

# Debussy in Performance

Edited by James R. Briscoe

Yale University Press  
New Haven & London

Copyright © 1999 by Yale University. Chapter 8 is extracted from D.-E. Inghelbrecht, *Comment on ne doit pas interpréter "Carmen," "Faust," "Pelléas,"* © 1933, and is used by permission. All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.  
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Debussy in performance / edited by James R. Briscoe.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 0-300-07626-6 (alk. paper)

1. Debussy, Claude, 1862–1918—Criticism and interpretation.
  2. Performance practice (Music)—19th century.
  3. Performance practice (Music)—20th century.
- I. Briscoe, James R., 1949– .  
ML410.D28D385 1999  
780'.92—dc21

99-38223

CIP

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

Preface ix

## Part One **The Spirit of Debussy Performance**

- 1 Debussy on Performance: Sound and Unsound Ideals *Richard Langham Smith* 3
- 2 Symbolism and Performance *Claude Abravanel* 28
- 3 *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Performance *Louis-Marc Suter* 45

## Part Two **The Genres in Performance**

- 4 Debussy and Orchestral Performance *James R. Briscoe* 67
- 5 Debussy and Early Debussystes at the Piano *Cecilia Dunoyer* 91
- 6 Debussy, the Dance, and the *Faune* *Stephanie Jordan* 119
- 7 Thoughts on the History of (Re)interpreting Debussy's Songs  
*Brooks Toliver* 135

Part Three **Interpreters on Debussy**

- 8 How Not to Perform *Pelléas et Mélisande* *Désiré-Emile Inghelbrecht* 157
- 9 Debussy, *Pelléas*, and Orchestral Conducting: An Interview with Pierre Boulez *James R. Briscoe* 176

Part Four **Debussy Performance and Score Analysis**

- 10 Structure and Performance: Metric and Phrase Ambiguities in the Three Chamber Sonatas *Richard S. Parks* 193
- 11 Timbre, Voice-leading, and the Musical Arabesque in Debussy's Piano Music *Jann Pasler* 225

**Notes** 257

**Bibliography** 285

**Contributors** 291

**Index** 293

## Preface

Musicians everywhere acknowledge the fundamental influence of Debussy in the twentieth century. Pierre Boulez, a leading composer and conductor of contemporary music, asserts in his *Notes of an Apprenticeship* that “modern music was awakened by Debussy.” And Debussy has had an abiding influence on popular music and jazz: the leading jazz composer and performer Chick Corea notes that “Debussy is the most important classical composer in my life.” Yet no comprehensive analysis of Debussy’s own performance expectations, of the performance traditions surrounding his compositions, or of the internal and contextual evidence that can inform performers has hitherto been undertaken.

This book focuses on several important issues that are helping to energize Debussy scholarship today. First and perhaps foremost, several contributors inquire into the “esprit debussyste,” as Richard Langham Smith terms it in his chapter on performance, where he calls on us to reach beyond the “urtext mentality” of too great a literalism. Claude Abravanel urges performers to adopt the symbolist mindset of Debussy, a point furthered by Louis-Marc Suter when he argues for the value of silence in performing Debussy’s opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

Part II examines issues of Debussy's genres in performance. The evidence offered by the composer himself and by the earliest performers who knew him is the basic resource of these chapters. Questions about performance forces, flexibility of tempo, aspects of piano playing, performer license, and the interpretation of expressive indications are considered in my chapter on orchestral performance, in Cecilia Dunoyer's on Debussy and early Debussistes at the piano, in Stephanie Jordan's on Debussy's music for the dance, and in Brooks Toliver's on interpreting the songs. Fixing Debussy's intentions is no easy task, for the composer occasionally altered his expectations according to given circumstances, and he rewrote whole passages when a performance exigency was at hand. On occasion he performed works differently from the score indications. Rather than attempting to find a given "truth" of Debussy's intentions, these contributors have shown the range of values within which Debussy and those closest to him appear to have conceived his music. Historical sound recordings are considered extensively here, as throughout this book, such as those housed at the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Library of the French National Radio, in Paris, at the New York Public Library, and at the Library of Congress Sound Archives. The artistic context of Debussy performance is considered here, too, for example, in Stephanie Jordan's discussion of symbolism, cubism, and modernism in relation to dance performance.

Part III presents the viewpoints of particular interpreters, including the conductor Désiré-Emile Inghelbrecht, writing in 1933 on how not to perform *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and Pierre Boulez, who agreed to be interviewed for this book.

Part IV concerns score analysis. The structural elements of timbre, voice-leading, and the musical arabesque, as well as metric and phrase ambiguities are explored by Richard Parks, who focuses on Debussy's sonatas, and by Jann Pasler, who stresses the need for performers to consider texture and timbre in the piano music.

Several of the studies in this collection draw upon the memoirs of performers close to Debussy, such as the conductors Inghelbrecht, Gabriel Pierné, and Piero Coppola; the singers Jane Barthori, Mary Garden, and Maggie Teyte; and the pianists Marguerite Long, Alfred Cortot, and George Copeland. Some of these reminiscences have appeared previously in the invaluable collection by Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (1992), but here they are placed in a context of genre performance, performance analysis, and performance aesthetic. Many of the authors draw on Debussy's own letters and music criticism, which have only recently been published by François Lesure and others. Studies by Richard Parks, Roy Howat, Lesure, and Richard Langham Smith, among oth-

ers, have provided important information about internal evidence in the music that affects performance choice, as well as about Debussy's own performances; the studies in this book are indebted to their pioneering work. Given this new interest in Debussy, as well as the ongoing publication of his complete works, the time is ripe for reflection on the issues raised in this book. The music of Debussy has been and will continue to be crucial in the evolution of contemporary music and music performance.

I am indebted to two former students, now scholars in their own right. Roberta Lindsey provided expert help in preparing the final copy and Andrew Simpson prepared the music examples.

**Part One The Spirit of  
Debussy Performance**



# Chapter 1 Debussy on Performance: Sound and Unsound Ideals

*Richard Langham Smith*

There was in Debussy's playing a narcotic/erotic note, a sweet dreaminess like that of a woman's hand.

*Karl Lahm*

So-called period performances have been chasing musicologists more quickly than the boundaries of the discipline of performance practice have advanced. Even before musicologists have begun to put pen to paper, performers have rushed into the breach, warming up their late nineteenth-century conical silver flutes with the *Faune's* C-sharps, and pressing into service some "authentic" pianos, even if documentation may show that they were of a type Debussy decidedly did not care for.<sup>1</sup> Before we are overtaken by a tide of performances claiming to be "historically informed," some serious consideration needs to be given to this composer's own performance ideals, seen in the context of those prevalent in his time. Why has so little been written on this subject, one might ask.

A perfectly legitimate response from those even moderately well read in Debussy's writings might be that this composer wrote precious little about such matters and that what there is has to be read with an inevitably speculative eye.

With regard to Debussy, the term "authenticity," outmoded when applied to the music of earlier times, may unashamedly be reverted to,

for even in the composer's lifetime, performers identified a specific "esprit debussyste" and encouraged their pupils to try to find it. Notions of "historically informed" performances may thus be separated from similar notions in regard to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries because there is no "lost tradition" in between. Or is there?

