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 re-
 veal 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'.

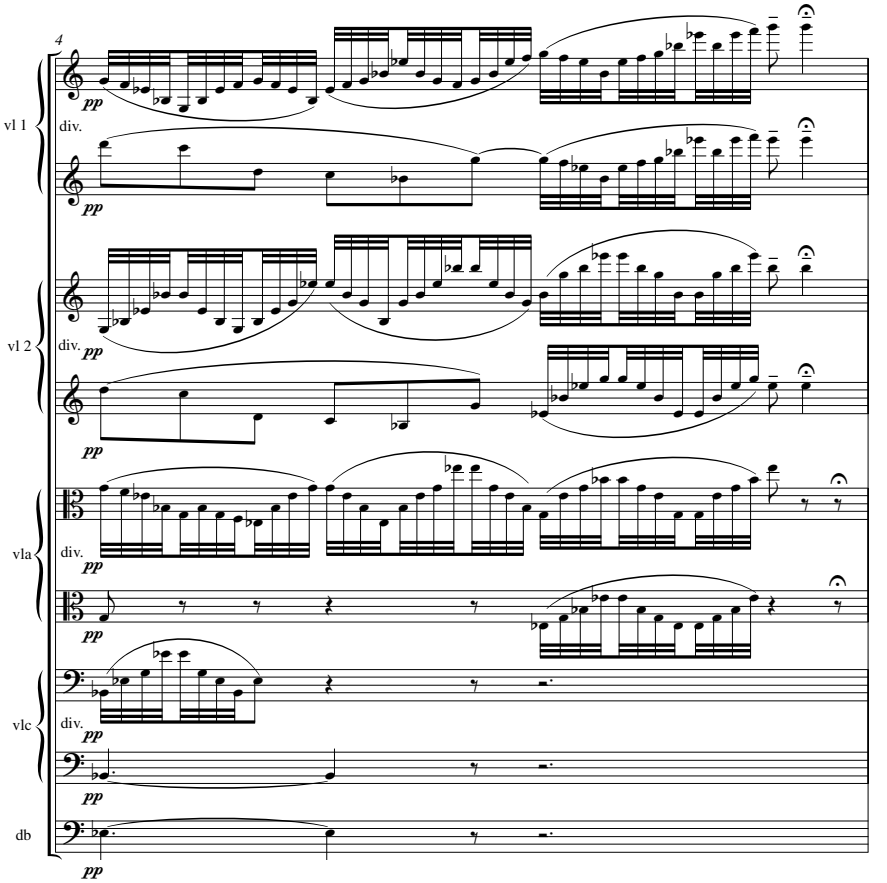
'Heterophony' is a term variously applied to different musical phenomena, but perhaps most often it is encountered in descriptions of non-Western instrumental music, where it means the *simultaneous* variants of a given melody, often ornamented and improvised on by two or more players. We will use the 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

