

The human and the physical in Debussy's depictions of snow

De l'humain et du concret physique dans les évocations de la neige chez Debussy

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Volume 14, Number 1, May 2013

L'imaginaire du Nord et du froid en musique : esthétique d'une musique nordique

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016198ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016198ar>

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Publisher(s)

Société québécoise de recherche en musique

ISSN

1480-1132 (print)

1929-7394 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Oravitz, M. (2013). The human and the physical in Debussy's depictions of snow. *Les Cahiers de la Société québécoise de recherche en musique*, 14(1), 49–54. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016198ar>

Article abstract

This article explores Debussy's musical engagement of the topic of snow in two representative works for piano, "Des pas sur la neige" from *Préludes*, Book I and "The Snow is Dancing" from *Children's Corner*. In the analysis of "Des pas," a narrative is put forth based on the interpretation of the work's opening short-long rhythmic figure as a representation of contact with a frozen, encrusted surface followed by an immediate collapse of that frozen surface and contact with the ground underneath. As the work's protagonist engages in walking meditation to confront a troubling memory, a state of contemplation is achieved whereby the musical portrayal of the footsteps are momentarily suppressed in strategic portions of the work designed to portray recollection, as Steven Rings (2008) has noted. In my analysis, I argue that the closing measures' portrayal of footsteps is shifted into binary alterations of two notes, *D* and *G*, in steady quarter notes, so as to illustrate the protagonist's emergence from an off beaten path to a more trodden one. In "The Snow is Dancing," Debussy shifts focus from that of human emotion to the actual physical properties of snow. Interestingly, the snow is anthropomorphized nonetheless into dancers. I trace shifts in rhythm, line and register, and engage gestures of motion to illustrate Debussy's compositional approach to both gravitationally suspending and animating wind-driven snowflakes.

The human and the physical in Debussy's depictions of snow

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As a number of his titles reveal, Debussy's compositional inspirations often come from nature: *La mer*, *Le vent dans la plaine*, *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* (Baudelaire), *Nuages*, *Reflets dans l'eau*, *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*, *Brouillards*. Such examples are countless, and to them can be added two works for piano engaging the topic of snow: "The Snow is Dancing" from *Children's Corner* and "Des pas sur la neige" from his first book of *Préludes*.

There are no direct references by Debussy to the titles he chose for either of these works. Yet, both works arguably have personal inspirations or connections. Though both in D Minor, their affects contrast greatly: "The Snow is Dancing" is a gentle, airy moto-perpetuo projecting the whimsical and spontaneous, while "Des pas sur la neige" is a starkly introspective dirge. *Children's Corner* was inspired by Debussy's only child Claude-Emma, born in 1905. He dedicated the work to her in 1908. Marcel Dietschy notes that during this rough patch of Debussy's life (he was going through a law suit regarding his divorce from Lily Textier), "she [Claude Emma] was the only one who inspired him in 1906; she gave him the quality of feeling to which we owe the *Children's Corner* of 1908" (Dietschy 1990, 144). Also, although a number of the Book I *Préludes* are rather pleasant, joyous or humorous in nature ("Les collines d'Anacapri," "La fille aux cheveux de lin," or "La Danse de Puck," for example), the singularly melancholy "Des pas sur la neige" comes roughly ten months after the health effects Debussy's cancer were beginning to manifest. At the very least, one can contemplate the connection between his ailment and the drastically introspective quality of this *prélude*.

Debussy's musical depictions of snow in these two works are at opposite ends of a spectrum between human experiences of and among snow and the snow's physical properties. Regarding the physical depictions of snow apart from human experience, they range from a singular, large landscape frozen into virtual immobility in "Des pas sur la neige," to that of an array of free-flowing, airborne flakes in "The Snow is Dancing." My goal is to show how Debussy

works at both ends of this continuum in order to infuse the extramusical topic of snow into his music. In "Des pas sur la neige," he initially engages the topic of snow through an implicit human protagonist. The protagonist is engaged in a contemplative, solitary walk in winter; the steps provide the protagonist with an internal rhythm that prompts a state of walking meditation that, in turn, allows for inner-contemplation and recollection. In my reading of this work, I engage the manner in which Debussy's gestures depict, with great rhythmic accuracy, a protagonist's meditative walk both off and on a beaten path of snow. Specifically, I explore how the musical depiction of "off the beaten path" walking, coming in the final measures of the *prélude*, is also a narrative sign suggesting the end of the meditative stage of the protagonist's walk.

