Interpreting and Developing Musical Imagery in Debussy's Piano Music

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Abstract

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Pianistic challenges are some of the varying issues in performing Claude Debussy's piano music. These include tempo and rubato, pedaling, dynamic control, articulation and touch, musicality and phrasing, and interpreting of musical imagery. Each pianist must strive to overcome these challenges, requiring dedicated practice and taking a closer examination of his piano style. "La cathédrale engloutie," from *Préludes* (1909–1910), will be the first topic on exploring his departure from tonality and venturing away from traditional harmonic structures. In addition, "Prélude," from *Pour le piano* (1902), will be examined from the same perspective of the influences from the baroque composers Couperin, Rameau, and Bach, stretching to Chopin's pianistic style in technique and pedaling. *Estampes* (1903) will be looked at in depth regarding the gamelan influences Debussy experienced while taking in the 1889 Exposition in the first

piece “Pagodes.” We will also observe the influences from Maurice Ravel through compositions from his two-piano, four-hands works that may have directly influenced “La soirée dans Grenade.” Furthermore, this dissertation discusses the topic of how “impressionism” was dismissed by the composer, as he often referred to himself as a Symbolist. “Reflets dans l’eau,” from the first book of *Images* (1901–1905), will be examined which relates mathematics to the Golden Section, organizing the structure of the entire piece. The late solo piano works nod to stereotypical racism, including “Golliwog’s Cakewalk” and “Minstrels,” venturing into American jazz and how Scott Joplin’s ragtime influenced and expanded Debussy’s stylistic grasp. From 1900, Debussy’s piano output was considerably more demanding in pianistic technique and more difficult to interpret than his earlier works. This dissertation will also give suggestions on how to successfully navigate challenges on the issues of performance. Moreover, issues in executing and understanding pedaling in Debussy’s piano works will be analyzed.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my committee members for providing me with unwavering support throughout my time on this dissertation. My esteemed advisors, Dr. Robin McCabe and Dr. Stephen Rumph, have been above and beyond in shaping the quality of this dissertation with their invaluable guidance, profound insights, and invaluable feedback. Dr. McCabe, my piano professor at the University of Washington, has been integral to my professional and personal growth with her unwavering encouragement and support.

My development as a pianist is forever indebted to the impact of my mentors and teachers. I am forever grateful to Dai Uk Lee, whose immense support and guidance at Hanyang University have shaped my growth as a musician. I extend my appreciation to Yong Hi Moon, my piano professor at Peabody Institute, whose passionate and heartfelt devotion contributed to reaching new heights in my musical pursuits.

Finally, I must also acknowledge the encouragement and endless support from my mother and my wife. Their patience and sacrifices allowed me to reach this far and their belief in me has inspired this journey.

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1. Introduction

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) occupies a place of unique quality and originality in the artistic fertile years comprising the end of the nineteenth century. The influence he exercised in his vision of twentieth-century music can be heard through his characteristic qualities, elements, and approaches of expression, sonority, rhythm, tonality, and form.[1] Debussy's character and composition style pose multiple perspectives on the roles of nature. Therefore, his influences and a brief background on each of the selections from his solo piano works will be examined.

Popular musicology has often associated his music with the Impressionist movement. Not only did the composer personally resist being labeled an "impressionist," but his main purpose was to suggest a mood or emotion in the mind, rather than to evoke a definite picture. Even before the Second World War, contemporaries acknowledged the composer as a Symbolist. As William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* says in Act 1, Scene 2, "The eye sees not itself – But by reflection, by some other things." Even more than most piano pieces, Debussy's are subjective and require different approaches in interpretation.

Many of Debussy's solo piano works show close links with nature's impressions and paintings that distinguish the music apart from so-called absolute music. The pianistic importance is difficult to truly understand, and a large part of his piano output must transcend mechanical playing. Because of this, I find many students and young learners struggle and fail to succeed in performing Debussy convincingly. *Le petit nègre* (1909), an approachable and one of the easier piano works, is looked at from technical and historical perspectives, understanding the significance of how it was influenced by racial stereotypes and the cakewalk rhythm and tune. The evoking of atmosphere and emotions departed from traditional and definitive harmonic

[1] Simon Trezise, "Debussy's Rhythmicised Time," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 232.

progression and structure. From this important departure, new compositional ideas often produced novel techniques such as tonalities, scales, non-functional harmonies, parallel voice leading and chord movement, and the frequent usage of irregular rhythms punctuated by meaningful silences. Additionally, "Reflets dans l'eau," from the first set of *Images* (1901–1905), uses asymmetrical and nonuniform beat patterns to understand how to pedal and understand the pictorial ideas.

The multiple approaches and new systems of thinking established Debussy as a unique voice. His musical characters range from rebellious to snooty, racist, and even ironic. The composer's form and expressive use of irregular rhythms provide clues to help us understand and express his wish for rubato. All of this leads to considering why and how his music should be interpreted.

This dissertation falls into four chapters, the first dealing with the shift in the new approach in his piano writing. Chapter 1 explores the departure of traditional harmonic and tonal structures. This break from tonality is explained with examples of compositional techniques found in two piano works: "Prélude," from *Pour le piano* (1901), and "La cathédrale engloutie," from the first set of *Préludes* (1909–1910). The latter, an accessible piece for intermediate students, trains the hands to play in parallel movements through modal scaling on the keyboard by keeping the hand position in a single position. Lacking leading tones, bringing out archaic elements, and the representation of the whole-tone scale are all examples of his flirting with traditional tonality. Furthermore, the tonal ambiguity and its exotic color suited Debussy's emerging style, leading to unresolved dissonance and suspended tonality. He relished ambiguity and subtlety, above all else.

Although Debussy never traveled to Indonesia and spent very little time in Spain, the extraordinary influences from these countries are found in "Pagodes" and "La soirée dans Grenade," from *Estampes*. Maurice Ravel's (1875–1937) "Habaneras," from *Sites auriculaires* (1895–1897) and *Rapsodie espagnole* (1907–1908), will be referenced as the target of influence towards Debussy. Chapter 2 explores the composer's fascination with Asian literature, art, and music, including Javanese gamelan, Japanese prints, and the pentatonic scales.

Chapter 3 analyzes the relationship between Debussy and his ambivalence about being called an Impressionist composer. A large portion of this chapter focuses on one of the most important and successful pieces of Debussy scholarship, Roy Howat's T*he Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, and discusses how "Reflets dans l'eau" introduces the Golden Section, revealing a crucial aspect of the composer's compositional process: Debussy's conventional attempts to represent nature, imagery, and facets, bringing out Impressionistic paintings to evoke mood and atmosphere. His sound through color, texture, and gesture in this work provides many examples of sonority, which makes his music unique and a defining structural element.

Finally, Chapter 4 explores the American spirit at a time in which ragtime music was popular with French composers: after the First World War. Debussy was, in fact, heavily inspired by Scott Joplin's style of writing, and he incorporated ragtime into "Golliwog's Cakewalk," from *Children's Corner* (1908), and *Le petit nègre*. The rebellious composer's parodies and minstrelsy, also heard in "Minstrels," from the first set of *Préludes*, will be closely examined.

2. The Break from Tonality: Expanding the Tonal Palette

Claude Debussy helped pave the way for the experiments and trends which typified the development of modern music in the twentieth century. His departure from traditional harmonic and formal structures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century influenced many composers, including Ravel, Bartók, Stravinsky, and even Schoenberg.

Unlike many of the musical families of the celebrated composers, Debussy's parents had no relationship with music. Despite this, his legacy made a lasting impact on Western music. Debussy's birth and decision to stay in Paris were important to his social, political, and cultural life. The explosive development of the city, acting as a central hub of Europe, also played a vital role in his life. His writings and critiques on other composers, especially towards Beethoven and Wagner, show that his views targeting programmatic music were generally hostile and almost surely suspect.

From the 1890s, Debussy's compositional output concentrated mainly on opera and orchestral music, neglecting writing for solo piano. Additionally, he wrote a significant number of songs for voice and piano in the 1880s. The only work he wrote for the piano during the years leading to 1900 was the first book of *Images*. Although published in 1903, "Hommage à Rameau," the middle movement of the three, was revised and also used in *Pour le piano* (1990) earlier as its middle movement, "Sarabande." Three pieces make up *Pour le piano*, which arguably marks the new point in departure in his productivity in piano works and hints at the wide range of pianistic writing that will follow.

Seriousness and brilliance are just two of the characteristics of *Pour le piano*. "Prélude," the first piece, features many pedal points and uses traditional harmonies such as

diminished-seventh chords and other classical tonalities such as the dominant and tonic structures. The I-V cadences also pay respect to Johann Sebastian Bach's (1685–1750) organ and traditional Baroque music. Furthermore, "Prélude" begins with a gesture or hints of the keyboard suites by François Couperin (1668–1733) and Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764). Victor Lederer says, "the stiffness in the phrasing seems to be scrupulously avoided in later works" and "the quick notes are typical of the old style."[2]

Debussy recalled how his first piano teacher, Antoinette Mauté de Fleurville, an alleged pupil of Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849), played Bach, which led to the *Pour le piano*.[3] In 1912, the violinist Egon Kenton observed a pianistic trait at a performance of Debussy: "His hands never left the keys."[4] So with this evidence, it is clear Debussy developed a distinctive use of tactile hand overlaps, easily seen in "Sarabande," at bars 13–14.[5]

Although not consistently, the key in the "Prélude" is in A minor. At times, Debussy toys with atonality, but from a respectful distance. From measure 6, the second melodic line is heard while the low A in the bass register acts as the long pedal point. These pedal points hint at the writing style in how he indicated pedal markings. Interestingly, the composer never wrote many of these markings.

Pedaling is a vital concern in Debussy's piano playing. Nevertheless, with almost no markings of pedaling in the score of his piano works, there is still some advice on how to use the pedal examined. It is rare, but he does indicate the pedal marking in the opening bars of "Pagodes," the final bars of "La soirée dans Grenade" and "Jardins sous la pluie," and "Serenade for the Doll," from *Children's Corner* (see Example 1).

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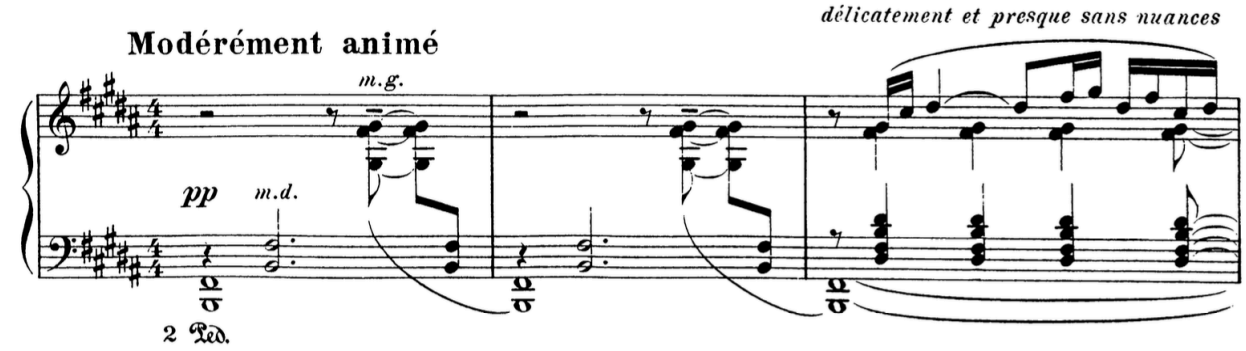
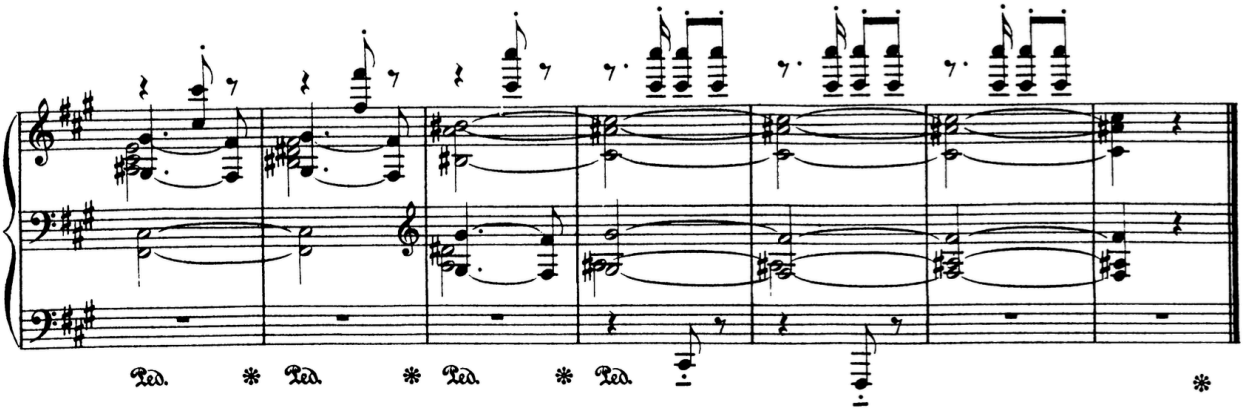
[2] Victor Lederer, *The Quiet Revolutionary* (New York: Amadeus Press, 2007), 37.
[3] Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 156
[4] Ibid, 72.
[5] Ibid.

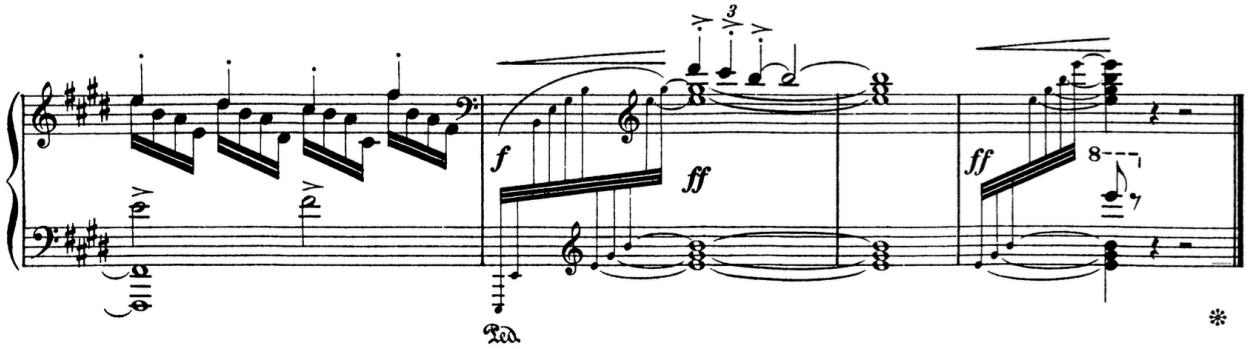
Ex. 1



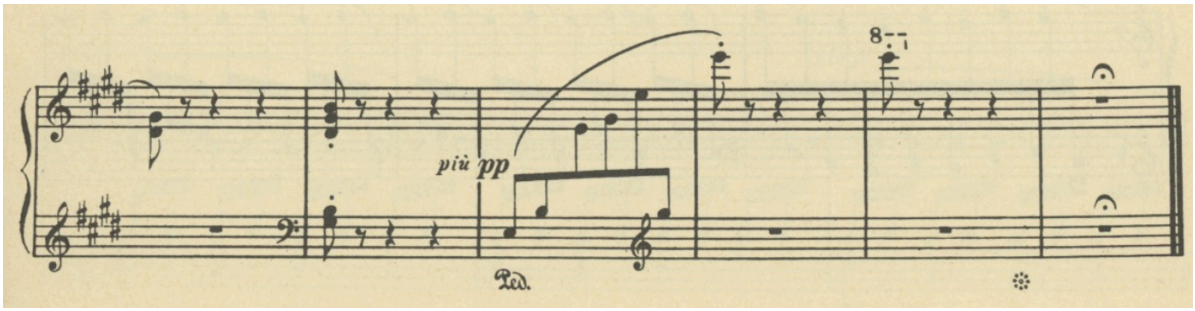
a. Debussy: *Estampes*, "Pagodes"



b. Debussy: *Estampes*, "La soirée dans Grenade"



