Arabesque and the Early Music Influence

in Debussy’s *Trois Chansons de Charles d’Orléans*

by

Carolyn Rose Rynex

A Research Paper Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Musical Arts

Approved April 2016 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

David Schildkret, Chair
Anne Kopta
Catherine Saucier

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY
May 2016
The early music revival in Paris, which came into full swing in the 1890s, had a defining impact on the composer Claude Debussy. Among the leaders of this movement were the Chanteurs de Saint Gervais under the direction of Charles Bordes and the Schola Cantorum, a school Bordes founded for the study and performance of early music in Paris. Debussy wrote admiringly of the performances of the Chanteurs and opera productions he saw at the Schola. He also spoke of the revelatory nature of performances of Renaissance masses that he heard in Italy after he won the Prix de Rome. Finally, he most likely visited Solesmes, important in the revival of plainchant. Hitherto unknown documents raise questions about the date of that visit, which most likely took place in 1892 or 1893.

A powerful manifestation of the influence of early music on Debussy’s compositional style is a melodic gesture that he referred to as “arabesque.” Debussy made many comments about the “divine arabesque,” which he related to the “primitives,” Palestrina, Victoria, and di Lasso. Further, Debussy connected those composers’ use of the arabesque to plainchant: “They found the basis of [the arabesque] in Gregorian chant, whose delicate tracery they supported with twining counterpoints.”

Debussy’s writings on early music provide a deeper context for understanding how plainchant, as well as music from the Renaissance, contributed to his compositional style, specifically in his use of modes and his notion of the arabesque. These influences are especially apparent in his only a cappella choral work, Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans.
Until now, analysis of the *Trois chansons* has not sufficiently considered the importance of either plainchant or the arabesque and their influence on the style and character of this work. Viewing Debussy’s musical aesthetic through the lens of plainchant and the arabesque brings his music to life in a new and exciting way, resulting in a richer understanding and more informed performance practice, especially in the *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans.*
To my parents, for always believing in me and encouraging me, and to my loving husband Michael, whose endless patience, love, and support helped bring this dream to reality.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the many people who guided and helped me in the process of writing this paper. First and foremost, thanks to my advisor, David Schildkret, who patiently and tirelessly guided me through the entire process, with great knowledge and expertise. Also, many thanks goes to my other committee members, Anne Kopta and Catherine Saucier, for their valuable help and guidance. In addition, thanks to the many other ASU faculty members whose wisdom, expertise, and encouragement guided along the way, including Greg Gentry, William Reber, Kay Norton, Ellon Carpenter, and Laura Emmery. Special thanks to Fr. Patrick Hala of Solesmes Abbey for generously allowing me access to cards and letters from Henry Briggs and William Gibbs, and for the generous offering of his time and knowledge in discussions on the subject of Debussy's visit to Solesmes. And finally, thanks to Erik Goldstrom, canon musician of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, for his valued support, counsel and encouragement during this entire process.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF TABLES</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF EXAMPLES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background: Primary Sources</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyses of Debussy’s Style Characteristics</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Criticism and Analysis</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THE EARLY MUSIC REVIVAL IN FRANCE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Bordes and the Chanteurs de St. Gervais</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Schola Cantorum of Paris</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviving Plainchant: The Benedictines at Solesmes</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 CLAUDE DEBUSSY AND EARLY MUSIC</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Prix de Rome</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debussy Encounters Charles Bordes and the Chanteurs de St. Gervais</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debussy and Solesmes</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debussy and the Schola Cantorum</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 DEBUSSY’S ARABESQUE</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td>PAGE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>TROIS CHANSONS DE CHARLES D’ORLÉANS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>PLAINCHANT, ARABESQUE AND MODES IN TROIS CHANSONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Types of Arabesque: Flowing and Ornamental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arabesque and Texture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arabesque and Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arabesque and Text Painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arabesque and Plainchant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Debussy’s Use of Modes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>PERFORMANCE IMPLICATIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Conceptual Integration Model of Arabesque, Modified</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mode Use in <em>Dieu qu’il la fait bon regarder</em></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mode Use in <em>Quant j’ai ouï le tabourin</em></td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Mode Use in <em>Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain</em></td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF EXAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Flowing Arabesque in <em>Arabesque I</em>.</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ornamental Arabesque in <em>Arabesque II</em>.</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Arabesque and Mode Use in <em>Pelléas et Mélisande</em>.</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ornamental Arabesque</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ornamental Arabesque in Alto, Bass</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Flowing Arabesque in Alto Solo Refrain</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Flowing Arabesques</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Homo-Rhythmic Parallel Arabesque</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Homo-Rhythmic Parallel Arabesque</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Arabesques in Contrary Motion</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Arabesques in Contrary Motion</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Polyphonic Arabesques in Paired Duets</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Polyphonic Arabesque</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Arabesque Texture Increasing Rhythmic Activity Before Refrain</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Using Texture for Contrast</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Onomatopoeia Evoking Tambourine</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Onomatopoeia Evoking Ocean Waves</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Arabesques Highlighting Important Words Using Ornament and Contour</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Highlighting Key Words with Arabesque Contour</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Creating Feminine Affect with Ornamental Arabesque</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Creating Excitement Affect with Arabesque</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Creating Non Chaloir Affect with Flowing Parallel Arabesques</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Contrasting Lively Arabesque</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Winter Angular Arabesque</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Contrasting Summer Arabesque</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Plainchant Qualities in Arabesque</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Plainchant Qualities in Arabesque</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Plainchant Qualities in Combined Arabesque Lines</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Grouping Dissonance</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Displacement Dissonance</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Tonal Ambiguity</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Tonal Ambivalence</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Mode Combining to Increase Tension</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The early music revival in Paris, which began gradually in the 19th century and came into full swing in the 1890s, had a defining impact on the composer Claude Debussy. Among the leaders of this movement was Charles Bordes (1863-1909), who established the Chanteurs de Saint Gervais and subsequently the Schola Cantorum of Paris. The concerts Bordes presented were a major influence on Debussy, and his references to Bordes and the Chanteurs de St. Gervais in his letters and published articles were full of emotion, expressing the deepest respect and the highest praise.¹ When he turned his attention to the Schola, Debussy was again full of reverent awe; beginning in 1903, in a review in *Gil Blas*, he heaped accolades onto the Schola for their revival performances of Rameau’s operas.²

In addition to Bordes, Debussy admired Vincent d’Indy (1851-1931) of the Schola. Though the two were considered to be at war by the opposing camps that had sprung up around them, the “Debussysts” and the “d’Indyists,”³ Debussy and d’Indy themselves remained above the fray and maintained a lifelong mutual respect, as evidenced in their writing.⁴ In addition, from about 1904 Debussy enjoyed the supporting

---


² Ibid.

³ Leon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works* (New York: Dover, 1973), 148-150. In his chapter “Debussyism”, Vallas discusses the “schism among French musicians which lasted several years” caused by the success of *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

⁴ Leon Vallas, *The Theories of Claude Debussy*, 174. Debussy mentions D’Indy favorably in his review of *Castor et Pollux* at the Schola: “the desire of perfection demanded of them by Vincent d’Indy, with his engaging smile. His very gesture as he beats time seems an embrace enfolding these youthful minds.” D’Indy gave an enthusiastic review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, comparing Debussy’s art to that of Monteverdi, three centuries earlier in “A propos de Pelléas et Mélisande”, *L’Occident*, June 1902.
efforts and friendship of Louis Laloy, another Rameau enthusiast (his book *Rameau* was written in 1908) and Schola Cantorum supporter who studied counterpoint and composition there while preparing his doctorate. A writer, musicologist and music critic in the Paris musical scene during the early 20th century, he was Debussy’s first biographer. His “stamp of approval” from numerous glowing reviews, including his reviews of *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans*,5 gave Debussy an implicit connection with early music and thus created an impression of a line of descent from Rameau and the composers of the Renaissance. His comments in 1932 for the Debussy Monument after Debussy’s death made his feelings explicit: “The composers of our Renaissance… Rameau, Couperin…these are his direct ancestors.”6

These aspects of Debussy’s connection with early music have been well documented.7 Less discussed in this regard, however, is Debussy’s experience with plainchant. Of greatest significance, perhaps, is a largely overlooked trip that he made to Solesmes sometime during the 1890s, where he took notes on the chants sung during the services and partook in discussions on modality with Harry Bembridge Briggs, founder of the Plainchant and Medieval Music Society of London, while his young student Becket Gibbs (add dates) listened in.8 This visit, reported in two letters from Gibbs, was presented as part of Julia d’Almendra’s research in her dissertation connecting Debussy’s


6 Ibid., 115,121.

7 See for example, Leon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*; also Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy, His Life and Mind* (London: Cassel, 1965).

music to what she calls “Gregorian” modes, and brings much of Debussy’s writing about early music into focus.\(^9\) There are discrepancies about his actual dates of visit that still need to be addressed, however, and d’Almendra’s investigation of Debussy’s musical style in the context of his connection to Solesmes is limited to his use of modes. Debussy’s discussions involving his ideas about various aspects of music style become clearer within the context of his visit to Solesmes, creating more space for a richer understanding and analysis of Debussy’s music in greater breadth, including his notion of the arabesque, and aspects of plainchant style.

Central to Debussy’s conception of early music and its influence on his own compositional style is a type of melodic gesture that he referred to as “arabesque.” Debussy made many comments about the “divine arabesque,” which he related to the “primitives,” Palestrina, Victoria, and di Lasso. Further, Debussy connected those composers’ use of the arabesque to plainchant: “They found the basis of [the arabesque] in Gregorian chant, whose delicate tracery they supported with twining counterpoints.”\(^10\) For Debussy, the arabesque was a natural ornament, based on the curving lines found in nature.\(^11\) It is a term he borrowed from the visual arts, where it refers to a style of decoration consisting of intertwining and abstract curvilinear motifs usually associated with Moorish art. An often complex design, it contains sinuous, spiraling, intertwining

\(^9\) Ibid., 183-186.


\(^11\) Ibid.
lines or linear motifs. Its use was revived in the late 19th-century Art Nouveau movement.\textsuperscript{12}

In this paper, I propose to explore the relationship between Debussy’s knowledge and experience of plainchant (specifically, the plainchant of the Roman Catholic Church performed for offices at St. Gervais and Solesmes), his encounters with other early music, and his development of the concept of the “arabesque.”\textsuperscript{13} I will focus on his only \textit{a cappella} choral work, \textit{Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans}, a highly regarded gem in the canon of 20\textsuperscript{th}-century choral music. Building on Debussy’s early music experiences and incorporating eyewitness accounts of his trip to Solesmes, I will make the case for the influence of plainchant on this work. Concurrently, I will discuss hitherto unknown documents that raise important questions about d’Almendra’s account of Debussy’s visit to Solesmes. In addition, I will explore Debussy’s other early music experiences and how they contributed to his evolving aesthetic. I will examine some of Debussy’s many writings on the subject of early music, which will provide a deeper context for understanding how plainchant, as well as music from the Renaissance, contributed to his compositional style, specifically in his use of modes and his notion of the arabesque. In the analysis of the \textit{Trois chansons}, I will focus on Debussy’s use of modes, the arabesque, Debussy’s approach to rhythm and meter, and his treatment of text, all of which I believe derive at least in part from his understanding of plainchant. Until now,

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} The term “Gregorian chant” as defined and understood in Debussy’s time will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Two.
\end{flushright}
analysis of the *Trois chansons* has not sufficiently considered the importance of either plainchant or the arabesque and their influence on the style and character of this work. Viewing Debussy’s musical aesthetic through the lens of plainchant, which underwent a revival in its Roman practice during his lifetime, brings Debussy’s music to life in a new and exciting way, resulting in a richer understanding and more informed performance practice, especially as it relates to *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans*. It can also broaden our understanding of Debussy’s compositional style as it relates to the larger context of his musical output, both in vocal and instrumental compositions. I hope that this study will add to the picture of Debussy as a composer who was sincerely and soberly convinced of the power and importance of understanding the past, of acknowledging his musical roots, and striving to live up to the ideals of those who came before him, finding in plainchant the basis of the arabesque, and from that, “the ornament, the root of all kinds of art.”14

---

CHAPTER ONE

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature on Debussy is extensive, including his own writings, considerable discussion of his personal history (beginning in his lifetime), and substantial and changing views of the analysis of his style and technique as a composer. Debussy was a prolific writer of both letters and reviews, and both his life and music have been the subject of much recent study, examination, and reevaluation. Some scholarship deals with the concept of Debussy’s arabesque and his use of modality, and views of this have changed over time. Of particular relevance to this study is current scholarship concerning Trois chansons that presents either an historical perspective or score analysis.

Background: Primary Sources and Debussy Biographies Addressing Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans

Claude Debussy was a prolific writer, both of critical reviews and essays on music, often employing the nom de plume “Monsieur Croche.”¹ He also wrote many revealing letters to his friends and colleagues. All of these primary sources are a valuable resource in understanding Debussy’s early music aesthetic. Debussy’s reviews and essays are found in the volume On Music, The Critical Writings of the Great French Composer, Claude Debussy (also titled Monsieur Croche et autres écrits), edited by François Lesure, and translated by Richard Langham Smith (1977). This volume includes Debussy’s essays (some signed “Monsieur Croche” and others with his own name) in the

publications *Gil Blas, La Revue Blanche, Musica,* and *L’intransigeant,* to name a few, as well as various other writings including the composer’s program notes. His translated letters are found in the collection entitled *Debussy Letters,* selected and edited by Francois Lesure and Roger Nichols, with translation by Roger Nichols (1987). It includes letters Debussy wrote from 1884 to 1918, comprising a good representation of his life experiences, associations, feelings, and opinions on various matters, including early music.

Beginning with Laloy’s in 1909, there have been numerous Debussy biographies. Most relevant to this study are those that deal with *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans.* A few biographies address not only the historical reception of *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans* but include the writers’ analyses and perspectives on this work. The most compelling in their scholarly approach are those by Léon Vallas (1933), Edward Lockspeiser (1963), and David Code (2010).

The French musicologist Léon Vallas was among the first and most comprehensive Debussy scholars to chronicle and analyze Debussy’s life and compositions. In his reverential biography, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works* (1933), he provides an assessment of *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans* that points to a Renaissance influence but does not identify any modal qualities, calling them “modern in harmony.” He acknowledges their use of counterpoint, describing them as written in an “old-world contrapuntal style” that was “obviously inspired by the Renaissance masters.”² In his assessment of the *Trois chansons* as “Renaissance” works, he

---

acknowledges an early music influence in their contrapuntal texture, but does not make a connection to plainchant. He does, however, point to a plainchant approach in some of Debussy’s other music, mostly in terms of rhythm. He says of Pélles et Mélisande, “The rhythmic element was equally original [as the harmony]. Contrary to the monotonous regularity of most music, it involved the melodic motifs in continual changes of accent, thus retrieving some of the infinite suppleness and elasticity of ancient lyrical poetry and of Gregorian chant whose rich resources had been contemptuously ignored for centuries past.” In this statement we see the possibility of connecting some of Debussy’s other music, namely his Trois chansons, to elements of plainchant.

Thirty years later, in his more broadly conceived and revealing biography, Debussy (1963), the noted Debussy scholar Edward Lockspeiser says that Debussy wrote the Trois chansons more as “somewhat scholastic settings rather in the manner of a Renaissance pastiche than for an original and compelling purpose.” He acknowledges modal counterpoint in the work mixed with “characteristic Debussyan harmonies” and points to Renaissance influences, suggesting that the work evokes Costely or Janequin with its “light dancing quality” and onomatopoeia in Quant j’ai ouy le tabourin, while the other two songs “revive something of a more severe and chaste art of Orlandus Lassus.” His reference to a “Renaissance pastiche” does not allow for a unified view of the style or method of composition of the Trois chansons. Lockspeiser highlights the use of modal

---


5 Ibid.
counterpoint and twining arabesques elsewhere in Debussy’s music, especially in the set for solo voice, *Deux rondels de Charles d’Orleans*.

In his recent critical biography on Debussy, David Code notes that the *Trois chansons* were not universally well received following their first performance. In a review in *l’Ouevreuse* one critic scolded: “After such a long silence, [the public] had the right to hope for more significant discoveries from such a musician.” Code advocates for a “more generous” response to the work. He sees *Trois chansons* as a “broadening” of Debussy’s musical aesthetic, and argues that Debussy had allowed himself to absorb and transform musical traditions as he did in other works such as *La Mer*, in “humbler exercises of musical craft” that could be “accessible to most community and church choirs.” In addition, Code likens *Trois chansons* to another work released in 1908, *Children’s Corner*, which in his opinion follows a similar path toward “humility and simplicity.” Yet Code acknowledges that though the effect is one of simplicity in *Children’s Corner*, the execution is far from that: “The simplicity is far from infantile in a technical sense.” According to Code, these pieces capture a childlike simplicity, with elegance and efficiency in a “refined sensibility by simple means;” to quote Debussy’s praise of Mussorgsky’s *Nursery* in 1901. Perhaps this is the way to understand *Trois chansons*.

---

7 Ibid., 130.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 131.
10 Ibid., 132.
11 Ibid., 131.
chansons. Yet Code’s view of Trois chansons does not entirely take into account the complexity and difficulty contained within the elegance of this work. Though there might be an exceptional community choir that could perform Trois chansons, it would be a formidable challenge for most; church choirs would not be likely to program this work at all, due to its secular nature.

**Analyses of Debussy’s Style Characteristics—The Arabesque and Modality**

The arabesque was a significant component in Debussy's writing and compositional style. While many writers have examined the arabesque from various viewpoints, few have fully understood or explained its roots in plainchant. Several authors identify the use of modes in many of Debussy’s works and some discuss a plainchant rhythmic approach in his music. In addition, a more specific description of the arabesque is offered by many authors. Beyond more general discussions of the role of the arabesque in Debussy’s musical style, several authors have discussed particular works from this point of view, leading to a more definitive understanding of the arabesque.

