

Parting the Veils of Debussy's *Voiles*

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Abstract

Restricted to whole-tone and pentatonic scales, Debussy's second piano prelude, *Voiles*, often serves merely to exemplify both his early modernist musical language and his musical 'Impressionism'. Rejecting both arid theoretical schemes and vague painterly visions, this article reconsiders the piece as an outgrowth of the particular Mallarméan lessons first instantiated years earlier in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. In developing a conjecture by Renato di Benedetto, and taking Mallarmé's dance criticism as stimulus to interpretation, the analysis makes distinctive use of video-recorded performance to trace the piece's choreography of hands and fingers on the keyboard's music-historical stage. A contribution by example to recent debates about the promises and pitfalls of performative or 'drastic' analysis (to use the term Carolyn Abbate adopted from Vladimir Jankélévitch), the article ultimately adumbrates, against the background of writings by Dukas and Laloy, a new sense of Debussy's pianistic engagement with the pressing questions of his moment in the history of modernism.

I will try to glimpse, through musical works, the multiple movements that gave birth to them, as well as all that they contain of the inner life: is that not rather more interesting than the game that consists of taking them apart like curious watches?

-Claude Debussy¹

Clichés and Questions

A favourite of the anthologies and survey texts, Debussy's second piano prelude, *Voiles* ('sails' or 'veils'), has attained near-iconic status as the most characteristic single exemplar of his style. In a narrow, technical view, this prelude's restriction to two non-diatonic scales (whole-tone and pentatonic) has made it a highly convenient encapsulation of his contributions to post-Romantic musical language. In a somewhat wider, aesthetic perspective, its near-unbroken

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

dynamic delicacy, along with its loosely-phrased textural drift and pedal-washed sonorous blur, have facilitated the most simple and immediate affirmations of his supposed 'Impressionist' affiliation.

No doubt, as Richard Langham Smith once suggested, the fact that the well-worn association between Debussy and painterly Impressionism has survived all attempts to discredit it speaks to its intuitive rightness at some immediate level of reception (Smith, 1973, p. 61). But if this stylistic cliché remains a source of impatience for many Debussy scholars (including Smith himself), this is because it tends to draw a misty screen of generality over the exquisitely refined detail of Debussy's craft. Because of its syntactical uniformity, *Voiles* has been particularly susceptible to such generalized description. On the other hand, it is not necessary to occupy the extreme wing of anti-theoretical curmudgeonliness to wonder whether the aspects usually singled out as significant by those accounts that *do* engage with compositional detail—the relatively obvious interrelationships of motives and gestures that secure the prelude's 'unity'; the 'referential pitch-class genera' that locate its scalar formations within the taxonomic catalogue of Debussyan syntax—are those most illuminating of its place in the development of this distinctive, poetic and imagistic compositional imagination (see for example Böckl, 1972; Charru, 1988; Harris, 1980; Parks, 1989).

This is not to say there is nothing of value in previous commentaries. Indeed, the balance of insight and limitation in one of the few previous discussions that can be considered at all 'critical', which appears within Arnold Whittall's 1975 article 'Aspects of the Whole-Tone Scale in Debussy', can usefully set the stage for a new approach. Whittall, for one thing, gives pride of place to the 'dramatic' aspects of Debussy's composition:

Debussy, at his best, was always a dramatic composer. What is dramatized, what brings tension and dynamism to the music, is the skilfully balanced relationship between chromaticism and diatonicism, both of which may show modal characteristics but which never lose sight of the triadic constructions and progressions of earlier tonal music. Debussy's harmony functions precisely in the sense that it gives meaning, and movement, to this relationship. As a language it can best be described as "expanded tonality," a language in which tonality still acts as a basic term, giving perspective to all other harmonic activity. (Whittall, 1975, p. 271)

Here, the fine metaphors of 'sight' into and 'perspective' upon the 'triadic constructions and progressions' of earlier tonality could valuably serve to open the historical investments behind Debussy's compositional choices. But while Whittall is indeed able, in this light, to offer appreciative analyses of *L'Isle joyeuse*, *Des pas sur la neige*, and *Jeux*—all of which are, of course, much more variegated in pitch language—he can only dismiss *Voiles* for its threefold dramatic 'weaknesses':

In the first place, it attempts to oppose static and dynamic harmonic entities, relying primarily on rhythm to propel the whole-tone sections. Secondly, it ignores the most

important, if not the only, property of the whole-tone scale itself—the fact that it can be transposed once, by a semitone, to provide the other six notes of the chromatic scale. Finally, although in *Voiles* the contrast and similarity between the two modes—both with B \flat and two other notes in common, but one without the crucial E \flat —are exploited and even dramatized, there is little evidence of any attempt to integrate the two elements in such a way as to produce a new kind of chromaticism controlled by the intersection of diatonic and whole-tone elements. (pp. 261-2)

It is hard to think of a clearer example of the tendency for normative music-theoretical presuppositions to thwart sympathetic critical engagement. Why, we might ask (with countless works from Stravinsky to Reich in mind), is it 'weak' to rely on rhythm to propel a static harmonic language? Is the whole-tone scale's only significant property really its potential—as Messiaen might put it—for 'limited transposition'? Is it appropriate to demand some pre-determined degree of pitch-syntactical 'integration', let alone some 'new kind of chromaticism', from this—or any—composition? In this early article, Whittall effectively condemns *Voiles* for not being (as he elsewhere describes *L'Isle joyeuse*) 'a satisfying subject for detailed harmonic analysis' (p. 267). But rather than taking such (wholly understandable) dissatisfaction as grounds for dismissal, it is more fruitful to consider whether the analytical categories themselves might be inappropriate to the particular case. In other words, *Voiles*, by its very syntactical poverty, might challenge us to recognize, and interpret, a dramatization of historical perspective that unfolds in other dimensions than pitch-patterns alone.

In this article, I take *Voiles* as a case study to explore, in a frankly experimental spirit, the critical potential in an analysis that focuses not only on pitch patterns and rhythmic processes in the abstract, but also on the way they are deployed to underpin—and, in some degree, to determine—an unfolding choreography of touch and gesture on the mediating substance of the piano keyboard itself. This redirection of attention onto the 'multiple [physical] movements that gave birth to the piece', to paraphrase a line from Debussy's first published paragraph of music criticism (Debussy, 1988, p. 23, as quoted in my epigraph), is obviously in tune with the many exhortations in recent musicology for a new critical attention to music's ephemeral, physical, performative aspects alongside either traditional formalist analyses of musical unity or hermeneutic readings of musical signification (see for example Berry, 1989; Briscoe, 1999; Cook, 1999; Dunsby, 1995). My sense, indeed, is that an attempt to analyse the 'multiple movements' of the pianist's hands as they realize the pitch-patterns of *Voiles*, if pursued with an ear to what those patterns might suggest about 'inner life' (as in the further words of my Debussyan epigraph), can usefully contribute to the recent debate about the relationship between these various, notionally distinct modes of understanding.

To refer only to the most polemical instance: it could well be said that Carolyn Abbate, who has recently enthusiastically endorsed Vladimir Jankélévitch's insistence on the essentially performative or 'drastic' nature of musical experience (as opposed to the 'gnostic' or signifying aspects elevated by any hermeneutics), ultimately exposes the potential limitations of such an approach rather more clearly than she adumbrates its revisionary promise (see Abbate, 2004).

