Interpreting Debussy's *Préludes* in Cultural Context (1909–1913)

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August 2018

A paper submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of D.Mus. Performance Studies

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Abstract

The prelude, by definition a miniature musical form, often expresses a character or atmosphere without external references provided by the composer. Claude Debussy, however, evokes extra-musical references in the titles after each *Prélude*, and thus invites a deeper understanding coloured by the choice of titles. Placing Debussy's two books of *Préludes* in their historical, biographical, literary, and artistic contexts informs our understanding of the composer's intent and the performer's interpretation of these miniature musical masterpieces. One might question the significance of drawing close attention to these titles: how can the extra-musical context and links to other domains inform a better performance, and how do Debussy's titles shape each of the books as an individual musical entity?

The aim of this paper is to improve our understanding of the *Préludes* through a broadened context. It draws on an analytical approach, suggesting (for example) that the bitonality of *Brouillards* mirrors the image of floating mists suggested by the title; what's more, this approach explores the influence on Debussy of Stravinsky's famous *Petrushka* chord. Explorations such as this reveal the context that informed Debussy's imagination in creating these character pieces; reconciling the relationship between creativity and external references will help to achieve a well-rounded approach to these works. Finally, understanding each book of the twelve *Préludes* as a unified entity will increase the appreciation of individual preludes as part of a larger form, and also will aid in selecting groups of preludes for performance in the most effective and logical way.

To answer these questions, I will carry out my analysis in segments, beginning with the unique place of Debussy's *Préludes* in music history, compared to similar sets of preludes written before 1909. The results of this analysis will be used to investigate how extra-musical content is manifested in Debussy's music by exploring several categories. The extra musical content suggested by Debussy draws on diverse perspectives, including influences such as his contemporary Igor Stravinsky and Oriental music. Both will be discussed in separate sections as their imprint on Debussy is unmistakable; musical examples will reflect on their influence in detail. Lastly, the cyclic aspects of the twenty-four *Préludes* will be discussed, along with the harmonic and motivic links that underlie their organization. This discussion will afford an expanded understanding of Debussy and the world in which he lived; the extra-musical themes and multiple influences evident in these *Préludes* can lead to a better understanding of Debussy's pre-war works and help to better define and comprehend this era.

Résumé

Le prélude, en tant que genre musical miniature, exprime souvent un caractère ou une atmosphère sans référence au compositeur lui – ou elle-même. Toutefois, Debussy évoque des références extra-musicales après chaque prélude et en conséquence appelle à une compréhension approfondie de ses choix de titres. On peut se demander qu'est ce qui justifie cette étude des titres : comment le contexte et sa relation avec d'autres domaines peut mener à une interprétation plus juste et comment Debussy a conçu chacun des deux cahiers des *Préludes* en tant qu'entité individuelle ?

Le but de cette étude est de mener à une prise de conscience élargie du contexte des *Préludes*. Elle procède d'une approche analytique et suggère, par exemple, que la bitonalité dans *Brouillards* est un reflet de la vapeur qui flotte au travers de l'œuvre ; de plus, ce travail mène à une étude plus approfondie de l'influence sur Debussy de l'accord de *Pétrouchka.* De telles explorations révèlent le contexte dans lequel s'inscrit l'imagination en regard de ces pièces de genre ; la réconciliation de la relation entre imagination et référence aidera le développement d'une approche organique de ces œuvres. Finalement, une vue de chaque cahier de 12 préludes comme entité unique aura un impact sur la perception de chaque prélude et mènera à des choix judicieux dans la sélection par l'interprète de groupes de préludes.

Afin de répondre à ces questions, je procéderai par segments. Comme introduction, j'aborderai la place unique des *Préludes* de Debussy dans le répertoire musical, en référence à d'autres cycles écrits avant 1909. En m'appuyant sur cette base, je questionnerai plus avant la façon dont le contenu extra-musical se manifeste dans l'œuvre de Debussy en explorant plusieurs

catégories. Le contenu extra-musical suggéré par Debussy fait appel à des perspectives diverses, ainsi qu'à des influences telles que Stravinsky et la musique orientale. Ces deux éléments seront abordés dans des chapitres distincts, en raison de leur impact indéniable sur Debussy ; des exemples musicaux appuieront le détail de ces influences. Finalement, l'aspect cyclique des 24 préludes sera discuté et en conséquence les liens harmoniques et motiviques qui sous-tendent leur organisation. Cette discussion mènera à une lecture élargie de Debussy et de son environnement ; la thématique à la source de ces *Préludes* nous amène à une meilleure compréhension des œuvres de Debussy de l'avant-guerre et nous aide à mieux définir cette ère.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisors Prof. Stéphane Lemelin, Prof. Robert Hasegawa, Prof. Kyoko Hashimoto and Prof. Lena Weman Ericsson who showed tremendous support during my doctoral studies. The last years have been a crucial part of my professional and personal growth, and I am in debt to them for guiding me and trusting my abilities in completing my degree. I am eternally grateful for my parents who have supported and encouraged my musical pursuit despite all the challenges from the very beginning; I would not be where I am without the continuous love from Matt Cohen, who witnessed my worst and best moments and still stood by me.

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Philadelphia/New York/Staunton

August 2018

1. Introduction

Claude Debussy's *Préludes* for solo piano hold an important place in the piano repertoire and continue the tradition of writing sets of preludes practised by Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer, Johann Sebastian Bach and Frédéric Chopin. Debussy's contribution to this tradition stands apart from that of other composers for several important reasons. Debussy's preludes are not systematic explorations of the twenty-four possible keys, like Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* or Chopin's twenty-four preludes, but instead are tonally free works, often ambiguous in key or using diatonic modes. Not only did Debussy abandon the tradition of tonal ordering, he also based each prelude on an extramusical image or idea, making the preludes much more varied and rich in character. Debussy's set includes single words or brief phrases of poetic imagery at the end of each prelude in parentheses, suggesting extra-musical content (albeit of an optional nature).

Debussy possessed broad knowledge on a wide variety of subjects, including visual art, literature, poetry, nature, archeology, and mythological characters; all of these influenced the subject matter of his *Préludes*. Other sources of inspiration included cultural influences from Russia, Spain, and the Orient, as well as music of earlier times (such as the Baroque era). Understanding the significance of Debussy's imagery, musical quotations, and cultural and musical influences is essential to do justice to these works.

In the next sections, I will conduct my research on Debussy's *Préludes* from a few different angles. In Section 2, *Titles and subjects of the twenty-four Préludes*, I will give a brief review of the complete preludes and their suggestive titles in order to explore how Debussy translates extra-musical content into music. This is followed by an examination of how these

cultural references can inform a performance interpretation. I organize the complete set of twenty-four preludes into several categories, based on similarities of subject matter. This naturally leads to the next section: Section 3, *Musical connections between the Préludes*. After zooming in on each individual prelude, here I consider each book in its entirety, examining how the individual preludes within each book are interconnected. Regarding each book as a unified set gives another dimension of context for each individual prelude. After discussing the large-scale form of each book, I proceed further with my investigation to make comparisons between the two books and explore as how one book evolves to the next (Section 4, *Stylistic evolution between the two books*). This section also considers upheavals in Debussy's personal and professional life (as well as in contemporary world events) that left an indisputable impact on his musical outlook. The last section (Section 5, *Influences on the musical language of the Préludes*) focuses on the major influences that mark Debussy's *Préludes*, including the music of Stravinsky, Oriental and Spanish music, and the composer's reaction to historical French music, and considers how they manifest in individual preludes.

The exploration of Debussy's complete preludes proceeds outward, first concentrating on individual preludes, then each book as a unified entity and relationships between the books, and finally on the preludes in their cultural and historical context. This progression is meant to contribute a better informed understanding of these rich and important works, improving performance interpretation through an awareness of a broader, more expansive context.

2. Titles and subjects of the twenty-four *Préludes*

BOOK 1	*BOOK II*
1. ... Danseuses de Delphes	*1. ... Brouillards*
2. ... Voiles	*2. ... Feuilles mortes*
3. ... Le vent dans la plaine	*3 ... La puerta del Vino*
4. ... «Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir»	*4 ...«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»*
5. ... Les collines d'Anacapri	*5 ... Bruyères*
6. ... Des pas sur la neige	*6 ... «Général Lavine» – eccentric*
7. ... Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest	*7 ... La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*
8. ... La fille aux cheveux de lin	*8 ... Ondine*
9. ... La sérénade interrompue	*9 ... Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*
10 ... La Cathédrale engloutie	*10 ... Canope*
11 ... La danse de Puck	*11 ... Les tierces alternées*
12 ... Minstrels	*12 ... Feux d'artifice*

Claude Debussy: *Préludes for solo piano, Book I & II*

The titles of the *Préludes* provide essential clues to Debussy's compositional inspirations. This section quickly surveys the titles of all twenty-four Préludes to establish their expressive context and their musical and extra-musical references. Where applicable, analysis of musical features shows the impact of these references on the language and form of each piece. As noted in the Introduction, Debussy placed the titles at the end of each prelude rather than the beginning; this was to ensure that the interpreter would approach the music unfettered by any preconceptions, as he wished for the audience and performer to free their imagination and initially experience the music without any predetermined imagery. Elie Robert Schmitz comments on Debussy's special placement of titles: "music is of the first importance, then titles as stimulus only as an afterthought."[1]

[1] Elie Robert Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, Inc. 1950), 130.

Rather than treating the preludes in order, I will group them by common themes such as archeological subjects, mythological subjects, and so on; grouping the titles into distinct categories will give a broad review of the subjects that inspired Debussy, as well as suggesting relationships between preludes in the same category (e.g. the "wind triptych" of Book I).

Archeological subjects
Danseuses de Delphes (Book I)
Canope (Book II)

Mythological subjects
La cathédrale engloutie (Book I)
Ondine (Book II)

Titles with natural elements
Voiles (Book I)
Le vent dans la plaine (Book I)
Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest (Book I)
Brouillards (Book II)
Feuilles mortes (Book II)
Bruyères (Book II)

Titles with literary connotations
«Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir» (Book I)
La fille aux cheveux de lin (Book I)
«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses» (Book II)
La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune (Book II)
Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C. (Book II)
La danse de Puck (Book I)

Titles with diverse cultures
Les collines d'Anacapri (Book I)
La sérénade interrompue (Book I)
La puerta del vino (Book II)

Titles with music hall/jazz influence
Minstrels (Book I)
«General Lavine» – eccentric (Book II)

Titles with debatable or multiple influences
Des pas sur la neige (Book I)
Les tierces alternées (Book II)
Feux d'artifice (Book II)

Archaeological subjects

Danseuses de Delphes (Book I)

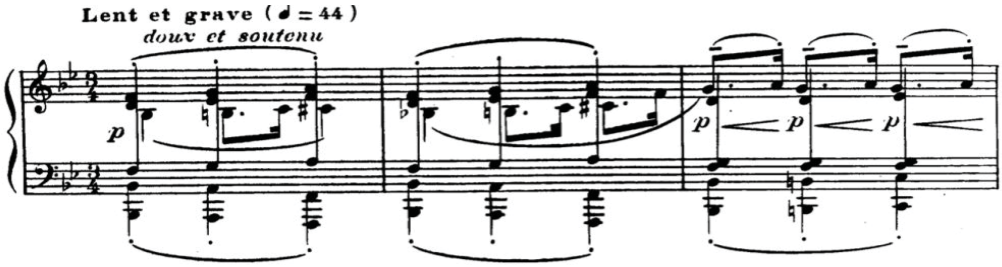
For the first Prélude of Book I, Debussy's imagination was stimulated by a specific ancient artifact, the Colonne de Danseuses de Delphes, featuring three bacchantes dancing on a column. The ancient Greek sculpture was unearthed during a French archaeological dig at Delphi starting in 1982, and was a sensation during the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900. From 1901, the work was on exhibit in the Louvre, where it inspired Debussy's 1910 composition.[2] The Temple of Delphi was dedicated to the worship of Apollo, the Greek god of arts and poetry.[3] A prophet, the Delphic oracle or Pythia, was said to sit in front of it, intoxicated by magical smoke rising from the earth and while delivering the voice of the god: a vivid imagery of a once populated holy place.

(*Colonne des Danseuses de Delphes, Musée du Louvre*)

[2] "Colonne des Danseuses des Delphes," Musée de Louvre, accessed August 8, 2018. https://petitegalerie.louvre.fr/oeuvre/colonne-des-danseuses-de-delphes

[3] Siglind Bruhn, *Images and ideas in modern French piano music: the extra-musical subtext in piano works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1997), 5.

Looking at the statue, one can almost imagine the dance of the bacchantes; the movements are elegant and graceful. Their veil-like dresses of light fabric enable the smoothness of the movements, all of which is reflected in the composition.

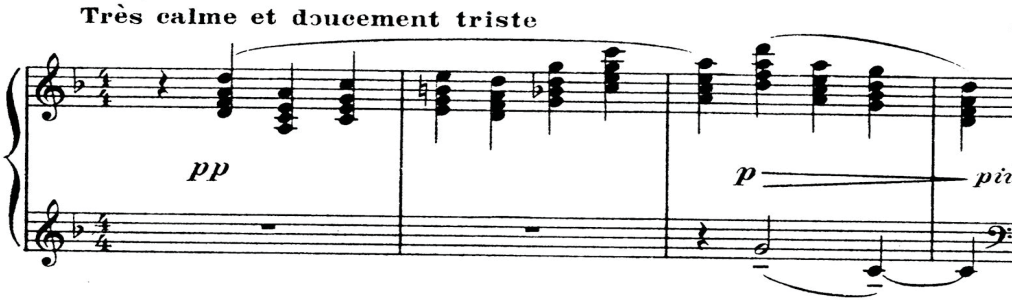


(*Danseuses de Delphes*, m. 1-3.)

The tempo is *Lent et grave* with quarter note = 44, a very stretched and static tempo for a sarabande that lacks excessive ornamentation. At this tempo, the note values are long: the main chordal construction is always in quarter notes, with interjections of eighth notes in phrases imitating harp arpeggios (e.g. m. 4-5). The slow pace of the movement and the expression marking of *doux et soutenu* further suggests a musical equivalent to the static poses of the dancers on the column. The piece is written in 3/4 with a metric pulse on each quarter, and the staccato under the slur calls for a *leggiero* touch to the quarter notes, in contrast with the overall gravity and sustained quality of the Prélude. This contrast evokes the light, transparent veils of the dancers while they execute their solemn and noble movements. The slow tempo and dotted rhythms are characteristic of a sarabande. Additionally, the second beat has an implied emphasis much like a sarabande; not only does the dotted rhythm first appear on this beat in m. 1, but the leading tone A in the bass also creates an emphasized dissonance between the I and V chords. Bruhn argues that the major seconds (as in m. 3) mimic the sound of the cymbals carried by the dancers.[4]

[4] Ibid., 5.

***Canope* (Book II)**



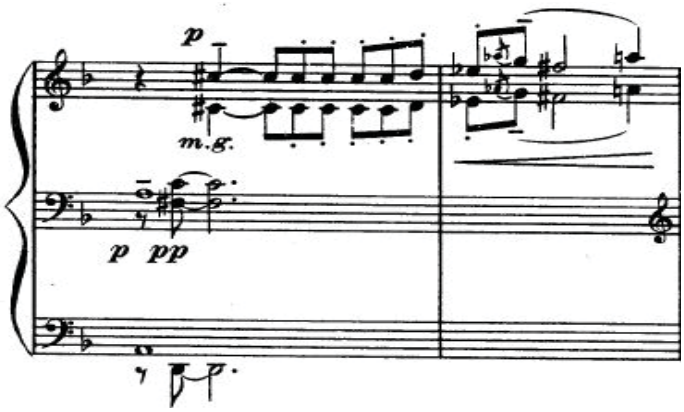
(*Canope*, m. 1-3.)

While many of Debussy's Préludes draw inspiration from other places, *Canope* refers to another time and place: Ancient Egypt. The title refers to Egyptian canopic jars, burial urns in which the digestive organs of the dead were stored. The lids of the urns can be in the shape of the deceased, of animals, or of the head of Osiris, the god of the underworld. *Canope* evokes the distant past with what scholar Siglind Bruhn describes as a lamenting quality[5]. Again, the metric pulse is centered on the quarter note, with the same quality of tranquility as the previously discussed prelude.

Since we know very little of Ancient Egyptian music, Debussy evokes an imaginary ancient music by incorporating "exotic" musical idioms from the Orient. *Canope* begins with full triads in first position crawling one by one in quarter notes through the pentatonic scale. The slow motion requires extreme patience and care, but also demands a reserved, objective approach to suggest the antiquity and remoteness of Ancient Egypt (as opposed to an excessive legato or Romantic expressiveness). Each phrase starts on the second beat, until the fourteenth bar announces the downbeat in a puzzling and unstable fashion: the D minor home key is fused with

[5] Ibid., 11.

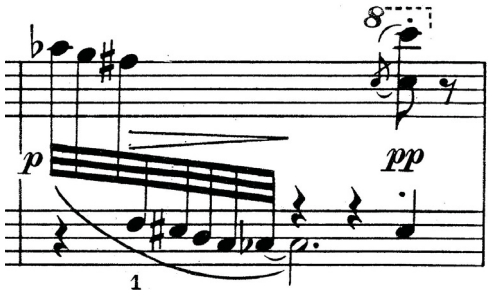
C major (to be discussed in Chapter 3). Constantly starting on a weak beat (beat two) gives an impression of incompleteness and mystery, as if Debussy is constantly searching in the ruins and experiencing a sense of loss and remoteness from the past.



(*Canope*, m. 9-10.)

As in *La Puerta del Vino* (to be discussed below), there are traces of the Arabic scale with its distinct augmented seconds in *Canope*. Measures 9 and 10 are the perfect example. The melody rises up outlining an Arabic scale: C-sharp, D, E-flat, F-sharp, G, A etc. Melodic embellishments suggest microtonal inflections that cannot be delivered on the piano, yet one can aim to mimic these Eastern tunings through the pedaled resonance and overtones.[6] The characteristic semitone seems to point towards a fusion of sounds without clearly defined pitches. As opposed to the opening bars, where each chord designates a clear tonality, the Eastern-sounding passage is more unstable and chromatic. There is not only a contrast between tonal clarity at the opening and the ambiguity of the "Arabic" passage, but also a contrast between the steady, regular timing of the opening chords with the rubato, flexible timing of the later passage.

[6] Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1996), 163.



(*Canope*, m. 24.)

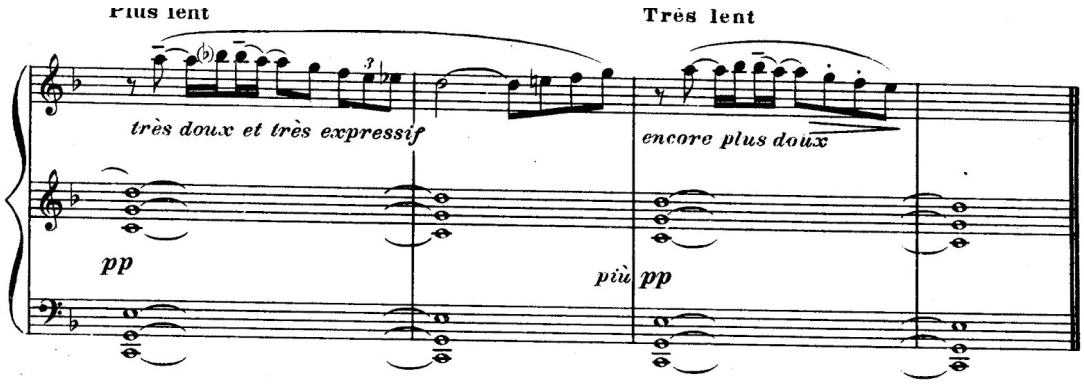
Just before the final return of the opening chords (measure 24), we hear the "strumming" sound of a rapid scale: this suggests an Oriental plucking instrument, similar to a guitar or cithara.[7]

The ambiguous tonality also adds to a sense of remoteness and mystery. The supposed tonal center of D minor is called into question through repeated appearances of C chords, as in measure 14 or the repeated chord at the ending, where the D tonality is fused with a C major chord. To further affirm this distant quality, the ending is a written out *cédez* and the held final chord is left unresolved like a question mark: does the piece end in C or D?[8]

As noted above, the melodic lines of *Canope* are written in an arabesque manner: flexible in rhythm with added grace notes, with pedaled resonance and overtones insinuating the improvisatory qualities of Arabic music. Arabesque, a decorative and ornamental element in Debussy's music, presents itself in seamless curves, which connect musical ideas without sudden leaps and shifts. Arabesque not only alludes to Oriental music with similar ornamental qualities, but also suggests Arabic calligraphy with its elegant, abstract curves. The use of arabesque also

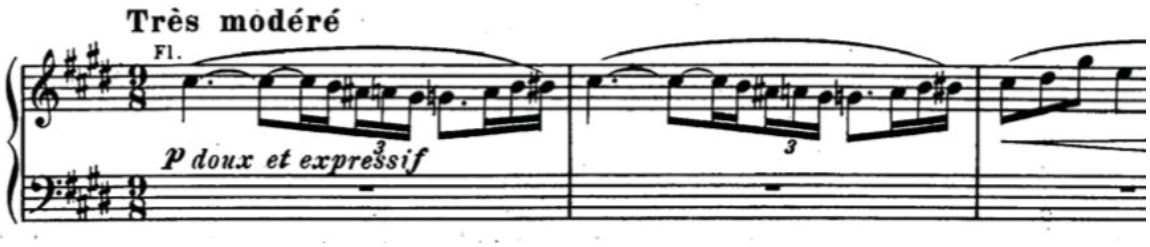
[7] Ibid., 164-65.
[8] Linda Cummins, *Debussy and the fragment* (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 68.

shares ties with the turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau movement, which emphasized the natural curved lines of plants and flowers, with a stress on aesthetic beauty and graceful decoration. Other works by Debussy using arabesque melodies include his *Deux arabesques* and *Le petit berger* from *Children's Corner.*



(*Canope*, m. 30-34.)

At the end of *Canope,* the arabesque melody leaves the expected final note D unarticulated, letting the previous E discreetly drift into the D from the held chord. In order to deliver the D successfully without re-articulating it, one has to make sure the D from the bar before is played loud enough to ring through the ending and create the illusion of linking with the melody, an idea discussed by Paul Roberts.[9]



(*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, m. 1-3.)

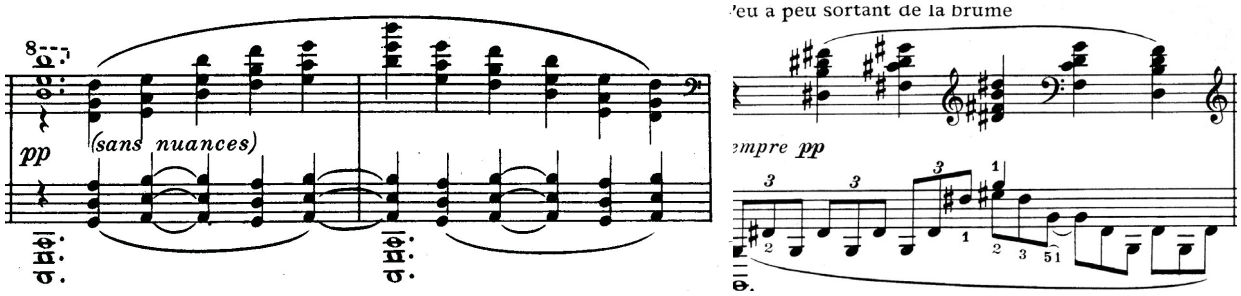
[9] Roberts, *Images,* 163.

The contour of this arabesque melody—descending to a long note before ascending again—is reminiscent of the beginning of Debussy's 1894 *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune,* played by a solo flute with a similar mysterious and remote quality.

Mythological subjects

La cathédrale engloutie **(Book I)**

According to a 1500-year-old legend from Brittany, the mythical seaside city of Ys was swallowed by the ocean as a punishment for the inhabitants' sinful ways. Long after vanishing beneath the ocean, the Cathedral of Ys was said to arise from the sea on clear mornings, only to return to the deep ocean at sunset. Debussy's prelude suggests the antiquity of the legend and the image of the cathedral with references to Medieval music. The parallel fifths and fourths stacked together suggest Medieval organum, illustrating the sound of ancient monks chanting when the cathedral surfaces with the waves.[10] The following examples demonstrate this organum as well as Debussy's simulation of oceanic waves through a rising arpeggio figure, "little by little emerging from the fog."



(*La cathédrale engloutie*, m. 14-16.)

[10] Bruhn, *Images and ideas*, 41.

***Ondine* (Book II)**

(Arthur Rackham, illustration for Ondine *by Friedrich Heinrich Kaul De La Motte Fouqué)*

The "undine" or "ondine" is a type of legendary water nymph, first described by Paracelsus in the sixteenth century. Later, "Ondine" would become a proper name. The legend became widely known through an 1811 novel, *Ondine,* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué. In this version of the story, Ondine is a water nymph, a siren who lured sailors or other mortals into deep water with her beauty and songs. Debussy was a pantheist and ancient mythology appealed to him greatly.[11] Scholar Paul Roberts suggests that Debussy was particularly inspired by an illustrated edition of de la Motte Fouqué's novel with prints by Arthur Rackham, a famous British illustrator at the time. A copy of this book was gifted to Debussy's daughter Claude-Emma ("Chouchou").[12] Debussy seems to have been fascinated by the character Ondine;

[11] Roberts, *Images,* 233.
[12] Ibid, 231-37.

in fact, Mélisande, the female protagonist from his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* closely resembles Ondine.[13] The publication of the illustrated French version of the novel coincided with the time of *Ondine*'s composition in 1912. In the music of the prelude, Debussy captures the sensuality and mystery of Ondine, as well as the fluidity and unpredictability of moving water.

Titles with natural elements

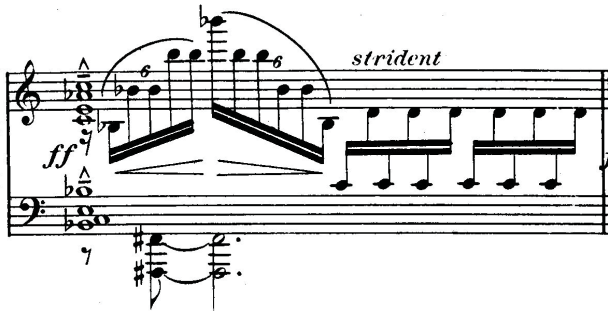
Voiles, Le vent dans la plaine and *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest* (Book I)

(Miniature seascape by Whistler; "Trois voiliers au loin" by Degas)

According to Elie Robert Schmitz, the three preludes associated with the wind in Book I—*Voiles, Le vent dans la plaine* and *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest*— make up a "wind triptych."[14] *Voiles* uses the whole-tone scale to create an ambiguous tonal center, fitting for the subject matter (either "sails" or "veils"), and suggesting the variable and temperamental nature of the wind. *Voiles* is also rhythmically fluid and ambiguous, starting on the second beat with a tied eighth note that further obscures the meter. Paul Roberts suggests that Debussy's inspiration

[13] Michel Otten, "Mystérieuse Mélisande (Pelléas et Mélisande revisité)," *@nalyses* (University of Ottawa) 7, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 98-110.
[14] Schmitz, *The Piano works of Claude Debussy,* 136.

might have included the miniature seascapes of Whistler and Degas's canvas *Trois voiliers au loin;* Debussy was familiar with works by both artists.[15] It is the most gentle "wind" in the triptych.



(*Ce que vu le vent d'Ouest*, m.25.)

Le vent dans la plaine depicts the wind whispering and whirling restlessly in a field. Siglind Bruhn relates the prelude's title to an epigram by Charles Simon Favart, "Le vent dans la plaine / Suspend son haleine." Debussy would have known this couplet well, as it appeared at the head of Verlaine's "C'est l'extase langoureuse," set by the composer in *Ariettes oubliées.*[16]

Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest portrays the most violent and terrifying wind of the three. David Schiff indicates an allusion to a poem *Ode to the West Wind* by Percy Bysshe Shelley, a poem that Debussy knew in translation.[17] Not only does the title (like Debussy's) specifically refer to the west wind, but the first verse—"O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being"—emphasizes the "wildness" of the west wind, which fits perfectly with the prelude. What's more, the last verse of the Shelley poem (see below) suggests linkages to the preceding prelude and the following one: *Des pas sur la neige* is set in the winter, and the spring is represented by *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, which implies a peaceful and pastoral setting.

[15] Roberts, *Images,* 245.
[16] Bruhn, *Images and Ideas,* 63.
[17] David Schiff, *The Ellington Century* (University of California Press, 2012), 270.

