

DEBUSSY'S PIANISTIC PALETTE: UNDERSTANDING HIS INNOVATIVE NOTATION

by

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Debussy's Pianistic Palette: Understanding His Innovative Notation

Thesis directed by Professor David Korevaar

As with many of the pianist-composers, the tactile element is a crucial part of the genesis of Claude Debussy's (1862-1918) piano works. Clues regarding the use of touch, physical gesture, and pedaling are found within his meticulous and innovative notation. Though highly specific, Debussy's system of notation can at first appear perplexing, hindering the initial learning process. This project aims to facilitate the learning process of the *Préludes* for piano by discussing Debussy's use of articulation. This is enhanced by a general understanding of Debussy's orchestral sound world, which can inform interpretative choices.

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CHAPTER I

DEBUSSY AS A PIANIST: OBSERVATIONS FROM ACCOUNTS AND PHOTOS

Introduction

Despite never achieving the status of a true virtuoso, a dream he had given up after failing multiple times to win the *Premier Prix* as a student at the Paris Conservatoire, Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was an extraordinarily gifted and capable pianist, particularly interested in exploiting the timbral possibilities of the instrument. In letters to his publisher, Auguste Durand, Debussy pleaded, “Make me forget the piano has hammers.”¹ Indeed, this evasion of the percussive qualities of the piano characterizes much of his music. Such a sound required an inventive and meticulous notational system, developed throughout Debussy’s career and reaching its culmination in the two books of piano *Préludes* written in 1910 and 1913.

¹ François Lesure and Roy Howat, "Debussy, (Achille-)Claude." Grove Music Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Web. 25 March 2018.

Debussy's unique timbral desires sometimes resulted in perplexing notational symbols that are seemingly impossible to execute accurately. One example includes the up-bow symbols found in "Les collines d'Anacapri" (Figure 1).²



Figure 1: "Les collines d'Anacapri" mm. 9-12

More general is the abundance of seemingly contradictory articulations, as in the opening measures of "Danseuses de Delphes" (Figure 2).



Figure 2: "Danseuses de Delphes" mm. 1-3

Though musical notation will always remain an approximation at best, Debussy's highly specific way of writing clarifies details to the attentive performer. The performer is left to grapple with turning these notations into sound.

² Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 216.

The pianist's tool kit includes touch, physical gesture, and the use of the pedals to start with. In this paper, the term "touch" encompasses a variety of pianistic possibilities, including finger positioning, from playing on the tips of the fingers to a more padded approach, as well as relative key depth and speed. Physical gesture, for my purposes, refers to the larger choreography of the hands, wrists, and arms required to execute a passage in a stylistically appropriate manner. Combined, these tools afford the performer a variety of timbral possibilities.

Before investigating Debussy's notational system, I will first turn to accounts of Debussy as a pianist by his contemporaries. Knowing what kind of qualities Debussy prized at the piano will help a performer gain the appropriate context required to perform his music.

Accounts of Debussy's Playing by Contemporaries

Accounts of Debussy's playing by his contemporaries convey a sensitive player who was especially adept at understanding the piano's tonal palette. Marguerite Long (1874-1966), the French concert pianist who studied with the composer near the end of his life, described Debussy's playing in her memoir *At the Piano with Debussy*:

His nuances ranged from a triple *pianissimo* to *forte* without ever becoming disordered in sonorities in which harmonic subtleties might be lost. Like Chopin, he considered the art of the pedal as a "sort of breathing."³

Long further recounts, "He played mostly in half-tint but, like Chopin, without any hardness of attack. [He was] fully preoccupied with Chopin's method, particularly Chopin's phrasing. . ."⁴

³ Marguerite Long and Olive Senior-Ellis, trans. *At the Piano with Debussy* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1972), 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

Louis Laloy (1874-1944), Debussy's first biographer, was one of many to remark on Debussy's affinity for the music of Chopin. Upon hearing the composer play near the end of his life, he recalled:

Debussy made me understand the poetry of Chopin's music of which so many virtuosos make an exercise of the difficulty. But it is necessary, in order to see the beauty of the line, to have a lightness in tracing the lines which is not at the disposition of ordinary pianists. Even though he hadn't worked for a long time, Debussy kept the delicate touch, the suppleness of fingers, the agile hands, which seemed to shape the rapid tones and allowed one to hear without shock a pool of fluid transparency.⁵

The Franco-American pianist E. Robert Schmitz (1889-1949) commented on the variety of touches in Debussy's playing and compositions in his book, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*:

His variety of coloring was as great in performance as in composition. To his music the mere depression of the key with more or less force is not sufficient. The manner of depressing those keys affects the tone and opens many avenues of coloristic research.⁶

Raymond Bonheur (1861-1939), a fellow musician and close friend of Debussy, described the orchestral qualities in the composer's pianistic style:

It is well known what an incomparable player he was of his own works, providing not only the illusion of an orchestra, but an extraordinary impression of life and movement...⁷

If Debussy's earlier plea to Durand indicated a desire for the illusion of a lack of hammers, it was realized in Italian pianist Alfredo Casella's (1883-1947) view of Debussy's playing:

⁵ Louis Laloy, *La Musique Retrouvée* (Paris: Plon, 1928), 122-123; quoted in Virginia Raad, *The Piano Sonority of Claude Debussy* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994), 13.

⁶ E. Robert Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), 39, originally published by Duell, Sloan & Pearce in 1950.

⁷ Raymond Bonheur, "Souvenirs et impressions d'un compagnon de jeunesse," *Revue Musicale* 7, no. 7 (1926): 1-3; quoted in Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996), 125.

...his sensibility of touch was incomparable; he made the impression of playing directly on the strings of the instrument with no intermediate mechanism; the effect was a miracle of poetry.⁸

From earlier in his life, Paul Vidal (1863-1931), a classmate at the Paris Conservatoire, describes Debussy's unique approach:

His playing, though very interesting, was not entirely pianistic; he had difficulty with the trill, on the other hand he had a very agile left hand which was capable of extraordinary extensions.⁹

Debussy's Technique and Physical Approach at the Piano

While accounts of Debussy's playing are important in understanding the aesthetic and sonic possibilities in his music, an understanding of the composer's technique and physique also plays an important role in developing the types of physical gesture required. Roy Howat, noted Debussy scholar, explains one important aspect of pianism as being able to sense and adopt the composer's natural ways of moving.¹⁰ This is especially important in the works of the pianist-composers, for whom the tactile element was a crucial element in the genesis of composition. In order to achieve a stylistically appropriate performance, the performer must have a vocabulary of physical approaches at the piano from which to draw in addition to carefully considering the type of instrument the composer had access to. This variety of approaches is informed by the technique and physical approach of the particular composer, style, or nationality. For example, the physical approach required to play Mozart's music is inherently different than the physical

⁸ Alfredo Casella, "Claude Debussy," *The Monthly Musical Record* 63 (1933), quoted in Roberts, *Images*, 180.

⁹ Paul Vidal, "Souvenirs d'Achille Debussy," *Revue Musicale* 7, no. 7 (1926): 11-12; quoted in Raad, *The Piano Sonority*, 2.

¹⁰ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 294-297.

approach required to play Chopin's music. Thus, performers should have a particular and informed physical vocabulary to draw from when performing Debussy's works. A starting place in developing this vocabulary should include an understanding of Debussy's approach to the piano.

Debussy's hands were described as large and bony, while his fingertips were reportedly square.¹¹ Photographs of Debussy suggest that he may have been ambidextrous. Though he gardened with his right hand, he held his cigarette and paddled with his left hand.¹² Paul Vidal described Debussy's left hand as having an "extraordinary agility and capacity for extension." This is also evidenced in the surprisingly numerous melodic bass and tenor lines found throughout Debussy's piano writing.

