

Mark DeVoto

## Some Aspects of Parallel Harmony in Debussy



Every listener familiar with the music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918) knows that it is distinctive, even unmistakable, in sound and texture, and that much of the “Debussy sound” has to do with harmony and voice-leading. Most first-year students of harmony, taught from the first that parallel fifths and octaves are forbidden in common-practice voice-leading, soon happily discover that Debussy is the unmatched rule-breaker in this regard, and that his music must be judged by different matrices of harmonic analysis. The discerning student soon learns that Debussy’s chords themselves are familiar entities, for the most part, but that they emerge in the music with two distinct differences: typically they are highlighted for their individual sound, and they move with unprecedented freedom. The freedom-to-move is itself twofold: the motion may be entirely non-classical—e.g., parallel between any or all voices; or the motion may be to a chord entirely unexpected in classical terms.

Debussy’s melodic and harmonic use of parallel intervals thus forms a fascinating but enormous subject for study, and the present essay can do little more than point to a few examples of this central aspect of his art and compositional technique. We will have here only a brief, partial survey of Debussy’s parallel harmony, with one goal in mind: to identify, distinguish,

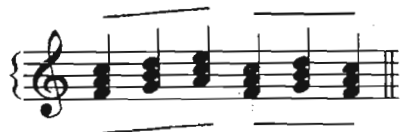
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and elucidate the different kinds of parallel harmony and parallel melodic motion he favored.

It is convenient to begin with Debussy's own reflections. Less inclined than most composers to discuss his own music in psychological or descriptive terms, Debussy was even more reticent about technical discussion of his own music, or indeed any kind of music. A valuable and often-cited source originates with the ethnomusicologist and composer Maurice Emmanuel (1862-1938), who wrote down his recollection of conversations between Debussy and his teacher Ernest Guiraud (1837-92).<sup>1</sup> Even in the fragmented form of Emmanuel's transcription, the Debussy-Guiraud conversations capture some of Debussy's theoretical thinking about his own emerging art of 1889-90, with lasting echoes in his later music. During their animated discussion, according to Emmanuel's transcription, Guiraud played block-chord successions on the piano, mostly with parallel motion of triads in root position, with or without octave doubling, and generally in forms that can be played with one hand:

ERNEST GUIRAUD: Well, do you find this lovely?

**Example 1:** [Parallel close-position 1-3-5 triads]



CLAUDE DEBUSSY: Yes, yes, yes!

GUIRAUD: But how would you get out of this?

**Example 2:** [Parallel close-position 1468 triads, diatonic]



GUIRAUD: I am not saying that what you do isn't beautiful, but it's theoretically absurd.

DEBUSSY: There is no theory. You have merely to listen. Pleasure is the law.

<sup>1</sup>Transcription cited from Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, Vol. 1, (London, Cassell & Company, 1962), pp. 204-208.

Much has been made in the critical press of Debussy's *Le plaisir est ma loi*, but rarely getting down to specifics. The examples just shown may or may not be a precise transcription of the parallel chords as Guiraud actually played them. Nor do we know whether Debussy went beyond his remarks with Guiraud, except from the direct evidence of his own music. Lockspeiser speaks of Theodore Dubois' (1837-1924) being sufficiently "impressed by Debussy's improvisations" to have experimented with them himself at the organ, playing a melody "with one finger" in chant-like style and registering it with mutation stops and mixtures, reinforcing the partials but omitting the fundamental.<sup>2</sup> (More likely Dubois was irked by what he perceived as Debussy's *enfant terrible* pranks, but good-humored enough to attempt to burlesque them.) The closest Debussy himself ever came to the organ in his own music was in *La cathédrale engloutie* (1910), arguably the only evidence that he might have been interested in medieval organum.

### Parallel doubling

Octave doubling of an upper melody or a bass melody in instrumental music, whether between first and second violins, or between cellos and basses, or in the left hand or right hand of the piano, is an everyday phenomenon in music from the seventeenth century to the present. The nature of the piano keyboard and the shape of the human hand allow the possibilities of octave doubling of complete chords for amplification of sound and texture. On the organ, keyboard doubling by fingers or feet can be further amplified by any number of octave-doubling ranks and couplers. In the orchestra, octave doubling of melodic lines suggests nearly limitless possibilities. The orchestral composer needs to be aware of melodic doublings that cross over other parts, and not all composers have avoided textures that sound excessively thick; many also make regular use of harmonic doublings in chordal textures simply to increase the volume of total sound.

Octave doubling of a melodic line is less often an ingredient of purely vocal texture, such as in unaccompanied choral music. When voices are combined with instruments, on the other hand, octave doubling occurs regularly. In the most elementary kind of vocal-instrumental texture, such as solo voice with piano accompaniment, the melodic line in the piano may be doubled by the voice even at a distance of two octaves. Such octave doubling in voice and piano is often a natural result of practical change

<sup>2</sup>Lockspeiser, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60. Dubois (1837-1924) was Saint-Saëns' (1835-1921) successor as organist at the Madeleine, and was director of the Conservatoire from 1896 to 1905.

from soprano voice to tenor or vice versa. It is a peculiar property of this combination, no doubt owing much to style and tradition, that a vocal doubling by a bass voice of an upper melody, even though it may sound below the rest of the accompaniment, does not suggest forbidden octaves between outer voices; it sounds like a doubled melody.

