ARIETTES OUBLiÈES AND FÊTES GALANTES
(SERIES I AND II) BY CLAUDE DEBUSSY

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State College in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

By

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Denton, Texas
January, 1960
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CHAPTER I

DEBUSSY AND THE SYMBOLISTS

Long before Claude Debussy discovered the Symbolists he displayed inherent qualities of temperament and artistic desires which made collaboration with them inevitable. After Debussy entered the Conservatoire in 1873 he became a member of the piano class of Antoine-François Marmontel and also attended classes in harmony, theory, solfège and piano accompaniment. From the beginning he evinced not only a preference for unusual chords, enriched harmonies and subtle harmonic progressions but also a hatred for the iron rules of traditional harmony and theory. Indeed, twenty-five years later, after he had become a celebrated composer, Debussy strongly condemned the traditional methods of teaching and said "I humbly acknowledge that I was never able to discover l'harmonie de l'auteur; but, indeed, that did not worry me much."¹

Unfortunately for Debussy, in the reactionary, tradition-ruled atmosphere of the Conservatoire his unique gifts which would later decisively alter the entire course of music were almost completely unappreciated. His masters and fellow students alike were amazed by the progressions and harmonies

¹Léon Vallas, Claude Debussy, His Life and Works (London, 1933), p. 10.
he played for them. Series of parallel fifths and octaves, chords of the ninth in all degrees of the scale, chords of the eleventh and thirteenth—these were incomprehensible innovations. Ernest Guiraud, who was one of the most sympathetic professors advised Debussy that "...you must keep that sort of thing for later on, or else you will never get the Prix de Rome."\(^2\) Debussy had already acquired a revolutionary reputation due to his originality, but he did want to win the Prix de Rome. To do this, he was obliged to hide the beginnings of his individuality and adopt the alien principles and outlook of the pedagogues. Thus it may be seen that, far from finding support and guidance for his peculiar genius which would enable it to mature, Debussy was obliged to stifle his new style, tentative and groping though it was.

After competing unsuccessfully in 1882 and 1883 Debussy won the Grand Prix de Rome in 1884, his cantata being L'Enfant Prodigue. As winner of this coveted award he was entitled to a three-year stay at the Villa Medici. It was not at the Villa Medici, however, that stimulation was to be found. From the beginning of his stay there in 1885 Debussy expressed disappointment, saying he found the atmosphere hostile and confining. Vallas quotes a letter to his friends, the Vasniers, in which the unhappy musician writes "The artistic environment and the good comradeship that the older men talk about are

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 21.
Debussy himself, writing in later years of his sojourn there says that "The conversations at the table very much resemble the gossip at a table d'hôte, and it would be idle to imagine that new theories of art, or even the burning dreams of the old masters are discussed."\(^3\)

Already Debussy showed evidence of leanings toward his mature style when he admitted in June 1885 that in working on Zuleima, a libretto after Almanzor by Heinrich Heine, he was finding it impossible to "imprison his music in any very definite mold." He thought he would do better with 'a subject in which the action was more or less sacrificed to a prolonged description of the feelings of the soul. I think in such a work, the music might become more human, more real; and one could deepen and refine the means of expression."\(^4\) He was seeking a type of music "supple and mobile enough to adjust itself to the lyrical emotions of the soul, and the whims of dreams."\(^5\)

Surrounded by influences hostile to his individual ideas regarding art and his markedly original composing idiom, Debussy's creative ability was stifled by the compulsion to compose music acceptable to the academicians. Feeling himself

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\(^3\)Ibid., p. 33.
\(^5\)Vallas, op. cit., p. 34.
\(^6\)Ibid., p. 35.
energized and incapable of artistic growth in this atmosphere, he did not stay the usual three years at the Villa Medici but returned to Paris in 1887 after spending only a little over two years in Rome in his official capacity. It was in Paris that Debussy found at last a group with artistic aims and ideas complementing and sympathetic to his own: the Symbolists.

"More than of the Conservatory, more than of Rome, more than of Moussorgsky, more than of the Gamelang, the rising composer with whom we now have to deal was the product, spiritually and aesthetically of the literary movement called Symbolism...." The Symbolists were the literary equivalent of the Impressionistic movement in painting and included such writers as Stéphane Mallarmé, Maurice Maeterlinck, Pierre Louÿs, and Paul Verlaine, whose works were the basis of many of Debussy's most renowned compositions. An excellent description of the aims of Symbolism is made by Arthur Symons in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* when he states

All the art of Verlaine is in bringing verse to a bird's song, the art of Mallarmé in bringing verse to the song of an orchestra. In Villiers de l'Isle-Adam drama becomes an embodiment of spiritual forces, in Maeterlinck not even their embodiment, but the remote sound of their voices. It is all an attempt to spiritualize literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority. Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically; the regular beat of verse is broken in order that words may fly, upon subtler wings. Mystery is no longer feared, as the great mystery in whose midst we are islanded was feared by those to whom that unknown sea was only a great void. We are

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coming closer to nature, as we seem to shrink from it with something of horror, disdaining to catalogue the trees of the forest. And as we brush aside the accidents of daily life, in which men and women imagine that they are alone touching reality, we come closer to humanity, to everything in humanity that may have begun before the world and may outlast it.

Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realized by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech.

The writers in the Symbolist movement, which began around 1885 in France and Belgium, endeavoured to unify and blend the arts. Especially did they feel a kinship with music which they felt to be poetry in a latent state and they sought to make their poetry resemble music and to portray by rhythms and sounds sentiments and emotions which cannot be analyzed. They "thought of music as 'colored hearing' and of 'orchestrated verse:'" Mallarmé, in defining Symbolism advised his colleagues to "seek their salvation in music and -- 'reprendre à la musique leur bien'---to take back from music what they had given to it."

In his association with this group, Debussy acquired a deep and subtle culture hitherto completely lacking in him.

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9 Thompson, op. cit., p. 102.
10 Ibid., p. 97.
due to his extremely limited education. Debussy had tried to remedy this lack of formal education by reading but association with these intellectuals expanded his mental horizon greatly. Debussy had already been pursuing independently a path similar to that of the Symbolists, but their philosophy helped him to clarify his tentative artistic code. "He came to realize the kinship of all the arts, literary, plastic, and sonorous---'perfumes, colours, and sounds correspond to one another.'"