In contrast to "Des pas sur la neige," by entitling his work "The Snow is Dancing," Debussy anthropomorphizes snowflakes into dancers. The snow itself becomes the personified focal point of my discussion, as opposed to the human protagonist among the snow. In this part of the essay, I engage how Debussy employs rhythm, registral distribution of gestures and pitch-specific counterpoint to portray the freely dancing snowflakes.

A possible narrative of Debussy's "Des pas sur la neige"

Debussy's musical projection of the footsteps in "Des pas sur la neige" has been engaged by a number of scholars. The work's opening musical idea, shown in Example 1, comprises a left-hand ostinato depicting the footsteps with discreet two-note gestures, D-E and E-F, representing right and left-foot alternation, as Siglind Bruhn has noted (1997, 91). Paul Roberts has also commented upon the manner in which this gesture captures the essence of a labored walk. He notes: "[t]he opening measures set up not only the rhythm, but the tug and release of harmony which the rhythm articulates, not only a frozen landscape but the trudging movement of footsteps crossing it—dissonance followed by resolution, endlessly repeated" (1996, 255).

Example 1: Opening measures (1–3) of “Des pas sur la neige”



In his article “*Mystères limpides: Time and Transformation in Debussy’s Des pas sur la neige*,” Steven Rings notes how the “ostinato acts as a sort of perceptual and interpretive fulcrum: a fixed point around which all other musical and semantic signifiers revolve” (Rings 2008, 183). He has noted a number of issues that can arise when attempting to hear the work’s opening footstep gesture as literal text-painting (Rings 2008, 185ff). Primary among them is the tempo, which is arguably too slow for real-time footsteps. One solution, and he posits a number of possibilities in his article, is that we might interpret the footsteps as *footprints* to be seen at once, as a recollection of the actual footsteps already taken. He also notes that the temporal correctness of what he interprets is the “heel-to-toe” motion in the ostinato’s short-long gestures is at odds with the longer spaces between each step. Citing Jonathan Kramer’s notion of vertical time (Kramer 1988, 54–57), Rings notes that this out-of-sync facet of the gesture can lend it a sense of timelessness.

Another possible interpretation that I offer here is one connected to the physical properties of snow, what Debussy refers to in his performance indication as a “frozen landscape.” Namely, I purport that the dotted rhythm, rather than being mimetic of a heel-to-toe motion, is rather that of a contact with, and then a collapsing through, a frozen landscape under the weight of the heavy footsteps. This possibly explains Debussy’s performance indication “this rhythm should have the sound qualities of a landscape sad and frozen,”¹ while also lending some mimetic currency to the time taken between each step. As I will discuss, I construe the prelude as depicting a protagonist walking in snow in order to confront his or her own thoughts. In such a walk through nature, it is likely that the protagonist is off the beaten path and is thus working through snow of a certain depth rather than a shallow blanket of snow. And given the work’s performance indication, we can imagine the snow to be encrusted with a glazed, frozen surface. The exact physical qualities of the landscape, as portrayed in this opening gesture, are arguably less important than are its timeless qualities—qualities that

nurture the act of meditation. As Rings has noted, there is a sense of timelessness borne out of the musical portrayal of repetitive physical action (Rings 2008, 188). But, as I will argue, an interpretation that situates the protagonist off the beaten path, in snow just deep enough to create such a sonic effect as I propose,² can offer some insights to the closing measures and the manner in which they help to frame a potential narrative.

I view the ostinato’s rhythmic utterances as meditative drones that feed the process of thought and inner contemplation; the notion of a solitary walk as a medium for meditation is ageless, and can arguably be found in the teachings of Buddha (Salanda, 2010). The slowness of the steps can also depict a broader metaphorical slowing in time in the mind of the protagonist; a contemplative sense of time that weighs past events in a manner that undulates between nostalgia and the protagonist’s present state of melancholy.

