

**The “Piano without Hammers”:
Reconsidering Debussy’s Pianism**

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submitted in partial fulfillment
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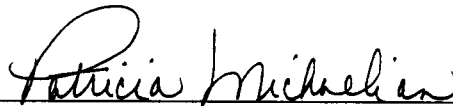
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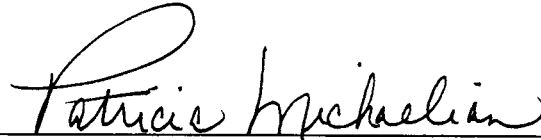
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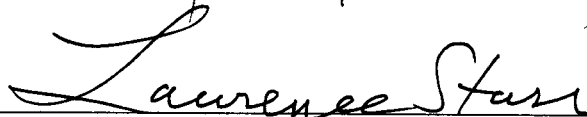
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Abstract

The “Piano without Hammers”:
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Claude Debussy (1862–1918) is regarded as an originator of the radically new and innovative musical language that has come to be known as “Impressionism.” His piano music, focused as it is on color and sonority, requires a vastly different approach to piano technique from that of piano literature in the past. Debussy worked with several notable pianists who performed his music, sharing with them insights into the music and piano technique from his perspective as a composer and a pianist. While Debussy gave relatively few performances of his music as a concertizing pianist, he was, in the opinion of many of his contemporaries, an accomplished pianist in his own right.

Debussy’s compositional activities have garnered the bulk of scholarly and critical attention to date. His aptitudes and achievements as a pianist have thus far not been studied in depth. This dissertation focuses on Debussy as a pianist, investigating his training and concertizing, and discusses the aspects of his technique and interpretation that emerge in the recollections and comments of those pianists he coached. Additional insights into technique and interpretation are gained through the analysis of the few piano rolls that Debussy recorded.

A fresh assessment of Debussy’s pianism, and his approach to technique and interpretation, may prove to be useful for all those who approach the performance, appreciation, and teaching of his music today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Musical Examples.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Debussy's Piano Training.....	7
Early Training.....	7
Conservatory Years.....	10
Chapter Two: Debussy's Piano Performance.....	18
Chapter Three: Debussy and Coaching.....	33
Debussy and Teaching.....	33
Working with Pianists.....	39
Chapter Four: Debussy's Comments and Suggestions on Piano Playing.....	52
Technique and Touch.....	53
Voicing.....	61
Color and Sonority.....	62
Pedaling.....	66
Fingering.....	69
Dynamics.....	71
Chapter Five: Debussy's Performance on Piano Rolls.....	75
Conclusion.....	85
Bibliography.....	88
Appendix A: Concerts where Debussy Appeared as a Pianist.....	94
Appendix B: Select Discography.....	96

LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example Number	Page
1. <i>Clair de Lune</i> , mm. 1–7.....	37
2. <i>Hommage à Rameau</i> , mm. 1–2.....	54
3. <i>Prélude</i> , mm. 46–47.....	55
4. <i>Reflets dans l'Eau</i> , mm. 1–7.....	60
5. <i>Hommage à Rameau</i> , mm. 1–2.....	61
6. <i>Poissons d'or</i> , mm. 1–4.....	64
7. The Little Shepherd, mm.1–15.....	65
8. Golliwogg's Cake-Walk, mm. 61–67.....	66
9. <i>Reflets dans l'eau</i> , mm. 80–81.....	69
10. <i>L'Isle joyeuse</i> , mm. 28–29.....	72
11. <i>Danseuses de Delphes</i> , mm. 23–31.....	82

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DEDICATION

To my father, Dr. Kenji Hirakouji.

INTRODUCTION

Debussy at the piano! One had to have seen it to appreciate its magic.

No words can describe the mysterious enchantment of his playing...¹

—Jacques-Emile Blanche 1932

The French composer, Claude Debussy (1862–1918), originated a radically new and innovative musical style that has come to be known, for better or worse (and against the will of the composer) as “Impressionism.” His unique musical language, quite different from that rooted in the functional harmony of the common-practice period, rested upon original compositional techniques. These techniques include the use of non-functional scale systems, such as church modes, pentatonic scales, and the whole-tone scale; the employment of extended tertian chords, parallel chord movement, and non-metric rhythms; and the abandonment of common eighteenth- and nineteenth-century musical forms, such as Sonata-allegro and Rondo. These devices serve the composer’s expressive purpose, allowing Debussy to create a highly original impressionistic music characterized by nuance and suggestion. In his words, “[Music] consists of colors and rhythmicized time...”²

¹ Jacques-Emile Blanche, quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 111.

² François Lesure and Roger Nichols, ed., *Debussy Letters*, trans. Roger Nichols (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 184.

Debussy's numerous piano works embody his musical aesthetic and utilize the instrument in new and unusual ways. His writing for piano requires an imaginative and sensitive approach to the keyboard, and makes considerable demands upon pianists, both in terms of technique and expression. In addition to technical prowess sufficient to execute rapid passages and negotiate huge registral leaps, performers need to understand how to create the colorful sonorities, nuance, complex timbral balances, and atmosphere that Debussy imagined. With this new sonority in mind, performers of Debussy need to explore and develop command over a great and varied range of touch—created by the fingers, wrists and arms—and integrate this with the thorough control of the pedal. Performers of Debussy will further benefit from a broad understanding of the sounds and aesthetic directions that inspired these piano compositions, drawing as they do on musics then outside the mainstream of western European practice, such as Javanese gamelan music and American popular music, and the extramusical sources to which Debussy was attracted, such as Japanese art and Symbolist poetry.

Debussy is known today primarily as a composer. His compositions have been studied at length for their considerable melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic innovations. By contrast, Debussy's own relationship with and approach to the piano as a *performer* has never been afforded the attention it merits, a curious omission given the wealth of performative insights such a study may yield, with regard to technique and interpretation. It is important to understand Debussy as a pianist in order to acquire the broadest possible understanding of the composer and the complexities of his musical character. The study of Debussy's pianism, and

consideration of the advice he gave to other pianists are invaluable to all those who enjoy his music, and of particular interest to those who would perform it.

Debussy concerned himself with innovative piano technique since his early days at the Paris Conservatory, where, as a budding concert pianist, he not only learned advanced repertoires in piano literature but also improvised extensively on the keyboard, experimenting with sound. While his performing career was aborted in the wake of his failure to win the *premier prix* as a pianist, Debussy was an accomplished pianist who continued to perform long after he established himself as a composer. Debussy gave several public performances including the premiere of his violin sonata in 1917, the year before his death, receiving favorable reviews both from the Parisian public and the critics.³

In addition to his own activities as a pianist, we can learn more about his pianism and approach to interpretation from the recollections of those pianists he coached in the performance of his music. Debussy's suggestions and comments vary from musical interpretation to detailed piano technique. The pianists he coached, including Ricardo Viñes, Maurice Dumesnil, Harold Bauer, George Copeland, Walter Rummel, Robert E. Schmitz, Maurice Ciampi, and Marguerite Long, not only benefited from his insights, but also witnessed Debussy's pianistic ability in close contact. Their observations give us a first-hand perspective of Debussy as a pianist. Robert E. Schmitz, for example, recalls, "I remember also the standard of piano

³ A list of public concerts where Debussy appeared as a pianist is found in Appendix A.

playing which Debussy himself had, and which he taught me through years of training.”⁴

Our understanding of Debussy as a pianist comes principally from the composer’s own remarks, the recollections and comments of his teachers and contemporaries, and from piano rolls made by the composer himself in November 1910. Prior scholarly research into Debussy as a pianist is limited both in scope and quantity. Virginia Raad’s *The Piano Sonority of Claude Debussy* (1994),⁵ exploring Debussy’s piano sonority, dedicates one chapter to Debussy as a pianist. In this short chapter, Raad collects and translates the remarks of Debussy’s contemporaries regarding his performances as a pianist. Charles Timbrell’s “Debussy in Performance” (2003)⁶ and Cecilia Dunoyer’s “Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano” (1999)⁷ both discuss Debussy’s piano playing, as well as that of those pianists who worked closely with Debussy. Part of each article examines the piano rolls made by the composer, and both include an extensive discography of Debussy’s piano works.⁸ Roger Nichols’s *Debussy Remembered* (1992)⁹ gathers the recollections of

⁴ Robert Schmitz, “A Plea for the Real Debussy,” *The Etude* 55 (December 1937), 782.

⁵ Virginia Raad, *The Piano Sonority of Claude Debussy* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994).

⁶ Charles Timbrell, “Debussy in Performance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 259–277.

⁷ Cecilia Dunoyer, “Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano,” in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 91–118.

⁸ See Appendix B.

⁹ Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1992).

pianists coached by Debussy. Dissertations by Sherry Lin-Yu Chen¹⁰ and Edna Breinig Chun,¹¹ focusing on Debussy's piano works, briefly discuss Debussy as a pianist. Karstein Djupdal's website, "Debussy at the Piano,"¹² is based on the master's thesis he submitted to the Norwegian Academy of Music. Although his entire thesis is not translated into English, the website gives us a useful summary on Debussy as a pianist. His list of Debussy's performances, which is found in Appendix A in this dissertation, is a particularly important source for the subject.

This dissertation endeavors to deepen our understanding and appreciation of Debussy as a pianist, exploring his aptitude, technique, and influence, and applying the insights thus gathered to the interpretation and performance of his piano works. Chapter One investigates Debussy's early training as a pianist. Chapter Two considers comments by his contemporaries and critical reviews of his piano performances. Chapter Three focuses on Debussy's interest in and approach to piano teaching, and discusses those pianists who had the opportunity to be coached by the composer in the performance of his music. Debussy's own perspectives on piano playing in general, and the performance of his own works in particular—with regard to technique, touch, fingering, pedaling, sonority and dynamics—are elaborated on further in Chapter Four. Finally, an assessment of his recordings on the piano rolls is provided in Chapter Five.

¹⁰ Sherry Lin-Yu Chen, "Debussy's *Children's Corner*: A Pedagogical Approach," (DMA diss. Rice University, 2001).

¹¹ Edna Breinig Chun, "Debussy's Piano Music 1903–1907," (DMA diss., Indiana University, 1980).

¹² Karstein Djupdal, "Debussy at the Piano," <http://www.djupdal.org/karstein/debussy/> (accessed, 20 March, 2008).

Claude Debussy had a unique skill for expressing his ideas on the piano, creating nuance and layers of sensitive sonorities latent in his music. Aware of his role as an innovator who changed piano playing forever, he was very interested in disseminating and perpetuating his ideas, both in his own time and with an eye to the future. The present study seeks, in its modest way, to honor that intention.

CHAPTER ONE

DEBUSSY'S PIANO TRAINING

Claude Debussy was born in 1862 to a middle-class family in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, just west of Paris, where his parents ran a small china shop. His family could not provide a superior private education for Debussy, nor did he have an ideal environment for music education. Debussy never even attended an ordinary school. Although his father, Manuel, who had served as a marine during the Franco-Prussian War, occasionally took young Claude to his favorite theater, he ultimately hoped his son would take up a naval career.

Early Training

Debussy's first piano lesson at the age of nine, was arranged by his aunt, Madame Clémentine Roustan. In the summers of 1870 and 1871, she invited Debussy to vacation with her in Cannes. At his aunt's suggestion, Debussy began piano lessons in 1871 with an elderly Italian musician, Jean Cerutti. Cerutti was primarily a violinist and had won the first prize (*premier prix*) at the Paris Conservatory. Debussy avoided talking about his Cannes days, and the historical information on his lessons with Cerutti is scarce, but he later told his close friend,

Louis Laloy, that Cerutti did not recognize any “particular talent” in him.¹³
According to Harvey, Debussy took the piano lessons only to please his aunt who most likely paid for them. However, back in Paris, he liked playing on the worn-out piano at home, making up chords and trying to imitate music he heard in the streets.¹⁴ Nevertheless, virtually the only music Debussy heard in his childhood was that of the military bands in the Paris squares and public gardens. When he was older, his father occasionally took him to the theater, introducing him to operas such as Verdi’s *Il Trovatore*, which made a great impression on him.¹⁵

In 1871, after he came back from Cannes, Debussy encountered a new piano teacher, Madame Antoinette-Flore Mauté de Fleurville, who changed the direction of his life. Madame de Fleurville, who had been a pupil of Chopin, recognized the young Debussy’s talent. Mme. de Fleurville was the mother of the operetta composer and conductor, Charles de Sivry (1848–1900), and also the mother-in-law of the poet Paul Verlaine. In his *Confessions*, Verlaine dedicated a short poem to Mme. de Fleurville, in which he sings of his admiration for her. He saw her as “a charming soul, an instinctive and talented artist, an excellent musician of exquisite taste, intelligent, and devoted to those she loved.”¹⁶ She was a dedicated teacher who passed on to Debussy what she had learned from Chopin. According to biographies by Vallas, Thompson and Myers, she taught the young Debussy without charge.

¹³ Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Maire and Grace O’Brien (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 3.

¹⁴ Harry B. Harvey, *Claude of France, the Story of Debussy* (New York: Allen, Towne & Health, 1948), 9.

¹⁵ Vallas, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Mme. de Fleurville remained a life-long, significant influence on Debussy's musical taste and piano playing, especially his interpretation of Chopin's music. In Debussy's correspondence with the publisher Durand, he mentioned that Mme. Mauté de Fleurville "knew many things about Chopin."¹⁷ He also explained to the pianist and conductor Alfred Casella how central Mme. Fleurville's instruction had been to his musical formation, not only as pianist, but also as a creator.¹⁸ Debussy recalled his lessons with her in a letter to Durand, dated 1 September, 1915:

Despite my respect to Saint-Saëns's great age, what he says about Chopin's pedal isn't entirely true. I have very clear memories of what Mme Mauté de Fleurville told me. [Chopin] recommended practicing without pedal and, in performance, not holding it on except in very rare instances. It was the same way of turning the pedal into a kind of *breathing* which I observed in Liszt when I had the chance to hear him in Rome.¹⁹

In a conversation with Victor Segalen dated 17 December, 1908, Debussy refers to a pianist he much admired, quite possibly Mme. de Fleurville: "I've only heard two fine pianists," he said, "my old piano teacher, a small, fat lady who threw me into Bach and who played him as no one does nowadays, making him live. The

¹⁷ Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, 5th ed. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1980), 8.

¹⁸ Alfred Casella, "Claude Debussy," *The Monthly Musical Record* (January 1933): 2.

¹⁹ Lesure and Nichols, 301.

second pianist is Liszt, whom I heard in Rome.”²⁰ Young Debussy was fascinated by Mme de Fleurville’s lessons and she encouraged him to go to the Paris Conservatory. His father, Manuel, who now hoped that his son would become a virtuoso pianist instead of a sailor, insisted upon six to seven hours of daily practice.²¹ Surprisingly, after only two years of piano training, Debussy was accepted to the Paris Conservatory.

Conservatory Years

In October 1872, when he was ten years old, Debussy was admitted to one of the two advanced piano classes of Antoine Marmontel at the Paris Conservatory. Confusion exists as to the exact date of Debussy’s admission to the Paris Conservatory. Biographies by Vallas, Thompson, Laloy, and Myers suggest that he was admitted in 1873, while Nichols’s biography, and several other sources claim that it was in 1872, when he was ten years old.²² John E. Clevenger, who has studied Debussy’s years at the conservatory in depth, also claims that the composer was admitted in 1872.²³ If he was indeed admitted in 1872, it means Debussy had studied only a year with Mme. de Fleurville, and had progressed remarkably.

²⁰ Victor Sagalen, Annie Joly-Sagalen and André Schaeffner, eds., *Segalen et Debussy* (Monaco, 1962). Translated and quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 148.

²¹ Maurice Dumesnil, *Claude Debussy: Master of Dreams* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1940), 16.

²² See, for example, Raad, 1, Nichols, *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 10, and Reginald R Gerig, *Famous Pianists & Their Technique*, new ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 321.

