



Code, D.J. (2013) *The "song triptych": reflections on a Debussyan genre*. *Scottish Music Review*, 3 (1). ISSN 1755-4934

Copyright © 2013 The Author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

Content must not be changed in any way or reproduced in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder(s)

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details must be given

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/68794/>

Deposited on: 14 February 2014

 David Code

 University of Glasgow

À quoi bon, vraiment, accorder la voix de Bilitis soit en majeur, soit en mineur puisqu'elle a la voix la plus persuasive du monde? – Tu me diras, 'Pourquoi as-tu fait la musique?' Ça, vieux loup, c'est autre chose ... C'est pour autres décors.

Debussy, letter to Pierre Louÿs

As is well known, Debussy significantly altered his approach to song composition around the years 1890–91. While he had been writing *mélodies* more or less continuously since his earliest student days, up to this point he had tended to set texts either singly or in various different groupings – as in, for example, the six *Ariettes, paysages belges et aquarelles* of 1888 (later revised as *Ariettes oubliées*, 1903), and the *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire* of 1887–89. Starting from around 1890, he was to conceive and present the vast majority of his *mélodies* in sets of three, often titled as such – as in one of the first, *Trois mélodies de Paul Verlaine* (composed 1891, published 1901) and the last, *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1913).

By some measures, the total number of eight 'song triptychs' that eventually emerged across this span of more than two decades renders this genre (or subgenre) the one for which Debussy wrote most often.² It is thus surprising how little analytical attention it has so far received in the literature. With a few significant exceptions, scholars have tended to treat Debussy's songs individually, in isolation from their composed and published companions. From such studies we have gained, by now, a rich and varied perspective on the approaches to text-setting and vocal writing that characterized Debussy's distinct contribution to the history of French art song.³ But his evolving approach to the tripartite collection of *mélodies* – for which he almost always brought together, into a new progression, three texts by the same poet – can bring into view further questions of potentially wide implication for our understanding, on one hand, of the famously problematic genre of the 'song cycle' and on the other, of Debussy's own compositional development across these two crucial creative decades.

There was of course plenty of precedent for composing sets of three songs. Schubert and Schumann each wrote a few; a more proximate and relevant instance is Gabriel Fauré's very first song cycle (and his only triptych), the *Poèmes d'un jour*, op. 21 of 1878. Fauré's assemblage of three freestanding poems by Charles Grandmougin into an 'implied narrative chronology' through three stages of a romantic dalliance (as Graham Johnson puts it) may well have remained in Debussy's mind as a distant model for at least some of his triptychs.⁴ But the musical relationship between Fauré's early settings of lightweight verse – for Johnson, exemplifying 'the sentimentality found in popular magazines of the time' – and Debussy's mature treatments of much more distinguished poetry seems tenuous at best; the possibility that he may have heard

the *création* of the *Poèmes d'un jour* at the Société nationale in 1881 hardly sheds much light on the significant turn in his song writing a full decade later. Further thought on this possible musical influence aside, for now I am more interested in considering whether a glance to the wider, inter-artistic concerns long recognized as fundamental to Debussy's compositional development might inform hearing and understanding of the 'triptych' form that was to become his signature contribution to the history of the song cycle.

It is suggestive that the very years that gave rise to Debussy's first three-part cycles on the poetry of Verlaine saw a widespread revival, throughout the post-Impressionist milieu, of the painterly triptych structure of three interrelated panels. A particularly prominent and celebrated example can be seen in the great mural for the amphitheatre of La Sorbonne commissioned in 1886 from Pierre Puvis de Chavannes – *éminence grise* for a whole generation of avant-garde painters – and inaugurated on 5 August 1889 by Président Sadi Carnot 'with pomp and circumstance amidst city, state and university dignitaries and emissaries from foreign universities'.⁵ This massive mural, articulated as three grand panels of the fields of learning – 'eloquence' and 'poetry' in the centre, with 'philosophy' and 'history' at the left and 'science' in its various forms at the right – received specific mention in one of the most influential art-critical interventions of that moment. In his 1890 essay 'Définition du néo-traditionnisme', the young Maurice Denis singled out Puvis as a key inspiration for a new, 'Symbolist' painting that could move beyond both sterile academic realism and *plein-air* Impressionist illusionism to recover the 'decorative' values of the Medieval 'primitives'.⁶ Through Denis's polemics for Puvis, we can situate the triptych form in the context of a lineage extending back to the altarpieces of Giotto and Fra. Angelico (to give two names most prominent in his account) with their characteristic structure of a central panel flanked by two subsidiary ones.

'Neo-traditionalism', however, was only one strand of Denis's attempts to negotiate a path beyond Impressionism, with a critical view both to the distant past and the most up-to-date modernist lessons of Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. If the years around 1890 saw the apogee of Puvis's 'decorative' influence for many more critics than Denis alone, then they saw also the zenith of *Japonisme*, characterized by another influential contemporary critic, Roger Marx, as 'an all-powerful influence' whose impact on contemporary French painters could only be compared to 'the influence of antique art on the age of the Renaissance'.⁷ One vivid manifestation of the zenith of Marx's 'all-powerful influence' exactly around the turn of the century's last decade can be seen in the lavishly illustrated journal *Le Japon Artistique*, which featured critical surveys of all things Japanese by contemporary experts in fine and decorative arts, and which was published precisely in the years 1888–1891 by Siegfried Bing, long-time proprietor of Parisian 'oriental' boutiques. From 25 April to 22 May 1890, furthermore, Bing curated a grand 'Exposition de la Gravure japonaise' (Exhibition of Japanese Engraving) at *L'École des beaux-arts* on the Quai Malaquais – described by one recent art historian as a 'huge retrospective' of the Japanese prints Bing had by that time been collecting, and dealing, for decades.⁸

Debussy's *japoniste* leanings are best known from the oft-reproduced Hokusai print he chose for the cover of *La Mer* and the lacquer panel of goldfish that inspired his last *Image for piano*, 'Poissons d'or'. But

if the general aesthetic interest he shared with countless contemporaries has been amply documented, no one has yet taken much notice of the fact that the Japanese prints on view in Bing's shops and exhibition presented another rich model for tripartite visual form.⁹ Literally thousands of three-part prints were produced across the key century from Utamaro (c. 1753–1806), seen by many fin-de-siècle commentators as the 'classic' model, to later generations – for example, Hiroshige (1797–1858), Kuniyoshi (1798–1861), and Kunichika (1835–1900), who became ever more inventive in their play with the relationship between the three individual images and the unified, tripartite whole (see Figure 1).¹⁰ This alternative triptych lineage directly influenced several members of the so-called 'Nabis' group of painters, for whom Denis served as principal critical spokesman. Indeed, even before Denis published his 1890 essay, his colleague Pierre Bonnard had produced, as two of his earliest works, the large, tripartite screens *Ducks, Heron and Pheasants* and *Marabout and Four Frogs* (both 1889), which not only exemplify in form and function the direct impact of *japonisme* on the fin-de-siècle enthusiasm for 'decorative' arts, but also come close to straight pastiche of *ukiyo-e* prints in their starkly schematic colour scheme (notably the bright red background) and their creation of a decorative whole from three panels with quite distinct foliage motifs.¹¹ Even more interesting as an exemplar of the hybrid possibilities of three-part form, however, is the triptych *La cueillette des pommes* by another 'Nabi', Paul Sérusier. Illustrated in Figure 2, this work (from around 1891) shows how the flattened perspective and brilliant colours of the Japanese (as filtered through the more proximate models of Gauguin and Van Gogh) could be synthesized with a triptych structure reminiscent of Medieval altarpieces – all to trace a summary narrative progression, from left to right, through a woman's life from childhood through fertile maturity to old age.¹²



Figure 1

Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861), *The Wrath of Igagoe*. Triptych. Color woodcut, undated. 36 x 24 cm per sheet. Photo: akg-images. Reproduced by permission.



Figure 2 Paul Sérusier (1864–1927), ‘Triptych of Pont-Aven’, otherwise known as *La cueillette des pommes*, 1892/93. Oil on wood, 73 x 133cm. Photo: akg-images / Joseph Martin. Reproduced by permission.

How might these tiny glimpses of an extremely wide artistic field inform an understanding of Debussy’s song triptychs? There is no guidance to be found in the very few letters he wrote during these years – and it would be foolish, at any rate, to try and isolate any single, direct stylistic influence from this tangle of post-Impressionist obsessions.¹³ One amusing encapsulation of the interrelated influences that fed contemporary debates about a new, ‘Symbolist’ and ‘decorative’ painting can be found in a little paragraph Gauguin wrote in 1888 to his fellow-painter Emile Bernard from Arles, where he was working alongside Van Gogh:

It’s funny, here Vincent sees Daumier-type work to do, but I, on the contrary, see another type: coloured Puvis mixed with Japan. The women here have their elegant coiffures, their Greek beauty. Their shawls forming folds like the primitives are, I find, Greek processions.¹⁴

It is hard to imagine a more efficient summary of the aesthetic crosscurrents of an era. But intractable as the question of direct stylistic affinity must always remain, the sheer formal variety of these contemporaneous visual triptychs can still conceivably serve as a heuristic to inspire fresh thought about the kinds and degrees of unity on offer in the Debussy song triptychs.

In the introduction to her recent book *The Song Cycle* (a Cambridge Introduction to Music – but also, surprisingly enough, the first English monograph on the topic), Laura Tunbridge succinctly sums up the difficulties of her chosen subject by asking: ‘Is the song cycle really a genre?’¹⁵ Glancing to the seemingly irresolvable questions of unity and continuity that have led even Schumann scholars to throw up their hands in exasperation, she later suggests that the published debates about *Dichterliebe* (the most contested case) might best be understood to emerge from differing prior investments in the ‘premise of organicism’.¹⁶

In this light, it is ironic to note the role of such Germanic foils in a claim that has remained unchallenged as the common understanding of Debussy's song cycles. In a 1988 article, Susan Youens asserted that 'Debussy's cycles are not as musically unified as those of Schubert ..., Schumann ..., or Mahler – there are not the tonal, melodic, or rhythmic links of the German lieder cycles. There are textual links, even if very general'.¹⁷ As the two exceptions to this 'very general' textual unity, Youens notes that in the *Trois chansons de Bilitis* of 1899 and the second *Fêtes galantes* triptych of 1904, the texts fall into clear narrative successions, for all that the song-by-song logic remains shrouded in 'suggestion and implication'. But she does not let this 'suggestive' textual logic qualify the strongly normative organicism that underpins her insistence that even a triptych like the *Fêtes galantes II* is 'not musically unified'.¹⁸

Clearly, the literature that treats the songs individually sidesteps such questions entirely, and while Youens's two exceptions have received most consideration as triptychs, the question of their unity has rarely been pursued in specifically musical terms. A 1994 article on the *Trois chansons de Bilitis* by Stephen Rumph, for example, offers fine accounts of musical detail song by song, but traces a unitary progression essentially textual in nature, hinging on questions of linguistic subjectivity and the evolution of a quasi-dramatic vocal interaction.¹⁹ More recently, in a 2008 account of the same triptych, William Gibbons has noted some slight melodic links between first and last songs, but gives no detailed consideration to the musical unity of the whole.²⁰ As for Youens's other exception, the *Fêtes galantes II*, while everyone notes the allegorical 'farewell to Romanticism' voiced across Debussy's three chosen poems, notions of musical unity have become blurred through repeated emphasis on the recurrence of a pianistic 'nightingale' motif from 'En sourdine', the first song of the first *Fêtes galantes* triptych (1891–92), in 'Colloque sentimental', the last song of the second (1904).²¹ The focus on this linking gesture between two triptychs conceived more than a decade apart has only deflected inquiry from the degrees of musical unity within each *Fêtes galantes* series, and thus about the ways they might encapsulate, through their distinct triptych forms, Debussy's evolution across the decade of work on *Pelléas*.