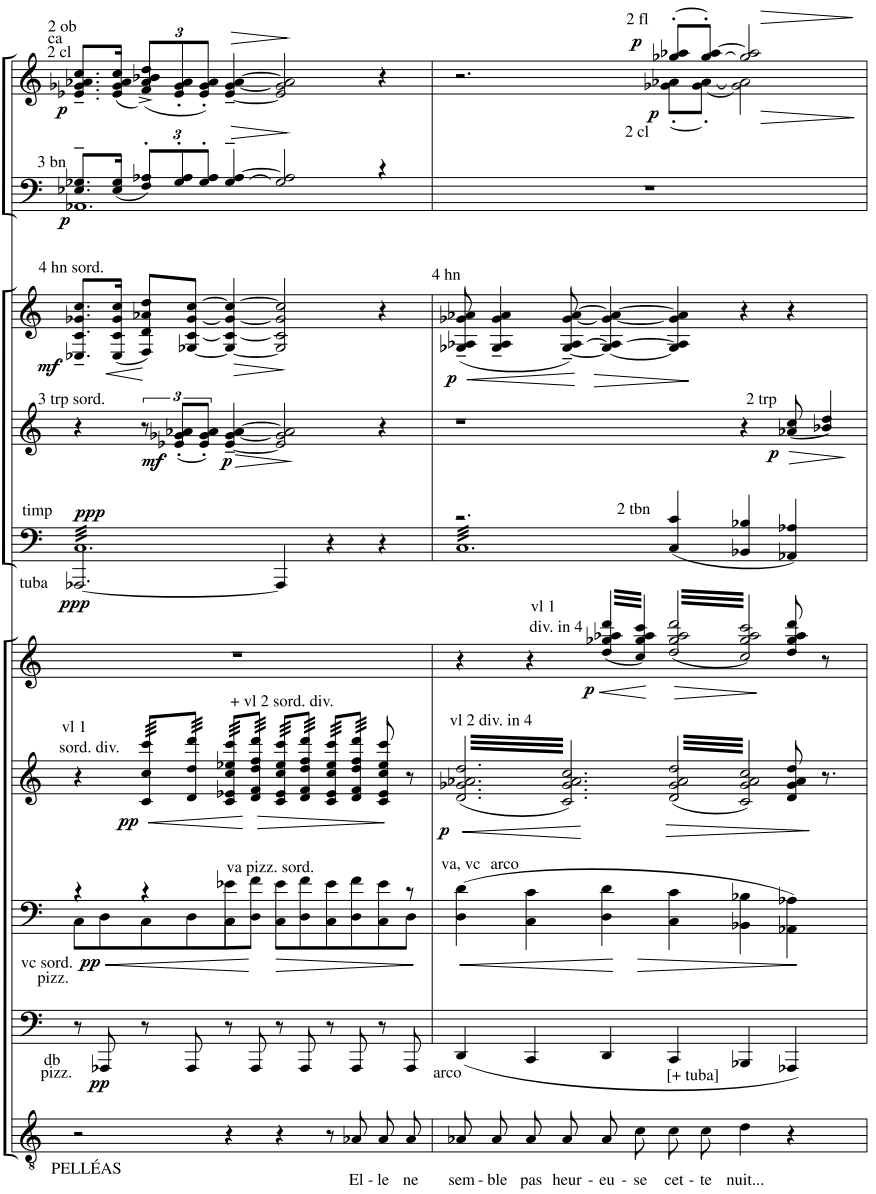
heterophony is seemingly more tentative and less confident than in the later works, as we know from the multitude of changes that Debussy later made in 'Sirènes', far more than in almost any other work.[8] If there is anything less successful about the sound of 'Sirènes', it comes from the squareness 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 II, 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*;

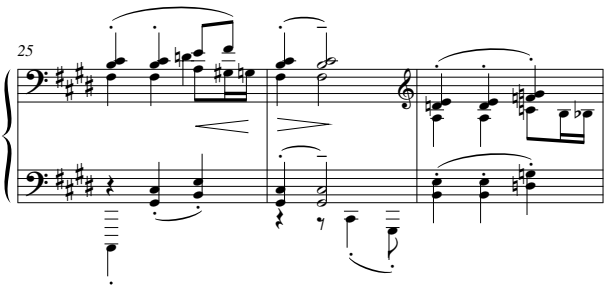
Example 10.2 *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act II, scene 3: short-score reduction of full score



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.

Debussy's use of parallel harmony extends from pure triads with doubled root to a large variety of chordal types with dissonant intervals, which are almost always best understood less in terms of root function in one or more keys, and more in terms of specific sonorities deployed as a colouristic

Example 10.3 *Pour le piano*, Sarabande (bars 25–7)



expansion of a single melodic line. Debussy's parallel harmony employed in this way is usually the principal textural element, sometimes the only one; thus it can be differentiated from simple melodic doubling in parallel intervals, including thirds in the *Petite suite* and 'Voiles', fifths in *La mer*, and major seconds in 'Jimbo's lullaby', in all of which there is usually a significant accompanimental element.

In the Sarabande we find Debussy's parallel harmony at its most crystalline, untrammelled by arpeggios and figurations, and with minimal contrapuntal delineation; the style reappears in 'Hommage à Rameau' (another sarabande) and in several of the *Préludes*, especially 'La cathédrale engloutie'. What is most important in the Sarabande is the differentiation between chordal types: in the opening measures a major ninth chord changes position before moving to a stable triad; bars 6–8 have root-position triads and seventh chords moving in opposition to a well-defined bass; bars 11–12 include parallel dominant seventh chords moving by whole tones with a contrasting melody above; bars 23–8 feature parallel motion of chords not previously found in Debussy (Example 10.3). These can be considered sonorities of three perfect fourths plus an octave doubling, or perhaps V^4_3 chords in which the third is replaced by an appoggiatura; but the most prominent aspect of their special sound is the departure from what up to now in the Sarabande had been specifically root-position harmony. In bars 61–3 we see three characteristic types of triadic root-position harmony: stepwise parallel triads as accompaniment to a contrapuntally differentiated upper melody; anti-parallel block triads, well in opposition to the bass; and parallel root-position triads with octaves in the outer voices. Some of the latter are incomplete, with root and fifth only, a favourite sonority of Debussy's, especially when arpeggiated, as in *L'isle joyeuse*, bars 99ff.

