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DEBUSSY

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10 The Debussy sound: colour, texture, gesture

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Everyone who knows Debussy's music recognises a distinctive 'Debussy sound' that is not a single quality but many; the sound of Debussy's style in most of his works is harmony, instrumentation, texture, timbre, all to a greater or lesser extent.

Even such wide-ranging elements as melody, rhythm, and microform affect Debussy's quality of sound. The composer Jean Barraqué, an astute analyst, spoke of Debussy's habit of repeating phrases and phrase fragments in immediate succession as 'the sole weakness that one might find in Debussy's scores',[1] without suggesting that this kind of repetition is a fundamental aspect of Debussy's sense of form; paired repetition, like breathing (which as a marker of time it somewhat resembles), is a trait of many composers from Vivaldi to Mozart to Rossini to Debussy; but in combination with others that we think of as characteristically sonorous, it is a trait that makes Debussy's style instantly recognisable even on first hearing.

Here we will discuss the sonorous rather than the temporal aspects of Debussy's music, focusing particularly on orchestral and piano style, texture, and colour, recognising that these aspects often penetrate each other as much as they are components of overall form.

Debussy's earliest instrumental style

Debussy's earliest piano pieces and songs include a variety of different piano styles and textures, but nothing that is markedly different from those of his French contemporaries or from his Parisian predecessor Chopin, for whose music he always had a special understanding and regard. Accompanimental textures in Debussy's songs of his Conservatoire years are more economical than in Fauré's of the same time, and for that reason they are often more effective. The Piano Trio of 1880, which Debussy did not publish, is the first of his works in which we can glimpse an instrumental style in addition to that already developing for the piano, but even though the ensemble always works well, again there is no notably original pianism.

The *Deux arabesques* of 1888–91 still echo Chopin's influence but reveal more imagination and skill than Debussy had shown earlier, plus a

remarkable mastery of complex diatonic harmony well regulated by classical progressions and bass lines. Idiosyncratic touches also appear, of which the most important is the parallel harmony with octaves between upper and lower voices at the end of *Arabesque* No. 2; this is even more striking in the song 'Chevaux de bois', composed at about the same time. Such parallel writing was not without occasional precedent in the nineteenth century; part of the Finale of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, with melody in three octaves and lacking only parallel fifths, is a clear example that startles even today. Debussy made this kind of parallel writing a persistent trademark all the way to his last completed work, the Violin Sonata.

The Symphony in B minor for piano four hands dates from 1881, one of Debussy's summers in Russia when he was discovering the music of Tchaikovsky. Even without any indications of orchestral instruments, it is not hard to imagine functions in this piece that would reflect Tchaikovsky's music or contemporary French scores by composers such as Bizet, Delibes and Lalo that Debussy would surely have heard. A more distinctive orchestral style is perceptible in the earliest available of Debussy's orchestral scores, *L'enfant prodigue*, and we know how much Debussy revised it before publishing it in 1908. Its orientalism *à la Lakmé* has been called facile, but there is no denying its skill; Debussy would hardly have wasted his time during the composition of the required Prix de Rome cantata behind locked doors on such an extensive orchestral episode as the 'Cortège et air de danse' (nearly twenty pages of score) if the piece had not captured his imagination. In the case of *Printemps*, composed in 1887, we have an even less precise idea of Debussy's original orchestration, because the score as published (1913) was re-orchestrated by Henri Busser from Debussy's directions, the original with chorus having been lost. (Busser's re-orchestration dispenses with the wordless female chorus Debussy had included in the lost score of the earlier version. In 1913, having already demonstrated this novel tactic in 'Sirènes' of 1899, Debussy apparently had no desire to show it again.[2])

The heterophonic orchestra

La damoiselle élue, for soprano and alto soloists, female chorus and orchestra, was completed in 1889 (five years after *L'enfant prodigue*); the *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra followed a short while later. These two neglected works of Debussy's first years independent from the constraints of the Prix de Rome are quite distinct from each other in narrative and expressive character, but one finds in both an orchestral style that is fully formed and mature – an early maturity then with a number of trademarks that were to

be extensively developed and ripened in Debussy's later works. The most important of these I refer to here as the 'heterophonic orchestra'.