I
O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

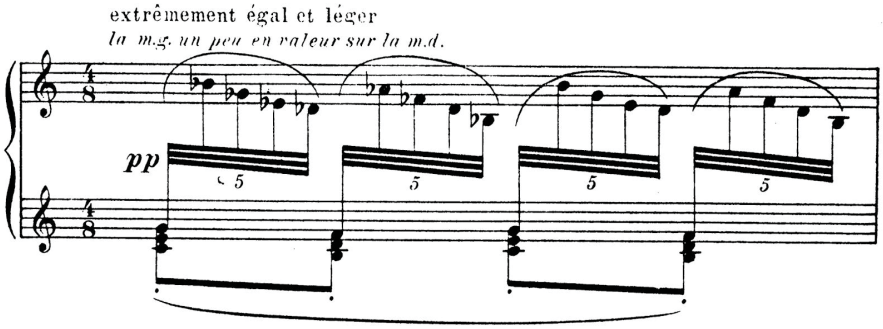
The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!
…...
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Schmitz relates *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest* to the Romantic heritage of *Sturm und Drang*, pointing towards its exaggerated dynamic ranges and expression markings, such as "strident", "tumultueux", "angoissé" and "furieux."[18] Although not as tragic as comparable works by Liszt (e.g. the Sonata in B minor or *Après une lecture du Dante*), it still does convey intense drama, and also uses some Lisztian pianistic devices such as tremolos and arpeggios.

***Brouillards* (Book II)**



(*Brouillards*, m. 1.)

[18] Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy,* 147.

In Book II, *Brouillards* (French for "mists") takes us into the realm of ambiguity, as mist is something shapeless floating in the air that cannot be touched. The tonality of *Brouillards* is also "misty" in that there is no clear tonal center; such tonal ambiguity makes the music hover like floating fog. It lacks physical substance just as it lacks a clear tonal centre, an effect created by the interplay of non-functional triads in constant parallel motion in the left hand. This chromaticism against the triadic melodies can be regarded as embellishment; this further confuses the tonal orientation, suggesting the constant motion of mist. *Brouillards* never resolves or settles on any tonality: even the ending poses a tonal question mark.

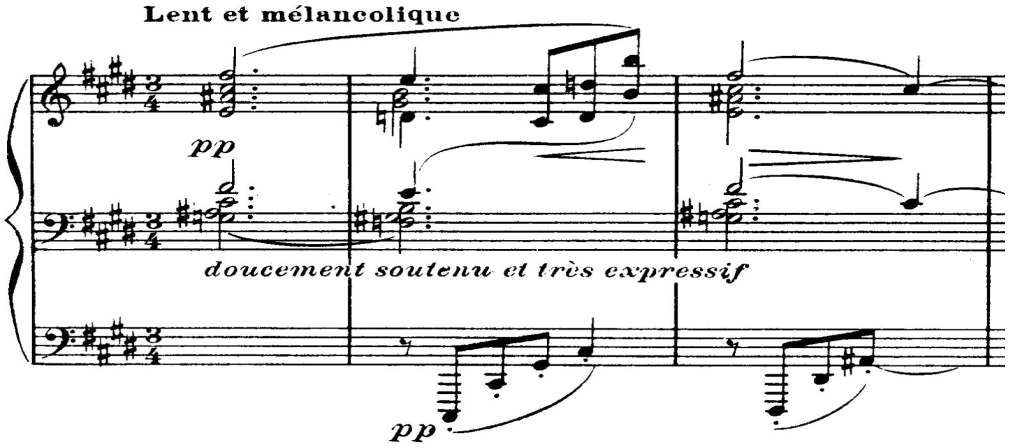
To illustrate the idea of mist, the pianist should pedal for a degree of resonance that gives the illusion of "wetness" in the air (as opposed to no pedal, which would suggest dryness). The harmony alters swiftly on every eighth note beat (adding to the mystery and constant variation of the mist), demanding quick and clean pedal changes to give the texture transparency. The pedal can be pressed halfway to avoid the overlapping of all the dissonances created by juxtaposing the white and black keys: full pedaling could result in a thick cloud instead. Debussy indicates "*extrêmement égal et léger*" ("extremely equal and light"): the music calls for a precise lightness of touch to achieve the weightless quality of mist.

Feuilles mortes **(Book II)**

Feuilles mortes (dead leaves), may have been inspired by a set of poems written by Debussy's friend Gabriel Mourey: "*Voix éparse: adagios, feuilles mortes, croquis rêvés.*"[19] In his article "L'entretien avec Monsieur Croche," Debussy referred to "the fall of the golden leaves

[19] Roberts, *Images,* 269-70.

that invest the splendid obsequies of the trees"[20] when describing this prelude and the imagery in his mind. In the music, Debussy vividly renders the movements and the shades of the leaves. We hear the rustling leaves from the echo of the first chord, prolonging the sense of melancholy and painting the colorlessness of the leaves depicted in the title.[21]



(*Feuilles mortes*, m. 1-3.)

***Bruyères* (Book II) and *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (Book I)**

Through prominent use of the pentatonic scale in both *Bruyères* and *La fille aux cheveux de lin,* Debussy recreated the archaic quality of folk music. Pianist Alfred Cortot describes *La fille aux cheveux de lin* as "a tender paraphrase of the Scottish song of Leconte de Lisle." Indeed, Debussy was inspired by the poem of the same title by Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle, published in the 1852 collection *Poèmes antiques : Chansons écossaises.*[22]

[20] Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy,* 164.
[21] Ibid., 164-65.
[22] Ibid., 149-50.

LA FILLE AUX CHEVEUX DE LIN.

Sur la luzerne en fleur assise,
Qui chante dès le frais matin ?
C'est la fille aux cheveux de lin,
La belle aux lèvres de cerise.

L'amour, au clair soleil d'été,
Avec l'alouette a chanté.

Ta bouche a des couleurs divines,
Ma chère, et tente le baiser !
Sur l'herbe en fleur veux-tu causer,
Fille aux cils longs, aux boucles fines ?

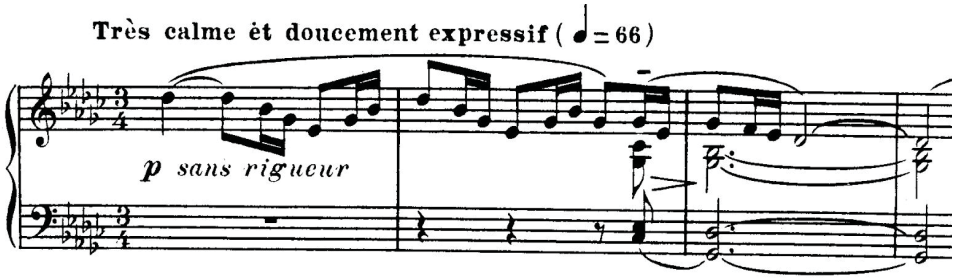
L'amour, au clair soleil d'été,
Avec l'alouette a chanté.

Ne dis pas non, fille cruelle !
Ne dis pas oui ! J'entendrai mieux
Le long regard de tes grands yeux
Et ta lèvre rose, ô ma belle !

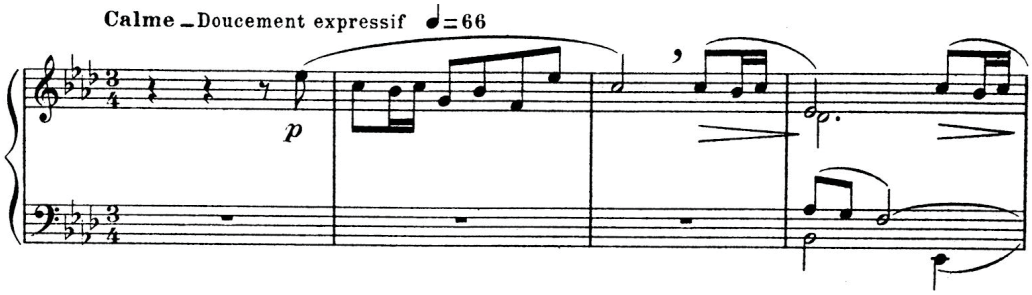
L'amour, au clair soleil d'été,
Avec l'alouette a chanté.

Adieu les daims, adieu les lièvres
Et les rouges perdrix ! Je veux
Baiser le lin de tes cheveux,
Presser la pourpre de tes lèvres !

L'amour, au clair soleil d'été,
Avec l'alouette a chanté.

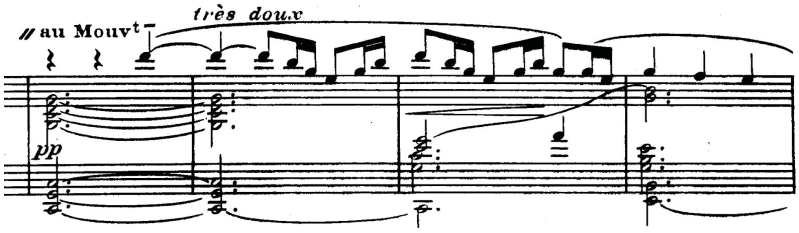


(*La fille aux cheveux de lin,* m. 1-3.)

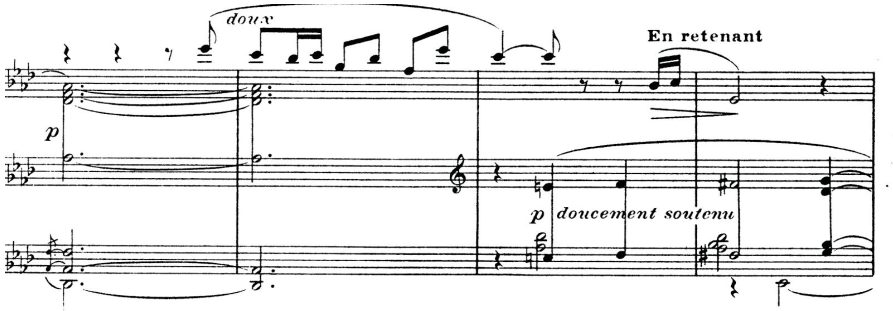


(*Bruyères*, m. 1-4.)

Bruyères similarly evokes a pastoral, rural setting: the word "Bruyères" can refer to a small town in the mountainous Vosges region of France, or a family of plants thriving in poor soils (Ericaceae, known in English as the heathers or heaths). Written in a similar harmonic language, both preludes open with the sublime simplicity of a flute-like solo line that spells out the pentatonic scale; moreover, both pieces use a similar spiralling effet: *La fille aux cheveux de lin* circles around the first minor seventh chord, whereas *Bruyères* circles around the opening motif of E-flat–C–B-flat. The preludes are also similar in meter and tempo: both are written in 3/4 with expressive markings of *calme* and *doucement expressif*, and share an identical metronome mark of quarter note equals 66, a comfortable tempo to convey these two expression markings. Both preludes have a similar structure of A B A', moving from innocence and reservation to extroversion and bloom in the middle section, before distantly recalling the opening at the return. In both preludes, the final thematic recollections are marked as *doux* before fading into the past.



(*La fille aux cheveux de lin,* m. 28-31.)



(*Bruyères,* m. 44-47.)

Titles with literary connotations

«*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*» (Book I)

This title is a quotation from the third line of Charles Baudelaire's poem *Harmonie du soir*. The poem itself is part of the collection *Les Fleurs du Mal,* which established itself as a cornerstone for the generation of Symbolists, including Debussy himself.[23]

Harmonie du soir
Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige
Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!

Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Le violon frémit comme un coeur qu'on afflige;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

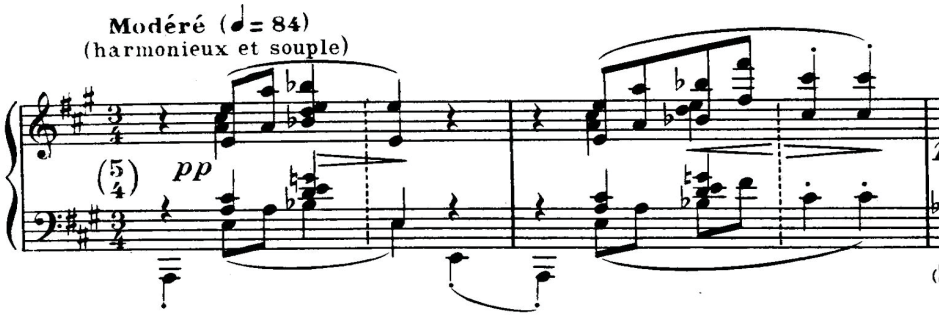
Le violon frémit comme un coeur qu'on afflige,
Un coeur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir;
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige.

Un coeur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige...
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir!
— Charles Baudelaire

The prelude's title evokes vivid images and smells of a ripe summer evening: scents (*parfums*) and sounds (*sons*) turn in the evening air. Debussy is known to be very sensitive to texts, and in his text settings he works very closely with each word. My interpretation of the first phrase draws on the first verse of Baudelaire's poem: "Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa

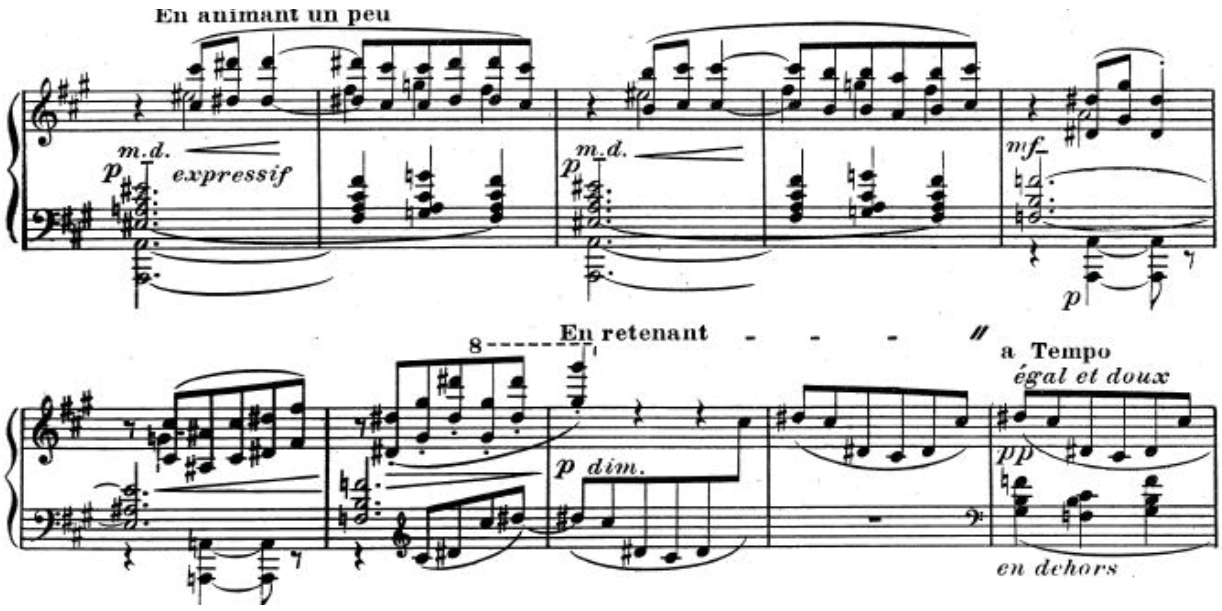
[23] Ibid., 139.

tige / Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir" ("The season is at hand when swaying on its stem / Every flower exhales perfume like a censer"). I regard the low A as "sa tige" (the stem), since the stem and root are found below the flower as its support. Playing the staccato on the A with pedal can add the effect of vibrating or swaying.. The exhalation of the flower's perfume ("Fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir...") can heard in the ascending motion from the low A to the high B-flat in m. 1, then (in m. 2) from the low A to the high F both gestures suggest the upward, rising motion of evaporation or smoke.



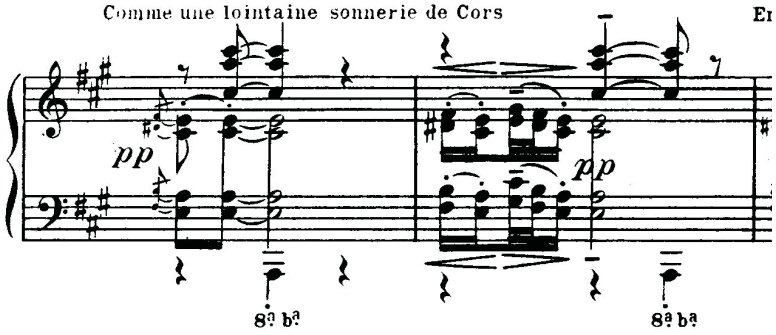
(*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir,* m. 1-2.)

The metric asymmetry of 5/4, rarely used by Debussy, suggests the "vertigo" of the following verse: "Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!.." ("Melancholy waltz and languid vertigo!"). The vertiginous waltz is successfully achieved through the subdivision of the meter into 3 + 2. The two beats of rest in the melody capturing the idea of "langoureux"; "melancolique" is suggested by the expressive flat second (B-flat) of A major, followed by a falling fourth like a sighing figure (F-sharp to C-sharp).



(*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir,* m. 9-18.)

In the second stanza, Baudelaire writes "Le violon frémit comme un coeur qu'on afflige" ("The violin quivers like a tormented heart"). One might wonder how Debussy could have translated the sound of a violin into the piano. I believe that the quivering of the violin ("like a tormented heart") is depicted from m. 9 with the melody lingering around C-sharp and D-sharp, then again in the subsequent phrase on Bs and C-sharps, while the sentiment of torment emerges from the crawling stepwise middle voice (alto and tenor voice), in chromatic motion that symbolizes pain.



(*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*, m. 50-51.)

Paul Roberts notes that Baudelaire was inspired by the German writer E.T.A. Hoffmann's fiction *Kreisleriana* (1814), in which the main character Kapellmeister Kreisler confides at the end that "unconsciously I sink into reveries as the deep notes of the basset-horn rise from afar."[24] This perfectly explains the ending of the prelude, where Debussy unexpectedly summons up the sound of distant horn calls ("comme une lointaine sonnerie de Cors").

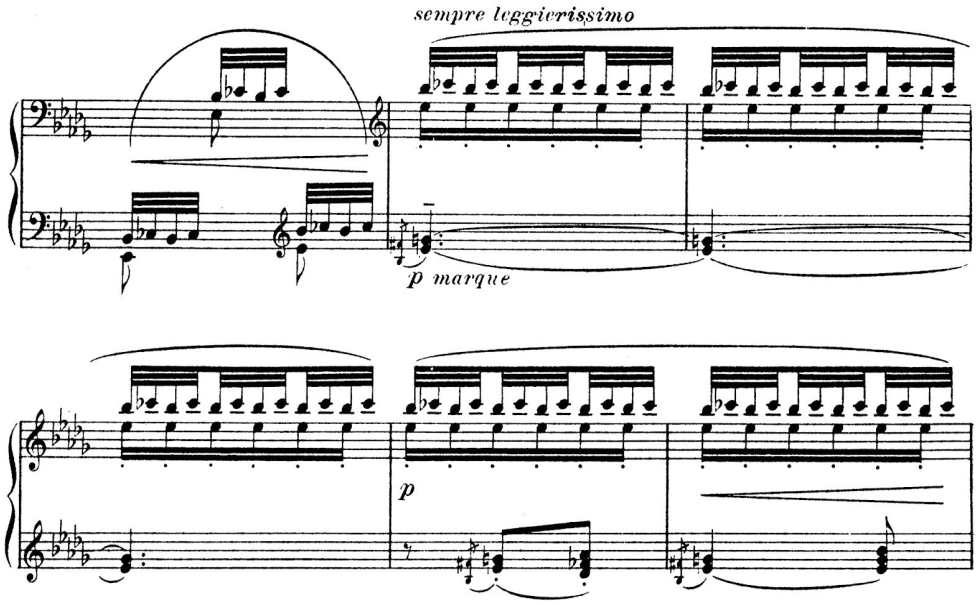
***«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»* (Book II)**

(Arthur Rackham, illustration from J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*)

As an avowed pantheist, Debussy had a keen interest in fairy tales. The title of this prelude comes from one of Arthur Rackham's illustrations for *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, a children's book by J. M. Barrie.[25] Rackham was enormously popular in Europe for his

[24] Roberts, Paul. *Images,* 74-75.
[25] Ibid., 228-30.

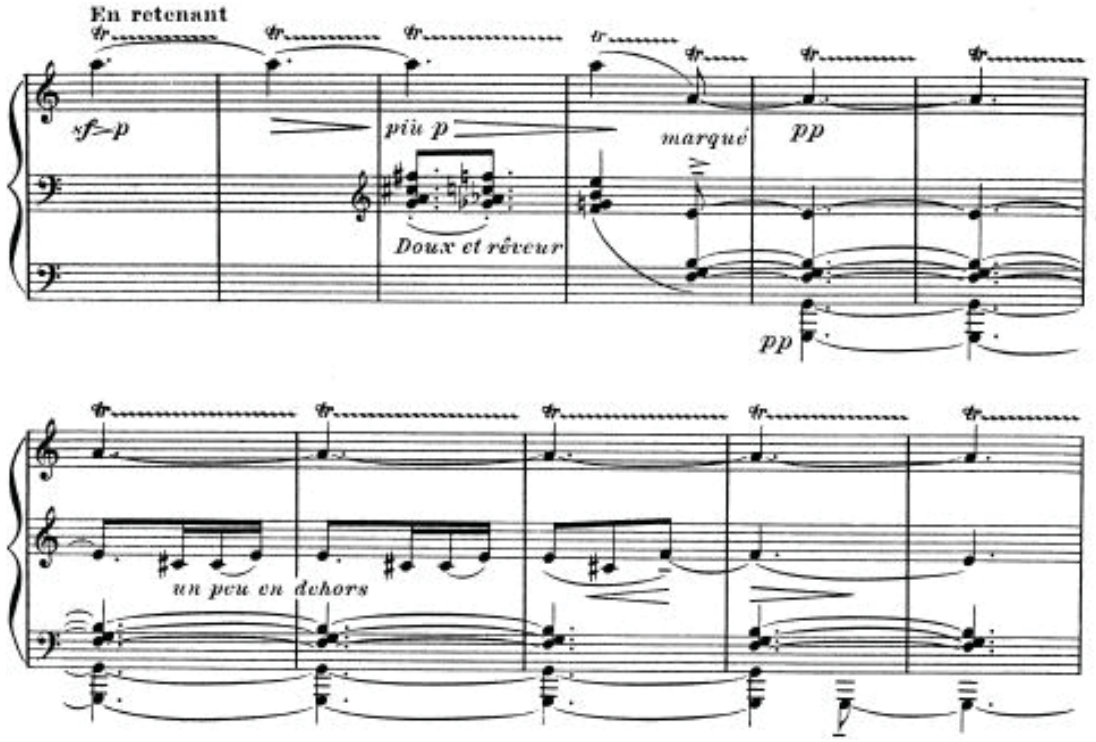
illustrations; his first exhibition in Paris was in 1912, which coincides with Debussy's conception of this prelude. Rackham's illustration first appeared in England under the title "The Fairies are Exquisite Dancers" in 1906, and was published in French the year after. However, it was not translated exactly word to word: the French title was "Les fées sont des danseuses consommées."



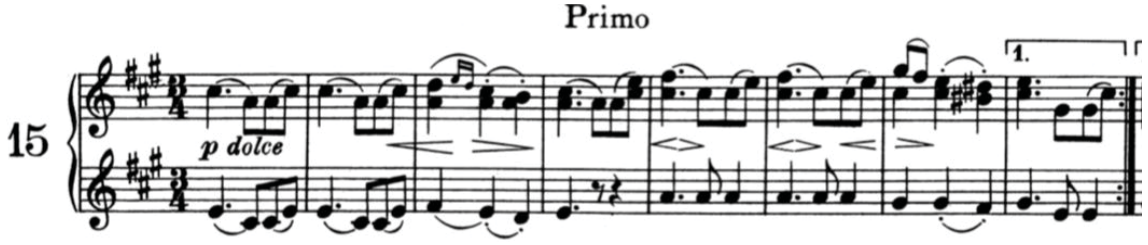
(*«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»*, m. 6-11.)

Rackham's illustration shows a fairy dancing on a tightrope, to the accompaniment of the spider's cello and the grasshopper's clarinet: this explains the three distinct layers in Debussy's prelude.[26] Debussy imitates each instrument in a different layer of the piano texture: the "cello" plays the prolonged chord in the bass for it has the lowest register with the best sustaining power; the "clarinet" on the contrary has an easier time making a transparent staccato in a higher register; and meanwhile the fairy dances in the top line with as much agility and lightness as possible, *sempre leggierissimo*.

[26] J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens,* illustrated by Arthur Rackham (Read Books Ltd, 2016), Chapter IV. "Lock-out time."



(*«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»*, m. 75-85.)

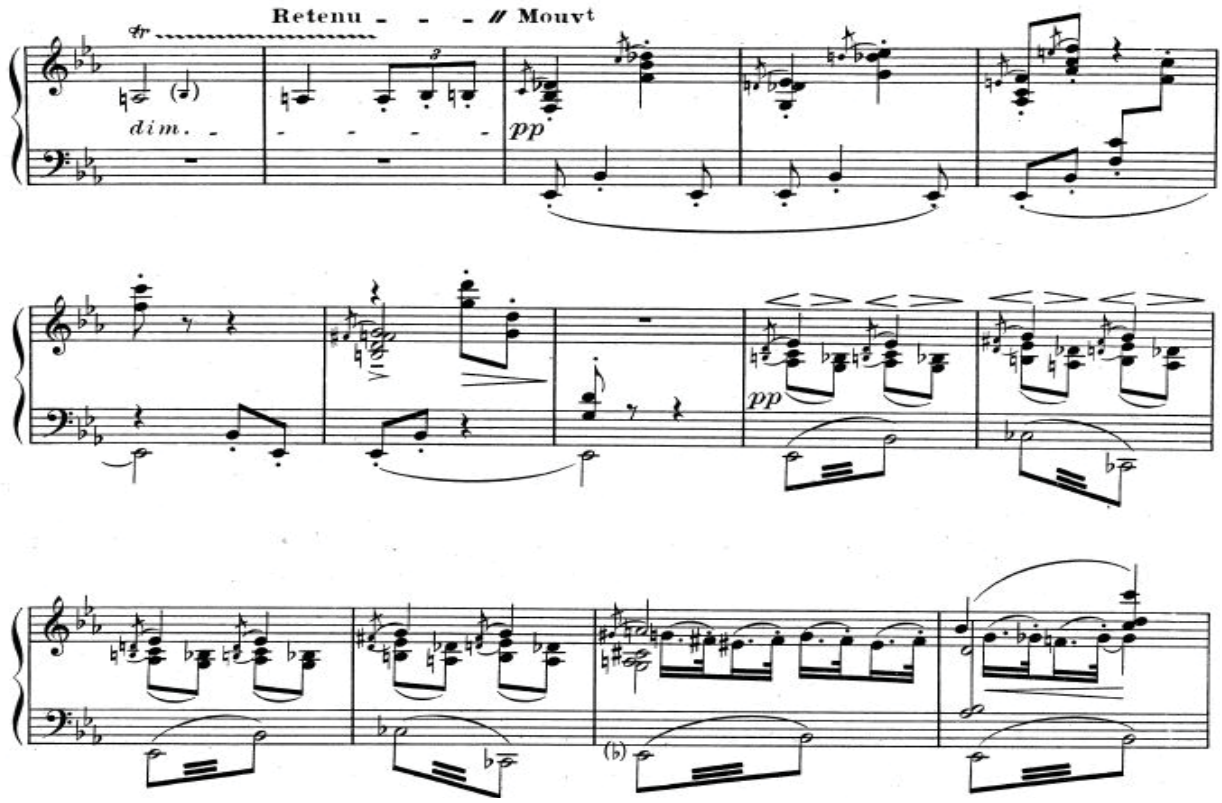


(Johannes Brahms, *Valse,* Op. 39 No. 15, m. 1-8.)

It is equally fascinating to see the connection to Brahms's *Valse* Op. 39 No. 15, for Debussy quotes the exact notes and dynamic markings of the first two bars, although in rhythmic diminution. The gesture seems intentional, as the entire section is prefaced with the marking "Doux et rêveur," which corresponds to the atmosphere Brahms evokes in his waltz, marked *piano* and *dolce.* The two pieces also share the natural swing of the waltz rhythm in three.

La danse de Puck **(Book I)**

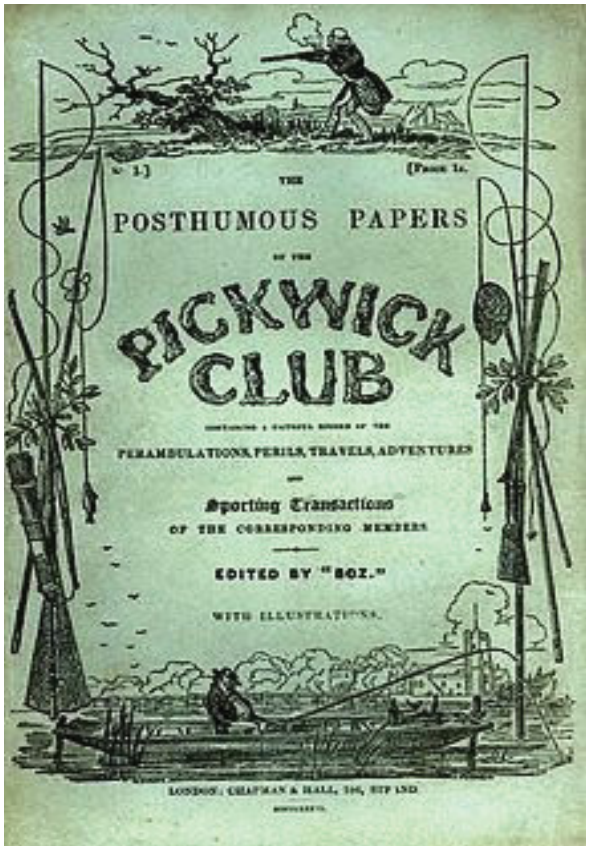
«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses» shares an affinity with *La danse de Puck*, which references the character from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Both Barrie's fairies and Shakespeare's Puck are capricious, whimsical, unpredictable, fragile, quick, slippery and hard to catch. The fairies are angelic, tender and graceful creatures devoid of harm or evil, dancing in a dreamlike world; Puck the elf, however, is a comic character, a mischief maker. The music for Puck is more dramatic, with a degree of nervousness from the incessant dotted rhythm, sudden shifts of dynamics (for example, *sff* to piano instantly), unpredictable musical gestures with constant tempo changes, and carefully specified articulations (such as the slurred dotted rhythm with a staccato on the second note) creating a skittish and anxious energy. Such uneasy drive and capriciousness is not present in the music depicting the fairies.



