Associations with the Visual Arts in the Music of Debussy

Thesis

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ASSOCIATIONS WITH THE VISUAL ARTS IN THE MUSIC OF DEBUSSY

by

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Abstract

Debussy’s writings make frequent reference to his artistic leanings and his penchant for visual inspirations, particularly those in the natural world. He enjoyed the company of both writers and artists, and his contemporaries, particularly his friend and early biographer Louis Laloy, were quick to point to a perceived analogy with Impressionism. Debussy’s ‘visualities,’ however, stretched far beyond this movement, taking in Post-Impressionist techniques and the philosophies and ideas of both French and Belgian Symbolists among others – all of whom demonstrate certain parallels between subject matter, the articulation of specific procedural techniques and emotional correlations with Debussy’s music. Sometimes his compositional strategies form direct equivalences with artists such as Seurat and Monet’s later practices.

Many studies over the last sixty years have articulated the notion of visual ideas within the French composer’s pieces, but this study proposes that they were far more prevalent than previously supposed, not only in his songs and opera, Pelléas et Mélisande, where such associations are more obvious, but also encompassed within the fabric of his more abstract instrumental works. Claude Debussy’s life straddles the second half of the nineteenth century when both music and art underwent radical changes, away from that which followed a given format or was purely representational towards the pursuit of the ‘inner self’ and the ‘idée.’ He became the catalyst for the movement towards a modern music in his challenge to the Romantic aesthetic, taking in modality and atonality and all that that allowed. In Debussy’s coalescence of musical and visual correspondances, we find a composer who was truly visionary in his outlook.
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INTRODUCTION

The title of my thesis focuses on the pivotal question of Debussy’s musical language and the means by which he evoked his ‘soundscapes’ in a parallel development to contemporary visual art. Particular reference will be made to aspects such as musical colour, pitch contours and multiple melodic lines of cohesion that interweave through his music both simultaneously and successively, extending our perceptions of phenomena such as water and clouds, and our reading of emotions in his Symbolist masterpiece, Pelléas et Mélisande. In addition, the degree of fluency or stasis in the composer’s music lends itself to a painterly interpretation that is analogous to aspects of each of the great art movements of the latter half of the nineteenth century, encompassing the Impressionists and Néo-Impressionnists, the Symbolists in both France and Belgium, as well as the Pre-Raphaelites, Nabis and Art Nouveau, which will be examined in detail.

My contention is that Debussy’s links with painters and their pictures, and his artistic temperament, indicate that he was very much enmeshed within the artistic community, as well as the literary one, and that it was these correspondances1 together with his range of interests that demonstrate the extent of the visual associations within his music, and the composer’s situation within these contextual clues. (His lifestyle within Montmartre cafés and cabarets is one aspect that comes readily to mind, and is demonstrated in chapter IV). It is in our perceptions as twenty-first century listeners and viewers that this study seeks to demonstrate equivalences by which we can draw comparative interdisciplinary judgements, particularly by using Peircian models of signs and how their interaction can cause us to comprehend a coalescence of music with the visual. Thomas Turino’s arguments showing how this semiotic theory can be applied to music will aid my methodological approach,2 together with Raymond Monelle’s The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays, which reinterprets the history of Western music in terms of semiotics.3

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1 Debussy borrowed this word directly from Baudelaire, who had used it in his theory of ‘Correspondances’ to emphasise the congruence between ‘sound, scents and sights’ in his poem featured in Fleurs du mal. It became a feature of Symbolist doctrine, and was used by Debussy to highlight the similarities of music particularly with ‘Nature’.


3 Raymond Monelle, The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays, Foreword by Robert Hatten (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000; Rev. 2010). This is a musical theory based on the parable of a fictional Dr. Strabismus, whose sense of music—semiotics, are ‘based on the assumption that music cannot be described without reference to its meaning…’ what ‘music says and signifies can be understood only with reference to history, culture, and the other arts…’ Foreword. Also see Mark Reybrouck, Music and Semiotics: An Experiential Approach to Musical Sense-Making, 2017. https://www.intechopen.com/books/interdisciplinary-approaches-to-semiotics/music-and-semiotics. It focusses on the evolution of semiotics and ‘the role of sensory experience in the process of musical sense-making.’
In order to substantiate this brief, a detailed analysis of Debussy’s fascinations and relationships with specific artists will be made and analogies drawn between his music and specific paintings, relating to the various artistic movements mentioned above. I shall seek to address this question not only with historical data but with an analysis of different musical pieces, their symbolic references and performance practices, especially in Pelléas et Mélisande, and how these relate to individual artistic works. This is an area where I shall be expanding on previous Debussy scholarship and looking in detail at inter-disciplinary knowledge encompassing the visual world. The oft-called poetic Debussy produced a vast literary output in terms of correspondence, interviews and articles, as well as some sound texts, which led to much academic work concentrating on his relationship with writers, but there are frequent references in his writing to his love of natural forms and their affinity to his artistic mores and ethos. The impact of these ideas on Debussy’s music demonstrates their unique effects upon his own creativity.

Much of contemporary research has linked Debussy with his cultural background and aesthetic developments, but the recent accessibility of his letters within the Correspondance and the publication of the Œuvres Complètes will enable me to draw many of these strands together. The artistic context and effects upon the composer’s work will therefore not only complement what has gone before but will augment our understanding of Debussy’s duality—the sensibility of a character that was at one and the same time both musician and artist. The nature of such a task will also help build bridges between the musical and artistic worlds and enhance their interrelated aspects, since little has been written about these equivalences with regard to Debussy, and I hope to redress the balance. As Anne Lennard defines in her essay on ‘Musical Metaphors in Art Criticism:

Music’s elusive quality came to stand for any kind of inexpressibility: this transcendence of words implied a purer, more ethereal realm… music had been the ordinary, universal language before it “decomposed into many incomprehensible tongues,” (making of the composer) a seer, or perhaps hearer, who did not so much create something new as recognise these lost original melodies.

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Thus, in the fin de siècle, ‘in music, both visual art and the language of criticism found a purer, higher version of themselves, a beacon and model.’ But as Marsha L. Morton noted at the millennium, research into ‘musicality’ in painting has been far more prevalent than ‘painterliness’ in music. Shephard and Leonard’s compendium on Music and Visual Culture (see fn. 7) aims at a broader research scope, opening out interdisciplinary realms that shape and extend my own ideas accordingly.

Hector Berlioz had written that instrumentation in music was the exact equivalent of colour in painting. They shared a basic vocabulary for instance, ‘including terms such as colour, tone, harmony, composition, improvisation, modulation and scale.’ Debussy’s own reflections on the process of composition, artistic debates and day-to-day struggles are all contained within the Correspondance (1872–1918), the salient book for my thesis because it brings together over 3000 letters and documents covering the whole of Debussy’s adult life, in their original language, covering Debussy’s friends and colleagues, collaborators, critics and journalists, therefore being a primary source of information. The French scholar François Lesure’s Préface muses on the profoundly differing opinions of Debussy’s character, and how these came about, but his correspondence with friends enables some rapprochement between the differing viewpoints to occur, and Debussy’s obviously mercurial nature helps explain his ambivalences and enigmatic persona. As he proclaims to Victor Segalen, ‘Tout chez moi est instinctif, irraisonné…’, whilst his relationships with contemporary artists such as Whistler, Maurice Denis, Odilon Redon and Camille Claudel come to life in his letters, providing important evidence of the synergistic potentials for my interdisciplinary research. This 2005 volume is indispensable in enabling me to draw conclusions about Debussy as man, musician and commentator on contemporary life and affiliations. Spontaneous and caustic comments as well as the poetic phrasing of the composer’s writing illuminate his words and bring him to life as raconteur, particularly when taken in conjunction with his Monsieur Croche persona, which enabled him to express his opinions in contemporary publications such as La Revue Blanche, Musica, Gil Blas, and S.I.M. under this pseudonym. The latter section also contains interviews for papers such as Le Figaro, Comoedia and

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10 Hector Berlioz’s Treatise on Instrumentation (1843/4).
12 See François Lesure in Preface to Csp., p. II.
Excelsior, which provide additional insights into his views and character, all in their original form, and contain some of his most famous pronouncements about issues of the time that he found important, such as La musique en plein air, detailing the freedom he required for his music so that it could use its ‘curves’ to express a natural fluidity. Debussy’s concept of music as ‘expressive effect,’ flowing freely en plein-air in a seemingly improvised way, often appeared to contemporaries to have an ‘impressionistic’ consequence, thus his writings are of primary importance in my analysis of Debussy’s artistic perceptions and commensurate curved and linear forms.

Earlier translations of Debussy’s writings were collected by François Lesure and translated by Richard Langham Smith, and Debussy Letters were selected and edited by Lesure and Roger Nichols. These remain useful as English translations giving immediate accessibility, but having been published in 1977 and 1987 have now been superseded by the comprehensiveness of the Correspondance. Although some early commentators on Debussy’s music noted artistic influences, such as his long-term friend and companion Louis Laloy, who wrote various influential articles and the first French biography of him, (Claude Debussy, 1909), these were not detailed revelations. Providing information that seems to have been derived first hand from the composer and concentrating on the naturalness of his music (le naturel) and connections with the other arts, Laloy does however affirm that Debussy’s ‘most profitable lessons came to him not from composers, but from poets and painters.’ He was writing during the years of Debussy’s compositional zenith and was abreast of contemporary culture across a wide span of subjects, including history, literature, and the visual arts, so his viewpoint is significant.

14 It seems that Debussy borrowed the idea from writer Paul Valery’s Monsieur Teste, and used it to set out his opinions on various musical matters, MC.
15 This is a term that Debussy borrowed from painting outdoors in natural light, which became a possibility in the 1840s, once paint was available in tubes and thus transportable. The French Impressionist artist Monet was a particularly prolific exponent of this method, using le plein air to explore his perceptions of nature in landscape painting. Debussy’s ideas for an equivalence in music were published in La Revue blanche, 1er juin 1901, MC, 45–46.
17 Claude Debussy, Debussy Letters, selected and ed. by Francois Lesure and Roger Nichols; trans. Roger Nichols (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987, revised ed.). Hereafter DL.
19 Ibid, 54.
Debussy Commentators

Most Debussy scholars writing during the early twentieth century were to concentrate on the analysis of his pieces, finding it almost impossible to categorise them in the manner of earlier Romantic pieces. Debussy’s quest for perpetual flow in his music, leading to his concept of rhythmicised time\textsuperscript{20} was in direct contrast to the Germanic model. It evolved instead as the continual unfurling of sound in a way that seemed to recall a sense of eternal \textit{Becoming} and mystery, an impression that Vladimir Jankélévitch elucidated in the mid-twentieth century,\textsuperscript{21} which avoided climaxes and had neither a beginning, middle nor end, (and indeed was indebted to Hegel’s theory of \textit{Being-Nothingness-Becoming} trinity formulated in 1830).\textsuperscript{22} Jankélévitch’s philosophical writing embodies the idea of Debussy’s music as emerging from silence, being viewed as a continuous line. Debussy’s use of curving phrases, weaving multiple lines that could either extend his pieces, as in the motivic development of \textit{La Mer},\textsuperscript{23} or adding a ‘vertical’ chordal aspect in addition to a horizontal flow, as in \textit{La Cathédrale engloutie}, and his appropriation of the artistic \textit{arabesque}, all helped to add a visual facet to his music as it was written on the page. These artistic references were allusions to visuality that I have sought to interrogate and develop within my thesis.

Further early attempts to find new ways of approaching a musical understanding of Debussy’s music, and less explicit ways of evaluating its forms, were made by Herbert Eimert and Jean Barraqué during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Eimert’s article for \textit{Die Reihe} in 1959\textsuperscript{24} made comparisons between the ballet \textit{Jeux} and the ‘organic inexactness of vegetation,’ which unrolled at unspecified points in ways that broke the mould of traditional structures, so that ‘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 \textit{Jeux} are made up wholly of antecedents,’\textsuperscript{25} a description that portrays the impression of continuous \textit{arabesque}, or Jankélévitch’s ‘Becoming’. This reassociation and combination of ideas that formed

\textsuperscript{20} Claude Debussy, \textit{Csp.} 1029–30, Debussy to his publisher, Jacques Durand, 3 Sept, 1907.
\textsuperscript{22} ‘Just as Hegel rejected all the primary dualisms of Western philosophy; so, in a sense, he also rejected his own Being-Nothingness duality by emphasising the category Becoming. We now have a Nothingness-Being-Becoming trinity; rather than a duality between Being and Nothingness.’ Hegel on Being, Nothingness and Becoming (with Stephen Houlgate). Stephen Houlgate, ed. \textit{The Hegel Reader} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
\textsuperscript{24} He spoke of the \textit{vegetative circulation} of Debussy’s form (‘organische Ungenauigkeit des Vegetativen,’).
perpetual sonorous lines in Debussy’s music were also taken up by Barraqué, when he spoke about the composer’s formal process as a *devenir sonore*, a ‘sonorous becoming…a developmental process in which the very notions of exposition and development coexist in an uninterrupted burst.’

The fluidity of such an evolution made it a perfectly protean style for *La Mer*, synthesising a mosaic of motivic development into Debussy’s tripartite orchestral piece that constantly develops and unifies by means of its nuances and meticulous scoring.

Individual authors such as E. Robert Schmitz and Roger Nichols early on mentioned Debussy’s refined sensitivities and pictorial waves of sound in his music, or pointed to the relationships he enjoyed with the artistic fraternity, whilst documenting his life. Following on from these, the musicologist Roy Howat’s *Debussy in Proportion: A musical analysis*, published in 1983, was to make a novel but strong case for proportional structure and Golden Section in many of Debussy’s pieces, as well as also demonstrating spiral structures within some, showing them to be highly structured in their musical intention, over which flowed a musical surface that was flexible and blurred in its elaborations by the use of Debussy’s ‘floating’ chords. Associations between music and a full range of artistic movements flourished during Debussy’s lifetime, and I propose to expand on these in terms of their subject matter, evocative mood and technical equivalences, further amplifying existing scholarship in this area.

The series of books written by Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: (The Master Musicians Series)*, *Debussy: His Life and Mind, Volume I* (1862–1902) and *Volume II* (1902–1918) have also been pre-eminent in their field over the last forty years, full of salient information and documentation of Debussy’s friendships and relationships with contemporaries which do, nonetheless, go further in their attempt to marry Debussy with other contemporary influences, such as early psychoanalysis, and within literature—

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26 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.
Mallarmé, Gide and Proust. The author’s section on ‘Dreams,’ as purveyors of the unconscious mind, is of particular interest in relation to Debussy’s only completed opera, _Pelléas et Mélisande_, juxtaposed against the artwork of both later Pre-Raphaelite and Belgian Symbolist artists of the time and set against a background of Freudian ideas filtering through society during the early twentieth century. However, it is Lockspeiser’s book _Music and Painting: A study in Comparative Ideas from Turner to Schoenberg_ that provides the earliest exploration of comparisons in the field of music and art involving Debussy and other composers, and though now 45 years old, remains a valuable resource of ideas and deductions in the author’s aim to examine the interaction of ideas in music and painting, in ‘the unification of the artistic experience… as a nineteenth-century ideal’. Lockspeiser provides an early interdisciplinary view in an area that to date had only considered artistic influences from a musical standpoint as a very peripheral area for study in the Debussy academic domain.

Another strand of research that dominated the middle years of the twentieth-century was the Impressionist versus Symbolist debate argued by researchers such as Christopher Palmer, who without recourse to any ‘proofs’ decided that all of Debussy’s pieces fell ‘naturally’ into the Impressionist camp, a position extending Lockspeiser’s, in that he believed Debussy reflected his age as no other, the composer’s originality propelling musical ideas forward in a totally innovative way. Palmer’s study provides little in the way of substantiation, perhaps because his perceptions at this time appeared to him as self-evident, whereas Stefan Jarocinski’s _Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism_ provides a much fuller debate of the Impressionist versus Symbolist positions that were to dominate much of the research during the second part of the twentieth-century. His stance refuted the erroneous concepts of ‘musical Impressionism’ that were adopted by groups such as the Debussyists, as well as giving the case for a Symbolist reading of Debussy’s music. I shall not, however, take up an either/or oppositional case, but examine contemporary artistic movements for similarities in common with Debussy’s music, and whether these analogies crossed each divide.

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34 Lockspeiser, _Painting: A Study in Comparative Ideas from Turner to Schoenberg_ (Cassell & Company Ltd. 1973).
Some commentators have taken a different approach by siting Debussy within the historical context of Wagnerian Paris, two of these being Andrew Lehmann and Robin Holloway. The former produced a work of considerable achievement in 1950, entitled *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France 1885–1895*, in which he pursued philosophical discussion as to the nature of art and the aesthetic of Symbolism, launched by Jean Moréas in 1885 in a series of manifestos. Lehmann argued that various ‘authorities,’ notably Téodor de Wyzéwa, editor of the *Revue Wagnérienne* in France, had chosen to ascribe these Symbolist views to Wagner in the search for a new view of art and suggested they had been guilty of ‘inventing’ the relationship between music and the other arts, grafting on to the composer’s aesthetic a role for poetry and painting that Wagner had not posited. Thus, Debussy’s predilection for nebulous Symbolist ideas which he incorporated into his pieces was far more innovatory and deserves closer scrutiny in correlating their moods with contemporary visual art works, because in this reading such concepts had not been appropriated by Wagner first. In fact, it was Robin Holloway, whose theme in both his thesis and book, *Debussy and Wagner*, looked for more direct effects such as leitmotivs as harbingers of characters in Debussy’s music, especially in his earlier works, even as Debussy sought to expunge such an influence. Even *Jeux* (1913) contains within it the kernel of ‘manifest content’ Holloway opines, the ‘suavely suggestive contour of its melodic arabesques, the consummate radiance and liveliness of its orchestra’ redolent of *Parsifal’s* subtle associations. Wagner does, however, provide a point of departure for Debussy, a move into new land where his originality is assured. Debussy’s early affinity with Baudelaire’s view of Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk as the pinnacle of music and art in his evocative dramas, linking as it does both music and the visuality of dramatic art in jouissance, largely dissipates as his own musical explorations lead him further from the pre-existing norms of composition.

Moving forwards to more directly comparative sources of Debussy and visual art, Roger Nichols’ partnership with Richard Langham Smith, with whom he wrote *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Cambridge Opera Handbooks), analyses Debussy’s opera, linking the Symbolist atmosphere with the writer Maeterlinck’s own childhood in Belgium. By virtue of its art form, the opera springs to life because of its visuality, and thus there is much to reflect upon

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in this area, which has been taken up by Langham Smith and other scholars such as Marie Rolf, Jann Pasler, Elliott Antokoletz and Roy Howat in a much more recent evaluation of Debussy’s contexts and truths in *Rethinking Debussy*, published in 2011. Debussy’s musical language of extended flexibility is used to interpret Maeterlinck’s interplay of themes and symbols, the interludes to *Pelléas* particularly portraying a purely musical Symbolism that had been present in the literature. This source is, however, mainly concerned with new perspectives of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, whereas my own work will bridge the artistic divide in a much broader exploration and summation of contemporary artistic activity and how this impacted on Debussy. Richard Langham Smith’s ‘Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites,’ however, traces the development of the *ange-femme* and its impact on Debussy in works such as *Diane au bois*, *La Damaoiselle élue* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, particularly the links with ‘outer stillness (that) often conceals profound inner drama’ that lent itself to the composer’s themes of silence and profundity of the soul. The visual qualities of the Pre-Raphaelite woman, imbued with an inner (deeper) love set within a silent landscape, was one that Maeterlinck was familiar with and translated into his plays, and that Debussy took up in turn to emphasise luminosity in his music. I shall build on this model in exploring the composer’s predilection for Symbolist themes.

Other existing analyses within the research environment have concentrated on reception studies, such as James R. Briscoe’s editorship of *Debussy in Performance* in 1999, relating to performance practice that perhaps captures the *esprit Debussyste* in some way, reflecting on how his music reaches its particular truth. Tantalising insights into the Debussy aesthetic as ‘ideals of a distillation of human emotion’ – (‘des sentiments de l’âme’) are revealed in works such as *La damaoiselle élue* and *Pelléas*— works that were set within the supernatural world rather than the material one, and Claude Abravanel’s contribution ‘Symbolism and Performance,’ indirectly references the execution of visual ideas in the composer’s ideas that sonorous ‘veils’ signify emotion. Jann Pasler’s ‘Timbre, Voice-leading, and the Musical Arabesque in Debussy’s Piano Music,’ is perhaps most informative as it relates to the curves

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and musical lines in Debussy’s music, since the notion of *arabesques* are at the crux of my argument regarding musical and artistic equivalences, as are the simultaneous intertwining lines relating to the Javanese gamelan which Debussy had so admired at the Great Exhibitions of 1889 and 1900. However, her work has been superseded by Gurminder Kaur Bhogal’s *Details of Consequence: Ornament, Music and Art in Paris*, from 2013, which has much to say on the subject of the *arabesque*, its meaning and decorative function, its temporal qualities and heritage, articulating its sinuous perception within both Islamic tradition and Western heritage:

To say that fin de siècle Western Europe was obsessed with the arabesque may be no exaggeration. Commonly thought to evoke vine, ivy and acanthus leaves, this vegetal ornament subsumed the cultural sphere in France. Its winding contours came to define Art Nouveau and mesmerized a range of artists who adapted this ornament to their expressive needs whether Néo-Impressionist, Symbolist, Fauvist or Nabi. The arabesque’s tendrils stretched all the way to and between Belgium, Great Britain, Germany and Austria… This ornament was also conceived as having no beginning and no end… which facilitated its proclivity toward saturating the entire surface…

During the last twenty years, which has seen the 150-year anniversary of Debussy’s birth in 2012 and renewed interest in his music, there has been a plethora of discerning texts published. I propose to mention just a few of these that would suggest their obvious application for my own research. *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy,* edited by Simon Trezise in 2003, approaches the composer from many different viewpoints such as ‘Debussy and nature’ and ‘Debussy and expression,’ as well as containing a substantial section on his musical techniques to evoke continual movement, encompassing ‘Debussy’s rhythmicised time’, and musical colour that enters the domain of perpetual metamorphosis. The many onomatopoeic effects Debussy uses to express the flexible fluidity of his music make his compositional process an important tenet to my discussion of painterly influences. Richard S. Parks’ contribution to this series, ‘Music’s inner dance: form, pacing and complexity in Debussy’s music,’ also examines the way the music advances in ‘a

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50 Caroline Potter, ‘Debussy and nature’ *ibid*, ch.8.

51 Nigel Simeone, ‘Debussy and expression’ *ibid*, ch. 6

52 Simon Trezise, ‘Debussy’s ‘rhythmicised time’ *ibid*, ch. 12.
veritable counterpoint of changes’, this pervasive ‘inner dance’ or moving line that Parks deduces is useful in comparative analogies.

More recently, a burgeoning body of material has focussed on the composer’s use of colour and texture as musical techniques within the moving reality of each composition, each taking a different standpoint. The current vogue for interdisciplinary and interrelated studies has seen the Debussy model taken up as a compelling instance of the link between fin de siècle art and music, but almost all of these enquiries concern the effect of music on painting and the other arts, not the reverse. My research will add to this body of work, but it will concentrate on the contribution visual associations have made to Debussy’s music, thus helping to redress the balance and further exploring these aspects within the composer’s œuvre.

From an interdisciplinary standpoint, Peter Dayan’s Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida, written in 2006, presents us with the quandary of whether music can ever really be described and equated with words. Dayan takes up a philosophical viewpoint concurring with Baudelaire, that there is always a space between the music and its listener which the imagination fills in. This lacune is an eternally elusive principal that is elucidated by the author as the divine ideal, a perception that relies on the individual imagination to translate, rather in the manner of Peircian signs – the methodology I take up as an interpretive approach to justify my reasoning in linking the sonic and visual.

At the forefront of those publications seeking to define music’s effect on painting lies a series of articles edited by Marsha L. Morton and Peter L Schmunk, in The Arts Entwined: Music and Painting in the Nineteenth-Century, another perspective continuing in a similar vein being Simon Shaw-Miller’s Visible Deeds of Music: Art and Music from Wagner to Cage – but both deal in reciprocal analogies. The former sets the scene for the advent of the Modernist era in a remarkably effective way by exploring the complementary relationships between music and painting during the nineteenth-century and beyond with the gestation of

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53 Richard S. Parks, ‘Music’s inner dance: form, pacing and complexity in Debussy’s music,’ in ibid, ch. 11.  
55 Peter Dayan, Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida (Ashgate, 2006). Hereafter MWL  
56 See Thomas Turino, SIE. A similar rationale is taken up by Richard Leppert’s The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), which makes the manifest point that the visual-performative aspects of music constitute the connection between sight and sound – ‘in pleasure that constantly recurs’.  
instrumental music, which became known as ‘the paradigmatic expressive art.’ Thus painting was enabled to approach abstraction, whilst composers cultivated pictorial images in their music, initially in programmatic music and thenceforth by Impressionist/Symbolist means and other correspondences. The latter’s most notable section on ‘Deeds of Music made Visible: Wagner, The Gesamtkunstwerk, and the Birth of the Modern’, is particularly apposite in placing Wagner within the context of European culture at this time, his importance as cipher of a universal Art form, where dance, music and poetry all combined under ‘the banner of Drama’ could hardly be underestimated. These articles examine the extension of musicological boundaries and new analytical strategies that enable us to take an interdisciplinary approach to cultural perspectives, so that we may conduct fresh dialogues across a network of associations in related fields of artistic endeavour.

Authors who have attempted to explain how artists sought to translate musical rhythms and structures into painting and how musicians developed visual themes in their compositions, include Peter Vergo in his work The Music of Painting: Music, Modernism and the Visual Arts from the Romantics to John Cage, Thomas Tolley, in Painting the Cannon’s Roar: Music, the Visual Arts and the Rise of an Attentive Public in the Age of Haydn, and Siglind Bruhn in Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting, although only the latter has written critically on Debussy and made explicit pictorial inferences within his Préludes. Vergo considers the intensification of musical/visual connections between musicians and artists, helping to bridge the gap between the painting and musical cultural crossover, whilst Tolley emphasises the role of commercial opportunities that clinched the popularity of Haydn’s later oratorios by encouraging people to want to see and hear more together. Bruhn’s ideas are based on Théophile Gautier’s ‘une transposition d’art’ which encompassed ‘the verbal representation of a visual representation’ or ekphrasis, as she terms it, but probably the most intriguing aspects of her work are the interactions between music and the other arts as ‘music and word’ and ‘music and image’, which analyse the Préludes in detail, but with recourse to the poetic rather than the visual. As a contrast to this, a very

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59 Ibid, ch.2.
recent ‘Biography of Sorts’, Stephen Walsh’s *Debussy: A Painter in Sound*,\(^64\) examines the composer through the prism of both his personal life and his music, offering a fusion of perceptions and analyses that have much appeal to the general reader yet imparting a great deal of information about the composer’s artistic temperament.

The nearest perspective to my own, but investigating the more specific phenomenon of ornamentation within the works of musicians such as Debussy, Ravel, Fauré and others, is Gurminder Kaur Bhogal’s *Details of Consequence: Ornament, Music and Art in Paris*, as mentioned previously.\(^65\) Whilst not confined to the Debussyan experience, it is most illuminating in its examination of the ‘decorative languages’ that permeated through both art and music at this time, but its focus is different to my own in considering one facet of the visual. My own research will draw closer analogies with various contemporary pictorial sources from different artistic movements, and examine the visual associations between specific paintings and Debussy’s music, thus fulfilling this particular scholarly gap.

Perhaps the most useful source of information for me has been the *Debussy: la musique et les arts* Exhibition at L’Orangerie, Paris: 22 fevrier-11 juin 2012, which I attended. It proved fertile ground for examining the impact of painting on Debussy’s music at the end of nineteenth-century France, but largely from the point of view of museum conservateurs Jean-Michel Nectoux and Guy Cogeval.\(^66\) Despite their meticulous catalogue of art objects and paintings associated with Debussy, there is still much to say in relation to Debussy’s music and the affinities that might be discerned between the two. In line with the exhibition, the catalogue book\(^67\) accentuates the many relationships Debussy enjoyed with other members of the artistic community and the effects on his own work with regard to aspects such as curves and ornamentation, as well as his ‘artnouveauesque’\(^68\) rooms where he kept many evocative reminders of his passions. These correlations, though, do not make the close musical analogies that I hope to draw with Debussy’s compositions such as his *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*. It is in this area of close equivalences and musical analysis of artistic affinities that I hope to contribute to the academic domain.


\(^{65}\) Gurminder Kaur Bhogal’s *Details of Consequence: Ornament, Music and Art in Paris* especially chs. 2–4.


\(^{68}\) Laloy, in Lockspeiser, Vol. I, 119.
CHAPTER I

EVOLVING THEORIES OF COMPARISON BETWEEN MUSIC AND THE VISUAL ARTS

All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music… this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees.⁶⁹

—Walter Pater, “The School of Giorgione” (1877)

There is only one Art; painting and music are only different fields, part of this general Art; one must know the boundaries, but also how it looks from the other side; yes, the painter who is musical, just as the composer who paints, these are true, genuine artists…⁷⁰

—Carl Friedrich Zelter (1783)

Part I

A Historical Perspective

The cross-fertilization of the arts marked out nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle Paris as a particularly rich period and locale in terms of the simultaneous flowering of art, poetry and music, but writers have in the main chosen to ‘prove’ the importance of music to the artistic and literary worlds, rather than the reverse. The very act of verbalising and ascribing meaning to music accords with a particular kind of symbolical transposition in the mind, especially with regard to its unique performance qualities, since the listener relies on these to interpret rather than the ‘concrete’ object of book or painting. It has followed, therefore, that the effects of visual connotations upon music have been a neglected area for comparative research. This study seeks to determine the symbiotic effect and influence of the visual arts on the music of Claude Debussy, (1862–1918), whose cyclic patterning of fluidity and flowing forms made his music innovative and expressive in ways that were redolent of natural forms and artistic ornamentation, as exemplified by movements such as


Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Art Nouveau and Symbolism. I argue that corollaries in technique, subject matter and emotional perceptions can be clearly detected with each of these movements, examining Debussy’s pieces with regard to various artists and particular paintings.

In this chapter I elucidate Debussy’s enigmatic new style which made such analogies possible, before probing the impact of important influences who both inspired him, in the case of Liszt, and encouraged him to adopt new practices in the case of Wagner. Additionally, the importance of Baudelaire’s theory of Correspondances as an overlying mantle to Debussy’s Symbolist ethos is clarified, as I appraise its effect on the poetic-artistic-musical divide. I also consider the impact of other contemporary influences and evolving comparative theories, showing how these impacted on Debussy’s music. In Part II I move on to comparative theories of the twentieth century, in particular Semiotics, in which I seek to show how Debussy’s music can be understood within a Peircean framework. I subsequently explain how this operates in order for us to perceive a coalescence between music and the visual arts.

Debussy’s New Style

A conversation took place at some point during 1889–1900 between Claude Debussy and his former teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, Ernest Guiraud. A fellow student Maurice Emmanuel transcribed what Lockspeiser called ‘some of the main points’ of the dialogue, which commented on Debussy’s own musical philosophy, divorcing it from the tonal ‘rules’ of its heritage. He maintained that:

Rhythms are stifling. Rhythms cannot be contained within bars…It is nonsense to speak of ‘simple’ or ‘composed’ time…There should be an interminable flow of them both…Music is neither major nor minor…Minor thirds and major thirds should be combined, modulation thus becoming more flexible.’

By exploring expressivity ‘there must be a balance between musical demands and thematic evocation. Themes suggest their orchestral colouring.’

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After Guiraud enquired about a selection of intervals Debussy had played, the composer replied that they were:

Incomplete chords, floating. *You have to drown in the sound.* One can travel where one wishes and leave by any door. That’s where enlarging the field comes from. And nuances.  

Debussy aimed to capture the intangibility of music in his compositional process by means of a much freer soundscape. Some years later he expounded that:

Moreover, I am persuaded more and more that music is not, by its essence, something which can flow inside a rigorous and traditional form. It is made up of colours and rhythmised time.  

By this, Debussy meant that music should operate organically, in an exact equivalence to nature, not in a manner that conformed to traditional forms such as sonatas and symphonies. Comprising a far more malleable reflection of time and space than had hitherto been the case, and sensing the equation between an unfettered expression of sound and his distillation of corresponding themes, the music of Debussy became emblematic of the push towards redefining artistic boundaries at this time. His life straddled the second half of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, a time when tonality expanded and exhausted itself as the common musical language, whilst Debussy redefined the way music was perceived and listened to and forged the way forward towards a new conception for it.

It was this sense of malleability that enabled Debussy to challenge teleologically-based music, and effect chords that were beautiful in themselves, whilst still retaining a pitch-centric core within his pieces. This move away from goal-oriented cadences and periodic structures was aided by his use of modes such as the pentatonic or whole-tone scale, and possibly acoustic scales, since they did not resolve in the same way as harmonic transpositions. Thus Debussy was able to capture the ‘music of the moment’, so that it existed in a timeless sense of ‘becoming,’ or circularity – a never-ending line that conjoined with its visual counterpart in contemporary artistic movements. Jonathan Kramer usefully describes

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74 ‘Par ailleurs, je me persuade de plus en plus que la Musique n’est pas, par son essence, une chose qui puisse se couler dans une forme rigoureuse et traditionnelle. Elle est de couleurs et de temps rhythmè…’ 3rd Sept., 1907, to his publisher, Durand, *Csp.* 1029–1030.

75 See examples in *Voiles*, *Préludes I*, 1910, or ‘Poissons d’Or’ from *Images II*, 1907.

76 François de Médecis, *La Maturation artistique de Debussy dans son contexte historique (1884–1902).* (Brepols, 2020), 293–307. A discussion about *Le jet d’eau* raises an interesting idea about a third scale that Debussy uses – the ‘acoustic scale,’ a mediator between the diatonic and the whole tone scales. A chart at *ex.* 2.53, p. 300, discusses the rotation of diatonic and acoustic scales within the piece.
this articulation of ‘moment forms,’ bringing us a sense of Debussy’s ethos in rendering to
music a sense of the natural, the ever-present. They ‘verticalize one’s sense of time within
sections, render every moment a present, avoid functional implications between moments,
and avoid climaxes…a composition in moment time has neither functional beginning or
ending’.

Debussy’s continually evolving pieces have been readily compared to the curving graphic
representations of the Art Nouveau movement, and the desire for decorative ornamentation.
The composer’s friend, Pierre Louÿs, had described Debussy’s flat as ‘your Art Nouveau
den,’ and the curving line of these artists may well have directly influenced the latter’s
conception of melody as flowing, twining ‘arabesque.’ Many studies over the past fifty years
have articulated some notion of visual ideas within them in relation to Debussy’s music, often
reflecting the stylistised, elongated undulations of this movement. Roy Howat’s discerning of
‘wave-like tendencies,’ and ‘dynamic waves’ in the composer’s piano pieces articulates
notions of rising and falling both tonally and dynamically, as well as his perception that
Debussy used ternary forms in the same vein. The potential for mathematical spirals in the
outer movements of La Mer, based on the Fibonacci series, are other visual features that he
discerns.

Roger Nichols also conceives of ‘each 3-note pattern’ of Reflets dans l’eau being ‘that of a wave,’ and the shaping of phrases taking on this contour, whilst the pianist E.
Robert Schmitz speaks of ‘waves of engendering waves’ generating the evolution of the
Préludes and ‘graphic representations’ of arches that he perceives in the score of La
Cathédrale engloutie (Préludes I, 1910). This study, however, proposes that visual
associations were far more prevalent within Debussy’s body of work, not only in the minds of
individual perceivers but also in the ways Debussy constructed his pieces to evoke
discernible sensations, and in the ways he wrote and presented his works. This is readily
apparent in his opera, Pelléas et Mélisande, where such Symbolist analogies are more
obvious, but also clearly evident within the fabric of his more abstract instrumental and piano
works. The filling of registral space by means of what Boyd Pomeroy calls ‘decorative
embellishment’ appears to manifest contemporary visual associations that possessed the

78 Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, vol. 1, 119. Also in text at L’Orangerie, Paris, of Debussy :
La musique et les arts, (22 février–11 juin 2012).
79 Roy Howat, DP, 24, about Reflets dans l’eau (Images I) 1905.
80 Ibid, 47. Howat conceives the ‘amalgam of rondo and ternary elements’ of L’isle joyeuse as ‘a type of wave’.
82 Roger Nichols, Oxford Studies of Composers: Debussy (10) 50–51.
‘irresistible…impulse to fill available space,’ and which resonated deeply within the Debussyan artistic sensibility, encompassing the very essence of pieces such as Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune.

Zelter’s remarks in 1783 (reproduced above) were prescient, since a century later artists ‘from Debussy to Gauguin were enriching and reformulating their art through mutual exchange.’ Whilst visual artists approached the realms of abstraction, Debussy created works that were either inspired by paintings, or contained visual elements that were incorporated into the very fabric of their being, in works such as ‘Nuages,’ ‘Fêtes’ and ‘Sirènes’ from the Trois Nocturnes, composed between 1892 and 1899, L’Isle joyeuse from 1904 and La Mer, from 1905. Compositions such as these were mirrored by the illustrative nature of his covers, which reflected Pre-Raphaelite women, Japanese woodcuts and the linear designs of the Art Nouveau that flourished throughout contemporary Europe at the turn of the century.

These evolving influences on Debussy during the latter half of the nineteenth century linked the composer’s music and the visual arts in the views of both contemporary commentators and those who have followed over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The musical convictions of two of his predecessors, Liszt and Wagner, however, were to particularly presage Debussy’s own ethos.

Comparative Studies of the Nineteenth-Century

The Impact of Franz Liszt

At mid-century, under the influence of music, painting approached the threshold of abstraction, whilst ‘concurrently many composers cultivated pictorial effects in their music,’ under the aegis of programmatic music – (descriptive programmes using motives and orchestral colour to suggest characters or images, thematic transformation to mirror situation changes and direct imitation of sounds such as birdsong). Although this may not

85 Morton and Schmunk, AE, 1.
86 Schmitz believed Debussy’s L’Isle joyeuse was possibly inspired by Watteau’s painting, The Embarkation for Cythère, ‘the enchantment of the “land of love” pervading the music…It is veritably the isle of joy.’ In The Piano Works of Claude Debussy, 94.
87 B. Hart, ‘The Symphony in Debussy’s World: A Context for His Views on the Genre and Early Interpretations of La Mer,’ in Debussy and His World, ed. Jane F. Fulcher, (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001), 195: ‘In each movement the conventional form, to the extent that it appears, serves to illustrate the title (the ‘content’), which in turn is inspired by Debussy’s contemplations of the sea…’
88 Morton and Schmunk, eds., AE, coversheet.
have been an equivalent inspiration, in that aesthetic doctrines have not hitherto examined the
effect of the visual arts on music in the same way, this wider sense of visualisation encodes
many aspects of contemporary painting, as well as springing from a mind-set that was
symbiotic among some painters and musicians. For example, composers such as Berlioz and
Liszt as well as Wagner, explored ways of conveying ideas and concrete images that would
give music a ‘power of speech’ and intellectualise its status. Devices such as Berlioz’s idée
fixe, Liszt’s ‘motivic transformations,’ as well as Wagner’s leitmotiv provided
characterisation and representation when text and music were combined together, so that
more complex images and ideas might now be conveyed. These met public demand in
popular works such as Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique, the import of ‘colour’ playing a
central role in its appeal, and the music of both Berlioz and Wagner being particularly
attractive to painters since it was filled with visual imagery, despite their known antipathy to
the painting world. Yet Berlioz at least was ambiguous in his outlook when he maintained
that:

Painting…cannot encroach on the domain of music; but music can by its own means act
upon the imagination in such a way as to engender sensations analogous to those produced
by graphic arts.89

The very association of music and the ‘graphic arts’ suggests a connection in the composer’s
mind, even if he sees this as a ‘one-way’ communication.90

Heated debate over the intrinsic nature of music continued throughout the century, led by
the theorist Eduard Hanslick, whose polemical book Vom Musikalisch-Schönen,91 published
in 1854 intensified the argument against Wagner’s publications as he objected to prioritising
expression over form, though not to programmatic music in itself. Although recent
scholarship has looked at the diverse nature of the concept of Absolute music, both as a term
and an ideal, Sanna Pederson has pointed out that it was Wagner himself who first used the
term in 1846 in a description of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony,92 rather than Hanslick, who
was merely associated with it. Only around 1880 did it come to be used as a positive term
designating the opposite concept to programme music.

89 From ‘L’imitation en musique,’ Gazette musicale de Paris, 1837, in Peter Le Huray and James Day
90 See fn. 87, which makes this point.
91 Edward Hanslick, Von Musikalisch-Schönen, (The Beautiful in Music) 1854, Trans. Gustav Cohen, ed. with an
introduction by Morris Wertz, The Beautiful in Music: The Library of Liberal Arts (Indianapolis, New York:
Liszt believed that the merging of the arts resulted in synergistic effects, and his fusion of music and the visual arts tried to convey either mood, narrative elements or specific visual imagery. His works based on poetry led to the symphonic poems of the 1850s, a term he invented to describe a loosely structured orchestral work encompassing literature, history and mythology, as well as piano pieces based directly on pictorial sources. These ideas were to permeate through French society, and contemporary writers such as Julius Becker, Brendel, and Louis Viardot pondered the ‘painterly-musical fusion’ that suggested the possibilities of an actual union of the arts. Becker, particularly, considered whether a merger was conceivable on synaesthetic grounds, and correlated colours and sounds, making analogies between the seven colours in the rainbow with tones in the scale and suggesting associations between specific instruments and specific colours, and between contours and the melodic line.93

During 1837–9 Liszt visited Italy, and it seems his acquaintance with the Renaissance masterpieces there made an immediate impact upon his sensibilities, which led to his linking the arts together. In a letter to Berlioz dated 2nd October 1839, he emphasizes this sense of unity:

Art appeared before my eyes in all its glory, it revealed itself to me in all its universality, all its unity. As regards my own feelings and reflections, every day I was struck more and more by the hidden affinities between works of genius. Raphael and Michelangelo helped me to understand Mozart and Beethoven…the Coliseum and the Campo Santo are not so far removed as one might think from the ‘Eroica’ Symphony or [Mozart’s] Requiem.94

As a consequence, Liszt’s second volume of Années de Pèlerinage (Years of Pilgrimage, 1837–49), comprised a series of musical ‘meditations,’ entirely instrumental, and based on Italian art, literature and music, such as sonnets by Petrarch and Dante’s Divine Comedy. The first two pieces were based on visual art—Lo Sposalizio (The Betrothal), apparently alluded to Raphael’s painting of the Betrothal of the Virgin (1504) and Il Pensieroso (The Thinker), inspired by the sculptural figure Michelangelo created (circa 1520-34), for the tomb of Lorenzo de’ Médici in the Florentine church of San Lorenzo. In his book The Music of Painting, Peter Vergo makes a compelling case for Liszt’s response towards these visual pieces, not purely based on their artistic merit, but on Liszt’s perceived attempt to capture the


mood of the pieces— the ‘emptiness’ and ‘sombre harmonies’ aligned with the feelings of ‘grief and desolation’ evoked by Michelangelo’s statue in Il Pensieroso, its ‘tonal arch’ perhaps conveying something of the spatial qualities evoked by the statue.

Without doubt, Liszt’s flexible forms impacted on the young Debussy. During the latter’s unhappy spell in Rome (1885–7) he was to encounter the aged composer, who introduced him to sixteenth-century works by Palestrina and Orlando di Lasso, and advised him to visit the church of S. Maria dell’Anima, where he might hear this music performed. As Debussy wrote excitedly to Henri Vasnier in November 1885:

I have been listening to two masses, one by Palestrina, the other of Orlando de Lassus, in a church called the Anima...it pleases me very much to see such a pure and simple style that distinguishes itself from all the others, where there is so much sculpture, paintings, mosaics...I consider the effects they produce, simply through their mastery of counterpoint to be a true tour de force...emphasising the feeling of the words with unheard-of profundity, the melodic lines unfold in a way that captures the effect of illuminated manuscripts and ancient missals.  

Even at this young age, Debussy’s poetic language and comparative vocabulary, highlighting musical compositional procedures with those of the visual arts is striking, and he makes frequent references to the curves of lines that tie sinuous musical contours to their artistic counterparts, aspects not given sufficient prominence previously. His improvisatory style, impressionistic in the way it appeared to evoke the changing textures and tempos of a shimmering sonorous soundscape, in soft dynamics reminiscent of Chopin, was also reminiscent of the Lisztian esprit, particularly in his new pianistic pieces from the first set of piano Images onwards (1905), and he was certainly affected by the older composer’s playing — ‘a sort of breathing’ — and his role in stimulating Debussy’s penchant for sacred music. During his lifetime, however, there were two even greater dominating sources of influence that impelled Debussy towards a predominantly Symbolist ethos. These were the great French poet Charles Baudelaire and the renowned German composer Richard Wagner.

95 ‘J’ai été entendre deux messes, une de Palestrina, l’autre d’Orlando de Lassus, dans une église, appelée l’Anima...elle me plaît beaucoup étant d’un style très simple et très pur ce qui la distingue d’un tas d’autres, où règne une orgie de sculpture, peinture, mosaique...puis, je considère comme un véritable tour de force, les effets qu’ils tirent simplement d’une science énorme du contrepoint...soulignant le sentiment des mots avec une profondeur inouie, et parfois, il y a des enroulements de dessins mélodiques qui vous font l’effet, d’enluminures de très vieux missels’. From the Villa Médici in Rome, after winning the Prix de Rome. Csp. 44 – 45.

Baudelaire’s Correspondances and Symbolism

One year after the birth of Debussy, in 1863, Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) was to observe that the arts were to aspire to a condition ‘in which they lend each other new powers,’97 an interchange that was to see music’s status rise in a reciprocal discourse with the visual arts on their relative merits, but also did not prevent the entanglement of both with literary sources. These new views and theoretical comparisons were contemporary with Debussy’s own lifetime, and very much in vogue, running parallel with his maturation into adulthood, though they were one generation removed in terms of date.

Baudelaire saw Wagner as the archetypal modernist figure,98 able to fashion Beauty from a mixture of both the antique and modern— the evanescent and the eternal: ‘I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable.’99 Speaking of the composer on 17th February 1860 after a series of three concerts, featuring extracts from Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Der fliegende Holländer and the prelude to Tristan und Isolde, he notes that Wagner had given him ‘the greatest musical pleasure I’ve ever experienced.’100 In an effusive letter Baudelaire finds himself overpowered by bliss – ‘jouissance’ – listening to Wagner’s music, and is unable to find words compelling enough to capture the music’s evocative powers:

Above all, I want to say that your music has given me the greatest pleasure that I ever experienced…What I felt is indescribable…it seemed to me that this music was my own and that I recognised it, as every man recognises these things which it is his destiny to love…it is something uplifted and uplifting…a vast extent of red… the supreme cry of the soul as it soars in paroxysms of ecstasy.101

98 Mary Breatnach (Edinburgh), ‘Writing about Music: On Baudelaire and Tannhäuser in Paris’: ‘Baudelaire wrote extensively about painting and literature, and in both types of criticism musical analogies occur with great frequency.’ In 1860 he wrote about music itself in ‘Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris’. Word and Music Studies: Essays on the Song Cycle and on defining the Field (Ann Arbor, MI, 1999), 49.
100 Ibid, 51.
Baudelaire endeavours to capture that evanescent, fleeting feeling that he senses in the composer’s music in his own use of words, employing whatever correspondances will most nearly capture such equivalences.

Correspondances

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténèbreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.  

Correspondences

Like long-held echoes, blending somewhere else
Into one deep and shadowy unison
As limitless as darkness and as day,
The sounds, the scents, the colours correspond.

He takes up these illustrative references to colour as synaesthetic metaphor in his famous set of poems Les Fleurs du mal, published prior to this in 1857, when the poem ‘Correspondances’ (see above) was to profoundly affect the fin-de-siècle Symbolist movement. These correspondances evoked the resonances between various phenomena, echoing the ideas of others such as the influential German Romantic E.T.A. Hoffmann, who had written enthusiastically about synaesthesia in terms expressing the perceived resemblance of ‘les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.’

Baudelaire quotes versions of this passage from Hoffmann in his review of the 1846 Salon and in his essay on Wagner and Tannhäuser, in an adaptation of the theme that he was to return to on many occasions:

It is not so much about my dreams of course as the accompanying daydreams that precede them…Moreover, it would not be ridiculous to argue, without analysis or comparison, that it would be truly amazing to find that sound did not suggest colour, that colours were not able to give the idea of a melody, and that sound and colour merged to translate such ideas; things have always been expressed through reciprocal analogies since God declared the world to be a complex and indivisible One.

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104 Lockspeiser, Music and Painting, 69.
105 ‘Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris’ : ‘Je n’oserais certes pas parler avec complaisance de mes rêveries. S’il n’était pas utile de les joindre ici aux rêveries précédentes… car ce qui serait vraiment surprenant, c’est que le son ne pût pas suggérer la couleur, que les couleurs ne pussent pas donner l’idée d’une mélodie, et que le son et la couleur fussent impropre à traduire des idées ; les choses s’étant toujours exprimées par une analogie réciproque, depuis le jour où Dieu a profréré le monde comme un complexe et indivisible totalité’. In Baudelaire, Œuvres Complètes, 513. My trans.
This phrase, linking the senses in a meshing of harmonious affinities, further reverberated through Baudelaire’s own poem, and was to become a central part of the Symbolist doctrine through Hoffmann’s *Kreisleriana*, whose musical writings formed part of his first book, the *Fantasiestücke in Callot’s Manier* (Fantasy-pictures in the style of Callot, initially published 1814–1815). In turn as A. G. Lehmann argues, they were to profoundly affect the French Symbolist movement, where Baudelaire’s theory of universal analogies was a prevalent view at the time. He states:

Sounds, and all other classes of sensa, images, emotions, notions, can suggest, or even be substituted for one another in communication – ‘correspondences’ on terms of equality– and all these diverse elements of artistic language, as well as answering to one another, are all symbols in a universal hierarchy, in which that which is symbolised is some aspect of an ultimate transcendent reality…every colour, sound, odour, conceptualised emotion…every visual image, even if complex…is in some way bound up with an equivalent in each of the other fields…

This heterogeneous feature of the senses is one that can be linked, in my perception, to the Peircian development of the semiological theory of signs (see Part 2) that will be used herein as methodology to demonstrate Debussy’s close links with the visual.

Baudelaire recognised that descriptions of music in words could never fully coincide or say everything, but he sought to effect as near a representation as possible, even though words could not access the emotions in the same direct way that was accessible to sounds.

By nature, music’s very flexibility made it the most malleable in any synaesthetic intermingling within the human mind, and therefore he held music to be the primary art. It could cross boundaries within the ‘soul’ and make associations that intuit prior to verbal understanding. Music’s sensuality and dynamism as ‘Queen of the Faculties’ gave it instant access to the changeable temperament of individual feelings in a way that verbal art could not attain, since it was mediated by the intellect, so it became ‘the eternally elusive principle towards which art endlessly aspired…’ This correlated with Baudelaire’s *lacune complété par l’imagination de l’auditeur*, or Mallarmé’s *idée*, which require the individual imagination to convey meaning in the space that music creates.

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108 Peter Dayan also describes this state: ‘writing about music becomes the creation of a meaning in perpetual expansion towards the horizon of what language can contain…as if the music (of Wagner) had defeated his words’. *MWL*, 27.
110 As Baudelaire theorises: ‘There is always a space, which the imagination of the listener fills in.’ *Ibid*, 781–2.
Debussy’s intention was to seek to replicate his subject’s emotion, rather than his own, by the use of suggestibility in his music through ‘feeling’ its inner vibrations. It was this indefinable aspect of the symbolic and mysterious and its quality of immediacy that Debussy sought to capture in the fluctuating rhythms and sonorous repetitions\textsuperscript{111} of works such as \textit{L’Isle joyeuse} (1904) or pieces like ‘Poissons d’Or’ from the \textit{Images II} in 1907 and ‘Voiles’ from the \textit{Préludes I} in 1910. Debussy’s ideas of music \textit{en plein air} enabled his music to flow in a supple and organic way, as if improvisatory, transcending time and taking up the fluid temperament of Baudelaire’s synthesis of mercurial \textit{correspondances}. In an 1885 letter to Henri Vasnier, a friend and chief benefactor during his younger years, Debussy almost reiterates Baudelaire’s comments to Arsène Houssaye (director of \textit{La Presse}), when in speaking of his difficulty in bringing his musical ideals to fruition in \textit{Zuleima}, he proclaims that:

… It is not at all the sort of music that I wish to write. I want music that is supple and concentrated enough to adapt itself to the lyrical movements of the soul and the whims of reverie.\textsuperscript{112}

The similarity of wording is significant in pointing up the extent to which Debussy, at the age of twenty-three had assimilated and adopted Baudelairean ideals, seeing a parallel between his own musical aims and those of corresponding arts so that music might move with a freedom hitherto unknown, in the same way that Baudelaire had sought such freedom for his verse. He would use line and colour expressively as an equivalent for rhythm and tone, arousing and inspiring the creativity of the subjective imagination in ways that would cause music and art to coalesce. Just as Baudelaire and the artist Eugène Delacroix formed a relationship in 1847 when the poet harmonized his ideas and practices with the painter, Debussy was later to do much the same in his Parisian circles, being ‘au courant with the artistic life of Paris,’\textsuperscript{113} which were frequented more by artists than other composers, and with his attendance at Edmond Bailly’s bookshop and publishing house, \textit{L’Art Indépendant}.\textsuperscript{114}


\textsuperscript{113} Jarociński, \textit{IS}, 81.

\textsuperscript{114} Roy Howat details Debussy’s visits to this establishment as an \textit{ésotériste}, and the friends he met there among the avant-garde literary and artistic fraternity, \textit{DProp.}, 164–172.
Baudelaire’s *correspondances* between music and colour, nature and human passions, were important ideas that were current during Debussy’s formative years and as I argue, held a strong resonance for him as he sought the evolution of colour and timbre within his music. Nevertheless, the effects of Wagner were also both immense and later troublesome to Debussy as he frequently explains in his letters to friends.

*The Impact of Wagner*

French *Wagnérisme* had reached its peak in the 1880s, during which time Debussy had twice made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth, in 1888 and 1889, hearing *Parsifal, Die Meistersinger* and *Tristan*, and later *Lohengrin* and *Die Walküre* at the Paris Opéra. The German composer’s popularity among Parisian concert goers was echoed among composers such as Chabrier, Chausson and d’Indy, though the intuitive Debussy warned readers of the *Mercure de France* in 1903 of the dangers of such foreign ‘importations’. By January of that year, he assessed Wagner’s contribution as the dramatic apotheosis of *Romanticism* rather than a new movement, writing in that publication:

> Wagner, if I am permitted to express myself with the pomposity appropriate to him, was a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn…"\(^{115}\)

After an early infatuation, Debussy was to decry the Wagnerian influence upon French music, and its seductive ‘impure art,’ encroaching as he perceived it on French clarity of expression and form, as exemplified by Rameau and Couperin. Robin Holloway characterises the ongoing public enjoyment of Wagner’s works in France as ‘an affair of *frissons* and *parfums*’ in reality, or ‘triumphant revels,’ in Mallarmé’s words, an ‘indigenous invention’ that divested the composer of his ‘quintessential German-ness; he is no longer sublime and massive, no longer mythological, regenerative, didactic.’\(^{116}\) Debussy’s disenchantment continued, particularly in regard to the pronounced Wagnerian *leitmotiv*, yet his feelings were paradoxical in that he admired Wagner’s later works, particularly *Tristan* and the orchestral effects of *Parsifal*, and his vitriol seemed to wane slightly with the passing of years. Even in 1914 his writing speaks of the incomparability of this piece which he saw again in that year, as ‘one of the loveliest monuments of sound ever raised to the serene glory of music.’\(^{117}\)

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\(^{115}\) ‘Wagner, si l’on peut s’exprimer avec un peu de la grandiloquence qui lui convient, fut un beau coucher de soleil que l’on a pris pour une aurore…’ Debussy, *Mercure de France*, January 1903, ‘*L’Influence Allemande sur la Musique Française,*’ in *MC*, 64. Trans. Déirdre Donnellon, ‘Debussy as musician and critic’, *CCD*, 46.

\(^{116}\) See Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner*, 12, 17.

\(^{117}\) *Ibid*, 20.
Perhaps Debussy’s increasingly conciliatory tone was able to grow as Wagner’s influence in France appeared to fade, even if this was perhaps a decade premature. Debussy was certainly occupied with his own bid for musical freedom – for pleasure and taste, moving away from traditional symphonic structures and programmatic formulae, and particularly sensitive to any traces of ‘old Klingsor, alias R. Wagner,’ that might keep appearing in his work. But it would perhaps not be too great a leap to infer that it is within Debussy’s music that the true potency of the Wagnerian spell can be discerned – infusing its essence through the genius of the French composer even as Debussy sought to escape its insinuating presence. Looking towards an academic summation of his achievements, it was Wagner who sought to satisfy the coming together of the arts in a practical sense. The suggestibility and popularity of his operas in France saw Baudelaire extol their ‘wordless profundity’ as the German composer adopted long skeins of self-declamatory melody endlessly reshaping themselves to the character’s shifting emotions, that were associated with particular characters or elements in his dramas. These were aspects that inevitably shaped Debussy’s craft in works such as Pelléas at Mélisande, despite his later negation of Wagner’s ethos.

Wagner’s concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, developed in his ‘Zurich essays’ of 1849–51, formed the pinnacle of Romantic aspiration towards a synthesis of all the art forms into a single composite work, by which this ‘artwork of the future’ would come to fruition, providing for both regeneration and spiritual transformation. In his fusion of word and music, Baudelaire understood Wagner’s perception of the consummate artwork, that:

…It was precisely at the point at which one of these arts reached impassable frontiers that the sphere of action of the other started, by the intimate union of these two arts [music and poetry] it was possible to express what neither of them could express in isolation.

Wagner’s music and philosophy were very much in the French eye at this time, reaching their peak during the 1880s and 90s through the influential Revue Wagnérienne, which featured many articles on the Correspondances, and both musicians and painters made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth to view the convergence of this ideal in the German composer’s operas. These reciprocal influences were viewed as a critical gestational period, when ‘instrumental music

118 Debussy had torn up his initial completion of the Pelléas love scene, in which he wrote to Ernest Chausson of the spectre of Wagnerian influence. See Csp, 2nd October, 1893, 160–61. Trans. Roger Nichols, DL, 54.
119 Holloway’s argument in Debussy and Wagner, 20–21, in which he speaks of the pervading influence upon Debussy of Wagner’s ‘host of short fragments from five to fifteen bars.’
120 These comprised his theoretical essays: Art and Revolution (1849), The Art-Work of the Future (1849), and Opera and Drama (1851). Shaw-Miller, VDM, ch. 2, 38.
was identified as the paradigmatic expressive art and theoretically aligned with painting in the formulation *ut pictura musica* (as with music, so with painting)…’ following on from the poetic equivalent.\textsuperscript{122} Wagner’s theories stimulated admirers from other branches of the arts, who were aesthetically inspired by this philosophy as they sought to emulate music’s special status, or took its ideas on board in a reunification of all the individual arts that only the *Gesamtkunstwerk* could fulfil.

Wagner’s ‘art work of the future’ melding a convergence of the deepest human emotions, foregrounding ‘tone’ over ‘word,’ was to arrive in France, the epitome of emerging Modernist culture and ‘beaux-arts tradition,’ by mid-century. There it impacted on the ideas of Baudelaire, whose essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, written in 1859, was to characterise his ideas on modernity, and whose teachings were to be taken up by the young Debussy twenty or so years later. However, A. G. Lehmann, writing in *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France 1885–1895*,\textsuperscript{123} concludes that within France ‘Wagner’s influence…has been grossly overrated – in any event it was born of misunderstanding and dilettantism…’\textsuperscript{124} (as Robin Holloway deduces), brought about by assumptions made from articles in the *Revue Wagnérienne*, founded in 1885 in Paris. As editor of this authoritative publication and a frequent contributor, Téodor de Wyzéwa, was largely responsible for ideas that the Symbolist movement took up about Wagner, ‘to reinforce symbolist tendencies with the prestige of his name,’ according his ideas with a much greater sphere of influence:

True Wagnerians are not content with limiting their curiosity; they inquire about the progress of the Wagnerian spirit in the fields of literature, poetry and painting.\textsuperscript{125}

Wyzéwa departed from Wagner’s classification of the arts and misrepresented other of his ideas to fit with an ethereal Mallarméan conception of society rather than Wagner’s own beliefs for ‘a mass regeneration of society’ as he foresaw in the development of ‘Art for the Future.’ It was Wyzéwa who sought to claim that ‘all the arts are to some extent musical, or must become so: where musicality is equated roundly with emotivity,’ as an integral element.\textsuperscript{126} In a series of articles entitled *L’Art Wagnérien*, he was to shape the notion of a

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, 247.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid, 206.
Wagnerian/Symbolist aesthetic that did not in reality co-exist as one, redefining the German composer’s literature.

In his *leitmotiv* themes, used to portray the emotions of characters and other dramatic elements, Wagner does link highly visual moments with music, so that one is associated with the other in a synergistic way, although these developed into more mature ‘idea leitmotifs’ by the time of *Tristan*. However, Debussy refers to the ‘character leitmotifs’ of The *Nibelungen* as a veritable *machine à trucs* (box of tricks), such is the predictability of their frequent appearances. Indeed, these ideas are central to an understanding of the visual associations in Debussy’s music, because in the years approaching *Pelléas* (1902), it was a fundamental Debussyan technique to portray the visual with links to the music as well, although these were far more subtle and allusive. *Pelléas* himself makes suggestive inference to lighting the lamp in Act 1 scene 2 – ‘Aie soin d’allumer la lampe dès ce soir,’ although as Richard Langham Smith suggests, this is a comment that is ‘not merely musical in that it alludes symbolically to far more than the lighting of a lamp.’ Debussy frequently expressed his dislike of the Wagnerian device and its overly-obvious appearances. Notably, in an interview for *Le Figaro* in 1902, he declares:

> Certainly, my technique, which consists of doing away with all ‘techniques,’ owes nothing to Wagner. In his music each character has, so to speak, his own ‘prospectus’, his photograph, his ‘leitmotif’ which must always precede him. I confess to finding this method a trifle blatant.

Despite Wagnerian ‘influences’, Debussy obviously sought to limit their predictability by means of his more delicate and subtle designs, perhaps seeking the ‘perfect union’ between emotion and music that he had found within some *Tristan* themes and the harmonic colours of *Parsifal*.