In the attempt to consider the formal intricacies of these triptychs in terms other than those predetermined by the 'premise of organicism', I have found useful orientation in the 2007 book *On Form* by literary scholar Angela Leighton. Tracing the distinguished history of this concept from Coleridge through Pater to Barthes, and then on to more recent literary critics, Leighton borrows from Adorno at one point when suggesting that 'it might be possible to catch at the notion of form, not in a philosophical nutshell, once and for all, but only along the way, in the part-gamble, part-guesswork which each singular, differently formed work inspires'.²² In fact, returning to the aesthetic context opened above, I find that the 'gamble' and 'guesswork' that revivifies the 'formal charges' gathered into Debussy's various song triptychs (to borrow a term from Susan Wolfson, one of Leighton's most recent interlocutors) might well be conceptualized through metaphorical comparison with the analysis of a series of related paintings.²³ From the broadest perspective, we might approach such a set of pieces not with a view to excavating some unitary *Grundgestalt* or *Umlinie*, but with an opportunistic ear for the deployment, in broad shapes and shades, of hues from an available audible palette. Listening more closely, we might seek not only the most strongly

related themes, but also the most suggestive interplay of distinct lines and gestures, as deployed in various patterns across the sonorous canvas.

At one point in her survey of twentieth-century critics of form, Leighton paraphrases from the 1939 book, *Vie des formes*, by the art historian Henri Focillon:

Form consists of all the metamorphic interactions the artwork initiates, including ones which are ‘matters of imagination and memory, of sensibility and intellect’. Far from being cut off from purpose and affect, authorial or readerly interests, form brings them all energetically into play.²⁴

It is this open sense of form as a play of ‘imagination’, ‘sensibility’ and ‘interests’ that I find usefully supplements familiar, systematically theoretical – that is, narrowly ‘formalist’ – approaches to multi-part structure with a richer sense of the various modes of musical unity on offer across Debussy’s song cycles, through textural and affective devices as much as more narrowly technical ones.²⁵ In order to adumbrate this potential, I here offer an overview of the whole series of song triptychs, considered both as textual and musical forms, and mapped (at least at first) between the notional polarity that arises from the relationship between the usual approaches to these works and the visual context I have opened above.

As scholars from Youens to Gibbons have noted in their various ways, a song triptych can distil ‘narrative’ down to the Aristotelian bedrock of ‘beginning’, ‘middle’ and ‘end’.²⁶ But the triptych structure native to the visual arts, which conventionally presents a central panel flanked by subsidiary ones, usually also demands recursive scanning, back and forth, to glean aggregate symbolic and allegorical implications. Thus, in Table 1, which lists all the song triptychs in historical order, I diagnose each ‘Textual Structure’ as either ‘narrative’ or ‘painterly’ (or some hybrid of the two), and then, after a summary list of keys, consider ‘Musical Structure’ in similar terms. In the discussion that follows, I will only be able to give a quick précis of most cases, but will linger on one or two – occasionally finding cause to invoke even more ways of conceiving a formal succession in three parts. Ultimately, with a glance backwards it will be possible to consider whether the precise moments at which certain formal dynamics come into view suggest evolving authorial ‘interests’ – and perhaps even new refinements to the usual stories about Debussy’s place in music history.

Table 1 Historical, textual and musical overview of Debussy's song triptychs.

Before 1890, Debussy wrote c. 30 songs, in various groupings (e.g. *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*, 1887–89). One set of three (*Trois mélodies*, published in 1902) would later gather diverse earlier settings of Hyspa and Bourget.

Date	Title	Contents	Textual Structure	Keys	Musical Structure
1891 [pubd 1901]	<i>Trois mélodies de Paul Verlaine</i>	1. La mer est plus belle (The sea is more beautiful) 2. Le son du cor (The sound of the horn) 3. L'échelonnement des haies (The serried rows of hedges)	Three poems without human presence: personifications of landscape (the sea, the evening forest, the seaside meadows) – no clear linear progression; 'painterly' shape in recurrent 'sea' imagery; also day-night- day	e m [to M] f m [to M] c#m [to M]	– 'painterly' in tempi: animé – lent – assez vif; also some hint in keys (esp. E to c#, but becomes C#) – note shared presence of 'Mélisande/ sea' motif in 1 and 3; evolution from chromatic to diatonic
1891– 2 [pubd 1903]	<i>Fêtes galantes, série I –Verlaine</i>	1. En sourdine (Muted) 2. Fantôches (Marionettes) [orig. 1882; revised] 3. Clair de lune (Moonlight) [note re-ordering: was 1, 3, 2 in autograph]	1. intimate address between despairing lovers [thesis] 2. telegraphic description of commedia characters [antithesis] 3. 'your soul' now populated by maskers [synthesis] – note the 'painterly' shape of two songs of address, one of impersonal description – from twilight to two songs of night	B/g# A (m/M) g# m [to Dorian]	– 'painterly' very clear in tempo/ mood: rêveusement lent – allegretto scherzando – très modéré – progression from ambivalent key of 1 to resolution of 3; – E# as 'T chord' appoggiatura becomes externalized modal coloration

1897–8 [pubd 1899]	Trois chansons de Bilitis – Louÿs	1. La flûte de Pan (Pan's flute) 2. La chevelure (The hair) 3. Le tombeau des naïades (The tomb of the Naiads)	– relatively clear narrative: from innocence to passion to disillusionment; note also spring to winter – ‘painterly’ in settings: pastoral/mythic; unspecific; death of pastoral/mythic	B /g [to B] G \flat m/M f# m [to M, added 6th]	– calibrated progression in intervallic palette; sequential isolation of distinctive scales, treated in a markedly systematic manner – all ‘lent’, note: triple-duple- quadruple succession – very strong cyclic implication in final ‘dominant’ of opening key(s)
1904 [comp and pubd]	Fêtes galantes, série II – Verlaine	1. Les ingénus (The innocents) 2. Le faune (The Faun) 3. Colloque sentimental (Sentimental conversation)	– oblique narrative, but relatively clear: a retrospection on innocence; a doom- laden present moment of intimacy; a much later melancholy aftermath	? ‘on F’ to F Aug ? ‘on G’ to G + F Aug from F/a to a	– root progression relatively strong: F–G–A, with much ambiguity of key – F-Aug ‘tonic’ in 1 becomes bitonal shading in 2; 3 begins on F, clarifies to a minor
1904 [comp and pubd]	Trois chansons de France – one Lhermite; two C. d’Orléans	1. Rondel (‘Le temps’ / The weather) 2. La grotte (The grotto) 3. Rondel (‘Pour ce que plaisance’ / Because pleasure’)	– no clear narrative shape; dim progression from light to dark – ‘painterly’ shape is clearer: the two rondels frame the central poem; the theme of weather recurs	B? to C# g# [dorian] d minor	– key elusive in (1) despite much pure diatonicism (B implied but never affirmed, end C#) – (2) revisits the g#/B ambiguity, and the dorian E# – (3) relatively settled d minor; NB ‘antique’ modal refrain

1910 [and 1904]	Le promenoir des deux amants – Lhermite	1. La grotte [see (2) above] 2. Crois mon conseil, chère Climène (Take my advice ...) 3. Je tremble en voyant ton visage (I tremble when I see ...)	– an excerpted narrative, selected from a larger poem; overall progression rendered more oblique and inconclusive by Debussy's excisions	g# [dorian] B/g# [to pent] D _b	– relatively clear relationship (1) – (2), though undercut by initial lurch to C maj – subsequently more oblique, to do with registral affinities, etc.
1910	Trois ballades de François Villon	1. B ^{de} de Villon à s'amyé (...to his lady) 2. B ^{de} fait à la requeste de sa mère (... at the request of his mother) 3. B ^{de} des femmes de Paris (... of the women of Paris)	– three highly distinct characters and dramatic poses; no hint of narrative – general theme of 'woman', from three distinct perspectives	f# m [to M] a/C [to C] c# m [to E]	– little clear coherence; set of stylistic poses: (1) madrigalesque expression; (2) 'antique' modal simplicity; (3) vaudevillian banter
1913	Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé	1. Soupir (Sigh) 2. Placet futile (futile petition) 3. Éventail (Fan)	– three poems of address; characteristically oblique in all cases	A [pent] g m [to M] ? to e m	– the most elusive structure of all

The first two Verlaine triptychs

The series begins with two instances composed around the same time, one of which proves exceptional in several ways. For his *Trois mélodies de Paul Verlaine*, written in 1891 but not published until ten years later, Debussy chose his three texts from Verlaine's most recent collection *Sagesse* (1889) rather than the earlier *Fêtes galantes* anthology (1869) that would give rise to his two better-known Verlaine sets. Also notable is the fact that this set, as published, boasts two dedications: the first song to Ernest Chausson, the second and third to Robert Godet.²⁷ Perhaps this suggests in itself some degree of looseness in unitary conception.

