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The Techniques of Impressionism in the Preludes of Claude Debussy

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THE TECHNIQUES OF IMPRESSIONISM

IN THE PRELUDES

OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY

by

Janet Duffel

Honors Project

Spring 1974

Claude Debussy, called by Bartok "the greatest composer of our period"[1], was one of the most important composers in the history of piano music. He introduced a new approach to musical composition which is best summed up in an excerpt from a letter written by Debussy in 1885:

> I don't think I shall ever be able to put music into a strict mould. I'm not speaking of musical form; it's a literary question. I shall always prefer a subject where, somehow, action is sacrificed to feeling. It seems to me that music thus becomes more human and one can then discover and refine upon a means of expression.[2]

As a student at the Paris Conservatory, Debussy showed little promise. His violations of the laws of composition annoyed and bewildered his professors. A description by a fellow student of one of his improvisations at the keyboard reveals many of the features which are now accepted as general characteristics of Debussy's piano music.

> At the piano we heard groups of consecutive fifths and octaves; sevenths which instead of being resolved in the proper way actually led to the note above or weren't resolved at all; shameful "false relations"; chords

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[1]Otto Deri, Exploring Twentieth-Century Music (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 152.

[2]Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy (London, England: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., Aldine House, 1951), p. 25.

> of the ninth on all degrees of the scale; chords of the eleventh and thirteenth; all the notes of the diatonic scale heard at once in fantastic arrangements. . . . And all this Claude called 'le regal de l'ouie' (a feast for the ear).[3]

Because of his departure from the basic harmonic principles which had been in use for hundreds of years, Debussy was one of the principal originators of the new piano style in the twentieth century.[4] Although Debussy was not always the first composer to use all the devices considered part of his style, he exploited them to such an extent that they became "part of the vocabulary of music."[5] As the music of Beethoven bridged the gap between the Classical and Romantic periods in music, the music of Debussy served as one of the most significant bridges between the music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[6]

Although the music of Wagner, of Russian nationalists, of the Far East, and of Mussourgsky all had a powerful effect on the formation of Debussy's style, his creative inspiration came from Impressionist painters and Symbolist literature. "Symbolist poets and Impressionist

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[3] Ibid, p. 18.

[4] Joseph Machlis, Introduction to Contemporary Music (New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1961), p. 127.

[5] Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth Century Music (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1967), p. 28.

[6] Ibid, p. 13.

painters helped to sharpen the senses of their contemporaries."[7] To the Impressionists the subject matter itself was of less importance than the impression the subject aroused. They turned away from realism and were more concerned with color and light than form and substance. The poets often sacrificed clarity of statement to emphasize the sounds of the words. Their primary aim was to establish a mood through the sound and rhythm of their verses.

In the Preludes, Debussy creates a mood by exploiting the resources of the piano. These twenty-four pieces contain all the compositional techniques which Debussy had formulated through experimentation with various harmonic, melodic and rhythmic devices.

In the area of harmony, Debussy's most important contribution is his treatment of dissonance. Previously, the use of dissonance had been governed by the principle that a dissonant chord must be followed by moments of relaxation through resolution. But Debussy uses dissonance to add color rather than create tension.

> ...Debussy's harmonic world has a different flow from the music of the preceding era; because there is no urgent need to reach 'destinations', the flow of the chords assumes a gentleness, an unforced quality. Instead of sharply drawn harmonic progressions, chords are presented, often merely for their

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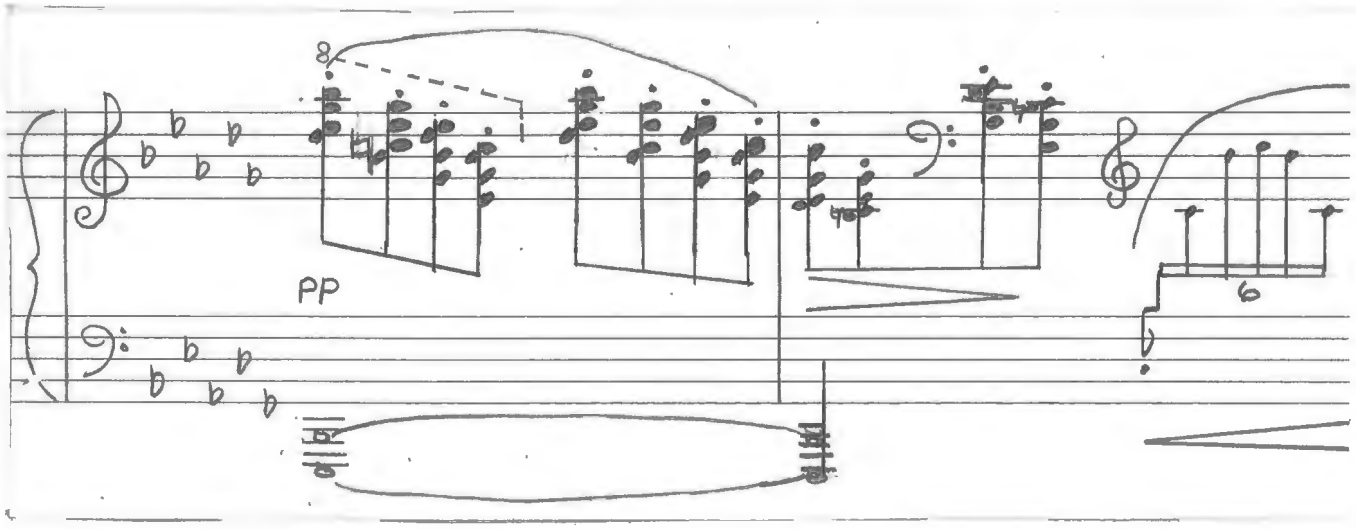
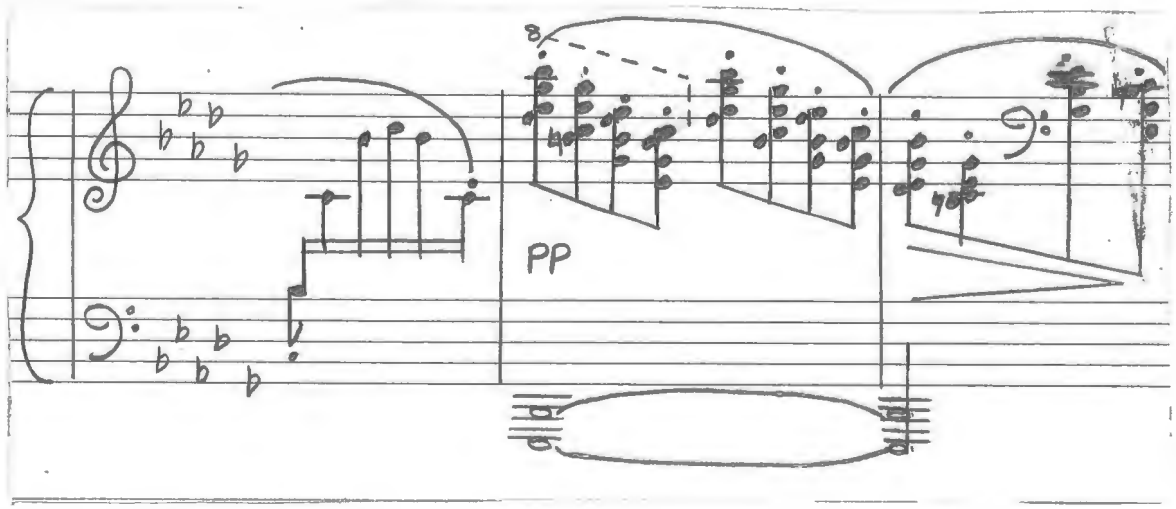
[7]Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1967), p. 12.

> sound values, with one unresolved chord gently flowing to the next, without eliciting any need for resolution of these chords.[8]

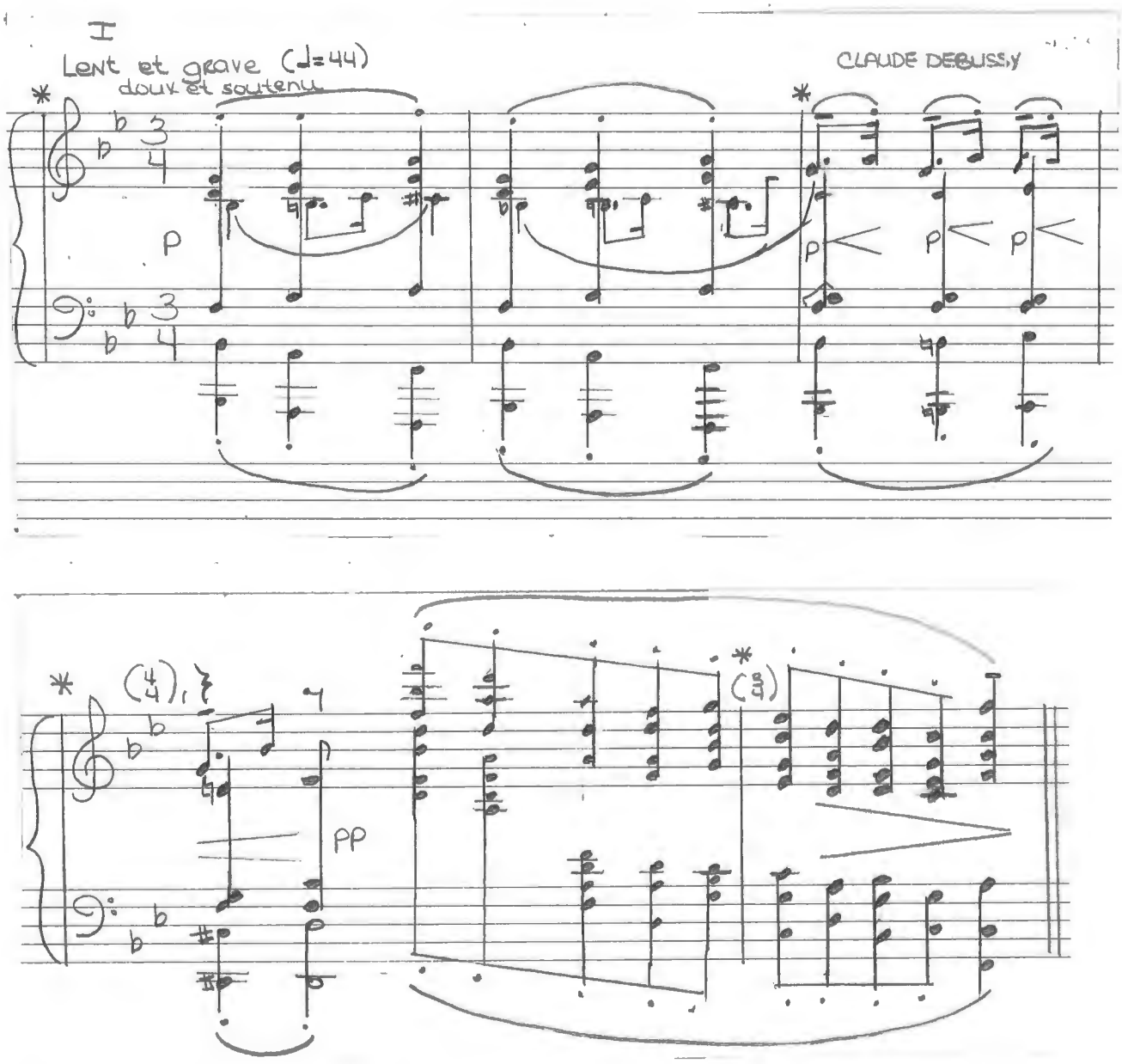
The following example, from "La vent dans la plaine", illustrates this technique of leading a dissonant chord to another one on a different level rather than resolving it.