Due to the lack of thumb-crossings required in his music, some scholars believe that Debussy did not like to use his thumb when playing the piano.¹³ Debussy instead tends to favor groups of three or four notes that may be played rapidly by the middle fingers of the hand, often exchanged conjunctly between the hands to create a rapid shimmering effect. One example is his *Etude pour les huit doigts*, which was designed to be played without thumbs. Another example is the opening of "Feux d'Artifice" (**Figure 3**).

¹¹ Marguerite Vasnier, "Debussy a 18 ans," *Revue Musicale* 7, no. 7 (1926): 17.

¹² Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 297.

¹³ Raad, *The Piano Sonority*, 41.

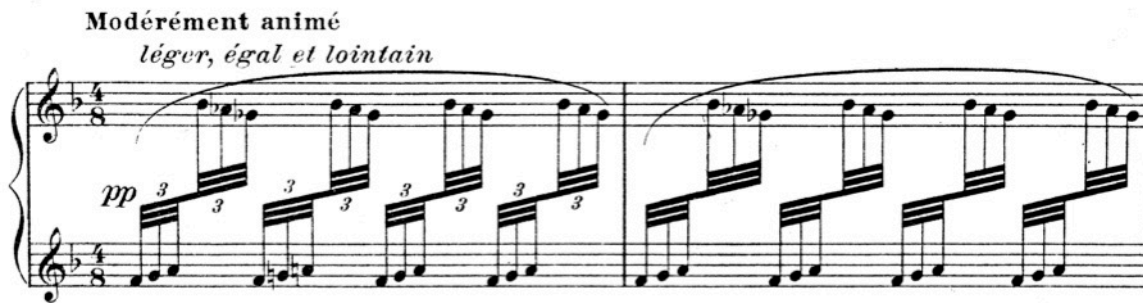


Figure 3: “Feux d’Artifice” mm. 1-2

Debussy played with a certain firmness of the fingers, which he described as the “firmness of rubber, without any stiffness whatsoever [to ensure that] in pianissimo chords, for instance . . . the notes will sound together.”¹⁴ In addition to this firmness, Maurice Dumesnil described his tendency to “massage” the keys, resulting in a sliding motion toward the edge of the key as it descends.

Howat identifies several elements of Chopin’s technical style in Debussy’s body language at the piano, including his suppleness, free movement, hand weight, and close key contact. These elements helped revolutionize French pianism from its previous finger-based emphasis.¹⁵ In Debussy’s own words, “hands are not made to be in the air above the piano, but to go into it.”¹⁶ Performers would be well advised to take this advice when performing Debussy’s music; with this approach, not only is one likely to achieve a more appropriate timbre, the execution will also be more accurate.

All of the accounts about Debussy’s playing included above give an idea of Debussy’s approach to the piano, governed simultaneously by his technique and aesthetic preferences. This

¹⁴ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 307.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

unique blend created a particular pianism, and required its own notational style. In the words of Marguerite Long, “Debussy has left us all the indications possible for the execution of his work. He regarded it with the utmost care, and at times was almost fierce about it.”¹⁷

Despite Debussy’s meticulousness with notation, many pianists find the notation of Debussy’s piano *Préludes* to be perplexing, hindering the initial learning process. The following discussion aims to facilitate that learning process, by suggesting appropriate physical gestures, touches, and pedaling to reflect Debussy’s notation.

¹⁷ Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, 13.

CHAPTER II

BASIC NOTATIONAL CONCERNS

Interpretation of Single Articulations

In the piano works of Debussy, one finds nearly all possible articulation marks, which sometimes occur with surprising simultaneity. The performer is left not only with the task of devising appropriate touches for each articulation, but also must grapple with how to interpret concurrent articulations that appear to be conflicting. While the context of a passage helps to determine an articulation's interpretation, there are certain articulations that retain their meanings more or less throughout Debussy's piano works. Many of these articulation "definitions" come to us through the memoirs of his contemporaries and are confirmed through Debussy's piano roll recordings.

The tenuto dash, which makes numerous appearances in each of the *Préludes*, is frequently used by Debussy as a voicing indication. "Les tierces alternées" provides a clear example of this practice, especially important in a piece that employs the same texture and interval throughout. A hint from the composer regarding the melody comes in the indication "*les notes marquées du signe - doucement timbrées*," translated "the notes marked with the sign –

sweetly rung.” In fact, simply holding the tenuti longer, as their definition requires, will naturally draw the listener’s ear to the pitches, achieving Debussy’s melodic intent without much extra effort.

At first, the tenuto appears predictably on the downbeat of each measure (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4: “Les tierces alternées” mm. 7-12

The appropriate interpretation of the tenuto marking becomes a critical element later in the piece, however, when Debussy omits the marking altogether for lines of music at a time. This may indicate to the performer that large swaths of color are more important than individual voicing of thirds at this point in the piece. Debussy confirms this by also including numerous shaping indications in the same sections (**Figure 5**).



Figure 5: “Les tierces alternées” mm. 33-37

As the piece continues, the tenuti become more varied in their rhythmic placement, signifying a change in the harmonic rhythm and voicing (**Figure 6**).



Figure 6: “Les tierces alternées” mm. 73-77

In other cases, Debussy’s use of the tenuto dash can signify weight or emphasis of a certain note, rather than the voicing of a complete melody. Debussy’s use of the tenuto in m. 15 of “Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” helps to clarify texture in this passage, which occurs in the lowest octaves of the instrument. Just as it signifies that the bass note should be played with more weight, reinforced by the marking *un peu marqué*, it also implies that the rest of the texture can be executed with a lighter touch, avoiding a muddy execution of the passage (**Figure 7**).



Figure 7: “Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” mm. 14-15

The above example also illustrates another truth crucial to a successful performance of the *Préludes*: long notes should receive more sound than their surrounding shorter note values, even when existing under the same marked dynamic. This allows for longer pedals that keep some of the lower frequencies present while allowing for more rapid clearing out of the higher

itches. Giving more weight to the longer note values also helps with a more natural decay of sound.

This hierarchy of sound and note values was important to French pianists at the turn of the century. Its place in the pedagogy of the time is evidenced in both Debussy's writing and in the playing of Ricardo Viñes (1875-1943), who premiered many of Debussy's works, along with other well-known French pianists.¹⁸

In this interpretation, the tenuto dash and the use of longer note value takes on the same basic meaning: emphasis or weight. This can be achieved on the piano by utilizing arm weight for a deep key depth, allowing for full tone without the harshness that comes along with a sharp finger attack. Because the two markings share the same basic meaning, one should be wary of passages that utilize them simultaneously. The context can help to determine whether Debussy intended their effect to be doubled, or whether he may have been using the markings to simply reinforce the meaning of the articulation.

Interpretation of Simultaneous Articulations

If Debussy were to use only one articulation at a time, uncovering his intent would be a relatively simple affair. However, Debussy's sound world was not so elementary, as evidenced by his recordings and accounts from his contemporaries. The result is his frequent use of many

¹⁸ Other characteristics of the French piano tradition, including a peculiar treatment of rhythm, the absence of sentimentality, close observation of note values, and careful attention to articulations, especially slurs, can be found in the teaching of French pianist Paul Doguereau (1908-2000). Doguereau, who worked closely with Ravel and Debussy's widow, Emma-Claude Bardac Debussy (1862-1934), carried on the French piano tradition after emigrating to America and teaching in Boston for a number of years. See David Korevaar, "The Teaching of Paul Doguereau" in Scott McCarrey and Lesley A. Wright, eds, *Perspectives on the Performance of French Piano Music* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014), 77-101.

articulations simultaneously. This style of notation can be a challenge to the uninitiated performer, but it conveys a wealth of information to the keen observer.