As examples of the level of 'drastic' understanding she finds possible during her own performance, Abbate gives only fleeting reports—'doing this really fast is fun'; 'here comes a big jump' (p. 510)—whose vacuity fully justifies both her own somewhat melancholy peroration and the querulous response of Karol Berger: 'if you have something worthwhile to say about them, do write about actual performances; but do not cloak your choice of the object in the spurious mantle of revolutionary heroics'. (Berger, 2005, p. 499)

Berger, in this response, rightly suggests that Abbate overdraws the distinction between drastic (performative) and gnostic (hermeneutic) experience. As he puts it, 'there is no such thing as pure experience, uncontaminated by interpretation' (p. 497). But this rebuttal swings so far in the other direction that it makes it hard to pursue critically the degree to which any musical composition might itself hold the possibility of 'pure experience' up to question—and, in so doing, enact an unfolding negotiation between the immediate, drastic pleasures of performance and all the imaginative possibilities such experience might inspire, simultaneously, in the parallel (or parasitical) realm of gnosis. Debussy's piano music offers a fertile field for an investigation of such self-conscious interplay between the material bases of aesthetic experience and their seductive summons to imaginative extrapolation, for exactly this kind of interplay was a central, conscious and intense concern of the poetic environment from which this music sprang.

In short, I take as a basic interpretive orientation the fact that *Voiles*, like a good many of its twenty-three companions in the two books of *Préludes*, is deeply rooted in the variegated nexus of aesthetic motivations nurtured by Debussy's formative immersion in the poetry of Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Indeed, though the nod to this lineage in the one-word title of this second prelude is far less explicit than in that of the fourth (whose title *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* borrows a line from Baudelaire's 'Harmonie du Soir'). I follow Renato di Benedetto's suggestion, in the most substantial single article on the piece, that the word 'voiles', in its two possible meanings and in its very ambiguity, is insistently evocative of the Mallarméan strand of Debussy's compositional sensibility (di Benedetto, 1978).² The problem remains, however, that invocations of Debussy's Mallarméan sensibility, too, dissipate all too easily into paeans to Symbolist 'mystery' that are no more illuminating about musical detail than clichés about Impressionist 'mist'.

Given that di Benedetto does not entirely avoid this related cliché himself, it will be useful to begin by revisiting his article briefly, to refine his conjecture about the Mallarméan pedigree of *Voiles*. Then, after sketching some essential points of historical background, it will be possible to turn to analysis in hopes that the Abbatean level of reportage ('here comes a really big jump') might be fruitfully supplemented both by Whittall's historical perspective ('this triad

2 As di Benedetto notes, there is no more crucial Mallarméan image than the 'veil'; the nautical implication of 'sails' is almost as central to the *œuvre*, in poems from 'Brise Marine' through 'Salut' to the shipwreck in 'Un coup de dés'.

doesn't feel as it should') and by some sense of the poetic penumbra that still, in Debussy's time, surrounded some of the most mundane scalar and physical materials.

A Mallarméan Conjecture, and Another

Di Benedetto's 1978 article 'Congetture su *Voiles*' is largely taken up with an analysis that nicely balances close attention to momentary textural deployment with broad considerations of background scalar logic. The analysis can be read on its own merits; I will highlight only one or two points of emphasis that help to understand the Mallarméan 'conjecture' di Benedetto offers in his conclusion. In short, he finds that *Voiles*, in spite of its 'static' scalar language, creates a sense of progress through an evolving density of 'contrapuntal artifice' (p. 318). But he also discerns a 'closed', almost crystalline underlying unity in its 'quadrilateral' deployment of whole-tone scale segments in prime, inverted, retrograde, and retrograde-inverted forms (see pp. 315-19). This bifurcation between his own diachronic and synchronic apperceptions leads him to question the work's formal stability:

This net of correspondences, allusions, reciprocal reminders, itself set in contrast to the apparent succession of events, annuls the traditional tripartite form, or rather absorbs it and encloses it in a circular form, even—it might be said—a rotating one, generated from the oscillatory movement that, in so many ways, is the true, primary framework of the prelude. (p. 333)

Daring to characterize *Voiles*, in this light, as an 'allegory of the ambiguous relation between essence and appearance, fiction and reality', di Benedetto asserts that 'all of this recalls to me ... one name: that of Mallarmé.' After spinning a virtuoso gloss on veil imagery in Mallarmé's poems, he further suggests, most intriguingly, that *Voiles* might also be fruitfully juxtaposed to Mallarmé's famous essay about dance, 'Ballets' (p. 335).³

Di Benedetto's Mallarméan conjecture is exactly the kind of inspired interpretive leap that can revivify our understanding of Debussy's richly evocative piano preludes.⁴ Still, the unapologetically 'linguistic and formal' nature of his analysis forestalls any development of his striking intuition about the potential interpretive relevance of Mallarmé's musings on *dance*. His conclusions, indeed, fall prey to the common one-sided view:

3 In partial support of the link to dance criticism, di Benedetto makes the simple but apposite observation that *Voiles* follows immediately in the first volume of preludes from a piece whose evocation of dance is explicit: *Danseuses de Delphes* (p. 339n25).

4 See also the contextual support provided by the piece's other close companions in the first volume—for example, the third prelude *Le vent dans la plaine*, whose title is taken from a poem by Favart; and the fourth, *Les sons et les parfums tourment dans l'air du soir*, a clear evocation—if not a direct gloss—of the Baudelaire poem from which its title is taken. The 'poetic' orientation of these works is patent, why not try and imagine, and consider critically, related avenues of inspiration in less explicit cases?

Heedless of analytical invasions, impenetrable and distant, the enigmatic “musical object” that is *Voiles* continues to oscillate before our eyes as if suspended “*dans le doute du Jeu suprême*” [within the doubt of the supreme game]; and, like the intangible mallarméan “eternal Azure,” lets its own serene, indolent irony pour over anyone who lingers, spellbound, to contemplate it: here, alas, is no poet, but only, and much less heroic, a ‘feeble musicologist who curses his genius’. (p. 339)

The image of the ‘spellbound’ analyst is inspired; the humility is touching; but di Benedetto’s identification with the poet’s ‘haunted’ idealism (as in the early poem ‘L’Azur’) overinvests in the trope of ‘symbolist mystery’ that has long forestalled precise insight into Mallarmé’s influence on Debussy. A more multidimensional sense of the dramatic experience traced through this ‘rotating’ nexus of pitches becomes possible if we consider, at the same time, the material and physical substrates of its temporal realization. It thus becomes possible to experience it as one more Debussyan exploration of the dialectical interplay central to all of Mallarmé’s literary art, between the brute reality of artistic materials and the expressive ideals such materials are manipulated to serve.

I have tried to expose this dialectic, in a previous article, by tracking in detail the close and sophisticated musical reading of Mallarmé’s ‘L’après-midi d’un faune’ in Debussy’s famous orchestral *Prélude* (Code, 2001). The primary goal of that exercise, let me now insist, was never simply to try and attach this or that chain of specific images (nymphs and fountains, reeds and roses) to this or that chain of musical ideas. In itself, that crudely mimetic level of reading could only ever attain what we might call the ‘cryptographic mundane’ in contradistinction to Abbate’s slightly mocking notion of the ‘cryptographic sublime’—by which she means the ‘deep’ social meanings desired and assumed by all ideological hermeneuts from Adorno through McClary, Kramer and Taruskin (see Abbate, 2004, p. 524 and after). The point is, rather, that by tracing the way the poet structures such imagery to serve an allegorical confrontation with broader, more basic oppositions and concepts—matter and idea; sound and sense; speech and writing—it becomes possible to unearth Debussy’s articulation of musical form around a similar, broad-brushed allegory of the relation between the same (or closely equivalent) categories of experience, as sensed at that moment in the history of orchestral composition.

