

## As Though Heard from Afar: Score Indications in *Debussyste* Compositions

Jane E. Harrison

Since their advent in musical scores during the sixteenth century, composers have used dynamic markings (symbols based on Italian words that conveyed relative volume levels such as the abbreviation *p* for *piano*, or soft) and performance indications (more lengthy descriptions of the desired speed, style, or timbre of sound) with increasing frequency and precision. Around 1900 a musical revolution was well underway in France, as controversial composer Claude Debussy had become the unwitting leader of a group of composers who imitated and expanded upon his style in their own compositions.<sup>1</sup> These composers, known as the *debussystes*, continued the trend of increasing use and finer nuance of directions in musical scores, but in a unique way. They strongly favored the soft side of the dynamic spectrum and performance indications calling for delicate sounds: a majority of the *debussyste* pieces that I have uncovered in my research maintain dynamic levels that rarely rise above *mezzo-piano* (moderately soft) and contain indications as soft as *pppp*. *Debussyste* scores are also full of poetic indications that ask for soft sounds and deceleration, particularly at the ends of formal sections and in the final measures: *lointain* (far off), *perdendo* (dying out), *très doux* (very soft), *le plus p possible* (as quiet as possible), and *à peine* (barely audible).

Certainly the *debussystes* were not the first composers to write tender music that reveled in exquisite shading. Their shared musical style grew out of French salon culture, which due to the intimate nature of its performance venue encouraged composers to cultivate an intimate and delicate sound. It was also common nineteenth-century practice to designate the middle

---

<sup>1</sup> The traits of this style include certain harmonic signifiers, unorthodox voice-leading, widely spaced sonorities that mitigate dissonance, beginnings in which the material gradually coalesces and incomplete endings in which it gradually moves away from the listener, streaming or arabesque textures, non-schematic melodies. Other strategies concerning rhythm and indications will be discussed in this paper.

movement as soft and slow in multi-movement instrumental pieces. What distinguishes the dynamics and performance indications of the *debussystes* is the sheer frequency with which these composers preferred a soft and subdued sound and the extreme degree to which this was taken in their scores. Further, such a consistent linking of a certain compositional style and a specific sensibility suggests that the composers practicing the style were inspired by a set of highly specific aesthetic goals.

My aim in this paper is to characterize directions written into *debussyste* scores as a shared stylistic practice and to suggest the aesthetic origins of this practice as part of a larger project about what the *debussyste* style was intended to communicate or represent. Score indications offer us that rare and relished glimpse into the composer's mind as he or she crafted a composition. This is especially the case in compositions from early twentieth-century France, when the first modernist composers were seeking to transmit increasingly specific information to their listeners and to exert more control over performers via directions in the score, therefore ensuring the faithful transmission of their ideas. For the sake of concision I will limit the scope of this study to solo piano music, which was a favored genre among the *debussystes* and tended to be where they created their most innovative works; and focus on the scores of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, the most visible and influential composers who wrote *debussyste* piano music. As I will show later, they were in direct contact with the other artistic and scholarly movements that inspired *debussysme* while young, and therefore provided the earliest and most intentional (and in a way the purest) exemplars of the translation of these influences into a musical idiom.

Example 1. Debussy, “La soirée dans Grenade” from *Estampes*, mm. 1-18

*Commencer lentement dans un rythme nonchalamment gracieux*

PIANO

*ppp*

*ppp*

*pp espressif*

*ppp*

*pp*

*Retenu*

*Tempo giusto*

Debussy wrote “La soirée dans Grenade” in 1903 as part of the piano triptych *Estampes*. The work was premiered for an audience of composers at a Société nationale de musique concert in Paris in 1904 and was frequently programmed on concerts of Parisian composers’ societies and other high-profile concerts into the 1920s. The boisterous dance music that one might expect in a composition that evokes a night in an exotic Spanish town sounds at only one point, during a brief climax in activity that Debussy intriguingly placed early in the composition, rather than

towards the end.<sup>2</sup> Dynamics and tempo stay firmly at low levels for the remainder of the piece, so that the persisting dance rhythms sound as though heard through a dream.