A further point of distinction emerges from Youens's brief remarks about the *Trois mélodies*. No doubt she is partly right to claim that this triptych is exceptional amidst the whole series for its setting of 'nature poetry, devoid of ... human presence'.²⁸ But this assertion needs to be qualified with a view to the way in which two of Debussy's three chosen poems exemplify a typically Verlainian personification of landscape. The first song, 'La mer est plus belle', describes the sea as a 'nourrice fidèle' ('faithful nurse') and quotes its address to the poetic persona: 'Vous sans espérance, | Mourez sans souffrance!' ('you who are without hope, May you die without suffering!') Then, in 'Le son du cor', personification shifts to a horn call 'grieving in the woods' with the sadness of an 'orphan', and 'weeping' with the 'soul of a wolf' ('Le son du cor s'afflige vers les bois | D'une douleur on veut croire orpheline ... L'âme du loup pleure dans cette voix'). Finally, the perspective in the third song, 'L'échelonnement des haies', opens out to offer a more objective view of colts and ewes gamboling on seaside meadows.

As I indicate in my summary of 'Textual Structure', in this case there is no clear linear progression through the new ordering of Verlaine's texts – nos. XV, IX and XIII, respectively, in *Sagesse* – though it is possible to trace a gross affective transition from an ambiguous, consolatory but death-shadowed opening, through the central, archetypally late-Romantic tones of melancholy, and out to breezy and energetic brightness. On the other hand, it is easy to discern a broadly 'painterly' structure: two poems that refer to the sea in the daytime frame a central, dusky vision (and audition) of a forest at sunset. A glance at the broadest determinants of musical structure finds that the suspicion of formal looseness raised by the double dedication is at least partly borne out. It is particularly difficult to trace precise musical links from the central, tonally ambiguous 'Le son du cor' outward into its two framing companions. But even so, the sequence of tempi and expression markings (*Animé* – *Lent et dolent* – *Assez vif et gaiement*), and to some extent the keys (two sharp keys framing a flat key), reinforce the textual suggestions of 'painterly' form. At the same time, some hints of a linear 'force' running through this tripartite form are actually accessible to traditional organicist analysis.

As I note in Example 1, the first song gives repeated emphasis to two variants of a four-note, coiling chromatic motive. It first appears throughout b. 13–16, where voice and piano together repeatedly trace a semitone and minor third figure (i.e. [0, 1, 4]) at two transpositions (see Example 1a). A first, similarly chromatic variant of the same motive, recast as semitone and major third (i.e. [0, 1, 5]) then appears in the

piano alone, high atop the texture of b. 19–20 and 23–4 (Example 1b). Eventually, in the last bars of the song, the same four-note shape finds its diatonic version, as a whole tone and minor third (i.e. [0, 2, 5]), prescient of the ‘Mélisande’ motif in *Pelléas et Mélisande* and of a key motif in *La Mer* (Example 1c). Ultimately, this local diatonic emergence bears fruit across the whole set of three songs. When the quicker tempo resumes after the meandering melancholy of ‘Le son du cor’, the culminating diatonic variant of the motive from ‘La mer est plus belle’ recurs prominently, again in voice and piano together, in the first sung phrase of ‘L’échelonnement des haies’ (Example 1d). Temporally distant as this fleeting reminiscence may be in a successive hearing of the three songs, the distinctive vocal-instrumental doubling, along with the close rhythmic-metrical congruence of the first and last instances (compare Examples 1a and 1d), renders them a subtle unifying hook between the triptych’s outer ‘panels’ – and indeed, at the same time, a succinct marker of the affective trajectory through the whole.

Example 1a ‘La mer est plus belle’, b. 13–16, showing [0, 1, 4] motif in both voice and piano, at two different transpositions.

13 [Animé] voice doubles [0, 1, 4] at both transpositions [mp] Elle a tous les dons Terribles et doux. p [p] 3

15 J'en tends ses pardons Gronder ses courroux. f Cette im- [0, 1, 4] [0, 1, 4]

Example 1b 'La mer est plus belle', b. 19–24, showing [0, 1, 5] motif in the accompaniment, at two octave levels and with two different harmonizations.

19 *calme et doux* *p*

Oh! si pa - ti - en - te, Mê - me quand mé -

21 chan - te! Un souffle a - mi

23 han - te La va - gue, et nous

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is common time. The tempo is marked 'calme et doux' and the dynamics are 'p' (piano) and 'pp' (pianissimo). The [0, 1, 5] motif is highlighted with boxes and labels in measures 19, 21, and 23. The motif is presented at two octave levels and with two different harmonizations. The lyrics are: 'Oh! si pa-tiente, Même quand mé- chan-te! Un souffle a-mi han-te La vague, et nous'.

Example 1c 'La mer est plus belle', b. 35–40, showing the final emergence and reiterations of the diatonic [0, 2, 5] motif. 'La mer est plus belle', b. 35–40, showing the final emergence and reiterations of the diatonic [0, 2, 5] motif.

35 En retenant jusqu'à la fin

verts... Plus bel - le que

37 tous, Meil - leu - re que nous!

Example 1d 'L'échelonnement des haies', b. 1–6, showing the [0, 2, 5] motive in both voice and piano, with the first vocal entry. (Compare with Example 1a).

Assez vif et gaiement

4

voice doubles [0, 2, 5]

dim. L'é - che-lon-ne-ment des haies Mou - tonne à l'in - fi - ni, mer

Even in this quick overview, we can already see some of the possible interplay between ‘narrative’ and ‘painterly’ types, and glimpse some of the detail that we might ‘catch at’ to serve an understanding of the compositional investment behind the tripartite form. A more acute, more self-consciously music-historical richness emerges, I suggest, in the contemporaneous triptych *Fêtes galantes I* – also composed in 1891 and published some years later – on three songs selected from Verlaine’s earlier collection. Perhaps the greater sophistication of this second triptych arises from deeper compositional familiarity, for Debussy had set all three of these poems some years before within the thirteen songs he composed for the so-called ‘Vasnier song-book’ (1882). When he returned to them he wrote wholly new versions of the first and last songs, ‘En sourdine’ and ‘Clair de lune’, now placed as a framing pair around a lightly revised version of ‘Fantôches’.²⁹ In a thorough article on the manuscript sources for the different versions of ‘En sourdine’, Marie Rolf once singled out this latest, 1891 triptych version as the song in which Debussy first attained a fully adequate response to Verlaine’s ‘Symbolist’ subtleties.³⁰ We might now consider whether the progression through the whole triptych (poems nos. XXI, XI, and I in Verlaine’s first edition, previously the second, fifth, and fourth songs, respectively, for Mme. Vasnier) shows similar sophistication.

As I note in my textual summary, the triptych begins with an intimate address between lovers. After the initial delicate scene-setting of ‘En sourdine’ – ‘Calme dans le demi-jour | Que les branches hautes font’ (‘Calm in the half-light | That the high branches make’) – the speaker implores his companion:

The *tutoiement* in the next verse – ‘Ferme tes yeux à demi’ (half close your eyes) – underlines the sense of romantic intimacy that ultimately opens out, in the last line, to include the song of a nightingale, ‘voix de notre désespoir’ (voice of our despair).

After the dusky love song of ‘En sourdine’, ‘Fantôches’ (Marionettes) shifts abruptly in tone. Rattling tercets of octosyllables deliver terse descriptions of *commedia dell’arte* antics:

Scaramouche et Pulcinella
Qu’un mauvais dessein rassembla
Gesticulent, noirs sous la lune.

Cependant l’excellent docteur
Bolonais cueille avec lenteur
Des simples parmi l’herbe brune.

[Scaramouche and Pulcinella
Whom some evil scheme brought together
Gesticulate, black shapes beneath the moon

Meanwhile, the fine doctor
From Bologna slowly gathers
Simples among the dark grass.]

Then, a glimpse of the doctor’s daughter, amorously seeking her ‘beau pirate espagnol’ (handsome Spanish pirate), sets up a textual link back to ‘En sourdine’. The nightingale reappears in the last lines of ‘Fantôches’, now no soft ‘voice of despair’ but rather shrieking at head-piercing volume (‘à tue-tête’).

With Debussy's third chosen poem, 'Clair de lune', the tone changes again. Personal address returns, now as 'vous' instead of 'tu'. Any sense of souls 'melting together' is displaced by another reference to the *commedia dell'arte*: 'Votre âme est un paysage choisi | Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques' (Your soul is a choice landscape | which is charmed by wandering maskers and bergamaskers).³¹ The song expands this metaphor, opening out from those few opening words of address into a last stanza of personified scenery:

Au calme clair de lune triste et beau
 Qui fait rêver les oiseaux dans les arbres
 Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau
 Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.

[In the calm moonlight, sad and beautiful
 That makes the birds dream in the trees
 And the fountains sob with ecstasy
 The tall slender fountains among the statues.]

Perhaps that glimpse of birds dreaming in the trees faintly ties this last poem to the nightingale image of the previous two. But the more interesting structural relationship across these three texts is one of broad linguistic dynamics rather than specific imagistic detail.

In the simplest overview, 'painterly' outlines seem quite clear in this new textual order: two poems of personal address frame one of objective description. But at the same time, we encounter here a progression markedly richer than any straightforwardly linear narrative. An initial idealized vision of intimate union, 'melting souls', first finds the starkly antithetical contrast of an objective, ironic staging of clichéd stage characters. (The transformation of the nightingale's song, from a participant in the intimacy of 'our despair' to the shrill voice of objectivity, perfectly fits the broader contrast.) Finally, when the closing encounter in 'Clair de lune' confronts the deceptive 'bergamasques' within the very soul of the addressee, the result can be described as a finely conceived interrogative synthesis, which returns to personal address only to bring into question the possibility of intimate union. Both a successive, narrative reading and a synchronic overview of the synthetic form are necessary if the aggregate is to be recognized, say, as a confrontation with the limits of romantic love and indeed of intimate personal and poetic communication.

An overview of the musical structure of the *Fêtes galantes I* triptych profits from this sense of textual hybrid. In the simplest summary, the basic structure of keys and tempi seems clearly 'painterly': five sharps – no sharps – five sharps; *Rêusement lent* – *Allegretto scherzando* – *Très modéré*. But there is also a progressive aspect to the tonal proceedings. The first song poises ambiguously between modal B major and g minor. Both possibilities receive at least some reinforcement through the first paragraph (compare b. 6 with b. 16) and the song ends, with typical Debussyan ambivalence, on a B major 'added sixth' chord (i.e. an inversion of the g minor seventh chord). After the central stepwise shift to a minor for 'Fantôches', the final song offers a clearer resolution: 'Clair de lune' both begins and ends with strong modal cadences to an unclouded g minor.

Example 2a 'En sourdine', b. 1–4, showing the 'Tristan chord' in its initial voicing, and the arabesque that anticipates the reference to the 'nightingale'.