The present essay is founded on the principle that in the 1990s, when a lot more information is available on both desk and music stand, as well as on the compact disc player, a reconsideration of what we know about Debussy's own ideals of performance might valuably be made, and in particular, problem areas of contradiction can be probed. This is a fairly straightforward task of "police-station musicology" if you like: the sifting and juxtaposition of this widening body of evidence.

Better texts are currently in progress: above all, the "urtext" *Oeuvres complètes*. Also trickling out is a wealth of reminiscences of varying degrees of reliability, previously unpublished letters and articles by the composer, and, perhaps most important, recordings and player-piano transcriptions from Debussy's own day.<sup>2</sup>

With such a wide spectrum of sources, musicology must reexamine its methods, not least because as soon as early recordings of one sort or another are brought in as source material, danger signals should begin to flash. Recordings and piano rolls, of course, have to be treated with particular caution: what we deduce from them must take into account the technical limitations and idiosyncrasies of early recording as well as human fallibility. But while on one level they have helped the compilation of the Debussy urtext, on another they challenge the esteem given to the notion of an urtext edition by positivist musicology. How often is "musicologically informed" criticism based on the maxim "This was a good performance because it followed the urtext score, this was a bad performance because it didn't"? Is that so bad? Yes and no.

With regard particularly to the standard repertoire of the late nineteenth century, Robert Philip, in his pioneering work on early recordings, has neatly contrasted the performing traditions of the early with the late twentieth century as follows: "The performances of the early twentieth century are . . . volatile, energetic, flexible, vigorously projected in broad outline but rhythmically informal in detail. Modern performances are, by comparison, accurate, orderly, restrained, deliberate, and even in emphasis."<sup>3</sup> To summarize the dynamics of the process of change from the one to the other approach, Philip traces the gradual decline of a tradition in which a sparing use of a rather fast vibrato among both string players and singers gave way to a slower, wider, and more widespread use; in which the general avoidance of vibrato for wind players, except for those of

the French school, gave way to a more widespread use; in which the use of portamento for both strings and singers gave way to its avoidance; in which a free approach to tempo gradually changed to a stricter approach, and so on. The musicologist must conclude that it was the former performing climate that Debussy knew and remind him or herself that he was dead before even the glimmerings of the latter tradition were felt.

Philip's unveiling of the detailed techniques of the performance practices of Debussy's day might profitably be approached in another way. Because Debussy himself was so fussy about the detailed notation of his scores (although he often seem to lose interest in precision at the proof stage), a dual approach that views the relationship between Debussy's printed scores and the recorded legacy might serve us well in situating Debussy's attitudes to performance in relation to the more general postromantic performing climate of his time. To put the question in a nutshell: Where did Debussy stand in relation to an interpretative tradition whose very essence was the licensing of riding a coach and four through the notational prescriptions of a score?

In this climate, composers' attitudes to their own scores were radically different, perhaps even the opposite, of what we expect today. Philip cites Mahler: a telling example of a composer in a pre-urtext mindset. On the one hand he produced immaculately notated scores; on the other he could claim that "all the most important things: the tempo, the total conception and structuring of a work are almost impossible to pin down. For here we are concerned with something living and flowing that can never be the same even twice in succession. That is why metronome markings are inadequate and almost worthless; for unless the work is vulgarly ground out in barrel-organ style, the tempo will already have changed by the second bar."<sup>4</sup> If Mahler as a conductor was as free as he liked with, say, Beethoven, then why shouldn't other conductors mess about with his own meticulously marked music?

Such a view might suggest that for most performers in the early twentieth century the notion of an urtext would have seemed ridiculous: Why go to the trouble of producing an impeccably notated score if it was assumed that any performer worth his salt would do what he wanted with it anyway? Mahler's view may seem extreme; Philip relates it to "Wagner and Bülow's kind of flexibility"<sup>5</sup>—but in fact a similar view was expressed by Debussy, with a metaphor that may make us smile in that it seems so typically French, and makes Mahler's reference to the "barrel-organ" style so typically teutonic. Writing to Durand in 1915, while working on an edition of Chopin, Debussy advises against the inclusion of metronome marks: "You know what I think about metronome mark-

ings: they're all right for one measure, like those roses which only last for a morning."<sup>6</sup> Clues about where Debussy stood as regards interpretational intervention can be had from a few of his letters. Surprisingly few more can be gleaned from his stint as a music critic.

Most important in this quest is to take Debussy's evolving aesthetic as the starting point, rather than to approach the issue from the other end. Whether he pulled triplets around or suggested bringing out "inner voices" are ultimately secondary questions. The basic level of the *esprit debussyste* must first be established.

From his earliest letters from the 1880s, written in Rome to such artistic mentors as Eugène Vasnier, Emile Baron, and Gustave Popelin, Debussy was apt to avoid any analysis of why a performance he had attended was in his opinion good or bad. He was content to affirm his approval or disapproval without going farther. On the few occasions when we can see through to ideals of performance, they are inevitably related to deeper ideas of how music should affect us.

A combing of the clues as to his ideas on performance that Debussy left us in his articles and letters reveals a polarity in his mind between realism and *rêverie*. His strong dislike of musical "realism" is a recurrent streak, developed at a time when he was faced with the task of assuming a stance as a critic.<sup>7</sup> These ideas were catalyzed by his disdain for Alfred Bruneau's opera *Messidor*, to a libretto by Emile Zola, which received its premiere at the Paris Opéra in 1897. Added to this were remarks made after his attendance at a rehearsal for Charpentier's *Louise* in 1900.

With regard to the former he confesses to the writer Pierre Louÿs that "life is too short" to attend such events and goes on to describe both Zola and Bruneau as "ugly" and "mediocre."<sup>8</sup> With regard to Charpentier a similar antipathy emerges again: "Note how Charpentier takes 'the cries of Paris,' which are wonderful examples of picturesque humanity, and like some wretched *Prix de Rome* turns them into chlorotic cantilenas with harmonies that, to be polite, I'll call parasitic. . . . And they call that life! Heavens above, I'd rather die on the spot—these are sentiments which are like a hangover when you've drunk your twentieth half."<sup>9</sup>

Debussy was clearly passionate about the falseness of Zola's naturalism and its transference into music because it was the polar opposite of his own approach. While Zola believed that the way to penetrate "reality" was "merely to observe," for Debussy such reality was less easily attained. For him, reality could be glimpsed only by engaging the imagination. *Pelléas* is the prime example of this procedure.<sup>10</sup>

Any speculations on the nature of the *esprit debussyste* must be founded in

this aesthetic, which, curiously, has been approached copiously from every angle except that of a critical and penetrating reading of Debussy's own writings, although there is plenty of writing that confronts Debussy's music with the opposing concerns of literary symbolism and visual impressionism.<sup>11</sup>

