

THE HIDDEN LIFE OF THE *Humble Arabesque*

by Catherine Kautsky

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*“These consist of bars,
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from among which now
& then a flower or a living
creature peeps out.”*

– Goethe

In a letter of July 1910 to Jacques Durand, Claude Debussy announced that, as an artist, he was “accustomed to living among apparitions.” Exactly what form those apparitions took is anybody’s guess, but some may well have appeared in the form of arabesques, and not always friendly ones at that. Despite the fact that arabesques are so innocuous as to have inspired many a child in ballet class and many a dilettante at the piano, they also gave birth to Edgar Allen Poe’s chilling *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* and to similar ghostly visions from Poe’s predecessor, E.T.A. Hoffmann. If we look in turn for musical offspring of these two dark, and often eerie, authors, we see that Poe was Debussy’s literary muse, and Hoffmann inspired Robert Schumann. Can it be sheer chance that these two composers enthroned the title “arabesque” in the world of the piano?

A Bit of History

The term “arabesque” originated with the word “Arab;” it referred to Moorish art and architecture centuries before Christ, particularly its appearance in southern Spain, and to the curvaceous figures one now encounters on Oriental carpets or other decorative “Oriental” objects. It was then applied to the scrolls found in Roman ruins at Pompeii, Herculaneum, and other Roman cities, and it came into

popular usage in the nineteenth century when news about the newly found artifacts was received with enthusiasm. Walls adorned with pictures featuring exceptionally ornate frames were especially touted, and they came to the attention of all sorts of eminent Europeans, Germans in particular. Even Goethe opined, and he happily paired the term, "arabesques" with "grotesques," a word coming from "grottos" or caves, where examples were found. In his 1789 essay "Von Arabesken," he expanded upon his vision, reporting that:

Upon one wall in any given room...we find in the center a small picture which is likely to depict a mythological theme...The rest of the wall is painted in one color. Now it is at the borders that we find the so-called arabesques. These consist of bars, scrolls, ribbons, from among which now & then a flower or a living creature peeps out. The tone is light. It appears that these decorative elements are intended to relieve and render more friendly the surrounding monotony of the painted wall, and as their light-hearted patterns point toward the center-piece bring the latter into harmony.

The same arabesque designation was applied to walls painted by Raphael at the Vatican centuries later, and Goethe was again entranced: "It seems to me that the arabesques closest to the idea of the ancients appear in a small chamber of the villa Raphael shared with his mistress...the half-risqué, villa respectable ornamentations breathe joy, life, and love."

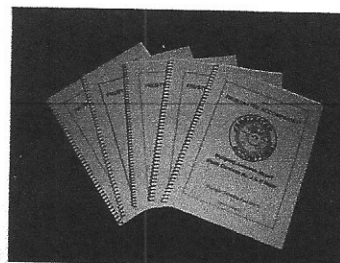
Given that, according to Goethe, "joy, light-heartedness, and delight in ornament seem to have created and popularized the arabesque," it seems mildly surprising that a decidedly heavy-hearted philosopher like Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804) saw fit to weigh in on the subject. Nevertheless, in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, a title heavy unto itself and likely to give pause to the joyful, he addressed the aesthetic value of the frame versus the framed and the meaning of ornament in such ponderous fashion that "delight" seemed distant indeed. In fact, the over-burdened arabesque soon became a philosopher's playground, and such urgent issues as the lack of delineation between centerpiece and arabesque/frame occupied a roster of German luminaries. Eventually, through a certain intellectual alchemy, the fluidity of that arabesque frame and design was deemed outright magical, and yet another philosopher, Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829), dubbed it "the oldest and original form of human fantasy." Schlegel, an apostle of the romantic fragment—itsself forever suggestive and incomplete—was equally besotted by the literary implications of the

coherence was repurposed as a happy symbol of life's chaos, and it took only a baby step for him to link it to the thriving genre of the *märchen*, or fairy tales, themselves "infinitely capricious." Indeed, what better than live beasts emerging full-blown from creeping vines to capture the free fantasy, delicious digression, and magical progression of those beloved stories?

