature included in the same thematic sphere: *Childhood Memories* by Ion Creangă or *Pastels* by Vasile Alecsandri. Childhood is initiatory, almost mystical, both in the conception of Enescu and of some emblematic writers such as Mihai Eminescu, Mircea Eliade or Lucian Blaga.

Although the moment of composition and the theme might suggest a descriptive, impressionistic work, it masks a deeply symbolic one: “the Suite’s movements are not descriptive or intended as tone paintings: they are abstract, hermeneutic, but also nostalgic invocations of scenes from Enescu’s childhood [...]. Each movement consists of a series of timeless moments that capture the atmosphere of Enescu’s childhood.” (Sarah Grossert, 2016, CD booklet, Ars Produktion, Stefan Tarara & Lora Vakova-Tarara) Therefore, the suite focuses not on the strict description of the recalled elements, but on the atmosphere that remained embedded in the heart and mind of the child Enescu and that he expresses through sounds at the age of maturity. The specificity of memory adapts to the age of the individual, and childhood determines the following stages: in the first three years of life are stored elements correlated with biological development, but also the features of the loved ones or “their affective-relational implications,” and after that age, up to the age of seven, memory stores “a vast social, territorial, verbal experience, flirting with imagination” (Șchiopu, 1997, p. 441). Enescu left for Vienna after turning seven, so what he preserved in his memory was an emotional treasure related to his origins, defined by Romanian language, culture, and spirituality. The explanation of the programme even captures some elements of the culture and customs of the place, such as the Orthodox faith of the inhabitants, the specifics of the houses or the peasant dress.

The Enescu exegets identified a route that the composer travels in the musical exercise of memory, following the outer perimeter of the house, then the inner one, with a return to the outside: pieces 1-3 – exterior, pieces 4-5 – interior, pieces 6-9 – the outer frame outlined from the inside, piece no. 10 – exterior. A similar cyclical pattern is found in the Romanian fairy tales, in which the main character returns to the place where he left (usually his parents’ house), but with a richer life experience; the route is therefore initiatory, having an important role in the growing-up process. An argument in favour of this comparison is the use of the motifs characteristic of a piece in the ones that follow it or even in the final one (in a varied presentation).

The affectivity is considered “very intense” in the first years of childhood (Șchiopu, 1997, p. 54), thus, what Enescu retained from that period (1883-1888) and the way in which he transposed the information musically (to which subject he paid more attention in terms of execution time or timbre intensity) may prove the emotional impact of some elements from the environment with which he had contact. *The Fiddler*, *Cradle Song* and *Sunrise* stand out as some of the most expressive songs. In this affective plane, Pascal Bentoiu identified in the suite three cells, conveying some states, as follows: cell *x* (semitone and minor third or augmented second, also mentioned by Ștefan Niculescu) = “restlessness, depression,” cell *y* (augmented fourth and minor second, to which Clemansa Liliana Firca assigns the unity of the work) = “anxiety, inexplicable, but also a major, cosmic balance” and cell *z* (semitone and major third) = “peace, reconciliation, inner balance”. (Bentoiu, 1999, pp. 449-450) We followed the distribution of the cells in the pieces that compose the suite and included in a table their frequency, resulting in an emotional picture of the music programme. In the parentheses of the table we find the number of cells that include other sounds as well, but retain the intonation of the characteristic intervals; their number is found in total, therefore it is not a surplus.

| Cell | Piece Number |           |           |           |            |          |           |          |           |           |
|------|--------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
|      | 1            | 2         | 3         | 4         | 5          | 6        | 7         | 8        | 9         | 10        |
| x    | 23<br>(4)    | 14<br>(2) | 30<br>(0) | 17<br>(3) | 1<br>(1)   | 5<br>(0) | 13<br>(2) | 1<br>(0) | 29<br>(0) | 53<br>(9) |
| y    | 12<br>(4)    | 21<br>(5) | 17<br>(6) | 8<br>(0)  | -          | 2<br>(1) | 10<br>(0) | -        | 15<br>(1) | 10<br>(0) |
| z    | 47<br>(2)    | 10<br>(0) | 13<br>(0) | 11<br>(0) | 35<br>(13) | 8<br>(1) | 25<br>(3) | 2<br>(0) | 13<br>(0) | 58<br>(1) |