Commentators have rightly seized upon the composer's response to Ernest Guiraud's question in his celebrated interview with Debussy about what constituted an ideal libretto: "Celui qui, disant les choses à demi, me permettra de greffer mon rêve sur le sien," freely translated by Lockspeiser as "the ideal would be two associated dreams" but perhaps more accurately rendered as that which, half-stating things, "allows me to graft my dream on to his" (the librettist's).<sup>12</sup> These ideas were already in germinal form during Debussy's early stay in Rome, as another, often cited letter to Eugène Vasnier shows. Speaking of his rejection of an initial plan for a setting of *Zuleïma* after Heinrich Heine, as his initial *envoi* from Rome, he again touches on the question of "reality." He mentions the impossibility of being subservient to a rigid literary plan and speaks of his need for a libretto where "the sequence of external events is subordinate to an extended exploration of the sentiments of the soul—'des sentiments de l'âme.'" Reading further into Debussy's response to the "ideal libretto" question in the Guiraud interview, we find the composer expressing a preference for a setting without historical reference, "out of time, and with no distinguishable setting."<sup>13</sup>

One of the first works to fulfill these ideals was *La damoiselle élue*, a setting of stanzas from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem "The Blessed Damozel." The scenario for this poem, an imagined heaven studded with the mildly symbolic bric-a-brac of Pre-Raphaelitism, and not unrelated to the images of heaven in illustrated Victorian Bibles, was certainly the diametrical opposite of Zola's real-life scenarios. The Damoiselle's slow declamation clearly exemplifies Debussy's ideals of a distillation of human emotion: "des sentiments de l'âme." A performance of the piece in 1900 drew a revealing letter of gratitude from the composer to the singer of the Damoiselle, again stressing the idea of an escape from the material world. Debussy was moved by her ability "to abstract herself entirely from the material world so that it became supernatural." He went on to admire her delivery of the line "All this is when he comes," which distills the Damoiselle's longing for terrestrial love in this imagined paradise.<sup>14</sup>

For several reasons, 1901–2 may be identified as a crucial time in the crystallization of Debussy's aesthetic standpoint. Firstly, this was the stressful period when Debussy saw *Pelléas* go through the production machinery of the Opéra-Comique, after which it was dealt with by commentators of all positions. In ad-

dition, at this time he first took on the position of music critic for *La revue blanche* and later for *Gil Blas*, a job that necessitated the clarification of his own aesthetic standpoint. And finally, in retrospect we see that after this period his musical style suddenly advanced into new realms.

Two strands may thus far be identified in Debussy's credo as we go into this crucial period: firstly, the preoccupation with the dream, which must have been severely challenged as he saw *Pelléas* made flesh in a realistic manner far removed from his own inner vision of his opera;<sup>15</sup> and secondly, the concept of distilled and heightened human emotion—the search for “des sentiments de l'âme”—which Debussy had explored in *La damoiselle élue*, and in *Pelléas*.

In his public comments on *Pelléas*, Debussy gave us one or two further tantalizing insights into the basis of his aesthetic, the most telling (and frequently quoted) of which is his comment about “exploring the mysterious *correspondances* between nature and the imagination,” whose application commentators have been tempted to extend well beyond the bounds of his opera.<sup>16</sup> With its Baudelairean overtones we may be tempted to append this idea to the two strands previously identified as being at the center of Debussyan ideals in general, and to extend its application to the period immediately following *Pelléas*, and in particular to the post-1900 piano works, with their evocative titles.

One figure whom Debussy seems almost to have envied as he formulated his own ideas was Paul Dukas. Debussy admired not only Dukas's opinions, developed in a vast corpus of articles mainly for the *Revue hebdomadaire*, but also his “intelligence at the service of complete understanding.” This esteem he expressed in a letter of 1901 that was in part concerned with his approval of an article in which Dukas had stressed the difficulty of pigeon-holing Debussy in a climate where the public liked to identify composers as “pupils of Franck, pupils of Massenet or disciples of Wagner,” and so on. Added to this, Dukas claimed, was that each of Debussy's pieces “brought something special, which marks, if not a sensitive transformation of his approach, at least an unexpected and different point of view.”

Debussy may also have admired Dukas's probing of the nature of his relationship to symbolist poetry, an expansion of the composer's self-confessed preoccupation with the “*correspondances* between nature and the imagination.” As Dukas wrote in his article:

Whether he collaborates with Baudelaire, Verlaine, or Mallarmé, or draws upon his own sources for the subject of his works, the composer confirms himself above all care-

ful to avoid what one might call a direct translation of feelings. What attracts him in these aforementioned poets is precisely their art of transposing everything into symbolic images, to make one word vibrate into multiple resonances. . . . The majority of his compositions are thus symbols of symbols, but expressed in a language in itself so rich, so persuasive, that it attains the eloquence of a new verb.<sup>17</sup>

Debussy's letter to Dukas clearly follows up ideas in Dukas's article. Even as, on the outside, he is appreciative of Dukas's ability to intellectualize his musical aesthetics, there is an anti-intellectual undercurrent in Debussy's response. After admitting that Dukas's piece on the *Nocturnes* is "practically a unique act of empathy," he adds that "having intelligence at the service of infinite understanding is a luxury to which you are accustomed." In a central sentence, clearly in response to Dukas's comments about Debussy's relation to poetry, Debussy confesses the he is "no longer thinking in musical terms, or at least not much, even though I believe with all my heart that Music always remains the finest form of musical expression we have." Possibly in a veiled attack on Dukas's own music, Debussy protests against music "manifesting an obvious inability to see beyond the work-table . . . lit by one miserable lamp and never by the sun."<sup>18</sup> Again he returns to the idea of taking people out of themselves into a land of dreams: "It is enough if music forces people to *listen* in spite of themselves, in spite of their little daily cares, . . . so that they think they have dreamt for a moment of a magic and therefore undiscoverable place."<sup>19</sup> Debussy's last phrase here is surely an important key to his kingdom.

If we are in danger of straying too far into compositional aesthetics which may not directly affect our notion of Debussyan performance ideals, a letter from the time of *Pelléas* brings us back to the question of interpretational intervention. Writing to André Messager after Henri Busser had replaced him as the conductor of *Pelléas* at the Opéra-Comique, Debussy accuses Busser of "ignoring the singers and throwing chords in front of their feet, without any attention to the harmonic logic." The idea here would seem to be twofold: firstly to give more time in the placing of chords so that the singers do not trip over them—perhaps those in the more recitativelike sections of the opera—and secondly to observe the inner logic of a progression of harmonies. After castigating Busser, Debussy identifies some of the points he admires in Messager, stressing his interpretative powers and raising interpretation as a wider question: "You knew how to bring the music of *Pelléas* to life with a tender delicacy that would be hard to find anywhere else, for it is incontestable that the interior rhythm of any music depends on who is performing it, just as this or that word depends on the lips that pronounce it. . . . So our impression of *Pelléas* was heightened by your personal in-

tuitions and feelings from which came the sense of everything being put in the right place.”<sup>20</sup> Debussy’s stressing of the importance of the interpreter in bringing to life the “interior rhythm” of the piece, which he seems to consider of paramount importance, is an idea which recurs in subsequent letters to other correspondents. His mindset is certainly not of the noninterventionist interpreter, faithfully bringing to life the notational details of the score, although, we may note, he likes the sense of things being in their “right place.”