For Wagner, music was superior to poetry because it was not fixed ‘in the particular’ like language, and for this reason could seek to attain the universal, Schopenhauer’s copy of the Will itself. It was therefore the supreme art, dislodging poetry from its long-held position, by

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virtue of its very correspondence to the higher, inner transcendence of the spirit. As he adopted a new musical language of chromaticism and increased dissonance, leading towards his use of the tritone and octatonic scales, albeit within a multimedia spectacle, it became the most powerful means of communication for Baudelaire and many others. But further influences certainly continued to affect the composer, not least ideas from England, which gradually permeated across the Channel, and which Debussy imbibed when he visited.

Other Contemporary Influences
The concept of a painting-music analogy was to resurface continually throughout the nineteenth century, and ideas and philosophies crossed the Channel freely, as common viewpoints and interpretations were shared. The influential English writer and critic John Ruskin affirmed that: ‘The arrangement of colours and lines is an art analogous to the composition of music, and entirely independent of the representation of facts’. He shared Wagner’s aspirations for a united art form, deploiring the increasingly fragmented separation of the fine arts from the applied or decorative forms during the nineteenth century, and perceiving their segregation as ‘symptomatic of the ills of modern society generally, with its mania for specialization’.

Partly inspired by Ruskin’s progressive writings, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood developed a dramatically original method of transcribing the natural world, ‘based on close looking and sustained engagement with the motif’. Vivid and precise oil paintings with pervasive natural imagery meant that ‘the world represented …is uncannily like the real world, yet it is clarified and concentrated.’ Ruskin had produced two volumes entitled *Modern Painters* in 1843 and 1846, which also mounted a spirited defence of J. M. W. Turner and landscape painting, and directed artists to:

Go to nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remembering her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing.

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135 *Ibid*, 86. Also see 52–3. Ruskin had particularly influenced Hunt and Millais with these volumes in the 1840s, whereas his essay on ‘The Nature of Gothic’ in *Stones of Venice* (1851–3) was to deeply impress Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris in turn.
The Pre-Raphaelites were to take up these words in a sense as their manifesto, and Debussy’s own words seem to accord directly with those of Ruskin:

I am for freedom, the freedom of nature. Every sound that can be perceived by a fine ear in the rhythm of the surrounding world can be represented musically. Certain people wish only to conform to rules; I want only to render what I hear.\(^\text{136}\)

Debussy’s affinity with Nature was well-known through the subjects of his compositions and his writings, quite apart from the influences of the Pre-Raphaelite movement itself on his early pieces such as *La Damoiselle élue* (1887).\(^\text{137}\) Whether he was acquainted with Ruskin’s writings is uncertain, but Debussy was certainly aware of the Brotherhood, its paintings and aesthetic aims. It may be that he was *au fait* with Ruskin’s admiration for Turner, since the composer was known to greatly admire his paintings, possessing ‘une belle admiration pour Turner, (et Rossetti),’\(^\text{138}\) and to have seen an exhibition of them whilst in England.

Parisians of the era were also particularly interested in ideas gleaned from English literature, especially translations of Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and *The Renaissance* (1877), which appealed to the emerging group of Symbolist intellectuals. Reviews of translations and commentaries fed into artistic sensibilities at the end of the nineteenth century, and fuelled debates that raged in new periodicals, such as *La revue indépendante*, *La vogue*, and *La revue contemporaine*, as well as *La revue wagnérienne*, through which Debussy kept abreast of contemporary issues. Walter Pater acknowledged the ‘condition of music’ in 1873, indicating its supreme position:

> Art, then, is thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception… the arts may be represented as continually struggling after the law or principle of music, to a condition which music alone completely realizes…\(^\text{139}\)

Although Pater views music as a purely sonoric art, what Richard Leppert defines as ‘sound without signification…a language of void,’\(^\text{140}\) it would seem that even in the most obvious

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\(^{136}\) ‘Je suis pour la liberté. La liberté par nature, est libre. Tous les bruits qui se font entendre autour de vous peuvent être rendus. On peut représenter musicalement tout ce qu’une oreille fine perçoit dans le rythme du monde environnant. Certaines personnes veulent tout d’abord se conformer aux règles ; je veux, moi, ne rendre que ce que j’entends’. December 1910, *MC* 289. My trans.

\(^{137}\) The composer refers to ‘*La Damoiselle Éluée*, poème lyrique d’après D. G. Rossetti’ in his letter to Gustave Doret, on 5th June 1896, *Csp*, 315.


\(^{140}\) Leppert sees the ‘condition’ of music as ‘less an aspiration of art than a desire for an embodied happiness that does not exist in material life but resides in the imagination,’ He suggests: ‘Life itself is conceived as a sort of listening—listening to music, to the reading of Bandello’s novels, to the sound of water, to time as it flies... really our moments of play…’ *The Sight of Sound, Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 221–222.
ways, music cannot in reality be divorced from its modes of production and consumption, in both its performance and visual presentation, quite apart from its original creation. Even as the sound itself enters directly into the inner sanctum of the ear, it has recourse to textural and figurative elements. Pater’s affirmation that music is the art to which all others aspire was also the consequence of contemporary evolutionary thinking, logically progressing along lines that accorded with Schiller’s belief that ‘the plastic arts, in their highest form, must become music’, and Schopenhauer’s declaration that ‘the goal of all art is to resemble music’. Each of these writers, in addition to Schlegel, Schelling, Tieck, Hegel and Hoffman, saw in music the culmination of all art forms, since its abstract form—its dematerialisation—was the nearest expression of man’s spirituality, his union with the eternal.

Questions of parity and compatibility have been integral to a continuing flux of philosophical and musical ideas linking the arts together. Undoubtedly, the biggest chasm lies between those who view music in terms of the feelings it engenders, and those who view it in terms of its analytical form and numerical properties, although many theorists have exemplified both views within their writings, taking music’s ‘forms’ as an archetypal foundation on which it can operate as fluid sensation, just as Debussy’s ‘floating chords’ use a tonal underpinning over which they freely soar. In a similar analogy, music’s appeal to the emotions lies above language and above representational art, in its abstractions that appear to access the ‘soul’ directly—Debussy’s evocation of feelings, Schopenhauer’s ‘form without matter’ and ‘soul without body’.

It is this melding together of artistic and musical forms in a symbiosis of ‘imaginative reason’ that this study seeks to prove in the music of Claude Debussy— that the metaphysical facets of ‘musicality’ in painting were matched by the ‘painterly’ features that he utilised in his compositions to produce musical works of art, his soundscape reflecting his love of Nature back to the listener. Various synchronies appear to reveal expressive equivalences between each of the arts, where they respectively operate as an individual language that in turn is translatable into another.

It is this direct link between music and feelings that led to its associative use in the ornamentation and decorative arts as applied by theorists such as Owen Jones and Walter Crane, where nonfigurative art—‘those mysterious effects of line and colour’ are applied as a

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‘musical game,’ *partie musicale*. At the end of the century, August Endell’s words embodied this new art of instrumental music, which was made up of ‘forms that mean nothing and represent nothing…that impress our soul ‘as only music can do with sounds.’ The notion of abstraction that followed, taken up by artists like Gauguin and critics such as Ruskin, was one that allowed the emotions to dictate ‘pure music’ as a pictorial model that served as the affinity between music and the visual arts in the music of Claude Debussy. It is that feeling of fluid emotion that this study perceives as the mutable element between the two, and which transmits itself as a visual component within Debussy’s œuvre. The means by which the mind discerns these perceptions is investigated in Part II.

**Part II**

*Comparative Theories of the Twentieth Century*  
*Perception, Interpretation and Reception*

This section delineates those theories from the twentieth century which most clearly demonstrate alignments between music and its visual connections. Correlations with our thought patterns enable us to adopt a dual approach, drawing complementary conclusions, thereby supporting this study’s contention that the two areas are linked. I briefly deliberate on Husserl’s belief that the creator of a work of art is inextricably bound to that object as ‘universal essence’, perception of an absolute, if you will, and on Heidegger’s ‘hermeneutic of being’, which posits the import of the material world about us, particularly language and text, contingent to our existence. The validity of reception theory, in placing the listener in their social context, is a further example of possible corroborative analogies, but Peircian semiotics, I argue, is the closest form of comparative source because his classification of signs is able to be interpreted by the recipient in the widest possible sense. Thus, it perfectly illustrates how the human mind can associate one idea with another, or a piece of music with visual associations.

Naturally such views are retrospective, impelled by more recent theory that played no discursive part in Debussy’s world; Peirce himself was a contemporary with the composer, but not a direct influence. To listen to Debussy’s pieces is to perceive new insights, affected


by philosophies of comparison that have changed over time, most notably transformed by those mediums of sound now available to us, which continue to develop and were inconceivable in the nineteenth century. Indeed, Debussy often spoke of his frustration at the gap between his own ‘hearing’ of his music and the opinions foisted upon it by others, particularly orchestral conductors and commentators. He makes this point clearly in 1905, when writing to his ‘cher ami’, the critic Pierre Lalo, about La Mer, who heard nothing of the sea in it:

I love the sea and I’ve listened to it with the passionate respect it deserves. If I’ve been inaccurate in taking down what it dictated to me, that is no concern of yours or mine. You must admit, not all ears hear in the same way…

Innovative in his own time, understanding of Debussy’s music has been deepened by those ears which listen a century or so later, and which can make such correlations in the light of retrospective historical knowledge in view of theories that developed after Debussy’s death. It is self-evident that a piece of music, a painting or literary work is directly related to its creator, and the link between thought and object would appear to be mutually dependent – what the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, perceived as the science of spirit, or of pure phenomena. These phenomena were not random individual consciousnesses but perceived as ‘a system of universal essences,’ the essential and unchanging part of something and our intuitive perception of it – what is intended by consciousness. In this hypothesis, knowledge could therefore be based on certainty, on the ‘deep structures’ of human consciousness itself. Thus object and subject are always bound up with each other, so that Debussy’s music, like the writer’s text, directly reflects his will, the eternal expression of his psyche, but its perception by others is not necessarily the same.

A phenomenological criticism aims at a wholly ‘immanent’ reading of the text or score, totally unaffected by anything outside it. This perception of universal essences apparently occurs at an intuitive level prior to language, a point taken up by the semiotologist Charles Sanders Peirce, whose theories will be examined later. The conundrum that this theory presents, as Terry Eagleton argues, is that whilst purporting to explain the inner sphere of the creator, Husserl seems to discount the notion that our exposure to life, our participation in all events and our inner perceptions, is compelled to be contingent on our circumstances– ‘all

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146 ‘J’aime la Mer ; je l’ai écoutée avec le respect passionné qu’on lui doit. Si j’ai mal transcrit ce qu’elle m’a dicté, cela ne nous regarde pas plus l’un que l’autre. Et vous ne concédez que toutes les oreilles ne perçoivent pas de la même façon’… Debussy writing to Pierre Lalo on 25th October, 1905, Csp. 927–928, Trans. Roger Nichols, DL 163.

experience involves language and language is ineradicably social. The human subject must conceive of things in terms of language, as when Debussy uses titles at the beginning of many of his pieces, or at the end of his Préludes to give listeners ideas about possible associations, placing impressions in their minds which must necessarily influence their perceptions. This would appear to make an understanding of phenomenology almost impossible to comprehend in the real world, even in an intuitive comprehension of music or art when human perceptions are more obviously involved with feelings and emotions that demand a more instinctive, spontaneous response. Indeed, Naomi Cumming allies the two in her summation that ‘If a “feeling” is involved, it is one whose interpretation has been culturally entrained.’ Connotations given to musical interpretations would appear to rely on social constructions and thereby denote ‘evidence of a musical understanding that is intersubjectively intelligible,’ already situated within a style or culture that is suggested by traditions of discourse.

Another dilemma raised by phenomenology is its application to texted pieces of music, such as Debussy’s Pelléas, full of Symbolist meanings within the music and the text. Though ‘intended’ as an integral component to the piece, the text must sit outside this idea of universal essence since it is only posited in a social context. This contention was raised by Martin Heidegger in his major work Being and Time in 1927. Reality is founded not in the realm of pure intellect but on the material world, which is ‘inexhaustible in its meanings and which constitutes us quite as much as we constitute it... human existence is a dialogue with the world.’ Our understanding therefore is part of human existence, part of a continual alteration in time, historical, and always part of ‘concrete’ reality, of which a central, pre-existing component is language, the humanising concept. Art or poetry, for example, are both mediums for which this holds true. This philosophy, Heidegger’s ‘hermeneutic of Being,’ bears some relationship to the import of the signs and symbols of French Symbolism and Baudelaire’s theory of Correspondances, in that the

148 Ibid. 51–52.
149 See Saussure’s theory of the arbitrariness of ‘living signs’, particularly in linguistic signs.
151 Ibid.
153 The fact that we are ‘bound up’ with the world means that we share ‘a host of tacit assumptions... before we have come to think systematically at all.’ Eagleton, Lit. T. 54.
154 The word ‘hermeneutic’ means the science or art of interpretation, Heidegger’s philosophy usually being referred to as ‘hermeneutical phenomenology.’ Ibid. 56–7.
latter searches for empathies between affective states which might better interpret the truth. It is these that Debussy sought to emulate when he affected to represent the feeling between these analogous states, particularly those representing nature and music. He expressed this desire in an article for *La Revue Blanche* in April, 1902:

I wanted music to have a freedom that she perhaps has more than any other art, as it is not restricted to a more or less exact reproduction of nature, but instead deals with the mysterious correspondences between Nature and the Imagination.¹⁵⁵

Debussy was well aware of the capricious nature of his own thoughts and feelings. Fernand Gillet recalls that during a rehearsal of *La Mer* for its premiere, the composer was said to have told the conductor, Chevillard: ‘un peu plus vite ici…’ Chevillard replied: ‘Mon cher ami, yesterday you gave me the tempo we have just played.’ Debussy looked at him with intense reflection in his eyes and said: ‘but I don’t feel music the same way every day.’¹⁵⁶ The composer’s words perfectly capture the congruent nature of his music, malleable to the feelings of any given moment between subject and object and countering the notion of phenomenology, particularly because of the involvement of the performer, who places his own interpretation upon any work in any given performance. Thus, I contend that music is perfectly congruent to the feelings of its composer, performer and listener at any given time.

The individual nature of our perceptions, therefore, and the fact that we live in the real world, gave rise to the advent of reception theory, placing the significance of our perceptions on the discrete separateness of each individual rather than on a system which relies on some universal archetype that is beyond our understanding. Its arrival in the mid twentieth-century, encompassing language, music and art, brings into being the perceptions of the reader/listener/viewer, the person for whom the work of art is intended, if it is not to exist in a vacuum. As Debussy had written to Lalo, all ears do not listen in the same way – they are all different, and this difference infers that all creations are framed by their social context.¹⁵⁷

All interpretation is therefore a dialogue between the past and present, making it understandable to us, but only ever in our individual and partial viewpoint from the present. The myriad of ‘readings’ we therefore feel when we listen to a piece of music, are the way in

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¹⁵⁷ See Hans-Georg Gadamer’s study in *Truth and Method* (1960), in which he elaborates on Heidegger’s contention that ‘there is a real sense in which language belongs to my society before it belongs to me’. Eagleton, *Lit. T.* 61–62.
which we as humans interpret and make sense of that performance, in order to decode its meanings, as far as we are able, to our own satisfaction. Each frames the experiences of the individual, aided in Debussy’s case by the hints he gives – his titles, manner of notation, written instructions on manuscripts and his own writings as Monsieur Croche, music critic and commentator of contemporary life, as well as his copious letter-writing to friends and acquaintances, documented in his collected Correspondance.

We are aware of different knowledge in retrospect to when Debussy’s music was formulated. We can listen to it in the light of the composer having listened to Wagner, who held such sway throughout Europe during the late nineteenth century, and who must have had an effect on the French composer. We can discern that it proceeds in a different way than if he had listened to Brahms, since it moves in fluid lines away from the ‘set’ formulation of periodic structure.

Drawing a parallel between the role of the reader in literature and that of the listener in music, reception theory demonstrates the vital role of each in the practice and significance of the art in question. The true essence of music lies in its performance, or so we may infer, and listeners, like readers, are not empty vessels, but come with their differing preconceptions, musical/non-musical ears and what Eagleton describes as ‘certain “pre-understandings”, a dim context of beliefs and expectations within which the work’s various features will be assessed...’ I argue that the impact of the visual arts on Debussy’s music is quantifiable because of the inferences that we can draw between the life he lived, evidential proofs in his music and writings, and ties we can discern between his ethos and that of contemporary artists with whom he associated.

On a philosophical level, Charles Sanders Peirce’s system of ‘signs’ most nearly explains how these analogies might be made in the mind of the observer or musicologist, since they deal with signs that are ‘pre-cognitive’, rather than those of Saussure, which deal with linguistic content, and thus it is to Peirce’s semiotics that we now turn.

Semiotics and Comparative Method

As the American founder of semiotics, Peirce and his classification of signs can perhaps be utilised most readily in order to interpret human intention when formulating a comparative study between music and the visual arts. Cumming, for instance, comments that Peirce’s philosophy has ‘the potential to be applied to signs of all kinds and contexts, irrespective of

158 Ibid, 67.
who the interpreter might be…’¹⁵⁹ in that its meaning is not a priori self-evident. A sign
instead:

receives its meaning by being interpreted by a subsequent thought or action...what Peirce
called an interpretant...The meaning lies not in the perception but in the interpretation of
the perception as a signal.¹⁶⁰

Methodologically, it is the interpretation of perception that this study proposes to examine in
Debussy’s music, for its signs of associations with the visual arts. Thus the meaning of every
thought encompasses a type of ‘triadic’ relationship – ‘an interpretation of the thought as a
sign of a determining object.’¹⁶¹ Such a position dispenses with the idea of intuitive
knowledge, leaving feeling as its only evidence – since Peirce claims that ‘Only by external
facts can thought be known at all...’ and thus ‘all thought, therefore, must necessarily be in
signs.’¹⁶² Debussy recognised the freedom and integrity of composing music which
 corresponded with the direct feelings of his subject, thereby making an innate
correspondance with his intended theme (whose signs we interpret).

This claim would appear to relate directly to listening to music, when we are only
conscious of our immediate feelings evoked by the sensations that music produces in us –
although at a slightly later point we may be aware of further things that it intuits within us, as
Peirce points out. But these come afterwards – after the feeling that we experience pre-
cognitively, and before we interpret it by any thought or linguistic mediation. This is the
reason why music might be said to hold the pre-eminent position of our inner sanctum, ahead
of the intellect that mediates in both the linguistic and representational visual arts.

Debussy’s temperament naturally reached for the indefinable, for the feelings that he
frequently referred to and sought to evoke in attempting to capture the correspondances
between his subjects and their musical equivalent. It could be said that in his interpretation of
signs as music he perceived the natural world around him, whether he was interpreting his
Cathédrale engloutie’, (Préludes I, 1910), the wind – ‘Le vent dans la plaine’ and ‘Ce qu’a vu
le vent d’ouest’ (Préludes I, 1910) or other meteorological phenomena such as ‘Nuages’,
(Trois Nocturnes, 1898) ‘Jardins sous la pluie’ (Estampes, 1903) ‘Brouillards’ (Douze
Préludes II, 1913) and countless others. On 1st July, 1901, for example, Debussy maintains in

¹⁵⁹ Cumming, The Sonic Self, 19.
¹⁶⁰ James Hoopes, ed., Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce (Chapel Hill and
¹⁶¹ Ibid., 7.
¹⁶² Peirce quoted in Hoopes, Peirce on Signs, 8. Also see ‘Questions concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for
Man’, 49.
‘L’Entretien avec M. Croche’ in *La Revue blanche*, that the Egyptian shepherd playing on his flute represents the idealised union of music and nature, representing a freedom that he desired for a direct music unfettered by rules: ‘my favourite music is those few notes that the Egyptian shepherd plays on his flute; he contributes to the surrounding landscape, and knows harmonies that aren’t in our books……’\(^{163}\)

The application of this idea in works such as the circular arabesques of the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un Faune* (1892), and the swirling, ornamental lines of *Syrinx* in 1913, were to evoke the fluid contours of such a flute player, dwelling on the fantasies of a ‘musical seduction’\(^{164}\) that perhaps transposed Debussy’s inner life to his creative one.\(^{165}\)

Debussy might have recognised Peirce’s contention that music possesses an immediacy that is prior to any words. It is a far more direct art that can by-pass our cognitive thought processes at the emotional level. Debussy’s ‘beauté totale’ seems to assert a divine essence that is present in his contemplation and evocation of nature in a way that is not perhaps so accessible within Romantic music – at least in the perceptions of contemporary Debussystes, and those who have followed afterwards. For him, the truth of musical beauty lies in its associations with the open air, in the freedom of the natural world. As he articulates in an interview for *Excelsior* in 1911, his feeling for music is such that:

> I love it passionately, and it is out of love for it that I try to release it from those sterile conditions which stifle it. It is a free art, liquid, an art of the open-air, an art that measures up to the elements, the wind the sky, the sea! We must not make it into a closed and academic art.\(^{166}\)

Debussy’s was an individual response that was always a representation of his inner self, interpreting the natural signs around him that resonated with his own ethos, not formulated to set designs, and whose immediate effects are instantly recognisable by his listeners, whether they are members of the public, musicologists and critics, or other composers. It is possible therefore to see how a Peircian interpretation of signs in Debussy’s music would work, for us, his twenty-first century interpreters, giving us insights into the Debussyan mind, and how the


\(^{164}\) Julie McQuinn, *CCD*, 126–131. Also see Richard S. Parks *CCD*, 207, in which he describes *Syrinx*’s ‘continual invention’ as embodying ‘an innovative variations paradigm…’

\(^{165}\) As Cumming points out, ‘musical sound is not heard as sound alone, but as possessing a subjective quality,’ firstly in its ‘quality of sound, realised in performance,’ and second in the ‘subjective potentialities of its style…’ which, if absent, will not allow the work to “live” … *The Sonic Self*, 25–29.

composer’s close links with painters and the visual arts would have impacted on his own creativity in the composition of his music.

The Coalescence of Music and Art within a Peircian Framework

As ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has argued in his ‘Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music’,¹⁶⁷ it is possible to use this hypothesis to extend our perceptions of the human process, encompassing a melding of the music and the visual arts within our social domain. This works particularly in interdisciplinary ways, widening the parameters of our understanding, because Turino recognizes that:

Music is a key resource for realizing personal and collective identities which, in turn, are crucial for social, political, and economic participation...The crucial link between identity formation and arts like music lies in the specific semiotic character of these activities which make them particularly affective and direct ways of knowing.¹⁶⁸

But it is a link that can be broadened. To extend this theory further, I contend that Peircian theory as a model can be used to aid our understanding of how people experience the social effects of music, art and expressive culture, and I explain how this can occur. This applies most particularly in relation to what people usually call ‘emotion’ or which Debussy articulates as feelings – what he called impressions – a seemingly instant pleasure that the composer discerned for music and his use of the arabesque’s curving, decorative associations to extend perpetual line.

Debussy could be said to have seen the world around him in terms of immediate sensation and interpreted its signs to create a seemingly improvised, free-flowing music. Peirce’s semiosis similarly involves a ‘chaining process’, a ‘community of enquirers,’ with each new sign creating a new object, thereby also creating a new interpretant in a ceaseless ‘train of thought.’ This operation continues ad infinitum or until a belief or conclusion is reached, before the process perpetually unfolds more signs in the mind, akin to Debussy’s ideas for freedom and forever moving onwards in his music. The sign is therefore not a separate entity but the catalyst for an effect as a chain of semiosis.

It is this malleability that brings us back to the supposition that music can evoke other feelings and ideas in a way that paintings – at least prior to abstract art – cannot. Their secrets are always mediated by chains of thought, however non-representational, and the work of various groups, such as the Pre-Raphaelites, Impressionists, Symbolists and artists of the Art

¹⁶⁷ Thomas Turino, SIE, 221–255.
¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 221.
Nouveau, can all be interpreted immediately at a level of reason or intellect despite the feelings they also generate within us, (even Impressionism’s ‘moment in time’), whereas music is abstracted from sound, and its immediacy as it enters the ear causes it to be perceived instantly. This perception is therefore one that is nearest to an interpretation generated by a sign because it is the closest to an emotional effect or feeling (see i) below.)

Peirce defines three general classes of effects created by sign-object relations, or three kinds of ‘dynamic interpretants’ (‘the direct affect actually produced by a sign upon an interpreter of it’).  

i) The first is the emotional interpretant, ‘a direct unreflected-upon feeling caused by a sign,’ probably closest to a sense, feeling or sentiment;

ii) The second an energetic interpretant, a physical reaction – whether unnoticed foot-tapping or heart beating faster in reaction to a siren;

iii) The third a sign-interpretant or ‘linguistic-based concept’. All types ‘involve perception and mental activity’ involving thought, whether it is concerned with language or other bodily feelings or functions.

Meaning, including musical meaning, is the actual effect of a sign, encompassing ‘direct feeling, physical reaction and language-based concept’. A sign has to create an effect or interpretant in Peircian logic, for it to attain a meaning. It cannot function in abstract constructs because a sign cannot function without a living being/interpretant. This can be extended to our music analogy because, as Turino notes:

Musical signs are sonic events that create an effect in a perceiver; not everything happening in music necessarily functions as signs all the time (something might not be apprehended, might not cause an effect). But within the Peircian framework if aspects of music create an effect, signs are necessarily involved...

It follows that the perception of sonic waves that can be perceived in Debussy’s music, his curved pitch contours, and interminable flow and fluidity, and how these relate to the artistic movements of the time, must therefore necessarily be interpreted from signs that are felt or conceived within the music – whether by emotional, physical or linguistic interpretants. The


170 Turino stresses the different variety of interpretants that can impose themselves almost simultaneously on the mind of the perceiver, and how all three interpretants involve ‘different aspects of the nervous system’. Although a chaining process operates ‘in an instant’ causing different reactions by the mind, it is not an automatic sequence or succession of hierarchies. Ibid, 224, and note 6, 251.

fact that Debussy sought a new expression for music, as the direct communication of feelings/correspondances, enables the listener to hear his music’s free-flowing chain of emotions.

That the composer was surrounded by a fertile Parisian art scene, the Great Exhibitions of 1889 and 1900, and befriended numerous artists, as well as frequenting Edmond Bailly’s bookshop and publishing house L’Art Indépendant – where he is known to have followed Avant-garde literary and artistic developments– meant that he was surrounded by visual signs and present at the daily discussions that flourished at the end of the century, stimulated by journals such as La Revue Wagnérienne. Not only this, he surrounded himself at home with paintings and objets d’art such as his toad Arkel and his Japanese tableau of goldfish on which ‘Poissons d’or’ (Images II, 1907) is said to have been based, because they were aids to his creativity – they were indicative of Debussy’s artistic mind and sense of self. These ‘visualities’ scattered throughout his home-life and daily discussions with artists around him are the reason why researchers have intuited these influences within Debussy’s music.

Aided by the composer’s encouragement to bear in mind the ‘complex play of ideas,’ giving them ‘free rein,’ to ‘Collect impressions’… and the work of some important critics such as Louis Laloy in reinforcing these beliefs, we are able to make deductions associating these visual connections with Debussy’s music.

In order to clarify the various aspects of signs, and types of relationship that can occur between the sign-object-interpretant, Peirce created ten basic types, ranging ‘from signs that produce particularly direct effects without need for the mediation of linguistically-based thought, to signs, objects, and interpretants grounded in language…’ which we can utilise when considering the roles of musical and artistic signs that Debussy applied in his compositions.

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173 This is not to say that different categories of people do not hold differing views, but that a ‘middling generality’ allows for a ‘commonality of perception’ between differing groups with regard to sensations such as colour, allowing for a starting point ‘for recognising common perceptions.’ Cumming, *The Sonic Self*, 106–107.
176 Eighty-two personal letters, notes and telegrams have been collected by François Lesure, demonstrating the friendship between Debussy and Laloy, a university intellectual whose knowledge was valued by the composer. Deborah Priest remarks that: ‘in discussing Debussy’s musical aesthetic, Laloy emphasizes two points: naturalness (le naturel) and connections or parallels with the other arts,’ particularly of literature and painting. See Louis Laloy (1874–1944) on Debussy, 20–21.
177 Turino, *SIIE*, 234.
Peirce identified three terms that tell the interpretant what is doing the signifying, elucidated as the *qualisign, sinsign or legisign*.

i) *Qualisign*: a pure quality embedded within a sign, such as redness in a painting or a quality of musical sound like ‘timbre’, ‘loudness’ or ‘rapidity’, helping determine the semiotic potential of the sign. The prevalence of ‘curves’ in *L’Isle Joyeuse*, aided by bold arabesques, would signify its waviness/contours to some interpretants.

ii) *Sinsign*: the actual specific instance of a sign telling you something about itself, like the sound of ‘cascading harps’ in ‘Jeux de vagues’, second movement of *La Mer*.

iii) *Legisign*: the sound needs knowledge of its context or wider associations to understand it as a sign, such as what is meant by ‘harmony’, the ‘major scale’ or the ‘cakewalk’.

A single sound might function in all these ways at once. Debussy’s *La Mer* is in fact a wonderful example of many layers of signs incorporating different musical qualities of all three types.\(^{178}\)

Peirce identified three terms to tell the interpretant how the signifying is happening – by means of the *icon, index or symbol*.

i) *Icon*: the sound resembles the thing it signifies. For example, the darting nature of Debussy’s piano lines in the *Images II* ‘Poissons d’or’ sound like flashing glints of goldfish in water. The swirling strings in *La Mer* actually sound like the sea.

ii) *Index*: the sound evokes or indicates the thing it signifies. A trumpet call might indicate battle; a strummed guitar might indicate a serenading lover.

iii) *Symbol*: the sound is understood through a code, rule, or convention that the interpretant has to know separately. For example, a knowledge of jazz would be necessary to understand the Prelude *General Lavine*.

These two sets of terms are answering different questions, but can operate together as follows: for example, the undulating melodic contours of *La Mer* might be a *qualisign* that evokes the sea through *iconic* meaning, evokes feelings of freedom and wonder through

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\(^{178}\)Roy Howat’s classification of motives in the tripartite movements of *La Mer* emphasizes all three methods of signifying their qualisign, sinsign and legisign natures. *Roy Howat, DP*, 68–69.
indexical meaning and elicits visual associations through Hokusai’s print The Wave off Kanagawa through symbolic meaning.

All of these terms only become signs when they are understood through an interpretant. In other words, a perceiver has to interpret a thing for it to become a sign, but meanings will overlap and perceptions are by nature different in different people. Debussy’s conception of the sea led him to compose the seascape La Mer, translating his own signs of the ocean as his own interpretant; in Le temps (16th February 1905), Pierre Lalo heard an entirely different evocation:

It seems to me Debussy has willed himself to feel, rather than feeling really deeply and naturally. For the first time, listening to a descriptive work by Debussy, I have the impression of standing, not in front of nature, but in front of a production of nature; a wonderfully refined, ingenious and carefully composed reproduction, but a reproduction none the less… I do not hear, I do not see, I do not smell the sea.179

The meaning of icons and indices are dependent on the experiences of the perceiver, which gives them a fluid and varied nature, whereas the meaning of symbols (Dictionaries, instructive manuals and mathematical rules for example), is usually fixed through social agreement and not dependent on context. Indices particularly are personal, relating to individual perception through time. Reality is founded in the continual flux and chain of thought and feeling that make up the individual’s personal experience – ideas such as Debussy’s preoccupation with the sea and his water pieces, discernible when he articulates:

Who can know the secret of musical composition? The sound of the sea, the outline of a horizon, the wind in the leaves, the cry of a bird – these set off complex impressions in us. And suddenly, without the consent of anyone on this earth, one of these memories bursts forth, expressing itself in the language of music. It carries its own harmony within itself…180

Here, the gist of Debussy’s words is that creativity – or ‘impressions’ as he calls them, can be called into being by aural or visual perceptions, or indeed by a combination of the two, or by other sensory perceptions such as perfumes. These signs operate within the individual in

179 ‘(Il me semble que dans La Mer la sensibilité de M. Debussy n’est pas aussi spontanée ni aussi intense qu’elle avait été jusqu’à ici) ; il me semble qu’il a voulu sentir plutôt qu’il n’a vraiment, profondément et naturellement senti. Pour la première fois, en écoutant une œuvre pittoresque de Debussy, j’ai l’impression d’être, non point devant la nature, mais devant une reproduction de la nature ; reproduction merveilleusement raffinée, ingénieuse et industrieuse, trop peut-être ; mais reproduction malgré tout’. Pierre Lalo, review of La Mer in Le Temps, 16th October, 1905. Csp. 927, n. 3. Trans. Nichols, DL, 164, n. 1.
ways that we can hardly fathom, generating a fluid surge of inimitable originality in the mystical language of musical flow. Debussy’s words seem to sum up his rationale in explaining his desire to capture these perceptions as they occurred, – the very chain of semiosis, or free flow of thought in musical form, what may be referred to as ‘a kind of semantic snowballing’.\(^\text{181}\)

The listener to music thus makes further significant connections according to their own emotional and social experiences, set in their own cultural milieu, layering the original sign with new perceptions.\(^\text{182}\) The relationship between Debussy’s music and artistic influences/patterns of expression and emotions that were being communicated concurrently in both France and other European cultures can therefore be perceived in such a way. Simultaneous reactions to a piece of music with special resonance may call up multiple meanings and emotions, so that we experience layers of feeling associated with it at an emotional level, their power being dependent on their individual import. Indexical relations are therefore grounded in our personal experiences, and are thus constitutive of our personal identities. They are, as Turino points out:

> Fluid, multileveled, and highly context-dependent... frequently harnessed for the construction of social identities... because of their emotion-producing potentials and as pre-existing signs of identity.\(^\text{183}\)

They are therefore particularly relevant to a discussion of musical signs, because they carry personal meanings and relate to us on an emotional level.

**The Operation of Music**

Music’s very fluidity makes it antithetical to the position of the visual arts, where we bring our preconceptions to the painting in a different way. It could therefore be surmised that we have a far greater emotional investment in music as we experience it on an indexical (lower) level than we do words and symbols, because it is experienced personally and felt by the emotions rather than the intellect. Debussy’s language of extended flexibility, created using a juxtaposition of modal, whole-tone, diatonic ‘white-note’ and even octatonic areas, helped

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\(^{181}\) Turino, *SIIE*, 234–235. Also note 18, 252.

\(^{182}\) Naomi Cumming’s ‘Case of the Scarlet Trumpet’, where ‘a quality is interpreted as bringing some other idea to mind,’ not a ‘literal property of the thing to which it is attributed’, but ‘a quality (stillness in an ocean bay) is noticed, hence “represented” in the mind.’ *The Sonic Self*, 108–113.

\(^{183}\) Turino, *SIIE*, 235–236. It is thus particularly relevant as a resource utilised by events and propaganda in order to create ‘social unity, participation and purpose’ – witness Leni Riefenstahl’s use of Wagnerian music in her films for the Third Reich; Music can integrate ‘the affective and identity-forming potentials of both icons and indices in special ways.’
bring such an aim to fruition; Jean Barraqué described this evocation of feeling in the following way:

Beginning with La mer, Debussy created a new formal concept which one could call open form, which would find its fullest flowering in Jeux and the last works: a developmental process in which the very notions of exposition and development co-exist in an uninterrupted burst, which allows a work to be self-propelled, so to speak, without relying on any pre-established model...184

Music is able to operate in unique ways because it possesses a multi-componental character of signs that all operate together, simultaneously, so that it is interpreted on different levels. These might include pitch, scale-type, timbre, rhythmic motion, tempo, melodic shape, metre, dynamics, harmony, specific melodies, quotes, genres and that might combine together, suggests Turino, to produce a macrolevel sign, some being foregrounded or backgrounded as the listener interprets them. He surmises that:

this multi-componental aspect of music cannot be overemphasized as a basis of music’s affective and semiotic potential.185

Each sign has the potential to work with or against others to provide new insights or meanings or emotional power, and does of course operate differently with every new performance of a piece, since every performer and listener interprets signs differently, even when its notational language is apparently clear. But the development of different interpretations of scores, the alteration of scores, different historical contexts and different perceptions of people interpreting the music at a later date, constantly evolving in a world of different signs and social being, necessarily mean that all three parts of Peirce’s triad, sign – object – interpretant, are perpetually involved in a process of semiotic change too. Because of the semiotic chaining process, and music’s ‘special potential’ for being able to create emotional effects (prior to language-based interpretants), it is evident that the signs which will produce these effects are mainly Icons (Firsts) producing emotional, sensory interpretants at that point on the semiotic chain, and Indices (Seconds) producing energetic or feeling interpretants – an effect further back/lower down on the semiotic chain than linguistic, symbolic signs (Thirds)186.

185 Turino, SIE, 237.
186 ‘Lower-level signs are more likely to create emotional and energetic interpretants, whereas signs involving symbols are more likely to generate language-based responses and reasoning – effects often described as ‘rational’ or ‘conscious’ responses.’ Turino, SIE, 234.
Signs in the visual arts play a more generalised role, on an indexical or symbolic level. Although they are subject to similar interpretations, they do not undergo the same level of semiotic change because their representational aspect means they are set ‘in the moment,’ a snapshot of a particular time, whereas Debussy’s revolutionary new style of music operating within such a multi-componential framework, perfectly exemplifies the mode of macrolevel signs. Debussy’s music was perceived by many contemporaries to be ‘painterly’ because it appeared to establish correspondences between the aural and the visual, since it used subtle textures and timbres as ‘colours’ and blurred harmonic distinctions in its ‘static’ evocations of nature. These chains of sensory perceptions are not only involved in semantic snowballing but gather multiple objects at the same time, the components of each of the three trichotomies being combined in order to understand its full character, so that music occupies a privileged place in this schema.187

It is this potential that allowed Debussy to ‘play with’ visual signs within his music and that we can see and feel in its performance, even in the twenty-first century. A perception of sonic waves in Debussy’s music, particularly his water pieces in the Images and Préludes, as well as La Mer, arise as a result of an interpretation of signs that suggest this aquatic nature – signs such as rising and falling dynamics, arpeggiated runs of notes, fluid and ‘open’ form, and use of pentatonic and modal harmonies with tritone layers of sound suggesting mystery and depth. Debussy’s piano style, much written at pp and in which he ‘enters into the keys’,188 evoking his own feelings and emotions when performing his music, would have been perceived as a sign of his sensitivity. His music has the capacity to be interpreted on this level precisely because the listener feels an affinity with its perceived emotions, and therefore is often involved with it intimately, in a manner that the visual arts cannot emulate because they are less direct and mitigated by the mind.

In the late nineteenth century, the blending of signs between music and the visual arts had the effect of unifying them as a creative force, even to the extent of the use of the Impressionistic tag as a concept to merge and unite them. The curving patterns of the Art Nouveau appeared to directly resemble the twining contours of Debussy’s arabesques and free-flowing ‘rhythmicised time,’189 particularly as he made free use of such figures

187 ‘Music has the potential of comprising many signs simultaneously...it is this multi-componential and yet non-linear character of musical “sign-bundles” that allow for a different type of flexibility in the creation of complex, densely meaningful musical signs... Turino, SIIE, 237.
188 Marguerite Long, At the Piano with Debussy, 19–20, and Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, Volume II 1902–1918 33.
189 Letter to Jacques Durand, 3 September 1907, Csp, 1029–1030. Trans. Nichols, DL, 184, in which he refers to his work ‘consisting of colours and rhythmicised time’ – ‘Elle est de couleurs et de temps rhythmés...’
It is impossible to know whether contemporary Parisians ‘read’ contexts into the realities they experienced in Debussy’s France since we are making a judgement retrospectively, but there are a multitude of evidential signs as well as documentary suggestions that such comparisons were felt and experienced between music and the visual arts, to some extent encouraged by the surrounding literature. Debussy saw music as an organic art, one that was free to self-perpetuate and continually evolve, perceiving the rhythms of the natural world to be the nearest parallel or correspondance to music. Both existing temporally, they could evoke the very life of the universe as it existed, not a solitary frozen moment like painters and sculptors, and thus capture ‘all of the poetry of the night and day, of the earth and of the sky to reconstitute their atmosphere…’ Debussy’s ideas were very advanced even early in his life. His music required the listener to become immersed in sonorities that brought a reciprocal pleasure to the experience via an imaginative interchange of feelings, not to do with structural analysis or analytical models in either literature or music. Perceptions change through the lens of time, and according to the ‘reception’ of various listeners. Whether it is possible to say that the gestures of Debussy’s music imply a particular kind of listener of the moment, operating in a kind of causal dance, their particularity only recognisable in retrospect, is a conundrum in the search for meaning, but it is part of the search to find new ‘truths’ in the interpretation of a comparative dialogue between the visual arts and music.

Twentieth-Century Philosophical Interpretation

Musicologists adopting a similar stance in their advance towards meaning which can forward an interdisciplinary approach, include Julia Kristeva, who maintains that text is an ‘energised’ object. Roland Barthes believes her ‘notion of the geno-song’ and its markers, such as ‘the voluptuousness of sound-signifiers’ can act as different levels of musical comprehension

190 See fig. 16 in Chapter VI, the cover for the Symbolist-style poems, Proses Lyriques that Debussy wrote himself. Debussy documents his full input into various covers, such as the colours and lettering for the Estampes, in a letter to his publisher Durand in August 1903, Csp. 769, DL, 138, where he even speaks of his ‘cover mania’. Also see the design and layout for Children’s Corner, sent to Durand, in August 1908. See Csp. 1107, DL, 195.

191 For example, see Chapter VI on Symbolism and its links to literature.

192 See note 33.


and experience. He defines this as the refining of ‘a certain “aesthetics” of musical pleasure’ because this level of experience ‘revolves round physical sensation’, according with the composer’s views on feeling his music rather than its analysis.\textsuperscript{195} Debussy’s music is perceived on a physical level, as ‘something to be felt not analysed… a geno-realm in which his music resides naturally.’\textsuperscript{196} In effect, the body ‘hears’ the physical relationship between performer and music. Debussy himself articulated a similar feeling: ‘It is necessary to abandon yourself completely, and let the music do as it will with you’.\textsuperscript{197} In another article he went so far as to claim: ‘All people come to music to seek oblivion’.\textsuperscript{198}

Live performance can therefore be experienced as the equivalent of desire, since it is a perception in which music revolves around physical sensation, the sensuality of music being ‘not purely auditory, it is also muscular.’\textsuperscript{199} Richard Leppert refers to this as a metaphor of the self:

Union, envelopment, and pleasure; music is jouissance… not the passive act of “mere” listening. Thus music’s performance is in and of the body, but a whole body, an interpreting body…\textsuperscript{200}

Perceptions are therefore felt by the body and senses in an unfettered way, drawn to an improvisatory piano style sounding wholly instinctive. Debussy’s music is sensate in that it is both an ‘auditive’ and sensuous enlivener of the body, and those who perform the French composer’s pieces are well aware of being drawn into its physical ambit.\textsuperscript{201}

The ethnomusicologist and semiologist, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, writing in 1990, in \textit{Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music},\textsuperscript{202} followed a Peircian interpretive position, but encompassed a role for intention and reception within his model: ‘…The essence of a musical work is at once its genesis, its organization, and the way it is perceived.’\textsuperscript{203} I do not

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{195} Ibid, 121.
\item \textsuperscript{196} Ibid, 121.
\item \textsuperscript{197}‘Il est nécessaire de vous abandonner complètement, et laisser la musique faire ce qu’elle veut avec vous’. George Copeland, ‘Debussy, the man I knew,’ \textit{The Atlantic Monthly} (January 1955), 35–8, (English) in Nichols, \textit{DR}.
\item \textsuperscript{200} Ibid, 215. Also see Jankélévitch, \textit{music and the ineffable} Trans. Carolyn Abbate. He speaks about music’s \textit{Charme}, or ‘mystical transaction’ – the ‘very operation of beauty…the unknowable something that is divine…’ a joy analogous to human love in its ‘transformational force.’ viii – x (Arnold I. Davidson, in ‘The \textit{Charme} of Jankélévitch,) and 125.
\item \textsuperscript{203} Ibid, ix–x.
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propose to go into this in any detail, but to note that Nattiez recognizes that ‘the thing to which the sign refers – that is, the interpretant – is also a sign’ and thus ‘the process of referring effected by the sign is infinite’, a process somewhat akin to Turino’s ‘semantic snowballing’. In reality signs vary from person to person, according to their own individual experiences, multiple interactions building ever outwards in a linking web, posits Nattiez. Thus, it is the lived experience of the sign’s users that is referred to in any notion of meaning as well. It is possible to assign a meaning, or many meanings, to a given text or score, but it is never guaranteed that the chaining process of interpretants will coincide in each person’s perceptions.  

The process of analysis/interpretation is therefore infinite, a constant dialogue alluding to multifarious meanings. It is therefore possible to draw analogies between music and the visual arts due to the multiple capacities of music to express its meaning to us. The visual prolongation of Art Nouveau décor has within it the potential associations of a piece such as L’Isle joyeuse, with its flowing elongations of curving pitch contours, or the darting fish of ‘Poissons d’Or’ (Images II 1907) naturally becomes associated in our minds with Debussy’s Chinese lacquer painting of carp which hung in his study in the Bois de Boulogne. These pieces, associated with what Boyd Pomeroy refers to as ‘non-goal-directedness,’ were possessed of an indubitable clarity of outline, but without the harmonic progression that had characterised composition in the past, producing kaleidoscope-type impressions that Debussy intended, to refine his music’s expressive nature. In March 1908, writing to his publisher Jacques Durand, he emphasises the expressive traits of the orchestral Images, and links them directly with pictorial associations:

> The Images won’t be quite finished on your return, but I hope to play you a great part of them…I’m trying to write ‘something else’ and to create – réalités – what imbeciles call ‘impressionism’, a term employed with the greatest inaccuracy, especially by art critics who don’t hesitate to use it as a label to stick on Turner, the finest creator of mystery in all of art!

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204 He explains this phenomenon by quoting from Pirandello: ‘the sad thing is that you will never know (and I can never tell you) how I interpret what you say to me… You and I, we use the same language, the same words. But is it our fault, yours and mine, that the words we use are empty? Empty. In saying them, you fill them with the meaning they have for you; I, in collecting them up, I fill them with the meaning I give them. We had believed that we understood one another; we have not understood one another at all.’ Ibid, 11.

205 Pomeroy, CCD, 159.

Concluding Remarks

Debussy shared with many visual artists of the time the desire to depict nature in as evocative and effective way as possible, and thereafter his music and contemporary art were associated in the minds of many critics, the Impressionist term being bandied about in relation to his music.\textsuperscript{207} His Spanish triptych \textit{Ibéria} – the 1909 \textit{Images} he appears to be referring to – unfolded in an improvisatory way, but possessed explicit titles to clearly articulate their visual \textit{correspondances} – ‘Par les rues et par les chemins’ (‘Along the Lanes and Byways’), ‘Les Parfums de la nuit’ (‘Perfumes of the Night’), and ‘Le Matin d’un jour de fête’ (‘On the Morning of a Holiday’). His visual \textit{Images} sought to capture moments of fleeting actuality, as if they were paintings caught in the blink of an eye – a snapshot of the instant, but capturing all the light and shade of the image, without appearing to be constructed in a programmatic way. Debussy writes excitedly of this ‘impressionist’ art to his friend André Caplet in February 1910, feeling that he had achieved such an extemporised effect in his music:

\begin{quote}
…You can’t imagine how naturally the transition works between ‘Parfums de la nuit and le matin d’un jour de fête. It has the air of not having been written’…And the way it comes to life, with people and things waking up…there is a man selling water-melons and children whistling, that I see very clearly…And yet not everyone finds it so obvious, some people thought it was a ‘serenade’.
\end{quote}

This impression of reality, then, spontaneously evolves from Debussy’s pen as if it had never been written, in an improvisatory manner, yet still apparently capable of being perceived aesthetically as a Sérénade. Whenever it is difficult to grasp the meaning of an object or situation, it is always the natural inclination of the mind to use all other possible means of perception to substitute meaning, whether encompassing words, lines, forms, colours, sounds, or even perfumes as signs. Thus, the traces left by every artistic and musical sign – such as Debussy’s use of the pedal as a sort of ‘breathing’\textsuperscript{208} evoke our individual interpretations, whether they are the individual’s own perceptions and/or part of cultural judgements that have been appropriated.

\textsuperscript{207} See the 1887 report from the Académie des Beaux-Arts in response to Debussy’s \textit{Printemps}. (Chapter V). Originally quoted in \textit{Les arts français} 16 (1918), Simeone, \textit{CCD}, 102.

\textsuperscript{208} \‘…Vous ne vous figurez pas combien l’enchaînement des \textit{Parfums de la nuit avec le matin d’un jour de fête} se fait naturellement. Ça n’a pas l’air d’être écrit…Et toute la montée, l’éveil des gens et des choses…il y a un marchand de pastèques et des gamins qui sifflent, que je vois très nettement…Et pourtant regardez comme on peut se tromper, puisqu’il y a des gens qui ont pris cela pour une \‘sérénade’’. 25\textsuperscript{th} and 26\textsuperscript{th} February, 1910, Csp, 1252–53. Trans. Nichols, \textit{DL}, 217.

\textsuperscript{209} See Suarez’s comments on \textit{La Mer}, that this masterpiece ‘palpitates and breathes in us,’ Oscar Thompson, \textit{Debussy Man and Artist}, (New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1965), 20–23 Also Long’s perception of her teacher’s use of the pedal as a ‘sort of breathing,’ \textit{At the Piano with Debussy}, 19.
In Debussy’s case, it is possible to see how this would operate because he went to great lengths to ensure each piece was performed in the manner he specified, clarifying his scores with specific instructions written on the work to ensure that it was interpreted in the correct way, ranging from numerous changes of tempo and dynamic in a symphonic-type work such as the Trois esquisses of La Mer to registral changes as in Syrinx and the elaborate ornamental style of Jeux, all meticulously marked on his scores in a notational precision that ensured his ornamental and melodic style with all its nuances and fluidity was carried through into performance. This exactitude of writing enabled Debussy to achieve an orchestration of his piano pieces, for example ‘La Cathédrale engloutie’ encompassing directions for Profondément calme, Flottant et sourd, and Doux et fluide, whilst L’Isle Joyeuse is performed Quasi una cadenza, a feature which reappears the following year (1905) in ‘Reflets dans l’eau’ (Images I). That is not to say, however, that he did not allow for individual interpretation – the reason he uses few metronome markings was because he saw tempo as a changeable construct, altering on a day-to-day basis. His piano roll recordings also depart from the score on many occasions, demonstrating his mercurial character.

Debussy’s use of cyclic form, building on recurring sequences of material that were clarified and articulated in great detail, led analysts such as Jean Barraqué to comment in the 1960s on the ‘devenir sonore’ of La Mer, in process akin to Peirce’s ‘semantic snowballing’:

Debussy has reinvented musical technique… Debussy, with La Mer, has really invented a developmental process in which the ideas of exposition and development coexist in an uninterrupted burst, which allows the work to propel itself away, without the aid of a pre-established model. 210

Constant change is a pervasive feature of Debussy’s music, actuated by the talents of its performers. Our perceptions capture Debussy’s correspondances between music’s colours and rhythms and the visual impressions of natural phenomena such as atmosphere, water and the sky, and it is this coalescence of the symbolic and the interpretive that brings the composer’s music to life. This sense of intentionality does therefore represent the score as a form of ‘text’ from which its true reality can issue forth as an entity and creative act in itself, enabling the composer’s work to pass onwards through history.

210”Debussy ait réinventé la technique musicale… Debussy, avec la Mer, a réellement inventé un procédé de développement dans lequel les notions mêmes d’exposition et de développement coexistent dans un jaillissement ininterrompu, qui permet à l’œuvre de se propulser en quelque sorte par elle-même, sans le secours d’un modèle préétabli”. Barraqué in Debussy, 182–84. My trans.
As the poet Mallarmé remarked, ‘each of the arts – literary, visual or musical – all are
extended and made the interpreter’s ‘own’ version...’211 This insight applies to both music
and the visual arts as well as literature – their representational element, diffuse in the case of
the musical performance, ‘concrete’ in the case of most artistic work – are open to continual
interpretation without detracting from the original whole. We can assert that the search for
meaning in Debussy’s music is perpetually renewing and altering according to the value
judgements of the perceiver/listener’s era and thus changes in concept and understanding,
posing the question of whether music can exist anywhere except in performance – where it is
always ‘relived’ in a sense, since ‘alive’ it is never the same twice.212

Comparative theories demonstrate how different systems of perception articulate the
possible mental processes involved in the generation of curved and flowing pitch contours in
Debussy’s music, and their link with the parallel formation of swirling (whiplash) lines,
Impressionist colouring or nebulous Symbolist ideas in the contemporary visual arts of the
period. Where the music sounds ephemeral, without a clear beginning or end, like Debussy’s,
it would appear that such traits are almost inbuilt into the kind of music we are listening to.213

Given the composer’s very precise character and perfectionism, his intentions are clearly
stated. He takes every opportunity to create clarity (in notation, dynamics and descriptive
instructions) with regard to the type of music he created. Whether his interpreters heed these
directions or hear other traits that resided in Debussy’s psyche are imponderable questions
that rely on mutable intuitions together with intellectual interpretations of known evidential
facts. In the next chapter, I turn now to examine each of the contemporary artistic movements
that Debussy was involved with, determining how perceptions operated in order to make
judgements involving the coalescence of music and art, beginning with Impressionism.

212 Carolyn Abbate, in Jankélévitch, xvii, in which she compares Debussy’s belief that music is realized in its
doing, akin to its elusive act of ‘Becoming’.
Debussy felt himself to be a kind of auditory ‘sensitive.’ He had an almost fanatical conviction that a musical
score does not begin with the composer, but that it emerges out of space, through centuries of time, passes
before him, and goes on, fading into the distance (as it came) with no sense of finality...’
CHAPTER II

PAINTERLY ART AND DEBUSSY’S MUSIC

Generally speaking, I feel more and more that music, by its very essence, is not something that can flow inside a rigorous, traditional form. It consists of colours and of rhythmised time…

Claude Debussy (1907)

When we listen to Debussy’s music it does not take much of a leap of imagination to bring visual images to mind. Indeed, his contemporaries frequently did the same – especially where so called ‘impressionistic’ pieces were concerned, such as La Mer, because they seemed to exude visual pictures that accorded with Impressionist paintings. An examination of Debussy’s pieces necessarily reveals the ethos behind them and the procedures he uses to effect their completed soundscapes. Where I seek to differ from other commentators is in my close consideration of Debussy’s work with regard to particular Impressionistic techniques, subject matter and so forth behind his pieces, that I believe demonstrate particular correlations between the music and a closer investigation of specific Impressionist paintings, and later the Divisionniste/Pointilliste artistic movements (Chapter III).

Perceptions within contemporary artistic and musical worlds naturally accorded with synchronous models of the day, enabling us to comprehend judgements of the time, but at a deeper level some of the parallels that have hitherto been made can be expanded upon. Work by later scholars such as Christopher Palmer who extended the parameters of possible Impressionistic interpretations, though rather simplistically limiting his comparisons to resemblances between subject matter and emotional parallels – what the music sounded like (particularly those works concerning the natural world,) can be developed by examining similar technical innovations between art and music and their predilection for analogous subject matter. Pieces from Debussy’s œuvre such as ‘La soirée dans Grenade’ from Ibéro were described by Palmer as being ‘impressionistic in the sense of assembling and juxtaposing multifarious impressions,’ surely a circular argument, ‘Jardins sous la pluie’ from

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214 ‘Par ailleurs, je me persuade de plus en plus que la Musique n’est pas, par son essence, une chose qui puisse se couler dans une forme rigoureuse et traditionnelle. Elle est de couleurs et de temps rhythmés…’ : Csp. 1030.

Debussy to his publisher Jacques Durand, from Pourville, 3rd September, 1907, in which he talks about the inseparability of form, rhythm and colour. Trans. Nichols DL, 184.
the *Estampes* (1903) was another ‘Impressionistic water piece’, ‘Reflets dans l’eau’, first of
the *Images*, was the most subtle of Debussy’s next ‘major Impressionist piano works’ whilst
the second set of *Images*, ‘Cloches à travers les Feuilles,’ ‘begins with that classic
impressionistic synthesis of tolling bells and rustling leaves.’ Moving on to the two sets of
*Préludes* for piano, Palmer extends his vision of a complementary universe:

> We find distilled the essence of Impressionism. In these pieces Debussy’s ability to
crystallize the visual elements and in certain cases the emotional connotations of a scene in
terms of musical sensation, in a series of short but telling brush-strokes, is demonstrated to
the full; no aspect of the Impressionist aesthetic or technique remains here uncalled into
play…

However, he does not reach below the surface of these ‘essences’ or discuss other painterly
associations with which Debussy is very clearly connected. He merely states his beliefs,
based on his own perceptions.

Other revelations that fit very well with Debussy’s enigmatic character and love of mystère,
are provided by Stefan Jarocinski’s book produced three years later on *Impressionism and
Symbolism* within Debussy’s work, which explored the artistic ideas that were current and
sited the composer’s unique place at the fulcrum between Classical and Modern musics. My
closer examination of Debussy’s réalités – the word he used to define his intentions – will
perhaps more clearly clarify the artistic threads which run through his work, both in his
writings and music, and allow me to draw a more conclusive resolution to the conundrum of
his painterly associations, whilst allowing both Impressionist and Symbolist movements their
place in the question of which inspired him the most.

Contemporary critical perceptions were quick to allude to similarities between Debussy’s
music and the Impressionist movement, drawing analogies between the visual immediacy of
artists such as Monet and the seemingly ephemeral and flowing nature of the composer’s
music, which appeared to possess comparable qualities and arouse corresponding sensations,
such as the ‘smudging’ of sonorities. Whereas artists appropriated terms such as harmony,
timbre and rhythm to describe their paintings, musicians spoke of colour, lines and light to
evoke painterly perceptions, Debussy himself using such language to explain the innovations
that he sought (see n.1). He is also purported to have told Léon Vallas that the two arts

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1976), ch. 1.
accorded with each other, finding a congruity that seems entirely natural and which the
author reveals in his early book on the *musicien français*:

These are real pictures… in which the composer has endeavoured to convey, aurally,
impressions received by the eye… The melody, with its infinitely varied rhythms,
corresponds to the multiplicity of lines in a drawing; the orchestra represents a huge palette
where each instrument supplies its own colour… This is *musical impressionism* of a very
special kind and of a very rare quality.²¹⁷

In this chapter I shall therefore examine these cross-disciplinary effects, focussing firstly
on contemporary opinions of Debussy’s music and the qualities that provoked this
perception, and then the prevailing artistic milieu and influence of the great poet and art critic
Baudelaire in the composer’s thinking, and the Impressionist ‘revolution’ of the 1860s–1880s
onwards. I shall chart the reaction of this movement against the strict rules of traditional
painting and its focus on a freer interpretation of reality *en plein air*, (a phrase that Debussy
was particularly drawn to in his writings)²¹⁸, enabling analogies to be drawn between the
contemporary artistic world and the composer’s musical ethos in a much more defined way
than previously. I will compare the evolution of the great ‘Impressionist piece’, *La Mer* with
the techniques of both Monet and Turner to whom Debussy was especially drawn, and to
whom his writings make mention, along with the emblematic part Monet played in the
Impressionist movement and its corollaries with music. Both have been noticed as
inspirations of the composer within Debussy scholarship, but their correlations have not been
developed before. Brief mention will also be made of the composer’s friendship with Henry
Lerolle, a painter who he looked on as an ‘elder brother’,²¹⁹ and who proved to be a good
listener when Debussy required support.

*Early Commentators*

The deductions I shall make rest on the copious amount of correspondence Debussy
conducted in his lifetime – to other musicians and artistic friends and acquaintance,

²¹⁷ Léon Vallas, Trans. Maire O’Brien, The *Theories of Claude Debussy Musicien Français* (New York: Dover
publications, Inc., 1967), 196–197. My italics. When in 1906 Vallas listed all the piano works by Debussy up to
the *Images I*, (1905) however, he only called the *Estampes* (1903) a ‘delicious and original Impressionism
indicated by the diverse titles’ in ‘Le Nouveau style Pianistique’, *La Revue musicale de Lyon*, Oct. 14th, 6,

²¹⁸ For example: ‘Je voulais à la musique une liberté qu’elle contient peut-être plus que n’importe quel art,
n’étant pas borne à une reproduction plus ou moins exacte de la nature, mais aux correspondances mystérieuses
entre la Nature et l’Imagination’. (I wanted music to have a freedom that she perhaps has more than any other
art, since she is not restricted to an exact reproduction, more or less, of nature, but instead deals with the

conductors, publishers and critics, as well as the articles he wrote for publications such as *La Revue blanche, Musica, Gil Blas* and *S.I.M.* expressing his opinions on all things musical and their relationship to the natural world. Debussy’s poetic style of writing and many artistic references do, however, concur with much of the spirit of the *fin de siècle*, where both critical and personal individuals among the *avant-garde* such as his close friend and musicologist Louis Laloy and other writers such as Camille Mauclair, expressed the climate of opinion that frequently linked art and music together, leading to the label of *musical impressionism*. As the latter wrote in an article for *La Revue Bleue* in 1902, entitled ‘Musical Painting and the fusion of the arts’, the general move was towards such thinking and Mauclair considered Debussy in painterly terms, comparing him to the Impressionists:

> The landscapes of Claude Monet are in fact symphonies of luminous waves… and the music of Monsieur Debussy, based not on a succession of themes but on the relative values of sounds in themselves, bears a remarkable resemblance to these pictures. It is Impressionism consisting of sonorous patches…

The composer’s choice of words in a letter to his stepson, Raoul Bardac, was a precise one:

> Collect impressions. Don’t be in a hurry to write them down. Because that’s something music can do better than painting.

They were imbued with a purity of ideal that Monet shared— that dispensed with established ‘classical’ ideals – instead implying an authentic individual response on behalf of the artist. Despite these affinities, however, Debussy was particularly averse to labels and paradoxically to the umbrella term of ‘Impressionism,’ which had been imbued with numerous meanings when applied to his music. However, critics such as Charles Malherbe, writing about a performance of Debussy’s ‘Rondes de Printemps’ (*Images*, 1909), made various correlations between Impressionist visual and musical techniques in the programme notes as late as 1910. Another critic, Michel Calvocoressi, described the composer’s piano

music as ‘markedly picturesque, even descriptive’ in 1906, and the following year identified Debussy’s music with the quality of ‘interiority’ – ‘musique sensorielle’, revealing a temperament that delighted in sonorities and melodies for their own sake, in a purely decorative manner. Laloy himself used the term ‘impressionnisme délicieux’ in connection with Debussy’s *Estampes et Nocturnes*, whilst Émile Vuillermoz associated Debussy with Chopin as both being ‘jewellers of sound,’ (‘joailliers du son’). Taken together, we may say that these connections attempted to clarify Debussy’s innovative style by identifying its decorative aspects, as opposed to the more intellectual approach of *musique cérébrale*. The fact that his music projected fluctuating, flexible rhythms rather than formal developments, and dissonant harmonies largely devoid of cadential punctuation, appeared to suggest a fluid, spontaneous music evolving in the present, much like the Impressionists’ attempts to capture the first sketch perceived by the eye, rather than working on and producing a highly-developed painting, akin to the polished symphonies that Debussy so despised. The composer’s music, nevertheless, was the opposite of a ‘first sketch’, even though it appeared otherwise.