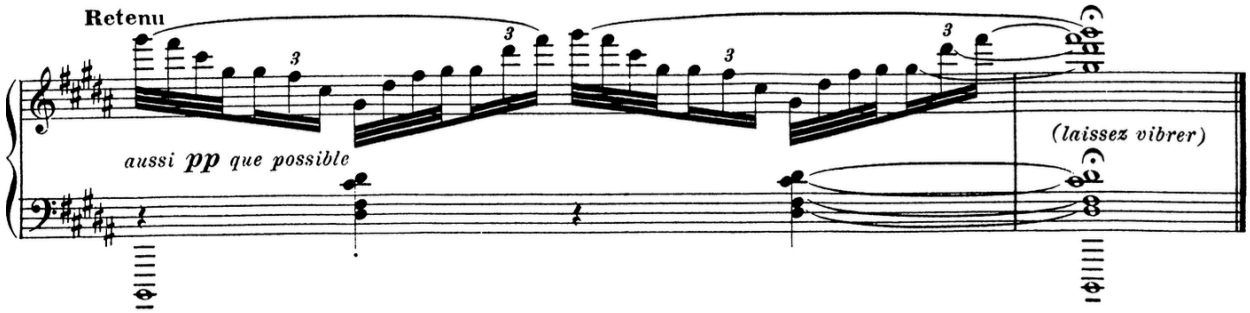
c. Debussy: *Estampes*, "Jardins sous la pluie"



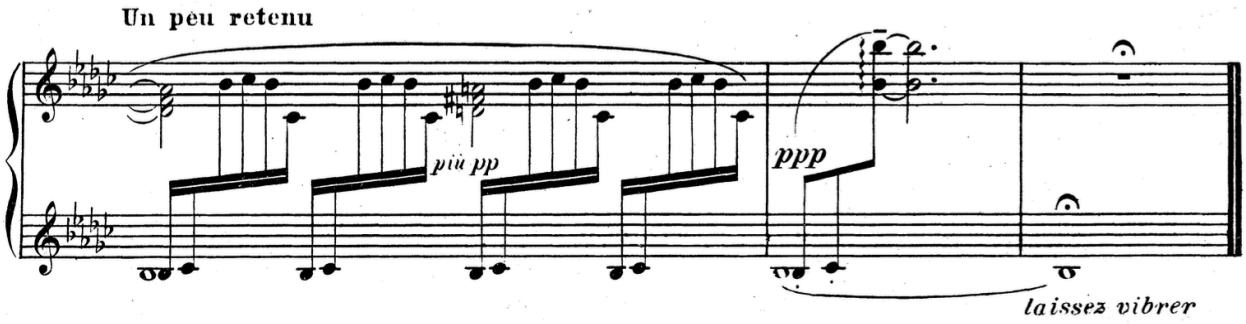
d. Debussy: *Children's Corner*, "Serenade for the Doll"

The rarer markings of *Ped*. in Debussy's piano music are typically written near the end of his solo piano works, fading the sound out. Another instruction he writes is *laissez vibrer* (let vibrate or ring). Examples of this instruction can be seen in "Pagodes," and some of his *Préludes* (see Example 2). The nuance of this musical notation is to allow the note to ring and sustain its sound even after the duration of its value, regardless of any subsequent notes or rests. Additionally, the effect of *laissez vibrer* heavily influences the atmosphere of the piece.

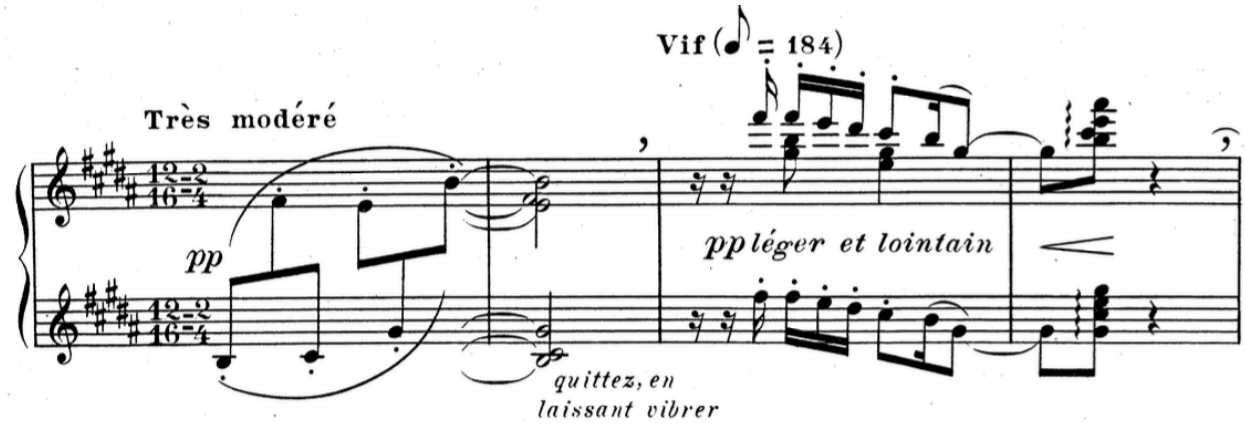
Ex. 2



a. Debussy: *Estampes*, "Pagodes"



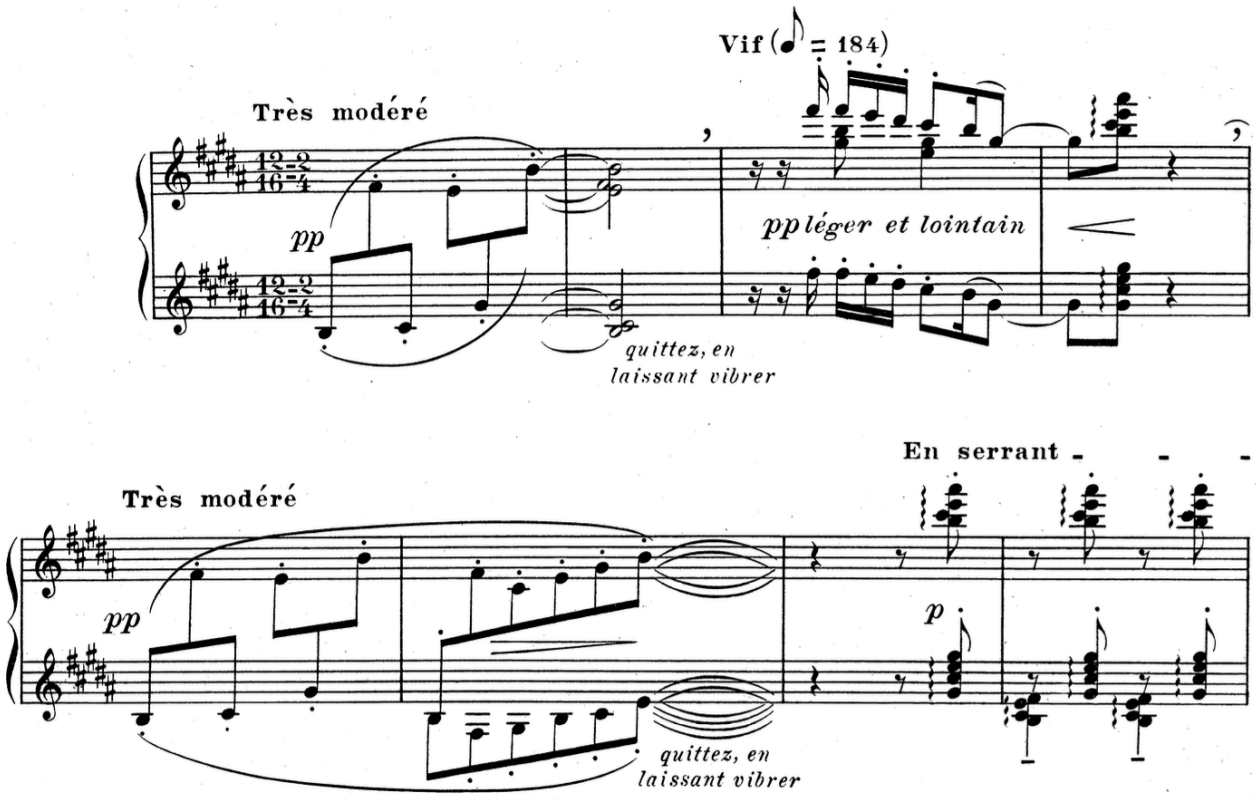
b. Debussy: *Préludes*, Book 1, No. 3, "Le vent dans la plaine"



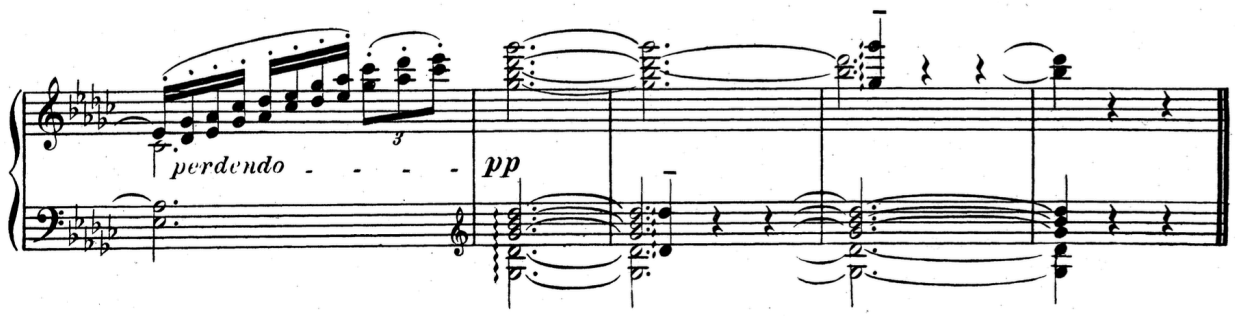
c. Debussy: *Préludes*, Book 1, No. 5, "Les collines d'Anacapri"

In general, long bass line slurs in Debussy's piano music are also considered indications of the pedal. Prominent examples are in *Préludes* (see Example 3). In "Les collines d'Anacapri," the notes in the opening bar are tied into the next measure. On the second line, in bars 5–7, Debussy does not even feel the need to write out the notes sustaining into bar 7. He continued this practice of writing ties to rests, or empty space, throughout his solo piano music and has consequently become a standard notational practice.

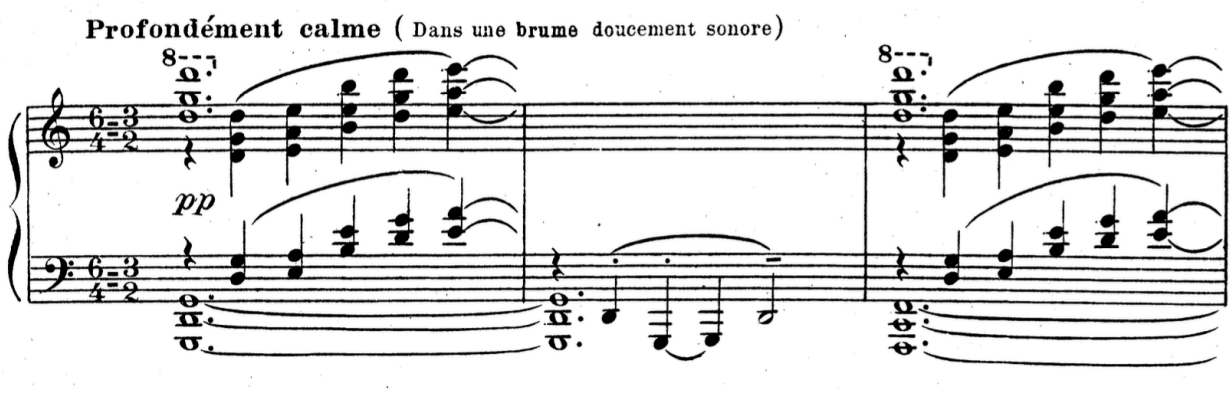
Ex. 3



a. Debussy: *Préludes*, Book 1, No. 5, "Les collines d'Anacapri"



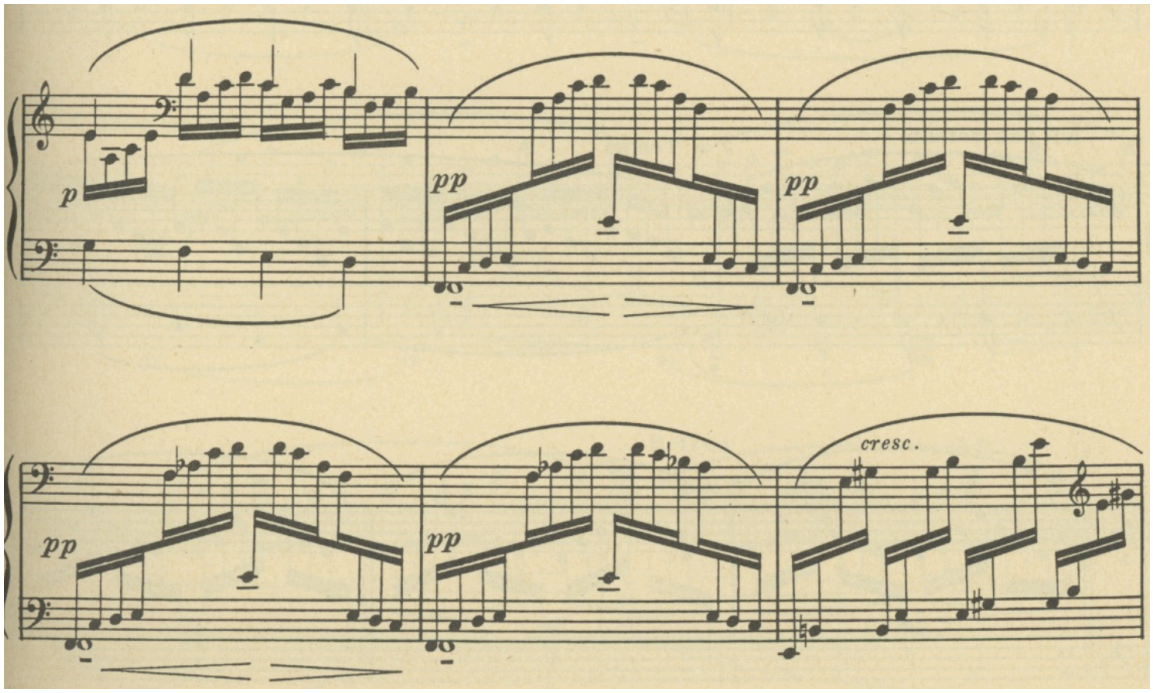
b. Debussy: *Préludes*, Book 1, No. 8, "La fille aux cheveux de lin"



c. Debussy: *Préludes*, Book 1, No 10, "La cathédrale engloutie"

Providing other issues, Debussy writes notes without ties often indicating the precise length of how long the damper pedal should be held down in "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum," from *Children's Corner* (see Example 4). Debussy writes a whole-note F in the bass and since the left hand is required to play the E's over the right hand, the bass must be released.