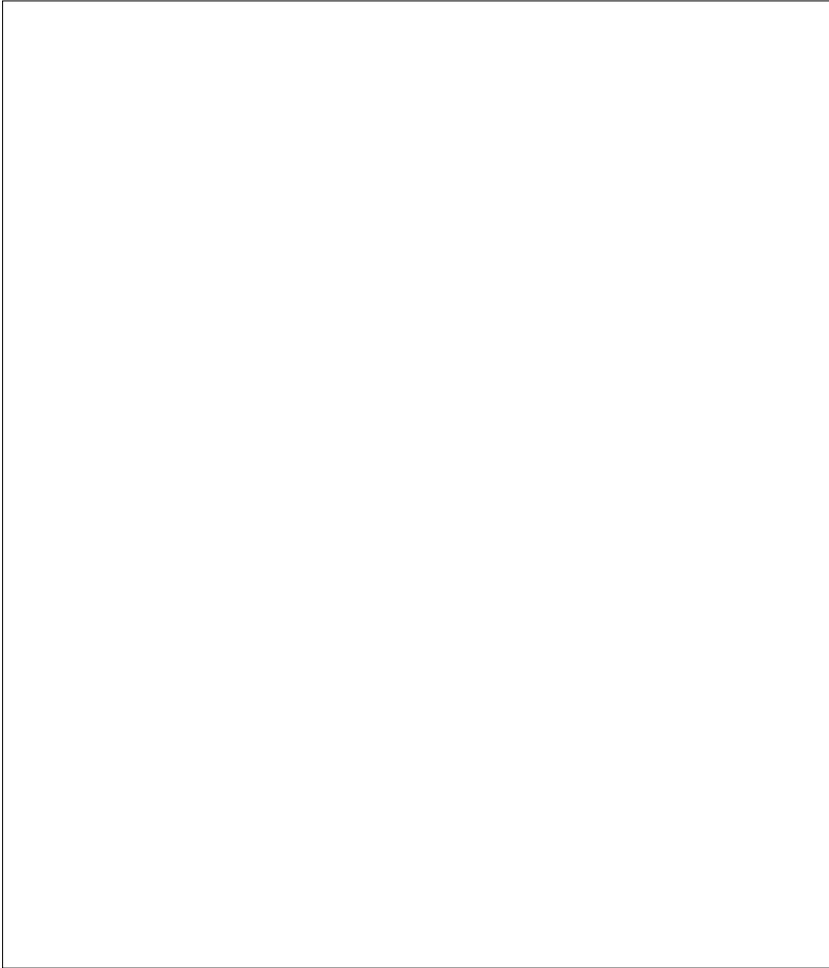
Writing to Manuel de Falla in 1907, in response to a query about the interpretation of the dances for harp and orchestra, Debussy elaborates on a rhythmic problem: “What you ask me is difficult to resolve! You cannot show a rhythm exactly any more than you can show exactly the exact expression of a phrase. The best thing is to rely on your personal feeling.”<sup>21</sup>

Debussy’s concern with “personal feelings” guiding interpretation, “intuition,” the impossibility of exactly notating rhythms and the respect for the “vertu” of harmonies may be tested by reference to the handful of recordings he bequeathed to us, and to a lesser, more speculative extent, by those of other performers who were coached by him.

A remarkable exemplification of some of the ideas which have been identified is found in the acoustic recording of the third of the *Ariettes oubliées*, “L’ombre des arbres,” made by Mary Garden with Debussy accompanying her in 1904.<sup>22</sup> The poem could hardly better exemplify an exploration, as Debussy had put it, of “the mysterious *correspondances* between nature and the imagination.” (See example 1.1.) The apex of the song, typical of Verlaine and of Debussy’s response, is the moment of coincidence of the two images of the poem: the moment when the qualities of the landscape—the first preoccupation of the poem—are attributed to the “voyageur,” a variant on the common anthropomorphic devices used by Verlaine. Across the line break “ce paysage blême / Te mira blême toi-même,” a new chromatic phrase emerges from the middle register of the piano texture, rising to dominate the falling phrase of the vocal line and thus lead to the climax of the piece. Debussy’s way of notating this has several subtleties, but his performance introduces still more. In the notation, the new phrase is not given a new phrase mark but is elided with the falling-fifth phrase which began the song and has insistently recurred at the same pitch: it is thus almost imperceptibly born of the first idea.

Over the whole phrase Debussy marks *un poco stringendo* and he gives the repeat and octave transposition of the phrase two crescendo marks as well as indicating a general crescendo over the vocal line. So far, Debussy’s accompaniment (as pianist) has been hypnotically in time, with the recurrent triplet-duplet





Ex. 1.1. “L’ombre des arbres,” mm. 13–20. Transcription of expressive devices as recorded by Mary Garden and Debussy, Paris, 1904.

rhythms (m. 2 of example 1) played exactly in time, without any hint of agogic alteration. In the recording, however, the *poco stringendo* is suddenly exaggerated, certainly not “un poco,” and the four eighth notes are given agogic accentuation, suddenly accelerated, and delivered roughly in the following manner: dwelling on the second eighth note and rushing the last two.<sup>23</sup>

This type of melodic rubato was widely used at the turn of the century. In this case it effects a sudden injection of energy, raising the emotional pitch far above that suggested by the expressive markings in the score.<sup>24</sup> If these rhythmic vari-

ants are deliberate—and I would suggest that they are—then it may be concluded that Debussy was not averse to grafting the “expressive” performance practices common in his time on to his detailed, prescriptive-looking scores.<sup>25</sup>

Closer analysis reveals deeper links with Debussy’s expressed performance aesthetics. His ideals of penetrating “des sentiments de l’âme” have already been brought out. Here Debussy’s own rendering gives us the sudden intervention of a dynamic and expressive style into a performance whose prolonged stasis throws into relief the slightest expressive nuance above the score. Suddenly, in the passage quoted above, extreme expressive devices—both in composition and performance—are employed to heighten the key line of the poem, more attenuated than any other line, where the poet’s “nature-rêverie” leads him to penetrate the “soul” of the “voyageur.”

The recording yields one further insight. Given that the vocal portamento was an integral part of the singing style of the day, Debussy’s line in this song climaxes in an interval in which he surely knew that the singer would utilize its most extreme form: the “full” portamento, beginning immediately on the top note, and slowly falling through the wide downward interval, in this case a diminished seventh. Four types of portamento of increasing intensity may be identified:

1. The use of a consonant as springboard for the next note, for example at m. 16, where the consonant of a word is sung on the previous note, in this case the “bl” of “blême”: a device simply to increase the sense of line and clarity of diction.
2. The use of a vowel sound to bridge a relatively fast interval, for example an upward third. The portamento is subtle and not prominent, but again it joins the line. An example of this is the “ô voy-” of “ô voyageur” at m. 13.
3. The “goal” portamento, usually initiated on a beat after a long note which has been held at pitch, aiming at the “goal” of a strong beat, for example at m. 14.
4. The “full” portamento, where two notes, almost inevitably a high note followed by a low note, are joined by a slow and immediate portamento, as in the last bar of the vocal line of the song. Examples 1.1 and 1.2 show the cumulative effect of these unwritten devices, surely in the composer’s mind.