Not only did Debussy find the Symbolist movement a source of inspiration for his artistic aims, he often selected his literary collaborators from them. Pelleas et Mélisande, Prélude à l’Après-midi d’un Faune, Chansons de Bilitis, Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé, Fêtes Galantes, Ariettes Oubliées, all had Symbolist authors. Moreover, the poetic style of the Proses Lyriques, of which Debussy himself was the author, is in the Symbolist manner. In the following paragraph written by Paul Dukas are many reasons why these Symbolist poets were so often sources of inspiration for Debussy.

Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Laforgue used to provide us with new sounds and sonorities. They cast a light on words such as had never been seen before; they used methods that were unknown to the poets that had preceded them; they made their verbal material yield subtle and powerful effects hitherto undreamt of. Above all, they conceived their poetry or prose like musicians, they tended it with the care of musicians and, like musicians, too, they sought to express their ideas in corresponding

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11 Vallas, op. cit., p. 53.
sound values. It was the writers, not the musicians, who exercised the strongest influence on Debussy.¹²

Although Stéphane Mallarmé became the leader of the Symbolists, it is Paul Verlaine to whom is attributed a posteriori, the conversion of the Parnassian outlook to the ideals of Symbolism. His Poèmes saturniens, published in 1866 were a Parnassian production. Today they can be regarded as among the first fruits of the Symbolist tree; though ordinarily the Symbolist movement is considered as not coming into being until about 1885, some nineteen years later.¹³

Of all the Symbolist writers, Verlaine's poetry was used more frequently than any other by Debussy. Debussy set a total of sixteen songs, which includes the Fêtes Galantes and Ariettes Oubliées.

Even before his association with the Symbolists, Debussy chose five poems for the first version of Fêtes Galantes which he wrote during 1882 and 1883. At Mallarmé's famous literary salon Debussy met Verlaine, whose mother-in-law had been Debussy's piano teacher before he entered the Conservatoire, but it is difficult to believe that much personal rapport could have been established between the sybaritic and elegant Debussy and the alcoholic and bohemian poet. Yet Verlaine's poetry, the opposite of his dissolute self, appealed immensely to Debussy for it was the embodiment of music Debussy wished to write, the lyric, suggestive, non-formal music of the soul.

¹² Ibid., p. 52.
¹³ Thompson, op. cit., p. 101.
A paragraph of the funeral oration by François Coppée delivered at the burial of Verlaine shows the similarity in artistic aims and execution of the two men.

...His name will always awaken remembrance of a poetry absolutely new, which has assumed in French letters the importance of a discovery.

Yes, Verlaine has created a poetry which is indeed his alone, the poetry of an inspiration at once childlike and subtle, entirely of nuances, a poetry evocative of the most delicate vibrations of the nerves, the most fugitive echoes of the heart; a natural poetry, however, springing from a source at times popular; a poetry in which the rhythms, free and broken preserve a delightful harmony, the strophes swirl and sing as in a roundelay of children, and the verses, which yet remain verses—and are among the most exquisite,—are already music....

If one were to substitute "music" for "poetry" in Coppée's tribute, one would have almost a perfect description of Debussy's work. Moreover, in the first and fourth stanzas of Verlaine's Art Poétique are contained the essence of the Symbolist creed and the embodiment of Debussy's music.

De la musique avant toute chose,
Et pour cela préfère l'Impair,
Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,
Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose.

Car nous voulons la Nuance encor,
Pas la Couleur, rien que la nuance!
Oh! la nuance seule fiancée
Le rêve au rêve et la flûte au cor!  

14 François Coppée, cited in C. F. MacIntyre, Paul Verlaine, Selected Poems (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1948), pp. xii, xiii.

15 Ibid., p. 180, for translation, p. 181.
"You must have music first of all,/and for that a rhythm uneven is best,/vague in the air and soluble,/with nothing heavy and nothing at rest."
"Never the Color, always the Shade,/always the nuance is supreme!/Only by shade is the troth made/between flute and horn, of dream with dream!"
This striving of poets, painters and musicians to suggest rather than to describe, to reflect not an object but the emotional response caused by the object, to discover not the heroic but the innermost murmurings of the soul, to make words, sounds, colors express new shades of emotions and feelings, had most important results in Debussy's idiom of composition. With the encouragement and stimulation of these colleagues Debussy found the courage to follow and develop the original harmonic and formal aspects of his work which were at such variance with established criteria.

Freedom—of harmony, form, rhythm, expression, ideas—this was the goal of the whole wonderful Symbolist era and of Debussy, the eternal revolutionary. Perhaps the best expression of their common ideals are these words of Debussy.

I can imagine a music specially designed for the open air, all on big lines, with daring instrumental and vocal effects which would have full play in the open and soar joyfully to the tree-tops. Certain harmonic progressions which sound abnormal within the four walls of a concert hall would surely find their true value in the open air. Perhaps this might be a means of doing away with these little affectations of over-precision in form and tonality which so encumber music. Thus art might find regeneration and learn the beautiful lesson of freedom from the efflorescence of the trees. Would it not gain in grandeur anything that it might lose in charm of detail? It should be understood that vastness of effect should be aimed at and not bulk. Neither should one weary the echoes with the repetition of excessive sounds. One should rather make use of them in order to prolong the harmonious dream. So, the very air, the movement of the leaves, and the perfume of flowers would work together in mysterious union with music which would thus bring all the elements into such
natural harmony that it would seem to form a part of each....In this way it could be proved without a doubt that music and poetry, alone of the arts, dwell in space....16

CHAPTER II

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SONGS

Background of the Songs

Debussy first began composing songs around 1876 while he was at the Conservatoire. It was also during his study at the Conservatoire that he wrote the initial version of Fêtes Galantes in 1892. This first version, which was to be drastically revamped later, included five of Verlaine's poems: Pantomime, En Sourdine, Mandoline, Clair de Lune, and Fantoches.

The six songs of the Ariettes Oubliées were first published separately in 1888. Three of Verlaine's poems, C'est l'Extase, Il pleure dans mon coeur, and L'Ombre des Arbres, are taken from the Romances sans paroles. Chevaux de Bois, which was composed in 1885 before the other songs of this group, is taken from the Paysages Belges, the Belgian landscape in this case being a merry-go-round. Green and Spleen are from the Aquarelles which are "designed to give the feeling of water colors in verse."¹

These songs were known at first simply as Ariettes. Two of the songs, whose titles were not given on the program, were performed at the Société Nationale in 1889 and were praised

¹Thompson, op. cit., p. 290.
for their "very delicate and refined artistic feeling."  

They were noticed by musicians, but not by the general public. Fifteen years after their publication in 1888, when the performance of Pelléas et Mélisande had brought recognition which he so greatly deserved to Debussy, they were republished by a different firm but under an altered title which "betrays ironical disappointment."  

