"BETWEEN THE STAVES" – ADAPTATIONS OF DEBUSSY'S *SIX ÉPIGRAPHES ANTIQUES* AND CREATIVE TASKS OF THE PERFORMER

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The *Six épigraphes antiques* represent a cross-section of Debussy's creative output that traces the composer's germ-seed from his original setting of the work in 1901 as incidental music to accompany the recitation of several poems, to the four-hand piano version of 1914, and its consequent reduction for solo piano. What can be gleaned by the methods of derivation from his original sketches to the final, mature works is an understanding of Debussy's use of musical metaphor and his connection to the poetry – the *Chansons de Bilitis* of Pierre Louÿs. Embedded literary procedures create a new musical expression of the work whereby text and music become integrated. Rather than serving as accompaniment to the poems, the *Épigraphes* function as the primary vessel for the conveyance of these ancient scenes.

Several of Debussy's hallmark symmetrical and structural moulds, such as the whole-tone, chromatic, octatonic, and mirroring techniques reflect the omnipresent symmetry of Classical Greece. Various other artistic creations emanated from the *Épigraphes*, most significantly the orchestration of Ernest Ansermet in 1939. A look at the techniques used by Ansermet for the augmentation of the piano work serves to extrapolate the multifarious layers relevant in performance. In order to facilitate the four-hand version for solo piano, Debussy used a variety of reductive methods. There are, however, means by which some of the extracted material might be restored to the solo version. Like the late work of many great masters, the *Épigraphes* are redolent of the tendency so many artists have near the end of their days – to revert back to the purest techniques of their language. The scoring of Debussy's *Épigraphes* is scaled back, compared to his *Préludes* (often consisting of three staves of notation), and

incorporates leaner textures generated from lapidary motifs which transmit the antique realms evoked by the poetry of Louÿs.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> You, who are able to read between the staves, will see traces of *The Imp of the Perverse* who encourages one to choose the very subject which should be ignored.
>
> – *Claude Debussy*

This fragment comes from a letter written by Debussy to his friend Robert Godet in 1917, one year before his death. At the time it was written he was undergoing the hardship and interminable mood swings that came as a result of his suffering, both from the depression of war and the cancer that would claim his life. In it, he talks about his Violin Sonata and expresses the futility he felt towards his work during the height of wartime.[1] This fragment is remarkable, however, because, in the same succinct fashion that came to define the essence of his art, it reveals an exceptional dimension of Debussy's musical insight. At one stroke he indicates two important facets of his makeup – his deep connection to literature and the regard he held for someone whose understanding extended beyond the written score. The story he references, *The Imp of the Perverse*, is by Edgar Allan Poe, a writer of particular import to Debussy (who set music for several of his works) and many Symbolist artists. Though the context of this fragment pertains to his *Violin Sonata*, the evolution of another late work of Debussy mirrors the same circumstances that surrounded its creation – the *Six épigraphes antiques*. It seems that, like other masters before him, the one stimulus that could regularly ignite his creative fires was – money, or debt rather. Debussy says later in the letter, "I only wrote this Sonata to be rid of the thing,

[1] Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (London, 1962), v.2, 218.

spurred on as I was by my dear publisher."[2] Similarly, with the *Six épigraphes antiques*, finance motivated him both when he first adapted the work in 1901 and then again when he returned to it more than a decade later in 1914. Debussy was at first reluctant when requested to set music for the *Chansons de Bilitis* by none other than the writer of the poems, his friend Pierre Louÿs. Louÿs insisted on having Debussy compose, and knowing his friend all too well, was finally able to prompt his support with the reminder, "it will spare you from having to worry about the quarter's rent, coming due in January."[3] The 1914 version was also written upon the encouragement of his publisher, Jacques Durand, who recommended he write something for two pianos. Regardless of his initial motivations, however, this work is testament not only to the complete mastery of his language and craft, but also to the loftier aspect of Debussy's art – the keenness of his memory, his regard for friendship, and the boundless layers of emotional content that connected him to this work – his humanity.

The evolution of this music traces the composer's germ-seed from his original setting of the work in 1901 as incidental music to the two-piano version of 1914, and its consequent reduction for solo piano. The music was initially conceived for two flutes, two harps, and celesta and served as accompaniment for the recitation of the *Bilitis* poems. Similar in manner to the staging of a melodrama, these *tableaux vivants* were set with music interspersed between readings of the poems while female models held poses suggested by scenes from the poems.[4] Debussy's initial misgivings came from a reluctance to contribute his art for this form of music-hall entertainment. The music for these original scorings was sparse, and the celesta part has not survived - possibly because Debussy was playing this part himself and may have written down little or nothing. After a long cessation from *Bilitis*, Debussy revisited the music in 1914; and

[2] Ibid, 218.
[3] Jane Fulcher, *Debussy and his World* (Princeton, 2001), 121.
[4] Ibid, 154.

piecing together material from seven of the twelve original *chansons*, he wrote *Six épigraphes antiques* for piano four hands.[5] That same year he also wrote a reduction of the work for solo piano. Much of the 1914 version consists of entirely new material based around several of the original themes from 1901.

The connection of this work to an entire poetic realm, one that is rooted through poetry to antiquity, is what makes this music of value to performers. With the genre of song, musical interpretation is innately bound together with textual interpretation, a connection that is rarely associated with the genre of purely instrumental works. Regarding his solo piano works, the thoughts and sentiments of Debussy's creative mind and the atmospheres evoked by these works are generally inaccessible. What little information is given comes mostly from a work's title, which, in the case of the preludes, he even subordinated to a position at the end of the piece, so as not to obscure an impression of the music. The *Épigraphes*, however, due to the adaptive progression of their birth and connection with a literary event, give unusual insight that is unique to the body of his piano works. Though Debussy is usually more cryptic regarding the revelation of his inspirations, always careful to preserve the mysteries, this music presents a singular opportunity to trace the vestiges of his innermost associations and inspirations.

Like the late work of many other great masters, the *Épigraphes Antiques* are redolent of the tendency so many artists have near the end of their days – to revert back to the purest techniques of their respective languages. In the late paintings of Monet, particularly *Waterlilies*, the artist no longer uses human figures or still-life but chooses to capture the minimized qualities of a landscape, only a segment, but one in which a complete world exists, that surpasses the fetters of a two-dimensional canvas. In Beethoven's *Six Bagatelles* for piano, op.126, the instrument and virtuosic device are cast to the background, serving simply as the means of

[5] Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theater* (Cambridge, 1982), 248.

conveyance for the transcendental content of the work. Likewise, the scoring of Debussy's *Épigraphes Antiques* is scaled back, compared to works like the *Preludes* (often requiring three staves of notation), and consists of leaner textures, generated from lapidary motifs. The vocabulary chosen for this work is not one of expansion; rather, he reverts back to the hallmarks of his musical language. The musician is served with (organic permutations of) symmetry and flexibility, framed within meticulous, expressive design – the thumbprints of Debussy.

This music is evocative of ancient Hellenistic and Egyptian influences – historical domains into which Debussy often slipped comfortably (*Canopes*, *Danseuses de Delphes*) and some of the most provocative sources of inspiration for artists and mystics of the time. The attributes of the ancients that were most revered, their closeness to nature along with the belief and worship of its mysteries, are the same mysteries that Debussy was drawn to. These mysteries are all echoed in the *Épigraphes* and serve to enhance the lambent fires of this antique world. The methods of exploration and investigation in this document and the consequent possibilities applicable to performance can be extrapolated on some levels to other music, functioning as a means to broaden the comprehension of a composition. This particular work, however, due to the rare circumstances surrounding its conception, especially lends itself to the investigation of connections that stimulated its creator, and opens new doors to its re-creator.

> In all compositions I endeavor to fathom the diverse impulses inspiring them and their inner life. Is not this much more interesting than the game of pulling them to pieces, like curious watches?[6]

[6] Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater* (New York, 1928), 8.

CHAPTER 2

LITERARY SOURCES

Translation

Follow the seeds that delineate back to the core of this work and you will arrive slightly beyond the point where Debussy's contributions to the tale begin. Pierre Louÿs initially took up the creation of the *Songs of Bilitis* for a noble cause, which happened to prove most profitable. This "cause" – which resulted in the creation of a sensational fictitious Greek "translation" that would establish his place in the history of literature – began as a response to the Academics charged with the authority of creating scholarly translations of ancient texts. As a writer, Louÿs was thoroughly educated in Classical literature. Part of the impetus for his creation of *Bilitis* was to challenge the notion that scholarship and historical research, if conducted beneath the banners of Academia, granted the translations of ancient text by certain scholars the authority to arrive at truth. He felt that translation, which also pertains directly to musical performance, necessarily involves invention.[7]

As the historicist must approach the task of translation, not only from an informed approach but also a creative one, so must the musician. Regardless of how historically informed any translator or performer may be, they are inescapably influenced by the aesthetic principles of the time in which they live, as were Louÿs and Debussy. Both of their compositions were depictions of antiquity that used contemporary language and artistic resources, though Louÿs's modernism was concealed and Debussy's was not. Likewise, performers today must choose in their own musical "translations," as do the translators of ancient text, either to shelter themselves from the attempts of those who came before and look on a work with new eyes or to embrace all

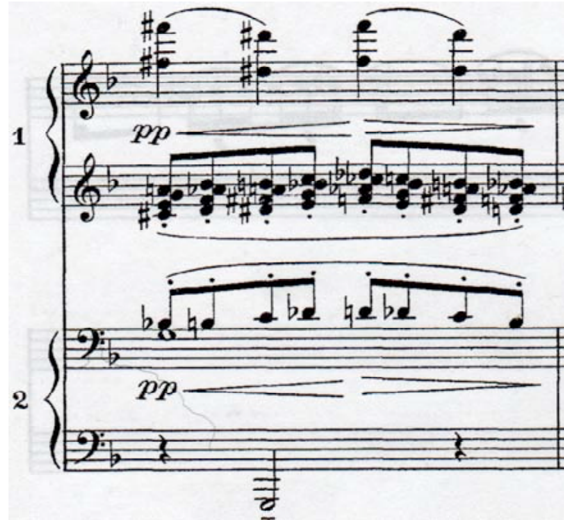
[7] Freeman G. Henry, *Perceptions of Values* (Atlanta, 1995), 33.

aspects of research to gain fuller insight. In turn, how much do we allow ourselves to be affected by the various waves of creative reaction – from the orchestration of *Six épigrahes antiques* by Ansermet, to the numerous *Bilitis* paintings, to dance adaptations – that resulted from the original pebble tossed by Debussy; and does so doing obscure the purity of the original work?

