

**Defining a notion of arabesque**  
**in the context of the music of Claude Debussy**

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the notion of the arabesque in order to establish how the composer Claude Debussy uses and develops it through his own work.

Arabesque is, of course, the title of two of Debussy's earliest known piano pieces.

It has established that there is a musical definition of 'arabesque', which also has broader connotations in the arts. Over time the use of the arabesque has changed, but it has been known to incorporate nature, including birds and plants as well as humans. Associated with flowing lines and the elaborate use of foliate, the term extends to art and literature as well as ballet.

This research indicates that Debussy's critical writing may have assisted with defining the musical arabesque. Debussy argues that the arabesque could be found in the music of Gregorian chant (Lesure, 1977: 27), and discusses how J. S. Bach developed the technique and use of the arabesque, in order to make it progressively supple and fluid (Lesure, 1977: 27).

With his interests in symbolism, Debussy was influenced by visual art as well as literature during the period of the Art Nouveau. It is clear that Debussy uses and develops the arabesque beyond that which he found in the music of J. S. Bach, but there is scope to explore this notion across a wider selection of Debussy's music than has so far been identified or discussed through this or other research.

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## Introduction

This research takes a critical look at a number of Debussy's compositions in an attempt to understand what Debussy defines and understood by the term 'arabesque' as well as exploring how Debussy developed and made use of the arabesque over time. As part of this process, this work explores the origins and definition of the word 'arabesque' in relation to both music and wider arts.

In addressing the research question, source material has primarily focused on Debussy's piano music. This came about as a result of available scholarship which tended to focus on such music, yet it is clear that the term should not be restricted to his piano output alone.

Debussy's critical writings were published under the *nom de plume* of Monsieur Croche (Lesure, 1977: x). In addressing Debussy's notion of the arabesque, most research has led back to the source of two specific articles which Debussy wrote for *La Revue Blanche* in May 1901 and *Musica* in Oct 1902. It is perhaps interesting to note that on this subject, most scholars refer to either or both of these articles, and whilst they also discuss Debussy's music in terms of the arabesque, it is not a term Debussy appears to use when describing his own music.