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Les Mains Désenlaceuses: unlocking the relationship of text and music in the Proses Lyriques

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*LES MAINS DÉSENLACEUSES: UNLOCKING THE RELATIONSHIP OF TEXT AND MUSIC IN
THE PROSES LYRIQUES*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Music

in

The Department of Music

by
Sacha Peiser
B.M. Loyola University New Orleans, 2007
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The rest of my committee must be thanked! To Dr. Perry, the fount of knowledge, I want to thank you for always seeming to immediately have the answer to whatever strange query I threw at you. Also, offering your Music and Text class could not have come at a better time for me to begin this project. You supplied me with many more analytical tools than I had at the beginning, and now I can examine the relationship of text and music in so many varying ways. Dr. Bade, you are a life saver! You took me under your wing as a theorist yearning to continue her vocal studies and have helped me so much with this project! The comic relief is indeed always helpful, but you never let me forget that I am still a singer, and to always let that inform my analysis.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Claude Debussy's *Proses Lyriques*, a set of four *chansons* published in 1895. These songs were composed during a pivotal time in the composer's life—concurrent with *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, the String Quartet, and the commencement of work on *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Also noteworthy is that out of a complete output of over 90 songs, these are the only published works with both text and music by the composer. Because of this unique property, the *Proses Lyriques* allows researchers, analysts, and performers to gain valuable insight into Debussy's intertwining of music and text.

This thesis utilizes various methods of analysis, and each song is examined in great detail. The study utilizes poetic analysis, motivic and reductive analysis, and Debussy's use of various collections and harmonies as means to tell a story. In addition, recurrent musical themes throughout the song set are highlighted and given specific narrative function. Lastly, the disparate musical and textual elements from each song are woven together in an attempt to bind all four songs into a complete unit and discover Debussy's overarching compositional themes.

INTRODUCTION

Claude Debussy's middle compositional period was one of growth and experimentation, including his only String Quartet (1893) and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894). He also began work on what would be his only complete opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*.¹ The origination of this opera's libretto in 1893 coincided with a digression in his song compositions from 1892-1898. During this time, Debussy composed nine songs in succession which are settings of free verse and prose. Before and after this detour he set metric verse alone.² Among this already special subset of *mélodies* there exists an exceptional group: the *Proses lyriques* (1895), the only published songs with both music and text by the composer.³ Close analysis of these unique middle-period songs will provide a novel perspective into Debussy's creative intertwining of music and words.

French symbolist poets greatly influenced Debussy throughout his life. He found inspiration for his *mélodies* and symphonic works from their poetry, and several of these poets were his close friends. Debussy went to one such friend, Henri de Régnier, for his opinion and advice regarding the composer's attempt at his own symbolist poetry. Régnier saw great merit in the *Proses lyriques* and submitted the first two for publication in the journal *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* in 1892.⁴ The complete set of four poems, titled "De rêve," "De grève," "De fleurs," and "De soir" respectively, derives much of its subject matter and imagery from the prominent contemporary symbolist poets. The evil flowers of Baudelaire, Laforgue's cynical view of Sundays, Louÿs's recollection of times gone by, and the creative struggles of Mallarmé all appear in Debussy's texts. The unifying feature of color and

¹ François Lesure and Roy Howat, "Debussy, Claude: Works," In *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/07353> (accessed November 14, 2008).

² Roger Nichols, "The Prosaic Debussy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 85.

³ Lesure and Howat, "Debussy, Claude: Works."

⁴ Arthur Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 198.

imagery is attributed to the *Art nouveau* movement of *fin-de-siècle* Paris.⁵ For example, the Romantic paintings of J.M.W. Turner, a great influence on Impressionist painters such as Monet, left their footprints in the narrative of the storm and sea, “De grève.”⁶

Debussy had always longed to complete an opera and searched for appropriate subject matter for one for many years. In 1890 he undertook *Rodrigue et Chimène*, with a text by Mendès inspired by the story of El Cid, but constantly looked for something that better spoke to him.⁷ In 1893, he discovered *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Maeterlinck, and abandoned his previous operatic project. In fact, he received permission to commence the work on setting the play through their mutual friend, de Régnier.⁸ The prose play certainly posed challenges to the young composer, who was most familiar with metric verse, but allowed him to craft the style of opera he most sought: a furthering of Wagner’s music drama, lacking definitive arias and sectional divisions, and creating an approximation of Wagner’s “continuous melody.” Debussy crafted the libretto himself, having won complete creative freedom with the permission of the playwright.⁹ Roger Nichols asserts that Debussy welcomed this change to prose. The composer had begun to feel confined when setting verse, and yearned for more flexibility and “elbow room.”¹⁰ Certainly, the personal need for more compositional flexibility coupled with his work on the opera libretto led to experimentation with free verse in the smaller form of *chansons*. Debussy was able to use this “prose patch” to explore new compositional styles and see what the setting of prose could produce.¹¹ Shortly before he drafted the libretto for *Pelléas*, he began writing his own free verse poetry. Suddenly, he did not need to seek out inspiration from the poetry of Verlaine and the plays of Maeterlinck, but could write texts that were meaningful to him and consistent

⁵ Ibid., 199-215.

⁶ Andrew Wilton, “Turner, J.M.W.,” in *Grove Art Online, Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T086656> (accessed March 18, 2009).

⁷ Lesure and Howat, “Debussy, Claude: Works.”

⁸ David Grayson, “Debussy on Stage,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 73-74.

⁹ Ibid., 74-75.

¹⁰ Nichols, 85.

¹¹ Ibid., 85.

with his aesthetic. At last, a total symbiosis of text and music could be achieved. He could make them fit together and enhance one another. The *Proses lyriques* are the result of this experimentation. Separately, the music and text are poignant and rich, but the combination of the two informs listeners and analysts of greater meaning.

The four-song set details Debussy's perspectives on dreams, the shore, flowers, and evening, respectively. Each song depicts its subjects in varying ways. "De rêve" tells the story of an ancient dream that the singer refuses to let go of. Its poetry is dense and ambiguous, and this is reflected in Debussy's treatment of harmonies and motives throughout. By examining harmonic structure, motivic transformation, and poetic/musical divisions, this thesis will clarify the bewildering poetry. The next song is much more straightforward, portraying a storm forming over a placid sea at twilight. Debussy enhances this simple tale by coloring the musical texture with varying registers and densities, bringing his "English watercolor" to musical life. The third song, the depiction of malicious flowers, is the emotional climax of the set. "De fleurs" is wrought with frustration and desperation, which is characterized by an ever-constant, languid motive. This song's recasting of a beautiful poetic image into one of malevolence speaks to the inner thoughts of the frustrated composer and poet. He asks for "disentwining hands" to rescue him from the flowers' ensnaring stems and to return him to creative fecundity. The last song, a comment on the state of Sundays in the technologically advancing world, ends with a solemn prayer asking for pity on the cities and the hearts of their inhabitants. The song's seemingly disparate subjects are bound together by the gradual transformation of a mechanized, repetitive motive into one of plaintive prayer.

The *Proses lyriques* are at first overwhelming, with their broad span of subject matter, varying, dense textures that mimic orchestral writing, and challenging poetry. This thesis will take each individual song and highlight the musical clues Debussy included in his compositions to provide textual clarity. The intricacy of the poems is reflected in the subtle motivic and harmonic framework

in their settings. “Disentwining” the music from the text will most aptly demonstrate how they support and inform one another. This project will take music that is beautiful and complex and reveal the profound detail that Debussy implemented in the settings of his own, most personal poems.

After having considered each song separately, this document will consider the set as an integral whole. There is not much about the *Proses lyriques* that overtly defines them as a unified entity right away. They were indeed composed as a unit, with text written by one person over a relatively short span of time. Their titles share similarity in their sparse structure as well, but the comparison seemingly ends there. The topics (dreams, the shore, flowers, and evenings) are very general and leave much room for ambiguity. However, as will be elaborated over the course of this analysis, there are many musical and textual elements that are featured throughout the set. The last section will synthesize these findings into a clear picture of global musical and poetic themes and imagery. With the text as a guide, this thesis will provide an account of the tonal materials that govern the set, the individual songs, and their parts. It will enumerate the features that bind the music and the poetry into a coherent whole.

The *Proses lyriques* are unique among Debussy’s works for voice and piano, both in structure and inspiration. They represent Debussy’s departure from his comfort zone of metric verse and his attempt at entirely new compositions in preparation for an operatic masterpiece. Their subject matter was entirely personal to the composer, as was the almost orchestral musical treatment of the accompaniment. The *Proses lyriques* are also contemporaneous with some of Debussy’s best known and most crucially developmental works. So much is revealed in these songs, yet so much is hidden. It is time for their nuances to be brought to light.

CHAPTER ONE: “DE RÊVE”

“De rêve,” the first song of the *Proses lyriques*, contrasts the world of dreams with that of reality. Just as the singer is lost in a dream of medieval chivalry, the listener can easily get lost in a sea of dense textures, jarring temporal shifts, and a wash of sound. Debussy’s poem and composition are each difficult to comprehend initially, but closer inspection reveals many harmonic and motivic clues to aid both listeners and performers.

“De rêve” details a progression from an idyllic, idealized vision to its gradual death and degradation. Over the course of the song, the singer’s grasp of an alternate reality is loosened as all of its characters vanish. In the conclusion, the singer accepts that her soul is “gripped by an ancient dream” that can never be reached. The song begins with an introductory passage in which old trees (a surrogate for the singer) begin to dream. They dream of a woman passing by but they cannot beckon to her. This leads to the full description of the vision, with women laughing and running through fields; but they have all died and nothing is left of them. This realization leads to despair over the death of heroic chivalry and eventually to the exclamation, “The knights are dead on the path to the Grail!” One can find a parallel between the singer’s questing after an unattainable goal and the fruitless quest of Grail knights. Just as the knights have died, so too does the singer’s passion for real life. However, the singer can still feel the essence of this dream, and it is almost inescapable. At the poem’s close, self-realization is attained (see Ex. 1.1, below, for full text and translation).

Debussy garnered inspiration for his *Proses lyriques* from symbolist poets such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé. He frequently set their poetry and was a member of their social circle. Arthur Wenk cites another poet, Henri de Régnier, as the main source of inspiration for “De rêve.”¹² Régnier’s *Songe de la Forêt* contains similar imagery, characters, and it also employs a similar rhyme scheme.

¹² Wenk, 200-201.

La nuit a des douceurs de femmes!
Et les vieux arbres, sous la lune d'or, Songent!
A celle qui vient de passer,
La tête emperlée,
Maintenant navrée, à jamais navrée,
Ils n'ont pas su lui faire signe...

The night has the softness of a woman!
And the old trees, under the golden moon, Dream!
Of her who has just passed,
Her head covered with pearls,
Now brokenhearted, forever brokenhearted,
They were unable to beckon to her...

Toutes! Elles ont passé: les Frêles, les Folles,
Semant leur rire au gazon grêle,
Aux brises frôleuses la caresse charmeuse des
hanches fleurissantes
Hélas! de tout ceci, plus rien qu'un blanc
frisson...

All! They have all passed: the Frail, the Foolish,
Scattering their laughter on the sparse grass,
To the grazing breezes the charming caress of
their blossoming hips
Alas! of all this, nothing is left but a pale shiver...

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!

The old trees under the golden moon weep
Their beautiful golden leaves!
No one will dedicate to them evermore the pride
of golden helmets
Now tarnished, forever tarnished.
The knights have died
On the path to the Grail!

La nuit a des douceurs de femme,
Des mains semblent frôler les âmes,
Mains si folles, si frêles,
Au temps où les épées chantaient pour Elles!
D'étranges soupirs s'élèvent sous les arbres.
Mon âme c'est du rêve ancien qui t'étreint!

The night has the softness of a woman,
Hands seem to graze the souls,
Hands so foolish, so frail,
In the days when swords sang for them!
Strange sighs rise up from under the trees.
My soul, this is some ancient dream that grips
you!

Ex. 1.1: Text and Translation of "De rêve"¹³

¹³ Translations acquired from Marie-Claire Rohinsky, ed., *The Singer's Debussy* (New York: Pelion Press, 1987),
with adjustments by the author.

Some of the recurring images and tone also relate to the prevailing artistic attitude in the *fin de siècle*: the general sense of malaise and distaste for all things contemporary, as well as the textual emphasis on the color gold.¹⁴

The frequent alternation between the dream/past and reality/present poses a problem for thorough comprehension of Debussy's poem. The composer utilized music to enhance the clarity of his text. This symbiosis is the essence of song, an interaction of music and text, in which each retains its own identity but both are mutually supported.¹⁵ The tightly woven connections between the two tell the story.

At the time of the set's composition (1895), advances in visual art, literature, and technology led to new ideas and attitudes concerning the traditional organization of time and space, which was a subject Debussy frequently explored, especially in "De rêve." One way in which Debussy signals the shift between past and present is by a move from relative tonal obscurity to eventual tonal clarity. Gregory Marion demonstrates this in his analysis of the first 18 measures of "De rêve."¹⁶ Measures 1 through 5 (*Modéré*) serve as a sort of introduction, characterized by ethereal arpeggiated chords over a descending whole tone passage in the bass (F#, D, C, A \flat [Ex. 1.2]). This passage strongly projects WT₀, but one note (E \flat) does not belong.¹⁷ Alternation between augmented and major triad sonorities in this passage undermines the completion of the WT₀ collection, which is given such prominence in the left hand accompaniment and voice part. The only member of the scale missing is E \sharp , which is replaced by E \flat in the second chord of the song. The dichotomy between the two WT collections is one

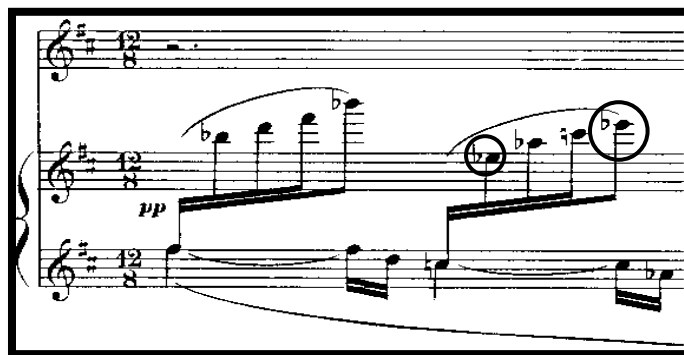
¹⁴ Ibid., 202.

¹⁵ Kofi Agawu, "Theory and Practice in the Analysis of the Nineteenth-Century 'Lied,'" *Music Analysis* 11, no. 1 (Mar. 1992), 7-8.

¹⁶ Gregory J. Marion, "Debussy and Recollection: Trois Aperçu," *Music Theory Online* 13, no. 1 (Mar. 2007), <http://mto.societymusictheory.org/issues/mto.07.13.1/mto.07.13.1.marion.html>.

¹⁷ The two whole tone collections will be referred to throughout this study thusly: WT (whole tone) 0 is the "C" whole tone scale with pitch classes [0,2,4,6,8,t], WT (whole tone) 1 is the "C#" whole tone scale containing pitch classes [1,3,5,7,9,e]. For a more detailed explanation, refer to Joseph N. Straus, *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 147.

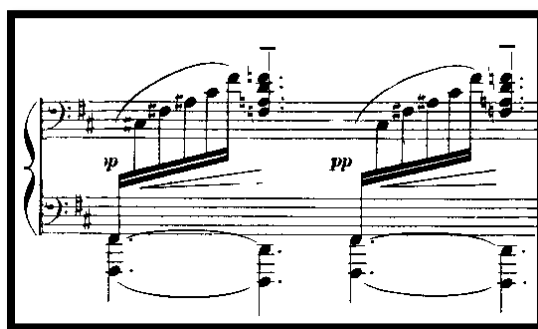
that Debussy will explore throughout the rest of the set in great detail: WT_0 providing a sense of calm and WT_1 representing unrest and tension. In “De grève,” WT_0 is presented as the representation



Ex. 1.2: m. 1. Introduction of “De rêve.” All except E_b belong to WT_0 .

of a placid sea, later disturbed by a frightening storm heralded by WT_1 . In the ensuing song, the opposition between E_b and E (and therefore between the two WT collections) is again directly informed by the poetry. In this introduction, the bass notes are all members of WT_0 , which introduces the theme of night (“La nuit a des douceurs de femmes!”) Night, a recurrent theme throughout the *Proses lyriques*, encourages dreams, artistic creativity, and solace. These arpeggiated chords impart a mysterious, dreamlike quality to the opening measures of the piece.

The arpeggiations shift in m. 3 (Ex. 1.3), alternating between an F^\sharp major triad and a D minor triad. The bass line motion in the first five measures fragments the bass figure of m. 1;



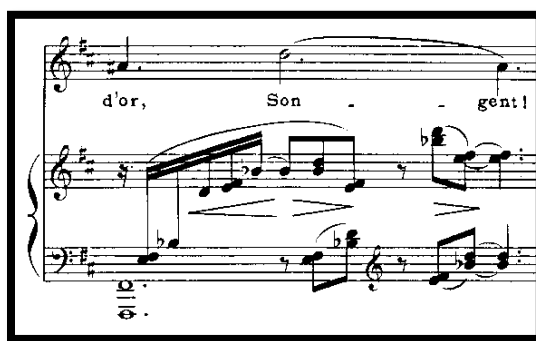
Ex. 1.3: m. 3. The hexatonic pole between F^\sharp major and D minor.

F^\sharp -D- C- A_b is fragmented first to F^\sharp -D and finally to F^\sharp . These chords are also supported by notes of the WT_0 collection. In addition, they form a hexatonic pole, which reinforces the passage’s

otherworldly quality, fitting nicely with the description that follows of another time and place.¹⁸

Another important distinction between these two triads is their placement on the piano. F# major is on all black notes while D minor is all white. In the first three measures of this song, Debussy has thus established a *Grundgestalt* for the entire set: the opposition of black versus white, reflected by the two WT collections and by E \flat and E \sharp , will recur throughout the *Proses lyriques*.¹⁹

In m. 4 as the text states that the trees are dreaming, the ascending figure in the accompaniment and vocal line are comprised entirely of the WT₀ collection (Ex. 1.4). Not only is a “dream” the



Ex. 1.4: m. 4. The WT₀ dream present in both voice and piano

impetus for the rest of this song, but for the entire song set as well.

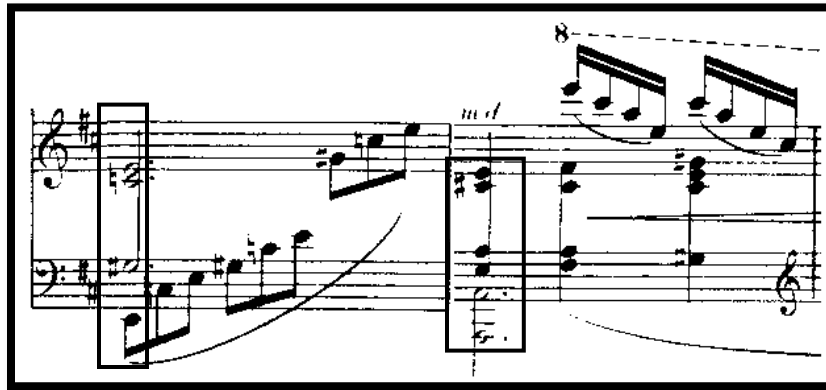
F# prevails in the bass throughout the introduction. At m. 6, the verb “Songent” (dream) is introduced, and we are ushered into the past; there is a strong projection of B minor. The first 5 measures only gain meaning and function as a prolonged altered dominant in retrospect, once the change in tempo (to Andantino) and harmony signal a temporal shift in the narrative.²⁰ The “recollection” of mm. 1-5 also experiments with the expanding harmonic vocabulary of Debussy’s day. In this case, a distinct tonal center is indicative of past tonal practices, while altered dominants and WT collections represent Debussy’s “present.” This same process is repeated throughout the song.

¹⁸ Cohn, Richard, “Uncanny Resemblances: Tonal Signification in the Freudian Age,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 285-6. Cohn defines a hexatonic pole as two triads, roots a major third apart, with each member of one lying a semitone away from the other (e.g. E major/C minor).

¹⁹ *Grundgestalt*, or “basic shape,” was a term used by Schoenberg to describe the fundamental motivic elements that will be developed in the piece. See Michael J. Schiano, “Grundgestalt,” in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/11868> (accessed March 19, 2009).

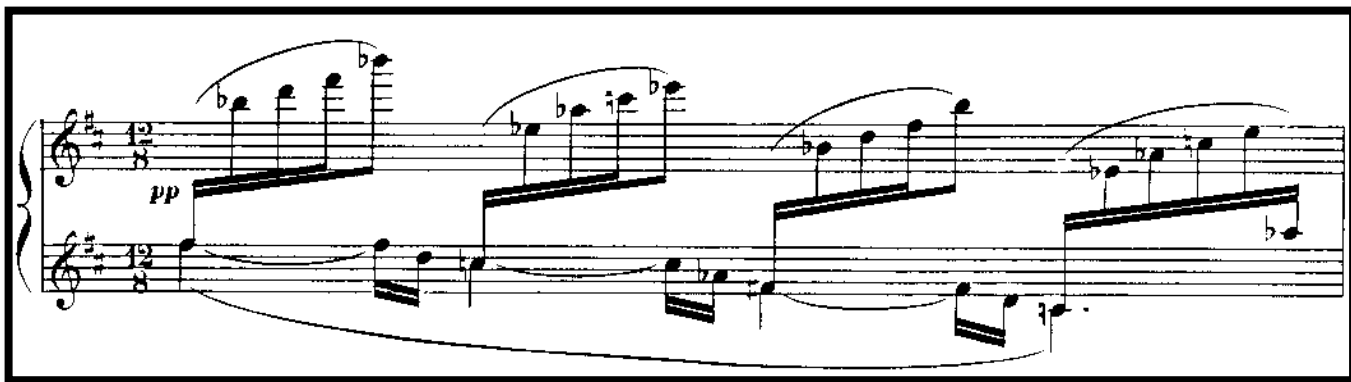
²⁰ Marion, 3.

Often it is repeated at the same transpositional level with the F[♯] augmented triad leading to B major or minor. Other times, such as mm. 17-18, there are different altered dominants leading to their tonics (Ex. 1.5).

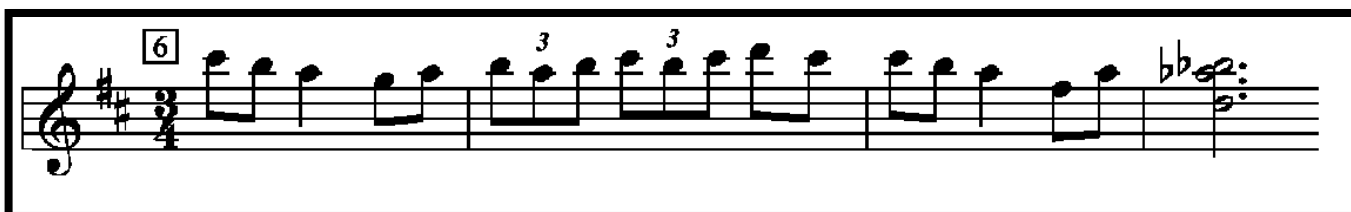


Ex. 1.5: mm. 17-18. Boxes show V^{♯5} → I in A major

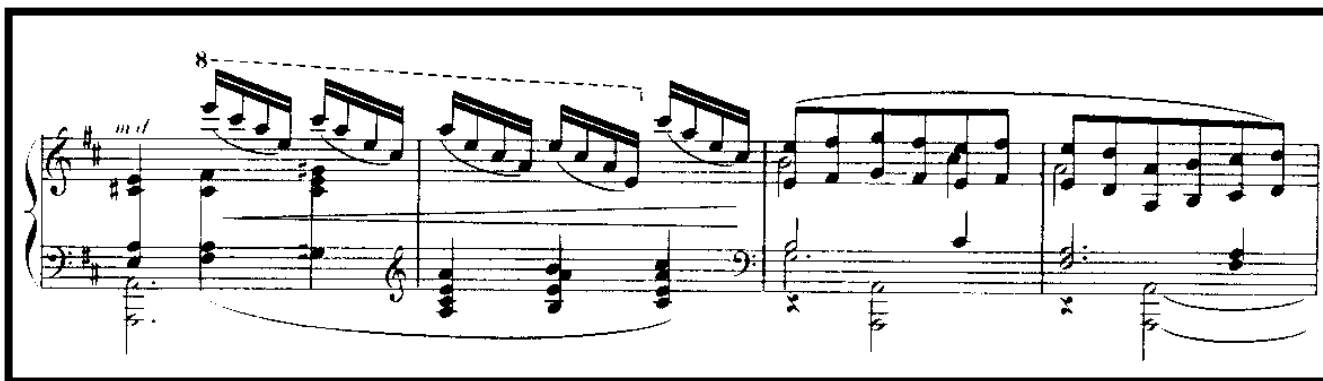
The opening accompanimental figure is one of five important motives that provide form and meaning to “De rêve” (See Ex. 1.6 for a motive chart and Ex. 1.7 for a complete form chart). Motive A, heard at the song’s outset, returns in mm. 47 and 65 and delineates sections based on stanza breaks in the poem. Section I encompasses stanzas 1 and 2. This section is further broken down into an introduction (mm. 1-5), the beginning of the dream (mm. 6-23 or strophe 1), and the full dream narrative (mm. 24-46). As evidenced by the poem, the primary business of strophes 1 and 2 is to paint the picture of a medieval idyll. There is a slight sense of regret presented as the singer describes the trees, and at the end of the section as the singer realizes her dream has disappeared. The third appearance of Motive A in m. 65 is an exact repetition from m. 1 in both the text and the music, with the exception of the F[♯] octave in the bass. The second appearance of Motive A, in Section II, is after the line “nothing remains but a pale shiver.” There is an important change in the motive and mood of the section compared to the other two (ex. 1.8). Notice that the arpeggiated triads are now accompanied by block chords in the left hand and a grounding low F[♯]. And notably, the second chord now contains an E[♭] and has an augmented quality: the full WT₀ collection is now present.