Although the composer railed against the Impressionist title his music attracted, it is known that he held Monet in great esteem, since he wrote to Vuillermoz in January 1916 saying so. The critic was an ardent defender of contemporary music, and after one such article, Debussy felt flattered to be compared to Monet, and wrote to thank him accordingly: ‘You do me a great honour by calling me a pupil of Claude Monet’.

The early *Trois Nocturnes* (1898) were particularly susceptible to accusations of Impressionism, an anonymous writer in *Le Figaro* making an oblique reference to Whistler’s *Nocturnes* with the comment that ‘Debussy seems to wish to express passing impressions of a dream’, whilst an article by Jean Marnold in 1902 about these pieces declares ‘mais c’est un musicien Impressionniste’. In the same year, Hugues Imbert proclaimed his opinion that Debussy had:

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227 Émile Vuillermoz, ‘Une Tasse de Thé,’ *Le Mercure Musical* (15th May, 1905), 510, Bhogal, 125.


230 *Mercure de France*, June 1902, 805.
Realised in music what the Impressionists – such as Monet and Sisley – have executed in paint. Mr Claude Debussy, is, without any doubt, one of the young musicians of the new school and his opera *Pelléas and Mélisande*, at the Opera-Comique, will shed full light on this… Listen to the *Nocturnes*. They are pages of pure Impressionism…

An Englishman, Edwin Evans, also made the link between art and music in 1910, as if Debussy’s music was filtered through these visual images and evocative titles that conjured up visually enticing perceptions, noting:

Debussy is often considered an Impressionist… [in the sense that] Impressionism… tries to create an impression analogous to the one produced by a non-musical phenomenon or by any phenomenon of the senses; it is not restricted to auditive phenomena. It is in this sense that Debussy is an Impressionist and not a realist…

In addition, he pointed out the influence of Mussorgsky as a ‘prototype of the musical Impressionists’, whose melodies from his song cycle *The Nursery* (1868–1872) had so influenced the young Debussy. Perhaps as a descriptive term Impressionism found its way into a widespread musical vocabulary thanks to the uniqueness of Debussy’s music, as an attempt to explain its innovations and exotic nature. Its evocative titles and ability to create pictures in the mind because of its emphasis on flowing lines and distinctive harmonies naturally led people to draw parallels with Impressionist art, which was already established by the time Debussy reached his peak. Contemporary perceptions, operating rather in the way of Peircian sensations, naturally built a bridge between the two – Peirce’s construct enabled the composer’s music to flow naturally between the artistic and musical worlds because the ears and eyes found a natural accord between visible and audible sensations.

*The Import of Baudelaire*

The ideas of the poet and art critic, Baudelaire, proliferated during the middle years of the nineteenth century, his *Les Fleurs du mal* (published 1857) having a great impact on the young visual Impressionists as well as on Debussy, since it was he who pursued the theory of *correspondances* that the composer was to take up and make his own, in his exploration of feelings that crossed the boundaries of specific subject-matter. These *correspondances*…

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233 In a lecture given 12th April, 2012, ‘Resonances of Baudelaire in Debussy’s Piano Music’, Roy Howat considers two Debussy piano pieces – ‘Les sons et les parfums’ of 1910 and ‘Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon’ of 1917 (a newly discovered work), whose titles come from within Baudelaire poems Debussy set in
between the visual, auditory and even the olfactory senses enabled the composer to extend his vision for a far more unfettered music encompassing senses that converged together in his mind.

Baudelaire was the intimate of both the painter Édouard Manet and the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, whose article entitled ‘The Impressionists and Edouard Manet,’ attempted to define Baudelaire’s ideas of the new art:

The search after truth, peculiar to modern artists, which enables them to see nature, and reproduce her… must lead them to adopt the air almost exclusively as their medium, or at all events to work in it freely and without restraint… As to the details of the picture, nothing should be absolutely fixed in order that we may feel that the bright gleam which lights the picture, or the diaphanous shadow which veils it are only seen in passing… which being composed of a harmony of reflected and ever-changing lights, cannot be supposed always to look the same, but palpitates with movement, light, and life. 234

Baudelaire extolled the perpetual rhythm of nature, and its ability to transcend all that is false. His abnegation of formes fixes in favour of ‘perpetual metamorphosis’, is, I believe, the strongest point of intersection with Debussy’s ideas, particularly his perception of light and its continually fluctuating effects. Calling on artists to become painters of modern life, the impact of these ideas reverberated throughout the artistic community. For Baudelaire, there was no orthodoxy – his sensibility decreed that thinkers should continually interpret, without a beginning or end, ‘in unceasing, sudden, shattered and recursive motion’,235 a phrase that chimes with Debussy’s quest for endless ‘becoming’ in his music and Peirce’s ‘snowballing effect’ that continually repeated and developed. Debussy’s originality dictated that artistic beauty be sought in the present, in the transitory, fleeting element of the here-and-now, in order to capture the truth of the modern, and it was this ‘effect’ that evoked comparisons with Impressionist art, a parallel that deserves to be foregrounded in twenty-first century research.

These ideas acted as a clarion call for all artists to reject the fixed forms of past eras and become engaged in modern life. These early beginnings were to link the arts in their

1889, (‘Le balcon’ and ‘Harmonie du soir’). Musically quite independent of the associated songs, they yet bear subtle relationships and perceptible ‘musical cross-currents’ to Baudelaire’s ‘particularly structured poems.’ www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/part-three-resonances-of-baudelaire-in-debussy's-piano-music

234 Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Impressionists and Edouard Manet,” Art Monthly Review, 30th September, 1876, 27–35. Published originally in English. Also see Baudelaire’s article ‘De la couleur,’ Le Salon de 1846, in Œuvres complètes, vol. ii (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1976), 425, in which he puts forward the idea of the colour spectrum as it merges from shade to light in nature in terms of its musical equivalents.

235 Roberto Calasso, La Folie Baudelaire, (Milan, Italy: Adelphi Edizioni, 2008; London, UK: Allen Lane, 2012). Baudelaire’s writing on art, particularly his great essay, ‘Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne’ (‘The Painter of Modern Life’), in 1863, was to centre on finding the ‘mysterious beauty’ within art centred on the momentary, the present – ‘modernity, for want of a better term.’ www.writing.upenn.edu/.../Baudelaire_Painter-of-Modern-Life_1863.pdf
equivalence of ideas, the alignment of views between Debussy (forty years later) and Baudelaire being particularly evident in the composer’s radical suggestion for music ‘en plein air,’ in 1901, which advocated a far freer role for a music that would seem improvisatory, shimmering in the air in much the same way that the Impressionists painters chose to paint outdoors, their quick, broken brush strokes and brilliant colours capturing the spontaneous effects of fleeting moments that gave their paintings an unfinished appearance, lighting up their canvases by the application of light and shade. Debussy’s emphasis on the evocative powers of music is evident when he discusses its possibilities in La Revue Blanche, writing:

I envisage the possibility of a music especially written for the open air, flowing in bold, broad lines from both the orchestra and the voices. It would resound through the open spaces and float joyfully over the tops of the trees… It would be a mysterious collaboration between the air, the movement of the leaves and the scent of the flowers – all mingled into music…

Debussy was espousing an organicism for his music, one that formed a correspondance with nature in the most direct ways, subtly evolving lines of melody that created a circuitous feeling. The reality of being on a mountain in the wind gave him impressions on which to draw, infinitely preferable to what he saw as the dry academic craft of writing music. His lifelong preoccupation with colour and its possible connections with orchestral and timbral qualities was also stimulated by Baudelaire’s ideas of the colour spectrum and its musical equivalents – that subtle blends of colour and shadow create harmony, form and colour unite as one.

Elements of the Impressionist Credo

The first sight (or hearing, taste, etc.) of a phenomenon is crucial to our understanding of Impressionism, where the recording of that impression in its component colours is paramount, before the mind begins to intellectualise and attach thoughts and labels or perceive detail. It is this semiotic understanding of signs that enables correlations to be drawn between the qualities of Debussy’s improvisatory style of music and the Impressionist movement. As Jules Laforgue, another writer who was an interpreter of Impressionism, and whom Debussy read and admired, surmised in 1883:

236 ‘J’entrevois la possibilité d’une musique construite spécialement pour “ le plein air”, toute en grandes lignes, en hardiesse vocales et instrumentales, qui jouerait dans l’air libre et planerait joyeusement sur la cime des arbres… Il y aurait une collaboration mystérieuse de l’air, du mouvement des feuilles et du parfum des fleurs avec la musique’. Debussy, ‘La musique en plein air,’ La Revue blanche, 1st June, 1901, MC, 45–6. Trans. DM, 40–41. Also see letter to Godet, on 18th December 1911, Csp, 1471.
Where the academic sees only things set down in regular, separate positions within an armature of purely theoretical lines, the Impressionist sees perspective established by thousands of imperceptible tones and touches, by the variety of atmospheric states, with each plane not immobile but shifting. The Impressionist sees and renders nature as she is, that is to say in unique vibrations of colour.237

Laforgue’s commentary goes on to make assertions that reject composed form – fixed forms and line are merely tactile illusions, he perceives, stating that visual reality is not defined by solid lines and colours but only by the vibrations and contrast of colours. By exercising naivety and forgetting the rules of these optical fallacies, the Impressionist can reach a truer position, closer to the *feelings* that Debussy espouses for music and the perceptions that Peirce talks about. Thus the Impressionist is better able to teach people how to see, encouraging communication through the imperceptible and the painting of reflected light rather than objects, so that the eye is in effect retrained:

The Impressionist sees and renders nature as it is – that is, wholly in the vibration of colour. No line, light, relief, perspective, or chiaroscuro, none of these childish classifications: all these are in reality converted into the vibration of colour and must be obtained on canvas solely by the vibration of colour.238

Debussy was thoroughly acquainted with Laforgue’s work – both his poetry, which the composer admired,239 and his ideas on painting and music, expounded in this long essay on Impressionism, which expressed his strong and sympathetic views on modern painting.240 Debussy sought to align his music with the Impressionist approach to nature, which was so much more than the strictly imitative. He was, however, ambivalent about the term itself, not least because its early connotations as a descriptive term in the art world were clearly derogatory. His antipathy may have arisen directly as a result of the veiled insult he had


239 Laforgue’s ‘Les Complaintes’ of 1885, *Music & Letters*, vol. 20, No. 2, (April, 1939) was his first published volume of poetry, in which his innovative experiments with language developed considerably, with the use of invented words and slang terms from everyday speech, together with unconventional rhyme and poetical structures, 168–176.

received for his envoi, Printemps, composed when he was studying at the Villa Médicis in Rome, when his ‘new art’ was described by the Secretary to the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1887 as follows:

One has the feeling of musical colour exaggerated to the point where it causes the composer to forget the importance of precise construction and form. It is to be strongly hoped that he will guard against this vague impressionism, which is one of the most dangerous enemies of truth in works of art. This was the first instance of the term ‘vague impressionism’ in use to describe Debussy’s music, and its pejorative context seems to have had a lasting effect on the composer’s viewpoint. It also links both art and music in the reader’s mind, and warns against dispensing with the notion of realism or representation that had previously been the guiding principle for classical painting. By extension, music was now included in this analogy, the author obviously seeing such a departure as a ‘dangerous’ shift in the development of ‘musical colour’, which dispensed with the importance of tonality, structure and form – what he perceives as the inherited truth – ‘la vérité’. In other words, Debussy’s innovative shift away from the rules could not be recommended.

In his search for a new expression of nebulous poetic and visual images, which often crossed over into a semi-synaesthetic state of ‘sensory intoxication’, Debussy sought musical ways of communicating colours and feelings that formed a correspondance to these intangible sensations, drawing closer to artistic ideals. Dispensing with intellectual concepts, the French painters sought a new art created on an empirical basis, the immediacy of visual signs outdoors meaning that they could be interpreted before the intervention of the mind, as in the Peircian model. Impressionists attempted to paint what was immediately evident – becoming closer to what Debussy is termed réalités. The individual mind, however, perceives its reality in a different way to every other individual mind, however ‘immediate’ that perception of a sign, and thus the painter or composer will reflect their own perceptions of what they see or hear, just as the viewer or listener will ‘see’ and ‘hear’ things differently.

\(^{241}\) Having won the Prix de Rome for his cantata L’Enfant prodigue in 1884, Debussy left Paris for the Villa Médicis in Rome for two years, which proved to be a difficult time for him, both on a personal and inspirational level. Csp, 29. Trans. DL, 8. The envoi, or composition, required yearly by the Institut in Rome, saw Debussy experimenting with a more supple music that was close to the Baudelairean ideal for poetry. \(^{242}\) On reconnaît chez lui un sentiment de la couleur musicale dont l’exagération lui fait facilement oublier l’importance de la précision du dessin et de la forme. Il serait fort à désirer qu’il se mît en garde contre cet impressionnisme vague, qui et un plus dangereux ennemis de la vérité dans les œuvres d’art’. A report by the Permanent Secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, 1887, originally printed in Les arts français 16 (1918), 92. Also in Camille Mauclair, ‘La peinture musicienne et la fusion des arts’, La Revue bleue, no. 10, 4th series, 18th Sept. 1902, 297–302. Quoted in Debussy on Music, trans. Richard Langham Smith, 50.
too. Every individual’s rendering of a work of art will necessarily be unique to them, because it rests on the unique experiences that dictate the perceptions of that individual.

**Debussy’s Music – Parallels with the Paintings of Monet and Turner**

Building on this idea of immediate perceptual responses, or Debussyan ‘realities’, in this section, I establish the profound impact of two painters on the development of the composer’s musical aesthetic—the first because Monet’s Impressionistic ideas concerning the need to work *en plein air* and his technical procedures very much accorded with Debussy’s ethos, and in Turner’s case because his vision of nature as a dynamic presence of light and colour impacted on both Monet and Debussy. If Debussy never talked about the Impressionists himself, beyond the odd brief comment, he certainly did express his admiration for Turner (see later). Operating on many levels simultaneously, the Englishman’s command of luminosity and darkness, contrasting light sources and sophisticated range of colours within both warm and cold palettes made him a formidable artist and a beacon for future exponents. Exploring both technical and almost abstract effects, he liberated light and colour in a seeming anticipation of Impressionism, and Monet himself, as well as Pissarro, was also known to be an admirer of Turner’s work.

In turn, Louis Laloy’s book *Debussy*, published in 1909, makes frequent mention of his painterly qualities. In his review of *La Mer* for *Le Mercure musical* (1st November, 1905),

he was one of the few critics to comprehend Debussy’s intentions and their link to a momentary snapshot of time, comparing the early charms of the *Nocturnes* (1898) to the full-blown Impressionism of *La Mer*:

> It gave us a new work by Claude Debussy which is among the loveliest, the most harmonious, the most captivating, and at the same time one of the broadest and most powerful not only in music, but in the whole of art… It goes without saying that, like the painter who establishes a landscape at a precise time of day and in a fixed lighting, Claude Debussy only wanted to express a single moment and a single impression in each of his tableaux. To understand all the appearances of the sea, his work would have had to fill all eternity.\(^{244}\)

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\(^{243}\) *Le Mercure musical* (1st November 1905), 487–489.

This perception relates directly to the Impressionist desire to capture the instant snapshot of nature however she manifested at a given time, and to a major pre-occupation of the movement – that of the series painting – capturing whole series of given moments in time, for which Monet’s varied output was particularly renowned. (Pissarro also produced series of urban paintings of Paris, Rouen, and the busy ports of Dieppe and Le Havre later on in his career). So convinced of his friend’s affinity with artistic colleagues was he that Laloy frequently draws attention to the commonality between their aspirations, and it is this juxtaposition of musical and artistic ideals that I seek to reveal and broaden, since there were synchronous parallels between Debussy and both Monet and Turner.

Whilst recognising the Impressionistic surface of Debussy’s soundscape to La Mer, we comprehend the structures that enable this perception to occur as being centred on the composer’s originality, his empirical techniques such as motivic lines interweaving throughout the whole that created such impressions, and which are related to Peirce’s qualisign and sinsigns – the inherent qualities embedded within a sign helping to determine its semiotic potential. Devices such as pentatonicism and whole-tone scales, often underpinned by pianissimo percussion and tremolando lower strings, along with the actual specific instances of a sign such as Debussy’s repetitive use of the tritone in La Mer – its ‘sharpened’ augmented fourth acting as a referent for the sea’s crashing waves and as an interpretant of eeriness and mystery – enable these feelings to stir emotions within us, whilst many varieties of motive propel the piece along.

Each part of the triptych reflects a single expression of time, comparable to an Impressionist painting in our perception of the esquisses symphoniques. Whereas the Nocturnes may be considered more Pointillist in their colourings, each stimulating an array of different hues in our perceptions, the consummate oneness of each of La Mer’s parts evoke clear pictures in themselves but, I contend, contribute to an overall display of visual and musical cohesion. For example, the cyclic motive shown at m 1 of example 2:1 in the cor anglais and trumpet parts of ‘De l’aube’, and then at m 44 of example 2:2 in the trumpet part (with mutes) alone, in ‘Dialogue du vent et de la mer,’ act to unify the work. By appearing in


246 See Peirce’s definitions of how the qualisign and sinsign work in Chapter I.

247 See Roy Howat DP for a detailed examination of Debussy’s ‘forms,’ in terms of Golden Section and symmetrical proportions based on the Fibonacci series, ch. 1–2, and his motivic analysis of Jeux de vagues at 68–69.

248 This was the subtitle to La Mer, deliberately avoiding the title of ‘Symphony’.
different guises during the first and last movements, with similar notational patterns but differing textures in terms of dynamics and key figurations, the listener hears an alternative but similar hue of fluctuating waves and the ‘call of the deep’ in Peircean terms.

(Example 2:1) Claude Debussy, *La Mer*: ‘De l’aube à midi sur la mer’: 1 : bars 11–18
(Example 2:2) Debussy, La Mer: ‘Dialogue du vent et de la mer’ : bars 30–37

Likewise, the broadening aspect of example 2:3 also calls from the depths (horns and bassoons) in binding the whole work together in a paean to the deep. The power of the piece, as Laloy declaims in his article ‘La nouvelle manière de Claude Debussy’ lies in its ‘new spirit’, its explicitness and self-contained qualities that nevertheless were closely allied to the visual in this mature work. This evolution towards stronger constructions and more vigorous rhythms, are what gives the piece a descriptive power that bring to life the ‘natural fecundity’ and ‘voluptuousness,’ of La Mer since it corresponds with our deep emotions for the sea, for the forces of nature.\textsuperscript{249} The effets pittoresques delineated by Laloy are linked by definitive harmonies that Debussy assigns to different parts of the orchestra, so that the evocative

\textsuperscript{249} Laloy, ‘La nouvelle manière de Claude Debussy’, \textit{La Grande Revue} (10\textsuperscript{th} and 15\textsuperscript{th} February 1908), 530–535. (‘Des formes plus amples, des idées plus précises, des constructions plus solides des rythmes plus vigoureux ; et cela, sans rien perdre de sa finesse ni de sa fraîcheur’).
phrase which we see first at bar 33 (ex. 2:4) appearing in the flute parts of ‘De l’aube à midi sur la mer’ is taken up by the oboe and bassoons at bar 41, creating Laloy’s ‘play of light and water’ that evokes the swell of waves. In this way, feelings stirred by the music stimulate an immediacy of perception that makes us each feel the call of the sea and visualize its motion.

(Example 2:3) Debussy, *La Mer*: ‘De l’aube à midi sur la mer’: bars 132–133

(Example 2:4) Debussy, *La Mer*: ‘De l’aube à midi sur la mer’: bars 33–36

Another commentator, G. Allix, writing for *La Revue musicale S.I.M.* found in *La Mer* a ‘very studied kind of Impressionism’ – ‘certain seascapes of the other Claude who is Monet’.
caress the eyes a little bit as the ears are delighted here’, and Georges Jean-Aubry, a year later in 1909, declared that ‘if one has already compared the music of La Mer so many times to the pictorial Impressionism of Monet, one will remember that this Impressionism owes a great deal to one of the English glories, J.M.W. Turner’, a theme that I shall take up later. After La Mer, though, contemporaries used the Impressionist term to describe Debussy’s work much more frequently in print, perhaps because this ‘symphonic’ work was so different to what had gone before. It was even applied retrospectively to pieces such as the Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire (1890) and Trois Chansons de Bilitis (1898), which Paul de Lestrang described as ‘L’Impressionnisme pur’ in an article he wrote for the Revue musicale de Lyon in 1906. The critic and writer Mauclair, (who had also written a short story entitled Mer belle aux Îles Sanguinaires, the original title of De l’aube à midi sur mer), considered Debussy in painterly terms as well when he noted:

For Monet and Debussy, a colour, a sound, is a feeling. The feeling does not come from the association of sound or colour with a specific idea, a sung or descriptive melody, or facial expression: for them, the feeling is included in the violet or D major.

Mauclair, who knew Debussy through the Mardis of the poet Mallarmé, was held in high esteem by his contemporaries as ‘la meilleure sorte de critique impartiale.’ Most of all Mauclair was particularly good at correlating current movements within the arts, so his words aligning Monet’s and Debussy’s creativity can be taken as being apt in recounting perceptions of the era – the direct feelings experienced by people who were identifying synchronous sensations in both music and painting. The reasons behind these synchronicities, which I now seek to illuminate further, will deepen the scholarship of previous contributors.

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253 ‘Pour M. Monet et pour lui, une couleur, un son sont des sentiments. Le sentiment ne jaillit pas de l’application de ce son ou de cette couleur a une idée distincte, mélodie chantée ou descriptive, expression de visage : pour eux le sentiment est inclus dans le violet ou dans le ré majeur’ : Camille Mauclair, ‘La peinture musicienne et la fusion des arts’, La Revue bleue : Revue politique et littéraire, no. 10 (le 6 septembre 1902), 300. Also see ‘La fin de l’impressionnisme’, La Revue bleue, Jan. 14th 1905, 49 and 300. My trans.
255 Paul Adam, (La Province, 1905), a Parisian novelist, quoted under ‘Opinions’ in G. Jean-Aubry’s Camille Mauclair, biographie critique, suivie d’opinions et d’une bibliographie (Paris : Sansot, 1905), 50–51.
**Monet**

The basis for a new approach to colour, light and shadow was taken up by the young painter Claude Monet in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His earlier paintings, such as *Girls in a garden* (1867) were strictly representational, but painted *en plein air*, an approach that he came to insist upon, and which later Debussy was to exemplify as his ideal for music. Bold effects and colours evoking bright light and particular moments were produced in paintings such as *The Porte d’Amont, Étretat*, (1868–1869), perhaps prompted by the newly fashionable Japanese wood prints and the advent of photography in the 1860s, with its stark contrasts of light and dark that disrupted ideas of what ‘seeing’ actually facilitated in terms of feelings. Monet’s graphic use of colour, almost confronting the viewer in an ‘unprocessed’ visual experience, instantly felt at the deepest level rather than mitigated by the intellect, gave his landscape painting a feeling of ‘forwardness’ that can be compared with Debussy’s purely generative musical effect.

In reconfiguring landscape painting, Monet was open to the kind of experimentation that included a ‘musical’ understanding – his critic and friend, Armand Silvestre, stressing the new dynamic of such a partnership, this comparison due to music being the art that was nearest to the ‘moment’ – nearest to the perceptions of human feelings, its semiotic character being that of *emotional interpretant*, as Peirce would define it, and creator of the instant. Whereas Monet grafted the musical (that is, its ephemeral, flowing qualities) on to the pictorial to intensify the sensation of his landscapes, in a direct corollary Debussy used colour and timbre to make direct *correspondances* between the visual and musical immediacy of his works, thereby intensifying sensations and feelings in a sensuous instant.

It is in pieces such as the beginning of ‘De l’aube à midi sur la mer’ (*La Mer*) that the composer indirectly pays homage to Monet’s paintings, ‘all set down in luminosities and atmospheres, particular to certain skies and certain times of day’ as Nectoux suggests.

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256 There is no proof that Debussy actually composed outdoors like Elgar and Mahler, but he is known to have ‘collected impressions’ and mused on his ideas whilst he was outside. See a letter to Raoul Bardac sent 31st August, 1901, when he remarks: ‘As I see it, one must never be in a hurry to write things down. One must allow the complex play of ideas free rein: how it works is a mystery and we too often interfere with it by being impatient… Csp. 615–616. Trans. Nichols, *DL*, 121–122. Also see letter for 24th February, 1906: ‘Collect impressions. Don’t be in a hurry to write them down…’ Csp. 942, Trans. Nichols, *DL*, 166.


258 *Ibid*, *AE*, 109–115. Musicality was inherent as modern aesthetic practice among his circle. The pictorial-musical relationship was particularly applicable to Monet’s friend Bazille, with whom he often shared a studio when working in Paris, since the latter, whilst an enthusiastic fellow painter, was also a musical melomane, having been brought up by a musically active family.

Debussy’s initial bars 1–5 evoke a pentatonic episode symbolizing the rising sun in the East that eventually comes to its apogée in the movement’s coda, (bars 135–141, *ex. 2:5*) after wave-like surges of obscure tonalities that are neither major nor minor and above which the free use of modes indicate the revolutionary character of the piece. The continuously trilling cymbal undulating against a chordal theme centred on G flat major whole tones reminiscent of bars 33–34, (*ex. 2:4, p. 15*), culminates in a majestic chorale, accompanied by triumphant brass that seems to symbolize the mid-day sun as it finally bursts forth at its highest point in the sky, its sonority all-enveloping.  

The desire to paint *en plein air* led Monet to produce a large number of paintings featuring the sea, gardens and the countryside, evoking the ‘unfinished’ appearance that was characteristic of his work. Early examples such as the *Bassin d’Argenteuil avec un voilier unique (Argenteuil Basin with a single Sailboat)* from 1874, (fig. 2:1), captures the fleeting conditions of light flickering on water that might be compared with Debussy’s own later attempts to capture the musical atmosphere of a similar scene, for example, his ‘En bateau’ from *Petite Suite* (1886–1889), *L’isle joyeuse*, (1904) ‘Reflets dans l’eau’, (*Images I*), composed in 1905, and ‘Voiles’ from *Douze Préludes I* (1910). The three different painted surfaces from *Argenteuil Basin* – water, sky and trees – are also reminiscent of Debussy’s predilection for the percussive Javanese gamelan, and its ability to operate on various lines, that he found so appealing after encountering its music at the 1889 Exposition in Paris. Musical line was to become an increasingly important facet to Debussy’s style, but the diversity of elements that ensured each gamelan was different to any other must have attracted the composer, especially the association of the music with nature, since it was often performed outside or in wall-less buildings.

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260 See DeVoto, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality*, also Trezise, *Debussy, La Mer*, for detailed explications of *La Mer’s* tonal/modal values and analysis of its structures.
(Example 2:5) Debussy, *La Mer*: ‘De l’aube à midi sur la mer’: bars 135–141

The following excerpts demonstrate how Debussy achieves his comparable effects of reflections on water in his piece ‘Voiles’, second of the *Douze Préludes* I, (1910). Debussy is looking behind the veils of music’s mysterious effects to find that which suggests rather than proclaims itself, using the sonorities of his chords as a shimmering vibration that resounds in the air in a similar way to Monet’s luminous dabs of colour that light up *Bassin*.

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261 These were ‘Sails’ according to Alfred Cortot, although Edgar Varèse, Debussy’s friend, maintained that ‘Veils’ alluded to ‘the diaphanous veils of the American dancer, Loie Fuller’, then famous in Paris. It is suggested that Debussy intended the ambiguity. See Howat in *Œuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy*, Série I, vol. 5, (Paris; Durand-Costallat, 1985), xvi.
d’Argenteuil. Depicting light flickering on water, we see in the painting below the three components that Monet used in almost all his earlier paintings – water, sky and trees.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 2:1) Claude Monet: Bassin d’Argenteuil avec un voilier unique (Argenteuil Basin with a single Sailboat), 1874 (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin)

The composer uses the whole-tone scale in a totally innovative way from the first bars, juxtaposing sharps and flats (ex. 2:6) caressingly, and straying far beyond the limitations of the old tonal system that usually formed a base, however remote, for his pieces. He does, however, maintain a very clear structure on top of pedal points (ex.2:7) demonstrating the veracity of G flat Major in the bass line as other sonorities cascade in vertical lines over the top like water refracting in the light, before black-note scalar passages and octatonic chords are used in a burst of speed, ‘En animant,’ perhaps to capture the quality that Debussy sought in its veiled character.
(Example 2:6) Debussy, *Douze Préludes I*: ‘Voiles’ bars 1–2,

(Example 2:7) Debussy, ‘Voiles’, bars 14–17,

After all, despite the interpretation of its title as boats sailing on a hazy day, Debussy maintained that *Voiles* was not a beach postcard. ‘Ce n’est pas une photo de plage!’ he said to his pupil Marguerite Long. Perhaps instead it was an attempt to capture the essence of mystery, that which we don’t quite see but catch a glimpse of, or sense its existence behind the flesh of ‘reality’.

Monet and the Advent of Impressionism

Monet claimed that he titled the painting *Impression soleil levant* of 1872 (Impression, *Sunrise*) in haste for the printing of his exhibition catalogue, and that he used the term due to his loose painting style in the depiction of this subject, but it was also a phrase used by the Barbizon school to describe the effect of a natural scene on a painter, and its effect on the viewer, and had already been employed by Daubigny and Manet to describe their own works. However, by the 1860s, it was being used to describe a painting which relayed such an effect itself, and came to describe the movement as a whole. The style of Monet’s painting encapsulated the start of the Impressionist movement, and in the eight exhibitions that

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263 Marguerite Long, *At the piano with Debussy*, 63.
followed up till 1886, both public and critics were scathing and mystified by the new style, its paintings’ ‘unfinished’ state, their lack of descriptive detail and bright colours.

It is interesting to note that *Impression soleil levant* (fig. 2:2), exhibits the same two elements of sunset and sea as works by Turner, which feel as though they are in a state of flux, capturing the moment in their movement. Building on the paintings he had seen and admired by Turner in London, early ‘Impressionist’ paintings by Claude Monet were distinguished by their broken colours and rapid brushstrokes, as well as their limited shades, very much indicative of his desire to paint what was immediately perceived by the eye. These were aspects that Whistler was also later to draw on (see Chapter VI), particularly his use of a limited palette, synonymous with Debussy’s own use of repetition and patterns of reiterated sounds from different orchestral instruments and ‘pitch classes’ that he favoured, although in Peircean theory music is naturally more accessible to our perceptions because it is further down the chaining process of our consciousness.

Monet’s painting— a landscape of the port at *Le Havre* — was part of the artist’s first independent exhibition in 1874, and was reviewed by the art critic Louis Leroy, who called the exhibition ‘L'Exposition des Impressionnistes,’ a name that was to stick. The atmospheric effect of this painting, its blue haziness merging sky and water into one, in a mist through which a red sun shines on the harbour buildings, captures the constant movement and translucency of the light. The painting which first attracted the title of ‘Impressionism’ is almost entirely made up of sky and water.

Like Turner, Monet was inclined to work at the same place in all weathers, and when he went to Belle-Île-en Mer, Brittany, in the September of 1886, sought to capture the sea visually in all its variable spirits (see figs.2:3–2:5), just as the English artist had done, and showing a confluence of ideas between himself and the English painter. As he wrote in a letter to Gustave Caillebote: ‘I am in a wonderfully wild region, with terrifying rocks and a sea of unbelievable colours’. Monet’s seascapes were most in demand, and from 1880 he chose to set up his easel in the most precarious positions in order to capture the moods of the ocean. Paintings such as *Rough Sea* (1881) and *The Sea at Fécamp* (1881), were painted along the Normandy coast before he was attracted to the wildness of the Côte Sauvage in Brittany.

(Figure 2:2) Monet: *Impression soleil levant (Impression sunrise)*, 1872 (Musée Marmottan Monet, Paris).

(Figure 2:3) Monet, *Tempête au large de la côte de Belle-Île (Storm off the Belle-Ile Coast)*, 1886 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris).
(Fig. 2:4) Monet, *Port Coton (Rocks at Belle-Ile, Brittany)*, 1886 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris).

(Fig. 2:5) Monet, Rocks at Belle-Ile, Port-Domois, 1886 (Cincinnati Art Museum)
Reminiscent of Turner (fig. 2.12), the artist’s brushstrokes become foregrounded and he focuses his attention almost entirely on the sea in its different guises, in many such works painted along the Northern French coast.

The Series Painting
Simon Trezise goes as far as to say that paintings such as this ‘must be accounted forerunners of Dialogue du vent at de la mer’, no doubt because of their equivalent discourse between land and sea, or two opposing forces. However, researchers have not taken these analogies further. I am emphasizing the significance of Monet completing many such pictures during his time spent in Brittany because they form a parallel that Debussy echoed in his use of repetition within his water pieces, particularly La Mer – each section moving on but slightly different to the last, unfurling its diverse colours.

Pieces such as Debussy’s atmospheric Prélude ‘Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest’ also feature this dualism, in mood and technique suggestive of similar tempestuous weather conditions and their effect on the sea. The speed of the notes, their short time values and accented grace notes bring the piece to its climax with loud exploding chords and extreme episodes of multiple dissonances evoking its tumultuous nature. This, and the disposal of a functional tonality encourage the ear to hear a cacophony of sonorities that shift perceptions towards turbulent waves and foaming sea, even though the wind alone is mentioned.

It also becomes clear from Debussy’s writings around this time of the affinity he shared with Monet (and Turner) for the subject matter of water, and just how important the visual stimulus of the sea was to the composer. To his friend André Messager he relates:

“You’re unaware, maybe that I was intended for the noble career of a sailor and have only deviated from that path thanks to the quirks of fate. Even so, I’ve retained a sincere devotion to the sea...” 266

Written from landlocked Bichain, childhood home to his then wife, Lily Texier, this is not to say that Debussy did not spend as much time as possible on the coast. In July 1904 he wrote from his Jersey hotel room to his publisher Durand that ‘The Sea has behaved beautifully to me and shown me all her guises...’ 267 And from Eastbourne a year later as he corrects the proofs to La Mer, he mentions to Durand that he works from ‘A charming, peaceful spot. The

265 Trezise, La Mer : ch. 4, p. 37.
266 ‘Vous ne savez peut-être pas que j’étais promis à la belle carrière de marin, et que seuls les hasards de l’existence m’ont fait bifurquer. Néanmoins, j’ai conservé une passion sincère pour Elle’. Letter to André Messager on 12th September, 1903, Csp. 780. Trans. Nichols, DL, 141.
sea unfurls itself with an utterly British correctness’. Likewise Monet appears to have been driven by similar intense emotions in the 1880s:

For three days now we’ve had a dreadful storm; I’ve never seen such a spectacle… I’m trying to do some quick sketches of this upheaval, because it’s marvellous… You know my passion for the sea… I’m mad about it.

There is a clear desire from both artists to capture the fleeting moment, the barely perceptible nuances of nature that make up much of these water pieces, as well as Monet’s series of ‘Mornings on the Seine’. Exploring the same subject again and again, Monet first sought to capture the transient effects of light and atmosphere before turning to the textures of the paint itself in a bid to ‘harmonize each series as a whole’ – much like Debussy’s use of timbral affects and motivic gestures that he used in water pieces such as La Mer and L’Isle joyeuse.

For example, the exuberant foregrounded layers of paint, in heavier brushstrokes, assume their own importance in being decorative in their own right, a style that finds comparison with the composer’s own predilection for decorative devices such as elongated trills and dotted rhythms, so prevalent in the following example of the first seven bars of the virtuosic L’Isle joyeuse (ex. 2:8), which Debussy was working on at the same time as his triptych.

As Debussy would move increasingly towards this idea of sonorous becoming, which culminated in the continuous development of Jeux, (1913), Monet proceeded towards his own idea of sequential works showing the effects of light and shade over time. From the early 1860s until 1889 the artist worked almost constantly on his paintings of the Seine (see fig. 2:6), reflecting his passion for painting such views in their changing colours and with mirrored reflections. His early morning series became less defined as time went on, so that they appeared more transparent and ‘veiled’, an ephemeral idea that I have mentioned previously in regard to Debussy’s works, and one which he mentioned in his writings.

Although I have concentrated on the water paintings, the unifying atmosphere between Monet and his subject is particularly noticeable in all his series paintings, such as the Meules, (Haystacks), and other diverse subjects as Rouen cathedral, the Houses of Parliament

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271 In 1960, the musicologist Jean Barraqué introduced the new concept of ‘open form’ to describe Debussy’s work after La Mer, which he describes as sonorous becoming. In ‘La Mer de Debussy, ou la naissance des formes ouvertes…’ Analyse musicale 12/3 (June 1988 : text dates from beginning of 1960s).
(England), and The Gare Saint-Lazare. It reveals itself as a hazy ‘oneness’ that washes over their surface, and is, of course, a precursor to his Nymphéas, water lily pictures which he was to concentrate on for the last decade or so of his life.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 2:6) Monet, Banks of the Seine, Vetheuil, 1880, (Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery, England).

(Example 2:8) Debussy, L’Isle joyeuse, 1905 bars 1–7
These varied series of paintings captured transparent impressions of his subjects in an ‘enveloppe’ of interactive coloured light to demonstrate how atmospheric conditions could transform what we perceive visually, even though the subject remained static. He subsumed individual shapes into a soft light that was undefined, capturing ‘this enveloppe of atmosphere unifying the picture with a vaporous luminosity’ and evoking slightly different moods each time.

As a composer, Debussy altered the tonal/modal palette of his pieces to portray different soundscapes and different rhythmical states by his manipulation of time. He was likewise perceived as capturing movement freely, without structure or ‘form,’ in an Impressionist style since his works appeared to be improvisational – such was their freedom from previous music and his wish for ‘open air music that will vibrate in the breeze of Freedom’s mighty wing…’ An examination of Debussy’s water piece ‘Reflets dans l’eau’ reveals recognisable patterns pervading its texture, which evolve into wave-like contours linking their physical properties with those of reflections of light in the water. The title itself emphasises the painterly aspect of the piece – the significance of reflections dans l’eau rather than sur l’eau. Debussy gives us glimpses of musical ideas that he reflected on and composed ‘using new material and following the most recent discoveries in harmonic chemistry… I’m starting to see things clearly again in my imagination.’ Wave patterns and their distorted refractions of light are played out within the confines of Reflets, melodic fragments imbuing the piece with an immense variety of shades that are achieved by the juxtaposition of diatonicism with whole-toned series and short pentatonic passages, via chordal passages that are patterned with cadenza style runs and two recurring motives in multi-layered effects. For instance, the two examples below (figs. 2:9–2:10) show these motives in the lower parts, demonstrating their tonal and modal variation within the piece and evoking very different sonorous effects. The level of surface detail Debussy uses in his pieces and their lack of teleological progression often due to the prevalence of modal/whole-tone/octatonic scales and pentatonic flavouring, lends them a harmonic inactivity that emphasizes the music’s colouristic effects instead.

272 Monet’s reference to the air itself was as a form of ‘enveloppe’.
273 National Gallery of Art: Claude Monet.
274 ‘J’espère que ce sera de la musique en plein ciel et qui frissonnera sous le grand coup d’aile du vent de la Liberté’. Debussy to Georges Hartmann, 16th September 1898, Csp. 419, DL, 100.
275 See Nichols, Debussy: Oxford Studies of Composers (10).
276 ‘J’ai donc résolu d’en composer un autre sur des données Nouvelles et d’après les plus récentes découvertes de la chimie harmonique… je recommence à voir clair dans mes affaires imaginatives…’ Csp, 18th August, 1905, 914, DL 155. Also see Œuvres Complètes xviii.
Monet’s preoccupation with water was also detected by other artists, such as Paul Claudel, who wrote on 8th July, 1927 about his revolutionary circular water-piece *Les Nymphéas*:

Mirrors of water on which drift water lilies at all hours of the day, morning, afternoon, evening and night...Thanks to water, he became the indirect painter of what we cannot see. He addressed himself to that almost invisible and spiritual surface which separates light from its reflection...²⁷⁷

Volume and depth were absent from these *Nymphéas* paintings (see example at fig. 2:7), as the artist sought an organic effect of liquidity. The artist painted his garden at Giverny 250

times between this early rendition and his death in 1926. Here, waterlilies and mirrored reflections become equally important, together with the surface of the water. The looseness of this painting evokes Monet’s attempts to capture transitory effects of light, blurring the surface of the water which alone occupies the whole canvas. The hanging of the Nymphéas paintings in the circular space of L’Orangerie brings about the ‘complete encirclement of the spectator’, an analogy that parallels Debussy’s auditory sense of circularity that listeners hear in his music.

Phenomena such as colours on the surface of water were adopted by Impressionist artists as visual means of representing light as it materialized at any given moment, and appear to correlate with Debussy’s own ethos in his new exploration of luminosity. Debussy was drawn to the medium of water with its fluidity and constant movement, which he could represent so evocatively in his music, composing early pieces such as ‘Le Jet d’eau,’ (Cinq Poèmes de Baudelaire, 1889), in which he seems to have perfectly caught the poem’s rhythm, such is his rhythmic precision in evoking the sounds of running water in the fountain. This particular piece also uses a form where the same musical material, in the same key, and with the same harmonies, recurs in a different light at each refrain, bearing technical resemblance to the Impressionist idea of series painting; this technique was used by Debussy throughout his life, in pieces such as ‘Clair de lune’ and his Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune. His meticulous instructions for each piece, and detailed expression/accent marks on many notes resembles the technical exactitude of the later scientific Impressionists, the Pointillistes – enabling Debussy to produce a piece whereby its seemingly organic nature and watery themes appeared self-propagating (see Chapter III).

Others of Debussy’s works such as ‘Poissons d’or’, (Images II 1907) and ‘Ondine’ (Préludes II, 1913) contain watery themes, as well as Pelléas et Mélisande (opera, 1902, see Chapter VI), which has a strong water component emphasizing psychological aspects of the drama. The dualities of light and darkness/shadows, are also evident, another Impressionist theme and related to the instantaneous nature of our emotions as they perceive mood in a perpetual metamorphosis of ideas. Yet music went even further, Debussy would explain, because it was not a static art, like painting, caught only in the fleeting moment; it conveyed the ever-changing flux of nature in much the same way as Peirce had described the mind’s constant appropriation and interpretation of signs in a ‘chaining’ process. Debussy expresses these thoughts in an article for the Revue musicale S.I.M. in November 1913:

278 Ibid, 69.
…Music is the art that is in fact the closest to Nature… Despite their claim to be true representationalists, the painters and sculptors can only present us with the beauty of the universe in their own free, somewhat fragmentary interpretation… It is the musicians alone who have the privilege of being able to convey all the poetry of night and day, of earth and sky. Only they can recreate Nature’s atmosphere and give rhythm to her heaving breast.  

(Figure 2:7) Monet, *Nympéas (Water Lilies)*, 1906, (Art Institute of Chicago)

I hope to have clarified the position of both Debussy and Monet in their search for immediacy and fluidity; their subtle mixing of colours exhibited the technical interplay of different hues that was to be a feature of later Impressionist trends, as well as the emotional mood of both artist and musician in their quest to mirror the actual reality of what they were seeing and hearing. Monet’s later series of *Thames* paintings from 1900–1901 onwards diverged from the spontaneity of his earlier Impressionist work, since although begun in front of his subject, he spent many long hours reworking them in his studio, often simultaneously

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and sometimes over a period of years, to achieve the effect of ‘instantaneity’ that he desired. This disparity between an instinctual rendering of nature and the reality of its production raises yet another parallel with Debussy, whose pieces sound as though they are carried on the wind of ‘becoming,’ yet appear to have been highly ordered and composed with great precision.280

Turne

On occasion, Debussy was to mention particular artists he favoured, especially Turner, (1775-1851), whom he regarded as the finest exponent of ‘mystery’ in the whole of art, a quality he sought to achieve within his own musical compositions. As early as 1891 the composer mentions his preferences in a letter to his friend Robert Godet, stating:

Brayer281 tells me he had a letter from you saying you were a great admirer of Turner and Rossetti, I’m delighted, and with good reason: I hope these two artists will keep you from seeing the rest!282

The first important French exhibition that featured Turner’s work did not occur until 1894, when it was given at the Sedelmeyer Gallery. Before this time, Debussy could only have known Turner via books and reproductions lent to him by his friend Gabriel Mourey, including a study that the latter had made of the great painter in 1895. A fragment from the diary of Ricardo Viñés, dating from 1903283 records that the pianist had gone to see Debussy about the Estampes (1903):

Once again (he) let me hear his new works for piano… By chance, I said to him that his music reminded me of paintings by Turner, to which he replied that, before composing them, he had in fact spent a great deal of time in the Turner rooms in London.284

It seems that from his earliest stay in London, in July 1902, Debussy went to admire the extraordinary collection of Turners that had been bequeathed to the National Gallery, including Light and Colour (fig.2: 8) and Shade and Darkness, whose abstract titles

280 See Roy Howat’s submission that Debussy’s pieces are composed according to the rules of Golden Section and symmetrical proportions based on the Fibonacci series, to achieve the most harmonious sounds. DP, chs. 1–2.
281 Jules de Brayer was organizer of the Concerts Lamoureux. He lent Debussy a copy of Mussorgsky’s Boris Godunov, at a time when the piece was unknown in France. DL, 30.
284 The British collection of Turners was officially put together in 1856, and consisted of 100 ‘complete’, 180 ‘incomplete’ and 20,000 drawings and sketches. The Tate Gallery opened in 1897, only exhibiting Turner’s works after 1906. The ‘Turner Wing’ opened in 1910.
foreshadowed those of Whistler, another painter whom the composer much admired. Turner’s
colours vibrating in the atmosphere only suggested their subject, the paint becoming
increasingly more important in its own right. In a letter to Jacques Durand, his publisher, in
1908, Debussy goes so far as to rail against the ‘impressionist’ label that had been accorded
the English painter, whose work he had examined in London:

The Images won’t be quite complete by the time you get back, but I hope to play you a
large part of them… I’m trying to write ‘something else’ – realities, in a manner of
speaking – what imbeciles call ‘impressionism,’ a term employed with the utmost
inaccuracy, especially by art critics who use it as a label to stick on Turner, the finest
creator of mystery in the whole of art!285

Substantiating Debussy’s high regard for Turner, two years later, in 1910, Louis Pasteur
Vallery-Radot mentions the colour reproductions of works by Turner and Whistler that he
saw in the composer’s apartment on the Avenue du Bois, which twenty years previously,286
when the composer first expressed his preferences, had not been available. This was
obviously a life-long choice, although at the present time we still do not know which works
the composer actually possessed, since even the recently discovered ‘inventaire après décès’
remains mute on the subject.

Turner’s liberation of light and colour within his paintings seemed to anticipate both
Impressionism and perhaps even abstract art, yet his technical expertise in his handling of
colour, perspective and use of mediums meant that he operated on many levels
simultaneously, much like Debussy’s own freedom of forms and colours that hid a
formidable compositional expertise. In a sense, Turner was a precursor to Impressionism, and
it seems a truism that Debussy used his conception of mystical light and uncertainty of
nebulous forms to develop his own musical ideas, ambiguity of feelings, and reveries awoken
by the landscape. Turner’s landscapes were animated by his decision to paint the particular –
episodes grounded in the reality of a specific moment that predates the Impressionists
concept of a ‘moment in time,’ yet shares their preoccupation with a looser form that
emphasises the vibrations of atmosphere, light and colour that Debussy was also to pursue.
Landscape painting was elevated in its capacity to vie with the intellectual paradigm of
historical pictures, since Turner had combined his art with physiological reactions so that it

285 ‘Les Images ne seront pas absolument terminées à votre retour, mais j’espère vous en jouer une grande
partie… J’essaie de faire ‘autre chose’ et de créer – en quelque sorte – des réalités – ce que les imbéciles
appellent ‘impressionnisme’, terme aussi mal employé que possible, surtout par les critiques d’art, qui n’hésitent
pas à en affubler : Turner, le plus beau créateur de mystère qui soit en art’. Fin mars-début avril 1908, Csp,
286 Debussy, Intro. Lettres de Claude Debussy à sa femme Emma, présentées par Pasteur Vallery-Radot (Paris :
Flammarion, 1957), 35.
effected a personal response, as Debussy was to favour himself. This reciprocal individualised response to nature lies at the heart of my argument, since it detects a commonality of perception for fluidity and vibrational luminosity between Debussy, Monet and Turner in their works of art, that I believe play a greater role than hitherto appreciated.

(Figure 2:8) Joseph Mallord William Turner: *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, 1843 (Tate, London).

Turner’s ability to completely control his tonal system by graduating shadows from the darkest hues to the most luminous, employing relative scales of contrast as he matured, led to a redefinition of the *chiaroscuro* (light/shade) principle, that could be seen as comparable to Debussy’s innovative ‘floating harmonies’. This is particularly noticeable in pieces such as ‘Reflets dans l’eau’, where his multiple lines reveal the qualities of light and shadow that Debussy was able to inject into his chord progressions and chromatic undertones, whilst the *Quasi cadenza* highlights fluidity and its improvisatory nature. Another of Debussy’s pieces,
‘La Cathédrale engloutie’, (echoing the Brittany legend), moves via parallel triads and doubling towards a C major tonic theme that eventually emerges at bar 28, making full use of an organum effect, accompanied by written instructions that evoke a visual image within the mind (Profondément calme; dans une brume doucement sonore; peu à peu sortant de la brume; sonore sans dureté).\footnote{Profondément calm; in a gently resonating mist; little by little emerging from the mist; ringing without harshness.} Several consecutive open parallel fifths introduce the piece, suggesting an obscure atmosphere of sea haze featuring an ascending G major pentatonic collection of chords (D, E, B, D, E), sounding like an organum chant, which then repeats (see ex. 2:11), as the bass changes from a G chord to an F and then an E in turn. This moves the pitch centre to E minor pentatonic as the treble is held on octave Es (bars 5–13), evoking the pealing of church bells (and hinting at the C tonic for the first time at bars 14–15, in the bass chords). These are followed by two alternating passages with differing harmonic poles (E major/C sharp minor and B major/ E flat major tonalities emerging over bars 7–23; see ex. 2:12), a key change at bars 16–18 into B major appearing to suggest a shift in the narrative, the arpeggiated figure in the bass evoking the rolling sea as the cathedral begins to emerge from the mist and waves, before E flat major appears at bar 19, both of these keys employing their pentatonic modes. The C tonic key is therefore blurred by the ambiguities of unorthodox tonal traits that are descriptive as a set of ‘floating’ pitches with stylistic qualities of shimmering light, and the tonic is not reached until relatively late in the piece, these tonal/modal sonorities seeming to suggest depth and light as felt musically by the composer.

(Example 2:11) Debussy, Douze Préludes I: ‘La Cathédrale engloutie’ : bars 1–3
(Example 2:12) Debussy, Douze Préludes I: ‘La Cathédrale engloutie’ : bars 18–21

The serene atmosphere of these pieces became an exercise in reticence that was revealed in the words of George Copeland, Debussy’s pupil, who captures something of the ‘half-tint’ that was Debussy’s desired aim for his music:

Musically, Debussy felt himself to be a kind of auditory ‘sensitive’. He not only heard sounds that no other ear was able to register, but he found a way of expressing things that are not customarily said…

Lockspeiser also equated Debussy’s music with a dream-like state which bound him instinctively to Turner, since they were both concerned with the art of movement, but my investigations take these parallels further. Debussy’s and Turner’s visions for music and painting had a fluidity that they both found instinctively when portraying the elements. With Turner ‘almost everything aspired to the musical state,’ probably because his paintings are evocative, fluid and otherworldly, requiring an imaginative interpretation, an analogy that Debussy naturally tuned into, especially in the harmonies of works such as the first of his Trois Nocturnes in 1898, when we can see that the atmosphere and light of ‘Nuages’ elicits the artistic visions and dreams of Turner’s paintings.

Debussy’s harmonies in the Nocturnes were essentially ‘decorative’, conceived to capture the impressions of the clouds’ slow and melancholy movement across the sky, evoking a limited colouristic palette that chimed with their ponderous motion (see ex. 2:13). Despite the key signature, harmonies are neither D major nor B minor, although B constantly recurs throughout. Bars 11–16 have overlapping E flat and G minor pentatonic scales with falling

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289 Lockspeiser, Music in Painting: ch. 5, 51.
5ths, enhancing the chordal structures of the opening bars; bars 17–20 are based on a pentatonic melody that leads into falling tritones (F sharp–C bar 22), whereas bar 21 builds on the G acoustic scale, exotic combinations based on augmented 4ths and diminished 7ths, all highly unusual sonorities that broke away from the pre-established norms. Bar 21 restores the cor anglais woodwind melody, reminiscent of the opening from Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, but instead of the C–F sharp flute tritone, featuring an inverted C sharp–F (diminished 7th chord of G acoustic scale). From bars 33 and 64 respectively, the harmonies become predominantly whole tone and pentatonic. The divisi strings that feature here at bar 20 and 1 bar after Figure 4 onwards, intensify the strings’ flexibility and expressive scope. These enhanced sonorities, timbres and dissonances were used by the composer to further his musical ideas and rhythmic freedom, but also complemented the subtle colouristic and ‘unfinished’ harmonies that both Turner’s dream-like perspective and the Impressionist painters sought.

(Example 2:13) Debussy: Trois Nocturnes, 1898, ‘Nuages’, bars 11–21
Likewise Monet’s style became looser after he moved to London for several months when he was thirty to escape the Franco-Prussian war, where he also discovered the work of Turner, especially the paintings the artist had bequeathed to the British nation, which were on show in the National Gallery (figs.2:9–2:10). Their loosely evocative style is again paramount, suffusing the whole painting of *Sun Setting Over a Lake* in light…particularly its luminous skies and colours, whilst the cold palette of *Snow Storm: Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth*, with its circular brushstrokes, captures the eye of the storm and the might of Nature. These paintings must have created a heightened sensitivity to such effects in their viewers, although the Impressionists did not want to be judged as copying. Together with Monet’s friend Pissarro, who was also in London, their enthusiasm was transmitted to other artists such as Signac, who was particularly interested in Turner’s application of colour which anticipated Seurat’s discoveries and new ‘scientific’ *Pointilliste* techniques (see Chapter IV).

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 2:9) Joseph Mallord William Turner: *Sun Setting Over a Lake*: c.1840 (London: Tate).

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290 See exhibition notes for the Musée d’Orsay at [www.musee-orsay.fr/...turner-whistler-monet-4219.html](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/...turner-whistler-monet-4219.html)
(Figure 2:10) Turner, *Snow Storm: Steam Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth*, 1842 (London: Tate).

Turner’s paintings captured the dissolution of form and pointed towards expressive abstractions of the future. Debussy’s musical pieces in turn captured the atmospheric stimulus of colours and *rhythmicised time*, 291 whose continual self-perpetuation were to lead to free forms and atonality. Pictorial and ‘musical’ Impressionism appeared to be in alignment to contemporary writers because they both sought to express ‘impressions’ through seemingly nebulous works of art. As early as 1835, Turner’s *Waves Breaking against the Wind* (fig. 2:11), appeared radically unfinished, but this very state was increasingly taken as signifying the artist’s intentions, and by the 1890s its lack of finish seemed to be the essence of modernity to contemporary viewers, demonstrating a shifting of perceptions as artists and composers followed their own paths. With only the semblance of a ‘picture’, Turner’s style

291 ‘Par ailleurs, je me persuade de plus en plus que la Musique n’est pas, par son essence, une chose qui puisse se couler dans une forme rigoureuse et traditionnelle. Elle est de couleurs et de temps rhythmés…’ (Generally speaking, I feel more and more that music, by its very essence, is not something that can flow inside a rigorous, traditional form. It consists of colours and of rhythmicised time…) Debussy to his publisher, Jacques Durand, on 3rd September, 1907, *Csp*, (1872–1918), 1030. Trans. Nichols, *D.L.* 184.
appears deliberately ‘unfinished’ but evoking the mood of the scene completely, as did Monet fifty-one years later (see fig. 3).

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 2:11) Turner, *Waves Breaking against the Wind*, c. 1835, (Tate Britain)

Lerolle

One further source of Impressionist influence should be emphasised, that of Debussy’s painter friend Henry Lerolle, particularly since little has been made of his closeness to the composer to date. The Lerolle home was an important meeting-place not only for other artists but musicians too, paintings of the Lerolle family highlighting their central role in the artistic community that Debussy frequented, ranging from the representational Impressionist work of Renoir, featuring Lerolle’s daughters, to the far more decorative and Symbolist-inspired works by Maurice Denis, a member of the Nabis group, for whom he was patron. The artist also collected the works of contemporaries such as Degas, Fantin-Latour, Whistler, Gauguin and others, which indicate his passion for the Impressionist (and Symbolist) genre, and would have provided inspiration for Debussy.

Lerolle exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1868, 1885 and 1895, and although his most important painting, *The Organ Rehearsal* of 1885 is judged to be ‘Naturalistic’, many others of his paintings were Impressionist in tone, such as *Le Marché Biron (Autumn wooded landscape)*, painted particularly freely in the manner of a sketch. Others, such as *Jardin des Tuileries, le soir*, showing his Impressionistic painting of this garden at night time, (fig. 2:12)
and *L’allée du jardin au Printemps* also demonstrate his penchant for landscape scenes, which won him accolades at the Salon.292

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

**Figure 2:12** Henry Lerolle: *Jardin des Tuileries, le soir, (Tuileries Garden, in the evening)*, around 1885–1890 (Private collection).

Debussy was to develop an important friendship with Lerolle, dedicating the *Proses lyriques* song cycle of 1893 to him ‘d’abord pour me faire plaisir, ensuite pour ne pas sortir d’un cycle d’amitié,’293 (partly because I wanted to, partly so as not to stray outside the *circle of friends*). Further, the import of this friendship and the support it gave him during the composer’s early life is evident because Debussy emphasises it in February 1894, stating that: …At least I have Lerolle with whom I can come clean. You’ll understand if I tell you I like him a lot; and then he shows such a lively sympathy for *Pelléas* that I can’t help but be grateful to him.294

Further letters written to Lerolle from August 1894 to August –September 1895 deal at length with the exigencies of life Debussy felt as he prepared *Pelléas* for completion, where he again reiterates his feelings for the painter, who was fifteen years older than himself and an experienced amateur violinist, revealing that his correspondance was:

292 See Biography, Henry Lerolle, Société les Amis d’Henry Lerolle. www.henrylerolle.org
…Welcome nourishment for my spiritual journey… I think of you as an elder brother whom one is fond of even when he grumbles, because you know he does it out of the kindness of his heart…

Debussy was clearly deeply affected by Lerolle’s empathy for his life as a composer, and it is highly probable that he was also inspired by the artistic company he found at his friend’s house, as well as the collection of paintings that could be viewed there. These included various genres, but contemporary Impressionist works were well-represented and many of Lerolle’s own works followed this loosely evocative style.

**Concluding Remarks**

As an early commentator described, Debussy ‘achieved with chord succession much what the painters achieved when they place colour strokes side by side.’ He explored and extended late nineteenth-century chromaticism, using chords based on the seventh, ninth, eleventh and thirteenth intervals purely for their sound qualities, fusing them with both ancient and exotic musics to broaden the field of tonality. This innovative style retained tonic hegemony but refuted the need for dissonant chords to resolve, and it was this ability to use open-ended chords with chromatic intervals that was the mark of Debussy’s ‘mature style’, using dissonance not as part of the process of tonality’s destruction but to expand its scope. Thus chords could now be employed for their colour properties as well as their harmonic function, and combined with new orchestral colour-timbres, so that they fused with melodic line to enable vertical and horizontal movement, allowing the spontaneous, transient essence of things that facilitated the ‘aquatic fluidity’ of his water pieces. Debussy’s *La Mer* appeared to conceive the Impressionistic constituents of Monet’s paintings despite his exasperation with the term – a loosening of representation, evocation of *le plein air*, and use of new techniques to establish his aesthetic objectives. These resemblances led individuals to perceive similarities between Debussy’s music and Impressionist art since musical signs are processed as feelings, those same feelings that painters such as Monet were trying to capture in their pictures – the immediacy of emotions and the quality of light on their subject, especially on water.

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296 Oscar Thompson, *Debussy Man and Artist*, 21.

So much was observed by Debussy chroniclers in the past, but I hope to have developed this analogy further by directly comparing the processes involved between musician and artist. (That is, the technical broadening of tonality to enable chords to be employed solely for their colour properties, as in the composer’s water pieces, in a direct comparison with Monet’s paintings, such as the seascapes, with their ‘enveloppes’ of coloured lights, and in a general loosening of representation within Debussy’s compositions and Monet’s paintings since they were both functioning at an emotional level that evoked le plein air—or vibrational luminosity and sonority). Operating iconically, a resemblance seemed to form between music and painting that was perceived by both viewers and listeners as a temporal parallel between the two. Beginning the ‘de-materialisation’ process that both artists and musicians were to follow, both Monet and Debussy evoked a sense of continual movement or movement about to happen, as well as effects such as mist and haze with their indeterminate representation and translucent effects that encompassed the mysterious, hidden depths of a dream-like world. These were aspects which hint at Debussy’s ‘veils’ or ‘eyes behind veils’ half closed in the midday sun, and the embodiment of the metaphysical that listeners perceived in his music.

These revolutionary experiments with evolving ‘harmonic chemistry’ enabled the musical line to flow freely in pieces such as La Mer and L’isle joyeuse that encouraged both contemporaries and more recent commentators to remark upon Debussy’s ‘Musical Impressionism’. The fact that he drew inspiration from radical artistic ideas was in itself not surprising, given his predilection for painting, but in turn, this would allow him to infuse his musical ideas with other creative stimuli too.