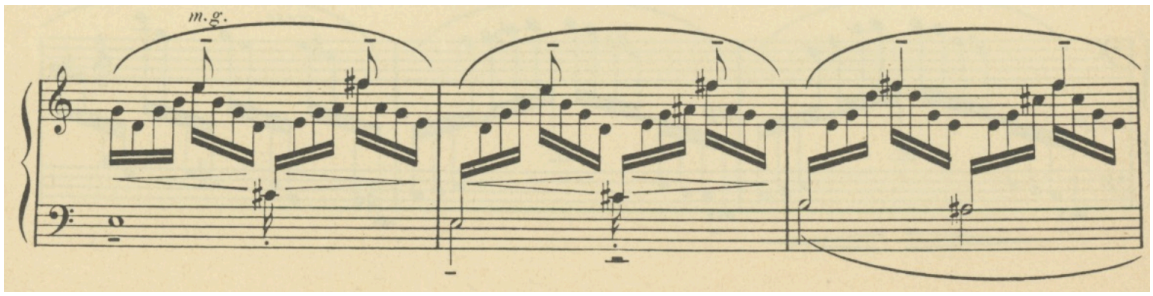
Ex. 4



Debussy: *Children's Corner*, "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum"

Debussy varies indications on pedaling later in the piece by writing the whole-note bass in the left hand but then playing half notes (see Example 5). This is indicated to change the pedal twice in the measure instead of only once.

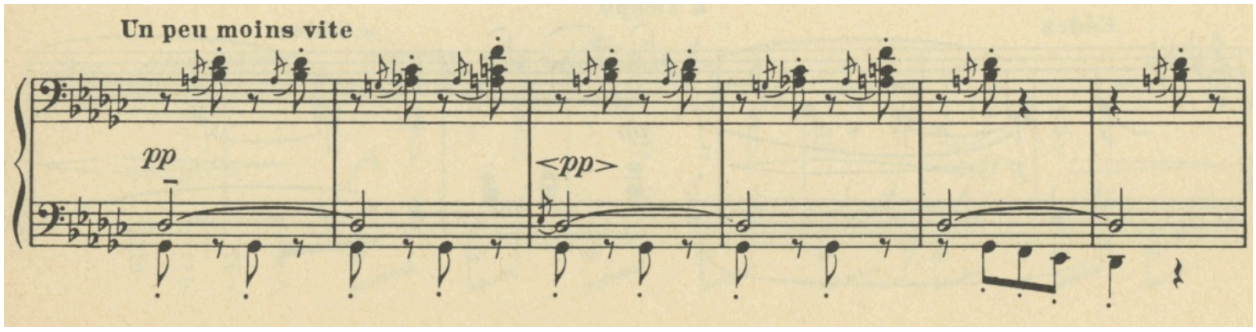
Ex. 5



Debussy: *Children's Corner*, "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum"

In some cases, long notes can create a contrast between sustained notes and short staccatos. In "Golliwog's Cakewalk," the middle section requires the left hand to sustain a long half-note tied in the next measure while playing a short bass note with a staccato marked on every one of them (see Example 6). With its musical and historical context discussed in a further chapter, the desired effect Debussy wants juxtaposes both long and short notes to be played with the nuance of playing without pedals.

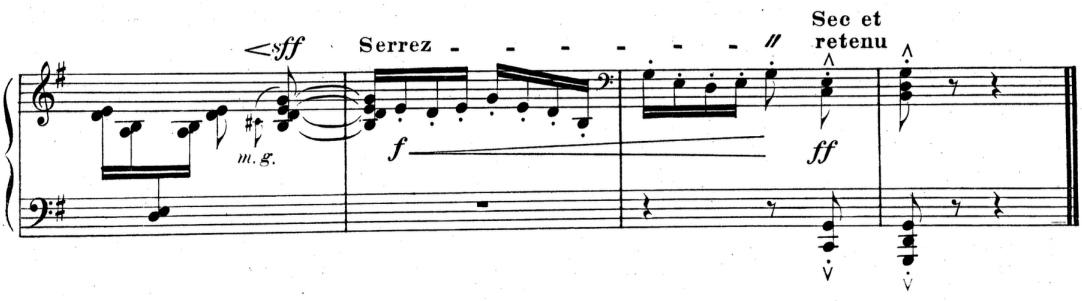
Ex. 6



Debussy: *Children's Corner*, "Golliwog's Cakewalk"

Furthermore, Debussy would indicate when he did not want pedaling in rare cases by using the word *sec* (dry). Debussy wrote *Sec et retenu* to complete the first set of *Préludes* in "Minstrels" (see Example 7).

Ex. 7

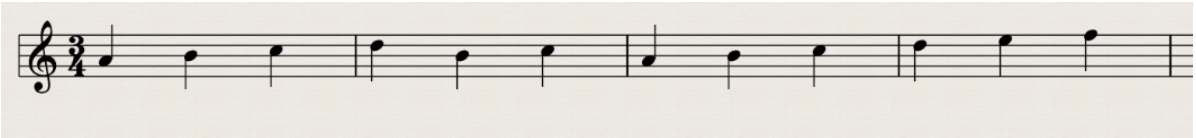


Debussy: *Préludes*, Book 1, No. 12, "Minstrels"

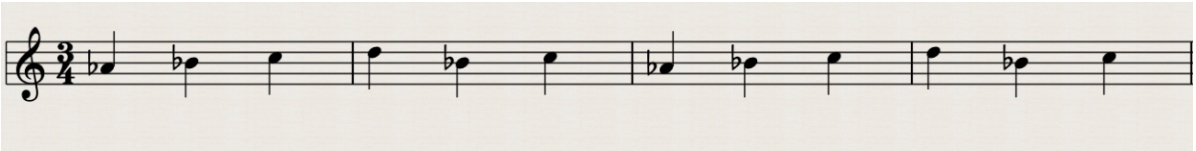
Pedal points, perhaps an homage in organ tradition, can be a controversial topic in Debussy's music. Today, almost every piano has a sostenuto pedal, but it was initially a French invention and Debussy never mentioned it or even had it. Using the sostenuto pedal in "Prélude" is possible as the bass notes last from measures 8–15. Although it makes little difference, some pianists cover all three pedals, the *sourdine* with the left foot and the others with the right foot, allowing the bass notes to last without blurring the harmonies. On the other hand, most pianists take the bass note strongly enough and flutter the dampers.

At the arrival of measure 75, both low and high A flats are pedal points. There is a mysterious and ambiguous effect from these bell-like tones. The melody heard in the opening bars transforms into a whole-tone scale (see Example 8). In retrospect, *Pour le piano* marks the beginning of his essential piano writing decades from the 1900s and shows subtle changes from typical tonality to the usage of whole-tones and modal changes.

Ex. 8



a. Debussy: *Pour le piano*, "Prélude," theme in A minor



b. Debussy: *Pour le piano*, "Prélude," theme transposed into whole-tone scale

The whole-tone melody played in *pp* gives a vibrant sound played without the dampers. Echoing the melody introduced with the low A pedal point, the traditional A minor tune transforms to whole tones with the pedal point shifting down to A flat. In bars 150–156, there is another shift from a diatonic scale to a whole-tone scale, repeated with rapid scales exchanged between the hands. The absence of leading tones, dominant harmonies, and half steps creates ambiguity and defies resolution. The fast notes lead to a virtuosically, almost Stravinskian climax, followed by a cadenza of real grandeur. Debussy ends the piece with six chords that sharply contrast the piece from the agitated perpetual motion in quick notes and *glissandi*-like scales.

Debussy incorporated the whole-tone scale in his music of various genres throughout his life, especially in the 1900s when his most important piano works were composed. As in his compositional writing in "Prélude," the typical application was between passages of modal, tonal, expanded tonal, or chromatic music.[6] Arguably the most significant figure in the development of the whole-tone scale, his integration of the scale both melodically and harmonically befits the emerging style that results in exotic colors and sounds. His fixation on

[6] John K. Novak, "Whole-Tone as Extension of Tonal Harmony in the Music of Debussy: An Underestimated Technique of Conjunction," *International Journal of Musicology* 1, (2015): 89.

parallel motion and sequential patterns are simple and autonomous, and constitute a fitting symbol of the anti-Romantic movement in art and music. John K. Novak says, "the innate tonal ambiguity of the whole-tone scale, as well as its exotic color, befitted Debussy's emerging style, which espoused modality, suspended tonality, parallelism, and unresolved dissonance."[7]

"Sarabande" is a slow and appropriate middle movement. Bach also used the sarabande as the center in the solo cello suites, violin partitas, and the partitas for the keyboard. In addition, Couperin and Rameau used this dignified triple-meter dance in their keyboard suites. Other influential works written by Debussy before *Pour le piano* echo Chopin. Debussy's *Ballade* (1890), a subtle and flowing work, uses Chopin's four ballades of the same title; *Nocturne* (1890), written in D flat major, is worth considering as it is Chopin's most often used key signature.[8] In addition to "Sarabande," Chopin's textures and pianistic techniques are applied, showing textures and recalling *Barcarolle* (1846). Lederer says, "some of the early works inspired directly by Chopin are slight."[9] Howat states, "Chopin's influence reached far beyond the piano."[10] He continues saying, "Chopin's Ballades, F minor *Fantasie*, and *Polonaise-Fantaisie* effectively invented the symphonic poem at the keyboard, devising forms that cohere while defying conventional analysis, in ways that interested both Debussy and Ravel."[11]

Howat's analyses on the parallels between Debussy's and Chopin's works spark interest. A prominent example are the opening bars in Chopin's *Polonaise-Fantaisie* (1846) and the similarities seen in the climax of "Hommage à Rameau," from *Images* (see Example 9). Debussy similarly applies the ascending arpeggiated figure seen in *Polonaise-Fantaisie*.

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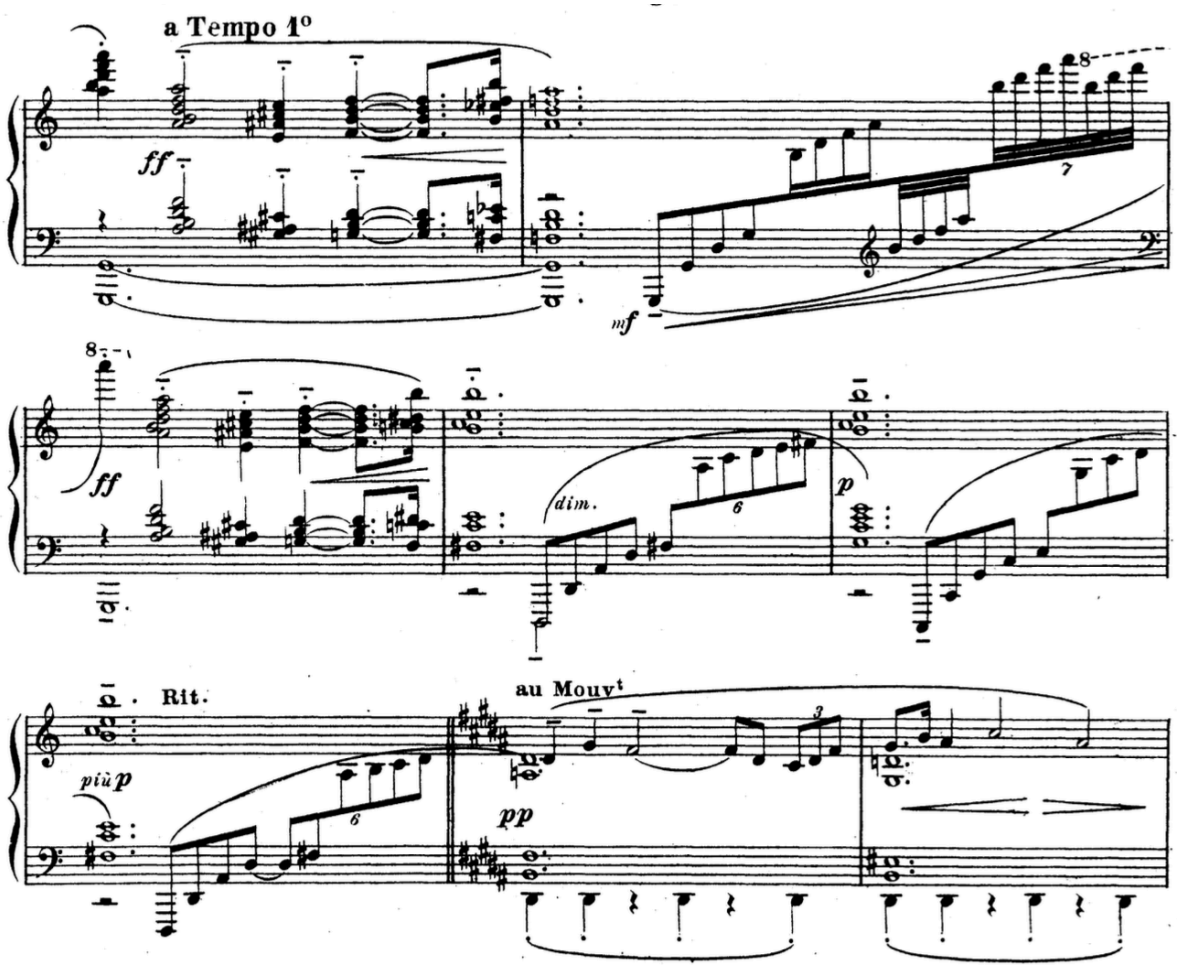
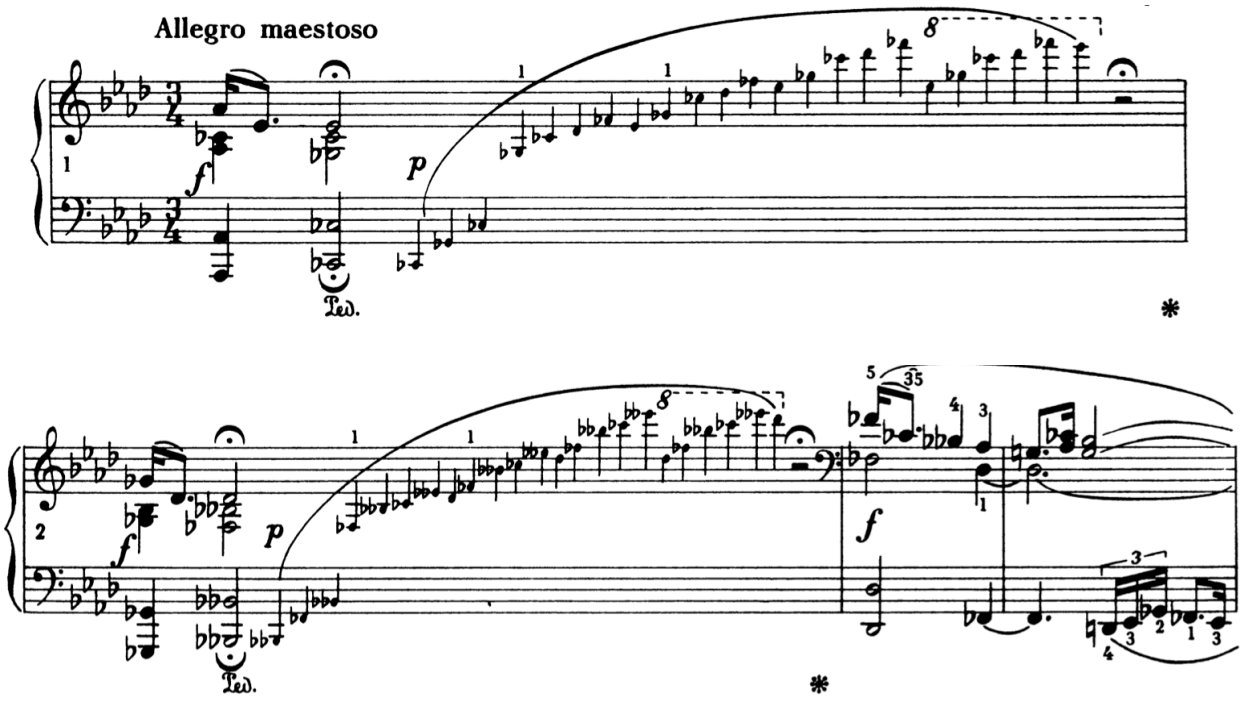
[7] Novak, "Whole-Tone as Extension of Tonal Harmony in the Music of Debussy," 80.
[8] Lederer, *The Quiet Revolutionary*, 36.
[9] Ibid, 39.
[10] Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 63.
[11] Ibid, 64.