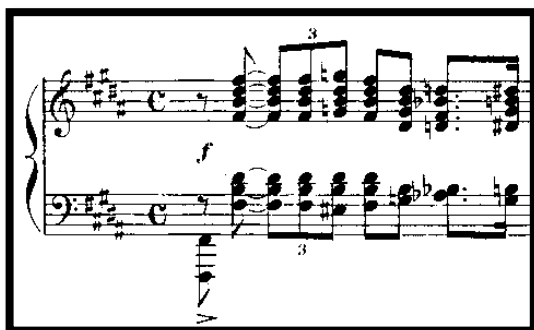
Motive A: m. 1



Motive B: mm.6-9



Motive C: mm. 18-21



Motive D: m. 53

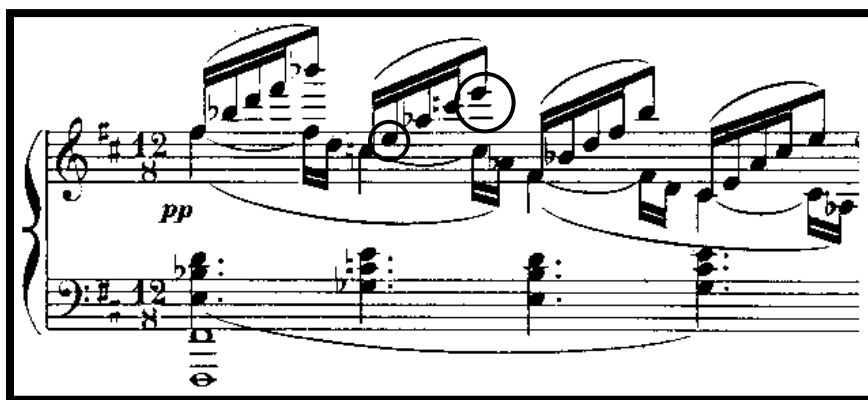


Motive E: m. 55

Ex. 1.6: First Appearances of Motives A-E

Divisions	Measures	Poetic Divisions	Narrative
Section I *Subsections: mm. 1-5 (Introduction) and 6-46	1-46	Stanzas 1-2	Unfolding and framing of dream
Section II	47-64	Stanza 3	Degradation of dream
Section III *Subsections: mm. 65-87 and 88-99 (Epilogue)	65-99	Stanza 4	Secondary climax, return to reality

Ex. 1.7: Form Chart based on Motive A and Text Repetition



Ex. 1.8: m. 47. E₄ appears, completing the WT₀ collection.

This motivic completion occurs at an ironic place in the text, as the formerly pristine dream has now dissolved. This simultaneous completion and dissolution lead into the next section as the trees begin to weep for a faded past. As the trees *begin* to dream in m. 1, Motive A is incomplete; after the dream is relived and subsequently vanishes, the story and motive is completed. Section II leads to the climax of the song beginning in m. 53, with the recognition that the dream is “tarnished,” never to return. When Motive A makes its last entrance at m. 65, the block chords are gone but the low F# remains, effectively grounding the formerly dreamlike motive. This section indicates that the narrator is reluctant to let go of what is gone. Despite the acknowledgment that the dream has vanished, the Knights are dead, and their helmets tarnished, the past glory of chivalry is recalled for the singer once more (mm. 77-82).

Refer again to Ex. 1.6. Motive B, which I have dubbed the “dream-narrative motive,” has a special significance throughout this piece. Its first appearance is in m. 6, after the introductory passage. Motive B occurs seven times throughout this song, always where references to the dream appear. Refer to Ex. 1.9 for a list of each successive appearance and its varied harmonizations. The motive is indicative of a temporal shift to the world of the past and alerts the listener to the fact that the singer is going to tell a story. Wenk refers to this theme as the “principal theme,” most likely due to its frequent appearance. He notes that it lacks a tonal identity and a melodic peak: he calls it a somewhat aimless theme that can be attributed to the *ennui* of the *fin de siècle*.²¹ The motive’s meandering qualities make it malleable. The first occurrence of the motive (mm. 6-9) fits within the interval of a minor sixth, and it has a peak on D⁶ in its first iteration. The melody on its own fits comfortably in the key of D major, but the strong B minor and E minor arpeggiations below it do not allow the tune to be at rest. Every time this motive appears it is transposed exactly, supported by varied harmonies. The dream-narrative motive is restless: it seems to be searching for stability. The melody implies a specific key but appears over a harmonic base that implies another. Each time the motive cadences, it moves to a different chromatic harmony. The statements of the motive in mm. 6-9 and 10-13 are set one octave apart, but the harmony ends on \flat^6 in m. 9 and \sharp^4 in m. 13 in terms of the implied melodic D major. Debussy skirts the pull of dominant to tonic by substituting neighboring notes between successive instances. Another interesting change occurs between mm. 8 and 12. While the melody is transposed down the octave, the supporting harmonies change significantly. In m. 8, there was a B minor seventh chord below it moving by semitone to a B \flat dominant ninth. In m. 12, the harmony changes to a D major seventh chord resolving to a G \sharp dominant seventh, a tritone away (Ex. 1.10). The final notes of the first two iterations of Motive B also contribute to the implied D major. The first concludes on B \flat , the second on G \sharp , neighbor tones to the dominant of D.

²¹ Wenk, 202.

Example A, measure 6: Treble clef, key of D major. The melody consists of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, and D4-F#4-A4.

A. m. 6

Example B, measure 10: Treble clef, key of D major. The melody consists of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, and D4-F#4-A4.

B. m. 10

Example C, measure 30: Bass clef, key of D major. The melody consists of eighth notes: D3, E3, F#3, G3, A3, B3, C4, B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3, D3. The bass line consists of chords: D3-F#3-A3, D3-F#3-A3, D3-F#3-A3, and D3-F#3-A3.

C. m. 30 ^{as an inner voice}

Example D, measure 42: Treble clef, key of D major. The melody consists of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, and D4-F#4-A4.

D. m. 42

Example E, measure 67: Treble clef, key of D major. The melody consists of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, and D4-F#4-A4.

E. m. 67

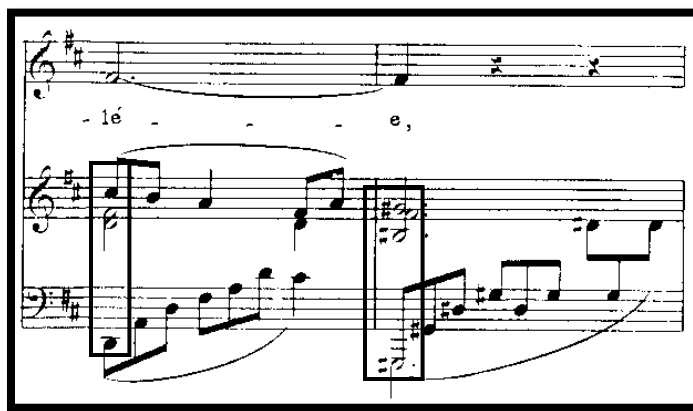
Example F, measure 74: Treble clef, key of D major. The melody consists of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, and D4-F#4-A4.

F. m. 74

Example G, measure 88: Treble clef, key of D major. The melody consists of eighth notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The bass line consists of chords: D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, D4-F#4-A4, and D4-F#4-A4.

G. m. 88

Ex. 1.9: Reharmonizations of Motive B



Ex. 1.10: mm. 12-13. Tritone resolution of D major seventh.

Debussy's second setting of this motive attempts closure, but is diverted to a distant key that will continue to move farther away from the implied D major. How this relates to the text is very clear: the woman and the dream move farther away from the singer/trees. Indeed, the motive is fragmented in mm. 14-17 as the trees are "forever brokenhearted." At the most vivid explication of the dream, Motive B is moved to an inner voice (Ex. 1.9C). The motive, now embedded in the harmony, becomes haunting. As the dream ends, the motive reappears in m. 42 (Ex. 1.9D). This is the first actual transposition, beginning on E rather than C#. The faded dream is becoming more distorted and implies a new key (F major) that (again) is not confirmed by the accompaniment. The last two occurrences are extremely non-diatonic, filled with accidentals, and repeatedly transposed as the dream and its characters attempt one last return. Measures 67-70 (Ex. 1.9E) feature tritone root motions with the melody echoing the initial statement of Motive B. A musical and textual repeat has just occurred, but the dream's progression throughout the song leads to this heavily chromatic, eerie restatement of the motive. It follows directly into mm. 71-74 (Ex. 1.9F), as the motive switches off between the left and right hands. This occurs under another echo of previously heard text: "hands so foolish, so frail" (as opposed to "the frail, the foolish"). Again, there is a distortion of the text this time, accompanied by very distorted harmonies. The singer is never at ease until the closing line, constantly yearning and searching for something she cannot have. At the epilogue (Ex. 1.9G), the narrative motive makes its final appearance, at last in a purely diatonic setting. In this context, one can hear that the motive

begins on $\wedge 7$ now that the song is in the stable tonic of F# major. Harmonic closure is never achieved until the narrator accepts closure as well.

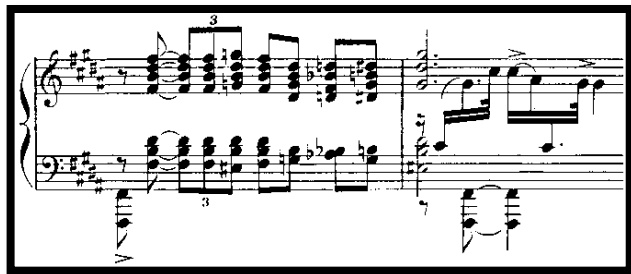
There is one factor that detracts from this sense of conclusion. Motive B, while diatonic, has distinct WT implications. The succession of whole steps prevails at the beginning, eventually given diatonic context by a half step up to " $\wedge 1$ " halfway through. Without this half step, the motive would consist entirely of whole tones. Every occurrence of this motive excepting that at m. 42 has a strong WT₁ implication. As mentioned earlier, Debussy uses WT₁ to represent unrest. The insistent dream that consumes the singer's soul induces a sense of angst and nostalgia, not calm. The only time Motive B implies WT₀ is after the dream has vanished and is only a "pale shiver." As long as the singer refuses to leave the past behind, she will never be at peace.

While Motive A is important for establishing formal divisions, Motive B is essential for temporal divisions. Its first appearance at m. 6 ushers in the first dream sequence and it runs throughout the rest of the larger Section I. As the main body of the dream ends (m. 42, near the close of Section I), we hear Motive B again, underpinned by A minor. The next time it is heard is m. 67, "hands seem to brush the souls," and is immediately repeated in m. 71 where the dream lingers. This is a major intersection of text and music composed by Debussy to clarify divisions in form and subject matter.

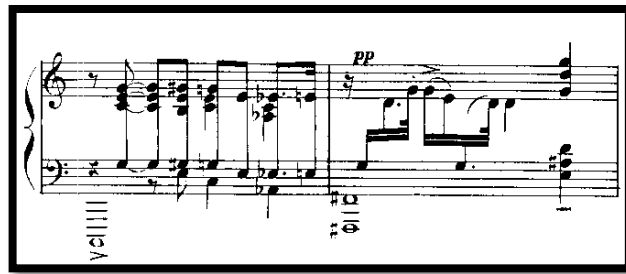
Motive C is a four-measure idea that only appears in its entirety twice in the song but is developed at other moments. As shown in Ex. 1.6, this motive is characterized by two separate musical ideas: parallel ascending chords and a meandering eighth note melody in octaves, and is most likely derived from Motive B. It is introduced in m. 18 at the line "they were not able to beckon to her," and its ascending motion is negated by the turning eighth notes in its third and fourth measures, which sound like a failed attempt to signal the woman in the dream. It repeats, transposed, at m. 22, but is restated at its original pitch level in mm. 26-29. It appears once again in the epilogue (m. 88). In

a related passage, one cannot help but notice the series of parallel chords from measures 82-85 echoing Motive C. Although they are mainly descending, they accompany another mention of the trees and the sighs that rise from beneath them. The trees are a main subject in this poem and initiate the rest of the action, and the series of parallel chords is associated with them.

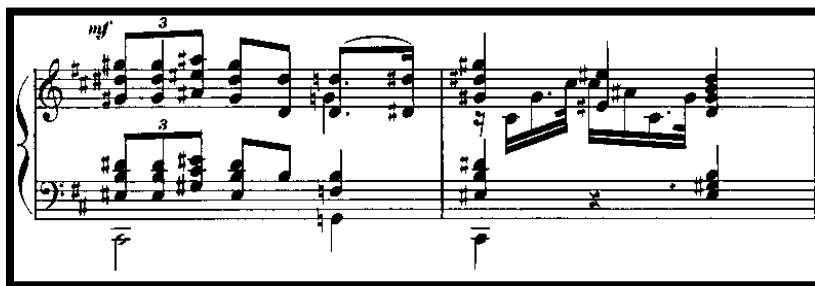
The last two motives, D and E, do not occur until Section II and often appear together. Refer to Ex. 1.11 for the transpositions of these two motives. Motive D, first heard in m. 53, has a characteristic rhythm and dense texture that is found only in the two climactic sections of the song. It appears at moments of despair or anger over the death of the dream (e.g. “No one will dedicate to them evermore the pride of golden helmets”), which explains why it often appears with the fragmented narrative Motive B (especially in mm. 78-79 and 81-82). At its return in m. 59 this motive is associated with the death of the Grail knights and their lost glory. Motive E is reminiscent of horn calls and is also related to the knights. Taking a cue from Romantic archetypes, this motive is indicative of remembrance and distance, two crucial notions in this song. Motive E is most utilized in mm. 62-64 under the text “the knights have died on the path to the Grail!” furthering their association with the past and remembrance. The horn calls pervade the second half of the piece. The two musical climaxes (beginning in m. 53 and m. 77) recall the glory and grandeur of the dissipated dream. They each contain Motives D (anger), E (reminiscence), and a fragmented B (the dissolved dream). While Motive D does not return in the epilogue, Motive E is the last melodic idea (m. 96), growing softer and more distant as the singer separates herself from the dream. Each time Motive E appears it is also at an exact transposition, and much like Motive B, it is frequently reharmonized because it uses open fifths as opposed to sixths. It appears starting on C# (over F# in mm. 55-56), G (also curiously over F# in mm. 62-64), and B (over B major). This motive, which is rooted in the past and glorifies the deceased Grail Knights, suggests B major because it is only in this



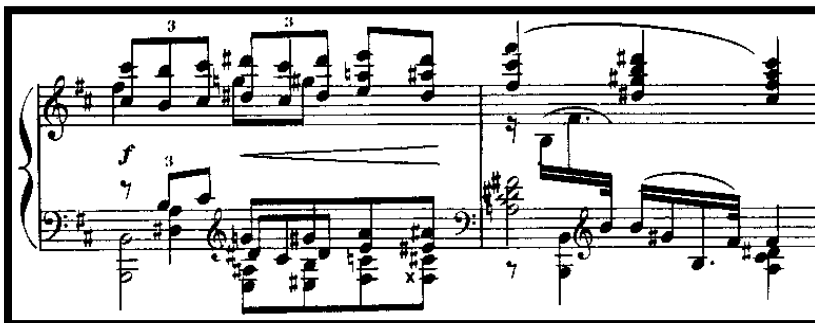
A. mm. 54 (Motive D) and 55 (Motive E)



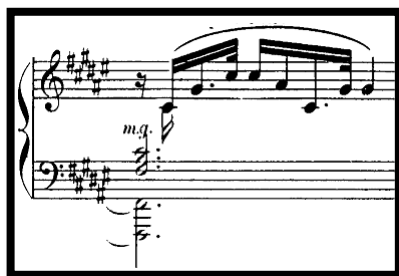
B. mm. 59 (Motive D) and 60 (Motive E)



C. mm. 78 (Motive D) and 79 (Motive E)



D. mm. 81 (fragmented Motive B) and 82 (Motive E)



E. m. 96 (Motive E)

Ex. 1.11: Transpositions of Motives D and E

key that the horn calls are supported by their implied harmony. The inherent differences between Motives B and E are that they are at home in the keys of F# and B respectively, reinforcing the opposition between these two structural tonalities in the song. B major/minor, the key of the past, continually clashes with F#, the key of the present, to take hold of the song and singer.

As previously mentioned, Debussy uses the harmonic motion of an F# augmented triad moving to B major or minor three times throughout the piece. This progression begs the question of tonality in “De rêve” and relates to its subject matter as well. Ex. 1.12 contains a bass line sketch of this song. The song explores two principal key areas in its 99 measures. Motive A, with its F# bass note, functions as the altered dominant to B minor in m. 6. At m. 6 it seems that the rest of the song might continue in B, with mm. 1-5 serving as an introductory passage. This same sequence repeats at the main sectional divisions (where Motive A returns), leading to B major/minor. The F# bass is retained in m. 53 at the climax of the piece, creating palpable tension due to the second inversion B major chord it supports. While the bass note is retained, the same “cadential progression” remains. The F# at m. 65 moves through C# in m. 76 to B minor again in m. 80 at the secondary climax. So far, the piece has spent a lot of time on B, but it is essential to remember that most of the poem places us in a dream world far from reality. A full return to reality is not achieved fully until the epilogue at m. 88. The dream has kept us in a world of F# leading to B, when in reality F# is the true key of the piece. At the moment of the singer’s self-realization the true home key is established. F# is no longer distorted into an augmented sonority but finally sounds as a pure major triad. Debussy musically deceives the listener just as the singer holds on to a dream world. The bass line sketch captures the tonal ambiguities of the song, particularly due to the beaming of both F# and B. The beamed F#s with the longer stems show the deepest level of tonality. However, the emphasis on B is demonstrated through the beamed B note heads. At the outset, Bs are given unfilled note heads to depict their apparent tonic

SECTION I SECTION II SECTION III

I 6 18 30 42 47 53 59 65 76 80 88

The image shows a bass line sketch for a piece titled "De rêve". It is divided into three sections: SECTION I, SECTION II, and SECTION III. SECTION I spans measures 1 to 42, SECTION II spans measures 47 to 59, and SECTION III spans measures 65 to 88. The notation is in bass clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). SECTION I features a melodic line with a slur over measures 18-30 and a figured bass line below. SECTION II features a melodic line with a slur over measures 53-59 and a figured bass line below. SECTION III features a melodic line with a slur over measures 76-80 and a figured bass line below. The figured bass line consists of two staves, with the top staff containing the figures and the bottom staff containing the notes. The figures are: *5 #3 for SECTION I, *5 #3 6 4 for SECTION II, and *5 #3 #5 for SECTION III.

*5
#3

*5 6 *5 #5
#3 4 #3

Ex. 1.12: Bass Line Sketch of “De rêve”

functions, with the F#s acting as dominants. The final F# (at m. 88) at last achieves tonic function, and is therefore shown as an unfilled note. The only other notes displayed in this sketch are the temporary tonicizations of A (mm. 18-42) and C/C# (mm. 59 and 76, respectively.) These digressions in the key scheme of “De rêve” help to reinforce B as the tonic, as they form a double neighbor figure around this perceived tonic area. However, they also serve a purpose in the grander scheme of an F#-centric piece, together forming a rising thirds sequence which completes a tonic arpeggiation.

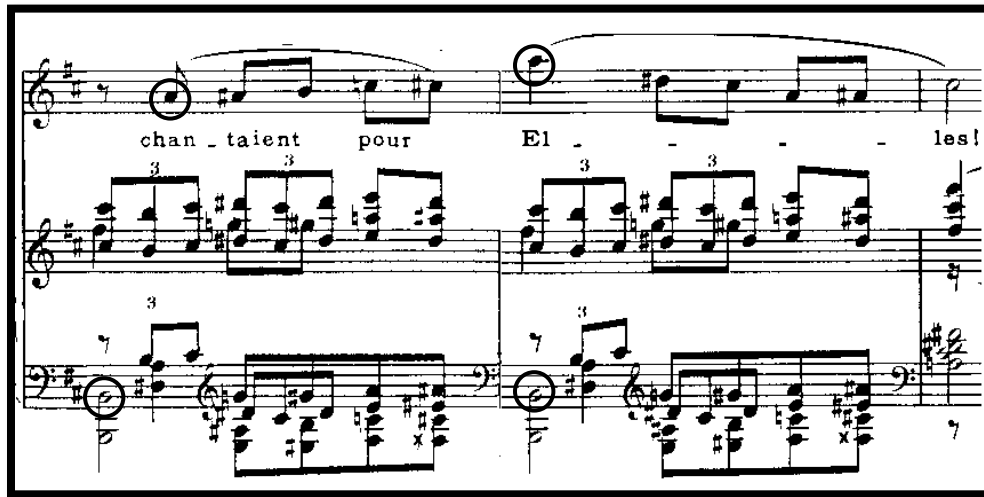
The secondary key areas occur at important textual moments: from mm. 18-42 and mm. 59-64. Measures 18-42 encompass stanza 2, the main body of the dream. After an augmented triad on E functioning as an altered dominant in m. 17, we begin in A major at the introduction of motive C. As the dream unfolds at m. 31 the tonality shifts to the neighbor key of G major. An E-augmented seventh chord in third inversion reestablishes A, this time in the minor mode, as the dream dissolves and dies away (m. 42). This is a musical reflection of the text. The key of A major/minor could serve two functions. If the piece is indeed “in” B major/minor, the dream narration would serve as a lower neighbor key. However, Debussy could have used A major/minor in a rising sequence of thirds starting on F#. The thirds sequence would eventually be completed at the other tonal digression in m. 59, C major. C major coincides with the intonation of “the knights are dead on the path to the Grail!” This utterance is the moment of maximum despair and loss and features a distant key and a new motive (E), the horn calls. It is the moment of the medieval idyll’s true dissolution. The music is in C major, a tritone away from our beginning and ending. C major can also be interpreted as the upper neighbor to B, in which case the moves to A and C would reinforce the overarching idea that “De rêve” is in B major/minor.

It is clear that Debussy uses many musical devices to clarify the text. Yet, readers may have noticed that as yet, this analysis has made almost no mention of the vocal line. In fact, the voice never sings any of the five motives; they appear only in the piano. The only sung music that returns is that of

the first two lines of the poem, returning at Sections II (mm. 47-49) and III (mm. 65-66). There are some similarities as well between the vocal line at the two climaxes (mm. 53 and 81 respectively). But most of the musical clarity is provided by the piano, which elucidates the text of the song. Closer inspection allows one to notice subtle relationships between piano and voice. There are many times when the voice cooperates with the accompaniment, singing longer note values and chord tones (Ex. 1.13). Often, the notes in the voice are doubled somewhere in the piano's thick texture. At other times, each is relatively independent of the other (Ex. 1.14). For the most part, the former situation occurs in the singer's "present," when she is removed from telling the story of the dream and its

Ex. 1.13: mm. 43-46. Parallels between the voice and piano are circled.

corruption. When the singer tells this story or comments on it, the voice part gets carried away and diverges from the accompanimental support. This is yet another crucial way in which the two performers work together to tell a complex story.



Ex. 1.14: mm. 80-81. Voice and piano are dissonant, with a full texture and duples against triplets

“De rêve” has an important role as the first song of the *Proses lyriques*. It sets forth musical ideas that will return in the ensuing pieces: the two opposing WT scales, E_b versus E_\sharp , black versus white, altered dominants, and motivic saturation. The poem presents imagery and color references that will recur throughout the set. It also demonstrates that Debussy will give listeners and performers all the musical tools that they need to properly interpret his complex poetry, be it through tonality, motivic manipulation, or cooperation between the voice and piano. Most significantly, it contains the secret to the tonalities of the entire set in its very first measure. The descending WT_0 notes of F^\sharp , D, C, and A_b (or G^\sharp) are the keys of all four songs, presented in order. It is as if the *Proses lyriques* are all one dream that persists from measure one of the first song to the end of the fourth. The dream world that has been established will return in the dreamlike scenario of the sea and storm in “De grève,” the tortured artist longing to return to night and dreams in “De fleurs,” and a melancholy poet dreaming for the days of simplicity in “De soir.” In “De rêve,” Debussy provides a preview of a tonal plan for all four songs, and he will utilize all of these compositional devices in very different ways.