This study goes further than previous accounts in exploring the precise synchronicities between Turner’s legacy, Monet’s contemporary painting and Debussy’s music, havinganalysed the specific parallels between the two and how they formed equivalences of perception in the human mind. It seems that the composer enjoyed visiting the Louvre with his friend, the writer Pierre Louÿs, and would view the work of contemporary artists at the

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298 See fn. 265.
299 Mallarme’s article ‘The Impressionists and Edouard Manet’ contains the following excerpt: ‘Nothing should be absolutely fixed in order that we may feel that the bright gleam which lights the picture, or the diaphanous shadow which veils it are only seen in passing… palpitating with movement, light, and life.’ Art Monthly Review, 30th September, 1876, in Denvir, B., The Chronicle of Impressionism (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 99.
300 N. 60 herein.
301 Jean-Michel Nectoux, ‘Towards a portrait of Debussy as a connoisseur of painting: Turner, Whistler, Lerolle, Degas’: ‘It was during these years that he also became a regular museumgoer, visiting the Louvre, of course, where, in the company of his friend, the poet Pierre Louÿs, he was stunned by Titian’s Jupiter and Antiope’. Catalogue for exhibition Debussy’s Paris: Art, Music, and Sounds of the City, Trans and ed. Peter Bloom. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts February 3–June 10, 2012, 35.
Musée de Luxembourg, as well as attending the annual salons of the newly-established Société de Beaux-Arts. The art galleries of figures such as Georges Petit and Durand-Ruel also proved a draw, where he could admire Whistler’s *Nocturnes* in the 1890s and Monet’s early series of *Nympheas*, circa 1900, unsurprising in a man who loved images almost as much as music.303

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CHAPTER III
LATER IMPRESSIONISTIC TRENDS

They have managed to produce intense colouring with the help of observation as precise as it is simple. . . . The mixture occurs in the eye, not on the palette. They paint by attenuating, by modifying the local colour of an object through reflections of the strongest adjacent colour. They have, so to speak, restored the virginity of the eye, forgetting conventional colours in order to find, on their own, the right note…

Jean Ajalbert

The significance of Later-Impressionist currents of opinion regarding the importance of optical mixtures of light, which were then translated into colour on the artist’s canvas, was one that was directly aligned with Debussy’s search for illumination and clarity within his music. Therefore, I scrutinize the scientific credentials of these trends, henceforth styled the artistic Divisionist/Pointillist movement, since they form a technical basis for the equivalence of both art and music in the fin de siècle, before moving on to those early precursors of musical ‘colour’, Wagner and Liszt, and their substantial ‘visual’ impact upon the young Debussy’s compositions. An early corollary to this in the art world, in that they perceived these optical mixtures of light as the ultimate in colour mingling, were Seurat and Signac’s paintings in a synthesis of colours which blended different hues in their artworks in a similar fashion to Debussy’s amalgamation of a dual system of sounds, encompassing modal and tonal vibrations. I examine these correspondances in a range of Debussy’s pieces, and also detect analogies between the restrained washes of the painter Whistler and the reticence that Debussy utilised to great effect in his music. Although contemporaries and later scholars have assessed Debussy’s œuvre in terms of its Impressionistic sound, my survey of technical analogies with the Divisionists/Pointillists aims to break new ground in comparative studies. Peircean theory particularly aids the conceptual move from art to music in this chapter because it acts as an intermediary between the two, clarifying how the signifying between the two art forms is occurring on an iconic, indexical or symbolic level, so that comparisons between the two may be drawn (see pages 115, 120 and 127). As an interpretant, I also discern the semiotic potential of auditory and visual signs that operate in the Pointillist

304 ‘Ils ont réussi à produire une coloration intense à l’aide d’une observation aussi précise que simple. . . . Le mélange se produit dans l’œil, pas sur la palette. Ils peignent en atténuant, en modifiant la couleur locale d’un objet à travers des reflets de la couleur adjacente la plus forte. Ils ont, pour ainsi dire, restauré la virginité de l’œil, oubliant les couleurs conventionnelles pour trouver, par eux-mêmes, la bonne note... Critic Jean Ajalbert, “Le Salon des impressionnistes,” La Revue Moderne, June 20, 1886.
paintings I discuss and within pieces of Debussy’s music with which I draw qualitative analogies (qualisigns, sinsigns and legisigns).

The equivalences between later and Néo-Impressionist trends and Debussy’s music can be discerned in a comparison between the technical similarities of his pieces with the Divisionist movement, whose theoretical practices underlined these leanings. Their pictorial technique required the observer to combine colours optically from a suitable distance, rather than seeing a mixture of pigments that had been blended on the palette or mixed directly on to the canvas. This mélange optique or ‘optical mixture’ was achieved by the precise placing of small dots or patches of pure colour on to the canvas which would interact in the viewer’s eye, producing what divisionists believed to be the maximum degree of luminosity that was scientifically possible. This practical application of the colour theory was known as Pointillisme, which developed alongside, focusing on the technique of painting small distinct dots of colour in order to form an image. As a reaction to the naturalistic depiction of light and colour by the Impressionists, Camille Pissarro coined the expression scientific impressionism, as he investigated Pointillist methods, which were adaptable to a more abstract and symbolic content.

Pointillism and Divisionism largely occupied French painters between the years 1883–1905, the main proponents of this method of painting being Georges Seurat (1859–1891) and his friend and follower Paul Signac (1863–1935), whose exuberant works were of unprecedented brightness and colour diversity, followed by Henri-Edmond Cross. In 1883, Seurat began to explore ways to express as much light as possible on canvas, culminating with his masterpiece, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of Grande Jatte, followed a year later with the exhibition of his first major work, Bathing at Asnières. I compare this to Debussy’s search for maximum luminosity within his music, thus also linking him with the techniques of the Pointillist as well as the Impressionist painters, particularly in the Nocturnes, La Mer and the Préludes, which will be compared to relevant artistic works.

Divisionism and Colour Theory

This method of blending colour and light was grounded in the science of contemporary colour theory and the study of optics by French chemists such as Eugène Chevreul, Charles Blanc, Charles Henry, and the American physicist Ogden Rood. By studying their technical treatises, Seurat set about creating scientifically the transitory effects of light – (Pissarro’s

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305 Other associates were Camille and Lucien Pissarro, Albert Dubois-Pillet, Charles Angrand, Maximilien Luce, and Hippolyte Petitjean.
'Scientific Impressionism' and Seurat’s ‘Divisionism’, sometimes referred to as ‘Chromoluminarism’).

Charles Blanc’s early colour wheel (fig.3:1) proved influential in the development of Seurat’s ideas. Light could operate in several different contexts which would vary colour placement and the resulting effects. For example, the main points derived from Henry and Chevreul determined that differences could be affected by the following circumstances:

- Local or overall colour/ the colour the brain perceives an object to be: As the dominant element of the painting, local colour refers to the true colour of subjects, e.g. green grass or blue sky. It is the natural colour of an object unmodified by adding light or shadow.
- Direct sunlight: As appropriate, yellow-orange colours representing the sun’s action would be interspersed with the natural colours to emulate the effect of direct sunlight.
- Shadow: If lighting is only indirect, various other colours, such as blues, reds and purples, can be used to simulate the darkness and shadows.
- Reflected light: An object which is adjacent to another in a painting could cast reflected colours onto it.
- Contrast: To take advantage of Chevreul’s theory of simultaneous contrast, contrasting colours might be placed in close proximity.306

Other deductions that Blanc made, (building on Chevreul’s *Law of Simultaneous Colour Contrast*, 1839, and the theories of the painter Eugène Delacroix), were as follows:

- Mixing colours optically would create more chromatically pure and vibrant colours than the traditional method of mixing them on the palette, thus making them more luminous.
- White light is the union of all colours.
- The three primary colours, added together, would create white light, therefore, a primary plus its complement would also create white light. For example: Yellow + Red = Orange.
  So Blue + (Yellow + Red) = Blue + Orange = white light.
- Colours achieve their maximum intensity next to their complement.
- A colour plus its complement will destroy each other.
  Blanc thus spoke of complements as being either ‘friendly’ or ‘hostile’ to each other. He said that they will either ‘triumphantly sustain or utterly destroy each other.’307
- Adding a complement to a colour softens it rather than ‘soils it’ by adding black. Another way to soften a colour is to place a softening colour next to it.

Charles Blanc’s Colour Wheel, with its ‘certain and invariable principles,’ saw ‘a luminous spectrum composed of six rays differently coloured– violet, blue, green, yellow, orange and red’, ‘simple’ or primary colours being yellow, red and blue, ‘composite’ colours being violet, green and orange, because they can be mixed from the first three. Intermediary shades between them are infinite. Without using black or white, Blanc’s colour circle of chromatic triangles uses these primary and complementary colours to form two interlocking larger triangles, the complementary colour pairs being ‘victorious allies when they appear side by side’ and ‘deadly enemies’ when mixed together, as denoted by the interior lines. These principles were built on by Henry, and adopted as colour theory by the Divisionists and Pointillistes.

This chapter therefore determines that these artistic processes have similar technical parallels in music, examining techniques used by composers, particularly Debussy, to achieve a comparable luminosity in their works. The ‘scientific systemisation’ of this quality was harnessed by the Néo-Impressionistes as a painterly reflection of Charles Henry’s ideal ‘harmonic order’.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 3:1) Charles Blanc’s Colour Wheel from *La Grammaire des Arts du Dessin (The Grammar of Painting and Engraving, 1839).*

310 *Le Cercle Chromatique, Tous le Compléments et Toutes Les Harmonies de Couleurs...*
311 Based on deductions that Blanc made, building on Chevreul’s *Law of Simultaneous Colour Contrast.*
Debussy mentions the word ‘colour’ in many of his letters and articles in relation to music, revealing in 1887, for example, the orchestral part for *Printemps* to his friend Ernest Chausson: ‘The whole thing’s a matter of ensemble and the mingling of the colours; both need a light touch’. Debussy’s comparative exploration of colour theory, particularly the foreground/background elements, can be scrutinized in many of his works, especially in his use of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ chords (chords whose nuances, whether modal or polyphonic, produce an equivalent melody to that emerging from ‘vertical’ chords, thereby combining the two in different ‘layers’), and chords ‘lit from behind’. These effects would be understood by an ‘Interpretant’ as combining a certain *quality* of sound emanating from the differing types of chord (Peirce’s semiotic ‘Qualisign’), with a musical knowledge of the working of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ chords as a necessity to tell the ‘Interpretant’ what is doing the signifying (Peirce’s ‘Legisign’). The sounds might be interpreted as both ‘Iconic’ and ‘Indexical’, arousing particular feelings of the sea in the harp *glissandos* of Debussy’s *La Mer*, for example, or the combination of chords and melody in the mysterious Breton legend of *La Cathédral engloutie* suggestive of the cathedral rising and falling, evoking chords ‘lit from behind’ in a synthesis of sound.

One of Debussy’s favourite painters, the aforementioned Turner, was closely involved with colour theory himself, producing diagrams and delivering lectures on the subject. He owned an English translation of Goethe’s *Theory of Colours*, (published in 1810), and found his ideas of light as seen through the atmosphere fascinating, so much so that he was moved to paint his *Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory) - the Morning after the Deluge - Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, which was exhibited in 1843 (see Chapter II). Depicting Goethe’s theory of light and darkness as seen through a transparent object (atmosphere), Turner was able to differentiate between colour in light and colour in hues (paint), and followed Goethe’s belief that colour possesses an infinite amount of variation, which could be used to express the light and dark of day and night. Turner’s diagram (fig. 3:2) was used symbolically to illustrate the behaviour of colour in light, the upper and lower portions representing the light and dark of day and night. Turner was not only a ‘painter of light’ as judged by modernist thinking, but harnessed broader artistic references in his depiction of visual art. It is a

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312 ‘…La façon particulière dont ils se mélangent à l’orchestre, pour tout dire c’est l’ensemble, le fondu dans les couleurs qui sont, délicats à obtenir’. 7th March 1889, Csp. 70. Trans. Nichols, DL 24.


truisms that the subject of infinite variation as applied to the artist’s colour theory was, of course, to be one of Debussy’s main compositional criteria in his development of a fluid and perpetual style, as he employed the same means in his search for music as an organic, living art.315 This analogy perceives a clear comparison between the technical exactitude of both Turner and Debussy, one that I have discovered through their attitude to colour theory.

‘Musical Precursors’: Wagner and Liszt

Next, I seek to establish that Debussy’s musical forerunners, Wagner and Liszt, also sought links with the other arts, both literary and visual. Wagnerian moves towards ‘endless melody’, thereby connecting operas with visual elements, is an analogy that might be considered commensurate with the divisionist painters’ quest for luminosity, in that sound would be continuous in the manner of unbroken thoughts. It would therefore reflect the cohesiveness of sustained emotion and likewise could be perceived as being taken to the limits of its capabilities in musical terms. Such intentions were conceived as futuristic initially by the German composer, but later came to be defined as ‘nostalgic vision’316 – not least by Debussy himself, who was to regard Wagner as a hindrance to progressive French ideals, viewing him as the ‘sunset’ on Romanticism.317

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 3:2) William Turner, Colour Circle No. 1, Lecture Diagram circa 1822-1828 (Tate Britain)

315 ‘Pourquoi j’ai écrit Pelléas’ (April, 1902), in MC, 61.
317 In his search for a new music, Debussy complained ironically to Eugène Vasnier as early as 1885 from the Villa Médicis that ‘I could always turn to Wagner, but I don’t need to tell you how ridiculous it would be even to try. The only thing of his I would want to copy is the running of one scene into another…’ 19th October, 1885, Csp. 42–43. Trans. Nichols, DL, 13.
The contemporary poet Laforgue was to compare the vibrations of light with those of sound. Furthermore, he makes the connection between colour and melody, tying this in with Wagner’s music, particularly his ‘voice of the forest’:

… In a Monet or a Pissarro… where everything is achieved by a thousand very fine touches dancing in every sense like sequins of colours… More than isolated melody, everything is a symphony which is alive and variable, like the ‘voices of the forest’ of Wagner’s theories in vital competition for the great voice of the forest, operating like the Unconscious, law of the world…

Wagner drew on the visual arts in a myriad of ways in order to inspire the settings of his operatic tableaux and to set the tone and overall effect of his ‘Total Art’. He produced orchestral pieces of great symphonic richness, dealing with evocative themes such as fate, love and death, often within a mystical and mythological setting. Among the most well-known of these is ‘Waldweben’, or Forest Murmurs, from Siegfried, an operatic interlude of profound unruflled beauty and calm, and deeply Impressionistic in its colouring. It is the work to which Laforgue no doubt refers above. The composer wrote both librettos and scores for his works, and created this piece by weaving together various parts from the opera score into an instrumental work that evoked the repetitive murmurings of the forest across the whole orchestra.

The range of Wagner’s musical and dramatic expression brings the forest to life, particularly in the ‘dialogue’ between Siegfried and the Woodbird, conducted between the flutes, clarinets and oboes (see ex.3:1), which form an interwoven texture and contain some of the most evocative and beautiful music of the entire work, the textural nuances of the orchestra bringing the opera to life by emphasising the visual elements on the stage. Wagner tops the woodwind melody with the tuned percussive sound of the glockenspiel to enhance the unified texture of the forest sounds, thus creating a coalescence of sound against an ‘open’ string section murmuring in the background to provide a suggestive accompaniment, the divisi string effects enabling him to achieve a brightened luminosity between the high

See Laforgue, Mélanges posthumes, 135–136.

‘Le Monet… et le Pissarro… ou tout est obtenu par mille touches menues dansantes en tout sens comme des pailles de couleurs… Plus de mélodie isolée, le tout est une symphonie qui est la vie vivante et variant, comme ‘les voix de la forêt’ des théories de Wagner en concurrence vitale pour la grande voix de la forêt, comme l’Inconscient, loi du monde…’ ibid, 137–138. This was very probably a reference to Siegfried’s ‘Forest Murmurs’ (see following page). My trans.

Siegfried was premiered on 16th August 1876 at Bayreuth, as part of Wagner’s Ring Cycle, as a ‘Music Drama’. The music is reminiscent of Chevreul and Blanc’s theory that keeping colours chromatically pure and vibrant by mixing them optically heightens their luminosity, rather than the traditional method of mixing them on the palette.
violas and cello, and withdrawing all the bass lines to achieve the *infinite melody* he is seeking.

Debussy’s early piece, *La Damoiselle élue*, (1887), was to employ a bright *divisi* registration in the strings as well, where high octave doublings were played at *piano* on the violins, sometimes left unsupported by bass instruments, as Wagner had already done with the Woodbird’s melody.321 Examples 3:2 and 3:3 demonstrate this similarity of technical expertise, enabling the orchestration of Debussy’s piece to create this luminosity of texture

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321 The lack of harmonic movement in the *Waldweben* is rather similar in aspect to the composer’s *Prelude* to *Das Rheingold*, which in increasingly elaborate figures portrays the depths and motion of the Rhine over its first 136 bars without any harmonic change.
and pointing up the visual, as Wagner had sought to do. The doubling of the violins and violas at Figure 14 (ex. 3:1) and their lengthened notes shimmer in the background ‘lighting’ up the importance of the Damoiselle’s words *Et pourquoi m’effrairais-je* (And why do I dread), as she yearns to re-join her lover in Heaven and again demonstrate Peirce’s ‘Qualisign’ and ‘Legisign’ as a means of signification when understood through an ‘Interpretant’. Their luminous ‘open’ character exhibits a sound that evokes ideas of a ‘Heavenly host’ that can be understood as both ‘Iconic’ and ‘Indexical’ in resembling our perceived notion of high angelic voices set against the lower human voice displaying fear. The example at Figure 25 (ex. 3:3) continues this theme, the *divisi* violins playing an octave higher in order to signify the ‘Iconic’ voices of angels – *Et les anges venus à notre rencontre chanteront, s’accompagnant de leurs guitares* (And the angels who come to our meeting will sing, accompanied by their guitars), pizzicato violas and bass lines indicating strummed guitars, operating in an ‘indexical’ way.

*(Example 3:2)* Claude Debussy, *La Damoiselle élue*, (1887), Figure 14.

*(Example 3:3)* Debussy, *La Damoiselle élue*, (1887), Figure 25.
This phenomenon of chords ‘lit from behind’ (see fn. 10), is even more pertinent with regard to Wagner’s last completed opera, Parsifal (1882)\textsuperscript{322}, whose orchestration also invoked the visual effects of shimmering light, and Debussy himself saw it at Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889.\textsuperscript{323} The overall colour of Parsifal, giving the piece its unified and atmospheric mood, was perceived by the young French composer as a sublime work of art:

Its music incomparable and bewildering, splendid and strong. Parsifal is one of the loveliest monuments of sound ever raised to the serene glory of music.\textsuperscript{324}

Despite his disparagement of the plot and characters and his later antipathy towards Wagner, it was to be the latter’s most subtle opera, almost timeless in its conception, and more abstract than his other dramas, the music pared down and restrained and its orchestration refined to the extent that Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande has often been seen as a continuation of its rectitude.

The other natural precursor of Debussy’s style was Liszt, a prodigious and virtuosic composer and pianist, whose Années de Pèlerinage, composed between 1867–1877 depicted scenes that he observed during his journeys abroad, and therefore also contained visual counterparts on which Debussy could draw. Renowned for their mercurial moods, these cycles of character pieces ranged from the rippling water effects of Au bord d’une source (première année, La Suisse) to the demonic bravura of Après une lecture de Dante (deuxième année, L’Italie). However, it is the climactic Les Jeux d’eau à la Villa d’Este, completed in 1877 which synthesizes the effects of nature with the divine. Its use of tremolo textures (bars 40–44 onwards) and constant shimmering trills at bars 22–33 for example, (ex. 3:4), glissando chords (bar 132 onwards in the left hand and 144 onwards in the top register of the right) juxtaposed with chords that are often expanded 7\textsuperscript{ths} and 9,\textsuperscript{ths} seem to produce evocations of different colours, light and texture that are reminiscent of the Impressionist movement, and musicologists have considered it as such.\textsuperscript{325}

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\textsuperscript{322} Wagner called Parsifal Ein Bühnenweihfestspiel, ‘A Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage.’

\textsuperscript{323} ‘Je pense à cette couleur orchestrale qui semble éclairée par-derrière et dont il y a de si merveilleux effets dans Parsifal’. (that orchestral colour which seems to be lit from behind, of which there are such wonderful examples of in Parsifal’. Letter to André Caplet in August 1912, Csp, 1540. Trans. Nichols, DL, 261–262.


The ‘beatific’ transcendence of bars 144 onwards reveal arpeggiated runs in the bass together with subtle chord changes, which are again textural rather than developmental, descriptive of their visual subject matter,\textsuperscript{326} just as Debussy was later to employ. Liszt had a deep rapport with Romantic literature of the era and prefaced most of these pieces with quotations from writers such as Schiller or Byron, but here chooses a Biblical example:

...sed aqua, quam ego dabo ei, fiet in eo fons aquae salientis in vitam aeternam (Evang. Sec. Joannem 4, 14)

...But the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life (John 4:14)

In this piece, we can see a resemblance between Liszt’s high register hymnic chords and Debussy’s \textit{Prélude} ‘La Cathédrale engloutie, written in 1910, whose layers of sound move towards a ‘mediaeval organum’ that is suggestive of the cathedral moving into full view through the sea mist (see ex. 3:6) – after a tonal colouring that encompasses major seconds to depict the sounds of ringing bells, two rolling harmonic waves, and horizontal whole tones at bars 5–6, juxtaposed against the tonic C major at bars 14–15. This C tonality, however, only becomes clear at bar 28, after hints of E major at bar 7, (with C sharp minor tonalities), B harmonies at bar 13, and G major at bar 22, blurring the surroundings of the tonic key. By introducing bars such as 42–45 (B flat and A flat –enharmonically A# and G#), and bars 47–50, (A# perhaps indicating G# minor), Debussy extends traditional tonalities even further with textural colour enabling him to produce innovative sonorous nuances to portray the nebulous atmosphere of the piece and suggest its visuality.

\textsuperscript{326} Following a loose episodic pattern, Liszt’s motifs are thematically transformed by recurring melodies, in a similar manner to Wagner’s later use of \textit{leitmotivs}, associated with different subjects, and his allusions to religious themes in this piece, particularly the deep significance of water, can be taken as another resemblance to Wagner’s spiritual archetypes.
The minim chordal theme of *La Cathédrale* maintains an almost static equilibrium over the surface of the water, sustained by a strong bass line. Bells ringing out in bars 40–46 are suggested by C/D seconds resonating against dissonant B flats and A flats in the bass line (flattened 7ths and 6ths), heralding the arrival of far more discordant tonalities set around C sharp minor.

The inspiration for both Liszt and Debussy was the open air and nature, thus it is hardly surprising that bells were a stimulus for Liszt as well, and a parallel may also be drawn with Debussy’s rising cathedral in *La Cathédrale* and the former’s *Les cloches de Genève: Nocturne* (1837–8, rev. 1855), a piece of evening music which began with an impressionistic tolling of bells on three notes in the treble line. Liszt’s piece maintains a feeling of timelessness, where there is no indication of tempo, and in that sense both pieces are evocative of their locations and ‘static’, essentially using chords that are purely textural and colour-driven to illustrate their subjects. A dialogue between low and high bells, interspersed with chords that seem to exist purely for their sound value have been described as an ‘interpolation of vague colour-play’ existing purely for pleasure, as Debussy might have concluded forty years later. Liszt’s early experiments in the musical world seem to be pointing our ears towards a new experimental atonality, his chromatic embellishments of the

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327 Possibly these are replicas of the exact sounds that Liszt heard when he was staying in Geneva.

augmented triad forming a pivotal role in his pieces, leading him inevitably towards atonal formations, aspects which Debussy admired and perhaps built on.  

These examples can be compared in turn to Henry and Chevreul’s experiments with colour, and their summation that if lighting is indirect, other colours such as blues and purples might be used to simulate darkness and shadows as a foil to the colour effects of direct sunlight. The expansion of Debussy’s tonality, in its use of chromaticism, tritones and whole tones as ‘colour’ threw harmonic modalities into light relief in comparative terms, by suggesting darker hues. This also hinted at the ‘hostile’ juxtaposition of Blanc and Henry’s theories of Simultaneous Colour Contrast which drew the conclusion that some complementary colours might be used successfully to enhance one another, whereas others placed alongside would destroy their original, in the same way that expanded tonality could work alongside traditional practices whereas total atonality could not. My perception of such a parallel hints at new comparisons to be made between musical and visual equivalences, which have not been broached in this way previously.

Within examples such as Liszt’s Les Jeux d’eau we can detect a similar flowing pianistic style that Debussy made extensive use of – avoidance of tonic and cadence, thereby prolonging the line, whilst the opening trill of Debussy’s L’isle joyeuse, followed by parallel augmented triads of whole tones (see ex. 3:7, B D# G natural, A C# F natural, G natural B natural D sharp) takes the expansion of tonality several steps further.

(Example 3:7) Claude Debussy, L’Isle joyeuse (1904) bars 1–2

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330 Another obvious link to Liszt’s fountain piece is Ravel’s own Jeux d’eau of 1901. His cascading arpeggios and ‘open’ 4th and 5th intervals in the left hand, his predominantly pentatonic melody and groups of paired ‘raindrops’, akin to ‘friendly’ complementaries helping primary colours to achieve their maximum intensity – all harken back to Liszt’s virtuosic flair and colour-led ‘Divisionist’ tendencies.
331 A direct analogy between Liszt’s left-hand figure at bar 44 also seems to echo in the left hand of Debussy’s bar 7.
Whilst different ‘colours’ shimmering in each register of *L’isle joyeuse* extended the contemporary notion of tonality by widening its previous boundaries, Charles Henry’s *Cercle Chromatique* of 1889 (fig. 3:3) operated in a similar way, since it sought to produce colours that were chromatically pure and vibrant by means of an optical mixing that would make them appear more luminous too. Their juxtaposition incorporated complementary colours, based on a personal reading of Chevreul’s teachings, and thus further extended previous theories of the pre-eminence of primary colours, by aiming to structure them by in a system.\(^{332}\)

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*(Figure 3:3) Charles Henry, *Le Cercle Chromatique, (The Chromatic Circle)*, 1889*

Another musical innovation was the possibility of describing chords that could be read in a multitude of ways and were therefore more akin to a ‘sound occurrence’ than their hitherto theoretical construct. Whether by multiplication or transposition, the proliferating of larger complexes of pitches, or echo-like harmonies and sonorities that floated as after-chords to the main phrases, these chords enabled shifts of colour and lighting to suffuse music, particularly in Debussy’s works, where modal complexities created a multi-sonorous shift of

\(^{332}\) Henry sought, through studies on the reaction times to the presentation of colours, a scientific base for the position of those colours on Chevreul’s circle. His chromatic circle, although presenting a graduation of wavelengths in geometric progression, was nevertheless made with pigments.
impressions.\footnote{See fn 65–66.} Pieces such as ‘Pagodes’ from the \textit{Estampes} (1903) and ‘Voiles’ from the \textit{Preludes I} (1910) demonstrate the ways in which Debussy used \textit{local colour} as atmosphere, the \textit{Estampes} particularly heralding the beginnings of Debussy’s exploration of oriental music and his fusion of complex polyphony with pentatonic scale structures in order to emphasise their eastern roots, although there was naturally an overlap with Western techniques. This use of overall colour as an accented focus for both music and art works can also be traced back to Henry and Chevreul’s colour wheels and the reasoning of their ‘scientific Impressionism,’ linking the two together.

In the \textit{Estampes}, many pentatonic scale structures are included to give an Eastern ‘sound occurrence’, together with a percussive and resonant property to emphasise the oriental tone, these qualities acting together as ‘Qualisign’, ‘Sinsign’ and ‘Legisign’ to evoke feelings of the East. Pentatonicism particularly resembles the Orient to Western ears, acting as both ‘Iconic’ and ‘Symbolic’—since this is a code whose meaning is understood by an ‘Interpretant’s’ exposure to the nineteenth-century traditions of stage melodrama and twentieth-century Hollywood film. Layered lines with an almost meditative sound that is pure ‘soundscape’ integrate within a classic European structure, thereby producing a much freer form. Themes and motives weave in and out over the reverberating bass notes and chords, reminiscent of the three strata of gamelan music and images of pagodas, often employing simple pentatonic melodies over a static background that utilise the Eastern concept of cycles, or music that goes round and round in perpetuity. The mood and percussive sound of the gamelan is furthermore emphasised by the use of pedal points to accentuate the bass ostinatos/gongs, and the five black notes of the piano (apart from the tonic and subdominant).

The initial piece, ‘Pagodes’, might be considered the first point of departure for Debussy’s new style. The composer organised the piece so that structurally it seemed to resemble a Javanese gamelan, an ensemble consisting mainly of percussion and gongs, viewed enthusiastically by Debussy at the 1889 and 1900 Paris Expositions. The instruments’ heterophonic texture, based on layers of sound with a core melodic line (\textit{balungan}), was mainly played on metallophones struck by mallets and a set of hand-played drums (\textit{kendhang}) which registered the beat.\footnote{Gongs of different sizes were also used to mark off circular segments, or cycles, of musical time, called the \textit{colotomic} structure, similar to the meter of a piece.} Debussy employed a key centre, B major, which allowed for a perfect pentatonic scale of C#, D#, F#, G#, A# to be used. In the example at ex. 3:8 the first theme is developed over a static bass B/F# open 5\textsuperscript{th} interval, resonating in the
background like a gong (or drone), whilst the treble part employs the pentatonic scale in the high register of the piano as a simple melody. Added 6th chords placed on the off beats set up a pp rhythmic ostinato whilst the other layers are largely static.

(Figure 3:8) Debussy, Estampes, ‘Pagodes’, 1903, bars 1–9

Utilising Le Cercle Chromatique, it becomes evident that the composer’s use of colours, particularly complementary, sometimes hostile, favoured a highly individual soundscape, in this case the pentatonicism reflecting oriental overtones and exoticism. A favourite device of Debussy’s, the repetitive and ambiguous seconds F#/G# continue in the upper lines throughout bars 1–6, whilst the bass overlaps in bars 5–6 with vertical chords incorporating A/B sonorities alongside tritone D#s as a highlighted colour, I suggest, above other layers of colours. The inclusion of A natural in bar 5 is suggestive of an E major subdominant chord to come in bar 7, but the harmony is further blurred by the open 5th (B–F#) in the bass line. A dominant element of local or overall colours therefore plays whilst being offset by simultaneous contrasts from the pentatonic scale and seconds that actually complement one another when played pianissimo as here, echoing as inner line. Likewise, the octave D#s with attached thirds (bars 3–4) and seconds (bars 5–6) give an inner luminosity to the piece by opening up an inner part, prior to the left hand incorporating a melody of its own to
accompany the treble, but in part contrary motion. These intricacies are repeated throughout ‘Pagodes,’ reflecting the many colours that Debussy was able to use in his compositions, each operating in a chromatically pure and vibrant way that in turn evoked the titles that they had been given, and focussed on textural contrasts to perpetuate a sense of stillness in the piece.

Contrasting colours juxtaposed side-by-side therefore elicited a softened, blurred outline that led to a vibrancy within both painting and music. This effect also shared a mellowing of mood, a fluid haziness or softened ‘blurring’ that allowed the mystery of the scene to exude from the somewhat static evocation on the canvas of paintings, whereas Debussy’s ‘floating’ chords were essentially static in that they do not move towards climaxes and resolutions, but were unified by their modal composition.

**Debussy’s Music: Parallels with Pointillisme and the Néo-Impressionnistes**

Musically, Debussy sought a free and flowing style for his compositions, but it was not perhaps until 1898 that his desires came to fruition with the *Trois Nocturnes*. Seeking an expansion of ‘colours’ that would truly express his feelings, he was able to extend the range of shades to attain a much wider degree of harmonic/melodic luminosity by extending traditional tonal practice, juxtaposing the Romantic predilection for chromaticism with ‘non-functional’ modalities that sounded new and exotic, especially with his use of the whole-tone and octatonic scales. Parallel triads and open fifths were also used to enhance textural chord successions, rather than operating as harmonic progressions.

The third of the *Nocturnes* ‘Sirènes,’ particularly, used the full gamut of Debussyan musical language to achieve rapid colouristic changes, particularly in his use of divisi strings (which were split into two and sometimes four), and the polyphony of female voices which were used without text for their timbral dimension, the ears doing the work of amalgamating these unfamiliar sounds, in parallel to the optical blurring of the eyes in divisionisme. Highly marked with phrasing, dynamics, accent marks and written instructions, Debussy was able to inject every intonation and nuance that he wanted to effect within his pieces, extending this to the voice parts of the sopranos and mezzo-sopranos. His use of the voice as an additional texture and timbre for the piece was highly unusual at the time, but it fitted perfectly with the effect of the sea sirens that he wished to evoke, the luring sound in the background forming an additional dimension to the piece that amplifies its meaning and perception by listeners (see chapter VI).

I suggest that this extension of musical practices in which Debussy sought an augmented vibrancy for his music by using all the means at his disposal, was similar to Seurat and
Signac’s ‘interpenetration’ of colours and tones in their pure state, the desired *optical mixture* being achieved by assigning the task of mixing them to the viewer’s retina. The *Divisionist* artists took this practice much further than the Impressionists, using a mathematical precision that achieved a much greater variety of colours and tones, the tiny brush strokes they used blended optically to produce images of a far greater luminosity. Similarly, Debussy’s new combinations of sounds were perceived by contemporary ears to be revolutionary, so fresh and innovatory did they sound.

When Debussy returned from the Villa Médicis in January 1887, he must have been aware of the new direction being taken by artists in Paris – the painter Seurat, for example, produced a diverse body of work, reflecting the profound concern he felt for different theories of visual perception and modes of being. His meticulous paintings revolutionised technique and spearheaded a new *avant garde* movement that was known as *Néo-Impressionnisme*, (a term adopted by the critic Félix Fénéon in 1886), which would resonate strongly with the next generation of artists and have a profound influence on future investigations into colour. Seurat’s aim was to reach beyond Impressionism and apply the scientific research that had been undertaken in the field of physics, which has been discussed earlier in this chapter, but he also wanted to find ‘something new, an art entirely my own’.

He was fascinated by the idea that colour is controlled by fixed laws that he believed could be taught, seeing them as a parallel to musical ‘rules’, among them the most basic element that two adjacent colours mutually influence one another – the light one becoming lighter and the dark one darker when they are of unequal value. Thus followed two years in which Seurat devoted his study to the detailed contrasts of black and white, achieving gradations and contrasts of each colour (see *fig. 3.4* for example, in which he highlights the tension between the lightness of the landscape against the density of the figure, almost silhouetted in the landscape).

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337 The art critic Félix Fénéon first used the term ‘Néo-Impressionnisme’ to describe the paintings of Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Camille Pissarro, and his son Lucien Pissarro, at the eighth and last Impressionist exhibition in Paris in 1886.
(Figure 3:4) Georges Seurat: Le Chiffonnier (The Ragpicker) 1882-83

These experiments with light and dark contrasts might be compared to Debussy’s later investigations with very limited series of notes, such as in ‘Des Pas sur la neige’ from the Preludes 1 (1910). Example 3:9 demonstrates the four-note motive that is present in the left hand of bar 1 and repeated throughout the next five bars before segueing into the right hand at bar 8 for four bars and then reappearing in bar 17. It is present throughout the piece, making up the first three notes of the D minor scale, forming juxtapositions against modal-sounding contrasts. Initially the motive is harmonized with a straightforward D pedal, the repetitive rhythm to sound like a sad and frozen landscape. The notes in the right-hand sound modal, in bar 5 resonating against a G major chord, and in bar 6 against an E minor 7th – in fact D natural minor (D Aeolian). This line continues to add chordal extensions to the ninth and thirteenth already seen, the melody interrupted at bar 7 by the motive’s reappearance in bar 8, where it is harmonised by two minor seventh chords, C and C#. By the time the composer reaches bar 12, the tonic of the D minor scale appears to have been replaced with G flat, which forms a Lydian mode if it is taken as the tonic, and by the time bar 14 is reached, the ‘melody’ has developed into an excerpt based on the whole tone scale of D minor. Debussy seems to be experimenting with a motive that perpetually recurs, representing the frozen landscape, set against various modal contrasts that change the colours of the scene.
(Example 3:9) Debussy, Préludes I, ‘Des Pas sur la neige’, 1910, bars 1–18

Seurat put into practice the preceding theories of colour in the 1880s just at the time Debussy was developing musically. Following his noir series, in 1883 Seurat began work on Une Baignade à Asnières, (fig. 3:5) one of his greatest paintings, which he later reworked using dots of contrasting colour to create a vibrant, luminous effect, such as the dots of orange and blue that were added to the boy’s hat – colours that served to achieve their maximum intensity when placed next to their complement on Henry’s Cercle Chromatique. Seurat separated out the elements of light, shade, local colour and the interaction of colours in a deeply methodical way interspersing dots of colour ranging from light to deepest shade.
His early death at the age of thirty-two in 1891 might have led to the demise of the new movement, but Signac took up the Divisionist banner, introducing Seurat’s system of colour harmony to Avant-garde critics and writers who would champion it. He published the influential treatise D’Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionnisme in 1899, arguing that Néo-Impressionism was the logical and legitimate successor to Impressionism, and developed his own style to encompass a bold and luxuriant palette in later years.340

Coining the expression ‘Pointillisme’ to describe the application of the paint to canvas, as opposed to the theory of Divisionism, Signac maintained that the separated elements were reconstituted into brilliantly coloured lights. Both Seurat and Signac favoured small, unmixed, precise brush strokes that frequently took the shape of round dots or longer ‘tâches’ (strokes), but not exclusively, and they were not applied uniformly but in several layers of superimposed colours that achieved a density of pigment. By separating colours into separate dots and dashes, proponents of this procedure believed that they captured the maximum amount of luminosity possible scientifically, the colours shimmering as they interacted optically to achieve this. They believed that by using pure contrasting elements and

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340 Sigmund Pilsing: ‘The Impressionist painter juxtaposes touches of colour that amalgamate and are realized on the retina of the eye of the beholder. The Impressionist musician presupposes a similar occurrence with sounds, so that they are received and mixed in the ear of the listener…’ ‘Der Stil der impressionistischen Musik’, Die Musik, XV, (1st October 1922), 43, in ‘L’impressionnisme comme forme de vie: écoutes allemandes de Debussy dans les années 1920’, Martin Kaltenecker, in Debussy: la musique et les arts, 138–139.
disciplined brushstrokes the optimum level of harmony and luminosity could be achieved as described by Henry in his scientific writings. Seurat attended his lectures at the Sorbonne, and adopted his principles equating the direction of lines with sensations of pleasure and pain. Those travelling upwards and from right to left expressed joy (dynamogeny): those travelling downwards and left to right grief (inhibition). The hues of colours corresponded to these – warm colours such as red and yellow and their mixtures were agreeable and stimulating and thus to be found at the top of pictures; cooler ones such as violet, green and blue were inhibitory and therefore occupied lower levels. It seems likely that Debussy’s structural harmonic poles in the Cathédrale engloutie that rises and disappears, and certainly the psychological drama of Pelléas et Mélisande featuring deep water and dungeons, bear some parallels – perhaps even on an intuitive or subconscious level – with Henry’s ideas concerning spatial directions as indicators of pleasure and pain. So we might also perceive his layering of sound – certainly his orchestral pieces such as La Mer and Prélude de L’après midi d’un faune often give the melodic line to the woodwind parts. For example, the meandering solo flute arabesque at Figure 1 of the Prélude de L’après midi (ex. 3:10), is taken up by the oboes, and then the clarinets, interweaving these evocative woodwind parts in the higher registers.

Signac had himself made a significant contribution to Henry’s Education du sens des formes (Education of the Spirit of Forms and Education of the Spirit of Colours), 1890, and designed a poster to illustrate others of his publications. Displaying the application of the Chromatic circle, (fig. 3:3), and representing the head and shoulders of a spectator facing the floodlit stage (fig. 3:6), Signac’s poster was used as a programme illustration for the avant-garde Théâtre-Libre in Paris and was probably one of the Néo-Impressionists’ most significant prints, representing as it does the juxtaposition of complementary colours – for example, the purple of the man’s head being next to the yellow footlights. The sequence of colours flowing through the ‘T’ follows the order of Henry’s Chromatic Circle.

Signac also sought new links with the musical world, becoming a mouthpiece for the ‘musical’ aesthetic that Seurat was developing. The Avant-garde coterie saw a clear


342 In a demonstration of his support, Signac originally used this design to advertise Henry’s book on colour.

343 He saw music as the embodiment of a higher reality, which in turn could only be accessed by that art, and had thus embarked on a series of entertainment paintings featuring musicians, such as La Parade (see Chapter V). Gustave Kahn, ‘Seurat’, L’Art Moderne, April 5th, 1891, 107–110, in Paul Smith, Seurat and the Avant-garde, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 155.
analogy between music and painting, and the relevance of one to the other in modern life. The visionary quality attached to sound synthesized the way forward to a ‘better life’, evoked in Van Gogh’s words of 1888: ‘In the end we shall have had enough of cynicism and scepticism and humbug, and we shall want to live more musically.’

344 L542, III, 55.
(Example 3:10) Debussy, Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune, Poem Stéphane Mallarmé, 1892, Figure 1.
(Figure 3:6) Paul Signac, *Application du Cercle Chromatique de Mr. Charles Henry* (Application of Charles Henry's Chromatic Circle); Théâtre-Libre playbill January 31, 1889 (The Met, New York)

*La Mer* and Signac’s Musical Series Paintings

The nebulous softening techniques of Debussy’s octaves and parallel fourths and fifths aided his fusion of sounds and blurring, which bore equivalence to the optical experiments of the *Pointillistes*, reproducing a perceptible merging of sounds in a similar way to how their optical experiments had acted upon the eyes, when colours amalgamated due to the vibrations of light on the eye. Debussy extended the potential of the piano, allowing it to expand the possibilities for sound, just as he amplified the potential for orchestral instruments such as the flute or oboe to enlarge their range of ‘colours’. The highly organised form of Debussy’s pieces, which appeared spontaneous and improvisatory to the ear but were in fact rigorously constructed, bore some resemblance to Seurat’s new techniques, which also integrated this drive to synthesize the landscape/seascape by systematic means that would heighten peoples’ visual perception.  

Debussy’s process of constantly refining and developing his works in order to attain the musical nuances he sought and his precision and drive towards ‘perfectionism,’ formed a parallel with Seurat’s own working methods, whose completion of a finished painting must have been similarly demanding.

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345 The ‘Phenomena of Vision’, published in 1880 by David Sutter, confirmed to Seurat that by controlling observation he was closer to achieving the exactness or veracity of things. Sutter had concluded that: ‘One must look at nature with the eyes of the mind and not merely with the eyes of the body, like beings without reason… In art everything should be willed’, ‘Les Phénomènes de la vision’, *L’Art*, 1880. See Rewald, *Georges Seurat* (New York, Wittenborn and Company, 1946), 59–60.
As a thematic whole, Debussy’s La Mer can also be compared in terms of its subject matter to Signac’s series of sea paintings. Debussy’s Jeux de vagues, for example, is directly comparable to Signac’s Scherzo and Presto (figs.3:7 and 3:13). The extent of Debussy’s innovative motivic diversity in this movement allows the music to fragment and reform moment-by-moment, so that waves appear to move spontaneously in the manner of a scherzo, akin to the movement in Signac’s paintings, where birds and boats are buffeted by the elements. The elusiveness of the composer’s music provides atmospheric impressions of an improvisatory character, rather similar to the way the artist has built up his effects of light and shadow with small touches of colour.

(Figure 3:7) Paul Signac, Scherzo, Opus 218, 1891, (Private Collection)

Whereas Debussy used technical linking devices such as pentatonic and whole-tone modal language, tritone harmony (see the cor anglais part at ex. 3:11) and chordal textures, as well as harp glissandos at metres 20 and 39 to unite his organic development of themes, Signac’s images cohere around a common colour palette consisting of two complementary sets — shades of yellow and violet, and blue and orange (see close up at fig.3:8). The artist’s colour palette for Calme du soir (fig. 3:11), illuminates the former in their colour role of light and shade, where the graded tonal values of the purples/blues highlight the luminosity of the yellow/ochre hues, accenting the foreground of the work against the haziness and reverie of

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346 Roy Howat refers to these as ‘subtle acts of continuity’, in DP, 64–65.
the evening sailing boats. It is therefore possible to conceive them as comparable in their treatment of colour.

(Figure 3:8) Paul Signac: Detail from Calme du soir (Evening Calm), Concarneau, Opus 220, (Allegro Maestoso), 1891, (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

(Example 3:11) Debussy, La Mer, ‘Jeux de vagues’, 1905, bars 9–13

The overwhelming impression of the first four of Signac’s pieces is that they are static, hazy and dreamlike in their composition and execution. The boats are becalmed, as their titles suggest, their reflections mirrored in a tranquil sea that is momentarily captured by the luminosity of dashes of paint, as the subject becomes increasingly reduced to a design, analogous to Debussy’s decorative ornamentation. The interplay of horizon against the vertical masts and boats of Signac also act as decorative devices, and move towards the
abstract qualities of musicality and Symbolism. The fishing boats act as a motif of reiterating patterns and rhythms in each picture, particularly in their placement along horizontal lines rippling with water, perhaps reminiscent of musical notation, given their titles – perhaps even recalling the leger lines on which Debussy was to affect his sonorous waves. The horizon lines of these paintings are also broadly split equidistantly between sea and sky, akin to Debussy’s *Dialogue du vent et de la mer*, where disparate fragments between wind and sea are interwoven in the heterophonic complexities of the music’s interior like two recurring spots of colour.

![Image Removed for Copyright Reasons]

(Figure 3:9) Paul Signac, *Le Port au coucher du soleil, Saint Tropez (The Port at Sunset, Saint Tropez,)* Opus 236, 1892 (Private collection)

Much of the thematic material for Debussy’s *Dialogue* derives from the first movement, particularly the restoration of the cyclic motif; example 3:12 shows it reappearing in the trumpet part, amplified by tritone harmony, swelling dynamics, and the brass sonorities as a portentous culmination of violent ocean, (reminiscent of Signac’s choppy conditions of sea and blowing sails in *Presto, finale, fig. 3:13*). This ‘melancholy call,’ can be contrasted with the far more melodic idea of Debussy’s that appears at bar 56, its theme more yielding and calmer – *Cédez, très légèrement et retrouvez* (see *ex.3:13*), and akin to the artist’s paintings at figs.3:9–3:12.
(Figure 3:10) Signac, *Calme du matin (Morning Calm), Concarneau, Opus 219, (Larghetto),* 1891
(Private Collection)

(Figure 3:11) Signac, *Calme du soir (Evening Calm), Concarneau, Opus 220, (Allegro Maestoso),* 1891, (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
(Figure 3:12) Signac, *Setting Sun, Sardine Fishing, Opus 221 (Adagio)*, 1891, (Museum of Modern Art, New York)

(Figure 3:13) Signac, *Presto (finale) Opus 222, 1891* (Private Collection)
The two contrasting forces repeatedly transform, fluctuating between a principal idea and a refrain, whose tritone harmony builds towards a cacophonous swell of sound before their synthesis in the finale at 61 onwards. The tranquil calm of a chorale, introduced first as an Interlude in the horns (bars 133–156) (ex. 3:14), and then again at 60 (bars 245–269) just prior to the finale, are also thematically reminiscent of Signac’s two paintings entitled *Calme du matin* (fig.3:10) and *Calme du soir* (fig.3:11), where sea and sky merge in a serenity of light and colour that Debussy perpetuates in his music by his use of sustained chordal passages, the minims and semibreves evoking a sense of homecoming. This subtly allusive language, together with descriptive titles and musical terms naturally lead the listener towards visual comparisons, in an analogy that I perceive as redoubtable.

Further to this, Signac’s beliefs in the vibrational values of colours seems to have been correlated with musical vibrations by the artist, and thus he followed in Seurat’s footsteps by espousing a musical aesthetic for art.\(^{347}\) This led him to adopt his own precepts, numbering his paintings in the same way as musical compositions, (see figs.3:7–3:13), and giving a selection of his seascapes titles such as *Adagio*, *Larghetto*, *Allegro*, *Scherzo and Presto*. The intensity of colours in these paintings, particularly *Le Port au coucher du soleil* (fig. 3:9), painted in the South of France, stimulates the senses as the eye moves from the almost luminous yellow of the horizon to the purple/blue contrasts of the hills and boats, colours intermingling in the water to evoke the serenity of sunset and the heat of the Mediterranean. Set side by side, these contrasting colours increased the luminosity of both, as deduced by Henry, and amplified by Debussy in his tonal/ modal compositions, so there are both

\(^{347}\) See n. 38 herein.
technical and subject corollaries to be made. Signac’s depth of colour over the mountains is particularly significant, since it takes on an almost ethereal glow – its sense of natural wonder reflected fleetingly in the still waters, lending the picture a mystical aura – an aspect that Debussy was only too keen to replicate, especially in his own seascape La Mer. As Gurminder Bhogal reasons when discussing Signac’s perception of ‘melody in colour and rhythm in line’: 

The reason why cross-disciplinary associations such as these make sense, or seem “natural,” is because the connection established between domains to create a metaphor, and the cognitive process through which this conceptual product materialises, has considerable physiological resonance.348

The visuality of colour application in Signac’s paintings become a metaphor for Debussy’s own ‘instrumental colour’ in his combination of extensive timbres or ‘tone colours’349 in works such as his oriental-sounding Pagodes (see pp. 126–128) and in the Dialogue du vent et de la mer (pp 139 and 142), where the contrasting forces of wind and sea highlight both the repose of the chorale and the ‘melancholy call’ of violent ocean. Simon Shaw-Miller’s suggestion that such metaphors operate as synaesthesia, ‘frequently fundamental both to our thinking about the arts and to an artist’s or musician’s own creative process’350 lends credence to this equivalence of ideas, the prevalence of such analogies and ‘sensual mixing’351 being a fundamental component to our way of communicating: ‘Conceptual blending is… a subconscious process that forms the very foundation of creative thinking…’352

One of Debussy’s first compositions, ‘La Damoiselle Élue,’ was performed in 1894 in Brussels within an exhibition of works by Renoir, Gauguin, Sisley, Pissarro, Denis and Signac. Peirce’s ‘semantic snowballing,’ from Debussy’s sensual and intangible music to the visual colour symbols hanging within the same room, must have been music for the eyes as the ears took in the seductive sounds. So too Signac’s ‘musical’ titles are more than mere fashionable ‘decoration’ – they resonate as a metaphor for the changing light and moods of

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his paintings, and for their sense of pace, because of the wind in his vision of these yatchscapes at sea, directly comparable to Debussy’s title for his ‘Trois Esquisses’ in *La Mer*.

(Example 3:14) Debussy, ‘Dialogue du vent et de la mer’, bars 133–144

From 1888 to the early 1890s, Signac’s output was dominated by river and seascapes from which he drew an analogy with music. In his work *D’Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme*, he makes explicit correlations between the two, commenting that:

The painter has played on his keyboard of colours in the same way that a composer handles the diverse instruments to orchestrate a symphony...

He saw artists as composers, pure sounds comparable to pure colours, and an orchestra of different instruments analogous to his ‘keyboard of colours’, a perception that ties together

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354 ‘Le peintre a joué sur son clavier de couleurs de la même manière qu’un compositeur manipule les divers instruments pour orchestrer une symphonie...’ *Ibid.*, 126.
the luminous properties of both painting and music and encourages us to equate the insights of both eye and ear in sensations that accord with Debussy’s *correspondances*.

Signac’s series of paintings from Concarneau, near Pont-Aven on the southern coast of Brittany, were collectively entitled *La Mer: Les barques* (*Concarneau 1891*), and were the culmination of various series of paintings featuring rivers and seas, ranging from the Seine near Les Andelys to Collioure on the Mediterranean. This particular set of five paintings were unique in being given individual musical titles, which the artist hoped would encourage viewers to imagine them as a pictorial version of a symphony, exploring a variety of themes that expressed contrasting feelings or ideas, whilst still maintaining the harmony and unity of the series as a whole.

Debussy’s use of motives operate as both binding and transformative elements throughout *La Mer*, aiding its ‘quality of temporal fluidity’ so that it is perpetually involved in an art of Becoming, what Jankélévitch refers to as the ‘timeless Now’. Various ‘overlapping devices’, such as the plagal cadence that completes *De l’aube* impelling the forward motion into *Jeux de vagues*, the second movement, bring together the whole piece, so that the fragmented kind of *scherzo* form of the latter, encompassing diverse textures and timbres, are knitted into the whole. I believe that Debussy was in effect painting a series of sound pictures in a technical manner similar to Signac’s sea paintings – each depicted moment by moment visually and audibly. These ‘overlapping devices’ enable Debussy’s continuous line to reform (each time slightly differently) and regenerate, for example the dynamic peaks after metre 26 of *Jeux de vagues* building with accumulative momentum towards the finale of metre 38. In turn, the *Dialogue* develops much of the thematic material from the first movement, fluctuating between the dualism of a principal theme and refrain (wind and sea) that finally re-establishes the tonality of the tonic D flat at bar 157 – an eternal sense of luminosity in a firmly stated major key that finally reasserts itself after the sliding tonalities that have prevailed throughout. Signac’s paintings shimmer in the light despite their explicit composition; Debussy’s pieces enable the reharmonising of a pitch/pitches where a chord can be read in more than one way, suffused with colour and lighting. His harmonies float as echoes to the main phrases, proliferating larger complexes of pitches that both evidence

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355 Debussy’s continuum is ‘that which prolongs sounds into the next ones … realizing the fusion of past and present’ which creates ‘the immanence that we call Becoming.’ In Vladimir Jankélévitch, *music and the ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate, 44, 94–95.

356 See Roy Howat, *DP*, who categorises the impelling devices that operate in *Jeux de vagues* leading to climactic culminations that further drive the wave surges forward, so that it ‘breathes in a series of dynamic paragraphs’, 112.
colour/timbral impressions and at the same time obscure the precision of the writing behind them, evoking spontaneity and a nebulous blurring of their metric patterns and modal harmonies so that their radiance shines above everything else.

This aspect is also very much to the fore in the work of the painter Henri-Edmond Cross357 (1856–1910), revealed by Jean-Michel Nectoux at the Debussy exhibition of 2012358 to be both a follower of Seurat and a friend of Signac. He was much influenced artistically by these painters, participating in the break from Impressionism by embracing an intellectual and methodical search for artistic harmony that could be undertaken in the artists’ studios, rather than the search for reality ‘in the moment’ en plein air.

Cross’s affinity to the group also extended to their political philosophy of anarchist leanings and utopianism, and as he spent more time in the company of Signac, Pissarro and others, his style became characteristically Divisionist/Pointilliste, using minute spots of paint to blend colours harmoniously. Cross rose to critical acclaim in his later years, from the 1890s –1910, when he enjoyed several solo exhibitions and commercial success that would have brought him to Debussy’s notice, since the composer was a frequent visitor to art galleries,359 as well as subscribing to artistic publications, such as the luxurious German magazine Pan, which was devoted to the most significant art movements across Europe. Cross was also an intimate of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, so it is possible that musician and artist met at his well-known Mardis.360 Both artist and composer sought new, looser forms of expression, liberating themselves from the imitative, Cross and others (especially Gauguin) seeking a ‘harmony’ in their move towards a synthesis of colours.

It was Cross’s masterpiece, Les Iles d’Hyeres (The Golden Isles) of 1891–2 that cemented his reputation, after he moved to the south of France through ill-health. Travelling south to Saint Clair in the Var region, he painted many radiant watercolours of his semi-tropical garden, his brushstrokes becoming longer with more decorative patterns of mosaic-like marks, often using a restricted palette of complementary colours that softened his colour palette. In Les Iles d’Hyeres (fig. 3:14), he was able to capture the moment when sunlight

357 Born Henri-Edmond-Joseph Delacroix, the artist shortened and anglicized his name in 1881, so that there should be no confusion with the well-known Romantic painter Éugène Delacroix.


359 Debussy’s friend Mme Gérard de Romilly, one of his pupils, noted that ‘Paintings had a great attraction for him. He liked visiting museums and picture exhibitions, and had a predilection for the landscapes by the Scandinavian painter Frits Thaulow and for the paintings of Monet. He was always sorry he hadn’t taken up painting instead of music’. In Nichols, DR, 54. See also ‘Portrait of the artist as Roderick Usher’, Jean-Michel Nectoux, in Debussy Studies, ed. Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ch. 5, 109–110.

seems to merge the landscape in vibrations of shimmering matter. Sand, sea and sky are fused together, becoming three large coloured bands and concentrating purely on the effects of light and colour under the sun, ‘transferring nature into a veritable symphony’.\textsuperscript{361} The Iles d’Or resonates in mood with the composer’s water pieces. Just as Debussy and Signac were aroused by their feelings for water subjects and the sound and visual inspiration of the ocean, Cross found much of his stimulus in the South of France painting the sea.

\*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 3:14) Henri-Edmond Cross: The Iles d’Or (The Iles d’Hyeres, Var), (The Golden Isles), 1891–1892 (Musée d’Orsay)

In this painting, Cross has eliminated all picturesque elements, dispensing with imitative features, just as Debussy sought in his move towards greater abstraction. As Nectoux states:

\textsuperscript{361} Quotation from Francoise Baligand, writing about Cross in the exhibition catalogue: Cross et la Néo-Impressionnisme, Exhibition Musée de la Chartreuse, 3\textsuperscript{rd} October–4\textsuperscript{th} January, 1998–1999. My trans.
The painter seemed to free himself from patterns here. The abstract character of the work is such that it seems possible to believe he is doing the reverse. He creates a spatial uncertainty that resonates with the landscapes of artists such as Turner and Degas, who were very much admired by Debussy…

Using rounded brushstrokes of different sizes, ranging from the dabs in the foreground to the tiny dots on the horizon, the painter altered the perspective of this technique in a way that could perhaps be equated technically with Debussy’s application of modal/whole tone passages in works such as *La Mer*. The first movement of this organic work begins with the melancholy call of a cyclic motif, the cor anglais and trumpets alternating together with ambivalent major/minor tonalities that are purely suggestive rather than developmental, (see *ex.3:15*) emphasizing light on the sea as it rises in the morning sky – made very clear to my mind by the exactitude of Debussy’s title, ‘De l’aube à midi sur la mer’. The ‘call of the east’ that resonates with Debussy’s pentatonicism might also suggest, I believe, the very high horizon line running across the *Iles d’Or* painting, which was a direct reference to the Japanese art of Ukiyo-e prints, which both artist and composer held in great esteem.

(Example 3:15) Debussy, *La Mer*, ‘De l’aube à midi sur la mer’, (‘From Dawn to Noon on the Sea’), 1905. Figure 1.

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362 In *Debussy: la musique et les arts*, 166. My trans.
363 Mark De Voto in *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality*: 145, emphasizes the colouristically brilliant and cohesive nature of *La Mer*: ‘Like his other works, *La Mer* features Debussy’s beloved paired repetition of motives. Semiphrases, even whole phrases without anything in between... Indeed what develops in succession is not really the melody nor even the motives, but the tonality and texture’.
By 1904 Cross had completely adopted the technique of separating his colours to attain a purity of shimmering hues that achieved their intensity through Henry and Chevreul’s theories of *simultaneous contrast* that would harmonise their visual effects, and in 1907 Fénéon, editor of *La Revue Blanche*, (for which Debussy was a music critic), organized a retrospective exhibition with Maurice Denis, another close acquaintance of both, contributing to the preface.

**Debussy’s Images and Préludes**

Technically, there appears to be a direct correlation between theories of *Divisionism/Pointillism* with some of Debussy’s middle to later works, in that the tonal/modal colours he uses often work within a dual system of sounds placed adjacent and later juxtaposed one against the other to create a smudging of tonalities that are neither major nor minor – contrasting or complementary images in fact. His ‘Reflets dans l’eau’, third of the *Images I* series of 1905, reveals two recurring motives that appear throughout the piece, which are tonally related, their appearance side by side mixing the colours of thirds in a Pointillist fashion, because they are placed adjacently in a similar way to the colours these painters used, to affect changes in sonorous perception. This can be seen at example 3:16 and in its relative at bar 24, (*ex. 3:17*), a further example being at bar 57. The A flat, F, E flat in the bass of bars 1–2, (motif A) is repeated throughout much of the piece, acting as Henry’s overall colour in the key of D flat Major, together with his ‘friendly’ complements in the treble, that emulate ‘sunny’ moments, bright and luminous like their painterly equivalents. By contrast, at bar 26 (issuing in motif B), a more melodic rendition of motif A brings in tonalities/modalities that are somewhat ‘hostile’ to their original – a second lower, with the addition of C flats in the treble line suggesting E flat minor harmonies, or potentially A flat minor with F flats in the bass. These seeming refractions of light on water are akin to Henry’s *shadows* – subtle dissonances that resolve into other dissonances, simulating darkness and shadows as a foil to their brighter primaries. Debussy uses these *contrasts* in close proximity as a pattern of light that forms an ABABABA arrangement. Overall, he plays with subtle diatonic sequences mixed with whole-tone harmonies that dominate after bar 47 in ways that suggest the fluid element of water and the play of light upon it, resulting in reflections that

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364 Debussy was closely associated with this Symbolist painter through his friendships with Ernest Chausson and Henri Lerolle.
both visually and aurally produce ripples/sounds moving off at a tangent, their tones being mixed side by side, ‘triumphantly sustaining’ one another, as suggested by Henry and Blanc.


(Figure 3:17) Debussy, *Images I*: ‘Reflets dans l’eau’, bars 25–28

In the *Préludes I*, (1910) the seventh piece, ‘Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’ouest’ (‘What the West wind saw’), produces a Pointillistic effect by superimposing D Major and A flat Major triads and arpeggios against one another so that two complementary ‘colours’ are adjacent, both affecting the sound of their neighbour, as in bars 6–9 below (fig. 3:18). The two pitch classes are set as D/F sharp/A, and C (F sharp to C tritone) and A flat/C/E flat/G flat, (C to G flat tritone), with F sharp/G flat and C compatible on each. Each major triad of ‘friendly’ tones is thus also accompanied by a ‘hostile’ tritone, therefore destabilising the sound. Together with the configuration of other ‘hostile’ sounds (seconds – A/A flat and D/E flat) Debussy conjures up the untamed nature of the piece – which in musical terms ‘triumphantly sustain’ rather than ‘utterly destroying one another’, encompassing both colours and their complements.
Debussy, *Douze Préludes I* ‘Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest’, bars 6–10

Figures 3:18 Debussy, *Douze Préludes I* ‘Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest’, bars 6–10

Fragments of whole-tone scales, pentatonicism and tritones operate in the large-scale dimensions of the piece, set against an overall tonality of F sharp minor. Two separate pentatonic scales – G A C D E and G flat A flat B flat D flat and E flat (white notes and black notes) are set in opposition to each other, the F sharp/G flat axis effectively operating as a tonic since it appears in thirty-six of the seventy-one bars, whilst the middle six notes (from C to B flat) form a whole-tone scale. The prevalence of F sharp (G flat) within the structure of the piece as an overall colour – Henry’s dominant element – and the emphasis on pentatonic scales – or complementaries – recur throughout.