Melodic doubling in parallel thirds or sixths is the most familiar kind of non-octave doubling in two melodic parts. Indeed, in its freest application, doubling need not even be parallel, though when two simultaneous melodic parts in the same rhythm change their separating intervals frequently it is proper to speak of collateral parts rather than doubling parts.

**Example 3:** Chopin (1819-49): Nocturne, op. 37, no. 2 (1839), mm. 2-4



*Perfect intervals: octave and fifth*

By its very nature, the octave is the "most perfect" interval, the interval that "most ideally" replicates a fundamental tone. When a melodic phrase is played or sung, and then repeated transposed an octave higher or an octave lower, it is obvious that its essential tonal nature is unchanged; it is merely repositioned in register. The same is not the case, however, with the interval of the perfect fifth, the next higher partial in the natural overtone series. If the ear recognizes the octave as an interval formed by two tones that are in some way the same, then it recognizes the fifth as made up of two tones that are essentially different, even though consonant with each other. The fifth may be easily combined with an octave or absorbed into a consonant triad to form a consonant sonority; but transposing a melodic phrase by the interval of a fifth instantly is perceived as changing the key as well as the register.

It is the consonant strength, if that is the right word, of the perfect fifth that marks it aurally with a particular sound quality, a sound quality that was widely cherished in the music of the Middle Ages but used with much greater discretion from the sixteenth century on, as the sound of the complete triad (root, third, and fifth, with or without doubling) became much more widely accepted, particularly in vocal music. The sound of the open

fifth, without a third, was a special attraction.<sup>3</sup> From the sixteenth century, one finds the open fifth carefully circumscribed in two-part counterpoint, in final cadences (particularly in vocal music, even as late as Mozart's (1756-91) *Requiem* (1791), and in specialized instrumental situations such as fanfares, so-called horn fifths, and drone basses. Open fifths are particularly prominent in Chopin's mazurkas. Certainly they suggest a rustic open-string quality in the Polish national dance; at the same time, it is obvious that Chopin emphasized the open-fifth sound because it held a particular attraction for him, just as it did for Grieg half a century later.

**Example 4a:** Chopin: Mazurka, op. 6, no. 3 (1830), mm. 1-6



**Example 4b:** Chopin: Mazurka, op. 7, no. 1 (1830-31), mm. 49-52



The above examples show the isolated perfect fifth in two contexts. The first is a simple tonic fifth which is soon absorbed into the initial tonic harmony. The second is a drone bass component of a dissonant sonority, an augmented sixth chord that lasts for seven measures before it resolves.

**Example 5:** Chopin: Mazurka, op. 24, no. 2 (1835), mm. 105-110



<sup>34</sup>(In four-part texture it is not advisable to omit the third, as that leaves the empty sound of the open fifth." Walter Piston and Mark DeVoto, *Harmony*, 5th edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), p. 28.

Here, in oscillating tonic-dominant complete triads, the open-fifth sound is absent. The motion of parallel perfect fifths in the lowest voices may well be noticeable to keen ears, and yet even so these fifths will likely be perceived as doubling voices, reinforcing overtones from the bass. Fifths such as these are partly coloristic, similar to the open-string fifths in the on-stage peasant orchestra in Kilian's song in Act I of *Der Freischütz* (1821), or, for that matter, the unobtrusive tuning-up notes in the three on-stage dance ensembles in the finale of Act I of *Don Giovanni* (1787); these fifths may sound prominently, even as they blend completely with the overall harmony.

Parallel perfect fifths occurring between upper melody and bass sound especially prominent, and are singled out by theorists for special rebuke; nevertheless there are numerous and well-known instances of momentary and sometimes inadvertent parallel fifths that usually pass unnoticed. The following example from a well-known piece by Chopin has, to our knowledge, not been remarked previously.

**Example 6:** Chopin: Scherzo, op. 54 (1842), mm. 49-53



On the other hand, the following example has been known for a long time; one assumes that Chopin did not deliberately set out to jeer at theorists or *épater les bourgeois*, but simply sought to emphasize a particular sound that struck his imagination.

**Example 7:** Chopin: Mazurka, op. 30, no. 4 (1835), mm. 129-132



More common are examples where, in a changing texture, doubling octaves might be confused aurally with octaves prohibited by classical voice-leading.

**Example 8:** Schubert (1797-1828): Piano Sonata, op. 53, D. 850 (1825), II mvt., opening



The ear easily perceives the upper melodic line doubled an octave below, within the interior texture; then the doubling drops out, only to reappear after a few beats. As a particular kind of sound, this texture is unusual by its own individual character, one which is not necessarily frustrating to the ear.

Within only a few years of the above example we are able to cite doublings that seem specifically designed to defy convention. The following example from Berlioz' (1803-1869) *Symphonie fantastique* (1830) shows a radically different kind of octave doubling. The perception of an independent bass is vague; the chords lack only the fifth of the triad to complete a parallel root-position sound.

**Example 9:** Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique*, V, mm. 407-412



### Parallel chords

The previous example leads directly to the closely related phenomenon of chordal doubling, in which a melodic line is amplified by a chordal layer. The early Renaissance practice of *fauxbourdon* is the best known of these, forming varying intervals of perfect or augmented fourth and major or minor sixth below the melody, according to the hexachord or diatonic scale.