Di Benedetto’s conjectural link, via the image of ‘veils’, between the maddening elusiveness of *Voiles* and Mallarmé’s dance criticism can be enriched by adopting the same kind of self-conscious, allegorical sensibility in the face of the physical realisation of the prelude’s ‘crystalline’ pitch structures. But a critical pursuit of a similar material-ideal dialectic through performative analysis is not best served by the particular example di Benedetto has selected from Mallarmé’s dance writings. The ‘veil’ in the essay ‘Ballets’ promises only ‘conceptual’ revelation: ‘through a communion whose secret her smile seems to pour forth, without delay [the dancer] yields to you through the last veil which always remains, the nakedness of your concepts’ (Mallarmé, 1945, p. 307). In another essay on dance, by contrast, we find the poet responding to the cascade of veils in a more modern production with praise more palpably oriented around the tension between the physical and the ideal.

The 'Autre Étude de Danse: Les Fonds dans le Ballet d'après une Indication récente' celebrates the American dancer Loïe Fuller, whose manipulations of gauzy veils and brilliant lighting entranced many fin-de-siècle artists. Any attempt to gloss such a characteristically extravagant piece of criticism—a truly 'drastic' use of language, we might say, which tries to re-enact the vibrancy of the viewed event in its own flexibly coiling prose—must of necessity sell it somewhat short. But it is worth underlining, in the first place, how passionately the poet responded to the intimate, symbolic or symbiotic relationship between the swirl of veils and the sound of music:

The décor lies latent in the orchestra, treasure of imaginations, to emerge, flashing, according to the vision that the representative of idea dispenses to the stage-front here and there. Well, that transition of sonorities to tissues (is there anything more similar to gauze than Music!) is, uniquely, the magic that Loïe Fuller operates, instinctively, with the exaggeration, the retreats, of skirt or wing, instituting a place. The enchantress makes the ambience, draws it from herself and puts it back in there, through a palpitating silence of *crêpes de Chine* ... Here is given back to Ballet the atmosphere or nothing, visions immediately scattered as soon as known, their limpid evocation. The full scene, at the service of fictions exhaled from the play of a veil with attitudes and gestures, becomes the very pure result. (Mallarmé, 1945, pp. 308-09)

Here, it is as if the elusive, concealing-revealing substance of the veils attains to the same semiotic promiscuity beloved by the musical hermeneuts. But at the same time, recalling the line previously quoted from the essay 'Ballets', much more than a purely metaphorical revelation of the 'nudity of concepts' is at issue in this 'transition of sonorities to tissues'. Through a passing glimpse of diastolic rhythm—Fuller extrudes the ambience, and withdraws it back—Mallarmé hints at his sense of the physical presence at the core of the whole representational extravagance.

As the essay continues, this palpable, electrical, hypnotising sense of the (unseen) dancing body becomes ever clearer:

All emotion issues forth from you, and releases a milieu; or dissolves onto you and incorporates the space back into you. Thus this multiple discharge around a nudity, great with contradictory flights wherever the body commands, tempestuous, soaring, magnifies it to the point of dissipating it: [it remains] central, for all reacts to each fleeting impulse in swirling eddies, she gathers it all in, by a mad will projected to the extremities of each wing, and darts all in around her severe, standing statuette—struck dead from the effort of condensing out of a near-total self-liberation these lingering side-springing ornaments of skies, of sea, of perfume, of foam. (p. 309)

For Mallarmé, in other words, for all the dazzling, evanescent beauty of the visual-sonorous display, the experience hinges most profoundly on an ineluctable, essential sense of the 'mad will' of the performer. And for this reason it is important to recognize that however hyperbolic

Mallarmé's enthusiasm for Fuller's dance might seem, it also carries a faint undercurrent of disquiet—or, to be more precise, of envy. In a valuable recent reappraisal of symbolism, Richard Cándida Smith speaks directly to this point when he suggests that 'Mallarmé ... embraced Fuller as the realization of the power modernity brings to art, although he himself was not sure how he as a poet could take advantage of the technical attributes that Fuller exploited so well.' (Smith, 1999, p. 71)

I would put it more strongly: in celebrating Fuller, Mallarmé is well aware that he is confronting an art that is available to the poet only as a distanced observer—that is, a mere *reader* of 'bodily writing'. And the dance critic, as reader, cannot even claim the partial performative satisfaction of the dramatic reciter—as offered, for example, in the lyric-dramatic hybrid of the 'faun' poem, with its formed pursuit of materialized voice, or indeed in the far grander performative project Mallarmé left incomplete under the title of *Le Livre* (see Code, 2004). In this sense, however passionately the critic might try to write the dynamism and extravagance of Fuller's art into his own prose, he inevitably finds himself at a remove from the participatory, physical immediacy of the art itself—much in the way (ironically enough) that Debussy, in translating the faun poem's allegory of speech and writing to the orchestra, could only enact a parallel at one remove, so to speak, where the sensations of *listening* imperfectly substitute for the embodied acts of performance.

It is in this light that we might now consider the potential significance for a rehearing—and re-experiencing—of Debussy's mature piano music of the occasional explicit exhortations, in Mallarmé's criticism, to read poetry *like pieces at the piano* (see e.g. Mallarmé, 1981, p. 26; Mallarmé, 1945, pp. 362, 380, 491). Pianism becomes an ideal act of reading because the pianist, simultaneously *reader*, *hearer* and (in some small way) *dancer*, is able, in deciphering the musical score whose arcane mysteries Mallarmé so envied, to project evocative sonorous 'gauzes' from the keyboard 'stage' through the choreography of hands and fingers. But in entering the choreography of *Voiles* as dancer-reader, we must not forget the historical self-consciousness with which the poet confronted the illusory promises of a complete, material-ideal synthesis in the 'symbol'—even as he tried, again and again, to enact through poetic form the idealized moment of physical plenitude. In other words, as we trace the *enchainement* of gesture along this field of black and white keys (*touches*), the challenge is to try and sense the interplay, at every step, between brute, sensate presence and the fleeting illusions of expressive promise.

Historical frames

The historical self-consciousness about lost or fading 'expressive promise' Mallarmé exemplified in his faun poem arguably became one of his most valuable and lasting legacies to Debussy. The faun *Prélude*, I have argued, articulated its elegiac pastoral poetics through a studied revoicing of Berliozian orchestral rhetoric and an ironic redeployment of Wagnerian harmony (Code, 2001). As a final ingredient for this Mallarméan interpretation of *Voiles*, we need at least

a rough sense of the somewhat different historical perspective that might be said to inform the piano music of more than a decade later.

For a start, it is possible to suggest (perhaps counterintuitively) that the sense of the historically mediated nature of musical materials could have become, if anything, even more intimate and insistent once Debussy turned his attention from the orchestra to the keyboard. Now the very 'stage' of encounter—the characteristic array of black and white keys—confronts the composer with a reified, material and technological trace of the history of equal-tempered diatonicism. At least one of Debussy's contemporaries argued that that this material field had itself become the primary locus of an ongoing interplay between the material and the conceptual in the evolution of musical language. The 1900 article 'À propos le monument de Chopin' by Paul Dukás, which begins by suggesting that the distinctive 'harmonic mobility' of contemporary music 'is inherent to the style of keyboard instruments', proceeds to suggest that the influence of Chopin's distinctive manner of compositional-pianistic 'utterance' profoundly informed musical language in all media:

It is in the orchestral works of Liszt, particularly the earliest, that the handling [*maniement*] of harmony, as Chopin conceived of it, appeared, for the first time, not just as a servile copy, but as the principle of an even freer mode of expression and of a progressive emancipation from the habits and customs of the tradition of the schools [...] The influence of Chopin was extended by Liszt as far as Wagner himself. Certain pages of the second act of *Tristan und Isolde* seem to have sprung directly from the *Nocturnes* or the *Preludes* of Chopin. Similarly, [...] the musicians most closely connected to Liszt—for example, the majority of composers of the new Russian school—are also those whose turn of thought and feel for harmony recall Chopin all the more. (Dukas, 1900, p. 516)

No doubt Dukas underplays the ability of composers to conceive and hear independently of instrumental idiom. But the importance he grants to the circulation between the 'feel for harmony' and the compositional 'turn of thought', in the creative lineage extending from Chopin through all of the most significant influences on Debussy, can serve as a preliminary stimulus to reconceive the historical 'perspective' encapsulated in his piano music more richly than in purely abstract, syntactical terms.