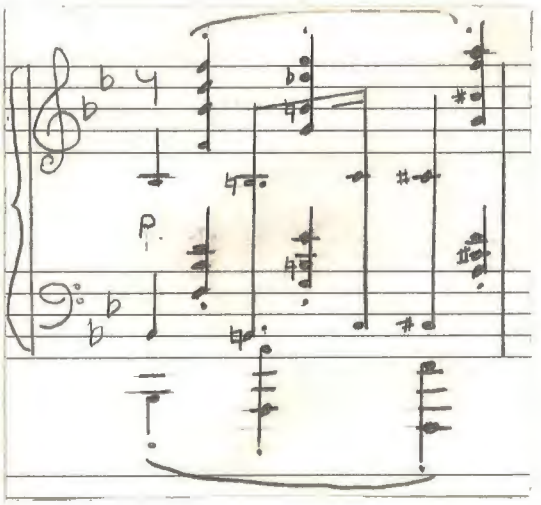




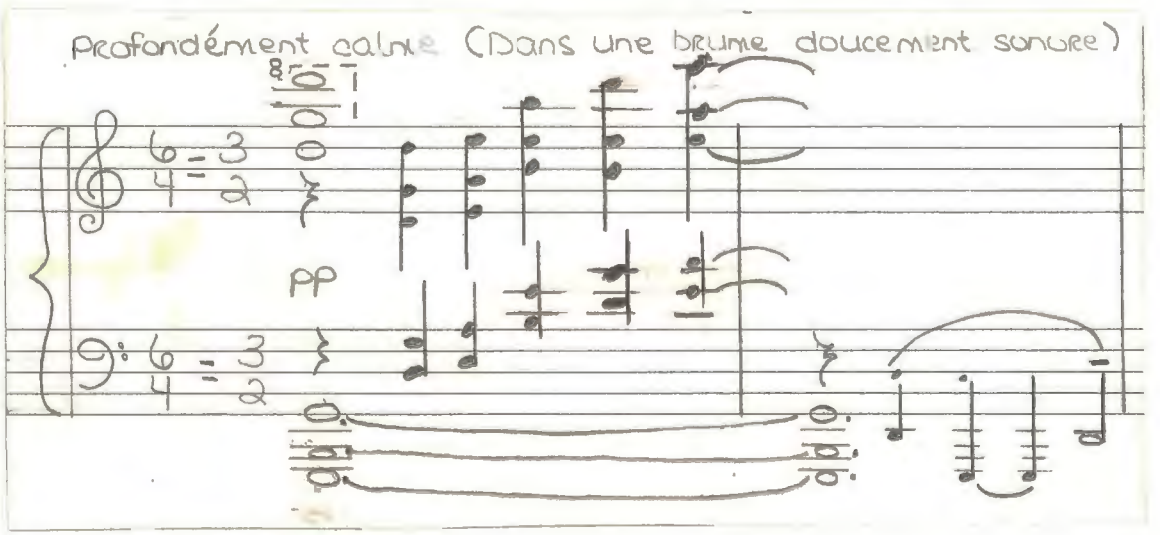
[8]Otto Deri, Exploring Twentieth-Century Music (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 157.

One of Debussy's favorite harmonic devices is the use of parallel perfect intervals--fourths, fifths, and octaves--and parallel chords. Some type of parallelism is found in each of the preludes. In "Danseuses de Delphes", Debussy uses parallel chords between sections of the piece to add color.

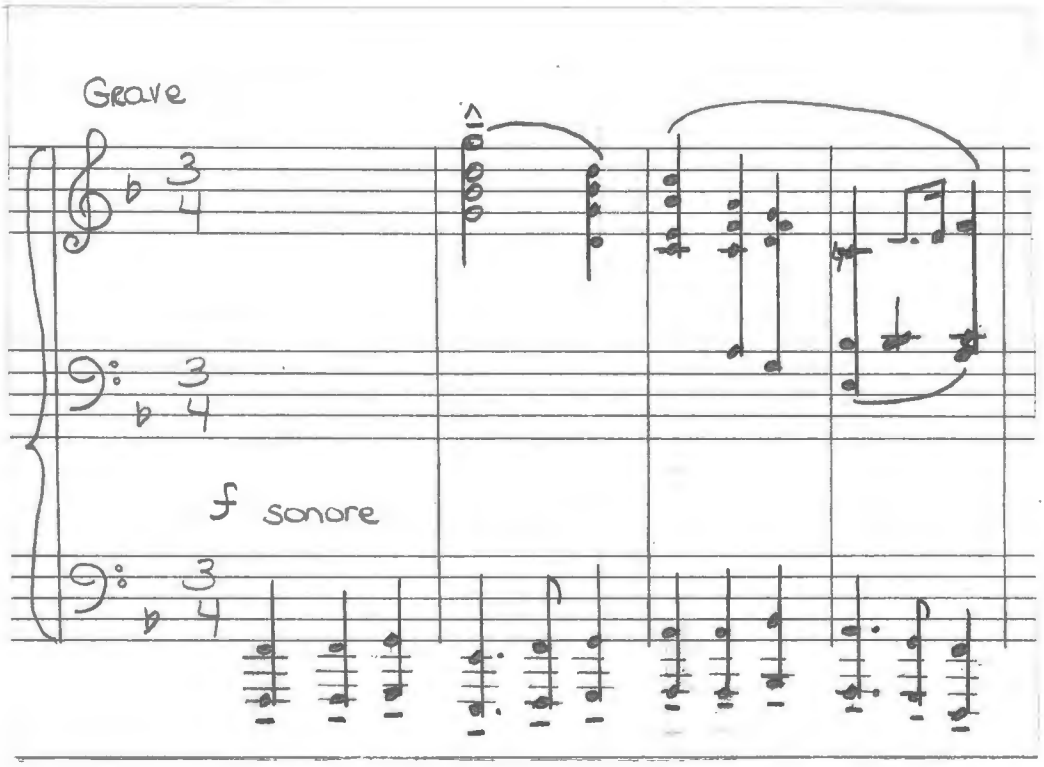




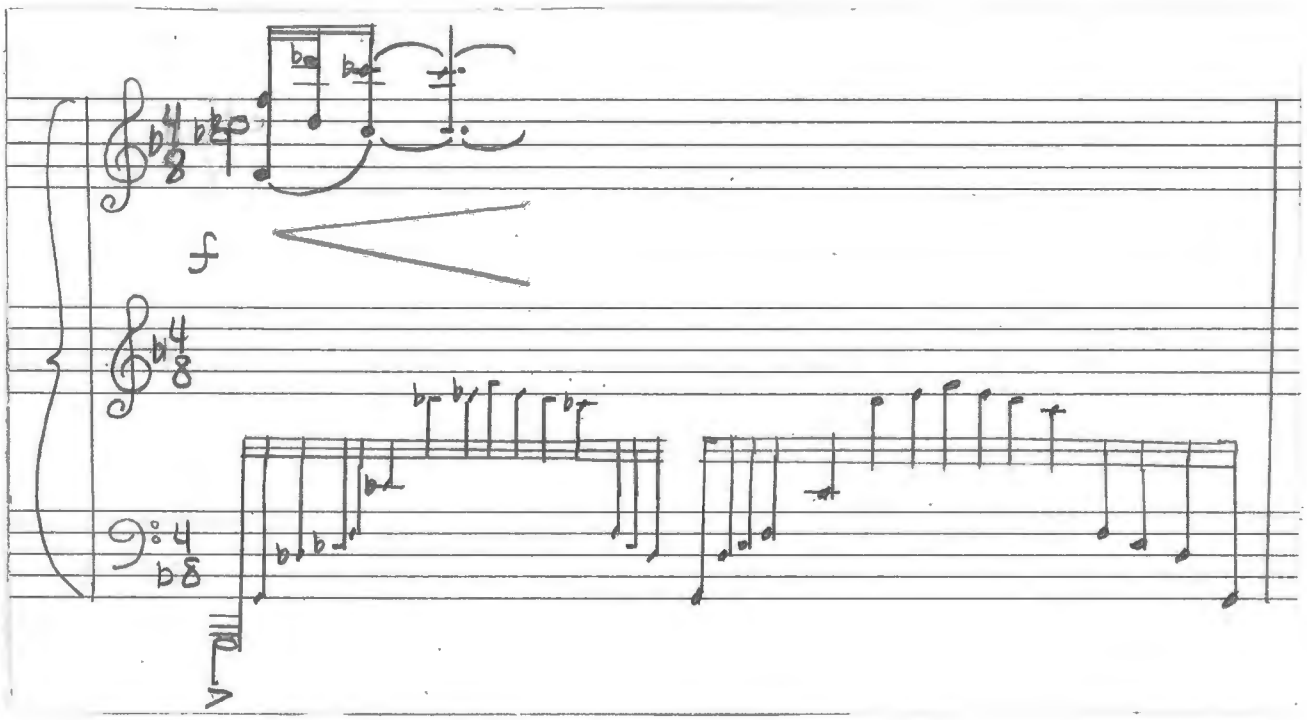
The main characteristic of "La cathédrale engloutie" is the use of parallel chords. The harmonies of the entire piece are based on parallel chords. In the first section, the harmonies are unusual because they are composed of fourths and fifths--the third of the chord is not present. This type of harmonic structure, called organum, helps to create the atmosphere of a cathedral because in medieval times chants were often sung at intervals of perfect fourths, perfect fifths and octaves.



Debussy also uses parallel chords to accompany the melody. In "Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. D.P.M.P.C.", the melody of "God Save the Queen" is in the bass in octaves, accompanied by parallel chords in the right hand.