In addition to the letters concerning Debussy’s visit to Solesmes that she cites in her dissertation, Julia d’Almendra explores the influence of “Gregorian modes” in French music leading up to and including Debussy (discussing Berlioz’s Symphonie fantastique, for instance, among other less well-known examples). She then analyzes the use of modes in many of Debussy’s works. The dissertation includes a substantial analysis of Debussy’s opera, Pélles et Mélisande, and some of his other vocal works. She presents

---

the foundational concepts of modes very comprehensively and outlines their use, with scale diagrams. Her work in discovering the letters concerning Debussy’s visit to Solesmes is often referenced in discussing Debussy’s use of modes in his music. She does not, however, address Debussy’s idea of the arabesque, and she does not discuss *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans*.

Arthur Wenk also examines Debussy’s use of modality in Debussy’s solo songs in *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (1976) and briefly mentions the arabesque.\(^1\) He talks about Debussy’s use of the Lydian mode in the *Chansons de Bilitis* and various other modes in the *Six épigraphes antiques*. He asserts that Debussy’s use of modes “demonstrates the extent to which considerations of melody dominate his musical thought” and contribute to the “breakdown of tonality” in his music.\(^2\) As Debussy follows the line of the “adorable arabesque” in the second *Fêtes galantes* and the *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, there is further “tonal breakdown.”\(^3\) Wenk’s analysis identifies “Gregorian” modes, as well as whole-tone and pentatonic scales, and “chromatic elements” in Debussy’s art songs.\(^4\)

The French musicologist Françoise Gervais highlights the arabesque and its contrapuntal application in Debussy’s music in her article “La notion d’arabesque chez Debussy.”\(^5\) She identifies Debussy’s arabesque as “the lines formed by curves that are

---


14 Ibid., 194.

15 Ibid., 195.

16 Ibid., 196.

followed by ones in contrary motion, often embellished with triplet figures,” with the definitive example of the arabesque in Debussy’s *Deux arabesques*. Gervais points out that while such earlier composers as J.S. Bach used the transposition of melodic motives into other keys to create sequences or for harmonic purposes, Debussy employs this technique primarily for its ornamental effect. Jann Passler, in “Timbre, Voice Leading, Arabesque,” also takes a contrapuntal view, relating the arabesque to counterpoint, text and voice leading. She emphasizes Debussy’s understanding of beauty as “lines in relationship to each other in constant metamorphosis.”18

In his dissertation, “Contrapuntal Lines and Rhythmic Organization in Selected Debussy Piano Etudes,” Asegul Durakoglu also talks about a contrapuntal approach and directly links Debussy’s piano music to the music of the Renaissance.19 Durakoglu connects Debussy’s use of rhythm to Renaissance polyphony, asserting that the repetition of rhythmic patterns in different lines reflects the isorhythmic techniques of Renaissance polyphony. Durakoglu argues that Debussy uses rhythmic devices with freedom and flexibility, and the rhythmic patterning is reminiscent of Renaissance polyphony in his use of rhythmic devices such as retrograde, diminution, and augmentation of rhythmic fragments to create form. He also addresses Debussy’s tendency to tie over bar lines to create a sense of measureless time, liberating rhythm from “the tyranny of bar lines”.20


Durakoglu continues his discussion of the piano etudes by exploring Debussy’s use of “Gregorian sounding” melodies and ancient modes, including the Aeolian and Dorian modes. He highlights Debussy’s connection to chant, asserting that the opening melodies in the Third and Fourth Etudes evoke plainchant in their length, modal color, and unmetered quality. Though he does not explicitly address the arabesque, Durakoglu’s work emphasizes the connection of Debussy’s music to Renaissance polyphony and opens the door to discussing an influence of plainchant in Debussy’s music.

In “Debussy’s Tonality,” Boyd Pomeroy discusses decorative aspects of the arabesque in Debussy’s music. He points out that the “ornamental conception finds its most characteristic form in harmonic inactivity, without the dimension of chord progression to distract from the ‘curve’ and ‘contour’ of the melodic arabesque.” Pomeroy’s definition of Debussy’s arabesque points to self-contained phrases or themes that reflect harmonic stasis. In his view, the arabesque motifs fulfill a structural function in Debussy’s music. The mostly two measure, arabesque-like units, often contrasting in motive, rhythm, or texture among other things, are combined to generate form. The harmonic progress moves more slowly, almost imperceptibly, under the arabesque activity on the surface. Connecting the arabesque to Art Nouveau, he talks about its impulse to “fill registral space.” This he does with a combination of stepwise and undulating disjoint motion, mostly limited to intervals smaller than a fifth. He connects

---


this “economy of line” with Debussy’s invocation of the music of Palestrina and observes
a “vocal” quality of writing in Debussy’s instrumental works. In addition, he points to
Debussy’s use of modes in arabesques. His analysis of Prelude à l’après-midi d’un faune
and other works is helpful in identifying the arabesque as a structural element, allowing
us to identify its presence more readily and to appreciate its importance to the overall
design.

Fleshing out the concept of Debussy’s arabesque beyond musical parameters,
Caroline Potter’s article “Debussy and Nature” connects his arabesque with forms found
in the natural world, emphasizing its dynamic character. Like Gervais, she associates
the arabesque with “Moorish” depictions of the arabesque shape, which are she says are
based on “natural forms.” She cites the writer Charles Henry, and subsequently José
Argüelles’s description of the arabesque as a “dynamically creative, or procreative,
energy principle” and defines the arabesque as a “decorative motive that is ‘often
intricate, repetitive, self-reproductive, and ideally, self-mutative,’” in other words, a
living, vital entity. She connects Debussy’s use of the arabesque in the opening of Faune
to his comments about an Egyptian shepherd playing on his flute. “He is part of the
landscape around him” and knows “the music of nature herself.” Her perspective gives
room to explore the forms the arabesque might take and how the arabesque can evoke
textual images.


(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 137-151.

25 Ibid., 145.
Gurminder Kaur Bhogal disputes Gervais’s identification of the arabesque as mere decoration, “an attractive but impotent gesture,” in her article “Debussy’s Arabesque and Ravel’s *Daphnis et Chloé*.”

By linking the arabesque to its representations in Art Nouveau and Debussy’s “intrinsic irregular rhythm and dissonant meter,” she connects the arabesque through its various distinct forms to its “ancient” past and elevates its role to a more significant structural and symbolic presence. She claims that Debussy had specific properties in mind, such as melody, rhythm, and meter, that connected the visual arabesque to the musical arabesque. Further, she links some properties of plainchant with Debussy’s arabesque, including melodic contour, narrowness of range, and rhythmic fluidity.

Along with Potter and Bhogal, Linda Cummins finds other non-musical associations in the arabesque in *Debussy and the Fragment*. She compares Debussy’s use of the arabesque with various poetic gestures that she groups under the label “literary arabesques”: an “aesthetic of the unfinished” that dates back to the Renaissance poet Petrarch and his “scattered verses,” the *Rurum vulgaria fragmenta*. She ties the fragment to the *Chansons de Bilitis*, whose texts by Louÿs are written in a fragmented style in order to create the appearance of a rediscovered, ancient manuscript. Debussy’s various musical devices coincide with the literary ones, such as open beginnings and endings. She explores Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, connecting his musical realization and his use of arabesques in the work to Mallarmé’s use of sentence

---


fragments and space, as well as other literary devices that she labels “literary
arabesques.” Her work demonstrates how literary ideas can be translated into musical
ideas, specifically through the arabesque. The connection of the arabesque to Petrarch
and ancient texts alludes to the Renaissance, with visual associations of the arabesques
found in “illuminations in ancient missals” of the Roman church during that period.

Most of these authors also discuss Debussy’s use of ancient modes. This is
helpful in linking Debussy’s ideas about the genesis of the arabesque to the “primitives”
(Palestrina, Lassus and Victoria) and to finding the “basis of [the arabesque] in Gregorian
chant.” In addition, Durakoglu and Bhogal connect specific plainchant qualities to
Debussy’s music, including modal color, length, range, contour and unmetered quality, in
addition to making the case for connections to aspects of Renaissance polyphony.

In addressing the concept of Debussy’s use of the arabesque in his music, the
authors understand this concept in a variety of ways. Gervais and Pomeroy discuss the
music qualities of the arabesque. Cummins describes the arabesque’s links with literature.
Potter’s interest is in the arabesque’s associations with nature and natural forms. The
work of Bhogal is helpful in the translation of visual arabesque to musical arabesque, and
her assertions concerning the structure and symbolic power of the arabesque are useful in
understanding the Renaissance style aspects of Debussy’s Trois chansons. Bhogal also
makes the case for a specific connection of plainchant to Debussy’s arabesque.

The two styles of arabesque found in Debussy’s works, as pointed out by Gervais
and Potter, are echoed by Bhogal in her description of “Supple Arabesque” and
“Ornament Arabesque,” but she goes further in defining these two styles. Gervais’s
description of the arabesque as including solo melodies, melodies independent of
accompaniment, triplets of varying duration, and small intervals, is helpful in identifying them, but Bhogal adds the additional aspect of metric instability.

Modern Criticism and Analyses of *Trois chansons de Charles d'Orleans*

Three authors have specifically addressed *Trois chansons de Charles d'Orleans* in the past thirty-five years. Maurice Alfred and Joshua Jacobson have taken on a fairly in-depth score analysis of *Trois chansons*, while Jane Fulcher’s historical and political analysis discusses the work in light of Debussy’s perceived or desired connections to early French music.

Everett Maurice Alfred presents the most in-depth analysis of *Trois chansons*. In his 1980 dissertation, “A Study of Selected Choral Works of Claude Debussy,” he outlines the use of modes in many of Debussy’s choral works, including *Trois chansons de Charles d'Orleans*.  

His analysis of the work is by far the most in-depth from this perspective, and he discusses ancient modes in all three of the songs. In addition, he discusses text setting and harmonic implications from a Shenkerian point of view. He does not, however, connect Debussy’s use of modes in the *Trois chansons* to arabesque and other musical features.

Joshua Jacobson’s *Choral Journal* article “Debussy’s *Trois Chansons*, An Analysis,” written eight years later, is the most recent published analysis of Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Charles d'Orleans*.  

Jacobson’s analysis focuses on texture, text

---

28 E. Maurice Alfred, “A study of selected choral works of Claude Debussy” (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1980).

setting, harmonic language, and form. He mentions the use of the Dorian and Aeolian
modes but stops short of a full modal analysis. He discusses texture in terms of equality
of voices and the horizontal layering and discusses text setting in detail, pointing out that
it is reminiscent of Renaissance text painting. In a section on harmonic language, he
describes Debussy’s “characteristic sound” in terms of dominant 7\textsuperscript{th} and half-diminished
7\textsuperscript{th} chords, polychords and augmented 6\textsuperscript{th} chords. He examines the relationships between
the songs (which he calls “movements”) in terms of tempo, key, pitch, theme
relationships, and the forms, which he identifies as rondo and ternary. In noting each
piece’s climax or highpoint, he brings up the “golden mean,” a concept of proportionality
he connects to ancient Minoan and Greek cultures, Gothic architecture, and nature.
Despite the thoroughness of Jacobson’s examination, he does not deal at all with the
arabesque or the influence of plainchant.

Jane Fulcher briefly discusses Debussy’s Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans in
her book French Cultural Politics and Music in a section entitled “Debussy’s
Nationalism.”\textsuperscript{30} She states that the songs are “ostensibly inspired” by the Renaissance,
but in a “provocatively inconsistent style,” and that the harmonic language is “clearly not
of the Renaissance period,” although the contrapuntal texture “most unashamedly” is.\textsuperscript{31}
She asserts that Debussy claimed early music associations, such as with Rameau, for his
own inspiration but also for political reasons, and that he did not fully embrace the rules
of composition of the earlier styles, such as those taught at Charles Bordes’s Schola

\textsuperscript{30} Jane Fulcher, French Cultural Politics and Music (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999), 170-193.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 187.
Cantorum. According to Fulcher, “The past for Debussy was a source not of nostalgia but of inspiration: his goal was to grasp the mood and character of its music within his personal style. Hence orthodoxy or respect for the ‘rules’ derived from the ‘masters’ as taught at the Schola, its concern for rediscovering great ‘laws,’ was never tenable for Debussy.”32 In her assessment, Debussy’s harmonic language in this work is “modern” and not in line with any school or method.

**Conclusion**

The influence of early music—especially music of the Renaissance—has been examined in Debussy’s music and in his choral work *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans*. Though the use of modes has been noted in many of Debussy’s works, including *Trois chansons*, the connection of plainchant to Debussy’s ideal of the melodic arabesque, especially in *Trois chansons*, has not been sufficiently discussed. In addition, other components of arabesque style in *Trois chansons* relating to text setting, rhythm and texture, have not been sufficiently investigated. The fertile ground of all of these aspects of Debussy's style could be found in the "primitives" of the Renaissance, and the root of that in plainchant, both of which were being revived in Debussy's lifetime in the Early Music Revival.

---

CHAPTER TWO

THE EARLY MUSIC REVIVAL IN FRANCE:
CHARLES BORDES, THE CHANTEURS DE SAINT GERVAIS,
AND THE SCHOLA CANTORUM OF PARIS

The Early Music Revival in France had an impact on many composers of the late nineteenth century, including Claude Debussy. The prevailing ideas and sentiments of the Romantic period, which became defined in part by huge orchestras and unrestrained emotionalism, were reigned in later in the century, partly through the influence of renewed attention to early music, both in performance and in scholarship. Whether greater interest in early music reigned in the perceived excesses of the Romantics, or the desire to find an alternative to those practices led to a greater interest in early music is not a settled question, and that is a subject for a further study. In any case, in France as well as in other countries, composers were looking for a way to regain their own national voice, and the past became a source of ideas and inspiration. Not only did French musicians look to France’s own Baroque and Renaissance composers, but they also embraced composers of other nationalities long considered by French musicologists to belong to the French school, such as Bach, Palestrina, and Lassus. Because they existed before Austro-German hegemony of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the dominance of Italian opera (with composers like Rossini, Donizetti and Verdi), these early composers transcended traditional national boundaries, and embracing them was not considered anti-national. In addition, Bach, Palestrina, and Lassus reflected an ethos that was sympathetic to a desire to change the music of the modern church, related to a quasi-political movement that was occurring in late nineteenth-century France concerned with religious life and morality.
Three institutions in late nineteenth-century France were profoundly influential in the early music movement and had a particular impact on Debussy: Charles Bordes and his Chanteurs de Saint Gervais, the Schola Cantorum of Paris, and the Abbey of Solesmes. These institutions created excitement through their revivals of earlier music, including music of French origin: Janequin by the Chanteurs, Rameau at the Schola, and a version of plainchant researched and practiced by the monks at Solesmes, who declared that it had a uniquely French identity with the Frankish-Roman hybridization in the eighth century.¹ In this way, the early music movement including the Chanteurs of Saint Gervais, the Schola Cantorum, and Solesmes helped to solve not only the problem of a Romantic musical style that was perceived to be out of touch with French ideals, but also addressed concerns about national identity and was part of a nationalistic music movement in France.² Claude Debussy was greatly influenced by these institutions and became a champion of what he perceived to be the unique and superior quality of French music, which he felt needed to be rediscovered.

In 1874, the composer and future Paris Opéra director Auguste-Emmanuel Vaucorbeil (1821-1884) lamented the lack of attention given to early French dramatic music:

Today the classics of dramatic music are nothing more than a memory, and we are never given an opportunity to hear them . . . the great composers of yesteryear are banished from the lyric stage . . . It is genuinely sad that the present generation is

condemned to ignorance of a single work by Lully . . . Rameau, or Destouches, these fathers of the French lyric stage.³

The repertoire of stage works at the time was primarily that of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers, including many of non-French origin. By naming these early French composers and identifying them as “fathers of the French lyric stage,” Vaucorbeil supported a national French identity and stressed the importance of looking to one’s own past to find that identity. In his view, the Paris Opéra and other institutions were contributing to the decline of France’s culture and the audience’s ignorance of their cultural legacy by neglecting the works of the past.

A similar situation existed in French music publishing. In 1880, the publisher Théodore Michaelis (1831-1887) noted a disparity between the way France and other European countries treated their musical heritage:

Germany has splendid editions for all her classic musicians; England has the magnificent volumes of the musical antiquarian society, Spain her superb collection the _Lyria sacro hispana_, . . . In France, alas, we still know only the names of our Great Old Masters.⁴

Michaelis’ statement was actually a sales tactic meant to promote his new publications of early music, but his sentiments speak tellingly of the general lack of availability of editions that would bring early French music to the public’s attention. The French performance scene was dominated by Austro-German music and musical style. There was little appetite for old French music, and there was little understanding for what constituted a unique French style. According to this argument, a musical culture


⁴ Ibid., 128.
dominated by Beethoven and Wagner had relatively little room for contemporary French music, to say nothing of older French music. Interest in and appreciation for any French music, old or new, was on the wane.

Among the most widely attended musical events in nineteenth-century Paris were the Concerts Populaire, founded by the conductor Jules Pasdeloup (1819-1887). Although initially performing symphonies of Gounod, Saint-Saëns, and other contemporary French composers, Pasdeloup became successful by championing German works. Pasdeloup was approached in 1859 by the German residents of Paris to produce a huge concert in the Champs-Élysées to celebrate the centennial of Schiller’s birth. The Orchestre Pasdeloup continued with large-scale concerts held in the Cirque Napoléon (later named the Cirque d’Hiver), which could seat an audience of over five thousand persons. Its inaugural concert program in 1861 consisted of works by von Weber, Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and Haydn. Pasdeloup also promoted Wagner’s works: he mounted the premiere of Rienzi in 1869 and eventually presented all of Wagner’s operas. Wagner, at first despised by the French, became the object of French obsession.

Many French people perceived the Germans to be more innately musical and artistic than themselves. In 1867, the noted French critic and historian Hippolyte Taine (1828-1893), observing the audience’s behavior at a Gluck opera, decried what he saw as the “debased” cultural standards of the Parisian public: “Natural affinity, an innate understanding of beauty, the capacity for imagination are all in Italy and Germany. In Berlin one listens to music in silence, as attentively as in church. Here one scoffs.”

Later, he compared the extent of a Parisian’s cultural appreciation to her brief enjoyment of a bowl of ice cream: “She doesn’t long for sentiment, for the depth of a misunderstood soul. All German importations slide over her without penetrating. She is perfectly French.”