Rêveusement lent

'nightingale' arabesque

pp Doux et expressif

3

'Tristan chord', original voicing (E# as 'appoggiatura')

(repeat 8vb, i.e. 'T chord' at original register)

Example 2b 'Clair de lune', b. 29–32, showing the return of the 'quasi-Tristan chord', now re-voiced with the E as modal coloration.

29

pp

mar - - - bres

pp *morendo*

m.g.

m.g.

g# minor+ E# (= 'T chord')

E# recurs as 'Dorian sixth'

Taking a closer look, it is possible to isolate some detail that infuses this broadest musical progression with subtler local expressive charges. As Rumph notes, 'En sourdine' starts with Debussy's 'most literal' statement of the 'Tristan chord', identical in pitch and spacing to Wagner's.³² Looking to Example 2a, we can see that the chord as initially presented, with the E as a quasi-appoggiatura that 'resolves' to F, remains a translated vestige of the chromatic voice-leading that had made it the nineteenth century's most famous musical icon of desire – an apt cipher for this poem's 'melting of souls'. Passing over the second song – whose precise musical attachment to the tripartite progression is, as with the second song of the *Trois mélodies*, the trickiest to discern – we find that at the very end of 'Clair de lune' (and of the triptych as a whole) the E recurs, atop what is effectively the 'same chord' that had launched 'En sourdine' (Example 2b). But now this pitch has been further retranslated, to become a pure modal coloration – a hovering

Dorian sixth whose decoration of the fifth degree, retaining no vestigial Wagnerian yearning, serves instead as an apt sonorous marker for the dissipation of tender personal address into cool marmoreal visions. In this case, while any reduction to pitch sets would recognize the link between first and final chords, it is only with thought for their different expressive shadings within Debussy's modal-chromatic syntax that the finest sense of his reading of the textual form – itself now best described as a quasi-Hegelian (or quasi-Fichtean) 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' progression – can emerge.

A pivotal case

After completing his first two triptychs, Debussy wrote the four *Proses lyriques* on his own prose poetry in 1892–93. This was his last collection of anything other than three songs. His next contribution to the triptych subgenre only emerged some years later, during the long wait for a staging of *Pelléas*. The textual origin of the *Trois chansons de Bilitis* (1897–98) was somewhat more complicated than that of the two earlier Verlaine sets. The Bilitis triptych also originates in a much larger collection – in this case, a book of prose poems Debussy's closest friend Pierre Louÿs had published as translations of a newly discovered ancient Greek poetess. (In truth, of course, he had written them himself.) More precisely, the composer brought together two poems from Louÿs's original 1894 edition – whose exotic-erotic sensuality had earned it continent-wide success – with a new poem, 'La chevelure', written for the expanded second edition of 1898.

From previous accounts we have, by now, a thorough understanding of the historical background that might seem to render the *Trois chansons de Bilitis* a classic instance of fin-de-siècle erotic exoticism – with all the familiar implications that trope brings in tow.³³ The initial dedication of Louÿs's book identified one of its muses as the famed Algerian prostitute, Meryem bent-Ali, whom he had visited on André Gide's recommendation in the oasis town of Biskra; he also took inspiration from his Algerian mistress Zohra bent-Brahim, whose sexual vivacity he reported with relish in letters to Debussy, and whose visits with the composer in Louÿs's Paris apartment were memorialized in several famous photographs.³⁴ Borrowing from Umberto Eco's thoughts on different orders of readerly understanding, Gibbons argues persuasively that knowledgeable contemporaries would have heard Debussy's triptych as a distillation of Louÿs's entire book, and thus an efficient encapsulation of those original erotic-exotic impulses.³⁵ But Rumph, proposing that the questions about incipient 'drama' running through these three songs (and into the 1904 *Fêtes galantes*) recall Debussy's struggles in the same years to 'realize' *Pelléas*, exemplifies the more suggestive (if by now wholly familiar) possibility that a composer of song cycles may appropriate poetic texts for creative ends partly distinct from those of their literary source. Accepting that possibility and pushing it further, I suggest that fresh attention to the musical environment in which Bilitis's quasi-dramatic 'dialogues' unfold – that is, to the accompanimental textures that proceed both in interdependence with and independence from the voice – can further deepen the sense of this triptych's relevance to the post-Wagnerian struggles that, in addition to his opera, also informed Debussy's previous completed work, the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (1894).³⁶

The set begins by reopening the antique ‘pastoral’ landscape of the Mallarméan tone poem and reintroducing the same iconic instrument. In Debussy’s first chosen poem, ‘La flûte de Pan’, the pubescent Bilitis establishes a springtime setting by invoking the god ‘Hyacinthie’ (whose name passed to one of the first spring flowers) and proceeds to tell of her lessons on the ‘syrinx’ (panpipes) while sitting on the knees of an unnamed ‘him’. The intimate musical exchange – ‘nos chansons veulent se répondre’ (‘our songs try to answer each other’) – ultimately leads to a more physical intimacy when their mouths briefly meet on the ‘flute’. The singing of ‘green frogs’ at evening interrupts the idyll; the last line deepens the hints of erotic innuendo with Bilitis’s casual observation that ‘my mother will never believe I stayed out so long in search of my lost sash’ (‘ma mère ne croira jamais que je suis restée si longtemps à chercher ma ceinture perdue’).

In the second of Debussy’s chosen chansons, ‘La chevelure’, the discursive situation becomes more complicated. Bilitis initially speaks only three of her own words – ‘Il m’a dit’ (‘He told me’) – before quoting, through fully three prose stanzas, ‘his’ account of a dream in which the two of them were so passionately entangled in her hair that it seemed (to him) as though ‘I became you or you entered into me like my dream’ (‘je devenais toi-même ou que tu entraï en moi comme mon songe’).³⁷ Returning to her own direct utterance for the last stanza, Bilitis responds to this fantasy of self-annihilating erotic immersion in tones of exquisite ambiguity: ‘il me regarda d’un regard si tendre, que je baissai les yeux avec un frisson’ (‘he looked at me with a gaze so tender, that I lowered my eyes with a shudder’).

Even in view of the textual origins described above, it is worth noting that Debussy’s selection brings together two poems that were to appear at much greater separation, as *chansons* 20 and 31 respectively, in the second edition of Louÿs’s book. In that context, the separation between the two marks a palpable progress towards sexual maturity that becomes much more abrupt in Debussy’s close juxtaposition. His third chosen *chanson*, ‘Le tombeau des naïades’, follows directly from ‘La chevelure’ in the 1898 edition. But this poem, another ‘dialogue’, changes in tone just as abruptly, from an extreme romantic passion to a frozen disillusionment that could also imply significant temporal distance. Now Bilitis tells of walking through snowy woods, her mouth blooming with icicles and her sandals heavy with muddy snow. When asked by ‘him’ where she is going, she claims to be following ‘the tracks of a satyr’ (‘la trace du satyre’). But he bluntly informs her that the satyrs have died, along with the nymphs, from the cold winter. Suggesting that they stay by the tomb, in the triptych’s quizzical final image he breaks the ice on a spring ‘where the naïads once laughed’ (‘où jadis riaient les naïades’), and looks through a shard at the sky.

The basic narrative progression through Debussy’s three chosen *chansons* is hard to miss: a naïve Bilitis, still in thrall to her mother, experiments with eroticism; a sexual partner’s dream of maximal intimacy tips over into disturbing excess; a melancholy aftermath records the loss of mythic ideals. But here again, other structural implications are also in view. In imagery and setting, the first and last songs are most closely related in their shared invocations of pastoral-mythic landscapes: one in spring, with flowers and frogs, one in the snowy forest of winter. By contrast, the central panel, steamy and oneiric, is unspecific in setting. Noting this fact, Gibbons aptly terms ‘La chevelure’ the ‘fulcrum’ of the form, which fits the ‘painterly’

triptych structure I read as a means to bring focus to a primary compositional investment.³⁸ Perhaps Debussy conjures naïveté in a springtime landscape, and expresses disillusionment in the same landscape frozen, primarily in order to frame a question about that extreme moment of sensuous immersion.

Finally, it is again possible here to glimpse a somewhat subtler operation of the dialectical process more obviously apparent in the progression of the *commedia* imagery through the *Fêtes galantes I* triptych. The first *chanson*, ‘La flûte de Pan’ presents a strikingly objective reportage of worldly sense data, emphasizing seen color (‘white wax’, ‘green frogs’) and heard sound; even its most intimate moment is a meeting of surfaces, the lips, on another surface, the flute. By contrast (*antithesis*), ‘La chevelure’ is wholly in thrall to subjective interiority. It reports a dream, and then activates the Romantic trope of looking into a lover’s soul. (When Bilitis lowers her eyes, denying ‘him’ access to her inner life, she thus gently claims significant power.) Finally, the third *chanson* returns to visible worldly imagery – for example, when describing the tracks in the snow as ‘holes in a white cloak’ – but ends with an image that holds the relationship between sensed surfaces and imagined depths in suspended interrogation. ‘He’ looks at a frozen surface, a shard of ice, but also through it, into the emptiness of a pale sky.

At its broadest level of musical structure, the Bilitis triptych offers the strongest key progression so far. At first, like ‘En sourdine’, ‘La flûte de Pan’ again exemplifies Debussy’s favorite B/g modal ambiguity, but this time the single song closes on an unclouded B major triad. ‘La chevelure’ and ‘Le tombeau’ are both set on enharmonic versions of the dominant of B (G and F major respectively). But the two cases are tellingly different. ‘La chevelure’ closes on a pure G major triad, which emerges from minor-mode inflections with an unforgettable chill. But ‘Le tombeau des naïades’ ends the entire triptych with a richer chord that locally deepens the ‘open-ended’ implications of the song-by-song tonal (i.e. tonic-dominant) progression. Here, the last chord is an F ‘added sixth’ (i.e. also a d minor seventh), which can serve as the dominant of either initial ‘tonic’ of ‘La flûte de Pan’ (B or g) – a harmonic detail in keeping with the endlessly ‘cyclic’ seasonal implications (spring – [summer/autumn] – winter) partly apparent in Debussy’s chosen texts.