As in the example above, Debussy often writes his melodies in octaves, accompanied by different figures according to the mood he wishes to evoke. In "Feux d'artifice", Debussy accompanies his melody by whole-tone passages.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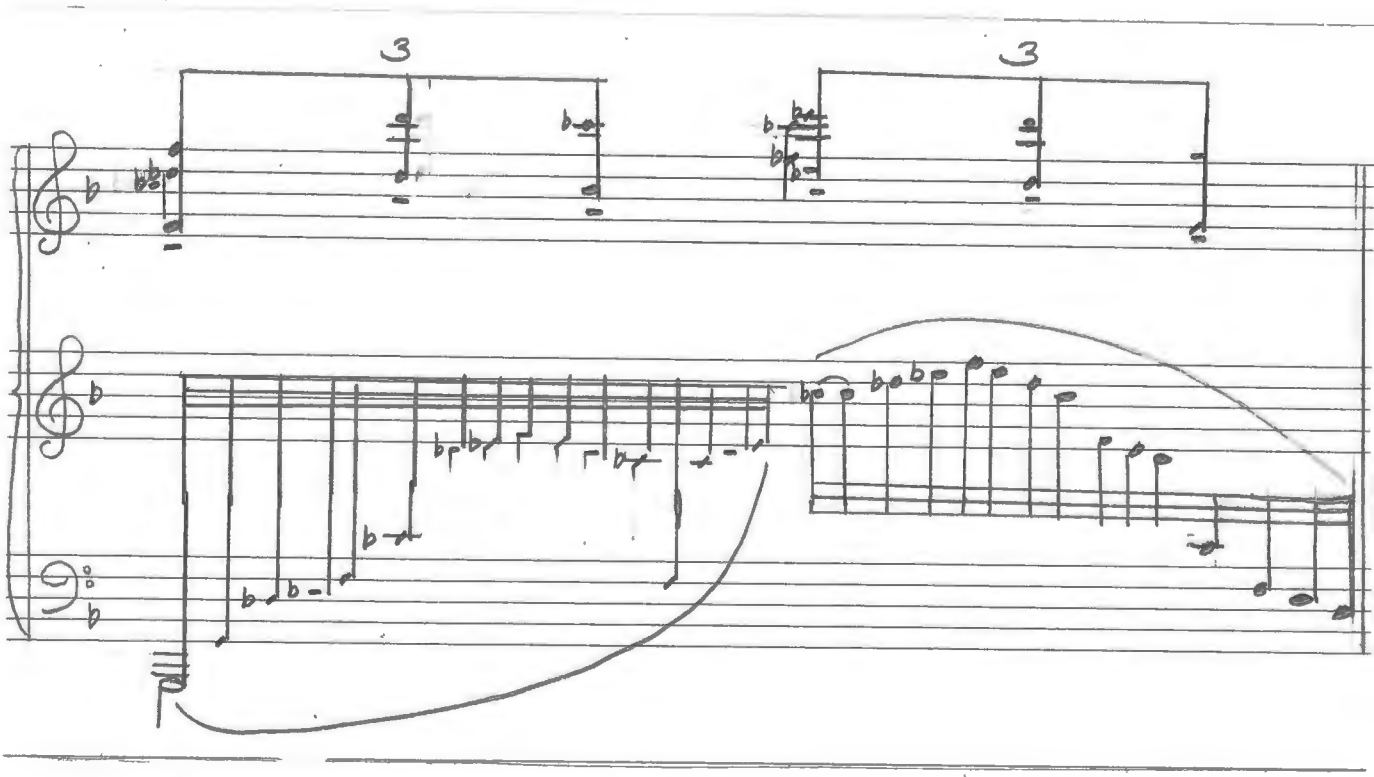
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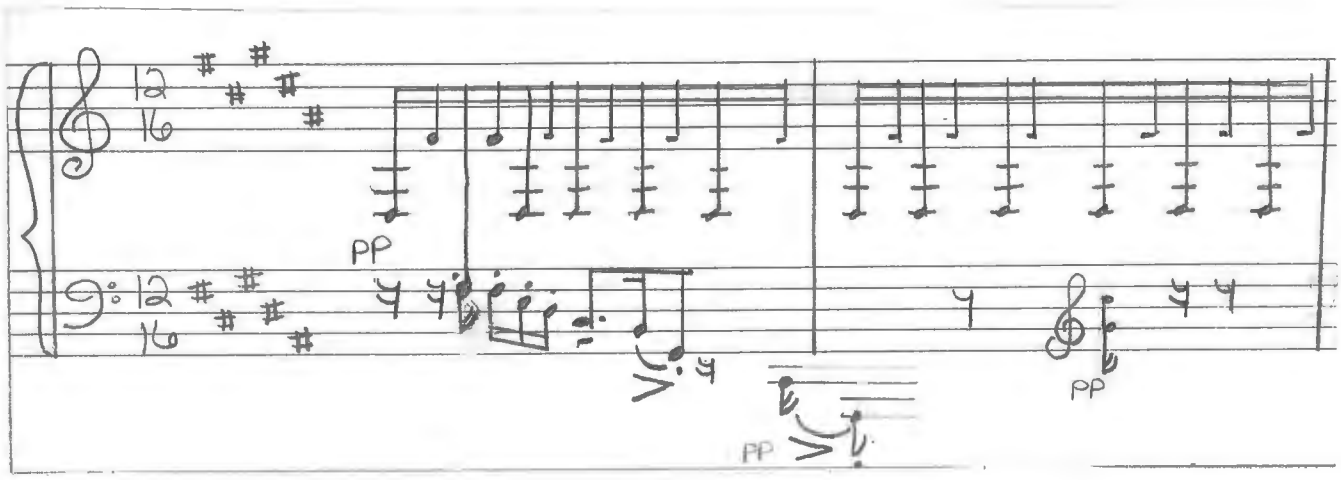
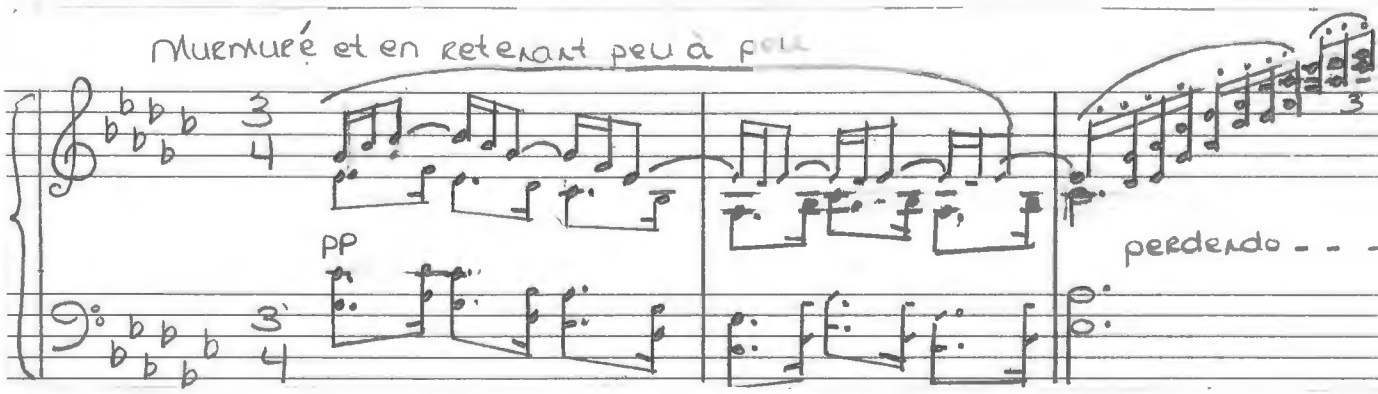
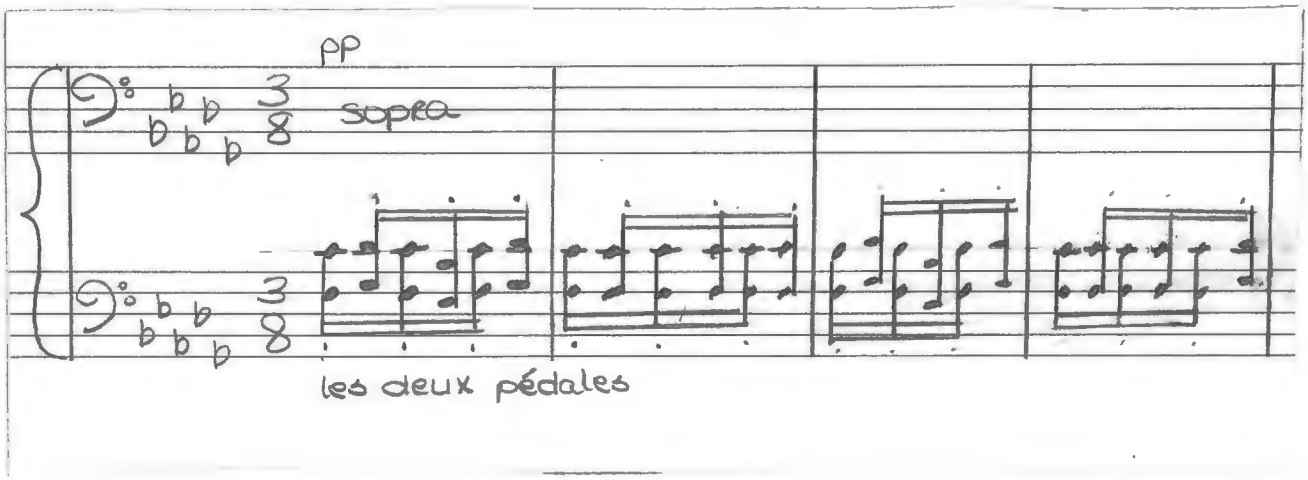
In "Les collines d'Anacapri", broken octaves are used to accompany the melody.

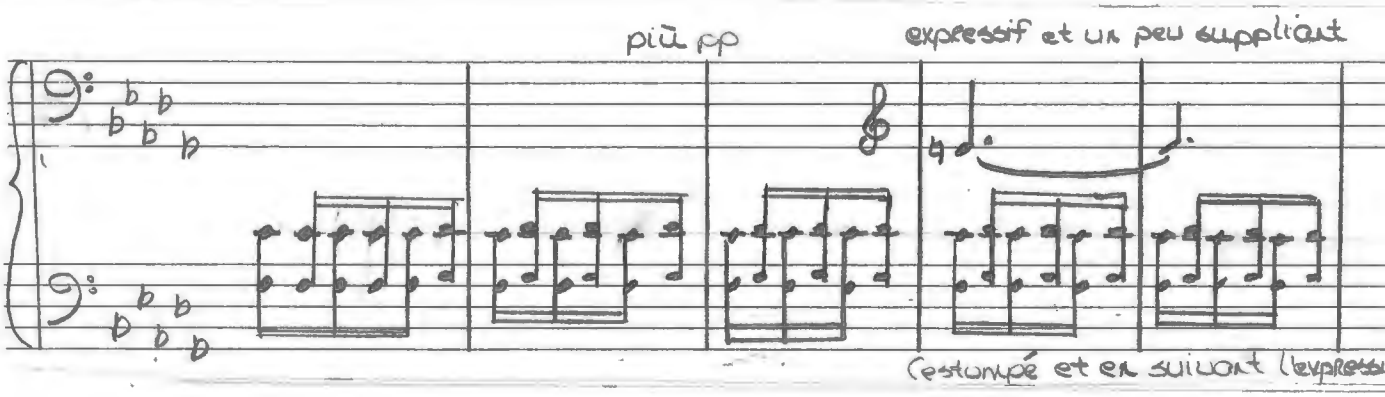


The other perfect intervals--perfect fourths and perfect fifths--also are used as accompaniment figures. One section of "La fille aux cheveux de lin" has parallel fourths accompanying the melody, followed by a run of parallel fourths at the final cadence.