French composers trying to write serious music were met with indifference by the French public. The composer and critic Ernest Reyer (1823-1909) pointed out in 1864 that although there were many French composers trying to make a career of composing symphonic music, their compositions garnered little attention:

Has not the public, the supreme judge, and the critic, no less infallible, each said more than once to so many composers that it is useless to name them: You are not born for the theater, you don't have a dramatic streak; you are a symphonist, make symphonies. Well, we ask nothing more than to make symphonies, but on the condition that there is in it a career at the end of which there would be a little glory and profit, on the condition that our symphonies, still-born works, are not condemned in advance, whatever their merit, to indifference and oblivion. Assuredly we have neither a Haydn, nor a Mozart, nor a Beethoven, but we have composers of uncontestable talent who have written some remarkable symphonies. Well ask them how many times their symphonies have been performed in the last dozen years.

German musical hegemony in France throughout the 1800s determined to a large extent what was considered to be “good” music, and composers with German names had an advantage. German musical dominance also informed the compositional style and methods taught to young French musicians. Composers such as Meyerbeer, Gluck, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Wagner dominated the compositional model taught at the

__________________________

6 Ibid., 229.

Paris Conservatoire to students such as the young Vincent d’Indy (1851-1931) in the 1860s.\(^8\)

The defeat of the French by the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 had an explosive impact not only on the political climate but also on the arts, particularly on the French musical scene. Yet even before the French defeat, feelings of nationalism and patriotism were beginning to swell. In 1871, on the heels of the war, the Société Nationale de Musique was formed, an organization dedicated especially to the performance of French music, promoting high quality music already in existence, and encouraging new “serious” compositions of merit by young French composers.\(^9\) César Franck, Henri Duparc, Ernest Guiraud, and Camille Saint-Saëns were among the founding members: their motto and battle cry was “Ars Gallica!” (French Arts!)

In addition to the general concern over the quality and quantity of new French compositions being heard in the concert hall, church music had its share of disapproval. Critic Pierre Lalo (1866-1943) summed up the generally held view of the state of church music in an article in *Le Temps*:

> A spirit of hostility toward the Christian musicians of the Renaissance prevails throughout the world of choirs, choir schools and vestries. This hostility is easy to explain. All, or nearly all, choirmasters are trained composers who furnish their parish and editors with musical material. Every one of them has written some syrupy, sickly-sweet *Libera* or *Pie Jesu*, dripping with false unction and steeped in mawkish, theatrical tears. These are nothing but hypocritical operatic arias which have neither true passion nor sincere piety; they banish all beauty and truthfulness and dishonour both music and religion at the same time.”\(^10\)

---


Following the course inspired by the Société Nationale de Musique to promote French music, and responding to the need to improve music in the church, many musicians took it upon themselves to edit and publish new editions of music by the old French masters and to give concerts of these works. Included in this effort were early compositions from other countries as well. Baroque masters such as Bach and Monteverdi were included, as they were universally revered; moreover, they came from a time before the nineteenth-century domination of the French musical scene by German and Italian music. Renaissance composers such as Palestrina and Lassus were likewise accepted as belonging to a previous era when France held dominion in the arts. French musicologist Alexandre-Étienne Choron (1771-1834) asserted with some justification that France used to be “what Italy has since become: the general storehouse of European music,” and the French school had been “the origin of all Europe’s contemporary schools of composition.” In addition, some claimed that Lassus, being of Franco-Flemish birth, was actually more French in style.

Musicians strongly felt the need for reform in the French musical landscape and responded with new editions and concerts of early French music. Organ virtuoso Alexandre Guilmant (1837-1911), along with his colleague André Pirro (1869-1943), published *L’Archives des maîtres de l’orgue*, a collection of ten volumes of organ music.

---

11 Katherine Ellis, *Interpreting the Musical Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 149. Ellis discusses the French appropriation of various composers in her chapter “Sources of Frenchness.”


13 Ibid. 161-2.
written before 1750. Vincent D’Indy (1851-1931) had already begun to edit works by Baroque composers André Cardinal Destouches and Luigi Rossi in 1882 and in 1896 was giving concerts of music by French composers such as Michel-Richard de Lalande, Destouches and Rameau. Charles Bordes, who was affectionately dubbed “the Pasdeloup of Palestrinian music,”¹⁴ was championing the music of the past through his own editions of early choral music and through his choral group the Chanteurs de St. Gervais. Charles Bordes, with the help of Guilmant and D’Indy, would go on to found the Schola Cantorum of Paris in 1894, a school of music dedicated to the performance of plainchant, the revival of Palestrinian music, and the creation of modern religious music.¹⁵

Charles Bordes and the Chanteurs de St. Gervais

Charles Bordes, a composer and the founder of the Chanteurs de St. Gervais, was of great renown throughout France and much of Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, though he is less well-known today. It was through Charles Bordes and his concerts with the Chanteurs that Debussy’s love of early music, first kindled during his sojourn in Italy after he received the Prix de Rome, was kept alive in Paris.

Charles Bordes was born in La Roche Corbon near Vouvray in 1863. His mother was a pianist and composer, and she probably taught Charles music lessons at home. As a youth, he traveled with his mother on sightseeing tours, visiting various historical churches, monasteries and pilgrimage sites. His interest in antiquities extended from

---


Gothic-style churches to the poetry of Charles d’Orléans, which he read in the
d’Hericault edition. He wrote to his friend Jule Chappée in 1881, “Like us, [d’Hericault]
prefers the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century.”16 Forced to support his family after
the death of his father, he took a civil service job but continued his musical education,
taking piano lessons with Antoine-François Marmontel and studying composition with
César Franck. He became organist and choirmaster at the church of Nogent-sur-Marne in
1887 before becoming the choirmaster at St. Gervais in 1890.17

Bordes was an organist by training, so his background and musical education
were heavily centered on liturgical music. With the support of the priest in charge at St.
Gervais, Father De Bussy, his mission became focused on raising the caliber of music
there. On the whole, he found contemporary church music to be subpar and weak in its
construction. In addition, he felt that churches had become neglectful of the works of the
early masters of previous centuries.18 Bordes soon began to revamp the music at St.
Gervais and eventually drew overflow crowds to the services.

At first, Bordes programmed works by his mentor César Franck and Robert
Schumann, but he soon began performing works of the early masters. Catrena Flint
speculates that Bordes’s interest in Palestrinian music stemmed from his trips to

16 Catrena Flint, “The Schola Cantorum, Early Music and French Political Culture from 1894 to 1914”
(PhD diss., McGill University 2007)

17 The Church of St. Gervais, Paris, was the renowned historical seat for generations of the famous
Couperin family.

18 Bernadette Lespinard, “La diffusion de la musique chorale en France après 1890: Les voies de la
Solesmes beginning in 1880. Another anecdotal explanation comes from Joseph Samson:

[Louis-Lazare] Perruchot, [the Chapel Master at Autun Cathedral] all expenses paid from Autun, settled down in [the church of Notre Dame de] Blancs-Manteaux. He gathered some boys together. He taught them all he could about singing Palestrina. Bordes came by. He heard. He was conquered. He imitated. Soon he founded the Chanteurs de St. Gervais….In the first row of his auditors, Paul Dukas and Claude Debussy.” This account was corroborated by Amedée Gastoué in 1909.

The reputation of the Chanteurs as an expert early music group was solidified by its landmark concerts in 1892. In January of 1892, the Société Nationale de Musique sponsored a concert of early music at St. Gervais, including works by Victoria, Josquin des Pres, a Tantum ergo adapted from a Bach chorale by an unnamed author, and a Suscepit Israel by Palestrina. During the Good Friday service in 1892, the choir performed the Miserere of Allegri, along with music of Palestrina, Victoria, Lassus, and Bach, attracting a standing room-only crowd. In addition, the choir sang chant in the Solesmes style. The Solesmes chant style at this time was known for its fluid and precise approach that seemed to "flow naturally and effortlessly," that would "glide with flexibility and ease from one note to another," privileging the clear expression of the text and producing a "beautifully bound song, free of anything that might seem either heavy


22 Philip Dowd, “Charles Bordes and the Schola Cantorum of Paris: Their influence on the liturgical music of the 19th century and early 20th century” (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1969), 20. The Holy Week services were publicized by d’Harcourt, with the express note that the chant sections of the service would be sung by the choir, “after the method of Dom Pothier, of Solesmes.”
or dragging, either chopped or jerky."23 The "ease and accuracy" in performing the complex neumes, "so pleasant to the ear," showed the importance of an advanced vocal technique in performing the chants.24 The Chanteurs de St. Gervais would go on to perform at the 1900 Paris Exposition and travel throughout France and Europe, performing music of Bach, Palestrina, Victoria, Lassus, Janequin, and others. The efforts of Bordes and the Chanteurs were tireless; they became known for their engaging, energetic and inspiring performances.

In 1894, American correspondent Fanny Edgar Thomas wrote, referring to Charles Bordes:

It is one of the caprices of Paris, this city that we imagine flashy, superficial, lustful, is called to open the way of asceticism on the galleries of organ. In spite of sufficient obstacle to prevent all personal initiative – a poor parish in a poor district, a small and little receptive choir, an old rickety organ dating from the years of Francois Couperin…with a salary that we would not dare to propose to a porter, a mastery without importance, a fragile constitution and a sensitive soul – he immediately organized the society of the “Singers of St.-Gervais” for the immediate and systematic survey of forgotten art, with the hope of its reintroduction. His brown and soft eyes smile when one asks him for what was the most difficult in the beginning. It is necessary to know this city of big wealth and poverty to understand the significance of this smile.25

The choir was made up of about sixty auditioned singers, all of whom were paid. Their concerts were eagerly anticipated. Edgar describes their humility: “One speaks of them with enthusiasm in the superficial surroundings, and the sincere artists pull their hat


and lower the head.”

Bordes’s vision for the organization included modern transcriptions and editing for ease of use of works by Victoria, Lassus, Palestrina, Josquin, Clemens non Papa, and Lotti, among others. At the time of Edgar’s article, the St. Gervais library included seven masses and thirty-one motets.

The Chanteurs were reviewed frequently in Parisian papers during their “golden” years (roughly 1891 – 95), owing to the high quality of performances and the public acclaim that followed them. In the space of four years they had thirty-four press references with twenty-four reviews in various publications. The reviews generally stressed how well the Chanteurs brought early music back to life, truly “reviving” it, with their flawless, vigorous and expressive performances. In particular, musicologist Julien Tiersot noted their efforts in making the works “live.” Camille Bellaigue praised them for “not just reviving [the old composers], but making them live.”

Reviewers were impressed with the placement of the choir in the loft, allowing for a more transcendent experience. Critic Adolphe Jullien rhapsodized that the music produced “real emotions” that filled the church with “sonic waves” and compared this to the kinetic impact of Wagner’s music on audiences. The composer Paul Dukas weighed in with similar sentiments, reporting that the choir sang “with a most remarkable rectitude of style and a vocal perfection worthy of all praise.”

---


27 Ibid.


29 Ibid., 17. Dowd refers to an article “In Memoriam” of Bordes, by Camille Bellaigue. La Tribune, 1909.

The Schola Cantorum of Paris

In 1894, Charles Bordes approached fellow musicians Vincent d’Indy and Charles Guilmant with the idea of establishing a school dedicated to teaching and performing early music that would rival the Paris Conservatoire. The curriculum would include the study of plainchant and “Palestinian” music, and based on that training, it would encourage young composers to write a new kind of religious music, as well as to revive the old. The Schola Cantorum, Society of Sacred Music, was opened shortly thereafter, in June of 1894.31

As part of its work, the Schola Cantorum issued a monthly periodical called La Tribune de St-Gervais. The title page states the mission of the school:

Schola Cantorum

Fondée pour encourager
L’exécution du plain-chant selon la tradition grégorienne
La remise en honneur de la musique palestrinienne
La création d’une musique religieuse modern
L’amélioration du répertoire des organistes32

(Schola Cantorum
Founded to encourage
The performance of plainchant in the Gregorian tradition
The restoration to honor of Palestrinian music
The creation of modern religious music
The improvement of organists’ repertoire)

Under works recommended by the Schola, the “Palestinian Music” section offers “Le Chansonnier” of the sixteenth century, a popular edition for use by amateur choral

31 The larger “école supérieure” was opened in November of 1900.


In succeeding issues of the \textit{Tribune}, Bordes contributed articles on performing various works of “Palestrinienne” literature, including an Ave Maria by Palestrina, pieces by Victoria, Andrea Gabrielli, and the Kyrie from the \textit{Mass à Douce mèmoire} (i.e. \textit{Missa Doulce mèmoire}) by Lassus. The advice is very detailed, including clarity of diction, declamation, and expressive elements, such as dynamics, word stress, and tempos.

Each issue of the \textit{Tribune} contained at least one article on plainchant. The authors usually had a connection to Solesmes: Joseph Pothier, the chief pioneer of the Solesmes chant revival, wrote an article for the first issue. Other authors were Schola lecturer Pierre Aubrey, who made frequent visits to the abbey and was a close associate of Solesmes music director Dom Mocquereau, and Dom J. Parisot, who was a monk at Solesmes and a musicologist.\footnote{Ibid. See, for example, the publications of 1898.}

The Tribune documented the continued success of the Chanteurs. In volume 1, no. 2, there is a favorable review of a performance of the Chanteurs in Brussels as well as an announcement of a performance to be given at St. Gervais that would include the \textit{Pope Marcellus Mass}.\footnote{Schola Cantorum. \textit{La Tribune de Saint-Gervais: revue musicologique de la Schola Cantorum.} (Paris: Schola Cantorum), 1:2.} Soon, the Schola’s repertoire grew to include performances of early
French operas, particularly those of Rameau. Especially notable were the 1903 performances of Rameau’s *Castor et Pollux* and *La Guirland* under D’Indy.

Debussy was one of the keen observers of Charles Bordes, the Chanteurs de St. Gervais, and the Schola Cantorum. He attended many of their performances and made frequent appreciative comments about their activities throughout the years. Beginning in 1893 until near the end of his life in 1917 (eight years after the death of Bordes), Debussy spoke often of Charles Bordes and the Schola, revealing the depth of their impact and influence on what came to be Debussy’s mature compositional style: “Charles Bordes is universally known, and for the best reasons in the world. He is an accomplished musician in the fullest sense of the word.”

---

36 *Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music*, 110.
Reviving Plainchant: The Benedictines at Solesmes

Along with the revival of early music of the Renaissance at St. Gervais and the Schola, another revival was taking place in France—that of plainchant, the earliest music of the church. This movement centered around the monastery at the Abbey of Saint-Pierre at Solesmes and was the primary vision of three monks: Dom Prosper Guéranger, Dom Joseph Pothier, and Dom André Mocquereau.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, monasteries in France were in severe decline. The French Revolution not only rejected the dominance of the aristocracy, it sought to strip the church of its conjoined power with the state. Monasteries had been ransacked and destroyed, monks were scattered, and abbeys were seized by the state. The properties and buildings were now to be conceived of as entities belonging only to “the people.” Among the most significant institutions that were destroyed was Cluny, a Benedictine center founded in the tenth century on the ideals of monastic reform in the Roman Catholic Church. In its heyday, Cluny had been the central head of hundreds of priories in France and throughout Europe, providing protection from abusive overlords as well as guidance of a spiritual and liturgical nature. The abbey of Cluny was a beacon in the splendor and length of its liturgical celebrations, so much so that the monks were not

---

37 The monks of Solesmes tended to use the terms “plainchant” and Gregorian chant interchangeably. It is generally understood now that Gregorian chant is only one style of chant, and the Solesmes monks were drawing from a variety of chant repertories and sources, so that not everything they transcribed and sang is properly “Gregorian.” In this paper, I will use the more generally accepted terms “chant” and “plainchant,” but will keep the original usage in quotations.

expected to do manual labor.\textsuperscript{39} It was also famous for its extensive library, which was one of the richest and most important of its time.\textsuperscript{40} The church’s massive sanctuary, situated on grounds covering twenty-five acres, was the largest in Christendom until the construction of St. Peter’s in Rome.\textsuperscript{41} The suppression and eventual destruction of the monastery in 1790 was a significant blow to the power of the old guard which included the church, but it was perhaps also emblematic of the loss of something of a spiritual and artistic nature in French society; at the very least, the loss of historical buildings, artifacts, and precious manuscripts meant a loss of some of the cultural heritage of France.

In 1831, a twenty-six-year-old cleric named Prosper Guéranger, despairing of the state of religious life in France, took it upon himself to purchase an abandoned priory near his hometown on the river Sarthe in the village of Solesmes. He received approval from the Vatican to form a new cloister that would return the Benedictine order to France. In addition to the restoration and renovation of the priory’s buildings, the way of life and worship in a cloistered setting had to be re-imagined. This included the Benedictine imperative of \textit{ora et labora}, pray and work. These two activities could be conveniently converged into one: the liturgy of worship, the music, and of course the chant would become the community’s work. For Guéranger, it represented “the very soul of the monastery.”\textsuperscript{42} In this spirit he dedicated himself to restoring “the pure Gregorian

---


\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{42} Katherine Bergeron, Decadent Enchantments, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 14.
phrase” by finding “manuscripts from several distant Churches [that] all agreed on the same reading.”