The French musician and critic Camille Bellaigue (1858–1930), a classmate of Debussy, describes Debussy’s arrival at the conservatory:

“At last, my child, you are here!” said Marmontel as he saw a puny little fellow entering late. Dressed in a belted blouse, the tardy boy held in his hand a kind of beret with a border and a tassel like a sailor’s cap. Nothing about him, his appearance, his conversation or his playing, suggested an artist. The only remarkable thing about his face was his forehead. He was one of the youngest pianists and not one of the best. I especially remember his habit of making the beat by a kind of hiccup or harsh breath. This rhythmic exaggeration later was to be the least of his faults. You will agree when you know his name: Claude Debussy.²⁴

At the time Debussy began his study at the conservatory, Antoine Marmontel (1816–1898), a little man with a shaved head, was almost sixty years old. He achieved first prizes in theory of music and piano in 1837 at the conservatory, and had been teaching at the conservatory for thirty years. He wrote about the great pianists of his day in a book entitled *Les Pianistes célèbres*, published in 1878. His other publications include *L’Art classique et moderne du piano* (1876) and *Histoire du piano et de ses origines* (1885). According to Bellaigue, Marmontel’s piano class was held in a room with a few benches and a large Erard grand. Each student took a turn and worked individually with Marmontel, then played his particular work to the group. Bellaigue recalls Marmontel as an exacting teacher:

²³ John E. Clevenger, “Achilles at the Conservatoire (1872–1884),” *Cahiers Debussy* 19 (1995): 3–35.

²⁴ Camille Bellaigue, *Souvenirs de Music et de Musiciens*, Paris, Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1921, 35. Quoted in Raad, 1.

Nothing escaped Marmontel, not our manner of execution, a fault in fingering or our poor taste. Yet he never admonished us or had us repeat; all of this with kindness, even with a seeming unconcern. He was sensitive, perceptive. Sometimes, he seized his long beard in both hands and pulled it as though to lengthen it even more; with his eyes half-closed, he sighed deeply and murmured: “Oh! Mon dieu! Oh! Mon dieu!” One could say that he sought heaven as his witness to our blunders and the suffering he was caused.²⁵

Debussy spoke little of his studies with Marmontel. Given the recollections of others, however, it seems plausible to conclude that Debussy’s instruction with Marmontel in the competitive atmosphere at the conservatory impacted his pianism significantly.

During his years at the conservatory, Debussy studied major piano repertoire, including Bach’s Toccata in G Minor, Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in C Minor, Op.111, Weber’s Piano Sonata in A flat Major, Thalberg’s Sonata in C Minor, Mendelssohn’s Piano Concerto No.2 in D Minor, Chopin’s Piano Concerto No.2 in F Minor, *Fantasia*, Ballade No.1 in G Minor, and the *Allegro de concert*.²⁶ He won second prize in 1877 playing Schumann’s Sonata in G Minor, but failed to win prizes in his subsequent attempts. Another classmate, Raymond Bonheur, thought that the discipline and enthusiasm required of a performer soon discouraged Debussy.²⁷ When he finally won first prize in 1880, it was not in piano, but in accompanying and

²⁵ Ibid., 36. Raad, 2.

²⁶ Clevenger: 16–17.

²⁷ Raymond Bonheur, “Souvenirs et impressions d’un compagnon de jeunesse,” *Revue de Musicologie* 7 (May 1926): 99–104. Quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 10.

practical harmony, after he entered the composition class of Ernest Guiraud. Debussy's failure to win the first prize effectively doomed his career as a concert pianist, and his interest in piano playing had been gradually shifted toward composition.

Debussy was not generally regarded by his classmates as one of the best pianists at the conservatory. Their observations, however, are not altogether negative, as the following remarks will show. They acknowledge Debussy's great musical sensitivity, but describe Debussy's playing as individualistic, and even "violent." Debussy's classmate, Gabriel Pierné, for example, writes:

In Marmontel's piano class he used to astound us with his bizarre playing. Whether it was through natural maladroitness or through shyness I don't know, but he literally used to charge at the piano and force all his effects. He seemed to be in a rage with the instrument, rushing up and down it with impulsive gestures and breathing noisily during the difficult bits. These faults gradually receded and occasionally he would obtain effects of an astonishing softness. With all its faults and virtues, his playing remained something highly individual.²⁸

Another classmate, Maurice Emmanuel, remarked that Debussy's performance of Beethoven was on "the heavy side."²⁹ Debussy apparently also gave a highly romantic performance of the F minor Prelude from Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* by Bach. Marmontel was impressed, although such a subjective account of

²⁸ Gabriel Pierné, "Souvenirs d'Achille Debussy," *Revue de Musicologie* 7 (May 1926): 10–11. Quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 4.

²⁹ Gerig, 322.

Bach was totally apparently unacceptable to the director of the Conservatory, Ambroise Thomas.³⁰

Paul Vidal, a classmate in Marmontel's class, described Debussy's playing:

Debussy, who had obtained the second prize in piano, two years earlier, hoped to win the first at the end of 1879, but he failed, which was for him, and certainly for his family, who hoped to see him have a brilliant career as a pianist, a large disappointment.

His playing, though very interesting, was not entirely pianistic; he had difficulty with the trill, on the other hand he had a very agile left hand which was capable of extraordinary extensions.

His gifts as a pianist were apparent most of all in Bazille's Accompaniment Class the following years where he distinguished himself.³¹

Antoine Marmontel made a variety of comments on Debussy's performance during the conservatory years, ranging from remarks about his "charming musical nature" and "true artistic temperament" to those condemning Debussy as "careless and inaccurate, [he] could do much better."³²

However, descriptions of Debussy's playing, as noted in the Parisian press, are generally positive, differing greatly from the critical remarks made by his colleagues at the conservatory. In fact, these writers acclaim the very aspects of his

³⁰ Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, Vol. I (New York: Macmillan Co., 1962. Reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 28–29.

³¹ Paul Vidal, "Souvenirs d'Achille Debussy," *La Revue Musicale*, 1er Mai, 1926: 11-12.

³² Timbrell, 259.

playing that his colleagues regarded as “faults.” The Parisian press, in describing Debussy’s 1874 and 1875 performances of Chopin, commended his “surprising security and power,” and cited his “promise as an exceptional future virtuoso.”³³ The reviewer of an 1876 concert exclaimed, “What verve! What enthusiasm! What real spirit! [...] when he takes over the piano, he imbues the strings with his whole soul [...] he is still not fourteen years old!”³⁴ These accolades from the press suggest that Debussy developed and refined his piano technique during his years at the conservatory. His achievements as a pianist were recognized by the conservatory in 1877 with the second prize for his performance of the virtuosic first movement from Schumann’s G minor sonata.

Debussy’s idiosyncratic performance technique built upon his conservatory training, but it also had much to do with his constant experimentation at the keyboard. He was concerned both with improvisation as a practice, and his curiosity to discover what new sonorities the instrument had to offer. Debussy had a natural talent for improvising and arranging music for piano since his childhood. When he was a child, after hearing a military band, he reproduced what he heard while improvising his own harmony. While at the conservatory, of his own accord, he spent time reducing Haydn’s string quartets instead of practicing piano.³⁵ He had a particular talent for creating lush, full sonorities, using the piano to create orchestral textures. One of his classmates, Raymond Bonheur, remarked:

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Claude Debussy (1862-1962),” *Revue de Musicologie* numéro spécial (1962): 97. Quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 5.

³⁵ Maurice Dumesnil, *Claude Debussy: Master of Dreams* (New York: Ives Washburn, 1940), 18, 22–24.

It is well known what an incomparable player he was of his works, providing not only the illusion of an orchestra, but an extraordinary feeling of life and movement...But it was when he played from a still uncertain sketch, with the fever of improvisation still more or less upon him, that he was truly prodigious.³⁶

One of Debussy's friends, Léon-Paul Fargue, later explained how Debussy improvised at the piano:

Debussy would sit himself down without speaking at the piano...and start to improvise. Anyone who knew him can remember what it was like. He would start by brushing the keys, prodding the odd one here and there, making a pass over them and then he would sink into velvet....He gave the impression of delivering the piano of its sound...³⁷

The singer Mary Garden (1874–1967), a friend and frequent dinner guest of the composer and his first wife Rosalie (née Texier), known as Lily, describes Debussy's improvisation:

After dinner we used to go into the drawing-room, and Lily and I would go into a corner and talk about things. Then Debussy would sit at the piano, and for an hour or so he would improvise. I have never heard such music in my life, such music as came from the piano at those

³⁶ Raymond Bonheur, "Souvenirs et impressions d'un compagnon de jeunesse," *Revue de Musicologie* 7 (May 1926): 99–104. Quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 11.

³⁷ Léon-Paul Fargue, letter to Auguste Martin, in: A. Martin, *Claude Debussy. Catalogue de l'Exposition organisée du 2 au 17 mai 1942 au Foyer de l'Opera-Comique* (Paris: 1942), ix, x. Quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 49–50.

moments. How beautiful it was, and haunting, and nobody but Lily and I ever heard it! Debussy never put those improvisations down on paper.³⁸

One encounters many such descriptions of Debussy's improvisations and impromptu performances. His ear for sonority, his flair for improvisation, and his academic training were the cornerstones of his pianism, which we will explore in greater depth in the following chapter through an examination of the accounts rendered by those who witnessed his performances.

³⁸ Mary Garden (and Louis Biancolli), *Mary Garden's Story* (London: 1952), 49, 63-68, 73-83. Quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 72.

CHAPTER TWO

DEBUSSY'S PIANO PERFORMANCE

While Debussy never made a career of piano performance, he continued to perform regularly until 1917, the year before his death. In addition to playing his own pieces, he performed works by other composers, including Wagner, Rimsky-Korsakov and Lekeu.³⁹ These performances took place in private chamber settings, and our estimation of Debussy as a pianist rests largely on the recollections of those who witnessed his playing.

In his conservatory years, Debussy gained and learned from a variety of performance experience, including solo, concerto, chamber music and accompanying. On different occasions, his performances also extended to the outside world. When he was 17, Marmontel recommended him to Madame Marguerite Wilson-Pelouze, who suffered from insomnia. Debussy played piano at the historic Chateau of Chenonceaux to help her sleep.⁴⁰ We may surmise that the sensitivity and softness ascribed to Debussy by his classmates served him in good stead in this task. He was

³⁹ See Appendix A.

⁴⁰ Raad, 4.

also an accompanist for the Concordia choral society in 1883, before he departed Paris to travel to Rome after winning the Prix de Rome in 1884.

Wherever he played, people recognized his uniqueness and growing talent. While Debussy was never a virtuoso or a child prodigy, he did make a strong impression on his audience. People remembered him vividly in their recollections of his performance. In the absence of extensive recordings, these recollections must serve as primary evidence in establishing Debussy as an extraordinary pianist. They must, however, be filtered through their authors' awareness of Debussy's great fame as a composer, and his importance as a musical personality, factors that may have had an influence on their accounts. This chapter explores Debussy's performance style according to those who witnessed his actual playing, among them critics, pianists, singers and composers. Their impressions yield valuable clues as to what Debussy was capable of as a pianist.

In the summer of 1879, Marmontel recommended Debussy to Madame Nedezhda von Meck (1831–1894), who was seeking a pianist from the conservatory to accompany her on a journey. The famous patroness of Tchaikovsky, she was herself an accomplished pianist. For three summers, Debussy traveled with the von Meck family across Europe and Russia, playing piano duets with Mme. von Meck and accompanying Julia, the daughter who was an amateur singer, and also playing in a trio with the violinist Ladislav Pouchalsky and the cellist Peter Danilchenko.⁴¹

Nicholas von Meck, the son of Mme. von Meck, remembers Debussy as a pleasant companion, whom his mother considered a gifted musician, not only as a

⁴¹ Ibid.

pianist, but also as a composer.⁴² We find several accounts of his playing in her correspondence with Tchaikovsky. In a letter from Interlaken dated 10 July, 1880, she writes:

The young man plays well, his technique is brilliant, but he's lacking in sensibility. He's still too young.⁴³

Lockspeiser translates the French “sensibilité” as “personal expression.” In a letter from Arcachon dated 7 August, 1880, she hedges her praise of her little “Frenchman.” One detects a note of Germanophilism in her comments:

Yesterday was the first time I had the courage to play *our* symphony [i.e. Tchaikovsky's No.4] with my little Frenchman. He did not play it well, although he read marvelously at sight. That's his only merit, but a very important one. He can read the score, even one of yours, *like a book*. [...] Altogether he is a typical product of the Parisian boulevards. He composes very nicely as well, but in that too he's a perfect Frenchman.⁴⁴

Mme. von Meck became quite fond of Debussy, and delighted in his visits, which gave her the opportunity to “gorge [herself] listening to music.”⁴⁵

⁴² Nicholas von Meck, “Achille-Claude Debussy”, manuscript memoir, published in: Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, 5th ed. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1980), 290–292.

⁴³ Edward Lockspeiser, “*Debussy, Tchaïkovsky et Mme von Meck*,” *La Revue Musicale* 16 (November, 1935): 246. Trans. Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 247. Trans. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁴⁵ Edward Lockspeiser, “*Claude Debussy dans la correspondance de Tchaïkovsky et de Mme von Meck*,” *La Revue Musicale* 18 (October 1937): 218. Trans. Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered*, (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 15.

Another lady who much enjoyed young Debussy's pianism before his departure to Rome was Madame Marie-Blanche Vasnier (1869–1935), an amateur singer who asked him to accompany her. Debussy was also very fond of (if not in love with) Mme. Vasnier. He composed and dedicated several songs to her. Her daughter, Marguerite Vasnier, speaks to Debussy's ability to achieve a range of effects:

His hands were strong and bony, with square fingers; his touch on the piano was sonorous, rather percussive but also sometimes very gentle and cantabile.⁴⁶

Except for gaps in the years 1884 to 1889, and from 1897 to 1903, Debussy continued to appear in concerts from the time he finished his studies at the conservatory to the end of his life. According to Charles Timbrell, Debussy's pianism underwent a "metamorphosis" during the years after he left the conservatory, until 1903, which he deems the emergence of Debussy's "mature style."⁴⁷ The most significant change in comments about his playing during these years regards his tone production. Interestingly, references to Debussy's playing as "percussive" gradually diminished after he began to perform his own compositions.

After the turn of the century, Debussy mostly performed his own compositions. Perhaps because of insecurity concerning both his new compositions and his playing, however, he normally entrusted the task of the premiere to other

⁴⁶ Marguerite Vasnier, "Debussy à dix-huit ans," *La Revue Musicale*, 7 (1 May 1926): 17–22, trans. and quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 17.

⁴⁷ Timbrell, 260.

pianists. As a soloist he played “Soirée dans Grenade” and “Jardins sous la pluie” from *Estampes*, “Reflets dans l’eau” and “Hommage à Rameau” from *Images I*, the six pieces of *Children’s Corner*, and thirteen of his *Préludes*. As a collaborator, he worked with such singers as Jane Bartori, Caire Croiza, Rose Féart, Jean Perier, Maggie Teyte and Ninon Vallin, as well as violinists Arthur Hartmann and Gaston Poulet, the cellist Joseph Salmon, and pianists Jean Roger-Ducasse and Ricardo Viñes.⁴⁸

In 1910, after Debussy’s performance of four of his *Préludes*, the critic Auguste Mangeot wrote, “Is there a pianist who has a more beautiful sound than Debussy on an Erard? I don’t think so.”⁴⁹ Paul Landormy, who attended the same concert also complimented Debussy’s tone production: “One can’t imagine the sweetness of his caressing playing, the sublimity of his singing touch—which said so many things at half voice, as it were—and how his smallest intensions came across.”⁵⁰ The French composer Darius Milhaud (1892–1974), who as a youth witnessed Debussy perform, recalls:

I had also the possibility of hearing Debussy in concerts—he played sometimes when he accompanied certain songs—and I was always

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Monde musical* (31 May 1910), quoted in: Charles Timbrell, “Debussy in Performance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 260.

⁵⁰ Paul Landormy, *La musique française de Franck à Debussy* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 231. Quoted in Timbrell, 260.

extremely moved by the tenderness with which he touched the notes; he played magnificently.⁵¹

Karl Lahm, who heard Debussy perform at large gathering of painters and sculptors, resorts to metaphor in his description of Debussy's gentle touch and tone:

he showed at the piano that colour depends on the correct handling of the overtones, which must not be obtrusive. He did not play for long, but there was in his gentle playing a narcotic/erotic note, a sweet dreaminess like that of a woman's hand.⁵²

We frequently encounter such sensual metaphors in descriptions of Debussy's playing. Leon Vallas and Louis Laloy likewise complimented the delicacy of Debussy's tone. According to Vallas, Debussy was "an original virtuoso, remarkable for the mellowness of his touch. He made one forget that the piano has hammers—an effect which he used to request his interpreters to aim at—and he achieved particularly characteristic effects of timbres by the combined use of both pedals."⁵³

Similar description is given by Alfredo Casella (1883–1947), the Italian pianist and composer who knew Debussy from 1910 to 1914. The two played piano scores together. Casella, like others before him, speaks both to Debussy's individuality and his gift for sonorities:

⁵¹ Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 243.