They were now to be known as Forgotten Ariettes and were dedicated "to Miss Mary Garden, unforgettable Melisande."

In 1892, ten years after the first version was composed, the three songs which comprise the first series of Fêtes Galantes were written. The final version includes En Sourdine, Clair de Lune (which has nothing in common with the first version except the text), and Fantoches. In comparing the two efforts, Léon Vallas states,

The versions of 1892 are a great improvement on the earlier ones. "Fantoches," however, was but little altered. Its sprightly humour and its delightful spontaneity seem to have gushed forth in a single stream. It bears all the characteristics of the type of art that was to be known as Debussyism.

The verses of the Fêtes Galantes, were written in 1869. The following paragraph delightfully describes their subjects and atmosphere.

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2Vallas, Claude Debussy, His Life and Works, p. 66.
3Ibid.
4Ibid., p. 31.
5Ibid.
The subject matter synthesizes the manners of the eighteenth-century nobility as seen in the paintings of Watteau, Fragonard, Boucher, etc. The marquis, the abbé, the coquette and the stock figures from the Italian comedy are all present like Dresden figures in a museum at twilight. The atmosphere is silver and silken, and lutes and fountains tinkle prettily. It is all delight-artificial, a series of colored engravings.  

Regardless of the muted loveliness of En Sourdine, the shimmering moonlight of Clair de Lune and the humor and spontaneity of Fantoches, these songs also had to wait for publication until after the performance of Pelléas et Mélisande had made Debussy a controversial but famous figure; they were not published until 1903.

The second series of Fêtes Galantes which includes Les Ingénus, Le Faune and Colloque Sentimental, is a product of Debussy's mature period and was finished in 1904. Unlike the two other groups mentioned previously it was published in the same year that it was completed.

As a song composer, Debussy is surely one of the most personal in all the literature and one of the most sensitive to the strange, unearthly area in which reality and its perception melt together.

If Debussy had been almost exclusively a composer of songs, like Hugh Wolf—-if there had been no Pelléas et Mélisande, no L'Après-midi d'un faune, no Le Martyre de Saint-Sébastien, no Nocturnes, no La Mer, no Iberia, no string quartet, no piano compositions—-he still would have been one of the most distinctive and individual figures in music. The essence of Debussy's musical personality is in the songs and they exhibit virtually every facet of his art.  

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6MacIntyre, op. cit., p. ix.  7Thompson, op. cit., p. 276.
Harmony

Claude Debussy is acknowledged one of the greatest and most original harmonists. Through his harmony "glows the voluptuousness of his spirit; it is there that he searches out, and finds, the caress that is the essential of his music." Since he showed strong indications of his harmonic style while still in his early teens at the Conservatoire, it must be obvious that his talent was an intuitive and natural one as opposed to an intellectually conceived theory. Yet this beautiful drifting sound has been a major influence on the musical development of the twentieth century because of the barriers toppled by Debussy's conception of harmony and the new paths he discovered. This influence is manifested through two major effects of his harmonic idiom: his treatment of dissonance, which "came to be regarded as an end in itself and not an episode on the road to a consonance," and the extension of the procedures in tonality caused by his treatment of chords as "independent units which could be arranged in successions contrary to accepted rules." By his revolution against traditional harmonic formulas he established "what in the end were to be looked upon as Debussy formulas."

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8Thompson, op. cit., p. 24. 9Ibid., p. 17.
10Ibid., p. 243. 11Ibid. 12Ibid.
The use of chords with added tones is "a device which Debussy used to enhance the richness of chords and which became a recognized Debussyism."\(^{13}\) Dissonance in the songs of this study is caused frequently by the technique of added tones. The twenty-sixth measure of Spleen is an excellent illustration of this method. This particular measure is based unmistakably on the tonality of F minor; the vocal line even outlines an F minor chord. The accompaniment, however, contains two examples of chords with added tones. The first occurs during the first beat when a D natural is added in the upper treble, forming a chord with an added sixth, and the second occurs during the third beat when the B flat added to the second inversion of the F minor chord results in the formation of a chord with an added fourth but with the fourth unconventionally placed as the lowest tone. Another example of the richness of coloring which dissonance lends is the chord of the first beat of measure twenty-eight of C'est l'Extase. The tonality of this chord heard in context is unmistakably F sharp major. The G in the bass by virtue of the approach to the chord gives no effect of a ninth chord rearrangement but is placed there for the stark coloring it lends.

Another of Debussy's characteristic treatments of dissonance is his use of unresolved seventh and ninth chords, often in series, as well as eleventh and thirteenth chords.

\(^{13}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 244.\)
An illustration of the extended use of one such chord occurs in the first eight measures of *C'est l'Extase*, in which the soft stroking of a dominant ninth chord built on B prevails. It is gradually dispersed by the G sharp seventh chord found on the third beats of measures seven and eight, until in measure nine the sepulchral E of the bass announces the arrival at last of the tonic. It should be noted here that the direct progression from a chord to another whose root is a third below it (in this case B to G sharp to E) is a device extensively utilized in all the songs analyzed. It is obvious that this extended use of a dissonant chord, as in the opening of *C'est l'Extase*, tends to obscure conventional feeling for the tonic since the listener gradually comes to hear the root of the ninth chord as the tonic.

One of the most striking usages of seriate seventh chords is found during measures twenty-six through thirty of *En Sourdine*. Measure twenty-seven particularly illustrates this distinctive technique.

![Musical notation](image)
The shimmering and vibrant coloring evoked by the added sixths which fall on the second third of each beat exemplify the frontiers to which Debussy advanced the seventh chord, causing, as a result, considerable vagueness of tonality.

This loosening of tonality which is so prominent a feature of Debussy's harmony is achieved through several other techniques of his harmonic idiom which are found in the songs treated herein. One of them is his use of parallel block chords, a device immediately apparent in Fantoches and Chevaux de Bois, two of the earliest songs considered. In both songs the parallel chords are frequently, but not exclusively, treated chromatically. The following illustration from Chevaux de Bois is an excellent example of both diatonic and chromatic treatment of parallel block chords.
The phrase, "tournez souvent et tournez toujours," is diatonic in nature; the following phrase balances the diatonic smoothness of the first phrase with its ascending chromatic motifs. As a consequence of this parallelism one of Debussy's "musical calling cards" which usually springs to mind when thinking of him is readily apparent in the foregoing measures from *Chevaux de Bois*. This is his partiality for parallel fifths or octaves. In Figure 2, parallel fifths result from the movement of the triads in the first two and one-fourth measures. Parallel
octaves are, of course, evident throughout the illustration in the outer voices of the accompaniment and are also doubled in the vocal line.