The 'Danse sacrée' for harp and string orchestra can be mentioned here as perhaps the most intentionally austere of Debussy's exercises in parallel harmony. Except for a contrasting middle section, most of this short movement features block chords for the harp, chiefly in parallel root-position

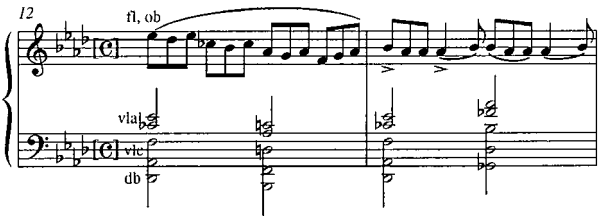
triads, often with the root doubled in the top voice. A few deviations appear: parallel triads without third, chords with seconds similar to the Sarabande type mentioned in Example 10.3 above, and sparing rhythmic-contrapuntal differentiation in the melodic line. Even the string accompaniment mostly consists of doubling the harp's melodic line singly or in octaves, with unexpectedly striking colouristic richness that is hardly suggested by the simplicity of the texture. Only once does the dynamic rise above *forte* amidst abundant *pianissimo, très doux et expressif* markings, but the strings remain unmuted until mutes are added for the beginning of the 'Danse profane' that follows without pause.

The year 1901 was a pivotal one for Debussy, as it was for Maurice Ravel as well, who at the age of twenty-six completed his *Jeux d'eau*. This was a pioneering example of new pianism that could hardly have failed to impress the older composer, already impressed by Ravel's 'Habanera' (1895, *Sites auriculaires* for two pianos, 1895–7). Whether there was direct influence or not, Debussy's interest in piano music took on new energy and he began to explore what for him were new directions. The arpeggiated pianism that in the Toccata was relatively restrained begins to be more elaborate: in 'Pagodes' (the first of the *Estampes* of 1903) and in 'Reflets dans l'eau' (the first of the first set of piano *Images*, 1905). 'Reflets dans l'eau' is a sound-study of Lisztian dimensions, complete with a sweeping *stringendo* cascade that Debussy cannot quite bring himself to call a cadenza (he labels it 'Quasi cadenza'). If Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* is inspired directly by Liszt's 'Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este' as many have claimed, then Debussy's aquatic style is surely influenced by such sonorous pieces as 'Au bord d'une source' and the *Harmonies poétiques et réligieuses*. In 'Pagodes', the slightly earlier *D'un cahier esquisses*, and 'Reflets dans l'eau' Debussy's impressionistic piano style is born, realised in a movement away from the regular phrases, steady tempos, and dance rhythms of earlier works and the elaborately digital, mechanical or *martellato* style of 'Chevaux de bois', *Pour le piano*, 'Jardins sous la pluie', and *Masques* towards a more rhapsodic style of freely changing textures and tempos, with more concentration on soft dynamics, weakly measured arpeggios and simultaneous use of high and low registers; in a sense, Debussy's *esprit* of Chopin became enlarged to include Liszt, but both remained prominent in the background of his own pianistic art all the way through the *Préludes* to *En blanc et noir* and the *Etudes*.