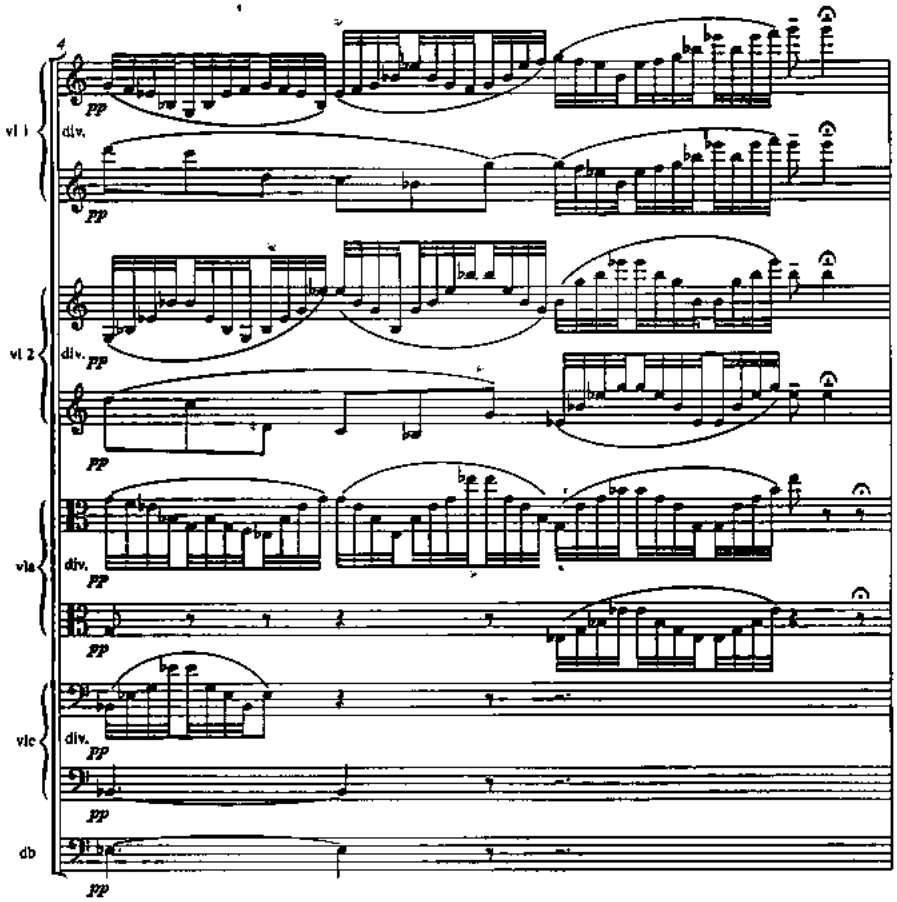
'Heterophony' is a term variously applied to different musical phenomena, but perhaps most often it is encountered in descriptions of non-Western instrumental music, where it means the *simultaneous* variants of a given melody, often ornamented and improvised on by two or more players. We will use the term here somewhat more freely to cover the general complexity and rapid colouristic changes of Debussy's textures, as well as his tendency to blur the melodic line, but at the same time to strengthen it with added ornamentation in mixed timbres. In Debussy's heterophonic orchestra several qualities typically stand out:

1. Primarily soft dynamics in a texture spread over a wide range; predilection for upper register of the strings in soft textures
2. Divided strings in multiple doublings from *à* 2 to *à* 6, in parallel or in maximally different rhythms, often with bowed and plucked notes at the same time; often with embellished arpeggiation of a single harmony
3. Woodwind and brass layers in harmonic doublings, with or without the strings, often in different simultaneous patterns or figurations
4. The principal melodic line doubled in one or more octaves either within or between instrumental choirs; preference for woodwind solos in the melodic line
5. Varied orchestral emphasis of the harmonic background, less often of the contrapuntal line

Divided strings, such as one encounters at the start of *La damoiselle élue* (see Example 10.1), are typical of the Debussy's heterophonic orchestra, but of course he had plenty of predecessors. The 'Forest murmurs' in *Siegfried* is perhaps the closest antecedent among Wagner's works; in this well-known episode the first and second violins are each divided in four, both layers oscillating uniformly between a single harmony and its auxiliary chord, while divided violas and cellos sustain single notes in harmonics. The Act I Prelude to *Lohengrin* uses divided and solo violins to explore ethereal upper-register sound. In the *Liebesnacht* scene in Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*, during Brangäne's call, the *pianissimo* muted strings are elaborately divided and differently textured, but melodic and registral differences in the strings are submerged in a blanket of wind sound, very rich but without much delicate coloration – not much like Debussy's heterophony.