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Connections to Schumann and Debussy

With that link to fairy tales we come closer to our chosen composers and their own connection to the obscure history of a forgotten shape. For no composers in the history of piano and chamber music have made more use of fairy tales than Schumann and Debussy. Schumann used the title verbatim when he wrote both *Märchenbilder* (Fairy Pictures), Op. 113 for viola and piano, and *Märchenzählungen* (Fairy Tales), Op. 132 for clarinet, viola, and piano, and much of his piano music draws on supernatural stories. Debussy based at least four of his *Preludes* (*Ce qu'a vu le Vent de l'Ouest*, *La Cathédrale engloutie*, "*Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses*" and *Ondine*) on legends and fairy tales, and numerous songs, orchestral, and dance works have fairy tale origins as well. Herein lies the key to the odd kinship, crossing both nations and centuries, between the Teutonic Schumann, and the Gallic Debussy. Strange bedfellows they may be, but



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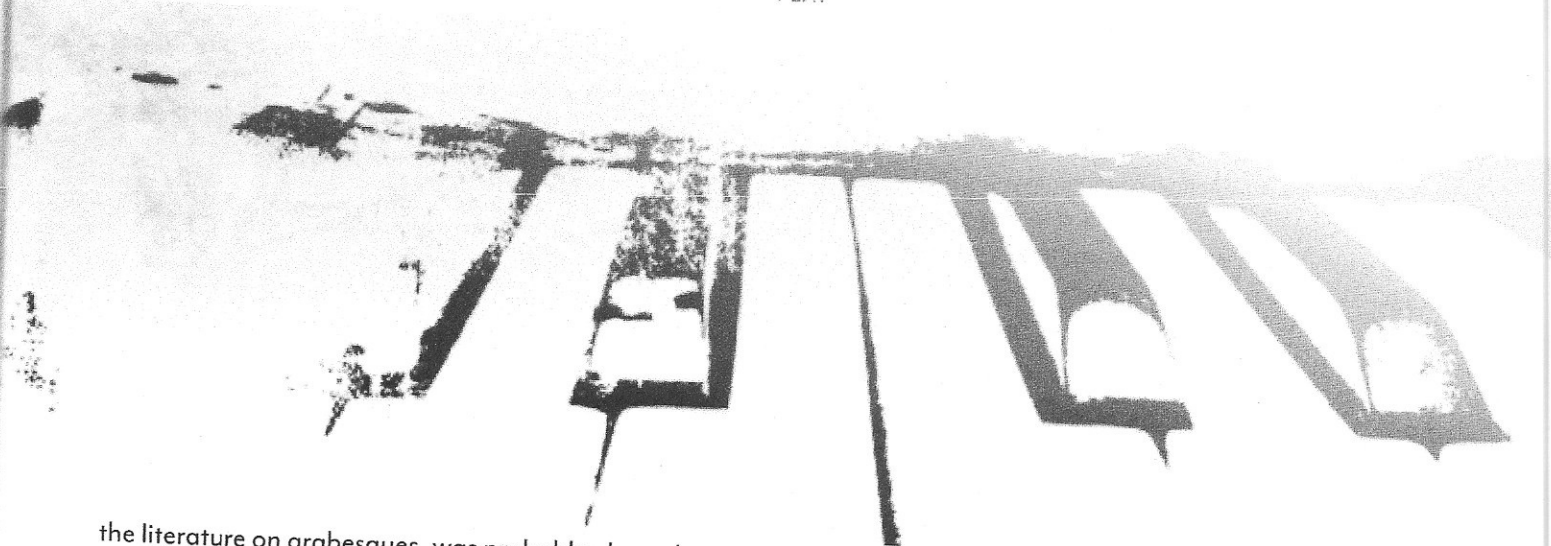
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Schumann, like Debussy, not only delighted in literature and wrote music with a story, but, most tellingly, also lived among apparitions. Both men had alter-egos: Debussy appeared in his music criticism as the acerbic Monsieur Croce, and Schumann appropriated both Florestan and Eusebius as authors of both his prose and his piano music.