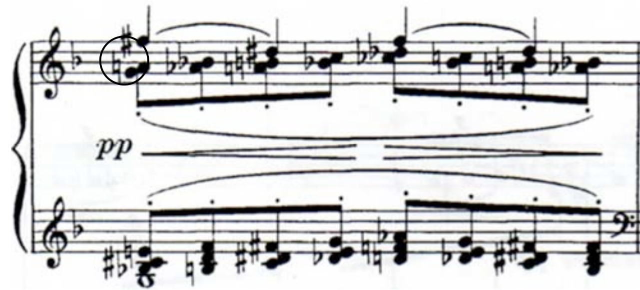
For the inquisitive musician, sifting through the surviving remnants of information left behind, a quandary arises upon the investigation of Debussy's letters – particularly for those seeking to make interpretive deductions based on them. His views, particularly those towards his own music, change as frequently as did his moods. With the same spectrum of emotional content evident in his music, his writings – from the wry commentaries of Monsieur Croche (his pseudonym) to his personal correspondence with daughter Chou-Chou – also attest to the intricacies of his character. Every bit of his humor, wit, sarcasm, mockery, depression, intimacy, elation is detectable. He may not have imagined, however, that a century later musicians would be poring over every recorded word of his. Compared to the Debussyan age, a war-torn era with many deep-seated divisions, present day modernization, the rise of media, technology, and globalization have led to an exchange of creative ideas hardly imaginable to anyone a century ago.

As translators of musical text, performers are also prompted to invent. In some ways the development of performance arts, through specialization and refinement, has enabled an expansion of possibilities. For example, there are places in the original two-piano conception of the *épigraphes* where the texture is so broad that in order to facilitate the arrangement of this work for solo performance, Debussy used a variety of creative means – diminution, unifying registers, reduction. However, it is possible to restore to the solo piano reduction much of what Debussy found necessary to extract from the two-piano version, thereby reconstructing the work

in a way that is both true to the original and can be fluidly executed in performance. One such technique that can be applied to many similar places throughout the work can be found in the second epigraph, *Pour un Tombeau sans Nom*.



Ex. 1 *Pour un Tombeau sans Nom,* m. 17, two-piano version.



Ex. 2 *Pour un Tombeau sans Nom*, m.17, solo version.

In the solo piano reduction (Ex.2), Debussy leaves out the full octaves in the quarter-note upper voice as well as the low G on the second beat of the two-piano version (Ex.1). However, it is possible, to preserve the upper octaves by taking all chordal harmonies of this chromatic ascent/descent entirely with the left hand (G, A-natural circled in first chord can both be taken with LH thumb), leaving the right hand free to preserve the octaves Debussy had to leave out.*

* The bottom G of the first chord can also be sustained with left hand voicing to the bottom and some pedal.

The specialization of performance, however, is also responsible in ways for its regression. The disconnection that exists nowadays between performer and composer has stifled the creativity of performance and given rise to the necessity of the performer to try and regain an understanding of the composer's musical language.

Lyric Poetry

As the templates of the *Bilits* poems were cunningly designed by Louÿs to imitate the mainstays of classical literature, what can be gleaned from his poetic device is a reverence to the ancient moulds he was reviving. Likewise, the six of these poems selected by Debussy, and the literary procedures he too imbedded into his music, show much of the same reverence. The first poem chosen for the *Six épigraphes antique* is *Chant Pastoral*, which begins "we must sing a pastoral song, invoke Pan, god of the summer wind." The tradition of beginning with an invocation of the gods is derived from the opening of Greek dramas that continued throughout Classical literature, functioning as homage to the divinities being called upon for the inspiration of a work – much like an opening prayer. The first lines of Homer's two great epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* both begin with some reference to the gods. Also, the *Homeric hymn to Pan*, *XIX* reads "They sing of the blessed gods and high Olympus and choose to tell of such an one as luck-bringing Hermes above the rest." Pan was the beloved son of the god Hermes, and also a favorite of Dionysus: "Then all the immortals were glad in heart and Bacchic Dionysus in especial; and they called the boy Pan because he delighted all their hearts."[8]

The poetess Sappho, however, lies at the heart of the *Chansons de Bilitis*. The queen of lyric poetry, her work not only served as the model after which Louÿs created his poems, but he also indirectly weaves the fabled poetess into his own poems. One of the women Bilitis

[8] Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *Homeric Hymns* (London, 1914).

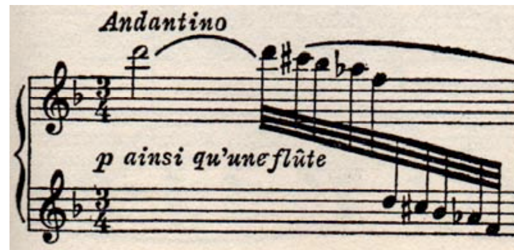
contends for the affection of in the poems, Mnasidika, was also one of the beloved girls who actually appeared in the work of Sappho. What odes and fragments remain of her work are lyric poems, and as such, that is how the text was handed down – musically, through song. This bond between music and poetry has always existed and has been the key to the survival of humanity's high art. "Associative" learning, a relatively modern term, can be seen this way in ancient form, where the poem tells us the tale and the music encapsulates the expression of that tale.

Pan

For the opening work of the *Six épigraphes antiques*, Debussy's selection of *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'éte*, the title taken from the first line of the poem *Chant Pastoral*, recalls the odes of Sappho. Her third and fourth odes, as translated from the surviving fragments by Bliss Carman, also invoke the same god: "O Pan of the evergreen forest, Protector of herds in the meadows."[9] Many artists were drawn throughout their artistic lives towards particular subjects, to which they returned frequently in their work. For Picasso, his essential cast of characters included the Horse and the Bull, symbols of Spain, as well as the Minotaur – a Greek mythological creature, half man and half bull, who fed on human flesh. This symbol was used in the artwork of Picasso as an expression of the political oppression Spain suffered under Franco. Debussy returns throughout the corpus of his work to another Greek mythological creature, also half man and half beast – Pan, as well as other manifestations of the half-human, half-goat deity (fauns or satyrs) as evolved from Greek to Roman mythology. Other works of his in which the character appears include the faun of Mallarmé's poem which he set orchestrally in *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*; *Le Faune*, from the second series of songs *Fêtes gallant*; the song *La flûte de Pan*, from *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*; and *Syrinx*, the flute solo (originally called *Le flute*

[9] Bliss Carman, *Sappho: One Hundred Lyrics* (London, 1921), 6.

de Pan) named after the nymph who, in flight from the amorous pursuit of Pan, was turned by the gods into the rushes from which Pan made his flute. This opening from the piano part of *Le Faune* (Ex.3) contains a downward arabesque similar to figures found in *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* and *Syrinx*. It is marked "*ainsi qu'une flute*" whereby the melodic line of the piano imitates the flute.



Ex. 3 *Le Faune*, from *Fêtes gallant*, second series.

The subject of Pan seems a natural attraction – particularly to evoke the sensuality and closeness to the natural world of the Bilitis poems – and perhaps an expression of the Dionysian aspects of Debussy's nature.

CHAPTER 3

MYSTÈRE

Aside from his background in classical Greek literature and proficiency with its forms, part of the reason Louÿs was able to perpetrate his counterfeit "translation" was with the careful injection of particular details, specific only to Classical Greek culture. For instance, his use of certain Greek words that related specially to ancient Greek culture or mention of the use of "métôpion," an Egyptian perfume, were details that would only be contained in an authentic document, or the forgery of someone incredibly well-educated. Another way he tried to beef up the authenticity of his work was the citation and support of a fictitious German scholar – G. Heim – whom he later admitted having created from the German word "geheim or Geheimnis – secret/mystery." Debussy was no stranger to the use of encryption and aliases himself. His most famous literary vent came in the form of Monsieur Croche (literally, "Mr. Eighth-Note"), Debussy's assumed pen-name, whom he used to veil the expression of his own dissatisfactions with the cultural society that surrounded him. Through the acrid yet mellifluous tongue of Monsieur Croche, he wrote a great deal of pieces – commenting on everything from the "infinite spirit of nature" to "old cosmopolitan Wagnerian ladies" – which were later collected and published as *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*.[10]

The publisher Edmond Bailly owned an occultist bookshop frequented by Debussy and his circle, including Pierre Louÿs, Toulouse-Lautrec, Odilon Redon, the astrologer Ely Star, Erik Satie, and Jules Bois. He wrote, "Debussy allowed himself to become strongly impressed by current theories of Hermetic literature."[11] Occult religious practices were common at that time in

[10] Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater* (New York, 1928).
[11] Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (London, 1962), v.2, 275.

fin-de-siècle Paris, and Jules Bois was the author of several works that gave detailed descriptions of many of these practices. Much of the ceremonies performed within these cults were based on rituals performed by the ancient Greeks and Egyptians. This circle that gathered at Bailly's bookshop was permeated with Pythagorean numerology and a particular interest in the Golden Section.[12] Evidence for Debussy's awareness of the Golden Section comes not only from his connections with certain French artists, but more specifically, one of his letters to Durand concerning the omission of a measure from *Jardins sous la pluie* (*Estampes*) because "it is necessary as regards number; the divine number."[13] Further research has also led to the discovery of Fibonacci sequence in works such as *Reflets dans l'eau* and *Le cathédrale engloutie*.[14] Whether or not such occurrences in Debussy's music were intentional raises a question. If the author of any creative work does not expressly say so, how can we determine if such phenomena are ever intentional? After all, if the entire body of a composer's work is examined, wouldn't it be possible to discover a particular numerical sequence somewhere within it?

Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss makes an engaging argument for the case. In his book *Regarder, Ecouter, Lire* ("Look, Listen, Read") he considers artwork from a variety of fields, periods, and cultures, finding convergences that demonstrate patterns common to each work. A clear example can be found in commonalities that occur in the topology and spatial relations between not only some of the most innovative musical compositions but other forms of artwork. He recognized the impression of fractals, or recurring structural models common in nature that often elicit an aesthetic response, and the manner in which the brain projects such representations onto a work of art. In music, fractals can be observed through lengths of notes

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[12] David Goldman. "Esotericism as a Determinant of Debussy's Harmonic Language." *The Musical Quarterly*, 75, no. 2 (Summer, 1991), 131.
[13] Richard Hoffman. "Debussy's *Canope* as Narrative Form." *College Music Symposium,* 42 (2002), 111.
[14] Roy Howat. "Debussy, Ravel, and Bartok: Towards Some New Concepts of Form." *Music & Letters*, 58, no. 3 (July, 1977), 287.

and their surrounding relations.[15] Memory of such relations, whether involuntary or not, is grafted to a work of art demonstrating similar patterns that occur between different artists. Some phenomena, however, are harder to overlook than others.

Pour la danseuse aux crotales, number four of the *Six épigraphes antiques*, contains a progression that occurs directly in the center of the work (mm.29-33 of 61 total measures) and shares a striking resemblance to one found in the fourth song of Alban Berg's *Vier Lieder*, op. 2, "*Warm die Lüfte*." Not only do they share the same harmonic motion, but also the same spelling.

Ex. 4 Berg – *Warm die Lüfte*.

Ex. 5 Debussy – *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*.

[15] Claude Lévi-Strauss. *Look, Listen, Read* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 83.