⁵² Karl Lahm, "Erinnerungen an Claude Debussy," *Melos* 21/11 (November 1954): 314–315. Trans. Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 123.

⁵³ Oscar Thompson, *Debussy, Man and Artist* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1937), 250.

No words can give an idea of the way in which he played certain of his own *Préludes*. Not that he had actual virtuosity, but his sensibility of touch was incomparable; he made the impression of playing directly on the strings of the instrument with no intermediate mechanism; the effect was a miracle of poetry. Moreover, he used the pedals in a way all his own. He played, in a word, like no other living composer or pianist.⁵⁴

Casella further recalls Debussy's playing of Mozart and Chopin's music.

Not only was he a unique interpreter of his own works, but also in some of the older music, particularly Mozart's, he was wonderful. It is one of the most happy and lively memories of my artistic life to hear him play a number of Chopin's pieces [...]

Louise Liebich, Debussy's first biographer, emphasized his sensitive approach to the keyboard in her article, saying she had "never heard more beautiful pianoforte playing" than when she heard him play *Danseuses de Delphes*. She states that "[Debussy] had a soft, deep touch which evoked full, rich, many-shaded sonorities."⁵⁵

According to Liebich's informants, Debussy's delicacy of touch and tone did not always play to best advantage in a concert hall. Léon Vallas also notes this effect with regard to Debussy's performance of several of the *Préludes* in the concert of 12 March, 1912.

⁵⁴ Alfredo Casella, "Claude Debussy," *Monthly Musical Record* 63 No.743 (January 1933): 1.

⁵⁵ Louise Liebich, "An Englishwoman's Memories of Debussy," *The Musical Times* 1 (June 1918): 250. According to Roger Nichols, the performance probably took place in 1910.

[He played] in his usual delicate manner. His playing, so full of intimate feeling and subtle effects, was not heard to advantage in the big Salle Gaveau.⁵⁶

The performance received a critical review from Auguste Mangeot, the editor of the *Monde Musical*, who, according to Vallas, “accused the pianist-composer of having maintained an almost continuous *pianissimo* during his entire performance.” In the same article, Mangeot reproaches Debussy for writing works which are not important enough for the concert hall.⁵⁷ Vallas speaks to the veiled, diaphanous nature of Debussy’s playing, describing it as mostly *pianissimo*, at times nearly inaudible. In his review of a 1914 concert at which the composer performed his own works, Vallas took Debussy to task for his “over-subtle interpretation.”

The performance was not lacking either in interest or monotony. M. Debussy gave a charming rendering of his “Preludes” which sound like clever pastiches written *in the manner of...Debussy*; he also played in a dim, veiled tone, that was at times almost inaudible, some accompaniments of songs which Mme Vallin-Pardo, skillfully muting her powerful voice, rendered in a soft unchanging murmur. This subdued colouring, evidently desired and insisted upon the musician, is in keeping with the general tradition that composers are apt to be the least successful and least convincing interpreters of their own works. The extremely elegant audience enjoyed a pleasant doze during the music, and woke up to join in the unanimous applause...⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Maire and Grace O’Brien (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 242–243.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, *Revue Française de Musique*, 15 April, 1914.

In keeping with his gentle and subtle approach to the keyboard, Debussy always kept the lid of the piano closed in his public performance.⁵⁹ Debussy's ideal setting for his piano music was presumably in the smaller concert hall or salon, as opposed to large concert halls in which audiences were accustomed to the loud, flashy performances of virtuosos.

Vallas further notes that "whenever a new work [by Debussy] was published, and especially whenever Debussy himself appeared in public, a section of critics gave vent to their dissatisfaction in very unfair articles."⁶⁰ One of the harshest critiques was made by E. Stoullig of *Le Monde Artiste*, who reviewed a concert of March 1913:

M. Debussy, *in person*, played three of his new Preludes. The first, "Bruyères," has no significance at all; the second, "Feuilles Mortes," has very little more; the third, "Puerta del vino"...is an improvement on the two first pieces, without being at all remarkable. But what was remarkable, was the behaviour of a section of the audience. There were enthusiastic cheers and numerous calls, and some girls even threw flowers to the celebrated composer, who picked them up with evident pleasure...M. Debussy is undoubtedly a man of great talent and a very clever pianist. But he must realize himself that his trifling little pieces do not deserve the same ovations as the masterpieces of Gluck, Beethoven, or Mozart.⁶¹

While Stoullig apparently holds Debussy's compositions in low regard, he does acknowledge Debussy's pianistic abilities.

⁵⁹ Gerig, 323.

⁶⁰ Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Maire and Grace O'Brien (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 243–244.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 244.

On the other hand, Debussy received a very favorable review from the critic in *La Critique Musicale*, praising his “ease and fluidity, and his insinuating, though rather monotonous tone.” He states further, “I confess, that I prefer his playing to that of any other pianist. His restraint and discretion make one forget all considerations of technical dexterity. Thus the naked soul of the work is placed before the audience; its action is direct; the interpreter is lost sight of.”⁶²

Louis Laloy displays a similar enthusiasm for Debussy’s performance in *Comœdia* after his concert with the violinist A. Hartmann, on 5 February 1914:

The power of magic will be realized by all who have ever heard his marvellous playing; the sounds seem to be produced without any impact of hammers or vibration of strings; they rise up into a transparent atmosphere where they unite without merging, and then dissolve in iridescent mists. M. Debussy puts the keyboard under a spell, the secret of which is unknown to any of our virtuosi.⁶³

Igor Stravinsky, who since 1910 had enjoyed a friendly relationship with Debussy, remarked on his strong sight-reading ability as well as his great pianism:

What most impressed me at the time and what is still more memorable from the occasion of the sight-reading of *Le sacre du printemps* was Debussy’s brilliant piano playing. Recently, while listening to his *En blanc et noir* (one of which pieces is dedicated to me) I was struck by the way in which the extraordinary quality of this pianism had directed the thought of Debussy the composer.⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., 245.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversation with Igor Stravinsky* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 49–50.

Louis Laloy, a witness to the event, describes the occasion with awe:

On a bright afternoon in spring of 1913 I was walking round my garden in Bellevue with Debussy. We were waiting for Stravinsky. As soon as he saw us, the Russian composer ran with his arms out to embrace Debussy who, over his friend's shoulder, threw me a look of combined amusement and affection. He had brought the piano duet arrangement of his new work, the *Sacre du printemps*. Debussy agreed to play the lower part on the Pleyel piano which is still in my possession. Stravinsky asked if he could take his collar off. Glaring through his glasses, pointing his nose at the keyboard and sometimes humming a part that has been omitted from the arrangement, he led his friend's supple, agile hands into a maelstrom of sound. Debussy followed without a hitch and seemed to make light of the difficulties. When they had finished, there was no question of embracing, nor even of compliments. We were dumbfounded, overwhelmed by this hurricane which had come from the depths of the ages and taken our life by the roots.⁶⁵

To play *La sacre du printemps* at sight is in itself a remarkable feat, let alone in a masterful duet with the composer.

The music critic Emile Vuillermoz hails Debussy as a singularly gifted performer of his own works whose performances reveal all of their harmonic nuances.

Like Casella's, his description also waxes poetic:

All those who have had the privilege of seeing one of Debussy's works well up from under his fingers know what a miraculously gifted pianist he was. Personally, I have never heard more supple, elegant or velvety playing. He obtained sonorities from the piano which softened the angles and asperities generated by his forward-looking inspiration. He had discovered the exact finger technique to suit his harmonic system.

⁶⁵ Louis Laloy, *La musique retrouvée* (Paris: Plon 1928): 213, trans. and quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 240.

Anyone who never heard him, in playing a chord, delicately mould the outline of an unresolved appoggiatura so as to emphasize its 'suspended' character as well as its allusive function, can have no idea of the charm attached to that way of suggesting a note, by a discreet approach which brushes it without sounding it fully. Debussy's playing was one long harmony lesson.⁶⁶

It is interesting to note Debussy's responses to the evaluation of his music and his personalities by these figures. Debussy was extremely humble about his piano playing. In an interview in February 1914, Debussy confessed, "I am not a great pianist," although the interviewer argued that people esteemed his performance of *Préludes* as a revelation. Debussy replied angrily, saying "Let them talk [...] It's true that I can adequately perform some of the Preludes, the easiest ones. But the others [...] make me quiver."⁶⁷

Jacques Durand also writes of Debussy's nervousness at the concert in a salon on 1889, playing the four-hand piece *Petite Suite*:

Debussy was very nervous before sitting down at the piano with me, and had urged me not to go too fast. I promised. But hardly had we begun when Debussy began to hurry; and despite all my efforts, I was unable to hold him back. He was in haste to put this public trial behind him. So I followed the somewhat hectic tempi as best as I could, and the work

⁶⁶ Emile Vuillermoz, *Claude Debussy* (Paris, 1962), 54–57, 80–81, trans. and quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 156.

⁶⁷ François Lesure, "Une interview romaine de Debussy (Février 1914)," *Cahiers Debussy* 11 (1987): 4, trans. and quoted in Cecillia Dunoyer, "Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano" in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 92.

finished with a brio that was, probably, an important factor in the polite sympathy with which the work was finally greeted.⁶⁸

It could be that Debussy was insecure about his abilities as a pianist, or that he suffered from performance anxiety. However, Jane Bathori, a French soprano who worked with Debussy, suspected that his nervousness onstage was a ruse:

Debussy did not like accompanying in public. He gave nervousness as a pretext, which he said made his legs tremble so that he was deprived of all his wits. I think this excuse was mostly to avoid the too numerous importunates, and to keep his time free.⁶⁹

Debussy's passion for piano playing could be seen in his last public performance, on May 5, 1917, a year before his death, in which he played the premiere of his *Sonata for Violin and Piano* with Gaston Poulet in Paris. Debussy was terribly ill. André Suarès described Debussy's condition:

There was no bitterness in his mysterious smile; he had passed the weariness of suffering. His hand was round, supple, plump, not too strong, episcopal; it weighted down his arm, his arm pulled down his shoulder, his head hung from his body, this head the seat of his unique, wonderful and cruel life...

In his eyes, which fled encounters, I saw the desperate irony which is so natural in one who is leaving life to those behind. In them were the

⁶⁸ Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 30.

⁶⁹ Jane Bathori, "Les Musiciens que j'ai connus II, Debussy," trans. Felix Aprahamian. *Recorded Sound* 6 (Spring 1962): 178.

depths of hell. On this day, one could suppose that Debussy was making his *Adieux*. He knew that he would never play again in public with those magic hands. Interpreting his own works, he never touched a strange instrument of ebony and ivory; rather, he enchanted. The play of Debussy was an incantation, the most immaterial music, with the greatest nuances one has ever heard. He didn't realize sonority as a pianist, never as a musician, but as a poet.⁷⁰

Of course, there was more at stake in this final performance than mere pianism. Here Debussy is confronting his own mortality, and was likely overwrought with emotion.

Taken collectively, the recollections of those who witnessed Debussy's performances suggest that he was an extraordinary pianist who left a strong impression of his musicianship. Especially after the turn of the century, his auditors typically describe his playing as "gentle," "sweet," "caressing," "supple," "elegant," and "velvety," and praise his sensitive approach to the instrument. Their comments focus on his refined touch and varied palette of tone colors. They refer consistently to his poetic evocation and atmospheric nuance. We no longer encounter critiques of his playing as "percussive" or lacking sensitivity, as we did in his student years. These traits seem to diminish as he began to play his own compositions. This suggests that while Debussy maintained his formidable technical facility, his performance style developed through the process of composing at the piano. However, he never seemed comfortable in the role of virtuoso, and largely delegated the premieres and

⁷⁰André Suares, *Debussy* (Paris: Emile-Paul, 1936), 171–172, 174, trans. and quoted in Raad, 12–13.

performances of his works to others. These pianists benefitted from the insights and advice of Debussy as pianist and composer. Debussy's search for a faithful interpreter of his music was nearly obsessive. The following chapter explores Debussy's coaching of several pianists with whom he maintained close relationships, and who have much to tell us about Debussy as a pianist, and his influence on them.

CHAPTER THREE

DEBUSSY AND COACHING

Debussy and Teaching

“There is no school of Debussy. I do not have disciples.”⁷¹ So said Debussy in an interview with an Austrian journalist in 1910. Debussy was opposed to the idea of forming a school of *Debussysme*, and discouraged those who sought to imitate his unique compositional approach. He did not teach piano, nor did he have composition students, claiming he had neither theory nor methods sufficient to explain his means of expression. He sought to influence no one, and to remain “independent,” saying merely, “I do my work as I must, as far as I am able.”⁷²

While Debussy had no regular students, he was nonetheless interested in piano playing and pedagogy. He coached a number of pianists who performed his music, seeking to share his interpretations and insights into the works from an aesthetic perspective. He once contemplated writing a piano method conducive to the

⁷¹ Claude Debussy, “Déclaration à un journaliste Autrichien,” *Monsieur Croche et austes ecrits*, (December 1910): 308. Trans. and quoted by Déirdre Donnellon, “Debussy as musician and critic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 51.

⁷² *Ibid.*, *Excelsior* (18 January 1911), 318-319, in *Debussy on Music*, collected and introduced by François Lesure. Trans. and edited by Richard Langham Smith. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 246.

particular technique and challenges of his piano music. Maurice Dumesnil remembers:

At one time Debussy interested himself in pedagogy, so much that he thought of writing a piano method of his own because he considered those in existence unsatisfactory, uninspiring, tedious and mechanical.⁷³

Although he never wrote the book, we see here his clear concern for piano pedagogy. Whether his concerns arose from his own piano training, his teaching experience, or his keen observation as a composer, he was definitely thinking about inspiring studies for pianists, and a new approach to piano technique.

His concern with the technique of piano playing was expressed in his last piano work, *Douze Études* (1915), a work consisting of twelve different types of exercises, dedicated to Chopin. Each etude deals with a specific technical device such as double-thirds, double-sixths, and octaves. In addition to the more common technical problems, Debussy added etudes dealing with double-fourths, ornaments, repeated notes, five fingers, eight fingers, and contrasted sonorities. In letters to his publisher Durand, he expressed satisfaction with his accomplishment.

I must confess that I am glad to have successfully completed a work which, I may say without vanity, will occupy a special place of its own. Apart from the question of technique, these *Études* will be a useful warning to pianists not to take up the musical profession unless they have remarkable hands.⁷⁴

⁷³ Maurice Dumesnil, "Coaching With Debussy," *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962), 10–13.

⁷⁴ Vallas, *Claude Debussy*, 259.

His comment about “remarkable hands” does not refer to the technical pyrotechnics of the virtuoso school. He detested almost all the popular virtuosos, many of whom he regarded as unmusical.⁷⁵ In his estimation, these virtuosos were akin to trained circus animals, performing tricks for a gullible audience:

The attraction of the virtuoso for the public is very like that of the circus for the crowd. There is always a hope that something dangerous may happen: M. Ysaye may play the violin with M. Colonne on his shoulder; or Mr. Pugno may conclude his piece by lifting the piano with his teeth.⁷⁶

Rather than empty pyrotechnics, Debussy’s developing piano technique was more concerned with touch, color, and sensitivity. He remarked to his publisher that several of the *Douze Études* were devoted “to special experiments in sonorities; amongst others, there is the one in fourths where you will find effects you have never heard before, despite the fact that your ears are inured to all sorts of strange sounds.”⁷⁷ Debussy’s music demanded a piano technique equal to its challenges, which are in many ways different from those posed by earlier piano music. Oscar Thompson commented, “Debussy knew he had altered piano performance through the scoring of special problems in tone production and fingering.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Alfredo Casella, “Claude Debussy,” *Monthly Musical Record* 63 No.743 (January 1933), 2.