The opening line of “Danseuses de Delphes” (**Figure 8**) is an excellent example of this practice. Three individual lines exist within this relatively simple texture: a bass line, chords, and a single-note melody. Debussy demarcates each layer with a slur which helps to visually separate each line while also conveying the segmented quality of the subphrases. Each of the subsidiary outer layers also contain staccatos on each beat within the slur. The staccatos are absent in the melodic middle voice. The observant performer can use two different touches within the same sonority to achieve Debussy’s apparently self-contradictory marking: a shorter stroke with active fingertips on the outer lines and a more legato touch for the melody. Due to the fingerings required to play the chords, the middle line cannot be played completely legato. The pianist can still give the impression of a legato line with a deeper touch and careful pedaling. The result is a clarity in the texture that helps draw the ear of the listener to the unassuming middle voice.

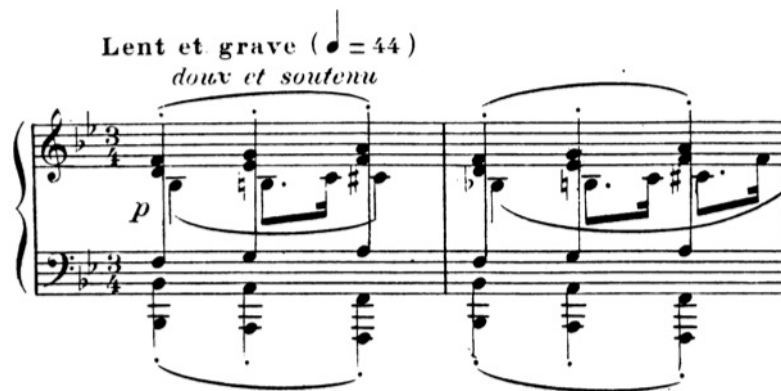


Figure 8: “Danseuses de Delphes” mm. 1-2

It is worth noting that the articulation found in the chords and bass line is identical to the *portato* articulation, which would typically require a detached touch that is between staccato and legato. In my opinion, this passage benefits from a quicker release of the notes which, in combination with the pedaling, results in a more resonant sound that clearly defines the texture.

What would this passage look and sound like without Debussy's extensive articulation markings? When confronted with a text as in **Figure 9** below, the performer would be less inclined to differentiate the textual lines through touch. When relying on voicing alone, the texture becomes inherently “blocky” in sound.



Figure 9: “Danseuses de Delphes” mm. 1-2, alternate engraving

The third measure of the same prelude provides even more simultaneous articulations. The slurs and staccatos remain, but now the slurs are on two-note gestures and include a tenuto dash on the downbeats. The usual strong-weak interpretation of the two-note slur seems to be contradicted by the dynamic indications between the staves (**Figure 10**).



Figure 10: “Danseuses de Delphes” mm. 1-3

Debussy is indicating a lifting wrist motion in the right-hand rather than a subtle shaping indication with the two-note slur. This explains his inclusion of a crescendo during the gesture, a technique commonly found in his works.

Just as Long asserted in her memoir, Debussy has carefully provided all of the necessary information for an effective interpretation. One need only understand and execute his instructions.

Use of Articulations to Indicate Technical Execution

Further examples of markings that clarify technical execution can be found in “Le vent dans la plaine.” It is not hard to imagine the genesis of this particular prelude as an improvisation at the piano; its patterned motoric quality would almost be easier taught by rote than deciphered through notation (**Figure 11**).



Figure 11: “Le vent dans la plaine” mm. 1-2

The chord jumps in m. 28 exhibit one of the most technically challenging parts of the piece (**Figure 12**). The emotional intensity of this passage, preceded by a virtuosic ascending line with a crescendo, tempts the performer to exaggerate the dynamic extremes. This is also the first time a primarily chordal texture has appeared in the prelude; when I first approached this passage, I was tempted to support the blocky texture with a heavy, blocky sound. However,

Debussy marks the beginning of this bar forte followed by a crescendo. Far from implying that it should start subito forte with a heavy touch, Debussy's marking actually tells the performer to start only forte, and to crescendo through the chordal jumps. This execution is not only closer to Debussy's apparent musical intent, but also proves to be more technically doable.

The accent on the first chord can further add to the performer's confusion. Rather than being a volume indication, the accent tells the performer to employ a quick attack, resulting in a gesture which is both an attack and a release, propelling the hand down an octave in time for the next chord.

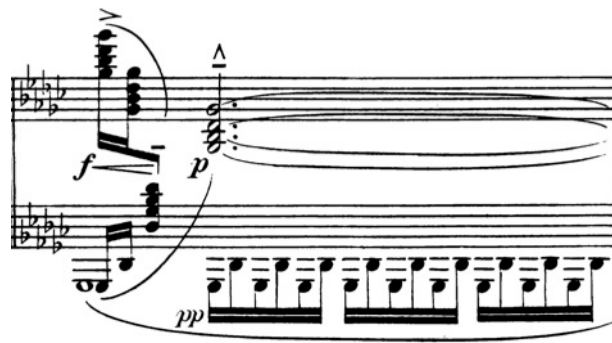


Figure 12: “Le vent dans la plaine” m. 28

As if reinforcing his point, Debussy includes the identical markings each time these jumping chords appear in the piece (**Figure 13, Figure 14**). The adept performer need only follow his instructions to achieve a stylistically appropriate and technically accurate execution. It is worth noting also that Debussy's pianos, including his beloved Blüthner grand, had a shallower key depth than modern-day instruments, which facilitated the execution of passages like these.

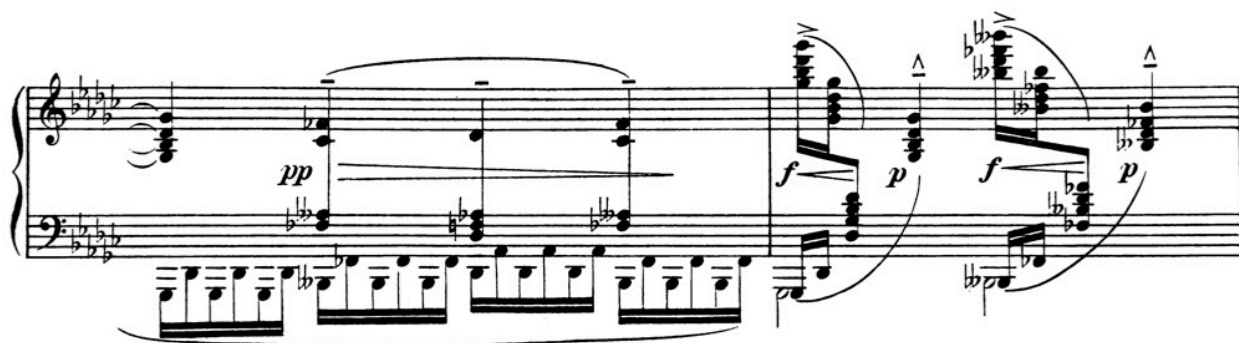


Figure 13: “Le vent dans la plaine” mm. 29-30



Figure 14: “Le vent dans la plaine” mm. 33-34

“Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” contains further examples of technically challenging block chords, frequently occurring in rapid succession, as in m. 21-22 and m. 49. In the first example, Debussy aids the performer by providing tenuto accents on each chord, implying that the pianist should reach the bottom of the key and remain there for the passage (Figure 15).