Berg's song was written in 1908 and also published in the radical expressionist manifesto *Der blaue Reiter*, along with works of Schoenberg and Webern.[16] As Berg's work preceded Debussy's, the question arises whether or not this was an intentional quotation of Berg. Perhaps as Levi-Strauss explains, since the repetition of such structural tendencies occurs naturally – and such harmonic structures as these were in the air at this time – we might explain this occurrence as either an unconscious repetition or purely coincidental. Or, was this perhaps an encrypted "tip of the hat" to Berg, only discovered some 40 years later by German musicologist H.H. Stuckenschmidt in the 60's.[17]

Though, what were his real views of contemporary German music and what precedent is there of musical quotation in Debussy's music? It is pertinent to note that recent Berg scholarship has pointed to a connection between his *Vier Lieder*, op. 2 and Wagner. The work seems to be imbued with reference to Wagner's *Tristan*, with embedded quotation of melodic gestures and harmonies at original pitch levels. One of the more notable instances of musical quotation in Debussy music occurs in *Golliwog's Cake Walk* (composed the same year as Berg's op. 2 – 1908) in which, like Berg, he also quotes the opening phrase of *Tristan*. Debussy's quotation, however, is a comical jest towards the immense gravity of the famous scene, while Berg's quotation is one of parallel to his own life. Berg's *Vier Lieder* dips even further into the associative realm with his insertion of musical acronyms and tonalities that, in the tradition of Schumann, represent him and his wife Helene. He repeats the pitches A, B-flat, B-natural,

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[16] Theodor Adorno, *Alban Berg, master of the smallest link* (Cambridge, 1991), 48.
[17] H.H. Stuckenschmidt. "Debussy or Berg? The Mystery of a Chord Progression." *The Musical Quarterly*, 51, no. 3 (July 1965), 458.

corresponding to *A*lban *B*erg and *H*elene, as well as the key of D minor, which he also associated with Helene.[18]

Louÿs originally claimed to have served as merely a translator to the discoveries of his fictitious German archaeologist, G. Heim. However, it was the Germanic precision of a non-fictional German scholar, Ulrich van Wilamowitz, which unveiled the hoax of Louÿs. Careful though he was, Louÿs used several entirely modern descriptors in the *Chansons de Bilitis*: "lips red as copper," "nose blue-black as iron," "eyes black as silver" – entirely unancient comparisons. He also happened to overlook the fact that there were no camels then in ancient Greece and that rabbits were not used as sacrificial animals.[19] In his attempts to exoticize his work, he gave himself away with the same use of details he sought to enforce his deception with. Ironically, the discovery of the common progression was made by another German scholar, H.H. Stuckenschmidt – whose name, if we apply the Louÿs/G. Heim treatment, can be translated literally from German as "forger of fragments."

Debussy's sentiment towards German innovation in music, whether interpreted as respect or aversion, seems confusing. In a sense, if he was intentionally quoting Berg, perhaps this was a gesture of esteem. Of course, the manner in which he weaves the fragment is dissimilar from Berg's in that it remains tonal and is not derived from any material that occurs before or after. Debussy's association with the young Stravinsky sheds some light on his opinion of the Second Viennese School. Debussy wrote to Godet, "Stravinsky himself is dangerously leaning in the direction of Schoenberg, but nevertheless remains the most wonderful orchestral technician of our time." Stravinsky, aware of Debussy's remarks, wrote of the 1912 performance of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, "Ravel was quickly contaminated with my enthusiasm for

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[18] Robert Gauldin. "Reference and Association in the Vier Lieder, Op. 2, of Alban Berg." *Music Theory Spectrum*, 21, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), 38.
[19] Freeman G. Henry, *Perceptions of Values* (Atlanta, 1995), 33.

Pierrot, too, whereas Debussy, when I told him about it, merely stared at me and said nothing." Stravinsky seems to have been affected by Debussy, as he later retracts his original excitement and writes of this same Berlin performance, "I did not feel the slightest enthusiasm about the aesthetics of the work."[20] Debussy highly respected Stravinsky's talent and mentored the young composer. They played together Stravinsky's two-piano version of *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Conductor Ernest Ansermet was present for this monumental collaboration in Debussy's home and recalled that, despite his admiration, Debussy remarked: "It seems to me that Stravinsky is trying to make music with non-musical means, in the same way as the German are now pretending to produce steak out of sawdust."[21] Debussy biographer Edward Lockspeiser indicates that this wry remark refers to the practice of German war-time rationing. Perhaps, however, "steak out of sawdust" was a metaphorical allusion to atonality, and his "German" reference was to the Second Viennese School (of which Berg was a member). Ansermet, one of the preeminent interpreters of Debussy's music, would later go on to make the contention that the dissonance of atonality presented inherent problems to human aural perception. Primarily a mathematician before he began his conducting career, Ansermet wrote extensively about this phenomenon, looking to mathematical postulation for explanation.[22]

Many presumptions have been made over Debussy's involvement with mystical practices, whether through the association of acquaintances or his collaborative works. Much of the same research has shown that Berg also was surrounded with the same cult of mysticism. Like Debussy, Berg also shared a particular affinity for numbers. He was drawn to the numerological mystique of Wilhelm Fliess, a friend of Sigmund Freud whose theories were used as the basis for a current of philosophical and musical thought. According to Freud's biographer,

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[20] Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (London, 1962), v.2 185.
[21] Ibid, 182.
[22] Ernest Ansermet, *Les Fondements de la Musique dans la Conscience Humaine* (Neuchâtel, 1961), 81.

Ernest Jones, he looked on numerology and occultism not always scientifically and had a fondness for stories of inexplicable occurrences. Berg shared a superstition along with Freud of certain numbers, particularly the number twenty-three, which he believed to have significance to events in his life; and he often threaded the number into his music.[23]

In the course of investigating the possible connection between the two similar passages, Stuckenschmidt corresponded with Ansermet on the subject. Though he was amazed with the similarity, he noted that the context in which the passages occurred between the two works was different. Debussy has an upper A-flat, repeated in a trance-like rhythmic ostinato pattern, while Berg has a weaving melodic line that spans from G-sharp to E-flat.[24] Regardless of which composer used this type of harmonic gesture first, by no means was this the only instance in which such motion occurs in either of their work. Debussy's use of chords built around the tritone was one of the hallmarks of his harmonic language. However, the mystery of this connection, the chance it could reveal some type of shrouded gesture of respect (or mockery), is uncertain. It may be purely coincident, but the thrill of uncovering a hidden door often supersedes the question of its actual existence. Laurence Sterne, the eighteenth-century English writer of *The Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, once laconically quipped to the seekers prompted to scrutinize his work in search of the allegories contained within it: "they all look too high–tis ever the fate of low minds."[25]

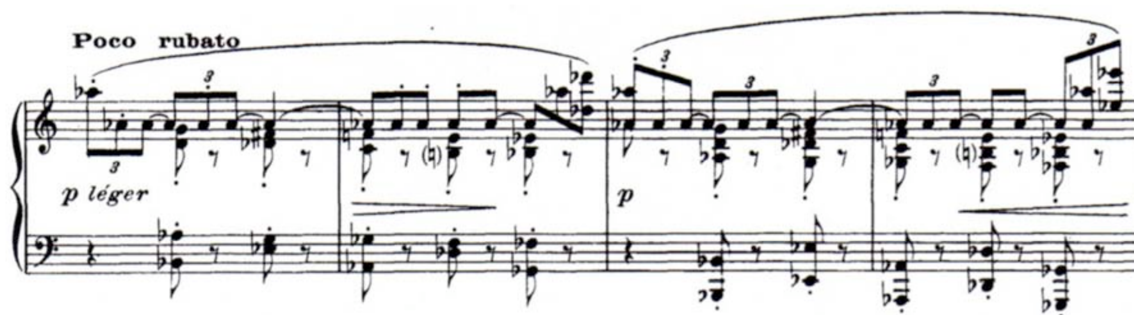
[23] Edward Lockspeiser. *Music and Painting* (London, 1973), 35.
[24] H.H. Stuckenschmidt. "Debussy or Berg? The Mystery of a Chord Progression." *The Musical Quarterly*, 51, no. 3 (July, 1965), 458.
[25] Laurence Sterne, *Letters of Laurence Sterne* (Oxford, 1935), 122.

CHAPTER 4

COMPOSITIONAL DEVICE

Symmetry

Debussy's use of compositional device functions like a montage. His application of harmonic or rhythmic techniques can occur sometimes sparsely, setting one particular method in the foreground, and other times as a layering of several methods from his musical palette working cohesively. The "mystery" chord progression from *Pour la danseuse aux crotales* is also a fine example of Debussy's typical layering of moulds (Ex.6). The bass moves downward in a circle of fifths; the chord progression, built of a tritone plus a fourth above (starting with A-flat, D, G), descends chromatically; the repeated A-flats in the upper voice follow an ostinato rhythmic pattern. Furthermore, all notes fit within the octatonic scale, though it is used more explicitly in other works and seems here only to function as the framework containing the tritone (A-flat to D).



Ex. 6 *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, mm.29-33.

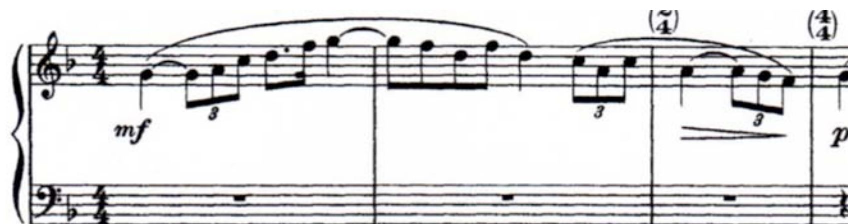
There is an inherent difficulty with attempting to impose any formal analysis to the music of Debussy. It seems that trying to do so goes against the grain of his creative methods, as he

said himself, "there is no theory: it suffices only to *hear*. Pleasure is the rule."[26] Herein exists the reason his music belies conventional analytical technique – hardly does he stay within the use of one method. It seems, rather, more beneficial to the performer to approach his music from an understanding of the language to which he was drawn and from which his music was generated – one of flexibility and structure that possesses both the heart of Dionysus and the head of Apollo.

The use of symmetrical designs can be seen throughout the work of Debussy. Though his attraction was not as much an obsession as it was for Nicolai Medtner (a composer whose use of symmetrical archetypes, such as the octatonic, whole tone, chromatic, often extended into the arrangement of formal structures to fit palindromic designs), Debussy's use of symmetry was a token feature of his style. In the *Épigraphes* it may also occur as a reflection of the omnipresent symmetry of classical Greek architecture, from its amphitheaters to its temples. The first epigraph, *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été*, follows the arch-like, palindromic structure ABCBA.