Emanating from that drone is the work’s opening melody (see Example 1), whose rhythmic articulations are strategically incongruent with and thus independent of those of the ostinato. The melody at once overtakes the drone as protagonist’s voice, relegating the drone to the meditative rhythm of the protagonist’s footsteps. Rings notes that its performance indication *expressif et douloureux* “recalls and contrasts with the *triste et glacé* of the ostinato, investing those impassive terms with a personal, or subjective, charge” (Rings 190, 2008).

The relationship between this personified melody and the physical footsteps of the ostinato is played out through the remainder of the work. The prelude’s form is best described as a series of strophes, each of which begin similarly but embark upon a new path of discovery, development and variation. Debussy scholar Richard Parks, in fact, refers to these strophes as a “synthesis of strophic variations” that undergoes continuous development (Parks 1989, 224–225).³

A significant element within this formal process is the interspersions of moments of cessation of the footsteps. These cessations occur twice in mm. 12–15 and 28.4–31 respectively, separated by a proportionally significant span of music. Each of these musical spans suggest the major mode, in contrast to the minor mode that is generally suggested in moments when the footstep rhythms are heard. The two passages inter-connect in a way that evokes retrospect and recollection with the assistance of

¹ «Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d’un fond de paysage triste et glacé.» Howat notes the precision that Debussy has taken in giving such a descriptive performance indication as this, in contrast to Ravel’s penchant for more prescriptive indications. (Howat 1997, 86). Among Debussy’s performance indications, this one stands out as one of his most poetic.

² Claude Debussy, during travels to London in February of 1909 (Debussy indicates 27 December, 1909 as a date of completion of « Des pas sur la neige ») or for that matter, elsewhere over the course of his life, may have experienced heavier snowfalls.

³ Parks, in his formal analysis of *Syrinx*, has “depicted [the form] as a series of journeys” of varying lengths beginning from similar points of departure. A similar approach can be applied to “Des pas sur la neige,” given the variant lengths and varying nature of each strophe (Parks 2003, 14).

⁴ The number to the right of the decimal (“28.4”) represents the fourth beat of m. 28.

suggestive performance indications in the score. The latter span of music's performance indication, *comme un tendre et triste regret*, clearly suggests a recollection. A longing for some unspecified topic is suggested: an earlier state of being, a lover or loved one that is no longer in our grasp. The second "step-less" moment is conjoined with the first by Debussy's use of a referential, nearly-related diatonic pitch collection of six flats (mm. 12-15 featured five flats). Adding to the complexity of the topic of recollection is the fact that Debussy is also clearly recalling, in mm. 28.4, the melody heard moments ago in mm. 21.4.⁵ However, it is the cessation of steps among 12-13 and 28.4-31 that is of interest to my interpretation. Both spans of music are shown in Example 2 and Example 3 respectively.

Example 2: Second strophe of "Des pas" (mm. 8-15) and the "step-less" passage in mm. 12-13

The musical score for Example 2 shows two systems of music. The first system, measures 8-15, begins with a piano (*pp*) and expressive (*expressif*) marking. The second system, measures 12-13, is marked 'Cédez' and 'Retenu', indicating a change in tempo and dynamics. The score is in D-flat Major and features a footstep ostinato in the bass line.

In the first cessation, found in mm. 12-13, there is a brief span of music in a D-flat Major pitch collection whose baritone melody sounds among a brief prolongation of that key's supertonic harmony (please see the bottom system of the score in Example 2).

The D-flat implication, however, quickly segues into a starkly dissonant whole-tone-based C Major-Minor sharp-eleven harmony (C-E-B-flat-F-sharp) that disintegrates the potential for the key of D-flat to emerge while also bringing back utterances of the footstep rhythm in the bass range in haunting melodic tritones between F-sharp and C.

Example 2 provides the work's second strophe. This strophe (mm. 8-15) begins with the characteristic D-E/E-F footstep ostinato, now underpinned with chromatically ascending quarter-note pulses in the bass line. The steady quarter notes in the bass countermelody add a structured pulse to the ambulation, suggesting a deepened level of inner contemplation. A few measures into this strophe, at measure eleven's end, we note the cessation of footsteps and the short-lived calming effect of the diatonic D-flat passage. This, in turn, is followed by the return of the footstep rhythm, ushered in with a haunting whole-tone harmony.