CHAPTER TWO: “DE GRÈVE”

Debussy had a life-long fascination with the sea. Nowhere is this more evident than in his symphonic work, *La Mer* (1903-05). The sea also makes an appearance in the *Proses lyriques*, his most personal song collection. The second song, “De grève,” translates to “Of the Strand” or “Of the Shore.” This song is unique within the set as it is a narration of a concrete, physical event: a storm at sea. The ambiguity of symbolist poetry is not found here, but one can find deep meaning in Debussy’s melding of colorful poetry and music.

Debussy’s words and music together paint a picture, or rather, a triptych. Shortly before this song’s composition, he became acquainted with the works of the English Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner. Turner often painted seascapes and storms, and utilized the effects of color and shading in his pieces, inspiring later Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet (Ex. 2.1). Debussy appreciated his meticulous attention to detail and sought to portray these visual effects in his music.²² Through the use of various registers, sonorities, and tonality, he paints a very graphic picture of a storm threatening the shore.



Ex. 2.1: J.M.W. Turner’s *Fishermen at Sea* (1796)

²² Wenk, 205-6.

Debussy's poem has three stanzas, each correlating to a stage in the particular event. See Ex. 2.2 for the complete text and translation of this poem. In the first stanza, twilight falls over the sea and the waves appear, rustling and chattering. In the next stanza, the clouds confer about the next storm in this "English watercolor." As the storm approaches, the waves are frightened and begin to panic. After the harrowing storm, the moon comes out and quiets the water and clouds, caressing the waves. As we pan out from the scenario, we see a smoothed sea and hear distant bells from "floating churches." In short, the story moves from a state of calm to one of panic and back again. Debussy takes this story out of the ordinary by repeating poetic ideas and personifying the characters. The colors of green and white are important – they portray the emotional state of the placid sea and the waves and paint a vivid picture ("green iridescent silk" as the waves chatter). The storm leers and the "grey conflict" is "too grave" for the green and white watercolor. The moon is characterized by white and restores the sea to its smooth, white state. The waves, clouds, and moon are given human characteristics throughout. The waves are schoolgirls with rustling skirts, naïve and innocent. As the clouds approach, the singer mentions "grave travelers," or old, cantankerous nomads. Of course, the moon is chaste, white, and kind as it is frequently portrayed in music, literature, and art. Debussy takes these archetypal images and gives them a musical personification through the gradual transformation of a single theme. With the manipulation of this theme and the music surrounding it, Debussy tells a musical story and provides necessary emphasis and drama to a simple scenario.

"De grève" is divided into three main sections. See Ex. 2.3 for a form chart of this song. There are numerous aspects of this piece that project a ternary form. With each new stanza of the poem, a new character appears, be it the sea, the clouds, or the moon. There are tonal elements that make the song reflect this division as well. Section I (mm. 1-18) serves as an introductory passage, introducing the main musical motive. Section II (mm. 19-35) encompasses the climax of the piece, as the storm commences. Finally, Section III (mm. 36-60) sees the sea returning to normal after

Sur la mer les crépuscules tombent,
Soie blanche effilée.
Les vagues comme de petites folles,
Jasent, petites filles sortant de l'école,
Parmi les froufrous de leur robe,
Soie verte irisée!

Les nuages, graves voyageurs,
Se concertent sur le prochain orage,
Et c'est un fond vraiment trop grave
A cette anglaise aquarelle.
Les vagues, les petites vagues,
Ne savent plus où se mettre,
Car voici la méchante averse,
Froufrous de jupes envolées,
Soie verte affolée!

Mais la lune, compatissante à tous,
Vient apaiser ce gris conflit,
Et caresse lentement ses petites amies,
Qui s'offrent, comme lèvres aimantes,
A ce tiède et blanc baiser.
Puis, plus rien...
Plus que les cloches attardées
Des flottantes églises,
Angélus des vagues,
Soie blanche apaisée!

Over the sea the twilight falls,
Tattered white silk.
The waves, like silly little girls,
Chatter, little girls coming out of school,
Amid the rustling of their dresses,
Green iridescent silk!

The clouds, grave travelers,
Consult on the approaching storm,
And this is truly too grave a background
For this English watercolor.
The waves, the little waves,
Do not know where they should go,
For here is the malicious shower,
Rustling of billowing skirts,
Green silk in panic!

But the moon, compassionate to all,
Comes to pacify this grey conflict,
And slowly caresses her little friends,
Who offer themselves like loving lips
To this warm and white kiss.
Then, nothing more...
Than the delayed bells
Of floating churches!
Angelus of the waves,
Smoothed white silk!

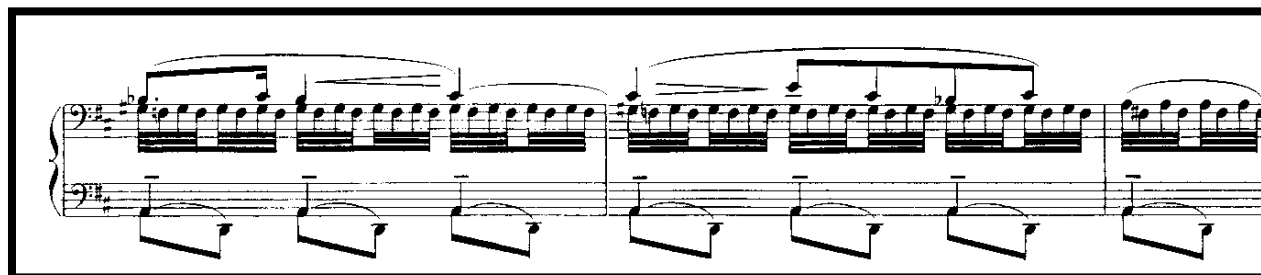
Ex. 2.1: Text and Translation of “De grève”

Section	Poem	Musical Features
Section I: mm. 1-18	1 st Stanza *Introduction of sea and waves	*Prolongation of D major *Vocal WT scales *Plagal cadences
Section II: mm. 19-35 *Two subsections: mm. 19-24 and 25-35	2 nd Stanza *Entrance of clouds and Storm	*Chromaticism *Parallel Chords *Augmented triads *Descending WT ₁ in the bass, leading to a WT dominant
Section III: mm. 36-60	3 rd Stanza *Entrance of the moon, reinstates calm	*WT dominant resolves to F# *Descending bass line *Return of D major *Plagal coda

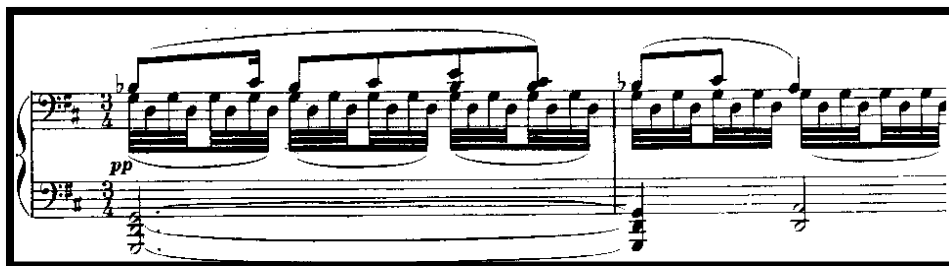
Ex. 2.2: Form Chart of “De grève”

the moon resolves the conflict. Debussy’s treatment of the main thematic material in “De grève” changes with each stanza.

Example 2.3 contains a motive chart for “De grève.” Unlike the first piece of the set, this song revolves primarily around the motivic development of just one musical idea. The storm motive, as it will be called, first appears in mm. 3-4 in the uppermost voice. It emerges out of a wash of clear triadic D major and immediately imparts an ominous quality. Its main notes, B \flat , C \sharp , E spell out a melodic diminished triad that “resolves” back onto the tonic triad members in m. 5. Notice all of its dissonances with the surrounding accompaniment. The B \flat clashes with A, the C \sharp with the D, and the E is dissonant with the F \sharp . This motive’s emergence, with its dissonances and distinctive rhythm, is very memorable. It serves particularly well for motivic development, as it contains a unique rhythm, contour, and harmonic implications. The storm motive fulfills Schoenberg’s definition of the Grundgestalt (basic idea) of a composition: it appears near the beginning of the composition and

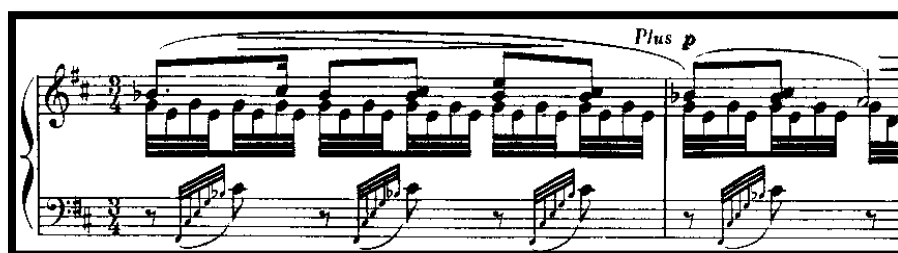


A. mm. 3-4



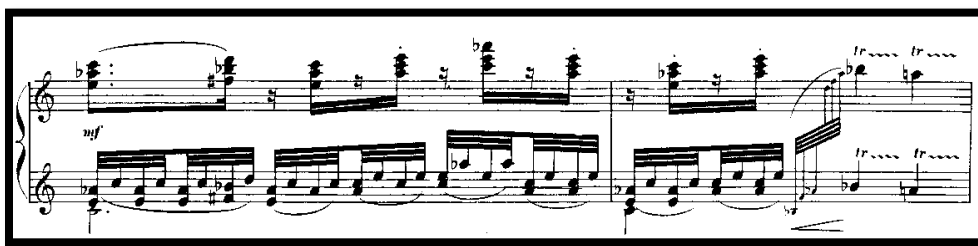
B: mm. 8-9

C: mm. 10-11

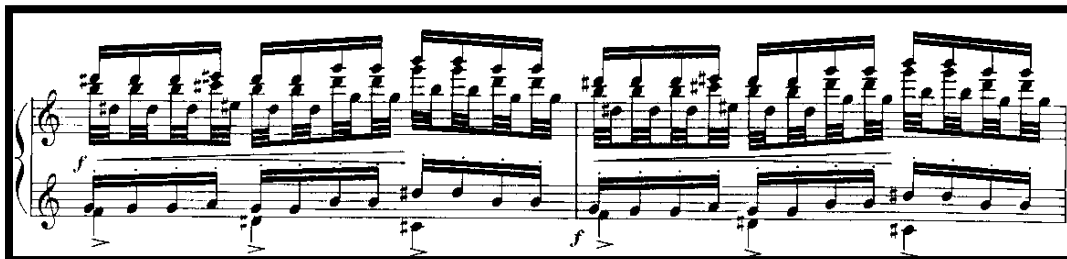


D: mm. 16-17

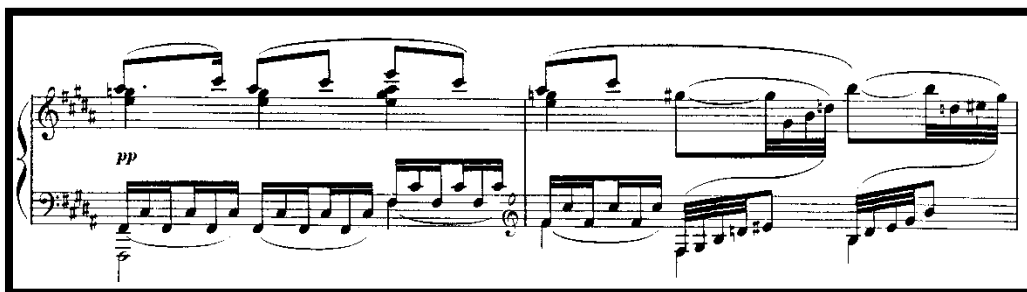
Ex. 2.3: The Storm Motive and its Subsequent Transformations



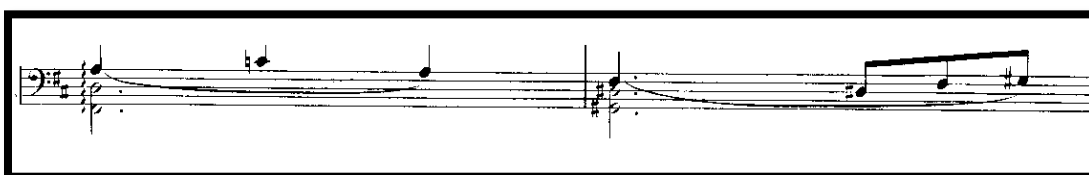
E: mm. 24-25



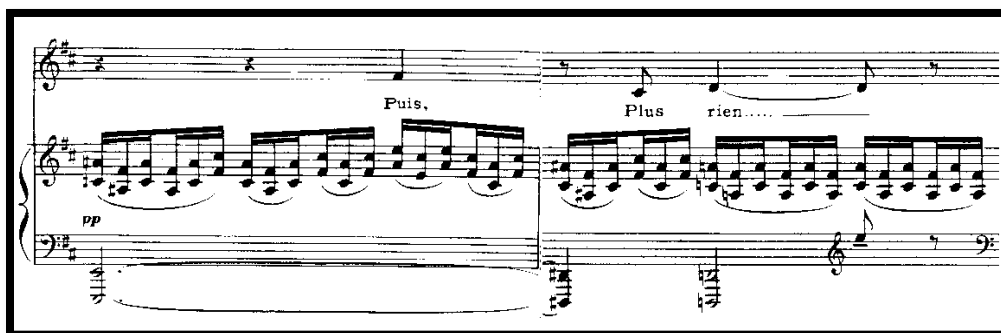
F: mm. 28-29



G: mm. 36-37



H: mm. 40-41

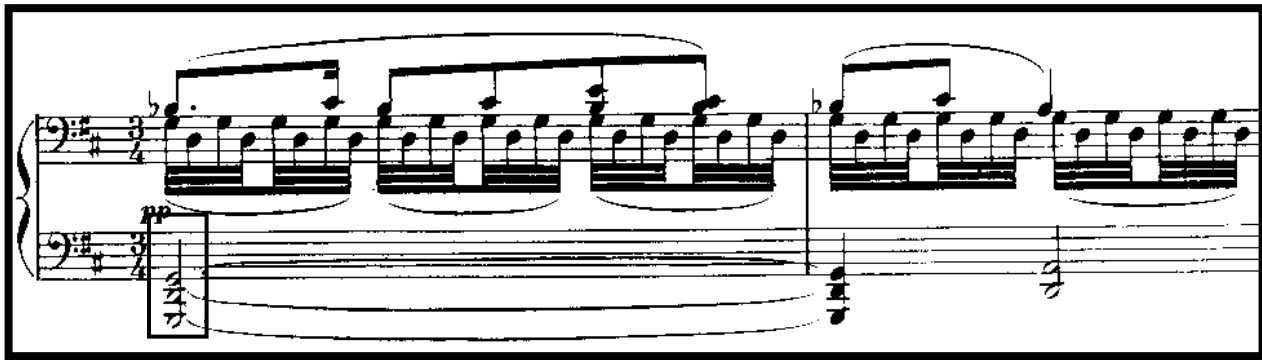


I: mm. 49-50

Ex. 2.3, continued

possesses a complex of unique characteristics that invite developing variation.²³ In order to keep repetition interesting, the motive must be varied. However, a composer cannot change all of a motive's attributes at once. Debussy very gradually and deliberately manipulates this motive throughout so that the final product of the process is really quite far removed from the original found in m. 3. The song tells its story through the transformation of this motive.

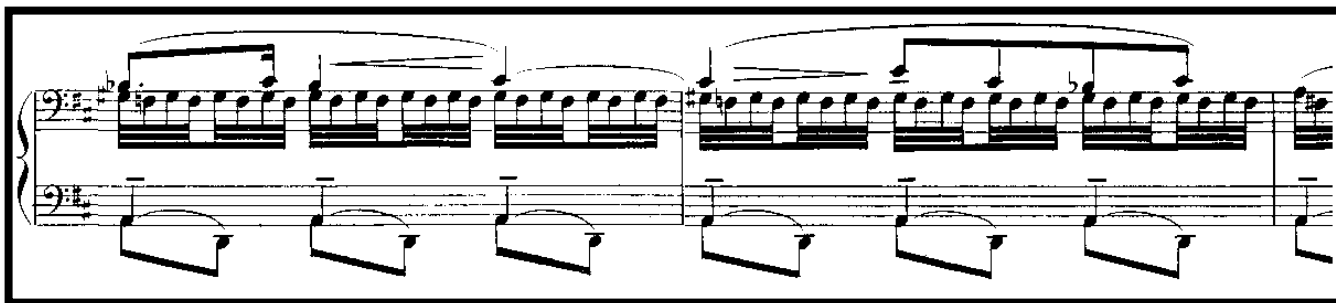
The motive's second entrance, at m. 8, is already modified (Ex. 2.4). It is rhythmically altered



Ex. 2.4: mm. 8-9. Shortened, reharmonized storm motive

and shortened, and also reharmonized. The motive appears untransposed over G and D. While some notes are still dissonant, the prominent B \flat forms a G minor triad, and the motive's final note A transforms the inner-voice G into a suspension that will resolve down in a plagal cadence in m. 9; the motive has thus become a part of the harmonic texture. What was ominous and distant is now more a part of Debussy's harmonic world, darkened by twilight. The motive is subjected to another modification in mm. 10-14, as the voice, doubled by the piano in parallel sixths, sings a melody with a very similar contour to the storm motive in mm. 3-4, with added passing tones (Exs. 2.5 a and b). This melody is now composed entirely of the notes from WT₁, as the scalar motive of the waves and melodic motive of the storm combine. In m. 16, the storm is heard again in something more like its original state. This time, it is rhythmically unaltered but transposed up an octave and brought

²³ Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, ed. Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 8.



Ex. 2.5a: mm. 3-4. Storm motive in top voice

Ex. 2.5b: mm. 10-11. Modified storm motive in voice, doubled in piano

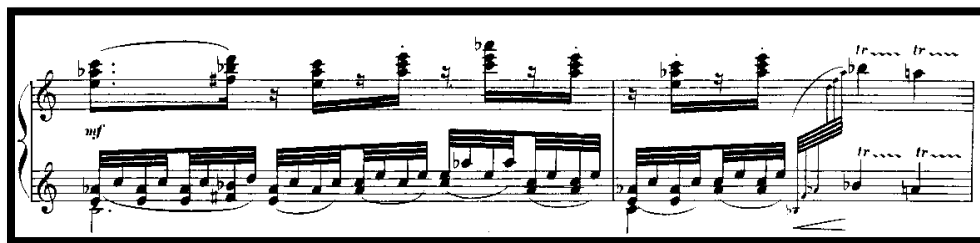
more aurally to the fore. Wenk observes the altered left-hand accompaniment—ascending arpeggios as opposed to open fifths—and relates it to the “iridescent silk” in the text, a form of text painting (Ex. 2.6). This is true, but of the five main notes in the gesture (eliminating repeated tones), three of them are the notes of the storm motive. The motive is now less removed from the harmonic support, and the notes of the motive are coming to the fore as the storm threatens.

Ex. 2.6: m. 16. Altered accompaniment to the storm motive.

Here in m. 16 the motive is fragmented and condensed, saturating the musical texture. The storm begins to threaten. The last note of the motive is treated as before, transforming the inner-voice G into

a plagal suspension. Also notice that when the motive appears in m. 16, it is over an F \sharp bass. This will happen again later in the song, and thus forms a motivic/harmonic linkage between the first and third strophes.

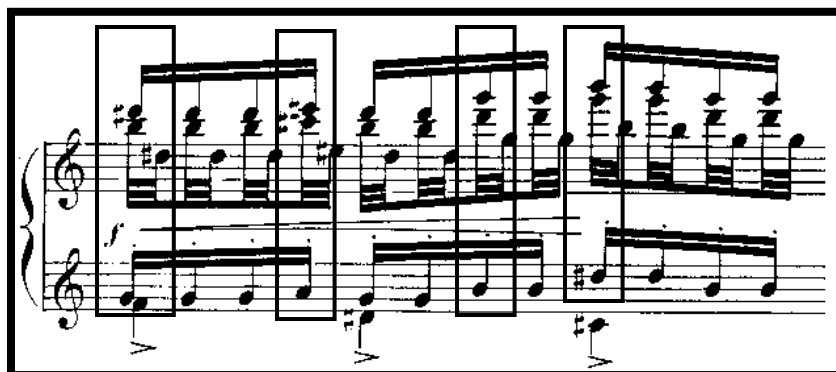
After this instance, the motive disappears for a few measures as Section II begins. As shown in Ex. 2.2, Section II divides into two subsections. The first of these, mm. 19-24, is free of the storm motive and highly chromatic as the clouds are introduced. However, at m. 24 (a phrase elision) something very similar to the motive is featured in block chords in the right hand accompaniment Ex. 2.7).



Ex. 2.7: mm. 24-25. Transformation of the motive into block chords

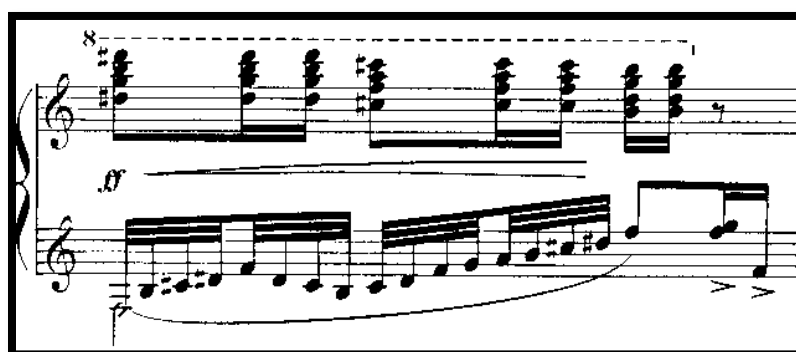
The rhythm is slightly altered, with many shortened chords set off the beat, but it is still recognizable. The single line melody has become individual augmented triads, and the contour of the melody, a diminished triad, has become augmented as well. Despite all these changes, it is aurally similar to the melody heard in m. 3. Its high tessitura and augmented sonorities, which suggest a distorted form of the first strophe's major triads, demonstrate the frantic nature of the storm. The last note of the theme becomes a pair of trills on B \flat^5 and A \sharp^5 . The text for the second part of Section II describes the panic of the waves, and this distorted storm motive echoes the panic of the frightened "schoolgirls." In m. 28, each chord is attacked repeatedly, completely filling all the musical space within the measure and resulting in rhythmic diminution and a written-out *accelerando*. Harmonically, this motive is all that is heard at this point, as the left hand is playing broken augmented triads in octaves with the right. The augmented triads are found both horizontally and vertically atop a repeated descending WT₁ subset

(Ex. 2.8). It is important to note that this section is comprised of WT_1 , the collection representing tension and unrest.



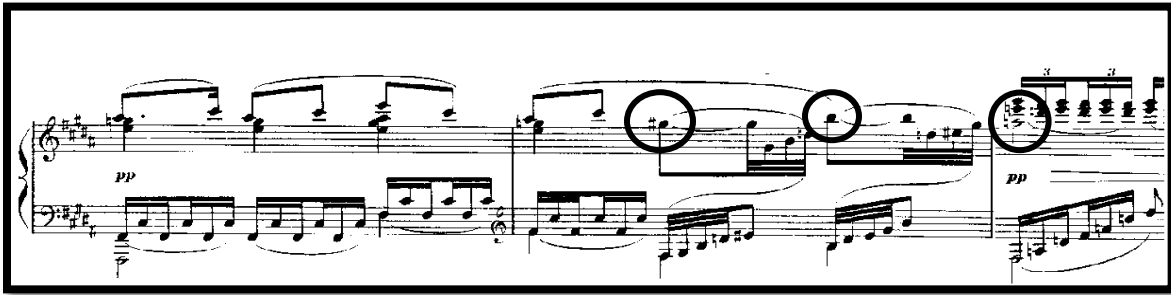
Ex. 2.8: m. 28. Augmented triads (boxed) supported by a descending WT subset (F-D#-C#)

Measures 30-33 feature descending augmented triads over WT_1 scales (Ex. 2.9). The initial storm motive has been completely changed over the course of the piece so far, as has the texture of the sea. The music in mm. 30-35 quiets, slows, and moves to gradually lower ranges, acting as a transitional area to the beginning of section III.