By 1913 when Debussy opened his *Douze Préludes II* with ‘Brouillards’ (‘Mists’), he had evolved a penchant for juxtaposing chords a tritone apart, this time utilizing a C Major/G flat Major tritone (see bar 1, *ex. 3:19*), and also the G/G flat (F sharp) semitone (2\(^{nd}\)) that he had become so fond of using, as a means of unifying these different colours. The tonic C major within a haze of shortened chromatic black notes that whirl around in the same register, produces the feeling of a nebulous atonal mist against the contrast of a tonal background. The centrality of tonic-dominant relationships was thus further undermined by Debussy as he placed them in opposition to dissonant modalities or disguised them ‘under the surface’ in a ‘friendly’/‘hostile’ ambivalence of colours. He also brings to fruition the earlier fragments of bitonal harmony which he had used only briefly in previous preludes. The opening bar of ‘Brouillards’, in which the left hand plays on the white keys using parallel C Major triads, is accompanied by the black keys of G flat Major in the right hand, displaying a clearly apparent bitonality that is aurally blurred and visually reminiscent of Debussy’s subject matter. This more complex use of juxtapositions and blocks of colour-led sonorities seems to translate Henry’s concept of overall colouring into a veritable musical equivalence. These innovatory modalities/tonalities have not been compared with their colour equivalents before,
but I have discerned direct correlations between the two that link both musical and artistic worlds. Technically there is a clear correspondence, demonstrating the closeness of visual and auditory sensations in our perceptions.

(Figure 3:19) Debussy, *Douze Préludes II*, ‘Brouillards’, bars 1–3

*The Nocturnes and Préludes: Other Artistic Parallels*

Debussy’s links to pictorial imagery also drew many correlations with the practice of the American painter, James McNeill Whistler, who had spent his early years living a bohemian lifestyle in Paris and associating with other French modernists such as Manet and Henri Fantin-Latour. Their technical parallels are evident and hitherto undiscovered, yet they are equally as apparent as Impressionist/Post-Impressionist examples that I have demonstrated, driven by the composer’s and artists’ desire for individual expression.

Whistler was at the heart of the *Avant garde* movement, imbibing Baudelaire’s thoughts on ‘modern’ art whilst in Paris during the 1860s and 1870s, and also becoming increasingly concerned with the musical *correspondances* between painting and music. He began to retitle many of his earlier works using musical terms such as *Nocturne*, *Symphony*, *Harmony*, *Study* or *Arrangement* to emphasise their tonal qualities above all else, and this aided the perception of a link between art and music, as painters appropriated musical terms and vice versa. Understanding of French visual art was greatly enhanced by these ideas, and later extended by Whistler’s ‘Ten O’clock’ lecture of February 1885, which also made this association:

> Nature contains the elements of colour and form of all pictures – as the keyboard contains the notes of all music – but the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the result may be beautiful – as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos, glorious harmony.\(^{365}\)

\(^{365}\) See ‘Mr Whistler’s Ten O’Clock’, Public lecture, Prince’s Hall, Piccadilly, 20 February 1885, in *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler*, (University of Glasgow) in
Whistler extolled the beauty of ‘art for art’s sake’, the prevalent mood of his work retaining spontaneity and fluidity like the Impressionists. In his vision of art for its own ends, we see an alignment with Debussy’s credo that music is purely for ‘pleasure’, for the enjoyment of its listeners. During the 1880s–90s, the artist became a leading figure of café society, renowned for his acerbic wit, and frequenting the Mardi gatherings of Mallarmé, who had translated his Ten O’Clock lecture into French.

Debussy had met the older Whistler at this Tuesday Salon, which he had been attending for at least two years, according to François Lesure, and found himself to be deeply impressed by the artist’s Nocturnes. (It was also due to this experience that the composer is said to have chosen the names for his own orchestral Nocturnes – ‘Nuages’, ‘Fêtes’ and ‘Sirènes’). By using musical analogies to name his paintings – Symphony in White, no. 3 (1865–67), Symphony in Blue and Pink (c. 1868), Harmony in Blue and Silver: Trouville (1865), Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the painter’s Mother (1870) and the Nocturnes from the 1870s, Whistler had recognised that music could not of its own volition possess correspondences with the external world, and thus set about casting the link between word and image into doubt, in much the same way that Debussy had decried the imitative programmatic music of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony. The ‘visible specificity’ of Whistler’s subjects was intentionally subordinated to his subtle individual aesthetic treatment as he evolved a technique that used a very liquid ‘sauce’ that was stroked on to the canvas quickly, rather reminiscent of Japanese calligraphy and ideally suited to the effect he wanted to produce. Applying the paint thinly, he produced an ethereal and unfinished appearance to the canvas ‘through an emphasis on a single overriding tonality, unifying colour, and a palette entirely the invention of the artist,’ words which evoke aspects of the same innovatory character in the composer. Whistler’s paintings were elegant and subtle, redolent of Japanese design yet highly individual, and their synthesis of line and colour enhance their

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366 ‘L’art pour l’art’ was a phrase credited to the French novelist and critic Théophile Gautier, but other writers such as Victor Cousin and Benjamin Constant, as well as Debussy’s esteemed Edgar Allan Poe, had also used the idiom to affirm their belief that art was intrinsically valuable as art.


368 Leon Botstein, ‘Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy’s Break with Tradition,’ Debussy and His World, ed. Jane Fulcher, 156.
expressiveness, their ‘dreamlike vaporous atmospheres’\textsuperscript{369} helping to create the sense of mystère that both Whistler and indeed Debussy sought.

Indeed, it is manifestly true that both artist and composer pursued a similar raison d’etre as far as their works of art were concerned. The predominant colours of these landscape paintings provide compelling studies of unifying colour washes that perceptually include the figures as a component of the landscape – part of the overall scene – rather than their being situated as separate entities, as can be seen in Symphony in Blue and Pink (fig. 3:15). As the subject matter dissolved into the purely decorative, the subtle tonal harmonies replicated the more abstract and ‘reticent’ nature of Debussy’s music, where no single event dominated, so that both music and painting is in effect reduced to the function of pattern (see Chapter VI).

As one of the most sensitive interpreters of the fashion for the arts of the Far East which spread through Europe from the 1860s, Variations in Violet and Green (fig. 3:16), marks the pinnacle of Whistler’s ‘Japanese period’. His painting is devoted entirely to the power of evocation rather than to description, its fluid treatment and subtle tones as well as its vertical format producing a new style of landscape paintings that influenced the development of Impressionism too, and its exaltation of atmospheric effects.\textsuperscript{370}

Debussy’s own predilection for applying individualist modal washes such as those in ‘Le vent dans la plaine’, third of Préludes I, can be compared with Whistler’s limited tonal contrast and emphasis on abstract patterns. Certainly, Whistler emphasized the fact that his Symphony in White, No. III (1865–1867) was purely an exercise in colour, just as Debussy was to articulate about his compositional Trois Nocturnes. Looking at the modal sweep in the composer’s ‘Le vent dans la plaine,’ its six flat key signature would appear to indicate either a G flat major or E flat minor tonic, but in fact the tonality is focussed around a B flat/C flat ostinato, a Phrygian device. It features so prominently in the first and last part of the Prélude that it operates as a functional tonic, vibrating in the air at the end of the piece as ‘laissez vibrer’ – an overall ‘wash’ so to speak. A contrast to this is the section at bars 9–11 (ex.


\textsuperscript{370} William Rothenstein, a young student arriving in Paris in 1889, captured the essence of the Post-Impressionist œuvre when he proclaimed: ‘The Japanese print cut across the sound French tradition of la bonne peintre, away from the luminous and nacreous handling of Chardin and Watteau. Most of us were seduced by this novelty, which incidentally, led us away from the pursuit of form. We thought flat pictures more ‘artistic’ than solidly painted ones’. W Rothenstein, Men and Memories, 1931, vol. 1, 69, in Fin de Siècle: The Illustrators of the Nineties, Simon Houfe, (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1992), 4.
3:20), where Debussy interjects a modal sweep of chords centred on the Doric E flat, the upper melodic line describing a semi-diminished C chord – C, E flat, G flat, B flat.

(Figure 3:15) James McNeill Whistler: *Symphony in Blue and Pink*, 1868 (Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, USA)

(Figure 3:16) Whistler: *Variations en violet et vert (Variations in violet and green)*, 1871 (Musée d'Orsay, Paris)
Although some areas of the Prélude could be considered as rather ambiguous tonally, the emphasis on the B flat at its beginning and end as an overall wash of colour bring the piece together sufficiently to enable a variety of modal, tritonal and other sonorities to interact over its surface, in a similar fashion to Whistler’s vivid variety of colours, such as the blues and pinks that emanate from his Symphony in Blue and Pink. All surface details are subsumed under the overwhelming colour palette that draws the figures together in a luminous landscape of oneness, as they appear to float in the atmosphere.

Whistler did not do series paintings, but like Signac he did use musical titles in order to evoke a time of the day/night and was very aware of the lighting and mood that he wanted to suggest in his paintings. This can be seen in figure 3:17, where he makes the merest suggestion of figures, concentrating his focus on the night sky and the explosive colour of fireworks in a painting entitled Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket. Detaching normative linguistic-based ideas from his paintings allowed Whistler to think in terms of colour and tone and musical forms, aspects which Debussy was well aware of when describing his plans for his own musical Nocturnes to Éugène Ysaÿe in 1894:

…It’s an experiment, in fact, in finding the different combinations possible inside a single colour, as a painter might make a study of grey, for example.

These are some of the most detailed expositions of Debussy’s ideas on the concept of colour in music and its use decoratively, and he is obviously referring to Whistler’s paintings and ideas here, especially the Variations en violet et vert, whose lustrous colour washes contain mere suggestions of boats and figures. Debussy’s thoughts were filtered through an imaginative, dream-like perception that rendered his thoughts into visionary pictures. These

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371 As a violinist and composer, the Belgian Ysaÿe was known to Debussy through the latter’s friendships with his sponsor Chausson and the artist Lerolle.

372 ‘C’est en somme une recherche dans les divers arrangements que peut donner une seule couleur comme par exemple ce que serait en peinture une étude dans les Gris’: Debussy, 22nd September, 1894, Csp. 222. Trans. Nichols DL, 75.
revelations of his feelings mean that each piece evolved by itself, ‘So each work by M. Debussy springs a new surprise on us… In fact, M. Debussy is unclassifiable.’

Paul Dukas’ review of the first performance of ‘Nuages’ and ‘Fêtes’ in the *Revue hebdomadaire* in February 1901 highlights their ‘expressive essence’, in particular their visual or ‘decorative’ impressions, as Debussy referred to them. In a sense each piece alludes to its subject in such an expressive way that we are beguiled by its suggestiveness. Intimations of light, colour and merging atmospheres bring to mind aspects of both Whistler and the Impressionists. Facets such as ‘moonlight’, which had been Whistler’s original titles for his nocturnal paintings, and ‘luminous dust’ surely induce thoughts of the artist’s 1874 work as well, the aforementioned *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (fig. 3:17), which seems to elicit both subject and technique of the ‘vibrating atmosphere of Debussy’s ‘Fêtes’, with ‘sudden flashes of light’.

Both artist and musician were affected by eastern decorative styles, particularly the appearance of Japanese woodcuts within the European market once trading routes were opened up in the 1860s, and Debussy was impressed by the Javanese gamelan that he viewed at the Great Exhibitions of 1899 and 1901. The patina of pentatonicism scattered throughout ‘De l’aube’, for example, reflecting the rising of the sun in the east with its exotic ‘otherness’ and oriental overtones, builds the sense of mystery that Debussy sought to convey between soundscape and its imaginative correspondance with the sea.

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374 Dukas reported: ‘In the first of these *Nocturnes*, the ‘décor’ consists of unfurling clouds on an unchanging sky, their slow progress achieving “in anguished grey tones lightly tinged with white” … In the second part, *Fêtes*, we encounter a means of transposition which most resembles the play of light through sound…’ *ibid*, 529–533. Quoted in Nigel Simeone, ‘Debussy and expression’, in CCD, 105–106. Trans. Simeone.
(Figure 3:17) Whistler: *Nocturne en noir et or: La fusée tombante* (Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket), 1874 (Detroit Institute of Arts)

*Concluding Remarks*

Debussy’s technical expertise in using complex modal harmonies as a contrast to tonality, in order to create soundscapes that relied purely on individual ‘colours’ for their evocation, are directly analogous to the science of *Divisionisme* and its use by *Pointilliste* painters to achieve optical realism in their paintings. Both music and art sought a luminosity that could best be achieved by the use of local colour, the warmth and coolness of light and shadow, and contrasting hues and highlights that would encourage the eyes and ears to perceptually mix
‘colours’ in ways that would expand the ability to see and hear in increasingly diverse ways. I have concentrated on the convergence between the innovations of Seurat and Signac, as well as Whistler and others, which I suggest saw an equivalence in both subject matter, especially water, and technique, that aligned these artists with Debussy’s own perceptions for a more modern, flexible music that followed natural rhythms. Divisionism produced highly-developed paintings that took many hours to complete, just as Debussy’s compositions were highly-organised to produce precisely the effects that he desired. This precision was in Debussy’s case an act of concealment that masked the process of his compositional practice, leading commentators to hear an ‘Impressionistic’ sound which they tried to equate with that earlier movement, but which in fact bore far more in common with the complexities of later Divisionistes/Pointillistes.
CHAPTER IV

THE ENTERTAINMENT WORLD AND DEBUSSY

Montmartre, c’est la cime de Paris. C’est un point de vue hautain, à mi-chemin entre les hommes et Dieu… La Butte est à Dieu et au Diable.375

Louis Morin, auteur et illustrateur, 1908.

Placing Debussy in his social and cultural context is necessary in order to determine his musical reaction to his surroundings in Paris during the fin de siècle, when his specifically ‘entertainment’ pieces were entirely congruent with the work of his contemporaries in the art world. This is an area that has required comprehensive research because so little is known of Debussy’s life among the nightclubs and circus community, yet they were essential components, centring on his friendships with the clowns Chocolat and Foottit, and the importance of both the circus and popular cakewalk dance to his music. A rich seam of background material emerges with many visual examples not previously linked directly with the composer’s body of work, suggesting a far more eclectic range of influences than has been considered before. Debussy’s circus and minstrelsy pieces are examined in detail.

I deliberate on the innovations of the late nineteenth-century, the role of Montmartre as a cultural capital and members of the artistic community such as Adolphe Willette and Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen who directly affected Debussy in the humoreuse/pathétique style of his compositions, referencing the numerous visual associations he encountered and used within his œuvre, such as the character of the Pierrot— a substantial addition to the research setting that surrounds the composer. I draw together the many strands of evidence for this contention, revealing technical parallels that also existed with the work of artists such as Jean-Louis Forain, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and the Pointilliste painters Seurat and Signac, and the interdisciplinary crossover in subject matter between music and painting. There is a far greater correlation of ideas and work than was previously supposed.

Paris became the apogée of entertainment in Europe during the 1880s–1890s, ranging from vaudeville and music-hall to circus and opera. Debussy’s penchant for minstrelsy, the ‘cake-

walk’ and the music-hall act show the composer’s light-hearted and perhaps satirical side and his thorough immersion in the diversions of city life.

Such experiences aligned him with the artist Toulouse-Lautrec and composer Erik Satie, and additionally led him towards modernistic cinematic photography. An examination of Debussy’s favourite night-time haunts reveals further correlations between his music and the mass culture of the Parisian public, dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure in what became known as Paris nouveau. It brought with it a whole new stage as far as performance was concerned – one that Debussy relished and in which he participated to the fullest. Innovations such as the theatre-phone, electric lights, trams, flush toilets, improved water supply, the wireless telegraph, line telephones, train lines and motor vehicles all helped to contribute to a burgeoning Parisian ‘night life’ bringing the public into the city for the diverse entertainments available there, in the nightclubs, cafés and restaurants. The Expositions of 1889 and 1900 particularly brought in thousands to the huge street fairs and exhibitions displaying aspects of contemporary civilization from all over the world. Edmond Deschaumes was to discern that ‘Paris is the real… and permanent exposition of all of France’ – it defined the country’s character. Gustave Eiffel’s tower, the ‘symphony in iron,’ became a symbol of the new spirit in France, celebrating science and a secular-based society, and in 1900 at the Exposition Universelle the new metro was showcased, allowing easy access to a Paris that was emblazoned as une ville lumière (The City of Light.)

Speaking about the second half of the nineteenth century, Vanessa R. Schwartz advances the theory that a plethora of cultural forms – including ‘boulevard culture, the mass press, public visits to the Paris Morgue, wax museums, panoramas and dioramas, and film’ were in effect the current events of Parisian life – actualités – that made its urban dwellers a ‘society of spectators’, their reality generated by an amalgamation of word and image that made them not only more literate but more visual too. This modernisation of Paris (foreseen philosophically by Baudelaire and changed into a commercial capital by the architectural designs of Baron Georges Haussmann) transformed the capital into the ‘quintessentially

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376 Cassell’s guidebook for the year 1884 confirmed contemporary expectations of what both visitors and natives might suppose they would experience: ‘No people in the world are so fond of amusements – or distractions, as they term them – as Parisians. Morning, noon, and night, summer and winter, there is always something to be seen and a large portion of the population seems absorbed in the pursuit of pleasure’, Illustrated Guide to Paris (London: Cassell, 1884), 111.
378 Edmond Deschaumes, Pour bien voir Paris (Paris: Maurice Dreyfous, 1889), 84.
380 Schwartz, 2–32
modern city – where cultural phenomena or ‘spectacular realities’ created a common experience that helped in the formation of a new metropolitan culture.

Urban spectacle encompassed every aspect of Parisian life, from the visuality of ‘modern boulevard culture’ and the \textit{flânerie}\textsuperscript{381} of the contemporary bourgeois male, to the use of sensationalism within the new mass press which reflected everyday life such as the opening of the fantastical wax museum, the Musée Grévin, in 1882, as the equivalent of free \textit{théâtre} for the masses. The \textit{grands boulevards} which had featured popular theatre such as marionettes, acrobats, menageries and wax cabinets displaying all manner of articles on their widened thoroughfares since the latter part of the eighteenth century, now found themselves in close proximity to the recently built train stations bringing visitors to what they perceived as the centre of the city – this ‘feast for the eyes’ that ‘the real Parisian spectacle is where we found it; in the street’.\textsuperscript{382}

\textit{Cafes, Cabarets and Music Halls}

This plethora of visual experience naturally attracted the full gamut of audiences and spectators, drawn by the transience of the ever-changing crowd and glitzy entertainment that was on offer. Indeed, Debussy declared himself so eager to leave Rome, (where he lived at the Villa Médicis after winning the Prix de Rome), that in September 1886 he complained to his friend Émile Baron that it was Paris which occupied his thoughts: ‘I've had enough of music and its eternal landscape, I want to see the Manet and listen to Offenbach!’\textsuperscript{383} In 1887 his return to Paris was more or less assured, where he was to partake fully in the delights to be found there.

Thus Paris emerged as the multi-sensory entertainment capital of the world during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Music, comedy, song, dance and drama flourished at a relatively modest cost in the cafés, cabarets and music halls, nightclubs and restaurants, usually allowing audience participation in the refrains of popular \textit{chansons} and the operettas of Offenbach and Hervé. Café-concerts, therefore, were a boisterous affair with large audiences who adopted performers as their own. Vaudervillians such as Madame Judic and Théo set the scene in the 1870s as popular entertainers with a flair for self-promotion – their


\textsuperscript{382} Georges Montorgeuil, \textit{La vie des boulevards} (Paris : Libraires Imprimeries réunies, 1896), 111 and 141.

\textsuperscript{383} (J'en ai assez de la musique, de ce même et éternel paysage, je veux voir du Manet ! et entendre de l’Offenbach !) \textit{Csp.} September 1886, 50–51. My trans.
charisma surpassing that of the more polished artists who appeared at the Opéra or Opéra-Comique, the former opening in 1875 and able to contain two thousand spectators.

In turn, the cabarets were a more intimate setting for artists and writers to meet, sometimes participating in semi-improvisational material and chansons that were more ambitious in their range, particularly those of a political and satirical nature. This venue therefore attracted more avant-garde patrons, who were eager to participate in topical events of the time. The ‘Hydropathes’, (a group of poets and writers who first met in cafés on the Left Bank)\(^{384}\) with which Charles Henry was connected, was one of the early cabarets where poets and writers met to perform to each other, and it was from this foundation that Rudolphe Salis, an amateur poet and painter with a flair both for business and the decorative arts, founded the Chat Noir in 1881.

Initially reserved for friends, composers, writers and painters performing for each other, the Chat Noir soon increased in popularity, drawing upon a much larger clientele of upper-class members who enjoyed the political commentary and satirical insults they might receive there.\(^{385}\) A year later, Salis launched a magazine of the same name, partially to promote the attractions of his cabaret. Graphic artists such as Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen and Adolphe Willette were hired for this purpose, and helped advance the reputation of this establishment, which enjoyed unrivalled popularity until about 1897. An urban ethos, particularly in the Montmartre district, was suffused with ironic humour, liberalism and anarchist ideals, ‘cabarets artistiques’ such as the Chat Noir fomenting black humour to deal with the injustices and degradations of fin de siècle life among the populous peoples, yet affirming their autonomy and creativity. I hope to establish that Debussy’s relationship with both of these artists (see below) demonstrates his close ties with liberal ideas and the political satire that was a part of this association.

At the same time, the development of pantomime buffoonery, as depicted by the clowns, grew in popularity because theirs was a wordless comedy, encompassing a humour that propagated both violence and vulnerability. They were living a style of life, an ‘alternative society where creativity would be rewarded and eccentricity tolerated, a high-spirited realm where art rather than lucre determined status and social relations’,\(^{386}\) Ironic humour could

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386 R. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 94.
cross the boundaries of poverty and be used to affirm and transform Montmartre, at its centre. It could transcend contradictory elements of modern urban life, the pathos of the clown and its tragic-comediy role within the character of Pierrot and the carnivalesque that Debussy was to appropriate for his own creations.

Debussy wholeheartedly participated in the climate of entertainment in the ferment of Montmartre and in the lives of those artists whose work contains visual correspondences with the composer’s own music. Technically, pictorially and emotionally, the experiences and work of certain artists are directly analogous with the composer’s own ethos and in this section, I shall examine the music of Debussy’s own circus and minstrelsy pieces in line with their contribution, drawing clear parallels between the two. This is an area in which I hope to make substantial inroads into artistic/musical analogies that existed between the composer and fin de siècle recreation in Montmartre.

**Debussy’s Circus, His Minstrelsy Pieces, and Contemporary Art**

*Adolphe Willette*

The role of the Pierrot, for example, and its importance to the lighter side of Debussy’s character, was of consequence because it tied Debussy to the artist Adolphe Willette who made many depictions of the character (see figs. 4:1–4:2), and who became a personal friend. They had met at a Left Bank Parisian café bistro, *Chez Thommen’s*, where both were frequent visitors, together with Maurice Rollinat, pianist at the *Chat Noir*. Much of Willette’s work recalled the *Commedia dell’ Arte*, and the world of Verlaine’s *Fêtes galantes*, (that Debussy had first set in 1882–1883), and in 1890 Willette provided an illustration for Debussy’s early setting of Verlaine’s ‘Mandoline’ from that series. *Figure 4:1* was inspired by Paul Margueritte’s *Pierrot, Murderer of His Wife* in 1881, whilst *Figure 4:2* shows detail of a cartoon from *Le Chat noir*.

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(Figure 4:1) Adolphe Willette, *Pierrot tickles Columbine to death*, *(Le Pierrot, Dec. 7th. 1888).*

(Figure 4:2) Willette: *A Drunken Pierrot dances Beneath the Moon*, Jan. 17th, 1885.

The antithesis of the mournful Pierrot appeared in Willette’s ‘histoires sans paroles’ (stories without words, see fig.4:3), when he converted pantomime into comic strip form for the first time, leaving the humorous pictures to speak for themselves by their use of irony and pantomime buffoonery.389 ‘Fumiste’ also alludes to the ‘bone idle’ nature of the Pierrot in this sketch!

The spirit evoked by Pierrot, according to Julian Brigstocke, ‘soon came to be recognized as the personification of Montmartre’s urban imaginary. He was considered to stand for a whole community, persecuted but joyous… a timeless hero of French pantomime and, as a figure of the ‘lowest’ form of art, he offered fin-de-siècle bohemians an alternative identity, an ironic disguise for their creative ambitions’. The ‘clown-artists’ affirmed their existence by adopting Montmartre as their home, where pantomime humour and buffoonery was the norm and where Willette became a real-life Pierrot for the sheer fun of living his art on the streets of Paris, and dressing up as a Pierrot figure himself (fig.4: 4). The pallor of the clown, resembling moonlight, emphasized his nature as ‘other’; he was an outcast, a parody of the bourgeoisie but presenting the Pierrot as victim of that very social class. Whilst exuberant, playful, but at times crude and impertinent, his adventures were carnivalesque and full of humour. Willette portrayed this lamentable figure in sketches such as Pierrot aux

(Figure 4:3) Willette, ‘Pierrot Fumiste’ in Le Chat Noir Magazine, 18th March 1882.


*bouteilles fumant*, produced in ink and white chalk in 1897, for the cover of *Le Courrier Français*, on 20th June of that year (see fig. 4:5).\textsuperscript{391}

(Figure 4:4) Willette dressed as Pierrot (With allusion to *Le Chat Noir*)

(Figure 4:5) Willette, *Pierrot aux bouteilles fumant* (*Pierrot with bottles and cigarettes*), 1897

\textsuperscript{391} In addition, the artist decorated many cabarets on the Butte, (Montmartre), such as the ceiling for cabaret *La Cigale*, the lobby of cabaret *Bal Tabarin*, as well as the famous *Moulin Rouge*.
Willette’s most famous work, painted for the establishment, was *Parce Domine* (see fig 4:6), depicting a fantastical Parisian bohemian scene. It was an immense canvas that took as its subject the first words of a hymn listing human sins and lusts, before imploring divine forgiveness. Destined for the Cabaret *Le Chat Noir*, where all Paris came to drink and have fun, the picture includes the mill of the *Moulin Rouge*, (of which Willette was architect), and where Debussy may have played the piano with Satie; its wings are turned into musical staves as the ever-sad, white-faced Pierrot is led to his death, possibly by suicide, at the front of the cacophony. Above all, it demonstrates Willett’s sharp sense of political satire, as evident in this painting as in his subversive cartoons. It has been called a ‘discourse of decadence’ in that the momentum of the unruly crowd – literally a surge of pleasure seekers – is downwards, the skull-shaped moon acting as a warning of what is to come. *Parce Domine* can thus be seen as ‘an ironic inversion’ of those patriotic mural paintings commissioned by the Third Republic to decorate its town halls and other public buildings.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 4:6), Adolphe Willette, *Parce Domine* (1884), (Montmartre Museum, Paris).

392 *Parce Domine* comes from a penitential Gregorian chant: *Parce Domine, parce populo tuo: ne in aeternum irascaris nobis* (Spare O Lord, spare Your people: lest you be angry with us forever). Brigstocke, ch. 6.
394 *Ibid*
The artist seems to unite both the superfluous energy and dissolute atmosphere of Montmartre with a macabre sense of its pessimistic reality— it is as if the whole Parisian entertainment world has gone mad, everyone a direct participant in a ‘surrealist’ world. This same sense of hysteria can almost be heard, I contend, in the later ‘Golliwog’s Cakewalk’ (Children’s Corner, 1908) and Little Nigar, (1909), in which Debussy had obviously absorbed the jazz-type rhythms that had arrived in the Old World from New Orleans, Cuba and South America. Experimenting with dance styles such as rags, rhumbas, fox-trots, tangoes and so forth, he used ‘invigorating syncopations’ in pieces such as these to liven up life in the cabarets, their uproarious tunes perfectly suited to the rowdy atmosphere found there (see ex. 4:1) for the dancing ‘exotic’ rhythms of Little Nigar, in ragtime style).

(Example 4:1), Debussy, The Little Nigar, (Later entitled The Little Negro and Le petit nègre, 1909), bars 1–25

Alternating with the excitement of the very rhythmical dancing in dotted rhythms reminiscent of ‘Golliwog’s Cakewalk’ a year earlier are quieter lyrical passages, but the hysteria of the first passage always intervenes to return the piece to its sense of raucous delirium, perfectly capturing the frenzy in the Parce Domine painting, where all the participants have their feet off the ground.

**Debussy and Pierrot**

Both Willette and Debussy were also connected to the shadow plays (*ombres chinoises*) that Henri Rivière put on in the early 1890s, which often showed the escapades of the lovelorn Pierrot. Having already encountered the persona from some of his favourite writers, de Banville, Verlaine and Symbolist poet Laforgue, Debussy found the stimulus of the Pierrot character a spur to his compositional work.

Debussy’s first setting of de Banville’s *Pierrot* was composed in 1881, (in *Quatre Mélodies de Claude Debussy*) at the age of eighteen, but remained unpublished until after the composer’s death. Banville makes a direct reference to the well-known Deburau's life (the celebrated mime artist at the Théâtre des Funambules), as the sad and hapless clown (fig. 4:7), tormenting him that ‘a young girl of supple body teases him in vain with her roguish eye…’ whilst the moon ‘looks askance at its friend Jean Gaspard Deburau’. He is thus portrayed as a lovelorn and truly pathetic figure, ever disappointed, but ever hopeful of love, despite becoming known as the most famous mime artist of the day in Paris.

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397 Three of ‘Les Complaintes’, (1885) his first volume of poems, were written in Pierrot’s voice, and his second collection, ‘L’Imitation de Notre Dame de la Lune’, (1886) were devoted entirely to the character and his moonlit world.


399 ‘Une fillette au souple casaquin En vain l’agace avec son œil coquin… Jette un regard à son œil en coulisse À son ami Jean Gaspard Deburau’. ‘Literary and stylistic analysis of Debussy’s *Quatre Mélodies de Claude Debussy*’, Diane Kay Moellenhoff (Austin: University of Texas, 1979).
(Figure 4:7) Jean-Charles Deburau, the celebrated early French mime artist.

In consequence, Debussy humorously observes his character, using a taunting melodic figure to capture his personality immediately at bars 1 and 3, jumping down the piano in octave Bs which, landing on a C in the bass, make for a jarring 2nd (see ex. 4:2). The melody continues in the right hand which introduces a well-known folk song in C major—*Au clair de la lune, Mon ami Pierrot*—repeated in the bass part from bars 7–12 before segueing back into the treble and then becoming chordal at bar 18. Henceforth this figure transfers back and forth, acting as a unifying motif between the many major and minor keys which briefly appear in the piano accompaniment, such as the tonal key of E minor at bar 11. The symmetrical structure is expanded by different harmonic material for each phrase, which amplifies the melody and leads to tonal ambiguity that now reflects the clown’s true pathos, in a piece that is both lyrical and ironical and directly captures Deburau’s character (*fig. 4:7*).
(Example 4.2) Debussy, *Quatre Mélodies de Claude Debussy*, 1881, no. 3 ‘Pierrot,’ bars 1–32. Poetry by Banville.
Debussy dedicated this melody to his first love, the singer Marie-Blanche Vasnier, who was married, and doubtless found the words of the poem redolent of their own situation, in that their affair could not become public and he was cast as her lovelorn paramour. His early songs were considered by Wilfrid Mellers as… ‘Above all the music of fantôme and of Pierrot…’ Even the luxuriance and vitality of Debussy’s piano piece, *L’Isle joyeuse*, (1904), with its intricate ornamentation, harmonic colouring and intense rhythmical expression evocative of Balakirev’s *Islamey* was, he says:

Still the world of Carnival, of Pierrot, but it is the world of Carnival become magically immediate and actual… In *L’Isle joyeuse* it is as if something dark and tropical had crept under Debussy’s skin… as though he had miraculously recovered the *joie de vivre* he had long felt the contemporary world had lost…

In the late *Cello Sonata*, composed 1915 and originally said to have been sub-titled ‘Pierrot fâché avec la lune’ (*Pierrot vexed with the moon*), Debussy employs a rich palette of textures. Rhythmically modernist, the music was both ‘angular and colourful’, with ‘the cello imitating a flute, lute and bass guitar’, thereby employing Peirce’s ‘Qualisigns’ to evoke the sounds of other instruments through ‘Indexical’ meanings. Although it is well documented that ‘this programmatic interpretation did not emerge from Debussy’s imagination’, even though this idea persists, such a reading would render the Pierrot’s character poignant and plaintive through ‘Iconic’ meaning. Debussy utilized sudden changes of tempo and accented notes allied to a harmonic language that alternated between major and minor tonalities, giving the cello special effects – harsh *pizzicato* passages and floating *flautandi*, for example – which appeared to others to depict the pathos of the puppet character. This was particularly evident in the ‘Sérénade’ movement where the character appears to sing/lament, perhaps also reflecting Debussy’s own regrets as his illness took hold.

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402 In 1916, purportedly Louis Rosoor, cello professor at the Bordeaux Conservatory, gained a copy of the sonata and suggested to its composer that he had subconsciously based it on ‘Pierrot Lunaire’ the sad clown, and other figures from the Italian commedia dell’arte. Though Debussy was quick to repudiate this, when Rosoor performed the piece, he subtitled it ‘Pierrot fâché avec la lune’, and published a short narrative in his programme notes. However, no evidence of this remains. Daniel Edwards, *Debussy Cello Sonata – A Parisian Music Salon*: https://parisianmusicsalon.wordpress.com/debussy-cello-sonata
405 Ibid.
Pierrot was the embodiment of the sensitive, melancholy and solitary artistic type, his white face and loose white blouse distinguishing his creativity and tormented figure.\textsuperscript{406} Having deep roots in the popular tradition of the \textit{Commedia dell’Arte}, avant garde painters and writers explored his character as a microcosm of man’s predicament in a changing world,\textsuperscript{407} symbolizing the triumph of spiritual man through the power of his creativity, the critic Champfleury probably being first to explore this theme in his macabre pantomime, \textit{Pierrot Valet of Death}.\textsuperscript{408} However, it was Théodore de Banville, Debussy’s early poetic hero, who produced the \textit{Odes Funambulesques} (1857), capturing his own creative aspirations in the image of a clown vaulting towards the stars to escape the earth’s gravity.

\begin{center}
\textit{Debussy and the Circus}
\end{center}

The circus as entertainment had developed in America before spreading to Europe, its routines dangerous as well as witty, and aimed at adults rather than children. Debussy was known to love its ethos, which often featured clowns depicting satirical ‘whiteface’ as well as ‘blackface’ minstrels usually giving comedic performances and running concurrently. Veering between the sadness of one and the jocular nature of the other, Debussy encompassed both in his music, and must have been influenced by the two well-known clowns that he became friends with at The Irish and American bar, \textit{Reynold’s}. An arena of ribald behaviour frequented by jockeys, trainers and English exiles, often heavily intoxicated, it provided ‘the decidedly aesthetic environment’ relished by the composer.\textsuperscript{409} At Reynolds he was introduced to the famous clowns, Footitt and Chocolat, who continued their singing and tap-dancing routines there after they had finished performing for the night,\textsuperscript{410} and were later to inspire Debussy.\textsuperscript{411}

\textsuperscript{406} Julie Pedneault-Deslauriers, ‘Pierrot L.’, \textit{Journal of the American Musicological Society}, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Fall 20110, 601–645. \url{www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/} She goes as far as to align Pierrot with some of the contemporary criticism of the character as the ‘hysterical’.

\textsuperscript{407} The performances of Jean-Gaspard Deburau, particularly, helped cement this view of Pierrot as a ‘pathetic saltimbague’, as a symbol of the creative artist ‘often ignored by an unresponsive public’. See Helen O. Borowitz, ‘Sad Clowns in French Art and Literature’, \textit{The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art}, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Jan., 1984), 23–45. \url{www.jstor.org/stable/25159845}

\textsuperscript{408} \textit{Ibid}, 23–35.


\textsuperscript{410} Richard Langham Smith has drawn attention to Debussy’s penchant for \textit{la grosse musique}… the ‘music of the open air, circus music, barrel organ, \textit{café concert} and music hall’ and to his frequent visits to the Bar Reynolds, where he met the celebrated clowns Footitt and Chocolat, and to \textit{La Chat Noir} cabaret, where he saw Henri Rivière’s popular shadow plays. In Matthew Brown, \textit{Debussy Redux: The Impact of His Music on Popular Culture} (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 5–6.

\textsuperscript{411} Franc Nohain, \textit{Footitt et Chocolat : Mémoires du premier clown noir : L’incroyable destin du premier artiste noir en France} (Pages Classiques, 2016).
Originally an English clown, Footit, (real name George Tudor Hall), trained as an acrobat with his father’s circus, becoming a leading horseback clown by 1880. His reputation, however, was entirely made in Paris when he met his partner Raphaël Padilla, born a slave in Cuba and known as ‘Chocolat’ during his working career. Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s at Le Nouveau Cirque, the two enjoyed considerable success, Footit taking the role of the authoritarian white clown whilst Chocolat played Augustus, a ‘poor stupid Negro’. At the end of each skit the latter would receive a correction: ‘Mr. Chocolat, I’m going to have to hit you’… Delivered impassively by Footit to a docile Chocolat, this would ‘bring the house down’, their slapstick antics uniformly popular with all levels of society, especially intellectuals and artists.

The two clowns were clearly inseparable at this time, ‘Les Joyeux Nègre’ (‘The Joyous Negro’)412 ever-popular as ‘Footit’s shadow’, yet Chocolat’s true mastery, grace and self-assurance were also evident when he was not on stage. Playing the idiotic fall-guy with over-inflated, flabbergasted reactions (ahurissements),413 he was happy to give the public what they demanded and found amusing, becoming legendary by 1905 as the counterpoint, perhaps, to the ‘true artist’ Footit.414 My studies have revealed that Toulouse-Lautrec did numerous drawings of the pair, and his 1896 lithograph, Chocolat Dancing in a Bar (fig. 4:8) was printed in Le Rire, where the raw energy of his uncensored scenes depicted all aspects of contemporary nightlife in dance halls and circuses. Following on are two posters featuring the iconic duo, the first retrospective, the second as the cover to a book, Les Mémoires de Footit et Chocolat clowns, printed in 1907 in French (figs. 4:9–4:10). Both are manifestly new visual evidence to the Debussy field. The composer liked to discuss what life was like in the circus with these empathic clowns – the technique they employed for the flying trapeze, the subtleties of music, philosophy and poetry.415 Debussy apparently quoted Banville’s poem ‘Le Saut du Tremplin’ (‘The Jump from the Springboard’) from Odes Funambulesques (1873) to the intelligent Footit,416 in which the sorrowful clown, about to somersault from his springboard, dreams of defying gravity to leave behind the glum audience, sprouting

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414 Ibid, ch. 4.
415 Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, 136–138, op. cit.
wings that will carry him up to the firmament of the sky, where he will find peace among the stars.

Comparatively, Debussy sought to capture the movement of cakewalk, golliwog, clowns and minstrels in his music, most of which he had come across in his trips around Paris, possibly at the Great Exhibition of 1900 when Sousa first visited the country, playing to huge audiences in open-air concerts. In 1903, writing for the publication Gil Blas, Debussy also expressed his enthusiasm for the new syncopated sounds: ‘At last… the king of American music is in town. By that I mean M. J. P. Sousa and his band have come for a whole week to reveal to us the beauties of American music as it is performed in the best society…’

Reintroduced from America, Debussy projected these syncopated rhythms and cakewalk dances on to his ideas for minstrelsy whether part of the fairground, the circus or the music hall, conveying aspects of all three within his pieces. The fact that Debussy knew French impresario Gabriel Astruc indicates that he almost certainly came into contact with black music through this particular friend, who had brought these performers to Paris and organised musical and circus events.

Debussy’s penchant for circus life fertilised his imagination, capturing the mood of the circus and the characters to be found there, such as ‘General Lavine–eccentric’ (based on the American Edward Lavine – ‘General Ed La Vine, the Man who has Soldiered all his Life’ from Douze Préludes II, 1913). This last ‘entertainment’ work, was, in contrast to his other works, based on the real American clown Edward Lavine, who Debussy probably encountered at the Marigny Théâtre on the Champs Elysées, where this part juggler, part clown and part soldier appeared between 1910 and 1912 (see fig. 4:11. Here we see him juggling with his ‘too small’ hat and lighted cigar). His popularity led Le Figaro to publish glowing reports of his comedic exploits:

There is nothing, down to the offstage noises, which does not serve to underline the comedy of this fantastic personage, juggling with his hat and his cigar. But such effects cannot be talked about. They must be seen. Quick, an aeroplane! Let’s go to the Marigny.

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420 Lockspeiser tells of a ‘prophetic vision’ by the writer Colette of Debussy extemporising on all available surfaces with whatever object came to hand and pre-empting the ‘music of the jazz band’. Ibid, 139.
421 Lockspeiser, His Life and Mind, 137 op. cit.
422 Le Figaro, August 10th, 1910.
(Figure 4:8) Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Chocolat Dancing in the Irish American Bar*, 1896. (Lithograph, Musée Toulouse-Lautrec, Albi, France).
(Figure 4:9) Retrospective poster – Images for La Burbuja Rosa: *Chocolat- Le Clown nègre* – (Films Lumière, date unknown).

(Figure 4:10) *Les Mémoires de Foottit et Chocolat clowns*: (Memories of the clowns Foottit and Chocolat). Collection of Marie Franc-Nohain Ed. 1907 (Paris: Lafitte & Co., 1907)
Lavine was both tall (one critic held him to be ‘nine feet’ in costume) and elaborately attired for his act, ‘a kind of free-standing scarecrow wearing a tuxedo coat... a three-cornered hat many sizes too small for him and apparently held on with a hairpin consisting of a huge nut-and-bolt arrangement which he unscrewed with a squeak during the act. His face was painted like a clown’s, but with the classic chin-whiskers of the stage tramp...’ Lavine was asked to write Lavine’s part for a new stage show at the Marigny, and so subsequently saw his show many times, but the scheme never came to fruition and the composer and clown never met in person. Perhaps this is why Debussy wrote his portrait piece for Lavine, in which a strutting cakewalk-style is merged with a clown’s antics as the composer captured both the satirical and vaudeville-slapstick style of the character. Catherine Kautsky suggests that the ‘abrupt chromatic passage of 16th notes in bars 29–30’ are indicative of ‘strong suggestions of jugglery,’ where Debussy deliberately suggests impressions of Lavine’s persona, his jerkiness ranging from Un style et le mouvement d’un Cake-walk, portraying the cake-walk itself (ex. 4:3 in bars 15–16), where it proceeds across the novelty of three staves, to the overly ambitious staccato juggling of bars 29–30. The true pathos of the clown is brought out at bars 94–97 (ex.4:4), where Debussy studiedly captures the sorrowful side to the clown’s character – or rather, that of General Lavine, who was a ‘shambling grotesque’ in reality. In a mixture of swagger and playfulness, Debussy completes the Prélude, representing his rather ambivalent feelings for this miscellany of a character that he had found so amusing in real life.

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423 Catherine Kautsky, Piano Portraits, op. cit.
424 Ibid.
425 See McKinley, 257, op. cit.
426 Bruhn, Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music, 118–119.
(Figure 4:11) ‘General Lavine’ by Charles Gir, (gallica.bnf.fr/Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

(Example 4:3) Debussy, *Douze Préludes II* ‘General Lavine’ 1913, bars 11–16
Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen

Another rarely mentioned acquaintance of Debussy’s, Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, exhibited his landscapes and nude paintings at the Salon des Indépendants in the 1890s. Montmartre and its surrounding districts were to become a favourite subject throughout Steinlen’s life, and he did not shrink from portraying the area as it was, in all its realism. His name was synonymous with Le Chat Noir, and he painted Debussy on various occasions (see the watercolour at fig. 4:12). In addition, he is mentioned several times in Debussy’s correspondence, as the father-in-law of the composer’s friend, Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht, and on 12th May 1916 Debussy writes directly to Steinlen to request his presence with ‘les Inghel’s’ at the Bois de Boulogne (his residence). His letter is couched in friendly terms – ‘nos sincères amitiés’, which are echoed in a further letter of the 20th August, 1917, so the two were obviously on fairly intimate terms, probably because Debussy was acquainted with Colette Steinlen, Inghelbrecht’s wife, a clear and close contact with the artistic community.\footnote{Csp. 2141–2142.}

\footnote{Inghelbrecht was a composer and conductor, debuting at the Théâtre des Arts in 1908 under Debussy’s direction for Pelléas et Mélisande, and in April 1911 for the Martyre de Saint Sébastien, becoming widely known as a great exponent of the composer’s work. He was married to Colette Steinlen. T. A. Steinlen is mentioned in a letter to the former dated 19th November, 1913 (Csp. 1697) and again in January 1914 (Csp. 1746, DL 285–6).}
Steinlen also showed a great preference for drawing (and sometimes sculpting) cats, particularly black cats that he depicted in many affectionate illustrations, perhaps because they were night creatures, known for their unpredictability and nocturnal sexual habits, associating them with the culture of Montmartre inhabitants. Possibly the most famous poster he produced is his work *Chat Noir* from 1896. The Cabaret represented all that was bohemian and *avant garde* about the Montmartre district, and the ‘Montjoie’ halo around the cat’s head signified a tongue-in-cheek spelling of ‘Montjoie’ – an old French battle cry, therefore signifying Le Chat Noir’s allegiance to the bohemian heart of Paris, the halo adding a religious parody of the political subversion that flourished there (see fig. 4:13, an early French postcard of the Cabaret). The black cat was thus portrayed as a saint, to be worshipped by all, in a poster that animated everyone associated with the Cabaret (fig. 4:14). With a diverse spectatorship and known as a radical and exciting venue, Debussy’s membership there demonstrates his liberal associations and partiality for the seditious *Chat Noir*. Between 1883 and 1920, Steinlen produced hundreds of illustrations of dance halls, theatre and brothels, like his great contemporary Toulouse-Lautrec, often featuring the black cat, both in playful and political mode.
(Figure 4:13) An early French postcard of *Une Soirée au Chat Noir*, *(A Night at the Chat Noir)* Paris, Montmartre.

(Figure 4:14) Steinlen, *Chat Noir*, *(Black Cat)*, 1896.
Shadow Plays

As depicted in the poster at fig. 14, the Chat Noir was also famous for its puppet plays – Les Pièces d’Ombres. Between 1887 and 1897 plays such as L’Épopée (The Epic) by Caran d’Ache featuring heroic Napoleonic scenes and La Marche à l’Étoile (The Walk to the Star, 1890), a ‘mystery in ten tableaux’, poem and music by Georges Fragerolle and illustrations by Rivière, were great successes. Subjects ranged from fairy tales to satirical plays, also encompassing Commedia dell’Arte figures such as Pierrot – L’Age d’or (The Golden Age), 1887 – and Pierrot pornographe (Pierrot the Pornographer) of 1893, which saw the tragic character suffering for his unrequited love of Columbine, and then in trouble for creating a naked painting of her. It seems inconceivable that Debussy would not have known of these since he often attended the shadow plays, and is known to have played at the Chat with Satie in the 1880s—‘rooted in a kind of artistic anarchy… Debussy was to be seen in attendance several times’, according to Richard Langham Smith, there being a great likelihood that:

At one time or another Debussy would have been called on to complement Henri Rivière’s shadowy images with an appropriate improvisation.429

Complex techniques involving animated silhouettes of zinc figures with interlaid hand-painted glass sheets, and light projected backstage from an open flame achieved intricate atmospheric effects (see figs. 4:15–4:16),430 Rivière becoming master of the Théâtre as both artist and illustrator as well as mechanic and chemist. Artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Bonnard and Vuillard began to use the silhouettes in their prints, their flattened expanses evoking a certain mood. Silhouettes were ‘suggestive’, not merely a pictorial convenience, which could distort figures and make requirements of the viewer – thus their lack of definition became ‘an ideal pictorial device for the decadent imagination…’431 speaking directly of Montmartre and its ‘decadent’ moral codes – visual aspects later to be taken up by Toulouse-Lautrec, whose first poster, Moulin Rouge: La Goulue, also made use of silhouettes. Debussy’s penchant for all things modern would also doubtless have seen him keen on these ‘proto-cinematic spectacles’432 at the Théâtre d’Ombres where movement and visuality combined in early motion pictures.

430 www.gadagne.musees.lyon.fr
(Figure 4:15) Zinc silhouette for the Chat Noir cabaret shadow play *L’Épopée (The Epic)*, 1888, Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, USA

(Figure 4:16), Fernand Lund (attrib.) *Interior of the Chat Noir*, showing a shadow play c.1889 (Private Collection).
Cake-Walk and its Relationship to Jazz

I attempt to demonstrate in the following section that within Montmartre society, musicians and artists socialised freely and made forays into their counterparts’ fields of endeavour. As well as the inspiration of Cabarets and Shadow plays, from which he composed ‘The Golliwog’s Cake Walk’ (Children’s Corner, 1908), and ‘Minstrels’, (last of Douze Préludes I, 1910, Debussy’s music was performance-oriented and linked to the black musical portrayal of the cakewalk in early twentieth-century Parisian art.

Seemingly anticipating the jazz age to come and possessed of a foresight that would signify a similarity to the popular syncopated rhythms and blue notes of the African-American genre from the United States, contemporary popular entertainment in Paris had embraced the Cakewalk as part of the ‘primitive’ vogue for ‘otherness’ – l’art Nègre in particular (see figs. 4:17–4:18). By 1892 this popular dance became more precise and had reached Madison Square Gardens, before being taken to Europe. This noble ‘danse de sauvages’ both seemed to caricature black cake-walkers as authentic African-American dancers whilst mocking the ‘civilised’ mannerisms of upper-class white society, so that as Davinia Caddy elucidates:

By 1908 the cake-walk had enjoyed a successful stage career. Renowned for its high-stepping, back-arching postures, the dance was the star attraction of music hall and circus shows… It even became a popular recreational activity; music halls sponsored “concours de cake walk” in which amateur couples competed in improvisational skill, and bourgeois salons incorporated the dance into their evening entertainment.  

(Figure 4:17) The Ragtime Skedaddlers, Mandolins at the Cake Walk, circa 1890’s

__*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*__

433 Jody Blake argued that Parisians welcomed the arrival of the cake-walk as ‘a specifically black musical performance’). In Le Tumulte noir: Modernist Art and Popular Entertainment in Jazz-Age Paris, 1900–1930 (University Park, Penn; Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 18.

Debussy sought to embrace all that was new – whether satirical, symbolist, or purely poking fun at the establishment, so it is unsurprising that his Children’s Corner, for example, dedicated to his daughter Chou-Chou and published in 1908, features the ‘Golliwogg’s cakewalk’, a dance or strut that was a syncopated ragtime piece, with banjo-like effects and reminiscent of the black-face minstrels of the era. Its main claim to fame here, however, is Debussy’s shameless lambasting of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, whose love/death motif interrupts the dance on several occasions in a parody of Wagner’s style, deflating the German master ‘by exposing the ease with which his musical idiom can morph into something trite and common…’, an attribute which Debussy no doubt enjoyed immensely and would have fitted with the spirit of the age. In a double irony, the ‘cakewalk’ was itself originally a parody of the exaggerated white mannerisms of plantation owners dancing, by slaves in the American Deep South, so Debussy’s piece was a comical rendition of minstrelsy that would therefore have been instantly recognisable. The first cover for the six pieces, (fig. 4:19), drawn by Debussy himself, shows a ‘Golliwog-type’ head, held as a balloon by Jumbo the elephant, perhaps reminiscent of Odilon Redon’s paintings of many ‘disembodied heads’.

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435 Caddy, 310.
Golliwog’s cakewalk contains dotted rhythms, staccato syncopated beats, short note values, accent marks and performance directions in almost every bar, which accentuate the unpredictable nature of this piece and its performance value from the beginning, and correlating it with the many cakewalks on display in the entertainment world. After beginning with a cakewalk motive, unusually executed at forte, bars 6–9 form a 4-bar vamp (ex. 4:5), whilst the main tune in E flat gives way to dissonant seconds, then thirds, before repeating itself and fading out before the eventual arrival of G flat major in bar 52. Debussy also emphasizes ragtime syncopation in the right hand to make the Golliwog dance, perhaps alluding to the world of Shadow puppets that he enjoyed, the staccato off beats propelling the dancing body forwards, whilst the sixteenth notes at forte provide additional energy as the doll is brought to life.

When the cakewalk melody arrives in bar 10, (ex. 4:6), the toy moves around rather awkwardly, (très net et très sec/ very precisely and very dry) in the controlled manner of a puppet finding its feet, its jolliness enforced and unreal. But at bar 30 a sudden foray into a low B flat for the cakewalk rhythm, followed by a bass gesture at forte crescendo to fortissimo, (bar 33, recalling bar 4,) seems to enliven the toy, invigorating its limbs temporarily before a slightly varied reiteration of the right-hand cakewalk returns. The return to a treble clef in the following bar, (34) at piano, makes this gesture stand out all the more, before Debussy uses another fortissimo section with accented beats to bring the music to a
climax, but then undermines the forward momentum completely, using *tenuto* marks over both hands (see *ex. 4:7*).

(Example 4:5) Debussy, ‘Golliwog’s Cakewalk’, in *Children’s Corner*, 1908, bars 1–9

Unlike bars 6–9, here the left hand lands on a crochet downbeat followed by a bar and a half of rests, which has the effect of bringing the cakewalk to a stultifying close, and the Golliwog to a stop, before the G flat section ensues.

(Example 4:6) Debussy, ‘Golliwog’s Cakewalk’ in *Children’s Corner*, 1908 bars 10–19

Debussy’s exaggerated musical effects and lilting ‘carnivalesque sentimentality’, perhaps mimicking the golliwog tearing around, also seem redolent of the ironic Pierrot as portrayed in Jules Laforgue’s poems – who Debussy never set, but once declared to be his favourite poet. As we see from his writings, Debussy’s fondness for Laforgue’s wit often resulted in his borrowing phrases for effect. Possibly the Wagnerian quotations are for emotional effect, to render the doll more human, in comparison to the lowbrow cakewalk that had hitherto played out. At the sudden end of the piece, Golliwog is returned to the ‘mechanical world’ of the European cakewalk, the slower rhythm and fading dynamics returning him to the toy that he really is, as he crashes to the ground, de-animated, for the moment at least.

Although not altogether characteristic of Debussy’s usual style, it is a delightful, humorous work, showcasing the composer’s ability to create unique contrasts, whilst allowing the pianist to put his own stamp on the piece and enabling Debussy to continue with the Commedia dell’Arte theme that he had used as a younger man to create his Suite Bergamasques (1890) and his Fêtes galantes. The facility Debussy demonstrates in these humorous pieces and the visual evocations that inspired them exhibit a fresh aspect of his character and abilities which have all too often been ignored in previous scholarship.

Debussy and the Golliwog Character

This link to the pictorial aspects of contemporary literature is one that I have uncovered during my research. Directly influenced by the little black ‘Golliwog’ character in one of his daughter Chou-Chou’s storybooks by Florence Kate and Bertha Upton, Debussy’s visual creativity unequivocally brought this character to life. The toy was already popular in Western Europe, having been introduced as a character in the Uptons’ 1895 book, The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls, (see figs 4:20–4:21), where it was described as a ‘grotesque creature, with very dark, often jet-black skin, large white-rimmed eyes, red or

437 Clowns, acrobats and so forth were known as saltimbanques. In the 1700s Watteau produced a series of paintings in the Commedia dell’arte style, associated with these travelling players. Also see Baudelaire’s ‘Le Vieux Saltimbanque’ (1861) and Picasso’s Family of Saltimbanques (1905). Caddy, 311–315.
438 See DL, 43, n. 2, 149, n. 4 and 302, n. 1, all of which demonstrate the phrases Debussy deployed from Laforgue’s writings in order to express his own feelings.
439 De Martelly suggests that the reiteration of the final chord is perhaps a tempting suggestion that the toy is ‘peak(ing) through a musical score that cannot fully contain him’. ‘Signification, Objectification, and the Mimetic Uncanny in Claude Debussy’s “Golliwog’s Cakewalk”, Current Musicology, No. 90 (Fall 2010), 29.
white clown lips, and wild, frizzy hair,’⁴⁴¹ but the Golliwog was also perceived by the public as both lovable and child-like. The French composer draws on many musical conventions to make Golliwog dance animatedly, as the toy is tossed about and treated rather roughly, in line with the original’s treatment in the Upton household. This romanticised version of the past, ‘exotic’ and seemingly familiar, enabled people to engage with and re-imagine the histories of colonial African subjects, even if somewhat illusory.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 4:20) Florence and Bertha Upton, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls*, (London; New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1895)

⁴⁴¹ In contrast to the third movement of the suite, ‘Serenade for the Doll’, in which Chou Chou’s ‘favourite doll’ is treated with far greater respect, and in refined European tradition. De Martelly 24–25.
(Figure 4:21) Illustration of Golliwog and wooden dolls from Florence and Bertha Upton, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls*.

In 1913 Debussy was to compose his children’s ballet, *Le Boîte à joujoux* (*Toy Box*), although due to his illness and the First World War, it was not performed until after his death in 1918, orchestrated by his friend André Caplet. Here again, the scenario was conceived by children’s book author and illustrator, André Hellé, who also completed the charming original watercolours for the book442 (see fig. 4:22), and shared Debussy’s fascination for toys and his desire for the ballet to be performed by children, although this did not occur.443 The characters themselves clearly derive from the Italian tradition of *Commedia dell’Arte* again, and the musical excerpts took their lead from various visual and narrative allusions to silent film, circus and vaudeville – forms of entertainment that were current in contemporary Parisian life.

Although the story of life, love and conflict within the toy box was written for Chou-Chou, its composition was not straightforward, Debussy complaining to Durand that ‘the soul of the doll is more mysterious than even Maeterlinck himself imagines, and does not easily put up with the humbug which so many human souls tolerate’.444 He stressed the ‘childish

simplicity of the ballet and its three-sided love affair between a soldier, a doll and a ‘polichinelle’ (Punch), but in reality the ballet resonates beyond the innocence of such a scene, including as it does witty references to cakewalk tunes, popular themes and extracts, including parodies of opera and folk melodies – what Robert Orledge refers to as ‘a veritable Aladdin’s cave of tantalizing similarities’.445

The direct ‘cakewalk’ quotation from Le Petit Nègre (published 1909) is given to ‘Le soldat anglais’, transposed a perfect 4th upwards, but this time with major 2nds as ostinato accompaniment for the first eight bars (see ex. 4:8), before the strident Polichinelle enters. In addition, the ‘hollow’ drums that were so important in the ‘Commedia’ are echoed in staccato throughout the soldier’s first twelve bars in the left hand of the Marche.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 4:22) Andre Hellé, Illustrator and Author of Le Boîte à joujoux (The Toys’ Box), 1913

445 Ibid.
(Example 4:8) Claude Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux, (The Toys’ Box)*, ‘Le Soldat Anglais’ (pp. 9–10), Ballet, 1913

The Polichinelle figure itself borrows a complex four-bar insert at *Brillant et fanfaron* (ex. 4:9) that bears resemblance to the ‘Golliwog’s Cakewalk’ in *Children’s Corner*, (seen below at bars 22–25, ex. 4:10), leaping up and down the keyboard simultaneously on an accented staccato note at the end of the four-bar phrase each time, very much emulating the black toy’s mischievous jumping around, since Debussy had originally conceived the ballet for puppets. A sharp tug of the string sends the doll jumping 7ths and 11ths in the treble and almost three octaves in the bass, its jerkiness accentuated by the double dotted rhythms and very short note values, as well as *acciaccaturas* to denote the tweaking movements in our imaginations.

(Example 4:9) Debussy, ‘Polichinelle’, (p. 11) in *La Boîte à joujoux*.

In *La Boîte à joujoux*, however, the four-bar phrases are almost an ‘ironic’ wrong note version of the original below (ex. 4:10), perhaps adding sonorously to the villainous character of the Polichinelle (Punch).

An extract from Debussy’s other entertainment piece, *Minstrels*, also comes to mind here, bars 28–31 (*ex. 4:11*) conjuring up melodic similarities to the *Brillant et fanfaron* section of Polichinelle’s part above. Although rhythmically different, the treble line harmonies are very similar, and both incorporate octave chords in the bass together with toy ‘jumps’ up the keyboard, perhaps suggestive of a barrel organ or piano rolls.446


The *moqueur* section below (*ex. 4:12*) is in itself visually suggestive of the clown’s antics, and musically suggestive as he leaps around in bars 41 and 44, the *grupetti* in bars 42–43 again suggestive of irony, mocking Wagner.

(Example 4:12) Debussy, ‘Minstrels’ (bars 41–44)

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446 The ‘Danse de la poupée’ is also reminiscent of Debussy’s ‘Serenade for the Doll’ from *Children’s Corner*, its *staccato* chords juxtaposed with longer-flowing phrases as a counterpoint to the jerky movements of the doll/puppet in both.
The end section of *Minstrels* at bars 63–74 (ex. 4:13) in particular, evokes the atmosphere of songs that were provided for audience participation, which was an integral part of the music halls. More sophisticated than previous pieces, although its title gives the lie to its minstrelsy origins, its provocative rhythms and musical representation of various instruments (such as banjo, cornet and drums), demonstrate Debussy’s love of clowns at the circus, whether they were white-faced and sad such as the Pierrot (or Footit), or comic stooges such as Chocolat. *Ex. 4:13* itself depicts the rapid change from the clowns’ initial sentimentality of bars 63–69 until at bar 70 their joviality takes over completely, depicting both sides of the clowns’ character.


Interestingly, Debussy’s piano rolls from the summer of 1912 demonstrate all kinds of effects that are not in the score, as he appeared to take a much freer attitude with the musical text, particularly the rhythmic exactitude of the ‘Minstrels’ and ‘Golliwog’s cakewalk’. Whether this was due to improvisatory interpretation, ‘digitization’ or the consistency of soft notes on the machine is unknown.⁴⁴⁷ The sentimental feeling of *Minstrels* – particularly its

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⁴⁴⁷ Jed Distler, [www.classictoday.com › review › ‘Debussy Piano Rolls’, Arkive Music (CD: Classics Today)](https://www.classictoday.com/cover/11567) See Peter Jost, *Debussy in Urtext: Part 3 Debussy’s recordings of his piano music* (Posted on YouTube, May 21st 2018). He comments that the rolls are: ‘a kind of snapshot. The next day, Debussy would have played the same piece in different shades.’
ending, was sometimes referenced as ‘old time Broadway song,’ as sensuous music seems to oscillate with the earlier jolliness of its circus performers.

Although there has been some research into Debussy’s entertainment pieces, their slant has usually been towards socio-political questions and the topical subject of racial stereotyping. This thesis is concerned with the interdisciplinary questions of Debussy’s music and its visual counterparts and influences and has perhaps uncovered some previously unresearched context, particularly that connected with the artists he knew.

**Toulouse Lautrec**

It is probable that Debussy knew the artist Toulouse Lautrec from the venue they both frequently inhabited to imbibe both drink and atmosphere, Reynold’s, where Lautrec recorded Chocolat dancing, yet their joint roles at the forefront of the musical and artistic worlds and their connection as innovators has not been considered within a research locale. This is both a consideration in terms of subject-matter and parallel techniques that I consider next.