In Bach's (1685-1750) time keyboard music began to include chromatic melodic lines amplified by diminished triads or diminished seventh chords:

**Example 10:** Bach: WTC I, D minor *Prelude* (1722), mm. 24-26

This practice persisted well into the nineteenth century and beyond, but most often in contexts where the chromatic scale is connective — between widely separated melodic points and usually in a cadenza or other improvisatory situation, where time and tonality might be freely but temporarily suspended. A good example of this, in a measured context, is the middle section of Chopin's *Etude* in E major, op. 10, no. 3 (1832). After Chopin, one finds examples of successive diminished seventh chords pushed to extremes, notably in Liszt (1811-1856) and Tchaikovsky (1840-1893). Other types of chords were also used in combination with a chromatic-scale melodic line: augmented triads (Liszt: *Gnomenreigen*, 1863; *Faust* Symphony 1857); half-diminished seventh chords (Wagner [1813-1883]: *Die Götterdämmerung* 1874; Dvořák [1841-1904]: Symphony no. 9, 1893); dominant seventh chords (Fauré [1845-1924]: *Impromptu* in F minor, 1883; *Ballade* in F# major, 1879); and even complete dominant major ninth chords, as in the following striking example from Emmanuel Chabrier's (1841-1894) *Le roi malgré lui* (1887):

**Example 11:** Chabrier: *Fête polonaise* in *Le roi malgré lui*

Such instances of parallel chords are certainly coloristic, but it is important to recognize that they nevertheless are essentially melodic events, whose specifically harmonic function is suspended; moreover, they are guided by the chromatic scale, almost never the diatonic.

*From Chopin to Debussy*

Debussy's outstanding ability as a pianist was recognized as early as 1874, when, just eleven years old, he performed Chopin's very demanding F minor Concerto at the Conservatoire. Debussy's keyboard style, which was really not one but many, is generally far removed from Liszt's or Brahms', and at times closer to Chopin's, whom in fact Debussy honored directly in 1914 by editing his piano works for Durand, and in 1915 by dedicating his *Douze Études* to Chopin's memory.

Chopin's music formed a significant part of Debussy's musical experience during his Conservatoire years, and he never wavered in his affection for it to the end of his life. But this was not the only likely influence on Debussy's early sense of parallel harmony. Another might well have been the sparkling ballet *Namouna* (1881) by Édouard Lalo (1823-92). (Debussy certainly knew this ballet; his own testimony is that at age 18, at its premiere, he applauded with such noisy enthusiasm that he was ejected from the hall.) The *Sérénade* in *Namouna* includes a passage for divided strings in parallel fifths suggestive of tuning a mandolin.

**Example 12:** Lalo: *Namouna: Sérénade*, mm. 17-23

Debussy's own early song, *Mandoline*, shown in part in Example 17 below, might have been influenced by this passage. Another section in *Namouna*, called *Dolce far niente*, includes prominent parallel fifths played by the very unusual combination of two English horns.

**Example 13:** Lalo: *Namouna: Dolce far niente*, opening

It is perhaps equally likely that Debussy was attracted to the modal parallel writing of Chabrier's third *Valse romantique*, a work he knew well.<sup>4</sup> This passage is distinctive for its harplike quality transferred to the piano; there is a clear contrapuntal distinction between melody and bass, but these are almost overcompensated by the root-position triads in close-position texture, the inner parts moving as blocks.

**Example 14:** Chabrier: *Valse romantique* no. 3, mm. 12-18



Chabrier, in turn, was a likely influence on Erik Satie (1866-1925), whose *Sarabandes* for piano of 1887 contain successions of unresolved dominant ninth chords seemingly inspired by the opening pages of Chabrier's opera *Le roi malgré lui* of the same year. Debussy's personal friendship with Satie began with a chance meeting, probably in 1891. At roughly the same time Satie wrote his *Le fils des étoiles* music with its strange parallel chords of superposed fourths; nothing like this kind of harmony appears in Debussy's music.

**Example 15:** Satie: *Le Fils des étoiles*, *Prélude*, opening



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<sup>4</sup>See Lockspeiser, volume 1, p. 82. Chabrier composed his *Trois valse romantiques* in 1883, the same year as his better-known *España*. In November 1885, Debussy and Paul Vidal (1863-1931), the Prix de Rome laureate of 1883, played the waltzes for the seventy-four-year-old Franz Liszt. See also Roger Delage, "Debussy et Chabrier," *Cahiers Debussy* 17-18 (1993-1994), pp. 57-64.

In the light of his remarks of 1888 or 1889, cited at the beginning of this essay, we should look at Debussy's parallel harmony in his early works, beginning with his songs. The earliest of these is generally considered to be *Nuit d'étoiles*, which probably dates from 1880, rather than the long-accepted early date of 1876. The parallel harmony of *Nuit d'étoiles*, though rich in octaves, is entirely textural; the piano is full, and there is abundant melody for the right thumb in the second verse. A thinner texture is found in *Fleur des blés*, a song which may date from as early as 1877; the prominence of octaves in the texture of the beginning of the song comes from a doubling of the upper melody in the left hand, surrounding the interior arpeggiated harmony. In orchestral textures, this kind of doubling — upper and lower melody just one octave apart with slow-moving, close triadic harmony in between — was widely used and overused by different composers but seems to have been a special trademark of Puccini (1858-1924), as in "Un bel di vedremo" in *Madama Butterfly* (1904). Such harmony has the close physical feel of improvisation at the piano. Again, this is not what we would identify as typical parallel harmony, and indeed the remainder of the song shows a more classical basis.