In the attempt to trace such perspective with maximal historical sensitivity, I have found it useful to borrow, and refine, a more recent framing of the central terms at issue. In a 1989 article on Debussy's prelude *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* scholar-pianist Michelle Biget sums up her own attempt at a gesturally based analysis with the help of the post-Derridean musings on 'technics' by the literary theorist Bernard Stiegler. In a lapidary formulation, Biget suggests that in Debussy's pianism 'there is no conflict between *logos* and *techné*' (Biget, 1989, p. 91; see also Stiegler, 1998, p. 193). But while this assertion seems a reasonably appropriate distillation of Dukas's point about Chopin and his most immediate heirs, its accuracy for Debussy's later engagement with pianistic history depends, I think, on a significant qualification. However unpredictable Chopin's *techné* and harmonic idiom may have been, both

ultimately remained bounded by the same *logos* (the 'language' of transposable diatonicism) that the keyboard itself arose—by means of significant modifications over time—to serve. But when Debussy composes for piano in the whole-tone scale (for example), he is, in effect, deploying an alien conceptual scheme against a technology designed for other purposes. The countless examples of 'black-key' orientation in Chopin (to take a different, equally relevant instance) are all enfolded within a diatonic envelope of coherence; Debussy's bald presentation of black-key pentatonic in such works as *Voiles*, by contrast, releases an incidental property of the diatonic keyboard into material and conceptual self-sufficiency.

For Debussy, in short, we might better ask of each of his compositions how it negotiates the various degrees of conflict or collusion between *logos* and *techné* that become possible as the circulation between abstract ideals of musical coherence and physical results of instrumental 'handling' drift free from the sustaining logic of common-practice harmony. The most immediate historical context that must inform the pursuit of such a question through any particular one of his works, finally, is the developing Debussyan pianistic *œuvre* itself. Although some celebrate the last work of the '90s, *Pour le piano* (published 1901), I am inclined to accept Ravel's polite insistence (in a 1906 letter to the critic Pierre Lalo) that Debussy's full attainment of a mature pianistic voice only took place in the 1903 *Estampes*, after the appearance of his own *Jeux d'eau* (Ravel, 1989, p. 83).⁵

Quibbles over the precise debt to Ravel aside, it is enough for now to note Debussy's telling shift from more abstract 'genre' designations (in the *Suite Bergamasque* and *Pour le piano*) to an explicitly evocative stance, for a triptych marked geographically as two 'exotic' pieces (*Pagodes*, *Soirée dans Grenade*) followed by one 'domestic' (*Jardins sous la pluie*). There can be no doubt that the poetic titles relate directly to the compositional language: *Pagodes*, for one, has long been recognized as Debussy's most blatant evocation of the gamelan (see [Example 1](#) (a), the opening pentatonic tune of *Pagodes*, and (b), its luxurious climactic swirls on the black keys).⁶ In his book on Debussy's piano music, Paul Roberts notes that while Debussy would never repeat such 'pastiche orientalism', the 'memory of the gamelan' would nonetheless 'remain with him at the profoundest level' (Roberts, 1996). It will be worth bearing this simple proposal in mind when we turn to *Voiles*.

As concerns the syntax—the *logos*—that sustains such pianistic indulgence, *Pagodes* is exemplary of the first stage of a trend that would continue through the next two or three piano collections. To put it simply, the piece's syntax hovers between two modal/tonal environments,

5 Ravel claimed to admire *Pour le piano* 'passionately'—and indeed orchestrated the *Sarabande*—but insisted the suite contained nothing very new 'from a purely pianistic point of view' ('au point de vue purement pianistique', emphasis original).

6 The 'exoticism' was recognized as both a material and a conceptual dimension of the piece: as Louis Laloy put it, 'the glissandi on black keys reflect the liquid sonority of a Far-Eastern orchestra' (trans. in Priest, 1999, p. 227). (There are actually no 'glissandi' in *Pagodes*, but the basic point is apt).

B major and g# minor, each of which contains all of the black keys. We might say in a preliminary sense that the modal environments with this basic physical property appealed to Debussy as contexts in which *logos* and *techné* can operate, on the whole, in a comfortable marriage or interlock.

After the *Estampes*, the central pianistic oeuvre appeared between about 1905 and 1915; a rough sense of the shift between the two books of preludes, 1910 and 1913, will suffice. In the first book, which includes *Voiles*, the many tactilely conceived passages remain grounded in relatively clear (if generally two-sided) modal or tonal fields. The most obvious instance, *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (see [Example 2\(a\)](#)) has been much celebrated both as a 'black-key' piece and an evocation of idealized innocence; a passage from *La sérénade interrompue* ([Example 2\(b\)](#)) can exemplify a somewhat more choreographic approach to the keyboard, in its 'black-white' mimesis of guitar strumming; *Les collines d'Anacapri*, for one further example, revisits both the g#-minor/ B major ambivalence of *Pagodes* and its general exoticist—in this case sunny and Neapolitan—idealism ([Example 2\(c\)](#)). All three preludes can be taken as exemplary of the interplay of syntax and technique in the first book as a whole: their various idyllic shades of exoticism and folkloricism are presented in the grammatical context of ambiguous modal regimes oriented around the black keys: Eb minor/Gb major; F Phrygian/ Bb Aeolian; B major/g# minor.

In the second book of preludes, by contrast, what Jankélévitch aptly termed an 'irrational' dissonant regime often results from a seemingly more arbitrary choreography of left hand on white keys against right on black (Jankélévitch, 1949, p. 156). Even a cursory encounter with the three most obvious examples—*Brouillards*, *Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses*, and *Feux d'artifice* ([Examples 3\(a\)](#), (b) and (c))—clearly shows the irrationality that results from the shift towards a more purely physical conception.⁷ Perhaps due to the challenge such passages pose to 'safe and conventional' notions of musical coherence (Roberts, 1996, p. 184), the reception of the second book of preludes has been more ambivalent than the first. For one early example, the eminent Italian musicologist Guido Gatti stated his discomfiture plainly in a significant 1921 article:

When he reached his thirteenth *Prélude*, Debussy's soul appears to have turned away—more or less—from any human subject: as though his soul no longer vibrated save in response to the refinements and delicacies of artifice ... We have the impression of something faded, spoiled by caresses, even confused. Hence the character of his emotion, which, if it be not superficial, is at any rate peripheral, and in a measure no more than epidermic, skin-deep. (Gatti, 1921, pp. 444-45)

⁷ To be sure, a 'rational' explanation can occasionally be developed, with reference (for example) to the octatonic scale. But my sense is that octatonicism can often serve as a *post hoc* justification for conceptions more fundamentally pianistic in origin. The question as to the precise balance between these two possible bases is precisely the one on which the finest historical understanding can be said to hinge.

