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# Debussy's String Quartet in the Brussels Salon of "La Libre Esthétique"

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## CONTEXTS AND QUESTIONS

As Léon Vallas noted long ago, the *création* of Debussy's String Quartet by the Ysaÿe Quartet at the Société Nationale in Paris on 29 December 1893, on a program including d'Indy's String Quartet, op. 35, and Franck's A-Major Violin Sonata, passed with little critical comment.<sup>1</sup> The composer Guy Ropartz heard the influence of "the young Russia"; the Belgian impresario Octave Maus praised the second move-

ment, "at once simple and complicated"; the critic Henry Gauthier-Villars admitted of "baflement" even while accepting the piece's "originality and charm."<sup>2</sup> Clearly, little in this pallid initial reception might inspire the kind of rich contextual reading that may occasionally be derived from more tumultuous musical premieres.

Richer avenues to historically informed analysis open, I suggest, if we subvert the mythic status music history so often grants to the premiere just so far as to approach the Quartet, instead, through the context of its second performance, in Brussels, about two months later. On 1 March 1894, the work belatedly found its perfect milieu: a setting that not only made programmatically explicit the musical aspira-

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I am grateful to the British Academy for supporting both my research in Paris for this article and my presentation of an early version to the Symposium of the International Musicological Society in Melbourne, 2004.

<sup>1</sup>As the majority of the critics either did not understand the bearing of the new quartet or did not dare to give a definitive opinion about it, very few mentioned its first performance" (Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Maire and Grace O'Brien [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933], p. 93).

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<sup>2</sup>For a convenient compilation of these reviews in the original, see Michel Stockhem, *Eugène Ysaÿe et la Musique de Chambre* (Liège: Pierre Mardaga, 1990), pp. 113–14.

tions of the Société Nationale circle, but also situated Debussy's own idiosyncratic participation in those aspirations amid the richest imaginable array of contemporary aesthetic cross-currents. This *deuxième*, so to speak, began the first-ever concert devoted to Debussy's music, which also included the *Proses lyriques* on his own texts and the Rossetti cantata *La Damoiselle élue*. This was one of four concerts given by the Quatuor Ysaÿe during a month-long exhibition of avant-garde painting and decorative arts curated by Octave Maus in the Brussels Musée de l'Art moderne under the name "La Libre Esthétique" (The Free Aesthetic).

While the critical reception of this second hearing hardly amounts to a substantial *Dossier de Presse*, the "Free Aesthetic" salon context itself has yet to be mined for its potential to inform an analysis that both locates the Quartet within Debussy's creative development and illuminates its closest aesthetic affinities. Most obviously, given the perennial question about his relationships to *fin-de-siècle* painting, the occurrence of this all-Debussy afternoon within a vast art exhibition cries out for some attempt to elaborate specific links. No doubt the other two works on the concert, the *Proses lyriques* and *La Damoiselle élue*, might seem more promising subjects for such interdisciplinary investigation. But the Quartet's *lack* of explicit programmatic lures can productively enforce a search for deeper shared grounds of coherence.

Indeed, one of the few critics to connect what he saw in the salon with what he heard on the Debussy concert, the Belgian *Wagneriste* Maurice Kufferath, addressed his sense of parallel bafflement explicitly to the Quartet:

There is in this quartet in four movements an assemblage of sonorities sometimes charming, sometimes irritating. It is not everyday, or commonplace; on the contrary, it is very distinguished, but one does not know how to take hold of it. A hallucination more than a dream. Is it a work? Can one say? Is it music? Perhaps, but in the manner that the canvases of the neo-Japanese of Montmartre and its Belgian suburb may be called painting.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>"Il y a dans ce quatuor en quatre parties un assemblage curieux de sonorités tantôt charmantes, tantôt crispées.

That a knowledgeable musician could react with such basic confusion ("is it a work?") might be taken as a challenge to historical understanding—a summons, that is, in light of Kufferath's even more sweeping second question, to try to outline how exactly it might have been said that Debussy's Quartet only qualified as "music," in 1894, in the manner that the canvases in "La Libre Esthétique" qualified as "painting."

The problem is that while Kufferath highlighted one main trend when he flippantly referred to Debussy as "an adept of the new school of musical pointillism," the art on view in the Musée de l'Art moderne was far from uniform in style.<sup>4</sup> Plate 1 presents the list of exhibitors for the 1894 salon, as it appears in the invaluable retrospective catalogue published by Maus's wife, Madeleine, in 1926.<sup>5</sup> In a quick overview, we might note that "pointillism"—Kufferath's term for the neo-Impressionist style developed by the late Paul Seurat—was indeed well represented by several of Seurat's followers, including the Frenchman Paul Signac and the Belgian Théo van Rysselberghe. But the work of an older generation of French Impressionists, including Pissarro (who adopted neo-Impressionism for a time), Renoir, Sisley, and Morisot, was also to be seen. Kufferath's other epithet, "néo-Japonisants," could attach to many of the artists on show, given the profound effect the discovery of Japanese prints had on everyone from Paul Gauguin to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec to the group of younger artists—Maurice Denis, Aristide Maillol, Paul

Ce n'est pas quelconque, ni commun, c'est très distingué, au contraire, mais l'on ne sait pas par où l'entamer. Une hallucination plutôt qu'on rêve. Une œuvre? Nous ne savons? De la musique? Peut-être, mais à la façon dont sont de la peinture les toiles des néo-japonisants de Montmartre et de sa banlieue belge." *Guide Musical*, 4 March 1894 (rpt. in Stockhem, *Eugène Ysaÿe*, p. 116).

<sup>4</sup>"M. Claude-A. Debussy, un adepte de la nouvelle école du pointillisme musical et de l'amorphisme universel" (*ibid.*).

<sup>5</sup>Madeleine Octave Maus, *Trente Années de Lutte pour l'Art: Les XX et La Libre Esthétique, 1884–1914* (rev. edn. Brussels: Éditions Lebeer Hossmann, 1980), p. 173. The 1894 salon was the first held under the new name "La Libre Esthétique," which marked a somewhat more inclusive phase than the earlier ten salons (1884–93), centered more strongly on the Belgian avant-gardistes known as "Les XX."

## EXPOSANTS :

C. R. Ashbee, Jean Baffier, Albert Bartholomé, Aubrey Beardsley, Albert Besnard, M<sup>me</sup> Anna Boch, D. Cameron, François-Rupert Carabin, Eugène Carrière, Guillaume Charlier, Alexandre Charpentier, Jules Chéret, M<sup>me</sup> Camille Claudel, Emile Claus, Arthur Craco, Henry Cros, Dalpayrat et Lesbros, M<sup>me</sup> Louise Danse, William Degouve de Nuncques, Auguste Delaherche, Maurice Denis, Louis-Henri Devillez, Auguste Donnay, Charles Doudelet, Paul Dubois, James Ensor, Fernand Dubois, Georges Frampton A. R. A., Jean Gaspar, Paul Gauguin, Victor Gilsoul, Emile Grasset, L. Welden Hawkins, A. J. Heymans, Henri-Gabriel Ibels, Selwyn Image, Fernand Khnopff, Eugène Laermans, Georges Lemmen, Henri Lerolle, Auguste Levêque, Alexandre Lunois, Aristide Maillol, Elkin Matthews et John Lane, Xavier Mellery, Charles Meunier, Constantin Meunier, Marius Michel, Comte R. de Montesquiou-Fézensac, M<sup>me</sup> Berthe Morisot, William Morris, Emile Motte, J. R. Murray, J. P. Niederkorn, Hermann Paul, Camille Pissarro, Georges Pissarro, Lucien Pissarro, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Paul Ranson, Odilon Redon, Auguste Renoir, Henri Rivière, Charles Samuel, Georges Sauter, Georges Serrurier, Paul Signac, Alfred Sisley, Charles Storm de s'Gravesande, Max Stremel, Heywood Sumner, Fritz Thaulow, Fernand Thesmar, Jan Toorop, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Edouard Tourteau, Charles Vanderstappen, Théo Van Rysselberghe, Thomas Vinçotte, Guillaume Vogels, Hector Wallaert, Georges Fr. Watts, R. A., Christopher-W. Whall, *le Café-Concert, l'Escarmouche, l'Estampe originale, la Royale.*

## CONFÉRENCES :

HENRI DE RÉGNIER : *le Bosquet de Psyché.*

CARTON DE WIART : *Léon Bloy.*

HENRY VAN DE VELDE : *L'Art futur.*

EDMOND PICARD : *Dialégomènes artistiques* (en deux séances).

PAPUS : *La Femme.*

Plate 1: The artists, themed exhibitions, and lectures at the 1894 salon of "La Libre Esthétique."  
From M. O. Maus, *Trente années de lutte pour l'art* (Brussels, 1926), p. 173.

Ranson—who exhibited in the 90s, with Paul Sérusier, Pierre Bonnard, and Henri Vuillard, under the name of "les Nabis" (the Prophets). But other figures hanging in the salon, such as Odilon Redon and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, would be harder to collect under any stylistic umbrella, let alone one that could also accommodate the realist, socially activist art of

fellow-exhibitors like Eugène Laermans and Constantin Meunier.

In short, when we further note on the "Libre Esthétique" list Belgians of more "Symbolist" tendencies, such as James Ensor and Fernand Khnopff, their Dutch relative Jan Toorop, and a British contingent including William Morris and Aubrey Beardsley, the salon begins to seem

an intractable locus for particular affiliations with Debussy's music.<sup>6</sup> How, we might ask, could this confluence of just about every artistic sidelight ever considered for his early maturity help in the selection of one (or a few) as the most telling for an understanding of the issues encapsulated in any particular work?

Perhaps paradoxically, I propose that the best way to discern the possible aesthetic substance beneath Kufferath's parallel bafflement is to turn aside, at first, from painterly concerns and begin by considering the work in light of the purely musical aspirations encapsulated by the salon's concert series, shown—again, as printed by Madeleine Maus—in plate 2.<sup>7</sup> As Kufferath noted, this series was “organized by Ysaÿe,” but in taking over the role previously held by d'Indy, the violinist effectively made the 1894 concerts the most blatant expression imaginable of the Société Nationale's compositional ideals.<sup>8</sup> For the first concert, he brought d'Indy's String Quartet, op. 35, together with Beethoven's “Serioso” Quartet in F Minor, op. 95, and Schubert's Quintet in C Major (“double cello”), D. 956. After the “Debussy show” he conferred particular honor on Franck, the well-spring (in the eyes of his followers) of the *fin-de-siècle* “chamber music revival,” by placing his String Quartet in D Minor alongside Bach's solo violin Chaconne in D Minor and Beethoven's op. 131.<sup>9</sup> And for the final concert,

Ysaÿe presented one last pairing of a contemporary with a classic: Chausson's *Concert* for Piano, Violin, and String Quartet, op. 21, closed a program that began with the second “Razumovsky” Quartet in E Minor, op. 59, no. 2.

The encapsulation, in this series, of d'Indy's claims for the *Franckistes* as the true heirs of Beethoven—which he would spell out at length, a few years later, in his *Cours de composition musicale*—could hardly be clearer. It is more contentious to assert that the series also invites us to consider Debussy's Quartet as an outgrowth of the same investments. To Vallas, among others, a retrospective view over his entire *oeuvre* must find this early chamber work, however admirable it may be in its own right, an aberrant concession to alien compositional priorities.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, clichés about his “coloristic” style (and, more recently, about his musical nationalism) have, on the whole, militated against any serious inquiry into the ways in which his Quartet might articulate its own kind of dialogue with Beethovenian models.<sup>11</sup>

In the face of such cliché, it is worth noting that in Debussy's criticism, apart from a few characteristic sneers, Beethoven is usually invoked in the most laudatory tones.<sup>12</sup> His close

<sup>6</sup>The impression is only deepened by the list of lectures given during the salon, shown below the exhibitors—for example, a discourse by Henri de Régnier on Mallarmé; a call by Henry van de Velde for a “future art” that makes no distinction between “high” art and craft; and a talk by the Kabbalistic mystic “Papus” on “La Femme.”