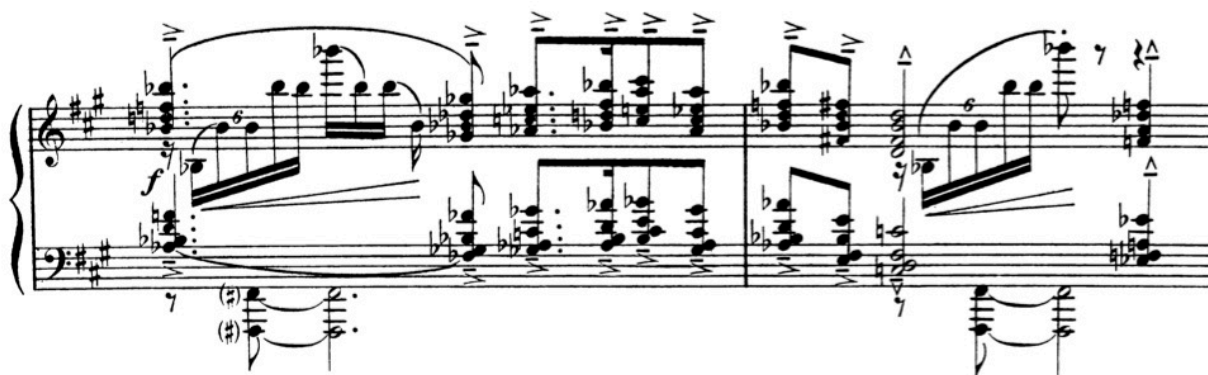


Figure 15: “Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” mm. 21-22

In the second example (**Figure 16**), Debussy provides a special variety of the tenuto accent, referred to henceforth as a marcato accent, which corresponds with the only quarter-note length chord in the passage. This chord is preceded by treacherous descending broken octaves. The marcato accent may imply to the performer that he or she should take the time necessary for a secure landing on the chord.

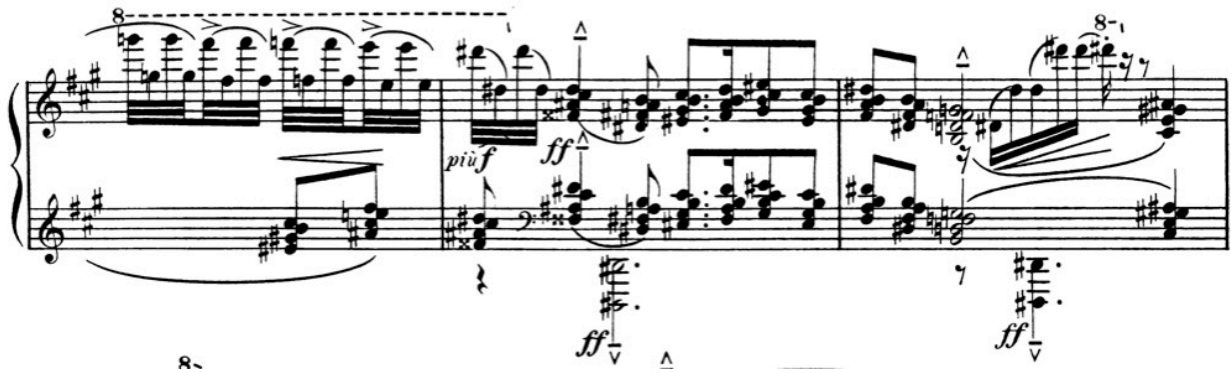


Figure 16: “Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” m. 48.5-50

Subsequent iterations of the same chord also include the marcato accent marking, though now the descending broken octaves follow rather than precede the chord.

Examination of the slurs used for the broken octaves in this section also eases technical execution. In mm. 47-48, Debussy uses one large slur over broken octaves of the same pitch class. Though the harmonic rhythm accelerates, this same principle is followed in m. 48 (**Figure 17**).



Figure 17: “Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” mm. 47-50

However, once the broken octaves span multiple registers of the piano, as in mm. 49-51, Debussy adopts the use of two-note slurs (**Figure 18**). Whether descending or ascending, the stress-release gesture of the two-note slur, along with a general lightness of touch that allows the hand to move at the required speed, is the only way to comfortably execute the passage. This marking reinforces the required technical execution and allows the pianist to release the tension in his or her hand between octaves.

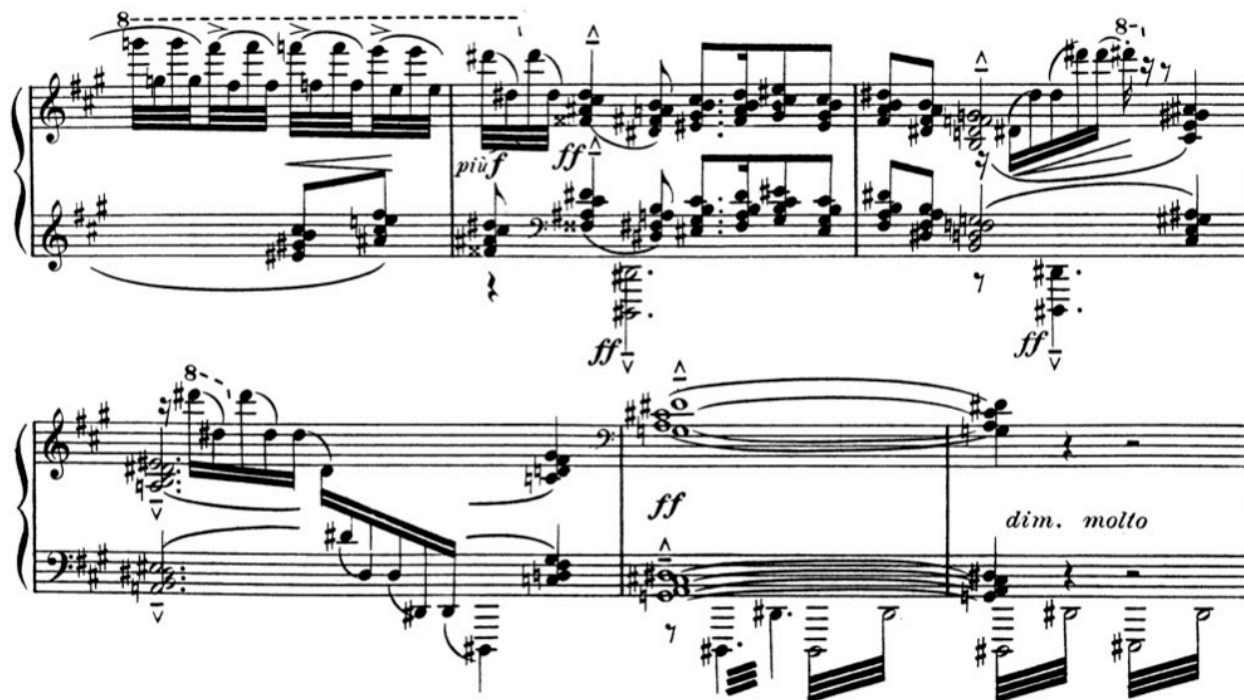


Figure 18: “Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” mm. 48.5-53

Use of Articulations to Clarify Contrapuntal Lines

Debussy also uses articulations to help clarify contrapuntal lines. In “Le vent dans la plaine,” the contrapuntal lines of the first melodic phrase are somewhat obscured due to the shared register and staff (**Figure 19**). The left-hand B-flat that evolves from the opening ostinato sometimes becomes part of the melodic line. Its function is made clear through the stem direction and the corresponding staccato or tenuto markings, which all exist under a larger phrasing slur. Without close observation of these articulation markings, the performer could unintentionally craft a different melody than Debussy appears to have intended.



Figure 19: “Le vent dans la plaine” mm. 3-4

In mm. 5-6, Debussy’s use of stem direction and note length shows the dual function of B-flat, which now serves simultaneously as accompanimental and melodic material (**Figure 20**).

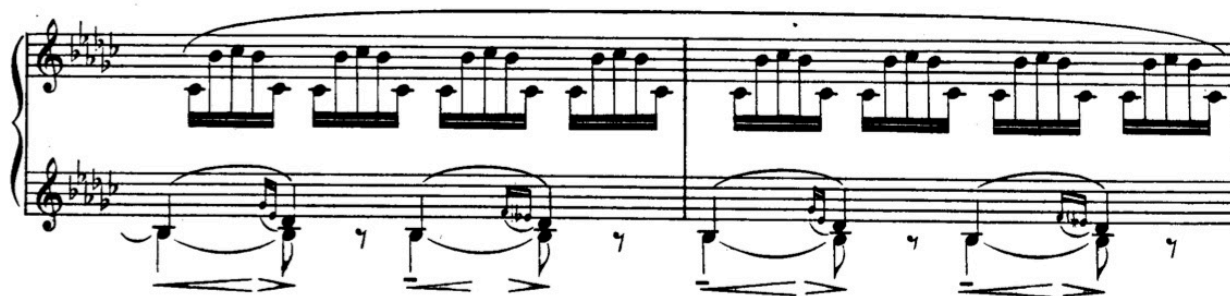


Figure 20: “Le vent dans la plaine” mm. 5-6

The role articulations play in demarcating contrapuntal lines becomes even more important in subsequent iterations of these phrases, which change as new harmonies are introduced. For example, in mm. 15-16 the role of the B-double-flat stays essentially the same, but Debussy’s inclusion of a staccato on the tied second beat indicates an additional release (**Figure 21**).