Dom Guéranger charged Dom Jausions with the task of restoring the chants to their authentic melodies. Jausions began by hand-copying the oldest obtainable manuscripts from a municipal library in Angers. After Jausions died in 1871, Dom Pothier took over the task. He published Les Mélodies Gregoriennes in 1880, a treatise on the proper execution and understanding of plainchant, and Liber Gradualis in 1883. Later, his successor Dom Mocquereau created a workshop at the abbey to continue the work, examining facsimiles of chants culled from all over Europe. He published Paléographie Musicale in 1889. Although the initiative to restore plainchant was felt and practiced at other monasteries throughout Europe, this more systematic approach, drawing on a broad base of sources with actual facsimiles, gave Solesmes an added distinction of authority, and Solesmes was regarded as a leader in the restoration and authentic representation of plainchant. In addition, the musicians at Solesmes became known for their unparalleled performances of chant. In 1860, the singing monks of Solesmes demonstrated their chants publicly for the first time to the attendees of the first Paris Congress for the Restoration of Plainchant, held at the Société d’Encouragement in Paris. A priest and friend of Dom Gueranger, Augustin Gontier, had created the method book Méthode Raisonnée de Plain-Chant (1859) delineating the rules for proper performance of chant, based on the practice at Solesmes. Gontier’s address to the

---

44 Dom Daniel Saulnier, Gregorian Chant. (Solesmes, 2003), 14.
45 Ibid.
congress was later published in another pamphlet, titled *Le Plainchant: Son Execution* (1860). This introduction brought Solesmes into the limelight, and it marked the beginning of worldwide recognition for Solesmes as a leading center for chant scholarship and performance.\(^{46}\)

Throughout the late nineteenth century, numerous musicians and literati were drawn to Solesmes. Visitors included writer and critic Joris-Karl Huysmans, who set the first chapter of his novel *L’Oblat* there. The story’s protagonist, Durtal, enthuses about the lure of Solesmes and the seduction of the liturgy, describing it as addictive like a drug. In 1901, Huysmans took solemn vows and became a Benedictine.\(^{47}\) Camille Bellaigue wrote effusively about his 1898 visit in the *Revue des deux mondes*. He compared the trip favorably to a visit to Bayreuth, but more worthwhile, and included lengthy, detailed descriptions of the singing of the monks. He found the distinctive quality of the gothic architecture impressive, quoting the architect monk, who described it as “*chant grégorien pétifié*” (Gregorian chant frozen in stone).\(^{48}\) Another significant visitor was the composer Maxime Jacob, who after spending time at Solesmes was converted and became a Benedictine monk, changing his name to Dom Clément Jacob. Jacob also attested that Erik Satie and Debussy had “come to Solesmes as a source.”\(^{49}\)

The leader and founder of the Plainchant Society of London, Henry Bembridge Briggs, made several visits to Solesmes in the 1890s, along with his protegé Charles

---


Gibbs. Gibbs’s written testimonial about seeing Debussy at Solesmes has received a great deal of attention and has been the basis of much speculation concerning the origin of Debussy’s use of modes in his music.  

Thus the powerful French influence on the church and its liturgy, formerly found in the monastery of Cluny, was restored at Solesmes. Through its intensive scholarship and superior interpretation of plainchant, the abbey would continue to be a beacon for many French composers. Solesmes, the Chanteurs de St. Gervais, and the Schola Cantorum formed a trifecta that exerted an especially potent influence on the music of Claude Debussy.

CHAPTER THREE

CLAUDE DEBUSSY AND EARLY MUSIC

Debussy had many encounters with early music throughout his life. It is clear from his many passionate writings on the subject that these experiences had a deep and lasting impact on him. In addition, Debussy’s early childhood provided the groundwork for his uniquely individualistic approach. Circumstances of his early life, particularly his father’s revolutionary idealism and loquacity, his mother’s emotionally volatile nature, and his early impoverished family life all had a significant hand in shaping Debussy’s personality. Throughout his life, his character was marked by a constant urge to push against the constraints of established institutions. At the Conservatoire, Debussy was seen as an outsider, a renegade, and perpetual rebel, and he always approached his art in the same way, refusing to be pigeonholed. His lifelong interest in nationalism was similarly defiant: he became antagonistic towards what he saw as the prevailing Austro-Germanic and Italian hegemony and influence on the French musical scene. He made it his mission to find the perfect expression of what he considered to be a uniquely French voice in music, even as he threw aside conventional norms. As he stated explicitly in 1909 about his training at the Conservatoire, “Since those [Conservatoire] days I have striven to eliminate by degrees all I had been taught...Above all, I have tried to become French again.”¹ This urge to “become French again” was an identifying factor that eventually led him to the path of early music for inspiration and direction.

Claude-Achille Debussy was born to a relatively poor family in the outskirts of Paris on August 22, 1862. Debussy’s mother and father were not overtly musical, though his uncle was reportedly a conductor in the provinces. His father, Manuel, was a tradesman, and at various points ran a china shop and worked as a bookkeeper. Though only marginally educated, Debussy’s father enjoyed operetta and liked to go on at length about the latest books and plays; he considered himself a self-taught “musical connoisseur.”¹ He also had participated in the 1870s uprising known as the “Commune” and was eventually imprisoned for this for a year, an event that must have made an impression on the young Claude and influenced his feelings of nationalism.³ Debussy’s feelings about his parents were complicated—he called his father “le vieux galvaudeux,” (“the old wastrel”).⁴ Eric Jenson, in his recent biography of Debussy, reports accounts of Debussy’s mother being “highly emotional,” disciplining the children with frequent slaps.⁵ Debussy later commented that one’s soul is “bequeathed to us by a crowd of perfectly unknown people,” indicating that he may have often felt lonely and isolated.⁶ Despite this difficult and complicated family situation, he was showered with attention and was eventually pushed toward a career in music.

Debussy’s childhood exposure to music sowed the seeds of his attraction to early music. He spent summers in Cannes from about the age of six, visiting his paternal aunt,

² Ibid.


⁶ Ibid.
Claudine. He likely attended services at the cathedral and may have heard plainchant there. He received his first piano lessons at the age of nine in Cannes at the urging of Claudine, while Debussy, his sister, and his mother were visiting during his father’s incarceration. Claudine probably funded his piano lessons with his first teacher, an Italian named Cerutti, who did not see much promise in Claude. Once back in Paris, a second teacher who heard him play declared “he must become a musician” and took him on as a student for no fee. This teacher, Madame Mauté “de Fleurville” (she embellished her name for effect), had supposedly once studied with Chopin, and Debussy praised her as one of only two fine pianists he had heard in his lifetime (the other being Liszt). His memories of her included vibrant experiences of Bach. He fondly remembered her as “a small, stout woman, who plunged me into Bach and played his music as it is never played now, putting life into it.” After only a few months’ study with Madame de Fleurville, Debussy took his entrance exams at the Paris Conservatoire and was admitted at the age of eleven.

At the Paris Conservatoire, Debussy stood apart for many reasons. He was a strange-looking boy: short for his age, he had a prominent, large forehead and was considered “timid and awkward of manner”; he dressed like a bohemian and was a child of the working classes. His tastes were eccentric but refined. His classmates noted that

---

7 Eric Jenson, Debussy, 6.
he preferred to purchase a smaller delicacy to eat rather than spend his money on a more substantial meal. He enjoyed looking at elegant books of art belonging to the father of his friend Gabriel Pierné, showing particular interest in small prints that were framed with large margins around them. One day he convinced his friend that they should cut out some prints of this sort from one beautifully bound book, *Le Monde Illustré*, to use as decorations in their rooms: Debussy chose some illustrations by Ernest Meissonier, depicting Napoleon’s wars. These very small prints with the large space surrounding them perhaps foreshadow his interest in small musical forms and his use of silence in music.¹² In his classes, he consistently challenged his professors and the status quo, specifically in matters of harmony and counterpoint. During piano examinations, Ambroise Thomas, opera composer and director of the Conservatoire, objected to Debussy’s renditions of Bach’s preludes and fugues, saying he “indulged” in “subtle shades of expression” in pieces that Thomas viewed merely as dry exercises in polyphony.¹³

Debussy had already begun to show the interest and creative approach to melody that he would eventually apply to his concept of the arabesque. Though for the first few years at the Conservatoire he made excellent progress in his piano studies under Antoine François Marmontel (1816-1898) and won several prizes, his progress eventually stalled, and the important prizes were not forthcoming. He found success in his class of solfège, where he excelled at the reading and dictation of melodic lines. Here he was instructed by


Albert Lavignac (1846-1916), who discovered in him a “remarkable degree of musical sensibility, a taste for unusual chords, complex rhythms, and unexpected progressions of subtle harmonies.”\textsuperscript{14} In this class he won a First Medal. Even then, in both the solfège class and in his piano lessons, his teachers remarked that he needed to work harder and to apply himself more assiduously to his studies. He preferred score reading to technical exercises and practice, spending his time on reading scores of Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Haydn, and Schumann.

After his prospects of excelling as a concert pianist had dimmed, Debussy enrolled in a course on accompanying and excelled in that, winning the First Prize—the only one that Debussy won at the Conservatoire. The accompanying class was taught by Auguste Bazille (1828-1891), a former Prix de Rome winner and the director of singing at the Opera-Comique. In the class, Debussy learned to harmonize extemporaneously on a figured bass and to improvise an accompaniment to a melody. His classmate, Maurice Emmanuel (1862-1938), noted Debussy’s unique approach:

Debussy, who felt at his ease with the conscientious and broad-minded Bazille, soon reached the stage when he could extemporize at the piano harmonic exercises that were well-balanced and finished in style. He was fond of adding interesting passing notes to his basses; he endeavoured to break the monotony of harmonic sequences, whose recurrence was inevitable, by varying the melodic contour of the upper parts—a proceeding which at first scandalized Bazille, who however soon gave way…Above all, he excelled in solving the musical enigma of the given melody.\textsuperscript{15}

When Debussy was seventeen years of age, he was employed by the von Meck family to serve as the pianist in a piano trio, accompanist, and private piano teacher. He


was invited to go along with the family on their summer travels and visited Florence, Venice, Vienna, and Moscow with them. Vallas links Debussy’s first use of modes with the trip to Russia: for example, the Dorian mode in the song “Chevaux de Bois.” The music of the gypsies that he heard in the cabarets in Moscow and ten years later in the 1889 Paris Exhibition exposed him to a “languorous dance music, with its supple melodies and fluid rhythms...rendered melodiously on the violin; whilst other bowed instruments and the tympanum, in strongly contrasting tone-colouring, supply an accompaniment...based on strange modes.”\textsuperscript{16} Despite his success as an accompanist, it became clear that he would not excel in a career as a solo performer. He decided to turn his attention toward composition.

His three and one-half years of study of composition at the Conservatoire were filled with questioning and non-conformity. Even at that time, he was stubborn in his musical vision, constantly challenging and asking, “why?” His classmate Maurice Emmanuel observed that Debussy would challenge his fellow students with his revolutionary ideas: “Dissonant chords must be resolved. What’s that you say? Consecutive fifths and octaves are forbidden. Why? Parallel movement is condemned and the sacrosanct contrary movement is beatified. By what right, pray?”\textsuperscript{17} He had a reputation for the unorthodox but original and made a strong impression: Even some of his professors imitated him in jest in their salons.\textsuperscript{18}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{17} Leon Vallas, Claude Debussy His Life and Works (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 18.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 19.
The Prix de Rome

After a couple of attempts, Debussy won the Prix de Rome in 1884 at the age of twenty-one with the cantata *L’enfant Prodigue* (The Prodigal Son). The prize was a scholarship that subsidized the winners for a three-year residency in Rome to continue learning and working on their craft. He set off for the Villa Medici in Rome in January 1885 for his prize residency and shared the house at the Villa Medici with other winners: painters, sculptors, architects, engravers, and composers, probably fifteen or so residents in all. There were only three other musicians present when he arrived, fellow composition prize winners Georges Marty, Gabriel Pierné, and Paul Vidal. He played his prize-winning cantata for his housemates on his arrival, but he reported that his fellow musicians disliked the piece.\(^{19}\)

Debussy was uncomfortable living in the house, which he called “this abominable Villa”; he was often sick and lonely. He found very little of value from the other musicians, who he characterized as “out-and-out egoists, every man for himself.”\(^ {20}\) In a letter to his friend and benefactor Eugene Vasnier, he complains the life he is leading is turning him “more and more into a savage,” who without possibility of rescue might as well just stay “quietly in my corner” and endure the misery.\(^ {21}\)

In many ways it’s like being a junior officer on full pay, and such a life has nothing to teach me. In fact, I’m glad to find I have the strength of character not to get involved, except where there’s absolutely no avoiding it. As a result my fellow students have come to regard me with a certain animosity. They accuse me, unfairly, of trying to parade my individuality, or else they philosophize all

---

\(^ {19}\) Claude Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, 5. Letter to Eugene Vasnier.

\(^ {20}\) Ibid.

over me in a style which, I dare say, they picked up in the bars on the boulevard saint’ Michel. I may say they get some tough, logical propositions in return. 22

One bright spot in Debussy’s experience was exploring small, out-of-the-way churches in Rome, like the Santa Maria del’Anima, where he heard Palestrina and Lassus. Debussy relayed his experience in a letter to Vasnier dated November 24, 1885:

I must tell you about my only outing this month. I went to hear two masses, one by Palestrina, the other by Orlando de Lassus, in a church called the Anima. I don’t know if you know it (it’s hidden away in a maze of small, shabby streets). I liked it very much; it’s very simple and pure in style, quite different from so many of the others, which are dominated by a riot of sculptures, paintings and mosaics—all rather too theatrical for my taste. The Christ in these churches looks like some forgotten skeleton, wondering sadly what it’s doing there. The Anima is certainly the right place to hear that kind of music, the only church music I regard as legitimate. That of Gounod and Co. strikes me as the product of hysterical mysticism—it’s like a sinister practical joke. The two above-named gentlemen are true masters, especially Orlando, who is more decorative, more human than Palestrina. I’m truly amazed at the effects they can get simply from a vast knowledge of counterpoint. I expect you think of counterpoint as the most forbidding article in the whole of music. But in their hands it becomes something wonderful, adding an extraordinary depth to the meaning of the words. And every now and then the melodic lines unroll and expand, reminding you of the illuminations in ancient missals. And those are the only occasions when my real musical self has given a slight stir.23

Debussy had encountered music by Palestrina at least once before. In April of 1884, he accompanied the choir La Concordia in a performance of the Kyrie from the Pope Marcellus Mass. But the experience in Rome made a more significant impression: it was a better performance given in a more compelling setting and in a place where there was little else to attract his attention musically (his fellow prize-winners gave him little encouragement and he was not interested in Italian opera). There was also the added

22 Claude Debussy, Debussy Letters, 14.
23 Claude Debussy, Debussy Letters, 14.
attraction of the contrast to the 18th- and 19th-century musical canon that he had been exposed to at the Conservatoire and against which he had rebelled.\textsuperscript{24} The experience of hearing music performed away from the stringent environment of the Prix de Rome fellows, in the quiet solitude of a humble church, “simple and pure,” was a breath of fresh air to Debussy, stirring his musical soul, as he said in his letter to Vasnier.\textsuperscript{25}

Debussy left Rome in 1887, fulfilling the technical stay required but cutting short the usual Prix de Rome experience by a year. He had scant pleasure of his experience there, perhaps limited to hearing Palestrina at the Anima. When he got back to Paris, he made new friends, including Ernest Chausson and Pierre Louÿs, and became a member of the Société Musicale. He completed his third Prix de Rome piece in 1888, \textit{La demoiselle élu}. He went to Bayreuth twice, in 1888 and 1889, the second trip reversing his feelings about Wagner, whose influence on the “elite public” he regarded as “baleful.”\textsuperscript{26} Lockspeiser regards his composition \textit{Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire} as “the fight against Wagner at its keenest.”\textsuperscript{27} Debussy also attended the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1889, where he famously encountered the Javanese gamelan and Vietnamese Annamite theatre. At this exhibition, the distinguished pianist Louis Diemer played the harpsichord in recitals of Marais and Rameau, accompanied by viola da gamba, flute, and viola d’amore. Though it is not known if Debussy attended, the concerts attracted widespread attention.

\textsuperscript{24} Erik Jensen, \textit{Debussy} (USA: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32.

\textsuperscript{25} Claude Debussy, \textit{Debussy Letters}, 14.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 26.

\textsuperscript{27} Lockspeiser, \textit{Debussy}, 41.
in musical circles. Rimsky-Korsakov was also there, conducting two historical concerts of Russian music. Lockspeiser considers the Russian influence to be apparent in Debussy’s *Ballade, Mazurka*, and *Reverie*, composed in 1891, with the Quartet of 1893 reflecting “oriental elements” of the Javanese gamelan. When his *Prelude après-midi d’une faune* emerged in 1894, “a new spirit, a new world was magically revealed.” Lockspeiser goes on to say that its novelty consisted “in revivifying the age-long French traditions.” But where was it that Debussy grasped the “sweet and powerful rénascence” of these traditions?

**Debussy Encounters Charles Bordes and the Chanteurs de St. Gervais**

Debussy found himself again looking to the Renaissance for inspiration in February 1893, when he wrote to his friend and benefactor Andre Poniatowski (1864 – 1955) disparaging the newly mounted opera *La vie du poète* by Gustave Charpentier (1860 – 1956). Debussy described it ironically as a “new star on the musical horizon, destined to achieve glory, riches and complete freedom from any aesthetic considerations.” He laments the opera’s “total absence of taste—what you might call

---

28 Harry Haskell, *The Early Music Revival*, 44.

29 Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, 41.

30 Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, 41.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

He complains of the music’s portrayal of the poet reaching his “ultimate degradation” in the final scene, complete with the orgasmic moans of a prostitute. “Poor music, when I see people like that dragging you in the mud!” He despairs when he hears people using music to tell “lurid anecdotes, when the newspapers do that perfectly well.” Music, he says significantly, “is a dream from which the veils have been lifted. It’s not even the expression of a feeling, it’s the feeling itself.”