In fact, Florestan, Eusebius, and their friends were so vivid to Schumann that, like the supernatural beings populating the stories of his beloved author, E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776–1822), they held a tenacious grip on his reality. The illogic of Schumann's mind, finally driven to madness, is the underside of that arabesque design which is “infinitely capricious,” and we'll understand the arabesque better through a look at Hoffmann, who reveled in the terror of the fantastical and was heavily influenced by the theories of his contemporaries, Goethe and Schlegel. Schumann's diary records with unmistakable fervor that he is “reading Hoffmann incessantly. New Worlds,” and Hoffmann's creation, Kreisler, a choir master accompanied by the magician, Abrahram, was the muse for three of Schumann's piano cycles (*Fantasiestücke*, *Nachtstücke*, and *Kreisleriana*). This choir master is himself half real, half magical; he drifts in and out of a comprehensible world, but it is always music with its intangible powers that is, as Hoffmann says, “able to speak the language of th[e] unknown, romantic spirit realm” where he resides. Robert Schumann incorporated that same realm of the unknown, with its attendant volatility and unexpected digressions, into his own music. Just as the arabesque in art had come to mean the intertwined shapes of unrelated objects, with one figure intruding upon another, likewise, in Hoffmann's writings, the “chaotic form—arabesque” that Schlegel identifies, plays out through mysterious doubles, most pointedly in the novel *Kater Murr* on which Schumann based *Kreisleriana*. Here, in a double novel, chapters authored by a cat intrude on those by a human, and neither the chapters nor the novel itself are ever completed. Likewise, in Schumann's cycle, keys alternate and fragments proliferate. More abstractedly, John Daverio argues, the disruptive “*Im Legendenton*” in the first movement of the *Fantasy*, Op. 17, engenders a form so deeply digressive, with its intrusion on an otherwise decipherable sonata form, that it's hard to deny the direct impact of Schlegel's ideas on its composer. In fact, Schumann goes so far as to preface the piece with a line of Schlegel's poetry, and the title “*Im Legendenton*,” itself links musical discourse inextricably with literary tales of spoken heritage. Finally, Schumann's own *Arabesque*, written less than a year after *Kreisleriana* and the *Fantasy*, gently partakes of the same discontinuities. Its coda, as well as the transition material between the first *Minore* section and the return to the principal theme, arrive unprepared, digressive, and strikingly discursive. Schumann, no doubt aware of



the literature on arabesques, was probably pleased to place himself in the company of Raphael, Hoffmann, and Schlegel.

Edgar Allen Poe and Debussy

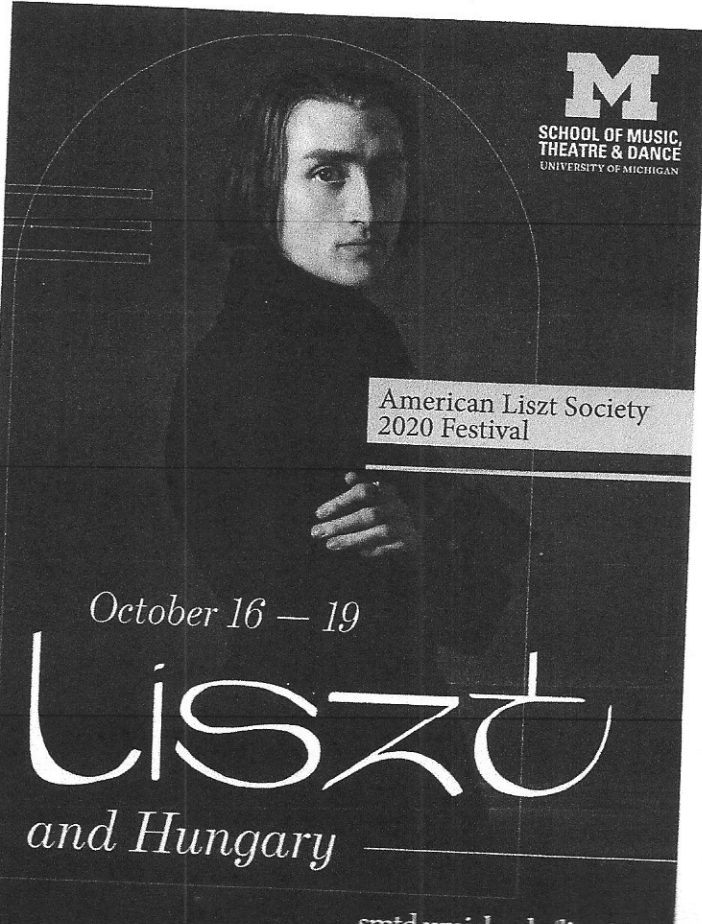
Debussy is said to have loved Schumann's *Arabesque*, and he would have been similarly eager to join the champions of the irrational holding court in France during the nineteenth century. First and foremost was Edgar Allen Poe (1809–1849), for Poe, despite being long-dead, short-lived, American, and alcoholic, was still a great hero to the French. Two of the writers closest to Debussy, Charles Baudelaire and Gabriel Mourey, had translated his works, and Baudelaire's translation of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* popularized those tales in France. Perhaps as a result, when Debussy was asked in 1889 to name his favorite authors, Poe was one of the two he named, and, he spent decades trying to complete operas on two of Poe's *Tales*, "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Devil in the Belfry." For Debussy, even offstage, Poe's world was inescapable:

I've been spending my days lately in *La Maison Usher*, which isn't exactly a house to calm the nerves, quite the opposite...You get the strange habit of listening to the dialogue of the stones and expecting houses to fall down as though that were a natural, even necessary phenomenon. What's more, if you press me to, I'd admit to a greater sympathy with that house's inhabitants than with...many others, who shall remain anonymous.
[Letter to Andre Caplet, August 1909]

Debussy, like Poe, loved dwelling on the mysterious form of the arabesque, announcing in *La Revue Blanche* in 1901 that "the primitives—Palestrina, Vittoria, Orlando di Lasso, etc.—had this divine sense of the arabesque... [and] Bach imbued it with a wealth of free fantasy so limitless that it still astonishes us today." In fact, he went

so far as to say that "the musical arabesque, that form of ornament...is the basis of all forms of art."

Small wonder that he should have included all forms of art, for the *art nouveau* painters and craftsmen around him, no doubt themselves influenced by Poe, were shaping jewelry, pottery, painting, and every conceivable decoration into the same winding spirals that had entranced the Romans and the Moors. Not just the shape, with its nod to the feminine body and hair, but the implicit incongruities



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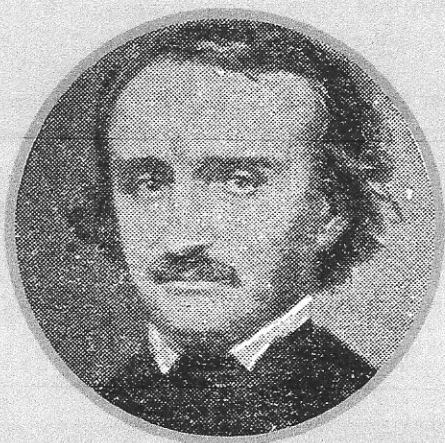
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of the arabesque were infinitely appealing in this age of rebellion against realism and reason. With artists eager to be free of naturalism's constraints, even interior design reflected Poe's declaration in "The Philosophy of Furniture" that "whether on carpets, or curtains, or tapestry, or ottoman-coverings, all upholstery of this nature should be rigidly Arabesque."

Poe didn't limit himself to upholstery, however. Arabesques appear throughout his stories and take on as many shapes and personalities as a many-headed hydra. They can be terrifying, as in "The Assigination," where murder lurks amidst props that bode ill: "Like these arabesque censors, [the hero's] spirit is writhing in fire."



Or, they can be sensual, as in "Ligeia," where "luxuriant, and naturally-curling tresses" convey the feminine allure and magical powers of a woman who, once dead, can reappear alive. Most portentously, in "The Masque of the Red Death," with the plague lying in wait, "there were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust." Lest we miss the link with our own subconscious: "To and from...there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these—the dreams—writhed in and about."