<sup>7</sup>M. O. Maus, *Trente Années*, pp. 174–75.

<sup>8</sup>Although a few concerts had been included in earlier years, it was only in 1887 that they took on similar status to the art exhibitions, in presenting a selection of the most up-to-date composition (largely French and Belgian, but also, for example, Russian), as selected by Maus in consultation with d'Indy and (later) Ysaÿe. The change in musical ambition sprang from the encounter of Maus and d'Indy at the Brussels premiere of Chabrier's *Gwendoline* in 1886. For details on the subsequent collaboration, including the shift of musical leadership to Ysaÿe in 1893, see Serge Goyens de Heusch, *L'Invitation au Voyage: La musique aux XX et à La Libre Esthétique* (Brussels: Fondation pour L'Art Belge, 1990), esp. pp. 20–30.

<sup>9</sup>The longstanding cliché about the *fin-de-siècle* “Renaissance” in French chamber music has been subject to much historical critique. See, for example, *Le Quatuor à cordes*

*en France de 1750 à nos jours*, ed. Bernard Crozier (Paris: Association Française pour le Patrimoine Musical, 1995); and Joël-Marie Fauquet, “Chamber Music in France from Cherubini to Debussy,” in *Nineteenth-Century Chamber Music*, ed. Stephen E. Hefling (New York: Schirmer, 1998), pp. 287–314.

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Edward Lockspeiser: “Debussy may have been making a concession to the current conventions of his audience at the Société Nationale, where as Vallas pointed out, Bach, Beethoven and the German Romantic masters were erroneously held to be the source of inspiration for the new French musical renaissance. . . . Vallas argues that the developments which French chamber music was following under the influence of Franck, d'Indy and Fauré were far from the ideals of the composer who had just completed *L'après-midi d'un faune*” (Lockspeiser, *Debussy* [rev. edn. London: J. M. Dent, 1963], pp. 171–74).

<sup>11</sup>Celebrations of the work's “colorism” abound in the literature from the earliest reception onwards. Needless to say, the Quartet's textural-timbral imagination is fundamental to its historical importance—the point is that a recognition of this obvious brilliance should not foreclose investigations of its intricate answer to classical logic.

<sup>12</sup>The most famous sneer targets the crude realism of the Pastoral Symphony; see Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et Autres Écrits*, ed. François Lesure (rev. edn. Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 95–96. Aside from a few other casual

PREMIER CONCERT DU QUATUOR YSAÏE

MM. EUGÈNE YSAÏE, CRICKBOOM, VAN HOUT ET J. JACOB,  
AVEC LE CONCOURS DE M. HENRI MERCK, violoncelliste

Vendredi 23 février 1894, à 2 heures et demie.

1. Quintette à deux basses en ré majeur (op. 163) . . . . . F. SCHUBERT.  
*Allegro ma non troppo. — Adagio. — Scherzo. — Andante sostenuto. — Allegretto.*
2. Quatuor pour deux violons, alto et violoncelle (op. 35) . . . . . VINCENT D'INDY.  
I. *Lent et soutenu; modérément animé.* — II. *Lent et calme.* — III. *Assez modéré; assez vite.* — IV. *Assez lent et déclamé; vif et joyeusement animé.*
3. Quatuor (n° 11, op. 95) . . . . . BEETHOVEN.  
*Allegro con brio. — Allegretto ma non troppo. — Allegro assai vivace ma serioso. — Larghetto espressivo; allegretto agitato.*

DEUXIÈME CONCERT DU QUATUOR YSAÏE

AVEC LE GRACIEUX CONCOURS DE  
M<sup>lle</sup> T. ROGER, cantatrice de la Société nationale de musique de Paris,  
de M<sup>lle</sup> LAURE CALLEMIEN, du Choral mixte fondé par MM. L. Soubre et Carpay,  
et des solistes des Concerts du Conservatoire de Bruxelles.

Judi 1<sup>er</sup> mars 1894, à 2 heures précises.

ŒUVRES DE M. CLAUDE-A. DEBUSSY (PREMIÈRE AUDITION)

1. Quatuor en sol mineur pour deux violons, alto et violoncelle (op. 10).  
I. — *Animé et très décidé.* — II. *Assez vif et bien rythmé.* — III. *Doucement expressif.* — IV. *Très modéré; très mouvementé et avec passion.*
2. *Proses lyriques.*  
a) *De fleurs.* — b) *De soir.*  
Chantées par M<sup>lle</sup> T. ROGER et accompagnées par l'auteur.
3. *La Damaïsselle élue*, pour soli, chœurs et orchestre, d'après D.-G. ROSSETTI (traduction de G. Sarrazin).  
Solistes : La Damaïsselle élue . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> T. ROGER.  
Une Récltante . . . . . M<sup>lle</sup> L. CALLEMIEN.  
Piano Pleyel.

N. B. — L'orchestre se composait de 51 musiciens, tous solistes ou chefs de pupitres des Concerts du Conservatoire.

TROISIÈME CONCERT DU QUATUOR YSAÏE

Vendredi 18 mars 1894, à 2 heures précises

1. Quatuor à cordes en ré majeur . . . . . CÉSAR FRANCK.  
I. *Poco lento; allegro.* — II. *Scherzo vivace.* — III. *Larghetto.* — IV. *Allegro molto.*
2. *Sarabande, Gigue et Chaconne* extraites de la Suite en ré mineur pour violon seul . . . . . J.-S. BACH.
3. XIV<sup>e</sup> Quatuor à cordes (op. 131) . . . . . BEETHOVEN.  
Les divisions qui composent ce quatuor s'enchaînent sans interruption.

QUATRIÈME CONCERT DU QUATUOR YSAÏE

AVEC LE GRACIEUX CONCOURS DE  
MM. AUGUSTE PIERRET, pianiste, et ALFRED MARCHOT, violon solo  
au Théâtre de la Monnaie.

Mardi 27 mars 1894, à 2 heures précises.

1. Quatuor n° 8 (op. 59) . . . . . BEETHOVEN.  
I. *Allegro.* — II. *Molto adagio.* — III. *Allegretto.* — IV. *Presto.*
2. a) *Portraits de musiciens* . . . . .  
G. Fauré.  
V. d'Indy; E. Chausson; V. d'Indy.  
C. Franck. } P. DE BRÉVILLE.  
b) Fantaisie pour piano . . . . .  
Introduction. — Fugue. — Finale.
3. Concert en ré majeur (op. 21) pour violon, piano et quatuor à cordes . . . . . ERNEST CHAUSSON.  
I. *Décidé.* — II. *Stettienne.* — III. *Grave.* — IV. *Finale.*  
Piano Pleyel.

Plate 2: The concert series given by the Quatuor YsaÏe at the 1894 salon of "La Libre Esthétique."  
From M. O. Maus, *Trente années de lutte pour l'art* (Brussels, 1926), pp. 174–75.

friend Louis Laloy, for one, was so far immune from reflexive assumptions about "anti-Beethovenian" inclinations that he could assert, some years after the Quartet's composition, that "Debussy is only continuing Beethoven's manner in his late quartets."<sup>13</sup> Given that Debussy ennobled his only contribution to this

preeminent Beethovenian genre with his only opus number, the first step toward a sense of its compositional "manner" is to reconsider how "op. 10" might frame a studied, ironic response to the style exemplified in op. 59, no. 2, op. 95, and op. 131.<sup>14</sup>

But any careful look at the "Libre Esthétique" concert series must also recognize another complicating background presence. On the Debussy program his Quartet, given no eminent ances-

criticisms, it is the paeans that predominate—as, for example, the belittling of Massenet as a composer for whom music was not "la voix universelle" qu'entendirent Bach et Beethoven" (ibid., p. 59); or the assertion that "Berlioz, Mozart, Beethoven sont de grands maîtres que je vénère, les deux derniers surtout" (p. 308). Most relevant in this context is Debussy's unqualified praise (in classic organicist and idealist terms) of the Ninth Symphony; see the review of 1 May 1901 (pp. 36–37).

<sup>13</sup>From Louis Laloy, "Claude Debussy: La simplicité en musique," *La Revue musicale* (15 Feb. 1904), 106–11. Translated as "Claude Debussy: Simplicity in Music," in *Louis Laloy (1874–1944) on Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky*, ed. and trans. Deborah Priest (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 65–74, at 69.

<sup>14</sup>Debussy's ironic perspective on the "nobility" of the genre was pointedly acknowledged in a letter to Chausson of 5 February 1894 following the latter's rejection of the initial dedication: "I was really upset for several days by what you said about my quartet, as I felt that after all it only increased your partiality for certain things which I would rather it had encouraged you to forget. Anyway I'll write another one for you, in all seriousness for you, and I'll try to bring some nobility to my forms" (*Debussy Letters*, ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. Roger Nichols [London: Faber and Faber, 1987], p. 65).

tral companion, rubbed shoulders instead with others of his own works that seem more characteristic of his "années symbolistes." An early version of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was also to have appeared, but was not completed in time, which makes clear that these companion works signal an ongoing negotiation with a more immediate precursor.<sup>15</sup> This was, after all, the very moment in which Debussy, in his *Prélude* (1892–94) and in *Pelléas* (1892–95, rev. 1902), was most strenuously struggling with the specter he called "the ghost of old Klingsor, alias Richard Wagner."<sup>16</sup>

The Quartet has occasionally been seen as anomalous within the cluster of literary, patently post-Wagnerian works Debussy wrote in the early 90s.<sup>17</sup> In this article I argue that through its studied adaptation of Beethovenian compositional principles, "opus 10" effects a distinct, "absolute" contribution to Debussy's post-Wagnerian negotiations. To trace this interwoven pair of influences is to derive a more robust account of the work's post-Classical logic (to adopt a term from Maus's review of the second performance) than has yet been offered.<sup>18</sup> In a wider view, this account suggests, in the

first place, a newly precise understanding of the conceptual unity beneath the hybrid, modal-chromatic language of Debussy's early maturity. And on the basis of this new analytical appreciation, in the second place, it becomes possible to look again into "La Libre Esthétique" with a clearer eye for the painterly conceptions most closely parallel in their manner of coherence.

#### LITERATURE AND METHODOLOGY

Laloy aside, the stylistic differences between Beethoven and Debussy have seemed so clear to most critics that few have even considered possible points of continuity. Charles Rosen once argued that Debussy's investment in "structure and development" placed him in the lineage of the "great classicists" more firmly than Ravel, but this suggestion did not leave much trace on later discussions—and Rosen did not, in any case, consider the Quartet.<sup>19</sup> On the basis of a few passing references in the early reception, it has become common, instead, to emphasize more recent influences, notably Borodin, Grieg, and Fauré.<sup>20</sup>

No doubt such proposals contain some grain of validity. All progressive French composers of the time were inspired by recent Russian music; on his return to Paris from Rome, as Jean-Michel Nectoux has argued, Debussy would undoubtedly have found in Fauré's modal-chromatic chamber music the most so-

<sup>15</sup>The early version of the *Prélude*, titled "Prélude, Interlude et Paraphrase finale pour 'L'Après-midi d'un Faune,'" was mentioned in the newspaper announcements for the concert; see Vallas, *Claude Debussy*, p. 97.

<sup>16</sup>The phrase appears in a letter of 2 October 1893 to Ernest Chausson; see *Debussy Letters*, p. 54. For some interpretations of the musical traces of this struggle, see, for example, Carolyn Abbate, "Tristan in the Composition of *Pelléas*," this journal 5 (1981), 117–41; Katherine Bergeron, "The Echo, the Cry, the Death of Lovers," this journal 18 (1994), 136–51; David J. Code, "Hearing Debussy Reading Mallarmé: Music après Wagner in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54 (2001), 493–554; and Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979).