(*La danse de Puck*, m. 16-29.)

One cannot forget that Puck is a comic character, and a successful interpretation of the piece must include an element of comedy as well. I find the humor manifests itself in a multitude of grace notes that lend Puck a uniquely mischievous character; while these grace notes can come in different intervals, the minor second is most characteristic of Puck's sly humor.

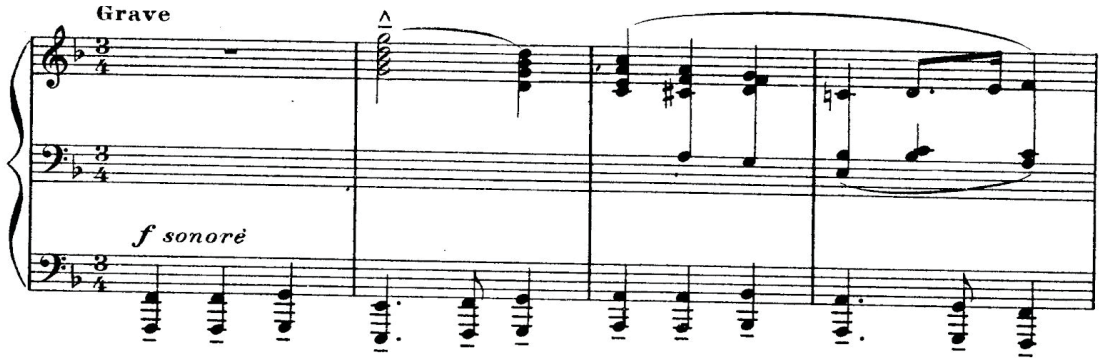
Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C. **(Book II)**



(Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers,* cover of first edition)

Charles Dickens was another British author who was admired by Debussy and who influenced his preludes. *The Pickwick Papers* was published as Dickens's very first novel in 1836, featuring the ironic, good-humored character Samuel Pickwick, the chairman of the

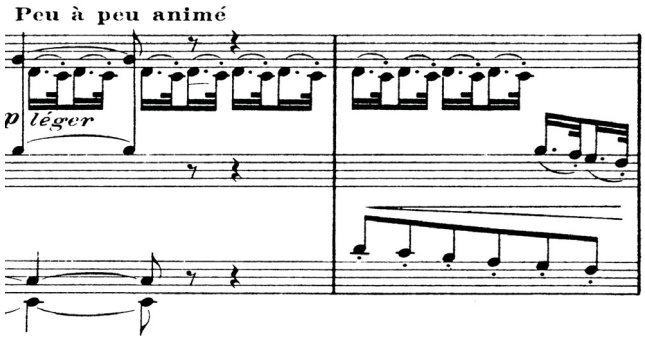
ridiculous Pickwick Club, named after himself. He serves as the leader—"Perpetual President, Member of the Pickwick Club" or P.P.M.P.C.—of the three members of the club, who travel and explore life.[27] Pickwick's serious, good-natured and occasionally ridiculous personality is described by Dickens: "The eloquent Pickwick, with one hand gracefully concealed behind his coat tails, and the other waving in air to assist his glowing declamation; his elevated position revealing those tights and gaiters, which, had they clothed an ordinary man, might have passed without observation, but which, when Pickwick clothed them — if we may use the expression — inspired involuntary awe and respect." (*The Pickwick Papers,* Chapter 1).



(*Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*, m. 1-4.)

Debussy opens the prelude with the noble English national anthem "God save the Queen" in the bass marked *forte* with *tenuto* accents. The tempo marking *Grave* and the solemnity of the English anthem indicate the earnest protagonist's wish to be taken seriously. The sonorous bassline requires lots of arm weight to prevent a harsh and insubstantial sound, as the pianist must convey the solemn opening of the hymn with lots of pride and dignity, like the character of Pickwick himself. This vividly contrasts with what comes after.

[27] Roberts, *Images,* 278-81.



(*Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*, m. 12-13.)

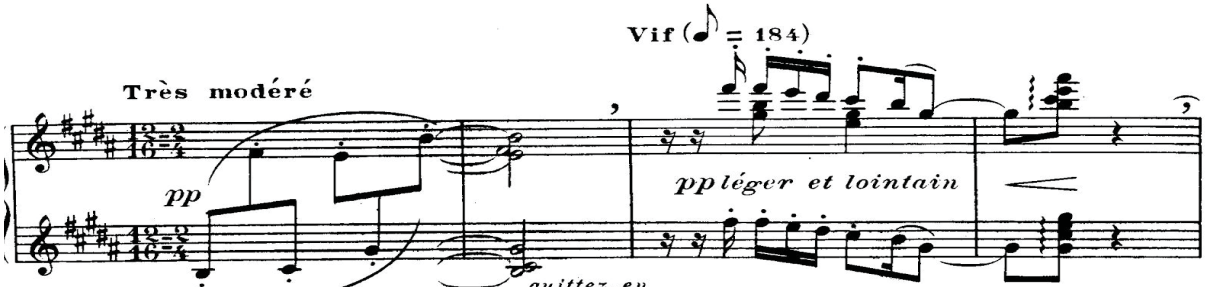
Shortly after this portentous, serious theme, the humor slides in with a light dotted rhythm, marked *léger* and *piano*. It is worth mentioning the importance of keeping the integrity of this dotted rhythm instead of gliding into a triplet, for the insistence of this rhythm provides the continuous momentum necessary to express Pickwick's humorous character. Such contrasts between the serious and comic continue throughout the prelude, just as Pickwick himself embodies the conflict between the two.

Titles with diverse cultures

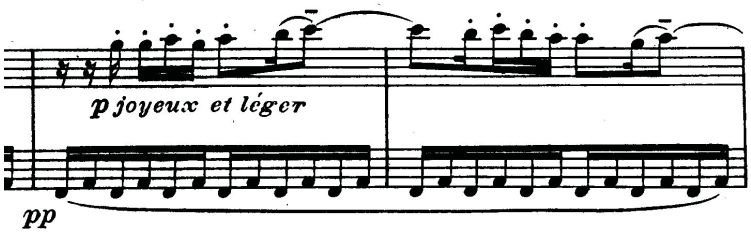
***Les collines d'Anacapri* (Book I)**

Anacapri is the smaller of the two cities on the island of Capri, in the Bay of Naples. Situated on a hill of 1600 feet overlooking a clear view of the ocean, Anacapri is a popular touristic resort with scenic views and clear skies. Its ownership passed through many cultures, including the Greeks in 400 BC, then the Romans, Austrians, Spaniards, French, English and Italians, all the while remaining a haven of unspoiled nature and seclusion. Elie Robert Schmitz

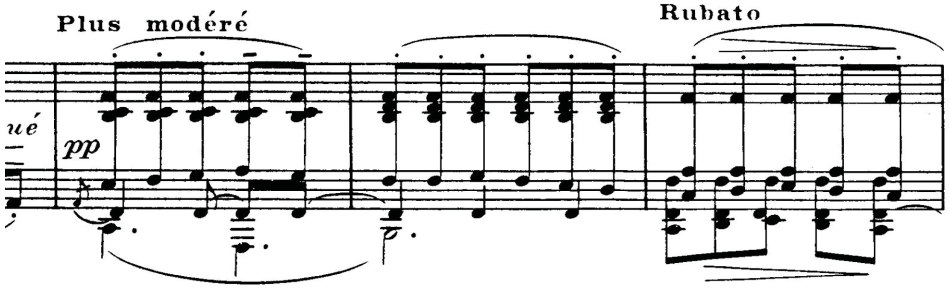
describes it as a place full of joyous spirits, without crime or politics.[28] The traditional Neapolitan dance of the tarantella, in a fast 6/8 meter, expresses joy and excitement. Debussy portrays a series of distant bells at first, then gradually unveils the frenzied dance. The contrasting B section reveals a polyphonic amorous serenade, perhaps a bit drunk with the hemiola.



(*Les collines d'Anacapri*, m. 1-4.)



(*Les collines d'Anacapri*, m. 14-15.)



(*Les collines d'Anacapri*, m. 55-57.)

[28] Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy,* 142-43.

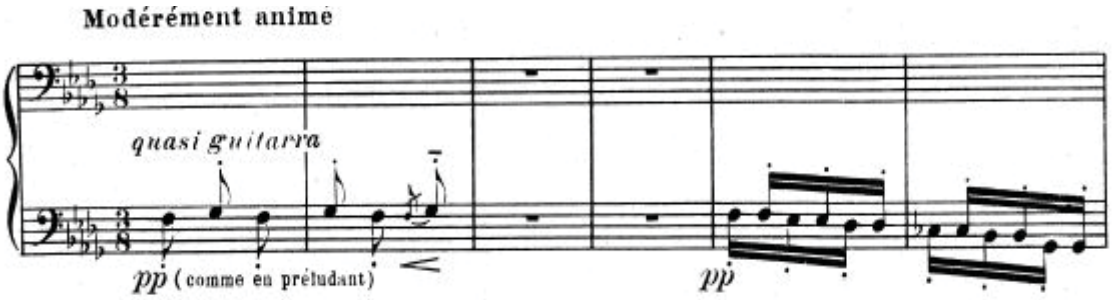
***La sérénade interrompue* (Book I)**

Along with his *La Soirée dans Grenade* (in the collection *Éstampes*) and *La puerta del vino* (*Préludes,* Book 2, discussed below), musicologist Elie Robert Schmitz considers this prelude part of Debussy's "Spain triptych."[29]

Debussy and his Parisian colleagues were fascinated and heavily influenced by Isaac Albéniz after his Parisian debut concert featuring entirely his own works. Thus, this prelude could be considered a tribute to Albéniz, who passed away in 1909, just a few months before its composition.

The serenade starts with a guitarist plucking the strings for the purpose of tuning the instrument and warming up. As he finishes this preparation, he starts to fully engage himself with the most beautiful melody he can think of, with a typically Moorish quality including emphasized augmented seconds with an accompaniment of constant open fifths. The serenade is suddenly interrupted by fragments of totally different pictures, as the protagonist's serenade is unsympathetically disrupted by external interferences. These interruptions include a *forte* episode in E major in m. 46-48 (Bruhn: "as if a window slammed shut or something was thrown at him!") and a brief D major interlude in 2/4 marked "lointain" (m. 80-84) like a distant march cutting short the guitarist's performance.[30] Performing this prelude requires a clear image of this imaginary scene, capturing the guitarist's frustrated reaction to these mishaps.

[29] Ibid., 166-67.
[30] Bruhn, *Images and ideas,* 126-28.



(*La Sérénade interrompue*, m. 1-6.)

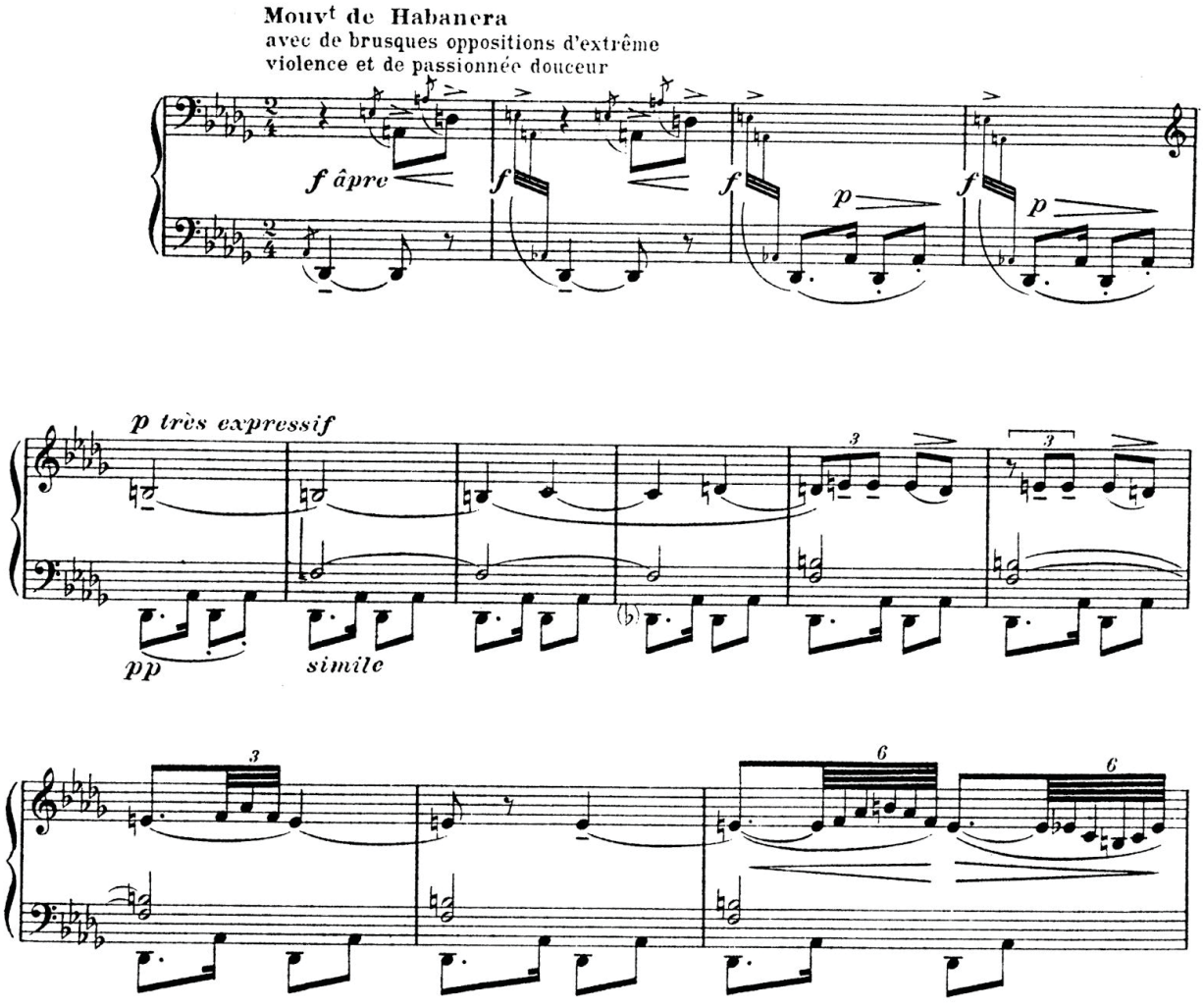
***La puerta del vino* (Book II)**

This prelude also evokes the music and culture of Spain; more specifically, the inspiration behind this prelude lies in a postcard Debussy received from Manuel De Falla.[31] De Falla displayed a great deal of interest in Granada, influenced by Debussy ("La soirée dans Grenade"), Albeniz (*La Vega*) and his own piano teacher José Tragó, before commencing work on *La vida breve,* his only opera, which Debussy helped to recast into the version premiered in Paris in 1913. Upon hearing De Falla's complete opera with its setting in Grenada, Debussy must have been inspired by the musical expressions of Grenada and drawn back to Andalusian culture. The postcard from De Falla displays an imposing gate (*la puerta*) of the palace complex Alhambra (close to modern day Granada), with its delicate arabesques illuminated by bright sunlight. The Alhambra was once a central gathering place where life was celebrated with flamenco dance and singing.

The Alhambra was built in the 13th century by Moorish princes during their occupation of Spain,[32] which explains Debussy's employment of an Arabic scale with two augmented

[31] Michael Christoforidis, *Manuel de Falla and Visions of Spanish Music* (Routledge, 2017), 110.
[32] Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy,* 166.

seconds in *La puerta del vino*. The sense of improvisation is also characteristic of a Spanish musical idiom. With its flexibly written rhythms, the melody resembles a flamenco singer improvising with arabesques and embellishments of the main notes. For instance, in measure 13 the embellishment in the right hand highlights the augmented second between A-flat and B natural, with another augmented second D-flat to E between the bass and melody. The arabesque on the Arabic scale embellishes the main note of E natural, with a symmetrical contour that moves up from E to B and then back down.



(*La puerta del vino*, m. 1-13.)

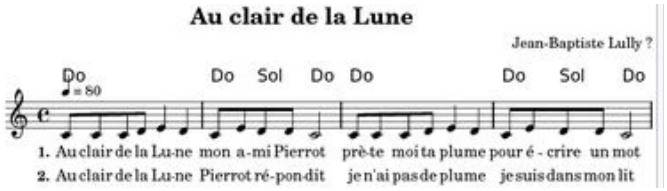
Flamenco dance embodies extreme contrast in its simultaneous expression of violence and passion. The flamenco vocal style known as "*cante jondo*" or "deep song" in Andalusia is particularly soulful and profound, often dealing with themes of death or anguish.[33] Debussy assimilated this idiom of contrast, indicating "*avec de brusques oppositions d'extrême violence et de passionnée douceur"* ("with sudden oppositions of extreme violence and passionate sweetness"). This contrast is reinforced at the opening, with the expression mark "*âpre*" (rough) in the dynamic of *forte* with individual accents in the first four bars, confronting the lyrical, *piano* melodies marked *très expressif* in the subsequent bars.

The tempo marking is "mouvement de Habanera," a dance form that features a unique dotted rhythm that persists throughout. Debussy's own remarks on the length of the dotted rhythm can help one understand the timing he had in mind for the performance of the Habanera rhythm. Marcel Ciampi, who received feedback from Debussy on his performance of *La puerta del vino*, recalls that "Debussy wanted the dotted rhythm sometimes to be stretched towards sextuplet value, [with] the natural elasticity of Mozart's Siciliano rhythms."[34] The length of the dotted note in this case needs to be exaggerated to emphasize the tension of the longer dotted eighth note and the quick release of the sixteenth note. As a result, the rhythm becomes more pungent and exciting. This constant and restricted accompaniment rhythm gives a foundation on which the melody improvises in flexible, rubato rhythms. The juxtaposition of the expressive triplet in the melody against the duple meter in the Habanera rhythm adds an additional contrast between regularity and rubato, while further accentuating the Spanish flavor.

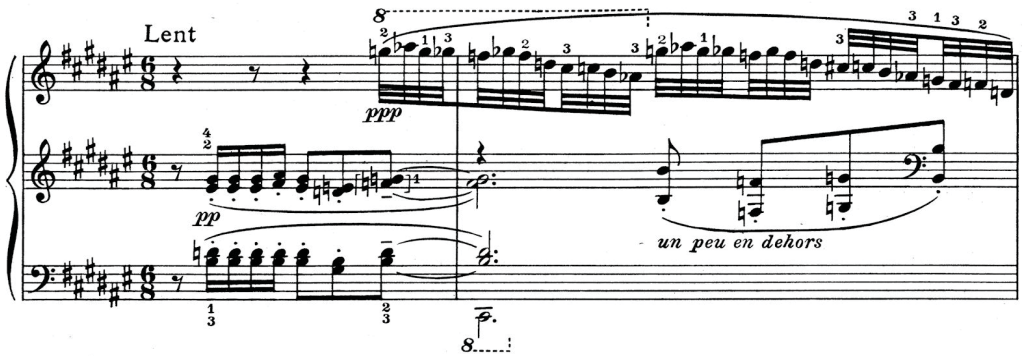
[33] Roberts, *Images,* 271-72.
[34] Roy Howat, *The art of French piano music: Debussy, Ravel, Faure, Chabrier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)..

***La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (Book II)**

La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune ("The terrace of spectators by the light of the moon") is one of three pieces by Debussy on the subject of the moon, along with *Clair de lune* from the *Suite Bergamasque* and *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* from *Images,* Book II.[35] All share a similar ambience: dream-like and ethereal with a tranquil and mysterious quality. In this prelude, composed in the last month of 1912, Debussy seems to have drawn inspiration from a French children's song with a nearly identical title, *Au clair de la lune,*[36] consisting of a similarly contoured opening melody and underlying rhythm: a repeated first note with an ascending major second, in the same rhythmic layout. *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* also involves two more possible sources with Oriental associations, to be discussed later in Section 5.



(*Au clair de la lune*, retrieved from Wikipedia)



(*La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*, m. 1-2.)

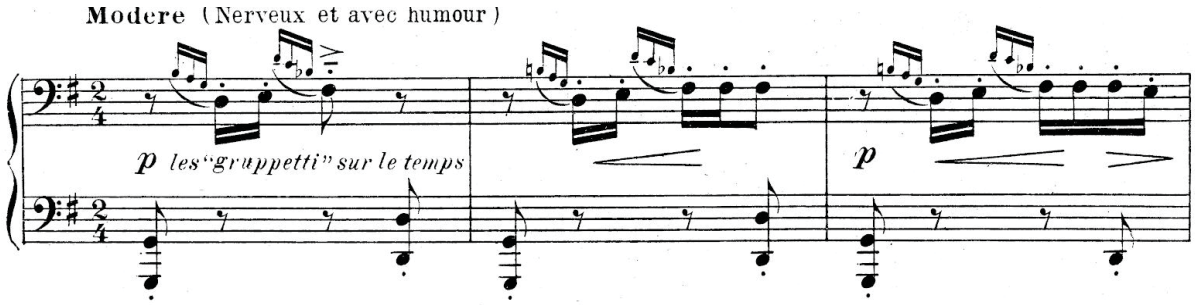
[35] Bruhn, *Images and ideas,* 49.

[36] Neil Rutman, "Imagination in the Piano Works of Debussy: How it Affects Touch and Pedalling," in *The Pianist's Craft: Mastering the Works of Great Composers,* ed. Richard Paul Anderson (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 145-155.

Titles with music hall/jazz influence

***Minstrels* (Book I) and «Général Lavine» – eccentric (Book II)**

Both *Minstrels* and *«Général Lavine» – eccentric* were inspired by music hall entertainment, an enormously popular genre of entertainment in Parisian society of the early twentieth century. An audience might enjoy the "precision of dance steps and tumbling figures; laughter at a cocky figure in white tailcoats and top hats," and be "caught off guard by a sudden deep pathos."[37] The musical language mostly consisted of various elements of African-American syncopated music styles: cakewalk, blues, Charleston, and ragtime to name a few. In playing the ragtime-based *Minstrels,* Roy Howat recommends the interpreter follow the advice of composer Francis Poulenc: "you should never play ragtime fast," or the "gruppetti" lose their effect.



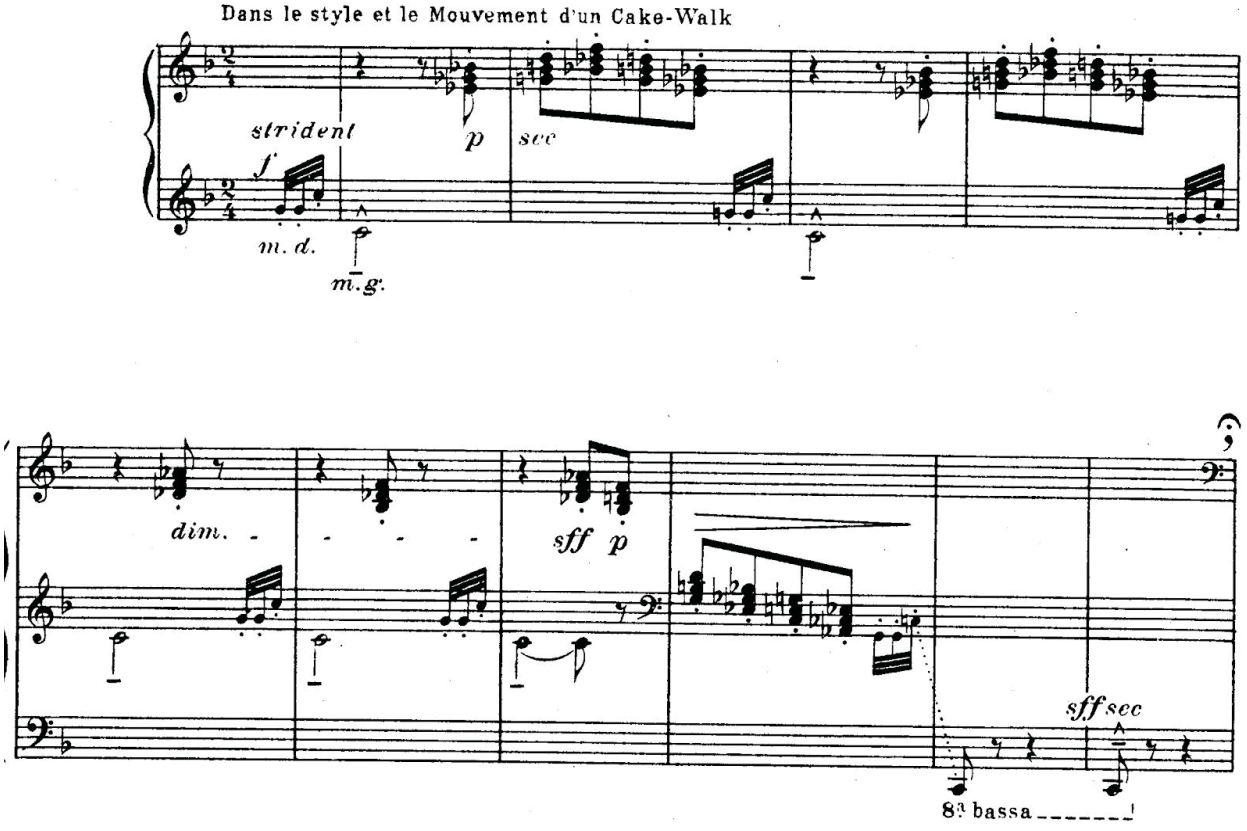
(*Minstrels*, m. 1-3.)

The prelude *«Général Lavine» – eccentric* takes its title from a popular music-hall entertainer. Général Lavine was an American comedic juggler whose farcical movements and mishaps were accompanied by jazz elements for the amusement of a European audience. Born in New York in 1879, Lavine pursued his career as a juggler only later in his life, after working in electrical shops in his youth. General Lavine was described by Alfred Frankenstein in 1945 as

[37] Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy,* 160.

"one of the most celebrated figures in international Vaudeville; he was a comic juggler, half tramp and half warrior, but more tramp than warrior." Général Lavine appeared in performance at the Marigny Theater in Paris on several occasions from 1910 to 1912, performances which Debussy repeatedly attended just before this prelude was composed.[38]

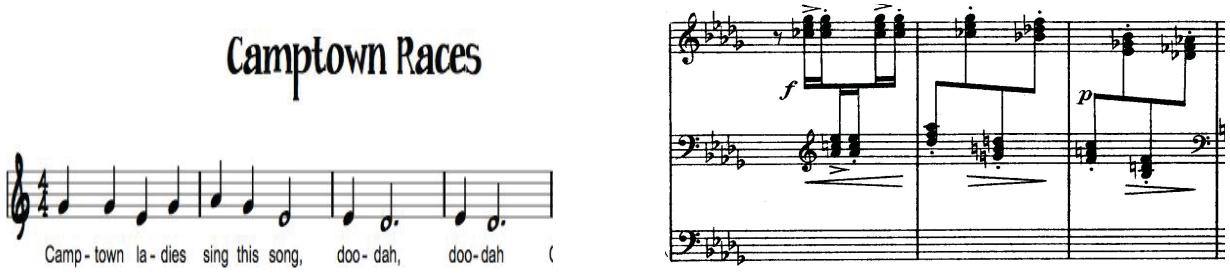
Debussy's choice of F major for the comedic figure Pickwick is again found in this fanciful portrait of Lavine. One wonders if Debussy intentionally picked this key for this pair of comedic portraits. *Général Lavine*'s musical language is direct, with exaggerated theatrical gestures.



(*«Général Lavine» — eccentric*, m. 1-10.)

[38] Catherine Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris,* Chapter II: "Clowns, Poets, and Circus Daredevils," accessed August 8, 2018, https://www.debussysparis.com/chapter-ii/#poetry.

The opening phrase is irregular in length: ten measures. The initial "trumpet" motif is a surprise: the accents are exaggerated and strident in *forte* with a caret accent on the final C. Such a strident gesture contrasts with the timid *piano, sec, staccato* in the second measure, truly illustrating the eccentric and changeable character of Lavine. The chromatic brass motif in the second full bar, probably mocking the brass player's poor intonation, reflects Lavine's onstage character, "half tramp and half warrior."[39] a soldier accustomed to the call of the bugle in the battlefield. To create a further contrast, Debussy then introduces a swaggering cakewalk, with a sudden tumbling over. In Leon Vallas's biography of Debussy, he notes Debussy's own description of Lavine: *"the fellow was made of wood,"* which according to Vallas suggests that he acted out a "mechanical stiffness". This image aids the performer's interpretation: strictness in rhythm is essential, as the stiff wood puppet should not exhibit rubato or an elastic rhythm: rather this prelude calls for precision and a strong pulse that enlivens the military march (though as a parody), while the musical expression comes from subtle dynamic changes instead of rhythmic flexibility.