We might follow Gatti just so far as to entertain the possibility that Debussy, having achieved an exemplary interdependence of *logos* and *techné* in several piano sets, ultimately courted a collapse of expression into purely solipsistic, 'epidermic' sensation. But Gatti's negative assessment demands qualification. He comes closer to the appropriate, ambivalent tone himself when he suggests later that Debussy's 'savourous, regenerated pianistic technic' eventually, in the second book of preludes, came to strain its own idiomatic security to the extent that the performer feels Debussy is 'groping for what he is in search of [rather] than finding it'. (p. 445)

From a more sympathetic view, the sense of groping 'search' can be understood, for some works at least, as programmatic—that is, as exemplary of a composed confrontation with the questions thrown up by this new stage in the historical circulation between musical 'thought' and instrumental 'handling'. It is in this light that we can best appreciate the close echo, in Gatti's accusation, of the words with which Debussy himself flippantly ended the preface he included in his last major pianistic collection, the 1915 *Études*:

Our old Masters—I mean to say 'our' admirable clavecinistes—never indicated fingerings, relying, no doubt, on the ingenuity of their contemporaries. To doubt that of the modern virtuosos would be unseemly. The absence of fingering is an excellent exercise, suppresses the spirit of contradiction that pushes us to prefer not to use the author's indicated fingering, and verifies those eternal words: 'One is never better served than by oneself.'

Let us search for our fingerings! (Debussy, 1991a, p. 2, emphasis added).

This last exhortation—'Cherchons nos doigts!'—can be read as an ironic trace of the history of pianistic touch that underlies much of the composer's output for piano. Attempting such a 'search' through *Voiles*, now, we can try to gain a precise sense of its place in this history of touch, language, and evocation.

Analysis

Although some of the points in the analysis of *Voiles* that follows can be understood with reference to the score given complete as [Example 4](#), I also include a set of film clips of performing hands, as an illustrative guide to my tactile and gestural observations. Though obviously an imperfect—because purely visual—simulacrum of embodied experience, the film might at least serve to direct the attention of other performer-interpreters to their own 'drastic' experiences [[OPEN VIDEO](#)].

The quasi-improvisatory arabesque in thirds that launches this prelude links it to a larger set of 'wind arabesque' works including the faun *Prélude*; *The Little Shepherd*; the Verlaine song 'Le Faune'; the Louÿs song 'La flûte de Pan'; and the first orchestral *Nocturne*, 'Nuages', with its

haunting *cor anglais* solo. This whole family is arguably shaded with the 'pastoral' topicality most fundamentally characterized by a search for lost purity or immediacy. In the case of *Voiles*, the sense of lack, or search, is compounded by the doubling of the line. For Debussy in 1910, a major third is not an (0,4) pitch set, but rather the most charged vestigial shard of the whole tradition of tertial harmony. Indeed, the triadic orientation of much of the material in *Voiles* only emphasizes the loss of the syntactical security once provided by triadic tonality.

'Taking the stage' to realize the opening arabesque physically, we immediately encounter an alternative, material and tactile grounds of coherence (see the first clip). In a wide view (at the middle-ground, so to speak) the vestigial reminiscence of antecedent-consequent logic in the first two phraselets is articulated by a contrast in sensation: the first gesture moves to the black-note third F#-Bb, the second drifts down to the white C and E. But this is only the most obvious hinge of a more thoroughgoing tactile orientation. The arabesque is, in fact, deployed on a materially symmetrical whole-tone octave, two black keys on either side (Ab and Bb below; F# and G# above) of three white (C-D-E). Topography here substitutes for tonal logic.

No doubt there are a few possible results of a 'search for fingerings' to realize the arabesque as written. I have found one in particular, [5/4-5/3-4/2-3/1-2/1], most intriguing as a point of departure for the choreography, for in bringing the seven-note whole-tone octave under the hand as symmetrically as the five fingers will allow, it gives palpable focus to the awkward relationship between the dancing hand and this new material-historical stage. Here, of course, we immediately confront the threat of solipsism: given that Debussy's *Etudes* preface implicitly acknowledges the open-endedness of any 'search for fingerings', it is hard to assess the relevance of any individual realization to historical understanding more generally construed.

It is impossible to address this problem decisively here, beyond noting that every analytical method, including the most 'scientific', proceeds by selection. The important question, it seems to me (if we are even to entertain the possibility of a 'drastic' mode of interpretation alongside more traditional scholarly approaches) is whether or not the quasi-'seven finger' reading of the opening arabesque can serve an account of the piece along the lines of Biget's resonant suggestion:

The deployment [*aménagement*] within the pianistic given counts at least as much as the identification of the 'harmonic' phenomenon. Beyond just assigning a label to the elements of the discourse, it is crucial to seize upon their situation relative to the instrumental journey. (Biget, 1989, p. 86)

Though other pianists' 'instrumental journeys', based on different choices of fingerings, will undoubtedly open different avenues of understanding, no doubt the reasonably limited range of options for physical realization of the notated sounds guarantee some possibility of fruitful interpretive dialogue.

Beneath the white third, a bass Bb enters (bar 5), followed by an octave-doubled tune (bar 6). The theoretical circumlocutions occasionally offered to explain the Bb syntactically as a true 'root' (see for example Whittall, 1975, p. 161) remain, I think, unconvincing. Better, at least at first, to think of it spatially, as a ground or gravitational *point de repère* for the choreography. Whether or not such a pitch-ground can remain syntactically neutral, or how it might take on 'logical' inflection as a true 'fundamental bass', are questions to carry through the piece. Here, the Bb states the first rhythmic stage of an ostinato that will, in the principal mechanism of large-scale coherence, rise and accelerate incrementally through the piece's sub-sections (see the second clip).

The 'arc tune', the second main thematic idea, whose drift through the span from Ab to E is not as palpably keyboard-derived as the opening arabesque, might offer a reminder that any particular analytical focus has its limits. Some musical ideas may indeed be more fundamentally conceptual than tactile. But this is not to say that the tune falls away as a pure sonorous object or pitch-cipher. Some slight interest can be gleaned from the seemingly arbitrary hand-sharing Debussy notates for its incipit and first statement: different choreographic oddities, we will find, also inflect the tune's two subsequent recurrences. But it is perhaps more fruitful to consider the *shape* of this tune through the historical self-consciousness previously imputed to the opening arabesque. If the improvisatory chain of thirds evoked pastoral winds, this octave-doubled line, we might say, traces an abstraction of a deeper musical archetype. To the faint topicality of the opening, the tune adds a highly attenuated version of the classic arc of lyricism, temporally adrift against the ostinato 'floor' and the regulating meter. In this sense, it stands for a larger perspective on lost expressive fictions, extending back through the various self-consciously belated treatments of melodic lyricism in such works as *Nuages*, the faun *Prélude*, and the *Quatuor à cordes* (see Code, 2007).

The remainder of the opening paragraph, with its re-tracing of the opening arabesque, has little to add to the tactile observations of the first appearance—though it is worth noting one physical detail about the return of the incipit of the arc tune as slightly denatured (i.e. augmented) triads beneath the arabesque (bar 15). While the two musical shapes occupy relatively distinct registers, their contrary 'instrumental journeys' result in a couple of brief overlaps (bars 15 and 17; 1'03" and 1'08"). The notional (and notational) separation of layers is belied by collisions on two shared pitches.

The sensation of such fictive part-writing can offer something to interpretation. At the very least, the disconnect between touch and sound-idea thematizes the illusory, deceptive relationship between the dance of fingers and the layers of sonorous 'gauze' it throws forth. Such a moment could well serve to remind us of the tangled interrelationship, over the development of Debussy's pianistic *œuvre*, between the idiomatic possibilities of the instrument itself, and its potential to operate suggestively as an imaginative transcription of the orchestral soundworld in which he first established his mature compositional voice. Extravagant or not, the image of Loïe Fuller, capturing and transmitting orchestral sounds in her swirling veils, might well stand as a fertile figure for the relation brought faintly into focus by these tiny tactile collisions—

the relation, that is, between the material-technical idiom of pure pianistic activity and the memory-saturated sounds this activity throws forth.