A real parallel harmony with a patterned texture begins to be noticeable in another early song, *Beau soir*.

**Example 16:** *Beau soir* (ca. 1880), mm. 8-10



The arpeggiated root-position triads in the left hand are particularly prominent. The parallelism between mm. 1 and 2 is not comprehensive, for the B $\sharp$  remains as an absorbed suspension. But what the listener is just as likely to remark is the unorthodox progression to the minor triad on  $\flat$  VII, with added sixth. On the other hand, the progression from E major to G minor in mm. 7-8 is even more unusual, I -  $\flat$  iii with two changes of mode (requiring the ear to shift first from E major to E minor, then from G major to G minor).

A favorite Debussy song from this period is *Mandoline* (1882), set to a well-known *commedia dell'arte* text by Paul Verlaine (1844-1903) that was also effectively set by Fauré. Parallel fifths emerge from the harmonic background in the accompaniment as part of the depiction of strummed

open strings. Debussy freely employs parallel root-position triads in the Phrygian cadence at mm. 10-11; then, continuing the chromatic root succession downward, he obscures the parallelism by inverting every other chord.

**Example 17: *Mandoline*, mm. 10-14**

Nevertheless, this is startling for its time.

In *Chevaux de bois* (1885), the parallel harmony is severe, its parallel triads dominating the texture and octaves in the outer voices and doubling the vocal line. The arpeggiation of the harmony is middle register and close-positioned, a toccata-like piano texture completely different from the typical left-hand arpeggiated accompaniments in the songs of Brahms (1833-1897) or his French counterpart, Fauré; they are even more different from the more polyphonically blended accompanimental style of Hugo Wolf's (1860-1903) songs written during roughly the same decade.

**Example 18: *Chevaux de bois*, mm. 13-16**

In all of Debussy's early songs one is struck by the variety and originality of well-developed and impeccably worked-out writing for the piano. As his friend Igor Stravinsky wrote in his memoirs (1959): "What impressed me most at the time [1912] and what is still most memorable from the occasion of the sight reading of *Le sacre* was Debussy's brilliant piano playing. Recently, while listening to his *En blanc et noir* (one of which pieces is

dedicated to me), I was struck by the way in which the extraordinary quality of this pianism had directed the thought of Debussy the composer."

We saw earlier that chromatic-scale successions of parallel first-inversion triads and dissonant chords are a recurrent feature in music from Bach through the nineteenth century and beyond. It was Debussy's distinctive achievement to expand the use of parallel harmony to include *diatonic* successions of chords of all types, particularly pure triads, and particularly with classically forbidden parallel intervals—octaves and perfect fifths—between the upper and lower parts. For Debussy, these were aspects of his preferred sonority; he liked the sound of open fifths, of major ninth chords in wide spacing, of paired melodies doubled in octaves, as their abundant use in all of his music reveals time and again.

It is no exaggeration to say that in Debussy, the diatonic context is the most striking aspect of his parallel harmony, especially in that the *upper melodic line* is the most significant element structure within the diatonic structure. This is a prime characteristic of his entire musical art, and its path of development begins with his earliest works.

*Parallel harmony in Debussy's orchestra*

The beginning of Debussy's cantata *La damoiselle élue*, from 1889, is sometimes cited for the parallel perfect fifths of its opening measures:

**Example 19: *La damoiselle élue*, mm. 1-2**

Yet these fifths are really doubling fifths, like those of the Chopin C major Mazurka illustrated earlier (see Example 5), and as such are not as remarkable as parallel harmony. The upper voice of the texture outlines a melodic motive in opposition to the bass, and the unusual modal progression of these measures hinders a ready perception of the tonality which, together with the widely-spaced muted string sound, is the most striking feature of this opening.



Debussy's *Nocturnes* for orchestra, completed in 1899, show a more advanced and exploratory harmonic idiom than the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* (1894), the work which first consolidated his mature standing among Parisian musicians. In the *Nocturnes* Debussy also sought to expand his orchestrational imagination; in this he was successful, but it was clearly a struggle, as his numerous complex revisions show.

The paired parallel voices in *Nuages*, and their antecedent in Musorgsky's (1839-1881) *Byez solntsa* ("Sunless," 1874) have been discussed many times. They are distinctive as octave doublings, first in two layers, later in three. At the beginning, the parts move together, but at measure 33 the developing lines, with moving half notes above and quarters below, doubled in three octaves, form a texture that is as darkly expressive as it is transparent. Debussy's fondness for this kind of two-part texture doubled in octaves may also trace back to Musorgsky for a model:

**Example 20a:** Musorgsky: *Boris Godunov* (1874), Prologue, scene 2:  
"My soul is sad"

**Example 20b:** *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), Act I, scene 2

Throughout the first section of *Nuages*, the structural value of the open fifth B-F# is offset by the more complete but less stable sonority B-F#-G# that supports the recurrent English horn melody centered on B; but it is the B-F# that is doubled. *Nuages*, through most of its length, features parallel doubling of melodic lines rather than parallel motion of chords, which makes the brief appearance of parallel major ninths at m. 14 and parallel dominant

sevenths at m. 61, with abrupt turnover of pitch-classes, particularly sunny events.