A closer look at musical detail suggests that this triptych most richly rewards an analytical ‘gamble’ informed by the metaphor of painterly description. For one thing, the three songs display a studied progression in what I will call a primary intervallic hue. ‘La flûte de Pan’ begins with twelve bars in which almost every chord is a simple major triad – most of them in root position. Example 3a shows only the first six bars. The only exceptions are the major seventh chords that accompany the ‘flute’ arabesque in b. 1, 4 and 12; a couple of inverted triads appear in b. 7). While this strikingly euphonious soundscape later gives way to richer, more characteristically Debussyan sonorities (see especially b. 13–16, not shown in the example), the extensive initial restriction to the most ‘naïve’ of consonances still poses a marked contrast to the overall sonorous hue of the second song. In ‘La Chevelure’, almost every beat, bar by bar from start to finish, features a struck major second – a first, soft level of dissonance that gathers a rich array of minor, dominant, and half-diminished seventh chords around it as it tinges the whole soundscape (see the continuous excerpt in Example 3c). Finally, the first several phrases of the third song present a

variety of soundscapes, from the clotted chromatic saturation of the opening bars through the plainer triadic sonorities associated with the first appearance of the unnamed 'him' in b. 9–10. But eventually, 'Le tombeau des naïades' completes the incremental, three-stage intensification in the prevailing level of dissonance with a harshly accented semitone motive. This motive, whose insistent repetitions first appear in b. 11 (and which recur in b. 15 and 17 of Example 3d), accumulates intensity as it rises through the texture, ultimately coming to saturate the last page almost as densely as the naïve root-position triads had colored the first long paragraph of 'La flûte de Pan'.

Example 3a 'La flûte de Pan', b. 1–6, showing the palette of root-position triads, and the 'antique' heptatonic mode in its plainest gestural statement.

Lent et sans rigueur de rythme *P* doux et soutenu

arabesque in uninflected 'antique' mode
(B Lydian, or g# Dorian)

heptatonic: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

pp g#/B ambiguity (n.b. palette of 5/3 triads)

4 retenu

thies, il m'a don - né u - ne sy - rinx fai - te de ro - seaux bien tail - lés, u - nis a -

pp retenu

6

vec la blan - che ci - re qui - est douce à mes lè - vres com - me le miel.

p *pp*

Example 3b 'La flûte de Pan', b. 17–26, showing the 'black key' field for the intimate contact of mouths on flute, and the modulation (via the [0, 2, 5] ostinato) to the opposite, 'white key' field for distant hearing of frogs.

17 [a tempo]
flû - te. Il est tard;
[black key' material for intimate contact] becomes 'black key' [0, 2, 5] ostinato
pp *sempre pp*

20 *Plus lent*
voï - ci le chant des gre-nou-illes ver-tes qui com-mence a-vec la nuit.
[white key' material for distant hearing] [white key' [0, 2, 5] ostinato] for 'frog song' ...
ppp *pp léger mais sans sécheresse*

23 *Pressez un peu pp Presque sans voix*
Ma mè - re ne croi - ra ja -
[white key' material for distant hearing] [frets' again] pure 'white key' from here

26
mais que je suis res - tée si long - temps à cher - cher ma cein - tu - re per[due.]
più pp

Example 3c

'La chevelure', b. 9–20, showing the linear whole-tone scale (crossing in voice and piano); the tetrachordal pivot to diatonic modality; the circle of fifths; and the climactic 'Tristan chord' just prior to the da capo.

'hexatonic': 6 5 4

9
 "...[poitri] - - ne. Je les ca - res - sais, et c'é-tait les miens,
 [mf] whole-tone scale descends one full octave in voice from here, rises a tenth in piano

11
 et nous é - tions li - és pour tou-jurs ain - si,

12
 par la mê - me che - ve - lu - re la bou-che sur la bou - - - che
 mf en pressant cresc. f
 'tetrachordal pivot' to diatonic mode (Lydian/Aeolian), directions and spans reversed
 1 12 3 4 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
 'circle of fifths' from here

2 **Tempo I**

13 *p subito*

ain - si que deux lau - riers n'ont sou - vent qu'u - ne ra - ci - ne.

p subito

'V' → 'V' → 'V' → 'V' → 'V'

15 *en pressant peu à peu et en augmentant*

Et, peu à peu, il m'a sem - blé, tant nos mem - bres é -

pp

17 *f*

taient con - fon - dus, que je de - ve - nais toi mê - me ou que tu en trais en moi com - me mon

f

19 **Tempo I, plus lent**

son - - ge."

[as bar 1]

characteristic intervallic hue isolated, as pivot to 'da capo'

ff

p très expressif

'Tristan chord' at pitch

Example 3d

'Le tombeau des naïades', b. 15–32, showing the new accented semitone motive; the linear octatonic scale followed by the whole-tone scale and 'tetrachordal pivot'; and the interval cycles of minor and major thirds.

15 **[Très lent]**

accented semitone motive (first introduced four bars earlier)

"Les sa - ty - res et les nym - phes aus - si. De-puis trente

17

ans il n'a pas fait un hi - ver aus - si ter - ri - ble. La tra - ce que tu vois est cel - le d'un

19

bouc. - Mais res tons i - ci, où est leur tom

p très doux 3

... plus minor tetrachord (=oct.)

linear octatonic scale, as 'eight notes' (compare 'heptatonic' mode in song 1)

becomes whole-tone scale, as linear 'hexatonic' ...

très dim.

1 2 3 4
1 2 3 4 5 6

8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

mf

p

M3 cycle M3 cycle

22

beau." Et a-vec le fer de sa hou- il cas- sa la gla-ce de la source où ja - dis ri - aient les Na

mf *cresc.*

* M7 * M7 * M7 * M7

* = 'semitone' inverted

25

ia - - des. Il pre - nait de grands mor - ceaux

f *dim.*

27

froids, et les sou-le-vant vers le ciel pâle, il re - gar - dait au tra -

P

starkly schematic minor 3rd cycle (three octatonic collections)

29

vers.

sf *p*

retenu

* m9 * m9

'V' of B/g#

This sense of a clear (if partial) logic in the succession of intervallic hues finds support in several other dimensions. For example, all three songs feature a linear – I would even say gestural – presentation of three different scales, whose successive order of appearance is clearly related to the gradual intensification in characteristic dissonance. ‘La flûte de Pan’, the most obvious case, begins with a characteristic Debussyan arabesque that is exceptional among many, more flexible relatives – as in the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* and *Nuages*, to name only two – for its directionally and rhythmically uninflected tracing of the seven notes of an ‘antique’ heptatonic mode, as if to capture the physical-material immediacy of a sweep of panpipes across the lips (see again Example 3a).³⁹ Glancing ahead to ‘La chevelure’, we find a similarly uninflected linear scale, now woven into the texture at a pivotal point in the form. In this case the modern whole-tone scale unfolds through a complete octave in the voice, crossing a rising tenth on the same scale in the middle voice of the accompaniment (see Example 3c, b. 9–11). When the two scales ‘turn the corner’ at b. 12, a tetrachordal pivot (C–D–E–F) serves to redirect the reversed crossing (rising voice, falling piano) on to one of the diatonic modes previously featured in the first song (here identifiable as either C Lydian or E Aeolian), which now delivers the song’s first climax, on ‘la bouche sur la bouche’ (‘mouth to mouth’). Finally, soon after adding the new semitone motive, ‘Le tombeau des naïades’ completes this incremental scalar progression when it presents the starkest linear octatonic scale in all Debussy, stated as ‘eight notes’ (i.e. without octave) in the middle voice of b. 20 (Example 3d) – much like the baldly ‘heptatonic’ presentation of the ‘antique’ mode in ‘La flûte de Pan’. In a continuation of the precedent just established, the next two bars of ‘Le tombeau des naïades’ then slip back onto the whole-tone scale once native to ‘La chevelure’ – here given a starkly ‘hexatonic’ presentation that pivots to a tetrachord whose ‘minor’ character also happens to fit the newest ‘octatonic’ environment (D–E–F–G, last beat of b. 21).

Intricately conceived as the tetrachordal play might seem, I imagine it may still be possible to read this studied sequence of intervallic hues and scalar gestures as a set of relatively unsurprising compositional decisions. Debussy features euphony and modality in his setting of a ‘naïve’ poem; a more up-to-date blend of steamy dissonance and late-Romantic scalar extravagances for mature sexual passion; and a harsher, more esoteric distillation from the most recent ‘experiments in musical chemistry’ (to borrow his own words from another context) to project the disillusionment that might follow.⁴⁰ Needless to say, there is nothing exceptional, in themselves, about the various ‘pitch genera’ indicated in the Examples in themselves all of which have featured in Debussy’s songs at least since the *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*.⁴¹ But the studied, three-stage selection of scalar and intervallic devices to serve this particular succession of texts conveys a more ‘energetic’ play with ‘authorial interests’ (to recall Leighton’s paraphrase of Focillon) than can be captured in purely technical, categorical terms. Perhaps the proposal can best be supported with a few selective glances at the harmony.

A summary overview of the harmonic design of the whole triptych would find, quite predictably, a predominance of the third-related progressions that often replaced traditional fifth-based harmony in Debussy’s mature language.⁴² But a sense of that overall syntactical canvas can help us recognize a subtler purpose behind the most distinctive harmonic gestures in each song. For example, only in ‘La flûte de Pan’

do we find a blatant and extensive instance of the ‘black key’ and ‘white key’ polarity Richard Langham Smith once traced in *Pelléas* under the heading ‘tonalities of darkness and light’ (see Example 3b, which also highlights the [0, 2, 5] ostinati that link the two fields).⁴³ In this context, providing an accompaniment for a gradated transition from the intimate sensuality of lips on flute to the distant hearing of evening frogs, the polarity seems an outgrowth of the initial ‘naïve’ mimesis of pipes across lips – as though Debussy further tests the degree to which the poem’s worldly spaces and sensations can be summoned through the very material and physical properties of his own modern instrument. Only in the second song, by contrast, do we find a pointed recourse to the archetypal ‘tonal’ circle of fifths. Unfurled through four dominants, this striking span of ‘traditional’ harmonic syntax starts from the first climax and ends just before the rise to the second begins (see Example 3c, b. 12–14).⁴⁴ When this next, more extreme climax ultimately delivers a fortissimo ‘Tristan chord’ for the arch-Wagnerian line ‘you entered into me like my dream’ (b. 18–19), we can sense again a play with notional musical powers that resonates richly with the textual imagery (recall countless *wagnériste* paeans, from Baudelaire onwards, to the penetrative intimacy of Wagner’s music). Finally, a similar match of compositional technique to poetic implications appears again at a few points in ‘Le tombeau des naïades.’ Harmonically, this is the only song to feature several interval cycles of minor and major thirds. In this case (as so often in Debussy’s letters) there may be a sly hint about compositional purpose to be gleaned from a note he wrote to Louÿs in December 1897: ‘The third *chanson de Bilitis* is adorned with all the music for which I am beholden to my well-organized nature’.⁴⁵ In ‘Le tombeau’, this most modern, ‘well-organized’ approach to harmony first underpins the octatonic and whole-tone scales (see again Example 3d, b. 20–22); later (b. 27), the minor-third cycle returns for the startlingly schematic parallel progression that sets up the quizzical closing image of a gaze through ice.