In the second large paragraph (starting bar 22) tactile orientation significantly strengthens. As the Bb expands to become a rhythmic pedal, and the ostinato element accelerates and rises one increment (from crotchets and quavers to dotted quavers and semiquavers; from bass to middle voice), a turn on the three black keys common to the whole-tone and pentatonic fields palpably anticipates the central section (bars 22–23; see the third clip, from 1'33"). Less obviously, the turn sets up a deepening of historical perspective. Di Benedetto is not the only analyst to reject hasty generalizations about Debussy's 'anti-contrapuntal' inclinations. But all too often, critics offer in place only ill-defined notions of *textural* and *registral* 'counterpoint'—that is, juxtapositions of layers; 'articulation of [distinct] musical lines'; 'independently evolved and developed horizontal levels' (see for example DeLone, 1997, p. 53; Pasler, 1999, p. 228; Schmitz, 1950, p. 18). This loose, textural sense of 'counterpoint', undoubtedly central to Debussy's style, should not be allowed to obscure the precise, historically self-conscious role he occasionally gives to more traditional contrapuntal aspects of local voice-leading.

Here, the black-key turn introduces an instance of—or a reference to—the strongest convention of traditional part-writing: two-voice contrary motion (bar 23; 1'38"). In the whole-tone context, such a texture seems a particularly freighted attempt to assert a syntactical security that is, in the absence of semitones, impossible. Even more clearly than the opening arabesque, this denatured counterpoint seems to seek material compensation for logical frailty: the new registration of the ostinato requires that the four fingers of the right hand split, to move from white-key sixth to black third, as if gripping a material substitute for the absent security of diatonic contrapuntal syntax. Even when the hand dances free from such material counterpoint, it resumes exploring symmetrical triadic shapes (the original G#-C-E-G#, along with another, Bb-D-F#) before falling away, through the black-key third, onto another inconclusive 'cadence' (bar 27).

In the next passage, a larger-scale choreography comes into play. After a new continuation from the turn (b. 29), the two hands cross, briefly, giving precise tactile focus, again, to the distinctive material aspects of this whole-tone field. As can be seen in the film (2'07"–2'08"), the left hand, above, fleetingly touches the three white keys as the right, below, turns on the three black. The turn, as has been noted, clearly anticipates the central section; it is a 'motive' in the traditional sense as well as a recurring tactile unit. At a purely gestural level, the hand-crossing, too, anticipates the piece's climax, which will feature a far more emphatic and abandoned dance of hand over hand. In its immediate context, this initial hand-crossing shifts the tactile encounter to a treble intensification of the prior contrapuntal 'sight into' tonal history (bar 31; 2'11"–2'14"). In this variant of the earlier contrary motion, the only intrusion of chromaticism in the piece hints, through its quick passing notes (G§ below, Db above), at the strongest of all moves in two-part counterpoint, diminished fifth to major third—again splitting the hand as if in physical intensification of the attempt to secure the third by breaking free of syntactical ambiguity.

Perhaps the emergence of the third from this spasmodic flicker of chromatic voice-leading (bar 32) represents a triumph; the cessation of the Bb pedal for two measures might reinforce such a reading. But the Ab-C third is never allowed to ring free. It immediately becomes entangled in the highest version of the ostinato (bar 33). Here, the coiling white-key semiquavers call up a literal sense of white 'veils'. However crude such a material-metaphorical equivalence might seem, it has strong precedent in Debussy's 'pianistic imagination'. An obvious point of reference is the notion of white-key / black-key (C major / F# major) 'tonalities of darkness and light' in *Pelléas* (see Smith, 1989); for another purely instrumental example, recall the pervasive 'white-note' harmonies in the outer sections of *Nuages*.⁸ At any rate, when the arc tune returns (clip 5), as a single line within the right hand doubled by left-hand chords (again, a textural configuration that anticipates one element of the climax), this naïve notion of white-note 'veiling' is deepened by another instance of the more subtle sense of a technical-substantive barrier. Again, fleeting collisions occur in the part-writing (bars 34-35; 2'28" and 2'30"), hinting once more that the distantiating of transcription intervenes between notated technical activity and the sound-world it purports to create.

With a brief infusion of dynamics, momentum, and textural cohesion, the pedal Bb now finally attains clearer syntactical implication, becoming the 'root' of a 'whole-tone dominant seventh' (Bb-D-F#-Ab) to set up the move to the pentatonic section, whose clearest tonal inflection is eb minor (bars 38-41; clip 6, from 2'40"). Starting from the black-key turn, the pivot between the two fields, a pair of harp-like sweeps choreographed for swiftly overleaping hands sets up the chordal surge to the climax, marked 'Emporté', swept away. The brief, ringing high point is no sooner attained than relinquished. The hands retreat reluctantly to a muted, repetitive afterglow (bars 44-47), in which black-key contrary-motion counterpoint, fifth to minor third, is topped by a pair of octave-doubled melodic phrases that utter the piece's most plangent trace of Romantic vocal inflection.

The simplest interpretation of this crux might note that as 'musical thought' the harp sweeps are utterly vacuous: naked affirmation of gesture on the keyboard, *techné* freed from *logos*. The five-note scale, unlike the whole-tone scale, falls easily beneath the hands; the 1+3+1 black-key symmetry of each seventh-span comes as close as is possible, on this technology, to a material correlate of the hands' own fingers. In this affirmation of a simpler scale, the material and the physical conjoin in a blithe ten-fingered dance that rebuts the tactile complexity of the only prior hand-crossing.

8 As possible 'material-poetic' substrates for the claim in the original program note (often attributed to Debussy) that *Nuages* 'renders the immutable aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds, fading away in grey tones lightly tinged with white' (see Vallas, 1973, p. 112) note, for example the hovering G dominant-major-ninth 'chord-cloud', bars 21-28; and the 'fade to white' over a B-A-G-F bass just prior to the end of the first section, bars 51-6. Clearly, the studied contrast between this white-note syntax and the black-key pentatony of the middle section is one main determinant of this piece's pitch structure.

The chordal rise is obviously more complicated. With its textural and rhythmic interlock of hands, semiquavers within and beneath demisemiquavers, it recalls the similar interlock, one increment slower in rhythm, in the last statement of the arc tune (compare bars 43-44, 3'06"-3'07" with bars 33-35, from 2'24"). But now, the mesh of collisions that 'veiled' that tune receives an answer in ecstatic, shared, purely pianistic transport. Arriving on a ringing quartal chord, free of triadic traces, and free of the pedal Bb, we might now sense a triumphantly distilled, gesturally liberated, octave-doubled and sonorously radiant affirmation of the 'Chinese scale' that had so clearly offered an exotic vision in *Pagodes*. This climax, in other words, seems, to realize again the promise such exotic materials held for the fin de siècle, of renewed expressive immediacy in the face of exhausted Western cliché. We might say that through our own dance of hands and fingers, we have sailed, imaginatively, to dreamed-of lands—or, more pruriently, we have parted the veils to reveal, and touch, the desired substance beneath. The diminuendo that follows, with its answering stasis, and minor-mode inflections, might be simply explained as the usual melancholy aftermath to intense pleasure.