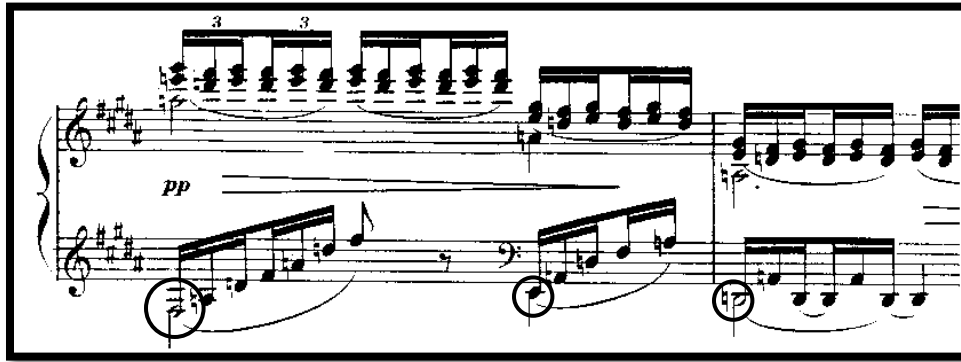
Ex. 2.9: m. 30. Descending augmented triads over a WT_1 flourish

At the outset of Section III (m. 36), the jarring augmented triads of the storm have disappeared and the music settles onto an $F\sharp$ ninth chord. The rhythm has slowed and the texture is thinned into open fifths and harp-like arpeggios (Ex. 2.10).



Ex. 2.10: mm. 36-38. A diatonic setting of the motive complete with decorative neighbor tones.

In m. 36 the original motive in its pure state returns, but is transposed up by two octaves and sounds less ominous. Debussy writes the starting note as an A \sharp rather than B \flat , in conformance with the key signature of five sharps. In this setting—as the third of a root-position F \sharp major triad—the motive is now diatonic and begins on \wedge^3 . It recalls the setting of the motive in m. 16, also over an F \sharp (refer back to Ex. 2.3). There is a tonal reconciliation here similar to the one found in “De rêve.” In that song, the dream motive was constantly transposed and reharmonized until it found a diatonic home in the conclusion. Here, as the moon spreads calm over the sea, the storm motive is respelled and provided with consonant support. The ending is changed as well, accomplishing the return to D major by inserting double neighbor tones to decorate the cadence. The low bass rumble of the sea from the introduction returns and calm has come back to the accompaniment. The storm motive is placed two octaves above its first appearance, eliminating its threatening tone and reinforcing the height and femininity of the moon. The music has a much slower rhythmic motion and the voice has descended by an octave. The rapid changes in the music here, both in texture and harmony, depict the assuaging power of the moon. After this statement of the storm motive, there is a stepwise descent to D major from mm. 38-39 in the bass (Ex. 2.11). This is the first of several contrapuntal cadences to the home key, which occur throughout the whole of Section III, often decorated with chromatic passing tones and eventually liquidated in the last ten measures.

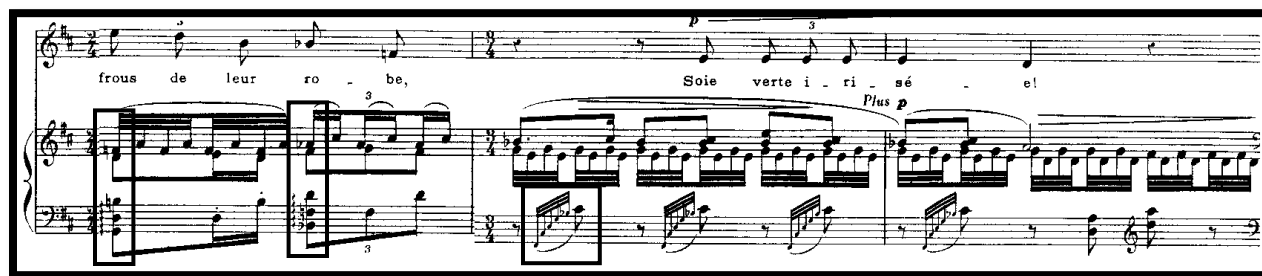


Ex. 2.11: mm. 38-39. Descending steps to D in the bass, forming a contrapuntal cadence.

Interestingly, it is in this section that the storm motive is most effectively disguised. In mm. 40-41 (Ex. 2.3H), a very exposed minor third motive sounds ($A^3-C^4-A^3$). The left hand's lowest voice in the next measure contains the open fifth $G\sharp^2$ and $D\sharp^3$, just the right pitch classes to complete a transposition of the motive a minor second below its original key. These notes also occur melodically in the tenor voice, masked by the inclusion of an $F\sharp$. This occurs twice in succession. As the third strophe progresses and the storm dissipates and loses energy, the motive appears in successively lower registers and loses its distinctive rhythmic profile. Similarly, another veiled statement of the motive is heard twice throughout mm. 49-52 (Ex. 2.3I). Here, the rocking sixths in the right hand accompaniment gradually spell out the motive in the same proportional duration as it first appeared. The $A\sharp$ (B_b) even settles to an $A\flat$ just as in the beginning. This repeat of the motive is accompanied by a contrapuntal cadence formed between the bass and the voice. The bass descends to D (from E and $D\sharp$) as the voice ascends from $C\sharp$ to D at the words "nothing more." At this point of the poem, the storm is over and things are quieting again, but the accompanimental passage from mm. 49-52 lends more prominence to the storm motive. Perhaps Debussy includes these distinct motive forms as a method of foreshadowing his sense that the storm will return; it really never disappears. Even the last musical figure of the piece is related to the storm motive. The song ends as it began with an oscillating minor third ($F\sharp-A$), now in the context of the home key of D major. The minor third has been a

building block of the song's primary motive, which spells out a diminished triad. In this sense, therefore, the storm never disappears at all, despite the text.

Debussy utilizes other musical devices to tell his story. One is the association of differing scales with each personified entity. Just as the sea/waves, clouds, and moon each appear in one of the three sections, the clarity of the song's narrative is enhanced by the shift to new scales at each formal division. As shown in Table 2.1, the waves are represented by WT collections in the voice in the first section. The singer's first two lines (mm. 6-9) are entirely in WT₀. As the waves (a separate, distinct character from the sea) enter the scene in m. 10, the F[♯] is lowered to F_♯ and the next two vocal lines are entirely in WT₁. The last two lines of the stanza (mm. 14-17) diverge from this WT pattern as the music moves toward a cadence. The accompaniment is a succession of dominant ninth chords over G, B_♭, and F[♯], leading to D major in m. 17 (Ex. 2.12). This provides sectional closure and leaves the

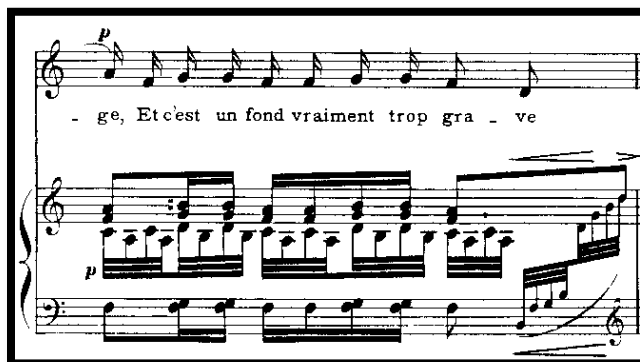


Ex. 2.12: mm. 15-17. Succession of dominant ninth chords cadencing to D major

music in a state of rest before the start of Section II. Thus, Section I is characterized by explicit usage of the WT collections in the vocal line. While both WT collections are used, they appear in discrete sections of the music, with no overlap between them.

Section II begins with a B_♭ major triad on the downbeat of m. 19. This signals that the WT collections are, for the moment, gone. The voice enters, singing an entirely chromatic line, doubled by the right hand piano and mirrored in the left. This chromatic backdrop is associated with the clouds. At the words “And this is a background too grave for this English watercolor,” the vocal line mimics

the melody that introduced the waves in mm. 10-11 at the exact pitch level in rhythmic diminution (Ex. 2.13).



Ex. 2.13: m. 22. Vocal echo of mm. 10-11 and Lydian hexachord accompaniment

The accompaniment features dissonant pitch collections (a Lydian hexachord) and a restless character. Clearly, a placid sea is represented by a WT_0 scale (which is losing some of its grip here), and troubling clouds by chromaticism. Wenk makes a connection between these musical colors and the art of J.M.W. Turner. The vague images of Turner's paintings and the more contemporary stylings of Impressionist art, the wash of color, can be musically associated with the WT collection that "lacks the definite center of gravity."²⁴ The use of a scale without grounding characteristics provides the ambiguous tone color used so often in the visual art of the time.²⁵

As the storm begins in m. 24, the augmented triads take over in block chords in the right hand and broken chords in the left (refer back to Ex. 2.3E). Augmented triads are comprised entirely of members from a single WT collection at a time, but convey a very different mood than a single melodic line of WT pitches. The smooth WT character of the sea has been transformed into frightening, shrill sounds. As the storm intensifies, what was a melodic diminished triad has been intensified into a blocked augmented chord, heightened both in melodic content and register.²⁶ The

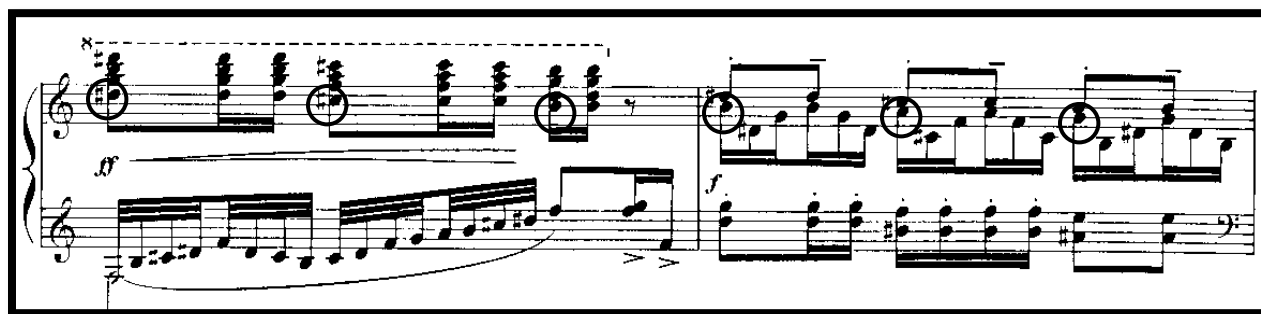
²⁴ Ibid., 208.

²⁵ For more about Debussy's use of whole tone collections, see Arnold Whittall, "Tonality and the Whole Tone Scale in the Music of Debussy," *Music Review* 36, no. 4 (1975): 261-271.

²⁶ David Lewin examines other compositions in which Debussy experiments with voice-leading parallelism to enhance poetic or extra-musical references. Refer to David Lewin, "Some Instances of Parallel Voice-Leading in Debussy," *19th Century Music* 11, no. 1 (Summer, 1987): 59-72.

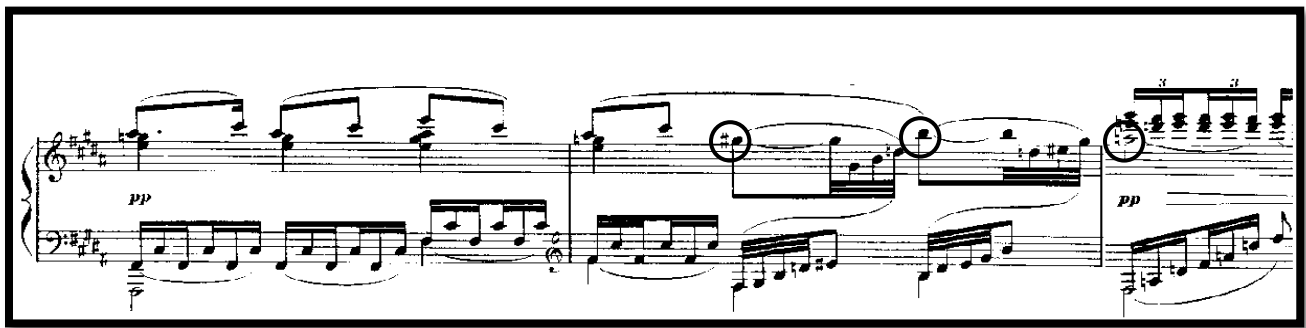
chords brought about by the storm have all but trumped the melodic line of the first section, but the association is still recognizable due to the gradual transformation Debussy has employed throughout the song.

In m. 28, the prominence of the augmented sonorities in the upper three voices of the piano covers the WT descending bass line of F-D \sharp -C \sharp when it first begins. It becomes more prominent in m. 30 as the upper/lower voice counterpoint highlights a WT descent with augmented triads arpeggiated in the middle voice (Ex. 2.14). As F-D \sharp -C \sharp persists in the bass, D \sharp -C \sharp -B is in the soprano, bringing WT₁ to the forefront. The climactic left hand flourishes in mm. 30 and 32 are also complete collections of WT₁. All of this music is characterized by uncertainty imparted by the unstable augmented and WT sonorities, but this bass line descent remains constant, and will lead the music into Section III.



Ex. 2.14: mm. 30-31. WT₁ prominence in accompaniment

The repeated descents to C \sharp in mm. 28-35 are finally given tonal context in m. 36, where the bass moves to a solid F \sharp , marking the beginning of Section III. This section, which depicts the moon, is as close to pure diatonicism as any section of the song thus far. The vocal line conveys a modal mixture of F \sharp major and minor supported by F \sharp harmonies throughout. By means of the E \sharp diminished seventh chord in m. 37, Debussy achieves a seamless transition to D major. This common-tone diminished seventh chord is made possible by the addition of the double neighbor tones in this appearance of the storm motive (Ex. 2.15).



Ex. 2.15: mm. 36-38. Double neighbor tones enhance cadence to D major.

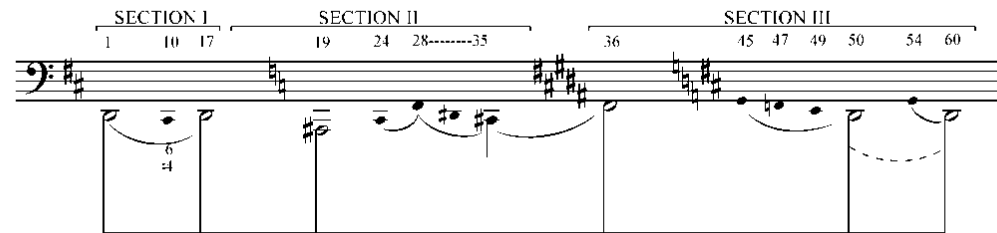
As mentioned above, the move to F# in m. 36 is transitory, as it quickly descends to a very brief “cadence” in D major (as the text states “the moon...comes to pacify this grey conflict”). The rest of the song will feature a repeated rocking back and forth of E and D in the bass, an image of the calmed sea. The moon, and her music, is peaceful and tonal. Notice that in m. 43, WT₀ reappears in the voice as the waves, her “little friends,” are mentioned (Ex. 2.16). There is some tonal ambiguity in the



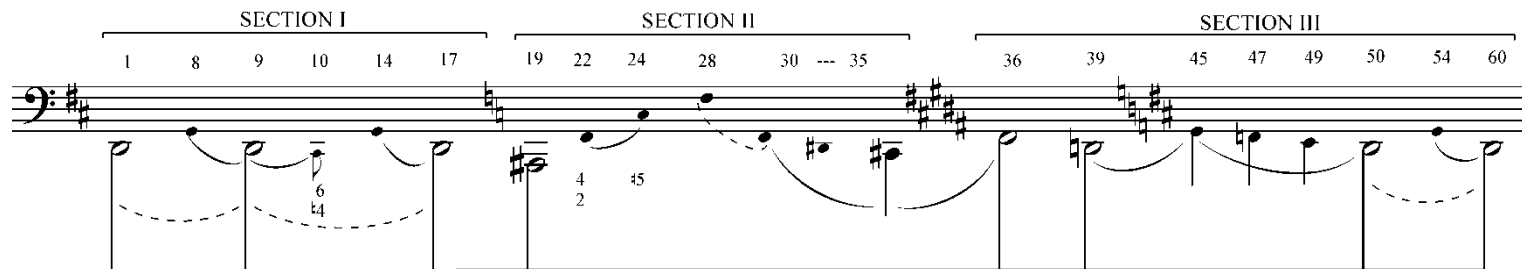
Ex. 2.16: mm. 43-44. Reemergence of WT₀

accompaniment throughout this section. It is quickly relieved in m. 47, the song’s secondary climax. This is a clear move to F major, which gives way (via F# major) to the melodic diminished sonority of the storm motive (A#-C#-E) in the right hand in m. 49. The song’s last 6 measures have a clear cadential function, diagrammed in the bass line sketches in Exs. 2.17a and 2.17b.

“De grève” is cast in a tripartite form with D major strongly established in Section I, a digression from it in Section II, and a return to D in Section III. Coinciding with this is a general arch form in texture, register and dynamics. The piece begins with a pianissimo rumbling in the bass. The voice, hovering in a low range for soprano (D⁴–D⁵) begins softly as well. The accompaniment and voice gradually ascend as the density of the music increases. In Section II, the music reaches a fever pitch with both an increasingly higher range for the voice and piano (the latter all in the treble register) and a more active rhythmic structure. The song reaches its dynamic climax, fortissimo, at the exact



Ex. 2.17a: Background of “De grève”

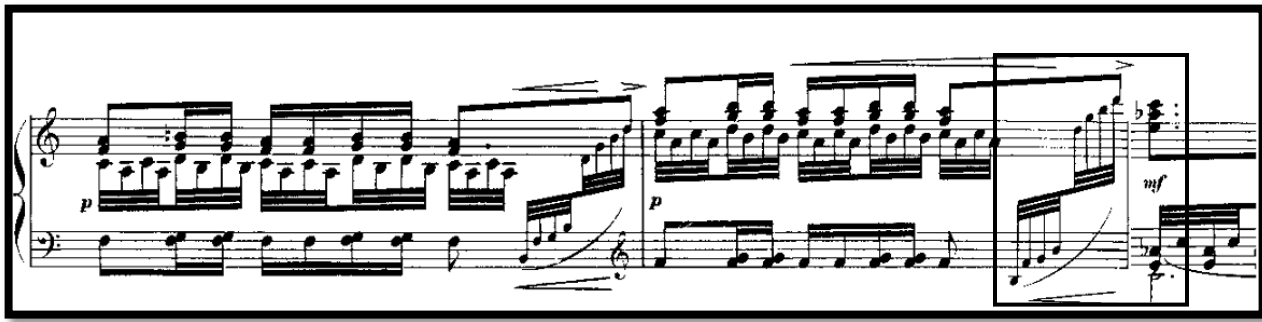


Ex. 2.17b: Middleground of “De grève”

midpoint of the song (m. 30). The registral and dynamic peaks are reached here, at the end of Section II, and dissipate very quickly over the two-measure interlude (mm. 34-35). During the interlude the entire accompaniment descends, to be matched by the voice in m. 36. The rocking accompaniment from the beginning returns as dynamics, texture, and rhythmic structure all regain repose.

The arch form is apparent in the motivic, textural, and modal treatments of the three sections, but is most evident in reference to tonality. The overarching tonality of this song is D major. It is the first and last chord in the piece. Schoenberg wrote in *The Musical Idea* that music first presents an idea in a stable environment. The stability that is inherent in the beginning of a composition is inevitably put into question and becomes unstable, leading to a climax. At a composition's close, these two states of being—stability and motion—are reconciled and consolidated.²⁷ This song lends itself nicely to this paradigm. As shown in the middleground sketch in Ex. 2.17, Section I depicts the sea in its state of rest, happily in D major. There is a neighboring motion down to C#, but the only other digression from D is a repeated plagal motion to G in mm. 8-9 and 14-17. Section I, therefore, prolongs tonic harmony. In Section II, there is a stark change. In these measures, D does not appear as a pitch center. The section begins with a Bb chord (A# in the sketch), and its first smaller section leads to an evaded F#-C# cadence in m. 24. The chromaticism over the Bb gives way to a cadential progression. As the chromatics disappear, mm. 22-23 boast a diatonic C major collection over an F in the bass. This functions as a local predominant that moves to a G dominant seventh chord in the third beat of m. 23. The vocal line reinforces this cadential motion which should end on C major in m. 24. Instead, the accompaniment features a strong augmented triad and texture change coinciding with a phrase elision (Ex. 2.18).

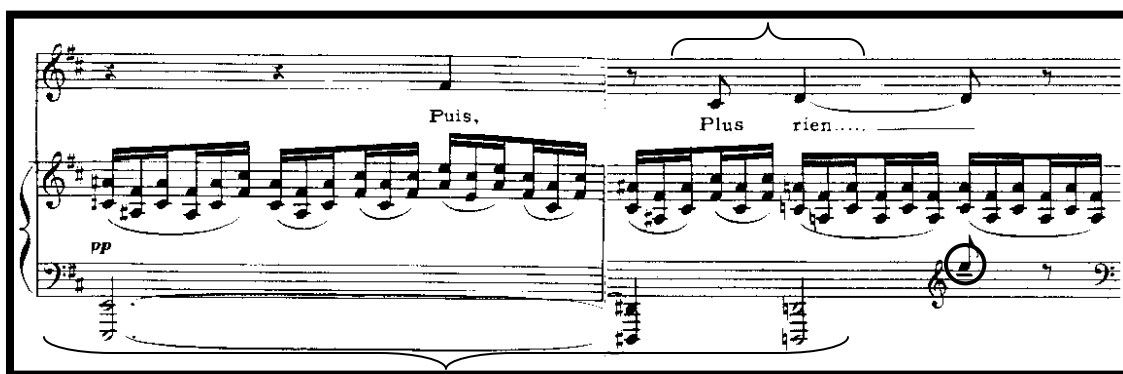
²⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, *The Musical Idea and the Logic, Technique, and Art of its Presentation*, ed. Patricia Carpenter and Severine Neff (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 96.



Ex. 2.18: mm. 22-24. Evaded IV-V⁷-I cadence

The rest of the section features the descending WT₁ fragment, eight measures of a prolonged dominant harmony that will move to the F# in m. 36. In the bass line sketch in Ex. 2.17 the structural bass notes are beamed together. They spell out a D augmented triad (D, F#, A#), a distorted version of storm motive and an important sonority in Section II (hence the enharmonic reinterpretation here of the bass B \flat in m. 19). This exact chord has been used before by Debussy in the *Proses lyriques*. It was arpeggiated in the first beat of the first song, the features of which Debussy will rework into the ensuing songs. The augmented triads of “De rêve” transport us to a dream world, but here they are reinvented to introduce a frightening storm. Clearly, it is not calm and peace that are most important to this particular piece, but the frenzied clamor of the storm.

The arrival on F# in Section III (m. 36) sets in motion a repeated stepwise bass descent to a cadence in the original key of D. When the structural cadence to D major is finally achieved in m. 50 it is under the words “nothing more.” The story and song are at peace as a calming contrapuntal cadence between the bass and soprano return the listener to D (Ex. 2.19). The last ten measures, almost an afterthought textually, act as a coda for the song. First, the descent to D established in mm. 45-50 is liquidated by a bass alternation of E and D. A repeated plagal cadence between G and D closes the piece. This cadence is not only related to the beginning but also the “floating churches” and religious symbolism at the poem’s close.



Ex. 2.19: mm. 49-50. Contrapuntal cadence in voice and piano, with “Angelus Bell” circled

The last ten measures feature a repeated E⁵ reaching over the texture, signifying the “delayed bells of floating churches” or the Angelus Bell. The text painting here is clear, but the use of the pitch class E \sharp is structurally pivotal. As the home key is D major, this pitch is dissonant with the tonic harmony. It echoes the contrapuntal cadence in the left hand from mm. 49-53. This singular pitch plays an important role throughout the entire song set, and is particularly special locally. The storm motive’s peak is also an E \sharp , defining the melodic shape of the motive. In the first six measures, E⁴ is the highest pitch and reaches over the texture. As the motive is gradually transformed into augmented triads, the E is the only pitch kept constant. In the next song, the strength of E will be undermined by its darker relative, E \flat .

Debussy’s “De grève” is seemingly a simple tableau. The poetry is clear and straightforward, the subject matter something we observe all the time. In the composer’s musical setting of his poem, tonal and motivic elements provide intrigue. The progression of the storyline coincides with an aural arch form, beginning soft and low, ascending to a pitch and dynamic peak, and returning to its original state. All of these elements combine to captivate the audience and engulf them in this drama of the storm and sea. However, although the poem suggests that the conflict has been resolved, the music tells otherwise. The storm lingers in the background, waiting for its chance to return.