Harmony as sound: Debussy's characteristic sonorities

When we say that Debussy's characteristic harmony is often independent of its tonal function (at least as we define tonal function according to the

Example 10.4 *Nocturnes,* 'Fêtes': harmonic reduction (bars 12–13)



principles of common practice), we mean that he chooses a harmony first and foremost for its value as sound and sonority. There are many places in Debussy where a classical tonal progression can be perceived, with strong root motion in the bass, even as strong as dominant and tonic in imperfect or perfect cadence; but these are not what we consider to be distinctive of Debussy's harmony. It is the non-functional dominant that is an immediately recognisable signal of Debussy's harmony, especially in its most characteristic spacing. (Example 10.4). The dominant major ninth sonority D♭–F–A♭–C♭–E♭ in this spacing is rare in the history of music before Wagner, and when it appears it is usually functional as a dominant or as part of extended chromatic voice leading of the type encountered in, for example, *Parsifal.* In Debussy, its dominant functionality is weakened beyond the point of no return. In 'Fêtes', the strongest tone-centring element is the A♭ minor scale, structurally related to the F minor that begins the movement. In 'Nuages' the subtly balanced ambiguity between B minor with F♯ and B minor with F♮ is abruptly washed away by a succession of distantly related dominant ninths; at the corresponding place later in the movement these are transformed into inverted dominant sevenths.

The distinctive interval of Debussy's dominant ninth sonority is the (compound) major ninth that spans the chord from top to bottom, that is, a major second with one or more added octaves. The major second itself, the complement of the minor seventh whose harmonic value originates in the dominant-seventh chord, historically 'the first unequivocal harmonic dissonance', is another distinctive marker in Debussy, whether as a prominent component of the French augmented-sixth chord (which maps onto the whole-tone scale), or as a contrapuntal element.

The berceuse-like sonorous seconds of 'Le jet d'eau' have a direct antecedent in Borodin's undinist song *Morskaya tsarevna* (The sea princess, 1868), which Debussy might well have heard during his early visits to Russia. The major second becomes a psychological leitmotif, a shudder of subconscious fear of discovery, as Pelléas playfully ties Mélisande's hair to the willow branches below her tower in act III, scene 1 of the opera (five bars before fig. 15). The major second here has the mildest value of dissonant tension

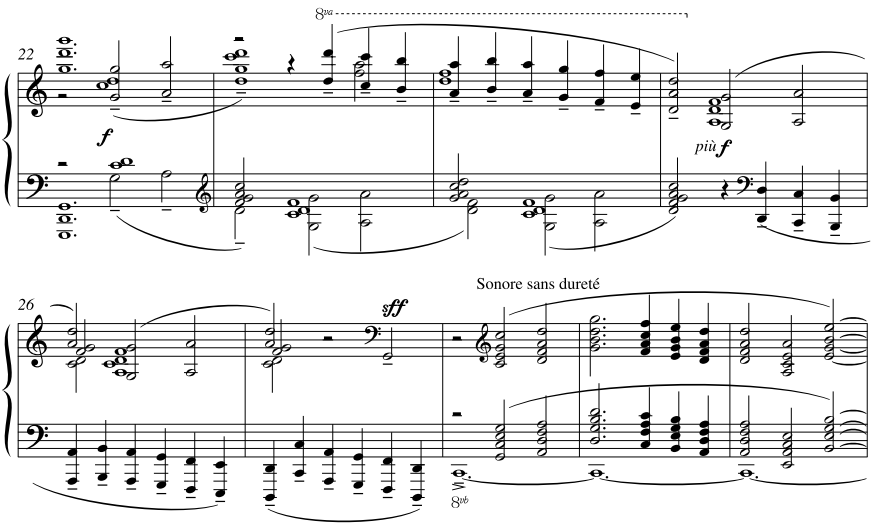
(*aussi doux que possible* in the preceding bar), but it resolves unexpectedly by chromatic expansion to a major third in a functional dominant ninth harmony.

Elsewhere Debussy explores expanded textures of major seconds in combination with octave doublings, as in the passage at bar 112 of 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer' that later merges smoothly with a whole-tone texture. In *En blanc et noir* some of the characteristic harmony includes diatonic seconds, that is, triadic harmony with added major or minor seconds from within the scale. At one point Debussy goes so far as to mark a passage *rude* to underscore the intentionally harsh effect of adding acciaccatura-like seconds to the chorale melody 'Ein' feste Burg', but this is an extreme instance.