In short, rather than merely distilling an exotic-erotic story already present in Louÿs’s book, and beyond exploring the implications of subjective and dramatic utterance through vocal interactions alone, I suggest that Debussy appropriated these three chansons to serve a more thoroughgoing interrogation of musical powers. Projected as much through the pianistic ‘environment’ as through the ‘most persuasive voice’ of Bilitis (as he once described it), the triptych frames different possibilities for musical expression within a notional three-stage history.⁴⁶ First, ‘La flûte de Pan’ encapsulates an ‘antique’ past of music, still materially and mimetically married to worldly surfaces and spaces – as in the fin-de-siècle trope Debussy himself endorsed in 1901 when claiming (as Monsieur Croche) to love best ‘those few notes from the flute of an Egyptian shepherd, he collaborates with the landscape and hears harmonies unknown to our treatises’.⁴⁷ But the placement of this song before its two companions arguably renders it a knowing interrogation of such ‘pre-theoretical’ ideals. And one way to understand its antithetical relation to ‘La chevelure’ might be to appropriate a passing remark of François-Auguste Gevaert, early in his two-volume *Histoire et théorie de la musique de l’antiquité* (1875): ‘According to the ideas generally accepted today, the antique spirit is essentially objective; within the modern spirit, on the contrary, it is the subjective and sentimental tendencies that dominate’.⁴⁸ Here again, the extravagantly orchestrated ‘Tristan chord’ that emerges as the icon of ‘subjective and sentimental’ modern harmonic powers in ‘La chevelure’ recalls Debussy’s own words – in this case, the classic *wagnériste* response to the first Act of *Tristan* back in 1887:

It is decidedly the most beautiful thing I know, from the point of view of the depth of the emotion, it embraces you like a caress, makes you suffer, in short: one passes through the same sensations as Tristan, and all that without doing violence to one's mind or heart.

A decade later, Louÿs's projection of a similarly extravagant, self-annihilating intimacy through a lover's fantasy 're-voiced' by Bilitis herself offered Debussy an ideal opportunity to question that easy youthful dismissal of Wagner's expressive 'violence'.⁴⁹

It is not so easy to find a clear authorial statement to pose alongside the 'ultra-modern' musical experiments in 'Le tombeau des naïades'. Perhaps the best textual reference point for his final 'games' with musical powers in the Louÿs triptych is the same one I once proposed for the similar esoteric games in his Mallarmé *Prélude*. Indeed, through its placement after 'La chevelure' as much as its imagery of futile searching, 'Le tombeau des naïades' arguably offers an even more blatant response than the 1894 tone poem to the creative struggles Debussy later recalled when looking back on these years after the *Pelléas* première: '[Wagner] had put the full stop to the music of his time much in the way that Hugo summed up all previous poetry. It was thus necessary to seek ways of being *après Wagner* and not *d'après Wagner*'.⁵⁰ In Louÿs's mysterious final image, supplemented by his own schematic scales and chord progressions, Debussy found a means to reframe a question much like that once projected through the crepuscular timbres of the *Prélude* – the question, that is, about what might remain for modern musical powers after the death of naïve 'antique' mimesis and Romantic affective excess alike.

Final elaborations

With this reading of Bilitis, I have effectively extended backwards the kind of allegorical, self-consciously music-historical reading that has so far only been widely applied to Debussy's next triptych, the second set of Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*. In this case, the first song, 'Les ingénus', sets a poem of wry retrospection on youthful flirting; the second, 'Le faune', a present-tense vision of a terra-cotta faun regarding lovers' interactions with cynical certainty about their 'suite mauvaise' ('bad outcome'); the last, 'Colloque sentimental', a dramatic scene between ghostly former lovers wandering in a wintry park as they dimly (and in one case reluctantly) recall long lost passions. Rumph, Youens and Bergeron all read the last 'chapter' of this oblique tripartite narrative as an allegorical farewell to Romanticism on the threshold of bleaker modernism. Yet while there is no question about the last nostalgic framing of Wagnerian passion in the middle section of 'Colloque sentimental' – which again features the 'Tristan chord', at the line 'Les beaux jours de bonheur indicible' ('those beautiful days of unspeakable happiness', b. 34–37) – a closer look at the musical progression through the whole triptych finds some possible refinements to this most obvious interpretation.

It is easy to see why Charles Koechlin was inclined to wonder, in one of the earliest discussions of Debussy's *mélodies*, whether the first two songs, 'Les ingénus' and 'Le Faune', had been composed 'considerably later' than all the other *Fêtes galantes*.⁵¹ The radical nature of these songs is one reason why

the summary of keys in Table 1 must inevitably be shaded with ambiguity. As shown in Example 4a, ‘Les ingénus’ begins with a meandering tune in the piano whose scalar basis Bergeron aptly deems a ‘deliberately artificial mode’, and which, like the voice when it enters, is oriented around the pitches of the F augmented triad.⁵² Ultimately, after a last arrival on D in the voice, the same triad emerges as the song’s final ‘tonic’ (Example 4b). The second song, ‘Le faune’, begins with a radically more modern (octatonic and chromatic) ‘flute’ arabesque than that of ‘La flûte de Pan’. It then settles onto a chordal tune whose harmonic combination with the drum-like G–D pedal tone ‘skirts bitonality’, as Koechlin puts it—no doubt with a view to the orientation of the main phrases around the same F augmented triad (Example 4c).⁵³ This song closes on a final ‘tonic’ of even more complex dissonance than that of ‘Les ingénus’: the augmented fifth F–C over the perfect fifth G–D (Example 4d). Finally, ‘Colloque sentimental’ is usually assigned simply to a minor, the key first suggested (somewhat ambiguously) by the vocal line. But in truth the only strong harmonic arrivals in the first 15 bars are on F major, and the clarification to a modal/diatonic a minor emerges only much later, after an impassioned middle section in which the sound of the diminished seventh is particularly prominent. The ending of the song, with vestigial diminished sevenths, is shown in Example 4f.

Example 4a ‘Les ingénus’, b. 1–8, showing the orientation of all material, vocal and accompanimental, around the F augmented triad.

Modéré orientation of material around the F Aug. triad at multiple levels, as indicated

The musical score for 'Les ingénus' (Example 4a) is presented in 3/8 time. It consists of piano accompaniment and a vocal line. The piano part begins with a meandering scalar line, annotated with 'F Aug.' and arrows pointing to notes F, A, and C. The vocal line enters in measure 6 with the lyrics 'Les haut ta - lons lut - taient a - vec les lon - gues ju - pes,'. The piano part continues with a similar scalar pattern, also annotated with 'F Aug.' and arrows. The score is marked 'Modéré' and 'pp doucement soutenu'. A box at the top right indicates 'orientation of material around the F Aug. triad at multiple levels, as indicated'. The piano part ends with '(etc.)' and a final chord.

Example 4b 'Les ingénus', b. 48–53, showing the final melodic and harmonic affirmations of the F augmented 'tonic'.

F Aug., as melodic skeleton

48 Lent

[bas,] Que notre â - me de - puis ce temps tremble et s'é - ton - ne.

(plus A in piano)

p *pp* *pp* *piu pp* *sf > pp* *m.g.*

F Aug.
(as 'tonic')

Example 4c 'Le faune', b. 4–12, showing the 'bitonal' inflections of the main chordal tune in the accompaniment.

4 [Andantino (Tempo rubato)]

très lointain, sans nuances, mais pourtant bien rythmé *pp*

pp avec une expression sourde

preceded by octatonic/ chromatic arabesque modal ... becomes 'bitonal'? F Aug. (over G)

G-D pedal

9 F Aug.

Example 4d 'Le faune', bars 36–39, showing the final dissonant (bitonal) 'tonic'.

36

pp *e perdendo*

plus rien

G-D pedal

F-C# plus
G-D
(as 'tonic')

Example 4e 'Colloque sentimental', b. 1–6, showing the initial whole tone material 'resolving' to F major, and the hints of a minor in the vocal melody.

Triste et lent

Dans le vieux parc so-li-taire et gla-cé, Deux

vocal line implies a minor? ... or F major?

pp

piu pp

p

whole-tone material

[V⁷ b⁹ I in F] (clears to F major triad)

Example 4f 'Colloque sentimental', b. 53–58, showing the final resolution to a minor after vestigial recollections of the middle section's diminished sevenths.

Plus lent
pp

en allant se perdant jusqu'à la fin

Et la nuit seule en-ten-dit leur pa-rol-les.

pp

piu pp

plus rien.

(dim. 7th from middle section)

clears to a minor

Example 4g Harmonic summary of the triptych.

F Aug. **F Aug. + G** **F / a ...** **to a**
'Les ingénus' 'Le faune' 'Colloque sentimentale'

This set begins by pushing beyond the modernist syntax interrogated in 'Le tombeau des naïades', and offers a nostalgic framing of Romanticism that ultimately gives way to simpler clarity. (See the harmonic summary of the triptych in Example 4g.) The possibility that this formal dynamic suggests something other than a straightforward progression towards a predetermined, ever more dissonant and bleak modernist musical language becomes clearer if we glance again at Table 1. Even as he was completing these last Verlaine songs, Debussy was also embarking on his settings of Charles d'Orléans and Tristan Lhermite in the *Trois chansons de France* (1904) – the first of the three song triptychs on older poetry that would all give new, significant prominence to 'antique' modality.

Leaving more detailed consideration of these later, self-consciously antiquarian triptychs for another time, I hope that I have given a preliminary sense of the potential for an approach to all these triptychs through quasi-painterly 'gamble' and 'guesswork' to provide richer, more flexible understanding of their musical unity than one rooted in narrowly organicist premises. It is only by 'catching at' form in this way that it is possible to recognize the progression from *Fêtes galantes I* through the *Trois chansons de Bilitis* to *Fêtes galantes II* as an intricate, sequential interrogation of the expressive possibilities in Debussy's own musical languages during the most crucial years of his negotiation with the Wagnerian heritage. The clearest sign of that interrogation is undoubtedly the 'Tristan chord', as transmuted from poignant tonal emblem to cool modal artifact in *Fêtes galantes I*, then held up to question again at the passionate 'fulcrum' of the *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, and finally relegated to ambivalent nostalgia in the framed (and rejected) reminiscences of 'Colloque sentimentale'. But if the fate of this harmonic detail seems just about enough to attach the whole, multi-song sequence to Debussy's struggles *après Wagner*, looking at Table 1, we might also consider whether the evolving dynamics of the triptych form itself reflect a similar historical self-consciousness.