CHAPTER THREE: “DE FLEURS”

Debussy’s *Proses lyriques* is a study in contrasts. In “De rêve,” the dichotomy of past and present is at the forefront. In “De grève,” the frenzy of the sea in a storm contrasts with the peacefulness brought on by the moon. In “De fleurs,” Debussy makes contrast and irony the building blocks of a dense, dramatic song. This is the richest song in terms of imagery, texture, and emotion, making it the climax of the set. Its inspirations are many: the ideals of the Art Nouveau movement featuring flowers, colors, and *ennui*, the pivotal *Fleurs du mal* of Baudelaire (especially “Amour de mensonge” and “À Celle qui est trop gaie”), religious imagery, and perhaps even Mallarmé.²⁸ All of these influences combine to form an intricate web.

In the third poem of Debussy’s set, all that is usually deemed beautiful becomes evil and stifling. The poem’s title deceives us because we first think of flowers as beautiful, even romantic, objects of nature. The singer’s first line contradicts our assumptions, setting the scene “in the desolate green *ennui* of pain’s hothouse.” See Ex. 3.1 for a translation of the poem. This is an oppressive environment that *forces* the growth of flowers. The distorted view of nature is an important poetic image throughout the song, where sunlight gives life to malicious flowers. Next, we learn that the flowers ensnare the poet’s heart with their stems. He longs to be freed from this confined, false, unbearable place. Because “De fleurs” is the most personal of the *Proses lyriques* due to its heightened emotions and the story that it tells, I refer to the narrator as a man despite the fact that the song is written for soprano. This is the only one of the four poems firmly rooted in the first person utilizing explicit references to another distinct person, “you.” While every other song in the set tells a narrative story, this is autobiographical. These words seem truly Claude Debussy’s own, especially in light of the close reading of the text and its setting expounded upon below.

²⁸ Wenk, 211-212.

Dans l'ennui si désolément vert
 De la serre de douleur,
 Les fleurs enlacent mon coeur
 De leurs tiges méchantes.
 Ah! quand reviendront autour de ma tête
 Les chères mains si tendrement désenlaceuses?

Les grands Iris violets
 Violèrent méchamment tes yeux,
 En semblant les refléter, -
 Eux, qui furent l'eau du songe
 Où plongèrent mes rêves si doucement,
 Enclos en leur couleur;
 Et les lys, blancs jets d'eau de pistils embaumés,
 Ont perdu leur grâce blanche,
 Et ne sont plus que pauvres malades sans soleil! -

Soleil! Ami des fleurs mauvaises,
 Tueur de rêves: Tueur d'illusions,
 Ce pain béni des âmes misérables!
 Venez! Venez! Les mains salvatrices!
 Brisez les vitres de mensonge,
 Brisez les vitres de maléfice,
 Mon âme meurt de trop de soleil!

Mirages! Plus ne refleurira la joie de mes yeux,
 Et mes mains sont lasses de prier,
 Mes yeux sont las de pleurer!
 Eternellement ce bruit fou
 Des pétales noirs de l'ennui,
 Tombant goutte à goutte sur ma tête,
 Dans le vert de la serre de douleur!

In the, *ennui*, so desolately green,
 Of pain's hothouse,
 The flowers enlace my heart
 With their malicious stems.
 Ah! When will they return around my head
 The dear hands so tenderly disentwining?

The tall violet Iris
 Viciously violated your eyes in
 Seeming to reflect them, -
 They, who were the water of dreams in which
 My dreams plunged so softly
 Enclosed in their color;
 And the lilies, white fountains of perfumed pistils,
 Have lost their white grace,
 And are no more than poor invalids without sun!-

Sun! Friend of evil flowers
 Killer of dreams: Killer of illusions,
 The holy bread of miserable souls!
 Come! Come! Saving hands!
 Smash the windowpanes of lies,
 Smash the windowpanes of evil doing,
 My soul is dying of too much sun!

Mirages! Never again will the joy of my eyes flower,
 And my hands are weary of praying,
 My eyes are weary of crying!
 Eternally the crazed noise
 Of black petals of *ennui*,
 Falling drop by drop on my head,
 In the green of pain's hothouse!

Ex. 3.1: Text and Translation of “De fleurs”

There is more than one way to interpret Debussy's symbolism in this poem. One is to read the poem as representing the death of a relationship or a loved one. The flowers, representing women or perhaps given to a woman, are deceitful and malicious. They are reminders of the past, constant reminders of death as they bloom anew only to wither and die away. What leads to this analysis is the proliferation of references to another person (e.g. "the violet iris viciously violated your eyes while seeming to reflect them") and romantic imagery. The flowers are deceitful and the sun, often considered the giver of life, is now an accomplice of flora. Without the sun, the flowers would die, releasing the protagonist from their torment. Instead, the sun helps them to grow, perpetuating constant pain in this "hothouse." Similar irony persists in several of the poems in *Fleurs du mal*; in "À celle qui est trop gaie" Baudelaire writes, "I have felt the sun tear at my breast,/As though it were in mockery;/Both the springtime and its verdure/So mortified my heart/That I punished a flower/For the insolence of nature."²⁹ The notion of nature as a tormentor had a precedent from many contemporaries of Debussy.

Alternatively, one may read the poem as representing a poet's creative struggle.³⁰ The symbolist poets often produced works about their writer's block and the constant search for inspiration. Here, Debussy puts a particularly dramatic spin on an artist's *ennui*. The flowers represent the birth of creativity, and the oppressive sunlight forces them to blossom. Debussy's inspiration is gone, no matter how much he cries and prays for it to return. The sun's role in this poem seems to relate back to the first song of the set, "De rêve." The singer longs for the sun to disappear so that night will come again and dreams, the fount of inspiration, can return. One cannot help but see the similarity to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, in which the "wicked" daylight prevents the lovers from meeting. At the third song's climax, the poet cries, "My soul is dying of too much sun!" In the end, he resigns

²⁹ Charles Baudelaire, *Fleurs du Mal*, trans. William Aggeler (California: Academy Library Guild, 1974). See also Charles D. Minahan, "Irony and Violence in Baudelaire's 'À Celle qui est trop gaie,'" *Symposium* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 3-15 for more about Baudelaire's use of irony in his poetry.

³⁰ Rohinsky, 210, Wenk, 212.

himself to the black petals (the dead reminiscences of inspiration) endlessly falling on his head as the second line of the poem (“dans le serre de douleur”) returns to close the piece. These two interpretations could be intertwined, where the death of creativity is brought on by the death or loss of a loved one or the poetic muse.

The poem is divided into four unequal stanzas separated by imagery and punctuation. Refer again to Ex. 3.1. Stanza I establishes the poet’s emotional state and ends with the question never answered throughout the course of the song, namely “when will they return around my head,/the dear hands so tenderly disentwining?” This question is the impetus for the following sections. The next stanza describes the flowers, which are later discovered simply to be mirages. The first two lines of this stanza are particularly interesting for their musical setting. We expect there to be a description of beautiful violet irises, but Debussy twists the word “violets” into “violèrent” in the next line, linking a pleasing floral image to an act of violation. Also notice the root motion by tritone between mm. 21 and 22, underscoring this ironic twist (Ex. 3.2). This is clever word play, and is set with “violets”

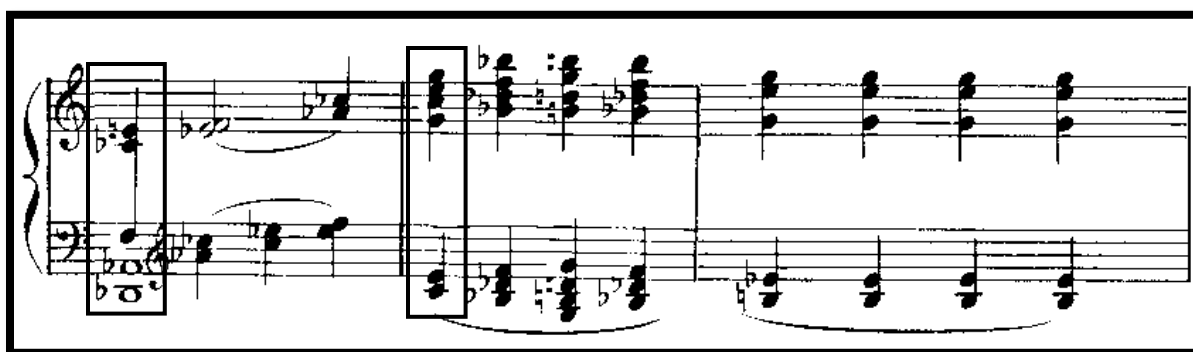
The image shows a musical score for Debussy's 'Les iris'. It includes a piano accompaniment and a vocal line. The lyrics are: 'Les grands I - ris vio - lèrent méchamment tes yeux.' The music features a tritone root motion between measures 21 and 22, moving from B-flat minor to E major. The tempo marking is 'Animez progressivement.' and the dynamic is 'toujours pp'.

Ex. 3.2: mm 20-22. Tritone root motion from B \flat minor to E major.

beginning a new musical thought and key area followed by a rest. “Violèrent” surprises us further, with a change in harmony from E major to D minor. This change sets the music into motion with a new harmonic rhythm, in which the chords change every beat. Stanza II ends with the realization that the sun is an accomplice to the evil flowers. The word “soleil!” ends the stanza with an exclamation to be expounded upon in stanza III with a textual repeat. The third stanza ends as it began, with still another exclamation of “Soleil!” The final stanza begins with a different exclamation, “Mirages!” and

marks a move from anger to despair. The poem ends as it began, with the second line returning as the last.

Debussy sets these poetic divisions in varying ways depending on the text. Ex. 3.4 is a form chart for “De fleurs.” Strophe I ends with a question. The section break is clearly delineated, Since the voice rests for two full measures while the primary motive of the song (to be discussed later) returns. The final clause of the question is posed over an ascending accompanimental figure arpeggiating a D \flat ninth chord, moving to the tonic C major (Ex. 3.3). This is a relatively smooth



Ex. 3.3: mm. 18-20. D \flat ⁹ resolving to C major.

transition because of the tritone between C \flat and F in the ninth chord, the same tendency tones as in the normal dominant seventh of C major. The reprise of the motive resolves in a new way at the beginning of Section II, further clarifying the division. Because the word “soleil” becomes so important in Stanza III and closes Stanza II, Debussy elides these two musical sections at m. 40. Despite the obvious poetic division, the music simply gains momentum over a new bass pedal. There is an increase in tension that builds over the next twelve measures. The chromatic ascent from mm. 46-52 alternates WT collections, relieved by a cadence to B major from a WT dominant on F \sharp in mm. 52-53. This brings about a new texture in the piano with the return of the primary motive in the accompaniment after two measures of vocal rest (Ex. 3.5). While a new poetic stanza doesn’t begin here, Debussy subdivides this dense third stanza at this point, yielding two smaller subsections with two very different purposes.

Strophe	Tonality	Poetic Themes
I: mm. 1-18	Static, C major	Entrapment in grief's hothouse
II: mm. 19-40	Begins in C WT ascent to G# Concludes on V of E \flat , not resolved until m. 60	Description of evil flowers
III: mm. 40-63 IVa: 40-52; IVb: 53-63	Climax of Song Large Scale cadence: B \flat -E \flat	Exclamations about the evil sun, pleading
IV: mm. 64-79	Descends to C in m. 67 9 measure cadence from G to C	Resignation to eternal grief

Ex. 3.4: Form Chart of “De fleurs”

The image shows a musical score for the song "De fleurs". It includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "Ve - nez!". The piano accompaniment features arpeggios and tremolos. The score is for measures 51-53, which is the return of the Ennui Motive in B major.

Ex. 3.5: mm. 51-53. Return of *Ennui* Motive in B major

The section beginning in m. 53 leads to the climax of the song in mm. 61-63. This establishes the last musical and poetic division as the perpetual motion of the song comes to a halt over a tremolo accompaniment with a dynamic and registral peak. The music moves rapidly from fortissimo to piano as the tremolo E \flat minor chords give way to soft arpeggios. Section IV, characterized by descending arpeggios, brings the realization that the poet will never escape the hothouse. The way in which Debussy builds and relieves tension across his musical divisions is very turbulent and mirrors the emotions present in his poetry.

Clearly, this poem is filled with irony. Flowers are evil instead of beneficent, depending on a malevolent sun, an accomplice to deceit, to remain alive. The sun is killing the poet's soul; he longs

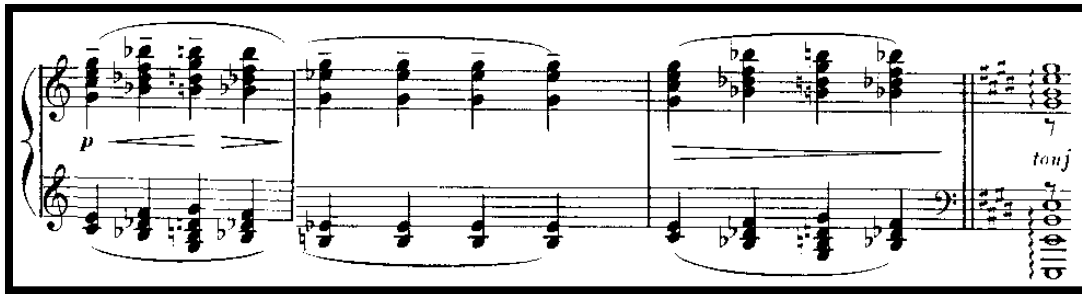
for darkness. Debussy again highlights the color green, so often used to represent freshness, youth and love (*Mein Schatz hats Grün so gern!*).³¹ In “De grève,” green was used to depict the chattering, youthful waves. In this poem, the color signifies desolation and falseness. Violet irises once reflected and reminded him of his muse’s eyes, but now they trick him. White lilies have fallen from grace and lost their purity.

Debussy highlights these contrasts in his musical setting. As in “De grève,” one primary motive is highlighted throughout the piece. This motive hardly changes in the course of the 79-measure song. It appears transposed and augmented, sometimes masked by the thick texture of the piano, but it is always recognizable. Refer to Ex. 3.7. This motive, variants of which will be the first and last musical gestures in “De fleurs,” represents the unrelenting *ennui* of the singer because of its stolid rhythm and failed attempts at harmonic progression. The motive also sets a languid tone for the rest of the song with its persistent quarter-note, tenuto ostinato. The two features unique to this motive are its rhythm and harmonic/melodic progression. While the full motive returns throughout the course of the piece, its characteristic rhythm never goes away. In the section beginning in m. 22, despite the thickened texture, the harmonic rhythm maintains a strict quarter note pulse further fueled by the repetitive bass line (Ex. 3.6).

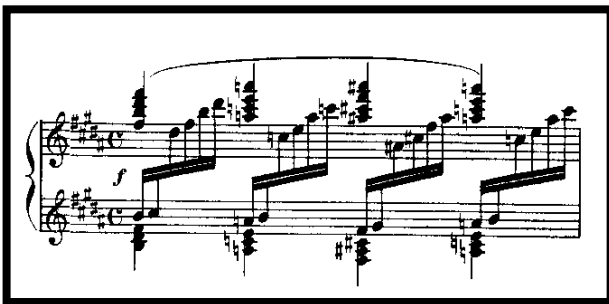




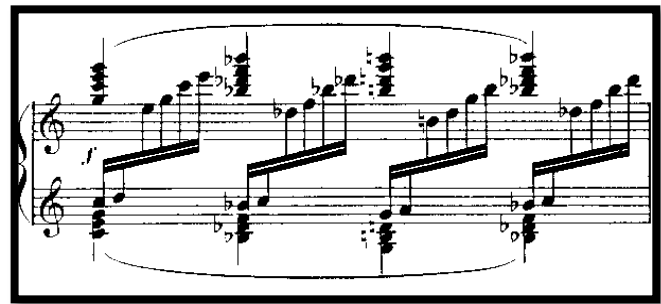
A: mm. 1-2



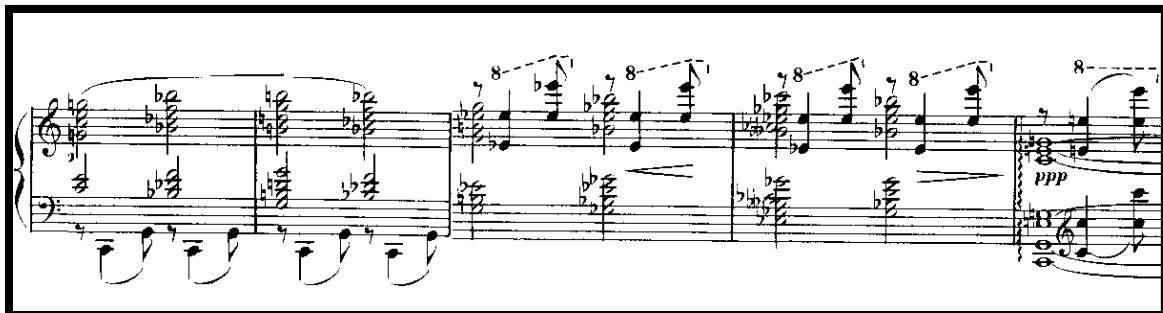
B: mm. 19-22



C: m. 53



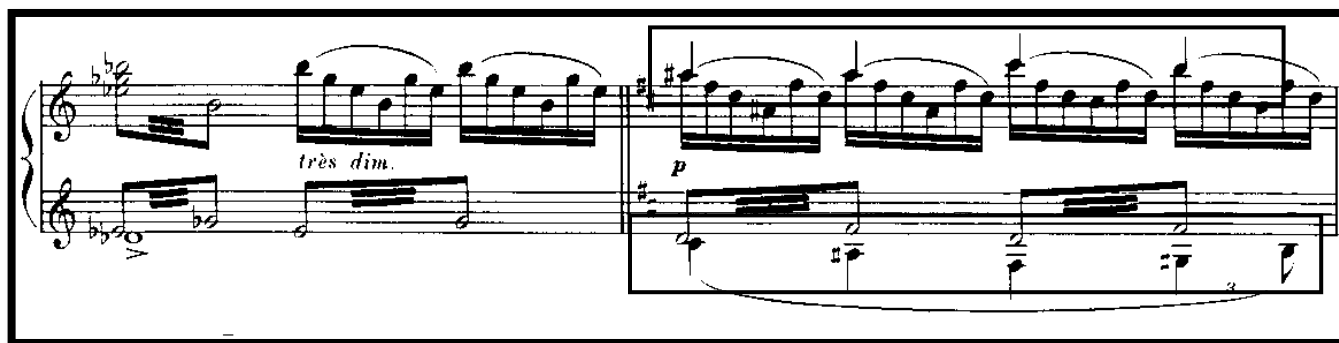
D: m. 57



E: mm. 74-78

Ex. 3.7: The *Ennui* Motive and its Subsequent Appearances

This pulse suggests the “black petals falling drop by drop” on the poet’s head, a musical water torture. The only time our sense of meter is disturbed is the song’s climax in mm. 60-62 as the accompaniment plays a tremolo on one chord. The pulse returns in the form of sextuplets to usher in the last section of the piece (Ex. 3.8).



Ex. 3.8: mm. 63-64. Tremolo yields to quarter note pulse.

The *Ennui* Motive is unrelenting and almost tedious with its thick texture and pure triads. For the first seven measures, no chordal sevenths appear, and the music is dominated by C major triads. For Debussy, this *is* boredom and lack of creativity. There is no Debussian flourish or embellishment. The first appearance of a chordal seventh at the end of m. 7 is a plaintive, gut-wrenching occurrence that accompanies “the flowers ensnare my heart.” The first three chords in the motive expand outward, only to constrict again to their original state. This gesture represents creativity yearning to escape the confinement of the hothouse, a fruitless venture.

The concept of irony and opposition is latent in the harmonic progression of the motive as well. The C major triad moves to B \flat minor, G major, and back again. This is a bizarre progression not just because of the (non-)functionality of the triads, but also because of the relationship between B \flat minor and G major. The chords share no common tones, and two of the three of them are a semitone away from the previous chord. The other is a whole step, resulting in a near-hexatonic pole (NHP).³² This

³² David Smyth, “More About Wagner’s Chromatic Magic,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Music

Theory and American Musicological Society, Nashville, Tennessee, November 7, 2008). Expanding upon the

eerie sound was utilized frequently in Wagner's operas to elucidate bizarre scenarios or opposing plot lines. In *Siegfried*, Siegfried's first entrance, accompanied by his horn call *Leitmotiv* in G major forms an NHP with the tonal world of Mime's cave (B \flat minor).³³ The NHP's more intense partner, the true hexatonic pole (in which all members of a triad lie a semitone away from its counterpart) highlights the "uncanny" in music, as mentioned in my discussion of "De Rêve." As we shall see, the NHP progressions, while not *quite* as jarring as the HP, also highlight the uncanny aspects in the text of this piece.

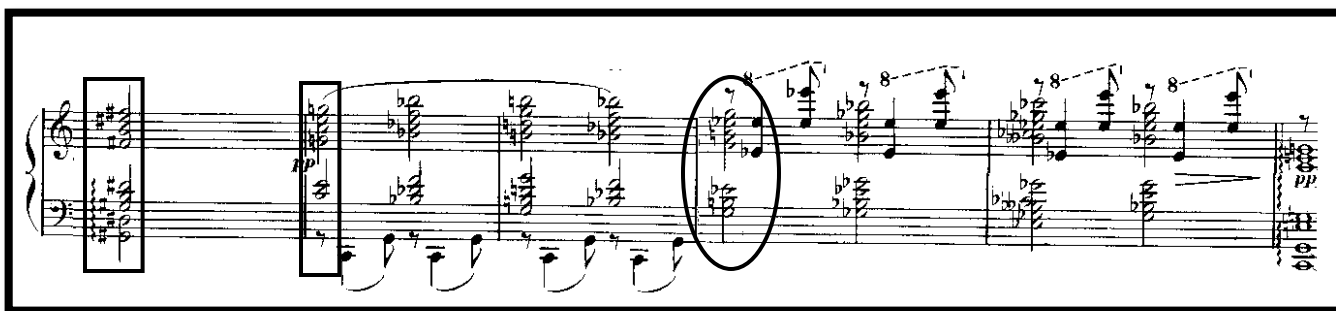
The *Ennui* motive appears in some form throughout the rest of the piece, but is curiously absent for 30 measures, from 22-52. During this section of the piece, the text waxes lyrical about the iris and lilies, finally accusing the sun of evil deeds. Since this is a digression from the central narrative, which concerns the poet's torment, here the motive is absent. In this section, the personification of the flowers and sun, and the many poetic metaphors creates an aesthetic overload. The text is truly characterized by flowery language. These 30 measures gradually build in texture, dynamics, and register as the singer's thoughts intensify in anger. The motive returns, transposed, at the singer's outburst in m. 53 (Ex. 3.7c), exaggerated by mirrored doubling and a high register. The piano's higher, more jarring register complements the text as the singer asks to "smash the windowpanes of lies...of evil spells!" This section is irate and persistent.

The next time the motive appears is m. 74, as the singer is resigned to unrelenting *ennui* (Ex. 3.9). It is approached from a G \sharp minor seventh chord, which forms a hexatonic pole with the motive's C major. This time, the motive's resolution is deceptive. We think it will resolve to C major just as it always has, but instead moves to a G augmented triad. This results in a "one more time" in which the harmony is changed significantly, finally resolving to C major in the last two measures of the piece.³⁴

work of Richard Cohn, the near hexatonic pole discovered by Smyth is two chords, roots a minor third apart, in which two tones lie a semitone apart and the third lies a whole step apart.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ For more about the "one more time" technique, see Janet Schmalfeldt, "Cadential Processes: the Evaded Cadence and the



Ex. 3.9: mm. 73-78. Rectangles show the hexatonic pole (g#/C), circle shows deceptive resolution (to G⁺)

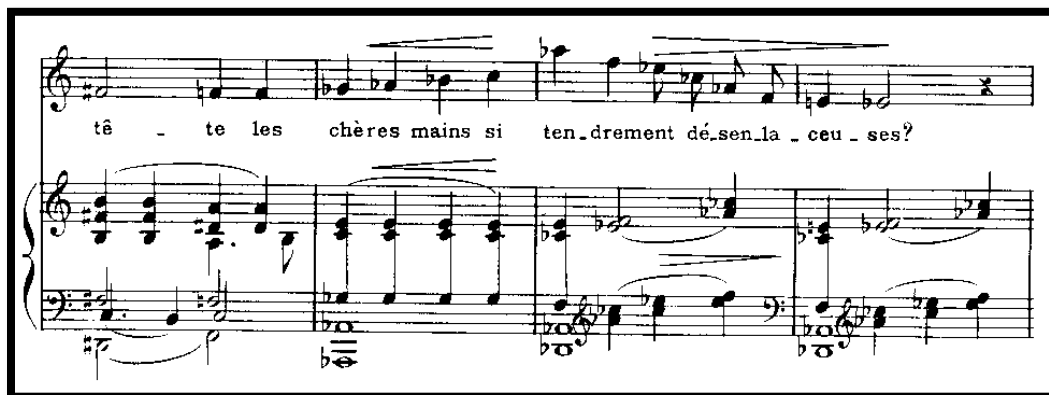
In mm. 76-77, we see the G augmented chord moving to E \flat minor, a clumsily spelled B dominant seventh, and back to E \flat minor, finally ending on the delayed C major.