Debussy was fond not only of parallel fifths but also of open fifths used singly. C'est l'Extase and Green begin with an open fifth, and the open fifth from A to E is the dominating characteristic of the coda of Fantoches. In fact, Fantoches ends on an open fifth as does Il pleure dans mon cœur. The hollow fifth also occurs occasionally at cadences where it imparts an antique coloring, as in measures sixteen and seventeen of En Sourdine or measure twenty-one of C'est l'Extase. Besides its value as a harmonic color, the open fifth is significant in another way. By avoiding the third, a very subtle effect is gained which produces a "hesitation between major and minor" which is another of the important qualities of Debussy's harmonic genius.

Not only does Debussy frequently "hesitate" between major and minor; he may avoid both by using a modally influenced harmonic idiom or by using unusual scales such as the pentatonic or whole tone. The modal influence is often manifested through his cadences. He seems to dislike the authentic cadence since he frequently shuns it in favor of a modal sound such as that of measure thirty of Clair de Lune, in which the progression

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Ibid., p. 242.
is IV\(^3\)-III-I,\(^{15}\) or the cadence of *Il pleure dans mon coeur* with its sombre IV\(^3\)-VI-I\(^-3\) progression in measures seventy-six and seventy-seven. It should not be construed, however, that Debussy never uses the authentic cadence. *Chevaux de Bois* contains numerous authentic cadences, such as that occurring on the third beat of measure twelve and the first beat of measure thirteen. Another authentic cadence occurs at the last beat of measure seventeen and first beat of measure eighteen.

![Musical notation](image)

*Fig. 3--Debussy, Chevaux de Bois, meas. 17, 18*

In this instance, however, a very novel effect is gained by the contrast in dynamics of the fortissimo of the dominant

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\(^{15}\)The alteration of triads is indicated as follows: sharpening is denoted by the sign #, flattening is shown by the sign b, the absence of a chord-tone by the sign -. 
and the sudden pianissimo of the tonic. Another element which adds to the strange effect is the shifting of register to the lower octave as the tonic is played. However, the final cadence of *Chevaux de Bois* is not authentic but a strange sub-dominant/tonic movement.

![Musical notation](image)

Fig. 4—Debussy, *Chevaux de Bois*, meas. 95 through 97

The raised root of the ninth chord, A-sharp, contributes a feeling of unrest as the chord is heard in second inversion, root position, second inversion, until finally, in the last beat of measure ninety-six, the raised root descends to its natural position, whereupon the chord dissolves from ninth to seventh and the tension is lessened. But on the very last sixth of the beat, the raised root quizzically returns and then the sonorous tonic is heard. This is not a modal cadence, depending as it does on the tritone relationship of A sharp/E; but it does illustrate Debussy's avoidance of straightforward major and minor idioms.
Another instance of a characteristic generally regarded as Debussyian is found in the introduction of Clair de Lune which is completely pentatonic in nature, utilizing as it does the black keys of the piano. This pentatonic flavor is created throughout Clair de Lune by the use of a motif derived from the first beat of the first bar.

![Fig. 5--Debussy, Clair de Lune, meas. 1](image)

This motif occurs in numerous measures throughout Clair de Lune. During beats one and two of measure twenty-one it appears in the treble of the accompaniment as part of the G sharp minor seventh chord, but it casts the aura of the pentatonic scale over this orthodox chord because of the character of the motif's first appearance.

Another scale associated with Debussy is the whole-tone scale. It is curious to note that this scale is not very frequent in these songs. The only song to utilize it to any noticeable extent is Colloque Sentimental, which is discussed in the section dealing with melody. The slow theme in measures three and four of Il pleure dans mon coeur is built in whole-tones.
Whether or not this brief episode should be considered whole-tone seems to be a question of each listener's subjective experience. Certainly the whole-steps in measures three and four are quickly nullified, not only by the G sharp in the voice but also by the contrast of the downward half-steps of measures five and six.

Still another component of the "Debussy formula" is the extensive use of pedal points, most often in the bass in these songs. A striking pedal is heard from bar thirty-nine through the first beat of bar forty-three in Chevaux de Bois, which consists of an uninterrupted but accented trill on B which is echoed on the off-beats an octave above in the staccato eighth notes, producing a mocking and cynical humor. A pedal of completely different character is the one used during the last three and one-third measures of L'Ombre des Arbres.

Fig. 6--Debussy, L'Ombre des Arbres, meas. 28 through 31
This beautiful, hopeless sound emerges from a slightly varied repetition of the two opening measures, in which the first E of the pedal takes the place which the voice assumed in measure two. The unorthodox progression created by the reiterated E which culminates in a $V^{13}_1$-I cadence is in effect a continuous modulation, emphasizing the futile despair of the poem. The longest pedal in any song appears in Colloque Sentimental in measure seventeen and continues through measure forty-eight; for thirty-two measures this pedal on A flat is heard, usually in a syncopated pattern but occasionally as a sustained tone.

Mention should be made also of the texture of Debussy's harmonies. His first musical study was of the piano, for which he displayed a marked aptitude. This pianistic training evidently played a large part in his spacing of chords. A span of three octaves seems to be the average range of his chords, but he takes advantage of the extreme registers of the piano. The total range of the piano utilized is from the lowest A of the bass to the highest F of the treble, a range of well over six octaves.

These, then, are some of the ways in which Debussy expressed his musical ideas. These techniques in themselves are of little or no worth; they become valuable only if a study and recognition of them causes a fuller understanding and appreciation of the mysterious entity which is the work of art of which they
are components. Debussy himself lends his support to this view when he says

Let me repeat that a chord in an edifice of sound has mostly the importance of a stone in a building. Its real value depends on the place it occupies and the support it lends to the flexible melodic line.\textsuperscript{16}

Melody

In considering melody, it should be born in mind that the term designates "a quantity which is infinitely variable."\textsuperscript{17} This is particularly true of Debussy who uses all the devices of melodic construction at various times. However, there are four broad aspects of his melodic idiom which will help to delineate the "Debussy melody."

The first characteristic is his use of a non-metric chanting style in the vocal line, obviously influenced by the fluid, supple line of plainsong.\textsuperscript{18} This chanting is admirably suited to the French language, a language not of accents but of inflections; and it is used frequently by Debussy who "did not approve of a sonorous syllable being more stressed in music than it would be in conversation."\textsuperscript{19} Among many examples of chanting, \textit{Spleen} provides an excellent illustration, as shown in Figure 7.