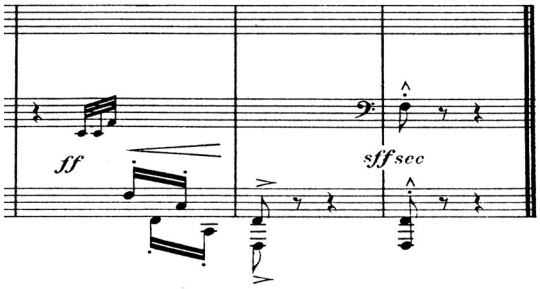


(Stephen Foster's "The Camptown Races" and *«Général Lavine» –- eccentric*, m. 51-53.)

According to scholar Paul Roberts, there is also a brief quotation from "Gwine to Run All Night" (better known as "The Camptown Races"), a famous American minstrel song written by

[39] Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy,* 172-73.

Stephen Foster and published in 1850.[40] Thinking of this song will help us to imagine a singing, lyrical phrasing rather than the mere execution of fragmented and pronounced accents with no context.



(*«Général Lavine» –- eccentric,* m. 107-109.)

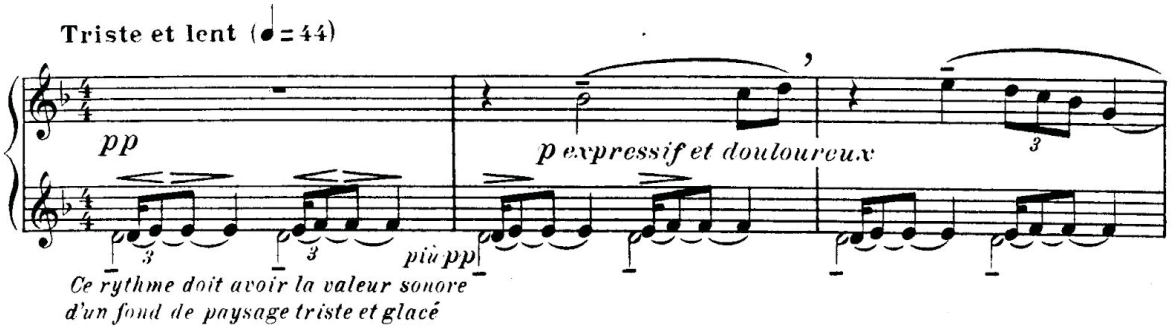
The Prélude ends with a big unison F marked "*sff"* and "sec"; the previous gesture suggests the fall at the end of Lavine's music hall performance, while the last F emphasizes the moment of landing.

Titles with debatable or multiple influences

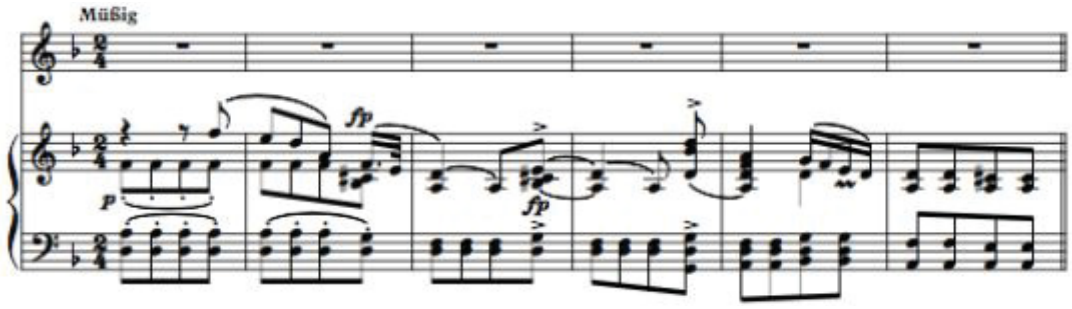
Des pas sur la neige **(Book I)**

This is the most expressive of all the preludes; though it has the fewest notes, it successfully describes the indescribable. It entails multiple sources of inspiration, encompassing music, visual art and literature. The title ("Steps in the snow") suggests that we can view the obstinate ascending second D-E, E-F as repeated footsteps, leaving footprints behind.

[40] Roberts, *Images,* 224.



(*Des pas sur la neige*, m. 1-3.)



(Franz Schubert: *"Gute Nacht*," m. 1-6.)

According to Steven Rings, the ostinato and image of a frozen landscape recalls "Gute Nacht," the first song of Schubert's song cycle "Winterreise."[41] The repetitiveness of the "steps" motive in Debussy is comparable to the constant eighth notes in the Schubert song. While Schubert's "Gute Nacht" has a brisk walking tempo, Debussy's footsteps are slower, for they mirror the frozen time between each step. Rings suggests that the prelude could have been influenced by the Symbolist poets; possible references include *Chant d'automne* and *Brumes et pluies* by Baudelaire, *Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui* by Mallarmé, or *Couchant d'hiver* by Laforgue. Rings further proposes a visual analogy with Pissarro's 1869 Snow at Louveciennes, featuring an isolated figure in a winter scene.[42]

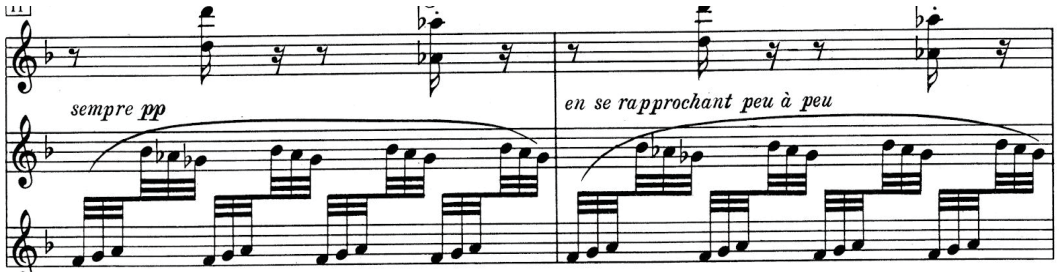
[41] Steven Rings, "Mystéres limpides: Time and Transformation in Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige*," *19th-Century Music* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 189.
[42] Ibid., 187.

***Les tierces alternées* (Book II)**

Les tierces alternées ("Alternating thirds") looks ahead to Debussy's etudes written written a year or two afterwards, for it concentrates on one sole technical aspect. Precursors of the prelude's toccata-like pianistic virtuosity can be seen in works such as the *Toccata* from *Pour le piano*, *Jardin sous la pluie* in *Estampes*, or *Mouvement* from *Images,* Book I. Roberts remarks that this prelude is so dedicated to the keyboard that it finds its roots in the French Baroque tradition of the *claveciniste* (to be discussed in length in the last chapter).

***Feux d'artifice* (Book II)**

It requires a lightning touch to achieve the sparkles of the fireworks on Bastille Day, the holiday on July 14 commemorating the storming of the Bastille, which marked the turning point in the French Revolution in 1789.

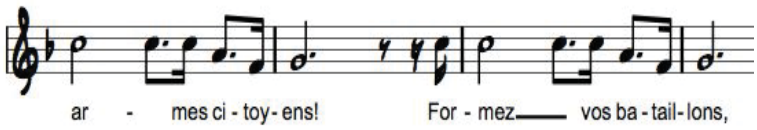


(*Feux d'artifice*, m. 1-2.)

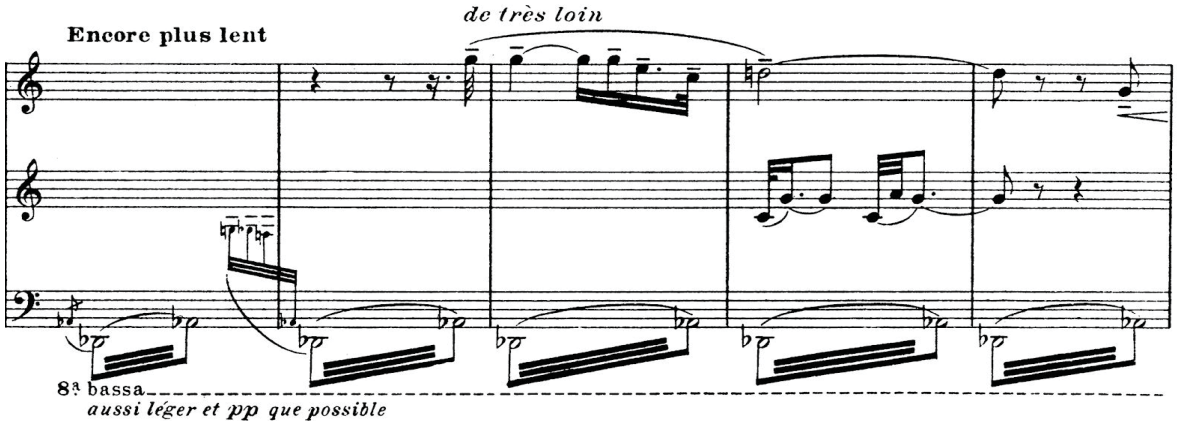
In this final prelude of Book II, one finds many technically virtuosic attributes that resemble Liszt: the rapid leaps over a long distance capture the same difficulty as *Mephisto* and the same intention to inspire excitement and brilliance.[43] To underline the historic and political importance of Bastille Day, Debussy inserted a subtle quotation from the French national anthem

[43] Roberts, *Images,* 181-83.

"La Marseillaise," heard at a distance (*de très loin*) as the fireworks show is about to come to a close, perhaps the sound of a distant brass band.



("La Marseillaise," m. 19-21.)



(*Feux d'artifice,* m. 104-108.)

3. Musical connections between the *Préludes*

In this section, I will focus on the musical connections unifying each of the two books of preludes. Although Debussy never suggested the necessity of performing the books in their entirety and performed only selected preludes at their premiere, my analysis uncovers musical threads and interconnections that convince me that playing the complete books in their original ordering is preferable. Even if a performer decides to play selected preludes only, study of their interrelationships may result in a more well-rounded and satisfying choice of groupings and pairings. The ordering of the two books of preludes that we see today in the published version is not random or arbitrary; Debussy seems to have considered multiple aspects including tonal and metric relationships, dramatic effect, and architectural variety, as will be shown below. Paul Roberts describes his own experiments with reshuffling, and concludes that the result was not as satisfying as the original order, for "even reordering for a comparable tonal scheme, the drama and emotional structure was ruined."[44]

Historically, there was no tradition of performing sets of preludes (such as Bach's or Chopin's) as ordered cycles in the 19th century, as selected short character pieces such as preludes and intermezzi were typically enjoyed in salons or small gatherings. Debussy himself premiered four preludes from Book I (*Danseuses de Delphes, Voiles, La cathédrale engloutie, La danse de Puck*) in May 1910, just a month after their publication.[45] The concert was for the support of the Société Musicale Indépendante, founded by Ravel and a few other pupils of Fauré in April 1910 to provide another association for young composers, as subscription to the *Société*

[44] Roberts, Paul. *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy.* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1996), 241.
[45] Roberts, *Images,* 241.

Nationale led by Vincent d'Indy was becoming increasingly difficult.[46] The premiere of Book II by Debussy took place in March 1913, when he performed only three preludes (*Bruyères, Feuilles mortes, La puerta del Vino*); the publication of Book II was a month later.[47] However by the 1920s, it became standard for pianists to perform the complete, ordered cycle in concerts.

Danseuses de Delphes, December 7, 1909 (1)
Le vent dans la plaine, December 11, 1909 (3)
Voiles, December 12, 1909 (2)
Les collines d'Anacapri, December 26, 1909 (5)
Des pas sur la neige, December 27, 1909 (6)
Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest, undated (7)
«Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir», January 1, 1910 (4)
Minstrels, January 5, 1910 (12)
La fille aux cheveux de lin, January 15-16, 1910 (8)
La sérénade interrompue,undated (9)
La Cathédrale engloutie,undated (10)
La danse de Puck, February 4, 1910 (11)

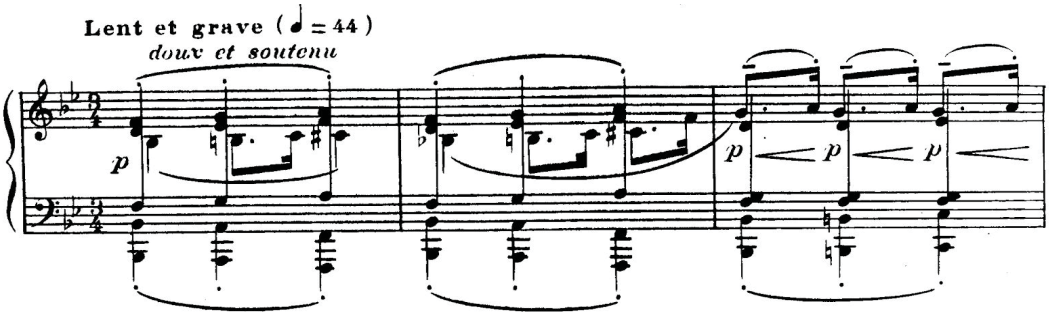
(Completion dates for Book I. Debussy's final ordering in the published version is given in parentheses.[48])

Some of the musical connections between the preludes could have resulted from the frenzied speed of writing them in a short amount of time; several preludes were completed in a matter of a few days, and Debussy moved on rapidly from one to the next. The table above helps to show the progress of his work and the closely overlapping dates. Both books were completed in a span of only a few months, though we have a full list of completion dates only for Book I. As one can see, the preludes of Book I were completed between December 7, 1909 and February 4, 1910; most were written in a short time, except for fragments of *Voiles*, *La fille aux cheveux de lin* and *La Cathédrale engloutie* which were begun a couple of years earlier.[49] The published

[46] Roger Nichols, *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 134.
[47] Roberts, *Images,* 241.
[48] Ibid., 242.
[49] Ibid., 241.

order roughly follows the order of completion dates, but not entirely: *Le vent dans la plaine* was written before *Voiles*, and *Les sons et les perfumes tournent dans l'air du soir* and *Minstrels* were rearranged as the fourth and twelfth preludes, respectively. These observations further confirm my belief that Debussy deliberately chose the published ordering for musical reasons.

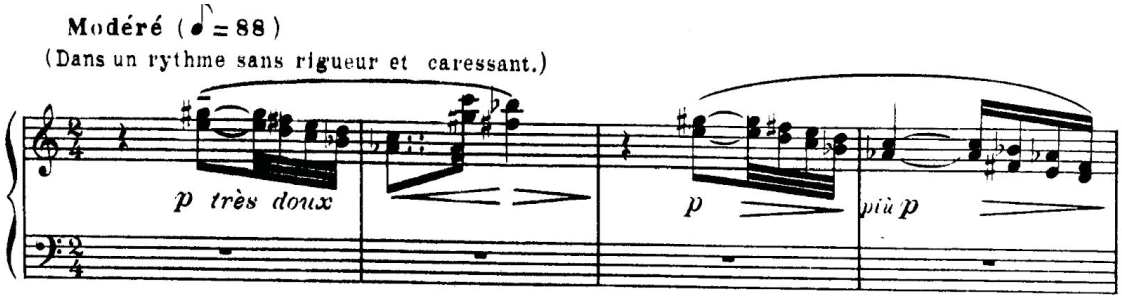
Book I



(*Danseuses de Delphes,* m. 1-3.)

According to Roy Howat's cyclic interpretation of Book I, the first six preludes share a tonal emphasis on B-flat (or the enharmonically spelled A-sharp), either as the tonic pitch or as an important secondary pitch class (like the flat second degree in *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* or the leading tone in *Les collines d'Anacapri*).[50] Rather diatonically organized with a chromatically sliding middle voice, the opening of *Danseuses de Delphes* has a series of well-established B-flat major chords in root position. So does the ending, with the tonic B-flat major chords confirmed by a low B-flat in the bass. Such tonal stability and clarity of rhythmic pulse is in total contrast with what comes next.

[50] Howat, *The art of French piano music,* Chapter 2.

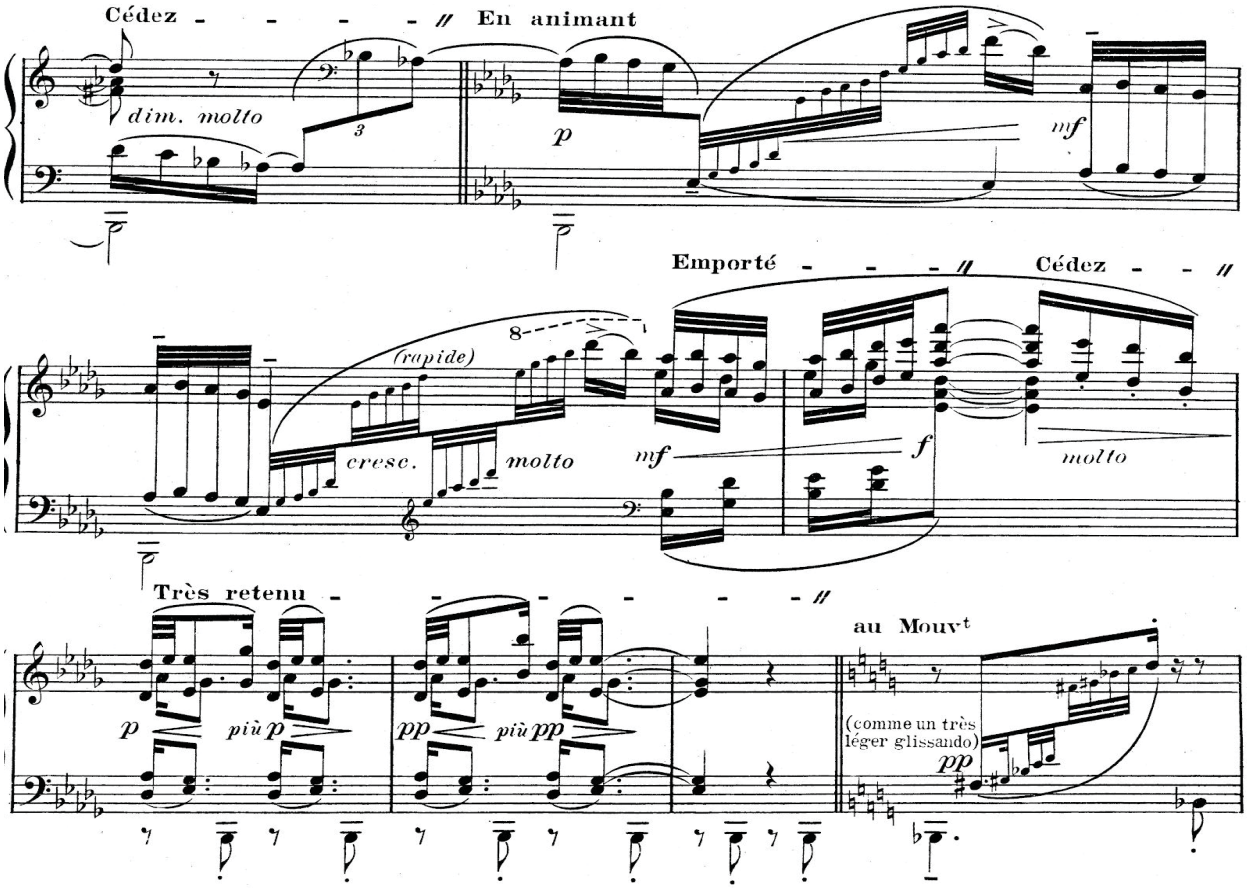


(*Voiles,* m. 1-4.)

In contrast, the second prelude *Voiles* reflects the instability and the floating lightness of a windblown sail through a similarly fluid tonality. Debussy employs the whole-tone scale throughout the piece (except for a few bars at the climax), a device that destabilizes the tonal center. Despite this tonal instability, B-flat still plays an important role throughout.

The B-flat serves, almost exclusively, as the low bass note that gives a foundation to both the whole-tone scale and the D-flat pentatonic scale at measures 42 to 47. The B-flat echoes in the audience's ears for the entire piece, and it is inconceivable to ignore its significance. The metric relationship between the first two preludes is also worth noticing; the metronome marking of quarter note equals 44 in *Danseuses de Delphes* is exactly half of the eighth note of 88 in *Voiles,* as Howat observes.[51] *Voiles* exhibits much more metric instability, beginning with a rest then a tied eighth note that makes the meter still more ambiguous.

[51] Ibid., Chapter 2.

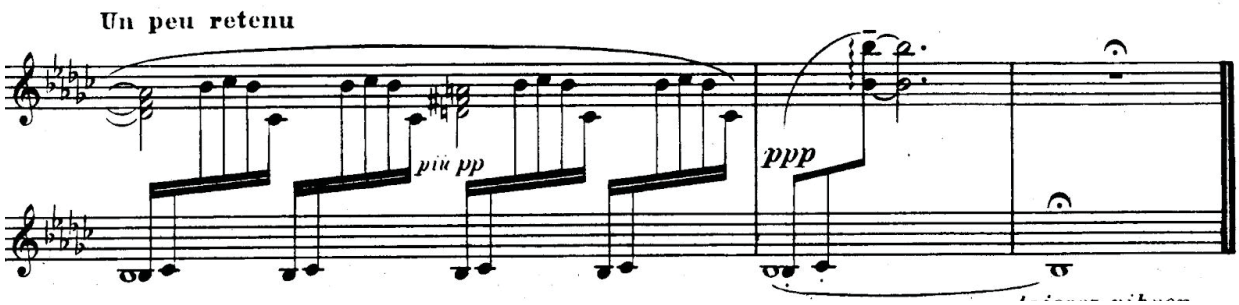


(*Voiles,* m. 42-47.)

B-flat is once again clearly emphasized as a tonal center in the following prelude, *Le vent dans la plaine*. The pitch is introduced right away at the opening in B-flat Phrygian, and it recurs in every beat of the first two pages, like a continuous heartbeat. The constant motion creates a vivid and transparent running passage that mimics the wind blowing lightly and briskly, another contrast between blurriness and clarity.

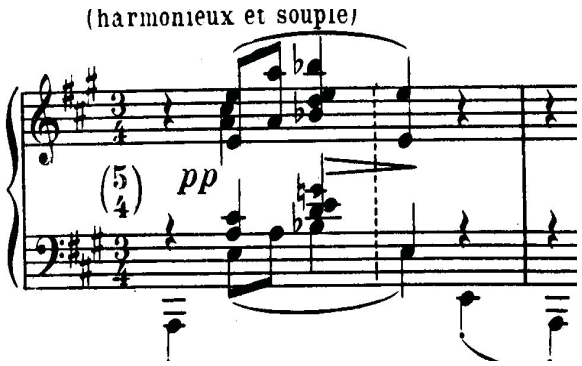
The ending is absolutely magical: the B-flat is held as a pedal point while another layer of chords searches chromatically until it also finds its home in B-flat. This chordal layer fades to indistinctness while the pedal point remains, like an echo in our ears.[52]

[52] Ibid., Chapter 2.



(*Le vent dans la plaine,* m.57-59.)

While the third prelude, *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir,* is written in A major, a hint of emphasis on B-flat links it to the previous preludes.[53] The strange waltz always seems to lead to the high B-flat, which then slides to A; the tonic A thus acts as a point of relaxation or resolution for the B-flat.

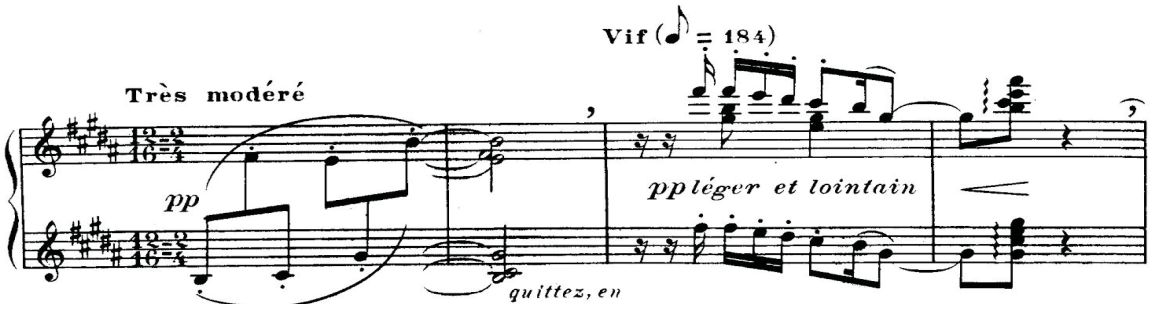


(*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir,* m.1.)

Paul Roberts notes that the last few eighth notes of *Le vent dans la plaine* in *retenu* provide a perfect continuation to the eighth notes in *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*, as they share a similar pulse and contour. After the restless *Le vent dans la plaine*, *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* provides a sense of comfort and intoxication, with its supple rhythm, slippery musical gestures (irregular phrases) and constant changes of key.[54]

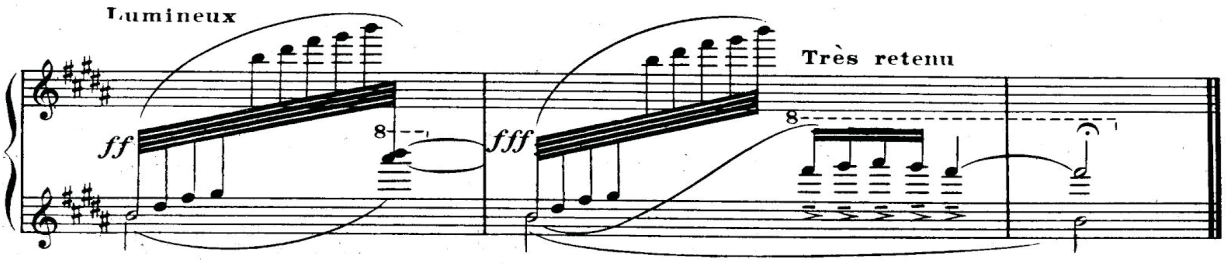
[53] Ibid., Chapter 2.
[54] Ibid., Chapter 2.

The joyous and bright tarantella of *Les collines d'Anacapri* is again in direct contrast with the dim light and hazy ambiance of *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*. Debussy starts *Les collines d'Anacapri* with distant bells, as if awakening the drunk of the previous prelude at dawn for a bright new day.



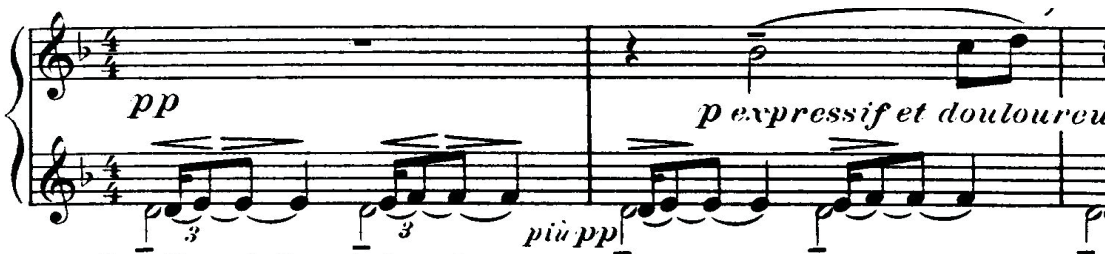
(*Les collines d'Anacapri,* m.1-4.)

Inserting the tarantella discreetly ("*léger et lointain*"), the phrase ends with a questioning leading tone, once again A-sharp (the enharmonic spelling of B-flat).[55] A-sharp takes on an importance in this prelude written in B major as the leading tone that always anticipates the arrival of the tonic. The A-sharp is once again highlighted at the end as the highest pitch, creating a luminous and dazzling sound effect, and keeps ringing in the ears as the brilliance fades away.



(*Les collines d'Anacapri,* m.95-97.)

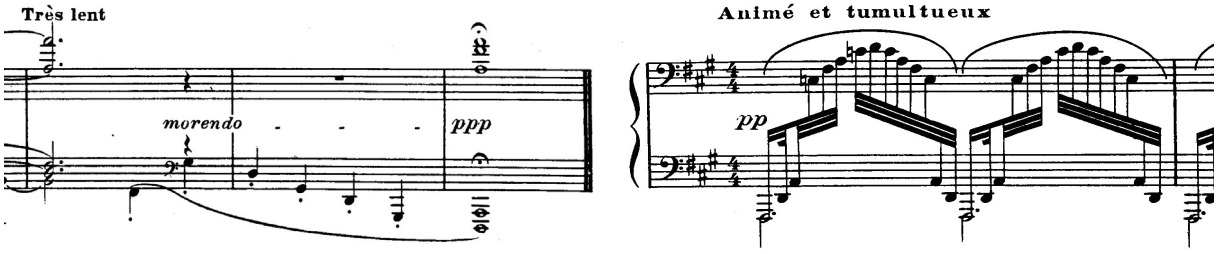
[55] Ibid., Chapter 2.



(*Des pas sur la neige,*m.1-2.)

Des pas sur la neige, the last prelude with an emphasis on B-flat, takes us to a completely bleak state, a shift from the bright summer of Anacapri to stark winter. Everything is in opposition: the tempo, the mood, the motion. The left hand commences with the footstep ostinato, as if the footsteps were already in progress before the piece began; the first melodic note, B-flat, is the most expressive, filled with pain and marked "douloureux."[56] In the key of D minor, B-flat is the only black key in the scale; I venture to suspect a connection between this B-flat and the special emotional content of "douloureux". The B-flat launches a syncopated melody that engages the emotional intensity and physical difficulty of walking in the snow. Throughout the prelude, the B-flat is often put in conflict with B-natural or the enharmonic C-flat. *Des pas sur la neige* proceeds naturally to the next prelude, *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest*, as if the walker recedes into the far distance where the cold wind is blowing. In *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest,* the wind gradually turns into a storm, howling and destroying the vicinity with its tremendous power.