This brief musical absence of the footstep rhythm in mm. 12-13 marks a momentary level of contemplation that is deep enough to suppress the protagonist's own awareness of his or her footsteps. The pulse of the music does not slacken in these measures, and there is no outwardly musical cue suggesting that the footsteps have literally stopped. Rather, the effect is that of a focus upon a memory whose major, diatonic pitch-collection is in stark contrast with the protagonist's present state of mind.

Two other instances where the footstep pattern is either varied or arrested are found in mm. 21-24 and 28-31. Both excerpts are shown within Example 3.

Example 3: Measures 19-32 of "Des pas sur la neige"

The musical score for Example 3 shows four systems of music. The first system, measures 19-24, is marked 'Cédez' and 'a Tempo'. The second system, measures 23-28, is marked 'Retenu' and 'a Tempo'. The third system, measures 27-32, is marked 'p' and 'Comme un tendre et triste regret'. The fourth system, measures 30-32, is marked 'Plus lent'. The score is in D-flat Major and features a footstep ostinato in the bass line.

Interestingly, in the melodic statement of mm. 21-24 (circled in Example 3), the rhythms of the steps do not cease, but rather the pairing of two-note dyads representing each foot do. Beginning on the second half of m. 21, Debussy features only the E-F dyad rather than the alternating D-E/E-F dyads featured up to this point in the music. Music commentator Rob Kapilow has suggested that one hears several attempts in a row to step with only one foot, suggesting a feeling of the protagonist being "stuck" in his or her own obsession (Kapilow, 2009). He suggests this obsession is let go moments later, in the varied restatement of this melody (also circled in Example 3), where footsteps cease altogether in mm. 28-31. Rings, on the other hand, construes this moment as "one footstep—a single physical action—heard seven times." He likens it to the effect of hearing a needle skip in a scratched vinyl record, with the ultimate realization that "we can hear the seven-fold

⁵ Rings extensively explores a number of interpretations related to the inter-connective properties and potentials for recollection between and among mm. 12-13, 21.3-25 and 28.4-31 (Rings 2008, 199-206).

iteration as an ‘unfolded’ presentation of a single, highly charged moment” (Rings 2008, 200).

As with the opening gesture, an exact physical interpretation of this passage is less important than what it metaphorically represents: a moment of fixated thought requiring an expenditure of emotional energy with the potential to bring the protagonist to a state of mind where exegesis or reconciliation may be attained.

The third instance where the footstep pattern is altered (mm. 28–31) is, as discussed, similar to mm. 12–13, in that the musical representation of the footsteps is momentarily absent. If we construe the footsteps as an energy source whose expenditure feeds the fire of thought and meditation, we can also construe the footsteps’ expansive cessation⁶ in these measures as a moment of profound recollection in contrast to forward-moving consuming of thought after thought, as the performance indication *Comme un tendre et triste regret* suggests. Not only is there a recollection of mm. 12–13’s calm, diatonic pitch collection, but there is also a literal recollection of the melody featured in the moment of obsession in mm. 21–24, as seen in the corresponding circled melodies in Example 3. This tender moment is accompanied by gentle, ascending diatonic chords implying G-flat Major. These move in quarter-note pulses that underpin a gradual rise in register in order to set up the work’s final strophe (see Example 4) of footsteps in mm. 32 to the end.⁷

The drastic shift in emotion brought about by the strophe’s return is greatly assisted by the equally drastic change in pitch collection, from that of the implicit G-flat Major (featuring six flats in its key signature) to the home key of D Minor (featuring only a single flat). In this final strophe, the texture is inverted, with the footstep ostinato now above the melodic statement. This lower-register melody, interestingly, references the opening melody that first ushered in the state

Example 4: Pitch and contour relations in “Des pas” between the opening melody in mm. 1–3 and the countermelody in mm. 32 (and its repetition in m. 33)

Opening melody (mm. 1–3)

Triste et lent (♩ = 44)

pp

p expressif et douloureux

pp

Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé

Measure 32 (footstep gesture with countermelody)

Plus lent

pp

of mind of the protagonist. Its left-hand melodic statement in mm. 32–33, D – C-sharp – B-flat and D – B-flat – G, mimics the range, notes and contours of that earlier melody. These similarities are shown in Example 4, with one set of lines illustrating the retrograde statement in the first half of the gesture and another set of lines tracing the pitch-structural similarities in the second half. The soundtrack, if you will, for the act of contemplation, the steady drone of footsteps, is no longer grounded, but rather, it quietly evaporates into the stratosphere.