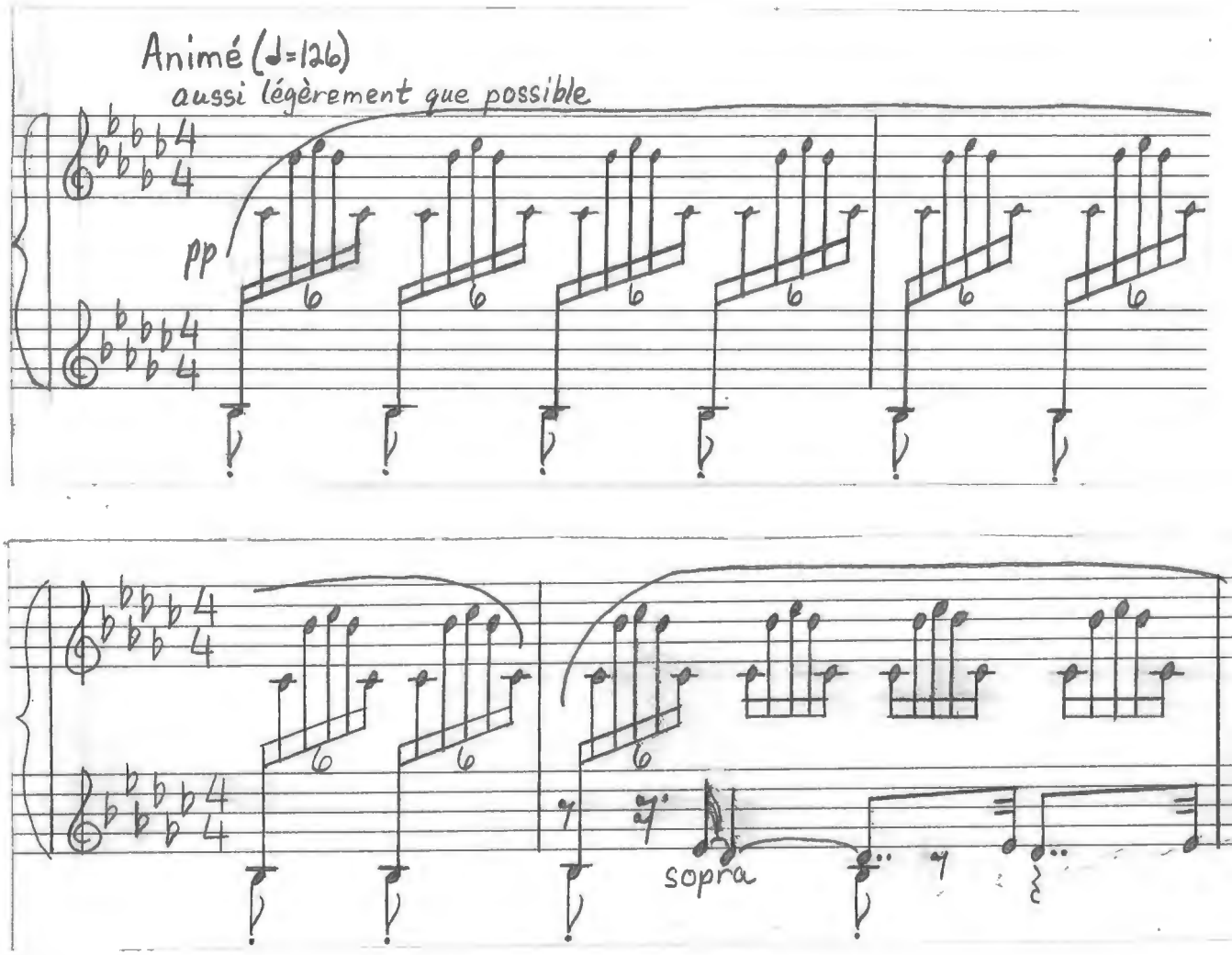


The parallel fifths in "La sérénade interrompue" not only serve as the accompanying figure when the melody enters, but they also suggest the sound of a guitar.

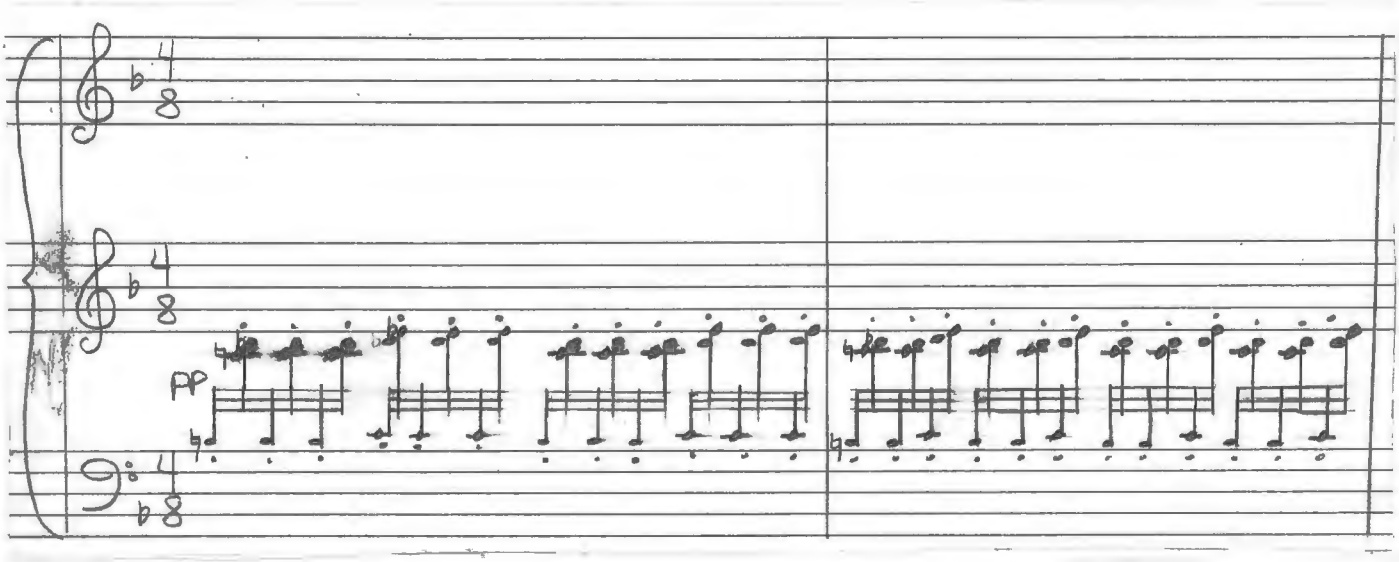




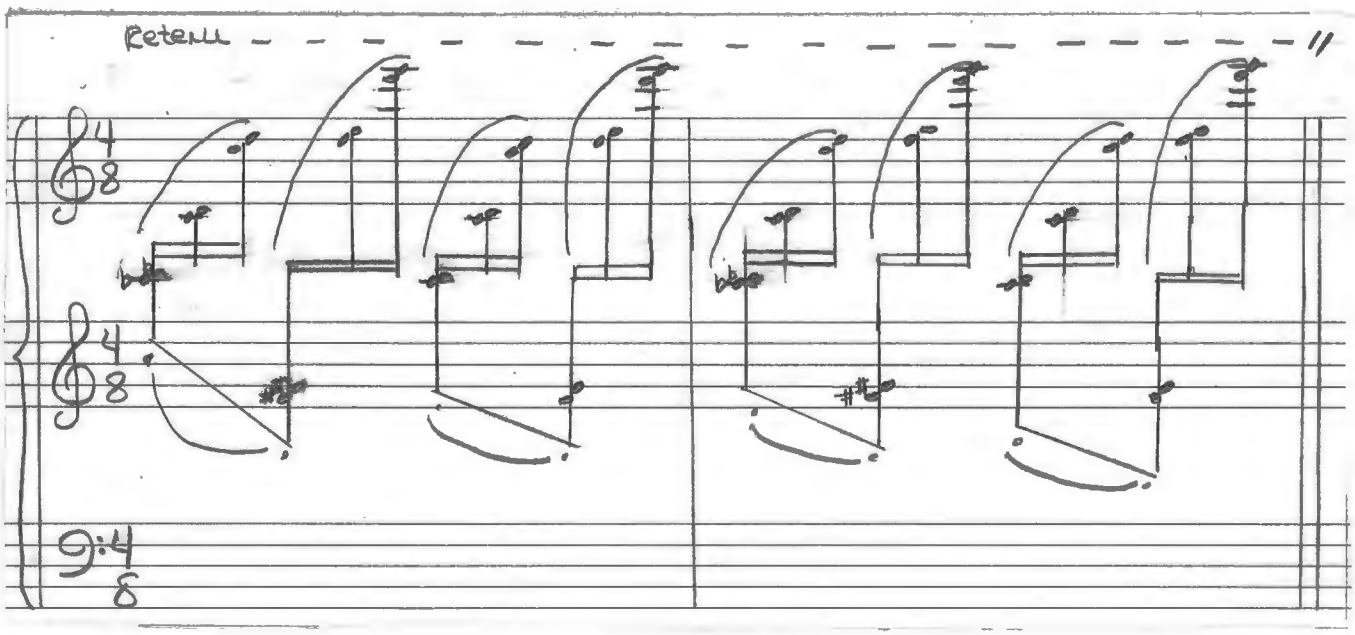
Debussy often uses the intervals of seconds and sevenths as accompanying figures and to form clusters. The accompaniment figure in "La vent dans la plaine" is based entirely on the intervals of seconds and sevenths. At the beginning of the piece the intervals are major sevenths and minor seconds, but in the middle section they change to minor sevenths and major seconds. At the end of the piece, major sevenths and minor seconds return in the accompaniment.



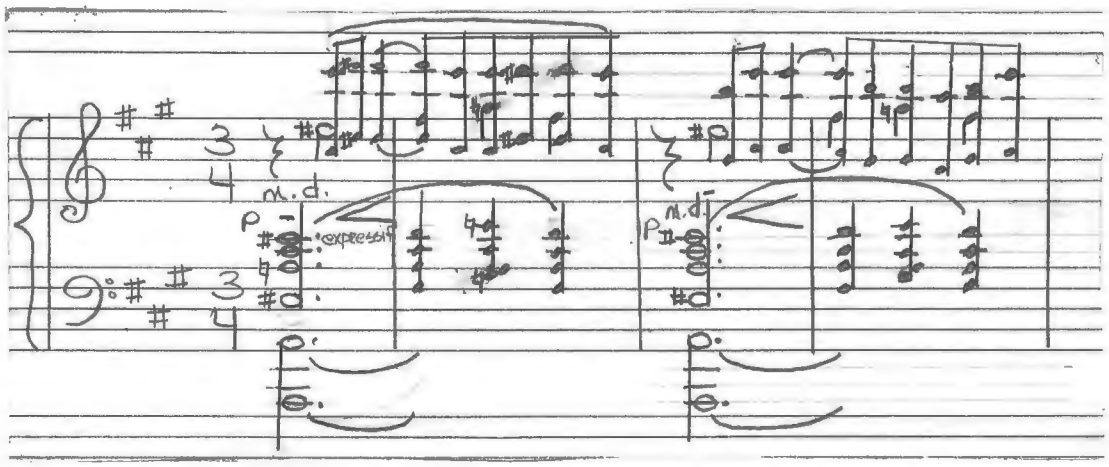
In "Feux d'artifice" both major and minor seconds join the sections of the piece. The right hand figure is composed of seconds and is a second above the note played by the left hand.