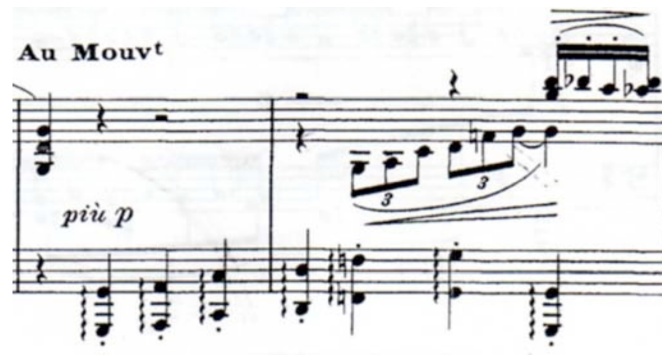
(A, mm. 1-17 B, mm.17-24 C, mm.24-27 B, mm.27-32 A, mm.32-36)

Debussy also uses symmetry in the form of an elliptical design with the recall of the opening theme from Epigraph I (Ex.7) in the last measures of the final Epigraph VI (Ex.8).



Ex. 7 *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été*, m.1.

[26] James Briscoe, *Debussy in Performance* (New Haven, 1999), 33.



Ex. 8 *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*, mm. 58-59.

Topographically, the contour of this opening motif creates another symmetrical arch (Ex.7), starting on G, with motion to the G an octave above, and return to the beginning G. On another level this opening figure, built from the pentatonic scale (F,G,A,C,D), demonstrates symmetrical design in its use of the pentatonic as an enabler of tonal obscurity. This adds tonal flexibility by using a motif for which the tonality is indefinite. This ambiguity also enables Debussy to render another of his frequent building blocks – parallel chords. Theorist Rudolph Reti describes Debussy's use of parallel chords as "chordal melodies" rather than harmonies, also allowing him to circumvent harmonic rigidity.[27] Other thumbprints of Debussy's symmetrical design include his use of whole-tone, chromatic, and octatonic scales.

Construction

Debussy's formal tendencies leaned towards his mastery of the miniature – complete, concise poetic forms that can be found throughout the body of his work. In the tradition of Chopin, he utilized and expanded the possibilities of miniature forms. In this way he deviated from conventional, large-scale formal structures. He has only three sonatas, his last works composed at the behest of Durand, which are unconventional in terms of sonata structure. His

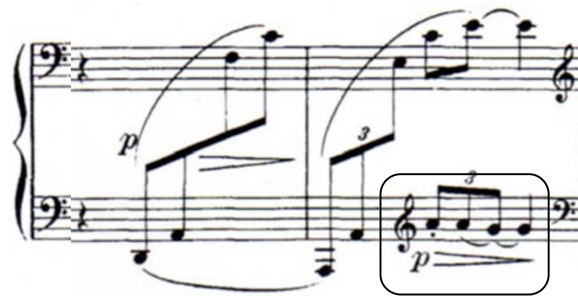
[27] Rudolph Reti. *Tonality, Atonality, Pantonality: a study of some trends in twentieth-century music* (New York, 1958), 27.

large structures come in the form of his complete sets (preludes, etudes) whereby each piece ("movement") functions as an integral piece of the whole structure, yet each is a complete, even interchangeable, work within itself. The syntactical placement is such that they can be, and are often, performed in mixed groups or individually. The craft of this structure is consistent with the flexibility and ambiguity prevalent in his harmonic language. It is also reflected in the occurrence of his work in symmetrical groups – almost all his piano works occur in groups of three or six pieces, as well as two books of 12 preludes, 12 etudes – six epigraphs.

As a collection of miniatures, the *Six épigraphes antiques* demonstrate Debussy's ability to say very much with very little. Like the careful piecing together of an ancient mosaic, his creation must be seen from a bird's-eye in order to glimpse the whole. In this fashion the work evolved much in the same manner as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. The whole of the novel is divided into nine books, each further divided into so many chapters that often a chapter consists of one short paragraph. The work was thought to have evolved from a collection of fragments that, when viewed sequentially, seems a disconnected mass of unfinished strands. Oddly enough, what Sterne's convoluted hero cherishes most is that which "may as certainly be caricatured, and conveyed to the mind by three strokes as three hundred."[28] Sterne's developments would later beget another literary experimentalist, Julio Cortazar, who further refined this methodology with his creation of an open-ended structure. His novel *Rayuela* (or "Hopscotch"), also redolent of the formal structure utilized by Debussy, was created so that the chapters may be read in linear or non-linear sequence, whereby one book consists of many. The author gives several suggested sequential formulas in which the book may be read, but allows the reader to choose his own.

[28] Laurence Sterne, *Life & Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (New York, 1935), 68.

Another way Debussy's musical craft honors its literary roots is through its reflection of poetry. It follows suit that as the *Épigraphes Antiques* were drawn from poetry, the music is filled with metrical devices that resemble those commonly used as the building blocks of classical poetry. These likenesses can often be observed in the melodic line, where text would be inserted if this were song. The length or emphasis of particular musical figures relates to the syllabic stresses of poetic feet, such as an iamb, trochee, dactyl, etc. In this example the design of this triplet figure (Ex.9) resembles the trisyllabic metrical foot of a dactyl, in the sense of emphasis rather than length of syllables (accented–unaccented–unaccented, rather than long–short–short).



Ex. 9 *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, mm.3-4.

Text-Painting

A 1978 doctoral dissertation by Linda Lee Watson reintegrated the text and music of the *Six épigraphes antiques* by creating a performance score that restores a recitation of the poems together with the 1914 piano-duo version. She reverted back to the original adaptation of the work and was able to demonstrate many clear-cut instances of text-painting throughout the music.[29] This type of research, while a vital component of investigative procedure, also demonstrates the "cause" of Louÿs. Debussy does not say specifically that certain passages

[29] Linda Lee Watson. "Debussy: A Programmatic Approach to Form." Ph.D.diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1978, 193-264.

correlate to the poetic text. In this way he also necessarily involves the performer in translation, through the recreation of the work. Unlike his songs, the text associated with the *Épigraphes* is not placed directly above the music to firmly support Debussy's ideas about text-painting. Watson's dissertation, based on clues from the composer, was the interpretive expansion of a performer, whose comprehension of the work was continued in the spirit of the composer.

Ever reluctant to disclose the spark behind his compositions, Debussy left this task to the performer: "one is never so well served as by oneself."[30] In certain instances, however, there are clues that can be found elsewhere in the body of Debussy's work to substantiate consistent musical ideas. There is also an abundance of musical representation in his work harnessed from his vast awareness of external musical currents, both historical and modern.

From the first epigraph, *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été*, Debussy's classic use of the pentatonic for the work's primary unifying motif (Ex. 7, Ex. 8) calls forth once again impressions of warmth, nature, purity, as in two other works with opening motifs based on the pentatonic – the preludes *Bruyères* (Book II, V) and *La Fille aux cheveux de lin* (Book I, VIII). The title *Bruyères*, or "Heathers" refers simply to the low-lying bushes found on the Celtic coastal highlands, while *La Fille aux cheveux de lin* presents another illustration of the composer firmly rooted in the literary world. The prelude was inspired by the poem of the same name by Leconte de Lisle that conjures much of the same imagery found in Louÿs's poem: "Love, in the clear summer sun, Has sung with the lark."[31] In all three instances Debussy relates a pentatonic melody with the evocation of calm pastoral scenes – a connection perhaps drawn from both the simplicity of the five-note scale and its derivation from many early music cultures.

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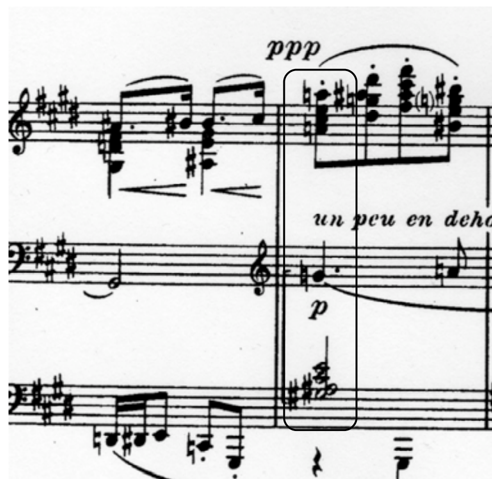
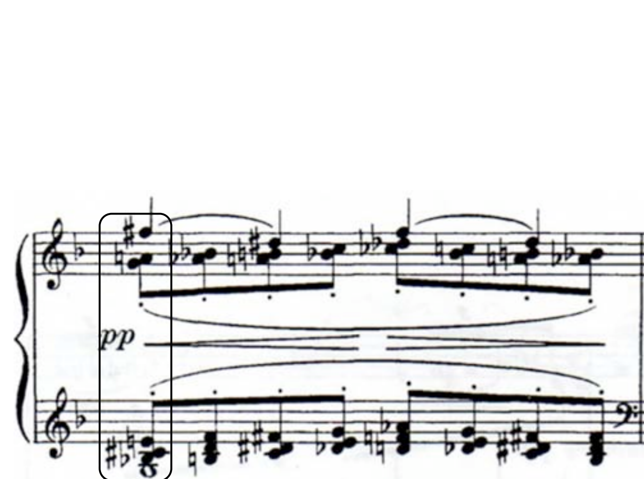
[30] Marguerite Long, *At the piano with Debussy* (London, 1972), 45.
[31] Ibid, 65.

In the poem of the second epigraph, *Bilitis* plunges abruptly from the "Summer wind," "flowers," and "grasses" of *Chant pastoral* to the "throngs of Hades" in *Le Tombeau sans Nom*. Debussy invokes the domain of death and decay in several of his other works, two of which contain musical resemblances to passages in *Pour un Tombeau sans Nom*. There are occasionally parallel situations in which he reworks a particular device in order to evoke common atmospheres. This chord (Ex.9) occurs at the central section of the prelude *Feuilles mortes* and consists of sonorities contained within the octatonic scale.



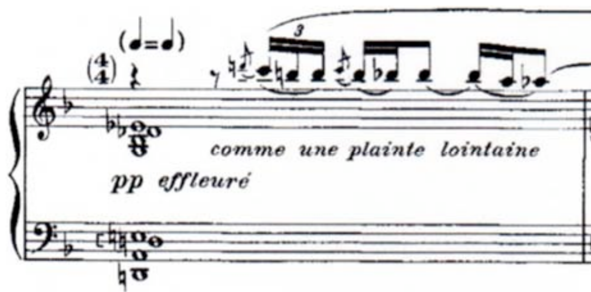


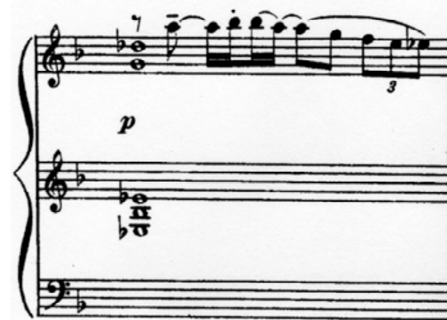
Ex. 9 *Feuilles mortes*, m. 25. Ex. 10 *Pour un tombeau sans nom*, m.17.

A similar chord occurs in *Pour un tombeau sans nom* (Ex.10). Both chords share the notes G, A# (B-flat), C#, E, A. The uncommon tones are G# in the prelude, which functions as a bass pedal, and F# in the epigraph, part of a melodic ostinato. Both chords, spelled at the same pitch levels, occur at a similar midpoint in the piece and both works invoke the atmosphere of death ("*Dead Leaves*" and "*The Nameless Tomb*").