Also of interest are further devices employed to retain the natural stress of the language, for example the shortening and lightening of the beginnings of reflexive verbs; and a refusal to let a legato line iron out diction. In “Il pleure dans mon coeur” this lightening of the beginnings of reflexive verbs happens twice, on the lines:

Insert 1

Comparison with subsequent early recordings in some way associated with the composer himself reveals that a similar approach to the composer's vocal lines of this time was commonplace, and it may tentatively be claimed to be central to the elusive esprit debussyste. Désiré-Emile Inghelbrecht, who left us a detailed analysis of points of technique in his essay on how not to perform *Pelléas*, advised singers to "say the text before singing it."<sup>26</sup> Sound advice! But as the century progressed, it seems to have been increasingly ignored in favor of "line," obscuring both speech-rhythm and differentiated vowel-sounds. (For more on this, see Inghelbrecht's essay, Chapter 8.)

Between the lines of Inghelbrecht's essay, which can claim to be near to primary evidence since Inghelbrecht had worked with Debussy as well as with several singers who had been coached by him, a point of balance between word and line may be distinguished. Quoting *Mélisande*'s first words, he writes, "You have just heard me pronounce these words, pronounce them yourselves, in your mind, and recall Mary Garden singing them." All very well, but we must turn to our primitive recordings of a tiny extract from *Pelléas* and three songs to re-

Ex. 1.2. "L'ombre des arbres," mm. 21–26. Hierarchy of cumulative portamento devices as recorded by Mary Garden and Debussy, Paris, 1904.

construct the musical context of Inghelbrecht's remark, echoed later when he continues (on the role of Mélisande) that it is "not enough for the singer to convey the word and the note," she must also, "by her look, convey the meaning of a phrase."<sup>27</sup> This, it seems, was an art which Debussy considered Mary Garden to have accomplished.<sup>28</sup>

Inghelbrecht cited various other interpreters of the roles from *Pelléas*, claiming them as exemplifying "le vrai," one of them being Hector Dufranne, creator of the role of Golaud. A letter from Debussy to Dufranne written in 1906 testifies to his admiration for this singer, and in keeping with what has already been put forward as an important priority in Debussy's credo, a penetration of the "sentiments de l'âme," encourages him to go still farther in this direction in a forthcoming revival at the Opéra-Comique: "You and Veuille [creator of the role of Arkël] are almost alone in having retained an understanding of the artistic conception which I attempted in *Pelléas*. . . . Please exaggerate the sad and poignant sadness of Golaud, . . . giving as much as you can the impression of everything he regrets not having said and done, and all the happiness which has now escaped him for ever."<sup>29</sup> The techniques Dufranne used can thus claim to embody that elusive esprit debussyste which Inghelbrecht stresses; moreover, he is the only interpreter from the original cast of *Pelléas* who bequeathed us extended excerpts of the role of Golaud. A brief examination of a series of historic remasterings reveals a good deal about changing performance styles. Act II scene 2 is the only scene common to them all.

*Excerpts recorded 1928, conducted by Georges Truc, with Hector Dufranne as Golaud. Reissued on CD VAI audio, VALA 1093, 1995.* Dufranne, in a similar way to Mary Garden in "L'ombre de arbres," is slightly free in his interpretation of Debussy's notated rhythms, always because of the natural stress of the language. Slight portamenti or their absence are used to "soften" or "harden" the expression, an absolutely marked and rhythmic declamation being a special effect used for particularly telling phrases. In Act II scene 2, in the passage where Golaud describes how the horse had fallen on top of him, this effect is used to considerable effect: "cela ne sera rien" is uttered strictly in time; as Golaud recounts his accident, rhythms are tightened to lessen the contrast between the triplets and duplets which pervade the opera. This may throw some light on Ninon Vallin's remembrance of Debussy's insistence "that the duplets and triplets which so often feature in the melodic lines of Debussy's songs . . . had to be perfectly balanced."<sup>30</sup> "Balanced," our researches may suggest, did not mean metronomic.

Following Debussy's instruction "en animant peu à peu et sourdement agité," portamenti are introduced and the end of the first passage is highlighted by a

loosening of the written rhythm and a considerable ritardando (example 1.3).

*Excerpts recorded 1928, conducted by Piero Coppola, with Vanni-Marcoux as Golaud. Reissued on CD VAI audio, VALA 1093, 1995.* Even making excuses for Vanni-Marcoux's having an off-day, an entirely different approach is discernible here. The approach to the rhythmic values of the score is free to the point of extreme sloppiness. His breathing in the middle of the phrases indicates that he was out of sorts, but the rhythmic freedom suggests either that he had not re-rehearsed his part (he

3.1-1



3.1-2



\*Reprint of Freach language VS, Fromont 1902.

Ex. 1.3. *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act II scene 2, as recorded by Hector Dufranne, the creator of the role of Golaud, Paris, 1928 (*Example continues*)

3.1-3

3.1-4

3.1-5

3.1-6

3.1-7

Ex. 1.3. (*Continued*)

had first sung it in 1914, thirteen years before the recording) or that he took a free approach to Debussy's rhythms. Whatever the case, it pales beside Dufranne's version on every count. Examples of the rhythmic liberties are as follows:

Insert 2

and later:

Insert3

These are just two of countless similar distortions (unless they were variants privately authorized by the composer, which is by no means impossible but, since the speech rhythm is distorted at least in the latter example, unlikely): Vanni-Marcoux's slapdash attitude to Debussy's text, off-day or not, is confirmed.

*Complete opera, recorded 1942, conducted by Roger Desormière, with Henri Etcheverry as Golaud. Reissued on CD EMI Références CHS 7 61038 2, 1988.* Etcheverry takes the opposite approach to that of Dufranne from the first note in Act I scene 1. Despite impeccable diction the musical notation is strictly adhered to with hardly any "nuance," forcing the language into the strict duplet-triple juxtaposition of Debussy's notation. There are no longer any portamenti, and in relation to the first recordings an entirely opposite, almost dehumanized effect is achieved.

*Complete opera, recorded 1952, conducted by Ernest Ansermet, with Heinz Rehfuss as Golaud. Reissued on CD Decca Historic 425 965-2.* Rehfuss takes a similar approach to Etcheverry, above, except for his poor diction (listen to the pronunciation of the word *d'extraordinaire* in Act II scene 2). This recording shows that even under an esteemed Debussyist like Ansermet, the tradition of Debussy's expression had not been preserved.

*Complete opera, recorded 1953, conducted by Jean Fournet, with Michel Roux as Golaud. Reissued on CD Phillips Opera Collector 434 783-2, 1992.* Roux, born in Angoulême in 1924, had made a specialty of the role of Golaud and was one of his most notable exponents during the 1950s. There is a clear move back toward a Dufranne-like interpretation: Debussy's rhythms are clearly absorbed, but the word-stress is allowed to predominate here and there. Unlike Dufranne there are no portamenti; and the line is not nearly as flexible and varied as Dufranne's, though it is commanding in a later interpretative style.