\textsuperscript{16}Vallas, \textit{Theories of Debussy}, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19}Vallas, \textit{Debussy, His Life and Works}, p. 89.
The first two phrases of the text are chanted in *Spleen* with only a minimum accompaniment. Due to the combination of chanted vocal line and meager accompaniment, this section has the character of recitative. *L'Ombre des Arbres* also uses the non-metric chant in the opening bars of the vocal line, but in this song the chanting is contrasted against a
sustained and pulsating accompaniment. So that there can be no possible misinterpretation of the non-metric rhythm, Debussy clearly marks the opening syllables with even stresses.

Another song which uses chanting extensively is Colloque Sentimental. The entire first section is chant-like in character; the second "ghost" of the text in the dialogue section has three measures of chant-like melody at measures twenty-four through twenty-six; and the last section, beginning at measure fifty-one, is derived from the first section.

A second aspect which distinguishes the "Impressionistic" melody of Debussy is the frequent use of modes as a basis for melodic construction. Figure 8, illustrates one such use of modal construction which occurs in Il pleure dans mon coeur.

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Il pleure dans mon coeur is tinged throughout with the Dorian mode transposed to G sharp. The cadence of this song is also modal in character. En Sourdine also makes extensive use of modal construction, but instead of the Dorian, the antique effect of the Aeolian mode is used with tranquil grace. This mode, transposed to D sharp, is the basis of the entire first eleven measures, with the exception of measure eight where a B sharp is used as part of the G sharp major ninth chord.

As a consequence of this partiality to modal effects and colorings, the leading tone is extremely rare in the songs comprising the Ariettes Oubliées and Fêtes Galantes. It might be mentioned also that the fabled whole-tone scale is not evidenced to any degree of frequency in these songs; Debussy uses chromatic melodies much more frequently. Fantoches in particular has frequent phrases of chromatic melody, as is shown in Figure 9.

Fig. 8—Debussy, Il pleure dans mon coeur, meas. 23 through 27.
This chromaticism, underlined by whirling parallel chords, imbues Fantoches with the gay spirit of Carnival. As for the whole-tone scale, it is used more rarely than the chromatic. The whole-tone scale is utilized to a larger degree in Colloque Sentimental than elsewhere, but it is used sparingly even there. The first three measures of the accompaniment are based on the whole-tone scale, and measures forty-nine and fifty are variations of this first statement. Measures nine through fourteen are also whole-tone in nature with the exception of measure ten in the accompaniment.

A third quality of this melody which moves "up and down the sonorous ladder with such disconcerting freedom" and which differentiates Debussy's conception of melody from that of previous composers is his extremely rare use of non-chord

\[\text{Vallas, Debussy, His Life and Works, p. 140.}\]
tones in the melodic line. Most frequently, the melodic tone is doubled in the harmony of the accompaniment, and, even when it is not, the melody most often functions to fill in a missing chord tone. In *L’Ombre des Arbres*, for example, there are only six instances of non-chord tones. Two of the six are passing tones, which occur in measure eight (the E during the first beat) and in measure eighteen (the C sharp). Two of these non-chord tones are neighboring tones which are used in measure eight (the F sharp during the second beat) and in measure ten (the B natural). Measure twenty-two contains two instances of non-chord tones, as shown in Figure 10.

![Musical notation](image)

Fig. 10—Debussy, *L’Ombre des Arbres*, meas. 22

One of these non-chord tones in measure twenty-two is an anticipation which results from the A sharp in the last beat, the other is the E of the third beat which is, of course, an added sixth in the chord built on G sharp. There is an instance
also in this measure of the harmonic function of the melody. The G sharp in the second beat supplies the missing fifth of the C sharp dominant seventh chord. *L'Ombre des Arbres* admittedly is a short song which comprises only thirty-one measures. Nevertheless it is highly significant that only six non-chord tones are used herein and that only one of the six, in measure eighteen, occupies even half a beat in duration. The rest are only one-third of a beat each in length.

Debussy's melody, which stunned listeners when his compositions were first performed, is traditional in one respect: when the subject of the text is intensely emotional the melodic line becomes wider in range, rhythmically more energetic, and often ascends by leaps; a lyric or tender text, for example, brings forth a circumscribed melodic line, conjunct and more scalar in nature. A specific example of this fourth characteristic is found in *Spleen* which has alternate sections of varying emotional intensity. The first section is a setting of a non-emotional text which reflects the feeling of ennui, and after the placid, reflective piano introduction, the melody is one chanted tone. As the text becomes agitated the character of the melodic line changes completely; in only five beats it spans an octave in range and at the words, "Renaissent tout mes désespoirs," the vocal melodic line leaps upward with rhythmic stresses at variance with the bar line. The next two lines of the poem are again reflective of ennui, and the melodic line descends in a smooth, scalar construction.
In the fourth stanza, however, the text becomes progressively more emotional, reflecting the poet's fear of losing his beloved, and the vocal line in turn is composed of leaps and frequent disturbing tritones. Each vocal phrase after measure twenty is ascending in character and covers an octave in range with the exception of the final two-note "Hélas." The melodic aspect of the accompaniment during this last section is also predominantly ascending in construction and is characterized by conflicting rhythmic stresses.

In no element of his music was Claude Debussy more truly a musicien français than in his melodic idiom. He rejected completely the Teutonic symmetrical melody and shaped his own melodic rhythms to follow the inflected variations of the French language. Even the accompaniment seems to murmur words which are just too faint to be distinguished. The melodies of Debussy merge with the texts in intensity of emotion and are a perfect expression by a different technique of ideas and experiences denoted in the poems. But the ultimate and undefinable characteristic, the quality which keeps the music of Debussy ever fresh and original, is simply this: like all the elements of his music, which are so inextricably mingled, his melodies are beautiful.

Rhythm

Rhythm in the music of Debussy can be likened to a fountain which flows continually but whose regular flow consists of a fine spray of water. This spray in Debussy's music is the
small motifs from which the overall flow of his rhythm is
taken. One or two motifs will create the entire rhythmic
character of a song. This "love of persistant patterns"\textsuperscript{22}
is manifested in every song in the \textit{Fêtes Galantes} and \textit{Ariettes Oubliées}. An excellent illustration of Debussy's repeated use
of one motif is found in \textit{L'Ombre des Arbres}, in which the
pattern of the accompaniment, \(\begin{align*}
\frac{1}{4} & \frac{1}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \\
\end{align*}\), is repeated
exactly in measures three and four, six and seven, eleven and
twelve, and thirteen and fourteen. The triplet figuration is
utilized frequently in the vocal line, and the motif occurs
again in slightly altered form, \(\begin{align*}
\frac{1}{4} & \frac{1}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \\
\end{align*}\), and recurs
in the closing bars, \(\begin{align*}
\frac{1}{4} & \frac{1}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \\
\end{align*}\), giving a symmetrical feeling to the composition. Indeed, in this song of
only thirty measures, such frequent repetition contributes
greatly to the unity of the composition.