Both Debussy and Lautrec had been involved with the *Revue Blanche*, set up in 1888 as the vehicle for Symbolist writers, artists and musicians, as well as frequenting Edmond Bailly’s esoteric bookshop. Certainly, Debussy must have been aware of Lautrec’s groundbreaking evocation of Montmartre, where he became the greatest chronicler of all, occupying a unique position as confidante of chorus girls and humorous social commentator, as well as launching himself as a painter of the popular Cirque Fernando. Debussy’s wish was to portray this exhilarating night-life in sound, mirroring the excitement of the artistic world. As new visual technologies accompanied the scientific and cultural developments in Paris, boundaries between painting and drawing and other art work shifted, and different areas of visual advancement such as the growth of poster art and advertisements prospered, aided by the vision of Lautrec’s modern art of Post-Impressionism and capturing the truths of contemporary life.

The large painting from 1887–1888, *The Equestrienne*, (fig. 4:23), soon became Lautrec’s calling card, going on permanent display in October 1889 in the foyer (for which it may have

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450 See Lockspeiser’s *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, 136.
been commissioned) of the famous dance hall, the Moulin Rouge. His skewed perspective and cropped figures on the edges are said to have derived from Degas and from the Japanese prints that had become popular at this time.\textsuperscript{451} His limited colour palette and economy of form were also features that would recur in his 1890s lithographic prints, where a few well-placed lines would capture the mood of the picture and its incumbents in a pithy manner. 

_Equestrienne_ is notable for its absence of shadows, diagonal lines of composition and the special cut of its painted figures and ‘certain decorative arabesques.’\textsuperscript{452} The circus theme appeared constantly in Lautrec’s work. He had a passion for horses, and during the last years of the century there was a veritable craze for the circus, which also manifested itself in the literature of the day,\textsuperscript{453} as well as paintings by other artists such as Degas, Renoir and Seurat.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 4:23) Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, _Equestrienne_ (The equestrian, at the Cirque Fernando in Paris), 1887–1888, (Art Institute of Chicago).

\textsuperscript{451} Lautrec collected Japanese prints; their flatness, bold colours and simplified lines favouring his lithographic style. _Toulouse Lautrec_, The British Museum Press, (London, 2007).

\textsuperscript{452} See _Henri de Toulouse Lautrec: Gramercy Great Masters_ (New York: Avenel, Random House Publishing, 1995), 16. Lautrec met Vallotton, Bonnard and Vuillard at the home of the Natanson brothers, from _La Revue Blanche_, who were also influenced by the style of flowing lines.

As the ideal spectacle of high and low life the Cirque Fernando combined the glamour of the bareback rider together with the appeal of the elegant ringmaster and plaintive clown, and these elements were frequently used by the artist on tambourines—the hoop motif being of particular importance to emphasise movement. Despite the sketchy ‘unfinished’ appearance of these works, Lautrec succinctly captures the drama of such scenes, as he contorts his subjects and emphasises the centrifugal energy of the horse, in a similar fashion to Debussy’s short pieces (particularly the Préludes), in which he was often accused of ‘miniaturism’—despite having captured the realities of nature to perfection, but in a hitherto revolutionary way that accorded with people’s perceptions of the natural world, not the rules of the Conservatoire.

Again, in the painting at Figure 4:24, Lautrec’s At the Cirque Nouvelle, the Dancer and Five Stuffed Shirts, shows his skewed perspective, visual shorthand of the ‘Five Stuffed Shirts’, and particularly distinct arabesque of the dancer. The artist challenged composition, technique and even subject-matter, breaking down the hierarchical rules of painting by his evocation of colour using pencils, watercolours and pastels, as well as cardboard on occasion for the new format of posters and advertisements which he executed with long, thin brushstrokes. This feeling of movement and spontaneity can be compared directly, I contend, with Debussy’s similar wish for music to be purely suggestive as well, to flow naturally ‘above the tree-tops’. Whereas Toulouse-Lautrec’s style appeared sketch-like and incomplete, yet thoroughly realistic, Debussy’s piano music was possessed of a new fluidity that seemed to echo the impressions of nature in a far more realistic way than had previously been the case. In addition, his heightened sense of modal colour brought pieces to life, as did Lautrec’s vivid primary colours (see fig. 4:24), but left a tonal base beneath that was still discernible, used as a foundation upon which to greatly expand. This link in ethos between composer and artist and their ties to the Montmartre entertainment scene is not one that has been examined previously, yet there is a direct link between both subject matter and technical innovations that yielded similar effects in artist and composer.

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Debussy’s humorous pieces – works such as ‘Minstrels’ and ‘Golliwog’s cakewalk’ demonstrated a wry irony that was also at the heart of many of Lautrec’s paintings. Both sought to lay humanity bare in all its reality, the painter seeking to portray elegant articulated structures such as horses, dancers, mime artists, acrobats and tight-rope walkers that were a ‘rich store of energies and ornamentation’, whilst the composer sought a sonic equivalence of the entertainment industry in Paris – its coffee houses, dance halls and salons.

Debussy’s *La plus que lente*, *(The Slower than Slow)* a piano piece written in 1910, further testifies to the dissolute note that he was able to inject into this evocative miniature waltz – all the vogue in Paris, with its sarcastic reference to the popular *valse lente* of the day, by many minor French composers. With its unresolved dissonances, free modulations and flowing atmosphere, it seems to have been Debussy’s laconic reaction to the pervasive influence of the slow waltz in those social venues, where it was viewed as the epitome of decadence. Debussy however, in his sardonically humorous way, seems never have intended for his piece to be slow, indicating it should be played more flexibly, at

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456 Whether Claudel’s ‘La valse’ sculpture, which sat on Debussy’s mantelpiece was the impetus for this composition of energy, movement and line is unknown, but it certainly possesses the concrete qualities of the physical waltz in action.
Molto rubato con morbidezza (with much rubato, morbidly), playing it rather more quickly himself on a piano roll for the Welte-Mignon company in 1913. Whether he purposed his own playing to be more improvisatory than other performers playing the piece is unknown, but the implication of his ‘molto rubato’ scoring appears to suggest an intentional flexibility that would be totally in character. The syncopated rhythms and elasticity of melodic line also appear to point the way presciently towards the jazz age by developing new sonic possibilities, particularly with the use of ‘blue-tinted chords’ in the left hand.

Certain of Lautrec’s models were used repeatedly, the most famous being Jane Avril, (stage name) and as the artist adopted a more ‘concentrated’ style – the linear elements become even clearer – the curves of his figures prefiguring the Art Nouveau, the colours fuller and more varied, viewpoints seen through the eyes of particular spectators, and the audience often parodied as ‘stuffed shirts’ in ironical glimpses of bourgeois life. The lithograph of Jane Avril, au Jardin de Paris (fig. 4:25), captures the animated atmosphere at one of the most popular café-concerts in the Champs-Elysees, bringing the revelry of music and dancing to life. Its skewed perspective, looking past the musician’s ugly hands, its cropping and flattened forms and spatial fragmentation seem to propel the dancer out of the poster, but also emphasise her sensuality, juxtaposing the voluptuous figure of Avril against the double-bass player’s caricatured features, the beautiful against the grotesque. The silhouetted musician is also reminiscent of the shadow puppets that Debussy enjoyed.

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458 Tom Huizenga, ‘Claude Debussy Plays His Own Jazzy ‘La Plus Que Lente ...’ in www.npr.org>deceptive cadence
Jean-Louis Forain

Lautrec also admired Jean-Louis Forain – an artist whose watercolours, pastels and paintings particularly focused on popular entertainments in the fin de siècle, such as the racetrack, ballet, comic opera and busy cafés, these modernist themes and attention to light and colour making him famous in his day and doubtless Debussy was familiar with his work (see Political caricatures below). Forain was, however, also to paint street entertainment/circus-style events that represented his natural interest in the lot of contemporary women, encompassing both the Circus and Opéra, aspects enjoyed by the composer in his busy social life. Intimacy is the key to The Tight-Rope Walker (fig. 4:26). As well as the flecks of light picking out the faces of her admirers the tight rope artist is almost one of the crowd, hovering just above the patrons below.

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Forain was also fond of depicting life at the ballet, perhaps influenced by his friend Degas, (his *Tight-Rope Walker*, after all was very much in the vein of Degas’ *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, created in 1879), and frequently chose to place his figures in the wings or attending to their *toilette* before performing. Like Degas, he sought to capture intimate moments that would bring to life the ‘realities’ of a dancer’s spirit, as well as her vitality on the stage, an aspect that Debussy also sought to capture in his music. He was to compose the music for two ballets himself – *Khamma* (1912) and *Jeux* (1913), as well as the piano solo *Boite à joujoux*, the role of dance incorporating both sight and sound into a visual moving form being particularly important to the composer.
Georges Seurat

The Néo-Impressionniste Georges Seurat, also produced paintings featuring circuses, including a nocturnal scene *Parade du Cirque*, (see fig. 4:27), set in artificial light, which was his first depiction of popular entertainment at night. Its horizontal and vertical lines combined with a restrained violet/blue-grey palette against an orange and green contrast features a geometricized scene of immobile figures, somewhat reminiscent of Egyptian reliefs/frescoes. Using artificial light, the painter was able to liberate himself from the effects of light in nature, harmonising his colours and lines according to his own requirements to achieve ‘a certain effect of monotony’ in the night air, producing a ‘frieze’ in the *Pointilliste* style.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 4:27) Georges Seurat, *Parade du Cirque* (*Circus side-show*), 1887–1888 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

These same points are evident in *Le Chahut* (fig. 4:28) as well, dancers and musicians performing in the fevered atmosphere of a nightclub under its dim lights. The painting demonstrates similar muted colours to *Parade du Cirque*, demonstrating the shadowy intimacy of the night-club. Seurat was developing a ‘musical’ aesthetic at this time, which Signac was to carry on after his death, seeking new links with the musical world, because it

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was seen as the embodiment of a higher reality. Like his colleague, Signac was known as a painter who epitomised modern life, but in contrast to Seurat he sought to free the imagination more by liberating himself from the mere imitation of nature, a proposition that Debussy shared and appreciated only too well.

(Figure 4:28) Georges Seurat, *Le Chahut (The Furore)*, 1889–1890 Kröller- Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands

*Paul Signac*

In contrast to Seurat’s more serious purposefulness, Signac was the mouthpiece of *Pointilliste* Divisionism and was constantly attracted by new ideas. Sharing Debussy’s and Félix Fénéon’s interest in both science and Japanese prints, in 1890 Signac depicted the enigmatic personality of Fénéon against a circus kaleidoscope of kinetic energy, emanating from a continuous wheel of colour at the central point (see *fig. 4:29*). Both the background and the title to the painting – *Opus 217* – translated Signac’s understanding of Charles Henry’s ideas into the non-representational, almost abstract perception of colour and line whilst alluding to the musical qualities inherent in such a design, emphasizing the flattened, decorative poster style of Lautrec.

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462 A letter to his friend Chausson reveals that the Debussy ‘Festival’ the composer was involved with in Brussels, in February 1894, showcasing works such as *La Damoiselle élue* and the *Proses Lyriques*, also contained an exhibition of paintings by various artists including Signac, so Debussy must have known his work. In *DL*, 66, n. 3.
Both technically and as a source of subject matter, these painters – Lautrec, Forain, Seurat and Signac, therefore held common ideals with Debussy that transcended their individual arts and embodied the spirit of ‘modern life’ that was the epitome of the fin de siècle.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 4:29) Paul Signac: Opus 217. Against the enamel of a background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones and Colours, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890, (Museum of Modern Art, New York City).

**Political Caricatures**

Debussy’s other connection with Forain, however, was largely in the latter’s capacity as a caricaturist who worked at lampooning political figures for Le Figaro for over thirty years, and was especially renowned for his illustrations and commentary on major political stories such as the Dreyfus affair. He held certain anarchical ideals in common with Debussy, and his ability to link caustic words with images whilst commenting on the political and social mores of contemporary life made his work overwhelmingly popular in publications as diverse as The New York Herald to L’Assiette au beurre.

The poster below, Le Bon Feu, (fig. 4:30), shows a man and woman wrapped in blankets, standing near an empty fireplace, representing a campaign to supply older people, particularly, with wood or coal for heat during the winters of 1914–1916. In this instance it is possible to make a direct comparison with Debussy’s own heartfelt composition for his coal merchant, a piece only discovered in 2001. ‘Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon’, (‘Evenings lit by glowing coals’), was written by the composer during the winter of 1916–
1917, which had been very harsh, when the Debussy household had been fortunate to receive supplies of fuel. As a thank you (and in lieu of payment), the composer provided his coalman with a ‘beautifully written manuscript of this piece’, probably written in February/March of 1917. Debussy could therefore commiserate emotionally with such a sentiment as expressed visually by Forain.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 4:30) Jean-Louis Forain, *Le bon feu* 1914-1915-1916 *N’oubliez pas ceux qui ont froid* *(The Good Fire [Campaign] 1914-1915-1916. Don’t forget those who suffer from the cold)* Lithographic poster, 1916

A further politically engaged piece was Debussy’s venomous ‘war carol’, written for homeless children in December 1915 – *Noël des enfants qui n’ont plus de maison*, just prior to an operation he was having for cancer. It is a prayer on behalf of French children and orphans, their houses having been destroyed by the German invaders, and calls for vengeance

464 *We have no more houses!
The enemies have taken everything, everything taken, everything taken,
Even our little bed!
They burned the school and our master too,
They burned the church and Lord Jesus Christ...
on Christmas Day. Its setting is more of a protest song, with repetitive elements to stir the feelings of the French against the war by rousing their nationalist instincts. The hardship suffered by Parisians and Debussy’s own personal problems led to his very low spirits at this time, and the impossibility of his working.

**Leisure Activities**

Seurat’s new ‘divisionist’ techniques were integrated into a large painting made from studies of landscapes and people relaxing in the public park on the island of La Grande Jatte, near Asnières. Many spontaneous sketches went into its eventual make-up, as the painter either eliminated or intensified the processes which he intended for the work, in order to reach ‘the truth’.465 This drive to synthesize the landscape by systematic means that would heighten peoples’ visual perception technically resembled the highly organised form of Debussy’s pieces, which appeared spontaneous and improvisatory to the ear but were in fact rigorously constructed.466 Changes in instrumentation, orchestration and phrasing within a movement were identifiable by Debussy’s different coloured inks and pencils, which varied between each work, additions such as new melodic lines, inner voices, harmonies and extra bars or cuts being made to the original ink drafts, all with the aim of producing a freer, more natural-sounding piece of music. His heterorhythmic doublings, however, which added the characteristically textural effect of shimmering were frequently only added in the final autograph full scores, showing that the composer continually worked on these subtleties right until publication.467 This process of constant refinement to attain the musical nuances he sought accorded with Debussy’s practice of creating mentally before he ever put pen to paper, a method that was confirmed by his stepdaughter Dolly Bardac.468 Such precision and drive towards ‘perfectionism’ forms a parallel with Seurat’s own working methods, whose completion of a finished painting was similarly demanding. I have discovered that Debussy’s own techniques very much form a correlation with his compatriot’s methodical way of working.

466 See Roy Howat’s theory that the theory of Golden Section and series of proportional Fibonacci numbers was integral to Debussy’s compositional style, whether intentional or intuitively completed. In *DP*, ch. 1. Also see Marie Rolf, ‘Orchestral Manuscripts of Claude Debussy: 1892–1905’, *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (Autumn, 1984), 538–566.
468 Interview with Mme Gaston de Tinan (née Dolly Bardac, Paris, July 1982), *ibid*, 546.
The painter’s *Un dimanche après-midi à L’Île de la Grande Jatte* (A Sunday afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte) (fig. 4:31) was completed in 1885, to be exhibited early the following year. Seurat depicted upper-bourgeois ‘Paris at play’ as people enjoyed their leisure-time in this suburban park on an island in the Seine River. During several campaigns, beginning in 1884, he worked on painting layers of small horizontal brushstrokes of complementary colours that appeared as solid, luminous forms when seen at a distance. His highly systematic Pointilliste technique (see ch. III) distinguished him from the more intuitive approach to painting adopted by the Impressionists. Although Seurat embraced the subject matter of ‘modern life’ preferred by artists such as Monet and Renoir, he went beyond their concern for capturing life ‘in the moment’ and the instantaneous qualities of light in nature. Instead, he sought to evoke permanence by recalling the art of the past, especially Egyptian and Greek sculpture and even Italian Renaissance frescoes, aiming to capture the essential traits of modern people as if he was placing them on a frieze. Some contemporary critics, however, found Seurat’s figures to be less a nod to earlier art history than a commentary on the posturing and artificiality of modern Parisian society.

The final changes to *La Grande Jatte* were made in 1889, when the painter restretched the canvas in order to add a border of red, orange and blue dots that would provide a visual transition between the interior of the painting and his specially designed white frame. Again, these techniques form an analogy with Debussy’s own compositional art. His music sounded improvisational – it had a fluidity about it that encouraged contemporaries to view it as ‘Impressionistic’, but it was both deliberate and exact in its formulation, in its construction more like the precise work of the Néo-Impressionists.

Aspects of the composer’s subject-matter also indicate similar parallels – Debussy’s second series of *Fêtes galantes* from 1904 suggesting love poems set outdoors in a rural environment, were based on Paul Verlaine’s twenty-two poems representing scenes and pictures that were largely inspired by the paintings of Watteau. The term was especially created by the French Academy to cater for the artist’s new category of painting which featured variations on the theme of the fête champêtre, (country/rural entertainment), which evoked scenes of humans living in leisurely harmony with nature, akin to an Arcadian setting. Seurat’s sunny afternoon on *La Grande Jatte* was a modern version of people enjoying the parkland together, its conversation and leisure time in a natural setting that echoes Watteau’s
amorous backdrop for his fêtes galantes, particularly his 1717 work, the Embarkation from Cythère, and Debussy was particularly taken with these ideas.469

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 4:31) Georges Seurat - Un dimanche après-midi à l’Île de la Grande Jatte (A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte), 1884–1886 (The Art Institute of Chicago)

Cinematographic Innovations

The drive towards Modernism was apparent across all boundaries; magic shows, light and shadow displays and magic lantern shows were all popular draws, enticing people into the capital, and in this theatrical environment the early French cinematographers learned their trade, transferring their knowledge to moving picture production.470 By the 1890s, Louis Lumière had created the first ‘cinematographe’ that combined a moving-picture camera with a projector, creating mobility and flexibility. This was pertinent to Debussy because early ‘motion studies’ of the 1880s–1890s can be correlated with the popularity of the ombres

469 The third of his 1904 series was entitled Colloque sentimental – Sentimental Conversation, that may well have echoed his personal life at that time, since in the June of that year he left his marriage to Lily Texier in order to elope with Emma Bardac to Jersey.
470 From as early as the 1880s Eadweard Muybridge, a British photographer, had conducted a series of lectures revealing his ‘motion studies’ in the Paris salons, whereby a chain of photographs taken in quick succession were projected onto a screen enabling them to become a continuous moveable picture.
of contemporary Montmartre, and we may speculate that Debussy attended such ‘proto-cinematic spectacles’—those ‘shadow plays’ performed by Henri Rivière in the Chat Noir to piano accompaniment by Erik Satie, and possibly Debussy himself. The Théâtre d’Ombres, its décor painted or superimposed on glass and paper, with cut-outs that featured Japanese style puppets, was a forerunner of the moving picture. The fascination of early motion pictures, capturing everyday events, but in a totally new and different way, should be linked with Debussy’s capacity in being able to place familiar sonorities in original and unusual contexts, I maintain, such as his music de plein air. The composer sought a similar mobility for his music, and the camera’s potential for multiple perspectives linked Debussy with the freedom of cinematic techniques. As the graphic arts developed a broader base, music too moved beyond the concert halls and elitist salons to take up residence in the cabarets and café-concerts of Montmartre, where Debussy occasionally played the piano and participated fully in the bustling entertainment of the capital, being a particularly keen observer of Parisian street life and the music it fostered.

Concluding Remarks
During the fin de siècle, art and music converged in a welter of performance-based amusements that enchanted the Parisian public, of which Debussy was an enthusiastic contributor. In the art world, challenging perspectives, viewpoints and angles provided Toulouse-Lautrec, Seurat and others, with stimulating scenes to paint in the cafés, théâtres, circuses and music halls. The fashion for abrupt cropping of pictures was influenced by the growing success of photography and the climate for Japanese prints. The circus and music halls that artists sought to illustrate represented a loosening of form – this far more spontaneous subject-matter was also transitory, a symbol of modern life that had moved on from the set pieces of the earlier nineteenth century. Within the musical world, vernacular music became the epitome of Parisian entertainment, and technological advances meant that

471 Debussy mentions these in a letter to Paul-Jean Toulet dated 22nd January, 1908. These ‘Ombres chinoises’ by Toulet, short stories illustrated with woodcuts by Léone Georges, were contained in an issue of the Grand Revue for 10th December, 1907.
474 Debussy mentioned his liking for cafés frequently in his letters, such as one sent to Robert Godet on Christmas Day, 1889: ‘We went to the café Vachette of course, and Monsieur Jean Moréas took Schopenhauer under his protection…’ Trans. Nichols, DL, 28. Also DL, xv–xvi.
Debussy’s music was soon reciprocally to be enjoyed on piano rolls, rather than the need to attend a concert hall. For musicians too, the impetus was towards a freedom to evolve naturally, as I have shown in Debussy’s pieces, such as the ‘Golliwog’s Cakewalk’, ‘Minstrels’ and ‘General Lavine’, and in this parody of life as it existed in Montmartre. These truths enabled Debussy to appropriate different styles of music that proved both popular and humorous and seem to echo the reality that artists portrayed visually in their paintings. Debussy’s desire for freedom within his music enabled him to make equivalent innovations within his compositions, articulating analogous approaches that enabled him to capture the ‘realities’ of life in Paris at this time, in all of its visual vitality.

This is an aspect of Debussy’s work that has not been explored in any detail previously, nor with any reference to his counterparts in the artistic world. To date, this subject has not been addressed for commercial publications either, since these bodies are under printing restraints and expenses that curtail their ability to produce both pictures and the copious amount of background material involving the personalities I have mentioned. Because this is a thesis, unrestricted by commercial limitations for the reproduction of rights-protected imagery, I have been able to draw on far more background material, deepening this particular field of research between the musical and artistic worlds and enabling me to present many more pictures as well as a rich seam of information that ties this visual hinterland to Debussy’s character and compositions.

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475 Piano rolls were in mass production between 1896 and 2008, although they peaked in popularity between 1900–1927. Debussy used a Welte-Mignon reproducing piano to record a series of his own performances, recording fourteen pieces onto six rolls in Paris, on or before November 1st, 1913.
CHAPTER V

FRENCH SYMBOLISM: POETRY, PAINTING AND MUSIC

I am inventing a language that must necessarily burst forth from a very new poetics, that could be defined in a couple of words: *Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces.* …

Stéphane Mallarmé to Cazalis 1864

Symbolism was an important movement that held sway both in European literature and the visual arts from approximately 1885 to 1910. It was concerned with the interpretation of works of art, in which indirect meanings could be evoked by associations – or the perceptions of the ‘receiver’. Following on from the theories of Peirce discussed in Chapter II, one of the major modern commentators on Symbolism, Tzvetan Todorov, defines a symbol thus:

Whereas a ‘sign’ might be viewed as clear and unequivocal, a symbol is possessed of an inexhaustible character that can be indefinitely extended as a manifestation of ideas and meanings, whether direct or indirect…

Thus it is possible to conclude that meaning is no more than an association between ‘something present with something absent’, or the ‘signifier and signified’. Vladimir Jankélévitch also commented with regard to Debussy that:

Debussy gives a voice to the most imponderable and the most precarious, the most inconsistent and the most inexistent things of creation: a brief encounter and a light breath, a fleeting reminiscence which, like the shooting star, crosses the nocturnal space of memory, a reflection which trembles in the water, a breath of wind which passes through the evening air, a cloud in the sky.

Addressed in a somewhat more poetic manner, nevertheless these nebulous vibrations in the air – ‘fleeting reminiscences’ – were to be Debussy’s soundscape, and evoke the associations we draw between his music and visual correlations.

476 ‘J’invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d’une poétique très nouvelle, que je pourrais définir en ces deux mots : Peindre, non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit.’ Letter to Cazalis (a member of his circle), written October 1864. Mallarmé asserts poetry should be composed ‘not of words but of intentions’ and all the words ‘should float away before the sensations.’ Documents Stéphane Mallarmé : Correspondance avec Henri Cazalis 1826–1897, Lawrence A. Joseph and Carl Paul Barbier, (Paris : Nizet, 1977), 137. Also see Rosemary Lloyd, *Mallarmé: The Poet and his Circle* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 48.


The composer was to focus on this quality of mystère within his work, once commenting to a critic, ‘when will people respect our mystery, even to ourselves?’ Debussy’s quest for the mysterious, that which held hidden meanings or hinted at the otherworldly and mystical, was at the centre of his musical ethos. As Jann Pasler noted, ‘Remaining mysterious, after all, was a personal as well as a musical ideal’, and Debussy’s admiration for Turner focussed on this concept, whom he proclaimed as the ‘greatest creator of mystery in art’. In examining more recent analyses as to the various ideas on the nature of Symbolism, especially through the work of Todorov, I hope to throw light on Debussy’s connections with both French and Belgian Symbolism and present a more detailed viewpoint of these associations, aided by documents that were not previously available to writers on the subject, notably Debussy’s Correspondance published in 2005.

Although there has been a wealth of detailed literary study on the nature of Symbolism and Symbolist movements throughout the world, studies of Debussy’s connections with the movement have in general not engaged with either its essence or its diversity, and have frequently confused Belgian Symbolism with French, an aspect that is particularly important given that Debussy’s opera, Pelléas et Mélisande, with its psychological themes based on dream-like statis, was written by the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck. I therefore have separated out these differing strands, examining the divergent features of Belgian Symbolism in Chapter VII. By looking at the various ways both movements were extended into visual arts as well as music, I hope to provide a more focussed view than has previous literature on the subject.

This chapter therefore deals first with the advent of literary Symbolism in France, its diverse fusion of ideas throughout Europe, categorising its defining features – especially its distinction from Impressionism – a subject that occupied Debussy scholars for much of the twentieth century. The dilemma of distinguishing between the terms Symbolist and Impressionist in their application to Debussy’s music, and where the two coincide, has remained the preoccupation of critics and researchers throughout the last one hundred years. I

483 Claude Debussy, Correspondance eds. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). (Thereafter Csp.)
484 In literature, Symbolism was predominantly French, the poet Jean Moréas, putting forward his ideas in ‘Le Symbolisme’, in 1886, a manifesto that was published in the Figaro littéraire.
therefore make mention of both terms with regard to Debussy’s music, in order to shed light on the symbiotic relationship I discern between the two, since he obviously found both movements to be a stimulus to composition and found an expressive overlap between them. Having explored the impact of Impressionism on the composer’s music in Chapter II, however, this chapter and the next will deal predominantly with French and Belgian Symbolism, and their differing impact upon Debussy.

Clarifying exactly what Symbolism has meant within the art and musical worlds has been a contentious issue, particularly during the mid-twentieth century in its relationship to Impressionism. It has remained the concern of many researchers to distinguish between these two terms, especially since contemporaries often judged Debussy’s work to be Impressionistic, whereas other critics, notably those evaluating his work from a temporal distance, have sited Debussy’s music firmly in the Symbolist world. It would seem to me, however, that the two overlap, causing the ear to hear impressions often corresponding with the natural world – and making deductions based on the individual’s own experiences in the manner of applying Peircean significations to invoke meanings – but at the same time summoning up the hidden world of ideas, mystery and rêverie – particularly true in Pelléas. As Stefan Jarocinski sought to distinguish in his book Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism, the term ‘Musical Impressionism’ became widespread throughout the late nineteenth century, correlating the similarities between the arts, particularly Debussy’s use of harmony as ‘colour’ to express atmosphere, but conversely he noted: ‘Symbols and Symbolism have their origin in magic…whatever inspiration an artist may draw from nature and express in a work of art can direct men’s thoughts towards the supernatural’, towards mystère and ‘feelings’. As Jarocinski was to conclude, music is naturally the symbolic mode of ambiguity and suggestion, and Debussy used these characteristics to achieve an art-form that was naturally aligned with the aesthetics of the Symbolist poets, utilising his correspondances with different sensations that accorded with all the senses.

More recently, scholars such as Shearer West have argued that Impressionism and Symbolist art are quite distinct from one another, clarifying their techniques as follows:

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486 Stefan Jarocinski, Debussy IS.
487 Ibid, 26–27.
The Impressionist artist seeks to reproduce the optical effects of light, colour and landscape. The Symbolist artist, on the contrary, does not reproduce the phenomenal world but looks at nature through an emotional filter.\textsuperscript{488}

Transferred to the musical world, however, this distinction is not so clear-cut, being largely dependent on how the ear hears sonorous effects, and how individual sensory perceptions interpret them. By ornamenting the melodic line and removing the (Germanic) need for progression, as well as his use of modalities, Debussy’s harmonies were essentially static, his addition of sevenths, ninths and so on providing more generalized representations of moods and atmosphere that allowed for greater ambiguity and symbolic indeterminacy. These qualities naturally lend themselves to a merging of expressive effects and a blending of Impressionist and Symbolist perceptions.

\textit{Debussy’s Encounters with Literary Symbolism and its Exponents}

Was Debussy’s engagement with French poetic Symbolism therefore primarily a literary one, as argued by writers such as Stefan Jarocinski\textsuperscript{489} and Margaret Cobb\textsuperscript{490}? I stress the fact that it is necessary to approach musical Symbolism through its literary counterpart because it was through poetry that Debussy engaged with this movement from an early age, and met other Symbolists. However, Symbolism in the visual arts also arose out of literary Symbolism with which it had strong connections, for example in book illustrations such as those of Symbolist poetry (see figs. 5:1–5:2 for examples of George Barbier’s illustrations, heavily influenced by the linear style of the Art Deco, for Pierre Louÿs publication of the \textit{Chansons de Bilitis} in 1894. These sensual prose poems, unique ‘d’amour antiques’ were intensely Hellenistic, and drew on the theme of lesbian love.\textsuperscript{491}) Such elements are therefore central to my thesis, because Debussy was also connected to these visual works, and was an intimate of Louÿs. There is no doubt that because of this, Debussy would have been familiar with Barbier’s illustrations which, among book illustrations of the time, are of the highest order. Literature was thus the initial source of this implicative movement, as well as being the key to visual connections which developed in parallel to their literary equivalents. Whereas the term

\textsuperscript{488} Peter Palmer, ‘Lost Paradises: Music and the Aesthetics of Symbolism’, \textit{The Musical Times} Vol. 148, No. 1899 (Summer, 2007), 37–50. He represents the viewpoint that Symbolism is diametrically opposed to Impressionism, as articulated by Shearer West in \textit{The visual arts in Germany 1890–1937: utopia and despair} (Manchester & New York, 2000).

\textsuperscript{489} Jarocinski, \textit{Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism}.

\textsuperscript{490} Margaret G. Cobb, \textit{The Poetic Debussy: A Collection of His Song Texts and Selected Letters}, collected and annotated by Cobb. Trans. R. Miller (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1982).

\textsuperscript{491} Debussy’s incidental music to accompany the poems, written in 1901, is discussed later herein.
‘Impressionism’ was one that was entirely applicable to painting, not literature, it is important to note that Symbolism exchanged ideas across the entire artistic spectrum. Thus contemporary journalistic articles querying ‘Debussy, était-il impressionniste ou symboliste?’ can be discredited because their terms were not comparable, and apart from this, if such terminology were to be accepted, Debussy was without doubt both (see Chapter II).

(Figure 5:1) George Barbier, ‘La Chevelure,’ Illustration for an edition of Les Chansons de Bilitis, (The Songs of Bilitis) by Pierre Louÿs, 1894.
I define the composer’s main sources of stimuli within the poetic/literary world, arguing in turn the importance of Théodore de Banville, Verlaine and Mallarmé in enabling Debussy to produce Symbolist musical works of his own by utilizing their literary ideas and the visual ideas that flowed from them, with particular application to the themes of the *Commedia dell’arte* and Debussy’s *Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune*. I also demonstrate the import of Symbolist themes to Debussy’s attempts at writing pastiche Symbolist poetry, not for separate publication but as the text for his song-cycle, the *Proses Lyriques* of 1893, which have received little attention to date. The effect of the Pre-Raphaelite painters on the
composer’s early works is demonstrable, and later members of the Brotherhood, especially Burne-Jones, produced paintings which were often based on mediaeval myth and literary allusions which could be termed Symbolist, and certainly influenced continental Symbolist artists. To conclude, I briefly examine the Symbolist themes in Debussy’s Chansons de Bilitis and Nocturnes, as well as his predilection for the paintings of Gustave Moreau, and their link to Sirènes (third of the Nocturne series, 1898).

Literary correlations were directly relevant to Debussy because from his early twenties until his last years he set the work of various Symbolist poets as they sought to find the suggestive ‘inexpressible truths behind external appearances’; a medium that was ideally suited to Debussy’s intangible and improvisatory music. His poems and music may well have been written with some sort of staging in mind, deriving from the visuality of their poetry/musical connection – a concept that was of importance for Debussy at this stage.

Théodore de Banville
Debussy was particularly influenced during his early years by Banville and the musicality of his verse, his meticulous approach to rhyme and rhythm as exemplified in his Petit Traité de poésie française (1872). Banville himself was very keen on both theatre and painting, especially the artist Watteau, who portrayed figures from the Commedia dell’arte such as Pierrot, Columbine and Arlequin, in a genre of paintings known as Fêtes galantes.

Mme. Vasnier, Debussy’s paramour during these early years, was the driving force behind the love songs that the composer set and dedicated to her in the ‘Vasnier songbook’. He initially concentrated on the Cariatides, (not published until 1877 but hailing from Banville’s own adolescence much earlier), drawn to their Hellenic themes, and in 1882 produced his first song for Mme. Vasnier and her accompanying sopranos at Mme. Moreau-Sainti’s singing class, where he acted as pianist. In the same year Debussy’s first solo song was published, ‘Nuit d’étoiles’, (a setting of Banville’s ‘La Dernière Pensée de Weber’ from his collection Stalactites, 1846), with its abundant Watteauesque elements. The refrain –

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493 He was renowned for his technical virtuosity and wittiness. Also see Arthur B. Wenk, Claude Debussy and the Poets (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1976), 9. Bonheur recalls seeing Debussy at the Conservatoire with a book of Banville’s poems.
494 For a detailed summary of Debussy’s love affair, see Lockspeiser, Debussy: Volume 1, 1862–1902: His Life and Mind, 68–72.
495 Priestesses of Artemis, a band of female poets/singers.
speaking of ‘Nuit d’étoiles, / sous tes voiles, /Sous ta brise et tes parfums, / Triste lyre…/ Je rêve aux amours défuns…’ (‘starry skies, hidden veils and perfumes, a ‘sad lyre’… and the poet’s ‘dreams of a love now dead’) contains all that is necessary for a poignant Symbolist reading (see ex. 5:1).

The last verse, whose discourse speaks of a special fountain (so prescient of Pelléas), in an idealised landscape comparing his love’s blue eyes to the heavens, her breath to a rose, her eyes to the stars, revels in time gone past – Hellenic suggestions and melancholia – ‘amours défuns’. The ‘sad lyre’ (Triste lyre/ Qui soupire) is suggested by the strumming arpeggiated chords across both hands in una corda pianissimo, which alter at each refrain, akin to those Debussy uses in ‘Le Jet d’eau’, from Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire, in 1887–9.
Banville’s *Nuit d’étoiles* was prefaced by the Symbolist writer E.T.A. Hoffman’s, *Kater Murr*, depicting the beginning of a dream:

> I thought I was walking in a beautiful garden where gillyflowers and roses bloomed entangled together beneath dense, dark bushes, spreading their sweet fragrance through the air. A wonderful shimmering light, like moonshine, rose in music and song, and as it touched the trees and flowers with its golden glow they quivered with delight, the bushes rustled and the springs whispered with quiet, yearning sighs. However, then I realized that I myself was the song echoing through the garden, and as the glory of the notes faded so must I too pass away in painful melancholy!

This passage, emphasizing an alignment of musicality and ‘soul,’ allows the poem’s language to embody ‘the very condition it sought to suggest’ foregrounding… ‘an oscillation between sonority and signification,’ Julian Johnson surmises. It is the reason why Debussy sought a Symbolist reading for his songs and why they preoccupied him over a lifetime.

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It was Debussy’s predilection for Banville’s poems and Arcadian mythology, with its harmonious, unspoiled landscape that led him to *Diane au bois*, a ‘Comédie héroïque en deux actes’, a piece that Banville had published in 1864. The composer decided to set a scene from it for his first envoi from the Villa Médicis, since ‘it’s nothing at all like the usual poems set for ‘envois’…’ Even at this early stage, it is perceptible that the poem’s own indications for fading light were echoed in his score’s stage directions. The staging and lighting directions clarify that Debussy intended the play/poem as an opera or at the least, for it to have a visual impact in addition to the sonorous one. For example, Banville’s own disposition towards Symbolism and ‘colouring’ are detectable in episodes such as Eros ‘détachant la flûte pendant à son cou’, (‘detaching the flute suspended from his neck’, at bar 63), and later at bar 77 ‘Eros s'assied sur un banc de pierre, et joue sur la flûte de Silène un chant rêveur et passionné, auquel répond un bruit lointain de cors, presque étouffé. Puis il prête l'oreille et écoute attentivement’. (‘Eros sits on a stone bench and plays a dreamy and passionate melody on the flute of Silène, to which responds a distant, almost muted sound of horns. Then, he lends an ear and listens attentively’). At bar 146 Diana responds by running towards Eros’ flute, as if drawn hypnotically towards its sound – her seduction a combination of both sight and sound.

In his letter to Eugène Vasnier Debussy continues:

I don’t think that I’ll ever be able to cast my music in a rigid mould. I hasten to add I’m not talking about musical form, merely from the literary point of view. I would always rather deal with something where the passage of events is to some extent subordinated to a thorough and extended portrayal of human feelings. That way, I think, music can become more personal, more true to life; you can explore and refine your means of expression.

The ‘delicate atmosphere’ of *Diane*, its echoes of Watteau and ambiance of a dream-like ‘visible silence’, recalling the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, its imaginary landscape and reference to myth, were attributes that Debussy found compelling. The composer’s desire to portray in music Diane’s gradual submission to the desire of Eros,

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501 Prunières, 135, in Briscoe, 149–150.

502 ‘… Je crois que jamais je ne pourrais enfermer ma musique dans un moule trop correct – je me dépêche de vous dire que je ne parle pas de la forme musicale, c’est simplement à un point de vue littéraire. J’aimerais toujours mieux une chose ou en quelque sorte l’action sera sacrifiée à l’expression longuement poursuivive des sentiments d’âme, il me semble que là, la musique peut se faire plus humaine, plus vécue, que l’on peut creuser et raffiner les moyens de rendu’. Letter to Eugène Vasnier, dated 4th June, 1885. *Csp.* 29. Trans. Nichols, *DL*, 6–10.

503 See Richard Langham Smith, *DPR*, 100–102.
set within a dream-like landscape, ‘striving for a new artistic vision and technique’,
proved however to be technically too difficult a task. In a letter to Vasnier dated October 19th, 1886, he was to conclude that:

Having no precedent, I find myself having to invent new forms.

The subject gave Debussy the opportunity to express a wide range of inner feelings, but he was unable to articulate these expressive powers in the way he desired at the time. Eileen Souffrin mentions that it was Diane au bois, nevertheless, which marked a ‘turning point’ for Debussy in the literary sense. Soon afterwards, Debussy was to abandon the piece, although its references to musicality and the world of Hellenic and Roman mythology evoked later images in the world of other writers, in particular Mallarmé.

The seduction of nymphs and perhaps even Diane herself (goddess of chastity), led Debussy almost directly to the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, during 1892–94. William W. Austin was to discern the link between the Parnassian movement in French poetry and Symbolism, finding Diane au bois to be ‘among the chief sources of ideas, mood, and methods that went into Mallarmé’s Faune’. The setting and character of Diane with her phrases of ‘beautiful coolness’, were also to prefigure the character of the mysterious Mélisande in Pélleas.

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505 "Je me trouve dans l'obligation d'inventer de nouvelles formes", Prunières, 135, Briscoe, 149.
Banville was at the forefront of literary thought in France, proclaiming to *Le national* on June 17, 1872 that music and poetry should necessarily form an indissoluble unity: ‘Necessarily, inevitably, music will return to what it was in Greece and in the ancient Orient, the twin sister

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508 Taking its narrative from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, it recounts the fate of a young hunter Actaeon, who is transformed into a deer as he encounters the naked figure of the goddess Diana and her nymphs enjoying a woodland bath.
of poetry’. Other Banville poems such as *Les Roses*, *Pierrot* and *Aimons-Nous et dormons* (1881), all make use of Symbolist themes – the language of flowers and nymphs, the Pierrot clown, his sadness lit up by the ‘white moon’ and a love likened to ‘celestial lilies’ (see below).

Aimons-nous et dormons  
Et lorsque nos deux cœurs  
S’en iront aux sphères heureuses  
Où les célestes lys écloront sous nos pleurs,  
Alors, comme deux fleurs,  
Joignons nos lèvres amoureuses,  
Et tâchons d’épuiser  
La mort dans un baiser!  

(Let us love and sleep  
And when our two hearts  
Depart for the blessed spheres,  
Where celestial lilies will bloom beneath our tears,  
Then, like two flowers,  
Let us press our loving lips together,  
And try to exhaust  
Death with a kiss!)

These were each subjects that Debussy returned to in his piano and orchestral music, indicating the direction of his inspiration, and the self-containment of his dream and ‘remote’ love. The visuality of the *Commedia dell’arte*, peopled by stock characters from literary plays, was a central part to Debussy’s enjoyment of this genre and he was to harness Banville’s own *Fête galante* poem to music in 1882, indulging in a further Banville song, *Sérénade*, in the same year, in which Colombine teases Harlequin, who is full of unrequited desire for her.

Las! Colombine a fermé le volet,  
Et vainement le chasseur tend ses toiles,  
Car la fillette au doux esprit follet…  
Arlequin chante et gratte sa guitare.  

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512 ‘Alas! Columbine has closed the shutter, And the poacher has laid his traps in vain, For the sweet girl with her wild ways… Harlequin sings and scratches his guitar’. In *The Lieder Net Archive www.lieder.net*
Both of these settings involve guitar–strumming characterisations, evoking *commedia* characters that Debussy brought to life in the piano parts, the latter utilizing trilling vocalese to accent Mme Vasnier’s expertise in coloratura.

**Verlaine**

Paul Verlaine sought his own poetical form that was ‘De la musique avant toute chose’ (music above all else),\(^5\) by utilising rhyme, assonance, illusion and metaphor in his quest for the lyrical, outlining his theories in his *L’art poétique* in 1884. The English poet Arthur Symons, a keen follower of both Baudelaire and Verlaine, commented: ‘With Verlaine the sense of hearing and the sense of sight are almost interchangeable. He paints with sound and his line and atmosphere become music’.\(^5\)

Verlaine placed emphasis on the *correspondances* between words and sounds, instilling a vagueness and sense of mystery into his poems that echoed the abstraction of music. Heralding a certain freedom within his verse, stressing nuances rather than deliberate connections, Verlaine followed the Post-Impressionists’ conscious decision to subordinate line and colour to ‘effect’ – using harmonies and discords that expressed the musicality of a scene:

Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise
Or l’Indécis au Précis se joint…\(^5\)

(... Nothing is more precious than the grey song
That joins the uncertain to the precise).

Verlaine’s fleeting visual images created parallels between external reality and the affective responses of the mind, blurring distinctions between the outer and inner worlds. Nuances of language evoking feelings, dreams, voices overheard and musical instruments playing in the distance, engendering perceptions that were only half-seen and half-heard, summon up the realities of Peirce’s multi-levelled symbols of perception, that bring them to the surface of the human mind. As an example of this, within Verlaine’s poems there are many indexical ‘falling’ images within his words – falling leaves (*Sous les ramures chanteuses*) in ‘Mandoline’, falling rain (*Il pleure dans mon cœur/Comme il pleut sur la ville*), in ‘Il pleure dans mon cœur’, falling tresses/*your hair’s dark flow … puis le Styx/De tes cheveux sombre*, in ‘Sérénade’, memories beating down *Tous mes souvenirs s’abattent sur*

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\(^{5}\) Paul Verlaine, ‘De la musique avant toute chose’ first line from his poem, *L’art poétique* which states the rules for creating modern poems, embodying those rules in its very form.


moi, in ‘Le Rossignol’ – as well as less tangible motives like ‘It is languorous ecstasy’, C’est l’extase langoureuse/C’est la fatigue amoureuse⁵¹⁶ in the poem of the same name – all of which are connected to Debussy by visual imagery which is then translated into the musical motives that he uses of descending harmonies – qualisigns that evoke these pictures in our minds through iconic meanings. C’est l’extase langoureuse illustrates this point precisely at bars 3–5 and 24–27 with descending chromatic phrases and diminuendo dynamics, as does his song about the nightingale Le Rossignol qui, du haut d’une branche (see exs. 5:2–5:3), whose first line L’ombre des arbres dans la riviè re embrumée (The shadow of the trees in the misty river) is accompanied by a rising and falling triplet motive. Both of these examples, particularly the former, are clear instances of Peirce’s icon parallel, where Debussy uses directions such as Lent et caressant and sempre dolcissimo (ex. 5:2), as directions to evoke feelings, and his repeated bars (7 and 8 in the piano part), to suggest languor. As in Jet d’eau (1890), Debussy also changes the harmonies for the repetition of verses, (see the C sharp minor chords at bars 3–4, B Dom. 7th, and their variable at bar 20, E M 7th) to provide different ‘colours’.

This is a good example of the aforementioned Arthur Symons quotation (n. 37), showing how Debussy evokes objects and colours within this song, as well as motion, and how he is constantly evoking sounds – both natural and musical.

⁵¹⁶ See these poems at The Lieder Net Archive www.lieder.net
Claude Debussy

Paul Verlaine

English words by M. D. Calvocoressi

Le som dans le plaisir
Seep't in a teeline

Copyright by E. Fournet 1909
Rédacts Jean Joubert, 44, Rue de Calais, Paris E. 152 T F. 4

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(Example 5:2) Debussy, setting of Paul Verlaine’s poem no. 1, ‘C’est l’extase langoureuse’ (‘It is languorous ecstasy’), *Ariettes oubliées, (Forgotten Airs)*, 1887.
(Example 5:3) Debussy, setting of Verlaine’s poem ‘Le Rossignol qui, du haut d’une branche’, (The nightingale, which, from the top of the branch…) no. 3 Ariettes oubliées, (Forgotten Airs), 1887.517

Verlaine’s early Poèmes saturniens dealt with love and sensuality, whilst later poems explored Grecian myths, nymphs and fauns, as well as the Commedia dell’arte, as the poet was very keen to reflect the art of Watteau. Debussy uses the same title for his later song sets, Fête galantes I (1891) and Fête galantes II (1903), but this time with Verlaine’s poems. The fact that he used symbols to create parallels ‘between external reality and the succession of

517 These examples, together with ‘Il pleure dans mon cœur’ were from Debussy’s Ariettes oubliées of 1903, and use texts that originated from Verlaine’s Romances sans paroles of 1874, which had been based on the poet’s homosexual relationship with Arthur Rimbaud that had wreaked havoc in his personal life.
affective responses that make up much of our inner life’, as Peirce’s chaining process suggests (see Chapter I), made his poems particularly suited to Debussy’s musical correspondences. Later, Mallarmé extolled Verlaine’s abilities in his important essay *Music and Letters* of 1894 as one of the main examples of a poet who was able to make his art an increasingly individualized mode of expression. In both, their use of visual ‘signs’ enabled Debussy to create songs with visual counterparts, using all the musical means at his disposal.

By 1891, Debussy’s settings of ‘Fantoches’, ‘En sourdine’ and ‘Clair de lune,’ each contained musical material from earlier versions, but had become far more adventurous harmonically, blending Debussyan modality and chromaticism together. ‘En sourdine’ (‘Muted’) uses Wagner’s Tristan chord (E#, B, D#, G#) substantially, perhaps to point up the theme of ‘profound but doomed love’ as in Watteau’s intimately visualised ‘pares silencieux’ (see fig. 5:4 below), depicting an outdoor gathering communing with nature that contemporaries would have viewed as a utopian image of love and sociability, but an unattainable ideal.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 5:4) Antoine Watteau, *Fête Galante in a wooded landscape*, 1719–21 (The Wallace Collection: London).

519 This text considers the ‘experimentation of contemporary poets with traditional verse structure’, where the “idea” is named as “the musicality of all things” (la musicalité de tout) It considers ‘the dimension of human possibility (tout l’acte disponible), that is limited to the relations between things, and the perception of the relations between things, as they become signs for each other.’ Mark Hewson, ‘The Mystery of the Moderns: The Historical Location of Mallarmé’s Poetics.’ *Affirmations: of the modern*, 5(1), 55–76. 2017.
520 Langham Smith in Mawer (ed.), ‘Advancing to maturity: the various settings of Verlaine’s Fêtes galantes’, *HI*. 

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There is a link here between the tropes of silence in Verlaine and the Debussy/Maeterlinck instances that are later revealed in Pelléas, notably in Act II scene I, where Pelléas remarks after a long conversation to Mélisande that ‘il y a toujours un silence extraordinaire’, that is felt as well as seen in the conversational style of the libretto as a ‘remoteness’/‘detachment’.

Declining motives and arabesques of the nightingale signifying the lovers’ despair in ‘En sourdine,’ also feature within Debussy’s opera (see Chapter VI).

‘Fantoches’, in contrast, embodies the musical noise of commedia entertainers, their strummed instruments within the poem providing visual representations within the music. The third piece, ‘Clair de lune’ (ex. 5:4) identifies the ‘soul’ (of the poet) directly with the landscape of the fête galante, in its very first line (see below), its lutes, ‘masquerades and dancers’ bringing our perceptions of the scene to life by the sad and beautiful light of the moon.

Debussy’s song to Clair de lune (stanza 1 below), utilizes the symbols from Verlaine’s poem in a characteristically intricate way. The first two bars, with a repetitive bass rhythm and treble octave chords with leaning appoggiaturas, immediately evokes the sound of dancing in the distance (pp, très doux), the effect of which is continued in a syncopated bass line at bars 5–6, which is reiterated throughout most of the second verse before a more complex intermediary at bars 19–20 (‘Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune’, / And their song mingles with the light of the moon), issues in the last verse, pointing up the musical line intermingling with the visual symbol. The initial voice part is largely declamatory, as is the reference to the lute strumming, but later sadness is drawn out in a long C natural, set against the G sharp minor key, with ‘pointed’ libretto and downward sloping notes on ‘fantasques’ to evoke sorrow, just as the allusions to their song ‘mingl(ing) with the sight of the moon’ are given an ascending phrase by the composer. The third verse gives Debussy ample opportunity to marry his music to Verlaine’s visual symbols – ‘birds dreaming in the trees’ are given 11-note arpeggiated runs up the keyboard, with S-shaped curving phrase marks, ‘sobbing fountains’ are revealed in tinkling groups of semiquavers in the higher reaches of the keyboard, before dying away (morendo) in a gradual descent as the water is perceived to run on.
Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.  

(Your soul is a chosen landscape
Where charming masquerades and dancers are promenading,
Playing the lute and dancing, and almost
Sad beneath their fantastic disguises)

523 The Lieder Net Archive www.lieder.net

These pieces seem to bring Watteau’s dreamworld to life in their use of a personalized language that speaks directly to the reader/listener, a feature that extends even further in the second set of Debussy’s fêtes-galantes subjects, published by Durand in 1904–Les Ingénus, (The Innocents), probably selected for its reference to ‘inexperienced men’ in love,

and its potential for emotional development. In addition, the suggestibility of high heels, evoked in Watteau’s paintings such as *Diane le bain* and *L’Indescret*, reveal an eighteenth-century pre-occupation with foot-fetishism, suggests David Kunzle, which seems to have encouraged a close ‘reading’ of these images by Verlaine (see below).

Les hauts talons luttaient avec les longues jupes,
En sorte que, selon le terrain et le vent,
Parfois luisaient des bas de jambes, trop souvent
Interceptés! – et nous aimions ce jeu de dupes.

Debussy’s transcription of this scene into a musical setting, where the young *beaux* receive unforeseen encouragement from their *belles*, is clearly referenced within the song, where Debussy slows the music by half (*le double moins vite*, see ex. 5:5) to mirror the languorous ‘dream’, finishing inconclusively on a wholetone triad (F, A, D flat): ‘The pretty girls, leaning dreamily on our arms, /Then murmured such fair-seeming words, /That, ever since, our startled souls have trembled.’ Whether from anticipation of what is to come or ‘des mots di spécieux,’ (special words), we are left to wonder, but these alignments of words and sounds provoke our perceptions towards potentially suggestive outcomes that are highly visual, as do other scenarios in this selection, ‘Le Faune’ and ‘Colloque sentimental’, both highlighting the ‘parcs’ of doomed lovers.

Although Debussy composed eighty-seven songs in total, many of which were never published during his lifetime, they spanned his entire compositional life, ranging from 1882 to 1915, and so must count as an important part of his inspirational stimuli. This love for poetry was mentioned frequently by his contemporaries such as Pierre Lalo, who noted:

For what we have enjoyed in Mr. Debussy is his feeling for poetry, the very essence of his sensitivity and of his mind.

Other song settings by Debussy included his ‘Recueillement’ (‘Meditation’) from *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*, 1890, where already the composer’s partiality for a consummate pairing of the auditory and visual aspects of his craft had been evident. Denis Herlin specifies

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524 (High heels struggled with long skirts, /So that, depending on contour and wind, /Glimpses of leg would sometimes gleam, too often/ Snatched from view! – and we loved this foolish play). Richard Stokes, trans. *The Lieder Net Archive* www.lieder.net

525 See Jacques-Henry Bornecque, in *HI*.

526 Ibid.

that the cover of its first edition was printed on simulated parchment and the title lettering was in blue, golden yellow and brown. Each song began on a fresh page, spaciously set, so that the edition was one ‘whose physical and visual properties well demonstrate the aesthetic delicacy and refinement that preoccupied Debussy throughout his life’.  


Mallarmé was constantly refining and challenging the representational function of language yet maintaining its relationship with the visual image and emphasising symbolic values. He recognised that musical effects were profoundly important because they provided the ideal fulfilment of the work as a symbol – ‘a liquid element, perpetually in motion and metamorphosis, and containing an infinity of possible forms.’ He was an admirer of Banville, attracted both by his Hellenic subjects and by the versification of the Parnassians that Banville perpetuated in 1872, in his reference work, *Le Petit traité de poésie française*. Mallarmé addressed some poems to him in the form of an Acte en vers from 1865, under the title *Monologue d’un faune*, and then in 1875 *Improvisation d’un faune*, but both went unpublished. These were very much in the genre of Banville’s *Commedia* works and also borrowed some aspects from *Diane au bois*, featuring his comedic design with regard to the seduction of nymphs and the challenge of Eros in deflowering Diane, goddess of hunting and chastity.

The classical nature of Mallarmé’s play *L’après-midi d’un faune*, was based on this Acte en vers, but was only accepted in its final version and printed as the Églogue in 1876, with Manet’s line drawings as accompaniment (see fig.5:5), since artist and poet were particularly close friends. It remains debatable as to whether it was intended to be acted or recited, since only an early version had stage directions and it was twice rejected as a theatrical work, but its visuality appears to have been recognized. Certainly when Debussy’s music was announced as an ‘Éclogue, Interludes and Paraphrase finale’, alluding to a pastoral theme, it may have indicated some type of staged performance in the composer’s mind, and hence a visual portrayal of its subject-matter, and ‘indications of orchestration within the piano accompaniment’ may hint at an ‘operatic essay’, although its style is closer to one of Debussy’s earlier mélodies discerns William W. Austin.

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532 See n. 43.
533 These referred to short writings in any genre, including parts of a poetic sequence, hailing originally from Ancient Greece. Within music they were applied to pastoral themes, notably used by one of Debussy’s inspirations, Franz Liszt.
In any case, Manet’s hand-tinted drawings in pink, (the paper, typography, spacing, and punctuation also accorded special consideration), were very probably known by Debussy as he was so closely involved with Mallarmé’s text, which was an ideal vehicle for Debussy’s insinuating musical style. As David J. Code articulates, from the first time Debussy read Mallarmé closely and in detail, he was set on ‘achieving a sophisticated compositional equivalent of the aesthetic principles pursued by the poet and his lyric protagonist, the faun’, despite earlier opinions that this was not the case.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 5:5) Édouard Manet’s wood-engraving of the nymphs in Stéphane Mallarmé's *L’Après-midi d’un faune*, 1876.

*Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*

Debussy appears to have met Mallarmé via his friendship with Ernest Chausson, who had suggested several of his works be played at a private concert, including the *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*. Subsequently, the playwright Ferdinand Hérod, who had formed a favourable impression of these works, was instrumental in ‘allowing Debussy to meet one of the most eminent and influential writers of his time… Stéphane Mallarmé… Hérod spoke to Mallarmé of ‘his friend Debussy,’ the composer organized a new audition of his five mélodies for the poet, and then began to attend his Tuesdays in 1890’. From these

537 ‘Permettre à Debussy de faire la connaissance d’un des écrivains les plus éminents et les plus influents de son époque… Stéphane Mallarmé… Hérod parle à Mallarmé de ‘son ami Debussy,’ le compositeur organise une nouvelle audition de ses cinq mélodies à l’intention du poète, puis il se met à fréquenter ses mardis à 1890’.
impressions it was decided that they would collaborate together on the *Prélude de l’après-midi d’un faune*.

It seems probable that Debussy and Mallarmé had discussed the possibilities of adding music to *L’après-midi d’un faune* by 1892, apart from which this was the date that Debussy wrote on his manuscript at the beginning. The Hellenic soundscape of Ancient Greece is evoked by the use of a special flute prélude, horns, and, as Richard Langham Smith suggests, a harp imitating the lyre—the latter eliciting the feeling of classical odes. This melodious landscape is repeated by Debussy at the beginning of his *Prélude*, taking obvious inspiration from both Banville and Mallarmé; in fact the first short score to *Diane au bois* contains scenic indications involving Eros and his flute as well as lighting instructions to fade out the light, which indicate that this *Acte en vers* was intended as a dramatic stage presentation, and therefore highly visual.\(^5\)

Debussy and Mallarmé probably intended the *Prélude* as the same, with sectional interludes of music, or even, as Richard Langham Smith postulates in *L’art de Préluder*, it was a ‘*Prélude*’ in which the faune improvises on his flute in preparation for pleasures to come. One thing is clear—the flute itself is used as the visible mode of suggestibility in that it seduces *Diane* in Banville’s piece, whereas in *Faune* it seduces nymphs when it is played. As William W. Austin confirms, ‘Banville’s *Diane* was among the chief sources of ideas, moods, and methods that went into Mallarme's *Faune*’,\(^5\) and thus by implication we can be assured that the visuality of the poets and their taste for Watteau, Corot and Manet paintings in the *Commedia dell’Arte* style was taken up by Debussy in his work on the *Faune Prélude*.

Mallarmé certainly reinforced the musical content of the three versions of the poem and greatly appreciated the final version of Debussy's work and its illustrative qualities. He decreed after the premiere that:

I have just come out of the concert, deeply moved. The marvel! Your illustration of *The Afternoon of a Faun*, presents a dissonance with my text only by going much further, really, into nostalgia and into light, with finesse, with sensuality, with richness. I press your hand admiringly, Debussy. Yours, Stéphane Mallarmé.\(^5\)

François de Médicis, *La Maturation artistique de Debussy dans son contexte historique* (1884–1902.) (Brepols, Turnhout, MMXX) 165–166. My trans. Also see Peter Avis, ‘*Claude Debussy: (1862–1918), The Complete Music for Two Pianos*’, on Hyperion CDH55014, Released May, 1999. Avis documents that ‘Debussy spent the summer of 1915 with his wife at Mon Coin, a house in Pourville, near Dieppe, owned by the playwright Ferdinand Hérold whom Debussy had met at Mallarme’s soirées.’


William W. Austin, ‘Prélude to ‘The afternoon of a faun’, *Norton Critical Score*.\(^5\)

It was to be 1912 however, before the *Faune* was made visible in the ballet of the same name. In his *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1892), Debussy’s music was able to capture the spirit of the poet’s ideas. The impact of Léon Bakst’s staging, lighting and shadows acted as a visual backdrop to the faun’s reverie and music making, whilst Debussy’s score evoked a sense of mystery and detachment. The importance of the flute arabesque (played by the faun) was taken from ‘A single line of sound, aloof, disinterested’ (‘Une sonore, vaine et monotone ligne’)⁵⁴¹ that occurs at the start of the poem, and from which all else flows (see ex.5:6, depicting the first four bars of the piece), followed by extended variations. The use of the flute as this drawn-out line or ‘arabesque,’ acting as a new form of undulating melodic contour, was a means of ornamentation that gave the piece its structural cohesion as well as its ‘decorative’ qualities.

(Example 5:6) Debussy, *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1892), bars 1–4

*Nijinsky’s ballet for the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*

Choreographed by Nijinsky as a possible new production for Diaghilev’s *Ballet Russes*, Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* was first performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris on 29th May 1912, featuring Debussy’s music as the *Prélude*, with Nijinsky in the title role. The Jewish-Russian artist Léon Bakst was responsible for the opulent and innovative designs for costumes and sets, based on Ancient Greek vases and Egyptian frescoes he had observed in the Louvre. These provided inspiration for the ballet staging that presented the dancers as part of a tableau, moving in profile like a bas relief and dancing with bare feet, in a stylised effect that resembled Ancient Greece. Conceptually, the two-dimensional stylised postures with slow pacing and pauses managed to evoke the feeling of Greek antiquity very well, with Nijinsky perfectly resembling the satyr he had seen in the museum, wearing a cream body suit with brown piebald patches and a short tail, a cap with golden hair surrounding two golden horns, and ears extended with wax to make the overall

⁵⁴¹ Debussy took this line directly from the poem *L’après midi d’un faune*. See Selected works of Stéphane Mallarmé in French. (Paris: Alphonse Derenne), 1876.
effect more animalistic. He choreographed and danced the main part of the Faune himself in the 12-minute performance – its eroticism and scenes of graphic sexual desire leading to a controversial reception for the piece, and its Modernist content labelled frivolous and decadent. Some critics were more empathic however. Louis Schneider perhaps wrote the most compelling critique of Nijinsky’s ballet and its complementary nature to Debussy’s music, fusing the visual and musical together in a simultaneous coherence reminiscent of Peircian perceptions by observing that:

Nijinsky adopted his choreography from Debussy’s music with absolute sincerity, after having pondered the subject for a long time and soaked up the atmosphere of the scene painted by the composer… Nijinsky obtained… a more intimate, more perfect fusion, a more direct cohesion between the various aspects of the music and the bodily movements that commented on it. 542

Another critic, Louis Vuillermin, writing for Comœdia on May 30th 1912, maintained: ‘As for myself, I confess to never having enjoyed so much a perfect union of dançé and music, such a complete joy to the eye and the ear’. 543 Perhaps most notably in aligning the visual arts with the composer’s music, a letter written to Nijinsky by Debussy in 1913, after a successful London run of Faune, praises the choreographer’s ‘genius’ in marrying the two arts in ‘a new dimension of beauty’ that allied the visual with music’s expressive capabilities, 544 on the cusp of a new Modernism. An intimate link with Debussy’s music seems to have been achieved, tying music and dance together in a synthesis of both visual and sonorous landscapes – a new kind of beauté, if you will, its visuality indicative of Debussy’s empathy for the ballet and a central feature of the choreography.