Next, Debussy describes a visit to the church of St. Gervais:

These last few days I’ve found some consolation in a very satisfying musical experience. It was at Saint-Gervais, a church where an intelligent priest has taken the initiative in reviving the wonderful sacred music of earlier times. They sang a Palestrina mass for unaccompanied voices. It was extremely beautiful. Even though technically it’s very strict, the effect is of utter whiteness, and emotion is not represented (as has been the norm since) by dramatic cries but by melodic arabesques. The shaping of the music is what strikes you, and the arabesques intertwining to produce melodic harmony: something that now seems to be unique, to produce something which has never been repeated: harmony formed out of melodies! (When you’re next in Paris I promise I’ll get you to come and hear it—better than my prose, which can’t possibly do justice to miracles like this!) I also heard a mass by Victoria, a Spanish primitive. With him it seems to achieve an ascetic and powerful mysticism with a similar simplicity of means. When you hear music like this you ask yourself why such a magnificent way of writing turned off on to paths where nothing lay in store for it but misfortune. Because it’s the very essence of the music that’s been transformed, and for it to have ended up at the Paris Opera is cause for the wildest astonishment! Needless to say, there were very few musicians there….There were rather more literary men and poets, the people who have been most successful in guarding the sovereignty of their art….Anyway, it gives one courage to go on living in one’s dream! And the energy to go on searching for the Inexpressible which is the idea of all art.36

34 Claude Debussy, Letters, 41.
35 Claude Debussy, Letters, 41.
36 Claude Debussy, Letters, 42.
This communication was the second time Debussy wrote about hearing Palestrina and Victoria, and the first time he used the word “arabesque,” describing its properties in detail. The priest he spoke of was the vicar Abbe De Bussy, who had recently hired Charles Bordes as the new choirmaster of St. Gervais. The singing of ancient music at St. Gervais became a huge attraction in Paris, resulting in standing-room-only crowds at many services. Later Debussy wrote that “it was such a success that the highest-ranking clergy were riled: they considered the concerts to have distracted the faithful! (Though the good Lord above never complained that He was shocked!)”37 In a later reminiscence, Julian Tiersot recalled seeing Debussy walking out of St. Gervais one day “with a light in his eyes such as I had never seen before,” then coming over to him and exclaiming simply, “Voilà la musique!”38 Palestrina was evidently on Debussy’s mind a great deal in 1893. He wrote to his friend Chausson in May, exclaiming, “Just think what excellent monks we’d have made, walking together in a slightly over-lush cloister garden, discussing how to perform Palestrina’s latest mass!”39

**Debussy and Solesmes**

It was either in that same year of 1893, or perhaps in 1894 (according to Julia d’Almendra’s account), that Claude Debussy made a trip to visit the monks at the Abbey de St. Pierre at Solesmes. Because of political upheaval, the Benedictine monks at this


time were in a state of exile from their own monastery and had to continue their life and
worship outside of its walls in the village church open to the public. This was where,
according to a letter from Dr. Beckett Gibbs written to d’Almendra, Debussy was
observed listening and taking notes at the services. Gibbs relates in his letter to
d’Almendra dated July 19, 1950:

I understand you have read my letter about “the one and only Debussy”?....In
1893 the monks of Solesmes were (by law!) obliged to live in the village of
Solesmes, while the parish church was used in lieu of the beautiful and spacious
abbey church …He [Debussy] took no part in any service but seriously pursued
his search for a better understanding of modality especially in the organ interludes
of that day’s organist. At each service attended he carefully noted what was being
sung, or chanted...No. I had no conversations with Debussy but, as I was
travelling with the founder of the Plainsong and Medieval Society, Harry
Bembridge Briggs, I listened to their frequent discussions when modality was
then the usual topic. 40

Gibbs mentions that all “strangers” were supplied with books of text at the services, as
well as the music. Thus, he says, Debussy must have had these in his possession when he
attended Matins and Lauds “the following morning” as everyone followed what was
being sung by the “100 (or thereabouts) monks.” He relates that Debussy “disappeared”
when Gibbs was playing the organ (which he jokingly blames on the organ’s defects), but
“returned for Nones and first Vespers of the Transfiguration.”

40 Dois-je comprendre que vous avez lu ma lettre sur le “seul et unique Debussy”? En 1893 les moines de
Solesmes furent (par la Loi!) obligés à vivre dans le village de Solesmes pendant que l’église paroissiale
était utilisée au lieu de la grande et belle église de l’Abbaye....Il ne prit part à aucun Office, mais a
poursuivi sérieusement ses recherches en vue d’une meilleure compréhension de la modalité,
particulièrement à travers les interludes exécutés par l’organiste du jour. A chaque Office auquel il a
assisté il a pris note soigneusement de ce qui a été chanté...Non. Je n’ai pas eu l’occasion d’avoir des
conversations avec Debussy, mais étant donné que j’avais comme compagnon de voyage le fondateur de la
Plainsong and Mediaeval Music Society, Harry Bembridge Briggs, j’ai écouté leurs discussions fréquentes
The letter to d’Almendra followed one written by Gibbs to a Mr. Eliot Wheaton in March of 1950. It was in this letter that he originally related his encounter with Debussy and states that “it was in August 1893 (or 1894)…we were there for a week and it was the Feast of our Lady of the Snows (August 5) that a small group of tourists arrived of which Debussy was one…I sat next to him at lunch to which the Lord Abbot had invited us.”

The uncertainty about the dates is concerning: did Debussy’s visit to Solesmes take place in 1893 or 1894? Was it August 5 and 6, the days that the church observes the Feast of our Lady of Snows and the Transfiguration, or was it another time? The confusion of dates may cast some doubt on the veracity of the account, though at the time of his letter Gibbs was a man of advanced age, trying to recall something that had happened at least fifty-five years previously. In the letter to Wheaton, he acknowledges that his memory of times and dates may be faulty, but states that he is certain that the incidents happened. “I lose no sleep over it, and it is still a happy memory and not a contradictory tale in any way.”

During a visit to Solesmes in the summer of 2015, I was able to examine some of the letters and cards from Gibbs and Briggs written during that time and in the years following. These may shed some light on their visits and the dates in question. One postcard, written by Briggs and sent to Dom Mocquereau, requests a room to be reserved for their upcoming visit. The card is postmarked clearly with the dates August 18, 19, and 20, 1894. The text requests two rooms for three guests, “myself, my brother, and a friend,” and states that they will arrive on Monday evening at 10:49, “if we don’t come

41 Julia d’Almendra, Les Modes Gregoriennes, 186.
42 Gibbs letter to Julia d’Almendra, 186.
rather in the day.” This party of three is exactly the group that Gibbs describes in his account.

Another communication from Briggs expresses his regrets to Dom Moquereau for not being able to visit that summer, explaining that he and his wife were in Normandy visiting family with a newborn baby. The date on the postcard is October, but the final number of the year is difficult to decipher. It may be 1893, but the number "3" is unclear; it could possibly be a "5." If the postcard is dated 1893, then it is almost certain that the visit in which they encountered Debussy did not occur in that year, as he gives his apologies for not being able to come.

If the visit took place in 1894, that calls into question Gibbs’s recollection of the encounter with Debussy occurring during the Feast of Our Lady of the Snows on August 5. According to the clearly dated letter, the party would have arrived on Monday, August 20, 1894.

If the illegible date on the postcard is 1895 or even another other number (1897?), then August 5, 1893, is a plausible date for their conversations with Debussy at Solesmes. Another consideration is that August 5 and 6, 1893, fell on a Saturday and Sunday. This might be a likely time, the weekend, for travelers to make a visit. To argue for the 1894 visit: it is true that August 22, is a Marian feast, the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which may explain Gibbs’s confusion. On the other hand, it is a little harder to imagine that he would be so confused as to combine that with Transfiguration in his account, since it is a feast day of distinction in the Catholic tradition.

There is another possible date for Gibbs’s trip with Briggs: Gibbs, in other letters (August, 1907; January, 1920), mentions 1892 as the date of his first visit to Solesmes.
When he speaks about an 1894 visit in a letter (dated October, 1903), he does not call it his first visit. Since we know that his visit in 1894 was in late August, the likely explanation is that there was at least one prior visit, either in 1892 or 1893, on the feasts of Our Lady of Snows and the Transfiguration, as he stated. Because those feast days are so figural, my belief is that Briggs and Gibbs most likely encountered Debussy during the feast of Our Lady of Snows and Transfiguration, most likely in 1892 (the year Gibbs mentions), but possibly in 1893.

There is another bit of evidence connecting Debussy to Solesmes. Maxime Jacob testifies to Debussy coming to Solesmes “as a source”:

Consciously or not, many musicians came to Solesmes as a source, such as Satie for example, Debussy before Pelléas ... There is no doubt that Gregorian modality is present in many works by French musicians, beginning with Berlioz and Gounod.\(^{43}\)

Jacob, a composer, was a contemporary of Debussy. After spending time at Solesmes, he was converted, took orders, and became a Benedictine monk, calling himself thereafter Dom Clément Jacob. By placing Debussy at Solesmes before Pelléas, he lends credibility to the 1893 or 1894 time-frame Becket Gibbs reported. Debussy began composing the work after procuring the rights to Maeterlinck’s play in 1893; Pelléas et Mélisande was essentially completed in 1896 and finally premiered in 1902. By saying that Debussy went to Solesmes “consciemment ou non” (consciously or not), however, Jacob leaves

---

\(^{43}\) Marie-Rose Clouzot, Souvenirs à deux voix – De Maxime Jacob à dom Clément Jacob, (Privat, 1969), 47. *Consciemment ou non, bien des musiciens sont venus à Solesmes comme à une source, Satie par exemple, Debussy avant Pelléas... Il est indubitable que la modalité grégorienne est présente dans bien des œuvres de musiciens français, à commencer par Berlioz et Gounod...*
some doubt as to whether the composer made an actual journey to Solesmes, or if he sought the monks’ work as a “source” in a more metaphoric sense.

The lore of Debussy at Solesmes continued through the twentieth century. Dom Jean Claire, choirmaster of Solesmes from 1971 to 1996, wrote an article in August of 1994 marking the centenary of Debussy’s visit, taking for granted that the date of 1894 was accurate. In it, he muses about what Debussy might have encountered at Solesmes during that time, including the questions: What did Solesmes represent in 1894 to attract Debussy? What was Debussy looking for in coming to Solesmes? What did Debussy take away from this encounter? The article does not try to prove or disprove Debussy’s visit, but assumes that it happened and offers Claire’s ideas about what the encounter might have been like.

Lockspeiser proposes that the “Debussy” whom Gibbs reported seeing at Solesmes was actually the curate at St. Gervais, a priest by the name of De Bussy who was no relation to Debussy. Though this would be a neat and tidy solution to the puzzle, it is difficult to imagine that the priest De Bussy would have been mistaken for a composer—presumably, he would have at least been wearing a priest’s collar. It is also generally assumed that De Bussy was not a musician, and therefore in-depth conversations about modality would most likely have been a bit beyond his ken.

Even if we question whether or not Debussy was actually present at Solesmes, there is good reason to believe that he encountered plainchant sung in the Solesmes style, either as a program given by the monks of Solesmes in Paris, in services at St. Gervais

---

45 Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy His Life and Mind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 177.
under Charles Bordes, or as part of the early music curriculum of the Schola Cantorum. In any event, the weight of evidence strongly suggests that Debussy did indeed visit Solesmes, probably in August of 1892 or 1893.

**Debussy and the Schola Cantorum**

Debussy’s fascination with early music at the Schola Cantorum continued with his attendance at their performances of Rameau’s operas. In February of 1903, Debussy heard a performance of Rameau’s *Castor et Pollux* at the Schola under the direction of Vincent d’Indy. Afterwards, he published a lengthy and effusive review in *Gil Blas* extolling the virtues of d’Indy, Charles Bordes, and the Schola Cantorum.\(^{46}\) He wrote,

> For some years this school, with just its own pupils and the addition of a few chosen performers, has not only restored to us all the beauty of early music, but has also presented to us the works of young, unknown musicians. When so many others inexcusably lag behind with constant repetition, or make no progress at all, one cannot but respect this little corner of Paris where a love of music is everything.\(^{47}\)

He notes the wonderful cross section of people attending the Schola concerts, “the aristocracy, the most left wing bourgeoisie, refined artists and coarse artisans,” and very few of the empty seats “too often found at the more famous establishments.”\(^{48}\) He marvels at the “real communion” between players and listeners, perhaps resulting from the smallness of the room, or “some mysterious influence of the divine.”\(^{49}\)


\(^{47}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.
Calling the Schola an “advanced school of music,” Debussy expresses his appreciation for the performance in words of sweeping praise: The overture “makes sounds appropriate for the display of the flowing costumes in all their silken glory.” Even though “we are enveloped in an atmosphere of tragedy, it’s still a human one. People weep, just like you and I…There unfolds the sweetest, deepest lament that was ever wrought from a broken heart…All sense of time and space is suspended…Never has such a delicate feeling of the voluptuous found such perfect expression! It fills the heavenly air with such light.”50 Finally, he concludes: “To the end, this music preserves its fine sense of elegance. It is never affected, and it never uses dubious effects. Have we continued in such good taste? Or have we replaced it with our Byzantine locksmiths? I dare not say. Let us thank the Schola, MM.V. d’Indy and Bordes, and the artists they assembled for such a restoration of beauty.”51

Four months later, Debussy attended another Schola performance, this time Rameau’s ballet opera *La Guirland*, after which Debussy was reputed to have shouted his famous line, “Vive Rameau, à bas Gluck!” Soon after, perhaps inspired by the performance, he wrote an essay recommending that the Opéra-Comique in turn mount a production of Rameau’s opera-ballet *Les Indes galantes*.52

Throughout his lifetime, Claude Debussy was affected by many significant early music experiences: tackling Bach with Madame Mauté as a child, the reviving experience

---

50 Ibid., 112-113.


52 Ibid., 217.
of Palestrina and Lassus at the church Santa Maria del’Anima in Rome, the consolation of the Chanteurs de Saint-Gervais led by Charles Bordes, the resource of chant at Solesmes, and the efforts of the Schola Cantorum to revive the work of early French masters. All of these influences contributed to the development of Debussy’s unique voice as a composer.
CHAPTER FOUR
DEBUSSY’S ARABESQUE

One of the most powerful outcomes of Debussy’s encounters with early music was his development and use of the arabesque, which figures prominently in many of his mature compositions. In several instances, including correspondence and music reviews, he referred to the arabesque as a significant element in the music of Bach, and the basis of the music of such Renaissance composers as Palestrina, Victoria, and Lassus.

Debussy first used the term “arabesque” in a letter after hearing Palestrina and Lassus at St. Gervais in 1893. He described what he heard as “arabesques, intertwining to produce melodic harmony” and highlighted the contours of the music as the most striking feature. He juxtaposed the practice of representing emotion not by dramatic cries but by melodic “arabesques,” describing the effect as “utter whiteness.” He also felt that this practice of “harmony formed out of melodies” was now “unique.”

The term and concept of arabesque were already somewhat fashionable in Debussy’s time, first used to describe an ornamental design of curving, intertwining lines and plant motifs in Moorish art and architecture. The arabesque came into French art with Baudelaire, followed by the Symbolists, who decried the notion that the purpose of art should be to evoke emotions. The arabesque was also a distinguishing aspect of the Art Nouveau style, which came into popularity in the 1890s and lasted until World War I. Art Nouveau was known for its flowing, sinuous lines and “whiplash curve,” which took their inspiration from nature, as described by Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in Art Forms in

---

1 Claude Debussy, Letters, 42.
As noted by Cybele Gontar in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, “The unfolding of Art Nouveau’s flowing line may be understood as a metaphor for the freedom and release sought by its practitioners and admirers from the weight of artistic tradition and critical expectations.” This description could aptly be applied to Debussy, and his quest for a release from the tradition and critical expectations he found in the music establishment of his day.

The Art Nouveau style, with its intricate linear designs and flowing curves based on natural forms, was practiced by French artists who were contemporaries and associates of Debussy, in particular Maurice Denis (1870-1943). These artists were influenced by the writing of John Ruskin (1819-1900), whose ideas on the connection between art and nature had recently been translated into French. Debussy was intimately familiar with the art of Denis—they were personal friends, and Debussy called on Denis to design the elaborate cover for Debussy’s *La Damoiselle elue* as well as to illustrate an edition of *L’après-midi d’un faune*. Denis wrote about the arabesque in 1890: “I dream of ancient missals with rhythmical borders…an embroidery of arabesques on the pages, an accompaniment of expressive contours.”

Debussy also knew about Ruskin: aside from the excitement over the new French publication *Ruskin et La Religion de la Beauté*, another translator of Ruskin’s works, Gabriel Maurey, was a close friend of Debussy. In addition, Debussy mentions Ruskin by name in his unpublished play *Frères en art*, and

---


according to Lockspeiser, the protagonist in the play contains elements of Ruskin’s character.⁵

Though it originated in visual art, the term arabesque is also used in dance, where it refers to various graceful poses “in Arabic fashion.” It is possible the term “arabesque” became associated with music in the Romantic period after F.W.J. Schelling and Goethe described architecture as “frozen music.”⁶ Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), the Austrian music critic, wrote compellingly of the comparison of enjoyment of absolute music to the artistic rendition of the arabesque in his book The Beautiful in Music (1854). “How music as able to produce beautiful forms without a specific feeling as its content is already to some extent illustrated for us by a branch of ornamentation in the visual arts, namely arabesque.”⁷ In the nineteenth century, various composers began to write pieces of a decorative nature with the title Arabesque, for example, Robert Schumann in 1839 (Arabeske). Debussy composed his Deux arabesques in 1888.⁸

When present-day writers apply the term “arabesque” to music, they usually refer to an ornamental approach that does not propel the harmony but is instead essentially decorative. The term has been used to describe gestures in works of Bach, Schubert, and

---


⁸ Ibid.
Chopin, in musical devices such as contrapuntal decoration (e.g., obligato), Gruppetti and scalar elaboration, and rapidly changing harmonies that function only decoratively.  

With this profusion of usages, it can be difficult to be sure what we mean when we apply the term “arabesque” to Debussy’s music. Debussy provided his most succinct definition of the arabesque in a 1901 review of Bach’s Violin Concerto in G Major. He says that the piece is “pure ‘musical arabesque,’ or rather it is based on the principle of the ‘ornament,’ which is at the root of all kinds of art.” He goes on to say:

The primitives—Palestrina, Victoria, Orlando di Lasso, etc.—had this divine sense of the arabesque. They found the basis of [the arabesque] in Gregorian chant, whose delicate tracery they supported with twining counterpoints. In reworking the arabesque, Bach made it more flexible, more fluid, and despite the fact that the Great Master always imposed a rigorous discipline on beauty, he imbued it with a wealth of free fantasy so limitless that it still astonishes us today. In Bach’s music it is not the character of the melody that affects us but the curve. More often still it is the parallel movement of several lines whose fusion stirs our emotions, whether fortuitous or contrived. Based on this conception of the ornamental, the music will impress the public as regularly as clockwork, and it will fill their imaginations with pictures.