It is possible that Debussy's image of soft *divisi* strings was inspired more by his forebears in France than by Wagner's examples in *Tristan* and *The Ring*. The 'Queen Mab' Scherzo in Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, in which both first and second violins are marked *divisi* from beginning to end, seems to be an obvious model, and its remarkable use of harmonics is also one of the earliest in the standard repertory; Berlioz, for his part always

Example 10.1 *La damoiselle élue*, string parts only (bar 4)



passionate about Shakespeare, doubtless admired the elfin string textures (unmuted!) in Mendelssohn's Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Another possible influence is Lalo's orientalist ballet *Namouna*, premiered in 1883 and cheered enthusiastically by the nineteen-year-old Debussy.[3] The Prelude to *Namouna* is marked by a complex and glittering string *divisi* clearly inspired by the Rainbow bridge scene in *Das Rheingold*, but the dreamy *dolce far niente*, with its muted strings, atmospheric pedal points, and parallel fifths with paired cors anglais adumbrates Debussy's orchestra as does no other work of its time.

The decade after *La damoiselle élue* represents Debussy's most intense period of artistic growth, marked by his primary focus on orchestral music and opera. His two years of effort (1890–2) in composing Catulle Mendès's *Rodrigue et Chimène* fizzled out, but the attempt sharpened his skills for the next one, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which became a milestone in the history of operatic sound as well as dramatic treatment. Along with the no less

remarkable String Quartet (1893) and some excellent songs, Debussy's other major accomplishments of the 1890s were orchestral, the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* after Mallarmé (1894) and the *Nocturnes* (1892–9), both recognised in popular opinion as primary emblems of musical Impressionism.[4]

Faune is unusual in Debussy's orchestral output for its textural complexity, which seems paradoxical because of the abundance of instrumental solos in the context of the relatively small orchestra. The complexity resides above all in the upper melodic line, which is full of changing motives, varied rhythms, and winding shapes, almost entirely conjunct but freely moving over a wide range, and constantly interacting with secondary lines from the interior of the texture; only in the *très soutenu* middle section does the principal line become somewhat more stable, and then only briefly, as the accompanimental patterns move to the forefront to absorb it in the only real *tutti* of the piece. The twisting vines of the melody amount to an idiosyncratic art of arabesque, which is indeed part of the very melodic essence of *Faune*, whereas in later works like *La mer* and *Jeux* they are more aspects of melodic coloration within the overall texture.

One observes, too, that *Faune* often features a diffuse orchestral counterpoint, but one that attempts to break away from the often more conventional counterpoint of *La damoiselle élue* in the direction of more rapidly changing, soloistic textures – ironically rather like some of Mahler's music of the same period, which in every other respect could not be more different from Debussy's. In *Faune*, the least heterophonic of Debussy's larger orchestral works, one is moved to compare the overall orchestral conception not to Impressionist painting (which *Faune*'s Symbolist poetic inspiration might already discourage) but to the sinuous precision of Art Nouveau. Debussy worked for a full year on this ten-minute-long work. The evidence of the *Particell* suggests that he struggled intermittently with subtle details of orchestration, details mostly in choice of solo instruments and doublings, but only seldom involving changes in textural layout.

The contrast of *Faune* with Debussy's next orchestral work, *Nocturnes*, could not be more striking, particularly in the first piece, 'Nuages', arguably his boldest single leap into the musical unknown. 'Nuages' defines a kind of tonality never heard before, based on the centricity of a *diminished* tonic triad (B–D–F♮), highlighted in turn by an extremely reduced rhythmic dimension in steady and oscillating crotchets. The recurrent call in the cor anglais is dynamically prominent even in *piano*, but most of the time the melodic line is fixed in the quietly rocking background, paired collaterally with one or two other parts but doubled in two or even three octaves at once and chiefly in the *divisi* strings spread out over a wide range. When pure triads appear, at bars 29–31, *forte*, the climactic effect is all the more

dramatic, a culmination of motion tending more and more towards purely parallel (see Example 8.4, p. 148 above).

The correlation of the beginning of 'Nuages', two paired parts doubled in octaves, with Musorgsky's *Sunless* has been pointed out by numerous writers, and Debussy several times acknowledged his admiration for Musorgsky's music; it seems no less certain that Debussy was influenced, in 'Nuages' and even more in *Pelléas*, by specific aural images from *Boris Godunov* and other works by Musorgsky (such as Boris's 'My soul is sad!' in the Prologue, scene 2).