<sup>17</sup>See n. 10 above; and also Arthur Wenk, *Claude Debussy and Twentieth-Century Music* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983): "Debussy's quartet, with its ironic classification 'Opus 10,' represents an apparent anomaly among his other works of this period, which more overtly display their affinities with the Symbolist movement in literature" (p. 54).

<sup>18</sup>In his review, "Oeuvres musicales de M. Claude-A. Debussy," in *L'Art moderne* (4 March 1894), Octave Maus suggested that this "logic" was apparent to the musicians: "Très nettement construit en quatre parties . . . le quatuor suit une marche logique, nettement réglé, malgré la capricante fantaisie des modulations qui semblent l'entraîner à l'aventure. C'est ce qui, dans ce torrent de jeunesse, d'audaces harmoniques, de résolutions imprévues, a particulièrement frappé les musiciens" (p. 67).

<sup>19</sup>"In spite of the classical veneer that Ravel gave many of his pieces . . . and the outspoken romantic program of many works by Debussy . . . it is Debussy who continues the work of the great classicists in his preoccupation with large questions of musical structure and development; and it is Ravel who, in his compositional procedures, is most easily situated in the great Romantic School of Berlioz, Liszt and Richard Strauss" (Charles Rosen, "Where Ravel Ends and Debussy Begins," *Cahiers Debussy* 3 [1979], 31–38, at 31). (This article originally appeared in *High Fidelity Magazine*, May 1959.)

<sup>20</sup>The "reminiscences" of Borodin and Grieg (along with Wagner and Bruneau) were noted in one of the earliest anonymous reviews, for the *Patriote* of 5 March, and have been echoed by many subsequent commentators. Roger Nichols, in *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), notes a faint echo of Fauré's G-Minor Piano Quartet in Debussy's opening, but accurately observes that "a comparison of the two passages shows to what utterly distinct worlds they belong for all their common ground in a modal G minor" (p. 75).

phisticated model of post-Romantic harmonic experimentation on offer.<sup>21</sup> But nowhere has any argument for such “influences” on Debussy’s Quartet been proposed on anything but a superficial level.<sup>22</sup> In suggesting that a better profile of the work’s compositional investments must start from a reappraisal of its post-Classical *form*, my main focus will be on the first movement’s sonata form.

However quaintly old-fashioned this focus might seem, the very fact that the outlines of Debussy’s sonata structure remain “elusive,” as Mark DeVoto put it in a recent book, speaks to the persistence of certain aporias in the understanding of his music.<sup>23</sup> To put it simply, the dialectical nature of traditional sonata process raised particular questions for a composer whose famously *non*-dialectical style was being consolidated at that very moment. Due to this basic tension, while no one has much trouble discerning a conventional tripartite scheme, analysis of the internal articulations of the outer sections, so crucial to the traditional dialectic, has continually posed problems.

It would be tedious to outline all proposed solutions, but a rough overview might begin by noting that Edward Lockspeiser, recognizing that none of the contrasting “thematic” episodes in the exposition returns in the recapitulation, denotes as the “second subject” a theme only introduced at the beginning of the development.<sup>24</sup> Richard Parks, on the other hand, finds it easier to recognize “the general contours of a sonata design,” which he describes, more appropriately, with reference to “theme-areas” instead of “subjects.” But Parks’s account soon devolves into vagueness—“the reprise eschews faithful parallelism in favor of a

freer use of material”—and his conclusion, that “[such] procedures are consistent with French Romanticism,” opts for bland generality rather than any strenuous confrontation with this particular formal logic.<sup>25</sup>

The situation is not much improved by the one full-length published analysis of this movement, Annie K. Yih’s article of 2000, “Analysing Debussy: Tonality, Motivic Sets and the Referential Pitch-Class Specific Collection.” Yih side-steps the question of form entirely, in presenting a set-theoretical analysis whose all-too-predictable thrust is clear from her claim to offer “an alternative way of hearing motivic relations within a unifying referential context.”<sup>26</sup> Although Yih does deliver some useful observations (notably concerning the subcutaneous octatonic logic discernible both locally and in the large), her argument for the work’s “integration” through melodic and harmonic “motives” is oblivious to all aspects of surface articulation and formal focus. This obsessive motivicism, for all that it may reflect one post-Beethovenian analytical inclination, is actually profoundly ahistorical in result, not only for its neglect of the formal processes that mark the Quartet’s intricate dialogue with Classical tradition but also for its wholly abstracted treatment of Debussy’s rich hybrid of modality and post-Romantic harmony.<sup>27</sup>

Significant progress toward a more historically sensitive account has been made in the multiauthored discussion “Le *Quatuor* de Debussy: recherches analytiques et esthétiques” that appeared in *Analyse musicale* the same year as Yih’s study.<sup>28</sup> While Philippe Gout-

<sup>21</sup>Jean-Michel Nectoux, “Debussy et Fauré,” *Cahiers Debussy* 3 (1979), 13–30, at 16.

<sup>22</sup>For one example: in support of his claim that Debussy “modeled” his Quartet on Grieg’s G-Minor String Quartet, beyond noting the two works’ similar “motto themes” Gerald Abraham can only offer scattershot indications of textural similarity, or proposals of affinity between passages quite distinct in structural implication. See his editorial preface to *Grieg: A Symposium* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1948), p. 8.

<sup>23</sup>Mark DeVoto, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality* (New York: Pendragon, 2004), p. 8.

<sup>24</sup>Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, p. 166.

<sup>25</sup>Richard S. Parks, *The Music of Claude Debussy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 217. Parks’s discussion of “architectonic control” in arithmetic terms (Golden section and Lucas series) is not particularly illuminating about “formal logic” in a post-Classical sense.

<sup>26</sup>Annie K. Yih, “Analysing Debussy: Tonality, Motivic Sets and the Referential Pitch-Class Specific Collection,” *Music Analysis* 19 (July 2000), 203–29, at 208.

<sup>27</sup>Indeed, Yih’s fetishistic pursuit of a wholly unified “system of musical thought” behind the work leads her to reject explicitly any attempt to address its hybrid language through a combination of “different analytical perspectives” (*ibid.*, p. 222).

<sup>28</sup>Jean-Philippe Guye, Philippe Gouttenoire, and Éric Demange, “Le *Quatuor* de Debussy: recherches analytiques et esthétiques,” *Analyse Musicale* 37 (2000), 32–60.

tenoire's tracing of the "filiations" of the cyclic theme through all movements differs only in degree from Yih's motivicism, and while the parsing of the first movement more or less matches Lockspeiser's, the methodological perspective widens to include consideration of the tonal "polarities" the work brings into focus; its "saturation" with the sound of the half-diminished-seventh chord (indelibly marked, for Debussy's generation, by Wagner's *Tristan*); and the difficulties posed to traditional analysis by its modal syntax. Here, almost all the important ingredients of the work's compositional "manner" are, to some extent, addressed. Most significantly, the proposal of a logical connection between local inflection (the characteristic semitone of the Phrygian mode) and large-scale unfolding (the semitone-related keys of main thematic events) represents a significant step toward the perception of a more Classical basis of integration than may be accessed in terms of motives or sets alone.<sup>29</sup>

Still, though I would wholeheartedly endorse Guye's warning against any willful elaboration of "an analytical interpretation that is unifying and totalizing, but abusive," a more robust account of the Quartet's conceptual (that is, compositional and intentional) integration can, I suggest, be developed through more careful consideration of its projection of Beethovenian sonata principles through a language saturated, equally, with shades of Wagnerian harmony and modal melodic inflections.<sup>30</sup> To this end, I opt for a different post-Beethovenian point of reference and approach the first movement as a sonata form in the Toveyan sense—that is, a structure that emerges dynamically from a harmonic tension projected through thematic pro-

cess, rather than a static "jelly mold" into which the main themes have been poured.<sup>31</sup> This approach demands, from the start, a rejection of those clichés about Debussy's harmony once succinctly endorsed by Schoenberg, for example, when he asserted that his chords were "without constructive meaning," and "often served the coloristic purpose of expressing moods and pictures."<sup>32</sup> If Debussy's chords, on the contrary, are to be shown to bear adequate "constructive meaning" to generate a harmonic-thematic sonata design, it is necessary to reconsider the degree to which they retain some vestige of the relational forces native to the tradition from which they emerged.

This is not, however, to endorse the procrustean presumptions of a background tonal "normality" that lead many to overlook—or to "Schenkerize" away—the implications of Debussy's modal-chromatic shadings.<sup>33</sup> A more imaginative attempt to approach the work on its own terms discerns a cunning translation, into this heterogeneous syntactical field, of what the founding theorists of nineteenth-century "tonalité," Choron and Fétis, termed the

<sup>29</sup>See esp. Gouttenoire's discussion of key-relations under the subheading "Modalité, Polarités et Thématique" (*ibid.*, pp. 44–45).

<sup>30</sup>Guye's salutary comments are worth quoting at length: "Il ne nous semble pas que l'écriture debussyste soit unifiable sous une catégorie dont l'analyse pourrait globalement rendre compte, sinon de manière privative (non-tonale, non-fonctionnelle, non-exclusivement-modale, non-'atonale' au sens des Viennois, etc.) . . . Pourtant, cette écriture est homogène. . . . La difficulté est donc de répertorier les procédures, sans tomber dans la neutralité insignifiante de l'inventaire, tout en évitant l'écueil analytique fréquent d'une interprétation analytique unifiante, totalisante, mais abusive" (*ibid.*, p. 47).

<sup>31</sup>"There are people who talk *a priori* nonsense about the sonata forms, as if these forms were stereotyped molds into which you shovel your music in the hope that it may set there like a jelly" (Donald Francis Tovey, "Beethoven: Ninth Symphony in D Minor, op. 125, Its Place in Musical Art," in his *Essays in Musical Analysis* vol. I: *Symphonies (ii), Variations and Orchestral Polyphony* [London: Oxford University Press, 1935], pp. 1–45, at 18). The main lineaments of Tovey's own view of the form can be gleaned, for example, from the chapters "The Larger Tonality" and "Beethoven's Art Forms" in his *Beethoven*, ed. Hubert J. Foss (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 28–40; 73–95.

<sup>32</sup>Arnold Schoenberg, "Composition with Twelve Tones (I)," in his *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 214–45, at 216.

<sup>33</sup>This presumption underlies the discussions of both Yih and Parks, for all that they take disparate views on the appropriateness of Schenkerian analysis to this piece. (Parks is happy to wrench the movement, with all its "unconventional prolongations," into a Schenkerian frame; Yih includes a Schenker graph to show how inadequate it is to account for much important material. Nonetheless, her reading of the modal environment is consistently distorted by the tonal assumptions she has inherited from Schenker.) For the most thorough attempt to read the Quartet's syntax as a much-clouded "normal" functional harmony, see Lawrence Berman, *The Evolution of Tonal Thinking in the Works of Claude Debussy* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1965), pp. 97–123.

"appellative" forces of harmonic relationships.<sup>34</sup> This Quartet would undoubtedly have struck Fétis himself as a realization of his worst fears for the dissolution of tonality, via the promiscuity of enharmonic modulation, into "omnitonic" incoherence. But we are better positioned to consider how its harmonic manipulations, "keyed" to a post-Beethovenian sonata process, project a new field of harmonic relations with its own elusive logic.