Ex. 9



a. Debussy: *Images*, Book 1, "Hommage à Rameau"



b. Chopin: *Polonaise-Fantaisie*, bars 1–4

Pour le piano may not have directly influenced the young Ravel, who had just completed his *Jeux d'eau* (1901), but there is no doubt that his interest in energy to begin exploring directions and pioneering new pianism was spurred by Debussy's three-piece piano suite.[12] Without a doubt, the Toccata style developed and began to become more elaborate in "Jardins sous la pluie" or "Mouvement" from *Images*. Debussy's attraction to and use of non-Western music has been explored by many ethnomusicologists.[13] Jann Pasler cites Pouillon, "François Picard, a Chinese music specialist, even argues that Debussy's exoticism was a 'personal invention,' using the whole tone scale and pentatonicism heard in *Estampes*."[14]

[12] Mark Devoto, *The Debussy Sound: Colour, Texture, Gesture*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 188.
[13] Pasler, "Debussy the Man, his Music, and his Legacy," 211.
[14] Ibid.

Pour le piano was composed before Debussy's developed and depictive style.[15] Lederer even goes on to comment, "*Pour le piano* is the culminating masterpiece of Debussy's early keyboard style, approaching *Estampes* in its intensity while falling just short of that work's revolutionary formal freedom and boldness of piano sonority."[16] As a result, many of the early works have formal titles adopted by the composer from earlier composers including Bach, Rameau, Couperin, and Chopin, but mainly from the baroque era. From *Estampes* and onwards, the descriptive names and abstract titles dominate all of his composition output.

In the history of Western music, Debussy's titles for both sets of *Préludes* can be considered the most confusing. The composer, a rebel of old traditions, writes them at the end of each piece aimed for an unbiased impression. Perhaps, the irony in this intended freedom in creativity and interpretation. It is typical to read the title of a piece before listening and Debussy's nuance of his preferred delayed titles raise questions as to why he did this. In addition, the titles of each prelude is preceded with an ellipsis and written in parentheses.

Debussy wrote several pentatonic pieces for piano including "La fille aux cheveux de lin," "Les collines d'Anacapri," and "Bruyères," all from *Préludes*.[17] Furthermore, he used pentatonicism extensively in "Pagodes," which deserves its own chapter. This portion of the chapter sheds further light on the nuanced sound, atmosphere, color, tempo, dynamics, texture, and harmonic palette in "La cathédrale."

As the piece opens, the presence of rests with notes attached to slurred markings reads as pedaling. Explicitly intended, Debussy's notation was to avoid any audible cut in sonority.[18] The pedal is needed to hold essential notes and warm the texture, blanketing the inner harmonies that

[15] Lederer, *Debussy*, 39.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Brian Alegant, "Reconsidering Debussy's Bruyères," *Intégral* 30, (2016): 1.
[18] Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 286.

evoke rising mist. “La cathédrale” is not merely a poetic idea, but something we are to hear.[19] Steven Rings points out what is perhaps most striking about the marking and how it does not say anything about a cathedral rising.[20] The imagery can hardly be missed if the title is in mind.

The descriptive intentions of “La cathédral” are perhaps the nearest Debussy has come to writing program music.[21] The title comes from a Breton legend, as Paul Roberts puts it, “a perfect vehicle for Symbolist fantasy.” Roberts continues, “the tragedy of a drowned city and the cathedral rising from the sea at dawn at certain times of the year is all evoked uncannily in the prelude: misty waters, the sound of cathedral bells, and the structure of the different sections, all imply the ascent of the cathedral out of the waves.”[22] Moreover, Debussy incorporates medieval chords and pervasive whole-tone scales.

The first notation *Profondément calme* (*Dans une brume doucement sonore*)–With deep calm in a gently resonant mist–provides most of the information needed to begin the piece. Although there is a hint of pedaling from the slurred notes over the bar line, Debussy’s recording can guide us in how he pedaled. His recordings in 1913 sparked controversy as to tempo since he was not writing everything down the way he played: in 3/2 time, bars 7–12 marked *Doux et fluide* (soft and fluid).

“La cathédrale” is a loose ternary ABA form, with double bar lines separating the middle section. For a brief thirty measures, the piece modulates to C sharp minor mainly played in the dominant over a low G sharp pedal point. The third section is composed in a typical Debussyan fashion: ambiguity meets certainty. It ends on a C major chord. Evoking medieval chants, the unharmonized pentatonic collection of notes is in G.

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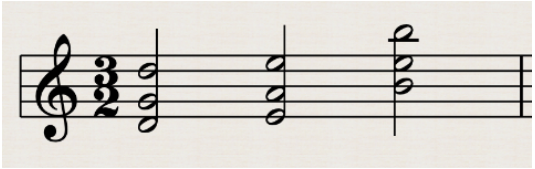
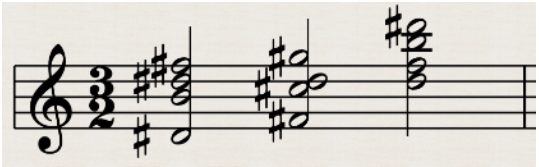
[19] Steven Rings, “Mystéres Limpides: Time and Transformation in Debussy’s Des pas sur la neige,” *19th-Century Music*, 32, no. 2 (2008): 183
[20] Ibid.
[21] Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), 28.
[22] Ibid.

The characteristic sonorities of the missing major thirds add to the atmosphere. At the arrival of measure 16, *Peu à peu sortant de la brume* (gradually coming out of the mist), the textures of the harmonies played similarly to the opening bars have added the major tonic triad (see Example 10). The following bars in the left hand are in an arpeggiating texture over the stable pedal points. The shift from the low B to E-flat and finally to C major marks the climax of the bells. Ultimately written with mostly diatonic harmonies, this section includes the major seconds. *Sonore sans dureté* (with a ringing but not stern tone)–a mysterious feel with chords in both hands played over a C pedal point in the bass. Despite playing both chords moving in parallel fourths, these sounds give it the mysterious sound.[23] As Claude Abravanel commented on the mysterious feel of the chords, "it is precisely this element of sonority, consisting of fourths embraced within other sounds, that gives these chords a mysterious and intentional transparency."[24]

Ex. 10



a. Debussy: *Préludes*, Book 1, No. 10, "La cathédrale engloutie," opening bars



b. Debussy: *Préludes*, Book 1, No. 10, "La cathédrale engloutie," B section

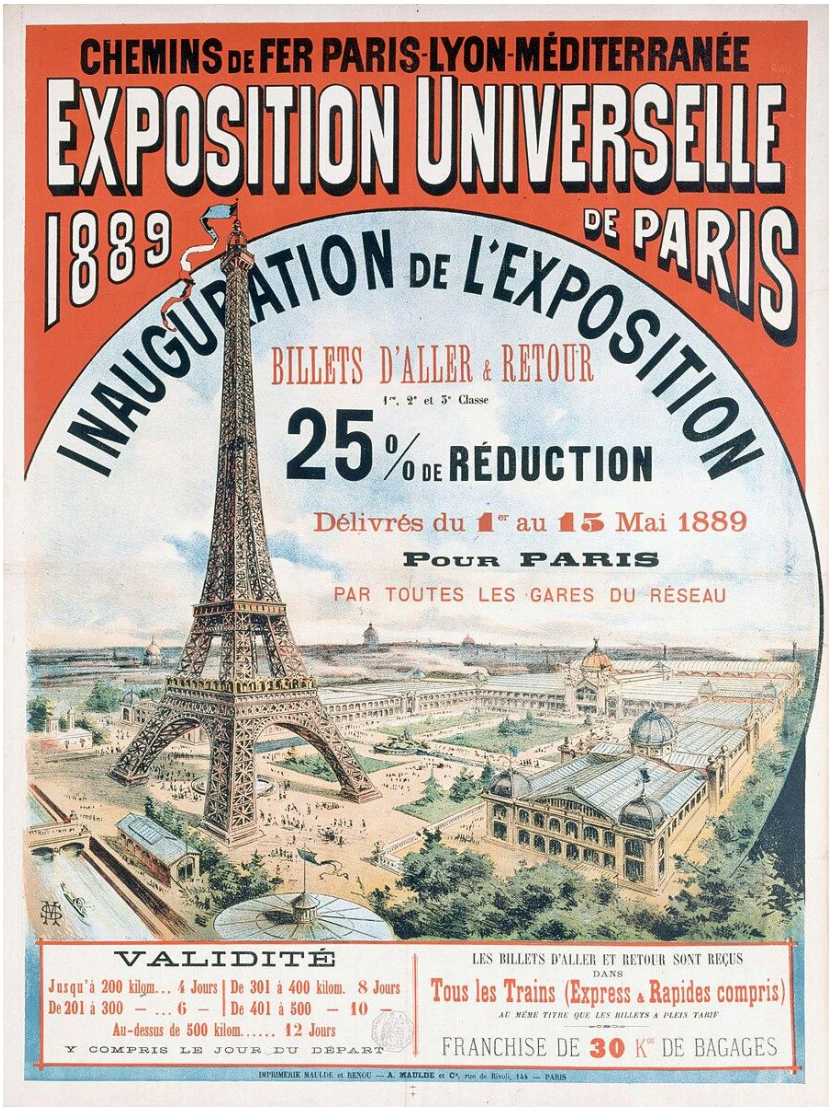
[23] Claude Abravanel, "Symbolism and Performance," in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 34–35.
[24] Ibid, 35.

Dynamics are strong characteristics that play an essential role allowing the musical intensity to have relief or to stand out.[25] As Howat states, "dynamics can be viewed as a formal element defining harmony, rhythm and texture."[26] The next chapter will discuss different uses of dynamics as they have different meanings intended for interpreting different instruments in "Pagodes."

This seeming obsession with the combination of pentatonicism was likely heightened by Debussy attending the Paris Universal Exposition. Debussy was only twenty-seven when he attended the famous 1889 Exposition. Art and industry from all over the world were on full display when the Exposition opened its gates. The lasting and inspiring impression on his imagination that he experienced firsthand was from the chiming instruments of the gamelan of the five-note and seven-note scales that give oriental sounds.[27] His creative imagination served to express, through the piano, the hammer and mallet effects of a gamelan.

[25] Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 42–43.
[26] Ibid, 42.
[27] Roberts, *Images*, 153–155.

3. The Lure of the East: Debussy the Virtual Traveler



The year 1889 marked the centenary of the French Revolution and the celebrated Paris Exposition Universelle. The construction of the Eiffel Tower was complete, which also emphasized the importance of the event. Considered one of the most successful world fairs, France's invitation to countless other countries worldwide drew a big response as they brought their various exhibits to Paris.

While the representation of the exotic was already popular in musical and stage works with characters, stories, dancing, and music, the Exposition, for the first time, brought authentic

Asian music to visitors to experience.[28] The Javanese exhibit was among the most popular among all the countries represented. It attracted millions, with the entrance featuring two tall towers with double-sloped pagoda-like roofs (see Figure 1). Javanese inhabitants lived in tents and carried out typical activities for all to see, such as housekeeping, cooking, weaving cloth, and making jewelry.[29] In addition, there was an open-air pavilion where musical and dance performances occurred daily.[30]

Fig. 1

Two Pagoda Towers at the Javanese Exhibit, 1889

The gamelan ensemble, a small percussion orchestra, mainly used instruments including metallophones struck with mallets. Other instruments included are gongs in different shapes and sizes hung with cords or suspended over resonator boxes and tubes. Found throughout Indonesia, the timbres from these instruments produce a rich and colorful sound. In the exhibit, many visitors, including Debussy, experienced the Javanese dancing with the Javanese instruments played (see Figure 2). Sylvia Parker mentions, “Debussy wrote no transcriptions of what he

[28] Sylvia Parker, “Debussy’s Gamelan,” *College Music Symposium* 52 (2012): 2.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

heard at the Exposition."[31] Parker continues, "Debussy provides us with detailed understanding through composition with no academic treatise about gamelan music."[32]

Fig. 2

Four Javanese Dancers

Like Western instruments, the size, resonance, and the means of striking gamelan instruments greatly affect the volume and speed of playable note patterns. Generally categorized into two groups: 'loud' and 'soft.' Evidently, at the exhibit, the traditions of how players played gamelan music differed from those of Western orchestras. Unlike traditional Western musicians, Javanese players never focused on a specific instrument and rotated between each instrument.[33] Children played at the exhibition and typically shared each instrument. Interestingly, Javanese gamelan practices employ percussion instruments that are intentionally out of tune with each

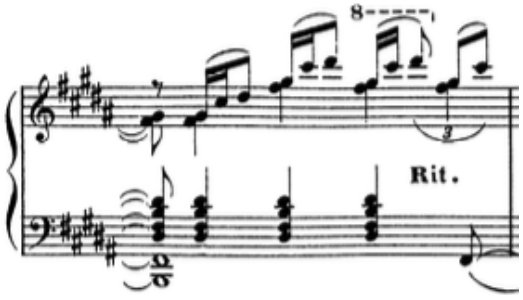
[31] Parker, "Debussy's Gamelan," 4.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid, 5.

other. The microtonal uniqueness of each gamelan is part of its character and is known and valued by Javanese players.[34]

Javanese *slendro*, a traditional gamelan tuning, is a scale with only five pitches spaced approximately over an octave. There is no fundamental pitch of the gamelan. The player's highest note sets the pitch they can sing.[35] The speed and rhythmic intensity are both governed by the resonance and clarity the instrument can play. The *iramas* (ratios), which are named and known to all the players, dictate the speed of the notes.[36] As Parker notes, "the rhythmic architecture always controls the punctuation known as colotomic structure."[37]

In Western music, downbeats provide the most critical rhythmic event, emphasizing a strong accent on the first beat of a measure. But in gamelan music, the rhythmic events are placed at the end with a slight *ritardando* (see Example 11). The ending of a whole piece is typically marked by the largest gong (*gong ageng*), and all of the different timbres resonate with the overtones of the other instruments. The *gong ageng* is listened to very carefully by all players so they adjust the timing of their final notes. Typically, the *gong ageng* is prepared by a *ritardando*.

Ex. 11



Debussy: *Estampes*, "Pagodes," bar 4

[34] Parker, "Debussy's Gamelan," 6.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid, 7.
[37] Ibid, 7–8.

Debussy found this music remarkable, and it transformed and stimulated his creativity. The music of the Exposition bears the gamelan's unmistakable influence. His fruitful and productive hours spent at the Java exhibit are evidence of this. *Estampes* is the apparent example of gamelan's influence in the first piece, "Pagodes." Roberts describes the gamelans influence on Debussy as "his most ambitious attempt at pentatonic effort."[38] Debussy did not seek to imitate asian music faithfully, but to absorb the evolving style of Asian music. Yet, the memory of the gamelan remained with him at his most profound level.[39] No other piece contains the same combination and pentatonicism of pitch material. The pentatonic tradition produces an exotic pleasing sound in the piano's black keys.

"Pagodes," as Roberts puts it, " is percussive in conception."[40] This seems like a paradox, considering the delicate nuances and soft dynamics that govern most of the piece.[41] Jocelyn Ho has described Debussy's music best as "delicate, ephemeral, subtle, like a well-constructed dream, or like a delicate and crystalline pastry, only faintly sweet."[42] Intuitively, Debussy explores the resonances created after the impact of the hammer, as the sounds are dying away.[43] This sound style is responsible for the atmosphere in "Pagodes," which has the elements of being the stereotypical Debussy sound.