After what came to be known as the *debussyste* style emerged in Debussy's piano compositions in 1890, sixty-eight of the seventy-three compositions that made up the remainder of his output for piano spend the vast majority of their time at the level of *piano* or quieter.<sup>3</sup> (In his earlier piano works the composer followed the nineteenth-century convention of treating *mezzo-forte* as the most common level.) More specifically, in these compositions *piano* or *pianissimo* is the normative dynamic level: the beginning and ending of the entire work as well as the beginning of individual sections within it tend to reside at this level. It is as though the musical material naturally resides at a lower energy level, and only with significant effort can it be pushed into a state of greater excitement. Once achieved, the higher level of energy is temporary and the music will soon fall back to its typical state of low energy. Debussy often emphasized his desire for faint music with descriptors: *doux* occurs at least once in thirty of the piano compositions, *léger* at least once in twenty-nine, and *délicat* once in four. He also frequently attempted to provide the listener with the experience of hearing sounds as faint due to perceptual difficulty, principally conceptualized as sound that is perceived from afar with the indication *lointain* (twenty-one compositions), and also as a sound source that is moving away from the listener with indications including *s'éloignant* and several Italian terms that signify dying away (*estinto*, *perdendo*, *morendo*, *smorzando*). In a few instances Debussy conceives soft sounds as sensations perceived weakly by other senses, such as *effacé* (erased) and *effleuré* (brushed against), which refer to sight and touch, respectively.

---

<sup>2</sup> That this composition was written by a Frenchman during the early twentieth century makes this kind of picturesque dance music even more expected, given the exoticized perception the French held of neighboring Spain at the time. See Richard Langham Smith, "Ravel's operatic spectacles," *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, Deborah Mawer, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2000): 190-191.

<sup>3</sup> This total treats each movement of each composition as a separate piece.

Maurice Ravel composed relatively few solo piano works in the *debussyste* style as compared to Debussy, due to his small compositional output in general and his move away from *debussisme* in 1913. Despite their small number, Ravel's *debussyste* creations for the piano were highly innovative and proved to be influential as the composer's stature among composers and prominence on concert programs grew in France after the turn-of-the-century.<sup>4</sup> All of Ravel's fourteen *debussyste* piano compositions spend the majority of their time at *piano* or softer, and several of them reside there for nearly every measure. Ravel treats soft dynamics unconventionally: textures at once murmuring and spiky in which short crescendos frequently ripple through it and convey latent energy, lengthy passages at *ppp*, and unconventionally large amounts of time spent decrescendoing (see in particular "Un barque sur l'océan"). One also often finds poetic indications calling for *doux* (delicate) and occasionally for *sombre* (somber) sounds. While Ravel utilized poetic indications far less than Debussy and was not as interested in soft sounds as weakly perceived – we only have the occurrence of *lointain* in three scores and *perdendo* in one – he did write in indications calling for emotionally subdued sounds and attached them in particular to quiet sections, including *calme*, *sans nuances* and *sans expression*.<sup>5</sup>

Ravel took the notion of delicate music to an extreme in "Oiseaux tristes" from *Miroirs*, shown in Example 2. The composition was so novel that several fellow *debussystes* received it coolly when Ravel first played it for them at a meeting of the Apaches in 1904, likely because even these elite listeners found its tediously soft and slow sound disconcerting upon a first

---

<sup>4</sup> Especially his taking on of students in composition around this time, his stature among the Apaches which was formed in 1902, and his role as the principal creator of the Société musicale indépendante in 1909 alongside several other *debussystes*.

<sup>5</sup> These indications were part of a refusal of excessive expression of the Romantics and especially Wagner, a reaction that was shared among *debussystes* and the new avant-garde writing in the *style dépouillé* after World War I, which Ravel also associated with briefly. Such markings asking for restraint, including Ravel's many requests to not slow down at the ends of phrases, reflect Western composers' greater desire to exert more control over the sound their scores prescribed in the early twentieth century.

hearing.<sup>6</sup> Thirty-three of its forty-four total measures are designated *piano* or softer. The dynamic level falls to as low as *ppp* and the piece contains just one crescendo that rises to the level of *forte* during a swell of activity that Ravel, like Debussy in “La soirée dans Grenade”, places in the first half of the composition. “Oiseaux tristes” is additionally very slow, designated *très lent* until the final bars (see Example 2b), where Ravel asks for the music to effectively die away: the tempo slows and the dynamic level decrescendos to *ppp*, meanwhile the markings *sombre et lointain* and *perdendo* further articulate the composer’s desire for the music to end with very little energy.