⁷⁶ Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche: The Dilettante Hater*, trans. B.N. Langdon Davies (New York: Lear Publishers, 1928), 54.

⁷⁷ Vallas, *Claude Debussy*, 258.

⁷⁸ Oscar Thompson, *Debussy, Man and Artist* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1937), 271.

Debussy's demanding attitudes toward piano technique and sonority might have come from his frustration with pianists, their poor technique, and their understanding of his music. In a letter to Edgar Varèse on July 12 in 1910, he wrote:

One is often betrayed by so-called pianists! I mean it — I can't tell you the extent to which my piano music has been deformed; so much so that often I have a job to recognize it! Forgive this personal outburst, but there are good reasons for it...⁷⁹

Debussy sought pianists who understood his approach to the instrument, and who would hew to his musical vision. Although his music might sound free and improvisatory, he had a definitive interpretation in mind, and was particularly vexed with those pianists who approached the music with a free hand. Marguerite Long remembers:

I often heard him tell—somewhat angrily—this story. A pianist once came to play to him some of his pieces. He stopped at a certain passage and said: 'Master, according to me this should be "free".' Recalling this, Debussy would say: 'There are some who write music, some who edit it, and there is that gentleman who does what he pleases.'⁸⁰

Debussy was very precise with his scoring, indicating every detail of performance. Of course, because every pianist has a different musical sense and taste, their performances are bound to vary with regard to the nuances each brings out, and the suggestive imagery of the works they bring to light. The execution of rubato

⁷⁹ Lesure and Nichols, 222.

⁸⁰ Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1972), 13.

becomes a particular issue in Debussy's music. When coaching Maurice Dumesnil on his performance of *Clair de Lune*, Debussy emphasizes that rubato should be applied at the phrase level, not on the individual beat. He was as unhappy with a too strict rhythmic rendering of the triplets as he was with exaggerated rubato.

The image shows a musical score for the first seven measures of Debussy's *Clair de Lune*. The score is written for piano and consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo/mood is marked 'Andante très expressif'. The dynamic is marked 'PIANO' and 'pp' (pianissimo). The instruction 'con sordina' (with sostenuto pedal) is also present. The score features a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure of the top staff, which is a key point of discussion in the text.

Example 1: *Clair de Lune*, mm. 1–7

Again the matter of triplet values came up. Now he found them too strictly in time. It was all right in a way, he said, but they ought to be included “within a general flexibility.” He advised me to depress the two pedals before starting, so that the overtones would vibrate immediately upon contact. Remembering his previous remarks about dramatizing, I tried to keep the middle part moderate. But I guess I still overdid: “No,” he said, “you exaggerate both crescendo and rubato. The latter must be done within the entire phrase, never on a single beat.”⁸¹

Debussy's remark about the pedals conveys his concern with sonority and how to achieve the desired effects. Marguerite Long, who was coached by Debussy, speaks

⁸¹ Maurice Dumesnil, “Coaching With Debussy,” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 11.

of a delicate rubato that could apply both to Debussy and Chopin's music. She states that rubato does not mean alteration of line or measure, but "a nuance or *élan*."⁸²

Debussy told the singer Jane Bathori that the indication "without strictness of rhythm" does *not* mean that one has the right to sing it in a whimsical manner as far as rhythm is concerned; rather, it means that one should not mark every change of rhythm with an accent.⁸³ With the exception of pedaling instructions, Debussy provided copious indications in his scores. Accuracy and a correct sense of tempo are absolutely necessary to perform his music. His comments lead us to believe that one should refrain from exaggerated rubato, and that expressive subtleties should be rendered within the terms he indicates.

Many pianists approach their performance of Debussy with what may be deemed as an excess of emotion, attempting to wring deep feeling out of every note and phrase as they might in a performance of Chopin. However, the key to his music is simplicity. As Debussy repeatedly said, "*Jouez simplement*. (Play with simplicity)."⁸⁴

We learn more about what Debussy meant by "simplicity" in a review of a concert in Brussels in 1914 in which Debussy performed "Soirée dans Grenade" and

⁸² Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, trans. Olive Senior-Ellis (London: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1972), 25.

⁸³ Jane Bathori, "*Les Musiciens que j'ai connus II, Debussy*," trans. by Felix Aprahamian. *Recorded Sound* 6 (Spring 1962): 176.

⁸⁴ Maurice Dumesnil, "Coaching With Debussy," *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 13.

“Jardins sous la pluie” from *Estampes* , “Hommage à Rameau” and “Reflets dans l’eau” from *Images I*, and *Préludes*:

Debussy’s interpretation is free of every mannerism and it surprises one by its simplicity. There is never any underlining of harmonic subtleties. The melodic lines are designed in thin strokes and rhythmic alterations don’t vainly declare themselves. This great simplicity, which at first is disconcerting, soon seduces one.⁸⁵

Working with Pianists

Although he once showed an interest in pedagogy, Debussy was not a piano pedagogue in the manner of Franz Liszt or Clara Schumann. He focused on his music, and teaching was merely a source of income for him before he established himself as a composer.⁸⁶ Teaching piano never became a major source of income or interest for Debussy, even during his financially difficult times.

As he established himself as a composer, Debussy started working with contemporary pianists on the performance of his works. It is more appropriate to

⁸⁵ *Guide musical*, 60/19–20 (10 and 17 May 1914): 154. Quoted in Charles Timbrell, “Debussy in Performance.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 260.

⁸⁶ Debussy’s first teaching experience occurred during his conservatory years, when he went on a trip with the von Meck family. One of the contracts he had with the family was to give piano lessons to their daughter Sonia. He earned money for living by staying with the wealthy family, teaching and playing. Until Debussy left for Rome, he spent much time in the household of Madame Marie-Blanche Vasnier, the amateur singer whom Debussy admired and to whom he dedicated early songs. He taught piano to her daughter, Marguerite. In 1898, when he married Rosalie Texier, he had to teach piano on his wedding day. The student, Mme. Worms de Romilly, to whom Debussy dedicated *Prélude* from *Pour le piano*, suggested postponing the lesson. Debussy answered “No,” and said “I need the twenty francs to entertain my wife’s family after the ceremony.” According to Raad, Raoul Bardac, the son of Emma Bardac, was Debussy’s student before his mother became his second wife. (Raad, 6)

describe these sessions as “coaching” rather than “teaching,” since Debussy only worked with pianists who had already established their careers, and presumably, their technique. Roger Nichols notes,

After *Pelléas*, Debussy soon gave up regular piano teaching, but he was always willing to offer advice to performers whom he found talented and sympathetic. From time to time he would also appear on the concert platform to play his own music, though it seems that his playing was undoubtedly heard to best effort in private.⁸⁷

The insights regarding interpretation and technique Debussy shared with these pianists are invaluable to those interested in the performance of his piano works, and in understanding the characteristics of Debussy’s pianism.

These musicians not only benefitted from Debussy’s advice on music, but also enjoyed the privilege of listening to the composer’s piano playing in an intimate setting. The pianists with whom Debussy worked include Ricardo Viñes, Maurice Dumesnil, Harold Bauer, George Copeland, Walter Rummel, Elie Robert Schmitz, Maurice Ciampi, and Marguerite Long. Copeland, Schmitz, Dumesnil and Long in particular left extensive and valuable source materials. Several of these pianists—Schmitz, Copeland, and Long, among them—recorded their performances of Debussy. Their recordings can thus possibly reveal the extent of Debussy’s influence and coaching upon their performance.

George Copeland (1882–1971) was the first American pianist to introduce Debussy’s piano music to audiences in the United States. Born and raised in Boston,

⁸⁷ Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1992), 155.

Copeland studied with Harold Bauer, among others, and gained a reputation as an excellent pianist. A review of an 1899 performance in Boston acclaimed Copeland's "superb technique and clear and liquid tones" in his interpretation of Mendelssohn and Chopin.⁸⁸ Attracted to Debussy's music, he prepared and premiered Debussy's *Deux Arabesques* on 14 January, 1904, in Boston.⁸⁹ Continuing to perform Debussy's works, Copeland was reviewed favorably by Phillip Hale of the *Boston Herald* in 1908:

[His strongest points are] his touch of crystalline clearness; his exquisite sense of rhythm; his intimate variety of tonal colors; and a musical nature that delights in bitter-sweet dissonances and anarchistic harmonic progressions, in twilight effects, in exotic and vaguely sensuous melody, and in fleeting shifting chords that are like sleep-chasings of a poetic brain."⁹⁰

A year later he presented the first of many all-Debussy recitals. The reviewer for the *Boston Transcript* commended his performance, resorting, as did many reviews of Debussy's works, to visual metaphor:

He commands the light and iridescent qualities of tone that these pieces require [and] he can spin their delicate arabesques, calling them from the air and seemingly letting them vanish into it.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Charles Timbrell, liner notes, *George Copeland: the Victor Solo Recordings* (CD recordings: Peal GEMS 0001, 1997).

⁸⁹ Timbrell, 264. Dunoyer claims it was on 17 April 1906.

⁹⁰ *Boston Herald*, 25 November 1908.

⁹¹ *Boston Transcript*, 27 April, 1909.

Although Copeland had performed Debussy for many years, he did not meet the composer until he played for him in Paris in 1911.⁹² At first, he did not wish to meet Debussy, as he was afraid that the “actual encounter with the man might in some way impair the devotion he had for him as a composer.”⁹³ He feared that if he had issues with Debussy as a man, he might come to dislike the music as well.⁹⁴ During his recital tour of Vienna, Rome and Milan, a mutual acquaintance, Señora d’Alvarez, urged Copeland to meet Debussy. She arranged a meeting between the two at Debussy’s house in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne. The next day, Copeland cancelled his return trip, and spent another four months in Paris during the spring and summer, meeting with Debussy on a daily basis, reading literature to one another and playing piano. Copeland described his encounters with Debussy in two articles, in which he shares Debussy’s insights and opinions on music.

According to Copeland’s episode of their first meeting, Debussy much admired Copeland’s interpretation of *Reflets dans l’eau*. Despite their disagreement on Copeland’s rendering of the last bars, Debussy refused Copeland’s offer to change it, saying, “I never pay compliments. I can only say that I have never dreamed that I would hear my music played like that in my lifetime.”⁹⁵ Given the composer’s sentiments, Copeland thus becomes an important resource for understanding Debussy’s pianistic aesthetic.

⁹² Copeland variously gives the date of his first meeting with Debussy as 1910 and 1911.

⁹³ George Copeland, “The First—and Last—Times I Saw Debussy,” *Musica* (November 1944): 8.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, “Debussy, the Man I Knew,” *Atlantic Monthly* 195 (Jan.-Jun. 1955): 34.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

To Copeland, it was obvious that the new sonorities of Debussy called for a new performance technique. He describes Debussy's own techniques for obtaining these sonorities, including, we presume, remarks from the composer (in quotes):

He achieved a crystal-clear, but floating, tone through complete disregard of the piano as a percussion instrument, and by a method of contracting the keys gradually with the cushions of the fingers, in an oblique, "caressing" motion, "like a cat rubbing itself against the hand that caresses it."⁹⁶

This rather sensuous, feline approach to the piano strongly contrasts with the more defined and aggressive German style then dominant. Regarding Debussy's pianism, Copeland mused,

Often I have been asked what I thought of Debussy as a pianist. I thought he was superb, in spite of his youthful failures at the Conservatoire, because at the piano he gave one *music*, not *piano-playing*. But the judges at his student competitions were right: Debussy could never have become a successful piano virtuoso, in the money-making sense so hoped for by his father.⁹⁷

Copeland seems to distinguish here between the flashy technical pyrotechnics of the popular virtuosos, and Debussy's intuitive ability to create a shared, expressive communication between him and his audience. Copeland infers the technical aspects of performance—rather than being celebrated for their own sake—become invisible, subservient to the larger purpose that he identifies as "music." We may further infer

⁹⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁷ George Copeland, "The First—and Last—Times I Saw Debussy," *Musica* (November 1944): 8.

that Debussy's failure to become a commercially successful virtuoso is not necessarily viewed negatively by Copeland.

Trained in France, Robert E. Schmitz (1889–1949) spent time with the composer from 1908 to 1915, accompanying the singers who worked with Debussy. He not only attended the coaching sessions with the singers, but also took the opportunity to perform his interpretations of Debussy's solo piano music for the composer. Schmitz's promising career was cut short by a hand injury incurred during World War I, which forced him to rework his technique. He settled in the United States after the war, and performed with more than sixty symphonic organizations throughout the world. He was active as a pianist, teacher, conductor, and concert promoter, and made great contributions to Debussy performance with the publication of his book, *The Piano Works by Claude Debussy* in 1950.

Essentially, Schmitz's book is the fruit of his life-long engagement with Debussy's music. He attempts a comprehensive overview of all of the composer's works for piano. He discusses the musical and cultural influences upon the composer, provides a technical analysis of each work, and offers copious suggestions for the "correct" performance of Debussy. The challenge that arises from his rather idiosyncratic writing style is sorting out those opinions that arise from his own aesthetic conceptions, and those of the composer. Schmitz believes that Debussy's works themselves reveal the correct approach to them. In other words, Schmitz believes that all the necessary aspects of Debussy's pianism are embedded in the

works, and that a comprehensive study such as his own will yield a wealth of performative insights:

It is, then, in the *works* [my emphasis] that we find the answer to his pianistic style and demands in performance, and not in the reports of his “violent attacks on the keyboard” or his “constant pianissimo” playing.⁹⁸

His article “A Plea for the Real Debussy” gives us a unique glimpse into Debussy as a pianist, and features the composer’s suggestions for performance. Having discussed Debussy’s obsession with the “slight crescendo” (a topic addressed further in Chapter Four of the present work), Schmitz describes the composer’s approach to touch and tone:

Another thing Debussy insisted upon was the proper way to strike a note on the piano. “It must be struck in a peculiar way,” he would say, “otherwise the sympathetic vibrations of the other notes will not be heard quivering distantly in the air.”⁹⁹

Schmitz draws a connection between the composer’s approach to the piano and his interest in the sonorities of Asian music. Gamelan music, in particular, focuses more on the construction of vertical sonorities, rather than the more horizontal aspect of much Western homophonic music, in which a primary interest is given to a single melodic line, for which harmonic structures function as support. He describes the

⁹⁸ Robert Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (New York: Dover, 1950), 35.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, “A Plea for the Real Debussy,” *The Etude* 55 (December 1937): 782.

composer's fascination with bell-like sonorities, and suggests that the performer of Debussy would do well to pay careful attention to sound color.

Debussy regarded the piano as the Balinese musicians regard their gamelan orchestras. He was interested not so much in the single tone that was obviously heard when a note was struck, as in the patterns of resonance which that tone set up around itself. [...] *One must learn to play Debussy's music as he played it himself*, striking each note as though it were a bell, listening always for the hovering clusters of vibrating overtones above and below it.¹⁰⁰

Schmitz asserts that “only a man who had Debussy's mature technique, of sharpened and tested tools, could express himself so perfectly.”¹⁰¹ We can, however, says Schmitz, never truly grasp the complete picture of Debussy's pianism:

It is rather difficult, after so many years, to describe the all-around pianist, he, himself was; the Puckish array of contradictions on this point form a Sphinxian enigma which, unfortunately, it is too late for anyone to unravel with any degree of certitude.¹⁰²

Maurice Dumesnil (1884–1974) had a successful career as a professional pianist, and also as a teacher in France, and later in the United States. In addition to a biography of Debussy, Dumesnil authored the book *How to Play and Teach Debussy*, and the articles “Interpreting Debussy” in the *Handbook for Piano Teachers*,¹⁰³ and

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 782.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁰² Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*, (New York: Dover, 1950), 35.

¹⁰³ *Handbook for Piano Teachers: Collected Articles on Subjects Related to Piano Teaching*. Evanston: Summy-Birchard Pub.Co., 1958.