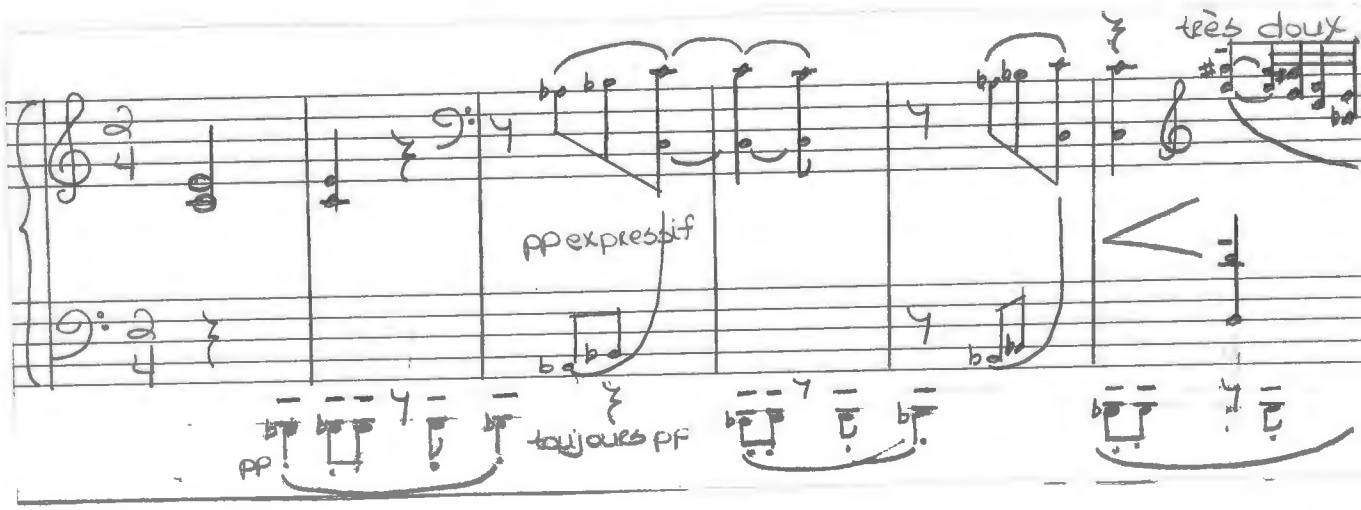
Later in the same piece, Debussy also uses clusters formed by major seconds.



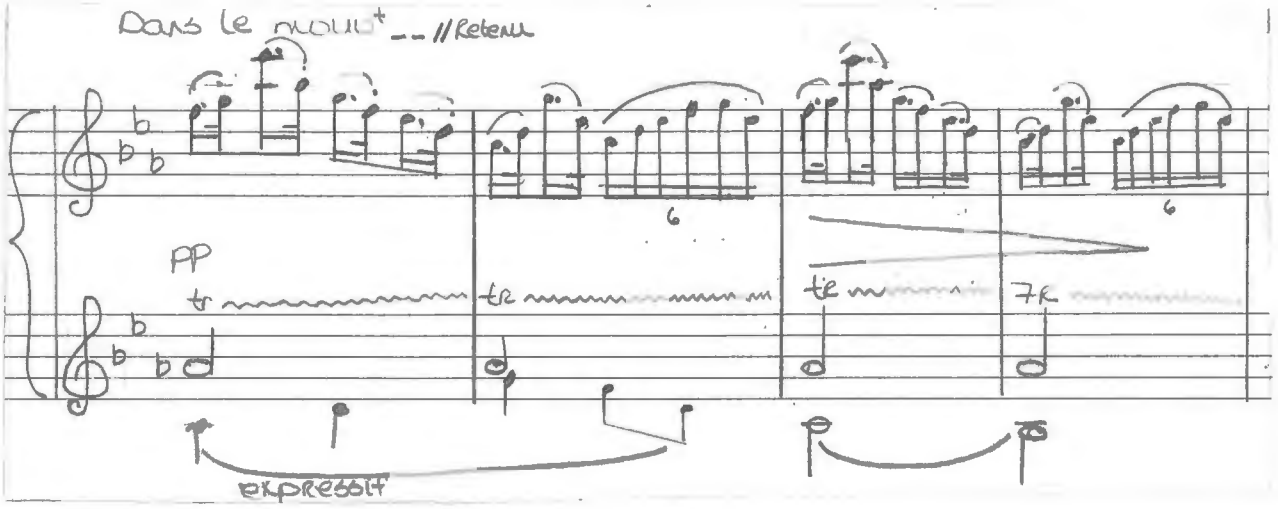
One of the traditional devices that Debussy uses extensively is the pedal point. When the pedal point is in the bass, it often helps to establish a tonal center, as in "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir."



"Voiles" is based on the whole-tone scale. Because all the intervals in the whole-tone scale are an equal distance apart, the piece does not have a tonal center. But the B♭ pedal point which occurs throughout the piece in the bass almost becomes a tonal center and also relates the contrasting sections of the piece.



Debussy's pedal points are not always in the bass. "La Danse de Puck" has a trill in an inner voice which is used as a pedal point.



The feature most commonly associated with Debussy's music is his use of scales other than the major and minor forms.

> The scale is the structural organization behind both melody and harmony, and when this is substantially changed from former musical practices, herein lies the clue toward the recognition and understanding of this new sound.[9]

Among these forms are the whole-tone scale, the pentatonic scale and the modal scales.

> To understand Debussy's preference for scales other than major-minor, one should think of the inherent psychological effects. One should keep in mind that the major-minor key system with the tonic-dominant axis sets up a certain

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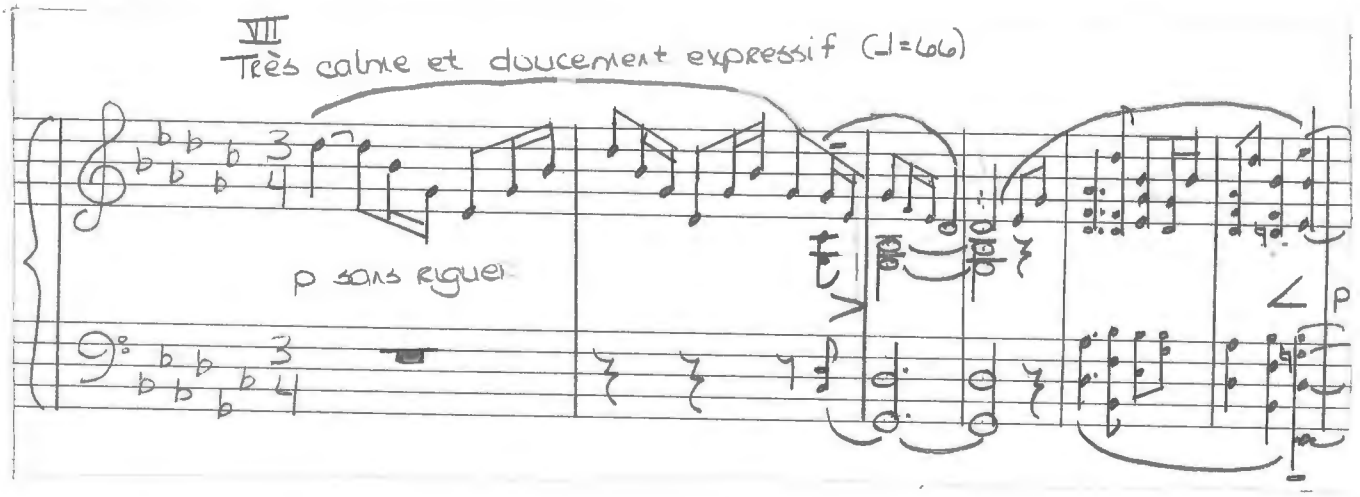
[9]Ludmila Ulehla, Contemporary Harmony: Romanticism through the Twelve-Tone Row (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 161.

> tension system with very well-defined destinations and harmonic purpose. This is exactly what Debussy wanted to avoid.[10]

The modal scales occur most frequently in the preludes. In "La fille aux cheveux de lin" the melodic material is in the dorian mode, but it is harmonized in the key of $G^{\flat}$ major.



The identifying characteristic of "Voiles" is the whole-tone passage which occurs at the beginning of the piece.

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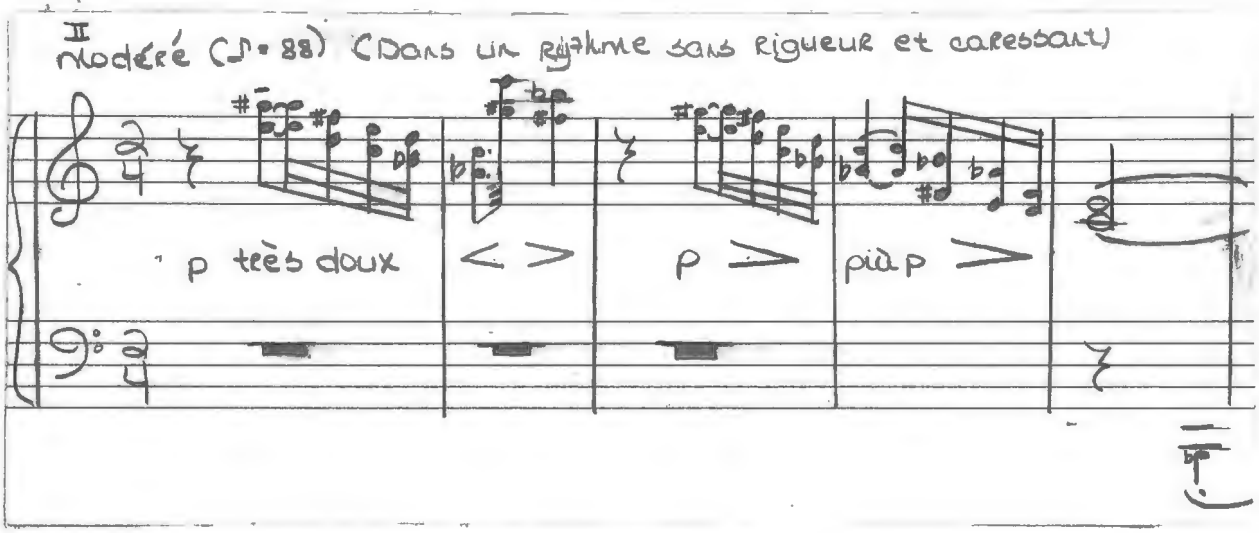
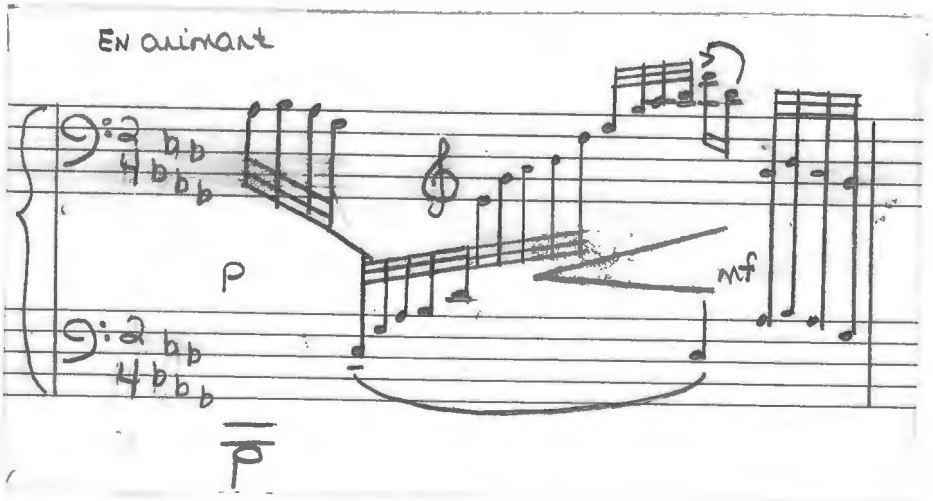
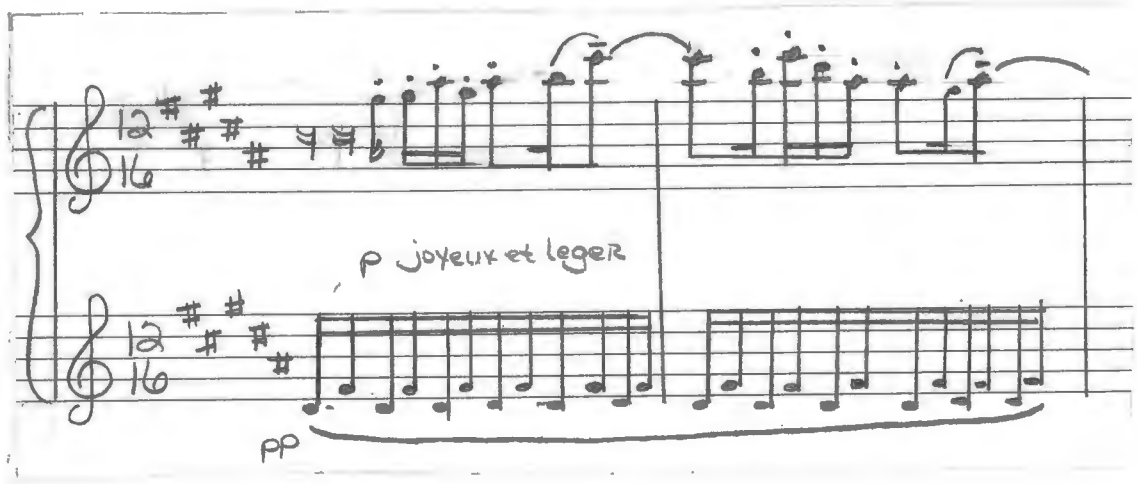
[10]Otto Deri, Exploring Twentieth-Century Music (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 157.