*Complete opera, recorded 1962, conducted by D.-E. Inghelbrecht, with Michel Roux as Golaud. Reissued on CD Disques Montaigne TCE 8710.* Under Inghelbrecht's direction the slight flexibility of Roux's approach becomes more pronounced: we seem to have come full circle and approach again the style of singing that Debussy obtained from both Dufranne and Garden.

Before moving away from vocal interpretation, the testimony—both literary and recorded—of one further singer may be mentioned: Claire Croiza. At the end of Debussy's life Croiza sang the part of Geneviève in a benefit performance of *Pelléas*; she also sang the *Damoiselle* in a staged version of the cantata, performing in *Le martyr de Saint-Sébastien* and giving the premiere of several early songs during the late 1930s.<sup>31</sup> The transcription of Croiza's master classes stresses time and time again the perfection of Debussy's notation and constantly advises



the student to follow this exactly: “[Debussy] has caught the poet’s rhythm so perfectly that the poem can be declaimed without changing anything in the rhythm. . . . The singer has only to follow the notation as closely as possible . . . musically everything must be rigorously exact, be sung with metronomic precision.”<sup>32</sup> In this context Croiza’s telling performance of the role of Geneviève in the extracts recorded with Dufranne in 1926 is illuminating. She gives a fine performance, but it is by no means metronomic! In the “letter scene” (Act I scene 2), she is never as rigorous as the later Golauds remarked upon above, even in the reading of the letter, which is marked “*simplement et sans nuances*.” As with Dufranne, the rhythms of the score are clear, but there is considerable freedom, especially in the triplets. The opening words, “Voici ce qu’il écrit à son frère Pelléas,” are delivered with a hurrying to the second syllable of the word *écrit* and a slight downward portamento, contrasting with a more deadpan delivery as she reads the letter. When Debussy begins to mark the nuances soon after this, they are faithfully observed, but as with Mary Garden’s performance, there is a sense of the language dominating. Debussy’s highlighting of the word *nuance*, implying that to sing “*sans nuances*” was a special effect, leads us conveniently into a further area of study. One line will suffice to illustrate this point, a line in which Croiza indulges in two successive portamenti, an upward “goal” portamento to the “*glo*” of “*sanglote*,” followed by a full portamento downward to its final syllable (example 1.4).

Several of those who have bequeathed us memoirs of Debussy’s coaching of his own music have stressed the importance he placed on the “nuance.” These memoirs must, of course, be treated with considerable care since bruised egos and rose-colored spectacles are omnipresent. But corroborated evidence, as it were, may lead us to truths. For Marguerite Long and E. Robert Schmitz, two pianists who have left us both copious reminiscences and a recorded legacy, “nuances” were of paramount importance. Both stress that Debussy’s dynamic range



Ex. 1.4. *Pelléas et Mélisande*, extract from Act I scene 2, as recorded by Claire Croiza as Geneviève, Paris, 1928

was extreme,<sup>33</sup> and we should remember that the French word *nuance* clearly referred to sound quality and not rhythmic or agogic freedom.<sup>34</sup>

The concern Debussy showed for sound is testified to everywhere and occurs at every level from his playing (lid down) of his Aliquot strung Blüthner piano, especially shipped from England, to the exact nuances of a sung text.<sup>35</sup> The majority of those coached by him wax lyrical about his special sound as a pianist, which some relate to the Chopin tradition; most agree that his mature keyboard approach was extremely subtle and idiosyncratic and never over-forceful, although it could be strong and clear in a Toccata-like piece. This is an incontrovertible testimony: the subject of another article, perhaps, and a key to Debussy's "dream-world," but it is an area which will not be further probed.<sup>36</sup>

More puzzling is that many voices are raised in favor of a strict adherence to the markings of Debussy's scores in this respect, whatever their recorded legacy shows. Here, certainly, were arguments which undermine the slightly flippant assertion that if everyone was so free, why bother with an *oeuvres complètes*? Firstly there is Debussy's care in the marking of nuances, in the tradition of Chabrier followed, among others, by Albéniz. Secondly is his frequent advice to stick to what was written. "So many pianists, who play Debussy today," wrote Schmitz, "overlook his crescendo markings," presaging the concern of the *Oeuvres complètes* in documenting Debussy's post-publication ideas by considering scores which were "corrected" by the composer, such as those of Schmitz himself, their alterations "meticulous, in lavender ink."<sup>37</sup>

Not indicated on the printed score are further subtleties, some of them commonplace tips among pianists, such as Long's advice to play softly; Schmitz's recounting of Debussy's insistence, inherited from his teacher Mme Mauté, on practicing without the pedal; and Maurice Dumesnil's recollection of Debussy's recommendation that one note in an octave must always predominate: "octaves sound flat when played with the same volume in both hands."<sup>38</sup>

More interesting, because more contestable, is the question of rubato—the various types of deviation from the score that were the norm of the interpretative tradition. When the available recorded legacies of the contemporary commentators who were also the strongest performers are placed beside what they advised, a considerable gap appears: to put it bluntly, while they advocated performing in time, they themselves did not, taking considerable expressive liberties. "Musically, everything must be rigorously exact, be sung with metronomic precision, and the same is true whether of Debussy or Duparc," claims Croiza.<sup>39</sup> Long cites the amusing anecdote she claims was frequently recounted to her by Debussy: "A pianist, who had come to play some of his works to him stopped at

a certain passage and said ‘here, it’s free, isn’t it?’ . . . Debussy, fuming, replied: ‘There are people who write music, and people who edit it: and this man who does as he wants. . . . All I want is a faithful interpreter.’<sup>40</sup> A reading of further passages, including those of Debussy himself, indicates that there is a line to be drawn, after all: the anecdote must be put alongside Debussy’s remarks about rhythm and the evidence of early recordings.

Here then is our first major contradiction: Debussy on the one hand insisting that interpreters follow his markings yet on the other confessing that rhythms could not be exactly notated; on the one hand insisting on singers following exactly his rhythms and nuances and yet admiring above all those who took slight liberties. In his rich memoir, Maurice Dumesnil was charitable to Debussy when the latter accused him of not playing triplets exactly: Dumesnil thought he was playing in time, and could perceive no difference when Debussy demonstrated how they should be played. He concluded that Debussy must have had an especially perceptive ear, only to be reprimanded at the next attempt for playing too much in time!<sup>41</sup>

To what extent do contemporary piano rolls clarify this point? First of all Debussy’s piano rolls of preludes from Book I are illuminating, even allowing for all possible unfaithfulnesses in the Duo-Arte mechanism. Even taking into account the new set-up in a recent compact disc reissue, with a modern piano and digital recording, certain things are clear.<sup>42</sup> As in his accompaniment to “L’ombre des arbres,” the rhythm in “Danseuses de Delphes” is mainly unwavering, although in the decrescendo in bar 10 a clear *ritenuto* is added where in the equivalent passage in bars 4–5 merely a slight placing at the cadence was made. The sound of the transcription bears out the praise bestowed on the duo-art system by several composers: the buried tenor melody line clearly stands out, retaining Debussy’s legato playing of this line, and the chords sound carefully voiced and played with a penetrating rather than a surface touch where the pedal is allowed to “make the sound.” Both of these features were corroborated by Long and Dumesnil, the former pointing out that “hands were not made to be up in the air at piano, but to *enter into it*,”<sup>43</sup> the latter remarking on the way Debussy “seemed to caress the keys by rubbing them gently downward in an oblique motion.”<sup>44</sup> In the rolls of several pianists, including Debussy, some of the dynamic levels do not sound as quiet as the score indicates, possibly because the soft levels are difficult to obtain without affecting the simultaneity of chording: one clear weakness of the system. But as is well known, deliberately unsynchronised playing was a stock-in-trade expressive device among pianists of the time. Evidence suggests that Debussy himself employed this technique.