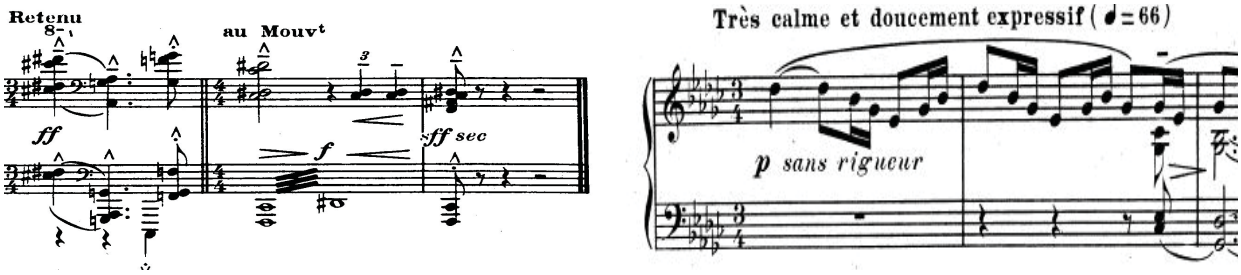
[56] Rings, "Mystères limpides," 191.



(*Des pas sur la neige,* m. 34-36, left; *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest,* m.1-2, right)

Dramatically, it is most effective for the pianist to vanish into the distance at the end of *Des pas sur la neige,* with an absolute silence and motionlessness (*morendo* and *ppp*). The silence secretly gathers its power for the appearance of a gust of wind coming from the far distance in *pianissimo,* gradually accumulating energy and violence. The progress is so organic that these two preludes can be regarded as a pair, linked by a dramatic transition.

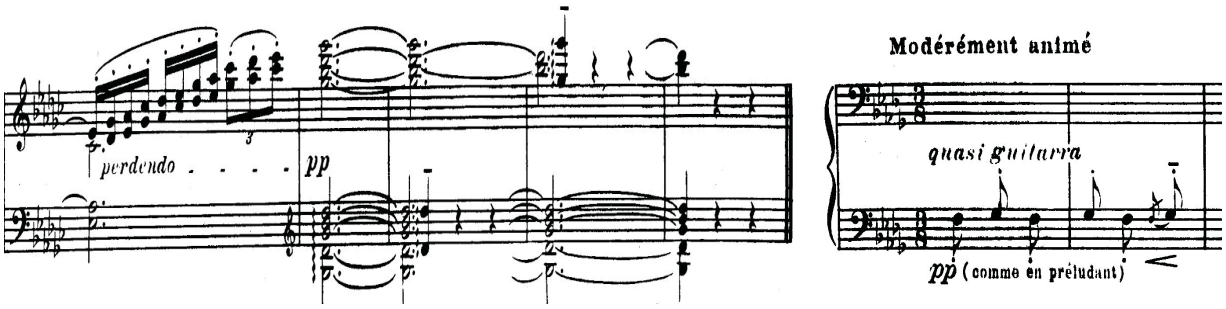
After nature dissipates the storminess and brutal wind, there is another dramatic contrast between this ferociousness and the completely pastoral scene of *La fille aux cheveux de lin,* with simplicity and elegance. This extreme contrast makes the two preludes an excellent pairing in a concert program of selected preludes. Paul Roberts detected that the final chord of *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* (F-sharp-A-sharp-C-sharp-D-sharp) is respelled enharmonically at the beginning of *La fille aux cheveux de lin*.[57]



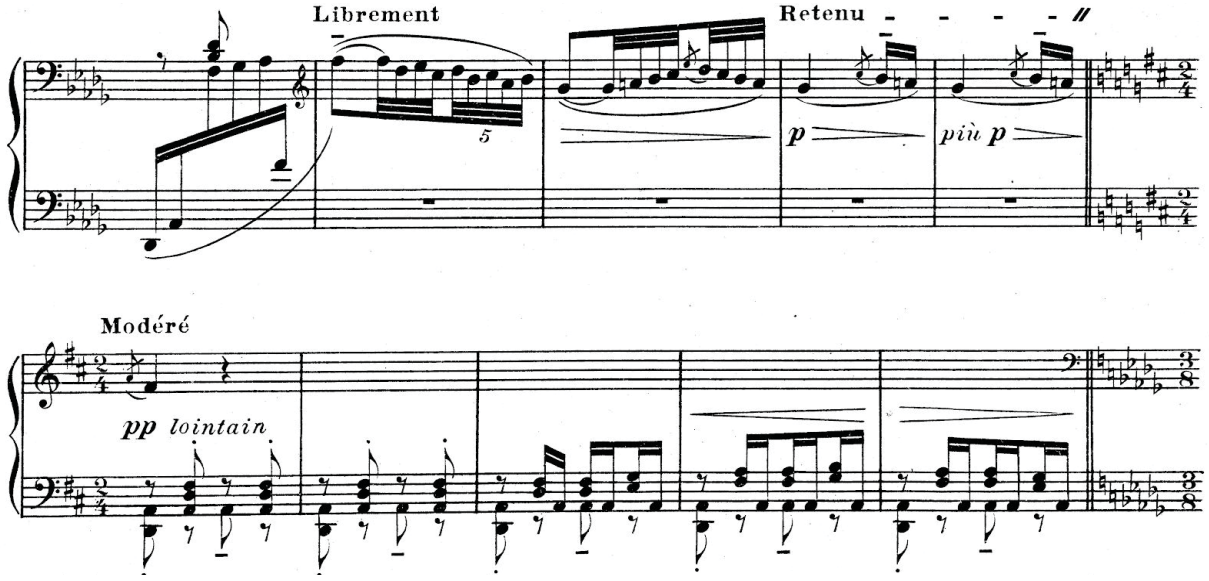
(*Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest,* m.68-71, left; *La fille aux cheveux de lin,* m.1-2, right)

[57] Roberts, *Images,* 254.

The tonic chord of G-flat major is underlined in the last few bars of *La fille aux cheveux de lin;* while the G-flat is still resonating in the listener's ear, the guitarist of *La sérénade interrompue* starts to tune between F and G-flat very softly in the background, an audible thread between the two preludes. I interpret these two bars as a natural transition from one to the next, as Debussy's guitarist warms up and finds his key for serenading. Paul Roberts notes that the pitch G-flat comes back as F-sharp in the D major interruption at m. 78-84.[58]



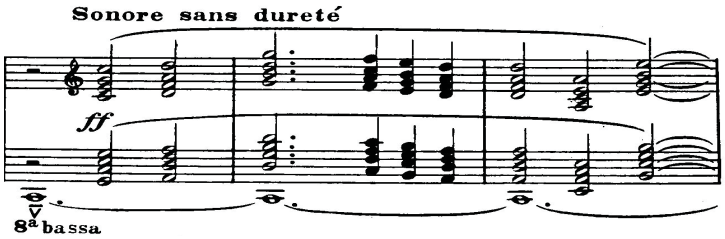
(*La fille aux cheveux de lin,* m.35-39, left; *La sérénade interrompue,* m.1-2, right)



(La sérénade interrompue, m.75-84.)

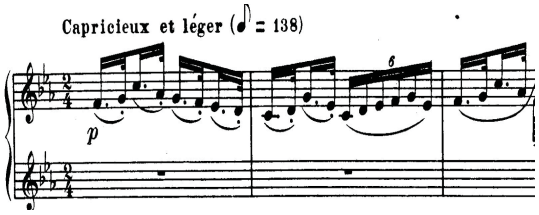
[58] Roberts, Images, 258.

As Howat observes, the remaining three preludes of the book work well in a group due to their shared tonal emphasis on C.[59] Debussy chose the key of C major as the most suitable for the grandiosity of the sonorous chant in *La cathédrale engloutie*, with its openness, purity and nobility.

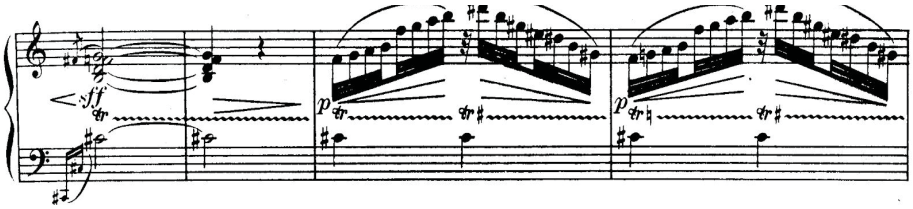


(*La cathédrale engloutie,* m. 27-30.)

La danse de Puck creeps in mischievously in the parallel key of C minor. Out of nowhere, there is an unexpected moment of C major in measures 53-56, a perfect match with Puck's capricious character. As Puck runs around frantically, Debussy confuses the audience with a trill on C-sharp clashing against the G dominant seventh chord.



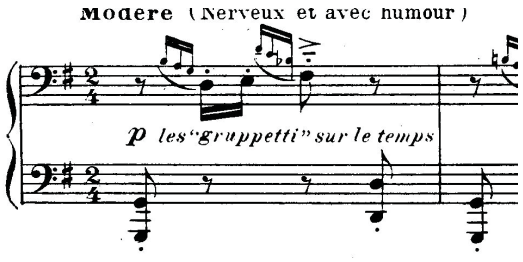
(*La danse de Puck,* m.1-2.)



(La danse de Puck, m.53-56.)

[59] Howat, *The Art of French piano music,* Chapter 2.

The prelude ends in the relative major, E-flat, with an ascending scale suggesting alternately A-flat major, E major, and finally C minor. As the last few ascending notes in the right hand are in a definite C minor scale, there is a sense of comfort and poise when *Minstrels* embraces the key of G, the dominant of the previous two preludes.



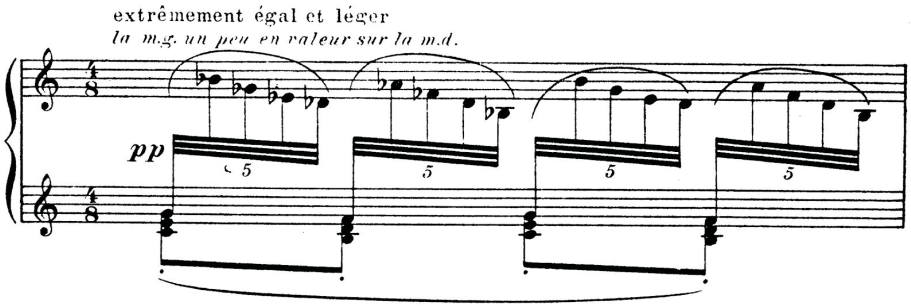
(*Minstrels,* m. 1.)

My consideration of Book I as a cycle draws on analytical findings (such as harmonic and melodic relationships, references to keys, and dramatic structure) as well as writings by Paul Robert and Roy Howat. It is not intended as a reconstruction of Debussy's own "cyclic idea," but rather a performer's interpretation. Exploring the inner connections between the preludes helps the performer understand and successfully convey a coherent sense of form across the full book . As analyzed above, the first six preludes are part of an overall scheme centered on B-flat; this is especially apparent in the first three, whereas the last three single out the pitch through various kinds of harmonic and melodic emphasis. I find personally that the next three preludes, *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest, La fille aux cheveux de lin,* and *La sérénade interrompue,* are linked by a strong thread of dramatic effects. The ordering works so well that the individual preludes would have a reduced effect if performed by themselves, but take on a greater dramatic significance when grouped together. The last three preludes share an emphasis on C, despite their extremely varied characters: the poised and calm *Minstrels* concludes the entire book on a G major chord, approached from C in a plagal cadence.

Book II

Despite the increased tonal ambiguity of Book II, my analysis suggests a number of linkages creating a thread between the disparate Preludes.

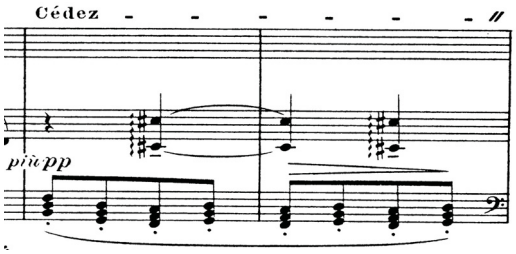
Brouillards opens with an interplay of non-functional triads in constant parallel motion. The chromaticism against the triadic melodies can be regarded as embellishment, further confusing the tonal orientation to suggest the constant movement and uncertainties of mist.



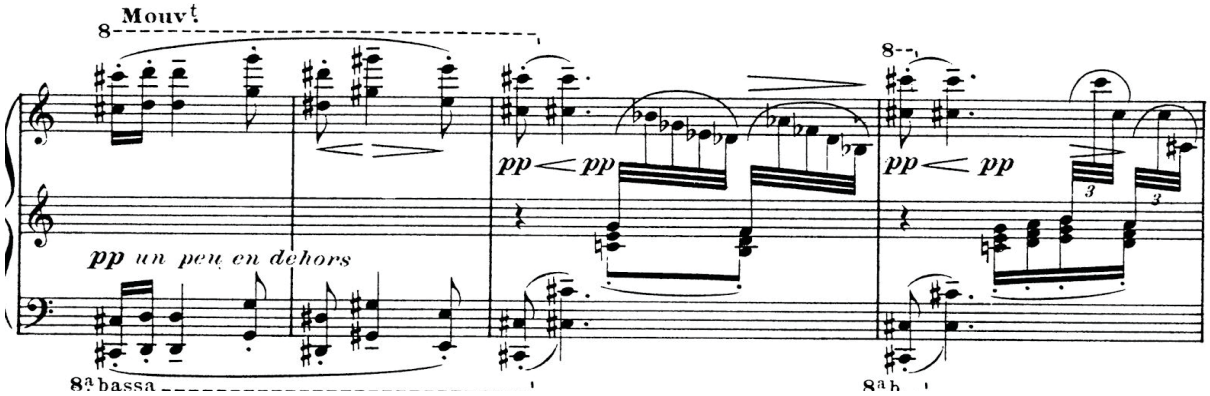
(*Brouillards,* m. 1.)

Howat hears an underlying C-sharp connecting the first three preludes, starting with the B section of *Brouillards* in C-sharp minor.[60] I would add that the pitch C-sharp is crucial for *Brouillards* from the outset, for in addition to the parallel triadic motions between C and B, there is also a chromatic alternation of C and D-flat (C-sharp), creating another dimension of chromaticism and tonal blurring. Therefore, the C-sharp/D-flat is already introduced at the beginning, not only in the B section. Octave C-sharps sound against the white-note triads at m. 16-18, and the idea of the C-sharp blurring the C is especially evident in m. 21-22, where C-sharp octaves are the foundation for a restatement of the opening triadic material.

[60] Ibid., Chapter 2.



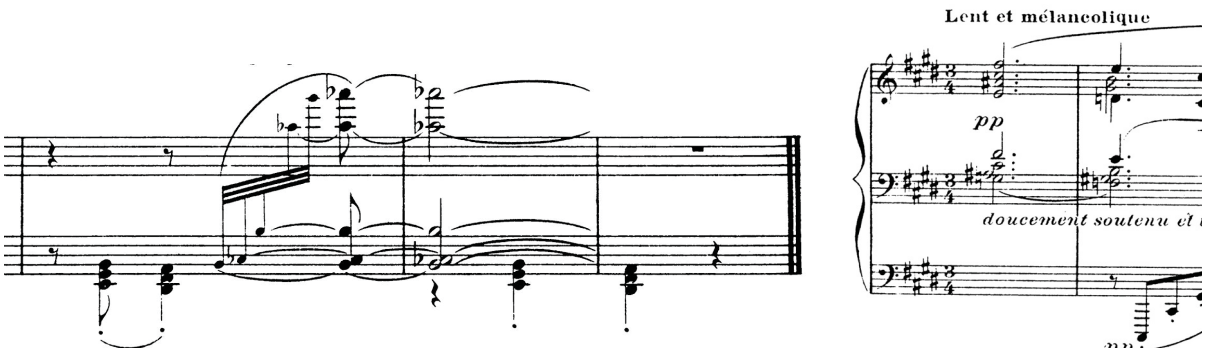
(*Brouillards,* m.16-18.)



(*Brouillards,* m.19-22.)

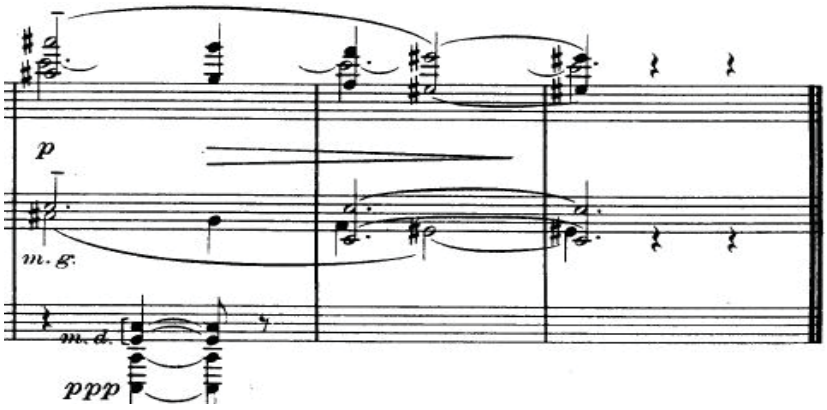
The second prelude, *Feuilles mortes* is written in C-sharp minor. Roberts points out that the top notes of the final two triads of *Brouillards* (G and F) are the same as the bass notes of the first two chords of *Feuilles mortes:* "one piece resolves (and dissolves) into the other."[61] The metric relationship is also worth considering: *Brouillards* indicates 4/8 in *Modérè*, but one can keep a similar quarter note pulse into the *Lent* in 3/4 of *Feuilles mortes*.

[61] Roberts, *Images,* 268.



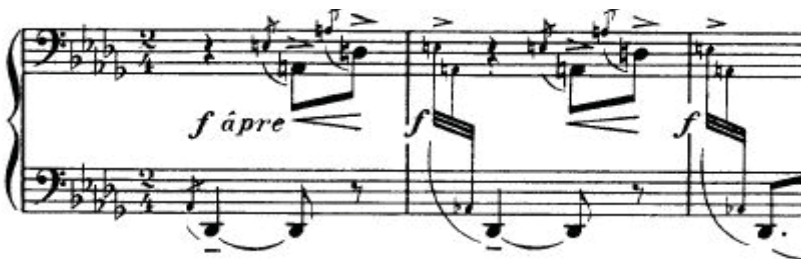
(*Brouillards,* m.19-22, left; *Feuilles mortes,* m.1-2, right)

The very last chord of *Feuilles mortes* functions as a perfect transition to the next prelude, *La puerta del vino* with its harmonic implication. The raised third degree E-sharp of the final chord (of *Feuilles mortes*) not only yields a luminous major triad, but also enharmonically introduces the key of the next prelude in D-flat major. Debussy assertively establishes the D-flat from the beginning, written in *forte* with the expression *âpre* (rough), and it is used as a pedal point for the habanera rhythm throughout.[62]



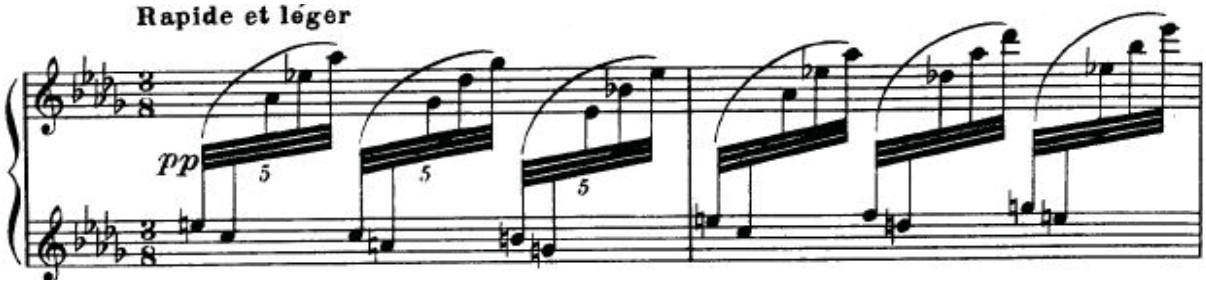
(*Feuilles mortes,* m.1-2.)

[62] Howat, *The art of French piano music,* Chapter 2.



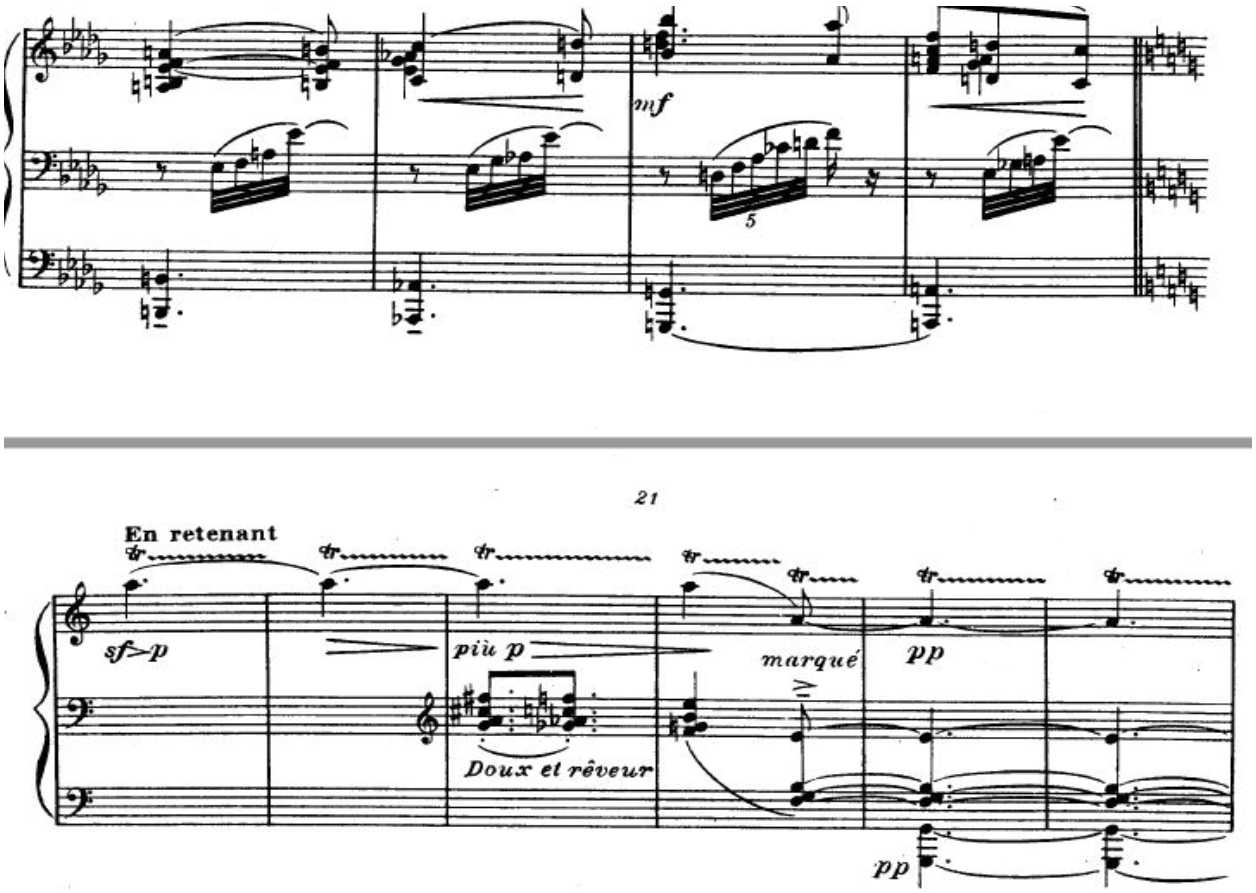
(*La puerta del vino,*m.1-2.)

While Howat hears only the first three preludes in C-sharp, I consider that C-sharp/D-flat can serve as an overarching thread for the first five preludes. D-flat is the home key of *«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»,* despite of the chromatic coloring of C major in the left hand.



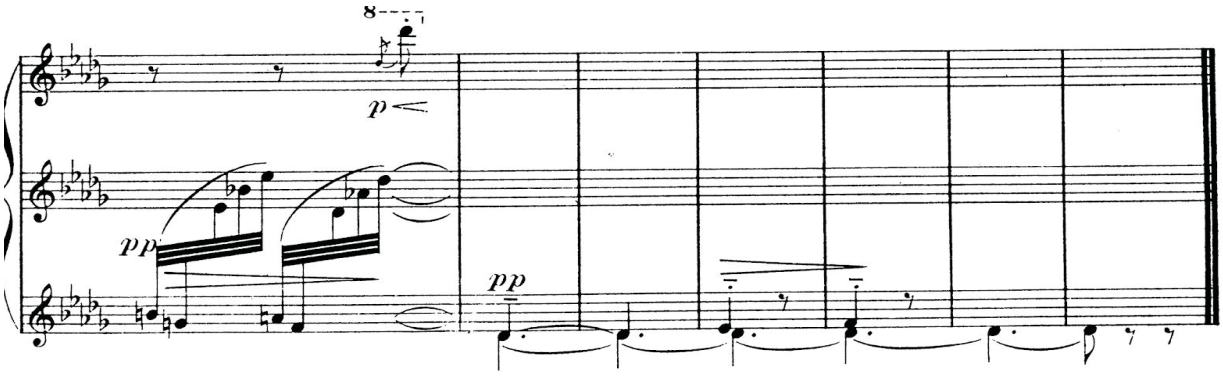
(*«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»*, m. 1-2.)

It is worth noticing how the key signature switches to C-sharp minor, then back to D-flat major, furthering confirming the importance of this pitch. The hints of C major in the first two measures make it no surprise that C major later appears as a passing key (m. 69-78) in the overall tonal context of D-flat major. The juxtaposition of D-flat and C also reflects the notion of bitonality (to be examined later in Section 5), already present from the beginning of the second book in *Brouillards*.



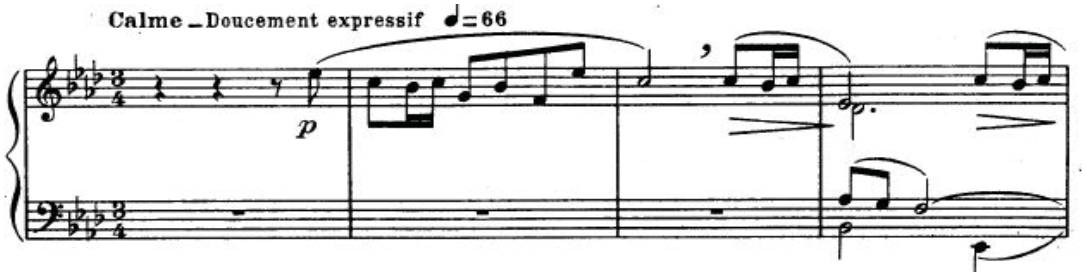
(*«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»*, m. 69-78.)

As the single D-flat at the end of *«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»* gradually dies away, the pitch-class finds its dominant key A-flat major in the next prelude, *Bruyères.* The fairies gradually fade into the distance, followed by a switch to a pastoral scene continuing the calm mood.



(*«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»*, m.121-127.)

The D-flat in measure 4 of *Bruyères* holds a special importance, for it is the first time the D-flat appears and it has the longest note value thus far. I apprehend the D-flat as a gesture of affirmation after the short introductory phrase (m.1-2) that poses a question. Thus, the D-flat emphasis continues even as the key changes to A-flat. One can hypothesize that the last E-flat and F at the end of *«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»* might foreshadow the next two preludes: E-flat is prominent in *Bruyères* as the first note and fifth scale degree, and F is the key of the next prelude, *«Général Lavine» – eccentric.*

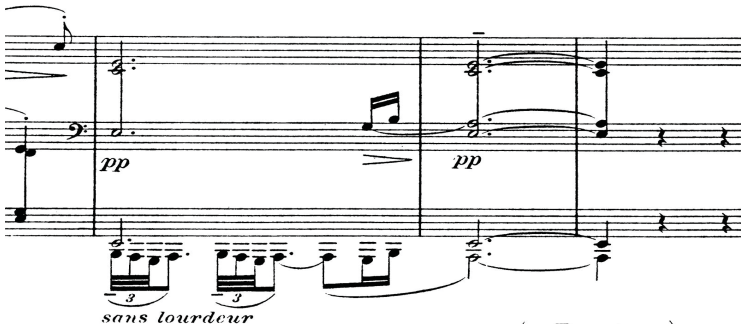


(*Bruyères*, m.1-4.)