Beyond this general historical perspective, specific appreciation of the Quartet's post-Beethovenian stance requires some further elaboration. Coincidentally or not, all three Beethoven quartets on Ysaÿe's "Free Aesthetic" concert series exemplify with particular clarity the procedure (which became iconic of his style) by which the initial, local harmonic inflections present premises subsequently "composed-out" into the harmonic-thematic unfolding.<sup>35</sup> (We might even imagine that the three quartets Ysaÿe chose, all of which give central prominence to the Neapolitan relation, thus feature

<sup>34</sup>Fétis—who also invokes many other terms ("attractions," "rapports," "relations," "tendances," "associations") for the "lois" of tonality—uses this adjective initially for the tritone between fourth and seventh degrees, the "consonance appellative de quinte mineure." See F.-J. Fétis, *Traité complet de la théorie et de la pratique de l'harmonie* (8th edn. Paris: Brandus et Dufour, 1864), p. 29. I have profited from Thomas Christensen, "Fétis and Emerging Tonal Consciousness," in *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism*, ed. Ian Bent (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 37–56. Brian Hyer, in his article "Tonality," *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 726–52, notes the debt Fétis owed, for "tonalité" itself as well as "appellative consonance," to Choron (p. 730). Needless to say, I am not suggesting that Debussy was reading directly from Fétis, rather that he was writing self-consciously within the penumbra of the "relational" or "appellative" tonal-harmonic tradition, as clearly exemplified in the more recent treatises of Durand and Réber.

<sup>35</sup>I am using "composing out" in its looser, non-Schenkerian sense; see William Drabkin: "Auskomponierung," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie and J. Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 2, pp. 189–90. For a particularly influential account of the principle of formal "emergence" from initial detail, see the section "The Coherence of the Musical Language" in Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (rev. edn. London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 57–98. There is a massive critical literature on the Tovey-Rosen lineage of sonata-form analysis; a useful starting point is Joseph Kerman's 1985 "Critics and the Classics," reprinted in his *Write All These Down* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 51–72.

one particular harmonic predilection to which Debussy's Phrygian inflections respond directly.<sup>36</sup>) But beyond the harmonic implications of the Phrygian inflection itself, the thematic-harmonic unfolding of this movement may be shown to spring from a more precise subgenre of Beethovenian "composing-out," which hinges on the perturbing influence of a single pitch or interval. The iconic model for this procedure was, of course, the famous C# "cloud" (as Tovey called it) in m. 7 of the *Eroica*.<sup>37</sup>

An obvious problem with the attempt to trace this kind of "composing-out" in Debussy concerns the difficulty of isolating similar "sore" notes—as Joseph Kerman put it in his Toveyan analysis of the first "Razumovsky" Quartet—within a language thoroughly clouded by modal and chromatic inflections.<sup>38</sup> A last suggestion can help. In an article on the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, I have argued that the oft-repeated emphasis on the new primacy given to wind writing in the *Faune* Prelude misses the point that this reconfigured orchestral hierarchy allows the previously normative string sound to emerge newly marked.<sup>39</sup> In the literature on the Quartet, by contrast, we often read that the mercurial process by two-measure cells all but dispenses with four-measure phrasing.<sup>40</sup> But when Debussy criticized

<sup>36</sup>The three Beethoven quartets chosen were, in fact, those to which the French literature often gave particular emphasis: the "Razumovsky" for its occasion (reported by Ries) of Beethoven's famous claim to the right to "break the rules" and write parallel fifths; the "Serioso" for its reconfigured key-relations and its abandonment of the repeated exposition; op. 131 for all the usual reasons to do with its maximal exemplification of the "late" style. See, for example, H. Barbedette, *Beethoven: Sa Vie et Ses Oeuvres* (Paris: Heugel, 1870), esp. pp. 57, 60; and Eugène Sauzay, *Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven: Étude sur le Quatuor* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1861), esp. pp. 130, 134, 144.

<sup>37</sup>"Beethoven: Third Symphony in E♭ Major," in Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis*, vol. I, *Symphonies*, pp. 29–34, esp. 30–31.

<sup>38</sup>Joseph Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (New York: Knopf, 1967), pp. 94–95. The comparison between the "sore" G in op. 59 and the C# in the *Eroica* is developed on pp. 101–02; it is worth noting, with Kerman, that op. 95 offers a particularly compressed and violent case of the same principle (see p. 171).

<sup>39</sup>Code, "Hearing Debussy Reading," esp. p. 530.

<sup>40</sup>See, for example, Paul Griffiths, *The String Quartet* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983): "This different variety of motion in Debussy, expressed in a large scale for the first time in his quartet, is intimately linked with a different

Franck's foursquare phrasing, for example, he called attention to a once-normative procedure that would not, in his own works of the early 90s, be simply avoided or effaced, but rather treated self-consciously, with newly marked significance.<sup>41</sup> Any analysis that seeks the elusive logic behind Debussy's Quartet must begin with a sensitivity to the way its studied phraseology marks its "composing-out" of harmonic "appellations" and syntactical "sore notes."

#### OPENING PREMISES

In ex. 1a, I provide an annotated score for the opening paragraph of the Quartet. A particularly detailed account of these dozen measures is necessary to highlight the premises that will be composed-out to generate the entire form (these are numbered and extracted, in the order they are discussed, in ex. 1b). In a general sense, first of all, analysis might best begin by acknowledging that the whole opening paragraph, with its clumsy quasi-homophonic texture and crude rhythmic lurches, adopts a deliberately parodic stance before the noble traditions of the genre. And from the start, the lurching, syncopated rhythm pointedly marks the deeper irony—the knowing distortion of tonal-harmonic syntax presented by the Phrygian mode.

The two syncopations (at two metrical levels, mm. 1 and 2) highlight a fact significant to any self-conscious post-Wagnerian: the dominant seventh of this mode is, like the famous "Tristan chord" itself, a half-diminished-seventh chord. Debussy's clunky chorale texture voices this "half-diminished dominant" (premise 1) to emphasize its two "wrong" notes,

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kind of phrasing. Debussy's ideas are generally short, occupying one or two bars, and often they loosen themselves from the antecedent-consequent logic that Franck's music displays as a paradigm . . . exactly as his harmony loosens itself from straightforward major-minor tonality" (p. 146).

<sup>41</sup>Debussy actually expressed warm praise for Franck, even in criticizing his phraseology: "The symphony of Franck is amazing. I could do with less four-measure phrases [*carrure*]. But what splendid ideas!" trans. in Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. 1 (London: Cassell, 1962), p. 208. For the original, as quoted within an account of Debussy's evolving relationship with Franck, see James R. Briscoe, "Debussy, Franck, and the 'Idea of Sacrifice,'" *Revue Belge de Musicologie* 45 (1990), 27–39.

F♯ in the treble, A♭ in the bass. Besides the tonic and this disfigured dominant, only one other chord appears in the first two-measure phraselet. A B♭-major triad, touched in m. 1, also becomes the point of arrival on the third beat of m. 2. Partly on the basis of this triad, some analysts invoke a shading of E♭ major.<sup>42</sup> But this assumption already betrays an inability to enter fully into the modal conceptual environment. Three flats no longer means simply "E♭ major"; the opening may well be shaded with modal ambiguity, but in the absence of any "E♭" move, the alternative could just as well be a hint of B♭ Mixolydian (premise 2).

This is a fleeting hint, however, for from the end of m. 2 Debussy begins to incorporate clouds of chromaticism. First, he reminds us of the absent leading note, once in the upbeat to m. 3 and then, in the next two measures, in two dissonant entries highlighted by aggressive accentuation. The chromatic inflection F♯–F♯ (premise 3), sounding from within three held voices, could be said to offer the first prominent cloud, particularly when we note the "asyntactical" pairing (diminished fourth) momentarily created between the viola F♯ and the second violin B♭. This is indeed one inflection that will later be "composed-out." But the next one, in the next phrase, proves more crucial to the form.

The second phrase starts, tongue in cheek, like a conventional answer, an octave higher. But the two-measure phraselet is now reharmonized as a breathless circle of fifth-related seventh and ninth chords, as if in a ludicrous attempt to normalize the bass move to A♭ that started the piece. At the end of the chain, foursquare phrasing breaks off as the process becomes stuck on the A♭, which is present in some voice or other for almost every eighth note of the next seven measures.

It is hard to find exact precursors for Tovey's cloud in nineteenth-century French writing on Beethoven—much of which is biographical, and dependent for musical descriptions (when any are given) on quotations from Berlioz.<sup>43</sup> Still,

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<sup>42</sup>Yih, "Analysing Debussy," p. 206.

<sup>43</sup>See, for example, Félix Clément, *Beethoven* (Paris: Hachette, 1882); Victor Wilder, *Beethoven: sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris: Charpentier, 1883); Edouard de Pompery,



Alexandre Oulibicheff offers, in his 1857 book *Beethoven et ses Glossateurs*, a glimpse of the same kind of understanding. Oulibicheff noted that the effect of the famous C# in the *Eroica* was, in the first instance, to expand what would have been an eight-measure period into thirteen measures.<sup>44</sup> Debussy's heavy-footed, four-square opening might conceivably have prepared a balanced eight-measure period. The "cloud" that causes its expansion to a total of twelve measures is not just the persistent Ab, but also a new "sore" note with which it combines. The strangely hovering, halting motion that follows m. 5 is saturated with an augmented second Ab–Bb (premise 4)—an interval whose perturbing properties derive from the fact that it (like the F#–Bb diminished fourth) has no home in pure diatonic modality.<sup>45</sup>

As indicated in the example, this asyntactical cloud first appears discreetly, within the first chord of mm. 6 and 7, before rising to the surface to become a chromatic distortion of the syncopated melody in m. 7.<sup>46</sup> Then it migrates to the bass and appears twice in m. 8 (vertically and melodically) before falling into place as the lower dyad of a four-note chord recognizable (taking the G as an appoggiatura) as a misspelled half-diminished-seventh chord—in fact,

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*Beethoven: sa vie, son caractère, sa musique* (Paris: Librairie du Petit Journal, 1865); A. Audley, *Louis van Beethoven: sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Paris: Didier, 1867). Somewhat more musical in emphasis (but still strongly indebted to Berlioz) is E.-M.-E. Deldevez, *Curiosités musicales: notes, analyses, interprétation de certaines particularités contenues dans les oeuvres des grands maîtres* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1873). Such biographical work obviously has its own value (Wilder's, for one, is very solid, showing up-to-date familiarity with the German literature); I simply note the paucity of music-analytical detail generally on offer.

<sup>44</sup>Alexandre Oulibicheff, *Beethoven, ses critiques, ses glossateurs* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1857), p. 175. Another significant contribution to the literature in French, Wilhelm von Lenz, *Beethoven et ses Trois Styles* (Paris: A. Lavinée, 1866), though it does offer some resonant comments on the primacy of the "idée" in Beethoven's composition (p. 72), contains little of specific relevance to the point at issue.

<sup>45</sup>The principle I am indicating—a background field of modal-diatonic (i.e., stepwise, heptatonic) "normality" within which "asyntactical" chromaticism is deployed to create form-defining frictions—can be traced through Debussy's entire *œuvre*, notably into the last three sonatas.

<sup>46</sup>This Bb is the only chromatic inflection in the first violin's opening paragraph.

the enharmonic equivalent, at pitch, of the original, most famous "Tristan chord" (premise 5). Finally, two quick alternations of this chord with the half-diminished dominant lead through a restoration of the pure Phrygian mode to the wispy end of the opening paragraph.

Of course, as Carolyn Abbate insisted long ago, we cannot just label any half-diminished-seventh chord in Debussy as the "Tristan chord."<sup>47</sup> But this fifth and final premise is best understood as an outgrowth of the first: the Quartet begins by pointedly highlighting the new syntactical role of the half-diminished seventh in this Phrygian environment, and then isolates this new dominant sound against the minor-third transposition that gives the enharmonic pitches of Wagner's famous chord. Although this harmonic reference might well slip by unheard, the fussy, inaudible change of voicing Debussy indicates for the augmented second in its two downbeat appearances (viola and cello, mm. 9 and 10) marks a compositional investment that becomes all the clearer when we note the multiple layers of correction—scrapings and over-writings, in pencil and ink—to this very dyad in the Quartet's manuscript.<sup>48</sup> Worrying over the details of voice-leading signals more than mere coloristic saturation: the "Tristan chord" is being singled out for a kind of "game," perhaps along the lines of those previously discerned in the *Prélude* and *Pelléas*.