Table 1 Distribution of cells *x*, *y*, *z*

In *The Fiddler* predominates cell *z*, which suggests the reconciliation equivalent to understanding the character’s purpose, and if we think about the association that some analysts make, that of the common destiny between him

and the musician Enescu, we will observe that  $x$ , the other important cell, indicates the restlessness, the state of the artist's constant search, which is interwoven with the balance (that "cosmic" balance) brought by  $y$ , which could prove the idea of the awareness of the joy that the world brings through his music, despite the difficulties he is faced with. Also, cell  $z$  could show the joy that music awakens in the child's soul, proven by the first experiences related to the sound universe: at the age of three Enescu hears a fiddlers' band (*taraf*), at the age of five he receives a violin, begins to learn the basics of music, composes his first musical work, and at the age of seven he meets Eduard Caudella (the violin teacher who notices his talent). The first title is part of a prophetic theme in the becoming of the child, with a strong autobiographical tinge. This piece is also an ethnic and spiritual mark of the suite. The musical text hints at the influence of the fiddlers' technique in the area of Moldavia on the violinist Enescu, noticed in terms of ornamentation, the use of the *glissando* or bowing techniques (e.g. *bariolages*). In the second piece, *The Old Beggar*, we most often encounter cell  $y$ , followed by  $x$ , so we deduce the anxiety and depression of the character, but perhaps also the anxiety it transmits to the child.  $Z$  is not used as much, suggesting the rare moments of reconciliation of the character with himself and his fate.

Fig. 4 G. Enescu, *The Old Beggar*

In *The Stream at the bottom of the Garden*, as Pascal Bentoiu notes, the number of  $x$  cells is equal to the sum of the cells  $y$  and  $z$ . The anxiety indicated by  $x$  is that of the murmuring water, which never stops its flow, suggesting the ephemerality of time that cannot be controlled.  $Y$  may show the inexplicability of the secret of life, and  $z$ , the tranquillity acquired in the state of contemplation of the water, as well as the state of balance that the child feels in the garden of his parents' house. *The Caged Bird and the Cuckoo on the Wall* is mainly based on  $x$ , which brings to our attention the restlessness of the captive bird, while  $z$  and  $y$  indicate both the balance (given by the precise signals of the bird-object, which measures the time), but also the anxiety of the seclusion. The slightly higher frequency of the  $z$ -cell compared to  $y$  also shows the balance



provided by the child's familiar environment. In *Cradle Song* we are dealing almost only with the z cell, a natural thing we might argue, given the title of the song. This is because the mother dispels from the child all the worries of the day, through her song. Through unison (the symbol of the voice) a strong connection is created between the two; this strong emotional imprint is underlined by the composer, who narrates about the excessive care bestowed on him by his mother, being the only surviving child of the family. The motifs of this piece can also be found in *A Cricket* or in *Moonlight through the Window Panes*. In the piece entitled *A Cricket* the only cell we encounter is z, which may denote the inner calm brought by the friendly nature, represented here by the small insect. *Moonlight through the Window Panes* includes, as Pascal Bentoiu remembers, the theme from the *Cradle Song*, so that we see mostly the z-cell, which induces the tranquillity and mystery generated by the celestial star with a quasi-static appearance, with a light which, filtered by the window of the room, becomes even more beautiful, maybe it even enhances the fairy-tale atmosphere created by the mother's songs and stories. The x and y cells are inserted to predict the storm (Bentoiu, 1999, p. 450). Z is used in the eighth piece, *Wind in the Chimney*, to symbolize the safety of the hearth, and x stands for the anxiety that the rustle of the wind creates at night; "the chromaticism is clearly deduced from the semitone of y" (Bentoiu, 1999, p. 450), which illustrates the anxiety of a stormy evening.

The image displays a musical score for two sections of a piece. The first section, titled "VENT DANS LA CHEMINÉE", is marked "Animando molto - al - Allegretto moderato" with a tempo of quarter note = 55. It features a treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature. The music is characterized by rapid sixteenth-note passages and includes performance instructions such as "sempre", "p", "pp", "pochiss.", and "poco". The second section, titled "TEMPÊTE AU DEHORS, DANS LA NUIT", is marked "animando molto al Allegretto moderato" with a tempo of quarter note = 55. It features a treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature. This section includes performance instructions like "p", "dim", "dim poco a poco", "p sempre un poco flautato, scivolando", "angoscioso", "pp", "p sempre", and "corda sino al segno". Both sections include piano accompaniment in the bass clef.

Fig. 5 G. Enescu, *Wind in the Chimney*

The anxiety caused by the dark and the frightening sounds of the storm are predominant in *Storm Outside, during the Night*, and *y* and *z* indicate the oscillation between the feeling of security in the interior (the house) and the anxiety of the child. The piece *Sunrise* contains a large number of *z* cells, so we understand the joy of overcoming all the fears felt by the child in the face of darkness, the storm, the violent sounds (which are still remembered by the appearance of the *x* and *y* cells). The increased percentage of *z*'s presence, expressing the embrace of light, of the once again friendly, serene nature, can even indicate the victory of good in the face of evil, a belief that the child preserved, and the adult transposed it musically in the bleak years before the war.