Consider how poignantly those famous words from Debussy's article 'Pourquoi j'ai écrit Pelléas' – 'il fallait chercher *après Wagner*' (It was necessary to seek [music] *après Wagner*) – encapsulate an obligation experienced by his compositional generation with radically more oppressive force than ever before. I am thinking here of Richard Taruskin's extravagant claim, in the third volume of his *Oxford History of Western Music*, that the most influential figure in nineteenth-century music history was Franz Brendel, who appropriated to music the Hegelian progressive 'laws' Wagner then adopted for his own self-glorification – and which later proved so influential on the ideology of the musical 'avant-garde'.⁵⁴ Wagner's writings, of course, quickly found their way into French discourse. The rapid dissemination of the progressive 'laws' he claimed

to embody was to be vividly illustrated, for example, in the paeans to music's eternal 'progrès en avant' ('forward progress') in the closing pages of Henri Lavoix's patently Wagnerian 1884 *Histoire de la Musique*.⁵⁵ Perhaps, then, there is more than coincidence in the fact that the three Debussy triptychs most overtly marked by Wagnerian detail were also those most intensive in their narrative – and indeed dialectical – structure.

Extrapolating further from such a conceit, we might well wonder whether the markedly looser musical progressions discernible in all of Debussy's triptychs after 1904 – and reflected in the provisional language about 'Musical Structure' for all later instances in Table 1 – themselves exemplify a retreat from, or rejection of, the obligation to narrative and progressive history. In truth, there is more than mere conceit in a suggestion that the progression, in gross outline, through these last triptychs takes on a newly complex, even contradictory music-historical aspect. It has proven easy simply to label the 1910 *Trois ballades de François Villon*, for example, as an instance of pre-war nationalist reaction, as if a glance to that ideological context tells us all we need to know about how this work fits into music history.⁵⁶ But maybe we should think more carefully about the fact that the composer of the madrigalesque intensities and vaudevillian humor of these 'Renaissance' settings could also, just three years later, push to an extreme of modernist refinement in his next (and last) song triptych. Marianne Wheeldon has convincingly analyzed 'Soupir', the first of Debussy's *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, as a proto-Boulezian 'open form'.⁵⁷ Conceivably, if the two *Fêtes galantes* sets and the *Bilitis Chansons* can now be seen together as the grand 'triptych of triptychs' through which Debussy (with some consistent purpose) confronted his post-Wagnerian historicist obligations, fresh study of his later ventures in the genre – in which a Debussy 'post-Villon' rubs shoulders with a Debussy 'pre-Boulez' – holds potential to unsettle the progressivist historiography within which his music has so often been ensnared.

Finally, however, I imagine that the attempt to 'restore' Debussy's songs to their original tripartite presentation could itself carry an implicit whiff of music-critical obligation – even an underhanded endorsement of the strong 'work concept' that has always been close companion to the 'premise of organicism'. One more glance to the visual context exemplified in Figures 1 and 2 can help delimit the claims of this study more judiciously. Given the wit and imagination with which the Japanese *ukiyo-e* printmakers explored the three-part form, it may be surprising to find so few complete triptychs amidst all the reproductions in Bing's *Le Japon Artistique*. But such a cavalier approach seems to have been the rule, rather than the exception, with *japoniste* dealers. To mention only one other notable example: within Van Gogh's extensive *ukiyo-e* collection we do find a few complete triptychs and he must surely have savored their clever devices of unity and continuity.⁵⁸ But he also owned many pairs of images, both adjacent and not, and even more individual ones, which had all fallen away from their original triptych companions.

This haphazard diffusion of once-unified imagery can serve as a useful spur to embrace the broadest sense of the 'open' approach to Debussy's songs that serves, in Wheeldon's analysis of 'Soupir', as much as an invitation to the reader as a property of the work itself. That is, to programme Debussy's song

triptychs as triptychs may offer a chance to re-experience the historical pressures that once informed their creation. But to let the songs float free, like the separate pages of the *ukiyo-e* triptychs – that is, to programme (say) a Villon ballade alongside a *Fête galante*, a Mallarmé *poème*, a Verlaine *mélodie* and a Bilitis *chanson* – might ironically offer an even better way to respond, belatedly, to Debussy's struggles with music 'après Wagner'. We might thus fortuitously recover, for the whole song oeuvre, some of the unruly openness of aesthetic possibility that at least some critics were able to celebrate in the 'Symbolist' painterly environment, before the polemicists for fauvism or cubism (or whatever else) came to enforce their cherished versions of art-historical obligation. I will end with one particularly vibrant vision of such openness, as offered by the Belgian poet and art critic Émile Verhaeren in 1891 – coincidentally enough, the very year Debussy first started presenting his songs in triptych form:

In sum, that which stays in the memory after a lengthy visit to the Salon *indépendant* is, amidst the recent arrivals and the seekers of surprises, a multivalent curiosity about widely disparate fields of art. There is no longer a school, at most there are a few groups, who are constantly breaking up. All these tendencies make me think of those dynamic and kaleidoscopic geometric designs, which mirror each other at one instant, come together at another, first conjoin only to separate and fly apart soon after, but nonetheless all keep turning together within the same circle, that of new art.⁵⁹

Endnotes

(Endnotes)

1. Claude Debussy, letter to Pierre Louÿs of 16 October 1898. In Debussy 2005, pp. 425–26.
2. I am treating the texted triptychs as a partly distinct subgenre within Debussy's predilection for 'sets of three', which of course also gave rise to numerous untexted examples, from the *Estampes* and *Images* for piano through *La Mer* to the last sonatas. Although we could expand the texted subgenre slightly to include the choral *Trois chansons de Charles d'Orléans* of 1909, I will discuss only the triptychs for voice and piano.
3. For a recent example, see Bergeron 2010, for example pp. 149–56 and 163–70, and also her earlier articles, Bergeron 2000 and Bergeron 1994. Notable others include Carolyn Abbate, 'Debussy's Phantom Sounds', in Abbate 2001, pp. 145–84; Monelle 1990, pp. 193–207; Rolf 1997; Wheeldon 2000. See also the survey of much of the oeuvre, song by song, in Wenk 1976.
4. Johnson 2009, pp. 114–20. Johnson suggests an inspiration for this set in the highly successful 'Poème' cycles of Massenet.
5. Quoted from the discussion of the mural in Price 1994, pp. 199–209.
6. Maurice Denis, 'Définition du néo-traditionnisme', in Denis 1920: for Puvis, see p. 9; for the

- 'primitifs', see pp. 2–3.
7. See Marx 1891, p. 466. (Bing's journal appeared more or less simultaneously in English and French; I will draw selectively from both versions).
 8. See Weisberg 2004. I quote from Weisberg, 'A Family Affair: from Hamburg to Paris and Beyond', pp. 9–31, at 25.
 9. Debussy's *japonisme* has been noted many times, from Lockspeiser and Barraqué to Roberts and Nectoux. For a typical lionization of Utamaro, see for example Geffroy 1891, p. 425. In the introduction to his catalogue of prints by a brilliant later artist of triptychs, B. W. Robinson gives a historical explanation for the form: 'the size of paper sheets available for print-making was strictly regulated by law, with the result that if an artist wished to publish a large composition he necessarily had recourse to the diptych or triptych'. Robinson 1982, pp. 9–10.
 10. It is worth noting that Bing largely reproduced only single prints in *Le Japon Artistique* (the only 'triple plate', by Toyokuni, appears in vol. 4), and his contributors rarely even mention their origin in sets of three. But see, for example, Théodore Duret's passing remark in Duret 1889, p. 80: 'Cette gravure ne forme qu'une fraction de la composition totale qui se compose de 3 feuilles, dont chacune mesure le double de notre reproduction. Ces sortes de feuilles ne sont point empruntées à des livres elles appartiennent à la catégorie des estampes qui se publiaient séparément, et que les Japonais désignent sous le nom de *Itshi maï yé* (images par une pièce)'. Might the phrase 'images par une pièce' be suggestive background to Debussy's sets of three piano *Images*, the first from 1894?
 11. See the color reproductions in Groom 2001, pp. 58–60. As Groom notes, the obvious pastiche in these early works renders them 'the least personal' – that is, the 'most obviously "borrowed"' – of Bonnard's decorative responses to Japanese painting, which would extend to several more personal variants (e.g. the tripartite screens *Ensemble champêtre* (1894) and *Méditerranée* (1911)).
 12. See the reproduction in Frèches-Thory 1993, p. 256. In her commentary (pp. 255–56), Carol Boyle-Turner suggests some allegorical implications, notably including the Biblical 'tree of knowledge'.
 13. For a useful attempt to navigate this tangle of possible connections see Botstein 2001.
 14. Gauguin 1990, p. 26.
 15. Tunbridge 2010, p. 1.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 14. For example, see Perrey 2002 and Hoeckner 2006.
 17. Youens 1987, p. 181.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
 19. Rumph 1994).
 20. Gibbons 2008. For another account of the same set, again largely textual in focus, see Youens 1986.
 21. For example, see Rumph 1994, pp. 484–86. Tunbridge fastens on this link when discussing Debussy in Tunbridge 2010, pp. 99–102.
 22. Leighton 2008, pp. 28–29.
 23. I take the idea of a formal 'charge' from Susan Wolfson. See Wolfson 1997 and a special issue of

- Modern Language Quarterly* which she edited in 2000 under the rubric 'Reading for Form'.
24. Wolfson 1997, p. 17. The reference is to Focillon 1939.
 25. A useful point of reference here is Rose Rosengard Subotnik, 'Toward a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno, and Stravinsky', in Subotnik 1996, pp. 148–76.
An edited collection inspired by this essay includes one contribution about a Debussy song that intriguingly (if not wholly successfully) attempts to account for musical form as a 'real time' listening experience. See Le Guin 2004.
 26. Gibbons refers more precisely to the 'cardinal points' of a narrative, as discussed by Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', in Barthes 1977, pp. 79–124.
 27. Debussy mentioned the songs to Godet in a letter of January 30, 1892; see Debussy 2005, p. 103.
I am indebted, throughout, to the translations and editorial commentary in Cobb 1994 and Briscoe 1993.
 28. Youens 1987, p. 181.
 29. As noted in Table 1, the autograph manuscript presents the three songs in a different order. But this fact is open to various interpretations: perhaps Debussy gave priority to the work on two wholly new compositions, saving the lighter revisions of 'Fantôches' for later.
 30. Rolf 1985), especially p. 232.
 31. It is the term 'bergamasque', of course, that explicitly evokes the *commedia*, conventionally thought to have originated in Bergamo.
 32. Rumph 1994, p. 489.
 33. For the most thorough account see Grayson 2001.
 34. The ideological resonance is clear enough to earn the Bilitis triptych a brief mention, along with a reproduction of one of the Zohra photographs, in Locke 2009, p. 219. Locke does not elaborate on any 'exoticism' in the triptych's music.
 35. Gibbons 2008, *passim*.
 36. See Code 2001.
 37. Debussy slightly changed Bilitis's first words, from 'Il me dit'. Youens deems this an 'improvement' that heightens the tension between 'what is remembered and/or dreamed and the present'. See Youens 1986, p. 86.
 38. Gibbons 2008, p. 19.
 39. Indeed we might say that the modal placement of the arabesque approximates that physical-material immediacy as closely as possible on the keyboard. Recall Chopin's suggestion that the best scale for pianists to begin with is not C major, but B major. Debussy's modal alteration (the E sharp) does not change the material basis for this suggestion: the way the B scale brings the fingers of the hands 'naturally' into contact with the groupings of two and three black keys.
 40. The reference to 'mes dernières expériences sur la chimie musicale', which refers to Debussy's incomplete Rossetti setting *La saulaie*, appears in a letter to Eugène Ysaÿe of 13 October 1896. See Debussy 2005, p. 326.