The crucial difference, of course, is that there is no Mallarmé or Maeterlinck text to lend symbolic meaning. In order to follow this purely syntactical game, it is necessary to extrapolate from the "appellative" theory of harmony presented so influentially by Fétis—a theory in which chords are not just neutral pitch-aggregates (or sets), but entities with precise syntac-

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<sup>47</sup>See Abbate, "Tristan in the Composition of *Pelléas*," p. 139.

<sup>48</sup>Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Département de la musique, Ms. 1004. It is hard to discern the exact order of erasures and corrections from the final state, though the simplest reading might be that the voicing was initially the same as the following measure. This much-corrected manuscript is rather more informative than the fragmentary sketches for the work, which have been discussed in Denis Herlin, "Les Esquisses du Quatuor à cordes," *Cahiers Debussy* 15 (1991), 23–54.

tical inflections. As we all know, the half-diminished seventh has two normal homes in major/minor diatonicism: it is the seventh chord on the leading tone in major, and on the supertonic in minor. In a traditional environment, then, the F–A $\flat$ –C $\flat$ –E $\flat$ -half-diminished seventh would carry only two syntactical implications: G $\flat$  major and E $\flat$  minor. But in this Quartet, as Debussy shows us from the start (and as he reminds us with the juxtapositions that end the paragraph), the half-diminished seventh also has a new meaning, as a “dominant seventh.” The same seventh chord has thus gained a new appellative significance, as the dominant of B $\flat$  Phrygian, which is thus included with the major and minor “tonics” in the list of this chord’s syntactical implications at the end of ex. 1b. As we will see, though the traditional (tonal) implications will continue to operate to some degree as Debussy composes out these various premises, he will give particular formal-thematic prominence to this new, modal, harmonic relationship.

EXPOSITION: “COMPOSING-OUT”  
EPISODES AND THEME-AREAS

Laloy may have invoked the “manner of Beethoven’s late quartets” behind Debussy’s style, but he was also well aware of the obvious differences between the two composers. In Debussy, he admitted, “between these various developments we perceive no transitions, so great is the cohesion of the whole, so supple too the harmony which is able to shift by insensible stages from one nuance to another.”<sup>49</sup> The point about absent “transitions” is a commonplace; it is the assertion of “cohesion” that proves more interesting. In view of the premises just isolated from the opening twelve-measure paragraph of Debussy’s Quartet, it may be possible to glimpse some conceptual cohesion across and beneath even an abrupt shift of texture like that of m. 13.

Some have seen the passage shown in ex. 2 as a (surprisingly early) second main theme, but in any considered view of the movement’s proportions, it is better understood as internal

to the first theme-area.<sup>50</sup> As indicated in the example, in mm. 13–16, with their new, swirling accompaniment, the prevarication on the leading tone (see the third premise in ex. 1b) so crudely hammered out in m. 3 is now deployed over two-measure phrasal cells. What was a local, linear chromaticism becomes projected as a false relation, most immediately between second violin and viola, more embracingly between the initial cello F $\sharp$  and the first violin’s melodic F $\sharp$ . The composing-out of premises arguably continues in the sequential reiteration (with textural inversion) of the same melodic phraselets in mm. 17–20. Altered to remove the chromatic inflection, the accompanimental swirls now offer a clear statement of the B $\flat$  Mixolydian mode that was one of the ambiguous modal shadings of the opening two measures (ex. 1b, premise 2).

This episode, in presenting two precisely calibrated modal hues—the one ambivalent, as a reflection of the F $\sharp$ –F $\natural$  prevarication; the other pure—also launches the movement’s considered confrontation with foursquare melodic ideals. These two-measure melodic cells, in their fourfold repetition, hardly amount to a “tune” of any description. It will help in the interpretation of later, more significant formal moments if we recognize that such pallid melodic gestures are best understood as self-consciously *non*-lyrical. Laloy once related Debussy’s melody directly to his modal syntax:

He did not study the old modes as Musorgsky did. Much freer still, in his music it is the melody that makes the mode, and varies with it. . . . The feeling of tonality subsists, however, in the sense that each of these unusual scales is neatly situated in its octave, and furthermore there are frequent returns to the ordinary diatonic, but they do not take the melody captive: it comes to rest there, ever ready to take flight again.<sup>51</sup>

Following Laloy, we might say that the two-measure phraselets here serve primarily to “make” the modal orientation over D and B $\flat$ .

<sup>50</sup>See, for example, the unconvincing comparison between the opening of the Quartet and that of Franck’s Piano Quintet in Briscoe, “Debussy, Franck, and the ‘Idea of Sacrifice,’” p. 29.

<sup>51</sup>Quoted in Priest, *Louis Laloy*, pp. 83–84, n. 2.

<sup>49</sup>Laloy, “Claude Debussy,” p. 69.

(a) phraselets on D with false relation F-F# (see premise 3)

(b) sequential reiteration with chromaticism removed:  
pure B $\flat$  Mixolydian (see premise 2)

(brief return to G Phrygian)

Example 2: Debussy, *Quatuor*, mm. 13–24.  
The first composing-out of premises, within the first theme-area.

They are, furthermore, just as rudimentary modal markers as they are phrasal units. Not exactly “neatly situated in its octave,” as Laloy put it, each offers only a gapped statement (degrees  $\hat{1}-\hat{3}-\hat{4}-\hat{5}$ ) of the mode’s initial pentachord.

The parenthetical nature of this whole episode within the “first theme-area” soon becomes clear. Following the breakdown of phrasal regularity at m. 20, chromatically blurred domi-

nant ninths over C and F lead to a varied recurrence of the opening theme at m. 26.<sup>52</sup> The reprise itself, shown in ex. 3, calls for particularly careful scrutiny. Its two-measure phrase-

<sup>52</sup>This is a “chain” of dominants that is, in effect, interrupted by the varied return. The final link is postponed to the “second theme-area” at m. 39.

Example 2 (*continued*)

lets preface the second theme-area with a studied exploration of prefigured harmonic possibilities. But the harmony is kept deliberately out of focus to lend finer relief to the second theme itself.

Recall the proposed appellations of the “quasi-*Tristan*” half-diminished seventh: E $\flat$  minor, G $\flat$  major, B $\flat$  Phrygian. Here, while Debussy does bring back his opening idea in E $\flat$ , in m. 26, and then in G $\flat$  in 28, the first phraselet seems to be E $\flat$  *major*, not minor. But the flattened sixth degree, C $\flat$ , is inserted to join the A $\flat$  in the second, rhythmically emphasized chord—and thus to give the first “syntactical” enharmonic respelling of the problematic A $\flat$ –B $\sharp$  dyad (premise 4). Although this distorted “E $\flat$  major” could also provide a home for the “quasi-*Tristan* chord,” Debussy actually presents the minor third in a diminished rather than half-diminished seventh. Then, in the somewhat clearer “G $\flat$  major” phraselet that follows, while C $\flat$  and A $\flat$  again appear together, this downbeat harmony is still the wrong chord, a dominant ninth. (The half-diminished seventh is—or would be—a subset of this chord, but here the F is missing.) In short, although both the “E $\flat$ ” and “G $\flat$ ” regions provide environments into which the augmented second may be translated as a diatonic modal interval, the studied lack of harmonic focus saves the true appellative environment of the half-diminished seventh (premise 5) for the second theme-area.

The modal basis of the second theme (mm. 39–46) is again clearly marked by melodic phraseology. Here, for the first time, two-measure units cohere into a continuous four-measure

sure breath. It remains a Debussyan breath, in that bald repetition replaces flexible response; but the resulting eight-measure span is still distinctive enough in this quicksilver context. Some analysts see G $\flat$  major here, but the key is never clearly established—for one thing, the only strong-beat G $\flat$  bass supports a harmony that includes, in an emphatic voicing, the respelled “problem” dyad, A $\flat$ –C $\flat$ .<sup>53</sup> (This slightly blurred harmony is most easily labeled an inverted minor seventh—but also carries hints of the half-diminished sound soon to emerge more clearly.) Harmonic puzzles aside, with Laloy’s comment on modality in mind we can recognize that the leading line here clearly “makes” B $\flat$  Phrygian, by pointing up the move from final to lowered second degree, C $\flat$ , and by highlighting the other semitone, F–G $\flat$ , at the turning point of the hexachord. Like the earlier rudimentary phraselets, this shape seems more like a bland tracing of mode than a lyrical indulgence—though some progress has been made, from the “gapped” pentachord heard earlier, to the “filled-in” hexachord. Precisely at the phrasal peak, the “quasi-*Tristan* chord” finds its “appellative” realization, beneath the fifth scale degree, as the dominant seventh of the new modal context.

<sup>53</sup>Again, Debussy’s special concern with this moment—and with this dyad—is marked by a detail of voicing: for a new edition in 1904, he added the octave doubling for the viola A $\flat$  in the repetition of the phrase (mm. 43–44). See the printed score with his autograph annotations in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Rés. Vmb 70.

Varied reprise of the first theme  
"E♭ major" (with C♭) "G♭ major"

second theme  
B♭ Phrygian

m<sup>7</sup> (or °7)

Example 3: *Quatuor*, mm. 26–51. Return of first theme harmonically “out of focus”; second theme in B♭ Phrygian; beginning of closing theme.

Quibbling over the modal identity of such a passage is not just shallow nominalism. The ambiguity that inevitably troubles any conventional harmonic reading, as Guye noted, only underlines the degree to which a conventional chordal understanding misconceives the me-

lodically focused Debussy’s modal conception.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, if Guye, even while recog-

<sup>54</sup>See the section by Guye, “Notes sur les procédures harmoniques et la modalité,” in “Le *Quatuor* de Debussy,” pp. 47–53, esp. 50–53.

(as previous 4 bars; note

40

m<sup>7</sup> (or #7?)

44 additional doubling)

48

dim.

dim.

dim.

dim.

closing theme

*p*

*p*

*p*

*pp*

*pp*

*p*

*pp*

*p*

*pp*

*p* en augmentant peu à peu

Example 3 (continued)

nizing the B $\flat$  Phrygian flavor of this passage (“mode de mi sur sib”), did *not* grant it the formal importance of a second theme-area, this was due to his disregard both for the underlying syntactical game with the “quasi-*Tristan* chord” and to Debussy’s care with texture and phraseology.<sup>55</sup> An eight-measure continu-

ous textural configuration—melody in near-homorhythm with a second voice, the other two accompanying in triplets—is, in itself, a crucial formal event in this style. Indeed, in the subsequent formal unfolding, the principal moments of syntactical settling will be marked by

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 52. But Guye accurately interprets this further example of a “mobile” third scalar degree (D $\sharp$  in the ac-

companionment against the melodic D $\flat$ ) as an instance of the conceptual separation between “inflexion mélodique” and “couleur harmonique.”

**First theme: chromatic variant**      **development theme**      (dissolve)

61 [2]      Un peu retenu  $\text{♩} = 52$       Rit.

*dim. p*      doux et expressif      *dim.*

*p*      *dim.*      *dim.*

*p*      *dim.*      *dim.*

*p* un peu un dehors      (f# minor)      (B dom<sup>9</sup>)      *dim.*

67 1<sup>er</sup> Mouvt      (theme)      (dissolve)      En serrant le Mouvt

*p*      *p* doux      *dim.*

*p*      *dim.*      *dim.*

*p*      *dim.*      *dim.*

*p*      (g minor)      (C dom<sup>9</sup>)      *dim.*

Example 4: *Quatuor*, mm. 61–74. Beginning of development section, with first statements of “development theme” in two-measure fragments followed by arpeggiated “dissolve.”

both the phraseology and the recurrence of a similar texture.