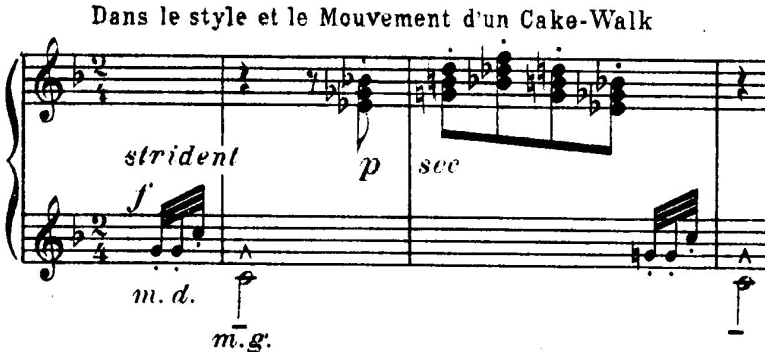
While *Bruyères* ended with serenity ("*sans lourdeur*") Général Lavine's bugle call, marked "*strident,*" shatters the peace and giving everyone a good wake-up call.[63] Once again,

[63] Roberts, *Images, 275.*

the dramatic effect of this transition is satisfactory for programming; what's more, the combination of the accented C (fifth degree of the key F major) with the chromatic eighth note chords that follow is a reminder of the bitonality of C and D-flat yet again.



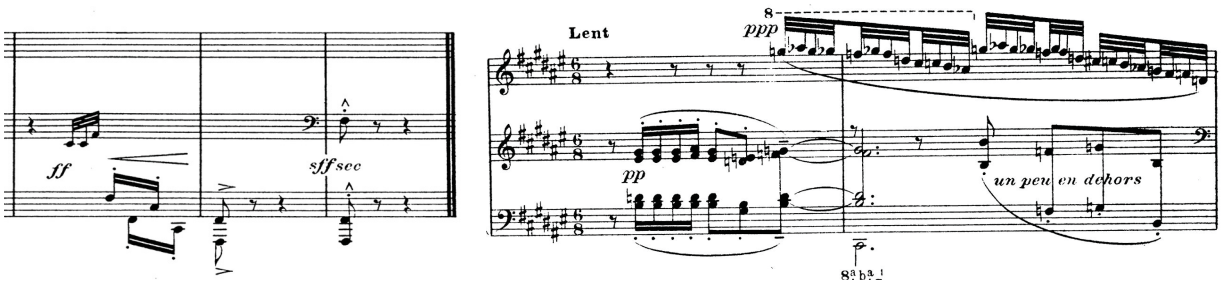
(*Bruyères,* m.49-51.)



(*General Lavine,* m.1-2.)

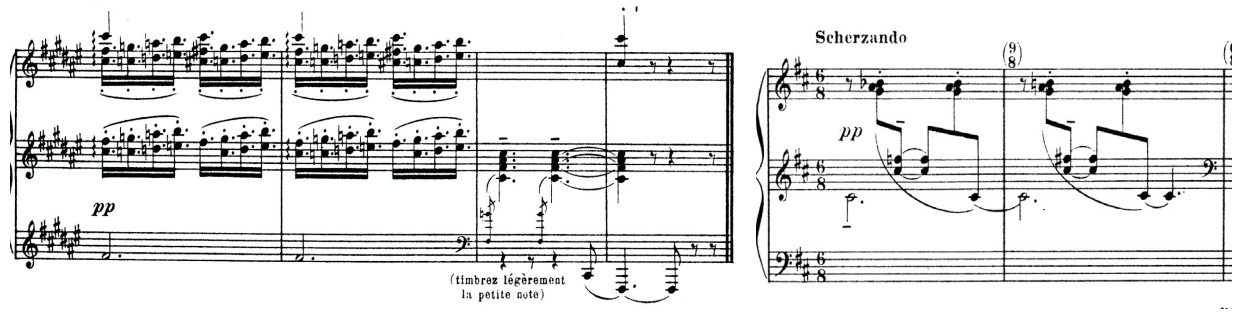
As Général Lavine proudly concludes his performance with an accented unison F, it fades away before being subsequently reintroduced as E-sharp in *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune.* E-sharp acts as a leading tone in the home key of F-sharp major. While Debussy preserves this sense of melodic relation, the two preludes are otherwise in complete opposition with polar dynamic worlds. The exotic sound world Debussy creates in *La terrasse des audiences du clair*

de lune includes an exotic scale descending from nowhere in *ppp;* at the same time, Debussy colors the key of F-sharp major with F-natural, G-natural, D-natural, E-natural and C-natural, notes that can be found in a C major scale, once again suggesting the bitonality introduced in *Brouillards*.

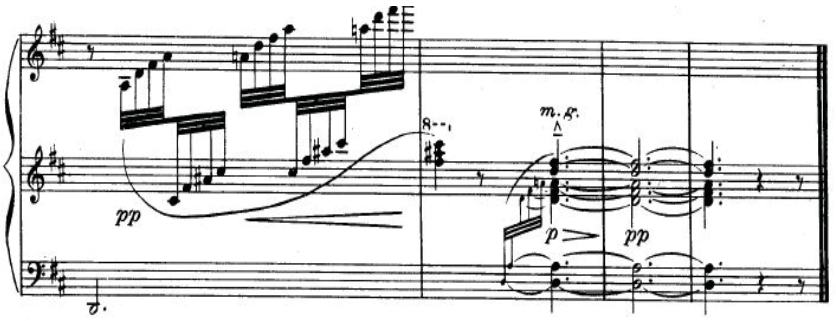


(*General Lavine,* m.107-109, left; *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune,* m.1-2., right)

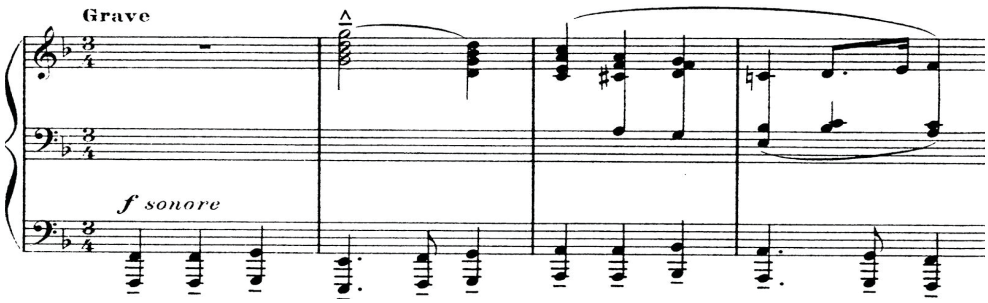
The high C-sharp chimes that resonate at the end of *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* supply a natural linkage to the succeeding prelude, *Ondine,* where the pitch becomes a pedal point launching the entire motion of waves and further disintegrating the sense of meter and tonality.



(*La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune,* m.42-45, left; *Ondine,* m.1-2, right)



(*Ondine,* m.71-74.)



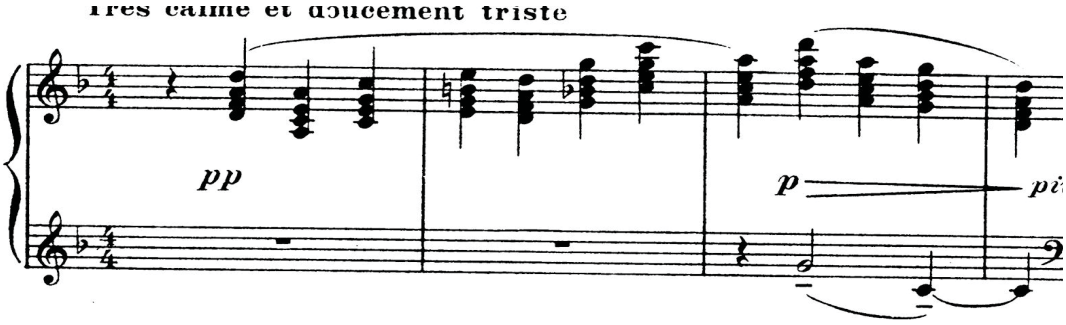
(*Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.,* m. 1-4.)

There is again a sense of shock and contrast in the transition from *Ondine* to *Pickwick*, as in the previous transition from *Général Lavine* to *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune.* The F-sharp on top of the stacked chord ending *Ondine* suggests another semitone relationship similar to the bitonality of *Brouillards* and other preludes. Debussy's choice of F major for the comedic figure Pickwick, as discussed in Section 2, connects this comic portrait to that of Général Lavine, in the same key.

The well-established F major of *Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.* naturally evolves into its relative D minor in *Canope.*[64] In complete divergence from *Pickwick,* a character

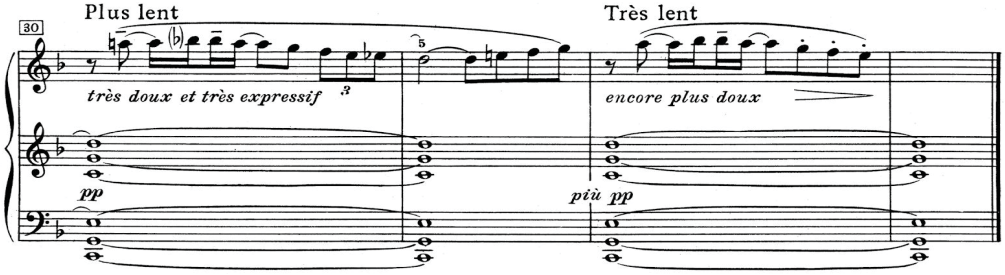
[64] Roberts, *Images,* 281.

full of liveliness and spirit, *Canope* requires detachment and distance. Despite the key of D minor, Roberts argues that there is an implied C throughout these last three preludes, *Canope, Les tierces alternées,* and *Feux d'artifice.*



(*Canope*, m.1-4.)

Linda Cummins suggests that the C major chords with an added D give a profound sense of tonal ambiguity.[65] This is particularly confirmed by the final chord, presented with no resolution or cadence (see below). This further supports Roberts's claim for the presence of C in the prelude.

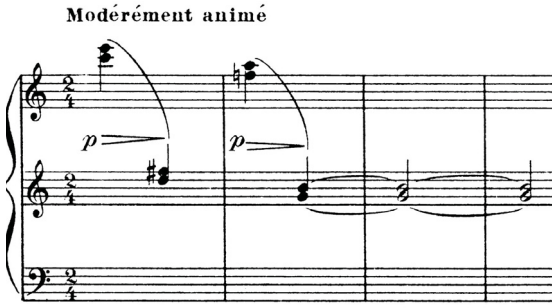


(*Canope*, last four bars.)

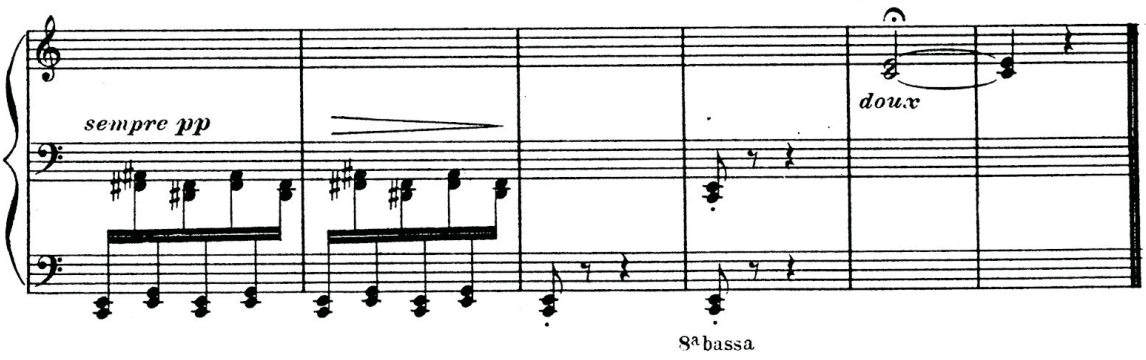
The final chords of *Canope* naturally transition into the next prelude: *Les tierces alternées*, in the key of C major. Debussy cleverly continues the tension between the two keys C

[65] Cummins, *Debussy and the fragment.*

and D by alternating major thirds on C and D at the beginning, a clear reminiscence of the ambiguity of these two pitch classes in *Canope*. Aurally, it creates a strong sense of connection between the two preludes. What's more, the dynamic level is soft in both cases, therefore supporting a smooth, continuous transition. The ending of *Les tierces alternées* again relies on a bitonal coloring, with a final closure on a C major third; as Roberts notes, this looks ahead to the bitonal opening of *Feux d'artifice.*[66]



(*Les tierces alternées,* m. 1-4)



(*Les tierces alternées,* m.160-165.)

[66] Roberts, *Images,* 281.

The key of C in *Les tierces alternées* is heard again affirmatively in the "La Marseillaise" melody of *Feux d'artifice*, one of the very few moments in this complex prelude where the tonality is clear and definitive. Not only there is a shared harmonic relationship, as the use of bitonality continues seamlessly from the *Les tierces alternées* to *Feux d'artifice*, but there is also an incessant motion that persists from one to another, contributing to their vigorous energy and liveliness. Moreover, as Paul Roberts comments, the eighth note pulse from the *Les tierces* is carried on into *Feux d'artifice*.[67] Both demand a new level of virtuosity, with similar technical challenges: refined touch, clarity, and agility. In addition, they are linked by the physical sensation of the two hands playing close to each other, as well as the "perpetual motion" alternation between the two hands..

The goal of this section has been to raise awareness of linkages between preludes to help create a more convincing performance of the whole Book. Even though Book II has a more ambiguous tonal language, this analysis proves that there are still interconnections between all the preludes. The first five preludes, as discussed above, emphasize the pitch C-sharp/D-flat. The new phenomenon of bitonality is present in Book II from *Brouillards* onwards, including preludes *Les fées* and *Les tierces alternées.* Repeated pitches link together pairs of preludes such as *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* and *Ondine;* other types of transitions include melodic or harmonic continuations, and metric or key relationships. Particularly in this book, I find the stroke of genius of the cyclic idea lies in how bitonality both begins and concludes the book, with the same C and D-flat bitonality from *Brouillards* detectable in *Feux d'artifice.* The

[67] Ibid., 281.

entire book ends on a bass D-flat fading into oblivion, placed in contrast with “La Marseillaise” in C.

4. Stylistic evolution between the two books

After examining the titles and context of individual preludes and exploring cyclic relationships within each book, my exploration of the *Préludes* now turns to the similarities and differences between the two books and considers Debussy's musical evolution between the years of 1909 and 1913. Substantial differences between the two books will be observed below: Book II is marked by a much more abstract and obscure musical language, as well as Debussy's absorption of some crucial influences. The rapid musical changes of these years correspond with a particularly tumultuous period of Debussy's personal and professional life. The timeline below gives a quick summary of this period, setting the composition of the second book of *Préludes* in the context of Debussy's troubled personal life and depressive mental state.

Developments in Debussy's personal and professional life, 1909–1913

1910

A great deal happened between the start of the first Book and the completion of the second. As discussed above, most of the preludes in Book I were written in the month of December 1909, terminating with *La danse de puck* in February 1910. The first book was published in April 1910, with a premiere of four preludes by Debussy just weeks before.

Debussy underwent difficult challenges in his personal life. A contentious marriage jeopardized some of his career opportunities. The months following the publication of Book I saw a decline in his marriage, as his wife Emma reportedly wrote to a lawyer to consult on a

potential separation. A few months later, Debussy experienced another blow: his father passed away, and in a letter he reported being deeply affected by this loss.

Thankfully, his *Rhapsodie* for clarinet and piano (1909-10, orchestra version in 1911) did receive a positive reception, but it did not save him from his ongoing debts. He had to accept unwanted performing engagements, including trips to Vienna and Budapest towards the end of the year to accompany singers and to advise in the conducting of his orchestral works, some of which he did in abject misery.

1911

Most of Debussy's energy from the beginning of 1911 to May was spent working on the musical play *Le martyre de St-Sébastian,* a commission from Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, as well as another new commission, the ballet *Khamma.*[68] Despite his doctor's advice to take a month off during the summer, Debussy threw himself into the re-orchestration of the clarinet *Rhapsodie* as well as proofreading *Le martyre de St. Sébastian,* contributing to the continued decline in his health. Despite his efforts, Debussy did not receive a positive critical reaction for *Le martyre de St. Sébastian*. Moreover, he took another conducting trip to Turino, where the reviews criticized his conducting, pointing at his "unclear beats, head ... always in the score, and turning pages with the baton hands." Musicologist Simon Trezise concludes that Debussy was suicidal at this time.[69]

During the final months of 1911, his marriage hit a nadir, as he was tremendously disappointed by Emma's refusal to allow him to visit North America to see performances of his

[68] Ibid., PAGE NUMBER.
[69] Trezise, Simon (ed.) (2003). The Cambridge Companion to Debussy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

opera *Pelléas et Mélisande.*[70] Debussy was very much looking forward to visiting America, especially during this low point of his career. All of these events contributed to his continuing depression.

1912

Another major event in 1912 threw Debussy's career into further disarray; he had accepted having Nijinsky, the star of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes,* choreograph a ballet based on his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. According to James Briscoe, the *Ballets Russes* had been a huge sensation among the French audience since 1908, with successes including Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (for its novel "Oriental" sound and exotic setting) and Stravinsky's *Firebird* and *Petrushka.*[71] Debussy was in fact familiar with the music of Glinka, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, and other Russian composers; in fact, he played four-hand compositions of Glinka and Tchaikovsky with Mussorgsky as a young man. Roy Howat observes that the rich and sonorous chordal climax of *La cathédral engloutie* echos the grandiose and chordal "Great Gate of Kiev" movement from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition.*[72]

It was no surprise that the *Ballets Russes* production of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* attracted enormous attention. Debussy's Symbolist tendencies and his aesthetic of subtle implications clashed with Nijinsky's production, rife with explicit sexuality. As Roger Nicolas reports, a scandal ensued and Debussy's intended effect was lost through the mismatch of Nijinsky's Cubist and angular movements with Debussy's fluid and seamless music.[73] The

[70] Nichols, *The Life of Debussy.*
[71] Briscoe, James R. *Debussy in Performance*. Yale University Press, 1999., 129.
[72] Howat, *The art of French piano music,* Chapter 2.
[73] Nichols, *The Life of Debussy*.

scandal brought Debussy more frustration and artistic humiliation rather than the positive attention for which he had hoped. Following his attendance of performances of Richard Strauss's *Salome* and Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps,* Debussy was motivated to embark upon another major artistic project, and agreed in June to write the ballet *Jeux* for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*. His acceptance of this offer to collaborate was motivated at least in part by his financial crisis, during which he urgently needed to take as much work as possible. As he was working full-speed on *Jeux* with a tight deadline from Diaghilev, he was also preoccupied with the second book of *Préludes,* for which the publisher Durand paid a large sum of 12,000 francs (making it one of his most highly paid works). The commision for the *Préludes* from Durand not only was just in time to aid Debussy's financial situation, but also gave him creative energy to experiment with new ideas in miniature works for solo piano. In the summer of 1912, he worked concurrently on the *Préludes,* the two ballets *Khamma* (1911-12) and *Jeux* (1912-13), and the last movement, "Gigues," of the orchestral work *Images* (1905-12). However, it was still not enough, and from the end of 1912 to the beginning of 1913 he worked as a music critic, writing a total of eleven articles for the Société Internationale de Musique.

1913

During the period in which the second book was composed, Debussy struggled with much personal and professional adversity. Book II was published exactly three years after Book I, in April 1913. The new collection reflected the many changes in Debussy's life over this eventful and challenging period.

Comparisons between selected preludes in Book I and Book II

Debussy drew inspiration from similar subjects in Book I and Book II, as already examined in Section 2. Both books are rich in character and imaginative in his choice of extra-musical references: various countries, people, comedic figures, mythological subjects, natural phenomena, fairies, visual art, works of literature and so on. Despite these shared categories, an evolution is evident in the subjects chosen for Book II. During the three years between the two Books, personal and social changes affected Debussy's mental state and musical outlook. The combination of health issues, the unenthusiastic reception of his music, marriage setbacks, his financial crisis and the overall pre-war turmoil all contributed to a decline in his health and spirits. Consequently, Book II reflected a darker, more obscure musical outlook and "seems inferior to [the first book's] emotional contents,"[74], with a "more advanced" and "difficult" musical language.[75]

With regard to its emotional energy and harmonic language, the second Book displays a more distant, introverted, reserved and almost confused approach, starting with the first two preludes *Brouillards* and *Feuilles mortes*. Titles such as *Feux d'artifice* and *Les tierces alternées* allude to a more objective choice of subjects. Such a change is reflected in Debussy's more abstract musical language: the tonal structure is more ambiguous, and harmonies fluctuate unexpectedly and rapidly, with incomplete and unsolved cadences and fragmented musical ideas. In conclusion, the titles of Book II are less explicit than Book I, and the musical language is correspondingly more resigned.

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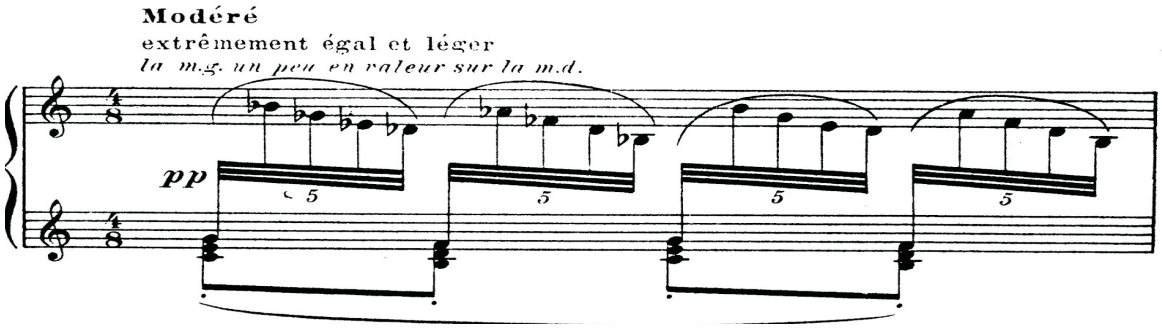
[74] Guido M. Gatti,Claude Debussy, and Frederick H. Martens, "The Piano Works of Claude Debussy, *The Musical Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1921): 418-60.
[75] Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy,* 129.

Comparing preludes from the two Books is a useful approach, as their similarities and differences will give a clear guide to the evolution in Debussy's musical language. I have chosen three comparisons below, based on similar subject matter. The first comparison includes titles invoking natural elements: the "*wind triptych"* from Book I and *Brouillards/Feuilles mortes* from Book II, while the second pair deals with archaeological subjects: *Danseuses de Delphes* from Book I and *Canope* from Book II. The third comparison will be made between *Minstrels (Book I)* and *«Général Lavine» – eccentric* (Book II), both based on music hall comedians.

"wind triptych" (**Book I)** and *Brouillards/Feuilles mortes* (**Book II**)



(*Brouillards*, m. 1)

In both books, Debussy focuses on the depiction of natural phenomena, from what Schmitz calls the "wind triptych" of Book I (*Voiles*, *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* and *Le vent dans la plaine*) to *Brouillards* and *Feuille mortes* in Book II. However, the images of nature in the second book are more subdued and abstract, and even psychologically more resigned. The three wind preludes of Book I have much more specific imagery in their titles: for instance, "the wind

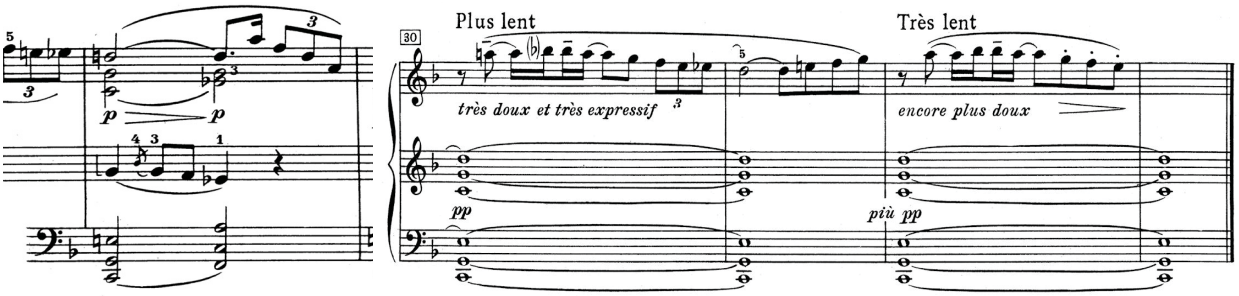
in the plain" with its literary link to Favart, or the reference in *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* to Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind." In contrast, Book II's *Brouillards* lacks context as we cannot determine where the fog is and what state it is in, and *Feuilles mortes* also lacks specifics on the season and location of the leaves. Schmitz concludes that these Book II preludes present a much more abstract elemental portrait, demanding more imaginative interpretation.[76] In terms of subject matter, both fog and dead leaves imply a more distant and pessimistic mental state, perhaps a result of Debussy's loneliness and unhappiness in life.

The tonal center in *Brouillards* is "misty" in the sense that there is no clear tonal center; such tonal ambiguity continues to hover like static and floating fog. The blurred triadic motif paints the fog moving slowly and hesitantly at the opening. The same idea returns at the end, as the fog as well as the sound fade away. In contrast to the "wind triptych" from Book I with its clear and definite tonalities (despite some temporary chromatic transitions and modulations), *Brouillards* never resolves or settles on any tonality: the end poses a tonal question mark. The depiction of the "wind triptych" is nuanced and vivid, with rhythmic energy and a huge dynamic range (*Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest*); whereas the imagery is more subdued in *Brouillards* and *Feuilles mortes*, lacking a wide dynamic range or rhythmical drive. *Pianissimo* is marked almost everywhere with little contrast, and the pacing is inactive and almost wearisome. *Feuilles mortes* is marked *lent et mélancolique* (slow and melancholy), which surely implies some faded and depressing emotional content. While searching for a tonal or modal confirmation, it ends in a totally unexpected key.

[76] Schmitz, The Piano Works of Claude Debussy, 161.

Danseuses de Delphes (**Book I)** and *Canope* (**Book II**)

The titles themselves reflect an emotional transformation; *Danseuses de Delphes* is dance in sustained and dignified movements, while *Canope* symbolizes a distant past and rumination on mortality, described by Alfred Cortot as embodying a "lamenting quality," and by Linda Cummins as an image of a "distant civilization."



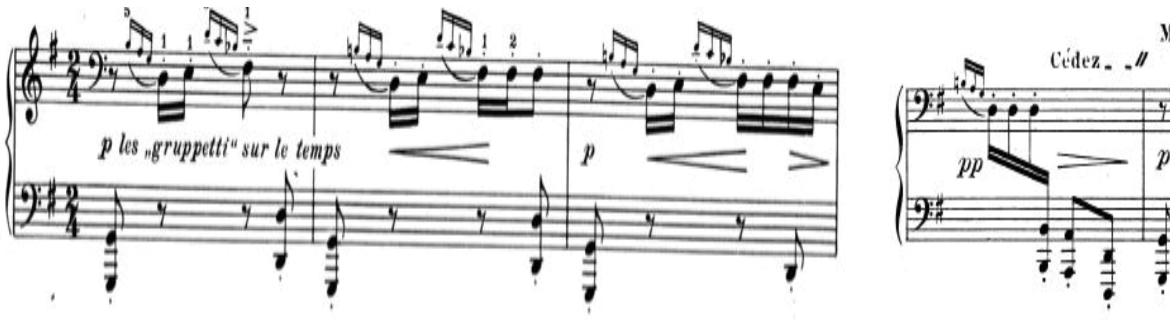
(*Canope*, m.14, left; m. 30-34, right)

The near stillness of *Danseuses de Delphes* not only adds nobility to the motion, but is also evident in the "stillness" of the tonality; a well-established, diatonic B-flat major with classical tonal syntax from the very first chord to the last, with a complete and satisfying tonal structure. In *Canope*, also a slow work, one can faintly hear echos of the blocky chords from *Danseuses de Delphes*. The remoteness of Ancient Egypt is suggested by the ambiguous tonality. The supposed tonal center of D is called into question through repeated appearances of C chords (m. 14, 30-33). To further affirm this distant quality, the ending gradually dies away; an irregular arabesque unfolds over the held final chord, left unresolved like a question mark. It remains ambiguous whether the piece closes in C or D, unlike the declamatory final B-flat chord in *Danseuses de Delphes*.

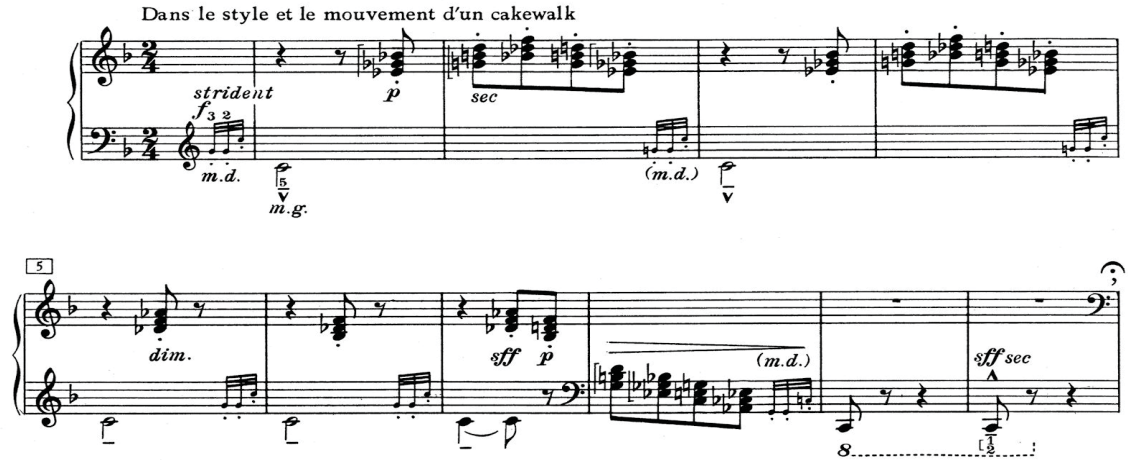
Minstrels (**Book I)** and *«Général Lavine» – eccentric* (**Book II)**

Both *Minstrels* and *«Général Lavine» – eccentric* refer to American comedic figures: jugglers whose comical movements and mishaps were accompanied by jazz elements. Debussy saw Général Lavine's performances at the Marigny Theater in 1910 or 1912, the latter date right before the piece was composed. *Général Lavine*'s musical language is much more direct than that of *Minstrels*, with exaggerated theatrical gestures, as well as a wider dynamic range and more extended and complex materials. In comparison to *Minstrels*, *Lavine*'s movements seem more sudden and uncontrolled.