"Pagodes" is diatonic primarily and in the keys of B and G sharp minor. The two keys, sharing the same pentatonic scale, allow both hands to play on the black keys. The pentatonicism of the opening bars suggests the large gongs and bells followed by the rhythmic sequence of *kempul*. These rhythmic notes are the slightly smaller gongs and frequently struck most as they

[38] Roberts, *Images*, 158.
[39] Ibid, 156.
[40] Ibid, 157.
[41] Ibid, 157.
[42] Jocelyn Ho, "Debussy and Late-Romantic Performing Practices: The Piano Rolls of 1912," in *Debussy's Resonance*, ed. François de Médicis and Steven Huebner (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2019), 513.
[43] Roberts, *Images*, 157.

decay in tonal sound. Each type of gong is central to how Debussy utilizes the pedal, imitating the Javanese gamelan. As Jeremy Day-O'Connell notes, "*Estampes* demonstrates an earnest engagement with the purely musical possibilities of the pentatonic scale."[44] The gamelan instruments' remarkable resemblance is hard through the articulation's direction. The markings such as slur, *tenuto*, accent, *portato*, and *staccato* indicate how to strike the piano keys. Rather than marks of expression, the sound qualities by differing strokes allow for the distinguishing timbre of the melodies.

Debussy introduces *gong ageng* in the first bar, on the low B. Also, the first 14 bars represent the low, middle, and high registers of the bowed string timbre of *rebab*.[45] The pentatonic motifs found in the right hand produce G sharp, C sharp, D sharp, and F sharp and are all slurred with rhythmic activity. Venturing to the first indication, *délicatement et presque sans nuances* (delicately and almost without nuance), the player evokes Javanese restraint rather than Western, more overt expressiveness.[46] In bar 16, the first significant event regarding phrasing changes with a subtle hairpin – the *rebab*'s natural inflection when played with the bow.

Fig. 3

Bar	Dynamic
1–10	*pp*
11–22	*p*
23–32	*pp*
33–40	*p*
41–44	*ff*
45–49	*pp*

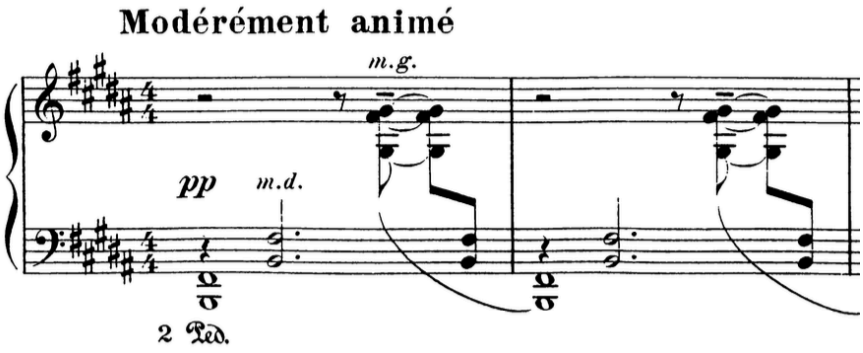
[44] Jeremy Day-O'Connell, "Debussy, Pentatonicism, and the Tonal Tradition," *Music Theory Spectrum* 31, no. 2 (2009): 226.
[45] Parker, "Debussy's Gamelan," 10
[46] Ibid.

50–52	*p*
53–60	*pp*
61–72	*p*
73–78	*ff*
79	*p*
80–98	*pp*

Debussy: *Estampes*, "Pagodes," bar numbers and dynamics

Dynamic levels vary throughout the piece (see Figure 3)–there are only twelve events of dynamic changes, two of them being *ff* otherwise soft. Parker says, "differing dynamic levels effectively simulate the gamelan's changing instrumentation between the loud and soft percussive styles."[47] In addition, the changing tempos are also essential signals for events similar to gamelan music. In bars 5, 7, and 9, there is a *ritardando* before each arrival of the gong. Another significant tempo change is *Animez un peu* at bar 19, becoming more animated to *Toujours animé* at bar 23, imitating the gamelan players from one *irama* to another.[48]

Ex. 12

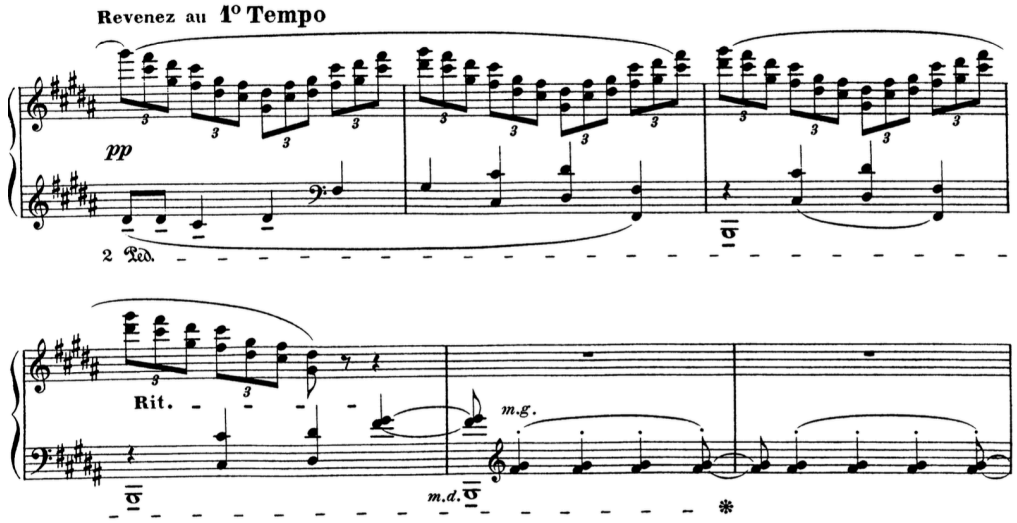


Estampes, "Pagodes," bars 1–2

[47] Parker, "Debussy's Gamelan," 8.
[48] Ibid, 11.

Convincingly, Debussy avoids the triadic-tonal associations of the major third but instead features the second and fourth intervals.[49] The sense in Western music is to establish the B tonic but fails to do so in the first chord. Instead, the B has F sharp on top, creating a perfect fifth. Furthermore, the rhythm perceived in bars 1–2 provides a syncopated resemblance of a real *gong ageng*.[50] The first and only of Debussy's piano works that feature the quarter – dotted quarter – quarter – eighth is consistent throughout the piece and even leads into bar 3, ensuing the offbeat quarter-note chords (see Example 12).

Ex. 13



Debussy: *Estampes*, "Pagodes"

Although imitating the Javanese gamelan music, the phrase structure and form of "Pagodes" are strictly in Western music practice. Despite the two-bar introduction, Debussy utilizes the four-bar phrases and neatly structures the piece in ternary ABA form. Incorporating Javanese elements, such as prolonging measures to give the ringing gongs time to decay, is heard two times. Bars 27–29 indicate *Revenez au Tempo 1* (return to original tempo), leading to bar 30

[49] Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 112.
[50] Ibid.

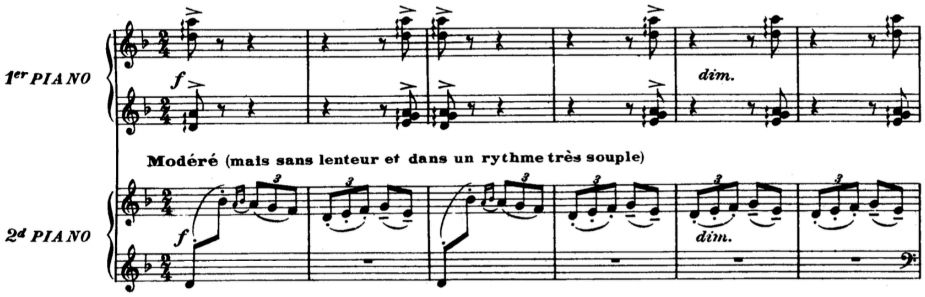
with the entire measure *Rit.* (see Example 13). Debussy meticulously details all of these bars to hold both pedals down to simulate the overtone-rich ringing of the *gong ageng*. The soft resonant vibration is cleared in bar 32, playing the static major seconds F sharp and G sharps. Bars 31–32 are transformed into an ostinato alternated in both hands while adding more instruments (trills) before leading back into the A section.

"Pagodes" marks a critical milestone in Debussy's evolution as a composer. In the previous chapter examining earlier piano works, Debussy had already revealed experiments with non-traditional elements such as whole-tone scales. Rather than creating an entirely different or radical style, he found the timbre, layering, and rhythm in Javanese music to orient his pianistic and composing elements.

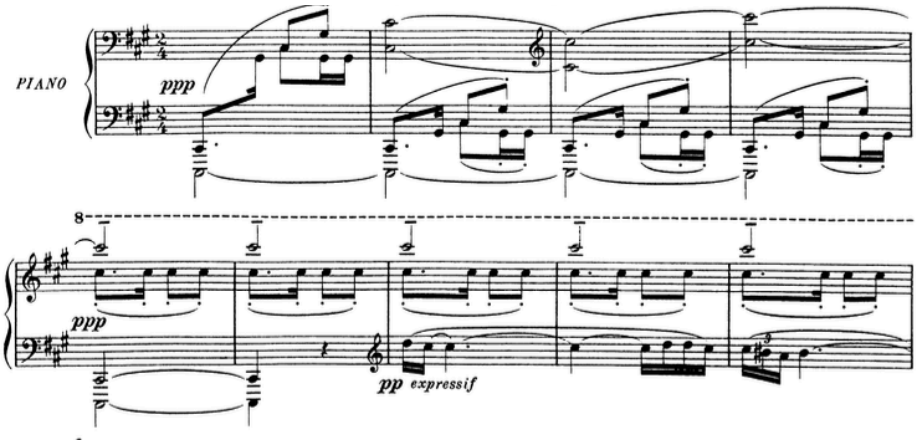
Debussy's music goes far beyond the East despite the chapter's title. His music is also atmospheric and evocative, influenced by Spanish music. His music is not particularly "Spanish," although the references are prevalent, for example, in the "La soirée dans Grenade" with the Habanera style. Besides the orchestral pieces such as "Ibéria," from *Images pour orchestra* (1908), other piano pieces that have suggestions of Spain are two preludes "La sérénade interrompue" and "La puerta del Vino," and the work for two pianos *Lindaraja* (1901).

Lindaraja is the first characteristically Spanish piece Debussy wrote. It was published eight years after his death, in 1926. It is a chamber work lasting five to six minutes. Its Habanera style, an eponymous dance rhythm, is commonly used throughout Spanish music, including "La soirée dans Grenade" and "La puerta del Vino." The inspiration may have been from Ravel who composed the two-piano work "Habanera," from *Sites auriculaires*.

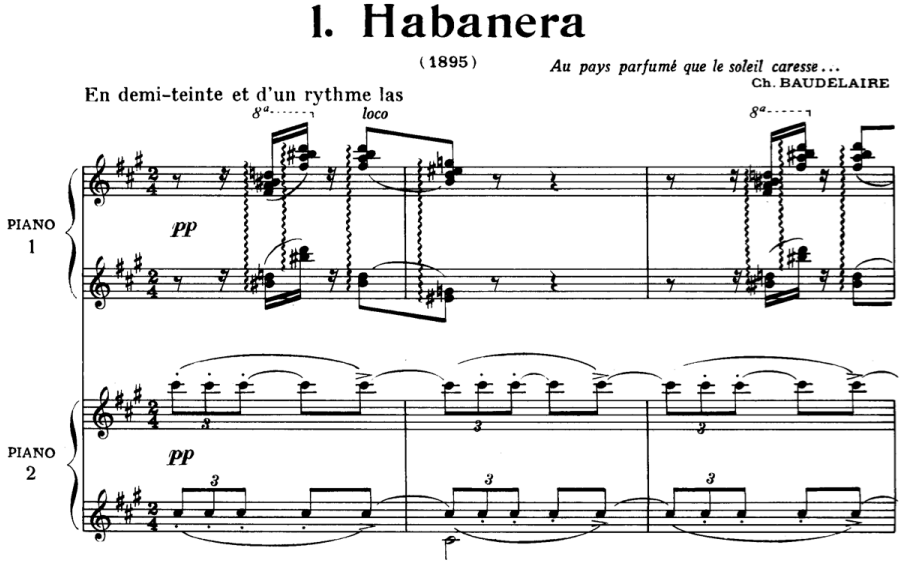
Ex. 14



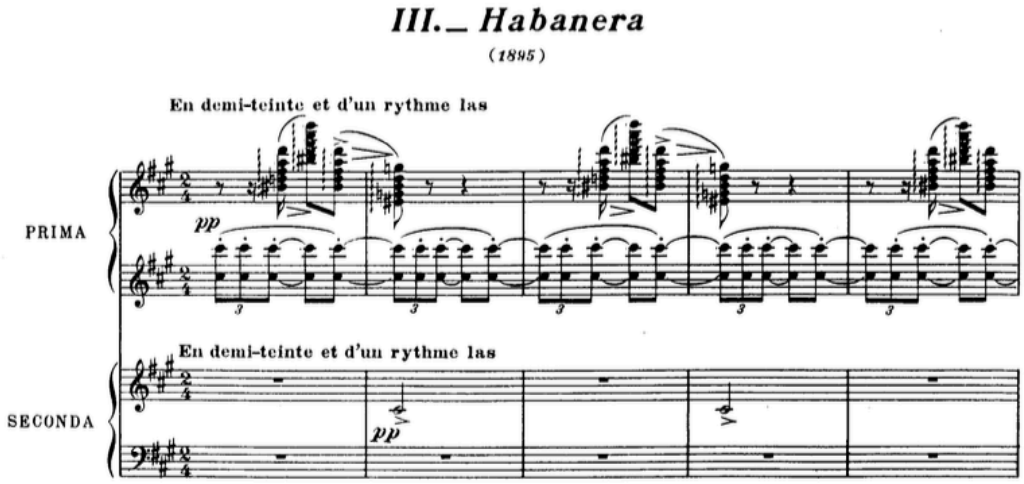
a. Debussy: *Lindajara*



b. Debussy: *Estampes*, "La soirée dans Grenade"



c. Ravel: *Sites auriculaires*, "Habanera"



d. Ravel: "Habanera" from *Rapsodie espagnole* (1907) ('Habanera' published in 1895)

After completing “Habanera” in 1985, Ravel composed *Rapsodie espagnole* (1907–1908), an orchestral work with four movements. He made sure to have the third movement, “Habanera,” dated 1895 printed in the published score. Perhaps the reason behind this was to avoid accusations because “Soirée dans Grenade” was composed in 1903. Strikingly similar in comparison (see Example 14), Ravel’s work is undoubtedly a critical influence behind Debussy’s “Soirée.”

In Debussy’s “La soirée dans Grenade,” the C sharps, played in the habanera rhythm, are suspiciously similar in the same keys, alternating between F sharp major and minor. These notes have triplets followed by the two eighth notes throughout the pieces. The constant toying of the Habanera dance and the rhythm of C sharps highlights the Spanish impression. Furthermore, Ravel’s *Rapsodie espagnole*, a youthful homage to Spain, is one of his first major works for orchestra. Following the favorable reception of its first 1908 performance, a transcription for one piano four hands was also composed.