Debussy mentions the arabesque again in a 1902 essay. Responding to a question about the future of music, Debussy declares that the best thing for French music would be to abolish the study of harmony as practiced in the conservatories. He again refers to Bach when he addresses the notion of the “wonderful arabesque”:

We can be sure that old Bach, the essence of all music, scorned harmonic formulae. He preferred the free play of sonorities whose curves, whether flowing in parallel or contrary motion, would result in an undreamed of flowering, so that

---


10 Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, 27.

11 Ibid.
even the least of his countless manuscripts bears an indelible stamp of beauty. That was the age of the “wonderful arabesque,” when music was subject to laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself. Rather will our time be remembered as the era of the age of veneer.\textsuperscript{12}

From these descriptions, we can see that Debussy thought of the arabesque as a melodic line with a curving contour. Debussy described the grouping of these lines as a “free play of sonorities.” They exist as free melodic entities—multiple voices—not confined or forced into a prescribed harmonic function, but each with their own individual identity, the definition of polyphony. Debussy describes these lines as “flowing,” reinforcing the idea of the freedom of the individual voices. They could be in contrary motion, “intertwining,” or flow in parallel motion. For Debussy, the defining feature of the arabesque is its curving shape, which he says derives from the “laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself.”\textsuperscript{13}

A deeper understanding of Debussy’s concept of the arabesque can be gained by examining his \textit{Deux arabesques} for piano (1888-91). As Caroline Potter points out, there are two types of arabesque found in this work: the flowing and the ornamental.\textsuperscript{14} The First Arabesque has the more flowing version, with sweeping triplet arpeggios that curve around in ascending and descending shapes (Example 1), and smaller-scale triplets in intervals of 2\textsuperscript{nd}s and 3\textsuperscript{rd}s that also have a curving shape and flowing style. Even the larger-interval triplets have a similar shape, curving around and back on themselves.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{13} Claude Debussy, \textit{Debussy on Music}, 84.


Example 1b. Flowing arabesque, *Arabesque I* measures 609.

The Second Arabesque (Example 2) also uses triplets, but in a miniature version, with the recurring rhythmic motive of a sixteenth-note triplet followed by an eighth-note.


These two arabesque forms create two quite different effects. Debussy himself made a distinction between Palestrina’s style and that of Victoria in the masses he heard in Rome in 1885. Though we do not know which masses he heard, it is interesting to note the choice of the word “decorative” compared with his later use of the word “ornament”
in discussing the arabesque. Debussy calls them both true masters, but he especially admires “Victoria, who is more decorative, more human than Palestrina.” It is possible that the two styles he heard that day influenced the two styles of his *Deux Arabesques*. The flowing arabesque is graceful, relaxing, and elegant, while the ornamental version is playful, lively, and impish. The first is composed of longer curving lines, and frequent juxtapositions of duple and triple rhythms that blur the sense of meter, while the second has many smaller curving ornaments on the beat, and a stop-and-go quality that feels more rhythmic, reinforcing the basic pulse. As we will see, these two types of arabesque approaches and shapes can be seen in *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans*.

Another piece that is commonly associated with Debussy’s use of the arabesque is the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1892-4), composed about the time of Debussy’s visit to Solesmes. The opening measures outline a tritone with a falling and rising countour that creates a curving shape. This combines with the unusual modal quality and the blurred sense of meter to evoke a plainchant-like antiquity. Linda Cummins suggests that the use of the arabesques here may have a connection to the ancients. The arabesque, historically associated not only with the Moors but with the art and architecture of the ancient Roman Baths of Tito, complements Mallarmé’s subject matter. Mallarmé’s literary fragment evokes ancient Greece and Rome, placing the mythological characters of the faun and the nympha within a vision of decaying ancient ruins to portray

---


the passage of time.\textsuperscript{17} The modality and the arabesque here create a sense of timelessness to summon up the atmosphere of the poem.

Debussy’s opera, \textit{Pelléas et Mélisande} (1902), connects his use of arabesque with modes to suggest ancient qualities and chant. Begun in 1892, again around the time of his visit to Solesmes, its creation occupied ten years of his life, during which time he composed two of the \textit{Trois chansons}. The first eleven measures of the prelude to the opera begin with low, quiet, open fifth movement in the cellos and basses that calls to mind a dark, primeval forest (Example 3). After four measures, Debussy places an arabesque figure in the upper woodwinds above the open fifth. This alternates between modal chords in a contrary (intertwining) motion in duple and triplet note values, further enhancing the scene of a timeless, ancient forest. Julia d’Almendra identifies the mode of the beginning theme as Dorian and identifies the use of other modes throughout the entire opera to represent different characters.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

Example 3. Arabesque and mode use in *Pelléas et Mélisande*.
The characteristics of musical arabesque have been identified by various authors in various ways. Gervais describes arabesques as abstract, supple melodies with curvilinear motifs, and “a pure entity that constitutes a melodic line where all the points that form this sustained line turn into themselves without interruption.” Her description includes solo melodies, accompanied independent melodies, triplets of varying durations, quintuplets, and small intervals. She points to the *Deux arabesques* as examples.

Boyd Pomeroy’s definition of Debussy’s arabesque points to self-contained phrases or themes that reflect harmonic stasis. In connecting the arabesque to Art Nouveau, he talks about its impulse to “fill registral space” with a combination of stepwise and undulating disjoint motion, mostly limited to intervals under a fifth. Here he connects this “economy of line” with Debussy’s invocation of the music of Palestrina, and observes a “vocal” quality of writing in his instrumental works. In addition, he points to Debussy’s use of modes and chromatic scales in arabesques (usually mixed with whole tone or octatonic elements.) The mostly two measure, arabesque-like units, often contrasting in motive, rhythm, or texture among other things, are combined to generate form. The harmonic progress moves slowly under the arabesque activity on the surface.

Gurminder Bhogal narrows down the definition of arabesque significantly, based on the concepts of metaphor and Integrated Conceptual Networks of Zbikowski. Her

---


outlining of aspects of the visual arabesque corresponding to its musical counterpart results in the four components of her definition of arabesque: Melodic Line, Melodic Curve, Supple Melody and Decorative Melody. In breaking down the requirements further, she asserts that Supple Melody, or Fluidity, must contain Metric Instability, which can be defined as Grouping Dissonance (combining duples and triplets) and Displacement Dissonance, which includes things like agogic accents and ties over the beats. In addition, she states that the Decorative Melody element must be present, which emphasizes short rhythmic values of eighth note duration or less. Finally, she insists that all of these components must be present in order for a melody to be considered an arabesque.

While Bhogal’s definition is refreshing in its specificity, it seems too narrow to embrace fully all of Debussy’s intentions. Further, she goes on to use this definition (and only one or two of Debussy’s actual works) to discuss Ravel’s use of the arabesque in Daphnis et Chloe. This transfer may or may not be applicable, but in focusing on Ravel, she seems to lose something of Debussy’s intention in the process.

As we have seen, Debussy’s own ideas about the arabesque include gestures of curving shape, with flexible, fluid, twining, intertwining textures, free fantasy, and parallel or contrary movement of several lines. In addition to this, Debussy spoke of the arabesque’s emotional and cognitive impact: the fusion of lines stirs emotions, impresses the public and fills their imagination with pictures. Finally, the arabesque is based on the laws of beauty inscribed by nature’s movements.

It is with this touchstone that one can understand the arabesque more broadly than the paradigm proposed by Bhogal. The arabesque is free to take more forms and also may
appear as several lines, in parallel or contrary motion. The curving, flexible shape and the movement of several lines simultaneously create the “ornament.”

Bhogal’s definition, however, is nevertheless useful in that it points to the aspects of curving melodic line and suppleness (fluidity). It is the various ways that these terms can be understood that leads to differing interpretations. Instead of all of the aspects Bhogal mentions as necessary components—metric dissonance only by means of superimposing triple and duple rhythms, and metric displacement—there are multiple ways of creating the fluidity or flexibility that is a quality of the arabesque.

For the purposes of this discussion and the analysis that follows, I base my understanding of the arabesque on Debussy’s *Deux arabesques* and the findings of Gervais and Potter. I propose a breakdown of arabesque into two broad categories, the flowing and the ornamental. Though all of the components as outlined by Bhogal can be part of arabesque, they are not all necessary at once. To suggest that they are limits Debussy’s broader compositional approaches. Bhogal discounts Debussy’s writings on the subject as vague and claims that his writing about the arabesque sometimes contradicts his own compositional style.22

Adapting Zbikowski’s CIN model from Bhogal’s application of it puts higher value on Debussy’s own writings as well as incorporating the findings of Gervais and Pomeroy (my own additions, incorporating Debussy’s writings and those of others, are marked with a plus sign):

---

22 Gurminder Bhogal, *Details of Consequence*, 165.
Table 1. Conceptual Integration Model of Arabesque, Modified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual Arabesque:</th>
<th>Musical Arabesque:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Line</td>
<td>Melody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Register</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>Succession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curve</td>
<td>Patterned ascending and descending motifs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ Stepwise and undulating motion (5\textsuperscript{th} and under)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>Temporal Duration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluidity</td>
<td>Metric Instability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ Flowing Melody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ornament</td>
<td>Short Rhythmic Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>+ Decorative Melody</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Abstract Curvilinear</td>
<td>+ Ornamental Motifs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motifs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Intertwining lines</td>
<td>+ Contrary Motion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ Swirling lines</td>
<td>+ Parallel Motion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This model gives a precise but also broad expansion of the idea of arabesque.

Using this model in an analysis of the arabesques in *Trois chansons*, we should privilege Debussy’s own descriptors: curved shape, flexible, fluid, twining, intertwining, free, parallel or contrary movement of several lines. In addition, it is wise to take to heart Debussy’s own effusive comments addressing the impact of the arabesque in Bach’s music and his observation that the most important aspect of the melody is not its “character” but its “curve.” He points out that the power in stirring our emotions lies within the “fusion” of parallel movement of several lines. This, he reminds us, is the conception of the ornamental that has the most impact, possessing a visual, even pictorial quality.
CHAPTER FIVE

TROIS CHANSONS DE CHARLES D’ORLÉANS

Background

Debussy based his Trois chansons on the poetry of Charles d’Orléans (1394-1465), a Renaissance poet who was considered a historical national figure in France. Charles d’Orléans, duke and prince, was held prisoner in England for twenty years after his capture in the Battle of Agincourt at age twenty-one. While in England, he was a prolific writer of poetry, composing poems in both French and English. Many of his poems had been set by French composers through the years and continued to be set by composers in Debussy’s time. In addition to using them in his Trois chansons, Debussy set two d’Orléans poems in the solo cycle Trois chansons de France (1904). In that work, the poems are titled simply “Rondel” and include the well-known poems Le temps a laissié son manteau and Pour ce que plaisance est morte. In choosing to set d’Orléans poems, Debussy was affirming his nationalism and his connection to the earliest roots of French art, including music of the Renaissance before the Austro-German hegemony of the nineteenth century. Debussy’s reverence for d’Orléans was evident in a 1914 letter to the conductor Émile Inghelbrecht (1880-1965) in which he exclaimed, “May we all shelter under the patronage of Charles d’Orléans, sweet prince, beloved of the muses and so excellently French!” Debussy was probably reading the poems of Charles d’Orléans in the d’Hericault edition, which had been published in 1874.

---

1 Claude Debussy, Debussy Letters, 285-6.
Debussy first set two of the poems, *Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder* and *Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain*, in 1898. The third chanson, *Quand j’ai ouý le tabourin*, which was to become the middle piece of the set, was not composed until 1908. Between the beginning of the process in 1898 and its completion in 1908, Debussy made some minor changes rhythmically and textually.

The premier of *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans* was given at a concert on Good Friday, 1909, at the Concerts Colonne with the composer conducting. The audience applauded the compositions warmly and with such enthusiasm that the last two pieces had to be repeated. Unfortunately, the critics were not universally pleased; many expressed exasperation at these “charming imitations.” One especially harsh critic was Pierre Lalo, who wrote a review in *Le Temps* on August 18, 1909, disparaging *Trois chansons* as “pastiche” that had “nothing of significance to say.” On August 25, Debussy poured out his frustration to his friend André Caplet:

> I haven’t read Pierre Lalo’s article, and you can be sure I won’t … In short, he’s one of the many who don’t hear music for itself but for what, to their ears, it brings with it of traditions laboriously learned; and they can’t change these without running the risk of no longer understanding anything…It’s the sort of blind, idiotic superstition which goes on for centuries and spreads itself over everything that’s submitted to human judgement; while the artists themselves have a struggle not simply to create new stereotypes in place of the old.

Debussy’s compositions could never be classified as “imitations”—they were entirely original—but he took elements of music that were already in existence and put

---


4 Claude Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, 212.
them together in his own unique way. This included inspiration from “the age of the ‘wonderful arabesque’ when music was subject to the laws of beauty ordained by nature”. Debussy’s renditions of *Trois chansons* took inspiration from various sources, including the “primitives”, composers of the Renaissance, who built their compositions on the “divine arabesque,” with their twining counterpoints, based on plainchant.

Debussy’s friend and champion, Louis Laloy, wrote very different reviews in 1908 and 1909. He declares Debussy’s *Trois chansons* to be an “homage to one of our purest French traditions, believed lost,” and says they “are not an imitation of but a continuation from Janequin, Costeley and Orlando di Lasso, masters of French song in the sixteenth century. This is clear-cut music, not corrupted by Italian loquacity or Germanic grandiloquence, with mouldings as delicate as they are firm.” In 1909, Laloy talks about Debussy becoming “increasingly enamoured of the beauty of the voice” resulting in his writing of unaccompanied choruses, “like his sixteenth-century ancestors.” He addresses the criticism of “pastiche” by saying, “one might as well say that a string quartet cannot be written without copying Beethoven.” While denying the notion of the music being mere copies, he states that Debussy’s mind “effortlessly makes the forms of the past its own. Thus the scale without a leading note, which appears in the first *Chanson*, is just as familiar to the Renaissance masters; but a long time ago Claude

---

5 Claude Debussy, * Debussy on Music*, 84.


7 Ibid., 210.

8 Ibid., 211.
Debussy rediscovered it, by instinct, and put it in many places where he cannot be suspected of archaism, for example in his quartet, and in Pelléas.” 9 He points out the strength of Debussy’s melodies, saying “it was bound to succeed for a composer who owed the richness of his harmony to the strength and freedom of his lines.”10

In addition to the emphasis on melodic lines, the connection of Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans to Renaissance chanson is also apparent in uses of modal tonality, mapping of rhyme and phrase, rhythmically intricate counterpoint, and text painting. These techniques are all typical of the music of such mid-sixteenth-century composers as Janequin and Sermisy. There are imitative duets in thirds or sixths, closely spaced, in different combinations, and cadences are often reached by various duets in ornamented parallel sixths, all highly characteristic of the sixteenth-century French chanson.

Text

The text of the first chanson, Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder, is in the poetic form of the chançon (old spelling—later spelled chanson) that predated the rondeau (which was later called “rondeau”). Like many chançons of the period, it has thirteen octosyllabic lines. There is a recurring two-line refrain (in italics), and the rhyme scheme is ABBA ABAB ABBA. The refrain of the chançon is composed of two lines at the beginning, the same two in the middle, and only the first line of the two at the close (as opposed to

9 Ibid., 211.
10 Ibid., 211.
the later rondel, where the refrain will reappear as only one line in the middle and at the close). Sarah Spence speculates that the early date of the poem puts it in the category of poems of “little metaphorical complexity” compared with the later ones and states that it is “remarkable more for its musical qualities than for its metaphorical ones.”

The "musical qualities" of the poem can be observed in d'Orleans' choice of particularly evocative and descriptive meanings, use of alliteration, and the aurally pleasurable quality of the words.

The poem is set faithfully, word for word, line by line by Debussy, except that he gives the first line of the refrain twice at the end of the song. (Debussy also inserts an exclamation point after the first word, Dieu.) The resulting form is in five parts, A-B-A₁-C-A², where the recurring refrain of the poem (A) is set to the same melody, with some variation.

---

DIEU! QU’IL LA FAIT BON REGARDER

Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder
La gracieuse bonne et belle!
Pour les grans biens qui sont en elle,
Chascun est prest de la louer.
    Qui se pourroit d’elle lasser!
Tousjours sa beaute renouvelle.
Dieu qu’il la fait bon regarder,
La gracieuse, bonne et belle!
    Par deça, ne dela, la mer
Ne sçay Dame ne Damoiselle;
Qui soit en tous bien parfais telle;
C’est un songe que d’y penser.
Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder!  

(Translation)
God, how fine He made her to look at,
The gracious lady, virtuous and fair!
Because of the great virtues that are hers
Every man is ready to praise her.

Who could tire of her?
Every day her beauty renews itself.
God, how He made her fine to look at,
The gracious lady, virtuous and fair.

On this side of the sea or the other
I know no lady or maiden
So perfect in every virtue.
It’s a dream even to muse about her.
God, how fine He made her to look at.  

Debussy composed the second movement of Trois chansons, Quant j’ai ouy le tabourin, in 1908, ten years after he composed the first and third chanson. Debussy was

---


deliberate in his text setting of this chanson, and his thoughtful approach can be seen in the following letter. In June, 1908, he wrote to his friend Laloy about the poem:

It would be very kind of you to tell me the exact meaning of the words I’ve underlined in the following Rondel de Ch. d’Orleans. I find this little piece so full of sweet interior music that—naturally—I cannot restrain myself from ‘exteriorising’ it—as our friend Victor Segalen would say—May good Charles d’Orleans kindly forgive me. I prefer to tell you straight away that I am waiting on your reply so that I can set my colours?

Debussy’s statement shows how he connected text with various “colours” or tonalities. The piece is essentially a contralto solo with alto, tenor, and bass (divided) chorus accompaniment, written in an onomatopoeic style evoking percussion instruments. The onomatopoeic writing is reminiscent of the chansons of Janequin (for example, his Battaille de Marignan). Debussy was familiar with Janequin’s piece and commented favorably on it in a review in 1914.