After the second theme, a brief harmonic deflection precedes a lurch back to the G region (in ambiguous modal shades) for a new motive in two-measure units that climbs, in sequence, to the *fortissimo* close of the exposition (only the first measure is shown in the example: see mm. 51–60). This passage feels and moves like a closing theme, though to argue the point with Parks (who calls the ensuing passage—shown in ex. 4—a “codetta-transition” and locates the development later) would truly be an exercise in fruitless nominalism.<sup>56</sup> The main point is that after this dramatic caesura

brings the expository explorations to a close, Debussy effects his most significant departure from the conventional formal template, by introducing a new theme that will recur in the second theme-area of the recapitulation.

#### DEVELOPMENT

Example 4 shows the first appearances of this “development theme,” once in F# minor (m. 63) and once in G minor (m. 69), in alteration with a chromatic variant of the main theme. The semitonal harmonic shift, whether or not it is related (as Gouttenoire suggests) to the initial Phrygian inflection, can serve to remind us that Debussy’s open formal conceptions often, while exploring prior queries, also interweave new features to be drawn more overtly

<sup>56</sup>Parks, *The Music of Claude Debussy*, p. 217.

into formal elaboration later.<sup>57</sup> In this piece—one of the most cyclic products of a milieu in which cyclicity was an obsession—the chromatic version of the main theme will become the theme of the second movement; the G–F# harmonic oscillation will recur beneath the main theme of the finale.

In the shorter view, the contrasting nature of the development theme is obvious from the markings, “Un peu retenu” and “doux et expressif.” Yet, although this new theme might seem to state four-measure “phrases” (after each two-measure recall of the opening theme), these do not possess the same continuity as the Phrygian arcs. The sighing, sequential descent and downbeat triplet of the first two measures (see mm. 63–64: all in all, a clear variant of the pitch content of the main theme) may seem expressive enough. But the continuation (over a dominant ninth on B) is more like a dissolve into triadic figuration than a balancing lyrical member. When the G-minor version, deflected in its turn to an arpeggiated C-dominant ninth (mm. 71–74), ushers in a *fortissimo* reharmonization of the main theme, we are left with the sense that we have been offered only partial melodic proposals, whose full lyrical potential has yet to be fully exposed.

What follows is the most traditionally “developmental” section Debussy ever wrote. A constant triplet pulsation, migrating through the texture, drives a conventional dialogue on various one- and two-measure thematic fragments. Soon (m. 88), the two-measure incipit of the “development theme,” given various continuations, begins to take prominence. Eventually (m. 97), through a Beethovenian foreshortening, it is repeated (two measures by two measures) in a whole-tone version, before a dramatic dominant ninth (one measure plus one measure, mm. 101–02) delivers the climactic phrase.

Example 5 begins with the dominant preparation, “toujours animé,” for this pivotal four-measure phrase. At the phrase itself (m. 103) the “Tempo rubato” marking—added to the

manuscript in a late, hastily scrawled pencil correction—underlines the expressive importance of the moment.<sup>58</sup> Here, the development theme gains, for the first time, a lyrical completion, to become a four-measure melodic flexion supported by a powerful dominant-tonic assertion of F# major (enharmonically G♭ major)—the second formally significant harmonic appellation of the quasi-*Tristan* chord. The chord itself now appears on the downbeats of both initial measures (103 and 104), in each case supporting one member of the initial problem dyad, stated atop the texture in a new modal-syntactical translation as a minor third, B–G#. At first, the texture follows the precedent set in the second theme-area: two voices (violin and cello) proceed in loose, two-part homophony, and the inner voices accompany in triplets. But after the half-diminished seventh takes its place in the dominant ninth, the cello, too, enters into the triplet pulsation to intensify the climactic arrival on the F#-tonic triad, and the completion of the four-measure breath.

The completion of the phrase (mm. 105–06) is strongly shaded toward D# minor over the F# pedal—a hint at the enharmonic equivalent Eb minor, the third and last “appellation” of the “quasi-*Tristan*” half-diminished seventh.<sup>59</sup> The brief phraseological cohesion thus marks a remarkably efficient encapsulation of syntactical concerns. Even more than the B♭ Phrygian second theme-area, however, the moment’s structural importance is hard to grasp, aurally, amid the textural flow—especially given that Debussy again opts for elision rather than articulation at the phrase ending. What sounds like a reiteration (mm. 107–08) breaks down immediately into one-measure sequential repetitions (not shown). Homophonic triplets then tumble down onto the extended dominant pedal that

<sup>58</sup>Bn Ms 1004, fol. 3v. The passage was initially marked “1<sup>er</sup> Mouvement.” A further change was made to this passage for the 1904 edition: the rhythm of the bass (initially a syncopation, with the treble, in the second half of the measure) was simplified to the existing two quarters, thus strengthening the arrival on F# major.

<sup>59</sup>The moment thus exemplifies Debussy’s predilection for the chord readable either as “major triad with added sixth” or “inverted minor seventh,” which implies two minor-third related “tonics” at once (as in the *Faune* Prélude’s E major–C# minor, and numerous other works).

<sup>57</sup>For the concept of “open” form in Debussy, see Jean Barraqué, “*La Mer* de Debussy, ou la naissances des formes ouvertes,” *Analyse musicale* 12 (1988), 15–62.

Toujours animé Tempo rubato

C# dom<sup>9</sup> f #7

#7 V<sup>9</sup> I

(phrasing now returns to one- and two-measure fragments)

Example 5: *Quatuor*, mm. 101–08. Dominant preparation leading to pivotal four-measures phrase in F# major (shaded with D# minor).

serves as the “retransition” to the recapitulation (see ex. 6).

Debussy’s decision to draw the development section to a close with this most clichéd of all sonata-form devices could be read as a naïve concession to convention. But here, of all places, it is crucial to recognize the studied nature of

the gesture. Having quickly restored the diatonic elements of G Phrygian only four measures after relinquishing the pivotal F# major/D# minor (m. 113), Debussy sets up his pedal with a *fortissimo* triplet texture whose outer voices, in parallel thirds, reassert the pure modal octave in its plagal position on D (mm. 114 and

G Phrygian "plagal octave"  
in thirds (outer voices);  
inner-voice chromaticism

Decorated Phrygian dom. 7th  
(B $\sharp$  is only non-modal element)

115

118 (dominant pedal with Phrygian tritone)

B $\sharp$  returns (as appoggiatura  
to Phrygian dom. 7th)

121

v $\sharp$ 7

Example 6: *Quatuor*, mm. 115–23. End of development section, with “plagal” Phrygian mode as preparation for Phrygian dominant pedal, and recall of the “sore” B $\sharp$ .

116; the second instance is shown in the example). The ornamental inner-voice chromaticism that colors the initial settling over a D pedal (m. 117) should not, however, be overlooked, for the B $\sharp$ —one member of the initial

problem dyad—persists to cloud the Phrygian dominant; the same pitch later recurs, contrapuntally, over the D–A $\flat$  tritone in mm. 121–22. Both the question posed by the “half-diminished dominant seventh” and the main syntac-

tical cloud, in other words, are again brought into prominence before the retransition takes its last diversion through a whole-tone texture (mm. 136–37, not shown) to deliver the recapitulation.

RECAPITULATION:  
A NON-DIALECTICAL SUMMATION?

The return (ex. 7) begins as a relatively literal, rescored reiteration of the opening, though the intervening process could be seen to leave its mark in one or two changes of detail. When a new doubling removes the F $\sharp$ –B $\flat$  dyad, for example, we might say that this particular “sore” interval has, in a sense, already been healed: once, to the flat side (G $\flat$ –B $\flat$ ) as early as the second theme (mm. 39–46) in the exposition; and once to the sharp side (F $\sharp$ –A $\sharp$ ) in the pivotal phrase near the end of the development (mm. 103–06).<sup>60</sup> Subsequently, the more important problem dyad (A $\flat$ –B $\natural$ ) is also much less obsessively present—though the five measures (142–46) still may be seen as a cunning variant of the eight (5–12) they replace: where the augmented second first fell into place below the quasi-*Tristan* chord, in juxtaposition with the Phrygian dominant, now the dyad appears in a misspelled dominant seventh on D $\flat$  (145), which moves by semitone to the true dominant seventh on D. (A more proximate relative of this moment, as indicated, appears in the retransition, ex. 6.)

The following passage (not shown) replaces the swirling parenthesis from the exposition with a much more dramatic bridge passage, built from several reiterations of a new melodic variant of the main theme over harmonies rising by minor third. As at previous moments of primary formal significance (before the dominant preparation of the pivotal F $\sharp$ -major phrase, mm. 97–100; prior to the recapitulation, mm. 136–37), a deflection into whole-tone harmony at the point of maximal intensity (mm. 158–59) precedes the last melodic and modal settling—that is, the return of the development theme, over a dominant pedal, to serve as the second theme-area (m. 161; see ex. 8).

<sup>60</sup>“Healed” is another of Kerman’s words; see *The Beethoven Quartets*, p. 171.

Traditionally, this is the most freighted moment in the form: the resolution of the large-scale tension; the synthesis of the tonal dialectic. In Debussy’s rethinking of the tradition, as shown in ex. 8a, he manages both to capture some sense of resolution and to sidestep any conventional harmonic synthesis. The evolving or cumulative formal conception is clearly highlighted by the break in the second violin’s leading line (m. 162), which allows the first violin to “patch in” the triplet on the same high G $\sharp$  previously given prominence at m. 104—thus marking the relation between this “second theme-area” and the development section, rather than the exposition.<sup>61</sup> (The expression marking, “A tempo rubato,” another pencil-scrawled correction to the manuscript, further underlines this new formal relation.<sup>62</sup>) It is only from the third measure that the expected textural deployment coheres, as second violin and viola, in octaves within triplet ostinati, twice affirm the B–G $\sharp$  minor-third translation of the augmented second. Rather than any straightforward “2 + 2” and “4 + 4” phrasal logic, the melody might now best be parsed as 8 + 2 (noting the change of figuration at 169); the first eight measures, further articulated as 2 + 4 + 2, frame the twice-reiterated move from B through A to G $\sharp$  as the expressive core of the whole descending line.

Unlike in the two previous melodic-modal affirmations (B $\flat$  Phrygian second theme-area; pivotal F $\sharp$ /d $\sharp$  phrase), the “quasi-*Tristan*” half-diminished seventh (at its original pitch) is a notable absence from this new context for the B–G $\sharp$  dyad. The background ostinato features, instead, the same sonority transposed one more minor third higher, to a G $\sharp$  root, in alternation with the D-major “added-sixth” chord (mm. 162, 164, 166). The half-diminished seventh has, in effect, rotated through the three minor-

<sup>61</sup>Effectively, this textural interplay allows the top voice to trace again the filled-in “minor third” translation of the “problem dyad,” B–A–G $\sharp$  (see violin 1, mm. 161–62).

<sup>62</sup>This passage was previously marked “Un peu Retenu”; see *Bn Ms 1004*, fol. 5 $\nu$ . The two clearly contemporaneous pencil corrections effectively replace reiterations of the two indications that appeared over the first statements of the development theme (“un peu retenu” and “1 $^{\text{er}}$  mouvement,” see mm. 63–70) with a new, distinctive emphasis on the expressive implications of “tempo rubato.”

Whole-tone "deflection" before return

136

*f*

Retenu

Recapitulation

1<sup>er</sup> Mouvt

139

Octave voicing removes F#-Bb dyad

143

Animé (compare m. 121, ex. 6)

*dim.*

*p*

*p*

*p*

*p*

*p*

"D<sup>b</sup>7"  
(with B<sup>b</sup>)

D<sup>7</sup>

Example 7: *Quatuor*, mm. 136–46. The recapitulation, with phrasal compressions and alterations of voice leading.

third related pitches of its original D–F–A<sup>b</sup>[G<sup>#</sup>]–C voicing. This rotational logic could well be related to the subcutaneous octatonicism noted by Yih. But it might also be understood, more subtly, as a cunning adaptation of Wagner: the three half-diminished sevenths that appear, in sequence, in the opening paragraph of the

*Tristan* Prelude have been projected through the background of Debussy's reconfigured sonata form.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup>DeVoto suggests that a similar "characteristic rotation" of the *Tristan* chord through its own intervals can also be



a. (continued)

b. Schematic representation of the G Phrygian (plagal)/D Lydian modal complementarity.