In *Fêtes*, the extensive parallel writing serves to mark absolute-pitch harmonies for structural roles. The open fifth on F underlies an F Dorian scale melody, D# added to the harmony in m. 4; D# and C# then alternate with D# and C#, with D# and C# then absorbed into the parallel dominant-ninth harmony that follows in the strings at mm. 9-10. The scale melody of mm. 3-5 is then restated beginning on A#, as an A# Dorian melody, supported by parallel ninth chords (mm. 11-14). All of this harmony that ambiguously outlines F minor, F diminished, D diminished, and D# seventh, and supporting a Dorian-scale melody centered on either F or A#, turns out to be an adumbration of the muted-trumpets central section of the movement, with pedal point on A#-G#. At the same time, the quasi-second theme at m. 27 (15/8), entirely in parallel triads, is sufficiently highlighted to require a change of key signature to A major, a harmony foreshadowed at the melodically lowest point of m. 10.

**Example 21:** *Nocturnes: Fêtes*: harmonic reduction and schema

The A major triad has no tones in common with the F minor triad; its third, C#, first appeared as the new tone D# at m. 6, further emphasized in the big cadence at mm. 23-26, which suddenly prepares the new theme and the new key. Within the new key, C#-D# abruptly reappears as a tone center at m. 39 (*Très marqué*), and parallel harmony essentially disappears from this point, not to come again until the quasi-*da capo* at m. 174.

Parallel harmony plays a lesser role in *Sirènes* than in *Fêtes*, but is featured prominently in mm. 38-41, with the parallel major ninth chords divided between plucked strings and upper woodwinds; the melodic basis is the main motive of the piece, first appearing at m. 12 in a different harmonization. The parallel harmony is most striking when the developed passage recurs at mm. 58-71, in expanded note-values (four times as slow) and a pellucid orchestral texture, with the main motive assigned to the wordless female chorus.



**Example 22: *Nocturnes: Sirènes* mm. 58-61**

(Un peu plus lent)  
58 Women's chorus (wordless)  
*p doux et soutenu*  
Vie. div. *pp* 2 Cl. Vc. div. Cb. div.  
61 2 Horns

**After the Nocturnes**

The premiere of *Nocturnes* in 1900 coincided with Debussy's renewed focus on music for the piano, a decade after his last major piano work, *Suite bergamasque* (1890) (if one overlooks the three *Images* of 1894 that remained unpublished until 1977). The significant achievement of 1901 was the suite *Pour le piano*, a new departure in Debussy's pianistic writing that took over from where *Chevaux de bois* (1885) and *Fantoques* (1892) had left off. In the *Prélude*, one is reminded of Bach's organ preludes by the long and systematic pedal points, and by the seemingly improvised harmony freely moving above them.

The *Sarabande*, with its abundant and distinctive parallel harmony very likely influenced by Erik Satie's (1866-1925) *Sarabandes*, (1887, revised 1911) dates from 1894 in its first version, as the second of the three unpublished *Images*; Debussy revised many details when he included it in 1901 in *Pour le piano*. It is in this work that Debussy employed a new and conspicuous kind of parallel harmony — chords not in root position and with major seconds attached. Nevertheless it is not the bass but the uppermost voice, as expected, that centers the tonality.

**Example 23: *Pour le piano: Sarabande*, mm. 23-28**

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Despite the Bach-like passages of the *Prélude*, the *Toccata* is not much like a Bach toccata for organ or harpsichord, but aligns itself more closely to the very digital, moto-perpetuo-like toccatas of the French symphonic organ school; those by Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937) (especially the Finale of the Fifth Symphony for organ, ca. 1882), Eugène Gigout (1844-1925) and Léon Boëllmann (1862-97) (*Suite gothique*, 1895) were popular when they were written and remain popular today. Debussy might well have had Chabrier's brilliant *Bourrée fantasque* (1890) in mind when he wrote *Pour le piano*; but one would be hard put to name any piano piece called "toccata" and written before Debussy, unless one goes back all the way to Schumann's opus 7.

Debussy's *Danses sacrée et profane* for harp and string orchestra, composed 1903, form a remarkable study in contrasts. *Danse profane* is rhythmic, evoking Satie's *Gymnopédies* (1887), at least in the accompanimental patterns; one should note that Debussy had already orchestrated Satie's *Gymnopédie* no. 1 in D major, in the same key as *Danse profane*, and with prominent harp arpeggios not reflected in Satie's original piano piece. Ornate and virtuosic in its solo writing (though with a conspicuous anti-harp gesture, the complete absence of glissandi), *Danse profane* offers an inspired touch of color the use of muted strings at the beginning. All of this, together with the faster tempo and more fluid chromaticism, is in marked contrast to the apparent austerity of the preceding *Danse sacrée*, in which the parallel harmony appears as an emblem of serene clarity, or perhaps of sacred purity, so as to reflect the title more literally. Though no specific religious dimension to the "sacred" is indicated, there is more than a little suggestion of Debussy's feeling for the pastoral aesthetic of ancient Greece, in the similarity of the *Danse sacrée* idiom to

that of the *Chansons de Bilitis* incidental music of 1900 and the *Danseuses de Delphes* of 1909.