That marvelous masterpiece…which conveys all the hubbub and rough way of life at an army camp. It is noted down shout by shout, noise by noise: the sound of the horses’ hooves mingles with the fanfares of trumpets in a subtly ordered tumult. Its form is so direct that it would almost seem to be ‘popular music,’ so accurate and picturesque is the musical representation of these events.”

However, in its mode use, (Aeolian and Dorian) subject (awaking sleepers), and overall mood, Debussy’s Quand j’ai ouy le tabourin is more similar to Janequin’s Le chant des oyeaux. The chorus in Debussy’s piece provides most of the onomatopoiea as it fluidly changes from one rhythmic and melodic expression to another, reflecting the sounds of the tambourine, the Maying crowd, and the non chalour of the sleepy narrator.

---

3 Louis Laloy, On Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky, 213.

4 Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music, 315.
Fox and Arn note that this poem about May (one of eighteen), written after d’Orleans’s return to France at the age of forty-six, was more melancholy than his earlier poems, contrasting “the gaiety of springtime with the sadness of his later years.” Debussy’s treatment effectively conveys this contrast of the gaiety and vitality of youth in the chorus parts with the non chaloir or indifference of older age, as expressed by the solo voice of the sleepy narrator in her bed.

The poetic form is a rondel. The term rondel is considered to be an early spelling of the later rondeau poetic form. The form, evolved from the earlier chançon, now has only the first line of the poem repeated for the last refrain. The rhyme scheme is ABBA ABBA4.

---

5 Ibid., 874.

6 Mary-Jo Arn and John Fox, ed. Poetry of Charles d’Orleans and his Circle, lv-lvi.
Debussy, however, repeats the first two lines of the poem for his refrain, and for the final section, repeats the first four lines of the poem, making his form A-B-A\(^1\).

**QUANT J’AY OUY LE TABOURIN**

Quant j’ay ouy le tabourin  
Sonner, pour s’en aller au May,  
En mon lit n’en ay fait effray,  
Ne levé mon chief du coussin;  
   En disant : il est trop matin,  
Ung peu je me rendormiray;  
Quant j’ay ouy le tabourin  
Sonner, pour s’en aler au May.  
   Jeunes gens partent leur butin,  
De Nonchaloir m’acointeray  
A lui je m’abutineray,  
Trouvé l’ay plus prochain voisin,  
Quant j’ay ouy le tabourin.\(^1\)

(Translation)

When I heard the tambourine  
Sound the call for the May ceremony,  
In my bed I made no fuss,  
And didn’t lift my head from the pillow.

Saying: it is too early,  
I’ll go back to sleep some more.  
When I heard the tambourine.  

Let the young distribute their booty.  
I’ll buddy up to Indifference.  
From him I’ll get a reward.  
I found him my closest neighbor,  
When I heard the tambourine.\(^2\)


\(^2\) Charles d’Orléans, *Poetry of Charles d’Orleans and His Circle*, ed. John Fox and Mary-Jo Arn, 450.
The third movement of *Trois chansons*, based on the poem *Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain*, was composed in 1898. The poem, like the previous *Quand j’ai ouy la tabourin*, is considered a rondel by the editors Fox and Arn\(^1\). However, the poem is labeled “Chanson” in d’Hericault’s edition. In this case, the refrain line is only found at the beginning and at the end. The rhyme scheme is Abba cccc abbaA with a contrasting rhyme in the middle section, sung mostly by solo quartet. Like *Quand j’ai ouy la tabourin*, this poem references May and is a celebration of the coming of spring and summer. It contrasts the harshness of winter (the spelling "Yver" is old French, rather than the modern day "hiver"), personified as a low-life “villain,” with the “high-born pleasantness” of summer. Debussy highlights d’Orléans’s opposing personifications of winter and summer with contrasts in tonality, texture and arabesque form in the music. The resulting form is ternary A-B-A\(^1\), reflecting the poem’s verses about winter and summer, as well as its rhyme scheme.

\(^1\) Charles d’Orléans, *Poetry of Charles d’Orléans and His Circle*, 450.
YVER, VOUS N'ESTES QU'UN VILLAIN

Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain,
Este est plaisant et gentil,
En tesmoing de May et d’Avil
Qui l’accompaignent soir et main.
   Este revest champs, bois et fleur
Da sa livrée de verdure
Et de maintes autres couleurs
Par l’ordonnance de Nature.
   Mais vois, Yver, trop estes plain
De neige, vent, pluye et grezil.
On vous deust banir en exil.
Sans point flater, je parle plain,
Yver, vous nestes qu’un villain! ¹

(Translation)

Winter, you’re nothing but a low-life.
Summer is pleasant and high-born,
So testify May and April,
Who are his companions night and day.

Summer reclothes the fields, woods, and flowers
With her livery all of green,
And of many other colors too,
Just as Nature commands.

But you, Winter, are too much
Snow, wind, rain, and sleet.
We should send you off to exile.
No flattery this, my words are frank,
Winter, you’re nothing but a low-life ²

¹ Charles d’Orleans, Poésies complètes de Charles d’Orléans, Vol 2, 48-49.
² Charles d’Orléans, Poetry of Charles d’Orleans and His Circle, 682-4.
Conclusion

In selecting a text to set his unaccompanied choruses, Debussy chose the Renaissance poet Charles d’Orleans, a national figure and hero in French history and literature who was greatly admired by the French. This choice accomplished two things: it proclaimed his commitment to nationalism, and it established the association of a period and tone for his chansons, the golden era of Renaissance music. In so doing, he solidified his position as a significant French composer by placing himself alongside a nationally cherished figure (Charles d’Orleans), and connecting himself to a time before all of the corrupting effects of German and Italian influence of music of the 18th and 19th centuries. Debussy’s choice of a Renaissance text elevated his music to “the age of the ‘wonderful arabesque,’ when music subject to the laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself.”

Debussy’s settings, while evoking elements of Renaissance chanson, were not imitations, as his mind “effortlessly [made] the forms of the past its own.” While endeavoring to remain true to the poetry’s form, tone, and sentiments, he incorporated some of his own textual adaptations, by repeating lines of texts in the refrains and occasionally modifying punctuation. In addition, he incorporated Renaissance chanson techniques and combined them with his own, evoking his own idiosyncratic style and approach to the poems.

---

3 Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, 84.

4 Louis Laloy, *On Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky*, 211.
The arabesque is a cornerstone of Debussy’s style and a key element of the *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans*. In these songs, Debussy employs two types of melodic arabesque—flowing and ornamental—and deploys the arabesque for distinctive purposes: to elucidate text, to create metric ambiguity, and to create texture that helps to delineate form. These reflect aspects of the Renaissance chanson and also connect the arabesque to its roots in plainchant. The influence of plainchant is also evident in the melodies upon which he builds his chansons: they have an arching shape, are often syllabic, have a limited range, are mostly conjunct, and use short, recurring melodic motifs. In addition, Debussy applies his understanding of modes as derived from his encounters with plainchant to the design of the *Trois chansons*. The combination of arabesque, plainchant-influenced melodic structures, and modal harmonies results in the distinctive Debussy sound, which possesses a “singular clarity of outline,” creating contrast without the necessity of harmonic progression.¹ This approach is more characteristic of the music of the Renaissance masters than that of the Romantics and helps to define Debussy as a French composer whose unique approach is rooted in older styles.

---

¹ Boyd Pomeroy, “Debussy’s Tonality”, *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, 159.
Types of Arabesque: Flowing and Ornamental

There are two distinct types of arabesque in Debussy’s music: the flowing and the ornamental. These have been described and discussed as defining characteristics in Debussy’s *Deux arabesque*. As is illustrated in the comparison in examples 1-3 (page 64) both have a curving shape and short note values, but the flowing arabesque has a longer line than the ornamental arabesque and flows with a consistently smooth rhythm, as in Debussy’s First Arabesque. The ornamental arabesque has short motifs with an uneven rhythmic quality, composed of short note values, as in the Second Arabesque.

**Flowing and ornamental arabesques in Trois chansons**

The ornamental type of arabesque dominates the first chanson, *Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder* (example 3). In the first five measures, the sixteenth-note triplet ornamentation in the alto and tenor parts interrupts the flow of eighth-notes. This ornamental quality is present throughout the piece as a rhythmic motif.
Example 4. Ornamental arabesque

The ornamental arabesque is much in evidence in the second chanson, *Quant j’ai ouy le tabourin*. In measure 2, for example, the altos of the choir sing short curving motives composed of two eighth-notes and two sixteenth-notes, highlighted by the addition of a D-sharp (Example 5a). This ornamental arabesque will be heard again in the next section (measure 20) and continues prominently as a rhythmic motive. The alto arabesque is expanded upon by the bass in measures 8-11, with two sixteenth-notes, an eighth-, and two sixteenth-notes in repeated ornamental arabesques (example 5b).

Example 5a. Ornamental arabesque in alto
Example 5b. Ornamental arabesque in bass

An example of the flowing arabesque can be seen in the alto solo refrain of *Quant j’ai ouy le tabourin*, which has a rhythmically smooth quality of mostly eighth notes (example 6). The line is extended and contains multiple curves.

Example 6. Flowing Arabesque in alto solo refrain

Another good example of flowing arabesque can be found in *Quant j’ai ouy le tabourin*, in measures 32-36 (example 7). The divided tenor has gently curving lines composed of eighth notes in an even rhythm.

Example 7. Flowing arabesques
Arabesque and Texture

Debussy’s writing about the arabesque often refers to the effects they can produce in combination. He speaks of “the arabesques intertwining to produce melodic harmony,” the curving “parallel movement of several lines whose fusion stirs our emotions,” and “the free play of sonorities whose curves, whether flowing in parallel or
contrary motion, would result in an undreamed of flowering."² All of these may be found in *Trois chansons*. They include arabesques in homophonic and homorhythmic texture, which can appear in parallel or contrary motion, and in polyphonic texture.

An example of a homorhythmic parallel arabesque is seen in measures 21-23 of *Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder* with the cascading sixteenth-note parallel lines in the alto, tenor, and bass (example 8). This technique, sometimes referred to as “planing,” is distinctive and frequent in Debussy’s music. In this music, it evokes the Renaissance style of fauxbourdon with its succession of parallel first-inversion chords.

Example 8. Homo-rhythmic parallel arabesque

Another homophonic arabesque in parallel motion occurs in *Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain*, when the lower voices enter together beginning in measure 14 in homorhythmic arabesques (example 9). An overall homophonic approach prevails through the rest of the summer section.

² Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, 84.
Example 9. Homorhythmic parallel arabesque

In contrast to the homophonic parallel motion arabesques are those in contrary motion. In the first measures of *Dieu*, the alto and tenor are mostly paired in thirds, with similar triplet motifs that echo one another and also sound simultaneously. But the bass line is a mirror of the arching shape in the upper three voices, creating contrary motion (example 10). With the interplay between independent voices they form the impression of lines intertwining.
In *Yver, vous n’este qu’un villain*, four lines move in contrary motion to create an intertwining arabesque in measures 29-33 (example 11). Though largely homorhythmic, each line has its own character and melodic shape, resulting in overall contrary motion. The alto and soprano descend in parallel thirds and sixths with a small upturn on the final notes. The tenor line has a truly curving shape, descending a seventh and ascending a fifth by steps. The bass also curves somewhat, ascending by step and then dropping back down the octave and ascending a fourth. The tenor crosses or intertwines with the alto, and the ascending bass line has its own rhythmic design and melodic shape and crosses with the tenor.
Example 11. Arabesques in contrary motion

Debussy also forms polyphonic textures using arabesques. Polyphony occurs very near the beginning of the set with paired duets to evoke the Renaissance chanson (example 12).

Example 12. Polyphonic arabesques in paired duets
A more elaborate use of polyphony occurs in measures 13-15 of Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder, where a polyphonic approach creates a variation of the refrain. The soprano begins with the melody that originally occurred in the alto in mm. 1-3 (stripped of its ornamental arabesques), followed by the lower voices with new arabesque lines (example 13).

Example 13. Polyphonic arabesque

Arabesques and Form

Debussy delineates form in Trois chansons partly through varying the way he builds up textures from the arabesques. In particular, he uses texture to highlight each poem’s refrain structure. In measures 21-23 of the first chanson, for example, there is a paired duet with increasing contrapuntal activity in the four voices before the refrain statement in measure 25 (example 14).
Example 14. Arabesque texture increasing rhythmic activity before refrain

Debussy also accomplishes form and the contrast of winter and summer in *Yver*, *vous n’estes qu’un villain* by use of contrasting textures, which are made up of differing types of arabesques or motives (examples 15 a-c). The winter section “A” is distinguished primarily by the use of imitative counterpoint of the “winter” motive. The winter motive—an “angular” conception of arabesque, is presented in the alto voice in
measures 1-2. This is followed by a similar statement in the tenor and a paired duet in the soprano and bass. (example 15a).

Example 15a. Using texture for contrast—polyphonic winter section

The staggered entrances of this section are contrasted with the largely homophonic section depicting summer that follows. It begins with a motive in measure 10 that evolves into homorhythmic arabesques (example 15b).

Example 15b. Homophonic texture for summer section
When winter returns in measure 34, Debussy heralds the return with imitative counterpoint, which continues in an overall polyphonic approach (example 15c).

Example 15c. Imitative polyphony for winter section

Arabesque and Text Painting

Just as it is in Renaissance music, text painting is central to Trois chansons de Charles d’Orleans. Debussy uses the arabesque in three ways in relation to the text in Trois chansons: in onomatopoeia, to highlight specific words, and for affect.
Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is especially prominent and easily identifiable in the second chanson, *Quant j’ai ouy le tabourin*, where Debussy uses arabesques to imitate the sound of the tambourine mentioned in the poem. In measure 2, the alto’s initial ornamental arabesque motif with its staccato eighth-notes sets the stage for the rhythmic onomatopoeia to follow. The bass presents a repeating rhythmic motif that evolves to an ornamental arabesque in measures 9-13. The alto has a rhythmically similar motif that in repetition forms a curving shape in its line (example 16). The onomatopoeia is evocative of the tambourine with repetitive long-short and dotted note rhythms and staccato articulations that give the vocal lines the percussive quality of the instrument.

Example 16. Onomatopoeia evoking tambourine

Onomatopoeia also occurs briefly in the first chanson, *Dieu qu’il la fait bon regarder*. The wavelike melodic arabesque of the dotted rhythm in measure 18, with its
repeated crescendos and rocking thirds, effectively paints the picture of ocean waves in the text “On this side of the sea or the other” (example 17).

Example 17. Onomatopoeia evoking ocean waves

Highlighting Individual Words

Debussy uses the rhythmic aspect of the arabesque to lengthen and highlight important words, and the melodic shapes also bring attention to important words in the text. Both of these applications can be seen in Trois chansons.

In measures 1-5 of Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder for example, the words bon (good), regarder (to look at), gracieuse (gracious), and belle (beautiful) all occur on triplet arabesques. The contour of the melodic lines also highlights the text. The word gracieuse occurs in all voices at the apex of the phrase, even as the alto and tenor arabesques highlight that word (example 18).
Example 18. Arabesques highlighting important words using ornament and contour

Debussy also uses the contour of the arabesque line to portray the text in the solo line of *Quand j’ai ouy le tabourin*. The melodic line rises to its apex on the word *Sonner* (sound), bringing out the importance of the word and making it sound louder. At the end of the second line, the line descends to its lowest note on *coissin* (pillow), painting the picture of the sleeper laying her head down on the pillow (example 19).

Example 19. Highlighting key words with arabesque contour.
Affect

Debussy uses the arabesque to convey specific affects. In the first chanson, the triplet motif is a decorative, curving, ornamentation on the melodic theme. The triplets and the sinuous, undulating curves mostly in conjunct motion at the opening combine to evoke the sensuality of the beloved (as outlined by Bhogal). The ornamental arabesque on sixteenth-note triplets, *sa beaute renouvelle*, reinforces the ornamented feminine quality of her beauty (example 20).

Example 20. Creating feminine affect with ornamental arabesque

In measures 21 and 22, the piece reaches its climax on the words *Qui soit en tous bien parfaits telle* (Who is so perfect in every respect). Here the contour and movement of the lines mirrors the enthusiasm and praise. The soprano reaches its highest note in the
piece twice in an arabesque repeatedly curving up and down, embellished with a triplet, thereby exuberantly proclaiming the superiority of the beloved, as if putting her on a musical pedestal. The flowing arabesques in the lower voices add to the excitement. (example 21). This passage calls to mind Debussy’s comment that “it is not so much the character of the lines that affects us, but the curve. More often it is the parallel movement of several lines whose fusion stirs our emotions.”

Example 21. Creating excitement affect with arabesque

Debussy paints the text *De non chaloir* in the second chanson through his choice of arabesque and its treatment. The idea of *non chaloir* or “indifference” takes on a significant meaning, almost a character of its own, as discussed by John Fox and Mary-Jo Arn in their critical edition of the poetry of Charles d’Orleans. R. Barton Palmer’s translation of this line in the critical edition is, “I’ll buddy up to Indifference. From him I’ll get a reward. I found him my closest neighbor.”

---

3 Mary-Jo Arn and John Fox, ed., R. Barton Palmer, trans., *Poetry of Charles d’Orleans and his Circle*. 102
makes Debussy’s treatment of the text all the more effective here. Debussy’s change of arabesque form in measures 32-40 and the instruction “à bouche fermée” along with the pianissimo dynamic combine to create the affect. The soft dynamic, the relatively non-rhythmic, melodically repetitive—even static—accompaniment evoke the non chaloir of the sleeper (example 22).

Example 22. Creating non chaloir affect with flowing parallel arabesques

Painting Contrasting Images

Debussy’s use of arabesque to highlight specific words or phrases also creates larger contrasts within each chanson. For example, the humming section in the second chanson, inspired by the languid text, (example 22), creates a contrast to the livelier music that surrounds it. The animated sections contrast sharply with the humming section.
and, with their planing arabesques and dotted rhythms, vividly paint the picture of the “Young people” in their celebration (example 23).