It was from the book, however, produced in 1914, that we possess our greatest source of pictorial representations of L’après midi. The American/French artist Baron Adolf de Meyer made a remarkable series of photographs related to the Ballet Russes production in 1912. Thirty of these were published as collotypes (photomechanical ink prints) in a 1914 edition of one thousand luxurious handcrafted books, using thin Japanese papers as ‘a tactile echo of the diaphanous costumes (designed by Léon Bakst), and the heavily manipulated negatives


enshrouded the angular figures in a dreamlike haze’. The images seem to capture the very rhythm and gesture of the Faune in action (see photos at figs. 5:6–5:8 below). These images clearly provoke the fantastical aspects of Debussy’s music allied to the dreamlike account of Mallarmé’s poetry.

The other main visual source for L’après-midi was the set designs, completed by Léon Bakst, particularly the curtain (fig. 5:10). Bakst was already considered an expert on the ancient world when he arrived in Paris in 1909, which saw him designing multiple stage sets for Diaghilev’s new ballet company, such as Scheherazade (1910), Le Spectre de la Rose (1911), and Daphnis et Chloé (1912), as well as L’après-midi d’un faune, also of 1912. He was determined to impress his own ideas on the ballet, bringing Greek ideas into a modern idiom, and it seems that he influenced both Diaghilev and Nijinsky in using the angular movements that he had come across during his visits to Greece in 1909, even so far as assisting at rehearsals. The frieze-like effect of the dancers on a narrow stage was chosen to evoke the ‘scene in relief,’ flattened figures that the trio had observed on the side of Greek vases, in order to create a totally unified theatrical piece.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 5:6) Adolf De Meyer, Nijinsky: Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 1912.

545 See Alamy.com for details of original book and photographs. Only seven copies are known, one residing in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
(Figure 5:7) De Meyer, Nijinsky crouching on the Nymph’s discarded veil, in Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 1912.

(Figure 5:8) De Meyer, Nijinsky as the faune. Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, 1912.
According to Charles S. Mayer’s article, ‘The Influence of Léon Bakst on Choreography’, it seems that Bakst equated his designs for the ballet with the creation of a painting, and the sequences of the story with a selection of pictures to evoke its expression, unified by Debussy’s interrelated musical rhythms, as well as the colourful harmonies of staging and costumes. Thus Bakst composed his décor, oriented his lines and chose colours and motives for his designs ‘so that at any given moment in the ballet the scene would represent a perfect optical unity, or that frame in the perfectly moving painting that he had referred to.’ It was in *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* that Bakst brought all these concepts to fruition, the Faun and Nymphs almost brought into an abstract form, that accorded with a completeness that synchronised dance, painting and music into a whole. Debussy’s *Prélude* was therefore an inimitable part of the ballet from its conception through to its performance and reception, advancing this ideal of a moving painting.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 5:9) Programme Illustration for *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* by Stéphane Mallarmé, featuring Music by Debussy, Choreography by Nijinsky, Dancing by Ballets Russes on 29th May, 1912, at Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris.

547 Mayer, 139.
(Figure 5:10) Léon Bakst: Design for Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, 1912 (National Museum of Modern Art, Paris).

(Figure 5:11) Bakst: Photo of performance of Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, as the Faune engages in erotic eye contact with the last Nymph.
Bakst’s staging and costumes drew on the sinuous designs of the Art Nouveau, Fauvism and Orientalism, the muted greens, browns and greys of the backcloth evoking woodland and mirroring the fluidity of Debussy’s music. The Nymphs moved in parallel lines across the stage as if in a frieze— with **stylized, angular postures that emphasized stillness in the music**. They wore white pleated muslin, stencilled in either blue or red patterns of ornamented lines, checks and leaves, so that they stood out against the scenery (figs. 5:12–5:13). **Long golden rope hung in strands for their hair, and they were given pink eyes and rouged toes.**

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figures 5:12–5:13) Bakst : Design for Nymphs in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune.*

George Barbier’s paintings of Nijinsky as the Faun also date from this period, a portfolio of illustrations from 1913, *Designs on the Dances of Vaslav Nijinsky*, propelling him into the limelight, whence he produced many pictures of the dancer and Ballet Russes, often in *Art Deco* design. Its *éditions deluxe* became very popular in both London and Paris during the 1910–1920s era. Two of his highly stylized plates for *Faune* follow (figs. 5:14–5:15).
(Figure 5:14) George Barbier, Designs on the Dances of Vaslav Nijinsky, Barbier’s first illustrated book, were published in 1913.

(Figure 5:15) George Barbier, Drawing of Vaslav Nijinsky, 1913. The Faune languorously moves beneath the Nymphs’ veil.
Après Le Faune

Shared aesthetic concerns gave both Debussy’s and Mallarmé’s work a visual component, not least because, like Baudelaire, Mallarmé was close to a number of artists, and at Manet’s studio he also met and befriended Monet, Degas, Renoir and Berthe Morisot. In this way, poetry was bound to both art and music, and Mallarmé, like Baudelaire, wrote various articles on painting. Although Debussy mixed with other avant-garde writers and artists at the homes of his friends the Chaussons and at Pierre Louys, it was Mallarmé’s Mardis, at 89 Rue de Rome that provided real mental stimulation and contained the summit of Parisian intellectual society. Near the end of his life, in 1913, it was to his friend that Debussy composed and dedicated his last cycle of mélodies for voice and piano, Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé

Debussy’s ‘Proses Lyriques’

Debussy’s lifelong love of poetry and its proximity to his day-to-day life is borne out by developments he made in the texts he wrote himself for five songs, the Proses Lyriques, written during 1892–1893, what François Lesure calls ‘les années bohèmes’ (the bohemian years). Using ‘vers libre’ (free verse), in order to avoid any metric restraints, they deal with Symbolist themes – De Rêve, (Of Dreams), de Grève, (Of Strands), De Fleurs (Of Flowers) and De Soir (Of Evening). They were conceived at the same time as Debussy was completing his Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, as well as beginning work on Pelléas, and in these mélodies he drew nearer to his own vision for music and verse. Their coversheet engraved by E. Fromont, (Parisian publishers), reveals in a continuous pattern of Art Nouveau butterflies and intertwining plant forms, arabesque-style, in muted greens (see fig 5:16), the process of which Debussy would have been thoroughly involved with, since his Correspondance documents several such occasions. For example, his letter to Durand in August 1903 makes explicit suggestions for the lettering on the cover of the Estampes, 1903, particularly the ‘pale gold’ he desired, and on 6th August, 1908, reveals his exacting standards

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549 Although it seems that the first two had no titles originally, and were published in Entretiens politiques et littéraires, in December, 1892. The manuscripts for Numbers III and IV were dedicated to Madame E. Chausson and Madame M. A. Fontaine respectively. Also see Louis Laloy, La musique retrouvée 1902–1907 (Paris : Libraire Plon, 1928), 121.

550 Engraved by E. Fromont, Catalogue Debussy : la musique et les arts. Also see Mark DeVoto, Music and the Veil of Tonality (Pendragon Press, 2004), 19.
for *Children’s Corner*,\textsuperscript{551} proof of his concern to unify the cover with the content. Many artists also made music covers an important part of their profession at this time.

\*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 5:16) Claude Debussy, *Proses Lyriques*, 1895; Design for cover of first edition. Engraved by E. Fromont\textsuperscript{552} (Collection Philippe Entremont, in Catalogue *Debussy: La musique et les arts*, 2012)

The Symbolist influences in these poems are clearly evident. *De Rêve*, for example, begins with a comparison of the softness of a velvety black night and that of a woman’s enveloping body (see below and at ex. 5:7).

\begin{quote}
La nuit à des douceurs de femmes!
Et les vieux arbres, sous la lune d’or, songent
À celle qui vient de passer la tête emperlée,
Maintenant navrée!\textsuperscript{553}
\end{quote}

(The night has a woman’s softness!
And the old trees beneath the golden moon dream
Of her who has just gone by, her head bespangled,
Now broken-hearted!)

\textsuperscript{551} *Csp.* 769 and 1107. *DL*, 138 and 195. The 1890s were also an era when fancy covers became very popular among publishers.

\textsuperscript{552} See Herlin, trans. Peter Bloom, ‘From Debussy’s Studio: The Little-Known Autograph of *De rêve*’, 19.

As she goes past, ‘her head bespangled’ we are reminded of the Pre-Raphaelite painting by Edward Robert Hughes, nephew of the eminent Arthur Hughes, who worked closely with William Holman Hunt – a founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (see fig. 5:17). The artist produced numerous works inspired by literary themes and belonged to several prestigious art societies. He often worked with his uncle, Arthur Hughes, and was friends with many of his artistic contemporaries, including Edward Burne-Jones and Walter Crane. Perhaps it was a painting that brought images to Debussy’s mind, since he certainly knew of Holman Hunt via a French translation by Gabriel Sarrazin of Rossetti’s ‘Damozel’, in his Poètes modernes d’Angleterre (1883). It is therefore possible that he had come into contact with this image, particularly when one considers the Denis painting for the frontispiece of
Debussy’s *La Damoselle élue* (1850–1873), in which this image, too, is surrounded by a starry night (see Chapter VI). Debussy had composed this cantata (or ‘Poème lyrique’ as he called it), in 1887–1888, and it was first performed in Paris on 8th April, 1893, at the *Société nationale de musique*. Its colours, particularly the blue/black of the night sky show the Damozel letting down her hair from her balcony, her background lit up by eleven stars. It was based on Rossetti’s poem of the same name and Sarrazin’s libretto, and printed by the *Librairie de l’art indépendant in the same year* (see first stanza below).

*(Figure 5:17)* Edward Robert Hughes, *Star of Heaven*. (Date unknown).
The image created by Rossetti’s words and Debussy’s music for *La Damoselle élue* naturally evokes the famous Tower scene from *Pelléas* where Mélisande lets down her hair to her love below, enveloping him in her long tresses. The opening notes of Debussy’s *Damoiselle*, with ascending wind instruments overlaying strings, suggests to the viewer/listener that if they look towards the heavens, they will see and hear her looking down on them, as she looks down on her love – lamenting from his place on earth – ‘Surely she leaned o'er me—her hair/ Fell all about my face. . ..’

...The blessed Damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven...
She had three lilies in her hand.
And the stars in her hair were seven...
Her hair that lay along her back
Was yellow like ripe corn....

(D.G. Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel*)

Visually, the Pre-Raphaelite woman had ‘a particularly haunting image’ described by Sarrazin as the ‘ange femme’, her heavy-lidded eyes – ‘lamps of the soul’ – implying ‘silence and knowledge’ when closed, wantonness and profundity when dilated, her full lips and long curled hair adding to her allure. Again, the Damozel’s head is ‘bespangled’ with stars, as she leans on the golden barrier of Heaven, lamenting the absence of her lover whilst she languishes in Paradise. On Earth, he believes he can feel her presence (see one of Rossetti’s paintings of the Damozel at fig. 5:18).

The ninth and tenth stanzas of the poem echo the ethereal sound of her voice, its heavenly vibration sounding out – ‘And now she spoke as when /The stars sang in their spheres’… ‘Her voice was like the voice the stars/Had when they sang together’. Debussy is able to capture this transcendent picture through framing his music in what might be termed a ‘Pre-Raphaelite silence.’ In *La Damoselle*, this quality asserts itself from the very beginning, when the open chords establish a strangely mysterious sensation (see *ex. 5:8*), alternating between open fifths and octaves in the *divisi* strings to effect a luminous, ethereal sound,

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557 Ibid, 97.
whilst the violas lower thirds rumble quietly in the background. This creates a ‘stained glass effect… as if lit from behind’, which, Richard Langham Smith deduces, ‘was perhaps suggested by Pre-Raphaelite paintings, a common device of which was to achieve a luminous presence by painting in transparent colours on a wet white background.’

Thus a visual analogy is given to the organum-like musical effect.


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559 Smith, ‘Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites’, 102.
(Figure 5:18) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel*, 1875–1878. One of Rossetti’s paired pictures and poems, the latter completed first, in 1850. (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, England).
It is a feature that is carried throughout the cantata, as shown at example 5:9, with *divisi* sopranos from Figure 4, whilst the orchestration of the strings stresses their repetitive ‘open’ 6th intervals and doublings in the violins’ high octaves to emphasize the otherworldly atmosphere. The libretto follows the poem closely, featuring the visionary quality of the Damoselle’s eyes – ‘les yeux étaient plus profonds que l’abîme des eaux calmes au soir’ (‘the eyes were deeper than the depths of water stilled at even’). It seems as if the poem, the images and the music coalesce in their depiction of the Damoselle, no doubt aided by Rossetti being the architect of both poem and painting, and Debussy finding the Pre-Raphaelite ethos of a silent landscape, framing the serene and silent composure of the main character, well suited to his own ideals.
(Example 5:9) Debussy, *La Damoselle élue*, 1887–1888. Figure 4.

Musical instruments in many Burne-Jones paintings added to the visual atmosphere, as they do in Rossetti’s poems and paintings. *La Damosel* speaks of ‘God’s choristers’ and later of ‘angels meeting us shall sing/To their citherns and citoles’.

Debussy also wove ‘des instruments Anciens’ such as these, and lutes, into his Poe piece *La Chute de la maison Usher*, to heighten feelings of mystery and perhaps the supernatural, as he was also to do in

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La Saulaie, (1896–1900), a projected cantata based on Pierre Louÿs’s translation of part of Rossetti’s ‘Willow-wood’, from The House of Life.561

I sat with Love upon a woodside well,  
Leaning across the water, I and he;  
Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,  
But touched his lute wherein was audible  
The certain secret thing he had to tell:  
Only our mirrored eyes met silently  
In the low wave; and that sound came to be  
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears fell.

The line ‘Only our mirrored eyes met silently’ emphasizes the ideal paradigm of Symbolist love, a quality that could be produced in both painting and poetry by visual means – ‘closed eyes, penetrating looks, averted gazes and even halos’, it was substantially more difficult to produce aurally,562 but Debussy’s predilection for Pre-Raphaelite poetry and the paintings associated with it make such an analogy important, when there is substantial evidence of major Pre-Raphaelite exhibitions in France during the latter half of the nineteenth century.563 Philippe Jullian564 has examined literature of the period, contributing to the overall impression of commensurate visual associations by examining book illustrations and engravings/photogravures of the period. In his opinion, the Moxon edition of Tennyson’s poems – ‘The Palace of Art’ – first published in 1859565 and then reprinted several times, spread the gospel of Pre-Raphaelitism more widely than any other publication.

Tennyson’s poems and their visual accompaniments would have particularly appealed to a young Debussy, since Rossetti, Millais and Holman Hunt, (founding members of the Brotherhood), had created wood-engravings to embellish the text, producing Medievalist images to accompany the poems they revered. Perhaps going further than Tennyson had foreseen, they utilized his poetry to create their own, in a visual sense,566 in that it was full of inner allusions to ‘Truth.’ The ‘static scene’ at figure 5:19 begets its own sense of inner drama as the angel looks down upon St. Cecilia, her eyes closed in an interior contemplation.

561 Smith, ‘Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites’, 99.  
562 Ibid, 102.  
whose ‘similar outward stillness often conceals profound inner drama,’ as in the visual and literary style of ‘The Blessed Damozel’ twenty years later. This outer essence of calmness reflecting the inner visionary can consequently be traced assuredly from the Pre-Raphaelites to Maeterlinck’s own play-writing in works such as Pelléas that I examine in my Chapter on Belgian Symbolism next.

(Figure 5:19) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Illustration to ‘The Palace of Art’: St Cecilia, wood engraving by Dalziel, published in Moxon's Poems of Alfred Tennyson, London 1857 (Royal Academy of Arts, London).

It was this idiosyncratic style, in which the imagery of the pictures formed a complete compatibility with the poems that Debussy was later to replicate. In his music Prélude a l’après-midi d’un faune and Pelléas et Mélisande – he understood and took further the musical application of Mallarme’s poem and Maeterlinck’s play in order to produce

567 Smith, ‘Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites’, 96–97.
something that made their writing more complete and ‘musical’ too, using stillness and silence to reflect the inner substance of his works.

Briefly, other literary themes, such as Tennyson’s *Sir Galahad* appear to make an appearance within Debussy’s poetry and subsequently in the themes of *Pelléas*. For example, within *De rêve*, there are also allusions to the chagrin of the Knights in their quest for the Holy Grail, in the third stanza of his poem:

Les vieux arbres sous la lune d’or pleurent
Leurs belles feuilles d’or !
Nul ne leur dédiera plus la fierté des casques d’or
Maintenant ternis !
À jamais ternis !
Les chevaliers sont morts sur le chemin du Grâal ᵃ

(The old trees beneath the golden moon tearfully shed
Their lovely golden leaves!
No one will plight them again the pride of golden helmets
Now tarnished!
Forever tarnished!
The Knights have died in their quest for the Grail!)

Perhaps this reference took wing after the composer’s musing on Tennyson’s verses, particularly the third stanza: ‘When down the stormy crescent goes, /A light before me swims, /Between dark stems the forest glows, /I hear a noise of hymns...

which appears to have inspired Rossetti in both an illustration for Moxon’s engravings, in 1857, (in the event not included in the final print), and to make a watercolour in 1859 in readiness for a much larger painting which never came to fruition (see figs. 5:20–5:21 below).

Sir Galahad, King Arthur’s purest knight, is portrayed resting at a woodland shrine during his quest for the Holy Grail. In the poem, invisible mystical forces tend the shrine, but Rossetti represents a cluster of female angels beneath the altar, ringing a bell. As Galahad rests by the well, and is refreshed by the water before he continues his quest, we are reminded of the male figure in the drawing of St. Cecilia (*fig. 5:19*), also in thrall to the *ange-femme*, and of Pelléas’s own love for Méliande, not least because of her supposed ‘innocence’. Galahad’s ‘virgin heart’ – ‘So keep I fair thro’ faith and prayer/A virgin heart in work and will’ (line 24), is portentous of Pelléas’s own relationship to come, as is the significance of the well and its mystical water in Rossetti’s illustration (see Chapter VI),

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<sup>568</sup> The Lieder Net Archive www.lieder.net

<sup>569</sup> The University of Rochester, Sir Galahad | Robbins Library Digital Project
and it seems likely that these literary and visual promptings did influence Debussy in his own quest for a silent background and symbolic landscape against which his opera could play out.

(Figure 5:20) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Illustration for Sir Galahad, lines 25–36 of Tennyson’s poem printed by Moxon, 1857.

(Figure 5:21) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Sir Galahad at the Ruined Chapel, Watercolour, 1859. (Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery)
This direction was further impelled by the paintings of later Pre-Raphaelites such as Edward Coley Burne-Jones, which were revealed to the French public in the 1889 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, his 1884 work *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* being a particular success. Subsequently *Love among the Ruins*, a watercolour, was loaned for an exhibition at the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in 1893, and it seems likely that Debussy would have viewed both works when they came to the capital, perhaps through Maeterlinck, since it was at this time that the composer first became interested in *Pelléas*. Medievally inspired by Arthurian myth, the ‘quest for the Grail’ coincidentally also raises parallels with Burne-Jones’s *Sir Lancelot* at fig. 5:22, featuring Lancelot slumbering by a well whilst a melancholy angel announces the failure of his quest, (for the Holy Grail), due to his passion for Guinevere.

*(Image REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS)*

(Figure 5:22) Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *Dream of Sir Lancelot at the Chapel of the Sangreal*/*Dream of Sir Lancelot at the Chapel of the Holy Grail* 1896. Photogravure by Frederick Hollyer, a mezzotint engraver and famed photographic reproducer of Victorian paintings, particularly by the Pre-Raphaelites (Southampton City Art Gallery).
These enigmatic scenarios thus captured a remoteness in time which Debussy utilized as the boundary between reality and fantasy was blurred. Their highly patterned and decorative surface effectively led to a flattening of perspective and an intensity of colour that made these paintings hyper-realistic, yet at heart their sense of spiritual interior evoked a visionary mysticism evident in paintings such as William Holman Hunt’s *Lady of Shallot* (1905) and Sir John Everett Millais’ *Ophelia* (1851–1852),\(^{570}\) which were often mentioned in French Symbolist writings.\(^{571}\) Paintings such as these invited a Symbolist reading, their sense of silence and fatalism reflected in Debussy’s control of colour and orchestration in his *Damoiselle, Proses Lyriques* and later in *Pelléas*.

**Les Chansons de Bilitis**

In 1897 Debussy set three prose poems (‘La flûte de Pan’, ‘La chevelure’ and ‘Le tombeau des Naïades’ taken from *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, first published in 1895,) for his great friend Pierre Louÿs, who had written a selection of erotic verse based on that of the Greek lesbian goddess Sappho, supposedly a friend of the young courtesan Bilitis. The relationship was in reality a spoof invented by Louÿs, many of the poems were cleverly reworked epigrams from the *Palatine Anthology*,\(^{572}\) some borrowed from Sappho herself, and Bilitis was his own invention (although doubtless based to some extent on Louys’s ‘friendship’ with Meryem ben Ali, who he had first met in Africa,\(^{573}\) and later Zohra ben Brahim. Nevertheless, Debussy’s music was based on an imagined sound of Ancient Greece, from whence Louÿs had derived much of his inspiration of classical antiquity,\(^{574}\) and Debussy the perceived freedom this accorded his music. It encompassed flutes associated with satyrs – reminiscent of his *Faune*, harps and the celeste, both sensual and oriental in sound. Debussy obviously relished the subject matter since he returned to its themes on three occasions, lastly in 1914, when he wrote *Six Épigraphes Antiques*, based on reworked passages to six of the *Chansons*, and there are again clear visual and philosophical resemblances with *Pelléas*. For instance, the

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\(^{572}\) A collection of Greek poems and epigrams discovered in 1606 in the Palatine Library in Heidelberg, and based on the lost 10th century collection of Constantinus Cephalus.

\(^{573}\) Julie McQuinn, ‘Exploring the erotic in Debussy’s music’, *CCD*, 126–131.

\(^{574}\) William Gibbons ‘Debussy as Storyteller: Narrative Expansion in the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*’ *The Trois Chansons de Bilitis - Academic Commons Columbia University*
mysterious Bilitis encounters an older man by a forest spring, and becomes intimately involved with a young man with whom she falls in love. In addition, her long flowing hair, reminiscent of Mélisande, is a sensual enticement for her lover.

In the triptych, Debussy follows Bilitis’s emerging first love, its eventual flowering, and then a winter landscape in which the mythical world, inhabited by satyrs and naïades, has died: ‘Le long du bois couvert de givre, je marchais ; mes cheveux/devant ma bouche se fleurissaient de petits glaçons… Les satyres sont morts, Les satyres et les nymphes aussi… Mais restons ici, ou est leur tombeau’. Debussy’s songs have a remoteness about them; they are highly sensual, yet static, almost as if they will bring Barbier’s frieze-like pictures to life, highlighting the link between the visual and musical.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 5:23) George Barbier, Le Vieillard et Les Nymphes, (The Old Man and the Nymphs), for Debussy’s Trois Chansons de Bilitis, Pierre Louÿs, poet, 1894. (Later Collection Pierre Corrard, Paris, 1922).

The plate at figure 23, Le Vieillard et Les Nymphes, (The Old Man and the Nymphs), is accompanied by the following tale:

Un vieillard aveugle habite la montagne. Pour avoir regardé les nymphes. Ses yeux sont morts, voilà longtemps. Et depuis, son bonheur est un souvenir lointain… Elles étaient

575 Along the frost-bound wood I walked; my hair across my mouth, blossomed with tiny icicles… ‘The satyrs are dead. ‘The satyrs and the nymphs too… But let us stay here, where their tomb is.’ My trans.
debout, près du bord dans l’étang vert de Physos. L’eau brillait plus haute que leurs genoux. 576

Sensuality and seduction go hand-in-hand in Barbier’s illustrations, bringing Louÿs’s ideas on Sapphic love to the fore.577

The songs, for female voice and piano, were apparently to be accompanied by *tableaux vivants* (living pictures) according to contemporary sources,578 although only one performance took place in Debussy’s lifetime, in Venice. These highly attractive visual accompaniments, however, by George Barbier, must have been well known to Debussy through his reading of Louÿs’ book, and no doubt influenced his decision to realize compositions of free-floating voice above a more sustained and sometimes passionate piano part to summon up synergies with the seductive text (see fig 5:23).

*Debussy’s Nocturnes*

Some of the most overtly visual of Debussy’s Symbolist works are his *Nocturnes*, since he expresses his own feelings about these compositions in language that refers directly to their pictorial aspects and lines up precisely with Whistler’s own convictions, the artist who produced a series of *Nocturnes* paintings (see Chapter III).

The first complete performance of the *Nocturnes* (which purportedly began life as *Trois Scènes au Crépuscule*, or *Three Scenes at Twilight*, its title inspired by a series of ten poems published in 1890 by Henri de Régnier, from his *Poèmes Anciens et Romansques*), was given in the Concerts Lamoureux series in Paris on 27th October, 1901, its elusive, dreamlike style drawing analogies with the nebulous qualities of Symbolist ideas and perceptions. The inimitable qualities of each *Nocturne* – *Nuages* (*Clouds*), *Fêtes* (*Festivals*) and *Sirènes* (*Sirens*), made each stand alone, the first and last being particularly restrained and individual in its sonority, Debussy seeing each primarily in visual terms as a study of changing visual effects:

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576 ‘A blind old man lives in the mountain so he can look at the nymphs. His eyes went a long time ago. And since then, his happiness has been a distant memory… They were standing near the edge in the green pond of Physos. The water shone higher than their knees.’ Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons le Bilitis*, illustrations de G. Barbier (Paris: Collection Pierre Corrard, 1922). My trans.

577 In both *Chansons de Bilitis* and his subsequent novel, *Aphrodite*, Louÿs decrees that ‘Love between women is acceptable, and they are free to take steps to formalize their relationship within their particular societies… marriage between Mnasidika and Bilitis in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and of Myrto and Rhodis in *Aphrodite*’, Lowry Gene Martin, II, *Desire, Fantasy, and the Writing of Lesbos-sur-Seine, 1880-1939* (D. Phil. Berkeley, University of California, 2010), 92. Trans. Martin.

The title *Nocturnes* is to be interpreted here in a general and, more particularly, in a decorative sense. Therefore it is not meant to designate the usual form of the *Nocturne*, but rather all the various impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests…

The expressive essence of each piece is captured in these words – a way of talking about music that was totally new and inventive, revealing the moods and senses of the ideas that Debussy was trying to capture, and stressing the clear visual connections between the composer’s thoughts and his creation of music that articulated these introspective musings. Free of any pre-existent literary ideas for the first time, Debussy articulates his own ideas and feelings in terms of colour and luminosity that would feature in his musical works from the *Nocturnes* onwards. These words also had the effect of distancing his *Nocturnes* from those of Chopin, which were totally different in terms of mood and format.

Debussy’s evocative language naturally invited comparison with Impressionism and with Whistler’s landscape paintings, which possessed titles such as *Harmony*, *Symphony in White*, *Nocturne*, *Variations en violet et vert* and so forth, suggesting a correlation between musical notes and Whistler’s colour tones. The use of these more abstract titles focussed the viewer’s attention on the artist’s manipulation of paint rather than subject matter, and the subsequent move towards abstraction in both music and painting. The capacity of Symbolist paintings to stress the unity of their representation and form as in the colouring of Whistler’s paintings, such as the grey hues of *Whistler’s mother*, and for content to be communicated through form, accentuated the surface of the painting—its effect, and its independence as a work of art. Debussy’s friend and biographer, Louis Laloy, maintained that:

The most profitable lessons came not from musicians, but from poets and painters… It is the secret of unity that is not ensured by external means, nor by special signs, but relies on the natural quality of impressions. It is in the unity of character…the unity of tone…not in the narrow understanding of musical theory, but in the defined sense that poets and paintings produce…

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579 ‘Le titre de Nocturnes veut prendre ici un sens plus général et surtout plus décoratif. Il ne s’agit donc pas de la forme habituelle de Nocturne, mais de tout ce que ce mot contient d’impressions et de lumières spéciales…’ In Thierry Vagne, ‘Un Commentaire discographies Comparées, Musique Classique, Claude Debussy - 3 Nocturnes, 29 Décembre 2014. Quoted in English in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, Master Musician Series, 189.

In *Nuages*, this sense of the immutable, in a silent landscape that fades into hues of grey and white, is expressed musically by Debussy’s gently rocking chord sequences for woodwind and muted strings, as clouds scud across the sky. Trumpets, trombones and percussion are omitted apart from the *timpani*, providing a softened palette of sound that only rarely departs from tranquillity. A solo cor anglais holds a fragmentary melody that appears and disappears whilst the music seems to move onwards, yet its diffuse meandering ensure it never progresses, taking a circuitous route that somehow only emphasizes its poignant reflection of the visual world (see early bars 11–14 at *ex. 5:10* and later bars 42–45 at *ex. 5:11*).  

(Example 5:10) Debussy: *Trois Nocturnes*, ‘Nuages’, 1898, bars 11–14
(Example 5:11) Debussy, *Trois Nocturnes*, ‘Nuages’, 1898, bars 42–45

The restricted palette of colour in *Nuages* can be seen as a parallel to Whistler’s own limited colour palette. For example, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862) featuring a young woman wearing a simple white cambric dress, is treated by the painter as object rather than subject. The artist is less concerned with pictorial likeness than with using the canvas to explore tonal variations of the colour white, using different shades in both foreground and background to explore these textures. The fact that he refers to the painting as a symphony suggests that these nuances of tone are conceived as musical notes (see fig. 5:24).
The variations of different hues of white in Whistler’s painting can be compared directly with Debussy’s violin textures in *Nuages at example 5:10*, bar 14, where the *divisi* strings are divided into eight different parts, the first and second violins dovetailing together to create a dense but *pianissimo* texture of close thirds in a ‘decorative’ chordal theme that illustrates the divergence of sounds the composer was able to devise. The variance of Debussy’s textures forms an equivalence with Whistler’s studies in colour. Conversely, in associating his paintings with musical compositions, Whistler’s experimentation with colour tones and the application of paint to canvas promoted both visual and sensual stimulation on behalf of the viewer. The notion that harmonious colour tones, mood and beauty of form were more important than subject matter were central tenets of Whistler’s work, and enabled Debussy to draw an analogy between his orchestral timbres and what might be perceived as their visual hues and luminosity.
In *Nuages* the colour and shape of clouds can be portrayed pictorially, but their movement drifts in ways that the composer captures through his use of ponderous modal textures, their homophonic chords extending both poetic and artistic intentions in mutual synergy. Aided by Debussy’s title, muted *pianissimos* and whole-tone modalities rise and fall in thirds, fourths, fifths and sixths, in a chordal wave culminating in parallel dominant 9ths (bar 14), whose phrasing smudges the sound to create purely sonorous qualities, synonymous with their subject matter. As in other Debussy pieces, the woodwind (clarinets and bassoons) has the opening theme, which leads into a variation of the beginning motive of alternating fifths and thirds, later taken up by the oboes and near the end by the bassoons. At bars 42-45, (ex. 5:11), syncopated viola and ‘cello/bass parts moving in thirds are offset by first and second violins split into seven parts this time, moving individually in seconds and thirds that are ascending (second and third parts a third apart) and descending (first and fourth parts in unison) in highly inventive textural phrases that imaginatively represent slow movement across the skies. Later episodes of whole-tone, pentatonic and octatonic scales permeate ‘Nuages’ in a series of glittering harmonies that evoked this sensuous subject.

Paul Dukas wrote at some length about the first performance of ‘Nuages’ and ‘Fêtes,’ aligning their expressivity with Symbolism. Each new work, he says, is unclassifiable, because each is different, surprising the listener anew and altering his perspective. He quotes Debussy’s perception that in *Nuages* he is characterizing:

…some impressions which are all ‘decorative’. In the first of these Nocturnes… achieving “in anguished grey tones lightly tinged with white” music which does not set out to be a meteorological representation of such a phenomenon…the real significance of the piece still remains symbolic… it translates analogy through analogy in the medium of music in which all the elements, harmony, rhythm and melody, seem in some way to have vanished in the ether of the symbol, as if reduced to an imponderable state…

Debussy was delighted with the sensitive perceptions articulated therein, writing to Dukas about the same on 11th February 1901. It is interesting to note that Belgian musicologist Harry Halbreich was even to refer to *Nuages* as “un véritable Turner sonore,” such was its perceived resemblance in music to Turner’s unconstrained colours in paint.

The third of the Nocturnes, the ‘mysterious song of the Sirens,’ encouraged Debussy to seek an even more radical orchestration, featuring a wordless chorus of sixteen female voices.

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The originality of such a concept enabled Debussy to achieve an other-worldly sonority suggestive of an almost instrumental vocalising that was spellbinding, conjuring up visions of the Sirens in a moonlit sea. The excerpt shown below, (ex. 5:12), demonstrates the wide colouristic range of Sirènes. The divisi strings performing in repetitive tremolo contribute to the sense of polyphony and the eeriness of ‘The Deep’, aided by the female voices without text, which operate as an additional instrument and textural layer, inducing us to conjure up images in our minds. Their enigmatic sound adds to the mystical sense of the work and a ‘snowballing’ of our perceptions, as do the shimmering harps with their heterophonic doublings.

(Example 5: 12) Debussy. *Trois Nocturnes*, ‘Sirènes’, (1898) bars 18–21
Sirens and Symbolist Sea Myths

There is little doubt that the composer was fascinated by underwater legends and watery themes, since he often took these as his subjects, and it seems more than plausible that he was influenced by the number of paintings of sirens and mermaids that were produced at around this time, particularly by the later Pre-Raphaelites. Burne-Jones was noted for portraying these mythological creatures, producing The Sirens circa 1875 and The Depths of the Sea in 1887 (fig. 5:25), both paintings exuding the metaphysical and sense of mystery that captured Debussy’s imagination in Sirènes. The affinity between the two is more than persuasive as a visual impulsion.

The figures in The Depth of the Sea, in which the mermaid’s victim succumbs to the fatal attraction of the alluring siren, another side to the enchantment of the 19th-century femme fatale, evokes an eerie underwater life, but it is the psychological relationship between the two figures that is suggestive of the female vocal part in Debussy’s music. Sirènes’ yearning calls from the deep speak of desire, fear of the unknown, and a fatal attraction that is compelling and beyond the male psyche to resist.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 5:25) Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, The Depths of the Sea, 1887, (Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, USA).

584 John William Waterhouse also painted Hylas and the Nymphs in 1896, and in 1900 The Siren.
Burne-Jones described his painting as ‘indefinite’ and ‘suggestive’, its meaning symbolic because it favours ambiguity, mood and suggestion over definitive representation. The mermaid herself appears androgynous, her deadly grip reinforced by her hair twisting around the victim’s shoulder like a serpent, their bodies interlocking as one. These indefinite ideas indicative of the Symbolist movement directly link Debussy’s nebulous water music with these paintings, water that is a means of sustenance but also dangerous.

Gustave Moreau, whom Debussy named as his favourite painter (other than Botticelli) in a questionnaire he completed in 1889, was another artist who painted Sirens. Both the composer and Moreau frequented Bailly’s shop L’Art Moderne, and their affinity was no doubt deepened by Moreau’s artistic philosophy which embodied similar characteristics to Debussy’s own, stressing the importance of feelings: ‘I believe neither in what I touch nor in what I see. I believe only in what I do not see and only in what I feel’, a Symbolist rationale.

The similarity of Moreau’s jewel-like colours of idealized feminine forms invites the spectator to become immersed in the originality of his paintings. Moreau’s passion for mythological subjects and his tendency towards reverie or dream-world were evoked in haunting paintings such as Les Sirènes, a catalyst of inter-art relationships between painting and poetry, Symbolism and Parnassianism, his heroic mythological subjects emerging as ‘a multifaceted unifying factor in fin de siècle European culture’. But his passion for phantasmagoria seems also to have extended to Debussy, who appears to have found an affinity with Moreau’s paintings in pieces such as ‘Les Fées sont d’exquises danseuses’ and ‘Ondine’ (both from Préludes II, 1913), apart from Sirènes – all part of the allure of the eternal feminine. Whilst Moreau’s Sirens are always displayed as mermaids – ‘maidens with fishtails’ – they allude to both innocent and destructive beauty, many of his paintings emphasizing erotic temptation. The nymphs in Les Sirènes are entwined, alluding to lesbian tendencies, their extremely long hair a tantalizing lure to the human male. Moreau’s canvases evoke an idyllic vision of love, but it is one that will inevitably, perhaps, come with strings attached.

585 See details in Csp. entry for 16th February 1889, 67–68.
We cannot know whether the artist and composer met at Bailly’s or at Mallarmé’s Mardis, but Debussy did know Huysmans, and the latter extolled Moreau’s Symbolist outlook in his novel *A Rebours (Against Nature)*, with long and enthusiastic descriptions of the artist’s pictures at the 1876 Salon, which helped make his novel ‘a mainspring of the whole Symbolist movement’. The link was therefore a close one. The decorative aesthetic of Symbolism and its esoteric and often ambivalent mode of expression lent itself to the intrepid world of emotions, fantasies and dreams, worlds which both composer and artist inhabited.

(Figure 5:26) Gustave Moreau, *Les Sirènes (The Sirens)*, 1872 (Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass).

Concluding Remarks

Symbolism brought a new way of thinking to Debussy and his French contemporaries, who viewed it as the means of expressing their dreams and the mysteries of the ‘soul’ – the ‘realities’ of truth or the essence of something, rather than what the eye could see, and in that sense, directly opposite to the immediacy of Impressionism. Perceived resemblances between Debussy’s music and Impressionist art – the loosening of representation, evocation of le plein air, and use of new techniques – led to a reading of musical signs that appeared to capture the immediacy of emotions and the quality of light on their subject, especially on water. It followed that the composer was enabled to find a far more flexible vehicle for his music, so that the line was freer and could be endlessly extended in varied repetitions, thus sounding fluid and impressionistic although it was in fact the result of a rigorous work-ethic and ingenuity which made Debussy’s pieces both innovatory and visionary, pointing the way towards the abstract. Symbolism, however, did the same in its evocation of dream-world and mercurial ‘soul’ perceptions, since these were transcendental and intuitive, also leading to a freedom of technique and flexibility that suggests both movements were important for Debussy, and that he took inspiration from each, enabling him to fulfil his desire for an unfettered musical style that brought his pieces to life in a soundscape of colour, texture and ‘rhythmicised time’. From this viewpoint, it seems that both Impressionism and Symbolism do not operate entirely autonomously within music as they do within painting and literature, and that both appear to operate simultaneously upon Debussy’s imagination.

As this chapter illustrates, Symbolism directly allied works of art such as those for the ballet Faune with the poetry and literature that inspired them, as well as the music that Debussy created as an auditory equivalent, which heightened the sensory perception of viewers and listeners and formed a nexus of creativity. This analogy between specific painters and their works – such as Burne-Jones’ and Moreau’s pictures of Sirens with the composer’s Nocturne ‘Sirènes’ – offers a new perspective on the symbiosis of painting and music within Debussy’s ethos during the fin de siècle, revealing some compelling correlations. Both painters and composer were able to use arabesques as the means of producing elongated and curved lines which presaged the Art Nouveau and also made it feasible for Debussy to produce works such as Pelléas et Mélisande, that dealt in feelings and ambiguities that only ever suggested possibilities rather than defined meanings, and used
silence as a vehicle to emote feelings. This opera, the apogée of Debussy’s work, is covered in the following chapter, which deals with its Belgian writer, Maurice Maeterlinck, and the symbolic work of notable Belgian artists whose paintings parallel Debussy’s symbolic perception of the play.

590 As Gurminder Kaur Bhogal notes in ‘Visual Analysis and Criticism’ from Music and Visual Culture: ‘It is true that Debussy empowered the arabesque so that it came to assume a structural as well as expressive role, but while most painters conceived of the arabesque as generating motion, Debussy relied on this figure to convey the very opposite: that is, his arabesques tended towards suspending time through a non-teleological development…’ precisely their function in the dreamy Prélude a L’apres-midi d’un faune and the beguiling Pelléas. See p. 195.
CHAPTER VI

AUTOUR DE PELLÉAS: BELGIAN SYMBOLIST ART, MAETERLINCK AND DEBUSSY

This chapter considers the staging of Debussy’s only completed opera, Pelléas et Mélisande, based on the Symbolist work by the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck. By extension I deliberate on the effects of French and Belgian art in turn on the play, and the extensive differences between the two approaches. In terms of visual art, important Symbolist archetypes featured in these diverse styles, the French often borrowing from the arabesques of the Art Nouveau, and the ‘whiplash’ curve\(^{591}\), whereas the Belgians were more influenced by the literary emphasis of the British Pre-Raphaelites, utilizing a much darker and more foreboding scenario which perfectly suited the atmosphere of Pelléas, crossing the boundaries between literature, painting and music.

Past research on ‘Symbolism’ and Debussy has almost entirely referred to French poets, not Symbolist painters, but French artists such as Denis, Bonnard, Ransom, Séryusier and Vuillard were personally involved in the set designs and programme creation for Pelléas, and I reveal an altogether deeper and more profound link than has hitherto been researched with contemporary Belgian artists, such as Fernand Khnopff, Henry de Groux, (whom the composer knew and at one time named as his favourite painter), and William Degouve de Nuncques, whose works are reminiscent of Poe in their capacity to generate fear and mystery. They each produced inspirational images which would have affected Debussy’s assimilation of Symbolist visuality and that the inception of the Belgian Maeterlinck’s play and early visual influences on his œuvre provoked its own parallels in Debussy’s opera, including, for example, the import of Pre-Raphaelite images to Belgian Art. Both Debussy and his brother were interested in this aspect, and had links to Belgian Symbolism through several friends, above all Maurice Denis\(^{592}\).

The contribution of Belgian Art has been underestimated in past literature on Debussy since it is often forgotten that what Debussy saw in Paris was essentially a Belgian production of Pelléas, with the scenic aspect largely executed by the Belgian artists surrounding Maeterlinck, although this was also close to the time of the Maeterlinck/Doudelet collaborations (see figs. 6:6–6:11). The use of specific symbols within the opera and the

\(^{591}\) www.vam.ac.uk>articles>the-whiplash Victoria and Albert Museum – ‘The Whiplash.’

\(^{592}\) Denis was influenced by the Applied Arts Movement in Belgium, arising from the British Arts and Craft movement and Pre-Raphaelite painting.
pictorial images they project, such as Mélisande as a siren – with reference to nineteenth-century wanton ‘femmes fatales’ versus the ‘anges-femmes’ of Pre-Raphaelitism – and the psychological aspects of the dark forest and shadowy castle in Allemende, correlate directly with Belgian art, and I contend that this breakthrough should occupy a place within any contemporary research of Debussy.

To reiterate the significance of Symbolism to Debussy, it had begun as a literary movement which then spread to both the musical and visual arts, advocating ‘the expression of an idea over the realistic description of the natural world’. Ideas were suggested through symbols and emphasised the meaning behind forms, lines, shapes and colours, but their interpretation was open-ended and essentially unspecific, moving towards the abstract and often expressing psychological truths and hinting at spiritual ‘realities’, thereby taking in the dreamworld and concepts of the ineffable. They alluded to a circle of ideas rather than the specificity of a ‘sign’ or ‘metaphor’, thus onlookers or listeners were asked to interpret, and this was true of Debussy’s opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* in both its text and visual aspect, and in its music.

By the 1890s Brussels was regarded as a centre for contemporary art, but the style of Maeterlinck and Belgian writers and painters was very different to French Impressionism and the French Symbolist poets Verlaine and Mallarmé. In order for Debussy to infuse his work with emotional impact the composer found ‘alternative means’ of transposing his perceptions of art into music, perhaps encouraged by his friend Erik Satie, who advocated Debussy disentangle himself from the contemporary French enthusiasm for Wagner (‘le besoin pour nous Francais de se dégager de l’aventure Wagner’). Debussy was persuaded that the answer to his desires lay in a correspondence of means with the impressions he found in the painting world rather than the qualities of fellow musicians, and that a transposition of this *esprit* would better serve his imagination and creative urge towards the abstract. By 1893, when Debussy used his own poems, the *Proses Lyriques*, as settings for his songs, he was veering towards a Symbolist literary text for his own works.

The impact of the Belgian Symbolists mainly centred on the playwright Maeterlinck as far as Debussy was concerned, the writer of the Symbolist play *Pelléas et Mélisande*— ‘a book of

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593 [www.tate.org.uk › art › art-terms › symbolism](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/symbolism)


595 As Satie divulged in around 1892: ‘Why not make use of the representative means presented to us by Claude Monet, Cézanne, Toulouse Lautrec, etc.? Why not transpose musically these means? Nothing could be more simple. Are they not expressions?’ *Ibid.*
spiritual thought and subtle discrimination" which raises disturbing philosophical questions on the meaning of life in an atmosphere of dreamworld and enigma. To this extent, it entirely fitted Debussy’s ideal that he should be able to graft his interpretation onto that of the writer, thus achieving a melding of music and text that were in perfect harmony, and would throw into relief "the ways the music emphasizes certain undercurrents in the play, allowing the score to step in so emotionally and timefully" and which became Debussy’s tour de force.

Debussy described his initial meeting with Maeterlinck in Ghent in a letter to his then friend and mentor Ernest Chausson dated 16th November, 1893, when there appears to have been a reciprocal exchange of ideas and appreciation of extending artistic boundaries, the composer reporting:

I saw Maeterlinck and spent the day with him in Ghent. To begin with he behaved like a girl being introduced to her future husband but then he thawed out and was charming...

The detached reticence Debussy sought for his characters was to come to fruition in his opera of 1902, when he was able to capture the belle froideur of Mélisande, as she awakens to the ideal of love and passion within a silent landscape. The remote idea of time within an imaginary landscape lent itself to Symbolist interpretations, with an almost supernatural setting, mysterious binary themes such as innocence and violence, activity and passivity, height versus depth (such as the tower set against the sea cave and castle vaults), and the visionary ange femme (closer to heaven than man) existing within a mediaevalised scenery.

Stylistic hints from current Lugné-Poë programmes and playbills are the only documentation for the first staging of the play that is available from contemporary sources, but connected images by Paul Sérusier, Edouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis, all associated with the production and Belgian Symbolist visual art of the period, mean that some important analogies may be drawn. This is particularly so because the painter Vuillard, a close friend

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596 Richard Langham Smith, “Aimer Ainsi”, Rekindling the Lamp in Pelléas’ in Rethinking Debussy 77.
597 Virginia M. Crawford, Fortnightly Review, August 1st, 1897, in Richard Langham Smith, ibid, 77.
598 ‘J’ai vu Maeterlinck, avec qui j’ai passé une journée à Gand, d’abord il a eu des allures de jeune fille à qui on présente un futur mari…” Csp. 176. Trans. Nichols, DL, 60.
600 Guy Cogeval comments: ‘La langage n’est qu’un voile jeté sur une réalité immémoriale’. (Language is just a veil thrown over a timeless reality), Debussy: la musique et les arts, 108.
601 ‘With reverence must we draw near to them, be they lowly or arrogant, inattentive or lost in dreams, be they smiling still or plunged in tears; for they know the things that we do not know, and have a lamp that we have lost…” Maeterlinck explores this idealised view of women in ‘Sur les femmes’ (‘On Women’) Les Trésor des humbles, trans. Alfred Sutro (New York [n. d.]), 103–110.
of Lugné-Poë, actually helped with painting the sets, as well as designing the programme for that production. Intrinsic to the performance was a green gauze curtain, behind which the actors performed, separated from their audience and sounding ‘like the voice of spectres’.\(^603\) This ‘unemphatic speech, inclining towards music and monotone,’ entirely accorded with the stylized backcloths and slow flowing movements of the actors, giving the spectators time to assimilate the symbols into their minds. It also chimed with the ‘eighteen short scenes separated by over-long idle silences’\(^604\) that enabled the Symbolist theatre to continually evolve.

A particular influence on their productions was the painter Maurice Denis – see pencil sketch at fig. 6:1, demonstrating his use of arabesques in strong decorative line to give expressive strength – Mélisande’s face a ‘contemplative and melancholic expression in the format of pious images in the ‘Sacré-Cœur’, radiates on the 'silent' white of the sheet: of an intensity comparable to the resonance of Maeterlinck's silence…’\(^605\) Denis knew the theatre producer Lugné-Poë from their shared military service, and his theoretical ideas guided the direction that French Symbolism was to take. Paul Sérusier, too, designed sets that accorded with these ideals, his curtain for a mystical play by Pierre Quillard consisting of a gold backcloth decorated with ‘mediaeval images of angels’ that encouraged Lugné-Poë to adopt a similar ornamental idea. All these artists sought a harmony between visual scenes and the content/meaning of the play, embodying the Baudelairean idea of correspondances, one mirroring the other, as Debussy extolled too.

**Maurice Maeterlinck**

In 1899 the French Symbolist poet Charles Morice visited Brussels to discern for himself ‘L’Esprit Belge,’ the title of a book he was later to publish,\(^606\) commenting that the two great mysteries – love and death – were viewed almost with a sense of religious exaltation there, their aspect ‘cette intensité mystique et spirituelle: la véritable Joie!’ Such a conclusion appears ready made for the writer Maurice Maeterlinck, who had been steered by the poet Villiers de l’Isle-Adam towards mysticism:

\(^{603}\) Jules Lemaitre, *Journal des débats*, May 21st, 1893. He claims that they recited their parts on a uniform pitch (une mélopée uniforme), entirely appropriate to the play. Quoted in Langham Smith, “Aimer Ainsi”, *Rethinking Debussy*, 80.


Literary and artistic theories of Maeterlinck apparently suggest this concern always connecting the state of mind that he studied, even the magical, with the most humble realities. His aesthetic... is a mystical interpretation of reality.  

(Figure 6:1) Maurice Denis, Pelléas et Mélisande, 1893 (Private collection).

Rémy de Gourmont, writing in 1915, thereby links these Symbolist qualities with the writer who was to become so important to Debussy. The latter had read Maeterlinck’s ‘faerie-tale’ play, Pelléas et Mélisande, in 1893, probably just before attending its first performance by Lugné-Poë’s Théâtre de l’Œuvre, on 17th May, 1893, a year after its publication. Approaching the Belgian through another Symbolist poet, Henri de Régnier, a friend of Mallarmé and Louÿs, Debussy was able to acquire the necessary authorisation to set the play to music, immediately recognising its potential as an opera.  

As ‘an innovator in Symbolist drama’ during the 1890s, the playwright had been more influenced by Anglophile and Teutonic literature than French, particularly that of the Pre-Raphaelites and Edgar Allan Poe, whilst the special significance of ‘Bruges d’autrefois,’ the dead city’ of Georges Rodenbach’s novel *Bruges-la-Morte* was idealised by Belgian writers and artists as representative of a lost age of spirituality and mysticism that was reminiscent of both Arthurian legend and a Gothic medievalism, these being naturally aligned with legends and symbols, as well as their visual counterparts.

Mallarmé’s review of the *Pelléas* matinée of 17th March 1893 already makes the point that the play is musical in its simplification, which would have appealed directly to the composer:

> Almost silently and abstractly to the point that in this art, where everything becomes music in the real sense, even the addition of a single, pensive violin part would be unnecessary.  

In a letter to Chausson, Debussy also writes:

> I’m using something that is quite rare, silence as a means of expression and perhaps the only way to underline the emotion of a phrase.

Furthermore, Maeterlinck himself was influenced by the visual art of the second generation of Pre-Raphaelite artists, especially Edward Burne-Jones and Walter Crane, whose haunting visions of *anges femmes* with limpid eyes portrayed melancholy tableaux hinting at a secret visionary world beyond, and provided the impetus for the writer’s play. Tennyson’s passion for Arthurian mythology evidently influenced Burne-Jones’s melodramas and pallid damsels in distress, which insinuated themselves into Maeterlinck’s conception for the character of Mélisande. Contemporary photogravures of the artist’s work were displayed on the walls of Maeterlinck’s study in Ghent, and he was to announce his intention of producing a book on the Pre-Raphaelite poets in the late 1880s, although this did not come to fruition.

Conversely, Burne-Jones admired Maeterlinck’s work, feeling a rapport with his ‘visionary


612 Brown, 7–8, op. cit.

and melancholic character’.

A fellow author, Iwan Gilkin, intimates that there was a kind of reciprocal understanding between the two: ‘If Burne-Jones furnished Maeterlinck with the outward appearance of his characters and the visible atmosphere which envelopes them, Maeterlinck has interrogated these wonderful figures, unveiled their souls, fathomed their mystery...’ Those paintings relating to the Arthurian legends such as fig. 6:2, The Beguiling of Merlin, would have found particular favour with Maeterlinck, who was an ardent enthusiast of Arthurian legends and the alluring ange femme.

Maeterlinck and Debussy also both shared a love of illustrated ‘toy books’ which were celebrated in the 1890s, although they had different tastes, the Belgian favouring Walter Crane’s illustrations, including those for Edmund Spenser’s sixteenth-century allegorical epic poem The Faerie Queen, (fig. 6:3), its script encompassing knights, damsels, magicians, monsters and mythical beings. Crane’s illustrations were extraordinarily detailed, vivid in both colour and execution, and bore strong echoes in style to the work of his Arts and Crafts friend, William Morris. Both, however, favoured the intertwining Art Nouveau style that illuminated contemporary art work, and in his book, ‘The Claims of Decorative Arts’, Crane extolled the latter as equally important to painting and sculpture, working with Morris to achieve much greater versatility among the arts. The Art Nouveau penchant for floral ornamentation, decorative script and flowing lines that weave throughout the available space is immediately obvious in the cover to the Faerie Queene. Feminine images predominate with flowing robes and hair, their piercing, elusive glances hinting at the unknown or otherworldly.

Debussy himself favoured the books illustrated by another English artist, Arthur Rackham. The composer’s piano Préludes, ‘Ondine’, ‘Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses’ and ‘La danse de Puck’ took inspiration from Rackham’s multitude of fairy images, particularly from his illustrations for author Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s Undine/Ondine, a German fairy-tale novella that was published in France in 1914 (see figs.6:4 and 6:5). Undine/Ondine was an underwater sprite, mermaid, or elemental associated with the sea, the name referring to a ‘wave’ in French. Rackham’s illustrations were considered very modern at the time, whilst subtle in their colouring and evocation of moods. Again, the linear qualities of the sea and

614 Ibid, 497.

Burne-Jones was also very keen on this work.
Undine’s long hair and dress are wonderfully romantic, curving waves decoratively filling the space so that Undine’s figure becomes part of them, and possibly influencing the sense of movement in Debussy’s conception for Mélisande. At the same time, five of Rackham’s grotesques lurk among the waves surrounding her, hinting at a melancholy outcome that chimes with the composer’s predilection for Poe’s macabre storylines. Rackham had illustrated James Barrie’s Peter Pan as well, a copy of which had been given to Debussy’s daughter Chouchou. Debussy’s Prélude, Les Fées sont d’exquises danseuses, from the same set, was itself inspired by pictures in that same volume.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 6:2) Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, The Beguiling of Merlin, 1872–1977, (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, Merseyside).

617 These figurative ideas were very much influenced by the arabesque: ‘The cognitive association of ornament with motion certainly played a role in the animation of the arabesque… the linear drive of the arabesque, coupled with its ability to evoke the ebbs and flows of rhythm, catapulted this ornament into the limelight at the fin de siècle…’ Bhogal, ‘Ornament and the Arabesque from Line to Melody’ in Details of Consequence, 79.
(Figure 6:3) Walter Crane, Cover to Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, published 1895.

(Figure 6:4) Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué *Undine (Ondine)*, Novella (German), 1811. Illustrations by Arthur Rackham (1909) in the Art Nouveau style.
Maeterlinck’s characteristic style for his ‘theatre of the soul’ was imbued with an atmosphere of anguish, mystery and tragedy, which permeated all his works, but his masterpiece was the Symbolist play, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which was premiered in Paris in 1893 at the Bouffes-Parisiens. The producer, Aurelian Lugné-Poë’s close working relationship with Maeterlinck ensured that this first production by the Théâtre de l’Œuvre was steeped in Symbolist ideas, and it was this version that consequently had a deep effect on the way Debussy came to
approach the opera. The five-act opera produced in 1902 provokes many questions, being full of ‘vague and elusive’ characters, and Lugné-Poë himself emphasized the fairy-tale quality of *Pelléas* and its mysterious, symbolic qualities.

Debussy’s Opéra *Pelléas et Mélisande*

Debussy’s own sparing orchestration emphasizes the atmosphere and colour of Maeterlinck’s play, acting as a unifying force to express mystifying undercurrents within both it and the emotions of characters whose silences are often used as a counterpoint to speech. Mélisande’s first appearance just after Figure 8 emphasizes the composer’s declamatory style for his characters – she is lost in the forest and responds to Golaud in such a way that the music, with its emphasis on rhythmic D and B single triplet notes, ‘Ne me touchez pas!’ and accompanying French language, reflects her fear. As the end of the phrase descends in semitones, we feel this sense of impending doom in her simple but effective intonation, almost from the beginning of the opera (see *ex. 6:1*).

(Subtle effects imply a Symbolist subtext functioning at an almost hidden, subconscious level; Debussy’s use of leitmotives, for example, were not simply associated with the characters, places or objects of the play, but based on the composer’s preference to associate his motives with inner feelings and sensations, in line with Symbolist resonances. Underlying these was the Maeterlinckian concept of the soul, or âme (that which is not controlled by

(Example 6:1) Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande* (opéra), 1902. Figure 8. Mélisande’s first words upon meeting Golaud.
reason), as in the case of Mélisande, who is not only lost in the forest but is a lost soul – we know not why. These corollaries emphasize Debussy’s emotional correspondances, which I contend are as directly linked with Symbolist art as its literary/symbolic connotations.

In Le Trésor des humbles, Maeterlinck had extolled similar values, that ‘True life is made of silences’, and that ‘Silence is the refuge of our souls’, the place where our souls can most be free. The quality of silences can vary with circumstance, thereby predetermining the destiny of the characters in a play such as Pelléas. Thus Debussy’s music follows the pattern of Maeterlinck’s silences – or truths, because it is the vessel of ‘supreme truths’.\(^{618}\) In order to underline moments of dramatic impact, the composer removes the orchestra completely, so that the unaccompanied melodic line is almost speech-like, by utilizing a very restricted pitch range. As Jann Pasler asserts, this level of ‘melodic statis’ determines the dramatic moment that ensues (see ex. 6:2), leading directly, if somewhat circuitously (49 bars later, 1 before 14) to Mélisande’s question as to what she should do if Golaud notices her missing ring.\(^{619}\) Pelléas answers in emotional turmoil, ‘La vérité, la vérité,’ using similar intervallic phrases that are again sung without orchestral accompaniment, leading into the theatricality of a further orchestral interlude – leaving his answer and what he means hanging in the air.


\(^{619}\) Ibid.
Debussy dispenses with fixed melodic lines, instead using *mélodie* as an element to imply connections. A much greater spontaneity and degree of intimacy is thereby achieved, brought to its peak when Pelléas finally expresses his love for Mélisande in speech, not song. When she replies, the orchestra is silent, allowing the restraint and understatement of the scene to penetrate the sensitivities of the listeners and highlighting the delicacy of the scene. Their initial words penetrate deeply, as Mélisande echoes this revelation with a resonating intimacy that Pelléas can barely believe, since he wants it to be true so much. When he asks ‘Since when have you loved me and Mélisande answers ‘Depuis toujours’ – ‘since always’ – we are led into a dream-like state that hints at the hand of fate. Both Maeterlinck and Debussy again use silence as a quality determining depth of love and profundity of soul as well as destiny to come. Mélisande, the enigmatic character and pivot of the entire opera, is perhaps reminiscent of the ‘ange-femme’ of Rossetti’s paintings, predestined for a Symbolist dreamworld that is never consummated, part of the eternal vision of lost soul returning to the light, which she never truly left.
Lugné-Poe’s green gauze curtain, separating the audience from the actors physically, also operates at a symbolic level, signifying that the Maeterlinckian language of thought and emotion is only revealed through a veil – ‘revealing through concealment’. The tragic outcome of the play only divulges that mankind is ignorant of the forces operating as fate. In this, it bears comparison with Plato’s ‘Allegory of the Cave’, where mankind attempts to confront and create his own destiny but in fact is powerless to do so. Maeterlinck’s rather unformed characters accord with his partiality for the world of shadow plays and marionette dolls in which he was interested, infused with an extra-human dimension that enabled them to be used for more complex and ambiguous purposes. Their passive, ‘lifeless’ dimension allies them directly with the symbolic characters of Pelléas.

Maeterlinck uses archetypal symbols that are used in a hierarchical manner to become ‘supernatural protagonists’ in the drama, a whole network of visual associations and sensations affecting every aspect of its development. Those that are most potent include water, including the fountain and well where Mélisande drops her crown and loses her ring in turn; the forest, where Golaud finds Mélisande and is later thrown from his horse; the Sea grotto, where Mélisande has purportedly lost her ring; and the vaults of the castle, where Golaud confronts Pelléas and tells him to leave Mélisande alone. Others – ‘visual icons’ as Richard Langham Smith refers to them, include the tower and its ‘femme-enfant’

Mélisande, her long hair, biblical symbols such as doves and sheep, gates and windows, as well as ‘beacons’ – interpolators of darkness and light within the text. Debussy’s role was in turning the playwright’s insights about the soul into an equivalence of the visual with the aural – in other words, sight in conjunction with sound. It is this equivalence of both senses in the composer that my argument seeks to stress – the significance of them reverberating through his intérieur.