In his own piano rolls, even in “Danseuses de Delphes,” there are hints of an arpeggiated octave on the top, bell-like sonority, marked with a tenuto mark at m. 13, although Roy Howat has suggested that this was a technique specific to the recording system so that the pianist could achieve emphasis which would otherwise be lost.<sup>45</sup> But the hints in “Danseuses de Delphes” become overt in a passage from “La cathédrale engloutie” where arpeggiations are used liberally but not randomly. The climactic “peal of bells” gesture at m. 23 is given the special effect of having an upward arpeggiation on each octave. Before this, certain of the bell-like sonorities are also arpeggiated upward, though not so prominently, seemingly emphasizing the top note, and the chords “peu à peu sortant de la brume” also receive various degrees of arpeggiation (example 1.5).

1.5a



Ex. 1.5. Arpeggiations in Debussy’s 1915 piano roll of “La cathédrale engloutie,” mm. 16–26. The printed score has no arpeggiations.

1,5b

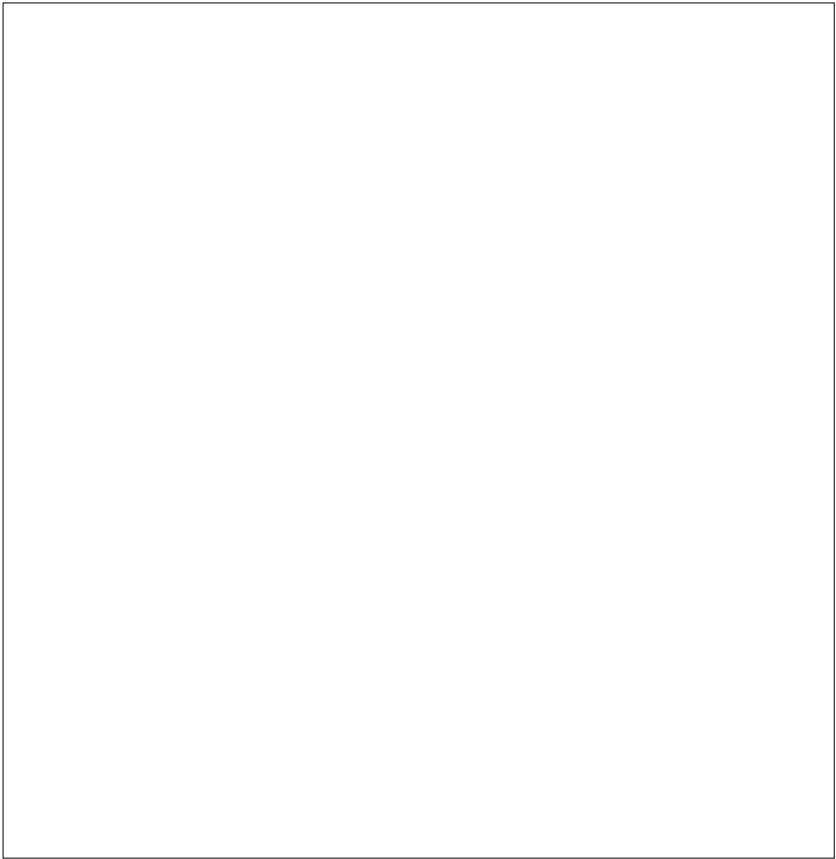
Ex. 1.5. (*Continued*)

Is this sloppy playing? An unreliable mechanism? I would suggest not. More likely is that it was just the normal interpretative freedom that a pianist trained by a so-called pupil of Chopin would carry forward into his or her playing even if, as a composer, this was counterbalanced by a more than usual respect for text. Before making further observations about the particular ways in which arpeggiation was applied, performances by two contemporary pianists may be profitably studied.

Performances by the American pianist George Copeland (1882–1971), who was active during Debussy’s lifetime and who met Debussy and made a piano roll of, among other pieces, “Clair de lune,” in 1915, show how Debussy’s music, at least his more youthful music, could sound in the hands of an accomplished arpeggiator. Example 1.6 shows how Copeland’s arpeggiation, like the well-used orchestral portamenti, the soft accent, and the delayed melody note, was used asymmetrically and with subtlety.

Copeland highlights unexpected chords within the gesture by two forms of his arpeggiation: the upward arpeggio and the playing of the left-hand chord in its entirety before that of the right. Several points emerge from the way this passage is arpeggiated. Firstly, in Debussy’s arpeggiation in “La cathédrale engloutie,” there is a dislocation or arpeggiation on the first chord of a new idea, as in mm. 15 and 20. Secondly, the repeats are arpeggiated differently, bringing out alternative highlights (or picking different flowers along the path, one might say). In addition, there is a general increase in dislocations at the beginning of the crescendo, giving a sense of tension building. In general, there is a sense that arpeggiations progress to synchronized playing rather than the reverse.

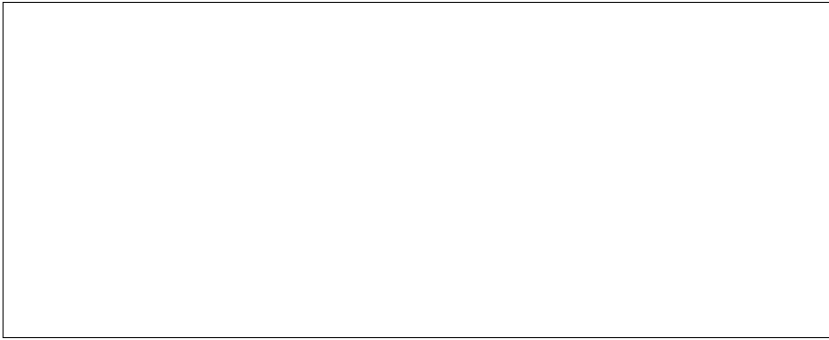
An earlier example from the same recording is perhaps even more interesting since it confirms a particular type of arpeggiation used by Debussy. In his roll of



Ex. 1.6. “Clair de lune,” mm. 15–23, showing arpeggiations and manual dislocation as recorded by George Copeland in October 1915

“La cathédrale engloutie” we noted how Debussy arpeggiated the first chords of a new phrase: a “springboard” technique signaling the beginning of a harmonic period to the listener. Copeland uses a similar technique in “Clair de lune,” where a descending chord pattern is given shape by gradually increasing the speed of arpeggiation to the point where it is almost synchronous, while at the same time using a slow *diminuendo* (example 1.7). Arpeggiation is being deliberately used to heighten the “*vertu*” of a harmonic progression.