Both are in 2/4, yet *Minstrels* has a more regular "short-short-long" eight-bar phrasing, whereas *Général Lavine* has phrasings that are irregular and longer (ten measures for the first phrase), as Debussy explores more irregular and unconventional phrase structures in Book II.

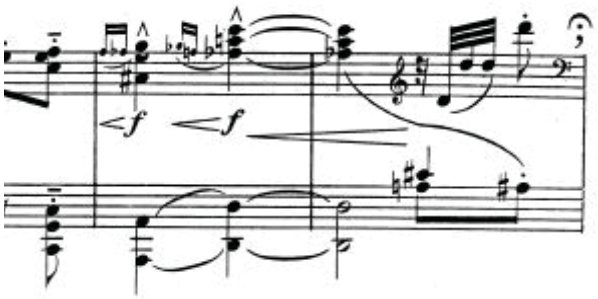


(*Minstrels*, m. 1-4)

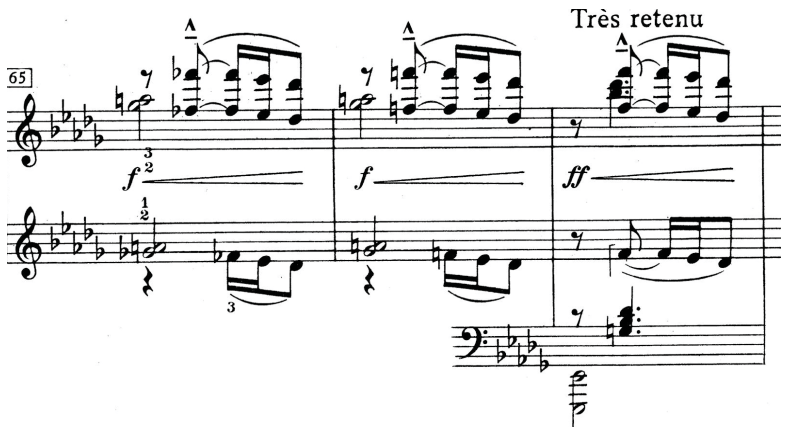


(*General Lavine*, m. 1-10)

The characters are also much different: *Minstrels* is more laid-back and mild in *piano*, although with occasional hair pins and accents. *Lavine*'s opening trumpet motif is much more of a surprise; the accents are much exaggerated—strident in *forte* and *carets* at the opening—and the articulation is also more percussive with loud accents and *sec* staccato. Such stridency in contrast with the timid *piano, sec, staccato* in the second measure truly expresses his eccentric character. The depiction is made much more vivid by this exaggerated contrast. The brass motif probably mocks the brass's playing out of tune with its chromatic language. To contrast with the brass introduction, Debussy then introduces the swaggering cakewalk material of *Lavine*.



(*Minstrels*, m. 76-77)



(*General Lavine*, m. 65-67)

The biggest moment in *Minstrels* has a harmonic tension building up to an augmented chord in forte (m.76), whereas in *General Lavine*, there is a huge emotional outcry at m. 65 culminating in the repetition of the same motif three times, leading into the climactic dominant chord built on the bass octave E-flat. This climax is achieved with a wider register and bigger dynamic range than in *Minstrels,* with even more insistency in its dramatic expression. The three years gap between the two preludes might have given Debussy a chance to experiment and enrich ways of expressing himself, allowing the creation of this more irregular and eccentric portrait.

5. Influences on the musical language of the *Préludes*

In this chapter, I will explore various external influences on Debussy's *Préludes.* Some of them are broad-ranging and not exclusively found in the preludes, but also in his other contemporary works. The influences to be examined below include the music of Igor Stravinsky, Oriental and Spanish music, and a renewed engagement with the historical music of the French Baroque.

Stravinsky

The writer of *Le sacre du printemps* left an undeniable mark on Debussy's compositional output, starting from the first performances of *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrushka* (1911),[77] both heard shortly after Debussy finished the first book of preludes in February 1910. Debussy complimented *Petrushka* in a letter to Stravinsky dated April 10, 1912, around the time he began the second Book, praising the work's "orchestra infallibility such as I have found only in *Parsifal.*"[78]

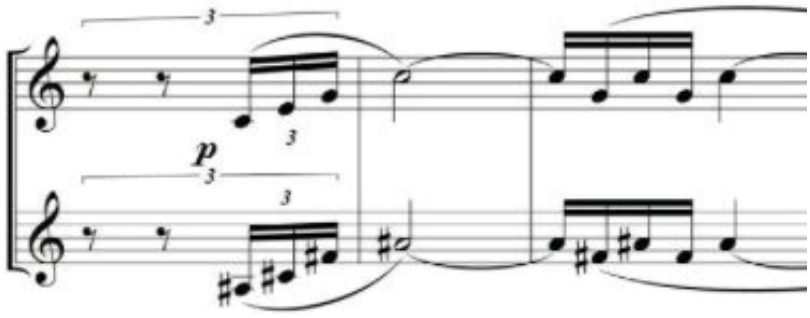
However, the impact of those two ballets was not comparable to that of *Le Sacre du printemps* (1910-13). Around mid-1912, Debussy attended a lunch party *chez* Louis Laloy, where he had the opportunity to read *Le Sacre du printemps* alongside with Stravinsky. When

[77] Howat, *The art of French piano music,* Chapter 9.
[78] Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: his life and mind*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

Stravinsky asked for his feedback, Debussy wrote in November that "the performance haunts me like a beautiful nightmare and I try in vain to recall the terrifying impression it made."[79]

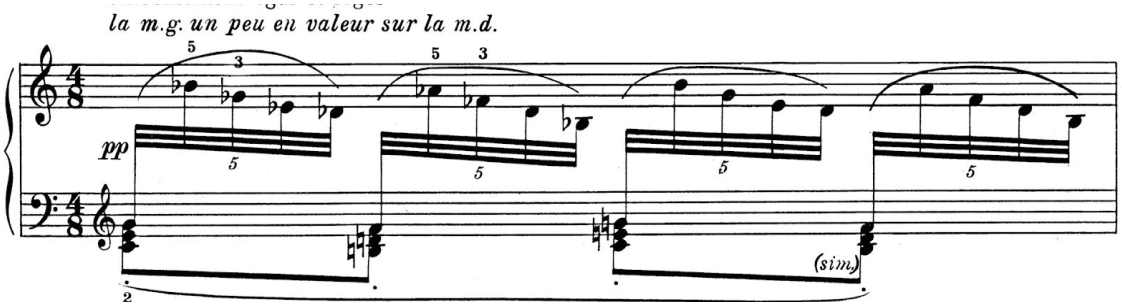
It indeed "haunted" his subconsciousness when writing the second book; the impact is evident in various aspects of the work, including harmony, direct quotations in disguised phrases, musical motifs and figurations, and extended pianistic technique. I will examine closely how Stravinsky's ballets shaped Debussy's conception of certain preludes.

I will begin with the musical influence of *Petrushka* on *Brouillards*. Unfortunately, unlike the first book, there is no record of the exact dates for each prelude, except for a general timespan between the second half of 1912 and the beginning of 1913. However, the coincidence of Debussy's comment on *Petrushka* in the letter of April 10, 1912) and the start of his work on the second Book (with *Brouillards*) suggests a close connection between the two.



(Stravinsky: *Petrushka* chord, *Petrushka,* second tableau, m. 1-3.)

[79] Howat, *The art of French piano music,* Chapter 9.



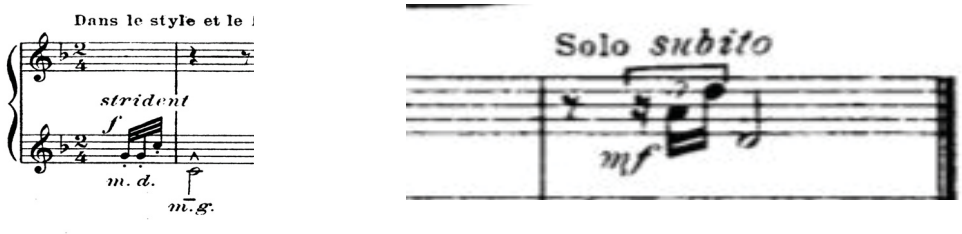
(*Brouillards,* m. 1.)

The first beat of *Brouillards,* combining of C and G-flat (enharmonic spelling of F-sharp) triads, is identical in pitch-class content to the famous *Petrushka* chord. Not only does the bi-tonal combination occur at the same interval of a tritone, the *Petrushka* chord also prefigures to Debussy's characteristic hand distribution in the second book: the visual and physical effect of combining one hand on "white keys" and the other on "black keys."[80] In the case of *Brouillards*, the right hand plays black keys from the key of G-flat over the white keys outlining a C major chord in root position, reversing the role of the hands from the *Petrushka* chord. The tonality is established in the left hand on the white keys, while the black keys in the right hand are a chromatic figuration shadowing the white ones, creating a misty harmonic blurring. In addition, the melodies that move step-wise in slow eighth-note motion further enhance the effect of a dense immobile mist. In *Brouillards*, the employment of the *Petrushka* chord not only forms a harmonic construction with a distinct sound but also can suggest a synesthetic visual experience for the performer and listener.

Général Lavine was famous for his wooden puppet-like walk, suggesting a further allusion to *Petrushka*, a love story of three puppets. The opening *"strident"* fanfare-like motif in

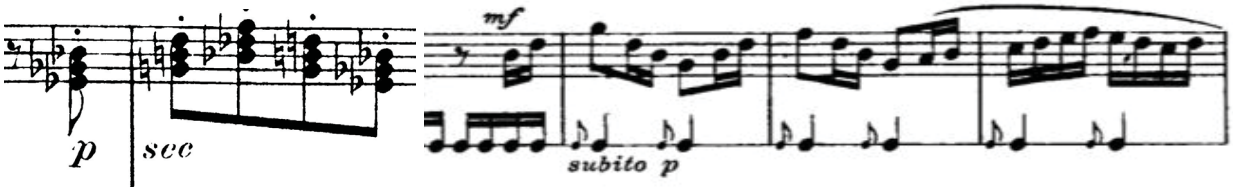
[80] Ibid., Chapter 9.

Général Lavine resembles the solo trumpet call in the third tableau of *Petrushka,* with the same intervals and effect of surprise.[81]



(*General Lavine,* m. 1, left; Stravinsky: *Petrushka,* third tableau, trumpet call, right.)

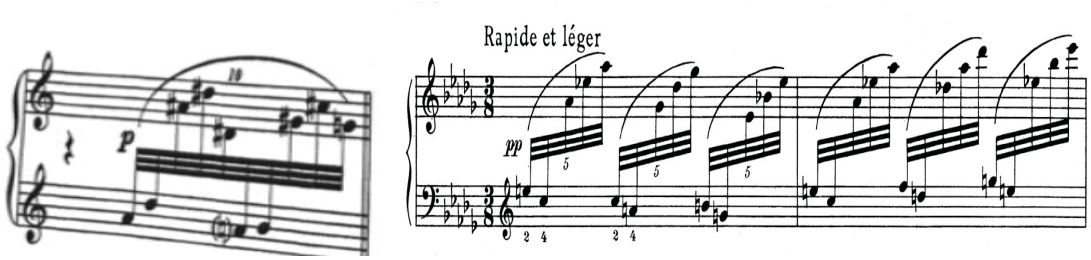
The well-known Ballerina dance solo in *Petrushka,* played by solo trumpet, has a similar melodic contour to the brass motif in the opening of *Général Lavine.* The bi-tonal mixture of black and white keys in the prelude also suggests the influence of the *Petrushka* chord.



(*General Lavine,* m. 1., left; Stravinsky: *Petrushka,* third tableau, right.)

Furthermore, the piano figuration of the second tableau of *Petrushka* in fluid thirty-second notes may have inspired the opening running passage of *«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses».*[82]

[81] Ibid., Chapter 9..
[82] Ibid., Chapter 9.

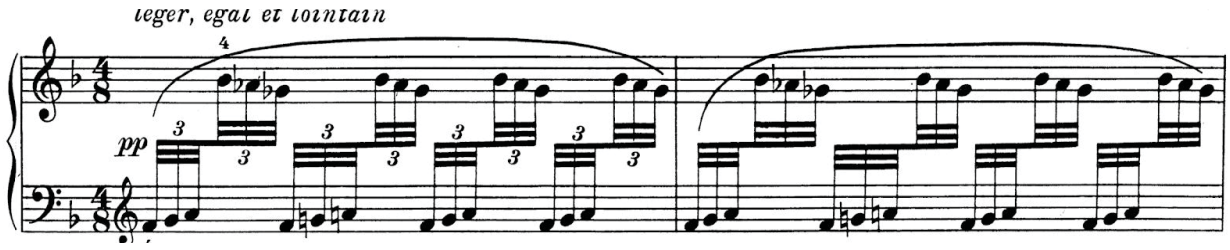


(Stravinsky, *Petrushka,* third tableau, m. 21, solo piano, left; *«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»*, m. 1, right.)

Like *Brouillards*, *«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»* sets the hands against one another in an opposition of black against white keys, suggesting a different tonality in each hand as in Stravinsky's *Petrushka* chord. Here, the left hand rests firmly on the white keys in the key of C major; the written key signature indicates D-flat major instead, which corresponds to the key of the right hand's black keys.[83] As in *Brouillards*, one hand serves as embellishment to the other one, which projects the prevailing tonality, with the contrast of black and white giving the pianist visual guidance to the distinct functions of each hand.

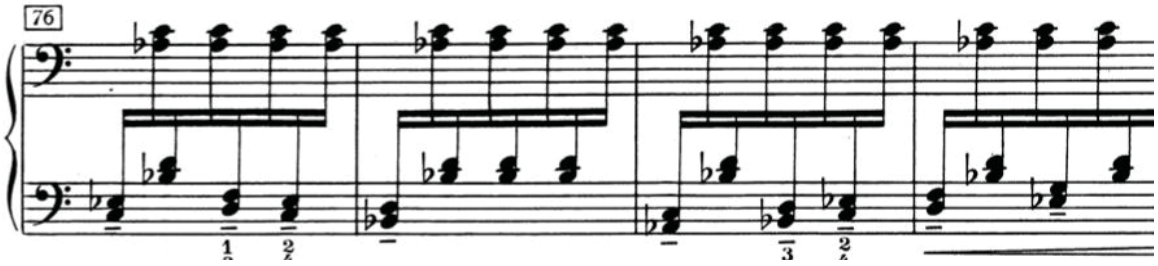
In *Brouillards*, the right hand plays all black keys while the tonality is established in the left hand on the white keys, as if the figuration on the black keys is shadowing the white ones. *«Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses»*, on the contrary, establishes its tonality in the right hand on the black keys. Lastly, *Feux d'artifice* displays such black-key/white-key alternation between both hands without a tonal center[84].

[83] Ibid., Chapter 9.
[84] Ibid., Chapter 9.

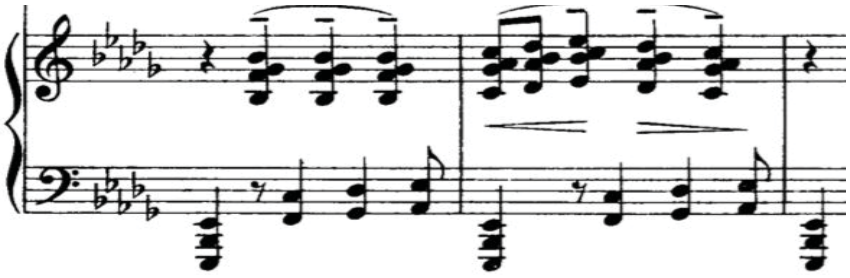


(*Feux d'artifice,* m. 1-2.)

As Roy Howat observes, Debussy recalled the introduction from Part II: "Le Sacrifice" in *Le Sacre du printemps* in his *Les tierces alternées,* written two months afterwards. The melody is secretly suggested and highlighted by the notes under tenuto markings.[85] I would also add the observation that the bi-tonal alternating thirds on C and F-sharp in m.160-61 strongly suggest the tritone intervals of the *Petrushka* chord.

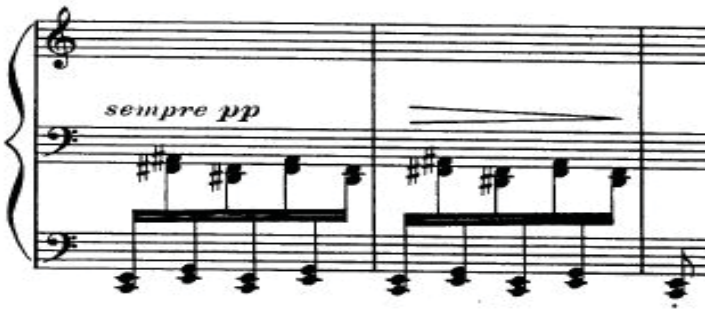


(*Les tierces alternées*, m. 76-80.)



(Stravinsky, *Le Sacre du printemps*, Part II: Le Sacrifice, m. 11-12.)

[85] Ibid., Chapter 9.



(*Les tierces alternées,* m. 160-161.)

Oriental influence

The influence of Orientalism can be felt especially strongly in Debussy's *Préludes.* Orientalism is a complex term that involves numerous historical, geopolitical, and social components. The "Orient" is an experience of "the other," an underrepresented and fantastical conception of an untouched land—the colonized lands, according to critic and historian Edward Said.[86] The Orient that ensnared Debussy was a post-colonial terrain, from which he drew vivid inspiration for his musical output.

The powerful and unfamiliar sound of gamelan left a strong impression on the acute ears of Debussy, after an ensemble performance of Javanese gamelan at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1889.[87] France held a world fair that involved the participation of many nations from around the globe: the Exposition Universelle, which brought artists and musicians from Africa, the Middle East and Asia, as well as folk music from various regions of Europe (Spain,

[86] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
[87] Howat, *The art of French piano music,* Chapter 8.

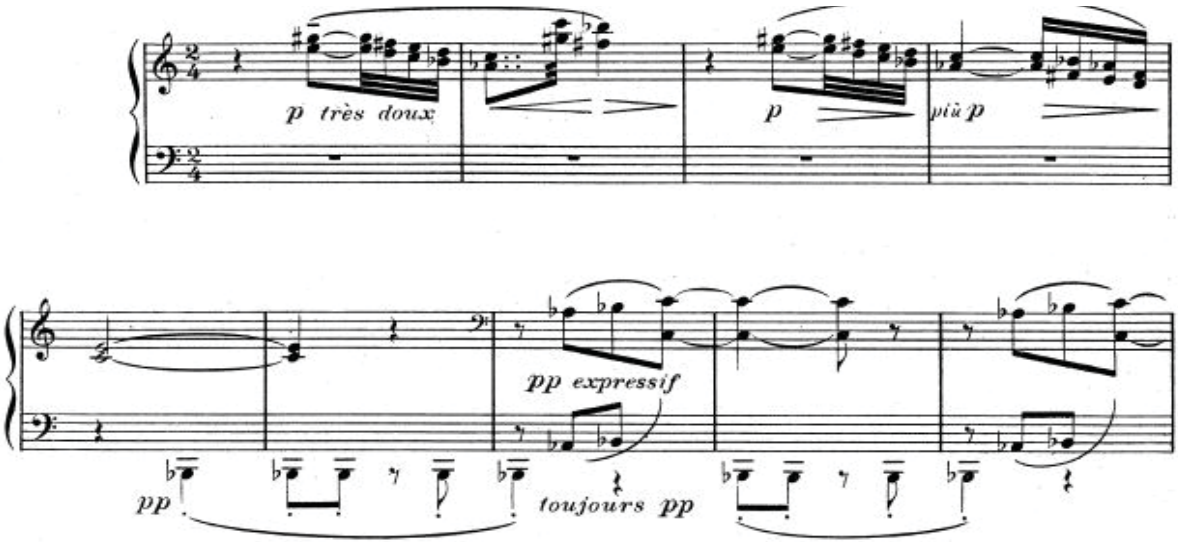
Romania, Norway, etc.). The wide-ranging scope and novelty of the exotic and foreign cultures that were presented contributed to the spectrum and depth of Oriental influence in French art of the time, Debussy's music included. Many of Debussy's titles allude to an Oriental context, such as *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*. In 1900 he had another chance to hear a gamelan orchestra, and he started to incorporate the gamelan sound in his compositions. He became engrossed with the sound of chimes, bells, and moments of silence.[88]

Voiles (Book I)

In *Voiles*, the constant stroke of a single note emerging from the low register imitates an important characteristic of the gamelan sound (m. 5). The tuning system of Javanese and Balinese gamelan contains two temperaments that resemble what we know as pentatonic (s*lendro*) and whole-tone scales (*pelog*).[89]

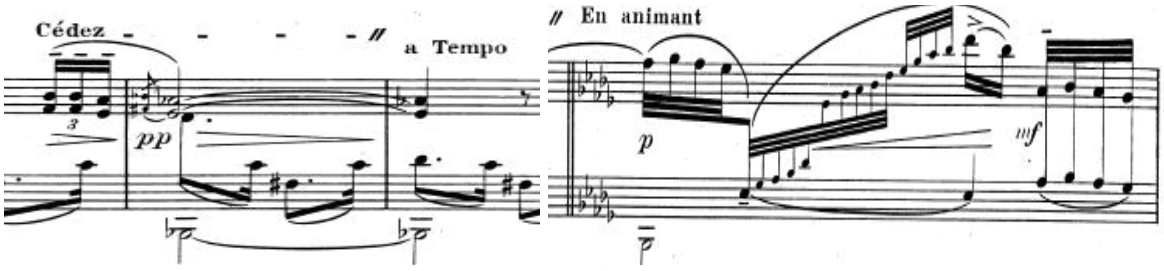
[88] John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 157.

[89] Michael David Schmitz, "Oriental influences in the piano music of Claude Achille Debussy," D.M.A. diss., University of Arizona, 1995.



(*Voiles*, m.1-9.)

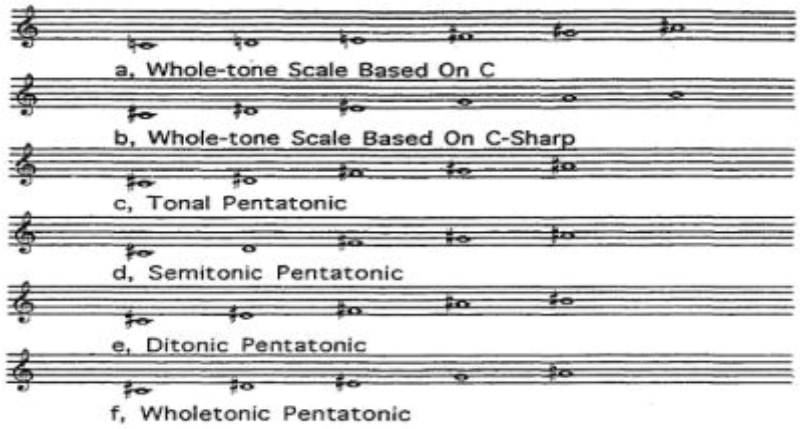
Both scales are often utilized in Debussy's preludes, sometimes even simultaneously. The whole-tone scale is introduced immediately in the first bar of *Voiles* in a very distant and mysterious manner, fluttering constantly in parallel thirds like a gentle breeze around the sails. The tempo markings "*cédez"* and "*a tempo*" (m. 27-28) imply the distinct sections in a way similar to Javanese music, which also slows down at the end of sections. The climax is a cadenza with virtuosic brilliance in the form of arpeggiated figures of the pentatonic scale, resembling the shift from *pelog* to *slendro*.



(*Voiles*, m. 27-28, left; m. 22, right.)

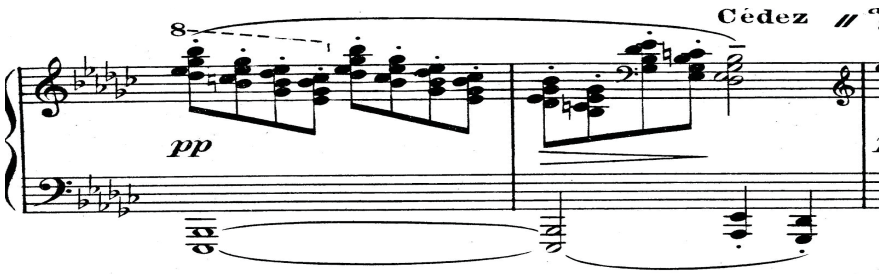
Le vent dans la plaine (Book I)

Pentatonic scales have different variants, depending on the placement of the half steps. Below is the chart compiled by Michael David Schmitz, explaining the six possibilities of the pentatonic scale. The minor ninth of between B-flat and C-flat at the beginning of *Le vent dans la plaine* corresponds to the Semitonic Pentatonic scale with the lowered second.[90]



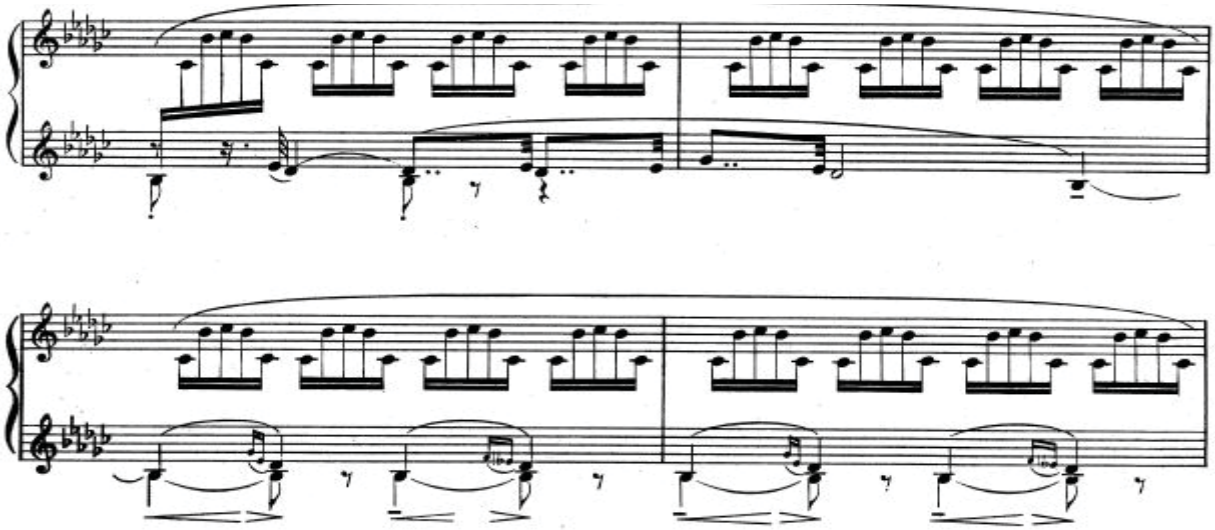
(Chart of variants of the pentatonic scale by Michael David Schmitz.)

The theme is essentially pentatonic: D-flat-E-flat-G-flat-A-flat-B-flat; the grace notes decorating the main theme in measures 5 and 6 resemble the effect of chimes. With details such as the chordal descent in staccato under a long slur (m. 9-10), Debussy was able to achieve the effect of bells, while retaining an open fifth in the bass as the foundation of the resonance.



(*Le vent dans la plaine,* m. 3-6)

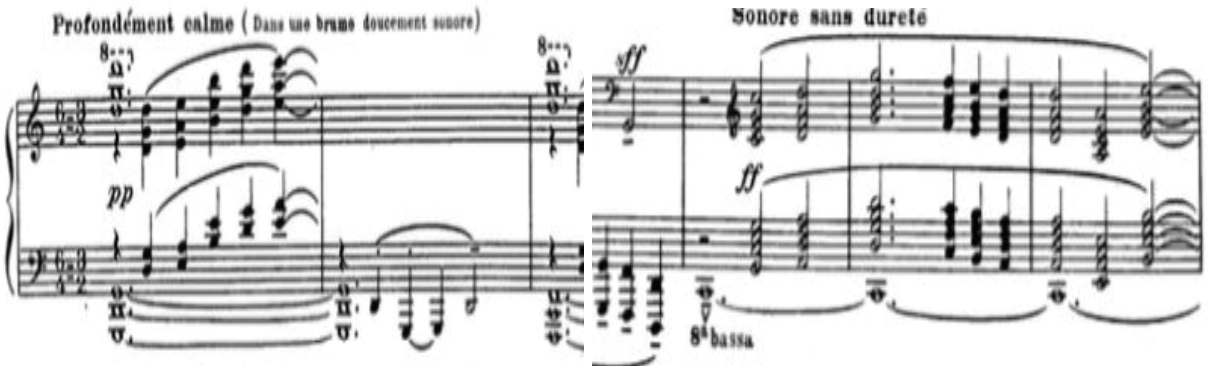
[90] Schmitz, "Oriental influences."