In \textit{Les Ingénus} Debussy uses an even sixteenth note pattern,
\(\begin{align*}
\frac{3}{8} & \frac{3}{8} \frac{3}{8} \frac{3}{8} \\
\end{align*}\), throughout in the accompaniment until the coda
which begins at measure forty-eight. In measures forty-nine
and fifty are brief reminders of the basic motif, \(\begin{align*}
\frac{3}{4} & \frac{3}{4} \frac{3}{4} \\
\end{align*}\),
as a sense of finality is established by the use of slower
note values in the remaining three bars. This sixteenth note
ostinato-like figure influences the character of the vocal
line as well as the accompaniment. Because of prosody as well
as rhythmic contrast, it is obviously undesirable for the

\textsuperscript{22} Thompson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 48.
voice part to consist only of repeated sixteenth notes, but seven measures do match exactly the motif of the accompaniment. "The accents of the vocal declamation at times are at variance with the accompaniment, which yields the feeling of an old dance transformed for the more sophisticated purposes of a later day."23 In contrast to the inexorable sixteenth note motif is the livelier figure, $\begin{array}{|c|c|c|}
\hline 7 & 6 & 7 \\
\hline
d\end{array}$, introduced in measure three in the lower voice of the accompaniment. This figure is condensed into a grace note pattern, $\begin{array}{|c|c|c|}
\hline 7 & 5 & 5 \\
\hline
d\end{array}$, occurring first in measure sixteen, which lends a faint humorous note to this somewhat plaintive song.

Debussy also used a reiterated flow of sixteenth notes in *Il pleure dans mon coeur* in which the steady patter is halted first for six bars at measure forty-seven where the quasi recitative section intervenes and again at measure sixty-five for six measures of sustained harmonies while the last phrase of the text is sung. However, the overall rhythmic character of *Il pleure dans mon coeur* differs from that of *Les Ingénus* in that a slow, sustained pattern of quarter notes, which intensifies the dolorous mood of the poem, is contrasted against the sixteenth note motif in both the opposite voice of the accompaniment and in the vocal line.

Two motifs which are extremely dissimilar in character are found in *Le Faune*. A cadenza-like figure, $\begin{array}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline 3 & 1 & 1 & 1 \\
\hline
d\end{array}$.

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represents the flute and serves as the introduction. The ostinato figure of the bass, \(\overline{\text{F}7,} \text{(,} \overline{\text{F}7,} \text{),} \overline{\text{F}7,} \text{(,} \overline{\text{F}7,} \text{)\),} \) which imitates the tambourine is first heard in measure seven and then continues throughout the song. The flute motif is expanded at measure nineteen and is brought back again in the closing measures, beginning at measure thirty-one. This reappearance of a motif first heard in the beginning at the conclusion of a song is a device utilized frequently.

Rhythm in Debussy's music is a sophisticated and subtle force. There is always an awareness of the pulsing, basic feeling of rhythm in Debussy, but this basic flow seldom has stresses or inflections which coincide with the "strong" beats of the tyrannous bar-line. Not only in harmony, but in rhythm as well, he renounced tradition and sought freedom and originality of expression. "Debussy's time signatures bespeak his quest of rhythmic freedom and...there are elaborate alternations of bar values...and a plenitude of conflicting rhythms."\(^{24}\) There is also a dissolving of the bar-line regularity by means of irregular phrases which extend across the bar, by accents which fall on "weak" or unaccented beats, reiterated syncopations which tend to obscure the pulse, chant-like sections for the voice which replace the basic pulse with an unaccented but inflected diminution, and an alternation in background values between duple and triple

\(^{24}\)Ibid., p. 245.
which gives a shimmering effect to the basic flow. None of these devices actually break the rhythmic pulse, but they give it an evanescent quality which might weaken the listener's grasp of the basic pulse.

Debussy's alternation of bar-line values is illustrated in *Chevaux de Bois* which is otherwise one of the most rhythmically straightforward of his songs. The song proceeds with an unmistakable feeling of two-to-the-bar until measure thirty-four when the time signature is changed to \( \frac{3}{4} \). However, even before this actual change of meter Debussy had produced an effect of changing meter in measure twelve by using a sforzando on the last half of the second beat and in measure sixteen where the sforzando occurs on the second beat. The background march of eighth notes never falters, however, and it is this steadiness which produces the relentless propulsion of the rhythm regardless of misplaced accents and shifting meter.

Conflicting rhythms are manifested in almost all the songs. An excellent example of this device found in *Green*, in which \( \frac{4}{5} \) is in gentle conflict with \( \frac{6}{8} \) throughout, is shown in Figure 11.

![Fig. 11--Debussy, Green, meas. 5, 6](image)
The basic pulse of the meter is never weakened, but this play in the background provides a lovely mist to enhance Verlaine's tender, lyrical poem. There are so many irregular phrases extended across bar-lines in these songs that in this respect, Green, with its symmetrical phrases in which the natural accents of the phrase coincide with the "strong" beats of the measure, is quite atypical.

Much more illustrative of the asymmetry associated with Claude Debussy is C'est l'Extase in which the rhythmic emphasis of the phrase is more often at variance with the traditional strong beats of the measure. This occurs both in the vocal line and in the accompaniment in the following example.

![Musical notation](image)

Fig. 12-Debussy, C'est l'Extase, meas. 29 through 31

Figure 12, also provides an illustration of a frequent happening in the Debussy songs: the opposition of the stresses of the accompaniment and those of the vocal line. The bracketed
stress marks show this variance of the two parts, which may produce problems of ensemble or result in the stressing of false accents unless the singer and pianist realize the independence of each part.

*C'est l'Extase* also illustrates Debussy's fondness of syncopation in the harmonic background which he uses in measures eleven through seventeen to express "tout les frissons des bois."