Another fragment that appears at the end of *Pour un tombeau sans nom* reflects the evocation of death found in a different prelude – *Canope* (Book II, X). This one-word title, placed at the end, calls forth an undercurrent shared between both works – the netherworld. The prelude *Canope* refers to the jars used by ancient Egyptians in ceremonies for the dead. Such

urns were used for the preservation of the vital organs, for the purpose of preserving the soul. Debussy is known to have kept two such Canopic jars on his work-desk.[32] Reflecting a similar atmosphere, the final line of the poem corresponding to *Pour un tombeau sans nom* reads: "For how could we summon a single soul from all the souls in Hades." Two passages, one in *Canope* (Ex.12) and the other from *Pour un tombeau sans nom* (Ex. 11), bear distinct resemblances to each other, whereby the melodic line follows the rhythmic alternation of a triplet in a descending arabesque figure.





Ex. 11 *Pour un tombeau sans nom*, m.28. Ex. 12 *Canope*, m.13.

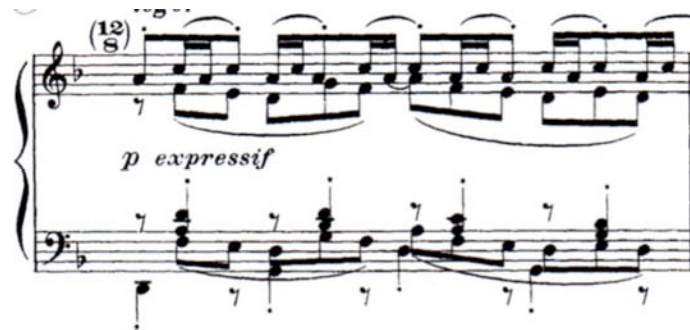
In both instances this descending figure is supported below with a sustained whole note chord, and both chords share the common tones E-flat, G, B-flat, D-flat. Unlike the epigraph, there is no poetry that corresponds to this prelude. The passage in the epigraph (written only 1 year after the prelude) is more explicitly marked with the indication *comme une plainte lointaine* ("like a distant cry"). The similarity of these two figures suggest that such a design holds significance for Debussy, the appearance of an apparition, the release, or "summon" of a soul.

Ostinato

Another compositional device Debussy used to enhance literary association in his music was the use of ostinato. In each of the six epigraphs ostinati can be found at some level, either

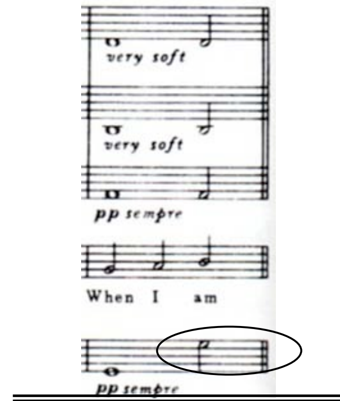
[32] Richard Hoffman. "Debussy's *Canope* as narrative form." *College Music Symposium,* 42 (2002), 106.

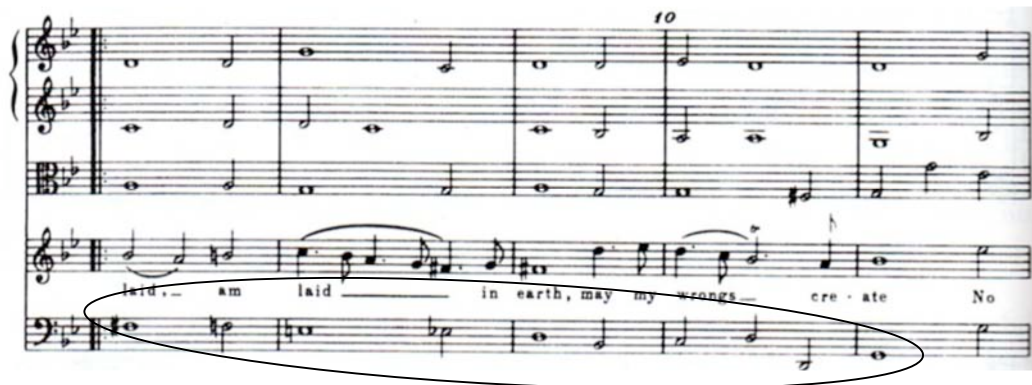
through the repetition of a particular gesture or a rhythmic pattern. Most of these ostinati also contain literary connections through their poetic implication. This rhythmic ostinato in the first epigraph (Ex.13) contains a repeated circular or "wheel-like" pattern, similar to Schubert's *Gretchen am spinnrade* (and in the same key of D minor), that resembles the motions of a spinning-wheel. The *Bilitis* poem corresponding to this first epigraph reads, "I tear the wool from the blond backs of the sheep to fill up my distaff, and I spin."



Ex. 13 *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été*, m. 24.

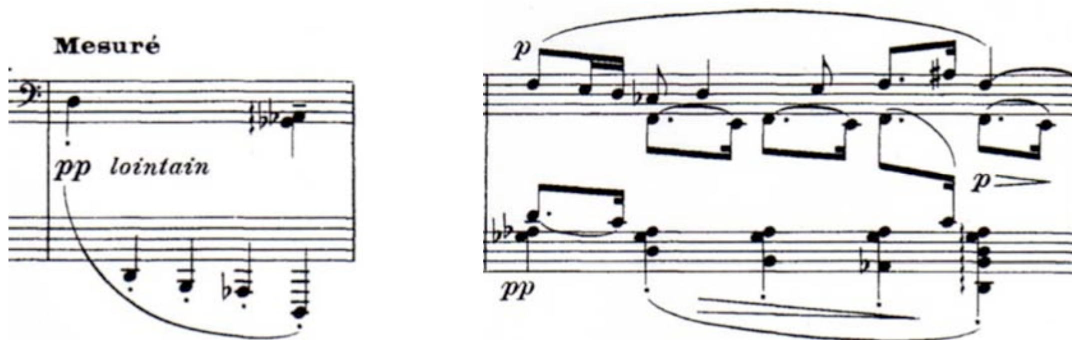
Another kind of ostinato used by Debussy can be traced back to a famous example from three centuries prior, found in Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. Purcell continues the tradition founded in Italian opera, and used by many others following, of setting the lament of Dido ("When I am laid in earth") above a *basso ostinato*. The bass repeats a slow, stepwise descending melodic pattern that accompanies Dido's aria (Ex.14).





Ex. 14 Henry Purcell (1659-1695), *Dido and Aeneas*, Act III, Scene 2, “When I am laid in earth.”

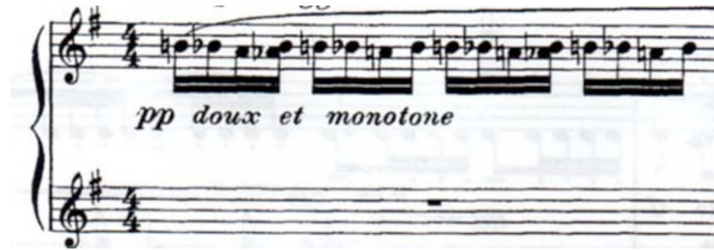
Such constructions were commonly used in musical scenes depicting descent into the underworld, a principle adumbrated by Debussy for the further enhancement of *Bilitis's* brief encounter with the realm of death in epigraph two (Ex.15).



Ex. 15 *Pour un tombeau sans nom*, m. 3 & m. 8.

In much the same manner that Renoir was able to achieve movement in his landscape paintings, Debussy commonly uses ostinato figures of perpetuum mobile for the same effect in

his music. This steady, circular motif is used for the representation of "the morning rain" in epigraph six (Ex.16). The poem to this epigraph reads: "And I, in the morning rain, I am writing these verses in the sand … Those who love after me will sing my stanzas together."



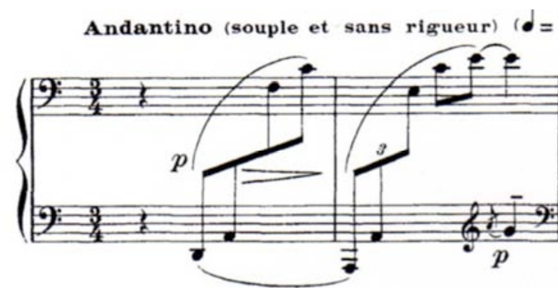
Ex. 16 *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*, m. 1.

This figure is different from that used to depict rain in previous works such as *Jardins sous la pluie* (*Estampes*). It shares, however, the circularity of other perpetuum mobile features used by Debussy (*Feux d'Artifice*) that are also placed as the final pieces to his large works – perhaps to underline the symbol of the circle, representing the eternal.

Double Entendre

Another instance of compositional device that more specifically relates to literary methods may be found in the fourth epigraph, *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*. As the word "*crotales*" has two meanings in French – "cymbals," or "rattlesnakes" – it is possible that "*crotales*" functions here as a double entendre. The more plausible meaning of the word in the context of the poem is "cymbals," most likely a reference to the Greek dancers who used small, castanet-like cymbals in their dances. The word evolved from the sound of the rattlesnake that was imitated by ancient dancers using a small percussive type of cymbal or clapper. Several Greek sculptures that feature such ancient dancers holding little cymbals are held in the Louvre – works also titled *les danseuses aux crotales*. Debussy was familiar with the collection of ancient art in the Louvre, as evinced with the prelude *Danseuses de Delphes* which was inspired by a

caryatid on display there. He even recalls the exact location of this work within the museum "at the top of the grand staircase … to the left of the 'Winged Victory.'"[33] It is also possible that the word refers to the depiction of a dancer with actual "rattlesnakes," rather than cymbals which imitate their sound. Many symbolic implements were featured in ancient dance, and the snake was a pre-dominant symbol in the Greek mystery rites – representing both fertility and immortality. George Barbier, in his 1922 set of art nouveau illustrations published alongside the *Chansons de Bilitis*, includes the image of a warrior battling a snake.[34] Interestingly, the topographical design of this epigraph's recurring motif possesses an uncanny resemblance to a type of serpentine motion (Ex.17).



Ex. 17 *Pour la danseuse aux crotales* motif, m. 1.

If this were the intended meaning of the word, the poem could be coherently translated by replacing "cymbals" with "snakes," or perhaps there are implications of both meanings. Debussy once said, in argument with his composition teacher Ernest Guirard about the use of unresolved chords, "one goes out by whatever door one will. Thenceforth the terrain is enlarged. And the nuances."[35]

[33] Louisa Liebich. "An Englishwoman's Memories of Debussy" *The Musical Times*, 59, no. 904 (June 1918), 250.
[34] Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis: traduit du Grec* (Paris, 1922).
[35] Marguerite Long, *At the piano with Debussy* (London, 1972), 17.

CHAPTER 5

ENSUING INTERPRETIVE WORK

Orchestration

The most notable interpretive contribution to emerge from Debussy's original creation of *Six épigraphes antiques* in 1914 was the orchestration of the work, created in 1939 by a musician very familiar with Debussy's orchestral technique – Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet (1883-1969). It is a lesser-known work than other orchestrations drawn from piano compositions (Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Ravel's *La Valse*). This may be due to the intimate nature of the *Épigraphes*, which dwell more in subtle nuance and atmospheric shading than large-scale contrast. It stands, however, as no less a work in creativity or innovation.