“Coaching with Debussy” in *The Piano Teacher*.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, his recordings are rare and difficult to obtain, yet his writing gives us valuable clues and insights into how Debussy played and interpreted his piano works.¹⁰⁵

Dumesnil’s book, *How to Play and Teach Debussy*, endorsed by Mme. Debussy, contains exercises for acquiring control in quiet playing, half-pedaling, voicing, and achieving certain touches for the performance of Debussy’s works. At the beginning of the book, Mme. Debussy declares, “It is so rare to hear an interpretation so scrupulously exact and comprehensive!”¹⁰⁶

Dumesnil studied with Isidor Philipp at the Paris Conservatory. As a teenager at the conservatory, he was fascinated by Debussy’s music, and also by the performances of Ricardo Viñes, who was then the leading interpreter of Debussy. Dumesnil’s enthusiasm compelled Viñes to accept him as a student, and Dumesnil had lessons with him for a few months. It was Viñes who arranged Dumesnil’s coaching session with Debussy. Debussy coached Dumesnil on *Reflets dans l’eau* and *Hommage à Rameau* from *Images I*, *Clair de lune* from *Suite bergamasque*, *Poisson d’or* from *Images II*, *Children’s Corner*, and *Pour le piano*.

Like the others, Dumesnil enjoyed an intimate view of Debussy at the keyboard. He describes a performance of *La Cathédrale Engloutie* by the composer

¹⁰⁴ Dumesnil, “Coaching With Debussy.” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 10–13.

¹⁰⁵ According to Timbrell, Dumesnil’s only recording of Debussy’s works is a piano roll of *La plus que lent* on Ampico 65501 G.

¹⁰⁶ Dumesnil, *How to Play and Teach Debussy* (New York: Schroeder and Gunther, 1932), title page.

as “truly unforgettable.”¹⁰⁷ He recounts his astonishment with Debussy’s tone projection in the performance of *Hommage à Rameau* he heard during their coaching session:

Finally Debussy sat down again at the keyboard for a sort of recapitulation of the entire piece. He played a number of passages and the tone he extracted from the Blüthner was the loveliest, the most elusive and ethereal I have ever heard. How did he do it?¹⁰⁸

It is worth noting that the Blüthner piano—Debussy’s instrument of choice—featured a fourth “aliquot” string running parallel to each normal string trichord, that was not struck directly by the hammer, but instead resonates sympathetically, thus enriching the overtone content of the sound. It is easy to see why Debussy, concerned as he was with the role of overtones in his music, would be attracted to the Blüthner piano.¹⁰⁹

Born in Nîmes, the French pianist Marguerite Long (1874–1966) studied with Antonin Marmontel, the son of Debussy’s early teacher, at the Paris Conservatory, where she was appointed Professor of Piano in 1906. After teaching some 35 years, Long opened her own school in Paris, the *École Marguerite Long–Jacques Thibaud*. In 1943 she and the violinist Jacques Thibaud founded an international competition that continues to the present. Acclaimed by the Parisian press and public for her

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., “Coaching With Debussy.” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 13. He refers here to one of the concerts in 1910 and 1912 at which Debussy played the piece; see Appendix A.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰⁹ Dunoyer, 101.

performance of Franck's *Variations symphoniques* in 1903, she became one of the leading pianists in France, performing new French music, along with the works of Chopin and Mozart. She maintained her performance career while teaching at the conservatory. Marguerite Long's career extended over a seventy-year period, during which she befriended Ravel, Fauré, and Debussy. These composers shared their suggestions and interpretative insights into their works. In 1965, she told Henry Kamm,

Having studied their works with [Fauré, Debussy and Ravel] gives me an obligation no one else has. I am the only one who knows, from Debussy, how Debussy wanted his piano works played. My task has been to serve the great composers who chose me as their interpreter by passing on to others how their music sounded to them.¹¹⁰

Long studied with Debussy in the summers of 1914 and 1917. Her impressions are recounted in her book *At the Piano with Debussy*. At first, Long avoided Debussy's music, as she regarded it as "too enigmatic."¹¹¹ In May 1914, Long played at a charity concert in which Debussy also served as an accompanist for the performance of his songs. Intrigued by her performance, Debussy requested her to play some of his music. A few weeks later, Long played *L'isle joyeuse* for him. This marked the beginning of their coaching sessions, which were soon interrupted by the war, and her husband's death. In 1917, they resumed working together, and Long played her large repertoire of Debussy for the composer, including *Estampes*, *Pour le*

¹¹⁰ Henry Kamm, "The Grande Dame of French Music," *The New York Times* (January 31, 1965, Section X), 11.

¹¹¹ Timbrell, 266.

*piano, Images I, and several of the Préludes and Etudes.*¹¹² Long's book, *At the Piano with Debussy*, reveals her great fascination with the composer and his music.

The following passage from the book reveals her admiration of his pianism:

Debussy was an incomparable pianist. How could one forget his suppleness, the caress of his touch? While floating over the keys with a curiously penetrating gentleness, he could achieve an extraordinary power of expression. There lay his secret, the pianistic enigma of his music. There lay Debussy's individual technique; gentleness in a continuous pressure gave the colour that only he could get from his piano. He played mostly in half-tint but, like Chopin, without any hardness of attack...His nuances ranged from a triple *pianissimo* to *forte* without ever becoming disordered in sonorities in which harmonic subtleties might be lost.¹¹³

Her book is a valuable source of information regarding Debussy's approach to the performance of several of his piano works, including *L'Isle joyeuse*, the *Études*, the *Préludes*, *Estampes* and *Images II*. Chapter Four of the present study draws on Long's book in its discussion of specific aspects of technique and interpretation. She recorded the two *Arabesques*, *La plus que lente* and "Jardins sous la pluie" from *Estampes*.¹¹⁴ Writing for *Le courrier musical*, Florent Schmitt commends Long's approach to Debussy's sonorities in the recordings, probably made in 1918 or 1919.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, trans. by Olive Senior-Ellis (London: J.M.Dent & Sons, 1972), 19.

¹¹⁴ Marguerite Long, *Debussy and Fauré: Solo Piano Music in Ravel Conducts Ravel*. Pearl GEMM CD 9927, 1991. Compact Disc.

Mme Marguerite Long brings to [Debussy's music]...a remarkable refinement in sonorities which would have thrilled Debussy."¹¹⁵

All of the pianists with whom Debussy worked speak of the great impact their encounters made upon them, and the lasting influence of Debussy on their performance of his music. Debussy's rich and detailed comments about playing the piano, arising from his highly refined musical sensitivities and his deep knowledge of the instrument, are discussed further in the following chapter.

¹¹⁵ Dunoyer, 109.

CHAPTER FOUR


DEBUSSY'S COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

ON PIANO PLAYING

As a composer, pianist, coach and critic, Debussy left a wealth of comments on music in general, and his own works in particular. As we have seen in Chapter Three of the present thesis, Debussy was very interested in matters of piano technique. He complained bitterly about the lack of technical ability evinced by many contemporary performers, especially the popular virtuosi of the day. His detailed suggestions regarding technique and interpretation speak to the high level of Debussy's own pianism, and his deep knowledge of the instrument. This chapter addresses Debussy's remarks in terms of the following: technique and touch, voicing, color and sonority, pedaling, fingering, and dynamics. While I have created these categories for the purposes of analysis and discussion, one should bear in mind the close interrelationship of these factors in performance. Indeed, these relationships are seen in Debussy's remarks.

Technique and Touch

“Precision” was one of Debussy’s obsessions with regard to the performance of his music. The composer demanded precision of technique, rhythm and tempo. Marguerite Long recalls,

Debussy underlined his great musical ideas with unbelievably minute precision. This he would say, “Four semiquavers mean 4 . The hands are not meant to hover in the air over the piano, but to enter into it.”¹¹⁶

By this, Debussy presumably intends that each sixteenth-note in a passage needs to be articulated with precision, such that each sixteenth-note in a beamed group retains its own identity, as opposed to blurring into indistinction as a result of sloppy execution.

His remark about “entering into [the piano]” likely refers to the deeply tactile connection the player should maintain with the instrument. That is, in order to achieve the precise articulation he desires, the player must remain connected to the instrument in an organic way, instead of “hovering” over it in a disconnected fashion.

Debussy’s insistence on rhythmic precision also emerged in his sessions with Maurice Dumesnil. After just two measures of *Hommage à Rameau*, Debussy stopped him and remarked, “I do not hear the triplets in time.”¹¹⁷ Dumesnil resumed playing, attempting to please the composer. He explains, “I tried again, inwardly

¹¹⁶ Long, 13.

¹¹⁷ Dumesnil, “Coaching With Debussy,” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962), 10.

counting so as to be sure of the values. But he was not satisfied. He put his hand on my shoulder and gently pushed me away. Then he sat down and played.”¹¹⁸

Lent et grave
(dans le style d'une Sarabande mais sans rigueur.)

pp expressif et doucement soutenu

Example 2: *Hommage à Rameau*, mm. 1–2

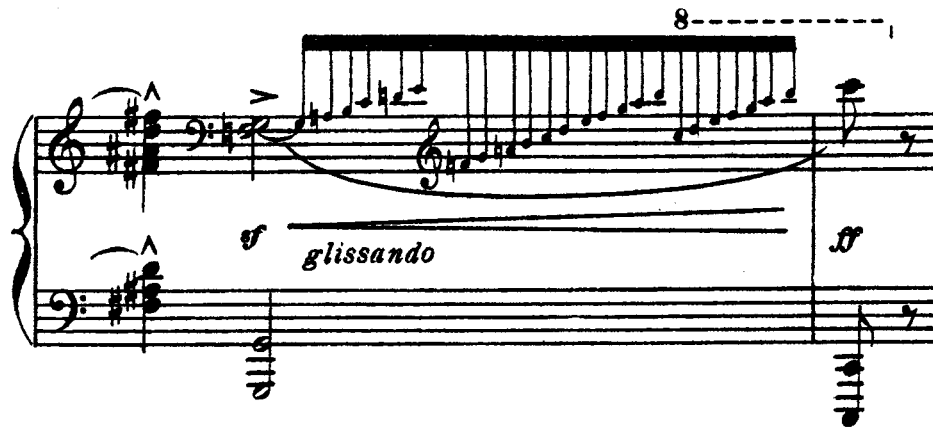
Dumesnil reported that he “couldn’t see any difference between his way with these triplets and mine,” but conceded to the possibility that Debussy’s perception of rhythm was operating at a much higher and more subtle level.

Clarity of expression, as defined by precise articulation, is also demanded by Debussy in his faster and more robust works, for example, the *Prélude* from the suite *Pour le piano*, *L’isle joyeuse*, *Masques*, and *Pour les octaves* from *Études*. As Dumesnil observed, “It would be a mistake to believe that Debussy always spoke in terms of softness, elusive approach, two-pedal effects, etc.”¹¹⁹ Debussy offered Dumesnil the following suggestions for the performance of *Prélude*. The remarks also show the clear interdependence of rhythmic articulation and touch.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

Debussy wanted the opening theme and its restatement later on in big chords played in time, with no rubato of any kind. He required that glissando scales be brushed off in virtuoso manner and straight up to the final *c*, with a follow-through comparable to the gesture of a tennis player after a strong drive. “D’Artagnan pulling his sword,” he commented with a smile, on the occasion.¹²⁰



Example 3: *Prélude*, mm. 46–47

Debussy speaks here both to the concept of “follow-through”—as in athletics—and to that of *élan*. In order to achieve the sort of definitive execution to which he alludes, one should begin the glissando with a lighter weight on the keys, and gradually increase the pressure towards the end of the glissando, with no *ritardando*. Dumesnil further suggests that it would ruin the “brushed” effect if one plays the arpeggio up to *b*, then strike the *c* with another finger.

Debussy’s first performance of *Danseuses de Delphes* from *Préludes* on 25 May 1910 confirms his precision of time. Marguerite Long, who witnessed this

¹²⁰ Ibid.

performance, said that “he played it slowly, with almost metronomic precision.”¹²¹ 56
In their coaching session, Debussy said “To the metronome,” requiring Marguerite Long to use the metronome to practice *Hommage à Rameau* and *Sarabande*. If Debussy did play with the “metronomic precision” alluded to by Ms. Long, he was, however, reluctant to include many metronome markings in published editions of his music, fearing that in the execution of lesser players such markings would result in a mechanical performance. In the letter to the publisher, Jacques Durand, dated 9 October 1915, Debussy expressed his reliance on performers’ common sense and musical intellect. He states:

You know what I think about metronome marks: they’re right for a single bar, like “roses, with a morning’s life”. Only there are “those” who don’t hear music and who take these marks as authority to hear it still less! But do what you please.¹²²

When Debussy tells his publisher to “do what you please” with regard to the inclusion of metronome marks, perhaps he believed that the superior musicians would intuitively understand the rhythmic temporal implications of the music and play accordingly, while the dilettante would butcher the music in any case. Thus, his concession to his publisher was either a matter of pragmatic compromise, or it ultimately really was of no concern to him. According to Dunoyer, the very few

¹²¹ Long, 63.

¹²² Lesure and Nichols, 305.

metronome markings present were only reluctantly included, usually at the encouragement of Durand.¹²³

Whatever Debussy desired in the way of rhythmic and temporal precision, he obviously could not abide a mechanical performance without any nuances, as shown in the following episode, recounted by Marguerite Long:

Some time in 1917 Debussy went to hear the *Suite (Pour le piano)* played by a famous pianist.

“How was it?” I asked him on his return.

“Dreadful. He didn’t miss a note.”

“But you ought to be satisfied. You who insist on the infallible precision of every note.”

“Oh, not like that.” Then emphatically, “*Not* like that.”

How paradoxical! How difficult to please! At times I recall some of his blistering comments on even the best known virtuosi, such as: “He grated like a rope in a well!” or “He plays like a water-carrier!”¹²⁴

Debussy was frequently critical in his estimation of others. However, because Debussy neglected to articulate exactly what he *does* want, we are left to speculate, as does Long.

When it comes to his conception of touch, Debussy did leave specific suggestions. His suggestions often tend to metaphor and analogy, as evinced by remarks he made to Dumesnil:

¹²³ Dunoyer, 99.

¹²⁴ Long, 24.

“Play with more sensitiveness in the finger tips. Play chords as if the keys were being attracted to your finger tips, and rose to your hand as to a magnet.”¹²⁵

Dumesnil adduces the manipulation of the so-called “double escape” as a possible means by which to achieve the effect Debussy describes. He is referring here to the slight resistance one feels near the bottom of the keystroke. The resistance is relieved finally by finger pressure. Playing close to the threshold of resistance—that is, remaining in the lower part of the stroke—can aid one in maintaining tone in *pianissimo* passages. Dumesnil explains, “Keep your fingers in contact with the keys, and do not allow them to come back all the way up, —only about half way, keeping the two pedals on all the time.”¹²⁶

With regard to firmness of touch, Debussy emphasizes a balance between too much relaxation on one hand, and rigidity on the other.

“It is not advisable to use relaxation consistently...In *pianissimo* chords, for instance, the fingers must have a certain firmness so that notes will sound together. But it must be the firmness of rubber, without any stiffness whatsoever.”¹²⁷

Marguerite Long also emphasized this concept in her book: “[to obtain legato] the pianist must feel the sound at the end of his fingers and ensure that he maintains

¹²⁵ Dumesnil, *How to Play and Teach Debussy* (New York: Schroeder and Gunther, 1932), 9.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Dumesnil, “Coaching With Debussy,” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962):

gentleness in force, or force in gentleness.”¹²⁸ Once again, we encounter the idea of a tactile interface between player and instrument.

According to Marguerite Long, Debussy frequently remarked, “One must forget that the piano has hammers.” Long concluded that Debussy’s preferred approach to his piano music required “a pressure of hand that is not merely continuous, but profound also” as well as “total adherence to the keyboard.”¹²⁹ Dumesnil witnessed the approach in Debussy’s performance:

I noticed that at times the position of his fingers, particularly in soft chord passages, was almost flat. He seemed to caress the keys by rubbing them gently downward in an oblique motion instead of pushing them down in a straight line.¹³⁰

The close interrelationship between touch and sonority is evident in the instructions given by Debussy to Robert Schmitz:

Another thing Debussy insisted upon was the proper way to strike a note on a piano.

“It must be struck in a peculiar way,” he would say, “otherwise the sympathetic vibrations of the other notes will not be heard quivering distantly in the air.”¹³¹

Debussy offered specific advice regarding technique and touch to Dumesnil when he played *Reflets dans l’Eau* for the composer. As Dumesnil played the

¹²⁸ Long, 22.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Dumesnil, “Coaching With Debussy,” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 11.