Example 8 (continued)

A $\flat$  tritone in the Phrygian dominant—this modal-harmonic settling over a dominant pedal exemplifies an even more significant aspect of the movement's embracing conceptual logic. Compare the G Phrygian mode in the “plagal” position, from D to D (as it appeared in m. 116 to set up the dominant pedal in the retransition, and as it is shown in ex. 8b) with the D Lydian presented here, for the recapitulation's second theme-area. Every pitch except the D is raised a semitone. Along with the rotational logic that links the half-diminished-seventh chords, and the enharmonic translations that recontextualize the intervallic clouds and sore notes, we glimpse here a sophisticated play with the hues of the diatonic octave itself. The “sharpest” stepwise syntax, so to speak, comes to oppose the “flattest,” in a stark scalar complementarity that intersects all of the other (traditional and reconfigured) tonal relationships in the movement.

After the D Lydian melody dwindles onto reiterations of its last chromatic fragments, an intensifying rise, musing on the central lyrical members of the last thematic event, incrementally removes all modal inflections. Then the coda, “très animé,” sweeps down and up again through the pentatonic scale (see ex. 9). Often,

in Debussy, this scale represents an ideal of brightness or plenitude. It is better here, in light of the movement's play of modal hues, to hear it as a brilliantly blank scalar canvas, stripped of the modal shades that only semitones can provide.

#### INTERDISCIPLINARY ELABORATIONS

A product of the *Franckiste* milieu, this Quartet will not, of course, resolve its premises until after all four movements. (Given the difficulties Debussy experienced with the finale, it could well be argued that he never fully succeeded.) While the blatant thematic “cyclicity” that binds the work is impossible to miss, it is arguably through its continuing composing-out of the new syntactical implications of its modal-harmonic language that it most richly enacts a post-Classical version of cyclic integration.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup>In the most cursory overview, note first, in the second movement, the counter-melody to the chromatic version of the main theme, which juxtaposes the Phrygian dominant seventh—including A $\flat$ —with the tonic major triad; then, in the third movement, the searching restatement of the B $\sharp$ -A $\flat$  dyad that precedes the settling into D $\flat$  major; and lastly, the questioning arpeggiation of the “quasi-Tristan chord” that launches the finale.

187 *subito*  
*pp* *ff*

190 *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff*

Example 9: *Quatuor*, mm. 187–94. The final pentatonic flourishes.

Yet beyond all arguments over different possible grounds of unity, the primary purpose of this analysis has not just been to quarrel (again) with the well-attested aporias of Fortean and Schenkerian theory, but to restore to hearing some sense of Debussy's self-conscious engagement with tradition, as a way to characterize as precisely as possible the compositional investments this engagement brings into focus.

No doubt an analysis that seems to seek such investments by holding yet another composer up to the standards of Beethoven might carry, these days, a whiff of perversity. But in all awareness of the profound differences between the two composers in terms (say) of rhetorical tone or *thematische Arbeit*, a reading of Debussy through Beethovenian spectacles can prove a salutary corrective to those reflexive celebrations of his "colorism" (or his "Frenchness") that seem to support only a simple-minded view of his craft. The Quartet can demonstrate his receptivity, on his own terms, to

one of the deepest lessons of Beethoven precisely as Tovey, or Kerman, or Rosen might have framed it—that is, his "composing-out" of musical form from the most fundamental relational principles in his tonal language.

It is the way these relational principles have changed, from one end of the century to the next, that allows this reconfiguration of Classical form to enact, at the same time, a cunning response to Wagner. However mindless a hunt for "Tristan chords" in Debussy can sometimes seem, there is no doubt he was strangely obsessed with this chord in the late 1880s and early 1890s, and he indeed found it a strong enough stimulant to make him rethink every dimension of his practice. Abbate's exposure of the chordal wordplay in *Pelléas* is, by now, well known; I have offered a more arcane argument about the Mallarméan harmonic symbolism in the *Faune* Prelude. Even absent these esoteric referents, the "game" in the Quartet is arguably just as sophisticated. Syntactically, the

"Tristan chord" was famed as the most intense distillation of the desirous energy carried, in tonal syntax, by the pre-dominant function.<sup>65</sup> It was, in other words, the most vibrant fulcrum of a language that remained, in spite of Wagner's incessant chromaticism, essentially bipolar. The Quartet transforms this fulcrum into something like a lens, through which appellative harmonic energies are refracted into a spectrum of modal hues in polypolar complementary relationships.

This kind of visual metaphor can serve to draw us back into the salon context from which we began. Of course, there is no reason why any one artist in the salon should offer a concatenation of painterly concerns that precisely parallels the musical cross-currents in this Debussyan moment. Indeed, as Leon Botstein has recently demonstrated, on the basis of either documented testimony or rough historical contiguity alone, it is possible to link Debussy's music to an even more variegated populace of artists than those named on the whole "Free Aesthetic" list.<sup>66</sup> The question is, however, whether a more robust sense of the principles informing some particular work might guide a selection from all possible affinities that can qualify, and refine, the connections so often proposed on murkier grounds.

My own first candidate appears in Botstein's account only as an artist who shares Debussy's effect of "dreamlike mystery."<sup>67</sup> Maurice Denis, only twenty-four years old in 1894, had by then designed the cover for Debussy's first edition of *La Damoiselle élue* and was gaining wider prominence as a leading art theorist. The richest point of intersection between Denis and

Debussy is not, I think, their ostensible "mysteriousness" but more precisely, their shared concern with *line*, as summed up in an ambiguous term that endlessly recurs in Debussy studies: the "arabesque." In fact, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger has made the connection between Debussy and Denis in these very terms before, in an article on "Debussy et l'idée de l'arabesque musicale":

The term arabesque belongs to the vocabulary of French painters, poets and theorists connected to the symbolist movement in the years after 1885. It recurs (in singular or plural) with insistent eloquence in the writings of Gustave Moreau, of Charles Henry—who cites Hanslick's famous essay in French translation—and, above all, of the painter Maurice Denis. Whether or not reference is made, in any instance, to Egypt and ancient Greece, to Byzantium, to Islam or to the Christian middle ages, the notion of the arabesque essentially underlines for the Symbolists a character of line that is decorative (ornamental) and abstract (stripped of subjective expression).<sup>68</sup>

Whereas Eigeldinger's emphasis on the "decorative" may be viewed as an accurate reflection of the central obsessions of the time, his parenthetical gloss of "abstract" as "stripped of subjective expression" demands more careful handling. In an article on the ninth "Exhibition of Impressionist and Symbolist Painters" of 1895, for example, Denis hailed a new kind of painting based on what he called "expression by means of the harmony of forms and colors, and by means of the material employed," rather than "expression by means of the subject"

<sup>65</sup>D'Indy gives amusing evidence of the currency of this understanding in his *Cours de composition musicale*, when he presents a reduction of the "Tristan chord" to a simple D-minor triad, declaring that "cet accord énigmatique dont l'audition faisait crier Berlioz, n'est cependant point autre que l'accord tonal de la en fonction sous-dominante, contracté mélodiquement sur lui-même, et la succession harmonique . . . est, en somme, la plus simple du monde" (*Cours de composition musicale*, ed. Vincent d'Indy and Auguste Sérieyx, vol. 1 [3rd edn. rev. and corrected, Paris: A. Durand, 1912], p. 117n.; originally redacted from d'Indy's classes at the Schola Cantorum, 1896–97).

<sup>66</sup>See Leon Botstein, "Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy's Break with Tradition," in *Debussy and His World*, ed. Jane F. Fulcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 141–79.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>68</sup>"Le terme d'arabesque fait partie du vocabulaire des peintres, poètes et théoriciens français rattachés au mouvement symboliste dans les années 1885 et suivantes. Il revient (au singulier et au pluriel) avec une insistance éloquente dans les écrits de Gustave Moreau, de Charles Henry—qui cite l'essai de Hanslick en traduction française—et surtout du peintre Maurice Denis. Que les références renvoient ou non, selon le cas, à l'Égypte et à la Grèce anciennes, à Byzance, à l'Islam ou encore au moyen âge chrétien, cette notion d'arabesque souligne essentiellement chez les Symbolistes le caractère décoratif (ornemental) et abstrait (dépourvu d'expression subjective) de la ligne" (Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, "Debussy et l'idée d'arabesque musicale," *Cahiers Debussy* 12–13 [1988–89], 5–14, at 5).

(*l'expression par le sujet*).<sup>69</sup> Eigeldinger's term, *l'expression subjective*, is potentially confusing, to the extent that it blurs the distinction between the painterly "subject"—that is, its worldly imagery—and the "subject" who is doing the expression, through arrangement of form and color.

The instability of the term can actually serve the inter-artistic comparison. For if the decorative abstraction courted by the painters (in part through the glorification of what Denis called the "arabesque pure") undoubtedly brought into question the "subjects" of representation, Debussy's melodic arabesques, by contrast, might best be said to confront, and question, the "subjective" expressivity of traditional melodic lyricism. Looking back to the B $\flat$  Phrygian arcs, for example, we should recall that the second theme-area in Romantic sonata form was usually the opening for the most indulgent lyrical effusions. If we were to compare this bland modal tracing with the 4 + 4 phrasing at the same formal moment in, say, Franck's F-Minor Piano Quintet, or even Fauré's G-Minor Piano Quartet, we could say simply that Debussy's markedly paler expressive rhetoric arises from the contingent, only quasi-syntactical relationship he presents between the line itself and its loosely oscillating harmonic support.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup>Denis is celebrating the "young painters" who have relinquished "naturalism": "Ils ont préféré dans leurs oeuvres l'expression par le décor, par l'harmonie des formes et des couleurs, par la matière employée, à l'expression par le sujet." This claim follows directly from a reassertion of Denis's most famous mantra: "Pour eux . . . un tableau avant d'être un représentation de quoi que ce soit, c'est une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées." From "Préface de la IXe Exposition des Peintres Impressionnistes et Symbolistes," in Maurice Denis, *Théories, 1890–1910: Du Symbolisme et de Gauguin vers un Nouvel Ordre Classique* (4th edn. Paris: L. Rouart et J. Watelin, 1920), pp. 25–29, at 26–27.

<sup>70</sup>I should make clear that I do not think Debussy's notion of the "arabesque" can ever be defined in a singular and unambiguous fashion, though it can be fruitfully drawn into interpretation in various ways. Eigeldinger's emphasis on "abstraction" *vis-à-vis* "subjective expression," for example, could usefully serve to insert the Quartet's "thematic" passages into the history of line and phraseology that extends through the *Faune* Prélude (with its framed *bel canto* lyricism) and *Pelléas* (with its careful near-avoidance of "singing") to the more abstracted lines of, say, *Nuages* and *Sirènes*. For a contrasting reading of Debussy's "arabesque," see Anya Suschitzky, "Debussy's Rameau: French Music and Its Others," *Musical Quarterly* 86 (2002), 398–448.

One contemporary critic of this piece did sense that something was happening, precisely, to melody, in relation to harmony and texture. Paul Dukas wrote that the Quartet's melody "strides across the [harmony] as across a sumptuous and finely decorated carpet."<sup>71</sup> This off-hand metaphor can open finer distinctions, when we note that Debussy's reconfigured sonata structure allows him several discrete opportunities to confront the fading potential of harmonized melody to promise lyrical expression. The texture briefly coheres more strongly in the development (even finding solidity of bass support); the movement ends with yet another, less grounded (but perhaps more expressive) melodic-harmonic interweaving. With all of the slipperiness of the term "subjective" in mind, this finely calibrated range of textural-expressive nuance might well be related to the similar range of signification in Denis's painted lines—as, for example, in his 1892 canvas *La Procession sous les arbres*, which hung in the 1894 "Libre Esthétique" salon, and whose linear arabesques (as plate 3 shows) may hover between figuration and pure decoration, as in the shadows, or fall into coherence as the outline of some readable *sujet*, be it a tree or a nun.