There is another major contrast inherent in “De fleurs.” There is a general sense of black versus white and more specifically, E \flat versus E \sharp , which pervades the piece. Mallarmé often opposed these two colors as descriptors of emotions, referring to white not as chaste or innocent, but as the creative struggle itself.³⁵ To him, white was a blank piece of paper begging to be written on. Its opposition, black, was genius at work and productivity. Since Debussy was concurrently working on *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, he was surely aware of this notion of Mallarmé’s concept of black versus white. Debussy could easily have adapted this to the piano, contrasting chords and keys with all white notes with those predominantly comprised of black ones. The music suggests that there is a dichotomy between the C major that opens and closes the piece with E \flat minor at the climax. This contrast differs slightly from Mallarmé’s notion of black versus white, but shows that as frustration, anger, and *ennui* build, the black keys predominate. The *Ennui* Motive contrasts all white chords with that of B \flat minor, a predominantly black-note key. Most of the beginning of “De fleurs” is on white keys, and the proliferation of accidentals occurs starting in mm. 12-18 as he longs to be released from the flowers’ malicious stems (Ex. 3.10). As the intensity increases and the accompaniment becomes denser and more rhythmically active (qualities that persist until the climax at 61-63), more black notes appear. At the song’s close, C major returns as the density of black notes decreases. The most

‘One More Time’ Technique,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 12, nos. 1-2 (1992), 1-52.

³⁵ Linda Cummins, “Debussy and the Fragment,” (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 98-103.

important pitch class oppositions are E and E \flat (or D \sharp). This particular black versus white relationship is manipulated throughout all four songs but is most palpable in “De fleurs.”



Ex. 3.10: mm. 15-18. Emergence of black key prominence

At the piece’s outset, E \flat appears almost throughout, associated with the bland C major harmony in Debussy’s representation of boredom. It is sustained for three full measures in the voice as its local high point (mm. 8-10) and at some point in every measure in the piano. Indeed, the tonality even moves to E major in m. 22. However, E \flat makes its first appearance at a pivotal moment: m. 12, at a texture change that accompanies a change in the mood of the text (Ex. 3.11). The voice makes a prompt move from E to a lower E \flat and the accompaniment is grounded by a D \sharp . This accompanies the singer’s unanswered question, “When will the dear hands return around my head, so tenderly



Ex. 3.11: mm. 10-13. Shift from E \flat to E \flat and D \sharp

disentwining?” This note is associated closely with the poet’s despair. As the sense of hopelessness grows, E is darkened by E \flat until it disappears entirely and is completely replaced. In m. 20, we expect the *Ennui* Motive to move to its usual C major, but it moves to an E \flat augmented triad (Ex. 3.12). This

is a jarring effect produced by shifting two of C major's notes by a semitone. The immediate repeat of the motive and segue into m. 22 (in E major) redirects the *Ennui* Motive and it resolves to a pure E major triad (Ex. 3.13). In such passages, Debussy's malleable harmonic vocabulary allows him to resolve to new sonorities, which helped him tell his story. By chromatically altering one or two notes

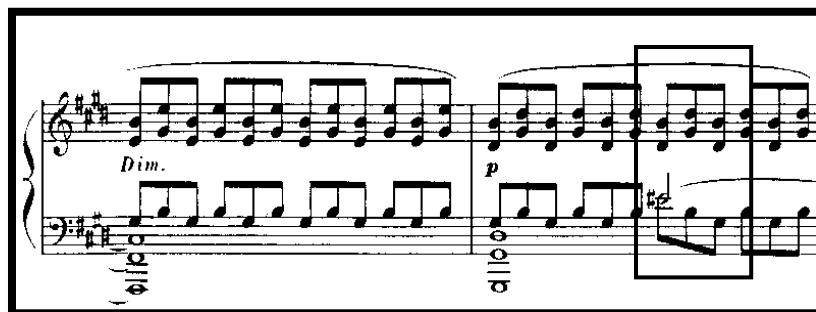


Ex. 3.12: mm. 19-20



Ex. 3.13: mm. 21-22

of the C major resolution, he can darken the mood or lighten it as demonstrated above (compare Examples 3.12 and 3.13). This section (mm. 20-40) is characterized by an initial reminiscence of the poet's muse followed by the gradual degradation of the flowers. E has not yet been darkened by E \flat in this transitional section that will lead to the poet's dramatic outburst. As the intensity builds in the move to E major, the D \sharp appears as a chromatic passing tone (first in measure 23). In a seamless transition in m. 33 over the word "couleur," the G \sharp minor harmony is joined by an E \sharp , forming a half-diminished seventh—the "Tristan chord" (Ex. 3.14). This chord is maintained for several measures



Ex. 3.14: mm. 32-33. The occurrence of the "Tristan Chord"

and will also appear at this same pitch level in the fourth song of the set. Debussy made use of this chord in many of his works, most notably transposed as the opening harmony in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and parodied in *Golliwog's Cakewalk*. From this point to m. 46 there are no E \sharp 's as

anger is directed toward the malicious sun. An expected E is replaced several times by E \sharp and there is a shift at m. 40 to the dominant of E \flat . This is exactly how Wagner used the chord in the climax of the *Tristan* Prelude. It is projected as the half-diminished supertonic, followed by a powerful dominant on B \flat . During this time, the tempo increases, the register gradually ascends, and the singer's anger dramatically intensifies. The ultimate climax of the piece, mm. 59-63, reaches E \flat minor starting in m. 60. Both voice and piano rest almost exclusively on the notes of the E \flat minor triad. The shift has been made from white notes to black, from *ennui* to anger. The move recaptures and intensifies the local NHP progression from G to b \flat in the Ennui motive.

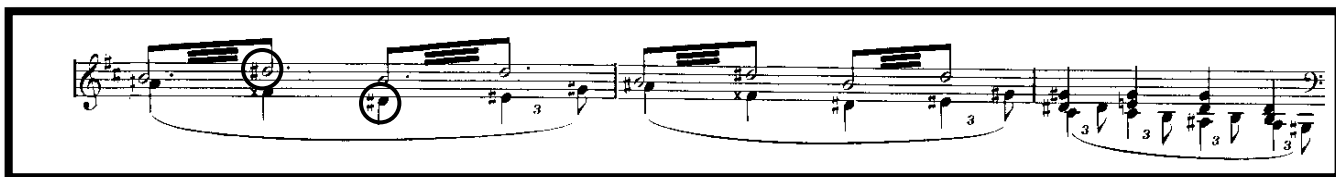
The final section, especially mm. 67-79, features a struggle between the two pitch classes E \flat and E \sharp . There is a respite in m. 67 where both voice and piano come to a full stop on a pure C major arpeggio which is the goal of a modal perfect authentic cadence (G minor-C major). E \sharp finally returns in m. 67 but is contradicted by D \sharp in m. 68 (Ex. 3.15). In fact, the voice intones the singular pitch for more than two full measures (mm. 71-73). It is also important to note the piano's bass line from

Ex. 3.15: mm. 67-68. Caesura on C major (E \sharp circled) giving way to D \sharp /E \flat

mm. 64-70. A new diatonic tune starting on C \sharp first appears in m. 64. After the C major caesura in m. 67, the tune returns transposed up a major sixth (Exs. 3.16 a and b). Now it contains D \sharp , as the voice remains fixed on D \sharp at the words “my hands are weary of praying.” At the next caesura, m. 71, the piano alternates between a G dominant seventh chord (all white notes) and G \sharp minor seventh (featuring the D \sharp) while the voice brings back the D \sharp as mentioned above. At the singer's utmost point



Ex. 3.16a: mm. 65-66. Bass voice melody featuring E \flat



Ex. 3.16b: mm. 68-70. Transposed melody featuring D \sharp

of resignation and acceptance, the E \flat returns as the accompaniment settles on C major (m. 74). The D \sharp that was so prevalent in the voice is effectively eliminated by this return of C major (Ex. 3.17). The story of these two pitch classes is not quite over, however. When the motive reaches its deceptive

Ex. 3.17: mm. 72-75. Elimination of D \sharp and return of *Ennui* Motive as the singer accepts fate

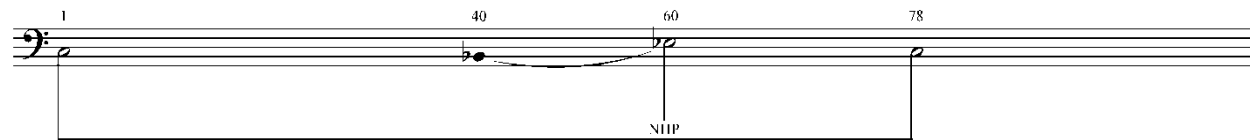
resolution in m. 76, the singer's last line arpeggiates an E \flat diminished chord over two measures, completely saturating the phrase with E \flat (Ex. 3.18). In the end, E \flat prevails, the very last note heard in both the voice and piano (in octaves). The final triumph of E \flat is not one of happiness, but of resignation. The stifling hothouse and lack of creativity will be the poet's fate, so the role of E is no longer purity and nostalgia as it was in the beginning of the song. Notice that the move in mm. 76-78 from E \flat minor to C major is yet another NHP, two conflicting sonorities.

Ex. 3.18: mm. 75-78. Deceptive resolution of motive and E \flat 's return (diminished arpeggiation). Bracket shows NHP.

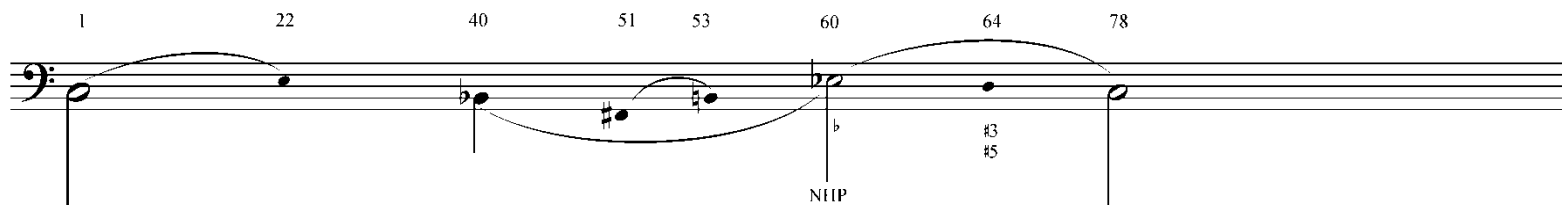
Not only do these NHP's appear locally in the beginning and end, but also in the background harmonies. Essentially, the piece is bookended by C major with a huge E \flat minor climax. It is significant that E \flat minor is the only minor triad that uses only black keys on the piano. The replication on the background level of the surface clashes between C major and E \flat minor and between white and black enhances the cynical, uncanny nature of the text and the song's complete textural dualism, which also influences the song's three-part harmonic structure.

Refer to Examples 3.19a-d for four bass line sketches of "De fleurs." The background (A) contains a large-scale departure from and return to C major. C persists until section III begins in m. 40, and throughout the 23 measure ascent to the peak of the song, B \flat takes over, eventually cadencing to E \flat . The descent to B \flat (m. 40) is at the exact midpoint of the song, supporting the textual and musical diversion from "pain's hothouse" to his soul's death and back again.

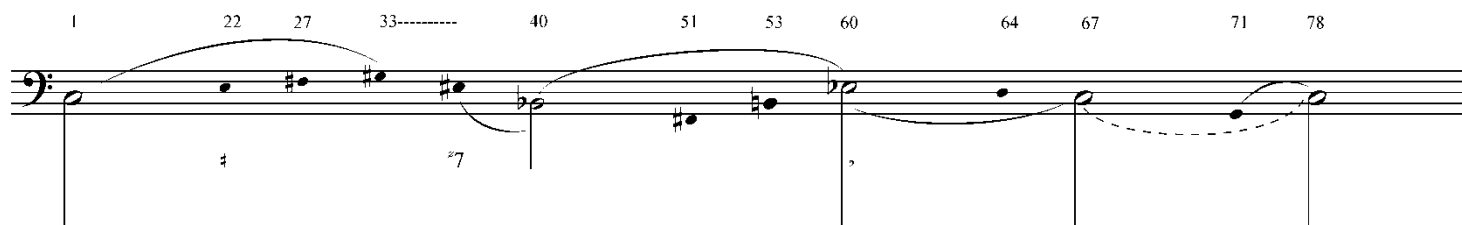
The deep middleground (B) highlights the interior embedded cadential motion that takes place between mm. 40 and 61. In m. 40, the key signature shifts to three flats while the harmony is rooted in B \flat . It is not until the true climax of the piece that the cadence from B \flat (V) to E \flat (i) is finally achieved, concluding that section and the poetic thought. The subsection that commences in m. 53 has its own local authentic cadence from F \sharp (V) to B (I) but functions as a deceptive move to \flat VI within the



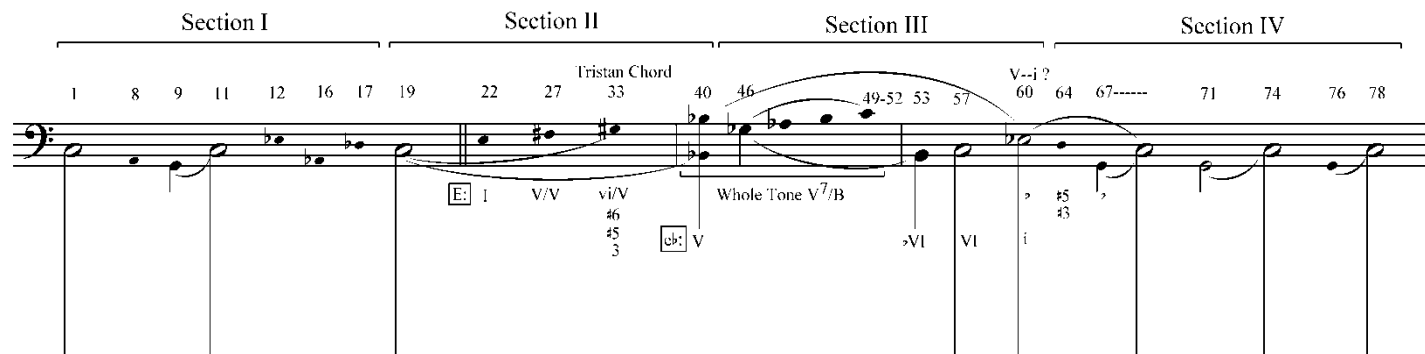
A: Background Sketch



B: Deep Middleground Sketch



C: Middleground Sketch



D: Foreground Sketch

Figure 3.3: Bass Line Sketches of “De fleurs”

overarching progression to E \flat minor. The return to C major is accomplished via a stepwise descent through D in m. 64, in stark contrast from the root movement by fifth permeating mm. 40-63. Also of note is the difference of a tritone between E \sharp in m. 22 (the “start” of section II) and the B \flat (as V/E \flat) beginning of section III. The topical and emotional leap between these two sections is immense, and is depicted by the distance between key areas.

The more detailed middleground sketch (C) includes the WT ascent up to G \sharp in m. 33. During this ascent, the intensity gradually builds through a registral ascent and tempo increase. It also shows the half-diminished “Tristan” chord that pervades the seven bars leading to section III. Lastly, the prolonged authentic cadence beginning in m. 71 demonstrates the prolongation of the tonic, despite the harmonic hurdles that Debussy includes in the final bars. There have been several other local authentic cadences throughout “De fleurs,” but this at last grounds the piece in C major.

Finally, the foreground sketch (D) fills the gaps left at the beginning and the end of the song. This sketch more adequately displays the ambiguities present in the music, as it details alternative harmonic readings of the climactic passages and includes many enharmonic spellings. The first section includes some of the less pivotal harmonies, but includes the first entrance of E \flat in m. 12 and the tritone substitution in mm. 17-19 (recall D \flat implying a cadence to G \flat but resolves to C instead). Between mm. 19 and 33 there is a WT ascent from C to G \sharp , as previously mentioned. In this graph, the gradual completion of the WT collection in mm. 22-52 is highlighted. Below the sketch are two different harmonic analyses. One that more closely relates to the other bass sketches shows the A \sharp (B \flat) from m. 40 as eventually cadencing to E \flat in m. 60 after a deceptive cadence to \flat VI. Because these two measures bookend the climactic section of the song, this large-scale cadence makes sense. More locally, one might consider the WT dominant of B that is unfolded in mm. 40-52. In E major, this would progress to V and resolve deceptively to VI in m. 57. However, the music shows that this is really an ascending sequence, gradually heightened as the tension increases. The most interesting facet

of this reading is that it again shows the opposition between E and E \flat , as the latter harmony seemingly appears from out of nowhere here, but closely relates to the text. When the “V” of E \flat appears in m. 40, it underscores the outrage over the sun’s malice. As the poet begs for the “blessed hands” to release him from the vapid hothouse, the cadence is interrupted and overtaken by a new local progression, as if all might end well. In the end of the section however, comes the exclamation “My soul is dying of too much sun!” and E \flat , the evil sun, returns. This sketch also contains three local authentic cadences from V to I of C major. While this repeated motion repeatedly grounds us in the key, it also reinforces the repetitiveness of this song. In addition, these repeated moves to V are by no means “normal,” as they lead to hexatonic poles and augmented triads. These authentic cadences are deformed, just as the flowers and hothouse have become.

“De fleurs” is an incredibly powerful song, and is rife with raw emotion. At times it seems excessive, and Marie-Claire Rohinsky even refers to it as being “grandiloquent.”³⁶ Its lush accompaniment and demanding vocal line emphasize a dire struggle that is being played out over the course of 79 measures. Interestingly, it ends where it began, after quite a musical and emotional journey. The struggle between poet and inspiration, day and night, *ennui* and creativity, and for Debussy, between compositional freedom and repression, takes center stage. But here, it is not only the words, but also the note E and its darker partner E \flat , white versus black, endlessly opposed and only tenuously reconciled, that tell the story.

³⁶ Rohinsky, 210.

CHAPTER FOUR: “DE SOIR”

The finale of the *Proses lyriques* presents Debussy’s personal commentary on the negative effects of technology and the modern age. Just as all three previous songs have glorified the night and vilified the sun, “De soir” recounts the impersonal attributes of one particular day and longs for the personal introspection and prayer of evening. It is divided into two large, unequal sections. The first details what happens in cities on Sundays, the second invokes nostalgia for simpler times and a personal prayer to “the Virgin, gold on silver,” the guardian of the night. Textually, Debussy’s poem is highly ironic as it highlights the mechanization of society. Musically, the song is motivically saturated and very repetitive, enhancing the composer’s point of view on the subject.

The meaning of Debussy’s final poem is somewhat clearer than the others, but its music is more problematic. The text can be divided into six main stanzas with an introduction and conclusion bracketing them. Refer to Ex. 4.1 for the full text and translation. The opening exclamation forms a separate couplet, followed by five five-line stanzas; the concluding section is a four-line stanza followed by the three-line prayer. Some, but not all, of the lines have a regular syllable count and rhyme scheme. Many of the stanzas conclude with a rhyming couplet. The structure of the poem is evokes a rondo form, with the word “Dimanche” beginning the first five stanzas. The fifth, which turns the focus of the poem from Sundays to night and prayer, commences with “And the night.” Debussy creates further musical divisions than these six stanzas. The two interior stanzas, 3 and 4, are each divided into two subsections based on subject matter. These subsections are musically divided by changes in texture in both voice and piano. See Ex. 4.2 for a form chart of “De soir.”

The poem introduces a vision of Sundays in the city. The first full stanza describes the childhood games that little girls play and sing. Next we travel to the bustling train stations where everyone is heading to a suburban outing. En route, the passengers and trains are “devoured” by

Dimanche sur les villes,
Dimanche dans les cœurs!

Dimanche chez les petites filles,
Chantant d'une voix informée,
Des rondes obstinées,
Ou de bonnes tours
N'en ont plus que pour quelques jours!

Dimanche, les gares sont folles!
Tout le monde appareille
Pour des banlieues d'aventure,
En se disant adieu
Avec des gestes éperdus!

Dimanche, les trains vont vite,
Dévorés par d'insatiables tunnels;
Et les bons signaux des routes
Échangent d'un oeil unique,
Des impressions toutes mécaniques.

Dimanche, dans le bleu de mes rêves,
Où mes pensées tristes
De feux d'artifices manqués
Ne veulent plus quitter le deuil
De vieux Dimanches trépassés.

Et la nuit, à pas de velours,
Vient endormir le beau ciel fatigué,
Et c'est Dimanche dans les avenues d'étoiles;
La Vierge or sur argent
Laisse tomber les fleurs de sommeil!

Vite, les petits anges,
Dépassez les hirondelles
Afin de vous coucher
Forts d'absolution!

Prenez pitié des villes,
Prenez pitié des cœurs,
Vous, la Vierge or sur argent!

Sunday over the cities,
Sunday in our hearts!

Sunday for the little girls
Singing in a knowing voice,
Of persistent rounds,
In which good towers
Only have a few days left!

Sunday, the stations are mad!
Everyone sets off
For a suburban adventure,
Saying farewell to one another
With frenzied gestures!

Sunday, the trains go fast,
Devoured by insatiable tunnels;
And the kind route signals
Exchange with their single eye
Utterly mechanical impressions.

Sunday, in the blue of my dreams,
Where my thoughts, saddened
By fizzled fireworks
Will no longer cease the mourning
For old bygone Sundays.

And the night, with velvet steps,
Comes to lull the lovely tired sky to sleep,
And it is Sunday in the avenues of stars;
The Virgin, gold on silver
Lets fall the flowers of sleep!

Quickly, little angels,
Outfly the swallows
So that you may go to bed
Strengthened by absolution!

Have pity on the cities,
Have pity on the hearts,
You, the Virgin, gold on silver!

Ex. 4.1: Text and Translation of “De soir”

Poetic Division	Musical Section	Measures	Bass Motion	Subjects
Introduction	Introduction	1-6	Descend from G# - D#	Activity of Sundays Busy Train stations Mechanization of Society
Stanza 1	Section I	7-14		
Stanza 2	Section II	15-24	Resume G#-E	
Stanza 3	Subsection III	25-32		
	Subsection IV	33-40	Resume G#-A _b (chromatic octave)	Nostalgia Reverie Night
Stanza 4	Subsection V	41-48		
	Subsection VI	49-59	Alternate between F#(I)/C#(V)/B(IV)	
Stanza 5	Section VII	60-83		Prayer
Stanza 6	Section VIII	84-94	Large Scale Cadence (V- _b VI-i)	
Closing Prayer	Closing Section	95-108		

Ex. 4.2: Form Chart of “De soir”

tunnels and the train signals exchange “completely mechanical impressions.” The third stanza serves as a pivot to the introspective ending, as the poet recalls the Sundays of his past and longs for their return. As night creeps in, it is Sunday in the heavens, and the “Virgin, gold on silver” lulls everyone to sleep. Now tiny angels fly quickly to sleep, as opposed to the trains of the daytime. Lastly comes the concluding prayer of the poem. The singer asks the Virgin to have pity on the cities and the hearts of their citizens. This concluding prayer alludes to the lost lazy Sundays, but also perhaps to the modern disregard for Sabbath duties by modern people. The advent of technology has led to constant activity instead of the spiritual gratification that Sunday used to bring.

“De soir” and its emphasis on Sundays draws inspiration from a series of poems by Jules Laforgue (1860-1888), each titled *Dimanches*. Laforgue, noted for his irony and aristocratic disdain, highlighted many Sunday traditions.³⁷ In his Sunday poems, a day usually considered to be the end of a work week, the Sabbath, a day of rest, becomes a blasé day of mediocrity. While Debussy’s poem does imply mild disdain for the present state of Sundays, the subject matter is mostly concerned with nostalgic yearning for a bygone era (recall “De rêve”).

The religious sentiment so overtly expressed in this poem and throughout the *Proses lyriques* seems somewhat contradictory to Debussy’s own personality. The mention of angels, pity, the Virgin,

³⁷ Wenk, 214-15.

and the phrase “strengthened by absolution” carry heavy overtones of Catholicism. Even the song’s title is inherently religious. The word “evening” is never mentioned in the poem, only “night.” Evening is a religious time reserved for Vespers, the evening prayers. Debussy was a very spiritual man, but revered nature more than the tenets and institutions of organized religion. He forcefully rejected the overtly religious overtones and what he regarded as an inordinately structured approach to composition in the works of his contemporary Vincent D’Indy.³⁸ This poem does address the lack of penitent “Sunday” behavior, but not necessarily because it is a day for prayer. Debussy was heartily interested in nature and deeply devoted to music. His spiritual attitudes relate back to the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Debussy’s writings describe “his essentially idealistic view of a life lived in tune with the rhythms of the natural world, an existence diametrically opposed to a modern civilization that has grown away from nature.”³⁹ In other words, technology has taken people away from nature and from personal growth. The first half of the song presents an outsider’s view of society, but the second half utilizes the first person, indicating personal sentiment. Debussy writes of “my dreams,” “my sad thoughts.” This poem *is* Debussy’s version of his own evening prayer.