Further tricks from early twentieth century pianistic traditions are in evidence in the playing of Schmitz, a remarkable testament being his piano roll, released in 1920, of “La fille aux cheveux de lin” (example 1.8). Two particularly important features emerge from Schmitz’s playing: the melodic *rubato* and un-

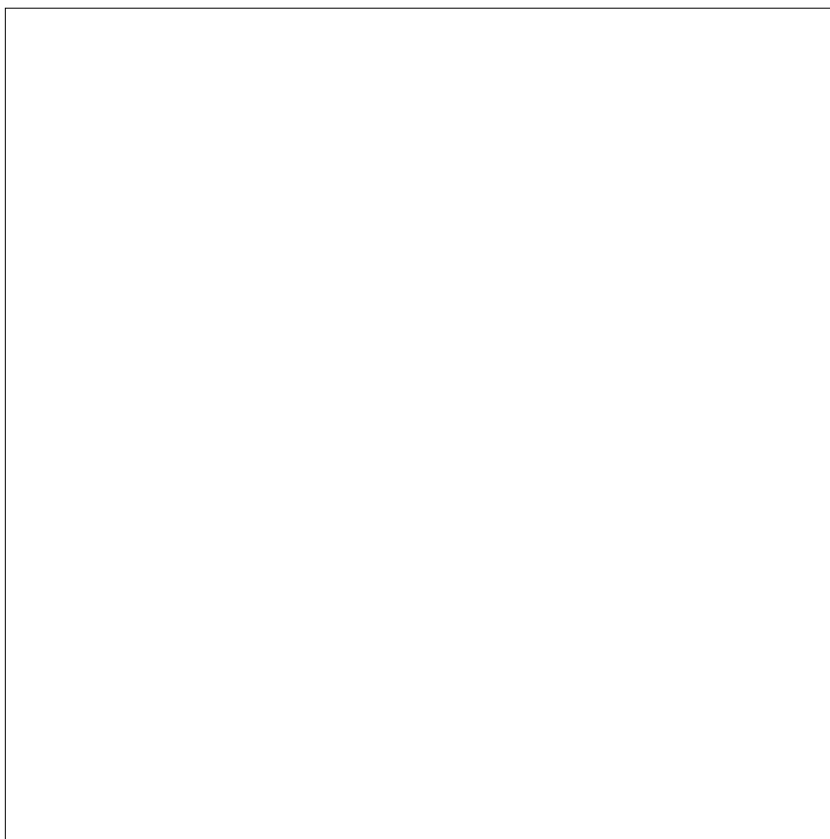


Ex. 1.7. “Clair de lune,” mm. 5–8, showing arpeggiations and manual dislocation as recorded by George Copeland in October 1915

synchronised counterpoint, a common practice of which this is a striking example. This must be distinguished from another common practice, manual dislocation, which we have seen as an expressive device in example 6. In m. 11 of “La fille,” Schmitz’s manual dislocation is driven by a higher musical logic. The left-hand descending motive, on the wane, falls to join the bass. It has already been lingered upon, by stretching the sixteenth notes in m. 10, and further rhythmic attenuation would be inappropriate. Dovetailed with its decline is a new rising arabesque in the right hand, a movement Schmitz emphasizes by weighting the upbeat sixteenth notes which provide the most important opportunity for rhythmic expression in the piece. Here Schmitz plays these somewhat slowly and emphatically, partly to signal the new motive and also to leave scope for an *accelerando* up to the apex of the phrase. Consequently, the two dovetailed motives become unsynchronised.

Philip’s study of tempo rubato in the second chapter of his book alludes extensively to the writings of Marguerite Long, who linked Debussy to Chopin: “Rubato . . . is as much a part of Debussy as of Chopin. This delicate rubato is difficult to obtain in both Chopin and Debussy. It is confined by a rigorous precision, in almost the same way as a stream is the captive of its banks. Rubato does not mean alteration of time or measure, but of nuance or *élan*.”<sup>46</sup>

Here we are in the realms of contradictions again, for contrary to the oft-repeated imagery of piano pedagogy—streams being the captive of their banks, candle flames wavering, or firmly rooted trees waving their branches in the breeze—Philip shows what we all knew: that robbed time is robbed time, more usually lingering than lurching forward, dwelling on certain things but not making it up.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps the emphasis on a mythical equilibrium of rubato is ulti-



Ex. 1.8. “La fille aux cheveux de lin,” mm. 1–4 and 8–13, showing rubato, arpeggiations, and manual dislocation as recorded by E. Robert Schmitz on a piano roll released in February 1920

mately a teacher’s ploy: pianists don’t really do it, but they play better if they think of it, just as, we hope, Dumesnil played better after being told by Debussy to play triplets in time one minute, and to free them up the next.

“La fille aux cheveux de lin” could hardly be more inviting as regards rubato, the constant anacrusis of two sixteenth notes was precisely the type of figure to which pianists applied agogic variety ranging from a tightening of

the  figure to  or even , to a loosening

of it to . See example 1.8 for a transcription of Schmitz’s



rendering of the main theme, which makes an interesting comparison with that of Cortot, who in his two recordings of the piece plays the motive very strictly in time.<sup>48</sup> What is clear from this example is that the procedure, common among pianists of Debussy's day, of slightly lingering on one of a pair of notes bridging a beat (which we had seen Debussy using in "L'Ombre des arbres) is not appropriate here because there is at first no harmonic context, and later, the motive does not have the tension between chord notes and accented passing notes which such rhythmic attenuations brought out.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, the recording is interesting if we bear in mind Debussy's comments on the impossibility of notating rhythms exactly.

Can we place any confidence in Schmitz's recordings as exemplifying the *esprit debussyste*? A difficult question to answer. What is clear, however, is that the techniques he employs—exaggerated expressive devices by today's standards—were also employed by Debussy, and that when Debussy urged his pupils to "follow the score" he was addressing those for whom such techniques were the *lingua franca* of pianism. His comments on precision were perhaps more of a "rappel à l'ordre." Had he been addressing performers already tainted with postwar, positivistic, teutonic, and Anglo-Saxon attitudes to the urtext edition, we might not altogether flippantly suggest that he might well have employed an opposite tactic. While on the one hand the Debussy *Oeuvres complètes* revisit the works, performance practice waits in the wings to put a spanner in them.

We may speculate on the way Debussy performance may go by learning from the early music revival. How unthinkable it is nowadays to hear baroque music without the host of expressive techniques which performance practice has rediscovered: the bulging string *messa da voce*; the encrustations of ornaments, often improvisatory in nature; the *trilli* of the music of Monteverdi's day; the *notes inégales* of French music. And how quaint and mechanical certain of the recordings of the immediate postwar years sound with their terraced dynamics, un-giving tempi, and mechanical bowings, sticking to the letter of the score. Maybe in twenty years' time it will be unthinkable for performers not to reopen the boxes of tricks which we can relearn through early recordings, using them to rediscover that *esprit debussyste* which seems to be lost, and which the *Oeuvres complètes* will not entirely help us to recover.