Debussy's *Arabesques* seem far indeed from those writhing dreams, but they share with them a location far from quotidian reality, and I wonder if Debussy took a secret pleasure in the apparent disconnect between Poe's arabesque stories of death and destruction and the sweet, placid music of his own *Arabesques*. In this composer's active imagination, darkened by unhappy love affairs, difficult friendships, and persistent debt, there was rarely a tranquil moment, and serene music was born of turbulent undercurrents. The *Arabesques* are hardly alone in their deceptive

calm. The *Petite Suite*, written in the same year as the *Arabesques* and drawing two of its titles from Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*, shares a similar fate. Though *fêtes galantes* are ostensibly elegant garden parties, the poems' suggestive texts, like the gloomy stories of Poe, could hardly be further removed from the child-like innocence of Debussy's music.

Who would guess that the gently undulating arabesques of *En bateau* draw their title from "Sire Églé's confession, Who, whispering many an indiscretion, Sets his heart on his next transgression" or that *Cortège* chronicles a lustful ape who "surveys with eager eye/Her bosom, pale and splendor-fraught, Luxuriant treasure much besought/By naked-breasted god on high"? In both the *Arabesques* and *Petite Suite*, Debussy's unruffled and gently curvaceous surface is unmarred by nightmare deaths or unseemly seductions, but connection to Poe's melancholy and Verlaine's illicit desire lurks in the composer's seething subconscious.

Similarly, the great painter Antoine Watteau, who inspired Debussy's *L'isle Joyeuse* and inaugurated the genre of the *fêtes galantes*, was fascinated by arabesques and drew on them for the ambiguous joy and melancholy of his paintings. He delighted particularly in the *Commedia dell'arte*, thus creating another important link to our chosen composers, for those masks and fickle characters convey a clandestine message neither he nor Verlaine nor Schumann nor Debussy could resist. *Suite Bergamasque*, *Masques*, *Carnaval*, and *Faschingschwank aus Wien* provide Pierrot and his brethren with musical homes *chez* Debussy and Schumann, and shifting modes and meters provide the requisite musical disguises. The dream world beckoned, and arabesques, with their embrace of the irrational, were omnipresent in the masquerades pictured alike by painters, writers, and composers.

The Age of the "Wonderful Arabesque"

Indeed, the list of composers smitten by the sinuous lines of the arabesque include many in addition to Schumann and Debussy, though these two bookend its heyday. Teachers will be familiar with Burgmüller's light take on the genre; advanced pianists may want to explore Sibelius' virtuosic entry, and others will gravitate toward Chaminade's stormy approach. Moszkowski, Arenski, MacDowell and others made contributions. Across the board, just as *art nouveau* concerned itself with the decorative and the feminine, this musical form associated itself with curvaceous shapes and it is that stereotypical appeal to the "gentler sex" which probably tamed the fiercer demons of Schumann's and Debussy's essays in the genre. It can be no coincidence that Debussy's idealized portrait of *La fille aux cheveux de* is built on a quintessential arabesque, or that Schumann characterized his own *Arabesque* as "delicate—for ladies."

Both ladies and arabesques served men's "delight in ornament," and, in age-appropriate fashion, Goethe's sunny claims for the "joy" and "light-heartedness" of the design suited both classifications equally well.

Quite aside from issues of sexual parity, the musical arabesque was gradually retired in the more glaring light of the twentieth century, aided by efforts from the likes of Charles Ives to prove that composition should be no "sissy art." Camouflage had flourished in the gentle moonlight of Schumann's *Mondnacht* and Debussy's *Clair de lune*, and there Florestan, Eusebius, and M. Croce could frolic, undisturbed, in a land of make-believe. They found themselves in the company of Watteau's cupids and more benevolent aspects of Poe's magic, happily bidding rationality a fond farewell. Debussy's "age of the 'wonderful arabesque' when music was subject to laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself," was no longer, and the demise of that "undulating, cradle-rocking music, abounding in curved lines" marked the end of an era. The musical world was a rougher place after its departure. ■



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