Probably no other work by Debussy is as striking as *Danse sacrée* in its abundance of pure triads and octave-doubled melody, which are particularly highlighted for long stretches by a modal diatonicism without accidentals. The block-triadic motion that drives the crystalline harmony of this piece is emblematic of the most natural position of the hands on the strings. The parallel triads are spaced with octaves in the outer voices at the beginning of the harp solo (m. 8), tenths (m. 21), and twelfths (m. 27), though in this last passage it is the melody in string octaves that predominates over the harp's upper voice. Between these triadic passages Debussy offers subtly contrasting parallel harmony: parallel 8-5-4 chords at m. 15 (similar to their counterpart, the *Sarabande*), and a freely-moving second-species upper melody at mm. 17 and 25.

The *Danse sacrée* shows Debussy's beloved three-part form, with the middle section beginning at m. 37 and the abbreviated return at m. 69. The contrasting middle section places the harp in a more accompanimental role, with a repeating pattern of four ascending eighth notes on a whole-tone scale segment; the melodic element is in the strings, with a shared octave doubling in the harp, beginning at m. 49. Parallel harmony is mostly absent from this section, although the parallel major triads at mm. 60 and 62, a minor third apart, form an emphatic solo gesture. The tonal area (D) of the central section continues from the first section, with a subtle modal shift from minor to major because of the whole-tone segment beginning on G $\flat$ ; at m. 49 the sense of key begins to veer away from D, soon gravitating towards C for a considerable subsection (mm. 56-62), which echoes the appearance of C at mm. 13-14. With the return of the pure triads of the opening section at m. 69, the modal D minor sounds as fresh as ever, enhanced by a fine coloristic subtlety, the unison doubling of the harp's root-position bass by the first violins, *pianissimo*, *doux et expressif*, with added cellos at m. 72.

**Example 24:** *Danse sacrée*, mm 69-72



*Danse sacrée* is simply the most highly developed example of a harpistic chordal sound that Debussy had already used orchestrally in *La damoiselle élue* and *Fêtes*, and even more prominently in the chamber-music setting of his *Chansons de Bilitis* recitation music of 1900; later, he would use it prominently in *Le martyre de Saint-Sébastien*. In all of these examples, the harp line is characteristically guided by an upper melody whose notes are the doubled roots of root-position triads in close texture.

*La mer and after*

The *Danses sacrée et profane* were followed in 1905 by *La mer*, Debussy's largest orchestral work, which has remained an outstandingly popular staple of the orchestral repertory almost from its premiere, far outshadowing any of his other works, even the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*. *La mer* represents the fullest and most complex dimensions of Debussy's orchestral imagination, and the full flowering of the impressionist orchestral texture that Debussy had begun to develop more than fifteen years earlier. At the same time, *La mer* reveals Debussy's redoubled interest in new kinds of harmony, in which he actually seems to be moving away from the exploratory directions in parallel harmony that had been so prominent in his works of the previous five years.

The harmony of *La mer* is projected through a constantly changing web of moving instrumental motives, like the shimmering surface of the calm sea or the agitated clash of waves. The shimmering is represented by accompanimental motives oscillating between a harmony note and a passing tone or neighbor note, often simultaneously with a different figuration that contains the same pitch-classes, only to move to a different register, with a different instrument and back again; solo melodies weave in and out of this accompanimental texture to achieve momentary prominence, only to disappear into the background as another comes forward. Within complex textures, these mixed patterns and motivic details form Debussy's heterophonic orchestra, minutely drawn at the close level of the individual instrument, but forming a rich synthesis at the broader level of the full orchestra itself. It is for this reason that Debussy, who disdained the classical symphony as an already worn-out principle, labeled *La mer* with the distinctive subtitle "Trois esquisses symphoniques."

In all the rich orchestral detail of *La mer* there is much melodic doubling but very little of Debussy's characteristic parallel harmony, which is indeed noticeable by its absence. The following is distinct as a melody in parallel perfect fifths with octave doublings; however, its superposition upon a single basic tonic harmony should be noted:

**Example 25:** *La mer: De l'aube à midi sur la mer*, mm. 33-34



The motivic cell is later expanded into a prominent and dramatic climax:

**Example 26:** *Ibid.*, mm. 76-77

Except for its more complex reappearance in the final measures of the piece, this is an isolated example of stark parallel homophony in *De l'aube à midi sur la mer*.

*Jeux de vagues* begins with a melody in parallel major thirds (flutes, clarinets); Debussy had been writing melodies in parallel diatonic thirds since his earliest years, and so had many other composers. This melody in *La mer* is notable not so much for its parallel thirds as for its lightning speed. More complex doubling is still to come. The strings at mm. 147-152, with violins divided in three in parallel 6-3 triads an octave apart, are played so quickly that the harmony itself is almost impossible to distinguish. (Ravel might have been thinking of this passage when he told Henri Sauguet (1901-1989) that he felt *La mer* to have been poorly orchestrated.<sup>5</sup>) With the basic pulse even faster at mm. 186-210, the harmonic rhythm is slower, and this triadic division of the string section, just before the biggest climax in the movement, is all the more effective.