Example 2. Ravel, “Oiseaux tristes “ from *Miroirs*

a. mm. 1-5

<sup>6</sup> The Apaches were a group of artists who began meeting in 1902 because they were inspired by Debussy’s opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The group included several *debussystes*, such as Maurice Ravel, Florent Schmitt, Paul Ladmirault, André Caplet, Maurice Delage, and Déodat de Sévêrac. About the night of the “Oiseaux tristes” premiere see a partial translation of Ricardo Viñes’s journal in Nina Gubisch, “Le journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes,” *Vines journal, Revue inter. de musique française* 1(2) (1980): 203.

b. mm. 34-37



Ravel's languishing tempo and dynamic markings quickly became notorious among performers as inappropriately soft and slow. In a letter from 1922 Ravel recounts that even his close friend and fellow Apache Ricardo Viñes refused to play "Le Gibet" according to his indications because "if he observed the nuances and the tempo that [Ravel] indicated, 'Le Gibet' would bore the public".<sup>7</sup>

In an autobiographical article from 1928 Ravel indicated "Oiseaux tristes" was meant to "evoke birds lost in the torpor of a very somber forest, during the hottest hours of summertime".<sup>8</sup> This description bears a curious resemblance to the images in Maurice Maeterlinck's *Serres chaudes* (*Hothouses*, 1889), a collection of Symbolist poems in which the despondent poet finds himself in a world of doleful flowers enclosed in glass jars, patients from a nearby infirmary wandering about, and indifferent white peacocks, metaphors for his melancholy and ennui. Ravel was quite familiar with the poems, meaning that Maeterlinck's imagery might have been one of the inspirations for the monotone piano piece, especially those found in the first poem of the collection, also titled "Serre chaude".<sup>9</sup> "Oh hothouse deep in the forest," the poet cries in the

<sup>7</sup> Letter from 1922 to M.D. Calvocoressi in *A Ravel Reader*, Arbie Orenstein ed, and trans. (New York: Dover, 1990), 219.

<sup>8</sup> Ravel/Roland-Manuel, "Une esquisse autobiographique de Maurice Ravel," *La Revue musicale* (Dec. 1928): 12-17; reprint in *Ravel Reader*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ravel owned a copy of *Serres chaudes*, which he lent an enthusiastic Viñes in 1897. See Gubisch, "Le journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes," 192.

opening salvo, and then lists several disturbing metaphors for the unbearable heat and despair he finds there, including birds (see Example 3).

Example 3. “Serre chaude,” *Serres chaudes*, Maeterlinck

Oh hothouse deep in the forest!  
And your doors forever closed!  
And everything that is under your cupola!  
And under my soul in your analogies!

The thoughts of a hungry princess,  
The ennui of a sailor in the desert,  
Brassy music at the windows of the sick.

Head for the warmest corners!  
As though a woman fainted on harvest day;  
Postillons in the hospital courtyard;  
In the distance a soldier passes, now a nurse.

Examine it by moonlight!  
(How nothing is where it belongs there!)  
Think of a madwoman before the judges,  
A warship in full sail on a canal,  
Birds of the night perched on the lilies,  
A glass at midday,  
(There, underneath the bell jars!)  
The sick halted in the prairie,  
A smell of ether on a day of sunshine.

My God! my God! When will we have rain,  
And snow and wind in this greenhouse!

The landscape of “Oiseaux tristes” is also far from an idyllic spot. Ravel’s forest is somber, uncomfortably hot, and the birds there do not chirp joyously but cry out plaintively. Like the Symbolist poet, Ravel is principally concerned with translating the subtle feeling the image evokes within him rather than the images themselves. The texture remains low in the piano’s register for most of the piece, amplifying the dissonance of its harmony and thereby creating discomfort in the listener. Meanwhile the birds, trapped somewhere in the forest canopy, call out intermittently and lethargically. The music transmits their hopeless frustration to the listener, who sits through a mere forty-four measures that as Ravel played them take over four minutes to pass.<sup>10</sup> Such apparent lack of progress in terms of drama or material construction might drive the audience to wish for something akin to Maeterlinck’s desperate cry for wind and rain to break the monotonous heat in the forest greenhouse. The first third of the piece is so low in energy, dictated by the slow tempo marking and extremely soft dynamics, that the outburst of activity

---

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Ravel, *Ravel Plays Ravel (Original Piano Rolls)*. Delta, 1995. Compact disc.



that begins in measure seventeen startles the listener (perhaps out of a drowsy day dream), but the birds fail to escape the forest and into a more cheerful and interesting environment. The Apaches' unhappy reception in 1904 may in fact have been just the reaction Ravel hoped the content and a proper realization of the performance indications of "Oiseaux tristes" would provoke; in 1938 he proudly looked back at the composition as a turning point in his stylistic evolution.<sup>11</sup>

Ravel's interest in Maeterlinck was hardly his only point of contact with contemporaneous, avant-garde literature. Both he and Debussy had several ties to the Francophone Symbolist movement, and the artistic influence from these literary friends is clear in their score indications as well as several other aspects of their similar styles. Debussy sought out not fellow musicians but writers and artists during his time as a student at the Paris Conservatoire. During the 1890s he frequented the Librairie d'Art, a Symbolist haunt, and his close friends included poets Pierre Louÿs and Henri de Regnier. Debussy and Ravel were seen regularly at Stéphane Mallarmé's exclusive Tuesday night gatherings, where the host articulated his complex theories of Symbolist aesthetics. Ravel exchanged ideas and artistic creations with writers who joined The Apaches, including Léon-Paul Fargue, whose poem "Les noctuelles" (moths) inspired an eponymous movement of *Miroirs*.<sup>12</sup> Both composers read Symbolist works voraciously and set several of them to music.<sup>13</sup>

One Symbolist aesthetic idea that influenced *debussystes* such as Debussy and Ravel was a desire to create delicate atmospheres of monotony and melancholy in their own works, because

---

<sup>11</sup> Ravel, "Une esquisse autobiographique," 32.