In a letter from July 11, 1914 to his publisher, Jacques Durand, Debussy expressed his intention to create an orchestral suite of the *Six épigraphes antiques* that never came to fruition. Through his acquaintance with Debussy and his role as one of the pre-eminent interpreters of his music, Ansermet was at a unique position to take on the orchestration of this work. A giant among the great conductors of the twentieth-century, he maintained a lifelong commitment to Debussy through his legendary performances of the composer's works. As a composer and orchestrator, Ansermet has only seven cataloged works, and the orchestration of *Six épigraphes antiques* was the last of these.[36] Before he began a career as conductor, he was primarily a mathematician. His mastery of numbers lent a fuller understanding of the structural levels of music, and his contributions in this respect are well documented in his 1961 book *Les Fondements De La Musique Dans La Conscience Humaine*. Ansermet was present when

[36] The list of Ansermet's compositions and orchestrations appears in the catalog of the Ernest Ansermet Exhibition held in Brussels in 1984, p.64.

Stravinsky played together with Debussy the two-piano reduction of *The Rite of Spring*, and he made several suggestions to Stravinsky that would give a clearer indication to the conductor by reorganizing several rhythmic structures in the score. Stravinsky's respect for the proficiency of Ansermet's orchestral comprehension led him to include these revisions in a later version of the work. In 1939 Ansermet undertook the work of orchestrating the *Six épigraphes antiques*, attempting to do so "in the style of Debussy."[37]

Such a task, as it also necessarily involves invention through translation, was not only undertaken as a creative expansion of the original ('the terrain is enlarged'), but also strongly grounded in the orchestral style of Debussy. Much of the instrumentation chosen by Ansermet reflects textual clues that can be found in the poems, both directly and indirectly. In the first epigraph, for example, the flute is used for the opening motif – a musical conveyance drawn directly from contextual clues, as Pan is referenced in the first line of the poem ("Let us invoke Pan") and also commonly associated with the flute. One example of an indirect textual representation would be the use of tremolo swells in the strings for the conveyance of an atmosphere associated with fear (trembling) found in the second epigraph (*Pour un tombeau sans nom*).

Range

The range of Ansermet's orchestration shifts rapidly, from small to large scale, between instruments of contrasting qualities. It is full of dialogue and exchange between winds and strings, contrasting temperatures of the brass, seasoned with percussion, while full tutti swells are reserved for contrast in pivotal moments. He summons the orchestral atmospheres of Debussy,

[37] "One day I had to conduct *Rondes de Printemps* in Paris and Ravel told me, after the concert, 'It was very good. You have done as well as possible with this bad scoring.' But I told him it is not badly scored. It is difficult to realize. That is the point. And now, you know, I have scored myself the *Épigraphes Antiques*, which were written for two pianos, and I have tried to write them in the style of Debussy." In Robert Chesterman, *Conversations with Conductors* (London: Robson Books, 1976), 93.

created with unique timbral effects, muted instruments, meticulous design and distribution, specific notation, and innovative instrumentation.

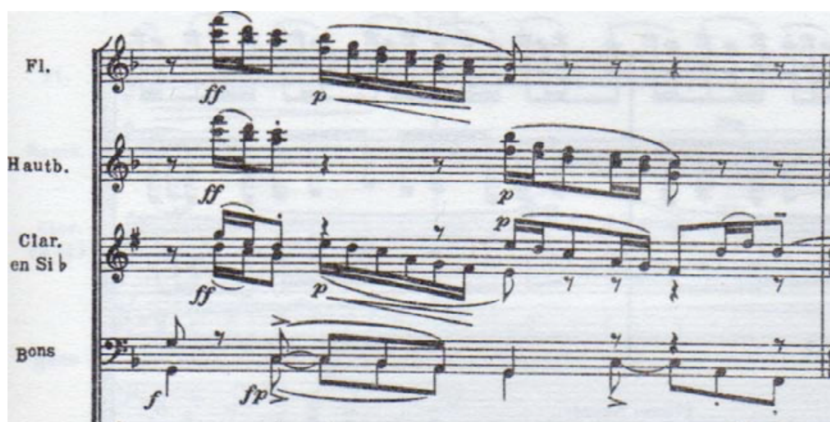
Expansion/Contraction

Ansermet uses the ability to manipulate the volume of sound by means different from those of the piano. The pianist's tools for the increase of sound are weight and speed, while Ansermet utilizes the expansion, or growth, of instrumentation. It is closer, though not as gradual, to the effect exploited in Ravel's *Bolero*: not just volume, or force used by the instrument to play louder increases, but an enlargement of sound is created through the increase of numbers playing. One example of this effect occurs in four measures of the orchestration to *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*, where the climactic swell of the piece, which is marked almost entirely *p* or *pp*, crescendos from *pp* to *mf* (Ex.18).

Ex. 18 *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*, mm. 34-38 (orch. Ansermet).

Ansermet, instead of simply marking a crescendo with the existing cast of instruments, starts thin and increases the forces of the strings by gradations, subtly expanding their numbers (new entries are even indicated with *ppp* so as not to increase sound abruptly with each additional layer). Within the space of four bars, he moves from just violas and winds playing *pp* to a full tutti *mf*.

Conversely, he achieves diminuendo in the same way, by whittling away the amount of instruments. He also combines this method of creating diminuendo with another – the exchange of material with instruments of gradually less bright timbres. One example of both techniques occurs in the dynamic swell of the first epigraph (Ex.19).



Ex. 19 *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été*, m. 22 (orch. Ansermet).

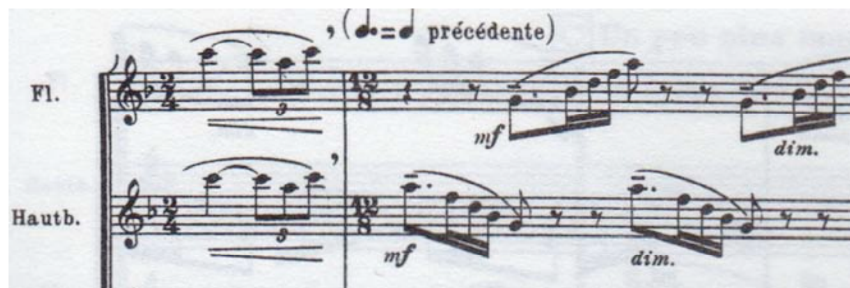
Another way he achieves a lessening of sound is by shifting the instrumentation of the upper melodic figure (given to the winds) into four groups of descending subordinate gradations: 1) flutes, oboes, clarinets; 2) flutes, clarinets; 3) oboes, clarinets; 4) clarinets. The piano version of this melodic figure, consisting of descending thirds and fourths, contains no fewer notes – only a decrescendo and diminuendo to the end of the bar.

Instrumentation

The two primary instruments represented in the artwork and lyric poems of ancient Greece are the lyre and the aulos. The lyre, and its larger counterpart the Kithara, was associated with the followers of the cult of Apollo. "Lyric" poetry meant poetry sung to the lyre. The aulos, often misidentified as the flute, was a reed instrument used in the worship of Dionsyus and accompanied the singing of dithyrambs. The aulos was used by Sacadas (586 B.C.) while playing the *Nomos Pythicos* – a musical portrayal of the combat between Apollo and the serpent Python. The Apollonian/Dionysian polarities of Debussy are also represented from the very outset in Ansermet's orchestration, both through the choice of instruments and distribution of parts. He uses the modern-day descendants of the aulos and lyre: flute and oboe exchange the melodic line while the underlying harmonies are plucked by the harp.

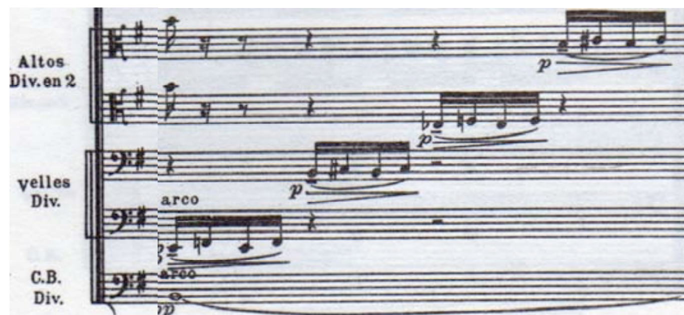
Exchange

In the case of repeated melodic figures or motifs within a piece, Ansermet often redistributes the instrumentation of such figures, dividing the timbre of one idea between different solo and groups of instruments. Two general types of such exchanges between instrument groups occur. The first type happens within smaller motivic fragments, which are rapidly divided between instruments. In *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été*, a fragment of the melodic line is exchanged between flute and oboe, changing the timbre of this melodic figure between its descent and ascent (Ex.20).



Ex. 20 *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été*, mm. 9-10.

This fragment in *Pour remercier la pluie au matin* is rapidly passed across different string registers (Ex.21).



Ex. 21 *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*, m. 41.

The other type of exchange is characterized by the redistribution of instrumentation over longer sections, whereby an entire motif, or large melodic portion, will be played through by one instrument, then given to another. This is also used in the opening motif of the first epigraph, played through by the flute then exchanged with other instruments upon the repetition of the same motif.

Recall

Another technique of orchestration that further develops Debussy's principle of symmetrical design is the use of recall. Ansermet uses a type of recall whereby one solo instrument is given the initial thematic material, which is then exchanged to another instrument and sequentially transferred between other solo and mixed pairs, only to be summoned back in the final restatement of theme by the original instrument. This plan is seen in the overall design of the first epigraph: after the inital motif is played through twice by solo flute, melodic material is then exchanged with the oboe and gradually increasing numbers, then finally restated by solo flute. The distribution of melodic material in the orchestration of *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été* happens in the following order.

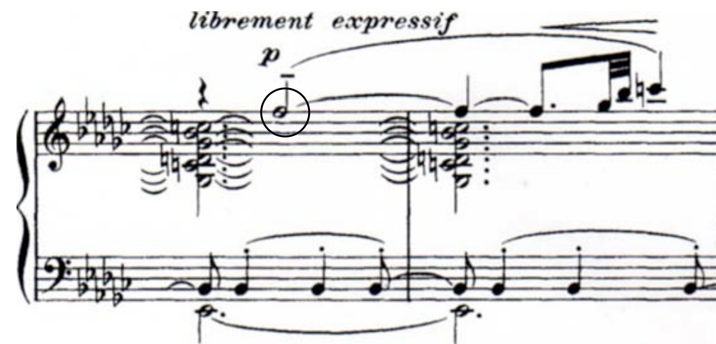
solo Flute and Oboe — Violins I — 2 Clarinets — Tutti — 2 Clarinets — Violins I — solo Flute and Oboe

It is also interesting that this plan, from the gradual scaling in the number of instruments used, has both arch-like and palindromic features and occurs similarly in *Pour l'Egyptienne*.