¹³¹ Robert Schmitz, “A Plea for the Real Debussy,” *The Etude* 55 (December 1937): 782.

beginning, Debussy commented, “I do not hear the bells.” After Dumesnil failed again to produce the proper sound quality, Debussy suggested: “Keep your left hand hanging loosely from your wrist. Then let it drop and let the tip of your third finger play those notes.”¹³²

Andantino molto
(Tempo rubato)

PIANO

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system is labeled 'Andantino molto (Tempo rubato)' and 'PIANO'. It features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of two flats. The music is characterized by a delicate, shimmering texture, with a 'pp' dynamic marking. The second system continues the piece, showing a similar texture with a 'pp' dynamic marking. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and slurs, indicating a specific performance technique.

Example 4: *Reflets dans l'Eau*, mm. 1–7

Debussy’s remarks suggest a high level of technical ability and attest to his deep understanding of the sonic capabilities of the instrument. They also speak to his ability to manipulate the sounds and vibrations from the piano to create nuance and atmosphere.

¹³² Dumesnil, “Coaching With Debussy,” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962):

Voicing

Voicing, defined here as the approach to balancing the constituent pitches of a chord or melodic line, is of critical importance in creating the sonorities and tonal effects desired by Debussy. The composer was extremely sensitive to the nuances of voicing. Coaching Dumesnil on *Hommage à Rameau*, he interrupted his performance and remarked:

“Start again; in those first measures I would like the right hand slightly more prominent than the left hand. Octaves sound flat when played with the same tone volume in both hands.”¹³³

Lent et grave
(dans le style d'une Sarabande mais sans rigueur.)

pp *expressif et doucement soutenu*

Example 5: *Hommage à Rameau*, mm. 1–2

Debussy’s music requires an approach to voicing that differs significantly with regard to the balance of melody and harmony from that usually applied to music of the Classical and Romantic eras, in which the melodic line typically predominates. Broadly speaking, much of Debussy’s piano music is characterized by a close, sensitive integration of harmony and melody. Much of his music is meant to be heard vertically as integrated sonorities in which harmony and melody are fused, rather than

¹³³ Ibid.: 11.

the horizontal, dramaturgical unfolding of a single melodic line supported by chords that one encounters in the repertoire of the common-practice period. Long remembers,

One day Debussy stared at me, his eyes clear and shining. ‘The fifth finger of virtuosi, what a pest it is!’ What he meant by that is that too often one hammers the melody without attaching sufficient importance to the whole harmony; harmony that, according to him, should never be sacrificed to the melodic idea. Harmony is intimately allied with melody, which in general is a kind of shaded relief.¹³⁴

Color and Sonority

Debussy often gives indications in the score of the sonorities he desires, for example, “Dans une brume doucement sonore (Softly sonorous, as in a haze)” in *La Cathédrale engloutie*, “dans une sonorité plus claire (with a clearer sonority)” in *Pagodes*, “expressif et lointain (expressive and distant)” in *La soirée dans Grenade*, “mystérieux (mysterious)” and “éclatant (brilliant)” in *Jardin sous la pluie*, etc. He uses poetic adjectives to describe the sonorities, evoking an image for a particular section of a piece. The suggestive evocations, of course, bear imaginative interpretation on the performer’s part. Coaching Dumesnil on “The Snow is Dancing” from *Children’s Corner*, Debussy remarked, “This is a mood picture as well as a tone picture. It must be brumeux, triste, monotone (misty, dreary, monotonous), and not too fast—not too fast at all.”

¹³⁴ Long, 13.

Debussy sought in this way to help pianists find the proper sonorities. For instance, as he coached Long on *Reflets dans l'eau*, he remarked, “[play like] a little circle in water with a little pebble falling into it.”¹³⁵ He refers here, presumably, to the three “bell-like” pitches—Ab, F, Eb—sounded in the left hand at the beginning of the piece. Long’s response to Debussy’s suggestion remains in the realm of metaphor, playing in the “real, inestimable water of the Debussy’s diamond,” where one might find inspiration for the passage from “a Fauré-like evening, perhaps, or the silence of midday.”¹³⁶ Her comments provide very little practical instruction. With regard to the same passage, Dumesnil, following Debussy’s suggestion, advises playing the notes in question by “*dropping* from the forearm, with the hand itself *hanging* from a perfectly relaxed wrist.”¹³⁷

Debussy also often described color and sonority by making reference to the sound of orchestral instruments. Dumensil recalls:

Debussy often thought in terms of orchestration. Concerning the second section of *Clair de lune*, he said, “The left hand arpeggios should be fluid, mellow, drowned to the pedal, as if played by a harp on a background of strings.” But he did not tolerate any confusion and insisted on the purity of each harmonic pattern. In the recapitulation the c flat in the left hand was to be brought out, thus emphasizing the change of color.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹³⁷ Dumesnil, *How to Play and Teach Debussy* (New York: Schroeder and Gunther, 1932), 15.

Here we also see the interrelationships among technique (“fluid arpeggio”), pedaling (“drowned to the pedal”), and voicing (“c flat was to be brought out”).

Debussy’s suggestions, again, can be challenging for the performer. How, for instance, does one achieve on a piano the sound of a clarinet, as Debussy asks for in the treble part at the beginning of *Poissons d’or*? Dumesnil recalls:

With *Poissons d’or* it was indeed difficult to satisfy Debussy. “*Jouez plus librement,*” he would repeat. I thought I did play with great freedom, but it was not enough. Then those initial figures of accompaniment—they had to be lighter, almost immaterial, so one could hear “two clarinets” up above.¹³⁸

Example 6: *Poissons d’or*, mm. 1–4

¹³⁸ Dumesnil, “Coaching With Debussy,” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962):

From Debussy's remark, we might imagine that he refers here not to the rich, dark chalumeaux lower range of the clarinet, nor to its more nasal, buzzy upper register, but to its clear mezzo-soprano register.

Debussy referred to another woodwind, the flute, as he coached Dumesnil on his performance of "The Little Shepherd" from *Children's Corner*. Debussy requested to "differentiate clearly between the improvisation of the shepherd on his flute and the dance motive."

The musical score for "The Little Shepherd" from *Children's Corner* is presented in four systems. The first system is marked "Très modéré" and "p très doux et délicatement expressif", with dynamics ranging from *p* to *sf*. The second system is marked "Plus mouvementé" and "p", with dynamics ranging from *p* to *p poco*. The third system is marked "au Mouvt" and "Cédez - - //", with dynamics ranging from *p* to *ppp*. The fourth system is marked "au Mouvt" and "p", with dynamics ranging from *p* to *ppp*.

Example 7: The Little Shepherd, mm.1–15

Dumesnil's recollections of Debussy's coaching of "Golliwogg's Cake-Walk" refer to the sound of brass instruments played boisterously:

The first and third sections *très rythmé*, with a strong, sharp rhythm. As a contrast, the middle part must be very free. There is a suggestion of the trombone in the part marked *avec une grande émotion*. Don't be afraid to overdo here.

The part to which Debussy refers contains his quotation of the opening motive from *Tristan und Isolde*:

The musical score consists of two systems. The upper system shows a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The lower system shows a piano accompaniment with chords in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The score is divided into three sections: 'a Tempo' (mm. 61-63), 'Cédez' (mm. 64-66), and 'a Tempo' (mm. 67-69). The 'Cédez' section is marked 'p avec une grande émotion'. The piano part includes dynamic markings of p and pp.

Example 8: Golliwogg's Cake-Walk, mm. 61–67

Pedaling

Pedaling is one of the most important techniques for performing Debussy, and he considered the act of pedaling as a "sort of breathing." His concern is expressed in a letter to Durand, dated 1 September 1915:

Despite my respect to Saint-Saëns's great age, what he says about Chopin's pedal isn't entirely true. I have very clear memories of what Mme Mauté de Fleurville told me. [Chopin] recommended practicing without pedal and, in performance, not holding it on except in very rare instances. It was the same way of turning the pedal into a kind of *breathing* which I observed in Liszt when I had the chance to hear him in Rome. I feel Saint-Saëns forgets that pianists are poor musicians, for the most part, and cut music up into unequal lumps, like a chicken. The plain truth perhaps is that abusing the pedal is only a means of covering up a lack of technique, and that making a lot of noise is a way to drown the music you're slaughtering! In theory we should be able to find a graphic means of representing this "breathing" pedal...it wouldn't be impossible.¹³⁹

Pedaling in Debussy's piano music requires sensitive listening to the whole harmony, as well as to the acoustic vibrations that carry variously, according to the instrument and the size of the performing space. Debussy remarked to Dumesnil, "Pedaling cannot be written down, it varies from one instrument to another, from one room, or one hall, to another." He left it to interpreters, saying "*Faites confiance à vos oreilles* (Trust your ears)."¹⁴⁰ Editions of Debussy's music thus lack direction with regard to pedaling, unless it has been added by subsequent editors.

Strictly speaking, when we refer to pedaling in Debussy, we are referring to the use of the *una corda* and damper pedals, as the *sostenuto* pedal was not in common use during the composer's lifetime.¹⁴¹ Debussy believed that pedaling

¹³⁹ Lesure and Nichols, 301–302.

¹⁴⁰ Dumesnil, "Coaching With Debussy," *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962):

should be executed according to the harmonic implications of any given passage, and their function in the overall harmonic scheme. Dumesnil recalls his pedaling lesson with the composer:

[Debussy] also gave me a wonderful object lesson in pedaling fast passages. I realize how many interpreters are misled by the famous blur so often associated with Debussy's piano music. He wanted the pedal used in long harmonic strokes, without breaks or confusion. Occasionally he allowed the pedal to encroach a tiny fraction from one harmony into the next, similarly to what one does when practicing the five-finger exercise *c, d, e, f, g* legato by lifting one finger just an instant after one plays the next. In any case, the blur should be used only for special effects, and with utmost discretion.¹⁴²

These remarks contradict the common notion of Debussy's piano music as being bathed in constant pedal.

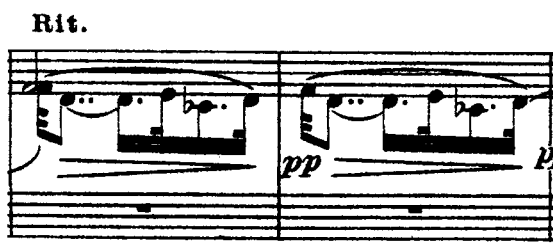
The blurring and blending of sonorities created by the extensive use of pedaling is part of what earned Debussy the label of "Impressionist." While it is possible to draw an analogy between the shimmering colors and softly delineated shapes of the so-called Impressionist painters and the swirling, amorphous sonorities created by the pedals, Debussy repudiated the label. However, on at least one occasion, we find Debussy asking Dumesnil to render *Reflets dans l'eau* "drowned in pedal."¹⁴³ According to Dumesnil, Debussy wanted the m. 80 "all blurred" in damper

¹⁴¹ Arthur R Tollefson, "Debussy's Pedaling," *Clavier* 9 No.7 (October 1970): 22.

¹⁴² Dumesnil, "Coaching With Debussy," *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 11–12.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11.

pedal (no una corda pedal), and the m. 81 with the una corda pedal alone, as an echo heard from afar.¹⁴⁴



Example 9: *Reflets dans l'eau*, mm. 80–81

Another special pedaling effect suggested by Debussy is to depress the pedals before beginning to play. Coaching Dumesnil on *Clair de lune*, he advised the pianist “to depress the two pedals before starting, so that the overtones would vibrate immediately upon contact.”¹⁴⁵ This technique facilitates the creation of the sympathetic vibrations upon which the lush sonorities of Debussy’s piano music often depend.

Fingering

Just as he expected performers to “trust their ears” with regard to pedaling, Debussy also expected them to find their own fingerings. He wanted pianists to be aware of each individual’s unique hand structure. On the first page of the *Études*, Debussy expresses his thoughts in the manner of pedagogue.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., *How to Play and Teach Debussy* (New York: Schroeder and Gunther, 1932), 16.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., “Coaching With Debussy,” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 10.

The present *Études* intentionally do not include any fingering; here, briefly, is the reason:

Prescribing one fingering cannot be consistently suitable for different hand structures. Modern pianism has thought to solve this problem by superposing several; this represents only an obstacle...The music in this way comes to resemble a strange process in which, by an inexplicable phenomenon, the fingers are required to multiply...

The case of Mozart, the precocious harpsichordist who, not being able to play all the notes of a chord, hit on the idea of playing one with the end of his nose, does not resolve the question, and is it not perhaps only the product of the imagination of a too-enthusiastic compiler of anecdotes?

Our old Masters—I should specify *our* admirable clavecinists—never indicate fingerings, no doubt trusting in the ingenuity of their contemporaries. To mistrust that of modern virtuosos would be unseemly.

To conclude: The absence of fingering represents an excellent exercise, obviates the spirit of contradiction that moves us to prefer not to use the fingering of the composer, and confirms these eternal words: “One is never better served than by oneself.”

Let us find our own fingerings!¹⁴⁶

Here we can see his interest in piano pedagogy and his trust in the judgment of contemporary pianists. It can also be taken as encouragement for performers to settle on fingerings only after the experimenting with sounds produced by alternate fingerings. We note here as well an inconsistency between Debussy’s exhortation to

¹⁴⁶ Claude Debussy, *Études, Children’s Corner, Images Book II and Other Works for Piano* (New York: Dover, 1992), 112.

trust in the instincts of the “modern virtuoso,” and some of the scathing criticisms to which he subjects them elsewhere.

Dynamics

While Debussy gave scant instruction as regards pedaling and fingering, his dynamic indications are more generous and often quite specific. Several of the pianists he coached attest to the composer’s near obsession with nuanced dynamics. Long states that “[Debussy’s] nuances ranged from a triple *pianissimo* to *forte* without ever becoming disordered in sonorities in which harmonic subtleties might be lost.”¹⁴⁷

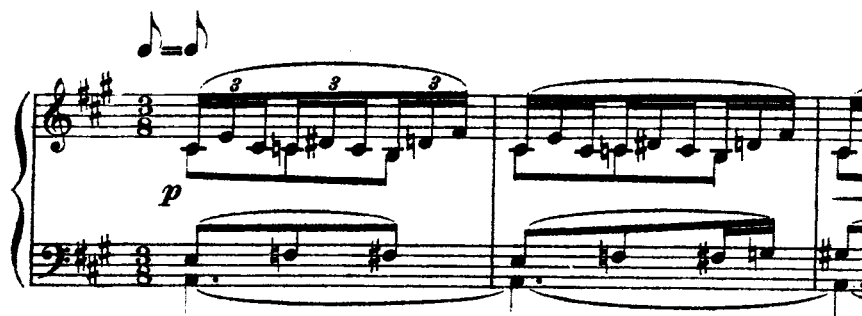
One of Debussy’s dynamic concerns was that of playing softly, to create a subdued tone. To this end, he usually lowered the piano lid. Dumesnil recounts one such instance of Debussy shutting the piano lid for a performance of his *Préludes* with the remark “*C’était pour mieux noyer le son* (It was to better mute the sound).”¹⁴⁸ Playing Debussy’s works for the composer at his residence, Copeland asked for permission to move a vase in order to open the piano lid. With great annoyance, Debussy replied, “*Absolument non!* [...]Do not touch it! I never permit that anyone should open my piano. As it is, everyone plays my music too loud.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Long, 19.

¹⁴⁸ Maurice Dumesnil, “Coaching With Debussy,” *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 13.

¹⁴⁹ George Copeland, “Debussy, the Man I Knew,” *Atlantic Monthly* 195 (Jan.–Jun. 1955): 35.

Long remembers that Debussy never found *piano* sufficient. Upon one occasion, as she played the 3/8 section of *L'Isle joyeuse* for Debussy, he expressed his desire for an extreme *pianissimo* by stopping her and saying “Tut,” while raising both hands.¹⁵⁰



Example 10: *L'Isle joyeuse*, mm. 28–29

From Debussy, Copeland learned that

The pianissimo also requires a special type of handling. It is not a question of playing softly only, but also of creating an impression of great distance and height, of tremendous remoteness and eerie proximity.¹⁵¹

We see here the close interrelationship between dynamics and sonority in Debussy.

Debussy's approach to the use of crescendos and decrescendos was likewise subtle. Schmitz recalls,

¹⁵⁰ Long, 39.