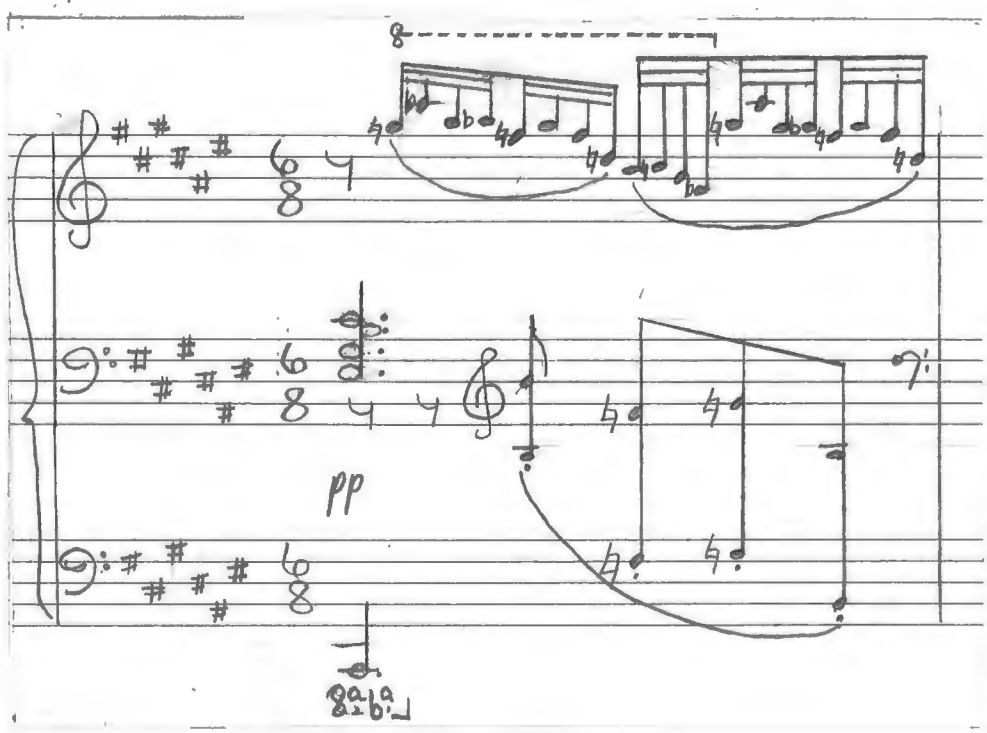
When the piece changes keys, the type of scale passage changes to pentatonic. At the end of the piece, the whole-tone pattern used at the beginning returns.

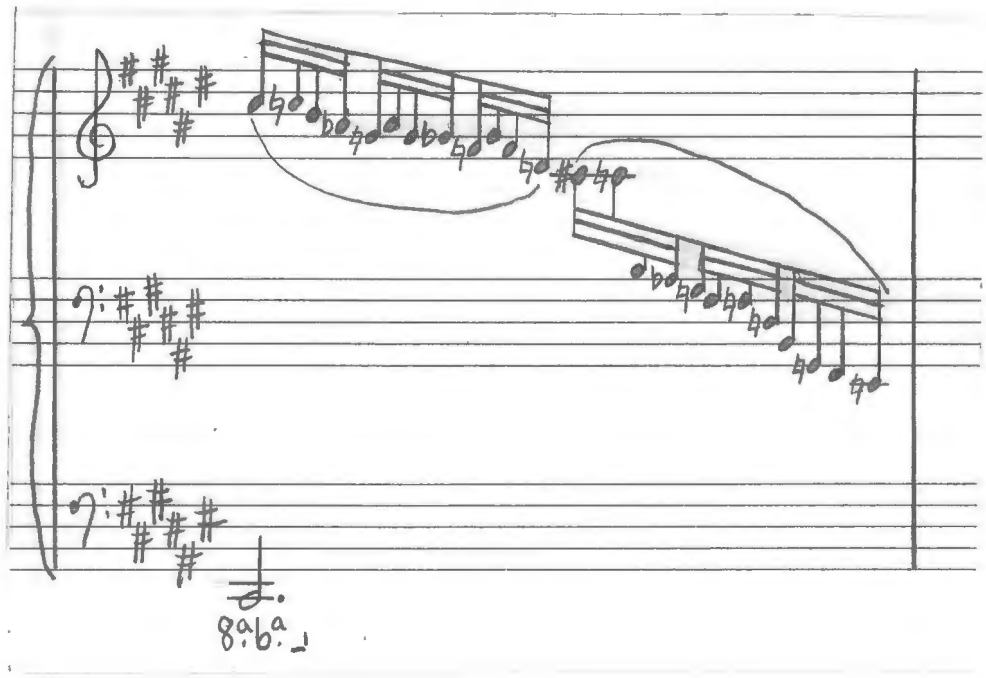


The melodic figure in "Les Collines d'Anacapri" suggests the pentatonic scale. A half-step occurs between the A# and the B, but the effect is that of the pentatonic scale.

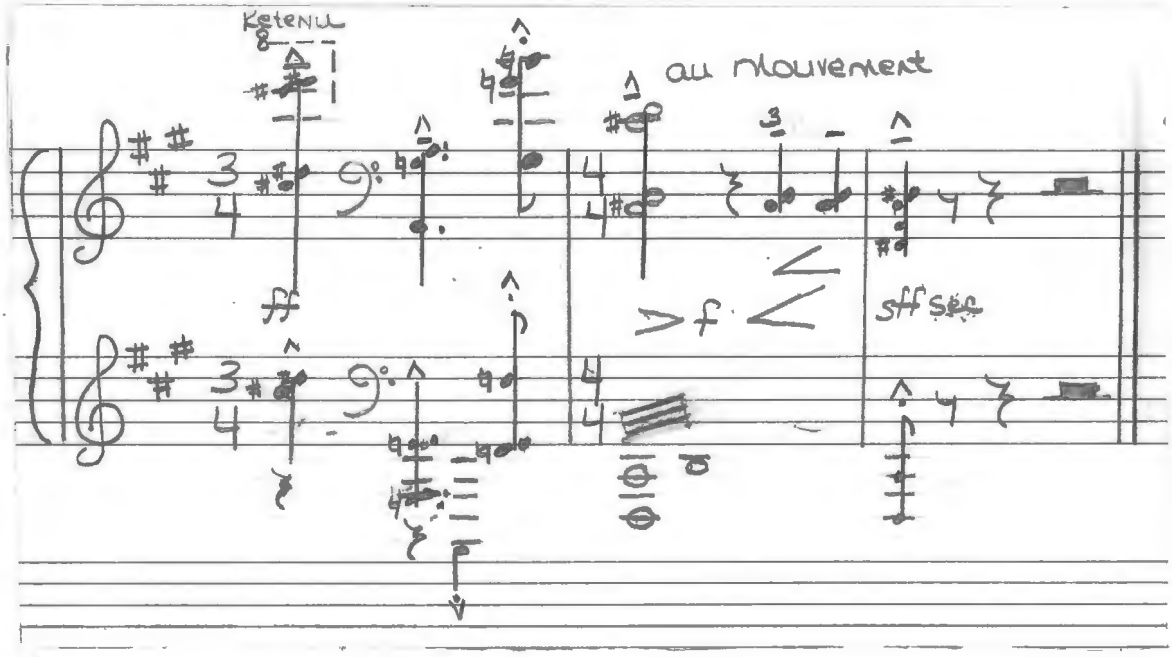


Debussy's use of the chromatic scale is primarily as an accompanying figure and to provide color between sections of a piece. "La Terrasse des audiences du Clair de lune" has chromatic passages used in both of these ways.

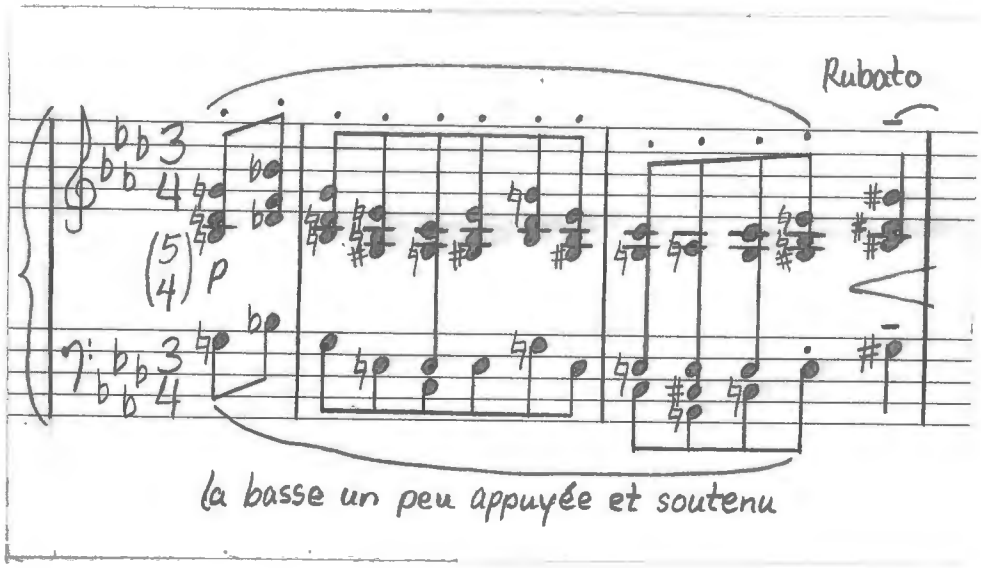




As a result of the use of modal, whole-tone, chromatic and pentatonic scales, Debussy's cadences depend more on the completion of a certain theme or section of a composition than on the harmonic progression. The final chord of the cadence functions as a rest chord, because it is usually less dissonant than what precedes it. An example of this type of cadence is the chord which serves as the final cadence in "Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest".