Beyond the Piano

Because of the nature of decay on the piano, the dynamic expansion (crescendo) of a single note, after struck, should only be perceptibly obtainable with a crescendo in the next following note. There are of course more impalpable means, however, to maintain a tone on the

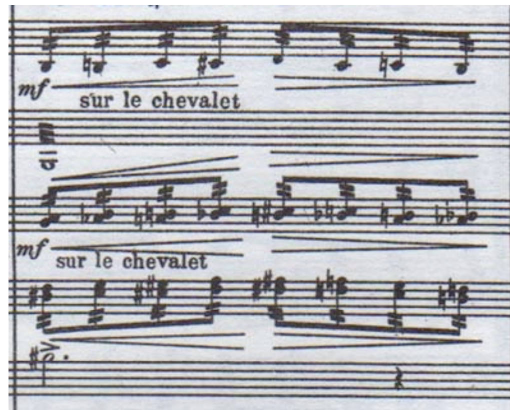
piano after it has been struck; but Ansermet utilizes the potential of orchestral instruments both to sustain and crescendo on long notes. This sustained half-note in the melodic line of *Pour l'Egyptienne* (Ex.22), because of the slower tempo, generally fades on the piano before its consequent notes, due to decay. Ansermet gives this line to the oboe, which is able to sustain and grow into the notes that follow.



Ex. 22 *Pour l'Egyptienne*, m. 5-6.

Orchestral Timbres

Ansermet uses the whole gamut of timbral effects unique to orchestral instruments. With the strings he uses indications like *sur le chevalet*, having the string tremolo played towards the bridge, as seen here in the violins and violas of the second epigraph (Ex.23). The poem of this epigraph reads, "Then I felt a great shiver." This effect would later come to be exploited by cinema composers in order to transmit instantly the air of suspense or eeriness to a scene. He also indicates the use of sordino, pizzicato, portamento, and glissando – all very specific effects that create sounds unique to string instruments.



Ex. 23 *Pour un tombeau sans nom*, m. 16.

As the poetic text of this work evokes the use of percussion, whether as ornament to ancient dance or ritual, Ansermet explores the possibilities of modern orchestral percussion to broaden this language. In *Pour la danseuse aux crotales* he uses the triangle to imitate the resounding "crotales" of the dancer, xylophone to highlight the grace-notes in *Pour l'Egyptienne*, as well as celesta, glockenspiel, timpani, and all manner of drums throughout the other epigraphs. *Pour un tombeau sans nom* calls for a *ppp* bass drum roll that accompanies the opening solo melodic line. The effect achieved by this is barely perceptible but quite stirring, as though somewhere within the ventilation of this tomb there is movement. No indication can be found anywhere within the piano parts by Debussy to suggest this effect. It is purely the enhancement of the interpreter, Ansermet carrying on the tradition handed down by the composer.

Visual

The *Épigraphes* represent a microcosmic fusion of the arts. Its inspiration is based both in the poetic and narrative realm of literature, which in turn dealt with the dramatic, dance, and musical forms of the ancient world. However, the direct impact of visual mediums concerning *Bilitis* and the possible influence of such artwork on Debussy's music is disputable. Ansermet

even argues that painting had no influence on Debussy's music and though the two arts existed parallel to each other, they were not dependent on one another.[38] Taken in context here Ansermet's statements seem more a reaction against the labeling of Debussy as 'Impressionist' and an assertion of his role as a lyrical composer whose music was closer to poetry than painting. Nevertheless, antique subjects were *en vogue* at this time in Paris and featured prominently as the subject of A*rt Nouveau* prints, drawings, paintings, and architecture. The popularity of *Bilitis* was long lasting and spawned a great deal of artwork on the subject. The artists Joseph Raphaël Collin (1850-1916) and George Barbier (1882-1932) both contributed works that illustrated Louÿs's *Chansons de Bilitis*. Collin, a French academic painter noted for his rendering of classical female figures and his association with Japanese artists, painted twenty-three works based on the *Chansons de BIlitis* that appeared in 1906.[39] Barbier was one of the most sought-after French illustrators of the early 20th century whose commissions included everything from theater designs, to ballet costumes, to wallpaper. The book of Barbier's illustrations, alongside the poems of Louÿs, was published in 1922.

Dance

In his lifetime Debussy witnessed the choreography of at least two of his works – *Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune* and *Jeux*. Nijinsky devised the choreography for both. His aim for the *Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune* was to set in motion an archaic bas-relief with the dancers heads held in profile and arms moving in angular positions.[40] Like the choreography for *l'Apres-Midi d'un Faune*, *Jeux* was also influenced by the principles of Swiss composer Jacques-Dalcroze. Following his methods, the movement of arms and feet were coordinated with note-

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[38] Robert Chesterman, *Conversations with Conductors* (London, 1976), 92.
[39] Accademia di Francia, *Debussy e il Simbolismo: Roma, Villa Medici, aprile-giugno*, *1984*. (Rome, 1984), 89.
[40] Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (London, 1962),v.2, 171.

values, attempting mathematical precision. Debussy strongly disapproved of the choreography for both.[41] He also felt that *l'Apres-Midi d'un Faune* was too mechanical, not flexible and that *Jeux* focused too much on the erotic, with insufficient fantasy.[42]

In 1984 the choreographer Jerome Robbins premiered his rendering of *Six* é*pigraphes antiques* with eight female members of the New York City Ballet, using Ansermet's orchestration of the work. While Robbins's choreography is quite modern, it proceeds from the idioms of classical ballet, also borrowing positions from the style of Martha Graham.[43] Robbins kept much of the angularity of Nijinsky in his choreography that so displeased Debussy. What must be kept in mind is that this angularity represents a twentieth-century vision of Hellenic artwork as perceived through modern eyes – living two-dimensional friezes. Despite the limitations of the artists who depicted them, ancient Greek dancers probably did not move like robots. Debussy's music, while it also uses a contemporary musical language that attempts to recreate the ancient with modern devices, does not separate itself from organic process. His roots are found in the timeless expression of human language.

Performance

Metaphor

One of the most powerful devices given the performer is metaphor, both in the way it is used to collect impressions during the learning process and conversely transfer these into expression through performance. This work opens infinite metaphorical and associative

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[41] "This fellow adds up demi-semi-quavers with his feet, proves the result with his arms and then, as if suddenly struck with paralysis of one side, listens to the music for a while disapprovingly. This it appears is to be called the 'stylization of gesture'. How awful! It is in fact Dalcrozian, and this is to tell you that I hold Monsieur Delacroze to be one of the worst enemies of music!." From Debussy's June 1913 letter to Godet in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind* (London, 1962), v.2, 172.

[42] Robert Chesterman, *Conversations with Conductors* (London, 1976), 90-91.

[43] Anna Kisselgoff, "Ballet: A Robbins World Premiere" *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1984.

possibility as it weaves its way through the depiction of an extinct ancient culture, perceived through the "rediscovered" poems about the rituals, life, love, and environs of a fictional woman, imagined by Louÿs, set to music by Debussy – a labyrinth of perspectives that extends through time. The work has further continued its evolution, through the interpretive contributions of artists following Debussy. Each performer is left to decide to what extent, if any, the ensuing creative efforts of others impact their own comprehension.

There is an inherent difficulty with writings about performance. The value of written description on the rendering of music is comparable to a dance manual published by the English Royal ballet, or the cookbook of a master chef – they contain hardly more than ingredients. The sous-chef or apprentice must work alongside the master, where they are able to taste, watch, and absorb the methods of age-old refinement. The learning process cannot be dissociated with sensory perceptions, particularly the ones most vital to each discipline. Hearing cannot be subtracted from music, but it exists not only through the realm of sound. There are specific pedagogical means unique to the craft of music that written words cannot demonstrate: the use of breath, gesture, proportion. Metaphor, however, enables higher-level connections that are shared in common with all art forms. Particularly for a composer such as Debussy, whose impressions survive through his own writings, or those close to him, words can guide, with contextual clues, emotional insight, and feed the creativity of the performer. It must also be considered that letters are often used to disguise, or at least obscure truth in some way. As performers, we are charged with the recreation of a work and some discernment of the creator's perception, and with the *Épigraphes Antiques* we are presented a work that reveals a composer completely immersed in the sensory world of an ancient atmosphere. While composing *La bôite à joujoux*, the 'children's ballet' based on the secret lives of his daughter's toys, Debussy wrote to Durand that

he was "extracting secrets from Chouchou's old dolls" and "learning to play the slide drum in preparation."[44] In order to fertilize the creative atmosphere of a composition he stepped completely into it.

Tools

The solo version of the *Épigraphes Antiques*, particularly because it is a reduction for one piano of what can be easily achieved by two performers, requires a great deal of creativity for the pianist to execute true to the composer's original vision. Compared to the orchestral or four hand piano performance of this work, there are many innate limitations to solo piano performance. As Ansermet utilized fully the orchestra's potential for his augmentation of the *Épigraphes*, pianists, likewise, must use every means at his or her disposal to achieve their own musical ends. There are several obvious advantages that solo interpretation has over ensemble, particularly with a work such as this which frequently and rapidly fluctuates tempi and character – flexibility, unity of intent. Due to the greater numbers being directed, orchestral performance requires more uniformity in interpretation.

Beyond the Orchestra

Debussy's musical imagination sought some ideal form that extended even beyond what could be achieved by orchestration (or typical orchestral instruments). He revered the sound of primitive instruments, such as the Egyptian shepherd's pipe:

> I prefer the simple notes of an Egyptian shepherd's pipe; for he collaborates with the landscape and hears harmonies unknown to your treatises.[45]

This statement, penned by him in 1904 (10 years before *Épigraphes Antiques*), prophesies exactly what he created with the opening of the first epigraph – simple notes, of an instrument

[44] Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge, 1982), 177.

[45] Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater* (New York, 1928), 11.

based on the pentatonic scale, above chords that float beyond the boundaries of traditional formal analysis. Whether he actually heard such an instrument as the Egyptian shepherd's pipe in his time, or if he simply envisioned the sound of it – evoked by the satyr's of ancient vases – changes our understanding.

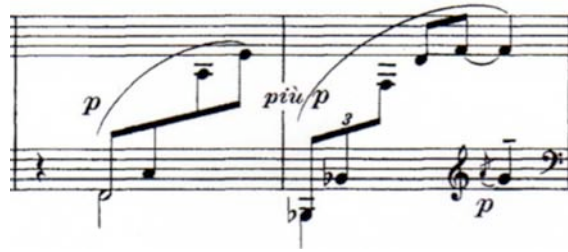
Should the performer choose to supplement his understanding of a piano work, based either on the orchestral augmentation of Ansermet or a general orchestral mentality, there are many concepts that can be borrowed from orchestral playing. There is a long tradition in keyboard playing that borrows from the bowing and breathing techniques of string and wind players, as evinced by the treatises of C.P.E. Bach, J.J. Quantz, and Leopold Mozart.[46]

Connection

Orchestral playing allows for the possibility of continuation or connection of sounds, while sustained notes and legato playing on the piano are restricted by decay. However, the pianist has several other "connective" tools unique to the instrument that can produce sonorities different from simply pushing down the damper pedal.