Figure 21: “Le vent dans la plaine” mm. 15-16

Because the exact rhythms and articulations of this phrase vary from statement to statement, the performer must decide whether the variety of note lengths and markings were intentional or coincidental. When understood as implying a variety of touches and colors, the articulations can help inform this decision.

Three-Staff Notation

Though Debussy is perhaps the composer most famous for utilizing three-staff notation in his solo piano writing, he did not invent the technique. Debussy would have been influenced by Franz Liszt (1811-1886), Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894), and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), who all employed three-staff notation in their piano works. Debussy's first uses three-staff notation in "La soirée dans Grenade" from *Estampes* (1903). Additionally, each piece in the second book of *Préludes* employs this notational technique. In many cases, the music could exist without issue on the standard two staves. Rather than out of notational necessity, Debussy utilizes the three-staff notation in order to clarify contrapuntal lines (**Figure 22**).



Figure 22: “Les fees sont d’exquises danseuses” mm. 67-72

Though Rachmaninoff used a four-staff notation 15 years earlier in his “Prelude in C-Sharp Minor,” Op. 3 No. 2 (1892), his purpose was entirely different from that of Debussy. The large chords and wide range of Rachmaninoff’s passage necessitates the extra staves; the music would be considerably less decipherable on two staves (**Figure 23**).



Figure 23: Rachmaninoff, "Prelude in C-sharp minor," Op. 3 No. 2 mm. 45-47

Unlike Rachmaninoff, Debussy utilizes the three staves in order to clarify the contrapuntal lines, which each carry their own touch and sound quality. For example, in **Figure 22**, Debussy marks the middle arpeggios *léger*, which requires a light hand and wrist execution. The bass consists of long note values sometimes emphasized with tenuto dashes, requiring a heavier touch that will sustain through rapid pedal flutters. The melody is marked *caressant*, though it still requires projection over the other lines, resulting in a third touch. All three touches occur simultaneously. Debussy could have portrayed this through traditional two-staff notation, but his use of three staves, one for each contrapuntal line and its corresponding touch, makes the desired effect clearer to the performer.

Notehead Sizes

The influence of Chopin's compositions on Debussy is unmistakable. His first teacher, Marie Mauté de Fleurville, claimed to have been a pupil of Chopin. Though there is no evidence to suggest this was actually true, she certainly instilled in the young Debussy a knowledge and

love of Chopin's music. Debussy studied many of Chopin's compositions while under the tutelage of Mauté de Fleurville and continued to do so while a student at the Paris Conservatoire. Around the same time that he was composing his own preludes, Debussy was working on an edition of Chopin's works for Durand.¹⁹ Parallels have been drawn between the two composers' sets of preludes, and the influence of Chopin's music on Debussy's pianism and compositional style is evident throughout his career.

Certainly inspired by Chopin's use of various notehead sizes in the "Prelude in F-sharp minor" Op. 28 No. 8 (**Figure 24**), Debussy frequently employs noteheads of differing sizes to show voicing and touch indications in the *Préludes*. One example can be found in the last sections of "Voiles" (**Figure 25**). In each of these cases, the larger noteheads show the melodic lines which require more sound. The smaller noteheads imply a lighter touch necessary to achieve the appropriate layering of sound. In addition to the music of Chopin, Debussy would have encountered similar techniques in the music of Liszt, including in "Un Sospiro" (1849).

¹⁹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 77.

Molto agitato. PRELUDE. F. CHOPIN. Op. 28, N^o 8.

8. *p*

36375

Figure 24: Chopin, “Prelude in F-sharp minor,” Op. 28 No. 8 mm. 1-4



Figure 25: "Voiles" mm. 49-57

The use of small noteheads for the whole tone scales in mm. 49-57 implies a light execution with the wrist, rather than a defined finger approach. This correlates with Debussy's marking, *comme un très léger glissando* (like a very light glissando), and helps to bring out the melody, also marked *douxement en dehors* (brought out sweetly). Compare Debussy's engraving with one that uses consistent note sizes (**Figure 26**). One glance at Debussy's engraving conveys a wealth of information about gesture and voicing.



Figure 26: “Voiles” mm. 49-50, alternative engraving

“Feux d’artifice” also uses a variety of notehead sizes to convey information about gesture. While most editions do a commendable job of reproducing these differences, it is revealing to note that Debussy included four different notehead sizes in the first edition.²⁰ The study of this piece by a pianist of any level would be enhanced by comparing the different sizes of noteheads found within; each conveys a different lightness of touch, brilliance, and volume.

Pedal Indications

The sonorities and atmospheres evoked in Debussy’s piano compositions typically require extensive use of the sustain pedal. However, since Debussy rarely marked pedal indications in the usual way below the staff, performers must determine this information from other clues contained within Debussy’s notation.

Debussy’s own pedal technique was highly influenced by both Chopin and Liszt. In a letter to his publisher from 1915, Debussy described the pedal technique of each composer: “He [Chopin] recommended practicing without pedal and, in performance, not holding it down,

²⁰ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 221.

except in very rare instances. It was the same way of turning the pedal into a kind of breathing, which I observed in Liszt when I had the chance to hear him in Rome.”²¹

In the same letter, he addresses the overuse of the pedal, a technique which has since become commonplace in many performances of his piano works: “The plain truth perhaps is that abusing the pedal is only a means of covering up a lack of technique, and that making a lot of noise is a way to drown the music you’re slaughtering!”²²

With such strong opinions about pedaling, why did Debussy leave so few traditional pedal markings in his works? In the absence of traditional markings, he left clues, including long bass notes and chords that are impossible to be held physically. In retrospect, this method is even more specific than what we encounter with traditional markings, which do not account for the differences between pianos and rooms encountered daily by pianists; what works on one instrument in one space may not be the same on another instrument in a different space. For Debussy, the sound is the guiding force. “Trust your ears,” he told his students.²³

Examples of bass notes as pedal indications abound throughout his piano works. **Figure 27** provides an example from “La fille aux cheveux de lin.” In order to retain the harmony in the bass clef staff throughout each measure, the performer must use a combination of clear voicing and half-pedaling in the right-hand line.

²¹ James R. Briscoe, ed., *Debussy in Performance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 99.

²² *Ibid.*, 99.

²³ *Ibid.*, 99.



Figure 27: “La fille aux cheveux de lin” mm. 10-13

Another example is found in the opening of “Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” (Figure 28).

The use of the half note value for the low F-sharp confirms to the performer that a murky quality in the sound is not only permissible, but desired. Though the execution varies on each piano, the performer must find the pedal depth that sustains the low F-sharp while still allowing for some clarity in the faster moving notes. The elongated note value used for the bass also serves as a voicing indication.