¹⁵¹ George Copeland, “The First-and Last-Times I Saw Debussy,” *Musica* (November 1944): 9.

Crescendos in those days were one of Debussy's obsessions in piano playing. He liked slight crescendos, a *ppp* increasing into a mere *pp*. Such tiny changes were meaningful and important to his art.¹⁵²

The crescendo, as an expressive device, should not draw undue attention to itself. Long avows, "The crescendos should not be exaggerated but remain in the same area of nuance in which they find themselves."¹⁵³

Along with subtlety of execution, the composer also strove to maintain consistency of tone color throughout the crescendo. Coaching Dumesnil on *Hommage à Rameau*, Debussy requested that the pianist not ruin the nuance by exaggeration:

At the crescendo leading to the climax marked *ff* he stopped at my side: "Please do not overdo this crescendo. It sounds too dramatic; start more softly and you will reach the same effect without impairing the quality of your tone."¹⁵⁴

Debussy's comments speak both to his highly developed musical vision, his ability to indicate precisely the effects he desired, and the appropriate methods for achieving them. His suggestions regarding technique speak to his deep familiarity with the potentials of the instrument, and his mastery of it. As a pianist, he taught a new approach to the keyboard characterized by the integration of technique, touch,

¹⁵² Robert Schmitz, "A Plea for the Real Debussy," *The Etude* 55 (December 1937): 2.

¹⁵³ Long, 23.

¹⁵⁴ Dumesnil, "Coaching With Debussy," *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962):

voicing, pedaling, dynamics, and careful attention to sound and color. Further, performers must face the more demanding interpretive task of adding their own nuance and atmosphere into the piece. The following chapter examines Debussy's recorded performances, and argues thereupon for his considerable technique, as well as his compelling powers of evocation.

CHAPTER FIVE

DEBUSSY'S PERFORMANCE ON PIANO ROLLS

Many of the expressions and qualities of Debussy's piano playing are found in piano rolls he recorded for the Welte-Soehne piano in November 1913. The rolls comprise fourteen pieces: five pieces from *Préludes*, *Le plus que lente*, *Le soirée dans Grenade* from *Estampes*, the six pieces of *Children's Corner*, and *D'un cahier d'esquisses*. These solo recordings are best heard on Kenneth Caswell's recent transfers of the rolls to compact disc, together with acoustic recordings of four of Debussy's songs sung by soprano Mary Garden (1874–1967), with the composer at the piano, recorded in 1904 for Gramophone and Typewriter Co.¹⁵⁵ For this release, Caswell sought to correct the distortions he believed had marred previous transfers. Instead of resorting to the computer and digital recording technologies, Caswell chose to create this transfer the “old fashioned” way, by playing the actual rolls on a restored 1923 Feurich Welte piano, recorded direct to stereo.¹⁵⁶ According to Caswell, “the Welte Mignon recording machine captured every detail of the playing of a pianist by marking on two synchronized master rolls each note as fingered by the

¹⁵⁵ Claude Debussy, *Claude Debussy: The composer and pianist*, prod. Kenneth K. Caswell, 49:02 min., Pierian, 2000. CD.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, liner notes, page 2.

pianist, the duration of each note, the exact tempos, *the dynamic level of each note*, as well as the pedaling, even a satisfactory illusion of half-pedaling.” Debussy scholar, Roy Howat, is careful to distinguish between the Welte-Mignon recording and reproducing process—which yield much performance information, particularly with regard to dynamics—and the rather unnuanced performances recorded on common “player pianos” or pianola rolls.¹⁵⁷

Welte rolls encode not only how long each individual note was held down but also details of pedaling; they also can reproduce quite fine degrees of dynamics, terracing them for crescendo, diminuendo, etc. Dynamics with Welte have two independent controls, one for each half of the keyboard, but the quickness of response between the notes, and the fact the pianists in these days tended to spread chords or play left hand before right, can allow some extra degree of voicing even within quite complex textures.¹⁵⁸

Debussy was highly pleased with his Welte Mignon recordings, precisely for the attributes Howat describes above, as shown in his note to Edwin Welte:¹⁵⁹

Paris, 1st November 1913.

Dear Sir,

¹⁵⁷ Roy Howat, “Debussy and Welte,” *Pianola Journal* 7 (1994): 5.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Claude Debussy, *Claude Debussy: The composer and pianist*, prod. Kenneth K. Caswell, 49:02 min., Pierian, 2000. CD. Quoted in the liner notes, page 3.

It is Impossible to attain a greater perfection of reproduction than that of the Welte apparatus.

I am happy to assure you in these lines of my astonishment and admiration of what I heard.

I am, Dear Sir,
Yours faithfully,
Claude Debussy

Howat holds the Welte-Mignon rolls in such high regard that he used them as a source for his contributions to the critical editions of Debussy's piano music.¹⁶⁰ His edition of *Danseuses de Delphes* from the *Préludes* contains chords Debussy played on the rolls that are not found in the composer's manuscript or the original Durand edition (1910).

The Welte Mignon piano was not without its limitations, however, and because many of the aspects of the recording process remain a mystery (all of the recording pianos, as well as the technical manuals, were lost or destroyed during the bombardment of Germany in World War II), the process of making transfers from the rolls is fraught with uncertainty. Timbrell and Dunoyer both discuss the possible inaccuracies of the rolls, mostly concerning issues of tempo. Timbrell points out the difference in tempo between the two transfers of Debussy's piano rolls of "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum" from *Children's Corner*. He compares Caswell's recording and the one issued on Columbia; both transfers were made from the copies of the original 1913 roll. Caswell's recording has a duration of 1:46, with a maximum

¹⁶⁰ Claude Debussy, *Œuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy* (Paris: Durand).

tempo on the final page of ♩ = 207. By contrast, the Columbia recording has a duration of 1:32, with a maximum tempo on the final page of ♩ = 245.

These discrepancies of tempi could result from different playback speeds obtained on different Welte reproducing pianos, as well as the fluctuations of the acoustical recording process used by Columbia. As a result, the exact tempos at which Debussy played remain uncertain, and can only be assessed relative to tempo changes within the recording itself.

For the purposes of this dissertation I have studied the recent, more accurate recording by Caswell, but it is worth mentioning that over the years there have been other recordings made from the rolls. One notable example is the 1992 digital recording by James Stewart Music and Ramden Ltd., on the Dal Segno label.¹⁶¹ The comparison of the different recordings—made on different pianos with different tonal characteristics—could certainly yield valuable further insights into Debussy's piano style.

Although the Welte-Mignon rolls can not possibly provide a completely accurate reproduction of Debussy's playing, they certainly provide evidence of Debussy's solid technique, the subtlety of his pedaling, and the improvisational qualities of his performance. The observations of Debussy's contemporaries as regards his pianism can be verified in part by a close listening to the rolls. An exhaustive analysis of the Debussy recordings is beyond the scope of the present work. In what follows, I shall endeavor to illustrate those aspects of Debussy's

¹⁶¹ Claude Debussy, *Master of Piano Roll: Debussy Plays Debussy: New Digital Recording*. Produced by James Stewart Music and Ramden Pty, Ltd., 73:38 min., Dal Segno DSPRCD001, 1992. Compact Disc.

technique discussed in the previous chapter by examining select examples from three representative pieces. *La danse de Puck* showcases the technical aspects of Debussy's playing; *Danseuses de Delphes* shows his evocative powers; and *Minstrels* gives evidence of the improvisatory aspects of his performance.

Debussy's technical dexterity is clearly evident in *La danse de Puck*, in which he shows total control of the fast, flowing *leggiero* passages. His performance exactly follows his own marking of *capricieux et léger* at the beginning, without creating any roughness among the different rhythmic patterns—dotted sixteenths, straight sixteenths, and sextuplets—of which the melodic line is constructed. He plays at approximately ♩ = 168, much faster than the metronome marking on the score (♩ = 138). He speeds up the tempo without breaking the nuance and flow until the marking of *retenu* at m. 6. By refraining from pedaling during the first seven measures of the opening, Debussy creates the light and capricious atmosphere he indicates. Pedaling this passage would tend to wash out the articulation of the dotted notes, and blur the distinction between the different rhythmic figures. Lightness of touch and precise control of the repeated dotted rhythms are evident throughout the performance. Only at m. 8 does Debussy begin a skillful blending of colors with subtle pedaling. His seemingly effortless and non-mechanical playing creates the impression that this is a piano “without hammers.” Noting the overall piano and pianissimo dynamics and fast tempo of the piece makes this performance all the more remarkable. The listener senses that he is completely at ease and in full command of touch as he evokes the sonic image of the dancing fairy to which the title alludes. Maintaining the pulse, for example, can prove exceedingly difficult in mm. 30–43,

where one must depress two keys with the thumb. Such precision and control of rapid, repetitive rhythmic patterns, and sense of a steady metric pulse can also be heard to great effect in the recordings of *Le vent dans la plaine* and *The Snow is Dancing*. In several instances, where a melody line lies in between the hands, as in mm. 63–66 of *La danse de Puck*, we can hear the melody emerge quite clearly in the middle register. Most of the passages marked *en dehors* throughout the recordings are clearly brought out by Debussy.

Nuance and sound created by Debussy's sensitive touch and control are best heard throughout *Danseuses de Delphes*. Debussy renders the opening chords as if they are weightless, defying gravity. His gentle, slow, yet well-controlled pulse provides the underpinning for the ritual dance of female Bacchantes—their robes flowing in the wind—that he saw depicted on a Greek vase in the Louvre, inspiring the composition.¹⁶² Debussy maintains the feel of a triple-meter dance even at the slower tempo than that indicated (approximately ♩ = 60 on the Caswell recording), which is a more difficult task than it may appear. Consistent with his philosophy of metronome markings (see p. 56), Debussy takes liberties with the tempo. After the first measure, played at ♩ = 60, he changes his tempo according to the structure and nuances of the phrase. Debussy maintains a steady, yet non-mechanical pulse throughout the piece. His rubato in each bar “breathes” with the music, but does not obliterate the steady pulse. For instance, after he plays the dotted rhythm of the second beat of m. 1 and m. 2, he slows down at the third beat of the same measures

¹⁶² Roy Howat, Forward of Claude Debussy, *Œuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy Série I* vol.5 (Paris: Durand), XVI.

with a slight diminuendo, taking time on the third chord according to the phrasing of the inner melody. The overall tempo of the long phrase from m. 1 to m. 5 balances his rubato by pushing the series of chords in m. 4 and m. 5 forward in time. He makes a slight ritardando in m. 5, taking time to play the last chord at the end of the phrase. When this melodic theme returns in m. 6, his tempo is more consistent. The repetition of the theme in mm. 6–10 contrasts its first iteration, with less rubato, and less marked articulation of the dynamics. Debussy preserves the harmonies through judicious pedaling, even through the series of ascending eighth-note chords above a pedal tone in the bass (mm. 11–14), specifically by half-pedaling. Similar effects can be heard at the opening of *La cathédrale engloutie*, which also involves a string of ascending chords above a long pedal tone. Details of voicing—especially where the music involves a series of continuous chords—are often hard to detect, given the limitations of the recording apparatus. Yet his execution of the chords creates a balanced underlying harmony, in which none of the constituent pitches stick out. We hear no “fifth finger of virtuosi” (an accentuation of the highest pitch of each consecutive chord) in Debussy’s execution of these chords. Often, the notes of chords and octaves are not played together, which might be due to the limitations of Welte technology in reproducing voicing, as Howat noted, with the observation that “pianists in these days tended to spread chords or play left hand before right, [in order to] allow some extra degree of voicing even within quite complex textures.” For instance, in mm. 11–14, the melody in the right hand is brought out by delaying the attack of the top note of the octaves (he misses bringing out the very first note). Effective voicing is heard in m. 9, where Debussy brings out the D in the bass octave

at the end of the crescendo on the second beat. The resonance of the bass makes great contrast to the following series of descending chords. Dynamic contrast in the piece is well executed, except perhaps the last chord of m. 24 (after the diminuendo), and m. 27 (pianississimo), which Debussy plays loudly, defying his own indication.

Example 11: *Danseuses de Delphes*, mm. 23–31

Debussy's recording of *Minstrels* features rhythms that strike one as quite uneven and awkward, departing significantly from those notated in the score. Some articulations are executed differently than indicated in the score. For instance, the staccatos in m. 49 and m. 53 are played legato, and Debussy pauses significantly between the chords in m. 75, ignoring the slur written for the left hand. Tempo changes—not indicated in the score—are taken quite freely. The composer as performer takes liberties with the music. One can hear abrupt changes of mood and dynamics, as when the quality of expression changes in the sections of the score marked "*nerveux et avec humor*," "*un peu plus allant*," "*monqueur*," and "*quasi*

tambouro.” This recording is perhaps the best evidence of the improvisational qualities of Debussy’s pianism to which his contemporaries allude. One notes, however, that Debussy does not seem to fully exploit the wide dynamic range—from pianississimo to fortissimo—indicated in the score. For example, in the hairpin crescendo phrase in mm. 55–57, we do not hear much of a contrast between *pp* and *ppp*.

The acoustic recordings of Debussy playing four of his songs with soprano Mary Garden are marred by distracting background noise, due to the age of the recordings. However, they remain a rare treasure, even though the primitive recordings do not allow us to assess subtleties of touch and tone color. One aspect of Debussy’s technique evident in these recordings is his command of octaves, as in the song “Green,” in which the right hand octaves move rapidly back and forth at intervals of the fourth and fifth. The dialogue and feeling of ensemble between the two performers is excellent. Debussy does not miss any of Garden’s subtle rubatos. The overall tempo feels somewhat faster than today’s standard. In fact, the recording sounds rushed, an effect that may also be partly due to the varying speeds of the recording devices. Debussy does not anticipate the tempo change in the piece, and he seems to ignore the first *ritardando* at m. 11. Timbrell observes that Debussy and Garden may have been anxious not to exceed the limited time on 78-rpm recordings, and thus taken the song at a faster tempo than they might otherwise have.¹⁶³

It is clear from the Welte Mignon rolls, and to a lesser extent, from the acoustic recordings, that the composer had a technique equal to his expressive aims.

¹⁶³ Timbrell, 262.

We see this in his control of the pulse, as well as his fluid, expressive rubato. His command of the keyboard is impressive. He executes the fast and complex patterns of his music deftly, even in sections of soft dynamics, a situation that requires advanced technique. His approach to dynamics is subtle and refined, and he performs without exaggeration or artifice. Overall, the rolls seem to capture Debussy's subtle crescendo and diminuendo within a small dynamic range even in the short phrases in which they occur. Although the entire range of touch and tone color cannot be captured by these early recording technologies, we are still able to sense Debussy's great powers of evocation and atmosphere.

CONCLUSION

Debussy's music arises from his fascination with tone color, and poetic imagery in sound. As we have seen, the recollections of those who heard him play suggest that technique became transparent in his performance. Throughout his life he remained vehemently opposed to technical virtuosity for its own sake. As Copeland observed, Debussy communicated with his audience through *music*, not *piano-playing*.¹⁶⁴ In the last years of Emma Debussy's life, she remarked to Dumesnil that "It is so rare to hear a faithful interpretation. Many pianists should bear in mind that if they play Claude's music and someone tells them how wonderful their technique is, then they are not playing Debussy."¹⁶⁵ Her comments bespeak her deep understanding of the composer's musical ideal.

The intuition of Debussy's early mentor, Mme. Fleurville, that the young man was possessed of an unusual aptitude for the piano, was borne out by his subsequent admission to the Paris Conservatory after only a year or two of formal instruction. The solid grounding in classical technique he gained there, as well as the disciplined and competitive environment of the conservatory, allowed him to develop as a pianist

¹⁶⁴ See page 43.

¹⁶⁵ Dumesnil, "Coaching With Debussy." *The Piano Teacher* 5 (September–October 1962): 13.

and composer, eventually to meld both into a music of stunning originality. Much of his music emerged from the new sonorities he discovered while experimenting with the possibilities of the piano.