In a letter to Eugène Ysaÿe of 1894 in which he refers to *Nocturnes* (at a time when he had in mind a work for solo violin and orchestra), Debussy compared the sound he was striving for to 'different combinations that can be obtained from one colour – like a study in grey in painting',[5] which recalls what he had said much earlier in a conversation with his teacher Guiraud: 'A painting executed in grey is the ideal.'[6] 'Nuages' is an apt realisation in music of what Debussy thus described, if only because by far the greater part of the orchestral texture is the constantly and subtly changing array of divided muted strings, beginning with high first violins divided in six (bars 7–10) and eventually ending with low divided cellos and basses (bars 88–97).[7] In between these registral antipodes, every register is marked by some uniquely characteristic string texture, including alternating chords doubled in octaves with simultaneous *arco* and *pizzicato* over a pedal point (bars 43–50), and a sustained harmony reinforced with two muted horns, surmounted by a melody in violin, viola and cello solos in three octaves (bars 71–4). The tutti at bar 42, the loudest point in the piece, with oboes, clarinets, bassoons and two horns, keeps all sections of the strings (without the basses) divided in two within a two-octave span, and still muted. All of these different string textures sustain the impression that in 'Nuages' the background is the musical protagonist, the wash of cloud and sky within which a minimum of gestural events occur – the *bateau-mouche* cor anglais and its muted-horn echo, the brief change of scene in D♯ minor with flute and harp.

In 'Sirènes', the third of the *Nocturnes*, Debussy sought an even more radical orchestration than in 'Nuages', but without the ideal of a 'study in grey'. The strings are often divided (usually in two, occasionally in four) and spread colouristically over a wide range, but the rest of the orchestra, including three trumpets and a second harp, shares the stage equally. The famous women's chorus is an additional element of the orchestration; the voices, without text, become a polyphonic instrument of a single coloration. Rapid colouristic changes, with heterophonic doublings, are much more prominent in 'Sirènes' than in 'Nuages' or 'Fêtes', and indeed significantly foreshadow the brilliant timbral dimension of *La mer*; yet the

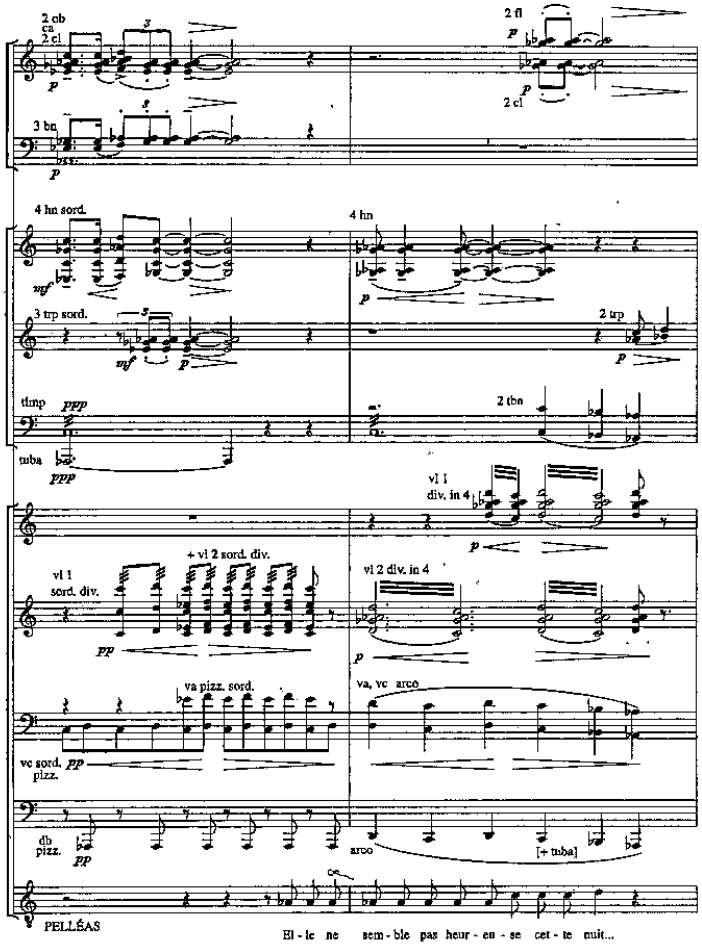
heterophony is seemingly more tentative and less confident than in the later works, as we know from the multitude of changes that Debussy later made in 'Sirènes', far more than in almost any other work.[8] If there is anything less successful about the sound of 'Sirènes', it comes from the squareness of the phrase structure; nearly everything is in one-bar or two-bar units, with more paired repetitions than in any other work of Debussy's; timbral and textural successions thus tend to be block-like and abrupt. Yet these successions are so frequently bound up with characteristic parallel harmonic motion that one can only say that they sound like Debussy and no one else.