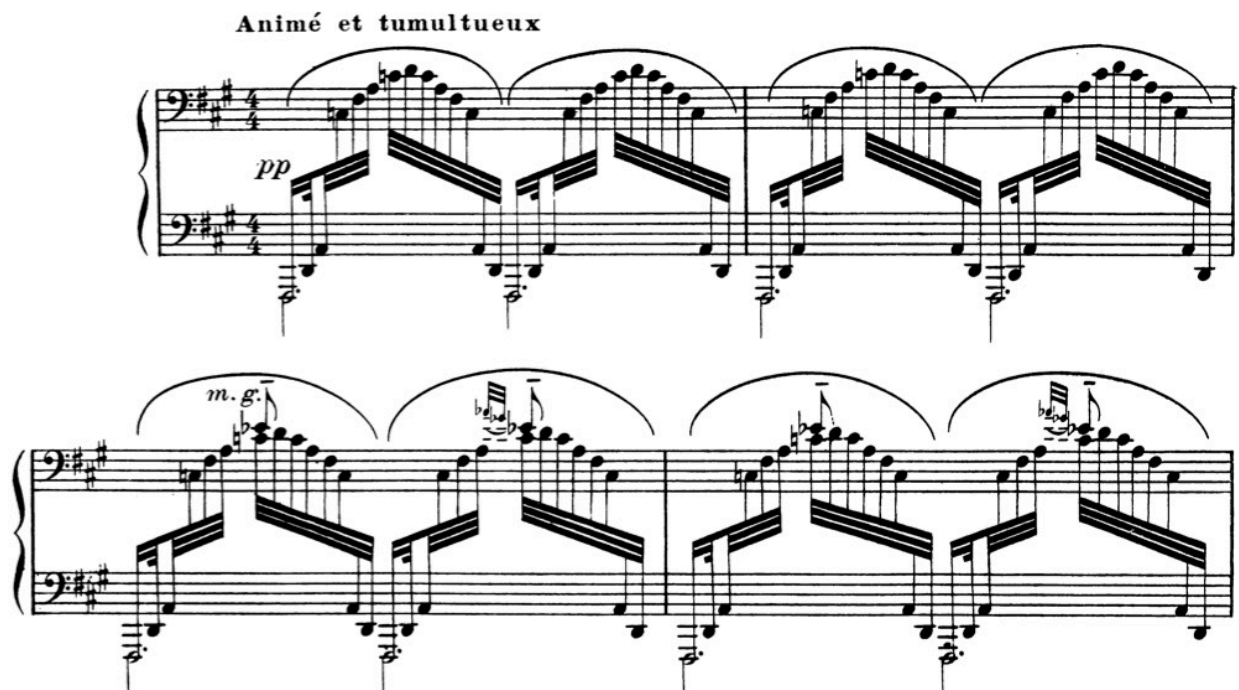


Figure 28: “Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest” mm. 1-4

Though Debussy is known for the technique of using bass notes and sustained chords as pedal indications, he did not invent it. Examples can be found in the works of Brahms and Schumann, including in the latter's *Symphonic Etudes*, Op. 13. Liszt made frequent use of this pedal indication technique, as did Ravel. Debussy adopted and evolved the bass-note-as-pedal indication throughout his career; though his early works do not frequently employ this notation, it is standard practice in his *Préludes*.

In addition to the above examples, Debussy also indicated the use of the pedal with flourishes contained within a larger slur. **Figure 29** from “Ondine” shows one of many examples. Depending on the piano, the performer likely would not hold the pedal down fully for the entire measure. However, some overlap between the beats would be desirable. Dumesnil confirms this technique in his manual *How to Play and Teach Debussy*:

All runs, arpeggios, and passages must always be treated from the “sonorous,” the “harmonic,” and the “vibrating” standpoint; never as a display of finger virtuosity. Therefore the damper pedal must be used very much when playing them. They must never be performed in a ‘neat and crisp’ fashion, but literally drowned into what might be called a “wave of tone.”²⁴



Figure 29: “Ondine” mm. 18-19

²⁴ Maurice Dumesnil, *How to Play and Teach Debussy* (New York: Schroeder & Gunther, 1932), 12.

CHAPTER III

ORCHESTRAL EFFECTS

Orchestration Techniques in the *Préludes*

Debussy's piano music is highly inventive and colorful for a variety of reasons, in part due to the emulation of orchestral instruments in his solo piano works. Though Debussy rarely described such compositional techniques overtly, and no orchestral transcriptions of the *Préludes* exist by Debussy, pedagogues and performers have long associated orchestral colors with Debussy's piano writing. This approach is wise for both pedagogical and historical reasons, because Debussy evolved more quickly as an orchestral composer than as a piano composer. The orchestral works from the 1890s, including *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894) and *Nocturnes* (1899), foreshadow many of the same colors and timbres found later in Debussy's mature piano music, including the *Préludes*.

In this passage from "Voiles," the teacher could instruct the student to hear the alto ostinato as an English horn line while the upper line is interpreted as a contrasting muted string timbre. The pedal B-flat could be orchestrated with *arco* string bass (**Figure 30**). The imaginative execution of such timbres by the student would result in a variety of touches and key

depths. A conversation like this also necessitates a basic understanding of Debussy's orchestral sound world. Teacher and student could then explore the varieties of touch and gesture required to achieve these orchestral colors. This process would also elucidate matters of sound levels and layering, as the student would be forced to think of the relative importance of each line.

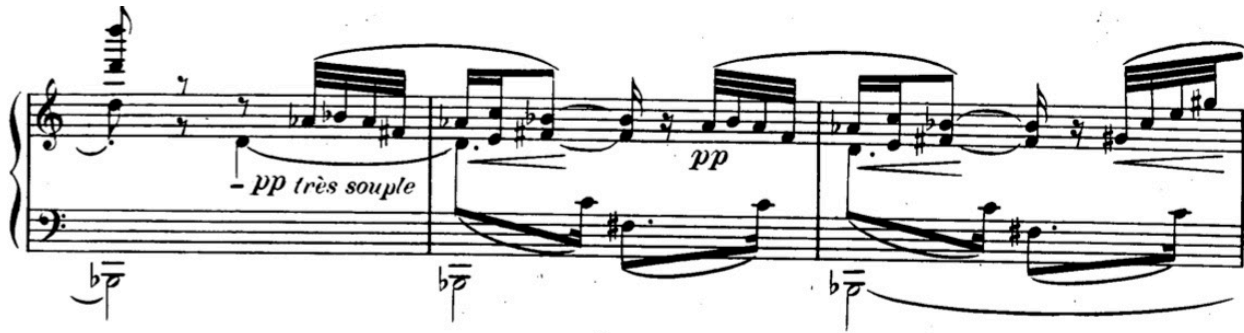


Figure 30: "Voiles" mm. 22-24

One additional excerpt from "Voiles" gives an example of "harp texture," found frequently in Debussy's solo piano music. If interpreted as a harp flourish, the student would innately understand that the gesture, color, and direction are more important than the integrity of individual notes (**Figure 31**).