In the final three measures, steady descending-fifth quarter notes in binary pairs of D and G grow out of the melodic statement used in the work’s opening to portray the protagonist’s contemplation of thoughts, prolonging the soft plagal cadence that closes the work (see Example 5). This D-to-G gesture—equated with a melodic line that initially represented the protagonist’s thoughts rather than the footstep drone—is the one now imbued with binary alteration of pitch. This D-G pair of quarter notes represents the only other musical gesture in the entire prelude besides the opening D-E/E-F footstep motive to clearly maintain an unaccompanied, steady, binary alteration of an event with a tempo appropriately mimicing footsteps. Interestingly then, the D-G quarter notes now become the footsteps.

Example 5: “Des pas sur la neige,” Measure 33–end

Très lent

morendo

ppp

These footsteps are now at a more practical quarter-note pulse rather than the half-note pulse featured throughout up to this point. The *très lent* performance indication at m. 34 ensures that the change of pace in steps is not overly drastic, but still marked. This new portrayal of steps is also now free of the stuttering rhythm depicting the frozen surface and its ensuing breakthrough into a deeper blanket of snow. This perhaps suggests that the protagonist has emerged, either literally, metaphorically or—more likely—both, from the snowy, frozen landscape onto a more trodden path to conclude his or her contemplative act of meditation in the form of a winter stroll. Whether or not a state of reconciliation with the plaintive memory has come about, we can only surmise.

⁶ As I have suggested earlier, I construe the musical paucity of the representative footsteps to be a sublimation of their awareness rather than a literal cessation of the protagonist’s ambulation.

⁷ As Parks (1989, 309–11) has noted, this entire prelude can be formally construed as a gradual expansion of register. He notes that the kernel of this expansion is found in the work’s opening gesture, and mirrored in large over the course of the entire prelude. Marian Guck’s analytical sketch of this work (Guck, 1975, 6–8) also provides an illustration of its expanding-wedge design.

Musical animation in “The Snow is Dancing”

Rather than engaging the topic of a human protagonist among a landscape of snow, “The Snow is Dancing” contrastingly anthropomorphizes snow into dancers. There are certain uncanny similarities between “Des pas sur la neige” and this piece. Its opening measures are shown in Example 6. Both pieces have a tonic key of D minor. Yet the opening to “The Snow is Dancing” is far less grounded, beginning on scale-degree two, E, rather than on its tonic scale-degree D. The first musical glance we get of the snow (of “snowflake #1” in Example 6), then, is afloat rather than aground. Both works feature an opening ostinato supporting a longer, expressive melody that begins on B^b. Yet, the ostinato in “The Snow is Dancing” is not nearly as relentlessly fixed in pitch and register as the ostinato in “Des pas.” Rather, as seen in Example 6, it is more of a moto-perpetuo ostinato defined by the fixity of its penchant for portraying two melodic strands of activity, each marginally offset by both register and by a mere sixteenth-note of time at a fairly active tempo.

Debussy’s performance indication for tempo is *modérément animé*, which—in a typical performance of this work—results in a quarter note of approximately 120 beats per minute. As a result, these separate melodic strands typically occur only an eighth of a second apart, lending a sense of one melodic entity rapidly trailing or chasing another.

Example 6: Opening to “The Snow is Dancing” (mm. 1–9)

A broader musical topic of similar objects in close proximity, shifting subtly from one moment to the next, permeates this first page of music. As mentioned, the opening features a pedaled-staccato texture, comprising rhythmically intertwined four-note eighth-note motives—staggered by a sixteenth-note of time to create a blur of sound over its whole-note drones. This not only depicts

a clouded visual perception of snow through the human eye, but also arguably offers the performer an example of “Augen musik,” whereby the notation itself begins to create a visual depiction of snow.