Given the extreme brevity of this gestural irruption into this historically self-conscious choreography, however, such a crude narrative reading seems inadequate. As concerns black-key pleasures, the counter-example of *Pagodes*—itself, now, a 'profound memory' (recalling Roberts's words)—demands more careful consideration. In 1903, it seems, black-key figuration, partly released from harmonic logic, was newly available for recursive tactile indulgence. (Even further back, in 1899, black-key pentatony was available for expansive reverie, deepened by the delicate flute and harp timbre at the heart of *Nuages*). In 1910, the player of *Voiles* cannot languish in the dream of exotic escape with the same naiveté. Here, by regressing to a hollow pentatonic reminder of lost contrapuntal security, and breathing a nostalgic vocal inflection, the piece invites a tinge of doubt about what such naked union of *techné* and technology has accomplished. Might the brief attainment of freedom from syntactical constraint promise only private, 'epidermic' pleasures (to recall Gatti's response to the second book of preludes), empty of expressive potential?

For a helpful comparison, consider a more distant precursor than *Pagodes* or *Nuages*. Chopin's iconic *Nocturne op. 27 no. 2* in Db major—the central reference, arguably, for the nostalgic lyricism at the heart of Debussy's faun *Prélude*—also, in its last rhetorical flourish (see [Example 5](#), bar 60), gives the performer an indulgent *maniement* of the same black-key seventh interval, simpler in its symmetrical array (perfect fourths above and below Ab). Here too, as Biget might say, the hand finds a gratifying *aménagement* in the 'pianistic given'. But this earlier unmeasured flourish of pianistic *techné*, unlike Debussy's, remains gloriously affirmative of the tonal *logos*: the rhetorical force of the 4-3 suspension, syntactical substrate and rational guarantor of the material symmetry, is heightened by the final, strong inflection towards the 'dominant 13th' F natural (bar 61).⁹ It is this strength of syntactical and expressive context whose very absence

9 Of course, the suspended Db does not actually resolve immediately in the right hand, but a more complete analysis of Chopin's middleground voice-leading is not germane to the current argument.

from Debussy's later sweeps that is, arguably, acknowledged by the subsequent muted shadow of lost contrapuntal conventions, where the contrary motion from hollow fifths (Ab-Db) to bare minor thirds (Eb-Gb) feels—considering middle register alone—like a studied incompleteness, precisely at the only point in the piece where the hand could have been given a full 'tonal' triad.

For E. Robert Schmitz, the 'ornamental glissando' figures that 're-establish the whole-tone scale' in bars 48-49 (Schmitz, 1950, p. 135) operate as a transition from the pentatonic section, precisely because they each use only five notes of the six-note scale (clip 7, from 3"41"). But these '5 finger + 5 finger' selections of the whole-tone field can also be felt as something of a rebuttal to, or erasure of, the simpler sensations of the untransposable and symmetrical '5+5' choreography on the black keys. The pianistic equivalent of 'harp sweep', so compelling in the climax, here is blocked, unsettled, by the more complicated tactile array, whose transposition and transformation (three black keys plus two white becomes two black plus three white) palpably thematizes the arbitrary relation between syntax and material within the whole-tone environment.

In the last statement of the arc tune (bars 50-54), this abstracted vestige of lyricism might seem, from the score alone, to attain an apotheosis, stated with its greatest clarity atop the texture. But a physical realization proves more complicated. I am not sure there is a single, *Werktreue* realization of the notated texture: to play the middle-register ripples as written, with the left hand alone, is to leave unexplained the three upward curving slurs extending through the measures 50, 51 and 52. It is possible to treat these slurs as *choreographic* notations, showing the silent path of the left hand as it rises to fill in alternate notes of the melody, and breaking this last melodic arc with a recurrence of an important 'gestural motive', the crossing of hands (see clip from 3"49"). Such a reading may seem absurdly contorted—but I think it is worth experimenting with the ways such strain in performative interpretation can literally work hand in hand with critical interpretation. However it is played, when compared to the co-operative dance of hands at the climax, any realization of this more complex textural array arguably carries an air of refutation similar to that borne by the five-fingered whole-tone 'glissandi' with respect to their pentatonic precursors.¹⁰

Along the same lines, the ensuing, registrally vagrant *enchainement* of chords in sixths, seconds, fourths and sevenths (bars 44 and 46; from 4'03") places the hands at an unprecedented tactile remove from the vestigial triadic shapes that have predominated—and that carried particular nostalgic weight in the afterglow to the climax. Cast adrift from any trace of contrapuntal cohesion, this thickened harmonic veil effects a further retreat from history. When

10 I think Debussy 'sets up' this choreographic realization through his initial presentation of the 'glissandi' in bars 48-49. However one reads the implied hand distribution here, it seems perverse to play the glissandi, in isolation, with a single hand. A 'hand-alternation' is established before the tune enters; we are, in effect, invited to continue this choreography through the presentation of the tune.

the arabesque returns amidst this denser gauze, to grasp again the uncomfortable seven-note black-and-white scale, and then to glide through expanded 'glissandi' onto the white third for the last time, we are inevitably reminded, by negation, of the opposite sensations we held briefly at the piece's crux.

Laloy's History, Mallarmé's Suspense, Debussy's Modernism

The same year Debussy completed his first book of *Préludes*, his friend and biographer Louis Laloy published an article on 'Claude Debussy and Debussysme' (see Priest, 1999, pp. 89-91). Proposing that the whole history of Western musical language is driven by a 'fear of anything that escapes reason', Laloy proceeded to trace a capsule history of musical language in terms of the defence against this fear. In a first displacement of individuated 'sensation' by classificatory 'notion', as he puts it, the unique, untransposable modes of the Greeks were simplified in Gregorian chant to several 'cuts' of a single intervallic sequence. The process of abstraction continued with the reduction of Medieval modality to the major/ minor system—in which the minor, for Laloy, is really only 'an accidental alteration of the major' (pp. 89-90). But salvation from the descent into arid rationalism was in store: Debussy appears, at the last stage of this account, as the composer who achieves 'deliverance' for music from all rational constraint and writes 'music which obeys no precept, only the laws of sensation' (pp. 90-91).

It is tempting to suggest that the 'sensation' at the climactic point in *Voiles* perfectly fits this idealized account of Debussy-as-saviour. The pentatonic revelation emerges, we might say, as a brief, triumphant recovery of the modal particularity Laloy mourns as lost, over intervening centuries, to accreted defences of reason against its opposite. But what is missing from Laloy's partisan perspective is any sense of the agonistic self-consciousness with which such a gesture now takes its place, framed within a whole-tone field from which all modal specificity has been even more decisively lost than it was from generalized diatonicism. In fact, Laloy's review, around the same time, of Debussy's orchestral *Images*, effectively contradicts his article's one-sided affirmation of 'sensation':

The two works, with different characters and proportions, achieve the union of sentiment and sensation which Claude Debussy has always sought, which he alone can give us, and which he has succeeded today in putting in more clear-cut form than ever. (Priest, 1999, p. 221)

Here, Laloy comes closer to recognizing what was compositionally at stake in this moment. Indeed he goes on to assert piously that 'music which is all about sentiment is abstract; music which is all about sensation has no continuation' (p. 221). With less reflexive confidence in Debussy's unqualified 'victory', we can see this unresolved double threat—of excessive conceptual abstraction on the one hand, and of purely sensuous (and thus historically inert) confrontation with musical materials on the other—as encapsulated in the juxtaposition of pianistic gestures and nostalgic counterpoint across the heart of *Voiles*.