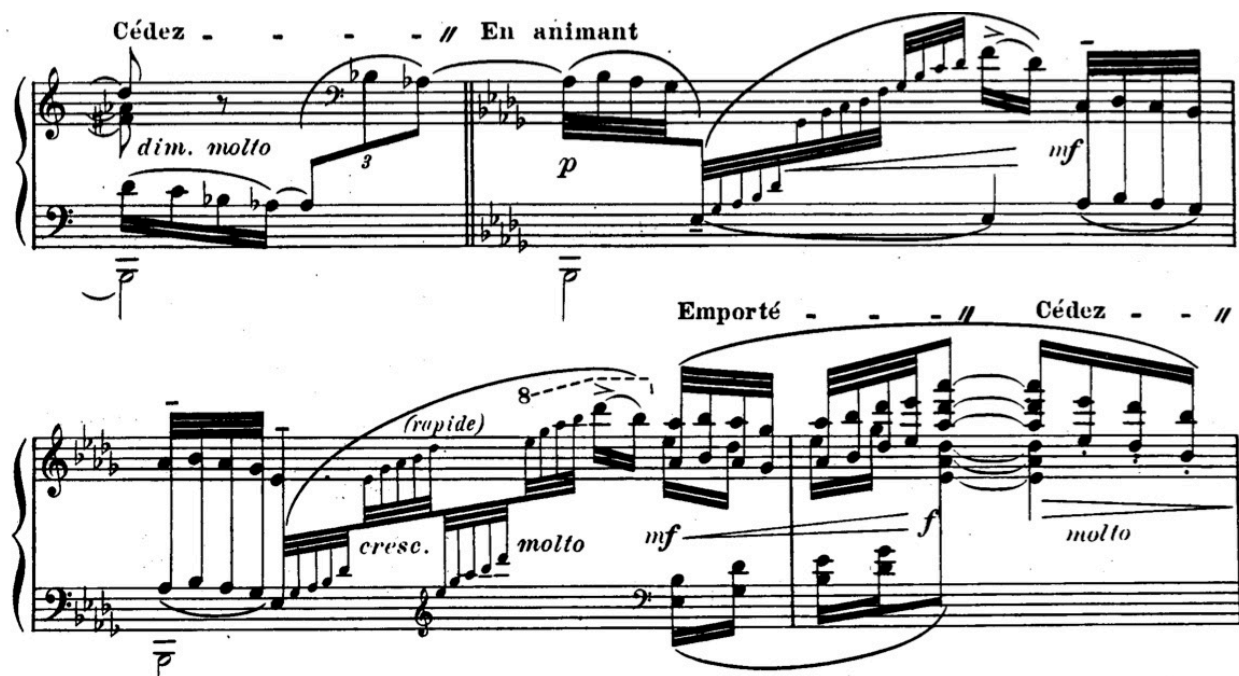


Figure 31: “Voiles” mm. 41-44

Case Study: *La Mer* and “Ondine”

A brief look at *La Mer* reveals characteristics of Debussy’s use of orchestral colors when depicting the trope of water. A comparison between *La Mer* and “Ondine” shows how pianists can creatively interpret and execute these timbres from the piano score.

In his description of “Ondine,” Schmitz describes the two qualities of water depicted by Debussy throughout the prelude:

...one evoking the opalescence of underwater, and the others the scintillating surface effects. The dynamics will be softer for the first group, sharper for the second, and will also determine the touch, which will alternate between a singing tone, born of flexible, relaxed fingers, and a crisper tone, born of curved finger action, but not heavy in dynamism.²⁵

²⁵ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 179.

An example of the former can be found in **Figure 32** while an example of the latter is found in **Figure 33**.

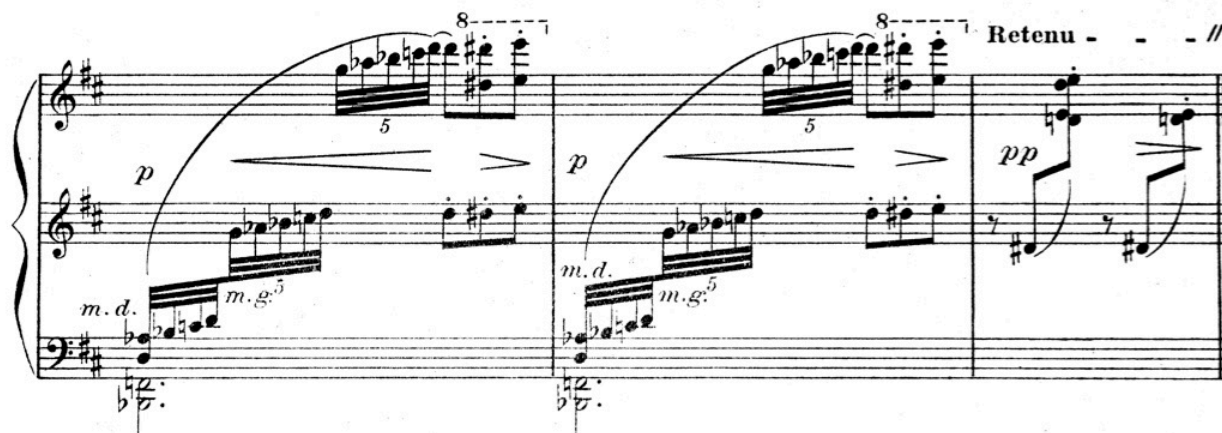


Figure 32: “Ondine” mm. 8-10

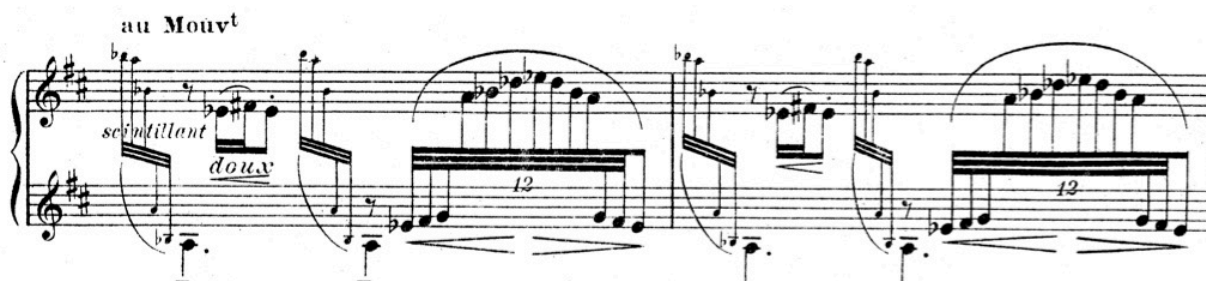


Figure 33: “Ondine” mm. 11-12

La Mer, published in its revised edition in 1908, exhibits these two qualities of water plus many more. “Ondine,” published five years later, can be understood as growing out of *La Mer*’s conception. The well-informed performer would be wise to draw upon the sound world of *La Mer* when devising touches and colors for the performance of “Ondine,” especially because the more concise format of piano notation does not always elucidate such a variety of sound and color. The larger orchestral forces available in the former awakens the pianist’s possibilities for interpretation.

One obvious way of depicting water utilized by Debussy in *La Mer* is through the shimmering string textures throughout, notated as tremolo in the score. Because the nature of the piano does not permit this exact technique, the tremolo notation is absent in “Ondine.” However, the same general effect can be found elsewhere in the prelude.

In the figure below, Debussy utilizes a repeated-note gesture, doubled in octaves, as one of the main themes in the prelude (**Figure 34**). Though the notation of the repeated notes is unlike that of the tremolo figures in *La Mer*, the basic effect is the same: a shimmering impression. As if confirming our suspicions, Debussy includes the marking *scintillant*, or “glittering,” in the previous passage (**Figure 33**).

Additionally, Debussy’s consistent use of two-note slurs on the repeated-note figures in combination with the staccatos on the thumb notes shows the pianist how to execute the passage physically. The tied fifth in the lowest staff also implies a long half-pedal that extends into the first measure of this theme. The performer will find that this pedaling and physical execution also help to create a shimmering effect.



Figure 34: “Ondine” mm. 15-17

The next phrase displays another example of Debussy’s “revised tremolo” for piano (**Figure 35**). In the top staff, the oscillation between fifths and thirds creates a shimmering effect,

similar to what is found in the orchestral writing. In this particular passage, Debussy clearly indicates the proper layering of sound by marking the top line “at ease” and “light,” while indicating that the melody in the middle staff should be brought out.