A favourite among Debussy's piano works, and one that most closely answers to a popular conception of musical impressionism, is No. 10 of the first book of *Préludes*, 'La cathédrale engloutie'.[10] Debussy's markings even include narrative details: *Profondément calme (Dans une brume doucement sonore)*; *Peu à peu sortant de la brume*; *Un peu moins lent (Dans une expression allant grandissant)*, etc. But above all else, 'La cathédrale engloutie', with its echoes of medieval organum, and its *quasi campana* and *organo pleno* writing, is Debussy's untrammelled exploration of chordal sound over the full range of the piano (Example 10.5). It begins with a basic midrange chordal motive, in *pp* doubled open fifths, framed by a bell chord in the top and bottom registers together; this is answered by a high-register melody in semibreves, *doux et fluide*, in three octaves, against a sustained upper pedal on E, also in three octaves, in a spare two-part counterpoint characteristic of 'Nuages' and many other places in Debussy. The open-fifth motive returns for two bars, but its colour is already changed by a left-hand harmony with a superposed additional fifth and a departure from strict paralleling (at the end of the piece, it changes once more, again for just two bars). At bar 16, 'little by little coming out of the fog', the texture and the harmonic flavour are instantly changed to one of Debussy's characteristic sonorities: a major tonic triad with added major second and major sixth degrees, in an arpeggiating pentatonic texture similar to the final bars of *Arabesque* No. 1, but here over an undulating tonic–dominant bass. This shifts to E♭ and finally C major for a climactic authentic cadence with pealing bells – with so many added major seconds one would call this pan-diatonic harmony (except that the leading-note B is present only melodically).

'La cathédrale engloutie' illustrates, as does no other piano work of Debussy in such a short frame, the variety of Debussy's inspiration in chordal textures. The sonorous bell fifths might have been inspired by Grieg's 'Klokkeklang' (*Lyric Pieces*, Op. 54, No. 6); but where since Musorgsky's 'Great Gate of Kiev' and some of Brahms's late Intermezzi have block triads sounded so well on the piano? The entire piece is dominated by chords in

Example 10.5 *Préludes*, book 1, 'La cathédrale engloutie' (bars 22–30)



steady motion, with relatively little of pronounced rhythmic character in the melodic line; yet the narrative structure is excellently proportioned and the drama entirely successful, in large part because the tonal structure is also well planned.

Debussy's later heterophony

With *Pelléas*, which he orchestrated in 1901, Debussy acquired still fuller confidence in his orchestral skill and imagination. Four years later came *La mer*, a score which, as pure sound, is much more complex than anything he had written earlier. In 'Sirènes' he experimented with multi-rhythmic doublings and layered changes of instrumental colour, without escaping a certain squareness of phrase, but this squareness is absent in *La mer* where the phrases are more freely shaped and more smoothly blended from one to the next. Timbral and textural changes, with spare and widely spaced textures and abundant instrumental solos, occur in *La mer* more frequently than in 'Sirènes', often with dizzying rapidity. Some parts of 'Jeux de vagues' involve such quick harmonic and timbral changes that the ear follows them only with difficulty, and perhaps it was passages like bars 5–8 and 142–52 that Ravel had in mind when he told Henri Sauguet that '*La mer* is poorly orchestrated. If I had the time, I would reorchestrate *La mer*.'[11] Nevertheless, Debussy's fearless imagination in *La mer* often results in an orchestral sound like nothing ever heard before, as in the first 80 or so bars of 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer'.

The heterophony of timbre in *La mer* is heightened by Debussy's increased use of rapid ornaments – grace notes, mordents, and rapid *gruppetti*.

These are an occasional feature of Debussy's earlier piano music, as in the Prélude of the *Suite bergamasque*, but they grow to larger proportions involving chromatic turns and tirades with whole-tone or chromatic scales in *Faune* and *Nocturnes*. Especially in Debussy's writing for the strings, these ornaments are less accentual devices than colouristic, of the same stripe as high-register trills and tremolos, and more typically are applied to weak beats. In 'Gigues' and *Jeux* especially, ornaments are associated with short melodic fragments and rapid changes of timbre or dynamics; where the beat is accented, pitches are de-emphasised. The obvious ancestor of this gestural, punctuated orchestral style is Berlioz. At roughly the same time as the last orchestral works, Debussy was working on the piano *Préludes*, in which instantaneously executed ornaments are prominent and often quite tricky to play ('La danse de Puck', 'La puerta del vino'); a few years later they form the basis of the *Etude* 'Pour les agréments'.