Another superb use of syncopation, though of quite a different character, is found in *Colloque Sentimental* where the figure which begins at measure nineteen in the accompaniment, \( \frac{3}{4} \), is repeated almost without respite until bar forty-nine. In this song may also be found the use of contrasting backgrounds and contradictory rhythmic patterns which are so much a part of Debussy's rhythmic idiom. In the very first bars a vagueness of background is established by the use of interspersed triplets, \( \frac{3}{4} \), in the accompaniment. This hesitant pattern, its triplet motif echoed by the vocal line, is the chief characteristic of the first section. In measure twenty a new pattern, \( \Delta \), is introduced. This third figure is used in conjunction with the syncopated pattern of measure nineteen throughout the second section and also in the last section which begins at measure fifty-one. An interesting feature of this last section is that the rhythm of the sentence
Tels ils marchaient dans les avoines folles,
Et la nuit seule entendit leurs paroles.

Deux formes ont tout à l'heure passé.
Leurs yeux sont morts et leurs lèvres sont molles,

is a repetition which is placed differently in relation to
barlines of two consecutive phrases.

which are part of the opening section. The syncopated
accompaniment of measures fifty-one and fifty-two, which
contrasts its duple feeling against the triplets in the vocal
line, completes the trinity of rhythmic motifs recurring in
the last section. Here is the essence of Debussy's rhythm—
an irregular, undulating fluidity which creates a subtle yet
definite rhythmic propulsion.

Form

It has been said of Debussy that form in his music is
the result of "a constant experimentation, a live sense of
organic rapport and proportion, and not the feathered beds
of complacently accepted molds."25 This is certainly true
of the twelve songs which are the subject of this analysis.
Of the twelve, eight are not based on traditional formal pro-
cedures but exhibit a formal aspect which can best be described
as the result of an exploitation of germ-motifs. Even those

25 Schmitz, op. cit., p. 20.
songs which utilize traditional forms do not follow the familiar formulas exactly.

The four songs based on more common formal patterns are Green, En Sourdine, Colloque Sentimental and Chevaux de Bois. All of this group except Chevaux de Bois are based on the ABA coda form. The form of Green, which is one of the most orthodox songs formally, is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Predominant Key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1 through 23</td>
<td>Ab minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>24 through 31</td>
<td>Db Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(A')</td>
<td>32 through 39</td>
<td>Ab Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(based on 9 through 16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>40 through 49</td>
<td>Ab minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(repetition of 3 through 11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>50 through 58</td>
<td>G Major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note that, although G flat is the key signature, this tonality is heard definitely only twice in the entire song; first, during measures twenty through twenty-three, and second, in the final measures of the coda. This delay of the real tonic is quite common in the songs studied in this discussion.

Colloque Sentimental and En Sourdine vary the ABA coda form. In En Sourdine the A section is characterized by a chant-like vocal line and the ornamental figure in the accompaniment which represents the "song of the nightingale." 26 The B section which begins in measure eighteen is dominated by the unceasing triplet figuration of the accompaniment. However, this triplet pattern does not stop when the return

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26 Thompson, op. cit., p. 293.
of A is signalled by the "nightingale" theme in measure thirty-two, but continues into measure thirty-four. By simultaneously using material from two different sections a large sense of unity is created because this recurring A seems to have grown out of B. In measure thirty-six the coda begins, and after the last two phrases are sung the "nightingale" theme is heard once more. Thus this theme becomes not only the alpha but the omega of this haunting, dreamlike song. The use of material from both A and B in the third section of Colloque Sentimental was discussed in the section dealing with rhythm.

Chevaux de Bois is the fourth song based on a traditional form, but it is unique among the songs analyzed in that it is in rondo form. However, Chevaux de Bois is not based on the classical rondo form as regards key relationships. The rondo theme itself does not always appear in the same key, and the final appearance of the A theme is not an exact repetition but is extensively altered. After a "lumbering preamble in an uneven time," the form follows the design of ABACADA'coda. This is one of the more formal songs, and its form is echoed by the poem which is divided into seven stanzas as is the music. Each stanza which begins with the word tournez is represented in music by theme A. However, the rhyme scheme of the text has no counterpart in the musical construction. Each poetic stanza is characterized by an ABBA pattern but

\[27\text{Ibid.},\ p.\ 290.\]
the musical construction, phrasewise, is not influenced by this pattern. The musical form of theme A, for instance, is ABAB, the A being a diatonic and the B a chromatic treatment of parallel block chords.

In none of these Debussy songs does the poem's rhyme scheme influence the musical form. Debussy's setting of a poem always matches the thought, feeling, or emotion exactly, but the technical construction of the text is never a prime influence except in the sense that Debussy always strove to render the words in music as they are spoken. "And only in Pelléas is he equally [to the songs] the master of the setting of words (with all due respect to his choral writing and the solo parts of the cantatas)." 28

To the structure of the largest number of songs in the Ariettes Oubliées and Fêtes Galantes, Debussy "applied the dictum of art concealing art." 29 This group, which includes C'est l'Extase, Il pleure dans mon coeur, L'Ombre des Arbres, Spleen, Clair de Lune, Fantoches, Les Ingénus and Le Faune, is not based on traditional procedures but utilizes germ-motifs which determine each song's formal structure. It should not be thought, however, that the structure of the songs in this group seems vague or loose. A strict form is not necessary for songs because the hearer is guided not only by the music but by the sense of the words. Although each germ-motif is

28 Ibid., p. 277. 29 Ibid., p. 245.
unique and follows no set procedures regarding when or where it appears, there are three statements which can be made regarding these germ-motifs: they are of short duration; they are not subjected to any extensive variation since "Debussy hated variations and obvious devices of formal development"; and their characters are representational in the sense that they illustrate an actuality or an abstraction described in the text.

Chevaux de Bois, for example, illustrates by whirling arpeggios the turning of the merry-go-round described in the poem. In the last section the arpeggios cease "as the merry-go-round slackens and goes to sleep; then, at the close,...we see the first star and scent the fragrance of the night." Le Faune also is very graphic in illustrating the "sound of tambourines" with a drum-like ostinato. Against this figure is traced a flute-like motif which was heard first as an introduction. The flute motif leads one to think that the "old faun of terra cotta" in the text must be playing the flute, as fauns often do. A different type of illustration is found in C'est l'Extase, in which the motif of the first section does not portray an actuality such as a flute or tambourine but exemplifies "languorous ecstasy" by a sustained, falling theme based on the B ninth chord.

\[^{30}\text{Ibid.}\] \[^{31}\text{Ibid., p. 290.}\]
Since it is obviously impossible to analyze each of the eight songs which make use of germ-motifs in this short discussion, an intensive analyzation will be made of one, C'est l'Extase, which is very typical in its use of germ-motifs.

C'est l'Extase in its entirety is constructed from three motifs. The first of these, which was discussed previously in relation to its representational quality, occurs first in measures one through three in the accompaniment, as shown in Figure 13.