By the time Debussy set his hand to orchestrating *Pelléas*, during the year before the opera's production in 1902, he was much more certain about what he wanted. If he never did get the sounds of the sea in 'Sirènes' quite right, he had no difficulties in the grotto scene at the end of act II of *Pelléas* (Example 10.2). (In the example it is the sea behind them that Pelléas says is not happy.) The passage shows a maximum of coloration and subtle changes of doubling and textural rhythm, with only one very slight change of harmony. Note the contrast in bar 1 between wind and string sound, even while the uppermost line, in the violins, alternates C and D immediately after the C and D an octave below in the winds (cor anglais, muted horn). The C and D in the upper violins are doubled in two lower octaves, including plucked cellos. (As an absolute-pitch aural image, this becomes a subtle and sinister leitmotif in act IV, scene 2, in the underground caverns, where Golaud asks Pelléas, 'Do you smell the odour of death?', and the C–D pair appears in the timpani.) Debussy later retouched this page slightly but tellingly, adding a lower octave in the tuba to the trombone notes in bars 2 and 3.

Piano sound: block chords and arpeggios

During the 1890s Debussy concentrated on opera and orchestral music and mostly neglected the piano. The one major work for piano solo he wrote during that decade comprised the three pieces entitled *Images*, unpublished except for the Sarabande, which, in a revised form, became part of *Pour le piano*, published in 1901.[9] *Pour le piano* marks a new point of departure in Debussy's productivity in piano music, which is most abundant during the decade that followed. The three pieces of *Pour le piano* show a wide range of keyboard styles. The Prélude, with its extensive pedal points, diminished seventh chords, and predominantly classical tonality with concomitant dominant–tonic relationships seems somewhat incongruously to hearken back to Bach's organ music. The third piece, Toccata, has passages that seem like a later working out of the Passepied in *Suite bergamasque*;

Example 10.2 *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act II, scene 3: short-score reduction of full score



yet it also seems to reflect the very un-Bach-like organ styles of such composers as Widor and Vierne, notwithstanding its episodes of well-ordered and completely Debussyan parallel harmony.

(see also Endnotes, next page)

[This excerpt represents approximately half of my article as originally published in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Cambridge University Press 2003, a book which is still in print; you can find the rest of the article there. I encourage you to buy the book, or at least to borrow it from the library, because it has a wealth of interesting information and analysis of Debussy's work by some expert and distinguished writers as well as myself. I thank Cambridge University Press for granting permission to reprint this portion.]

admiration for that charming masterpiece *Namouna*.' *Debussy Letters*, 116.

4 'Impressionism' is a term I use loosely in reference to music, but in applying it to Debussy's art I think especially of his heterophonic orchestra of multiple short melodic details, rhythmically varied but with more harmonic than contrapuntal value, and preference for soft textures with blended instruments in the background. In the piano music the operative characteristics are rapid arpeggios, extremes of register, pedal effects and strategic rather than formal use of themes and motives. Added to these are a lack of thematic assertiveness and the psycho-literary impact of provocative but often non-specific or even obscure titles that go far beyond the familiar outlines of the Schumannesque character pieces. All of these traits are anti-classical and 'Romantic' only insofar as they appeal to the visual and auditory senses rather than to concrete structures of logical design.

5 Quoted in Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. I, 128.

6 As recorded by Maurice Emmanuel; see ibid., appendix B, 205.

7 In the same letter to Ysaÿe Debussy states that the first movement is to be given to strings, the second to flutes, four horns, three trumpets and two harps and in the third one both groups came together. *Debussy Letters*, 75.

8 Debussy acknowledged this apparent uncertainty when, not long before his death, he showed Ansermet a printed score of *Nocturnes*, marked up in several different colours of pencil and ink, and invited him to choose the revisions that he thought best! See Denis Herlin, 'Sirens in the Labyrinth: Amendments in Debussy's *Nocturnes*', in Smith, *Debussy Studies*, 51–77.

9 They were finally published in 1977 under the title of *Images oubliées* (Philadelphia: Elkan-Vogel).

10 The Debussy sound: colour, texture, sonority, gesture

1 Jean Barraqué, '*La Mer* de Debussy, ou la naissance des formes ouvertes: essai de méthodologie comparative: la forme musicale considérée non plus comme un archétype mais comme un devenir', *Analyse musicale* 12/3 (June 1988), 28.

2 (A reconstruction of the original score by Christopher Palmer based on the extant arrangement for piano duet and chorus was given its premiere at a BBC Prom concert in London on 29 July 2001. Ed.)

3 On 27 August 1900 Debussy recalled his early enthusiasm for *Namouna* in a letter to the composer's son Pierre Lalo: 'Many years ago now I was forcibly removed from the Opéra for being too energetic in demonstrating my