(*Le vent dans la plaine,* m. 3-6)

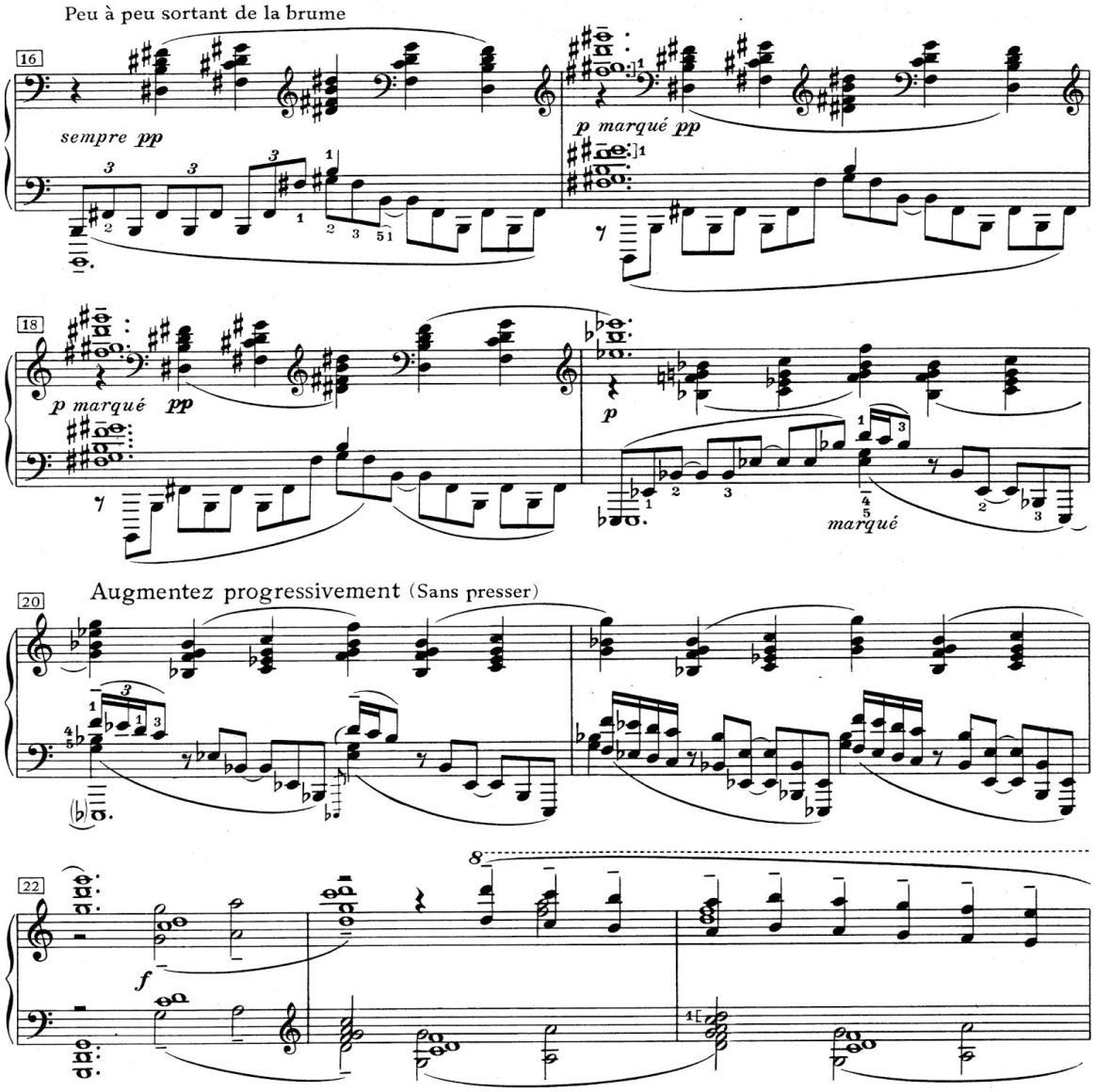
La cathédrale engloutie (Book I)

Owing its timbre and texture to the influence of the Javanese ensemble, the stratification of texture in *La cathédrale engloutie* captures the full spectrum of bell-like sounds, from the massive gong with a rich rumbling bass to metallophones featuring a more crisp and piercing tone in the high register. The improvised vocal lines within a gamelan ensemble resemble the free-flowing nature of Gregorian chant.



(*La cathédrale engloutie,* m.1-2, left; m. 27-29, right.)

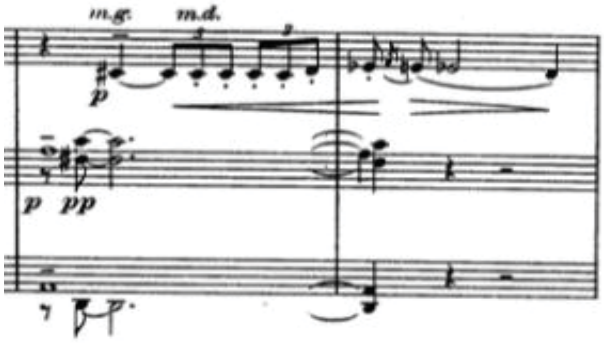
The very opening measure demonstrates the sound effect of the full range of bells by pressing keys from at extremities of the piano, the bass maintaining the resonance while the overtones gradually fade away and the parallel chords in the middle register ascend and die away simultaneously. The parallel chords are built on fourths and octaves, further enhancing the openness of the sound and evoking the immensity of a broad horizon.



(*La cathédrale engloutie*, m.16-24.)

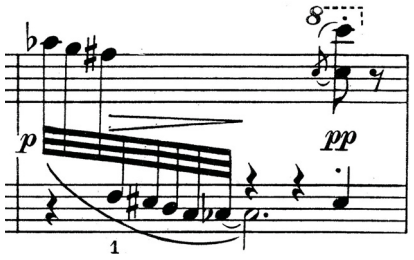
Organization of phrasing and meter in gamelan is dictated by the largest gong, which completes a cycle every four, eight or sixteen bars; a similar punctuation can be seen in *La cathédrale engloutie*. The phrasing and periods of modulation emulate the sound of oceanic waves, and are regulated by the reverberating low bass every three bars; the first phrase has a bass note of B, modulating to E-flat in the next phrase, and finally G at the start of a new section.

Canope (Book II)



(*Canope*, m.7-8.)

The melodic lines in *Canope*, written in an arabesque manner with added grace notes, hint at the fluid, improvisatory nature of Middle Eastern music. Moreover, *Canope* begins with full chords crawling one by one through the pentatonic scale. Paul Roberts suggests that the unique sound created by the cluster in measure 24 imitates an Oriental plucking instrument.[91]

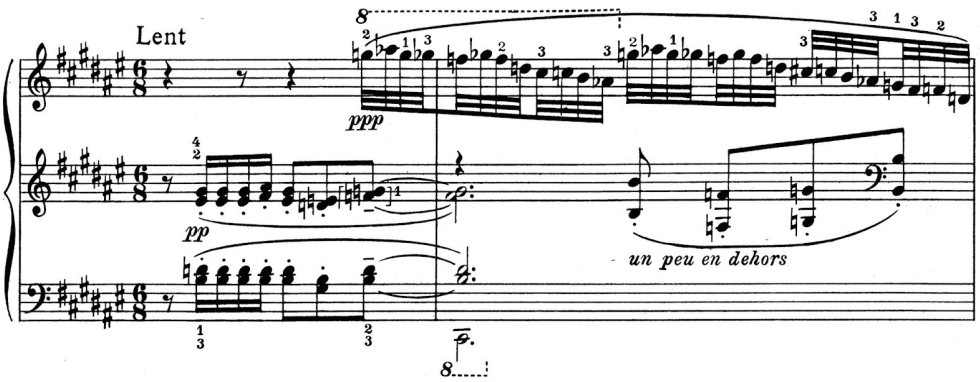


(*Canope*, m.24.)

[91] Roberts, *Images,* 165.

La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune (Book II)

The three-staved notation of this prelude reflects the multi-layered texture of the gamelan ensemble, in which different instruments have distinct melodic and metric assignments, an essential concept in Debussy's late writing. In *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune,* the polyrhythms and distinct melodies differentiate the layers clearly. Schmitz suggests that Debussy's title is an allusion to Pierre Loti's *L'inde (sans les Anglais),* which includes a scene of a moonlight meeting ("terrasses pour tenir conseil au clair de lune"), or to René Puaux's *Ce fut le beau voyage,* which describes the Durbar ceremonies for the 1912 coronation of King George V as Emperor of India and speaks of "the hall of victory, the terrace for moonlight audiences."[92]



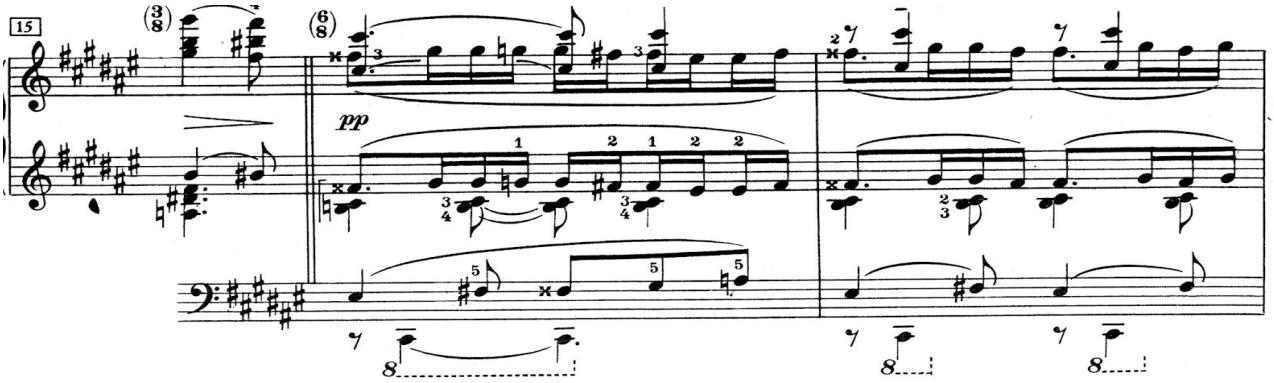
(*La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*, m.1-2.)

In the first two bars, the constant arabesque over running passages depicts the falling moonlight,[93] demanding an extremely light touch to insinuate the transparency of the moonlight while creating a seamless descending line with even touch. The left hand marked "*un peu en dehors*" mirrors the sonority of bells: the staccato imitates the gentle striking of the mid-ranged bells in the Javanese ensemble, whereas the post-strike resonance of the bells is notated by the

[92] Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy,* 175.

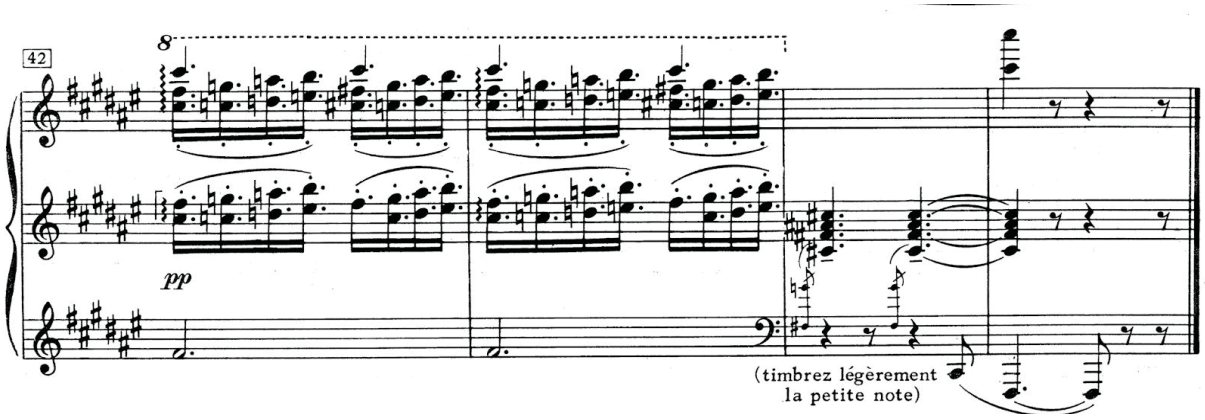
[93] Oscar Thompson, *Debussy: Man and Artist* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1937), 269.

slur over the staccato. These two distinct materials occur over a long, gong-like C-sharp, sustaining as a foundation throughout the passage.



(*La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*, m. 15-17.)

Many layers are again displayed in m. 15-17 through the sustained pedal points in the lower register on C-sharp imitating a large gong, and the top melodic layer featuring a heavily embellished F-double-sharp with an improvisatory quality. While another layer ascends chromatically in the tenor voice, there is also a much higher gong in C-sharp octaves, in hemiola rhythm with the bass gong.

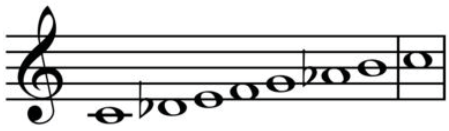


(*La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*, m. 42-45.)

The ending replicates the sound of high, metallic chimes: parallel and arpeggiated chords in open fifths in the high register, again notated with staccato and slurs. This passage is particularly evocative, and the performer must use quick attacks to produce a bell-like quality that remains within the overarching sonority, while adding brightness to the bell resonance through use of the pedal.

Spanish influence

Spanish music is also featured prominently across the two books. Debussy was known for his regard for Spanish culture, demonstrated by the fact that he carried around pocket books of Spanish folk songs, and also by his fondness for the music of Albeniz and De Falla, his friendship with the pianist Richard Viñes, and last but not least the painting of Granada by Rusiñols, which made a lasting impression on him.[94] Recognizable Spanish and Moorish features include the he double harmonic scale (also known as the Gypsy/Arabic scale) with augmented seconds.



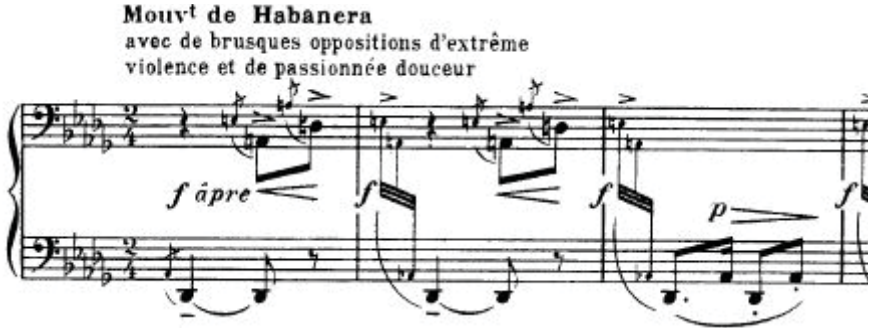
（Gypsy/Arabic scale with augmented seconds）

La Puerta del vino and *La sérénade interrompue* will be addressed below as examples of this Spanish influence.

[94] Howat, *The art of French piano music,* Chapter 8.

La Puerta del vino (Book II)

The name of this prelude is taken from a postcard of a gate in Alhambra sent to Debussy by De Falla.[95] The main components of Spanish influence that we can identify in this prelude are the perpetual habanera dance rhythm in the bass, the use of the "gypsy" scale, and the dance rhythm in duple juxtaposed with triplets. Such pungent dance rhythms were particularly appealing to Debussy.



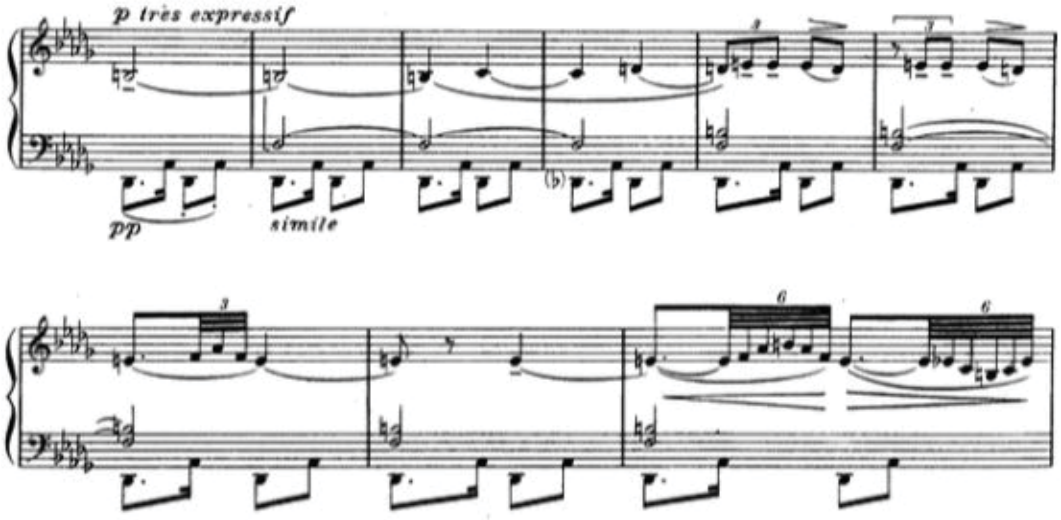
(*La Puerto del vino*, m.1-3.)

The Spanish flavor can be identified right away from the introduction of *La Puerta del vino*, which gives prominence to a four-bar guitar solo featuring pure intervals of open fifths. The tenuto marking on the bass D-flat suggests the sustained, resonant pluck of the guitar, while clashing against additional open fifths on A-natural and D-natural. Debussy emphasizes the dissonance, which is another major characteristic of Spanish music, by marking accents on the A-natural and D-natural in the key of D-flat major, sounding against the D-flat pedal point.

Reference to the guitar is inevitable in illustrating Spanish musical culture. Thus, the imitation of a guitar is essential to the performance of this prelude, in order to recreate the

[95] Bruhn, *Images and ideas,* 44.

authentic Spanish sounds Debussy heard on various occasions, such as the flamenco performances in the 1900 Universal Exposition.[96] Through exploring piano techniques to imitate the guitar on the piano, Debussy incorporates musical gestures such as open fifths, strummed repeated notes, and plucking/pizzicato-like staccatos. The bass in the opening of *La puerta del vino* requires a lifting gesture to the slurred legato, mimicking the hand departing when plucking, instead of a downward motion with heavy weight into the keys. A light touch of pedal will help achieve the slight vibration and resonance of the plucked string.

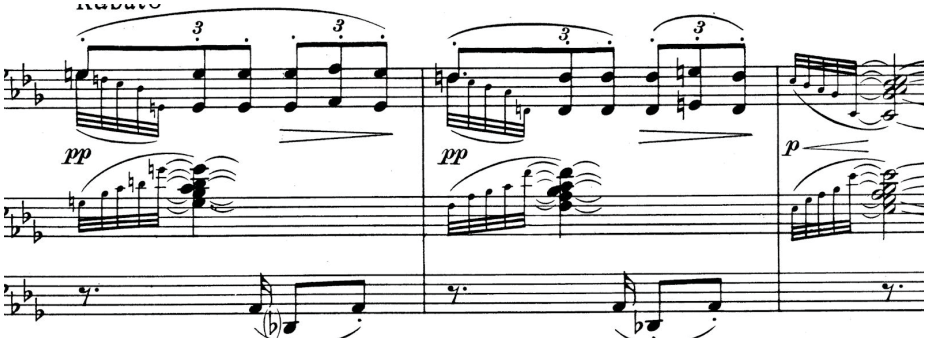


(*La Puerta del vino*, m.5-13.)

Then the melody enters, resembling a flamenco singer improvising with embellished runs. The dissonance and polytonality is perceptible between the two elements: the constant habanera bass rhythm in D-flat major, contrasting with the prolonged singing line in a different tonality with B-natural, C-natural, D-natural, and E-natural. The rhythmic arrangement of the melody starts with longer note values that gradually become shorter through diminution.

[96] Roberts,*Images,* 271.

Meanwhile, the augmented second between the A-flat and B-natural in the embellishing run conveys the character of the Gypsy/Arabic scale.

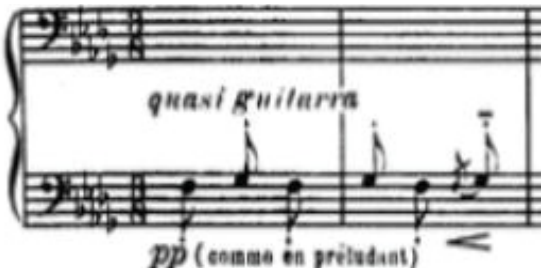


(*La puerta del vino*, m. 25-26.)

Another trait echoing the Spanish guitar is the sound of strumming, which can be seen in the rapid arpeggios in measure 25. Strumming on the guitar is a quick action that covers all the strings consecutively; the action is so rapid that it resembles a chord. Debussy captures the quickness of a strummed attack through decorative grace notes that take place within the rhythm of the triplet, followed by the rumbling and vibration of the strings. It requires swiftness on the roll and an evenness of touch on the keyboard for each grace note, since the vibration on all of the strings need to be absolutely equal.

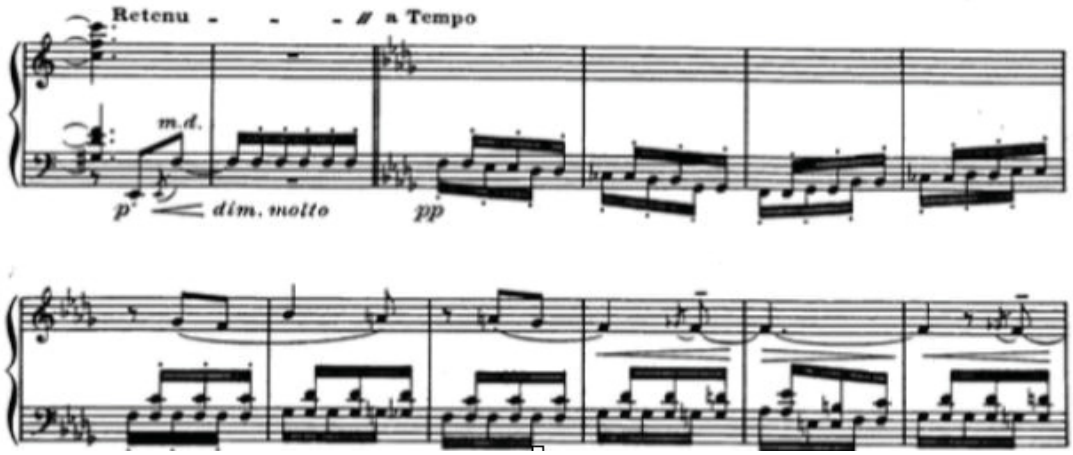
La sérénade interrompue (Book I)

The opening imitates a Spanish guitarist plucking the strings for the purpose of tuning before engaging in a serenade.



(*La sérénade interrompu*e, m. 1-2.)

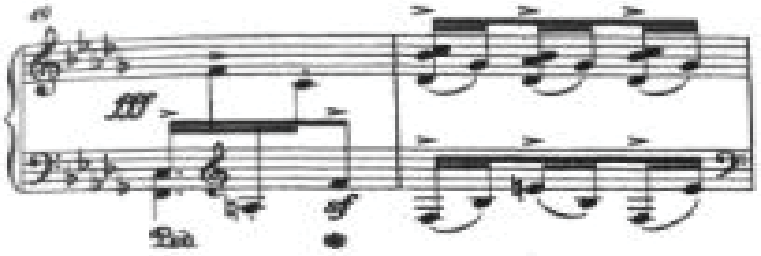
The Gyspy/Arabic scale is conspicuous throughout the entire serenade; as seen the scale of the "serenading" melody is spelled as F-G-flat-A natural-B-flat-C etc. Debussy stressed the importance of the augmented second by placing a rest between the two A-naturals, creating a prolonged suspension before G-flat enters.



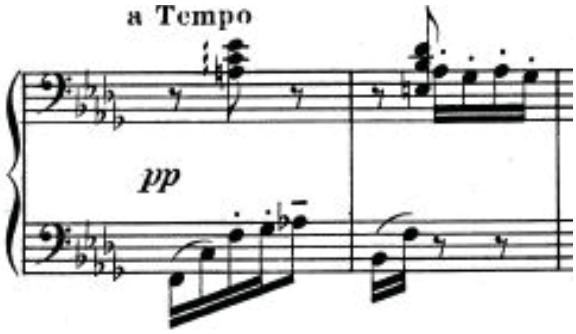
(*La sérénade interrompu*e, m.48-59.)

The incessant and percussive alternating fifth accompanying the Gyspy scale melody further explores the feature of the string instrument's natural open fifth. The guitarist's serenade evokes El Albacín, from the suite *Iberia* by Albéniz, for they share the same rhythmic arrangement, tempi, and melodic contour. It could well be a tribute to Albeniz, who passed away a few months previously in May 1909.[97]

[97] Howat, *The art of French piano music,* Chapter 8.



(Albéniz, "*El Albaicín*" (*Iberia,* Book 3), m. 19-20.)



(*La sérénade interrompu*e, m.19-20.)

French Baroque composers

Debussy never stopped thinking about his identity as a French musician: a compilation of articles from 1903-09 reveals his interest in going back to the tradition of the clavicinists. He wrote that "we had in Rameau a pure French tradition of a delicate and charming tenderness… Couperin is the most poetic with a tender melancholy… French music is marked by clarity, elegance… a combination of fantasy and sensibility."[98]

All the characteristics that he describes in Rameau and Couperin can be found throughout the *Préludes*. The elegance and translucent sonority can be heard in *«Les fées sont d'exquises*

[98] Stefan Jarocinski, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism* (London. Ernst Eulenburg Ltd, 1976).

danseuses», with rapid changes of timbre and dynamic while preserving the light touch.[99] The formal simplicity, changes of timbre, and pianistic style of clarity and fluidity with rhythmic precision echo distinctly within many preludes, such as *Les tierces alternées* and *Feux d'artifice*; these late preludes are purely dedicated to pianism and look ahead to his *Etudes* of the following year. *Les tierces alternées*, for instance, was written in a minimalistic approach with few slurs and phrasings. There is no clear differentiation of melody or accompaniment; instead the motion is continuous as the alternating thirds between both hands are incessant and rapid. Clarity can be preserved by performing with very little pedal in order to avoid any blurring of harmonies, or heaviness in consideration of Debussy's marking of "*légèrement détaché*" (lightly detached). Rubato, or playing with time, is much associated with Romantic or late Classical repertoire; Debussy's tribute to Rameau, the Baroque master, makes apparent his preference for rhythmic precision, since the animation of the perpetual and ceaseless motion is carried out through subtle dynamic changes rather than changes in timing.

[99] Neil Rutman, "Imagination in the Piano Works of Debussy: How it Affects Touch and Pedalling," in *The Pianist's Craft: Mastering the Works of Great Composers,* edited by Richard Paul Anderson (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012):145-155.

6. Conclusion

My study of these preludes has shown me how their performance can be enriched by considering their historical and cultural context, and how Debussy may have intentionally integrated some of these elements into his compositions.

Unlike absolute music such as a sonata by Beethoven or a fugue by Bach, Debussy's preludes incorporate a wide variety of external references. Understanding these diverse inspirations (including mythology, natural elements, exotic cultures, and various literary sources) is essential to fully grasp the underlying meanings behind this pillar of the repertoire. By studying the different aspects of Debussy's inspiration, the pianist can stimulate her imagination for a more creative performance, drawing on a wide range of artworks, legends, literary and theatrical characters, and musical cultures of the world. The result is a richer and more colourful performance, with the individual character of each prelude more clearly and precisely defined.

Though early performances (including Debussy's own) often included only reordered selections from the *Préludes,* by the 1920s pianists regularly performed the complete books in their written order. A sensitive performance of Book I or Book II needs to consider the overall shape of each Book in order to shape the experience of the audience with care. Looking at each Book as an ordered cycle helps the performer not only to conceive each book as a whole, but also to detect the inner connections that can inform a thoughtful decision when selecting just a few preludes for a shorter program. Selections could be grouped by shared extra-musical themes (*Minstrels* and *«Général Lavine» – eccentric,* or the "wind triptych" of Book I) or musical features (the common tonal center of B-flat of the first six preludes of Book I).

Even though the time gap between the two Books is only three years, there is a significant evolution from Book I to Book II in Debussy's musical language. My comparison of the two Books draws on musicological writings (Schmitz, Gatti) and the comparison of selected preludes sharing similar subject matter. The preludes of Book II tend to have a more complex and abstract musical language, and a darker emotional tone. This can be partly accounted for by challenging times in Debussy's personal and professional life, as well as changes in the contemporary world around him.

Even at this late stage in Debussy's career, he continued to incorporate new musical influences, particularly in the preludes of Book II. In addition to the Oriental and Spanish references that inform both Books, Book II includes a number of polytonal techniques that reflect Debussy's discovery of the music of Stravinsky, particularly *Petrushka.* There is still more research to be conducted in analyzing the evolution between the two Books; it would be particularly interesting to compare the *Préludes* with his other works from the same period (both for piano and for other forces). With their wide range of musical expression and stylistic experimentation, the *Préludes* are key to an understanding of Debussy's late style.

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