<sup>12</sup> Ravel dedicated the piece to Fargue and according to Vlado Perlemuter, a piano student of Ravel, this was because the poet had inspired the composition. See Perlemuter and Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, *Ravel d'après Ravel* (Lausanne: Editions du Cervin, 1970), 22. About the Apaches see Jann Pasler, "A Sociology of the Apaches: 'Sacred Battalion' for Pelleas," in Barbara Kelly and Kerry Murphy eds., *Berlioz and Debussy: Sources, Contexts, Legacies* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 149-166.

<sup>13</sup> See lists of their reading material in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy, His Life and Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 84 and for Ravel, Gubisch, "Journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes".

it was an artist in this state and free of superfluous emotional extremes that could produce the most authentic translations of the soul, or interior mental life. Albert Samain believed his task as a poet to be the translation of his own interior states and frequently described his favorite literary passages as moments enveloped by sadness and softness where the soul of the author seemed to float towards him like perfume. Consider his description of the Symbolist poem *La demoiselle élue* in a letter to Raymond Bonheur, close friend of Debussy and fellow *debussyste* composer:

In every way it is exactly what you said to me, of an exquisitely white inspiration, of an ideal and diaphanous atmosphere where visions almost without bodies, all floating in lines, move in a luminous music...at its essence a flux of continuous and monotone sadness that accumulates at certain moments and resolves with a kind of poignancy.<sup>14</sup>

The description could apply equally to “La soirée dans Grenade,” “Oiseaux tristes,” and hundreds of other *debussyste* compositions written in early twentieth-century France. Mallarmé frequently idealized poetry in similar metaphors: he enthused to a friend that he was creating “marvelous pieces of lace” in his poetry in 1866, and in 1891 famously encapsulated true poetry as “contemplating objects, the image vanishing in the dreams elicited by them”.<sup>15</sup>

Relationships between composers and these authors provided the conduit through which stylistic ideals flowed from Symbolist literature to music. The evidence of this transmission is perhaps nowhere clearer than in written instructions in *debussyste* scores, as the composers transferred this light and somber Symbolist ambiance into low dynamic levels and poetic directions, as reviewed above. In songs setting Symbolist texts this transition would have been

---

<sup>14</sup> “En tout les cas, c’est bien ce que vous m’aviez dit, d’une inspiration exquisement blanche, d’une atmosphère diaphane et idéale, ou les visions presque sans corps, toutes flottantes en lignes, se meuvent dans une musique lumineuse...Au fond de tout cela, un flux de tristesse continue et monotone, qui s’accumule à certains moments et se resout en une sorte de poignance.” Letter from 30 April, 1887, in Albert Samain, *Des lettres: 1887-1900* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1933), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Letter to Aubanel quoted in Elizabeth McCombie, *Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 22 and Mallarmé’s response in Jules Huret, *Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1891), 55-65.

relatively smooth, as the text provided a pre-existing atmosphere that only needed to be mirrored in the music. But by 1890 Debussy had managed to move the Symbolist aesthetic one step farther and into purely instrumental music. This move was realized in “Rêverie” and “Clair de lune,” both written for piano in 1890, and these are also the first piano compositions by Debussy in which the markings *doux* and *calmato* appear, which demonstrates the extent to which his newly discovered style was linked to specific indications. These indications then point towards the desired effect upon the listener, and back towards the influence of Symbolist discourse about the necessity of subdued and delicate atmospheres. Such terms are present in Ravel’s earliest piano scores, which were written during the late 1890s, suggesting that this usage was something he had learned from the older Debussy.