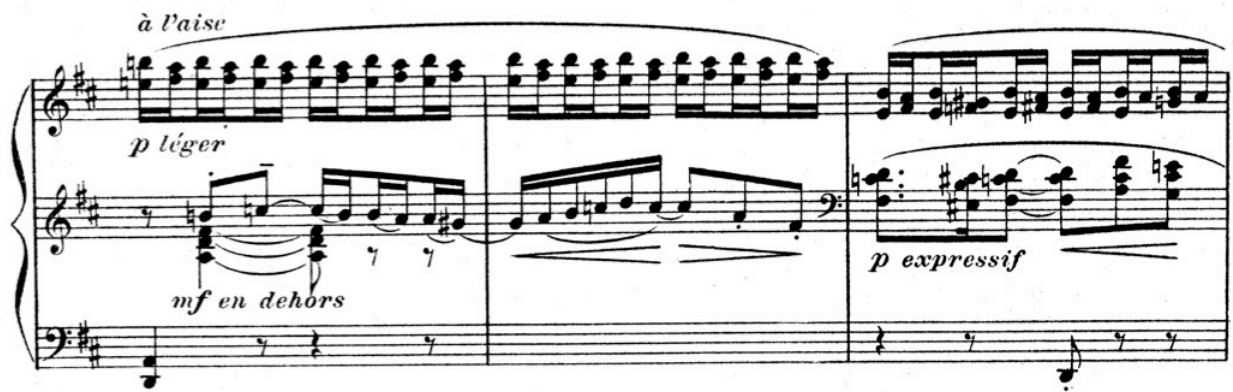


Figure 35: “Ondine” mm. 20-22

Coincidentally, this passage contains striking visual resemblance to Debussy’s writing for strings in *La Mer* (Figure 36).



Figure 36: *La Mer*, I. “De l'aube à midi sur la mer” mm. 33-36

In addition to showing Debussy’s use of “revised tremolo,” **Figure 34** also exhibits Debussy’s characteristic doubling of melodic lines. In the orchestral works, these doublings employ surprisingly diverse instrumental timbres, as seen in the English horn and cello duet in mm. 118-127 of the first movement (**Figure 37**).

The combination of two distinct orchestral timbres results in a unique composite sound. Pianists should consider this facet of Debussy's orchestral writing when playing doubled melodic lines on the piano; far from being mundane, octave passages provide the performer with an even larger palette of color and touch possibilities. Debussy's advice to his contemporaries confirms this idea. Maurice Dumesnil recalled Debussy explaining that "octaves sound flat when played with the same volume in both hands."²⁶ Pedagogues have long taught students to voice one side of the octave; we can also encourage our students to assign different timbres to each octave for an even greater variety of sound.

It is also worth observing that in his orchestral works, Debussy often assigns the melodic line to the woodwinds rather than to the strings. The strings, with their softer, often *con sourdine*, texture, frequently execute subservient melodic lines. Understanding this facet of Debussy's orchestration can help the performer achieve a stylistically appropriate performance. Though Debussy's general sound world can often be described as rounded with pastel and muted colors, there is a certain focus and clarity that pervades the melodic lines, similar to his treatment of melodic lines orchestrally. It is the surrounding texture that gives much of Debussy's works its muted color. When one understands this tendency in Debussy's orchestrational technique, it may also affect the interpretation of his piano works.

Mm. 32-37 of "Ondine" (**Figure 38**) provide a clear example of this practice. The melody is found in the topmost staff, while another tremolo effect and sustained chord are found in the lower two staves. Though the overall dynamic of the passage ranges from piano to pianissimo, the general texture would benefit from a more focused treatment of the melodic line.

²⁶ Briscoe, *Debussy in Performance*, 20.

Orchestrating this staff as an oboe timbre would help the performer achieve an appropriate touch that stays within the notated dynamic range while still projecting melodically.

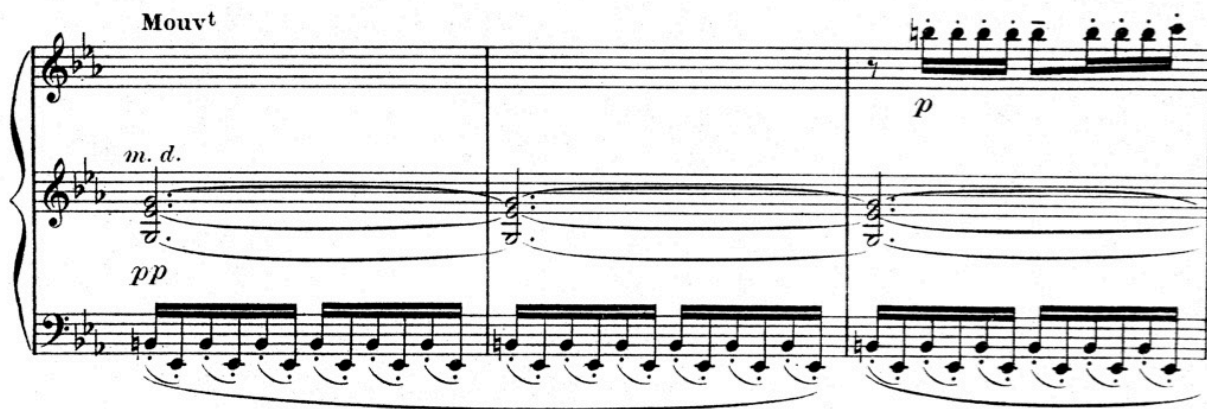


Figure 38: “Ondine” mm. 32-34

There is much to be gleaned from Debussy’s treatment of sound in the orchestral works, particularly in works that employ tropes similar to those found within the solo piano works. Debussy, a master orchestrator, was certainly thinking orchestrally while composing the piano works. Maurice Ravel even described Debussy’s “L’isle joyeuse” as “an orchestral reduction for the piano.”²⁷ By treating the piano works orchestrally, we are opening up a world of sound and gesture possibilities for both ourselves and our students.

²⁷ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 330.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Editions

Though Debussy's notation reveals a high level of meticulousness, musical notation will continue to remain an approximation at best. Some editions of Debussy's music are more successful than others in preserving the content found within Debussy's fastidious manuscripts.

Of particular note is the *Œuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy*, edited by Roy Howat and published by Durand in 2004. In addition to correcting several mistakes published for decades in other editions, including four missing chords in "Danseuses de Delphes" and a missing bar of rests in "Les collines d'Anacapri," Howat offers additional performance suggestions based on Debussy's piano rolls.

Most editions do a commendable job conveying the purely visual components of Debussy's scores, which include the font, typesetting, and page color. While these elements may seem inconsequential to musical performance, a brief look at editions by Henle and Alfred reveals a wide disparity between musical and visual aesthetics. In my opinion, the visual components of the score can convey a wealth of information about the desired sound world and

character, which is relevant to Debussy's interest in the visual arts. This is worth keeping in mind when choosing an edition from which to play or teach.

Areas for Further Research

Numerous areas for further research within the topic of Debussy's notation are worth investigating.

Debussy's interest and involvement in the visual arts community had a strong influence on his notational style. His manuscripts were highly meticulous and aesthetically pleasing from a purely visual standpoint. One example includes the use of slurs in *La Cathédrale engloutie*, which Schmitz has noted resemble arches that may reflect the shaping, phrasing, and structure.²⁸ A study investigating the work of painters close to Debussy may reveal additional insights about his notation.

Similar influences may exist due to his involvement with the symbolist poets, who likewise invented unique ways of notating their work. A cross-disciplinary study of the works of Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire may be a worthwhile pursuit.

Because many of Debussy's preludes were inspired by works of visual and literary art, specific case studies between these preludes and their inspirations may be revealing.

An investigation of Debussy's use of notation for common tropes in both the solo piano and orchestral works could reveal elements of his desired sound world that may not be directly transferrable to the piano. The idea of the piano works as orchestral reductions has been touched upon in Chapter 3, but there are countless more facets to this topic available for exploration.

²⁸ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 156.

Conclusion

While Debussy's somewhat idiosyncratic approach to notation may initially challenge the performer, it provides nearly all of the information required for a stylistically appropriate interpretation of his works. Combined with a knowledge of the French piano teaching tradition and a general understanding of the timbral possibilities found within Debussy's orchestral works, a careful study of the articulative markings throughout the solo piano works reveals a wealth of information regarding touch, gesture, and the use of the pedals. Careful use of these tools, informed by Debussy's notation, allows the pianist to craft a stylistically appropriate performance with a full range of timbral possibilities. Additionally, a general understanding of the orchestral works and the instrumental colors found within can further elucidate the sound world of Debussy to the performer. In the end, it is the job of the pianist to recapture elements of Debussy's composition lost in the translation of notation.

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