

# Rain, Cathedrals, and Preludes: Compositional Allusions in the Piano Music of Mel Bonis

Audio examples here



Jennifer Shafer England, Montana State University  
jennifer.english2@montana.edu

## Overview

Mel Bonis (a pseudonym for Mélanie Domange, 1858-1937) was a French female composer and pianist. Although her music is gradually becoming better known, it has received little in-depth analytical attention. This poster presents short analytical vignettes of three solo piano works, each of which makes clear allusion to works by other composers. Both the type and “amount” of allusion vary from one work to the next, providing an interesting case study of compositional voice and development of style.

The first two pairs of allusions are “Il pleut” (Bonis, 1913) and “Jardins sous la pluie” (Debussy, 1903) and “La cathédrale blessée” (Bonis, 1915) and “La cathédrale engloutie” (Debussy, 1910). Beginning with relatively transparent titular references, these pieces feature clear similarities in the “hook” of each piece: the perpetual motion, left-hand melody combined with physically close right-hand “arpeggiations,” and some amount of hand-crossing acrobatics in the first pair, and the large sonorities, heavy bass, and planing (or quasi-planing) chords in the second. The third pair proffers an allusion not discussed elsewhere: Bonis’s “Prelude” (Op. 10, 1889), a short composition which clearly references Chopin’s “Prelude in B minor” (Op. 28, No. 6, 1839). Though the opening of this piece bears perhaps the most similarity to its parent work, the points of divergence from the original are fairly striking, including elements of mode, harmony, motive, register, theme, and physical use of the pianist’s hands.

All three allusions rely primarily on motivic similarity, rather than specific melodic or harmonic ideas, but of the three, the Prelude is—perhaps unsurprisingly—arguably the most similar to its “parent” piece. Formal design is very similar, and both the textural setup of the opening motive and the general structure of the motive and opening phrase itself is maintained, though Bonis’s fascination with multi-layered textures and counterpoint changes the scene dramatically after that opening phrase. In “Il pleut,” Bonis’s piece is in many ways simpler than the model, but paints a very different rain soundscape—perhaps as if it is a sun shower, rather than opening as a dark thunderstorm. Just two years later, with “La cathédrale blessée,” we find a piece that, arguably, makes more of a passing allusion to its namesake, even if the titular relationship is more overt in this case. Bonis’s musical references are much more general—only the shape of melodic lines, chordal densities, and the use of low pedal points really seem to reference the source work. Certainly the unsettling final sonorities make it difficult to hear resolution or peace at the end of this work. Though this study is by no means a comprehensive study of allusion or intertextuality in Bonis’s music, the examination of one of her earlier allusory works offers intriguing context for these other allusions, and highlights the need for further study of allusion and intertextuality in Bonis’s music.

## Rain

### “Il Pleut (Bonis, 1913) and “Jardins sous la pluie” (Debussy, 1903)

- Titular reference (clear, but not overt)
  - Mayer 2006 refers to Bonis’s work as a “pleasurable reminiscence” of Debussy’s earlier work
- Similar textural motive in opening theme, toccata style

Audio Ex 1 → → Audio Ex 2 →

- Use of folksong(s) to derive melodic material (de Medici 2020, Mayer 2006, Chen 2016, Hinson 1993)

→

- Contrast in formal design, usage of folk tunes, and physical use of the hands

Section	Thematic material	Mm.	Melody placement, etc.
1	A	1-63	LH melody, toccata style, hand crossing
2	B	64-91	RH melody, chord/accomp style
3	A	92-133	LH melody, toccata style, hand crossing
4	B	134-49	LH melody, chord/accomp style
5	A	150-72	LH melody, toccata style, hand crossing

Section	Thematic material	Mm.	Melody placement, etc.
1	Tune A	1-55	LH melody, toccata style, hand crossing
2	Transitional	56-74	LH melody, toccata style
3	Tune B, then both	75-100	Both melody, trill in middle register
4	Tune A	100-125	LH melody, RH arpeggiations
5	Both tunes	126-157	LH melody, toccata style, hand crossing

## Cathedrals:

### “La cathédrale blessée” (Bonis, 1915) & “La Cathédrale engloutie” (Debussy, 1910)

- More overt titular reference
  - Editor’s notes question whether Bonis ever heard Debussy’s work (Géliot 2004)
- Previous work by Francois de Médicis (2020)
  - Programmatic implications connected to the bombing of the Rheims Cathedral in 1914
  - Intertextual references to Debussy & possibly also to “Le Gibet” by Ravel
  - Use of *Dies Irae* as the second theme (Audio Ex 4)
- Opening thematic referent: Large sonorities, heavy bass, and planing (or quasi-planing) of chords. In contrast to Debussy’s work, Bonis utilizes:
  - Change of mode and “darker” key signature
  - Alternating ascending and descending blocks
  - Combination of ~traditional functional voice-leading with more “true” planing, darkened by a plethora of tritones and seventh chords

Audio Ex 3 → →

- The final section brings back an earlier theme in each piece. The darker mood in Bonis’s work persists, rising to an emotional climax and then closing with a sense of doom and defeat.

pp return, top of keyboard, “wrong” key → →

pp return, bottom of keyboard, ostinato bass, C major (some use of B-flat) →

Melody floats over the ostinato, gradually ascending in register →

Build to climax, “standing on the dominant?” →

Further drifting towards top of keyboard →

Resultant defeated fall to lowest registers of keyboard →

Closes on a C major sonority, multiple registers sounding simultaneously →

Dissonant and dark close on G# minor over a repeated A-natural (theorized as a funeral bell by de Médicis) →

## Preludes

### “Prelude” (Bonis, 1889) and “Prelude in B minor” (Chopin, 1839)

- A much earlier compositional allusion than the other two more well-known works
- Originally published as part of a set of smaller works on a pastoral theme (Mayer & Géliot 2004).
- Similar opening theme presentation: sentence structure, LH melody (predominantly)
  - Bonis changes the rhythm and voicing of the RH ostinato pulse, delays the cadence slightly, and more clearly moves the melody to the RH just before the cadence. Elides cadence with a repetition of the opening motive.

Audio Ex 7 → →

- The following B (and A') sections differ significantly more, particularly in use of register, chromaticism, and motive, as well as physical use of the pianist’s hands.

Chopin repeats 2 measures of the opening theme but it is quickly diverted by an appearance of the Neapolitan chord (1), which ushers in the B section proper (2). This section emphasizes the dominant chord and has a “failed” resolution to the submediant (3) before resolving back to the original tonic (4). A return of only 2 measures of the A theme (5) precedes the final tonic repetitions (6). The melody remains in the LH throughout, with some contrapuntal motions in the RH.

Audio Ex 8 →

Bonis repeats only 1 measure of the original theme (1) before the RH takes over and introduces an entirely new melody (2), which is repeated for the next 3 bars. At this point, a motive originally introduced within the A section makes a reappearance in the RH (3), and this motive dominates the remainder of the B section. The LH makes one brief foray into a more melodic motion (4), but largely plays a minimal accompanimental role until the closing cadence (5) which ushers in A' and again elides with an entrance of the main motive. In this final section, the two motives intertwine, gradually ascending near the top of the keyboard and melting into the final cadence, which is preceded by the appearance of the only chromatic note of the piece.

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