<sup>5</sup>“*La mer* is poorly orchestrated. (...) If I had time, I would reorchestrate *La mer*.” (The project was not carried out.)” Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 127.

In *Dialogue du vent et de la mer* one finds once again little purely parallel harmony. There is an abundance of orchestral doubling, and even an isolated instance of octave doubling of a two-part texture as in *Nuages*, at mm. 147-153. But the following passage is a textbook instance of *antiparallel harmony*, by which we mean harmony with one or more parallel lines matched by at least one line in opposite motion:

**Example 27:** *La mer: Dialogue du vent et la mer*, mm. 17-20

It is difficult to imagine that Debussy did not arrive at this unusual harmony other than by experimenting at the piano; to discover its sonority and to test it manually.<sup>6</sup> Later in this piece (mm. 118-121*ff.*), Debussy engineers a massive climax for the full orchestra in antiparallel harmony, but this is of a familiar kind, contrary-motion chromatic lines of augmented triads that always sum to whole-tone harmony. A similar climax appears in *Gigues* (mm. 157-160). In any case, this represents nothing innovative for Debussy, who had written similarly in the last movement of his early *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra (1889).

If parallel diatonic harmony is not notably a feature of *La mer*, it occurs prominently in the *Images* for orchestra (1908), particularly in *Ibéria* and *Rondes de printemps*. In *Ibéria*, parallel 9-8-5-3 chords dominate much of the accompaniment of the first movement, *Par les rues et par les chemins*, whose chordal texture is harmonically more complex, but much less heterophonic, than that of the first movement of *La mer*. It is possible to relate the parallel chordal shapes of the accompaniment in much of this movement to the *barré* position in classical guitar playing; at other times the parallel chords in the strings remind the listener of open-string fiddle playing; still others, of *rasgueado* (scraped) strumming in flamenco guitar style. But the most impressive examples of parallel harmony in *Ibéria* are to be found within the climactic statement in the second movement (*Les parfums de la nuit*) of the main *Ibéria* melody in a rich coloration of parallel muted trumpets, flutes and piccolos:

<sup>6</sup>See Mark DeVoto, “Alban Berg and Creeping Chromaticism,” in David Gable and Robert Morgan (eds.), *Alban Berg: Historical and Analytical Perspectives*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, pp. 57-78, especially p. 73.

**Example 28:** *Ibéria: Les parfums de la nuit*, mm. 92-95

72

48 Tempo (Sans trailer) ( $\text{♩} = 80$ )

Violon I. *p doux et soutenu dans l'expression*

Violon II. *p doux et soutenu dans l'expression*

Viola

Cor A

Trompe 2<sup>e</sup> et 3<sup>e</sup> *pp léger*

Trompe 1<sup>re</sup> *pp léger*

Cor B *pp léger*

Tam-tam *Sourdine aux 2<sup>e</sup> et 3<sup>e</sup>. p doux et soutenu dans l'expression*

Harpe

48 Tempo (Sans trailer) ( $\text{♩} = 80$ )

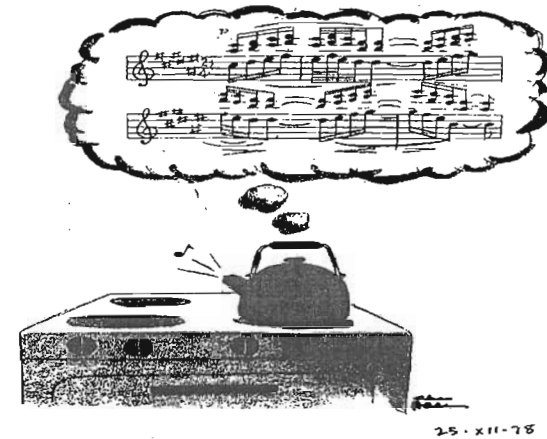
Violon I. *p doux et soutenu dans l'expression*

Violon II. *sur la touche pp très léger*

Viola *sur la touche pp très léger*

Cor A *p doux et soutenu dans l'expression*

Cor B *sur la touche pp dans cette section*



Drawing by Chas Addams; Courtesy of Tee and Charles Addams Foundation.

and the spectacular, even violent strumming *quasi guitarra* of the entire string section (violins and violas are directed to be positioned under the arm), an unprecedented device in the orchestral literature, and one rarely imitated since:

**Example 29:** *Ibéria: Le matin d'un jour de fête*, mm. 32-36

[illegible]

### *The last works*

Space does not permit an exhaustive examination of Debussy's parallel harmony in the music of his last decade. Some examples certainly represent further stages in Debussy's growth and refinement, while others are simply

characteristic manifestations. Some writers feel that Debussy's perhaps necessarily rushed efforts with *Le martyre de Saint-Sébastien* and *Khamma*, for which he was compelled to retain the creative assistance of Caplet and Koechlin,<sup>7</sup> respectively, came to more conventional and less satisfactory conclusions. Even if Caplet's hand is evident in the orchestration, exigent circumstances cannot be the correct explanation for the pristine single-layered triads of *La cour des lys*, whose lucid woodwind timbre seems perfectly appropriate for symbolizing a hieratic purity.