Debussy used the piano as a vehicle to express his musical intentions. His original approach to piano technique was created in the process of composing and performing his own music. Music and technique are thus inseparable to Debussy. His pianistic insights are ideally suited to the performance of his music, and we are fortunate that he was able to pass down this knowledge to the pianists he coached, and thence, to us. The characteristics of Debussyian piano technique depend on the performer's ability to listen closely to sonority, and to wield the sound palette judiciously and artistically to achieve the blending and variety of sonorities for which his music calls. His compositions compel performers to listen very carefully in order to achieve just the right amount and shape of crescendo and diminuendo, as well as effective voicing, and to develop a fine control of the weight on fingers and arms to exploit a wide dynamic range. All of these aspects are mediated by a sensitive, subtle approach to pedaling that employs many different layers of half-pedaling. It is perhaps not possible to know unequivocally whether Debussy's music arose from his technique, or that he developed his unique pianism as a means by which he could express his musical imagination. Perhaps both are true. We can, however, note the close, even synergistic interrelationship of the various aspects of technique with the sonic atmospheres of his music.

His own strong opinions about piano performance notwithstanding, Debussy expected performers of his music to bring their own interpretation and nuance to it.

Those pianists privileged to hear the composer perform his own music were both inspired and influenced by him. The attempt to trace the sphere of Debussy's influence as it radiates outward from the composer and the immediate circle of those pianists he coached would be a worthy project, albeit one that exceeds the scope of the present study. As Debussy did not teach, it is difficult to posit the existence of a "Debussy piano school." It is perhaps sufficient to suggest that those pianists who engage the insights dispensed by the composer will benefit greatly thereby.

Obviously, applying Debussyan technique to the performance of Debussy will bring us closer to the composer's intentions. It is also interesting to consider whether and how aspects of his approach to the piano could be applied to the performance of the piano works of *other* composers, both those who preceded and those who followed him. In situations where sensitive voicing and extreme pianissimo are required, for instance, we might do well to put into practice Debussy's adage, "one must forget that the piano has hammers."¹⁶⁶

By understanding Debussy as a pianist, we not only learn more about matters of technique, and the sonic possibilities of the instrument, we learn much about his music. An application of the insights discussed in this study may well lead to a fresh, and perhaps a more stylistically and aesthetically appropriate interpretation of his works. To get close to the intentions of a composer is an enterprise fraught with difficulty. Without making a claim for a "definitive" interpretation of his works, we may suggest that by observing and practicing the aspects of piano technique that the composer has shared, we may at least be on the right path.

¹⁶⁶ See page 59.

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APPENDIX A: Concerts where Debussy Appeared as a Pianist

date	concert	program
July, 1874	piano competition at the Paris conservatory	Frederic Chopin: Piano concerto no. 2, 1st movement
July, 1875	Piano competition at the Paris conservatory	Frederic Chopin: Ballade no. 2
January, 1876	Appear as a pianist in a trio, in Chauny outside Paris	A trio by Haydn
July, 1876	piano competition at the Paris conservatory	Beethoven: Sonata op. 111, 1st movement
July, 1877	piano competition at the Paris conservatory	Schumann: Sonata no. 2, 1st movement
July, 1878	piano competition at the Paris conservatory	Carl Maria von Weber: Sonate no. 2 A flat major, 1st movement
July, 1879	piano competition at the Paris conservatory	Frederic Chopin: Allegro de concert, opus 46
December, 1881	Plays in the newly opened Cabaret <i>Chat Noir</i>	
May 12, 1882	A Concert together with Mme. Vasnier	Some of his own works: "Nocturne" for piano, "Scherzo" for violin and piano, and two songs: "Les roses" and "Fête galante."
1884	Prix de Rome 1884	<i>L'Enfant Prodigue</i> . The work was performed with singers, and Debussy and his friend René Chansarel playing the orchestra part on piano.
March 1, 1889	A Paris music salon	<i>Petit Suite</i> played by Debussy and Jacques Durand
May 6, 1893	A lecture on Wagner <i>Ring des Nibelungen</i> by Mendés	Debussy and Raoul Pugno plays music examples, together with 6 singers
January 20, 1894	Société Nationale	A piano duet by Rimsky-Korsakov: Capriccio Espagnol
February 7, 1894	Société Nationale	Debussy accompanies Mlle. Thérèse Roger in two songs, <i>De Fleures</i> og <i>De Soir</i> .
February 1, 1896	Société Nationale	Pianist in the work <i>Quatour Inachevé</i> by Lekeu
January 23, 1897	Société Nationale	<i>Quatour Inachevé</i> by Lekeu
April 21, 1903	Schola Cantorum	<i>Nocturnes</i> , transcribed for two pianos, performed by Debussy and Ricardo Viñes
June 23, 1904	Private concert at Madame Colonne	Accompanies songs, <i>Ariettes oubliées</i> , and <i>Fêtes galantes</i>
May 25, 1910	Société Musicale Indépendante	<i>Danseuses de Delphes</i> , <i>Voiles</i> , <i>La cathédrale engloutie</i> , and <i>La danse de Puck</i>
May 25, 1911	Cercle Musical	Conducts some orchestra works, and accompanies some of his own songs.
March 29, 1911	Concerts Durand, Salle Erard	<i>Les sons et les parfums</i> , <i>Le vent dans la plaine</i> , <i>Des pas sur la neige</i> , and <i>Minstrels</i> .

March 5, 1912	Concerts Durand	Accompanies Maggie Teyte.
March 12, 1912	Concerts Durand, Salle Gaveau	Some of his Préludes.
March 5, 1913	Concerts Durand	Bruyères, Feuilles mortes, and La puerta del vino.
June 19, 1914	“Gala Claude Debussy”, Comédie des Champs Elysées.	Iberia, transcription for two pianos, performed by Debussy and Ricardo Viñes. Debussy also plays La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune, Canope, Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.
February 5, 1914		Plays together with the violinist A. Hartmann: Grieg violin sonata, transcriptions of <i>Il pleure dans mon cœur</i> , <i>La fille aux cheveux de lin</i> , and <i>La puerta del vino</i> .
March 1, 1914	Concert in Amsterdam dedicated to Debussy	Debussy conducts the Concertgebouw, and also plays some piano préludes: <i>Danseuses de Delphes</i> , <i>La fille aux cheveux de lin</i> , and <i>La puerta del vino</i> .
March 21, 1914	Salle Gaveau	Accompanies Ninon Vallin in <i>Trois Poèmes de Mallarmé</i> , and plays Children's Corner, and three préludes: Feuilles mortes, La cathédrale engloutie, La fille aux cheveux de lin.
May 1914	A charity concert together with Marguerite Long.	Debussy accompanies Rose Féart in a couple of songs.
December 21, 1916	A war charity concert.	Accompanies Rose Féart, and plays <i>En blanc et noir</i> together with Roger Ducasse.
March 24, 1917		Joseph Salmon and Debussy give the first performance of the cello sonata
May 5, 1917	Salle Gaveau	Debussy accompanies Rose Féart, and Gaston Poulet and Debussy give the first performance of the violin sonata.
September 1917	Concert in Saint-Jean-de-Luz	Gaston Poulet and Debussy play the violin sonata.

Note: The information included in Appendix A is adopted from and indebted to the research undertaken by Karstein Djupdal in his study of Debussy as a pianist, “Debussy at the Piano,” <http://www.djupdal.org/karstein/debussy/>

APPENDIX B: Select Discography

Claude Debussy

“Danseuses de Delphes,” “La cathédrale engloutie,” “La danse de Puck,” “Minstrel,” “Le vent dans la plaine,” “La plus que lente,” “La soirée dans Grenade,” the entire *Children’s Corner*, and *D’un cahier d’esquisses* were recorded for M. Welte and Soehne, in Paris, 1 November 1913, issued on Pierian CD 0001 (earlier transfer of the five *Préludes* and *Children’s Corner* issued on Columbia ML 4291 (LP); the five *Préludes* alone issued on Telefunken GMA 65 and GMA 79 (LP)). Also, four songs with Debussy accompanying Mary Garden: “Mes longs cheveux,” “Green,” “L’ombre des arbres,” and “Il pleure dans mon cœur,” were recorded in Paris, 1904 (G&T 33447; G&T 33449; G&T 333450; G&T 33452), reissued on Pierian CD 0001 and EMI CHS 7 61038 2. Compact disc produced by Kenneth Caswell (Austin, Texas, 1991)

Marguerite Long

“La plus que lente” and “Jardins sous la pluie,” recorded in 1929 (Columbia LFX24)
 First and second Arabesques, recorded in 1930 (Columbia LF55)
 The above recordings were reissued on long-playing record, Pathé Marconi 2 C 051–16349, in the 1950s.
 Compact disc Pearl GEMM CD 9927 (Wadhurst, England, 1991)

Ricardo Viñes

“Poisson d’or,” recorded in 1930 (Columbia LF 41) and “Soirée dans Grenade,” recorded in 1930 (Columbia D 15245), reissued on Pearl Opal 9857.

Alfred Cortot

Children’s Corner, recorded in 1928 (HMV DB1248-49)
 Two *Préludes*, “La fille aux cheveux de lin” and “Le vent dans la plaine,” recorded in May 1928 (HMV DB1249)
 Violin Sonata in G Minor and “Minstrels” arranged for piano and violin, with Jacques Thibaud, recorded in 1929 (HMV DB1322–23)
Préludes Book 1, recorded in 1930 and 1931 (HMV DB1240–44)
 Compact disc Biddulph Recordings LHW 006 (London, England, 1991)

Harold Bauer

“Clair de lune” (recorded in 1929) and *Rêverie* (recorded in 1939), reissued on Biddulph LHW 009.

George Copeland

“Ondine” and “Canope,” from *Préludes*, Book II (Victor 1643); “Bruyères” and “Général Lavine eccentric,” from *Préludes*, Book II (Victor 1644); “La cathédrale engloutie,” from *Préludes*, Book I, and “La terrasse des audiences au clair de lune,” from *Préludes*, Book II (Victor 7962); “Clair de lune,” from *Suite bergamasque*, and “Soirée dans Grenade,” from *Estampes* (Victor 7963); *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (trans. Copeland) (Victor 7964), all recorded on 21 March, 1933.

“Menuet,” from *Suite bergamasque*, and “Sarabande,” from *Pour le piano* (Victor 14201); “Voiles,” from *Préludes*, Book I, and “La puerta del vino,” from *Préludes*, Book II (Victor 14904), all recorded between 16 and 24 April 1936

“Clair de lune,” from *Suite bergamasque*, “Minstrel” and “La cathédrale engloutie,” from *Préludes*, Book I, “Prélude,” from *Pour le piano*, and “Hommage à Rameau,” from *Images I*, all recorded in 1950 on a Steinway (recordings available at the University of Maryland International Piano Archives)

Suite bergamasque, “Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut” and “La puerta del vino,” from *Préludes*, Book II, recorded in 1962 by the producer Peter Bartók, on privately issued long-playing records (known as Subscription Recordings GC1, 2, and 3, some of which are also available at the University of Maryland International Piano Archives)

Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune (transcribed by Copeland), Menuet, “Clair de lune,” “Sarabande,” “La soirée dans Grenade,” “Voiles,” “La cathédrale engloutie,” “La puerta del vino,” “Bruyères,” “General Lavine—eccentric,” “La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune,” “Ondine” and “Canope” (recorded 1933 and 1936), reissued on Pearl GEMS 0001.

E. Robert Schmitz

Préludes Book I, recorded in 1947 (RCA Victor M1031)

Préludes Book II, recorded in 1947 (RCA Victor M1138)

Reissues in 1955 of *Préludes* Book I and Book II (RCA Camden CAL 179 and CAL 180)

Walter Rummel

Chopin: Waltz in C-Sharp Minor, op.64, no.2 (DGG 68063); Waltz in A Minor, op.34, no.2 (DGG 68063); Waltz in A-Flat Major, op.69, no.1 (DGG 68064); Waltz in G-Flat Major, op.70, no.1 (DGG 68064); Mazurka in A Minor, op.68, no.2 (DGG 68279), all recorded in 1943.

J.S. Bach: Chorale-Preludes transcriptions by Walter Rummel, recorded in 1928 (Gramophone P-858)

J.S. Bach: Prelude and Fugue in B-Flat minor, Book 1, recorded in 1942 (DGG 67933)

Compact disc Dante Productions HPC027 (Vanves, France, 1995). This disc contains fourteen of the twenty-two sides that Rummel recorded on 78 rpm between 1928 and 1943.

Marcel Ciampi

“Les collines d’Anacapri” and “La sérénade interrompue” (recorded in 1929), Columbia D 13075 (78-rpm); “La cathédrale engloutie” (recorded in 1927), reissued on Malibran-Music CDRG 115.

Mary Garden

Beau soir (recorded in 1929), reissued on Romophone 81008-2; four other songs (see under Debussy, above)

Ninon Vallin

“Green” and “Air de Lia,” *L’enfant prodigue* (both recorded c. 1930) reissued on Pearl GEMM CD 9948.

Maggie Teyte

Fêtes galantes, series 1 and 2; *Trois chansons de Bilitis*; *Le promenoir des deux amants*; *Proses lyriques*; “Le jet d’eau” (recorded 1936–40), reissued on Pearl GEMM CD 9134.

Claire Croiza

Romance (recorded in 1927), “Il pleure dans mon cœur” (recorded in 1928), “Le jet d’eau” (recorded c. 1930), “Les cloches” (published in 1936), *Les anges* (published Georges Truc, recorded in 1928), reissued on VAIA 1093.

Jane Bathori

Chansons de Bilitis, *Fêtes galantes*, series 2, “C’est l’extase” (recorded 1929–30), reissued on Marston 51009-2

Hector Dufranne

Three excerpts from *Pelléas et Mélisande* (conducted by Georges Truc, recorded in 1928), reissued in VAIA 1093.

Vanni Marcoux

Two excerpts from *Pelléas et Mélisande* (conducted by Piero Coppola, recorded in 1927), reissued on VAIA 1093.

Gabriel Pierné

Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune (conducting the Orchestre des Concerts Colonne, recorded in 1930), reissued on Malibran-Music CDRG 140.

Désiré-Emile Inghelbrecht

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (conducting the Orchestre National de France, recorded 1955–62), EMI C 153-12137/8 (LP); *Pelléas et Mélisande* (conducting the Orchestre National de France, live, 1962), Disques Montaigne TCE8710 (3 discs); *Nocturnes* (conducting the Orchestre National de France, 1955–62), EMI C 153-12137/38 (LP); *Le martyre de Saint-Sébastien* (conducting the Orchestre du Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, recorded live, 1960) Ducretet 320 C 155 (LP).

Pierre Monteux

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, recorded in 1962), Decca SXL 2312 (LP); *La mer* (conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra, recorded in 1954), RCA 61893-2; *Images* (conducting the London Symphony Orchestra, 1963), Philips 442 595-2.

Vittorio Gui

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (conducting the Florence Symphony Orchestra, recorded c. 1960), Camelot CMTS 104 (LP).

Piero Coppola

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (conducting the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris, recorded in 1930); *Nocturnes* (conducting the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, recorded in 1938); “Ibéria” (conducting the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, recorded in 1935). All reissued on Lys 295-297 (3 discs).

Ernest Ansermet

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (conducting the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, recorded in 1957), reissued on Decca 440 499-2; *Pelléas et Mélisande* (conducting the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, recorded in 1952), reissued on Decca 425 965-2 (2 discs); *Pelléas et Mélisande* (conducting the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, recorded in 1964), Decca 277/9 (LP); *La mer* (conducting the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, recorded in 1964), reissued on Decca 425 781-2; *Jeux* (conducting the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, recorded in 1958), Decca 433 711-2.

Walther Straram

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (conducting the Orchestre des Concerts Straram, recorded in 1930), reissued on VAIA 1074.

Note: The information included in Appendix B is drawn largely from Charles Timbrell's study, “Debussy in Performance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise, 259–277 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and a study by Cecilia Dunoyer, “Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano,” in *Debussy in Performance*, ed. James R. Briscoe, 91–118 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

VITA

Sachi Patricia Hirakouji was born in Los Angeles, California, and was raised in Shiogama, Miyagi, Japan. She earned a Bachelor of Music degree in Piano Performance from the Kunitachi College of Music in Tokyo, and a Master of Music in Piano Performance from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. In 2008 she earned a Doctor of Musical Arts from the University of Washington in Piano Performance. Currently, she teaches private lessons, ear training, theory and chamber music at various local music academies. She has an extensive career as a solo pianist, chamber musician, and accompanist. In the future, she hopes to expand her work into an outreach performance program.