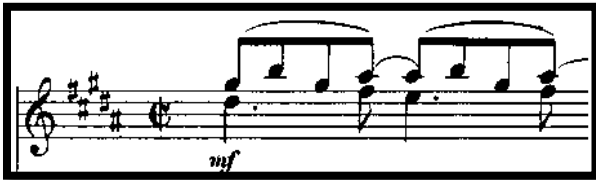
“De soir” is characterized by many kinds of musical repetition. Whether it involves bass line movement, the two primary motives, or even the vocal line, constant repetition evokes Debussy’s distaste for the *ennui* of modern Sundays.

The opening statement features six measures of unchanging accompaniment. The piano’s uppermost melodic line, labeled here as the “Train” motive, repeats three pitches and an eighth-note pulse interspersed with syncopation. See Exs. 4.3 and 4.4 for motive charts.

³⁸ Déirdre Donnellon, “Debussy as Musician and Critic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 52.

³⁹ Caroline Potter, “Debussy and Nature,” *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 138.

Train Motive:



A: m. 1, piano, motive in moving eighth notes



B: m. 25, piano r.h. motive in slower, accented line



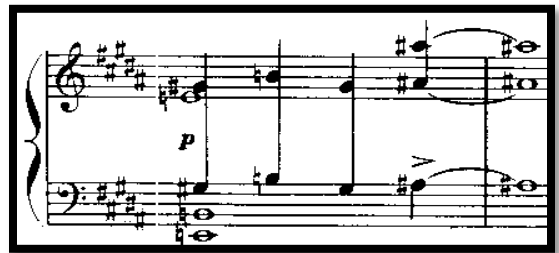
C: mm. 60-61, piano l.h.



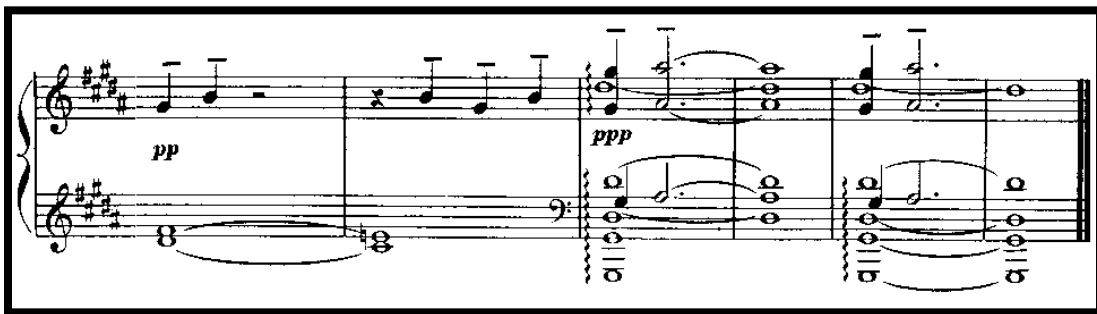
D: mm. 84-85, piano r.h. motive distributed between G#⁶ and G#⁴ register



E: mm. 87-89, fragmented in r.h.



F: mm. 94-95, doubled in quarter notes



G: mm. 103-108, inverted motive in r.h.

Ex. 4.3: Iterations of the Train Motive

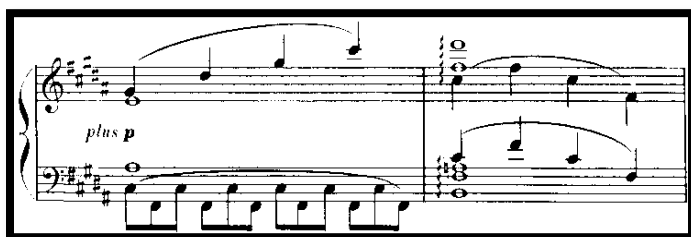
Bell Motive:



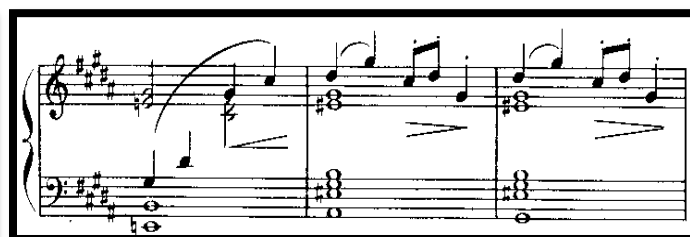
A: mm. 33-34



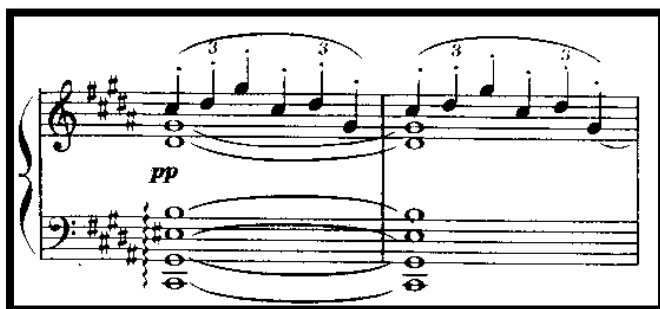
B: mm. 41-42



C: mm. 49-50, fragmented to one measure



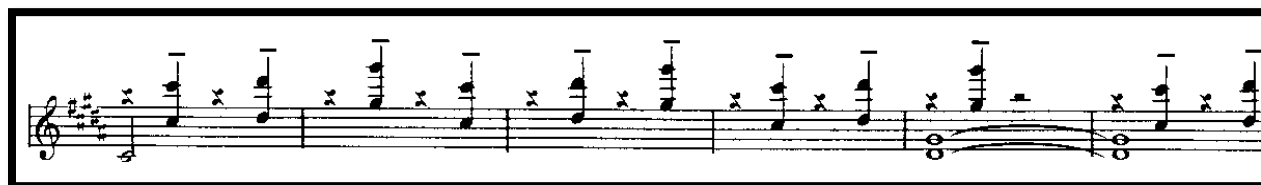
D: mm. 55-57, second measure of motive is accentuated



E: mm. 58-59, tail of motive, repeated as ostinato



F: m. 60, motive in sextuplets



G: mm. 78-83, motive fragmented to first gesture, separated by eighth rests

Ex. 4.4: The Bell Motive

For the first 32 measures, the eighth-note pulse is constant, referencing not only the mechanized train but also the rhythm of the little girls' song. The passage detailing the girls' "rounds" refers to a real French children's tune, similar to "London Bridge."⁴⁰ "La tour prends garde" is quoted verbatim in the right hand in mm. 7-9 (Ex. 4.5). In fact, one can hear the similarity between this children's song and the train motive that begins the piece.

Ex. 4.5: mm. 7-9. The box highlights "La tour prends garde."

The train motive gradually moves down in register and is rhythmically augmented in mm. 25-27. It is grounded by a low bass with doubled octaves below. This happens right before stanza 3: "the trains move fast." The accompaniment truly sounds like a locomotive preparing to move. As this subsection ends in m. 32, a new motive appears in the left hand under a quickened sixteenth-note pulse in the right hand. Arthur Wenk calls this the bell motive, as it will soon be moved to a higher register and take on the character of a tolling bell.⁴¹ Right now, this strong motive, dominated by fourths and fifths as opposed to the stepwise motion of the train motive itself, represents the forward motion of the train.

As stanza four begins (m. 41), the bell motive and arpeggios switch places and appear in invertible counterpoint. This is a crucial moment in the song, as stanza four (particularly its first line) is a turning point in the subject matter of the poem. This exchange is signaled by not only a double bar line but also a change to a flat key signature as the narration sinks into reverie. Throughout this brief

⁴⁰ Wenk, 216.

⁴¹ Ibid, 218.

passage, the bell motive sounds in B \flat over descending arpeggiations. There is frequent alternation of D \flat and D \natural , a black key versus a white key and members of the two opposing WT collections. This long, lyrical line, spanning 8 measures, features a gradual thinning of the texture in both voice and accompaniment. The rapid pace of Sundays becomes calmed as the singer recalls the past and begins to dream. After the singer concludes this line in m. 48, the original key signature returns and the bell motive stays constant over a much more harmonically grounded left hand. In this section we can trace the transformation of the motive from a duple, strident meter to a lilting compound meter (refer to Ex. 4.4E and F). Debussy first moves the motive to new registers, liquidates it, and varies it rhythmically in m. 60. The bell is transformed not only metrically but also in function. It was first a speeding train, then nostalgia, and now a lullaby used to put the sky to sleep. As everything becomes night, Debussy again liquidates the motive in quarter-note octaves beginning in m. 78 and it disappears at the double bar line in m. 83 (Ex. 4.4G). Oddly, the train motive reappears in mm. 60-63 and 70-73, disguised in half-notes in the left hand. This is the only time the two motives appear simultaneously, and this is the only time the ideas of sleep and movement coincide. The night appears “with velvet steps” to put the tired sky to sleep. The train motive prevails in the last two stanzas of the piece. In its reappearance in m. 84, it is disguised by means of registral displacement, but appears under the recurrence of the word “vite.” The last time this word was sung (m. 28) it was in reference to the quickness of the train. Now it is the quickness of the angels hurrying to sleep. At the conclusion of the song, this motive is all that appears in the piano. As the bell motive had been transformed, so has that of the train. It has changed from a mechanized, impersonal tune to a personal prayer, asking for forgiveness for and pity on modern day society. The poignancy of this transformation is palpable. It leaves us without closure, only reflection. The constant chugging of an engine has become true simplicity, a natural form of movement.

The vocal line is similar to the motivic repetitiveness in the piano. The entire setting is syllabic, and for the first 40 measures, does not really feature a “melody.” It is akin to a Gilbert and Sullivan patter song for the first four strophes, only to change in the latter half as the character of the accompaniment changes. The first fourteen measures consist almost entirely of a pentatonic collection (G \sharp , D \sharp , C \sharp , F \sharp), with two notable additions of B \natural and A \natural . These are important structural notes in the seven-measure tonicization of E from mm. 7-14 (refer to these measures for a very clear I-IV-V-I progression) leading to a reprise of the beginning back in G \sharp . The majority of the melody is spent on black keys for the first 40 measures as well. This of course has something to do with the key signature of five sharps, but one cannot forget the significance of black versus white throughout this song set.

It seems peculiar that “De soir” has such a pentatonic quality in the first section, since use of this collection was Debussy’s favorite way to invoke nature and completely opposes the subject matter of the beginning of the poem. Indeed the collection is ambiguous. It implies a diatonic collection of G \sharp Aeolian and also creates a five-cycle. Regardless, the quality of the opening music is rich in fourths and fifths, an ancient, natural sound. Here irony is at work; a natural collection has been manipulated to sound repetitive and robotic, just as Sunday has been transformed into a rote ritual of leisure. Clearly the singer’s three-note opening gesture (G \sharp -D \sharp -G \sharp) is the impetus for the bell motive later in the piece. Again, what was strident and ungraceful later becomes a lullaby.

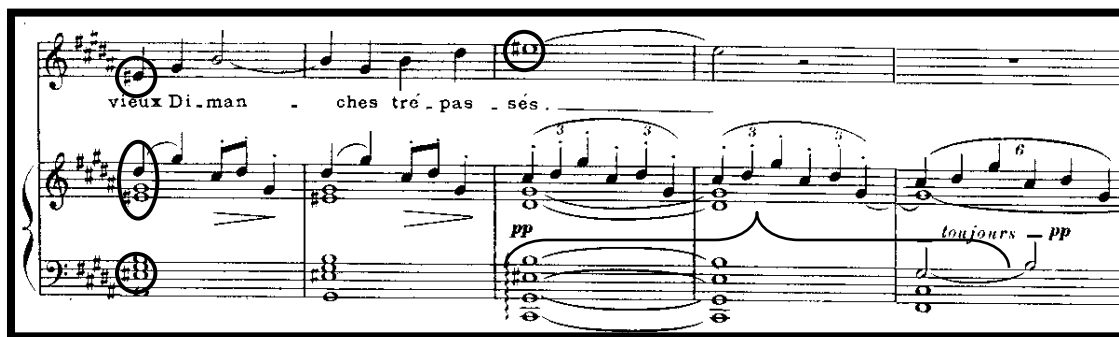
There is no structural chromaticism until the “madness” of the train stations happens in stanza 3 (beginning in m. 15). Both voice and piano feature increased chromatic passing motion and textural complexity as the station fills with bustling excitement. In the conclusion of this stanza (mm. 21-24), the voice outlines a triadic arpeggiation of a B diminished triad, with melodic tritones over a chromatic accompaniment. The “frenzied gestures” are unsettling, but in mm. 25-27 we are then shuttled, by way of a repeated plagal progression, into a new scenario: F \sharp major, on the train (Ex. 4.6). The melody in this section is undeniably related to that of mm. 3-6, but is now transposed down a whole step to match

the descending bass support. Again, the melodic and bass lines are rich with fourths and fifths. In fact, for the whole of Section I, most of the structural melodic notes move in parallel octaves with the bass line, as will be shown in a reductive graph shown below. This angular melody continues until the end

The image contains two musical excerpts. The top excerpt is a vocal line and piano accompaniment in D major. The vocal line has a circled G4 note, and the piano bass line has a circled G2 note. The bottom excerpt shows a similar passage with a circled G4 note in the voice and a circled G2 note in the piano bass line. Both excerpts feature a descending bass line and a melodic line with parallel octaves.

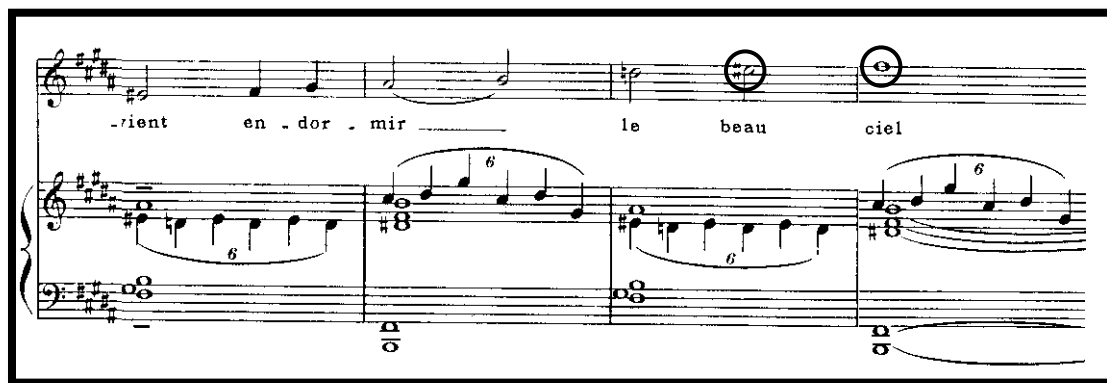
Ex. 4.6: mm. 3-6 and 27-28. Circles show transposition of voice and bass note in these passages of m. 40—it is just as mechanized as the trains. In m. 41, invertible counterpoint transforms the prominent opening perfect fifth in the voice into a perfect fourth. The F/B \flat perfect fourth of mm. 42-43 demonstrate a textual move in the opposite direction from the two analogous section openings just discussed. This 8-measure phrase features arpeggiations of B \flat minor in the voice and piano, a more natural and melodic type of line.

From mm. 49-82 the voice assumes a more fluid character with graceful changes in contour and participation in the underlying harmonic structure. During this passage, a pitch class that we have only heard as either a chromatic passing tone or leading tone gains importance. E \sharp returns in m. 56 in both parts (Ex. 4.7). The vocal line uses it to outline a half-diminished seventh chord; here again the



Ex. 4.7: mm. 56-60. Increased importance of E# and vocal arpeggiation of the Tristan Chord. Bracket shows C#7 resolving to F#.

“Tristan” chord is used at pitch, which last appeared in “De fleurs.” Could Debussy be referencing Wagner’s emotionally intense, expressive, late-tonal world as the bygone Sundays for which he yearns? In the piano, the E# persists over a descending bass, eventually forming a C# dominant ninth chord that will resolve to F# in m. 60 (see Ex. 4.7 again). This E# acts as a leading tone in both parts, a very unstable note. While the E# in the piano technically resolves up to F# through a registral transfer to the bass, the voice’s E# in mm. 58-59 does not and we await the vocal resolution to F#. Instead, the voice resolves down to E# at its next entrance (m. 61), adding an unprepared seventh to the F# sonority present in the piano. One measure later, Debussy restates the melodic line from mm. 56-59 (filled in with passing tones), completing the $\wedge^7\text{-}\wedge^1$ ascent to F# that our ears have expected for 10 measures (Ex. 4.8). As such, we find that the F# in m. 60 is transitory, acting as a dominant seventh that will resolve to B in m. 64.



Ex. 4.8: mm. 65-68. Completion of melodic line to F#.

When the pace quickens again in m. 84, the voice regains some of its previous patter characteristics, in unison with the piano, only to be slowed down by the transition music in the piano (mm. 91-94). The duty of the singer in the last three lines of the poem is to intone the prayer and to participate in the final cadence to G# minor (mm. 96-105). The melodic pitches A#-C#-D#-B-G# in the vocal line (mm. 96-103) belong to the larger cadential motion in G# minor of predominant to dominant and then a descending arpeggiation of the tonic triad. As the piano gains speed and eventually quiets in the closing material, the motives do the same thing. Now it is clear that the singer, at first quickly chattering, has slowed down and ended in quiet prayer.

Example 4.9 features a bass line sketch for “De soir.” The first large section, from mm. 1-40, textually details hectic and mechanized Sundays. It is characterized by repetitiveness with respect to both gesture and harmonic motion. Notice that the bass line makes two attempts to descend. In the first, the bass moves from ^1 down to ^5 and starts over on ^1 at the beginning of strophe two after a clear V-I cadence (mm. 14-15). The return of the word “Dimanche” at m. 15 signals the beginning of a second scalar descent from G#. Strophes two and three (mm. 15-29) feature a bass line descent from ^1 to ^6. In the poem, Debussy brings us from one vignette to another and each scenic shift is signaled by “Dimanche.” Each time we move somewhere new, the same harmonic motion returns. The third time however, as the subject matter changes, so does the harmonic structure. A sequence of embedded V-I motions occurs from mm. 40-41, leading solidly to Bb major in m. 41. At the end of the phrase (mm. 47-48), the music shifts to Bb minor as the singer yearns for the past. A chromatic descent begins in this phrase, the turning point for all the components in “De soir.” There is a foreground descending diatonic fifth-progression in Bb minor, the overarching key of these 8 measures. This is the point when the singer descends into a dream.

SECTION I TRANSITION SECTION II CLOSING

St. 1 St. 2 St. 3 St. 4 St. 5 St. 6 Prayer

1 11 14----- 15 25 29 33 41 47 48 49 59 60 64 70 74 82 84 91 95 101 105

9 4 13

6 7 6 7 3

4 2

7 7

G#

D#-V/G#-bVI

Ex. 4.9: Bass Line Sketch of “De soir”

SECTION I

1 11 14 14 15 25 29 33

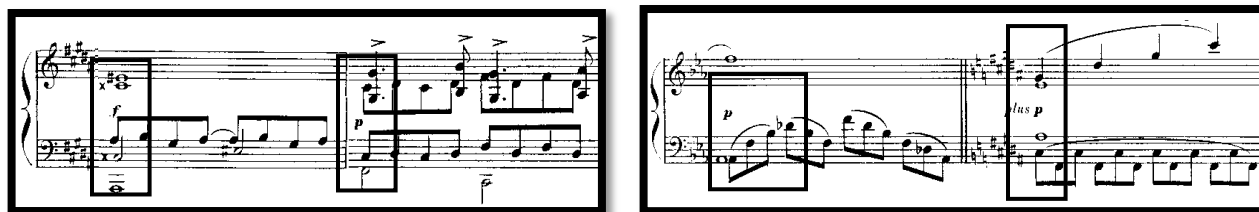
Voice

8 8 7 8 8 8 10 8

Bass

Ex. 4.10: Parallelism Between Voice and Bass Line in Section I

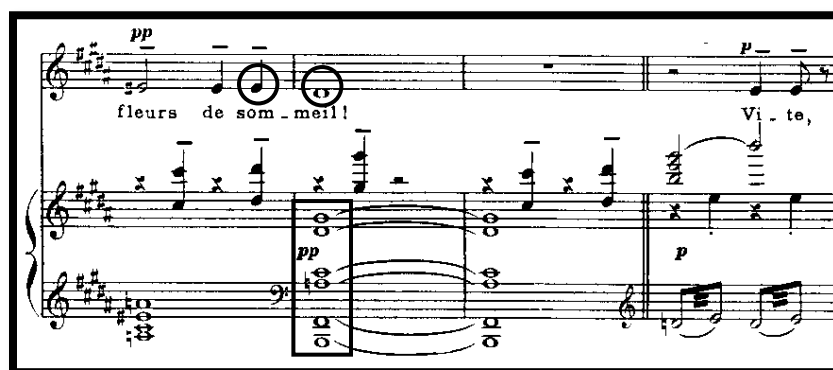
The B \flat then descends to A \flat (completing the octave descent from G \sharp in m. 33 to A \flat /G \sharp in m. 48) and continues to F \sharp in m. 49. This progression from a B \flat minor seventh chord leading to F \sharp is an alteration of a progression heard in mm. 24-25. See Ex. 4.11 for a side-by-side comparison. From m. 49 into section II, the root movement



Ex. 4.11: mm. 24-25 and 48-49. Repeated progression of B \flat ⁷ to F \sharp .

consists of strong perfect fifths and fourths supporting a string of unresolved seventh chords as the singer yearns for past Sundays.

As the song draws to a close, the E \sharp that returned in m. 56 (locally functioning as \wedge^7 of F \sharp) becomes more important still. It appears in both voice and piano, growing increasingly powerful until m. 81, where we encounter an augmented sonority that should resolve to F \sharp . Instead, the voice resolves deceptively down to D \sharp over the dominant of E (Ex. 4.12).



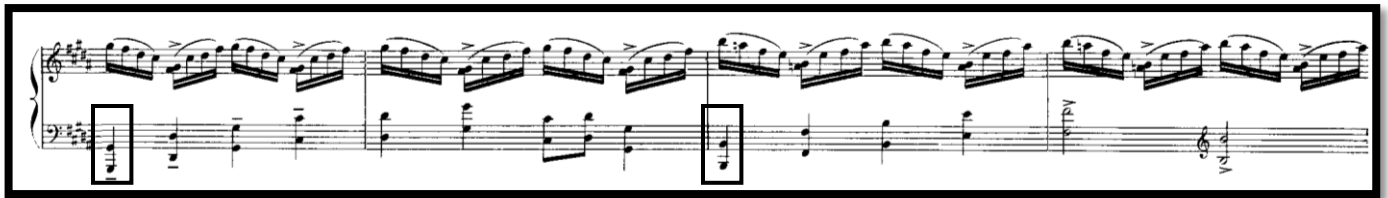
Ex. 4.12: mm. 81-84. Deceptive resolution of E \sharp to D \sharp over V/E (boxed)

This passage lacks closure and also juxtaposes E \sharp with its various chromatic alterations, an issue that has recurred throughout the whole set. When E does arrive, in m. 84, it is clouded by the presence of its own seventh in the bass. This seventh, D \sharp , begins a stepwise descent to E \sharp , which once again supports the “Tristan” chord, at pitch, in m. 90. Here again the two altered states of E are present

simultaneously: the E \sharp in the bass, and D \sharp /E \flat in an inner voice and melody. The chord functions as a predominant harmony, moving to a misspelled dominant in m. 91 as the bass continues its descent to E \flat . In m. 91 a large cadential progression begins. There is a deceptive cadence into the prayer in m. 95 as the D \sharp moves upward again to VI in G \sharp minor. Over the course of the prayer, the VI is manipulated chromatically until it falls to C \sharp (iv) in m. 104 and completes a plagal motion down to G \sharp , the overarching tonic. The plagal trope has been present since the beginning of the song, particularly in the accompaniment in the first six measures (the bass line alternation of G \sharp and C \sharp). There have been other, less-structural cadences between various sections as well. Debussy employed plagal cadences throughout the set (recall “De grève” and its frequent cadences from G to D, surrounding religious imagery and the calm of the waves), and is especially fitting after this section, again rife with religious imagery.