The *Six épigraphes antiques* of 1914 for piano four hands are an expanded version, with two entirely new pieces, of four of the shorter pieces Debussy had composed in 1900 for two flutes, two harps, and celesta, as accompaniments to recitations of Pierre Louÿs' prose poems *Chansons de Bilitis*. Part of the new material for the fourth of the *épigraphes* (*Pour la danseuse aux crotales*) involves sequential parallel appoggiatura-thirteenth chords, moving downward, chromatically, over a circle-of-fourths bass, a favorite jazz progression in later years and a characteristic example of antiparallel harmony. H.H. Stuckenschmidt made much of this progression in a celebrated article, "Debussy or Berg? The Mystery of a Chord Progression," but he did not search carefully enough. See my "Alban Berg and Creeping Chromaticism."<sup>8</sup>

**Example 30:** *Six épigraphes antiques*, no. 4, *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*, mm. 28-30

<sup>7</sup>André Caplet (1878-1925), composer and conductor; Grand Prix de Rome, 1901; orchestrated portions of *Le martyre de Saint-Sébastien* (and conducted the premiere in 1911), *Gigues* (1913), and, after Debussy's death, *La boîte à joujoux* (1919). Charles Koechlin (1867-1950), prolific composer and writer, orchestrated Fauré's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1898) and Debussy's *Khamma* (1912), and wrote a four-volume *Traité de l'orchestration* (published 1954-59).

<sup>8</sup>See my "Alban Berg and Creeping Chromaticism" (footnote 6 above). See also H. H. Stuckenschmidt, "Debussy or Berg? The Mystery of a Chord Progression," *Musical Quarterly* 51 (1965), pp. 453-459.

In the *Douze études* of 1915, Debussy focused partly on specific techniques of piano playing, and partly on specific intervals: thirds, fourths, sixths, octaves, whose execution bears on other aspects of piano technique. Mostly, Debussy writes these characteristic intervals as melodic lines or accompanimental fragments; the *Étude* in thirds shows a completely different pianism from *Les tierces alternées* in Book II of the *Préludes*, in which the thirds are literally alternated between the two hands. The rich harmony of these pieces does not involve much in the way of parallel chords.

Another work of the banner year 1915 is *En blanc et noir*, three pieces for two pianos. In all the earlier and most of the later literature for two pianos, the essential compositional approach has been dominated by the concept of duet-dialogue, shared and exchanged musical materials stated first by one and then answered by the other. In *En blanc et noir*, however, there is very little dialogue; what takes its place is a synthesis, the pianos combining as a single, huge, and complexly-textured instrument. This enabled Debussy to imagine keyboard textures in a way that he could never have accomplished with a two hands on a single instrument. The result displays some fine antiparallel harmony in triads at the very beginning:

**Example 31:** *En blanc et noir*, no. 1, opening

In the third of the three pieces, dedicated to Stravinsky, one can detect significant inspiration from that composer's *Petrushka*, a work that had delighted Debussy at its premiere in 1911. Debussy experiments with chromatic-directed parallel harmony of a kind he had not used before, especially in the following passage:

**Example 32:** *En blanc et noir*, no. 3, mm. 53-56*Summary*

Debussy's personal reinvention of harmony is probably the most easily audible aspect of his revolutionary art. The other and equally important aspect comes with deeper listening and closer study, namely the function of harmony in overall form — Debussy's use of common tones to associate remotely-related tonal quantities, and his use of absolute-pitch values to anchor structural points in non-classical sonorities. The classic example is the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* and its gravitational use of pitch-class C $\sharp$ ; ten years later this same pitch-class plays an even larger but often more scattered role in *La mer*.

Debussy's parallel harmony plays a different role in his work. It does not symbolize the deeper structure. Parallel harmony emphasizes the melody of the moment, and at the same time it highlights the individual sonority. These two orthogonal functions typically heighten the stability of a single key; rather less often, they are used connectively, to join points that are widely separated tonally. *La cathédrale engloutie* is a particularly felicitous illustration of abundant parallel harmony used to color and differentiate melodies that generate little formal development. We have seen, too, that Debussy's parallel harmony is related to parallel doubling, but is distinct

from it; yet both form aspects of instrumental timbre, and both bear far more than accidental suggestions of having originated through experimentation at the piano, even when extrapolated to the registral variables of the full orchestra.

It was the significance of parallel harmony as pure sound that attracted other composers to Debussy's art, beginning with Ravel. To be fair, both he and Debussy himself to a limited extent, also learned from Satie's smaller-scaled parallel experimentation. By the second decade of the twentieth century, Debussy's influence on a later generation of composers — Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), Manuel de Falla (1876-1946), Béla Bartók (1881-1945), Gustav Holst (1874-1934), Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920), perhaps Leoš Janáček (1845-1954), even Charles Ives (1874-1954)—was at an apogee. Parallel harmony has since become an integral part of the creative musical process; Debussy's use of it consolidated disparate sources, and his own examples remain even today the most powerful and personal models.