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Sunrise' by George Enescu. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The score is divided into two systems. The first system is marked 'Un poco Andante' with a tempo of quarter note = 42. The vocal line begins with the lyrics 'ral - len - tan - do' and 'len.' followed by a fermata. The piano part includes markings such as 'più d'm.', 'sordamente', 'mp', 'b p', and 'dolciss. etereo'. A box containing the number '32' is present in the piano part. The second system is marked 'LEVER DE SOLEIL' and 'harm.'. The vocal line has markings 'cant.', 'dolce, chiaro', and 'f. c. espress.'. The piano part includes markings 'mp', 'pizzolando non troppo', 'poco', 'mf stacc.', and 'poco p armonioso'. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Fig. 6 G. Enescu, *Sunrise*

### 3. Comparative expressive landmarks

The inclusion of the works mentioned in this study in the development of a programme was possible due to the composers' appeal to image, symbol and state of mind. The image is related to the evocative, descriptive character of the music, and the symbol and the state of mind are correlated with "a dialectic of metaphors"; thus, "the programmatic idea [...] acts as a catalyst that optimizes the double transfer toward the ideal, through a subtle mechanism of suggestion: the area of manifestation of connotations is narrowed, but, in compensation, their intensity increases" (Banciu, 2006, *The Aesthetic Significance ...*, p. 10). We can see that in Schumann's case the emphasis falls rather on the image, in Debussy all three are present, and in Enescu the symbol and the state of mind

predominate. A key element in the musical outline of a programme is the timbre.

The musical expression is determined by imagination, virtuosity and instrumental vision, concepts that we compared in the works of the three composers.

As for Schumann, we notice the musical expression that stems from the melody, we may even discuss about a poetics of cantability; the emotions identified through images and states of mind define an imagination of sensibility and storytelling. The composer does not appeal to virtuosity, but to a piano technique focused on differentiated touches, intelligible phrasing which, most of the times, is achieved by means of the *legato*; polyphony and nuance are also part of Schuman's instrumental thinking. When Clara received the score of the work, the following words of the author accompanied it: "You will certainly enjoy playing these little pieces, but you will have to forget that you are a virtuoso. [...] You will have to avoid the effects; instead, you will have to let yourself be carried away by their simple, natural grace which lacks in rigidity" (Tranchefort, 1989, p. 725).

In Debussy we encounter an imagination distinct from that of the Romantics, more precisely a descriptive and symbolic one. Alfred Cortot thinks that the virtuosity imposed by Debussy's works constitutes an element of "atmosphere," "which attenuates or crystallizes the relations of sonorities"; he considers that the "fluid" passages of the composer "tend to blunt the contours, to veil the harmonies and almost to prolong silence." (Cortot, 1981, p. 24) The intense exploration of the piano registers, the subtle nuances, the harmonies that venture beyond the limits of classical tonal relations and the meticulous pedaling are the characteristics that define Debussy's pianistic instrumental thinking.

Enescu makes use of a symbolic and affective imagination, with details that are clarified by explicit musical indications. In Enescu, the image rests in the shadow of the symbol, and a proof of the symbolism of the work is, as Pascal Benteoiu remarks, the fact that the motives that suggest the solar fullness and joy of the last piece are those used in the previous movements: "musically, the strictly programmatic argument is somewhat abandoned, as the melodic essences of the previous moments are called to the glorification of the sun." (Benteoiu, 2017, p. 79) The Romanian composer's belief in a virtuosity determined by emotion and message is rendered by the technical difficulties that require first of all an exceptional timbre refinement, determined by the excessive sensitivity that characterizes Enescu, but also by the historical situation. Previous eras employed "three of the properties of the musical sound: pitch, duration and intensity"; in order to extend the "physical limit of sound", musical modernity chose "the most rhetorical of properties: the timbre" (Banciu, 2006, *Introduction ...*, p. 89). Enescu's score of the *Impressions* brings

forth a very complex dynamic scale, with harmonies enriched by those added sounds or by the polyphonic overlaps, indications that suggest the type of instrumental sonorities.

#### 4. Conclusion

The performer examines not only the musical, technical elements, but a whole path of information, from the historical, stylistic elements, to those belonging to other disciplines, in order to expressively render the works, gathering a complete picture of the programmatic suggestions. This path becomes a necessity when the programme of the pieces is part of the same theme, but the works belong to different eras.

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