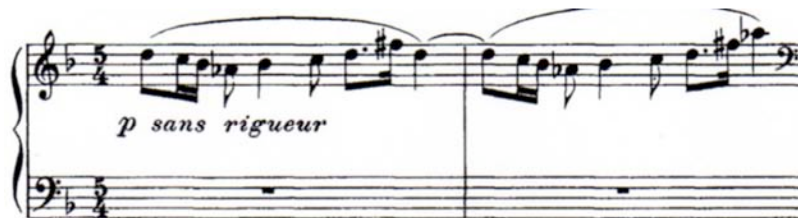
"Hand pedal" involves a type of sustain that is achieved by means different from the damper pedal. Holding one or several notes, particularly from the lower register, allows a type of sustain which is cleaner than the use of the damper pedal – as only a few dampers are raised rather than all. Here is an instance in which the use of just the hand (bass half-note is held into consequent bass quarter-note, eighth-notes released) to connect the bass notes is understood, as the damper pedal would blur the eighth-notes into one another (Ex.24).

[46] Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (New York, 1948).



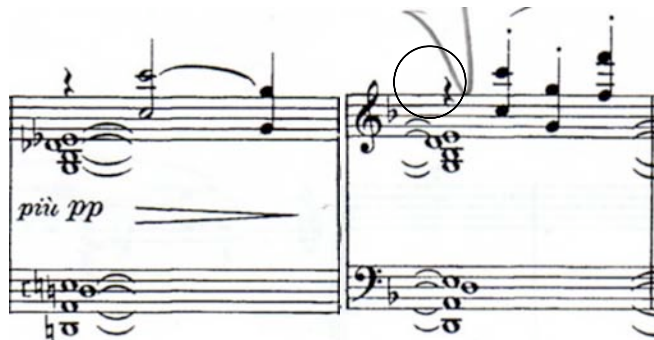
Ex. 24 *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, mm.19-20.

It is also possible with a simple melodic line to create a type of sonority, without using pedal, that creates a sound of sustain, or ringing (characteristic of the right pedal), in a way that escapes the overt blending of tones caused by lifting all the dampers. In this opening of *Pour un tombeau sans nom* (Ex.24) Ansermet compliments the melodic line in his orchestration (given to the oboe) with a *ppp* bass drum roll, subtly creating a type of barely inaudible sense of movement in the air. As the left hand of the pianist is free in this opening measure, it is possible in the solo version to create an atmosphere that is similar but unique. By silently depressing and holding a cluster of notes in the bass, before beginning the work, a particular sonority is created as the melody is played with the right hand. Also subtle, this effect is similar but different from use of the damper. This sonority is caused by the release of overtones, associated with the held bass cluster, that are activated when their relative tones are depressed in the melodic line.



Ex. 24 *Pour un tombeau sans nom*, m.1 (Bass Cluster).

Rarely is the use of middle ("sostenuto") pedal explicitly notated by composers. However, as this work was originally conceived for four hands, which are capable of holding things two hands are not, there are many instances where the use of sostenuto pedal seems logical. One instance where the sostenuto pedal seems a necessity occurs in the second epigraph (Ex.25). In order to observe the rest indicated in the right hand, the whole note chords (sustained from the previous measure) must be taken with the sostenuto pedal.



Ex. 25 *Pour un tombeau sans nom*, mm.19-20 (Sostenuto Pedal).

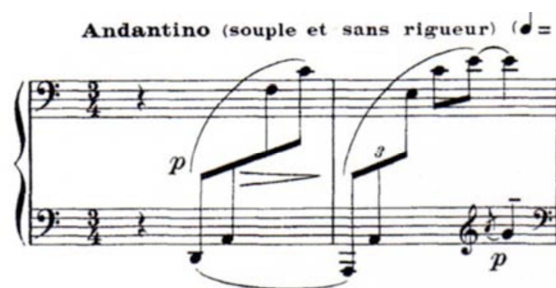
This type of sound sustaining exploration, however, falls entirely short of mentioning the most popular sustaining device of all. Most commonly referred to as "the" pedal (damper/right pedal), it is the easiest to use; yet like the gas pedal of a car, there are many gradations that determine a great deal more. The pedal can open layers beyond; but it requires, more than anything, a sharp ear.

Notation

Debussy took meticulous care over the hand-written final copies of all his compositions. An artist from beginning to end, many of his works were bound with *art nouveau* cover designs. His *Prèludes*, for example, were adorned with peacock feathers. Over-sized pages allowed for the broad spacing of phrases, suggesting the massiveness of *La Cathédrale engloutie.* while the span of phrase lines resemble more serpentine swirls. *Morendo* endings appear to actually fade

away from the page.[47] He also paid particular attention to the kind of typefaces used for musical direction and titles. In his letters with Durand, Debussy discusses in great detail not only the particular types of paper to be used, but also specific colors appropriate for binding of the covers.[48]

Though with careful investigation, one can find through the subtleties of his notation clues to the intricate master plan of his aesthetic design. One example of the subtlety of his musical intent as evidenced by minute differences in score indication can be found in *Pour la danseuse aux Crotales*. The unifying motif of the piece, occurring three times throughout, is annotated with a slight difference each time it appears. The bass notes are given only eighth-note values and connected with a slur (Ex. 26).

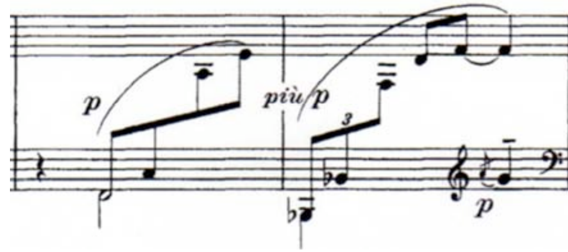


Ex. 26 *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, m.1.

In the second occurrence of this motif (Ex.27), the bass is indicated with a half-note leading into a quarter, no slur. Here the bass must be held with the hand, as pedal would also blend the surrounding eighths.

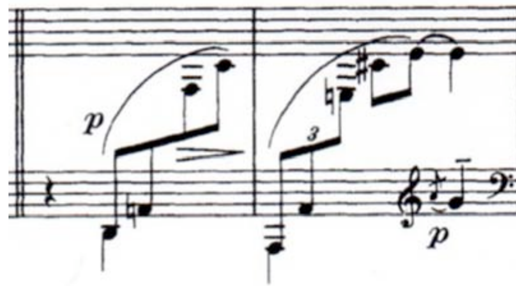
[47] John Kenneth Adams. "Debussy: Sketches, Manuscripts, the Preludes and the Etudes." *The Piano Quarterly*, 35, no.139 (Fall 1987), 40.

[48] Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge, 1982), 177.



Ex. 27 *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, m.19-20.

In the final occurrence there is no connection between the bass notes (Ex.28). They are given quarter note values to emphasize their weight, but they are independent of each other and should not mingle.



Ex. 28 *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, m.42-43.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The direction taken by this research was set in motion by the desire as a performer to dig beneath the score in order to unravel and create a fuller picture. This work, which spans the crest of Debussy's creativity, attests to the diversity of his inspirations. Despite his scrupulous attention to detail, the scores of Debussy are also remarkable for what they do not say. He involves the musician by handing over the mould that must then be construed and metamorphosed into animate musical language. His music was left deliberately without pedaling or fingering indications. This fact, coupled with the widely misconceived "impressionist" notion of Debussy's work, has resulted in the notorious misuse of both in his music. We know from accounts of his own playing, however, that Debussy's use of the pedal was incredibly refined. He compared it to a "sort of breathing." Part of the reason he left out pedaling was that he felt the means being used to do so were inadequate for his requirements, and that there must be a better way:

> The truth is that an abuse of the pedal is one way of covering up a lack of technique and so one has to make a lot of noise to prevent the music one is mutilating being heard! In theory there should be some means of indicating the "breathing space" graphically: it is not impossible.[49]

This ideal "means of indicating" never came to be realized on page, but in doing so he left it to the performer's own creative device. Likewise, with fingering he acknowledged the fact that each person is different; and by marking very little in the way of fingering and very much in the

[49] Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Debussy* (London, 1972), 45.

way of musical intention, he left it to the performer. In the preface of his *Études* he writes, "Let us find our own fingerings … one is never so well served as by oneself."[50]

Time

The tempi of the *Six épigraphes antiques* are rarely static, lending them a continual sense of flexibility within framework. Debussy says himself, "You know my opinion of these metronome markings: they are good for just one measure, as 'roses last the length of a morning.'"[51] On entering such a caveat it should be considered that, like the "breathing space," tempo and metronome markings were the only means at his disposal that enabled him to graphically indicate time. He circumvents rigidity, however, with tempos that change in harmony with the unfolding of new ideas and numerous score indications, such as *sans raideur* or *librement expressif*. His tempi reflect the variable movement found in the natural worlds of their depiction, always shifting, like the summer winds of Pan, or the stillness of the tomb.

Prior even to the first note of performance, there are several perspectives that lie before the player. This work contains perceptions that extend beyond time and imagination – whether perceived through the youthful eyes of *Bilitis*, the mature reflection of Debussy, or as a modern day "translator" equipped with the language and knowledge of the present. The decision must not be made, however, to wear one mask, but to see to what each can tell. Despite the fact that the depictions of this music are based in fiction, what can be collected from the text is the time being evoked by the poet – the time of day, or the season. The first epigraph indicates that it is Summer ("god of the Summer wind"), the second – coldness ("then I felt a great shiver"), the third epigraph – night-time, the sixth – morning rain. These factors all contribute to the

[50] Ibid, 45.
[51] James Briscoe, *Debussy in Performance* (New Haven, 1999), 84.

evocation of atmospheres unique to each picture. The performer must therefore decide what is unique to each.

One certainty is that Debussy carried this music, from the nucleus of its initial conception to the emergence of the final, for more than fifteen years. We can only guess, based on the existing incidental music, how fully developed any of the music was before he wrote the 1914 version. As this work is a reflection, a reminiscence and final utterance on a time long past, we can presume that for Debussy it was the same, the personal evocation of a time past, for his friendship with Pierre Louÿs and his self-proclaimed muse and mistress, the Algerian woman Zohra bin Atala (whose sister Meriem was the dedicatee of *Chansons de Bilitis*) – a time of great lavishness remembered during a time of war. The *Épigraphes Antiques* are also an attempt to resurrect, or regenerate in a way, the practices of antiquity and to understand their motivations – which share much in common with our own. The idea to glimpse at a poem, thought to have been created over 2,000 years ago, and see how similar life was then as it is now – the same emotions, impulses, fears – holds great appeal. Like the survival of the art and teachings of ancient Greece, constantly reborn and enhanced throughout history, from the "rebirth" of Greek drama in the Renaissance to the foundations of Classicism, Debussy's work, a reflection of the very cast of his mind into these concentrated, luminous bas-reliefs, continues to be reborn through modern performance. ***

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