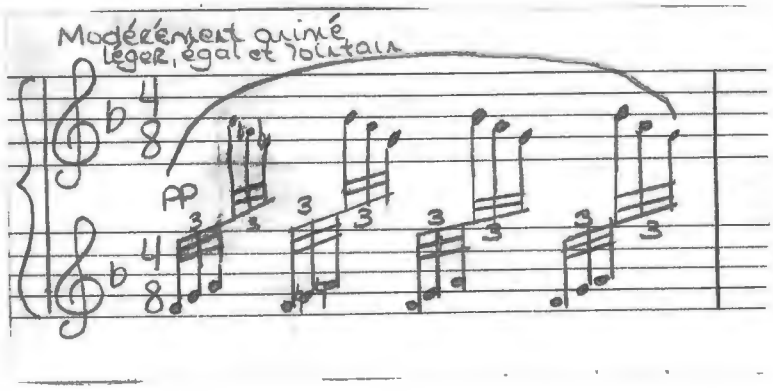


The use of these scales and cadences helps to obscure the tonal center. Debussy often uses a particular key signature and then a chord or series of chords which cannot be analyzed as having any relationship to that key. This kind of harmonic progression appears in "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir". The key signature is that of A major, but in measures 34-36 there is a series of parallel chords which cannot be analyzed in the key of A major. This harmonic structure results in an indefinite tonal center.

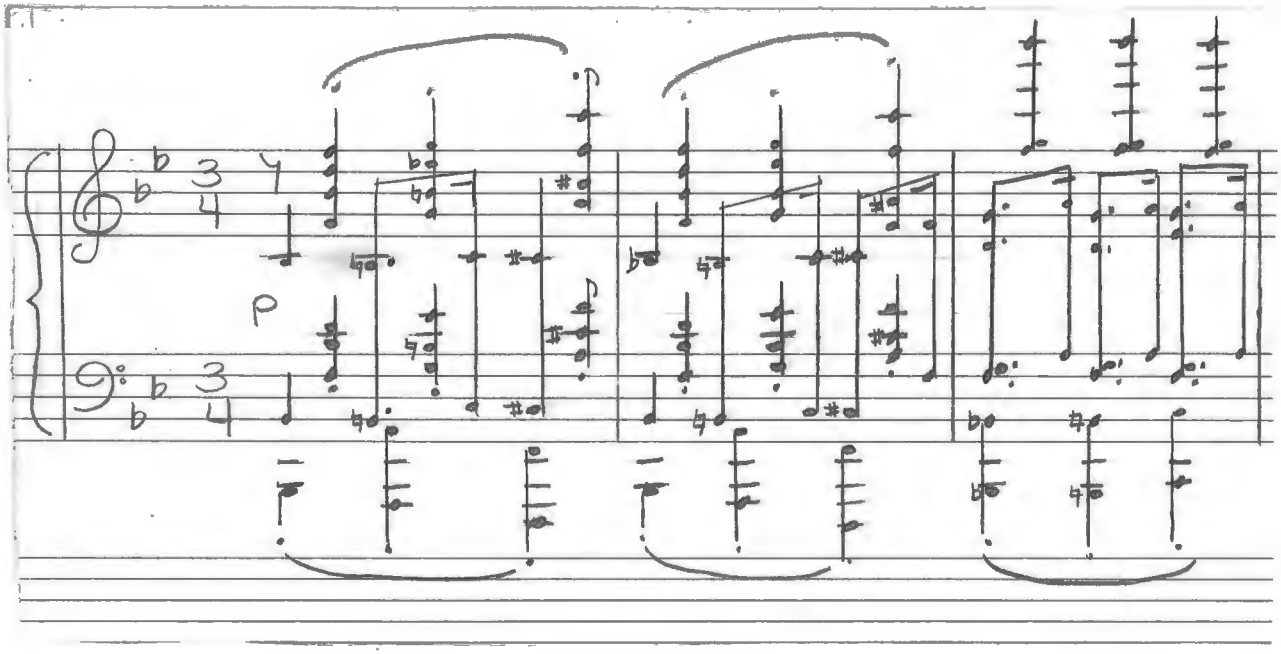


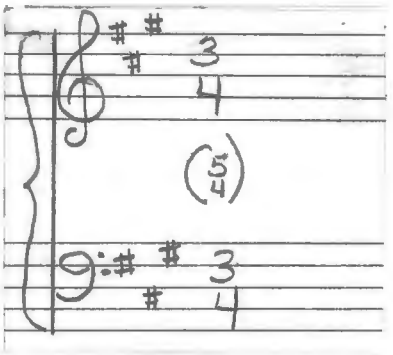
Many of the Preludes change key signatures at least once. "Feux d'artifice" begins with the key signature of F major. Then the key signature changes to $D^{\flat}$ major, to C major, to Ammajor, back to C major, to $F^{\sharp}$ major, to C major, to $F^{\sharp}$ major, to C major, to F major and ends with the key signature of C major.

Another technique which obscures the tonal center is the use of many accidentals. At the beginning of "Feux d'artifice" the key signature is that of F major, but the accidentals in the first measure obscure the tonal center. The pattern for the first half of each beat is F-G-A. But on the second half of each beat the pattern is $B^{\flat}$-$A^{\flat}$-$G^{\flat}$. By using some of the same tones in each pattern with different accidentals, Debussy obscures the tonal center.

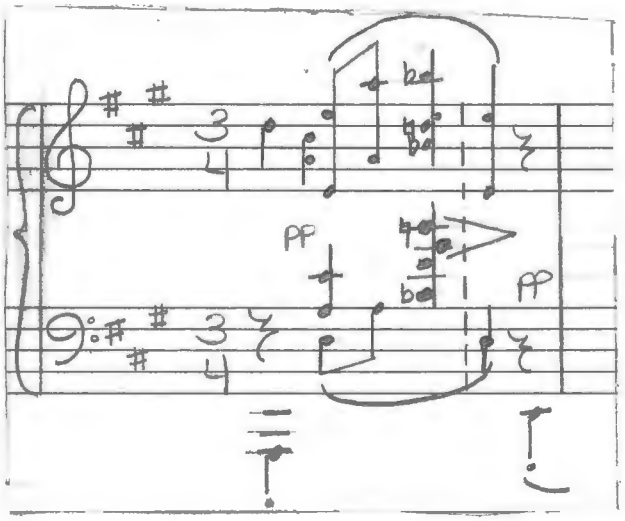


Debussy's melodies frequently consist of short phrases which are often repeated. The melody in "Danseuses de Delphes" is composed of one short phrase, its repetition, and a longer phrase. This melody is presented in different registers of the keyboard and with various accompanying figures.

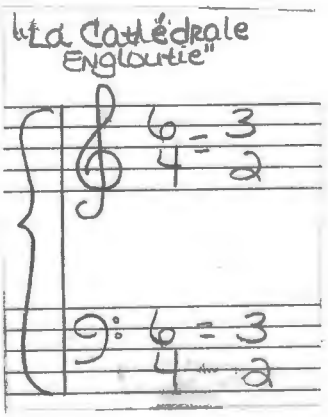


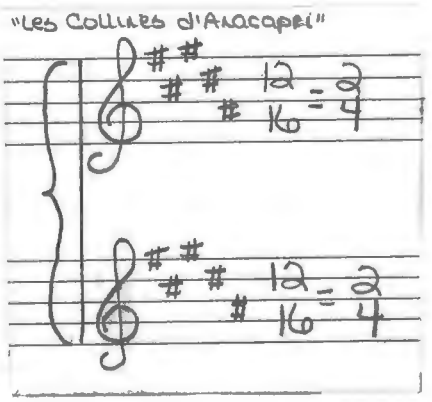


Throughout the piece, the meter change is indicated by a broken bar line where the normal bar line in $\frac{3}{4}$ should come.

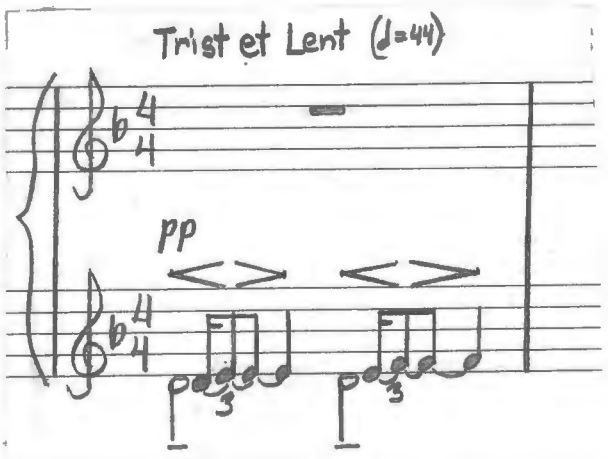


The time signatures at the beginning of "La cathedrale engloutie" and "Les Collines d'Anacapri" are $\frac{6}{4} = \frac{3}{2}$ and $\frac{12}{16} = \frac{2}{4}$.

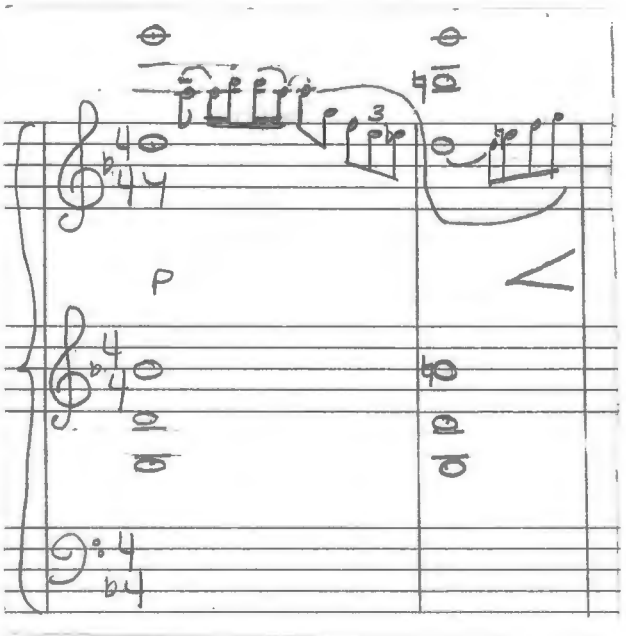




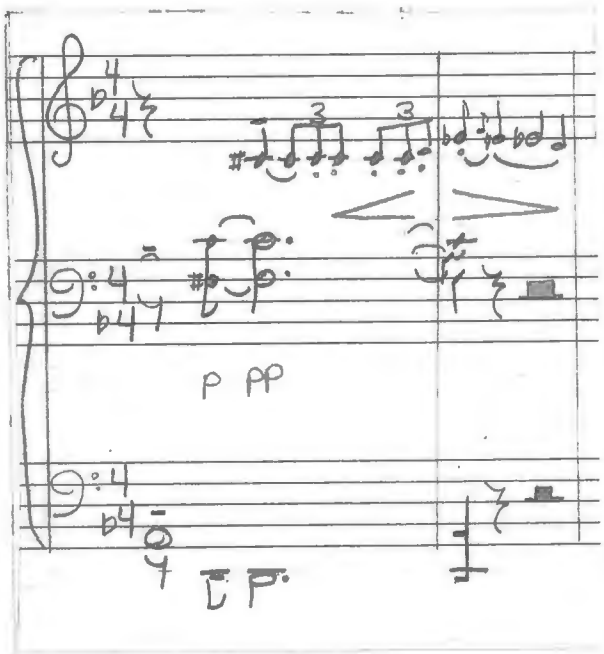
The rhythmic pattern of the accompaniment which appears throughout "Des pas sur la neige" obscures the meter through the use of an uneven triplet and tied notes.