Like the *Etudes*, composed in memory of Chopin, *En blanc et noir* is one of Debussy's last works, composed in a remarkable burst of steady inspiration that lasted only a few sunny months in 1915 when he was already ill with cancer. *En blanc et noir* exhibits a complexity of texture, including an entirely idiosyncratic non-dialogue counterpoint, that Debussy could not have achieved with one piano, and at the same time an intensification of his keyboard style that he could not have felt in the same way in his orchestral works. Yet the two instruments are perfectly combined, and not even an instant of the three pieces seems texturally overloaded or a note superfluous. Much of *En blanc et noir* explores block-chord sonorities and keyboard patterns in ways that Debussy had never tried before, let alone any other composer for the two-piano medium. Years later, in his memoirs, Igor Stravinsky wrote about when he and Debussy met in 1912 to play through the piano-duet reduction of Stravinsky's newly composed *Le sacre du printemps*:

> What most impressed me at the time and what is still most memorable from the occasion of the sight reading of *Le Sacre* was Debussy's brilliant piano playing. Recently, while listening to his *En blanc et noir* (one of which pieces is dedicated to me), I was struck by the way in which the extraordinary quality of this pianism had directed the thought of Debussy the composer.[12]

Some of Stravinsky's influence, particularly from *Petrushka*, can be traced in *En blanc et noir*; but like every other external influence in Debussy, it is perfectly assimilated.

Jeux, Debussy's 'tennis ballet' commissioned by Diaghilev (composed 1912, premiered 1913 with choreography by Nijinsky), is his last major orchestral work and the only one of the late works that he orchestrated himself.

Stravinsky stated in his memoirs that Debussy frequently consulted him about the orchestration of *Jeux* during 1912 (when Stravinsky himself was composing *Le sacre du printemps*).[13] *Jeux* is a 'poème dansé' only eighteen minutes long but of extreme narrative concentration, with a maximum of gestures and events. As an intensification of orchestral tendencies seen earlier in *La mer*, *Jeux* does not reveal individual instrumental writing of such whirlwind velocity as the fleetest passages in 'Jeux de vagues', but rather it involves the pace of musical ideas. These are due to the meticulous correlation of the music with the choreographic events on stage, as reflected in the brevity of melodic gestures and constant sudden shifts of tempo and texture.[14]

There are very few motives of obvious structural importance in *Jeux*, but their constant reassociation and recombination makes for a remarkable continuity of ideas: the protean flexibility of the thematic material of *Jeux* is evident on nearly every page. There is plenty of regularity of phrase and subphrase, but it is often broken up by changes of tempo, a *bricolage* of musical events. As Jean Barraqué remarked about *La mer*, the formal process is a *devenir sonore*, a 'sonorous becoming . . . a developmental process in which the very notions of exposition and development coexist in an uninterrupted burst'.[15]

Jeux calls for an orchestra of 2 flutes, 2 piccolos, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, sarrusophone, 4 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, tambourine, triangle, cymbals, celesta, xylophone, 2 harps, strings, which is close to the instrumentation of *Petrushka*, premiered in 1911. Except for the slightly larger complement of *Le martyre de Saint-Sébastien*, this was Debussy's largest orchestra. Much has been made of the complexity and richness of the orchestration of *Jeux*, especially by the post-war generation of European composers, who saw in Debussy's score an anticipation of Messiaen's highly detailed orchestral style. Most of all, however, one recognises in *Jeux* what Barraqué recognised in *La mer*, that the compositional and orchestral processes are completely unified.

Herbert Eimert, in a landmark article on *Jeux* first published in *Die Reihe* in 1959, speaks of the 'vegetative inexactness', the 'organic inexactness of vegetation' ('organische Ungenauigkeit des Vegetativen') in *Jeux*, by which he seems to mean the resemblance of the motivic and formal growth of *Jeux* to the budding and leafing of a developing twig or branch at unsymmetrical, unspecifiable but inevitable points. As Eimert remarks, most tellingly,