The initial shift of objects is subtle. In m. 2, Debussy uses an agent very similar yet slightly different to the line in m. 1 to create a blurred sense of “other” between the two strands of activity, that of octave duplication. Note how the lower octave takes over the on-the-beat placement of the upper octave’s measure-one statement, while the upper octave kaleidoscopically shifts to the offbeat sixteenth. Within the implicit pedaled-staccato articulations, these octaves blend so that one line is almost a mere shadow of the other, yet both are perceptually separate.

A second subtle shift occurs in the longer values of the whole-note melody, where the melody’s B-flat to C natural step in mm. 3–4 is re-shaded to become B-flat to C-sharp in mm. 5–6. The C-sharp leading-tone pulls the line into the delayed tonic arrival of D at m. 7, to perhaps illustrate one of the two snowflakes’ contact with the ground. Yet, the musical line representing the “grounded” snowflake is not the one preceded by C-sharp. Here, another subtle shift has occurred. Though one is correctly inclined to hear the whole note in m. 7 as a cadential arrival of the whole-note melody in mm. 3–6, the whole-note agogic arrival on D in m. 7 is actually that of the “lower snowflake’s” register (“snowflake #2 in Example 6). Its motion has suddenly arrested, while the whole-note melody’s leading tone C-sharp has now

become an animated snowflake. This animation (m. 7ff) initiates two strands of dancing snowflakes in far closer proximity to one another than what was heard in the opening measures. The two strands now begin close together, on D and E respectively, and wedge from one another in contrary motion. The entire work abounds with such playful shifts of activity among lines and registers.

Another such example is found in the span of music beginning m. 30, which is shown in Example 7. At m. 30, after a tonal diversion in the preceding measures, the music returns to D Minor. This measure is identical to the D Minor arrival point of m. 7 discussed earlier, but with all parts scored down an octave. At m. 32, we note a small shift in the upper-most stratum’s tetrachord, down a step from D Minor to C Dorian. In m. 34, a melody enters in the upper stratum on a static, repeated B-flat, cast in triplet-division cross rhythms which offset this stratum independently of the sixteenth notes comprising the two dancing-snowflake lines below it. Regarding the lower lines, note the subtle trading of rhythmic placement between the C and D when comparing mm. 32–33 with 34–35. In mm. 34–35, the C now becomes

the afterbeat, while the D now occurs on the beat. This tradeoff is shown in the example with the crossed lines.

The upper line on B-flat portrays a flake in suspension, traversing above the ground's surface. The pulse of the music slightly slackens with the *Cédez un peu* performance indication. The static C below it likewise represents a snowflake traversing along the ground's surface, where a sideways wind has animated the grounded object while also delaying the gravitational pull of the upper B-flat snowflake. In mm. 35–37 we witness the gravitational pull being thwarted by this force of wind three times.

Example 7: mm. 30–38 of “The Snow is Dancing”

Each attempt to fall comes closer and closer until, on the downbeat of m. 38, the wind gust suddenly accelerates into a brief tumult, throwing the D-flat/B-flat descending eighth-note pair up an octave back to the original suspended register the snowflake held in m. 34. This is shown with an inverted-arch arrow in Example 7. Debussy also sculpts this gesture by use of the rapid rolling of the chord in m. 38, whereby the performer engages in a kinesthetic mimesis of the wind's upward thrust.

Conclusion

In “The Snow is Dancing,” it is interesting to contemplate the extent to which Debussy conflates a human perception of snow — musical lines kaleidoscoping one another to represent a visual blur — with the physical motion of the snow itself, animated by wind, as heard in the gestures' rapid traversing through registers and in undulations between states of stasis and tumult. Thus, we see Debussy metaphorically drawing from both arenas of human perception and the physical properties of nature in order to fashion the gestures of his musical sound sculptures.

In “Des pas sur la neige,” human emotion intertwines with gestures emanating from human contact with snow, in contrast to the more playful, abstract portrayals of snow itself in “The Snow is Dancing.” A deeper, ice-encrusted surface, from which the ambulating protagonist must emerge with each step, necessitates a physical labor in walking that mirrors the emotional labor of the protagonist wrestling with his or her thoughts. In both works, we experience Debussy's acumen in projecting gestures of snow and winter in order to artistically frame his musical narratives.

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