![Figure 13](image)

This sustained, descending figure is continued by the vocal line which enters in measure three. In measures seven and eight the three-note ascending figure in the treble of the
accompaniment is the retrograde of the first three notes of theme A. The first section cadences during the ninth and tenth measures, whereupon the second motif is heard in measure eleven.

![Musical notation image]

Fig. 14—Debussy, C'est l'Extase, meas. 11

This syncopated pattern representing "all the breezes of the forests" is reiterated under a chant-like vocal line until measure eighteen when theme A is heard again in a repetition which is exact except for the last chord. In measures twenty-two and twenty-three, a descending motif reminiscent of theme A is heard which precedes the appearance of the third germ-motif in measure twenty-four.
This third germ-motif shown in Figure 15, is composed of two elements which characterize C'est l'Extase until measure thirty-four: a descending chromatic line, found here in the vocal line, and a syncopated harmonic accompaniment derived from theme B. Moreover, since both theme A and theme B are descending figures, there is great rapport between these motifs. This chromatic section cadences in measure thirty-four on D major; the rhythmic pattern is syncopated, showing the influence again of theme B. This syncopation continues through the forty-third measure, with the addition of a two-note fragment from theme A in measure thirty-six which is heard in alternate measures. The vocal line of this last section becomes progressively more ecstatic and fragmentary in nature; the climax is the high A in measure forty-three, following which the voice repeats the melodic line of the accompaniment which began at measure five. In measure forty-six the accompaniment reiterates theme B while the voice chants its final phrase.
The brief coda is based on a combination of syncopation and the two-note fragment from theme A. As the ritard takes effect, the syncopation merges into the even eighth notes of the final two measures.

The object of a great song composer such as Debussy must certainly always have been not only to match the mood of the poetry in music, but by music to enhance the poet's thought. "Of Pelléas and his compositions for the voice it has well been said that Debussy's music does not illustrate the text, but transposes it to another order."32 Regardless of whether the form is traditional or not, it is always impeccably allied with the emotion of the text.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSIONS

The *Ariettes Oubliées* and *Fêtes Galantes*, even when examined more than half a century after they were created, still merit for their composer the designation of "très exceptionnel, très curieux, très solitaire."\(^1\) Claude Debussy must be considered among the great innovators in music and as one of the composers least bound by the traditional procedures of his time. In all the musical elements, Debussy sought and found a new expression, a fresh and vibrant spirit with which to illustrate his own personal visions. Harmony, melody, rhythm, form—all were revolutionized and vitalized by his unique musical conception.

"The fundamental of his harmonic revolt was a desire to escape from the accepted use of chord combinations with a given key."\(^2\) In speaking of this desire, Debussy used a metaphor which complements the Symbolists' description of poetry in musical terms.

For the sake of greater clearness, let us compare sounds to words. Everybody uses the same words. But whence comes the charm, the new light which these same words acquire when employed by some writers, if it is not from their particular setting?\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.  
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 243.  
\(^3\) Vallas, *The Theories of Claude Debussy*, p. 27.
Along with this freedom of chordal progressions came the use of dissonance as an end in itself. Debussy used dissonances freely with no thought of resolving them. Even in his Conservatoire days he was disputing the "law" that dissonances must resolve and only in certain ways. Regarding these innovations, Debussy wrote in a letter to Louis Laloy that he was trying "to rid music of the legacy of clumsy, falsely interpreted traditions, under whose weight the art seemed likely to succumb."  

The melodies of Debussy are light and aethereal, a complement to his glowing harmonies. His melodic idiom never has a ponderous or massive feeling. "Finesse invariably takes precedence over muscularity." Although there are instances of more conventional, romantic designs, Debussy's melodic contour most often resembles the supple, fluid line of plainsong, both in its chant-like, non-metric rhythm and by virtue of the fact that development plays no significant role in the melodic conception of Debussy. His pliant melodies are extremely expressive, and they not only match but enhance and illuminate the shining fantasy of Verlaine's poems.

In rhythm, Debussy sought "evanescent curves and irregular patterns." Like Verlaine and the other Symbolists he deprecated rhetoric and like them he avoided regular lines and

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4 Thompson, op. cit., p. 245.
5 Ibid., p. 253.
6 Ibid., p. 245.
symmetrical rhythms. His avoidance of heavy stresses is admirably suited to the French language with its nuances and inflections.

Another similarity between Debussy and the Symbolists is that for both the composer and the poets, "form became less a cadre for ideas than the pulsation by which those ideas ran their course."7 Certainly, no song in either the Ariettes Oubliées or the Fêtes Galantes follows a traditional form exactly; in these songs, the form is an accidental result of Debussy's musical ideas. Debussy himself condemned the rigid imitation of classical forms by his contemporaries, and he wrote in Monsieur Croche the Dilettante Hater a most stinging indictment of those who used form as a cloak for lack of talent:

Beethoven's real teaching then was not to preserve the old forms, still less to follow in his early steps. We must throw wide the windows to the open sky; they seem to me to have only just escaped being closed for ever.8

The Ariettes Oubliées and Fêtes Galantes contain songs which are among the most exquisite of all song literature and the most personal. Debussy's sensitivity and discreet eloquence are the perfect complement to Verlaine's delicate and subtle poetry. There are many moods and shades of emotions portrayed in these songs—humor in Chevaux de Bois, warmth

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7Ibid., p. 17.
8Debussy, op. cit., p. 31.
and freshness of love in Green, disillusionment in Colloque Sentimental, sadness which has no cause in Il pleure dans mon coeur, despair in L'Ombre des Arbres---but there is never a heroic or pompous quality in their delineation. Instead the minutest nuances are portrayed with reticence and refinement. Debussy's aesthetic is always one of grace and elegance.

Far from tumults and great defeats or victories, he could envisage the faun and the naiad, the dream of the moon on marble, the melancholy of the terraces, the murmurous magic of the harmonies of approaching night. Of the era of which Debussy was the exemplar, a statement has been made which provides an eloquent summation of these beautiful masterpieces of song literature:

How fantastic were the colors and patterns of the new music that greeted the dawn of the twentieth century in Europe! It was a music that seemed to the listener at times like a mere drift of sound that stunned the senses, at times like the unearthly flower of a world yet undiscovered....The strange landscape of sound was perceived rather than heard; the listener quivered as to the blows of some great bell sunk in the ocean of ineffable pleasure, where reality and its perception were fused into each other.  

9 Thompson, op. cit., p. 23.  
10 Guido Pannain, Modern Composers, cited in Oscar Thompson, Debussy, Man and Artist, p. 25.
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