French and Russian composers took the lead in evoking Spanish music from the middle of the nineteenth century onward. In addition to Debussy and Ravel, several notable French composers are Chabrier (*España*, rhapsody for orchestra), Saint-Saëns (Introduction et Rondo capriccioso), and Fauré (“Le pas espagnole,” from *Dolly*. Russian composers include Tchaikovsky (“Danse Espagnole,” from Act III of *Swan Lake*), Rimsky-Korsakov (*Capriccio espagnol*), and Glinka (*Spanish Overture*). Spanish composers Falla and Albéniz are two of the many composers who come to mind. However, the influences and ‘Spanish’ masterpieces are derived chiefly from France and Russia.

Debussy's fascination with "La soirée dans Grenade" can be described with many Spanish elements. Spanish rhythms, harmonies, and ambiance suggest the influence of the folk music heard in Granada, Spain. This is evident with the visit of real Spaniards playing Spanish music at a time where Spanish music was little known. Stephen Walsh has explained that "La soirée" was, "an adaptation in underlying its concepts to certain ideas of his own to Ravel's music."[51] The fixation of the rhythm qualities and improvisations played on guitars heavily influenced Debussy around 1913. Another profound influence on Debussy's impressions of Spanish music came from Albéniz, notably his work *Iberia*, a piano suite written in four books with three movements each.

"La soirée dans Grenade," as Roberts puts it, "is as perfect as a cinematic experience." Debussy creates glimpses of the whole picture, from snatches of guitar rhythms and languid flamenco melodies that appear to lead nowhere.[52] Like "Minstrels," Debussy's splicing technique, where one frame can be cut to another without transition, is beyond extraordinary. Both "La soirée" and "Pagodes" are a mysterious ambience of oriental art and fragments of a complete picture.[53] Additionally, Alexandra Kieffer states, "the ambiguity invokes recollections of a specifically auditory, musical nature–suggestively raises the possibility that we might understand this piece as a kind of fragmented reenactment of a listening experience."[54] "Jardins sous la pluie," the third piece, instead employs techniques that borrow compositional elements from earlier works like "Prélude" and "Toccata." The three pieces, as Roberts says, are "among the longest Debussy wrote yet the most contained in scale: the material in each is deliberately limited."[55]

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[51] Stephen Walsh, *Debussy: A Painter in Sound*, (Knopf, 2018), 162.
[52] Roberts, *Images*, 59–62
[53] Ibid.
[54] Alexandra Keiffer, "The Debussyist Ear: Listening, Representation, and French Musical Modernism," *19th-Century Music* 39, no. 1 (2015): 75.
[55] Roberts, *Images*, 62.

"Pagodes" and "La soirée" are all part of the stylization of the pentatonic scales and gong effects or the habanera rhythms and guitar figurations used to vividly depict objects and scenes easily. In addition to the music of *Estampes*, inspiration will be found in trends in visual art that followed the Impressionists and in which Debussy professed a far greater interest.[56]

[56] Roberts, *Images*, 70

4. Mathematics and Impressionism: Playing with Numbers

Collecting original prints was a favorite hobby of Parisian's pastimes, and the most obsessively collected prints were colored Japanese woodblock prints.[57] The popular Japanese art of *ukiyo-e* (pictures of the floating world) significantly impacted Western visual art. Examining the images in photographs and descriptions of Debussy's studio in his later years, we find not impressionist paintings, but Japanese engravings and various Asian objects.[58] It is interesting to note, as Jann Pasler suggests, "recognizing that Debussy's music changed over time, as did various styles in painting, cannot be reduced to one aesthetic or another."[59] In addition, serious interest from essential twenty-first century researchers wrote and analyzed aspects of *japonisme*, most specifically Howat.

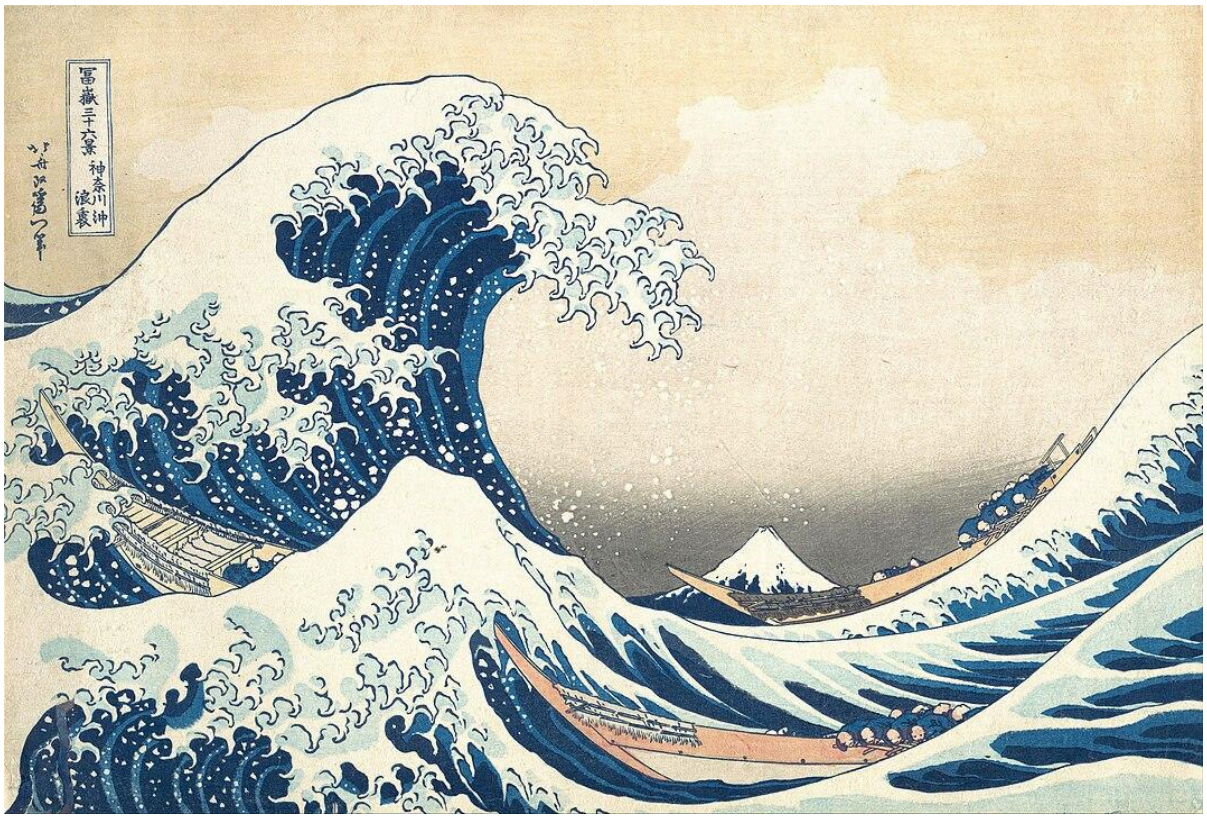
Perhaps, it is the Japanese print that arguably is the background for *Estampes*.[60] Roberts points out that "Debussy gave painstaking attention to the design and color of this cover."[61] In addition, it was the *manga* and Japanese newspaper comics, in which the French received their ship's load of porcelain that first attracted them to Asian art, woodblocks, and stamps.

The effects and influences of Japanese art on Western European artists, or the French term *le japonisme*, began in 1856 when twenty-six-year-old Claude Monet (1840–1926) started buying Japanese prints in the northern French port of Le Havre.[62] Bracquemond, another artist of the same year, discovered prints called *Hokusai Manga*. The art of *ukiyo-e* and its themes were taken from everyday life, and Hokusai gave it a broader and more poetic interpretation, creating

[57] Roberts, *Images*, 45
[58] Jann Pasler, "Debussy the Man, his Music, and his Legacy: An Overview of Current Research," in *Notes* (Music Library Association, 2012), 210.
[59] Ibid, 210.
[60] Roberts, *Images*, 46.
[61] Ibid, 45.
[62] Ibid, 47.

popular art and landscape paintings.[63] The French were infatuated with these wonderful drawings of everyday life.

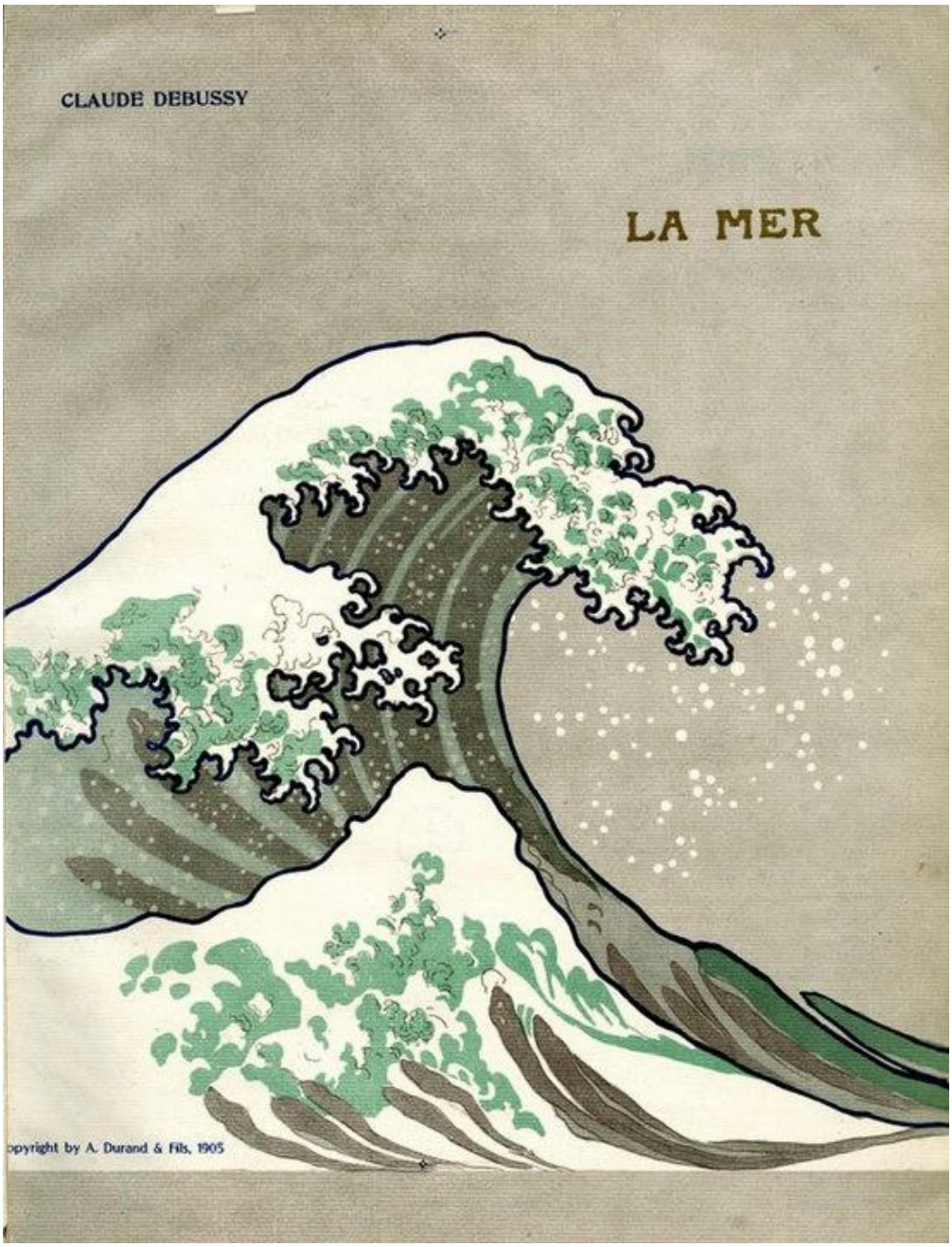
Fig. 4



Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*

[63] Roberts, *Images*, 48.

Fig. 5



First edition of *La mer*, front cover featuring Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*

The famous photograph of Debussy with Stravinsky was taken in 1911 by Erik Satie. Behind the two composers on the wall are Japanese *estampes* (see Figure 4), including Katsushika Hokusai's *Great Wave off Kanagawa*.[64] *La mer* (1905) also has a stylized imitation of this *estampe* on the front cover reflecting the crashing waves (see Figure 5). The piece evokes the imagery of the waves at the end of the first movement and in the finale. "Like it or not," as Howat puts it, "impressionism is a term and a key aspect of this orchestral work."[65] *La mer* is the second of three orchestral works, the others being *Nocturnes* and *Images pour orchestre*; Debussy explored links in Hokusai's print to the musical structures while composing *La mer* in 1903–1905.

According to Abravanel, "Reflets dans l'eau" is an example of Debussy's piano music that contains solely color and nuance with sonority in D flat.[66] From a mathematical perspective, "Reflets" make up bars following a key sequence of I–I–II–V7–I. In other words, the tonal events occur at bars 1, 35, 56, 69, and 77. The numbers belong to a sequence by Italian mathematician Leonardo of Pisa (Fibonacci). This sequence is an infinite series of numbers where the first two are 1 and 1, and each succeeding number is the sum of the two immediately before: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, etc. The Fibonacci sequence is strongly associated with the golden ratio. Howat demonstrates in depth about the Golden Section, based on the proportional structure, and even Roberts says "The Golden Section proportions can also serve the composer by determining the distance between sections, climaxes, and so forth."[67] The Golden Section is also a brilliant study in Howat's *Debussy in Proportion*, where Debussy takes "Reflets

[64] Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 51.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Abravanel, *Debussy in Performance*, 35.
[67] Roberts, *Images*, 96.

dans l'eau" into a more analytical level to proportion and ratios. An example Simon Tresize finds, "the music reaches its loudest level in bar 58; bar 58 out of 94 bars is 0.62 of the piece, which is very close to the Golden Section (the golden proportion is 1:1.618)."[68]

Although Debussy was born in 1862, Japanese art was widely popular, starting in the 1850s at the Universal Exposition. In 1867, a group of painters around Manet, later to be called the Impressionists, sought to break with academic conventions and to represent new modes of vision.[69] An aficionado, Debussy was fascinated by Japanese illustrated books and magazines. It was the sculptress Camille Claudel who had first introduced him to Japanese art in the 1880s.[70] Hokusai's *Manga* struck the composer the most. He discovered a profusion of tiny capering figures, horses, wrestlers, twenty or more to a page, sometimes with such slight alteration from figure to figure as to impart a sense of jerky movement in the manner of early cinema, and from here were flowers and birds, landscape drawings of mountains, spring and summer rain, waterfalls, and double-page prints with arabesques that may even suggest "Poissons d'or," from the second *Images* for piano.[71] Hokusai's prints influenced Debussy, so he always wrote to his publisher admiring "the rareness of taste… their aesthetic sense" in the words of Monet.[72]

For the second half of the nineteenth century, Impressionism was a term of mockery. This ridiculing word has become challenging to appreciate today. Ronald L. Byrnside says, "this term, so casually and somewhat pejoratively introduced to painting, eventually found its way into the field of music."[73] Furthermore, Byrnside comments how it is probably true that for most people the first name associated with musical Impressionism is Claude Debussy.[74] The critics of France

[68] Trezise, "Debussy's Rhythmicised Time," 232.
[69] Roberts, *Images*, 50.
[70] Ibid, 53.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid, 57.
[73] Ronald L. Byrnside, "Musical Impressionism: The Early History of the Term," *The Musical Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (1980): 522–523
[74] Ibid, 523.

would use this term to target and even insult painters. A group that included Monet, Degas, Cézanne, Sisley, Pisarro, and Renoir called themselves the "Incorporated Society of Artists, Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, etc." in 1874. But soon after, a satirical magazine *Le Charivari* labeled them "Exhibition of the Impressionists".[75] So, to become an Impressionist in the seventies and eighties was to be accused of sins, as Roberts puts it, or be an artistic failure.