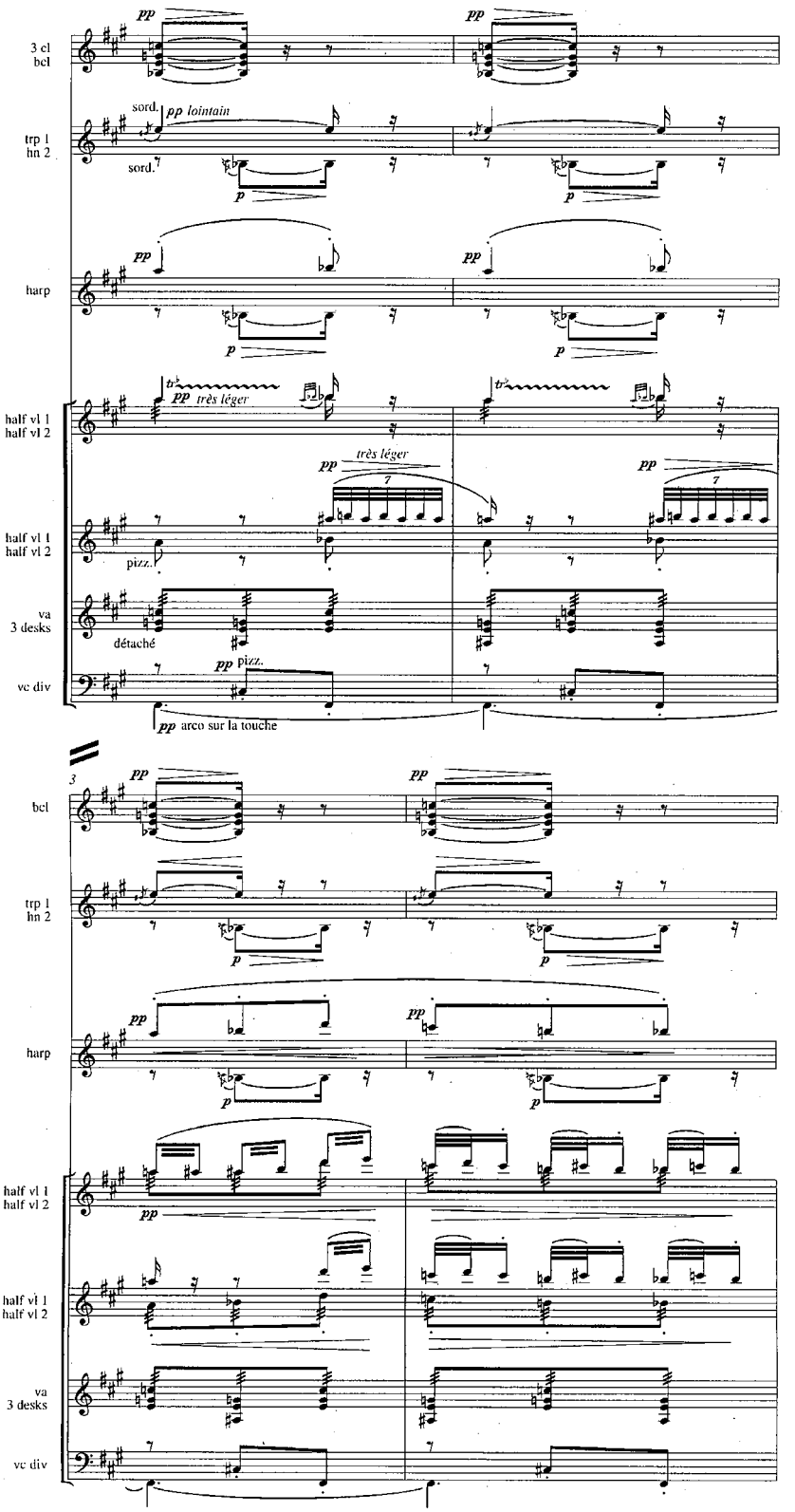
> [E]ven though the themes and groups of motives in *Jeux* are mostly in four and eight-bars, they do not comply with traditional formal claims. Concepts such as antecedent and consequent are no longer applicable. If one tried to apply them, one would have to say that the themes of *Jeux* are made up wholly of antecedents.[16]

This appraisal seems particularly apt when one compares *Jeux* with 'Sirènes'. Paired repetitions in *Jeux* sometimes involve short units, one bar or even less, but they are often four-bar phrases, which may be separated by entirely different gestures, even by different tempos. (Compare, for instance, bars 224–34 (from figs. 27–8) and 245–55 (figs. 29–30), each passage involving three changes of tempo and texture, with no motive longer than two bars.)