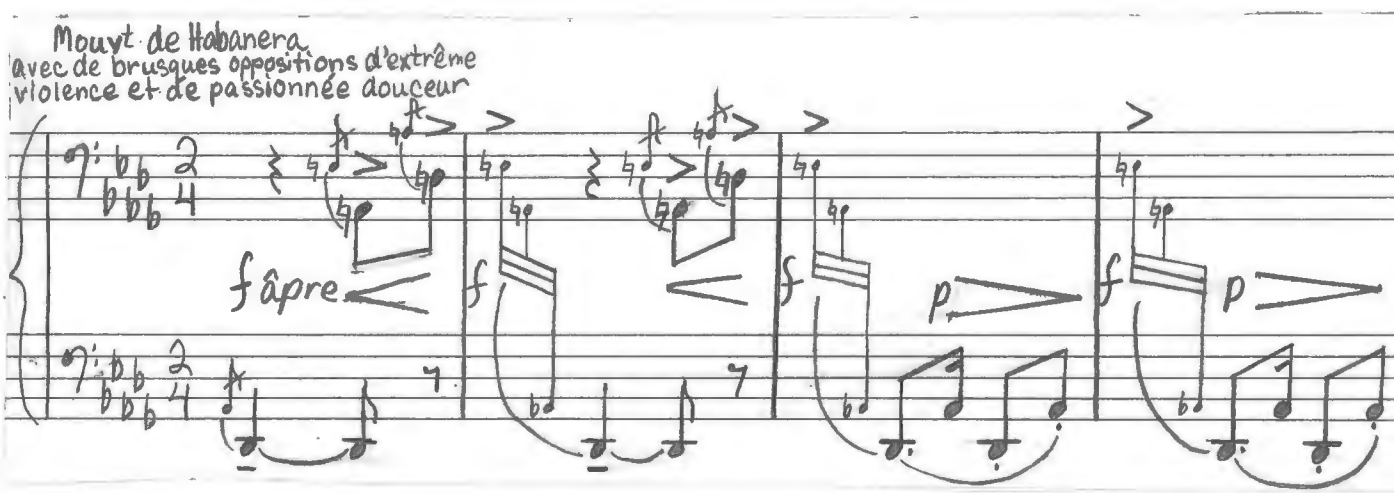
In "Canope" different subdivisions of the beat are used in the same phrase to obscure the meter of the piece.



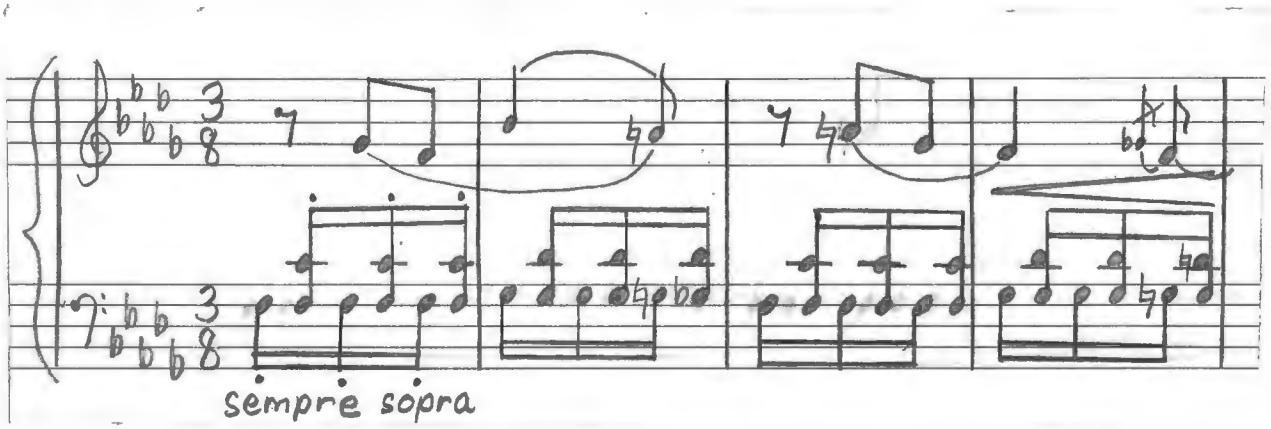
"Canope" also has an example of syncopation. The emphasis comes on the second beat of the measure rather than on the first or third beat. The first beat is a quarter rest, and the third beat is a tied note.

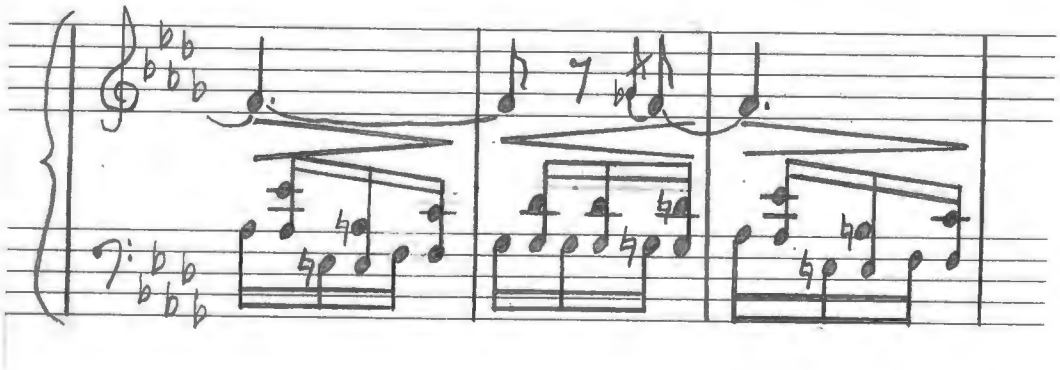


The influence of Spanish rhythms on Debussy's music is obvious in "La puerta del Vino". The tempo marking at the beginning, the great number of accents, and the dotted rhythms indicate a Spanish influence.



Another prelude which shows the Spanish influence in melody and rhythm is "La serenade interrompue".





Debussy is precise in his tempo and dynamic markings. In each prelude there are many markings which tell the pianist exactly what to do. The remarks at the beginning of each piece often set the mood for the entire piece. "Dans le style et le Mouvement d'un Cake-Walk" characterizes the atmosphere of "General Lavine 6 eccentric _". "La puerta del Vino" begins with the following instructions: "avec de brusques oppositions d'extreme violence et de passionnée douceur".

The comment at the beginning of "Voiles" reads: "Dans un rhythme sans rigueur et caressant." One of the specific remarks in "Les collines d'Anacapri" directs the pianist to play that section of the piece "avec la liberta d'une chanson populaire". Some of the most frequent tempo markings in the Preludes are "Cedez" (ritard), "Retenu" (ritard to the next tempo marking), and "Mouvement" (a tempo).

The majority of Debussy's dynamic markings are pianos and pianissimos.

> Seven of the Preludes of the first volume start pp and the other five are marked p. Stunning dramatic climaxes occur, but they are momentary flashes soon to be replaced by quiet.[11]

Debussy not only uses precise dynamic and tempo markings but also gives specific directions for playing the piece. For instance, in measure 48 of "Voiles" the directions read: "comme un très leger glissando". One section of "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir" says that "la basse un peu appuyée et soutenu". In the next to the last measure of "La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune", the words "timbrez légèrement la petite note" appear.

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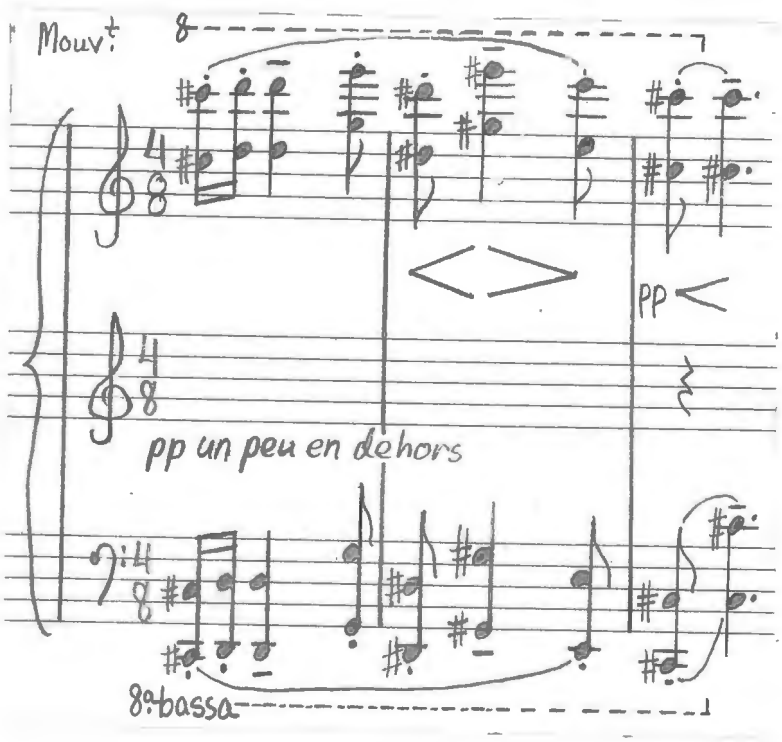
[11] Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1967), p. 33.

Debussy makes use of the entire range of the keyboard. Some of the preludes in the first volume, such as "Les collines d'Anacapri", make use of extreme registers of the keyboard, but not until the second volume are the high and low registers used simultaneously with the middle area empty. This technique appears in "Brouillards".



By using the compositional techniques discussed in the preceding pages, Debussy arrived at one of the most original and influential styles developed in the early twentieth century. His new approach to dissonance, his weaving together of brief, fragmentary melodies, his use of scales other than major and minor, and his new apprception of sound and form influenced the leading

composers of the twentieth century.

> One can state without exaggeration that Debussy exerted the most important single influence on a host of composers, including Stravinsky, Bartok, Berg and even Webern and Boulez.[12]

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[12]Otto Deri, Exploring Twentieth-Century Music (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 163.

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