As explored in the previous two chapters, Debussy can be seen as a rebel who forsook aspects of classical discipline, indulged in the "looseness" of technique, and paid little attention to formal aspects of symmetry and precision. Questioning tradition and asserting non-conformity led to trouble. These tendencies were noted in his music even from the beginning. The École des Beaux-Arts in 1887 included the term "impressionism" in their report on Debussy's music. In the third of his orchestra compositions, *Images*, Debussy wrote a letter to his publisher explaining the intentions behind the work. In this instance, perhaps the words led critics to keep labeling him as an impressionist.

Debussy admired the Impressionists and according to his circle of friends and colleagues, he even wanted to be a painter.[76] It is almost impossible not to see why Debussy's music is closely celebrated as the spirit of Impressionism. His life coincided with a time when all young artists from the Western world were drawn to Paris during one of the most revolutionary, but exciting upheavals in the history of painting.[77]

In 1894 critics first started calling Debussy an Impressionist. Consequently, the young composer's piano output after the 1900s has visually suggestive titles. In retrospect, Debussy's reactions to Impressionist color must have been shocking. The Impressionists were known for having characteristic brightness in palettes. The young painters of the new century, Matisse,

[75] Roberts, *Images*, 114.
[76] Ibid, 121.
[77] Ibid, 127.

Vlaminck, and Derain, went even further with more violent colors on display at their notorious exhibition of 1905.[78] Whatever connections are found between Debussy and Impressionism, the piano music and the musical symbolism warrant further examination.

After composing *Estampes*, Debussy wrote two sets of *Images* for piano. In the first set of *Images*, all three pieces share pictorial and experiential natures, describing through music how people perceive the world, not only through hearing, and visuals.[79] Water was one of Debussy's fascinations through its various forms, and with success, he learned to portray it in the "Reflets."

Franz Liszt (1811–1886) preceded Debussy in using the keyboard resources to fully describe the elements aurally in their rippling and flowing incarnations.[80] Appropriately, Liszt's programmatic piece "Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este" (The Fountains of the Villa d'Este), from *Années de pèlerinage* (1887), hints at Debussy's style of writing, from titling and compositional techniques. Additionally, Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* was modeled on Liszt's piece before Debussy. Debussy wrote several other piano works capturing water, including "Jardins sous la pluie" and "Poissons d'or." In "Poissons," from the second *Images*, one can feel the water's trembling in which fish move.[81] "Reflets dans l'eau" shows light reflecting on water that is not always still.

Composed only a few months after the completion of *La Mer*, "Reflets dans l'eau" presents a startlingly different musical image of water. It successfully evokes mood and landscapes through musical depictions. "Reflets" is the perfect example of how water is characterized in Debussy's compositional techniques, with characteristic examples of landscapes that come to mind: water with yellows, blues, and red, reflecting sailing boats and trees.[82] Guided by the title, we hear and visualize water. Guido M. Gatti writes, "*Images* depict a musical

[78] Roberts, *Images*, 130–131.
[79] Lederer, *Debussy: The Quiet Revolutionary*, 68–69.
[80] Ibid, 69.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Roberts, *Images*, 25.

landscape: the reflections mirrored in a pool, shifting and changeable, having all the tenacity of tender fancies… Debussy wishes to express the inner, intimate musicality, the *unexpressed* music of things; that aspect of them which is capable of transforming itself in the inwardness of a musical being in musical expression; to present auditive sensations, musical rather than visible."[83]

Debussy's pioneering of programmatic music, describing his music like water, deeply influenced Olivier Messiaen. Debussy called the opening "a little circle in the water, with a little pebble falling into it."[84] Messiaen added, "water is still, unmoving, but immediately you throw a pebble in, there's a shockwave around the pebble, and the water is set in motion. And Debussy's music is like that. There are stops and all of a sudden, it moves. It was those stops that seized my imagination."[85]

First, the tempo in the first piece is always indecisive, changing, and even at times. "Reflets dans l'eau" has movements and flecks of color, mists of water, and even a sense of travel. As the piece progresses, it gradually becomes more complicated, with sounds of chromatics and increasingly complex arpeggios flourishing, governing the entire keyboard. Walsh raises several questions: "Is water a metaphor for something in the human psyche? Is it just a pool, like the pools in Monet's garden at Giverny, or is it a symbol of emotion in the unconscious?"[86] Walsh answers these questions by saying Debussy's music and Monet's paintings can be all or any of these things, according to the preferences of the listener or viewer. Walsh also states, "Debussy's musical image for this mobile stillness is a softly resonant series of D flat major harmonies in chords ranging up and down the keyboard, some consonant, some

[83] Guido M. Gatti et al. "The Piano Works of Claude Debussy," *The Musical Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1921): 430–433.
[84] Walsh, *Debussy: A Painter in Sound*, 218.
[85] Benson, *Debussy's Influence on Messiaen* (New York: Films Media Group/Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1985), streaming video file, 18:14–18:34.
[86] Walsh, *Debussy*, 218.

dissonant, but at first without chromatic notes, then gradually complicating the sound with chromatics and increasingly brilliant arpeggio flourishes, as if the pool had suddenly developed a cascade of two, before slowly subsiding into a stillness even more profound than the one with which it began."[87]

Through visionary expression, "Reflets" opens with a perfect fifth in the bass, above, which chords shimmer gracefully. We can only visualize these chords as the rippling effects forming concentric circles. Droplets of water can be heard twice in bars 9–11, just before the first significant event of rhythm and rest. These *portamento* markings, which he meticulously writes, appear three more times, all in different sections, marking either the end of a section or an arrival into a new section.

The second time Debussy writes *portamento* is in bars 33-34, just before the arrival of D flat major. *Portamento* in "Reflets" marks a substantial event. The next event is on the bass notes A flat and D flat, in bar 69. Lastly, bars 88–89 end the piece with the right–hand octaves, creating water droplets in the high register, similar to the first *portamento* in bars 9–11. At the arrival of bar 17, Debussy prepares the first rhythmic event with a decrescendo on a long eighth note tied over the bar line to a quarter note in bar 18. After bar 18, there is complete stasis in rhythmic movement and creates ambiguity in form and structure. He breaks this fragile moment of pause with sixty–fourth note triples resembling a rapid rhythmic change and enhancing the aquatic tone-painting. It was perhaps Debussy's addressing rubato as Richard Langham Smith speculates, "Debussy urged his pupils to follow the score."[88]

With bars 17–18, the musical depiction of the water imagery will be interpreted. Motion from the open fifths widely apart in high and low registers of the piano comes to a complete

[87] Walsh, *Debussy*, 188.
[88] Richard Langham Smith, "Debussy on Performance: Sound and Unsound Ideals," in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 27.

pause in motion. These bars are ultimately broken with a ripple in water with the rapid sixty-fourth notes marked *p*, breaking the quietness of the *pp*. Because of the ambiguity in pulse, this marked a major compositional trait and technique in Debussy's treatment of rhythm.

Structurally, Debussy departs from broken chords in "Reflets." The eruptions of the rapid sixty-fourth notes foreshadow the entire next part of the piece. Arpeggios dominate the majority of this piece, expressing different facets of water. Although Timothy Cochran focuses primarily on bars 17–18, most of the piece can be linked to the representation of water. Cochran states, "like water it should be malleable and subtly unpredictable even in its cycles and reiterations."[89] The following central section from bar 21 is marked *Quasi cadenza*. The correlation between flexible rhythm and water should be noted in how water should flow. His notation *poco a poco crescendo e. stringendo* directly relates to how he wanted to evoke water flowing rapidly from the stasis in bar 17. Reaching the climactic point in "Reflets," E flat major stabilizes harmony and tonal elements. Marked *f* and *ff* in the following bar, his depiction of a giant wave is played in both hands, with a grand sweep of the keyboard arpeggiated.

[89] Timothy B. Cochran, "The Pebble in the Water: Debussy and the Meaning of Rhythmic Contrast," *The Journal of Musicology* 31, no. 4 (2014), 505

5. Minstrelsy and American Popular Music: Venturing into the Realm of Jazz

The final decade of the 1800s changed Debussy's life and music. 1890 was the year in which he altered the preferred form of his Christian name from Achille to Claude-Achille and the time he met his first lover, Gabrielle Dupont. Financially struggling, Debussy temporarily moved out of his parents' apartment and moved in with his friend Étienne Dupin. Perhaps through Dupin, he made the acquaintance of the great Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé.[90] The encounter was responsible for broadening his literary and artistic horizons by the doors it opened, to cafés and piano salons. Debussy often played the piano in one café, the Chat Noir, an arty café-nightclub in Montmartre. As a regular at the café, he began a friendship with composer Erik Satie.[91]

Debussy's friendship with Satie was important. He orchestrated two of Satie's *Gymnopédies*, a service he never did for any other composer.[92] In retrospect, Satie's influence on Debussy shows in many of his piano works, including *Children's Corner*, *Le petit nègre*, and *Hommage à Haydn*. Satie's simplicity and serenity, poking fun at serious music in general, was what he contented himself with, regardless of the title or subject matter in music.[93] An example is *Sonatine bureaucratique* (1917), which is filled with humoristic elements, parodying Muzio Clementi's Piano Sonatina Op. 36, No. 1. Neoclassicism, a term that would later govern new composers, including Igor Stravinsky, was associated with this piece, which has many elements of minimalism.

[90] Walsh, *Debussy*, 82.
[91] Lederer, *Debussy*, 13.
[92] Walsh, *Debussy*, 84.
[93] Ibid.

Neoclassicism was part of the Modernist trends after the First World War. Stravinsky (*Rite of Spring*), Hindemith (*Ludus Tonalis*), and Prokofiev (Symphony No. 1) are just a few of the critical composers until the 1950s. Political questions continue to interest scholars, particularly Debussy's nationalism. His resistance to German influences, particularly "Wagnerism," caused him to break the rules in harmonic procedures. "Golliwog's Cakewalk," the sixth and last movement of *Children's Corner*, will be examined for its complex meanings.

There are many inspirations in *Children's Corner*: Schumann's *Kinderszenen* (1838), a sizable thirteen-work piano suite, and his *Album for the Young* (1848). In addition, Mussorgsky's *The Nursery* (1868–72), a song cycle of two sets, was a suite Debussy particularly admired. Inspired by and dedicated to his daughter Chouchou, who was three years old, these "sound pictures" of six movements capture a child's views, joys, fears, and anxieties.[94] In addition to Schumann and Mussorgsky, Lederer points out that Bach may have also provided a more abstract example with the works he composed for his children and pupils.[95] These works include the *Little Clavier Book of Anna Magdalena Bach*, and the two- and three-part Inventions. All of the works mentioned above show little in the way of concessions to inexperienced and young players.

"Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum" is the opening piece from *Children's Corner*. The title of this movement is a nod to the 100 etudes of Muzio Clementi. Clementi's collection of 100 technical exercises, *Gradus ad Parnassum* (The Steps to Mount Parnassus), remains an important teaching tool for piano students. Perhaps a joke, Debussy wrote this key in C major, focusing on finger independence. As the piece progresses, an indication of *En animant peu à peu* pushes the pianist to become more excited and play faster as *Très animé* ends the final 10 bars.

[94] Lederer, *Debussy*, 73.
[95] Ibid, 74.

The same idea of poking nods towards composers is heard in the extremely difficult first of his *Douze études*, L 136 (1915), also in C major, and marked *d'après Monsieur Czerny*. Debussy's études were modeled after Chopin's two books, beginning the C major étude with a five-finger exercise.[96]

In "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum" and the C major étude, Debussy shifts into different harmonies in the middle sections and returns, ending the pieces energetically. Perhaps, Debussy was poking fun at his daughter, Chouchou, practicing on her own and speeding up in the "Doctor Gradus" so she could leave the piano once she finished playing it. Debussy's piano roll from 1913 has a duration of 1 minute 46 seconds playing "Doctor Gradus," which shows how fast he intended it to be performed.[97]

Besides "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum," the remaining five pieces have English titles because Chouchou's governess was English.[98] The real birth piece of the suite was 'Serenade for the Doll,' the third movement, written in 1906 when Chouchou was only five months old.[99] Often *Children's Corner* sounds easy to play, but it has the virtue of sounding harder than it is. "Jimbo's Lullaby" borrows the nursery song *Dodo, l'enfant do*, from "Jardins sous la pluie." "The Snow is Dancing" is possibly the trickiest of them all as it requires awkward Clementi-like syncopation between hands, evoking snowflakes dancing in the wind.[100] On the other hand, "The Little Shepherd" is the simplest and purest of all six pieces to play. Lastly, "Golliwog's Cakewalk," possibly the most famous, marks Debussy's first venture into the jazzy rhythms of ragtime.

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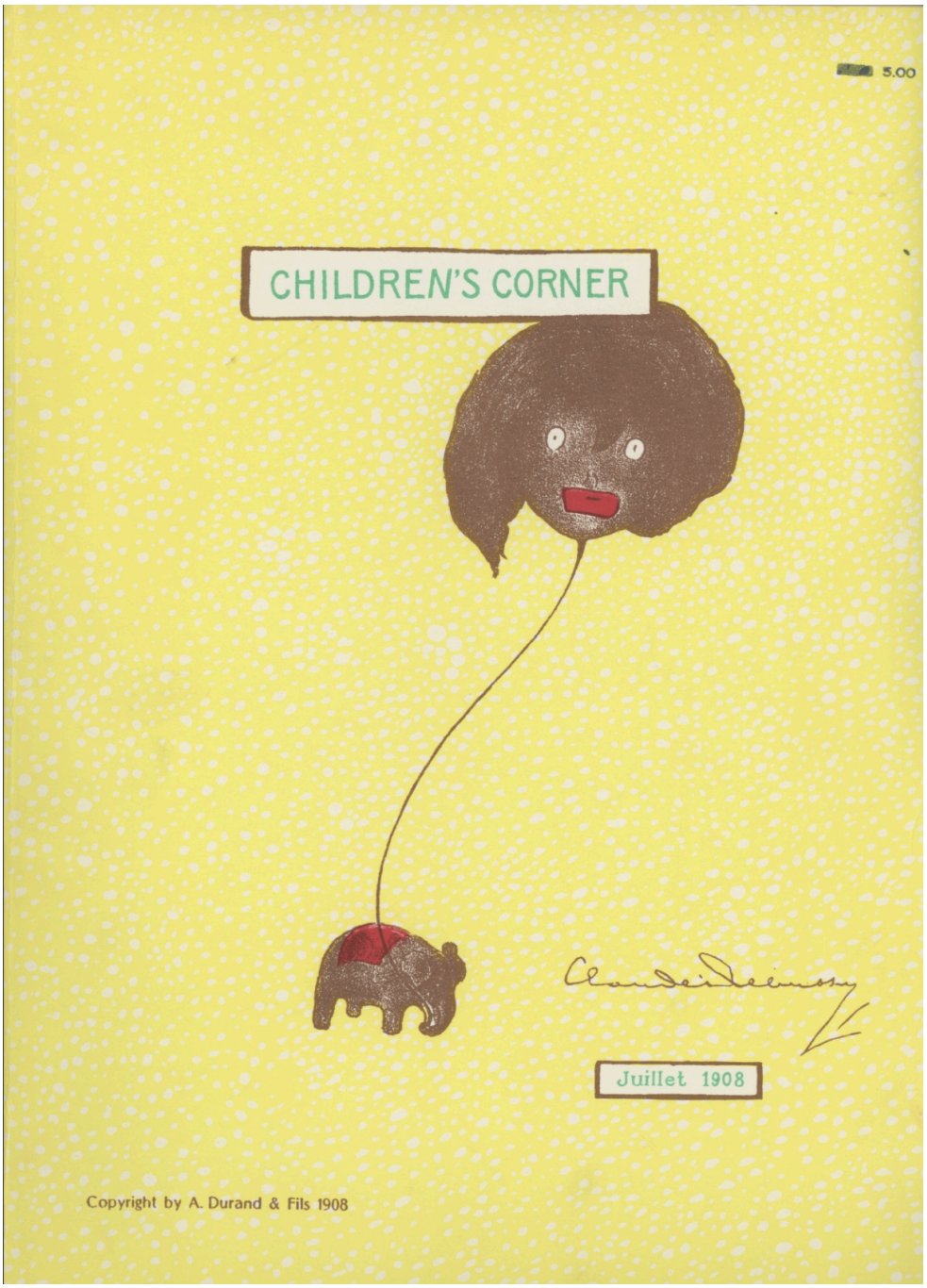
[96] Robert Orledge, "Debussy's Piano Music: Some Second Thoughts and Sources of Inspiration," *The Musical Times* 122, no. 1655 (1981): 25.
[97] Charles Timbrell, "Debussy in Performance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Tresize (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 262–263.
[98] Walsh, *Debussy*, 200.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid, 201.