Philosophers such as Henri Bergson and Charles Henry were envisioning theories to explain the functioning of the human mind around 1900 that complimented the artistic auto-analysis of the movement of thought pursued by the Symbolists. Henry believed that the task of art in the modern age was to mimic the unconscious mind, which allowed the viewer/reader/listener to become consciously aware of his own unconsciousness. The mind existed as a series of mechanical states that art could imitate as motion, a theory that accorded with Mallarmé’s notion that poetry should consist of opposing motions. The philosopher was part of Symbolist circles and significantly influenced the movement’s aesthetic formulations; he also gave popular lectures on art and the mind at the Sorbonne.<sup>16</sup> Henri Bergson’s developed similar theories that were more purely philosophical in nature and garnered even wider public interest, and at least two *debussyste* composers, Charles Koechlin and Paul Le Flem, were

---

<sup>16</sup> José Argüelles, *Charles Henry and the Formation of a Psychophysical Aesthetic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 78-81 and 103-109.

profoundly influenced by them.<sup>17</sup> He posited that a stream of activity, the pure duration, lay deep in the mind, consisting of perceptions and memories, and like the Symbolists he believed that this delicate interior life was hidden behind mental constraints learned from society. This stream of thought varied in intensity, often quickening at a perception or sensation which triggered memories, all of which intertwined and caused vast numbers of atoms in the body to vibrate together.

Debussy and Ravel were certainly influenced by Henry by way of their Symbolist friends, and they were very likely familiar with Bergson's ideas due to his widespread popularity among artists. There is at least documentary evidence that Debussy and Ravel were concerned with translation of the inner life, just as the Symbolists had been, and considered their goal as composers to be an evocation of powerful states of their own minds. They also used terminology and ideas that seem to imitate the discourses of Bergson and Henri. Writing in 1906, Debussy shared his understanding of what it meant to be a composer:

Who can know the secret of musical composition? The sound of the sea, the outline of a horizon, the wind in the leaves, the cry of a bird – these deposit complex impressions in us. And suddenly, without the consent of anyone on this earth, one of these memories bursts forth, expressing itself in the language of music.<sup>18</sup>

Debussy's many pieces titled after natural imagery (*La Mer*, *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, *Reflets dans l'eau*) have long been interpreted as "impressionistic" descriptions of these images in music that are analogous to Monet's paintings, with their particular attention to subtle details of light and color. The composer makes clear, however, that it was not the natural phenomena themselves that interested him, but what occurred in his mind as he experienced them and

---

<sup>17</sup> "Propos impromptu de Paul Le Flem" *Le courrier musical de France* 18 (1967): 72 and Robert Orledge, *Charles Koechlin: His Life and Works* (New York: Harwood, 1989), 295.

<sup>18</sup> Untitled article, *Excelsior* (11 Feb. 1911); reprinted in *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, François Lesure ed. (Paris: Gaillmard, 1971), 303.

continued to experience them as memories. Close friend Robert Godet affirmed that Debussy composed when “saturated with nostalgia,” or memories, and sought not “fallacious imitation of the means that had evoked this sentiment,” but “his creative interpretation of them”.<sup>19</sup> Speaking of his own compositional method in 1928, Ravel revealed how much of the creative process took place entirely within his mind:

In my own composition I find a long period of conscious gestation, in general, necessary. During this interval, I come gradually to see, and with growing precision, the form and evolution which the subsequent work should have as a whole. I may thus be occupied for years without writing a single note of the work...Then comes the time when new conceptions have to be formulated for further composition, but these cannot be forced artificially, for they come only of their own free will, and often originate in some very remote perception, without manifesting themselves until long years after.<sup>20</sup>

Ravel, too, posits his own memories and not images as they objectively appear in the present reality as the seeds of his compositions. It is as though a mysterious process occurs within his mind, seemingly without his conscious control of it, in which an image is perceived, recorded, and then transformed into musical material. The language used here is reminiscent of Bergson’s rhapsodic descriptions of the same processes, and becomes increasingly so later in the speech as Ravel describes the evolution of the composition within the mind as “seemingly directed by currents of inner forces, so intimate and intricate in character as to defy all analysis”.<sup>21</sup>

In light of these influences and aesthetic ideas, the curiously deflated music of “La soirée dans Grenade” can be interpreted as a musical portrayal of what occurs in the mind as someone who has attended a merry party in Grenada reflects back on the experience, rather than of a

---

<sup>19</sup> Robert Godet, “En marge de la marge,” *La jeunesse de Claude Debussy, numéro spéciale de la Revue musicale* 7 (1926): 59-60.