The various E pitch types discussed above (E, E \flat , E \sharp) are particularly interesting in “De soir.” E \natural does not often appear in this song. Solely because of the song’s key of G \sharp minor, D \sharp /E \flat appears multiple times in the first half. This makes textual sense as altered E has generally coincided with tension or stress in the other three songs of the *Proses lyriques*. Rather, it provides brief harmonic support (recall mm. 7-14) and is completely replaced by either E \flat or E \sharp , particularly from mm. 56-83. As the nostalgia for the past begins in the second half of the song, E \natural is still curiously absent for the most part. Its first significant, structural moment in m. 84 (where it sounds in three octaves) is clouded underneath with a seventh. The appearance of E \natural , prepared in the previous measure by its dominant, still sounds unexpected due to the tempo change and lowered seventh. At m. 91, E \flat returns and commences the 18-measure cadence, supported by the right hand piano and voice. It is preceded by E \sharp , and the two together negate the strong E \natural of m. 84. The last two times E appears is as a harmonic support, but is again unexpected because it locally functions as a deceptive cadence. It seems that this cycle does not end with any real closure—“De soir” begins and ends with unrest, further implied by the history of the pitch type E.

In fact, there is another questionable aspect of this final song, and that is the lack of harmonic closure. The five-sharp key signature could imply either B major or G# minor. I have indicated in my graphs and discussion of the tonality of this song that G# is the home key. Truthfully though, Debussy does not give us that straightforward answer. He alternates between G# and B in different places, especially in the first and last moments. Notice that the train motive's first two notes are G# and B with the four-note figure ending on A#. Is this ^2 or ^7? The first six measures are supported by a G# bass line, but then the children's song at mm. 7-14 brings a clear tonicization of E. In m. 33 the bell motive first appears. It begins on G#, echoing the opening melodic line, but is then quickly transposed to B and alternates between the two for several bars (Ex. 4.13).



Ex. 4.13: mm. 33-36. Bell Motive alternates between G# and B.

There are also several tonicizations of F# throughout the song, pointing toward B as tonic. The most obvious tonicization of B begins in m. 58 and persists for quite some time. A C# dominant seventh moves to F# in m. 60 and then to B in m. 64. The arrival on B is repeated in mm. 67-68. We will return to B in m. 82, although here the chord functions locally as V/E. As the train motive from the first measure of the song will close the piece, the same contradiction is present in the last 13 measures. The voice alternates between B and G# in her last phrase, and the piano follows. Despite the G# in the bass for the last four measures, the last melodic pitch is an A#. Again, we are faced with the same question: does the piece end on a neighbor tone to G# or an uncompleted ascent to the tonic of B? This would not be the first time B has been a potential tonic that is ultimately denied (recall “De rêve”), and it is certainly an interesting aspect to ponder.

“De soir” concludes the *Proses lyriques* on a rather unsettled note. There is a severe lack of harmonic closure by way of the piano's triple octave dissonance in mm. 105-108; this suggests a

musical analogue to the poem's final plea for mercy. The poetry first expresses distaste for the modern state of society, then shifts to nostalgia, and ends in prayer. Debussy reinforces this with pentatonic melodies, deceptive progressions, and pervasive dissonance with the last chord. Another way in which the song avoids closure is that the ending is essentially a repeat of the beginning, both in text and motivic accompaniment. "De soir" develops musical ideas we have encountered throughout the set, but certainly maintains its uniqueness.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined each song of the *Proses lyriques* in detail in order to reveal what binds each song into a complete unit or story. Now, the larger set must be subjected to the same consideration. Awareness of continuity among these songs is of the greatest use to performers. The poems explore such a broad range of emotions, from nostalgia to narration and emotional torment to prayer. Various factors must be considered when examining these four songs as a set: recurring poetic and musical themes, key areas, and the question of whether or not we should consider them a continuous set, rather than a mere complementary grouping, at all.

First, there is the issue of whether these songs constitute a unit. By the *fin de siècle* the art song tradition had undergone many transformations. In the German tradition, composers such as Schubert and Schumann had grouped *Lieder* in the style of the *Volkston* into dramatic song cycles.⁴² *Winterreise* and *Dichterliebe* were stories that unfolded over the course of many smaller songs, using the words of one poet. The poetry and music in these cycles tell a continuous story, held together by motive, key schemes, and/or harmonic closure between songs. On the other hand, Brahms loosely grouped his songs into “bouquets” that he intended to be performed together, but in his own day these groupings were largely ignored by performers.⁴³ The unity in Brahms’s song groupings is looser than the true song cycles of Schubert and Schumann, and they tell multiple unrelated stories. The concept of musical unity had changed dramatically over the course of the 19th century, in France as in Germany.

The *Art nouveau* movement had swept the creative circles in France, and both poets and artists provided inspiration for composers. Debussy’s contemporaries Fauré and Ravel were enraptured by

⁴² Walter Frisch, “Schubert’s ‘Nähe des Geliebten (D. 162): Transformation of the *Volkston*” in *Schubert: Critical and Analytical Studies*, ed. Walter Frisch (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 175-199.

⁴³ See Inge Van Rij, *Brahms’s Song Collections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) for more insight into the continuity of Brahms’s *Lieder*.

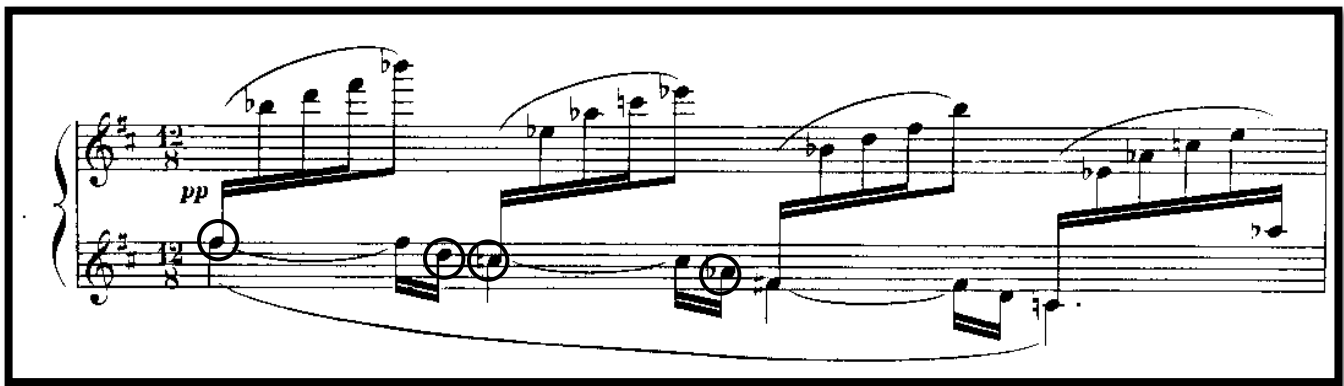
the Symbolist poets, often setting groups of their poems. Debussy's *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire* (1890) and *Trois poèmes de Mallarmé* (1913) were published as sets, and therefore they are to be performed as such.⁴⁴ At the same time, Symbolism suggests allusive, non-obvious connections between events or cause and effect, thereby detracting from textual continuity in a group of songs which set Symbolist poetry. In the case of the *Proses lyriques*, we have four songs with poetry by a single author, but in this case it is Debussy. The poems were written as a group, completed in 1892 and set to music between 1892 and 1893.⁴⁵ The fact that Debussy performed two of the *Proses lyriques* with Thérèse Rogers could be taken as evidence that he regarded the collection as a separable entity.⁴⁶ However, they also share similar titles that suggest they are parts of a single poetic whole. So, while the date of the composition of these songs (preparing for the libretto for *Pelléas et Mélisande*) imply their unity, were they merely an artistic experiment without any intent of continuity of subject matter? They clearly do not tell as cohesive a story as the song cycles from decades before, but the question remains whether there is a continuous flow from one song to the next.

It seems as though this question can be answered in the first seconds of the *Proses lyriques*, even before the utterance of a single word. When faced with the question of unity within music, most will immediately refer to key areas to find logical progressions. The keys of these four songs are F#, D, C, and G#. Refer again to the opening measure of “De rêve,” (Ex. 5.1). The first four notes played in the left hand are F#, D, C and A♭. Using the enharmonic spelling for A♭ gives us the key of each song, presented in order. This cannot be coincidental. We can also hear that this is a descending WT succession in the left hand supporting an alternation of augmented and major triads. In a sense, these first two beats have established a *Grundgestalt* for the whole set, the components of which will be utilized and transformed over the course of all four songs.

⁴⁴ Wenk, 69 and 246.

⁴⁵ Wenk, 198.

⁴⁶ Wenk, 198.



Ex. 5.1: m. 1 of “De rêve”. Circled notes represent the keys of each successive song.

There is more to the choice of these four bass tones. Played simultaneously, they form a French augmented sixth chord, a symmetrical WT subset, consisting of two black and two white keys. The symmetry extends to the arrangement of the keys, with a major third between the first two, a major second between the middle two, and then another major third. The arrangement of these keys could imply multiple relationships. The first and second songs, related by a major third, might have correlations just as the last two (also related by major third) would have. Certainly, the first two songs place great emphasis on the augmented triad (recall the altered dominants and motive A in “De rêve” and the augmented chords of the storm in “De grève”). The last two employ irony both in text and harmonic progressions. However, there is an inherent correlation between the outer two (black note tonics) and inner two. In songs one and four, for instance, two keys compete for dominance, the “loser” in both being B major. The inner two share a distortion of nature, be it the storm over the sea or a stifling hothouse. One aspect that binds them all is the fact that all four belong to WT_0 . As has been mentioned throughout the previous chapters, the opposition of WT_0 and WT_1 suggests a duality of rest and unrest. The contradiction between two important pitch pairs, E/E_b and $E/E\sharp$ lies in the juxtaposition of the two WT scales as well.

There are other means of continuity employed in the *Proses lyriques* that relate to the music and also to their poetry and overarching sensibility. First, let us reconsider the general storylines in each of the songs. “De rêve” is about clinging to an unattainable idyllic vision, the characters and

setting of which has disintegrated into nothing but a “pale shiver.” Despite its degradation, the singer’s soul refuses to stop its yearning. “De grève” tells the story of a picture of the sea and its innocent waves rocked by a violent storm, only to be calmed by the caring moon; the storm still hides off in the distance waiting for a chance to return. “De fleurs” is a glimpse into the mind of the tortured artist who has lost inspiration—possibly due to the loss of a loved one. Trapped in a hothouse, images of nature become malicious reminders of the past. In the last song, “De soir,” the modern hustle and bustle of Sundays has overtaken the cities, and the singer yearns for the “old days” when it was a day of relaxation and reverence. The set ends with a prayer to the Virgin Mary for forgiveness.

The central ideas binding these four disparate stories together are distortion, nature, dreams, and night. The medieval idyll of the first song is transfigured from one of life and laughter to one of thin grass and deceased characters. Musically, it features the distortion of various motives throughout, the transformation of which aid in telling the complicated story; the catalyst for the narration of this story is the dreaming trees under the night sky. In song two, as night falls over the calm sea, its placidity is thrown into turmoil during a harrowing storm. The smooth WT depiction of the quiet sea is gradually transformed into shrieking augmented triads, which eventually resolve to a placid diatonic state. The distortion of nature is boldly depicted in “De fleurs,” as sunlight and flowers become monsters. Irises deceive the poet, the lilies have lost their innocence, and they flourish wickedly under oppressive sunlight. Night and dreams are unattainable for the poet, and he longs to return to sleep to foster creativity. Instead, he is trapped in endless daylight. This yearning for night reappears in “De soir,” as the first half of the song details the activity of the day. Old Sundays have been transformed into a day of activity and travel. These modern times leave the singer yearning for “Sunday, in the blue of my dreams,” and night returns leading to prayer. One could certainly posit a relationship between dreams and prayer. Both activities lead the participant to see things that are not really there, to hope for something that they do not have and both are, in a sense, altered states of consciousness and communication with the unseen.

The relationship between dreams and prayers leads to the idea that the *Proses lyriques* may constitute a single dream. The opening five measures of “De rêve” transport the singer and audience to a dream world, a world that persists for the next twenty minutes. The placement of the word “Songent!” in m. 4, which describes the actions of the trees, is almost a command to listeners as well. Debussy takes us on a vivid journey filled with colors and seascapes and bold imagery. He even brings us into a nightmare where flowers are monsters. He ends with various vignettes of modern life, transitory images, concluding in prayer as evening sweeps over the city. Indeed, while the *Proses lyriques* is as much about night and day, it is also concerned with sleeping and waking. This is evidenced as the second song narrates the waking of a “wicked” storm, while the poet of the third song longs to return to sleep and the inspirational world of dreams. The idea of waking is presented as an invitation to danger or unrest, and the looming dream world throughout the set seems to reflect the intended experience for listeners. The opposition of day and night, sleeping and waking, is mirrored in the alternation of black and white keys, the two WT collections, and tonic opposition in the outer two songs.

The religious imagery that is so important to the final song was subtly prepared in the preceding songs in various ways. It is referred to somewhat abstractly in “De rêve” as mysterious hands “brush the souls” of the deceased. The hands that appear here are difficult to comprehend, but they return in the third song as redeeming or saving hands that will release the poet from his prison. In this first song, the hands seem to be a supernatural entity with possible religious connotations. After the storm in “De grève,” there is a poetic mention of the Angelus bell, echoed in the accompaniment with a repeated E⁵, the “distant bells of floating churches.” Bells make frequent appearances in Art Song, notably Wolf’s *Morgenglocken* in “In der Frühe” or Schubert’s tower bells in “Die Junge Nonne.” The peaceful religious imagery of the first two songs becomes more tumultuous in the climactic section of “De fleurs.” The poet yearns for the “saving hands,” and the sun has become the “holy bread of miserable souls.” When the hands of redemption never come, the poet reveals that his

hands are weary of praying. This prayer, commencing in the third song, is further fleshed out in the final one, as a prayer is intoned asking for redemption for the inhabitants of the city. The Angelus bell of the second song was rung to remind the prayerful of the declaration of the Immaculate Conception of Mary by the Angel Gabriel, tying together its appearance with the prayer to Mary who “lets fall the flowers of sleep.” The concepts of salvation and redemption are inherent throughout the set due to the proliferation of religious imagery.

Debussy was inspired by the *Art nouveau* movement, and its influence is found throughout the *Proses lyriques*. The *Art nouveau* movement flourished near the end of the 19th century, and was a revolution in the style of architecture and the graphic arts. It was largely characterized by clean lines, finding most of its decorative inspiration in nature, exotic plant life, and *Japonisme*. This movement produced the iconic works of Tiffany’s stained glass and the decorative art of Alphonse Mucha.⁴⁷ The larger poetic concepts of this period were those of *ennui* (a general listlessness and dissatisfaction produced from a lack of interest) and irony, particularly in the works of Laforgue, Mallarmé, and Baudelaire.⁴⁸ Irony, a literary device pointed to in Chapter Three from Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal* is a rhetorical device in which there is discordance between the current understanding of something and the general understanding of it. For example, “De fleurs” takes what is typically a symbol of love and beauty (a flower) and turns it into a malicious tormentor. Their influences on Debussy’s poetry are vast, as detailed in the previous chapters.

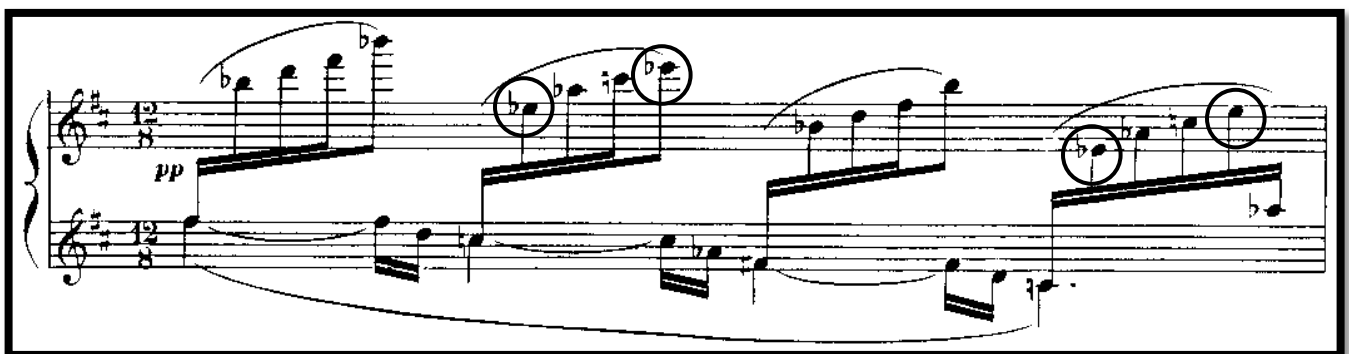
The two notions of *ennui* and irony are most present in “De fleurs,” but they also pervade the final song of the *Proses lyriques*. The idea that the train signals (inanimate objects) comment on how mechanized society has become is just one way that this irony is explored. But also, throughout the poem it is obvious that Debussy has grown tired of Sundays. They were no longer inspirational, and he mourned the death of Sundays past. In the first song, harmonic trickery between the keys of B and

⁴⁷ Michèle Lavallée, “Art Nouveau,” in *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online*, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T004438> (accessed April 22, 2009).

⁴⁸ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. s.v. “Ennui.”

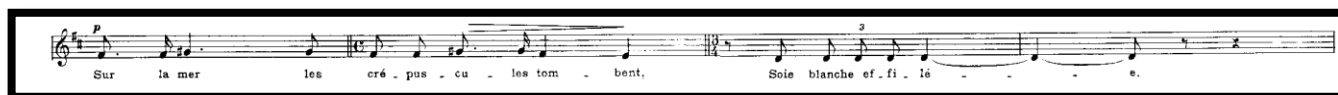
F# persists until the final bars. The true key of the song is not revealed until the end, where the singer accepts the death of her vision. The juxtaposition of the dream filled with laughter and life with that of the dead Grail knights contributes to the irony as well. Life and death play important roles in the third song, but not in the same way. In the first song there is certainly an opposition between the two. “De fleurs” perverts the notion of life, as the flowers forced to bloom torment the poet. At the climax comes the exclamation “My soul is dying of too much sun!” The death of inspiration equates life and death in this poem.

Also crucial to the *Art nouveau* movement was color. The art that was being produced at the time made so much use of the depth of color that Debussy used the same tactics to give life to his poetry and the music. Rich, sumptuous gold holds particular significance in the outer two songs. In one it pertains to decadence, while in the last it refers to religious splendor. The inner two songs give weight to green and white, each with separate connotations as well. “De grève” uses green to signify the innocence of the waves and the activity of the water, while white is calming and associated with the chaste, loving moon. “De fleurs” takes away the innocence associated with the two colors in the previous song. Debussy refers to the desolate greenness of grief’s hothouse. Here, green invokes sorrow, and the lilies have lost their “white grace.” This is the loss of innocence and naïveté so crucial in “De grève.” Musically, the differing colors of various scales bring the stories to life. The ethereal quality heard in “De rêve” is attributed to the registral placement of arpeggiations, but also the arpeggiation of the WT collection and harmonically ambiguous augmented triads (Ex. 5.2).

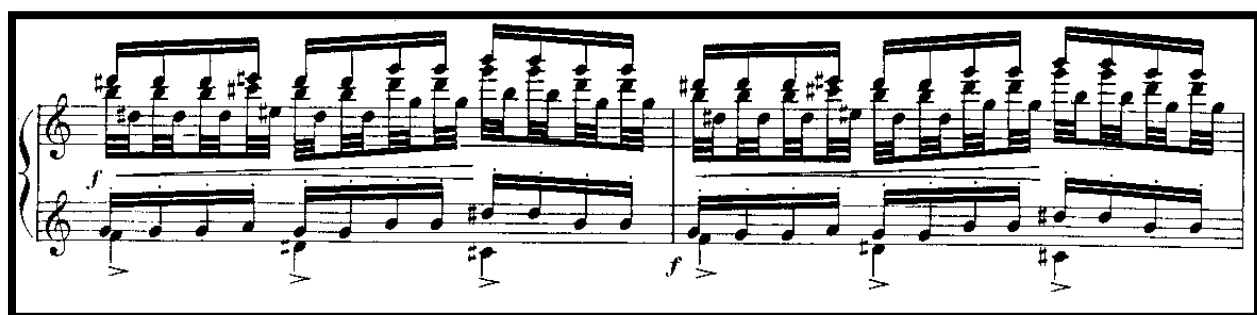


Ex. 5.2: m. 1 of “De rêve.” Shows the WT₀ collection, with the exception of E_b (circled).

The extensive use of WT melodic lines and augmented triads in the second song imparts an entirely different mood to the music. Since augmented triads are comprised of WT subsets, Debussy uses texture and presentation to provide different atmospheres as the story progresses. A WT₀ melody is the evenness of the calm sea, dense augmented triads from WT₁ are the frenzied nature of the storm.



Ex. 5.3a: mm. 6-9 of “De grève.” A WT melody portraying the calm sea.



Ex. 5.3b: mm. 28-29 of “De grève.” WT₁ augmented triads depicting the storm.

In “De fleurs,” nonfunctional harmonic progressions (particular NHP’s) portray the unnatural state of the hothouse and the irony of the text. Strong root movements in “De soir” coupled with a very active



Ex. 5.4: m. 1 of “De fleurs”

syncopated rhythm lends to the mechanized nature of the first half of the song (Ex. 5.5). The pentatonic subset here, so often used by Debussy to invoke nature, does exactly the opposite.



Ex. 5.5: mm. 4-8 of “De soir.” Pentatonic scale and rhythm combine for a robotic sound

This mood persists until the texture and mood change with relationship to the poetry, which eventually turns toward awareness of religious feeling and reminiscence for the past.

Debussy’s poetry features much thematic continuity, which is frequently heightened by the musical settings. However, there are other musical continuities that are given significance by the poetry. The result is a mutually symbiotic relationship. In some ways, the music enhances the text, and in others the text informs the musical choices. These include the opposition of the pitch class E and its chromatic relatives, E \sharp and E \flat , the use of WT scales and block augmented triads, altered dominants, and tonal opposition.

The cycle’s many augmented triads lend harmonic ambiguity to the *Proses lyriques*. They become pivot points from which Debussy can leap to (sometimes unexpected) new key areas. These triads are frequently used as altered dominants throughout, but especially in “De rêve.” Loosening the pull of the dominant/tonic axis was a frequent aim of many composers in the latter half of the 19th century including Strauss and Mahler. For Debussy, it enhanced the ambiguous nature of symbolist poetry and gave his music a more graceful quality.

The use of non-diatonic collections and lack of strong dominant/tonic root motions allowed Debussy to frequently contrast two distant keys, particularly in “De fleurs,” where the white and balck C major and E \flat minor represent extremes of emotion through an NHP relationship. Similarly, we have encountered tonic opposition between F \sharp and B in the first song and G \sharp minor and its relative major in the last. Due to the inherent contrasts between past and present in each of these songs, it makes sense

to have our perception of key area constantly fluctuate as our sense of time is manipulated. Here, music and temporality intertwine. It is notable that in the outer songs, B tries to emerge as tonic and is defeated both times. In “De rêve,” B minor/major appears as the key of the past, and the true F# tonic represents the present. In the end, reality wins, which is why B is banished. On the contrary, “De soir” describes someone who longs to return to the past but must languish in the soulless modern day. B, the key of the past, attempts to take control, but is never reached despite the yearning and praying for another time.

All four songs display opposition between the two WT collections. On a surface level, Debussy employs the contrasting roles of E \natural and an altered E (i.e. E \flat or E \sharp). An E \natural appears at times of rest or ease, while one of its chromatic variants appears during some of the more tumultuous moments. There really are no calm, peaceful moments in “De fleurs” due to the constant angst and pain of the narrator, so E \natural becomes more closely associated with his *ennui* and resignation. The pitch appeared altered during the most emotionally charged moments (recall the climax of the song on an E \flat minor triad). This song displays the starkest contrasts between E \natural and its alterations as evidenced by the background bass line sketch. The proliferation of D \sharp in “De grève” during the storm is telling also. During the “wicked shower,” E never appears in its natural form. D \sharp completely takes over as the composition is subsumed by WT₁ during the storm, the collection representing conflict. In the last song, the increased appearances of E \sharp , contextualized as a leading tone whose resolution is frequently thwarted by motion to both E \flat and E \natural contributed to the weight of the last section of the *Proses lyriques*. We see throughout the set that there are surface details employing the dichotomy between the two WT collections and various pitch types. This opposition also translates to the deepest levels of analysis (compare the global harmonic motion in “De fleurs” and the local use of E \sharp in “De soir”). Debussy is using both macro- and micro-motives to tell one larger story of opposition: rest/unrest, sleeping/waking, dream/reality.

The *Proses lyriques* of 1895 remains an astonishing collection. Debussy's skillful melding of his own poetry and music provides a unique demonstration of how song can convey a vast array of emotions and transport us to a different world.

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VITA

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