The ornamental melodic style, full of trills, graces and *gruppetti*, that characterised much of *La mer* and was carried further in the orchestral *Images* reaches its highest point of elaboration in *Jeux*. It is as though the pensive but intense decorative style of Couperin's harpsichord pieces has been transferred to all divisions of the orchestra and greatly accelerated in tempo, like a speeded-up film, with much blurring of the musical surface. It was probably this aspect more than the timbral that bothered Stravinsky when he wrote, 'I still consider *Jeux* as an *orchestral* masterpiece, though I think some of the music is "trop Lalique".'[17] Stravinsky wrote further: '*Jeux* discovers a whole new world of nuance and fluidity. These qualities are French, even peculiarly French, perhaps, but they are new.'[18] Even before *Jeux*, Stravinsky himself, an apt student of *La mer*, was inventing similar nuances and colorations in *L'oiseau de feu*, and it is not surprising that passages such as the one shown in Example 10.6 seem to echo the Firebird's first dance. This passage marks the first appearance of the two female dancers, 'timid and curious'. The melody is in the upper part, with upper second violins in *tremolando* and short staccato notes, doubled at the unison by harp and an octave below by the rest of the second violins, pizzicato; the first violins, divided in two, double these same upper notes with trills that Debussy notates in three different ways, and so fastidiously that one still wonders how, for instance, the double grace note A–B♭ on the third quaver can possibly be executed as written, with an up-bow on the beat. The melody itself is clearly perceptible, but it is coloured with a shimmer of Monet-like brushstrokes. The accompaniment to the melody is a single harmony, bitonally suggestive of the *Petrushka* chord, distributed between the lower strings, harp, three clarinets, and muted trumpet and horn. Note also the dynamic and expression markings, *très léger*, *détaché*, mutes on the brass but not the strings, *sur la touche*, *lointain*, specification of just three stands of tremolando violas, etc., all of these adding up to a degree of notational precision equal to that of Webern's most meticulously marked scores.

Even in the largest climaxes of *Jeux* (as at bars 645 and 653, marked *Violent* but only *f*) there is no full *tutti*, but instead a careful and rapidly changing separation of colouristic elements. The *fortissimo* dramatic climax, at bar 677 (fig. 78), lasts just two bars, with a big unison of the main four-note motive in three octaves, middle register to top, harmonised by a single major second.

Example 10.6 *Jeux*: short-score reduction of full score (fig. 10)



In the last sonatas Debussy achieves a remarkable refinement and re-adoption of classical chamber-music textures that he had outgrown after his student works, with some of the chordal spacing reminiscent of Schubert and Brahms's chamber works with piano; yet some of this is not widely different in texture from some of Debussy's own piano pieces, neither does he entirely avoid emulating the filigreed sound of the impressionist orchestra. The Sérénade in the Cello Sonata features some unprecedented and very effective *quasi chitarra* pizzicati, but the guitar is also imitated in the piano at the beginning of the Finale, and in most of the work a smooth cantabile dominates the writing for cello. In the Sonata for flute, viola and harp, typical gestures of the virtuoso harp style, especially glissandos and arpeggios, are mostly avoided in favour of an equal share in a balanced dialogue between melodic roles for all three instruments; 'Bruyères', in book 2 of the *Préludes*, is not a particularly striking kind of piano writing, but when the same style reappears in the first movement of the Sonata nothing could be more appropriate to the serene neo-archaic atmosphere of the piece. The Violin Sonata shows what is perhaps the most obvious Debussyan sound in its writing for both instruments; the rippling parallel harmony at the beginning of the last movement seems to go back as early as the song accompaniments of the 1890s. But the Intermède, marked *Fantasque et léger*, for all its textural simplicity, shows a new colouristic voice in its repeated notes and chords; nothing else of Debussy's prepares the listener for the strange sound of the violin's high double-stop major thirds, doubled by piano an octave lower, at bar 101.

The individual aspects of Debussy's sound are well rooted in, and logically descended from, the music of his predecessors. His great achievement was to synthesise these into a distinctive and personal style that, even as it evolved, remained consistent from the earliest works to the last. The Great War and Debussy's death in his prime marked the end of what some writers called the Impressionist period in music, but his achievement endured in full force. Although Debussy's style was manifold, in the realm of pure sound there was nothing inimitable about it; for better or worse, no other style, particularly in orchestral music, has been more widely or more successfully imitated in the twentieth century. Ravel, Stravinsky, Respighi, Casella, Holst, even composers as different as Prokofiev and Berg, as well as two or three generations of later French, British, Iberian, Soviet Russian and American composers, were all keenly influenced Debussy in their compositional makeup.