Before discussing specific symbols used in the play, mention must be made of the illustrator Maeterlinck collaborated with for various of his works, and which influenced the visual aspects of his Pelléas. Charles Doudelet had become involved with the important Belgian Symbolist magazine ‘Le Réveil’ (‘The Awakening’, 1892–1895), meeting the writers Grégoire le Roy and Maurice Maeterlinck, being particularly drawn to the latter, who lived in Ghent like himself. Doudelet’s paintings became a synthesis of the visual expressions of

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621 Maeterlinck wrote a series of ‘Marionettes Plays’ early in his career, using ideas from the Japanese Bunraku (puppet theatre), as well as Javanese and Balinese Wayan Kulit (shadow theatre).
622 Langham Smith, op. cit. 86–88.
Maeterlinck’s writing, so much so that after being asked to illustrate *Douze Chansons* in 1896, he commented:

I was in love from the first verses of this original genre, filled with pure poetry, vague, emotional, bringing to the soul new sensations, elevating our thoughts into unknown dreams, opening them into infinite horizons. I illustrate his works with conviction, with love. I feel an incredible delight in understanding, fully grasping the poet’s idea, depicting it visually.623

Maeterlinck was later to declare that: ‘In my opinion, it is Charles’s masterpiece—synchronization, perfect harmony between the poet and the images created by his interpretation’.624 Widely circulated and admired, this book completely accorded with the new Symbolism that delighted both painter and artist as well as Debussy, who found Maeterlinck’s reticent style to be a perfect match to his own ideals. The woodcuts I have chosen to illustrate Doudelet’s influence on *Pelléas*, show scenes from *Douze Chansons* released in 1896, and later examples from the 1922 copy of the play, as both add to our understanding of the opera as quintessentially Symbolist.

![Image removed for copyright reasons](image-url)

*(Figure 6:6)* Charles Doudelet, Illustration for Maeterlinck’s *Les Chansons*, 1896

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*Figure 6*: A triptych potentially showing scenes from *The Last Judgement*, depicts chasms that have opened in the earth, through which ‘rivers of blood’ flow, symbolized by snakes (symbolic of Evil). Sheep have been separated in the second part (symbolic of Good), whereas the third shows a group of three angels kneeling – their swords rendered useless from the battle they have fought.

**Specific Symbols**

*Mélišande* herself is a Siren figure, her name perhaps deliberately reminiscent of Mélusine, a female spirit of fresh water such as a sacred spring or river. A figure from European folklore, she is usually depicted as a woman who is a serpent/fish from the waist down, much like a mermaid. Like water sirens, Mélisande has the ability to entice the human male (Golaud and Pelléas), but in her childlike innocence is powerless to develop her love, causing the destruction of both herself and Pelléas. As Bettina Knapp points out, like Sirens she is associated with water (the unconscious) rather than the rational (conscious) mind and governed by the moon, (also associated with water). She favours darkness rather than light, and meets her love near various wells. Mélisande is seemingly pure, naïve, transparent, fluid and graceful, reminiscent of Burne-Jones’s ‘intangible and distant’ Pre-Raphaelite woman.\(^{625}\) In Act III, scene 1 Mélisande’s song from the tower charms Pelléas, and in the following love scene he fantasises over her beautiful voice - ‘On dirait que ta voix a passé sur la mer au Printemps!’ (Your voice seems to waft across the sea in springtime!) He does not realise that he has invoked the sirens who fatally seduce sailors on the sea.

Her appearance to Golaud when she is lost in the forest hints at mystery, magic and the dream state; we are only aware that she is from a distant land, not the reason for her arrival. She has mislaid her crown, but does not want Golaud to look for it, perhaps distancing herself from past trauma. She seems unable to answer his questions about her appearance in the forest, but whilst she is afraid of the paternal Golaud, with the more passive and younger Pelléas she is provocative and seductive, becoming the alluring and mesmerizing siren that we see in Moreau’s and Burne-Jones’s paintings. Her behaviour is instinctual rather than rational;\(^{626}\) she is the epitome of Symbolist mystery and seduction.

\(^{625}\) “Mary Watts” remarks to Mrs. Campbell (a later Mélisande), that ‘You have got the spirit of a beautiful Burne-Jones picture into it all; how wonderful it is to have done that for us.’ Mrs. Campbell’s *My Life and Some Letters*, (London: Hutchinson, 1922), 136. Also see Jann Pasler, ‘Mélišande’s Charm and the truth of her Music’, *Rethinking Debussy*.

Water is frequently used as an image for purity, rejuvenation, and abandonment; it also emphasizes the characters’ powerlessness over the forces of destiny. ‘La clarté de la mer’ (the light of the sea) is symbolic of its infinity, yet it is also mercurial, prey to moods and an overriding destiny reminiscent of Poe’s dark forces, particularly in the debris of the sea cave. The grotto is a Symbolist emblem of shadows and darkness, a place which also reflects both beauty and danger (see Doudelet’s reminiscent picture of a sea grotto at fig. 6:7, also reminiscent of the dark labyrinths beneath the castle, prefiguring doom and disaster, and his Art Nouveau image of this subject at fig. 6:8, in which the beggars sleep). Maeterlinck uses the subterranean passages as the labyrinths of a secret realm, where Pelléas and Mélisande search for the lost ring, knowing it not to be there. They ignore the call for transparency/openness, symbolised by increasingly bright lunar rays, whilst they penetrate the blackness in a search for ‘treasures’ (spiritual values that will perhaps heal them), but if they are unable to understand or evolve in their knowledge of self, destruction will result. The characters are blind to their misconceptions and motivations, in contrast to the light and fresh air of healthy open relationships. The soul could be described as ‘drowning’, such is its dependence on ‘the forces of nature’ which emerge from the shadows and later return to them. The stagnant water in the castle vaults hint at a poisonous atmosphere and impending doom and death that underlie everything in Allemonde.

Mélisande’s tears add to the many watery/liquid images, featuring weeping willows, rivers, lakes, seas, mountains and cascades. Ambiguously, the flowing nature of fountains, wells and springs are representative of infinite possibilities symbolically, since water is a life force above all else, nourishing and beautifying. An allusion to its invigorating quality lies after the tower scene, where Geneviève (Golaud’s mother) is showing Mélisande the castle gardens and the intoxicating scent of roses by the terrace rises into the air, as they have just been watered, bringing fresh anticipation to the young ‘lovers’.

The wells are reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism, used as devices where love might flourish, their depths symbolic of both treasures and traumas. They represent infinite possibilities as to the source of life and potentiality, hinting at both darkness and light, also

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curing ‘the blind’ (a common theme in Maeterlinck’s writing), but none of it is seated in reality. When Pelléas meets Mélisande at The Blind Man’s Well (fig. 9) and her ring from Golaud is lost in the water, she appears not to care, lying to him when he notices later on. Although Pelléas offers to retrieve it, she declines, perhaps because she is blind to the effect this will have on her husband and secretly would prefer to be with Pelléas.

(Figure 6:7) Charles Doudelet, Illustration for Maeterlinck’s Douze Chansons, 1896.

(Figure 6:8) Charles Doudelet, Illustrations for Maeterlinck’s Pelléas et Mélisande: (1922 version: Museum Arnold Vander Haegen).
(Figure 6:9) Charles Doudelet, Illustration for Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*: Meeting at the Blind Man’s Well, 1922.

*Forest:* Lost therein, both Golaud and Mélisande will experience ‘La nuit sera très noire et très froide’ (The night (that) will be very black and very cold), resounding with hidden secrets. The subliminal spheres of a dark, archaic forest where chaos reigns indicate the profound psychological distress of lost souls, encased in a remote blackness that speaks of the Underworld or primitive level of the psyche. Painful psychological experiences are inferred by the fact that Golaud is trying to block out the death of his wife, whilst we do not know what horrific experiences have led to Mélisande’s ‘amnesia.’ These are places where the sun never shines – a portent of death perhaps, as the forest seals off the castle from the outside world, a ‘reality’ that is encased in the unreality of enchantment. *Figures 6:10–6:11* bring these nightmarish visions into being pictorially, the former showing a female figure wandering in the darkness of the forest (subconscious), whilst surrounded by other darkened figures/potential figures, the latter depicting Mélisande and Golaud lost in the forest.

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628 See Bettina Knapp, n. 35.
(Figure 6:10) Charles Doudelet, Illustration for Maeterlinck’s Douze Chansons: 1896.

(Tower Window: Pelléas and Mélisande experience the heights of jubilation in the release of their love, in a scene akin to the Romeo and Juliet balcony scene, Mélisande’s long blonde hair descending in a curtain onto Pelléas: ‘Oh, oh, Qu’est-ce que c’est?... les cheveux, tes
As a symbol of her most intimate self, it is as if her hair represents both her virtue and passion, her physical and metaphorical essence of demure saintliness, although Pelléas has a premonition of doom. Perhaps he senses the presence of Yniold, Golaud’s son by his first wife, who is later questioned about his stepmother’s behaviour by Golaud. When the child attempts to retrieve his golden ball, it remains stuck under a large stone, perhaps symbolising the hopeless struggle of man against his destiny. The orchestral strings support this, yielding ‘a variant of the Fate rhythm’ in an ‘obsessive ostinato’ that adapts the pentatonic figure (A-C-D-E-G) used for the Forest earlier (C-D-E-G-A).

Shadows: As the play reaches its climax, the characters withdraw into their own poetic world, the lovers confessing their passion for one another. Asked to come into the light, Mélisande retreats into the shadows of the trees as the interplay of light and dark/moon and sun vie for dominion. When she and Pelléas embrace in a moment of abandon, Golaud steps forward to kill his brother, whilst Mélisande takes flight, gives birth and dies.

An early poem by Maeterlinck, Serre chaude, exclaims: ‘Mon âme! – Oh, mon âme vraiment trop à l’abri!’ (My soul!–Oh, truly my soul dwells too much in the shadow!) And it is this dwelling in the shadow which becomes a dominant characteristic in Pelléas and Mélisande, as well as La Princesse Maleine, Les Sept Princesses, L’Intruse, Les Aveugles, (The Princess Maleine, The Seven Princesses, The Intruder, and The Blind.) — in all of these the writer ‘hardly ever moves out of the shadow of a strange and affecting imaginative gloom’ whose essence is entirely Symbolist. Pelléas and Mélisande exist in a twilight, fantasy world that is chimerical and abstract, enlivened more by mystical ideals than any form of reality, but they deal with human feelings and human sufferings and are finally reunited by the sublime.

629 ‘Oh, oh, what is this? Your hair, your hair comes down to me! All the hair, Mélisande, all your hair falls out of the tower! I hold it in my hands, I hold it in my mouth... I’m holding it in my arms. I put it around my neck... I won’t open my hands again tonight... Act III Scene I. My trans.


631 (First poem in Serres Chaudes/Hot House Blooms), published 1889.


633 The work of contemporary critic William Sharp emphasizes this aspect of Maeterlinck’s work in general.
All of these means of expression, whether pictures or declamatory words set in a musical dimension, trigger other visualities within our minds, in an ever-increasing ‘snowballing’ effect. This is the subjective nature of Symbolism operating on our subconscious minds, where all the arts cohere in creating a meaningful Symbolist ‘picture’ that we individually comprehend.634

The Symbolism of Mélisande’s hair

The character of Mélisande, particularly, is central to Debussy’s opera, according with an idealised viewpoint, her communion with Pelléas as much a meeting of the eyes and knowledge of the soul – the greatest intimacy and the fulfilment of ‘an ideal,’ rather than in any real sense a sexual consummation. The first operatic Mélisande, played by Mary Garden, embodies this Pre-Raphaelite paradigm visually,635 Rossetti’s ‘sensual and quasi-spiritual nature of sexual love.’636 Her hair, particularly, was a symbol of erotic desire in fin de siècle Paris, as ‘hair that seduces’ (see fig. 6:12), representing the ‘eternal feminine’. (The photograph of Mary Garden, who played Mélisande in Debussy’s premiere of Pelléas et Mélisande, emphasises this sensuality.)637 In the tower scene Pelléas covers his face with Mélisande’s hair in an aura of ecstasy; it is also a spiritual force since it emanates from her head, where the essence of her soul resides. He loses himself in the fantasy of Mélisande’s hair, enraptured perhaps because it physically fulfils what her elusive character cannot. As Elizabeth G. Gitter explains, her power was invested in its ‘transcendent vitality’, both ‘enchanting – and enchanted’, its magical essence and abundance implying the degree of sexual potency or wantonness she possessed:

When she was saintly – a wife, nurse, mother, or victimized princess – the gold on her head was her aureole, her crown, the outward sign of her inner blessedness and innocence. But when she was dangerous and corrupt, her gleaming hair was a weapon, web, or trap, a glittering symbolic fusion of the sexual lust and the lust for power that she embodied…638

634 The operation of Symbolism is described in: Tzvetan Todorov, Symbolism and Interpretation: ‘Meanings evoked indirectly are meanings like any others; they differ only in their mode of evocation; which is precisely that of the association of something present with something absent…’ 15–16.


637 Ibid, 122, 132–133.

(Figure 6:12) Photo of Mary Garden, who played Mélisande in Debussy’s premiere of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, taken April 4th, 1908.

In Mélisande, we are unsure which category she truly occupies—whether she is saint or sinner, but when she lets down her hair from the castle tower in Act III Scene I, its alluring nature proves overwhelmingly provocative and seductive to Pelléas, standing below. Debussy captures this bewitching scene with octave chords in the violins, whose ‘falling’ motif descends in tandem with Mélisande’s hair at bars 59–60, figure 7 (see *ex. 6:3*). The flutes at bar 62 echo this ‘falling’ soundscape in a more sustained modal descent, joined by the *divisi* strings in octaves again at bars 62–63 and the whole of the woodwind section at bar 63 in the

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when it is golden, has always been a Western preoccupation, for the Victorians it became an obsession… ascribing to it powers both magical and symbolic…” 936–943.
quaver motif. It seems that he is evoking the visuality of the scene in music, making the scene an obvious corollary within the opera. In another piece of Debussy’s music, the setting of ‘La Chevelure’ (see fig.5:1, Chapter V), Katherine Bergeron refers to his ‘timeless song of hair’ as ‘desire’s tune’, in that it becomes ‘erotic hair music’.

The sensitive coupling of words and music within this Pelléas scene arouses similar sentiments.

(Example 6:3) Claude Debussy, Pelléas et Mélisande, Act III Scene 1, bars 56–63.

The composer may, too, have been aware of contemporary paintings such as Henri-Edmond Cross’s painting *La Chevelure*, (about 1892), and felt their allure. Painted in *Pointilliste* style, it reflects a preoccupation with hair during the *fin de siècle*; Mélisande’s hair is a salient feature of seduction symbolically and visually within Debussy’s opera, and it seems likely that the composer would have known this picture of a cascading wall of hair when he came to write the work (see fig. 6:13).

(Figure 6:13) Henri-Edmond Cross, (Henri-Edmond Delacroix)*\(^{640}\) *La Chevelure, (Hair)*, circa 1892, (Paris: Musée d’Orsay)

*La Chevelure* stimulates the senses of touch and vision with its flowing arabesques of a woman combing her long silky tresses – the tactile nature of her hair and its relationship to her body capable of embodying symbolic qualities that naturally aligned Néo Impressionists

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\(^{640}\) This was Cross’s real name, but because of its’ associations with Eugène Delacroix in the painting world, he used an Anglicized version himself.
such as Cross with the Symbolist ethos. The peaceful atmosphere of this painting, set against a harmonious background of browns and mauves, highlights the importance of the hair to the eyes, with Cross’s use of dabs of paint in complementary colours. The vibrations of these hues deliver a form of alchemy that gives the picture a sense of luminosity and disintegration that takes away from its methodical structure, operating in a similar way to the action of Debussy’s *open form*. The erotic nature of long flowing hair is also a feature of Cross’s slightly later painting *L’Air du soir (The Evening Air)*, 1893, which again fetishises the languid desire associated with long hair, and links it to Baudelaire’s own ‘La Chevelure’ from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which scholars have argued that desire and fantasy are inextricably linked, heightening sexual intensities by means of a common elusiveness. The self is lost within Debussy’s sonorous music as it creates physical sensations enhanced by flowing arabesques that are translated into a continuous stream of feelings and impulses, or *snowballing* of Peircian perceptions that are mysteriously realised ‘like a powder of sound cast into the light’.

**French Painters**

**The Nabis: Maurice Denis, Paul Ranson, Edouard Vuillard and Félix Vallotton**

Debussy was known to have been personally acquainted with Maurice Denis and the Nabis or ‘Prophets’, who were associated with Gauguin’s Pont-Aven artist’s colony in Brittany, and as I have maintained, must have had a direct influence on his conception for the staging of *Pelléas* in Paris in 1911. This group of painters sought a symbolic reading of their work; seeking to release themselves from purely representational art, they were inspired by broad planes of unmediated colour, often textured surfaces created by various brushstrokes, defined outlines, and bold patterns that characterized the fashion for Japanese prints. Maeterlinck and Lugné-Poë were connected to both French as well as Belgian artists, drawn towards the Symbolist emphasis of the *Théâtre de L’Œuvre*, so brief mention will be made of them here. Some were set designers—Maurice Denis, Odilon Redon, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard

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641 The concept of *open form* was coined by Jean Barraqué, speaking of ‘*La Mer* de Debussy, ou la naissance des formes ouvertes,’ *Analyse musicale* 12/3 (June 1988), 15–62.


Vuillard, were all involved, whilst Paul Sérusier and Paul Ransom were involved with programme design. They used very little lighting on stage, removed the footlights, and, as has been discussed in relation to the London performance, interposed a gauze between audience and actors – all to produce a hypnotic effect.

In 1891 Denis had already been instrumental in designing the scenery for *Le Songe de la belle au bois* (*The Dream of the Sleeping Beauty*), written by his friend Gabriel Trarieux. On the 22nd March, 1892, the Nabis were responsible for producing the early stage designs for Maeterlinck’s *Sept Princesses* (*Seven princesses*), Edouard Vuillard and Paul Sérusier being in charge of the scenery, Paul Ransom for the programme and Maurice Denis for the theatrical costumes, the play’s single-act brevity impacting on the Nabis’ smaller-sized paintings. It is Ransom’s programme (fig. 6:14), which gives us some indications of the curving ‘arabesque’ style that was to link Pelléas with other ‘fairy tales’ of the period, its curving lines following the shape of the sleeping princess. The princess’s downturned head, above which decorative linear elements are represented, allows the spectator to be drawn into her dream-world, as analogous to the material world she inhabits below, akin to the conscious/unconscious world of Mélisande. Two of the figures are asleep, or have their eyes closed, like Denis’s frontispiece for Debussy’s *La Damoselle élue*, completed a year later, in 1893, (see fig.6:15), and all face inwards, their concentration on the intérieur. An Arkel-like figure (king of Allemonde and Golaud’s father) hovers in the background, crown aloft, whilst a watery theme with waves and seaweed-type patterns fills in spaces decoratively, alluding to other popular Symbolist themes.

It was in this decorative style that Denis formed his greatest collaborative role with Debussy, on the lithographic cover for the composer’s cantata *La Damoselle élue* produced in 1893 for the *Librairie de l’Art indépendant*, and based on Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Blessed Damozel*, (see Chapter V), which was available as a reproduction by the 1890s. Both composer and artist were much taken with the later Pre-Raphaelite style that was very popular in France towards the turn of the century, bolstered by Maeterlinck’s mediaevalist approach and the contemporary penchant for faerie lore. Denis’s conception of Debussy as ‘quintessentially symbolist’ mainly relates to the ethereal Symbolist themes he chose to use, overt examples being *La Damoselle élue*, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and ‘Sirènes’ (*Trois

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645 These were apparently on show at Mallarme’s Mardis, documented by the writer Mauclair in *Mallarmé chez lui* (Paris; 1935), 72.
*Nocturnes*, but their decorative aspects were also complementary, combining literary and visual aspects. The two became regular companions at the homes of the artist Henry Lerolle and his composer brother-in-law Ernest Chausson, who became friend and patron to both. Paintings of the Lerolle family highlighted their central role in the artistic community Debussy frequented, especially the decorative and Symbolist inspired works by Denis featuring Yvonne Lerolle, which her father commissioned in 1892.

(Figure 6:14) Paul Ransom, Programme for *Les Sept Princesses*, 1892, (Saint-Germain-en Laye, France: departmental museum).

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647 In addition, ‘Voiles’ and ‘Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir’ from *Douze Préludes I*, ‘Brouillards’, ‘Les Fées sont d’exquises danseuses’ and ‘Ondine’ from *Douze Préludes II* also used these mystical subjects.

648 The ‘lilting arabesque’ style of these linear figures was ‘implied by Maurice Denis in 1890: ‘Art comes into being when it moves.” (L’art, c’est quand ça tourne.) Denis, ‘Definition du Néo-Traditionnisme,” Théories: Du symbolisme au classicisme, 39. In Bhogal, ‘Ornament and the Arabesque,’ Details of Consequence, 81.

649 See Clément Dessy, *Nabis and Dramatists à l’Œuvre: Reflections on the Decorative from Maurice Maeterlinck to Alfred Jarry*, 2010, ch. 20. www.academia.edu/.../Nabis_and_Dramatists_à_l_Œuvre_Reflections_on_the_Decorative...
La Damoiselle élué was performed in 1894 in Brussels; tellingly it took place within an exhibition of paintings by Renoir, Gauguin, Sisley, Pissarro, Signac and Denis. Debussy’s work was impregnated with the Pre-Raphaelite style, which was also mirrored in the design of Denis’ frontispiece for the work, with the figure’s flowing hair and its flat, two-dimensional form. Debussy had probably read a French translation of Rossetti’s ‘Damozel’ in a newly published anthology of English poetry, Poètes modernes d’Angleterre (1883), [Figure 6:15] Maurice Denis: Frontispiece to the score of La Damoiselle élué, based on Rossetti’s The Blessed Damozel, 1893 (Collection Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond).
translated by Gabriel Sarrazin, which he used as the libretto. The figure of the *Damoiselle* also bears resemblance to the character of *Mélisande* from Debussy’s opera, with which he was concerned, according to his letters, from 1893 onwards.

In addition, by 1891 Debussy had completed two piano *Arabesques* in the decorative flowing style of unfurling lines and ornamentation that obsessed these artists during the 1880s–1890s (see ex.6:4). Mirroring the shapes in nature evoked by the *Art Nouveau* art form, the composer uses a simple motif to progress the piece, with early hints of pentatonicism.


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Maeterlinck’s use of assonances and alliterations in his writing created a repetitive linguistic rhythm that appears to find a parallel in the visual rhythms of these Nabis paintings, their arabesques curving and counter curving in numerous formations, a pattern that Debussy was to follow musically in pieces such as Prélude à l’après-midi d’un Faune and the later Sonata for flute, viola and harp (1915), where he uses continuous arabesques to produce flowing lines of sound, particularly in the flute themes. Undulating melodic lines are taken up by the oboe and clarinet in the former, whereas the viola and harp continue the ‘Pastorale’ arabesques as varied repetition to create fleeting impressions (ex. 6:5) in the Sonata.


Both the viola and harp contain initial stressed descending beats in bar 14, followed by a 7-note pattern in which the viola echoes the harp in a curving decorative design that alters slightly in the next bar, but is essentially imitative and embellishment. Whilst these painters were moving towards an ‘ornamental’ abstractionism that asked the

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651 As Smith elucidates: ‘Maeterlinck in his premier théâtre employed literary techniques that were at the root of this silent, static spirituality: repetition and paradox in the dialogue, oblique answers, the development of recurring symbols...’ ‘Aimer Ainsi,’ RD, 83;

viewer to participate in the search for meaning, Debussy’s own challenges to his listeners were reflected in his refined repetitions.

Echoing this concentration on the intérieur, Pierre Bonnard and his friend, Édouard Vuillard, concentrated on painting interiors and domestic scenes also serving to reflect the intricacies of the inner self. As ‘intimists,’ they sought to apply their ideas in large-scale works such as screens and murals to be used in fin de siècle decoration, the use of flat patterns employing a profusion of splendidly harmonious colours, particularly in paintings such as Personnages dans un intérieur, La Musique (see fig.6:16) and Le Salon aux trois lampes, rue Saint-Florentin, where the figures are embedded within the patterns in order to express both emotions and ideas.653 The decorative function of these rooms is intense, and no distinction is made in the hierarchy of objects and people, who appear as immobile figures, absorbed in their own inner worlds. Dense interlacing motifs parallel visually what Debussy sought to achieve in his technique of a complex aural blending of motifs in works such as La Mer, in order to achieve a sense of temporal fluidity, although this was clearly an Impressionist work, evoking the sounds of the sea.654

The impetus for these artists was the inner psychological state, the feelings engendered within and transferred to their works of art, which reflected these emotions back to society. Vuillard advocated an indecisiveness and vagueness of atmosphere, simplifying objects and people by his use of muted and neutral colouring, which became popular in Lugné-Poë’s theatrical productions in order to emphasize their mystery and spiritual quality. These paintings also perhaps display the dramatic art of avant-garde Symbolist writers such as Ibsen and Strindberg as well as Maeterlinck, whose psychologically tense work was showing in theatres at this time.

These decorative, design-led pictures had no need for imitative realism, and it was this alignment with an ornamental function that I maintain evidences correlations within Debussy’s music, whose suppleness – focussing on decorative themes such as the simulation of visual arabesques, and ability to transcend meter by manipulating the listener’s sense of time – was able to produce a mysterious soundscape that exerted a similar ornamental

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654 Debussy’s cyclic theme, reappearing in the first and last movements, holds together the intricacies of Movement II – Jeux de vagues – that is full of overlapping textures and decorative moods that change and become fragmented, yet overall, La Mer exudes a coherence of design regardless, due to these ‘binding’ features.
function to Vuillard’s intricate patterns and introspective atmospheres. No one part of these paintings is more important than any other – a factor which is unusual considering the number of people depicted. They are part of the general decorative theme; they are not foregrounded within the composition, but become lost in the patterns that consume the picture’s space, unequivocally akin to Debussy’s music of sinuous lines and arabesques, which are interwoven with each other.

(Figure 6:16) Edouard Vuillard, Personnages dans un intérieur, La Musique, (People in an interior, Music), 1896 (Paris: Petit Palais, musée des Beaux-Arts de la ville de Paris).

Bhogal documents: ‘As vertical motifs gave way to patterns organized around a horizontal axis, the arabesque became endowed with a sense of energy and dynamism, which was perceived as setting the entire visual plane in motion…” The arabesque, with its ‘animated form and ambiguous meanings lent itself to the Nabis’s concerted efforts to “link art with life…” See N Watkins, ‘the Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic,” 6, in Bhogal, Details of Consequence, 79–84.
The composer’s music generally does not build up to the highlights/climaxes of the Romantic era— the Préludes, particularly, evoking a piano to pianissimo discourse that plays out in a continuous line, without the thematic tensions of frequent changes of dynamics. Its circularity is thus essentially decorative in the same way that these paintings function as embellishment. ‘Voiles’, for example, second of the Douze Préludes I, expresses its nuances through dynamic markings and instructions such as ‘Dans un rythme sans rigueur et caressant’ but only ever strays above a piano marking in three bars (see ex. 6:6 below).656

(Example 6:6) Claude Debussy, ‘Voiles’ from Douze Préludes I, 1910

Debussy’s reliance on repetition and mirroring devices therefore extends the arabesque device to music. Denoting a psychological horror reminiscent of Poe, the impulses of the interior mind are woven into a dense fabric that lets in no light, akin to the impenetrable

656 Jean-Michel Nectoux : ‘Édouard Vuillard’, Debussy : la musique et les arts, 48. Nectoux refers to the level of ornamentation in Vuillard’s painting as ‘this level of vertiginous and scary mise en abyme artificiality,’ (an infinite reproduction of an image within an image, as a recurring sequence) … ‘with no escape between the decoration of the library and the library itself, coinciding with the concern that Debussy distils sometimes in his compositions…’ My trans.
thicket that clothes the paintings of Vuillard’s interior spaces. To take the analogy further, there is an overlap in subject matter between these ‘interiors’ and the forest in which Golaud meets Mélisande in Debussy’s opera. In both, the characters are contained within the darkness of fear – enclosed within the imagination of their own minds and the interior of wooded landscape, full of Symbolist angst.

Félix Vallotton (Swiss, but working in Paris), was also linked to Debussy by his development of the modern woodcut and as a member of the loosely Symbolist Nabis group. His woodcut style, emphasizing outlines and flat patterns, utilised stark masses of undifferentiated black and white areas that could stand as evocations of light and shadow, simplifying detail. Doubtless his striking black and white wood engraving of *Edgar Allan Poe*, to whose work Debussy was devoted, would have attracted the composer’s attention (fig. 6:17), as would those featuring musical instruments, such as *La Flûte*, (fig. 6:18), *Le Violon*, and *Le Violoncelle*, all completed in 1896. The white facial areas of both Poe and the flute-player below appear as masks, superimposed on the background shadows that surround them, hinting at mysterious allusions. The inscrutable and erotic nature of the artist is also apparent in the small nude female figure that appears in *La Flûte*, seemingly attached to the leg of the cabinet on which the musician leans, possibly referencing the instrument as a ‘female’ one.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 6:17) Félix Vallotton, À *Edgar Poe*, 1894, (Paris : Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des Estampes et de la Photographie).
(Figure 6:18) Félix Vallotton, *La Flûte*, 1896, (Paris : Bibliothèque nationale de France, département des Estampes et de la Photographie).

(Figure 6:19) Félix Vallotton, *Woman at Piano, Intimités (Interiors)*, 1908.
Together with his Nabis friends Vuillard and Bonnard, Vallotton created satirical woodcuts also known as *Intimités* and paintings depicting the interiors of homes, including a series that were reproduced in newspapers in 1898. These often disquieting paintings conjured up both a sense of mystery and more than a hint of menace, associating them with Poe’s *La chute de la maison Usher*, in which the composer strongly identified with the protagonist, Roderick Usher.657 (The woodcut at figure 6:19 is suggestive of the dangers of male attention). Vallotton’s use of shadows as psychological imagery and hints of the subconscious also allied his work to Debussy’s * Pelléas*, where shadows of the forest and darkness in the castle vaults and grotto do more than intimate the murkiness ahead, both literally and in the human condition.

As Vallotton’s work was widely disseminated in books and periodicals throughout Europe, this led to the opportunity to design the poster for Siegfried Bing’s new art gallery of *Art Nouveau* style (fig. 6:20), which was opening in Paris. Bing had popularised woodblock prints from Japan and had published *Le Japon Artistique* — a monthly art journal, for three years between 1888–1891, with colour illustrations. This was a style that briefly became universally celebrated, linking painting, sculpture and music, and Debussy’s use of linear curves with the *Art Nouveau* style.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 6:20) Félix Vallotton, *L’art nouveau* poster for Siegfried Bing’s gallery, 1893, (Colour lithograph)

Talk about curves and contours pepper Debussy’s correspondence, stressing the necessity for fluidity and imaginative emotional response. He was particularly fond of the ‘great master’ J. S. Bach, perceiving his music and that of ‘the primitives’ to have flourished with their use of the ‘adorable arabesque’:

The primitives, Palestrina, Vittoria, Orlando di lasso, made use of that divine “arabesque”. They discovered the principle in Gregorian chant and supported its delicate intertwinings with firm counterpoint. When Bach took over the arabesque he made it more supple and fluid and, despite the severe discipline that great master imposed on beauty, it was able to move with that free, ever fresh fantasy which still amazes us today.  

The eastern gamelan also had a great impetus on Debussy’s compositional style. Having observed its capacity for musical line and its strong relationship with Nature at the Great Exposition de Paris in 1889, the composer was encouraged to adopt its interwoven lines in his own music. As Jann Pasler observes, it was ‘a multiplicity of simultaneous lines… rather than the emotive power of a single line, as in a melody, it was lines in relationship to other lines and in constant metamorphosis that he understood as synonymous with musical beauty’. Gurminder Kaur Bhogal develops this idea in her conviction that:

The arabesque held a special place in the hearts of philosophers, artists, musicians, and critics during the nineteenth century… The arabesque’s inherent ambiguity in meaning allowed it to be pulled into aesthetic debates that raged on such topics as taste and morality… This ornament survived these arguments because of its chameleonic properties… In consequence, the undulating and intertwining nature of the arabesque, together with its malleable nature, made it a natural vehicle for Debussy’s continual transformations of style.

The Influence of Belgian Artists
The significance of Belgian artists lies in their darkened Symbolist themes, which particularly would have had an impact on Debussy’s musical inspiration for Pelléas and the obscurity of its subject-matter. My research demonstrates that there was a much deeper link between the two, Belgian Symbolist paintings forming a resonant affinity with Debussy’s intentions for the opera, which has not been considered previously.

660 Bhogal, ‘Ornament and the Arabesque from Line to Melody’ in Details of Consequence, 64.
As far as Fernand Khnopff (1858–1921) was concerned, the city of Bruges lay at the heart of a tradition of mysticism in Belgium. Its ‘Gothic churches, towering belfries, tortuously winding cobblestoned streets, gabled roofs, medieval turrets and somnolent canals’ led to its romanticisation and idealisation by a generation of Symbolist artists and writers for whom it created ‘the quintessential image of the city as a ‘soulscape.’ The artist returned from his studies in Paris and helped found the Avant garde literary journal, La Jeune Belgique, and it was in these circles that he first met Maeterlinck and Georges Rodenbach, another important Belgian Symbolist writer.

Khnopff was frequently commissioned to produce paintings and illustrations to literary texts, and was asked to design the cover for Le Vice suprême, Joséphin Péladan’s new novel. Subsequently invited to Paris as guest of honour on several occasions to the exhibitions of the Rosicrucian Order, which also interested the composer, it is perfectly possible that he met Debussy during these years. However, his main field of expertise lay in producing works that resonated completely with Rodenbach’s literature. What is striking is the joint parallel that can be drawn with Maeterlinck’s atmospheric writing about the Flemish flatlands, and the impact of this on the visuality of Pelléas et Mélisande. Knopff’s frontispiece for Rodenbach’s Bruges-la-Morte, (Paris, 1892) appeared in the same year as Maeterlinck’s play, and its female image is certainly reminiscent of the Mélisande character that Debussy visualised, particularly the symbolism connected with her long hair, and from thence her image within Debussy’s later opera, (see fig. 6:21 and a comparison with Mary Garden, who played the first Mélisande, at fig. 6:12). Both are reminiscent of the languid beauty of Pre-Raphaelite women, long-haired and in loose drapes, set among floral blooms, idealised and innocent. Khnopff’s figure lies dead, as inferred by the title of the painting and the lilies that surround her, the scene exuding a visual silence that can be linked directly with the ultimate silence of death and the form of declamation and reticence that Debussy uses for his opera, as well as his themes of darkness and light that hide or reflect this quality back upon the characters. The inevitability of fate and its link to a melancholy outcome are present within Bruges-la-Morte as well as Pelléas.

The frontispiece of Bruges-la-Morte associates the death of the city with the leading character’s dead wife, emphasised by the horizontal lines of the image and drawing a

correspondance between the two: ‘Bruges était sa morte. Et sa morte était Bruges.’ (Bruges was his dead wife. And his dead wife was Bruges). The original 1892 publication of Rodenbach’s novel also contained several other drawings that linked with both the imagery of the frontispiece as well as the deathly eeriness of La Ville Abandonnée (see fig. 6:22). Within this mediaeval city the Gothic revival and Pre-Raphaelitism found a natural expression alongside chivalric and Arthurian legends. It is immediately apparent that these representations of ‘contemplative’ women also link to the character of Mélisande, and are a personified vision of women being ‘closer to God’, which Maeterlinck had articulated in 1891, in an article ‘On Women’ in Le Trésor des Humbles. Mélisande was thus both child and seer, graceful in her innocence yet sexually attractive, and blessed with the uniquely feminine power of wisdom.

(Figure 6:21) Fernand Khnopff: Frontispiece for Georges Rodenbach’s Bruges-la-Morte, 1892. (North-western Library, Special Collections)

Rodenbach also imbued his novel with a Schopenhauerian pessimism in which silence became an active force of will, operating as an imperious tyrannical reign over the dead

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663 Maeterlinck’s ‘On Women’ expressed his belief that: ‘All women have communications that are denied to us… It is they who preserve here below the pure fragrance of the soul, like some jewel from heaven which none know how to use… and the sources of their being lie deeper far than ours…’ My trans.
cities and imposing his authority, exercising his vengeance against those who are too happy’, much like Maeterlinck’s scenes of forest, tower or seashore, which he makes not only visually beautiful, echoing the ‘atmosphere’ of the soul, but ‘so emotionally significant’. La Vie Abandonnée personifies the melancholy nature of Khnopff’s landscape pictures, devoid of human presence, haunted and abandoned, the city appearing as a spectre of the past when in mediaeval times it was a prosperous coastal port. Now, the picture reeks of desolation, the emptiness of sky and water devouring the space in silence.

Debussy had used silence as a means of expression and intimacy reflected in overwhelming restraint and delicacy, thus heightening the sensuality between the lovers, particularly that moment in Act IV by the well, when Pelléas asks: ‘Tu ne sais pas que c’est parce que – Je t’aime’. Mélisande replies, ‘je t’aime aussi’, ‘Oh! Qu’as-tu dit Mélisande!’ cries Pelléas (excs. 6:7–6:8) The nuances of feeling and sensitivity spoken between the two as the orchestra remains silent only serve to heighten the intensity and humanity of the scene, its understatement penetrating the sensitivities of the listeners. Maeterlinck’s pauses in the dialogue, indicated by a dash or an instruction for ‘Un silence’ or ‘Un long silence’ for extended pauses are thus reflected in Debussy’s representation of the unspoken so that the feeling is genuine, or authentic. Their words penetrate deeply as Mélisande echoes Pelléas’s revelation with a resonating intimacy that he can barely believe, since he wants it so much. When he asks ‘Tu m’aime? Tu m’aimes aussi? Depuis quand m’aimes-tu?’ Mélisande answers ‘Depuis toujours’—we are led into a dream-like state that hints at the hand of fate – ‘twas ever thus.’

Each of Debussy’s binary contrasts in Pelléas underpin the Symbolist concepts of ‘diametrical opposites’ (le connu and l’inconnu, lumière/obscurité, avertis /l’innocent), these musical gestures refining the sense of the text in suggestive ways, using Debussy’s

668 ‘You know not why I must go? You know not that it is because I love you?’ ‘I love you too’, ‘You love me? You love me too?’
670 ‘You love me? You love me as well? Since when have you loved me?’ ‘Since always’. (Act IV Scene IV)
veiled tones and features such as extended ninths implying longing and desire and half-diminished chords to denote sadness and pity. This expression of polarity between the human element and fate reflects the inexorable unfolding of destiny in the face of Mélisande’s unknown trauma, demonstrated by Debussy’s modal and whole-tone harmonic vocabulary and his ‘more diffuse, static effects’, in order to represent the psychological states of conscious/unconscious minds.672

(Example 6:7) Claude Debussy, Pelléas et Mélisande, 1902 (Act IV 3 bars before 43).

(Example 6:8) Claude Debussy, Pelléas et Mélisande, 1902 (Act IV 5 bars after 43)

672 Ibid, 84–87.
Maeterlinck’s play *Les Aveugles* (*The Blind*) is but one of his works which concentrate on inaction, a strong sense of the unknown, an oppressive silence and an impending sense of doom. The language of silence can be identified as ‘the ideal medium for the transmission of spiritual knowledge, and Maeterlinck’s theories of the unexpected can be linked directly to his concept of cosmic consciousness and soul-to-soul communication’. Silence brings passage to the *paysage intérieur*, and this inarticulateness informs both his characters and the playwright himself, adding to the depth of Belgian lamentation. This theme was also taken up by the French artist, Odilon Redon, who produced a series of paintings featuring *Silence*.

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673 Others include ‘Le Silence’ (‘Silence’), ‘Le Réveil de L’Ame’ (‘The Awakening of the Soul’) ‘Les Avertis’ (‘The Pre-Destined’).


including the Christ figure, (see fig. 6:23) echoing the theme of silence in literature and Debussy’s expressive use of silence in music,⁶⁷⁶ as well as many entitled Les Yeux Fermés.

Khnopff shared many of these ideas, and had produced his own painting personifying Silence in 1890 (fig. 6:24). A young, rather androgynous-looking man dressed in gown and gloves, holds his finger to his lips as if calling for quiet. The use of pastel softens his appearance, which exudes an unknown mystery, further enhanced by the low position of the viewer which gives the picture an almost angelic presence, as if he requests silence from a heavenly perspective. Having visited Britain the previous year and become a friend of Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Holman Hunt, Rossetti and Burne-Jones, it is not unreasonable to detect their painterly influence in some of Knopff’s paintings during this era, including this one. The Belgian artist also illustrated Maeterlinck’s work, including his Pelléas et Mélisande (see fig. 6:25, depicting a pensive, ethereal pastel of Mélisande dated 1907, one of many he completed during the early years of the twentieth century).

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 6:23) Odilon Redon, Le Christ du Silence (Christ in Silence), 1897

(Figure 6:24) Fernand Khnopff: *Silence*, 1890, (Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels).

(Figure 6:25) Fernand Khnopff, *Mélisande* – an illustration for a new edition of Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, 1907
Khnopff’s concept of the androgyne was one that was particularly important to him, (see figs. 6:24 and 6:26 herein,) the eternal struggle crystallized by the spirituality of these idealized figures as they confront earthly sensuality. By juxtaposing the carnal with the pure, the painter gives visual embodiment to an intellectual debate which was not only central to the period but to his personal philosophy of art, believing that the inaccessible absolute or inexpressible would always reign supreme, a philosophy that by implication sought the acme of painterly authenticity and accorded with Debussy’s own love of mystère. The figure contemplating the crown at the well (fig. 6:26) recalls Mélisande’s plight lost in the forest, when Golaud comes upon her. The crown appears to be a ‘poisoned chalice’, since she seems to have forgotten her past and her role in some sort of traumatic event. This creature – an ‘angel’ woman lost in another world – is inaccessible, surrounded by crown and well, prefiguring loss and perhaps death to come; a building reminiscent of ‘Bruges la morte’ towers over her in the background. Full of mystery, she invokes profound reverie, silence her only solace and regenerative force, seeming to echo the Symbolism of Pelléas.

Another link with Debussy was Khnopff’s passion for the theatre and opera, and his subsequent portrayal of women as either ‘femmes fatales’ or ‘angelic women’ – aspects of Symbolist dualism that had surfaced within Debussy’s own work, such as Diane au bois and more particularly in La Damoselle élue (1887). Khnopff was a keen Anglophile, lecturing and writing on subjects including Walter Crane, to whom Maeterlinck was devoted. He was also a friend of Edward Burne-Jones, conducting a lecture on the artist’s death entitled ‘In Memoriam: Sir Edward Burne-Jones: A Tribute from Belgium’.677 There are many points of possible contact with Debussy, including Stéphane Mallarmé, for whom he illustrated various texts, his work Poetry (Listening to Flowers, see fig. 6:27) being particularly reminiscent facially of Burne-Jones’s late Pre-Raphaelite paintings, its title alluding to the synaesthetic qualities of Symbolism.

In 1903 Khnopff produced his first theatre designs of Rodenbach’s play ‘La Mirage’, for the Deutsches Theatre, Berlin, and in the same year designed the costumes and sets for Ernest Chausson’s opera, ‘Le Roi Arthus’ at the Monnaie in Brussels. This is very likely to have brought him into the ambit of Debussy, since he and Chausson had known each other well (until the Thérèse Roger affair had fractured their close friendship in 1894),678 and Debussy had conducted an intimate correspondence with Chausson.

677 Excerpts of lecture to La Cercle Artistique, in Magazine of Art, 1898, 520–526.
678 Csp. 2246–2247, which confirms Chausson’s importance to Debussy, as benefactor as well as friend.
(Figure 6:26) Fernand Khnopff: *Avec Georges Rodenbach: Une Ville morte*, 1889.
Another Belgian artist, sculptor and lithographer closely involved in the Symbolist movement was Henry de Groux who had first met Debussy in 1902, and in 1909 made a portrait and bust of him (fig. 6:28). The composer was known to admire his style (l’art échevelé)\textsuperscript{679}, particularly his painting of Christ aux outrages, (fig. 6:29), first produced in 1889, and other works such as Le Cyclone from around 1894.

\textit{Henry de Groux}

\textsuperscript{679} Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond, ‘Du côté de l’ombre : Debussy symboliste’, in Debussy Catalogue p. 64.
Christ aux outrages was to be his masterpiece, embodying both his own tormented nature (he was later to be interned in a psychiatric hospital), and the restlessness of many Catholics during the fin de siècle, when threats of anarchism and war, as well as increasing societal secularization, were to prove unsettling. It was brought to Paris in 1890 and exhibited at the Salon des Arts Liberaux (following success in Belgium), where it found sympathy among Avant garde writers such as Emile Zola for its depiction of the screaming crowd, particularly women, dogs and children attacking a bound and defenceless Christ. Whilst repellent to some critics, it found sympathy with others who found the image moving, as did Debussy. In his very definition of music, ‘Debussy also does not hesitate to choose a darkened picture: “music is made for the inexpressible…”’\textsuperscript{680} In a letter to another friend, Robert Godet, dated 18\textsuperscript{th} December, 1911, we know that Debussy had visited De Groux’s latest exhibition at the Salon d’Automne, and his feelings when he met the painter again:

It’s a wonderful exhibition... a whole succession of images and shapes which haunt you continuously. I saw de Groux there, hardly changed. Still giving the impression of a talented clown, with all the dreams of the world in his eyes.\textsuperscript{681}

\textsuperscript{680} ‘Debussy n’hésite d’ailleurs pas à choisir une image ténébreuse… « La musique est faite pour l’inexprimable » …’ \textit{Ibid.}, 64. My trans.

(Figure 6:29) Henry de Groux, Christ aux outrages, (The Ravages of Christ), painted in the style ‘l’art échevelé’, (dishevelled/disorderly), where only part of the figures is completed, 1889.

Clearly Debussy held the painter in close esteem, reminiscing about their first meeting and viewing of Christ aux outrages, and probably relishing the fact that he was so unconventional – having been thought dead prior to this due to his reclusive nature! Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond maintains that Debussy’s friendships with various painters and ‘occultistes’ were always closely driven by ‘la dimension d’un symbole’, 682 whether by the twining figures of sculptor Camille Claudel, the detailed dreamy female portraits exhibited in Paris by the naturalised Frenchman Louis Welden Hawkins, or the hallucinatory ‘visions’ of De Groux. They were in fact ‘toute maeterlinckienne du mystere’, 683 enfolding that intimate otherworldly sense within them that Debussy held to be at the heart of all great art.

682 Ibid, 64.
683 Ibid, 64.
It is evident in my comparison between Groux’s paintings and Debussy’s music that the composer’s continual desire for mystery led naturally to themes concerning the afterlife, not necessarily to the peaks but rather the abysses of Symbolic landscapes, reflecting introspection and inquietude, as depicted in the darkness of his Pelléas and the Poe plays. Debussy did not hesitate to choose an ‘image ténébreuse.’\(^684\) Figure 6:30, Groux’s Dante and Virgil in the Inferno, dated 1895, expresses the visual counterpart to these enigmatic thoughts, the downward projection of the characters towards the fires of Hell alluding to their descent both metaphorically and in terms of mood towards the inferno. In a direct comparison, scholars such as Gaston Bachelard have used the botanic term of ‘géotropisme’ to describe Debussy’s tendency to write music that had the ‘tendance à la ligne descendante’ particularly when he was moved by ‘la tentation des profondeurs souterraines’ (see extract from Pelléas, ex.6:9).\(^685\)

\*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*  

(Figure 6:30) Henry de Groux, Dante et Virgile aux enfers (Dante and Virgil in Inferno) circa 1895.

\(^{684}\) An image of darkness/gloom/shadows. He declared: ‘music is made for the inexpressible; I wish it would appear like air from the shadows and then, after moments, returned there...’ Cited by Maurice Emmanuel, Pelléas et Mélisande de Debussy. Étude et analyse (Paris : Mellottée, 1926), 35–36.

\(^{685}\) Jumeau-Lafond, Debussy: la musique et les arts, 64–66.
The depths of de Groux’s inferno with a many-tentacled creature awaiting the unwary can be aligned directly with Debussy’s introduction of Mélisande and Golaud deep in the forest, where both instruments and voices drop into the depths, alluding to impending doom/fate that is in store for them. Mélisande’s notes take a downward trajectory that encompass an octave and triplet semiquavers that heighten the tension, before ending on three semitone steps. The lowest note is on the word l’eau (water), significant because it is key to the unconscious/underworld (refer to ex. 1).


In the passage above (ex.6:9), Mélisande has lost her wedding ring, and has told Golaud that it must be in a cave by the seashore. In a search within the dark grotto, Pelléas says that he will describe the place so that she can answer Golaud, should he question her. Pelléas’s words, finishing on *interroge*, hint at the unease of the two, both within the harshness of its consonants and the scenario of the story itself, plunging a fifth downwards akin to their mood of growing unease. These examples directly reflect the mood and landslide into the abyss of De Groux’s painting.

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686 Lawrence Gilman, ‘Play of Pelléas: Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande,*’ Project Gutenberg, E-Book. [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16488-h/16488-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16488-h/16488-h.htm)
Further to these examples, De Groux’s cave painting, (fig. 6:31), completed shortly before Pelléas (1902), is particularly significant in that it cannot help but remind us of the opera’s symbolic landscape, its suspension between darkness and light, its visual sense of lingering doom as beacons light the entrance to a mysterious corridor – aspects that frequently recur within the characters’ conversation in the opera, symbolising elements of light on the one hand, set against the foreboding atmosphere of darkness on the other. Of particular interest in Act I is the transition from the ‘dark’ F tonalities of the forest and gardens to the ‘light’ of the F# major chord, symbolizing ‘la clarté de la mer’ for which they are searching. Mélisande herself is representative of the inner spiritual light, embodying the ideal that Pelléas and Golaud are searching for, if not the reality.

The sea cave within Pelléas is a source of mystery and Symbolism that Maeterlinck leaves the listener to interpret. When Mélisande sees three beggars in its interior, lit up by the light of the moon, she is unable to voice her feelings – ‘Ah! Il y a... Il y a...’ Although Pelléas articulates the possibilities of danger, he does not know why either: ‘…Take care; do not speak so loud... Let us not wake them... They are still sleeping heavily…’ Perhaps he intuits the darkness of the cave and its use as a shelter as a hazardous portent; perhaps it is the beggars’ ragged demeanour as members of Belgium’s working-classes that stirs his fear, and they depart in silence.

De Groux’s cave is also another world, like Allemonde – figures ascend its steps, moving towards the darkness beyond the doors, yet the entrance is illuminated by an angel-like figure holding a flaming torch, which acts as a beacon of welcome to the interior. Figures dressed in white are accompanied by darker individuals – is this a gateway to another world, an inner spiritual light that is disguised from outer materialism? What does it portend in its juxtaposition of darkness and light? We can only surmise, but we feel the same sense of unease as Pelléas portends. My discovery of this painting and contention that it is a corollary to the sea grotto in Pelléas, full of foreboding atmosphere and metaphysical meanings, opens new pathways within the interdisciplinary arena of Debussy’s music and its visual associations.

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688 Ibid.
689 Pelléas et Mélisande, Act IV, scene I: ‘Prenez garde, ne parlez pas si haut… Ne les éveillons pas… Ils dorment encore profondément…’
William Degouve de Nuncques

Probably Debussy was also aware of the work of William Degouve de Nuncques, who not only belonged to this Belgian circle of Symbolist poets, but also lived with Henry de Groux for a time and travelled widely in France. Sharing the same melancholy character as Maeterlinck, he sought answers to the human condition within the transcendental world, producing paintings that underlined a static drama and immobility, derived from his use of lines framing fleeting intuitions of the invisible. In a Symbolism largely devoid of human figures, these dark aspects link the painter with Debussy’s circularity of forms and his capacity for a depersonalised correspondance with his subject. Just as Debussy’s listeners invent their own interior world to understand the inner workings of Pelléas, Degouve’s ‘immobile’paintings also provoked his audience to probe their own introspections.

The Leprous Forest from 1898, (fig. 6:32), was one of Degouve's most openly morbid works. Its gnarled and twisted tree roots searching for light appear to express the artist's intuition of sadness permeating the natural world, and resonate with Charles Henry’s theories concerning lines that might be extended, as well as the curves and arabesques of their musical

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690 See Caroline Potter, Debussy and nature’, CCD, 137–149. She observed: ‘I suspect that he preferred the open spaces and the silence of the countryside (a silence broken only by the sound of wind, water and other natural phenomena) to the company of his fellow human beings…’
counterparts, aspects that were to be embraced in both the musical and painting worlds. The *Leprous Forest* is particularly suggestive of *Pelléas’s* archaic forest where the gloomy atmosphere is initially set between Golaud and Mélisande, their lostness hinting at spiritual as well as living dilemmas. Degouve’s use of the term ‘leprous’ can also be linked to Debussy’s portrayal of other death-ridden places – both in *Pelléas* and his Poe pieces. In Act III scene II Golaud leads Pelléas to the castle vaults, where the ‘stench of death’ permeates their dank and unwholesome depths in a scene of horror. In the darkness the odour is ‘like poisoned slime’⁶⁹¹ that parallels the atmosphere of this painting again, particularly the green hues of the tree roots. Like Poe’s narrative, fear pervades Degouve’s painting, slithering roots and tendrils hung with snakes meld into an atmosphere of dread and decay that highlights a Symbolism hitherto unexplored yet an explicit correlation with Debussy’s opening scene.

*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS*

(Figure 6:32) William Degouve de Nuncques: *The Leprous Forest*, 1898.

The Belgian poet Emile Verhaeren (also Degouve’s brother-in-law) described his landscapes as ‘obscure dreams of a morbid climate’, largely devoid of human figures and intimating the presence of the metaphysical, claiming that two other paintings by him, *La Maison Aveugle* (fig.6:33), and *The Canal* (fig.6:34), had also both been inspired by Edgar Allen Poe tales, particularly *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which Debussy himself struggled to set for many years. Certainly the fact that both Debussy and Degouve were

⁶⁹¹ Trans. ‘Comme une boue empoisonnée.’
inspired by the same shades of darkness/light allied the psychological facets of their works. The meaning of the former painting was hotly debated, particularly the strange glowing light that reveals the house and its relationship to the shadowy depths behind, but Degouve himself wrote in 1911 that he had intended the lighted windows to represent ‘life immobilized.’ A parallel may be drawn between these lights and those of Pelléas, where much of the action takes place between the eerie half-lights of sunset and the deeper obscurity of night, perfectly captured in the French word ‘crépuscule’ (dusk). Any glimpses of light such as beacons over the sea, hidden by mist, are both fleeting and distant, as Debussy’s music oscillates between the darkness that permeates Allemonde and the light (and love) that Mélisande seeks but fears. The ‘labyrinthine forest’ is never far away, its shadows and sense of silence permeating all else as Debussy blends different timbres in order to depict such binaries (Light/Love, F-sharp major, Darkness/Death, C major).

Belgian cities preserved in aspic against the industrialization of the late nineteenth century stand immobile and decaying, their otherworldliness revealing itself at ‘twilight’. The Canal, (fig. 34) revealing neither the hour nor season of its painting, appears compressed into a strip of horizontal canvas that echoes the shape of the canal itself. The deserted buildings are again lit up in a strange light, shattered window panes perhaps representing the decayed state of cities such as Bruges and Ghent, punctuating the façade of the building, and reminiscent of Khnopff’s Bruges la morte from 1892, time standing eerily still. This lack of defined temporal characteristics resembles the landscape of Debussy’s Pelléas, hidden symbolic meanings paramount. Maeterlinck’s play Les Aveugles, (The Blind, premiered in 1890), was just as influential at the time as The Bluebird or Pelléas and Mélisande, and very probably was connected to the subject matter of Degouve’s paintings, especially as the artist is known to have worked on the setting of at least one Maeterlinck play. Degouve’s mystifying lights on his strange buildings seem to carry a similar message, linking his paintings with Maeterlinck’s writing in a shared affinity of ideas, which deserve to be emphasized in any academic work involving Maeterlinck and Debussy’s music, underlining this synchrony across the artistic spectrum.

692 Langham Smith, ‘Aimer Ainsi’ in Rethinking Debussy, 87.
(Figure 6:33) William Degouve de Nuncques: *La Maison Aveugle*, *(The Blind/Shuttered House. Known as the Pink House in English)*, 1892.

(Figure 6:34) William Degouve de Nuncques: *The Canal*; 1894 (Kröller-Muller Museum, Netherlands).

The artist’s painting *In Venice* (fig. 6:35) perhaps derives its mystifying atmosphere from Maeterlinck’s castle depths since it is full of darkness and light sources, its staircase into the water reminding us of the dark castle vaults in *Pelléas*, its mysterious light sources providing a sense of Symbolist conundrum. The soft iridescent light also reminds us of Debussy’s lightness of touch and creation of similar subjects, such as ‘Brouillards’ (mist/fog) in his *Douze Préludes* II of 1913 (see ex.6:10), the music’s reticence and the importance of silence within. Degouve’s velvety pastels enable him to capture the feelings of each picture and give a nebulous quality to the scenes, emphasizing their strangeness and stillness, whilst Debussy’s musical emotions, conducted in arpeggiated runs and at a *pianissimo* dynamic, act as qualisigns that evoke the fluidity of the misty scene iconically to his listeners/interpretants.
Maeterlinck expressed similar concepts when he affirmed, ‘Speech is of Time, Silence is of eternity’, and ‘Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves’.\footnote{Quotations from \textit{Le Trésor des Humbles} (Treasure of the Humble), collection of Maeterlinck essays from the 1890s : ‘La parole est du Temps, le Silence est de l'éternité’, et ‘Le silence est l'élément dans lequel les grandes choses se façonnent.’}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1}
\caption{William Degouve de Nuncques, \textit{In Venice}. 1895 (Kröller-Muller Museum, Netherlands).}
\end{figure}

Debussy’s \textit{Brouillards} recalls a foggy day traversing three octaves across the treble keyboard. Their tonal range hints at mystery, each bar consisting of two elongated \textit{arpeggios} (of 17 notes) that ascend and descend in a haze of bitonality (D major with G# major– a tritone,) echoing the ambiguities that recur throughout and creating what Siglind Bruhn refers to as ‘interweaving elements in misty air’.\footnote{Siglind Bruhn, \textit{Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy, and Messiaen} (6) (London: Pendragon Press, 1997), 84–89.} Their flowing character also generates space within their different layers, \textit{pianissimo} in the upper register creating the illusion of distance and stillness, akin to Degouve’s pictures,\footnote{Other possible influences for Debussy’s subject matter may have been Monet’s 1879 painting, \textit{Vetheuil in the Fog}, and possibly Arthur Rackham’s \textit{Book of Pictures}, which included his own rendition of ‘Fog’. (New York: The Century company, 1914).} alluding to objects just glimpsed, as if they are barely there – the seen and the unseen.

*Concluding Remarks*

Debussy’s originality as a composer was readily acknowledged by his contemporaries, particularly after the 1894 première of the *Faune*, a musical mosaic incorporating a compositional precision that paradoxically manages to create a dream-like atmosphere with its preference for repetition to develop contrasts. Friends as well as critics certainly compared Debussy’s music with visual art, Louis Laloy for one perceiving a natural synthesis between
Debussy’s painterly and musical ideals, whether or not one accepts the suggestion by Léon Vallas that the composer had aspired towards the occupation of artist in his youth. This chapter deals with the numerous visual associations that abounded ‘Autour de Pelléas’, demonstrating how both French and pre-eminently Belgian artists brought Symbolist ideas into the enigmatic world of Debussy’s only opera, enabling a blending of music and painting to flourish. Such a coalescence of the arts deserves further interrogation in detail since an equivalence of subjects, ideas and technical expertise is apparent when the composer’s music and contemporary paintings are examined. This is particularly the case with Belgian artists who, naturally enough, were aligned to the Maeterlinckian ethos of mystère.

Debussy’s reflections upon the intuitive birth and cognition of the interior thought processes bring to mind a particularly Symbolist way of looking at things, whether the artist is musician, poet or painter. The Symbolist musical work is the expression of the composer’s emotional and artistic intuition, and the culmination of all that emerges from his inner being – that ‘naked flesh of emotion’ (la chair nue de l’émotion) as Debussy articulates it. Veiled in mystery, his music seems therefore to be constantly evolving with a sense of spontaneity that carries its own emotion forward. Because each listener perceives differently and unconsciously, the composer can only make suggestions with his titles that are then able to be ‘felt’ by the individual imagination. The music is ‘suggestion, décor, ambiance,’ rather than representative subject, and thus titles are sometimes placed at the end of works such as the Préludes. Debussy’s emotions are Symbolist emotions, which colour his words in a visionary way, reflecting on the ‘interior, spiritual signification’ of his music.697

696 Debussy writing to Robert Godet, on 18th December 1911, Csp, 1471. Trans. DL, 250.
697 Claude Abravanel, DP, 40–44.
EPILOGUE

Impressionism and Symbolism were both a human construct, employed in an attempt to explain Debussy’s style and how he created his music. But these terms are not an either/or hypothesis, though ‘Est il Impressionniste ou Symboliste’ was surely the question of the fin de siècle. Debussy was undoubtedly both, but at the same time he detested labels and refused to be categorised. As an individualist and idealist his creativity encompassed a great love of poetry and painting, as well as music. The former was always recognised, tying in with the Commedia dell’ arte and the song cycles that he continuously returned to throughout his life, but I have concentrated on revealing his passion for painting. My research has proved there is a rich seam of visual associations that correlate with Debussy’s techniques and subject matter, as well as the Impressionistic and Symbolist ideals that were current at the time and affected all three arts – painting, poetry and music.

Music was perceived to be nearest to the human spirit in its mobility, able to react with a freedom denied the other arts; it is the equivalence of our feelings, which, Debussy believed, reached the sublime by being at one with nature. This ability of music to conjoin with nature enables it to access our perceptions instantly, in the manner of Peirce’s multi-componential signs, wherein its fluidity and multi-levelled signals ensure a chaining process of perceptions that are instantly accessible. Debussy’s unifying strategies all operate together simultaneously, so that his ‘floating’ vertical harmonies, whole-tone, pentatonic and modal scales juxtaposed with tritones, adjacent harmonic poles, expanded intervallic chords, subtle dynamics and ‘rhythmicised’ time and textures can be interpreted on different levels, almost as macrolevel signs, however the listener hears them. Whether they are foregrounded or of ‘lesser’ importance is therefore a matter of individual perception, by the ‘Interpretant’, dependent on the piece’s affective and semiotic potential.698

The enigmatic ‘enchainment’ of Debussy’s later works – exemplified in his ballet Jeux (1913) and the Douze Études (1915) – wherein fragmented motivic material and tonal/non-tonal pitches form a continuous kaleidoscope of ideas – resembles Peirce’s ‘chain of semiosis’ or ‘snowballing’ effect that links continuous ideas with each other because there is a link between music and the feelings it produces. His music operates iconically to make suggestions, in this case with visual images that are not merely representative (imitative) but are suggestive, in that way approaching the musical (abstractive) state. This ‘suggestiveness’ is naturally aligned with the advent of Symbolism, since it operates as such a wide-based

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698 See Turino, 237, and Chapter II herein.
process of assigning meaning, which makes it uniquely placed in lending itself to Peirce’s perceptions. Being based on ideas that were ‘ineffable,’ Symbolism particularly causes us to detect similarities and relationships between the arts of music, painting and literature, as they form natural extensions with one another in our minds.
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