<sup>20</sup> Ravel, “Contemporary music,” Lecture delivered at Rice Institute Lectureship in Music at the Scottish Rite Cathedral, Huston, 7 April 1928. Reprinted in *Ravel Reader*, 46. That Ravel uttered this quote in 1928, more than a decade after he had moved away from *debussysme*, suggests that despite his obvious stylistic shift away from *debussyste* techniques his fascination with memory had continued and that these subsequent styles were still answers to the same problem of how to translate the functioning of the human mind into music.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

simple exoticized portrayal of the experience itself. This interpretation explains the many slow and quiet sections in the piece as mirroring the sensation of remembering the night, which has become something distant, hazy, and denatured in the memory. Performance indications for dynamics and tempo play a key role here, signaling shifts as thoughts and memories that are of varying emotional character join the stream of mental activity and others drift away. The music of the first sixteen measures consist of the memories of the soirée beginning to move in the mind, as two different strands, an ostinato and a melody are introduced at the opening markings of *ppp* and *très lent* and gain slightly in energy. As they interact with each other both of them undergo transformation, a technique that seems to realize Bergson's description of the coalescing and mutual enriching of memories and perceptions in the pure *durée*.<sup>22</sup> At measure seventeen indications accompany the interjection of a new image into the *durée*: the increased tempo and volume imbue this image with more energy, perhaps evoking people dancing in the imagination of the listener. This new memory fades after a few measures, and the whole tone passage that follows imparts a sense of suspense, as though the subject of the piece begins to reflect more deeply on what has entered his or her mind. The dance motive breaks in once more and although it once again quickly fades, its energy remains and animates the ostinato dance rhythm in measures thirty-six through thirty-seven, in turn provoking the joyous music of the next several measures in which the memories of the night finally activate the pleasant emotions the subject associates with it. This high state of energy cannot last, however, when after allowing the music just two measures at the triumphant *fortissimo* Debussy enacts a decrescendo over the next fourteen measures. "La soirée dans Grenade" continues in this manner, where contrasting

---

<sup>22</sup> Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1959), 272.

fragments interrupt each other and occasionally intertwine, but the music will never again reach the exceptional energy level of the *fortissimo* outburst.<sup>23</sup>

Debussy notes fifteen changes in tempo in the piece, one for each moment when the musical material or principal image in the pure duration changes (the first one of these can be found in Example 1). The majority of these indications concern the feeling of the passage of time rather than relative speed: *tempo rubato* and the opening marking of *lentement dans un rythme nonchalamment gracieux* signifies a flexible approach in which the performer is free to modulate the speed in accordance with expressive requirements, while *très rythme* and *tempo giusto* indicate a strictly even and emphasized pulse. These tempo markings exemplify the *debussyste* predilection for confusing the listener's sense of the passage of time, another correspondence between the *debussyste* style and late nineteenth-century theories of the mind. Bergson and Henry argued that time in the deep recesses of the mind was not uniform and that one's sense of it could change depending on the thoughts under consideration at that moment; the former went so far as to state that the concepts of past and present even collapsed there, as the mind considered all of its thoughts to exist at the same moment.<sup>24</sup> Symbolist poets tried to re-create this free dilation of time in the constantly shifting rhythmic structure of their poems, and in Mallarmé's case even in the irregular placement of the words and blank spaces on the page.

The *debussystes* achieved temporal confusion through several means. Extremely slow tempos like those found in Ravel's "Oiseaux tristes" and "Le Gibet", frequent shifts in tempo such as those of "La soirée dans Grenade", and the simple technique of changing meter cause the

---

<sup>23</sup> Ravel's solo piano piece inspired by Spain, "Alborada del gracioso," also seems to switch between pseudo memories of Spain and more direct and typical musical evocations of the country, but in a different order: it begins conventionally with the expected exuberant and bitingly dissonant Spanish dance music and then the texture dissolves into a series of fragmented episodes that employ changes of direction and into which bits of the dance music interject themselves, as though they are the memories the mind has begun to reflect upon.

<sup>24</sup> See Bergson, *Les données immédiates*, OC 67-71 and *Matière et mémoire*, OC 342; and the introduction of Henry's *Le cercle chromatique* (1888), reprinted and translated in Argüelles, *Charles Henry*, 163-174.

Example 3. Ravel, "Ondine," from *Gaspard de la nuit*, mm. 2-5

très doux et très expressif

This musical score consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system shows the right hand playing a dense, arpeggiated texture of chords, while the left hand plays a simple, flowing line. The second system continues this texture, with the right hand's arpeggios becoming more complex and the left hand's line more melodic. The tempo and expression markings are 'très doux et très expressif'.