It is on this point that reference to Debussy's 'Mallarméan sensibility' can usefully supplement any purely style-historical interpretation of his pianistic *œuvre*. One particularly acute framing of the agonistic inflection I have sensed in the course of the material-conceptual 'dance' through *Voiles* can be found in the postlude Mallarmé later added to his essay on Loïe Fuller. He quoted, with emphasis, a 'luminous' passage in another critic's response to a nude statue of a *danseuse*, which captured, he found, 'the proper concern of ballerinas for all time'. According to Georges Rodenbach, this was: 'to complicate with all sorts of vaporous attire the sorcery of dances, in which their bodies appear only as the rhythm on which all depends but which all conspires to hide' (Mallarmé, 1945, pp. 311-12).¹¹ In response to Rodenbach, Mallarmé was inspired to give his own most efficient statement about the near-invisible 'nudity' at the physical core of Loïe Fuller's dance:

An armature, which is not of any particular woman, of unstable locale, through the veil of generality, attracts onto some revealed fragment of the form and there drinks the flash of light that deifies it; or, exhales, in return, this ecstasy, through the undulation of the floating, palpitating, dishevelled tissues. Yes, this is the endless suspense of Dance: the contradictory dread, or desire, to see too much or not enough, which demands a transparent continuation. (p. 311, my emphasis)

This twisting prose comes close to the perfect description, from this pianist's perspective at least, of the interrogatory poise of the climactic *crux* in *Voiles*.

'Endless suspense'; 'contradictory dread or desire to see too much or not enough': for the 'reader' of the dancing body, lack of erotic specification might disappoint the searching gaze—but excessive clarity, total revelation, would be a failure of the idealistic-materialistic 'suspense' that remained so central to Mallarmé's poetic vision. For the dancer-performer of *Voiles*, the searching fingers may indeed attain a marriage of sensation and substance that pierces the 'veil of generality' to recover a lost, untransposable modal specificity (and suggest at the same time—in a classic *fin-de-siècle* equivalence—a fulfilment of exotic fantasy).¹² But in falling away to a muted, eviscerated evocation of history—a moment of 'groping for syntax and not finding it', we might say with Gatti—the piece turns back on the fleeting marriage of five (plus five) fingers with five (plus five) black keys, as if with the question: 'too much, or not enough?'

11 The postlude is separated from the Fuller essay by another essay, 'Mimiques', in the *Oeuvres complètes*, but it followed directly in the 1897 Fasquelle edition of *Divagations*.

12 In 'Claude Debussy et Debussysme', Laloy exemplifies the commonplace slippage between exoticist dreams of renewal and antiquarian dreams of recovery. His capsule history of postlapsarian music in the 'rational' West follows this Romanticized claim: 'A Chinese who is transported simply by the sound of singing stones or bells, a Hindu plucking the strings of his bamboo lute deliberately one after the other, a Senegalese who spends hours at a time caressing a little harp which is so soft that only he can hear it, all are Impressionists and even Symbolists without knowing it: they hear, they are moved, they dream.' (Priest, 1999, p. 89)

To discern such a question at the crux of this iconic little piece can help to draw it into line with the best recent interpretations of literary Symbolism. As Richard Cándida Smith puts it in the course of a book that champions a more socially grounded understanding of Mallarmé, ‘the embedding of content, that is, of idea, into the physical experience of the medium was central to what made symbolist activity “experimental”’ (Smith, 1999, p. 22). In a much wider sense, it could be that the (inevitably uneasy) attempt to draw the sensations of performative *techné* into analysis alongside the ratiocinations of theoretical *logos* is the best way to revivify our sense of Debussy’s engagement with the most profound concerns of contemporaneous modernism. By this I mean such concerns as those Jim Samson indicates telegraphically near the end of a recent essay on music analysis, when he describes the ‘crisis in bourgeois culture at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ as one ‘variously characterized as an epochal change of discourse (Reiss), a broken contract between word and world (Steiner), and a deconstruction of the boundary between *sensus* and *ratio* (Derrida)’ (Samson, 1999, p. 51). It is this last reference that is most resonant here, in light of Biget’s different wording for the same sort of dialectic. And of course, in the attempt to diagnose modernism in such terms—matter and idea, *sensus* and *ratio*, *techné* and *logos*—many more names could be added to Samson’s few.¹³ But in the face of all temptation to literary-theoretical generality, I would insist that the only way the historical operation of such ancient metaphysical oppositions can be brought to life through criticism is through continuing attempts to illuminate precisely how this dialectic is confronted through the formal processes of particular works.

Framed within a choreographed search for lost syntactical security and expressive rhetoric, the black-key quartal chord at the peak of *Voiles* hovers briefly on a pivotal moment: between the pianistic indulgences of the 1903 *Estampes* and the epidermic oddities of the 1915 *Etudes*; even, at a stretch, between what Biget characterizes as the more ‘enunciatory’ pianism of Chopin or Liszt and the more irreducibly physical pianistic choreographies of Kagel or Ligeti. This is not to claim that everything before *Voiles* differs from everything after: Debussy’s *oeuvre* traces widening circles, rather than any straightforward teleology, in its explorations of syntax and material.¹⁴ He himself, finally, may have given us some hints as to how best to interpret the issues underlying this circulation. In a 1901 review of Dukas’s piano sonata, he wrote:

True music lovers rarely visit fairground booths; they have their simple piano, and passionately return to certain pages; this is just as sure to intoxicate as the ‘true, powerful and subtle opium’; and creates pleasurable moments in a way that is much less debilitating.

13 Thus, for another framing of the same dialectic, cultural historian Peter Por argues that the ‘general constellation of European thinking’ at the fin de siècle evinced a ‘recognition of the impossibility of any unity between *poiesis* and *techné*, idea and matter.’ (Por, 1989, p. 101)

14 In spite of his own ambivalent gestures towards periodization, Gatti makes this point well when he suggests that ‘the personality of Debussy is one of those which unfolded in concentric circles, and indeed, one may say that nothing vitally necessary had been forgotten on the road of its unfolding.’ (Gatti, 1920, p. 422)

Paul Dukas seems to have thought of this sort of person when he wrote his sonata: the hermetic quality of the emotion to which it gives expression and the rigorous connection in the progression of its ideas strongly demand an intimate, profound communion with the work. (Debussy, 1988, p. 30)

For a start, this paragraph can usefully serve to qualify the scepticism Abbate turns on the idea that complex acts of 'gnosis' might take place in the fleeting and 'drastic' experience of real-time performance. For many of us, 'performance' is, in point of fact, private *practice* for a good deal of the time (whether or not we eventually take the stage). Such practice, less time-bound than any recital, makes possible countless 'passionate' repetitions, as Debussy suggests, of those 'pages' and 'pleasurable moments' that, in offering distinct physical sensations, also prove most inexhaustibly fertile with interpretive questions.

It might also be said that this review of Dukas obliquely anticipates the incremental broadening of Debussy's own pianistic writing, from its origins in music whose 'fairground' appeal, in marrying *logos* and *techne*, gloriously realizes collective fantasies, to those later explorations perhaps fully understandable only through the intimate epidermic experience of 'true music lovers'. One ramification of such an account of Debussy's development is that the risk of solipsism inevitable to any choreographic reading becomes essential to an account of this music's historical stance. Solipsism—like historical self-consciousness itself, and the fantasy of expressive plenitude—is, in this view, one of the central terms at issue in *Voiles*. None of these terms will ever be fully accessible to systematic analysis. But while it is thus too much to hope that this interpretive experiment will lead others to experience, across the climax of *Voiles*, exactly the same exquisitely Mallarméan suspension between ecstasy and mourning, it might at least inspire some to try and *sense* afresh how the various possible choreographies summoned by these pitch patterns can offer richer pathways for the imagination than are distilled by any arid analytical theorem, or captured by any hazy Impressionist scene.

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