Fig. 6



Front Cover of Debussy's *Children's Corner*

"Golliwog's Cakewalk" works as a tribute to a little black doll popular at the time. The cover of the first edition Debussy sent to his publisher includes the head of Chouchou's doll (see

Figure 6). Florence Kate Upton, a cartoonist and author of children's books, was the creator of Golliwog. This toy, whose first story was completed in 1894, has distinct features of American blackface, which perpetuated vicious racial stereotypes. The Golliwog toy, or doll, became hugely popular in the early twentieth century. The doll is a little minstrel dressed in a swallow-tail coat and vest, and has messy hair and has a bow tie.[101] Perhaps Debussy became aware of this doll during his travels to London.[102] As Ann McKinley explained, "at first Ethiopian minstrels were white men in blackface; after the Civil War black men, too, sought to make names for themselves, often in blackface."[103]

"Golliwog's Cakewalk" takes the familiar cakewalk elements in rhythmic patterns and traditional chord progressions and has the conventional ABA form. In addition, the left hand's steady stride accompaniment creates a march-like beat for the syncopated melodies in the right hand. The same compelling balance is in "Minstrels"; it is playful, awkward, it stops and starts spontaneously.[104] Debussy's recording of *Children's Corner* exhibits faster tempi as a whole, and the "Golliwog's Cakewalk" recording is very much in the spirit of being clumsy and rhythmically awkward.[105]

Le petit nègre, the smaller companion to "Golliwog," also features the cakewalk elements, including the syncopated rhythm in the right hand, although in C major. Originally, Debussy himself called it *The Little Nigar* (incorrectly spelling it) and has been softened to *The Little Negro*. *Le petit*, known to most piano teachers but not mentioned in some of the sources of

[101] Ann McKinley, "Debussy and American Minstrelsy," *The Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 3 (1986): 249.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid, 252.
[104] Cecilia Dunoyer, "Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano," in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 94–95.
[105] Ibid, 95.

Debussy's piano music, was commissioned by a piano faculty member at the Paris Conservatoire, Théodore Lack.[106]

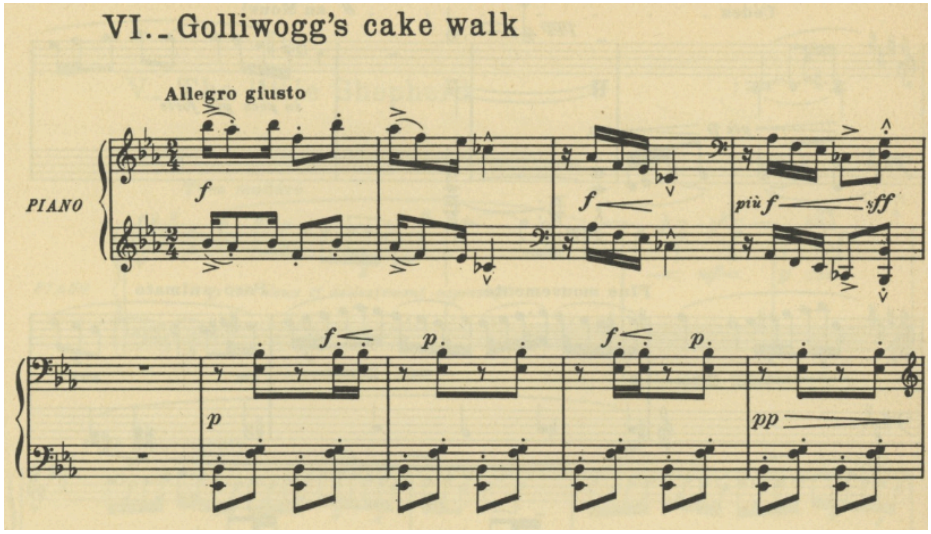
In Debussy's piano works, only a few are considered to have an extroverted or loud opening: *L'isle joyeuse*, *Masques*, or 'Prélude' from *Suite bergamasque*. Humor is rarely heard in Debussy's music, but the B section of "Golliwog" is quite droll, providing the listener gets the joke. Debussy inserts a marking *avec une grande émotion* quoting the opening motive from Richard Wagner's hallowed *Tristan und Isolde* (1857–1859). Yet Debussy has inserted chuckling grace-notes asides between the lugubrious Wagnerian phrases.

Much of "Golliwog's Cakewalk" has to do with American minstrelsy. Minstrelsy dates back to the early nineteenth century and was a racist theatrical spectacle in which white people performed in blackface. The featured instruments included the banjo, bones, and tambourine, with syncopated music alternating with plaintive ballads or plantation melodies.[107]

It is challenging to find evidence that Debussy heard American minstrels in Paris or saw performances of African-American music. He did enjoy the circus, which the French did not look down upon, as they offered blackface performances that were funny and dangerous.[108] Debussy's idea of poking fun at Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* was perhaps inspired by the amusing circus acts.[109] "Minstrels," and "Général Lavine–eccentric," from the second book of *Préludes*, also feature obvious cakewalk elements. "Minstrels" has a marking of *nerveux et avec humour* (jittery with humor) and even has *quasi tambouro*, imitating a little drum.

[106] Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 250.
[107] McKinley, "Debussy and American Minstrelsy," 252.
[108] Ibid, 253.
[109] Ibid, 254

Ex. 15

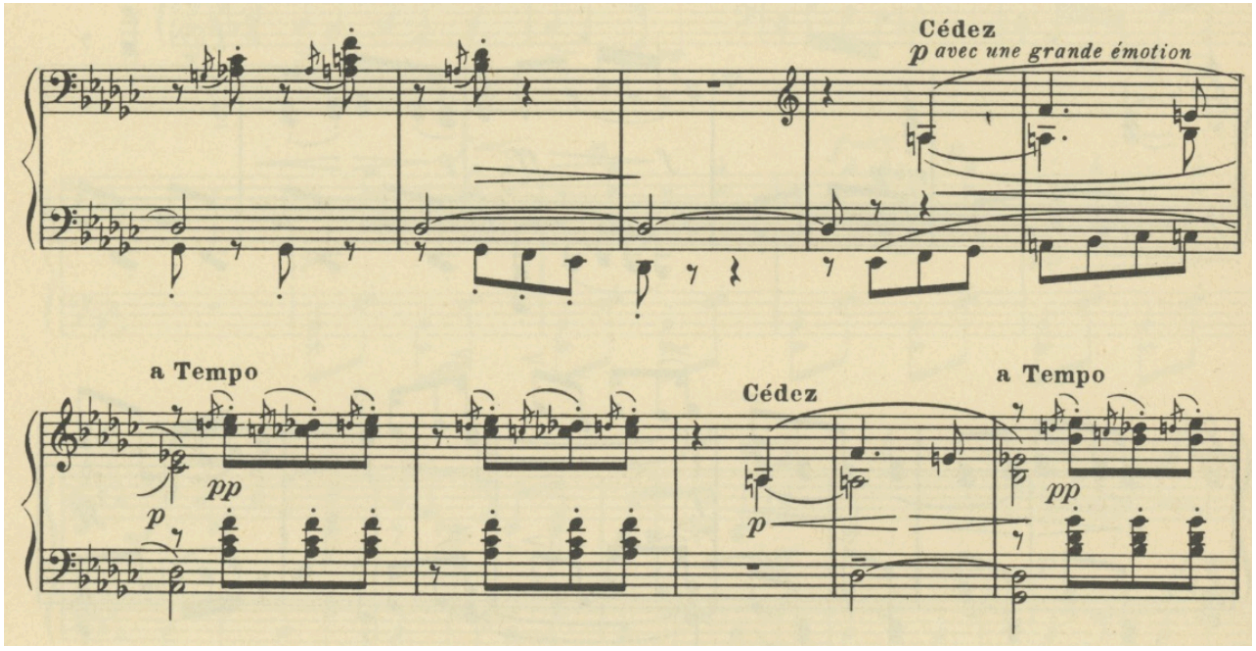


Debussy: *Children's Corner*, "Golliwog's Cakewalk"

The cakewalk originated as a slow, high-kicking dance by black workers on the American cotton plantations, imitating and parodying white dancers.[110] The cakewalk was essentially ragtime music in "Golliwog," "Minstrels," "Général Lavine," and *Le petit*. One of the key elements of ragtime music is the time signature, typically 2/4 rhythm. Structurally, a brief introduction of four bars introduces the piece, followed by a characteristic "vamp till ready" passage venturing into the dance music (see Example 15).[111] Although the central section mocks Tristan's opening phrase, the opening arpeggios of this introductory "rag" is the Tristan chord.

[110] Roberts, *Images*, 214.
[111] Ibid, 217.

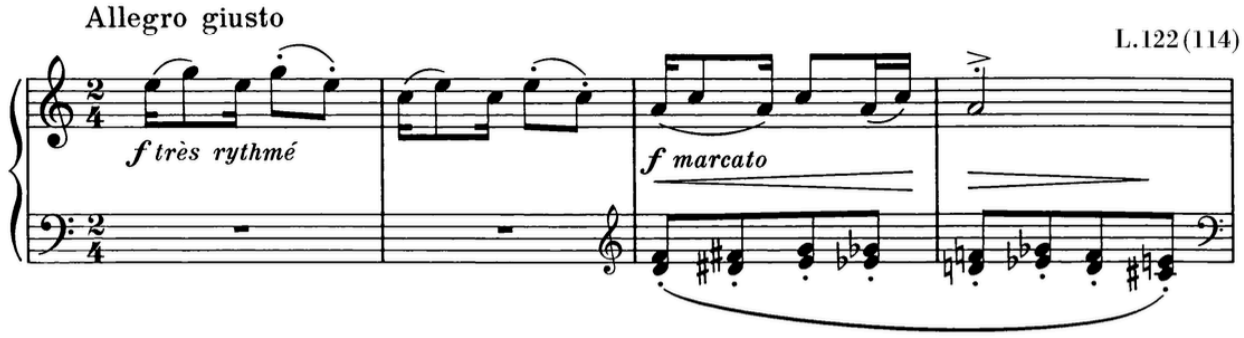
Ex. 16



Debussy: *Children's Corner*, "Golliwog's Cakewalk"

Besides the opening arpeggios mocking Tristan chord, the B section (see Example 16) quotes the opening leitmotif from *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-9). Providing the listener gets the joke of the grace-note giggles, another layer of sarcasm lies in Debussy's instruction *avec une grande émotion* (with great feeling and emotion). The juxtaposition of the exaggerating emotion and mocking it by adding gracenote figures heightens the parody. Debussy quotes Wagner two additional times, preparing the listener for the return of the A section of the cakewalk rhythm.

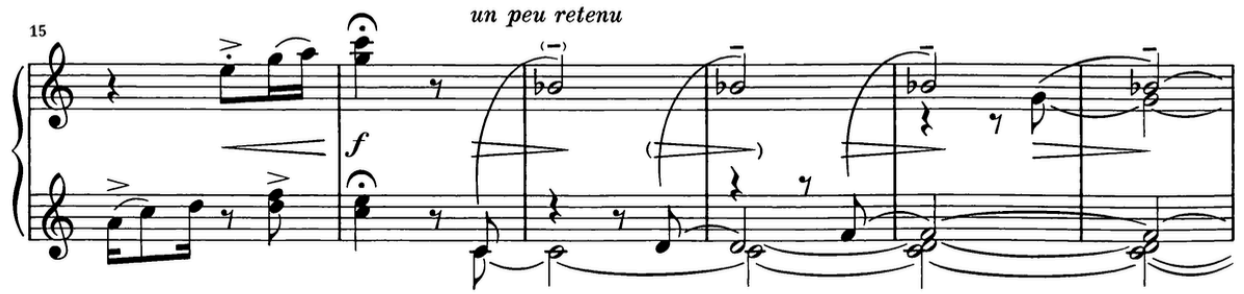
Ex. 17



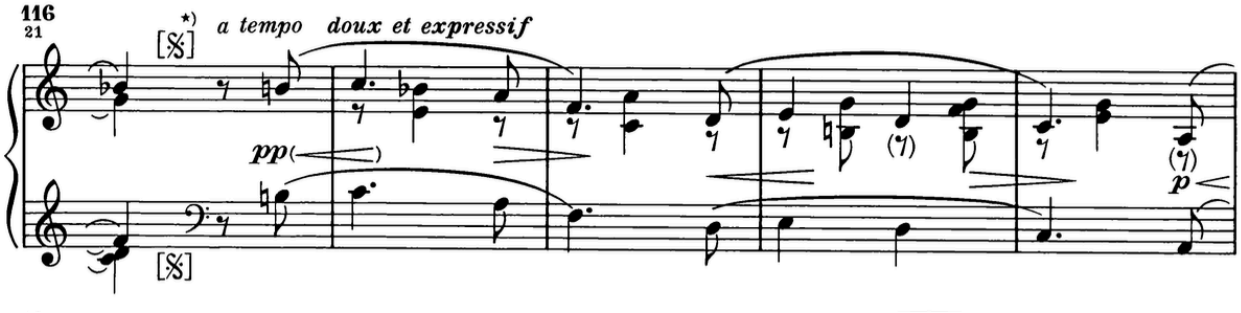
Debussy: *Le petit nègre*

Sharing many qualities of "Golliwog's Cakewalk," *Le petit nègre* opens the piece with the unaccompanied cakewalk rhythm. Despite the absence of the stride in the left hand, the accompanying eighth notes moving chromatically in staccatos serves the same function of the jolly rhythm (see Example 17). Written in C major and intended as a method piece for late beginner and early intermediate students, the overall accessibility makes it easy for smaller hands and is a great introduction to Debussy. Furthermore, Sarah Martin indicates, "the rubato is nonetheless quite complex and must be played in strict time, with exact synchronization between the hands."[112] Playing both hands together with a strict tempo makes young learners practice slowly, gradually increasing the tempo.

Ex. 18



[112] Sarah Martin, "The Case of Compensating Rubato," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 127, no. 1 (2002): 127.



Le petit nègre

The overall form of this piece shares the same ABA structure "Golliwog" has. The B section (see Example 18), although missing the mockery of the Tristan chord, is instructed to play *a tempo*, *doux et expressif* (gentle and expressive).

6. Conclusion

Performing Debussy's piano works demands interpretation from intellectual and emotional perspectives. One of the student pianist's most common misconceptions is the belief that intellectual understanding alone can result in a satisfactory performance. While rational analysis is adequate for understanding structure and theory alone, it will not suffice to absorb and express the nature of Debussy's work. This highly subjective and unquantifiable emotional context is what will truly bring the music to life. That element is reached through knowledge, of course, but also through a humanistic "lens" that allows the performer to reflect and project their feelings and convictions about the music. Little research has yet been done with regard to the emotional dimensions of musical performance. One of the main aims of this dissertation is to explore and widen the reader's imagination and insights, with the goal of better appreciating and representing the piano music of Claude Debussy.

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