Example 4. Debussy, "La danse de Puck," from *Préludes I*, mm. 63-73

En cédant

*mf* *p*

Mouv<sup>t</sup>

*p* *pp* 12 *m.g. m.d. (en dehors)* *p* *pp*

Cédez . . . / Mouv<sup>t</sup>

*p* *sfz*

This musical score is for the piece 'La danse de Puck' from Debussy's *Préludes I*. It is divided into three systems. The first system is marked 'En cédant' and features a melody in the right hand with a dynamic of *mf* and a piano accompaniment in the left hand with a dynamic of *p*. The second system is marked 'Mouv<sup>t</sup>' and contains complex textures with dynamics ranging from *p* to *pp*, including a section marked '12' and 'm.g. m.d. (en dehors)'. The third system is marked 'Cédez . . . / Mouv<sup>t</sup>' and shows a transition from a piano (*p*) to a fortissimo (*sfz*) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.



listener to lose track of the pulse.<sup>25</sup> Ravel often included very quick streams of notes in his piano works in which the pulse is subdivided to such an extreme that it masks the strong beats. As a result the relatively slower parts of the texture to seemingly hang in unmeasured temporal space, for instance in the opening of “Ondine” shown in Example 3.<sup>26</sup> Debussy utilized this technique as well as textures overwhelmed by gestural fragments that completely avoid rhythmic patterns to create similar temporal effects. For instance consider the inconsistent movements of “La danse de Puck,” another piano piece by the composer in which the expected, strongly-metered dance music is hardly there, shown in Example 4. Both examples, despite their very different material, seem to manifest Bergson’s description of the memory as “vibrations without number, connected in an interrupted continuity...and that ripple in all directions”.<sup>27</sup> A desire for music freed from a strict pulse and therefore a uniform passage of time is perhaps best summed up in Debussy’s frequent appending of *sans rigueur* or *souple* to opening tempo markings.

*Debussyste* strategies concerning tempo changes also play a necessary formal role. If this style attempted to mirror human thought, which is not compartmentalized but rather seems to grow and change with incredible subtlety, conventional sectional endings with satisfying cadential movement and definitive textural breaks would not be appropriate. The *debussyste* technique of causing the music to die out in volume and speed at the ends of sections, even the final section of a piece, allowed for the irresolution of moments in terms of texture and harmony.

---

<sup>25</sup> Jann Pasler and Jessie Fillerup have offered explanations of such temporal strategies in specific *debussyste* compositions, and have suggested their similarity to Bergsonian understandings of interior time. See Jann Pasler, “Debussy, *Jeux*: Playing with Time and Form,” *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 6 (1982):60-75; Jessie Fillerup, “Eternity in Each Moment: Temporal Strategies in Ravel’s *Le Gibet*,” paper given at the annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010 in Indianapolis.

<sup>26</sup> “La matière [de mémoire] se résout ainsi, en ébranlements sans nombre, tous liés dans une continuité ininterrompue, tous solidaires entre eux, et qui courent en tous sens comme autant de frissons.”

<sup>27</sup> “La matière [de mémoire] se résout ainsi, en ébranlements sans nombre, tous liés dans une continuité ininterrompue, tous solidaires entre eux, et qui courent en tous sens comme autant de frissons.” Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, OC 343.

Indications are the primary way of accomplishing this, especially *ritardando* and *retenu*, and the many poetic metaphors for fading sound discussed earlier. Written out deceleration of the music as progressively long note values could take the place of an indication to slow down - this is the case at the end of “La soirée dans Grenade”. With these indications in place of conventional, neat strategies for ending sections, the *debussystes* were then free to spotlight different elements of the stream of thought activity and pull away but yet communicate that the thought continues out of the listener’s perception, gently gives way to something new, or is interrupted by what Henry would term an opposing direction. Through this technique as well as the practice of treating soft dynamics as normative at the beginnings of sections *debussyste* scores function as a counterpart to the delicate waxing and waning of the Bergsonian pure duration, creating a stream of activity that gradually builds in intensity and then slowly dissipates without a feeling of conclusion. The ending of Ravel’s “Sad birds,” marked “dying out” in addition to the falling volume level, is a perfect example of this.

Composers use performance indications to address performance practice, typically that of their own culture. They supply certain categories of information: that which lies outside of what was known through oral and written transmission of a certain culture’s performance practice, or what goes against those practices and can therefore only safely be communicated to the performer by explicit directions. The abundance of such written directions in *debussyste* piano scores suggests that we can believe these composers when they construed their works as expressing something strikingly new to the French musical community. Ravel explains what this new thing was in a binary opposition to which he frequently returned in published writings, pitting composing guided by the will against composing guided by instinct. In concert reviews

published in 1912 the construct returns several times. Witkowski's Second Symphony is "artificial" because the composer "appears to have been guided by the will alone in this composition, causing him to treat the elements of music separately and intellectually, when they should be dealt with simultaneously and "instinctively".<sup>28</sup> D'indy is similarly focused on music in the "pure domain of the will", causing him to be inhospitable towards true freedom of musical material, and Buffon makes similar errors because of his false assumption that "the will alone can direct artistic instinct".<sup>29</sup> I turn again to the richly illuminating speech Ravel gave in 1928, where he revealed the compositional philosophy alluded to in these reviews:

No academic attempt to establish permanent laws, however, ever helped or hindered the advancement of work in art...such would-be laws are dealing only with the obvious and superficial part of a work of art without ever reaching those infinitely minute roots of the artist's sensitiveness and personal reaction...that inner motion which purposely sets our intelligence and perception to seek its own development in its own atmosphere and tradition – not its historical tradition, but the tradition which heredity makes one feel is to be true to one's nature. Such searching may be intensively selective, and then becomes a clearing process applied to our natural gifts and supervised by our individual consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

In this model academic laws of music take the position of the will as used in the 1912 reviews, and "individual consciousness," "inner motion," and "the artist's sensitiveness and personal reaction" specify the more general ideas of instinct and emotion. Ravel's tone here is polemical, and he perceives himself locked in a battle with musical institutions and other transmitters of convention to free the composer from artificial rules so that he could become attuned to the "laws peculiar to his own being".<sup>31</sup> Debussy similarly opposed academic music (*écriture*),

---

<sup>28</sup> Ravel, "Concerts Lamoureux," *Revue musicale de la S.I.M.* (Feb. 1912): 62-63; reprinted and translated in *Ravel Reader*, 340-343.

<sup>29</sup> Ravel, "Concerts Lamoureux," *Revue musicale de la S.I.M.* (March 1912): 50-52; reprinted and translated in *Ravel Reader*, 344-347.

<sup>30</sup> Ravel, "Contemporary Music," 41.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

preoccupied with rigorous formal technique, to the true work of the artist as cultivating the most direct and concise expression of what they found within themselves.<sup>32</sup>

Ravel's project of liberating the inner consciousness of the artist harkens to Bergson and Henry, who likewise believed that problems arose when an individual was insensitive to the movements of their inner mind. For Bergson uniform time and linear thought were societal constraints that aided communication among individuals but impinged upon their free thought and true liberty, while Henry believed that failure to perceive the many "directions" that the consciousness consisted of at any single moment could lead to illusory thinking and therefore societal ills.<sup>33</sup> They encouraged individuals to break free from these constraints and praised the ability of art as an aid to this effort. Many early twentieth century scholars believed that of all human phenomena it was music that most directly interacted with the deepest and purest levels of consciousness. Philosopher Théodule Ribot devoted an entire chapter of his *Logic of the Sentiments* to music and stated that musicians were at a greater advantage in translating the unconscious mind than the Symbolists because sound bypassed language.<sup>34</sup> Bergson turned exclusively to music whenever he sought an artistic metaphor for the pure duration.

In this perspective composers were therefore gifted with the power to lead modern individuals into greater self-awareness, freedom of thought, and the evolution of consciousness. Debussy and Ravel, as supported by both their words and their compositions, took hold of this birthright. Written directions in their scores are yet more evidence of these composers' connection to Symbolists and philosophers researching the mechanisms of human thought, and

---

<sup>32</sup> See for instance "A la veille de Pelléas et Mélisande," interview done by Louis Schneider, *Revue d'histoire et de critique musicale* (Apr. 1901); "La musique d'aujourd'hui et celle de demain." *Comoedia* (4 Nov. 1909); and "La pensée d'un grand musicien," *Excelsior* (18 Jan. 1911). Reprinted in *Monsieur Croche*, 265-267, 281, and 289, respectively.

<sup>33</sup> Bergson, *Les données*, OC 85-110 and Argüelles, *Charles Henry*, 109.

<sup>34</sup> Théodule Ribot, *La logique des sentiments* (Paris: Alcan, 1905), 142.

their affinity with the goals of both. Among many other stylistic strategies, dynamic markings and performance indications were components of the score in which the composers could break music out of its conventions of rhythm, form, and expressive content. Instead of music with a regimented passage of time and an extroverted expression of generalized emotions, all neatly broken up into schematically constructed sections, the *debussistes* created music with a fluid sense of time and blurred sectional breaks, and they communicated their own unique inner states. Understood as such, *debussyste* scores are not the product of sickly elitists who could not help but write delicate music as detractors liked to claim, but something much more meaningful: sites of confluence and expansion of Symbolist aesthetics and contemporaneous scholarship on the human mind.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Meant as an insult, the claim that Debussy's style was music written for the weak, by the weak recurs in Raphaël Cor's diatribe against the composer, *Le Cas Debussy*. He contrasts this "murmuring and subtle monotony, quite able to please delicate ears" to virile music that imparts strong and pure emotions to the listener. C. Francis Caillard, José de Bérès, Raphaël Cor, *Le Cas Debussy* (Paris: Bibliothèque du Temps Présent, 1910), 12-17.