Still, while Denis's version of post-Impressionism might valuably serve the critical reattunement to line in Debussy—so often lost under the misty clichés about his Impressionism—it is hardly, in itself, an adequate parallel to the Quartet's self-conscious hybrid of influences. For a second heuristic comparison, we could do worse than revisit Kufferath's passing invocation of "pointillism" and consider the painting and writing of Paul Signac, most influential polemicist for the neo-Impressionist style of the recently deceased Georges Seurat.<sup>72</sup> Plate

<sup>71</sup>"M. Debussy se complait particulièrement aux successions d'accords étoffés, aux dissonances sans crudité, plus harmonieuses en leurs complications que les consonances mêmes; sa mélodie y marche comme sur un tapis somptueux et savamment orné." Paul Dukas, "Le Quatuor de Debussy" (May 1894), in *Les Écrits de Paul Dukas sur la Musique*, ed. G. Samazeuilh (Paris: SEFI, 1948), pp. 173–78, at 176.

<sup>72</sup>See Paul Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impresionisme*, ed. Françoise Cachin (Paris: Hermann, 1964). This work was initially published in 1899, as one culminating expression of a widespread orientation toward a "scientific aesthetic," rooted in the writings of Charles



Plate 3: Maurice Denis, *La Procession sous les arbres* (1892), shown in the 1894 salon of “La Libre Esthétique.” Private collection (© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London, 2007; photo: akq images).

4 shows one of Signac's paintings that also hung in the 1894 salon. Intriguing though the canvas's quasi-musical “opus number” may be, I am not particularly interested in arguing that Signac's painting *looks* much like Debussy's music *sounds*. Rather, I will lean on my metaphor of refraction for the Quartet's harmonic logic and propose a deeper relation between the kind of modal-harmonic thinking that underlies the first movement's formal-thematic unfolding, and the conceptual basis of Signac's defense, in his influential book *D'Eugène Delacroix au Néo-Impressionisme*, of the neo-Impressionist style. In short, by tracing a lineage from Delacroix through Cézanne, via such color theorists as Michel Eugène Chevreul and Charles Henry, Signac presented a polemical argument for Seurat's technique of systemati-

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Henry and previously promulgated in, for example, the art-critical writings of Félix Fénéon. (Note that “pointillism” is a derogatory label Signac explicitly rejects for the style he is defending.)

cally juxtaposing complementary colors as an epoch-defining alternative to traditional tonal modeling.

To develop the heuristic parallel between this new coloristic conception and Debussy's modal “complementarity,” we could, perhaps, begin by noting the numerous references to music in Signac's book. At one point, for example, he enthuses:

The painter [in completing his canvas] will have played on his keyboard of colors in the same way that a composer handles the diverse instruments in orchestrating a symphony: he will have modified in his own way the rhythms and the measures, paralyzed or exalted some element or other, modulated to an infinite degree some gradation of hue. Caught up in the sheer joy of directing the games and struggles of the seven colors of the prism, he will be like a musician multiplying the seven notes of the scale to produce the melody.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>“Le peintre aura joué son clavier de couleurs de la même façon qu'un compositeur manie les divers instruments pour

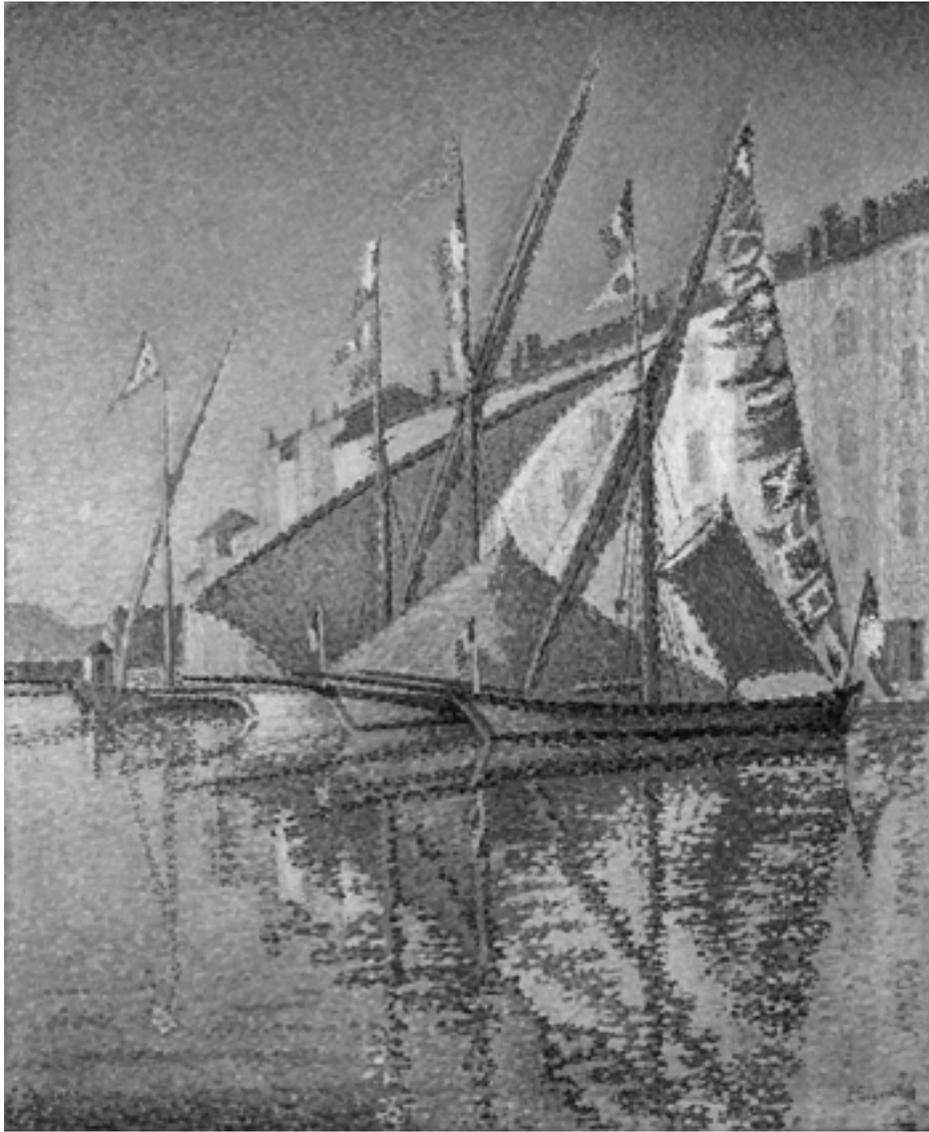


Plate 4: Paul Signac, *Tartanes pavoisées*, op. 240 (1893), shown in the 1894 salon of “La Libre Esthétique.” Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal (akg images/Erich Lessing).

But while this last parallel (between the spectrum and the scale) may be immediately appealing in light of the modal complementarities discernible through analysis of the Quartet, Signac’s easy slippage, earlier in this paragraph,

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l’orchestration d’une symphonie: il aura modifié à son gré les rythmes et les mesures, paralysé ou exalté tel élément, modulé à l’infini telle dégradation. Tout à la joie de diriger les jeux et les luttes des sept couleurs du prisme, il sera tel qu’un musicien multipliant lest sept notes de la gamme, pour produire la mélodie” (ibid., pp. 108–09).

from the “keyboard of colors” to symphonic “orchestration” also clearly exemplifies the inevitable instability—and the potential superficiality—of such interartistic metaphorical transfers. In this light, it could be that the parallel at the level of musical and painterly conception might be articulated more solidly from the other direction, with reference to the background of traditional harmonic thinking as exemplified in d’Indy’s *Cours de composition musicale*.

D’Indy, at one point, describes the Classical logic of modulation along the circle of fifths

with a metaphor of *chiaroscuro*: a modulation upwards—"sharp side"—moves in the direction of "brightness"; a modulation downwards, to the "flat side," is a move toward "darkness."<sup>74</sup> Undoubtedly, Debussy's Quartet is still deeply indebted to the fifth-related logic that remains a given to d'Indy throughout his *Cours*—though I would emphasize again the patently ironic inflections of the work's most traditional tonal gestures. And I would say further, now, that part of this sense of irony derives from the way its loosened dominant-tonic syntax is shot through with a new, schematic manipulation of the modal hues of the diatonic octave, much in the way that the logic of spectral complementarity lifts Signac's art at least partly free of the *chiaroscuro*—the polarity of light and dark—previously so fundamental to painting's grammar. In both, we might say, the vestiges of traditional order are overlaid with a conception that is (explicitly in Signac's case, implicitly in Debussy's) protomodernist in its systematic scientism.

Perhaps this last claim strains credibility, given that the Quartet's modal-chromatic, vestigially "tonal" syntax seems pretty tame by comparison with the far more radical—and far more schematic—explosions of traditional musical language that were soon to follow. But to relegate Debussy to a transitional phase of avant-garde experimentation is to miss the lessons his modal-chromatic hybrids might still hold for a "modern classical" style free of Schoenbergian imperatives.<sup>75</sup> It is also to forget that his language did challenge even those first hearers who had once seen themselves as the leading defenders of musical radicalism. For a closing reminder of that initial challenge, I will give the last words to Kufferath, whose flippant

reference to pointillism was perhaps more astute than he suspected, and whose touching candor about the paradigm shift he sensed in Debussy's "Libre Esthétique" concert nicely exemplifies the historical self-consciousness we would do well to restore to our hearing of this Quartet: "Where this school will lead us, what it will amount to, is difficult to predict—and that is not our business. It will be the pressing concern of our descendants, who will likely scorn us as old fogies for our inability to comprehend Debussy, just as we once disdained those of our predecessors who could not come to terms with Wagner."<sup>76</sup>



<sup>76</sup>"Où cette école nous mènera, à quoi elle aboutira, il est difficile de le pressentir et ce n'est pas notre affaire. Nos petits-neveux seront fixés là-dessus et nous traiteront peut-être de vieille perruque, pour n'avoir pas su comprendre Debussy, comme nous avons quelquefois traité nos prédécesseurs qui n'avaient pas deviné Wagner" (Stockhem, *Eugène Ysaÿe*, p. 116).

### **Abstract.**

The second performance of Debussy's String Quartet, given by the Ysaÿe Quartet on an all-Debussy program during the 1894 salon of "La Libre Esthétique" in Brussels, offers an ideal context for a critical reexamination of his musical and aesthetic affinities at this pivotal moment. In the first place, a view to the salon's other three concerts, which honored Beethoven alongside recent works by Société Nationale composers, encourages reconsideration of Debussy's own response to the "great tradition" in the work he ironically designated "Opus 10." But at the same time, due regard to his other contemporaneous compositional obsessions, as exemplified in the works programmed alongside the Quartet, raises the question as to how such self-conscious dialogue with Classical models related to more pressing, post-Wagnerian musical negotiations. Pursuit of this question through analysis of the first movement's reconfigured sonata form ultimately suggests ways to distinguish, from amid the myriad post-Impressionist artists on view in the "Free Aesthetic" salon itself, those painters whose visual explorations most tellingly paralleled Debussy's own "games" with musical syntax and expression in the early 1890s. Keywords: Claude Debussy, *Quatuor à cordes*, op. 10, Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Wagner, modality, post-Impressionist painting.

<sup>74</sup>See d'Indy's general discussion of the development section of sonata form, with its various modulations "orientées vers la lumière ou l'ombre," *Cours*, II, 273–82. D'Indy maps the metaphor directly onto the circle of fifths: sharp-side modulation is toward "clarté" (e.g., p. 275); flat-side is "sombre" (e.g., pp. 281, 282).

<sup>75</sup>I take the term "modern classical" from the recent article on Debussy analysis by Arnold Whittall, "Debussy Now," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 278–87.