41. I refer here to Parks 1989. For an exemplary attempt to conjoin a systematic approach to Debussy's 'referential pitch set genera' with a similarly systematic Greimasian linguistics, see the discussion of diatonic, whole-tone and octatonic devices in the Baudelaire song 'Le Jet d'eau' in Monelle 1990.
42. See Sömer 1995.
43. See Smith 1989.
44. It is tempting to make something of the textual reference to 'roots' at this exceptional passage of traditional root-directed harmony.
45. Debussy 2005, p. 377.
46. See my epigraph, and note 1 above.
47. Debussy 1987, p. 52.
48. Gevaert 1875, vol. 1, pp. 25–6.
49. Perhaps Debussy's *chansons* thus became, in part, a sly contribution to the heated disagreements he was having with Louÿs, in these very years, about the status of Wagner. We only have Louÿs's side of the fiercest argument: see his long letter of 29 October 1896 in Debussy 2005, pp. 330–32.
50. 'Pourquoi j'ai écrit Pelléas', in Debussy 1987, pp. 62–64, at p. 63.
51. Referring to all six *Fêtes galantes*, Koechlin suggests that 'les *Ingénus* et *Le faune* sont probablement assez postérieurs aux autres'. See Koechlin 1925.
52. Bergeron 2010, p. 256.
53. 'Le faune ... côtoie la bitonalité' [emphasis original]. Koechlin 1925.
54. Taruskin 2010, vol. 3, pp. 411–16. Taruskin actually introduces Brendel in somewhat more circumscribed terms: 'there was no more important figure in the world of German music at midcentury' (p. 411). But his discussion of 'Historicism' concerns Brendel's much wider impact – indeed, his 'lasting influence even among musicians who have never heard of him' (p. 415).
55. Lavoix 1884, p. 365. I take the date of Lavoix's first edition from the article on Lavoix by Joël-Marie Fauquet in Fauquet 2003, pp. 670–71. Fauquet identifies Lavoix as an amateur 'musicographe' rather than a professional 'musicologue' – but that fact itself speaks to the widespread absorption of the Wagnerian model.
56. See for example Fulcher 1999, especially pp. 169–93.
57. Wheeldon 2000 (see note 2 above).
58. For example, see the selection from 'Ukiyoe collected by the Van Gogh brothers', reproduced in the exhibition catalogue *Vincent Van Gogh and Japan* (Kyoto, TV Asahi, 1992), pp. 194–232.
59. Émile Verhaeren, 'Le salon des artistes indépendants', in Verhaeren 1997, pp. 416–18, at 418. [orig. *La Nation*, 22 March 1891].

Bibliography

- Abbate 2001: Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
- Barthes 1977: Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
- Bergeron 1994: Katherine Bergeron, 'The Echo, the Cry, the Death of Lovers', *19th-Century Music*, 18/2 (1994): 136–51.
- Bergeron 2000: Katherine Bergeron, 'Mélisande's Hair, or, the Trouble in Allemonde: A Postmodern Allegory at the Opéra-Comique', in Mary Ann Smart (ed.), *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 160–85.
- Bergeron 2010: Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Botstein 2001: Leon Botstein, 'Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy's Break with Tradition', in Jane Fulcher (ed.), *Debussy and his World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 141–79.
- Briscoe 1993: James R. Briscoe (ed.), *Songs of Claude Debussy* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 1993).
- Code 2001: David J. Code, 'Hearing Debussy, Reading Mallarmé: Music après Wagner in the Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 54/3 (2001): 493–554.
- Debussy 1987: Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits* (rev. edn, Paris: Gallimard, 1987).
- Debussy 2005: Claude Debussy, *Correspondance, 1872–1918*, ed. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
- Denis 1920: Maurice Denis, *Théories, 1890–1910: du Symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un nouvel ordre classique* (Paris: Rouart & Watelin, 1920).
- Duret 1889: Théodore Duret, 'La Gravure Japonais', *Le Japon Artistique*, 2 (1889).
- Fauquet 2003: Joël-Marie Fauquet (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la musique en France au XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).
- Focillon 1939: Henri Focillon, *Vie des formes* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1939).
- Frèches-Thory 1993: Claire Frèches-Thory and Ursula Perucchi-Petri (eds), *Die Nabis, Propheten der Moderne* (Munich: Prestel, 1993).
- Fulcher 1999: Jane F. Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music from the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Gauguin 1990: Paul Gauguin, *The Writings of a Savage*, ed. Daniel Guérin, trans. Eleanor Levieux (New York: Paragon House, 1990).
- Geffroy 1891: Gustave Geffroy, 'Japanese Landscape Painters – (Conclusion)', *Le Japon Artistique*, 6/33 (1891): 419–27.
- Gevaert 1875: François Auguste Gevaert, *Histoire et théorie de la musique de l'antiquité* (2 vols, Ghent: Annot-Braeckmann, 1875).
- Gibbons 2008: William Gibbons, 'Debussy as Storyteller: Narrative Expansion in the *Trois chansons de Bilitis*', *Current Musicology*, 85 (2008): 7–28.
- Grayson 2001: David Grayson, 'Bilitis and Tanagra: Afternoons with Nude Women', in Jane

- Fulcher (ed.), *Debussy and his World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 117–40.
- Groom 2001: Gloria Groom, *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Painting by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890–1930* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2001).
- Le Guin 2004: Elisabeth Le Guin, 'One Bar in Eight: Debussy and the Death of Description', in Andrew Dell'Antonio (ed.), *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 233–51.
- Hoeckner 2006: Berthold Hoeckner, 'Paths through Dichterliebe', *19th-Century Music*, 30 (2006): 65–80.
- Johnson 2009: Graham Johnson, *Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).
- Koechlin 1925: Charles Koechlin, 'La Mélodie', in L. Rohozinski (ed.), *Cinquante Ans de Musique Française de 1874 à 1925*, 2 (Paris: Librairie de France, 1925), p. 34.
- Lavoix 1884: Henri Lavoix fils, *Histoire de la musique* (new edn, Paris: Alcide Picard & Kaan, n.d. [original 1884]).
- Leighton 2008: Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Locke 2009: Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- Marx 1891: Roger Marx, 'On the Role and Influence of the Arts of the Far East and of Japan', *Le Japon Artistique*, 6/36 (1891): 459–66.
- Monelle 1990: Raymond Monelle, 'A Semantic Approach to Debussy's Songs', *The Music Review*, 51/3 (1990): 193–207.
- Parks 1989: Richard S. Parks, *The Music of Claude Debussy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
- Perrey 2002: Beate Julia Perrey, *Schumann's Dichterliebe and Early Romantic Poetics: Fragments of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- Cobb 1994: *The Poetic Debussy: A Collection of his Song Texts and Selected Letters*, ed. Margaret G. Cobb, trans. Richard Miller (rev. 2nd edn, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1994).
- Price 1994: Aimée Brown Price, *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1994).
- Robinson 1982: B.W. Robinson, *Kuniyoshi: The Warrior-Prints* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1982).
- Rolf 1985: Marie Rolf, 'Debussy's Settings of Verlaine's "En Sourdine"', in Dave Oliphant and Thomas Zigel (eds), *Perspectives on Music* (Austin: University of Texas, 1985), pp. 205–33.
- Rolf 1997: Marie Rolf, 'Semantic and Structural Issues in Debussy's Mallarmé Songs', in Richard Langham Smith (ed.), *Debussy Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 179–200.
- Rumph 1994: Stephen Rumph, 'Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis*: Song, Opera, and the Death of the Subject', *The Journal of Musicology*, 12/4 (1994): 464–90.
- Smith 1989: Richard Langham Smith, 'Tonalities of Darkness and Light', in *Claude Debussy, Pelléas et Mélisande*, ed. Richard Langham Smith and Roger Nichols, *Cambridge Opera Handbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- Sömer 1995: Avo Sömer, 'Chromatic Third-Relations and Tonal Structure in the Songs of Debussy', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 17/2 (1995): 215–41.

- Subotnik 1996: Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Deconstructive Variations: Music and Reason in Western Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
- Taruskin 2010: Richard. Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (6 vols, rev. edn, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Tunbridge 2010: Laura Tunbridge, *The Song Cycle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- Verhaeren 1997: *Écrits sur l'Art* (1881-1892), ed. Emile Verhaeren and Paul Aron (Brussels: Éditions Labor, 1997).
- Van Gogh and Japan 1992: *Vincent Van Gogh and Japan* (Kyoto: TV Asahi, 1992).
- Weisberg 2004: Gabriel P. Weisberg, Edwin Becker and Évelyne Possémé (eds.), *Les origines de l'art nouveau: la maison Bing* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2004).
- Wenk 1976: Arthur B. Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
- Wheeldon 2000: Marianne Wheeldon, 'Debussy's *Soupir*: an Experiment in Permutational Analysis', *Perspectives of New Music*, 38/2 (2000): 134–60.
- Wolfson 1997: Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).
- Youens 1986: Susan Youens, 'Music, Verse, and "Prose Poetry": Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis*', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 7/1 (1986): 69–94.
- Youens 1987: Susan Youens, 'To Tell a Tale: Symbolist Narrative in Debussy's *Fêtes Galantes II*', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 16/1–2 (1987–1988): 180–91.