Example 23. Contrasting lively arabesque

In Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain, Debussy contrasts the soft round arabesques of summer with harsh, angular arabesques to depict winter. He may have gotten the idea from Edgar Allan Poe, one of Debussy’s favorite writers.⁴ According to Ashton Dore, Poe makes a distinction between the arabesque and angular forms, disparaging “the harsh mathematical reason of schools and complaining that practical science has covered the world with rectangular obscenities.” Further, he “quite explicitly identifies regular angular forms with everyday reason, and the circle oval or fluid arabesque with the other

---
⁴ Claude Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, 54n. Replying to a questionnaire in 1889, Debussy identified Poe and Flaubert as his favorite prose writers. At that time, he was working on a symphony based on Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*.
worldly imagination.”⁵ Poe’s angular forms or settings in his descriptive writing usually held ominous meanings. Debussy’s depiction of winter in his use of motives has a harsh, angular quality (example 24). The pitches descend and ascend in an irregular pattern of seconds and thirds, creating a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability, and the first two long notes followed by five staccato eighth notes create an insistent, driving rhythm.

Example 24. Winter angular arabesque

By contrast, the gently recurring dance rhythm and mostly conjunct motion of the arabesque figure in measures 11-16 of Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain aptly portrays the easy carefree feeling of summer (example 25). The interval of the second is figural. It has an easy carefree quality because it requires relatively little effort to execute—the ear
hears the transition from note to note and the lilting rhythm, alternating between quarter-notes and eighth-notes, as smooth and effortless, reflecting the ease of life in summertime.

Example 25. Contrasting summer arabesque
Arabesque and Plainchant

Debussy believed that Renaissance composers derived the arabesque from plainchant. He wrote, “They found the basis of [arabesque] in Gregorian Chant, whose delicate traceries they supported with twining counterpoints.” Plainchant qualities such as narrow range, melodic contour, and rhythmic fluidity are fundamental to Debussy’s style. Vallas talked about the “rhythmic suppleness” of Debussy’s music. Durakoglu asserts that some of Debussy’s piano etudes evoke plainchant in their length, modal color, and unmetered quality. Bhogal finds properties of plainchant in Debussy’s construction of arabesques, including melodic contour, narrowness of range, and rhythmic fluidity.

The melodies and texture in Trois chansons reflect Debussy’s attraction to “delicate traceries…supported with twining counterpoints.” The vocal lines in Trois chansons are frequently built up of arabesques that in turn manifest aspects of plainchant. There can be no doubt that the two—arabesque and plainchant—are thoroughly linked in Debussy’s mind.

Characteristics of Debussy’s vocal writing that recall plainchant include arched form (with possible multiple arches) and a narrow range where “the shape of the line impresses itself particularly clearly upon the senses.”6 Frequently there is a steep ascent, often of a leap, followed by a slowly descending line or series of waves.

---

Plainchant Qualities in the Arabesque Line

Plainchant characteristics are particularly evident in the refrain of the second chanson with its curving, undulating arabesque (example 26). Like a plainchant, the melody has a limited range, an arching shape, and is mostly conjunct. A leap of a fourth is followed by descending intervals of seconds. The melodic arabesque begins and ends on the same low note. The line is rhythmically fluid, composed entirely of eighth-notes.

Example 26. Plainchant qualities in arabesque.

The use of plainchant elements in crafting multiple vocal lines is evident in the arabesques in each of the Trois chansons. The opening of Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder, a refrain that recurs twice more in the piece, already declares Debussy’s intention to model his materials on plainchant (example 27).

Example 27. Plainchant qualities in arabesque.
The alto line, which is later revealed to be the main melody (it occurs in the soprano in the second statement of the refrain) begins with an ascending leap of a third that is followed by stepwise descent, then a leap of a fourth followed by a stepwise descent. The melody therefore has a curving shape, created by a repeated arch.

The vocal lines in this opening all have an arching shape covering a range of a fourth or a fifth with conjunct movement predominating. The second phrase continues in plainchant style, with an arch shape of a fifth or a sixth and mostly conjunct motion. The lines turn into themselves, winding around and mostly ending where they began (only the tenor phrase ends on a different note; Debussy does this to achieve an antique-sounding open fifth rather than the triad that would result if the tenor ended on the A with which it began). The rhythm in all parts in both phrases is predominantly eighth-notes, with ornamental arabesques constructed of triplets to create “delicate traceries” (example 28).
Example 28. Plainchant qualities in combined arabesque lines.

Arabesque and Metric Ambiguity

Though he never wrote about it explicitly, we can infer from Debussy’s music that he understood that Renaissance composers had a more fluid sense of rhythm and meter than did later composers. He uses arabesque in the *Trois chansons* as a means of evoking both the Renaissance and a plainchant character, specifically by creating metric ambiguity. As outlined in the previous chapter (see page 69), metric ambiguity (which Bhogal calls metric instability) comprises two types, displacement dissonance and grouping dissonance. Grouping dissonance involves the juxtaposition of triplets against
duplets, and displacement dissonance happens when the regular metric beat is disrupted, resulting in a feeling of suspension of meter. This type of arabesque is found elsewhere in Debussy’s music, most notably in the flute solo that opens *Prelude à l’après-midi d’un faune*. Debussy uses metric ambiguity to create a sense of spaciousness and an organic connection to nature, to evoke the fluidity of plainchant, and to create contrast with more metrically defined components.

In *Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder*, the use of metric ambiguity creates a feeling of suspended time, contributing to an atmosphere of devotion evoking mystical adoration of the Divine. The flexibility of the arabesque used in various triplet verses duplet rhythms allows each phrase to have a different quality, character or shape, creating both variety and unity of form, evoking “all her virtues” and qualities.

The first section of the piece (mm. 1 – 5) has a feeling of metric ambiguity, and the placement of the words increases that sensation. The first entrance, a half-note beginning on beat two as an anacrusis, creates displacement dissonance from the very first notes. Debussy begins the piece with the word *Dieu!* on an accented half note with diminuendo. This rhythmic arrangement makes it difficult to discern the meter. Grouping dissonances occur almost immediately in the opening measures of the piece: between the bass and the altos and tenors on the fourth beat of measure 2 and between the tenor and alto in the first beat of measure 3. In addition to this, the alto and tenor have grouping dissonance within their own five-measure phrase (example 29).
Example 29. Grouping dissonance

In Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain, Debussy uses the arabesque’s metric ambiguity to create a languid atmosphere in the summer section, contrasted with the rhythmic regularity of the winter sections. In measure 24, the introduction of the triplet in the middle of duple meter creates displacement dissonance—a hemiola effect. The triplet is used again in measures 26-28 for the same effect (example 30).
Debussy’s Use of Modes

Another aspect that evokes early music in Debussy's Trois chansons is his use of modal scales or melodies, reflecting the sounds he heard in performances in Italy, at St. Gervais, and at Solesmes. Although Debussy was inspired by hearing these performances, he had a personal, internalized approach based on what he heard. In his review of *Trois chansons*, Laloy wrote:

There is nothing in these compositions which is put in for the sake of resemblance, nothing which does not translate what is in the author's mind with the strictest accuracy. But it must be added that this mind, not being a slave to modern regimentation, effortlessly makes the forms of the past its own. Thus, the scale without a leading note, which appears in the first Chanson, is just as familiar to the Renaissance masters; but a long time ago, Claude Debussy rediscovered it, by instinct, and put it in many pages where he cannot be suspected archaism, for example in his Quartet, and in *Pelléas.*

---

7 Louis Laloy, *On Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky*, 211.
Modal writing evokes the music of Renaissance polyphony, Palestrina, Victoria, and Lassus, and creates an even earlier link with plainchant. A striking similarity can be heard, for example, in Lassus’s *Bonjour mon coeur*, which is similar to *Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder* in voice movement, pitch relationships and use of the Mixolydian mode. In Renaissance polyphony, mode is determined by several factors: range of tenor and superius, prominent cadences, reciting tone, etc. Debussy's experience of Renaissance polyphony and plainchant, primarily from the perspective of a listener, reflects his own personalized approach, based on aural perception rather than score study or reading Renaissance theory.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the broad definition of modes was applied, as the "selection of tones, arranged in a scale, that form the basic tonal substance of the composition."\(^8\) Winnington-Ingram (*Mode in Ancient Greek Music*, 1936) summarized this later conception of mode in terms of its scalar and melodic aspects:

> Mode is essentially a question of internal relationships of notes within a scale, especially of the predominance of one of them over the others as a tonic, its predominance being established in any or all of a number of ways: e.g. frequent recurrence, its appearance in a prominent position as the first note or the last, the delaying of its expected occurrence by some kind of embellishment.\(^9\)

Further clarification of Debussy's use of modes is gained by examining the melodic patterns and repeated motives and other significant voice movement that outlines the modal scales, under the more generalized idea of pitch collections.\(^10\)

---


In *Trois chansons*, Debussy does not strictly follow a sixteenth-century method of modal writing, but creates his own personal, idiosyncratic approach, for example, by transposing modes to different keys and pitches. Nevertheless, the effect of his use of modes in *Trois chansons* effectively connects Debussy’s late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century style to sounds evoking Renaissance polyphony and plainchant.

In his discussion of modality in Debussy's music Pomeroy asserts:

In Debussy's mature style, while the traditional major/minor system continues to inform tonal identity on a large scale, at the level of surface detail that system is often undermined by a prevalence of degrees of modal scales such that melodies and chord successions often resist traditional tonal classification.\(^\text{11}\)

He goes on to connect Debussy's arabesques to modality, among other tonal applications.\(^\text{12}\) In *Trois chansons*, Debussy personalizes mode use through various techniques: mixing modes, combining modes with pentatonic, whole-tone and octatonic scales, and using them with 7\(^{\text{th}}\) and 9\(^{\text{th}}\) chords, yet maintaining the overall flavor of the ancient modes. Debussy makes use of Aeolian, Dorian, Lydian, Mixolydian, and Ionian modes, supplemented by whole-tone and chromatic elements.

Debussy uses modes idiosyncratically in various ways in his *Trois chansons*, such as to outline the form, both in the poetry and in his composition, and to support and highlight the poetic text.

\(^{11}\) Boyd Pomeroy, *Debussy's tonality*, 157.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 159.
Outlining Poetic Form

In *Dieu, qu’il la fait bon regarder*, Debussy reflects the organization of the poem into couplets by distinguishing each couplet with a change of mode (table 2).

Table 2. Mode use in *Dieu! qu’il la fait bon regarder*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dieu! qu’il la fait bon regarder</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mode</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dieu! qu’il la fait bon regarder</em></td>
<td>F-sharp Mixolydian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La gracieuse bonne et belle;</em></td>
<td>D Mixolydian/B Mixolydian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pour les grans biens que sont en elle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chascun est prest de la loüer.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qui se pourroit d’elle lasser?</td>
<td>C-sharp Aeolian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tousjours sa beauté renouvelle.</td>
<td>C-sharp Dorian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dieu qu’il la fait bon regarder,</em></td>
<td>Transitioning, descending chromatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La gracieuse bonne et belle!</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par de ça, ne de là, la mer</td>
<td>F-sharp Lydian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ne scay dame ne demoiselle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qui soit en tous bien parfais telle.</td>
<td>F-sharp Dorian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C’est ung songe que d’i penser:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dieu! qu’il la fait bon regarder!</em></td>
<td>F-sharp Mixolydian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Dieu! qu’il la fait bon regarder!</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the second chanson, *Quand j’ai ouy le tabourin*, modes help to define the poetic form by heralding the refrain with use of the Aeolian mode. This is highlighted by the presence of Ionian (mixed with other modes) immediately preceding the refrain (see table 3).
Tonal Ambiguity

Modes help to create tonal ambiguity, a favorite technique for Debussy. In the second chanson, *Quant j’ai ouy le tabourin*, tonal ambiguity aurally paints the ambivalence, the *nonchaloir*, the sleeper in the poem feels about getting up from her comfortable bed, and the clash of modes portrays the contrast between the sleepy speaker and the raucous party-goers (table 3).

Debussy begins with a descending Aeolian scale on F-sharp, but in the second measure he adds a D-sharp to the alto arabesque to create a major-minor seventh chord on B (example 31). This brief allusion to either B Ionian or Dorian mode based on F-sharp sets the stage for the tonal ambiguity that will be a hallmark of this piece.
Another case of modal ambiguity is found in measures 19-21, where the bass descending F-sharp major scale is followed immediately by an F-sharp minor scale. In measures 22-25 a combination of modes is implied with the bass staying in the original F-sharp Aeolian while the alto and tenor seem to suggest D Lydian as a tonal center. An “ambivalence” evocative of the meaning of the text *De non chaloir* is created by a coloristic use of a B-flat in measures 36-37 in the C Ionian section. The tonal color that
the dominant seventh chord creates results in a modally ambiguous sound, evoking the Mixolydian mode for two measures (example 32).

Figure 32. Tonal ambivalence

A strange effect is created in measures 43 by the use of the F-sharp descending scale with a C-natural, emphasizing the tritone and creating a whole tone combined with an octatonic scale. With the D tonal center in the bass, and a G-sharp and C-natural, the effect is a combination of Mixolydian and Lydian modes. The combinations of modal
colors and scales create a state of heightened tension before the release of the final cadence (example 33).

Example 33. Mode combining to increase tension

The final chord, an open fifth, reinforces modal ambiguity and resembles a type of Renaissance final sonority.
Table 3. Mode use in *Quant j’ai ouý le tabourin*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Chorus, “la la” etc.)</td>
<td>F-sharp Aeolian/Dorian/Ionian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quant j’ai ouý le tabourin</td>
<td>F-sharp Aeolian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonner pour s’en aller au may,</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>En mon lit fait n’en ay effray</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ne levé mon chef du cousin.</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>En disant : il est trop matin,</td>
<td>A Ionian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ung peu je me rendormiray:</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Chorus, “la la” etc.)</td>
<td>F-sharp Ionian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quant j’ay ouý le tabourin</td>
<td>F-sharp Aeolian/Lydian in chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonner pour s’en aller au may,</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeune gen partent leur butin,</td>
<td>A Mixolydian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De Nonchaloir m’acointeray</td>
<td>C Ionian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lui je m’abutineray,</td>
<td>C Ionian/Mixolydian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouvé l’ay plus prochain voisin,</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quant j’ay ouý le tabourin</td>
<td>F-sharp Aeolian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonner pour s’en aller au may,</td>
<td>F-sharp Aeolian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>En mon lit fait n’en ay effray</td>
<td>F-sharp W.T.-Octatonic/D Mixolydian-Lydian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ne levé mon chef du cousin.</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Final Chorus “la la” etc.)</td>
<td>F-sharp (open fifth)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Contrasting Modes for Affect**

Debussy uses contrasting modes to evoke the sense of text. In the second chanson, *Quand j’ai ouý le tabourin*, different modes are used to create contrasting affects in describing the drowsiness of the sleeper in the refrains (Aeolian), contrasted with the
bright energetic activity of the Maying crowd (Ionian). (See table 3; also see translation of the poem on page 80).

In *Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain*, winter is contrasted with summer. The use of Aeolian sets up a dark ominous tone portraying winter, contrasted with the happy brightness of the Ionian mode, which paints the picture of a pleasant summer scene.

Table 4. Mode Use in *Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YVER, VOUS N’ESTES QU’UN VILLAIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Yver, vous n’estes qu’un villain,</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esté est plaisant et gentil,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>En tesmoing de May et d’Avil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qui l’accompaignent soir et main.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esté revest champs, bois et fleur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da sa livrée de verdure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Et de maintes autres couleurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Par l’ordonnance de nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mais vois, Yver, trop estes plein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De nège, vent, pluye et grézil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On vous deust banir en éxil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sans point flater, je parle plein,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Yver, vous nestes qu’un villain!</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

In its flowing and ornamental types, the arabesque in *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans* takes on various aspects and has many applications that connect *Trois chansons* to Renaissance music. In addition, Debussy’s arabesques have qualities that reflect plainchant, including narrow range, small or mostly stepwise intervals, and
curving and arching shapes. The use of modes and modal-sounding scales is another connection to plainchant and Renaissance music. Debussy inventively employs the arabesque in text painting, a specifically Renaissance technique, and uses the arabesque to highlight words, for onomatopoeia and to create affect. He uses arabesques and arabesque textures to create varying structures for form. His tonal colors, though sometimes achieved with modern techniques, evoke the colors and sounds of Renaissance chanson and plainchant.

Though he deploys them in structures and harmonies rooted in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century techniques, the plainchant qualities of Debussy’s arabesques call to mind a Renaissance style that is apt for the poetry of Charles d’Orleans. Moreover, the basis of Debussy’ arabesques in plainchant gives them a distinctive beauty that is especially felicitous for the human voice.

To fully understand Debussy’s *Trois chansons*, it is essential to acknowledge the important role of both arabesque and plainchant in this work. The arabesque is a beautiful design, and its presence is easily observed, but for Debussy its musical existence was intimately tied to plainchant. His most effusive and enthusiastic comments were reserved for that style of music that he described as containing the “divine” arabesque, that had its basis in plainchant, “whose delicate traceries they supported with twining counterpoints.” Debussy’s conception of *Trois chansons* echoes a musical style similar to the “primitives” of the Renaissance. The chansons begin with plainchant-like motives and build on them with “twining counterpoints” to create arabesques that intertwine or move in parallel motion. Debussy’s connection to plainchant had an important role in his life:
it took him away from the mundane, factory approach that had become common in
teneteenth-century France, to a style and an approach that gave him inspiration.

To Debussy, there was no distinction between "sacred" and "secular." To imagine
plainchant in a chanson would not have been a contradiction for Debussy. His approach
to the religious music of the past was an appreciation for its form and beauty and
admiration for those who originally wrote it. He could easily adapt certain of its features
or style and use it for his own works without making a distinction between a sacred or
secular forms, for to him, as a pantheist, everything was full of spirituality.

This sentiment was evident in his discussion of his approach to his work Le
Martyre de Saint-Sébastien in an interview with the journalist "Henry Malherbe" in 1911:

In my opinion the writing of sacred music ceased with the sixteenth century. The
beautiful, childlike souls of those days were alone capable of expressing their
passionate, disinterested fervor in music free from all admixture of worldliness. . .
I do not practice religion in accordance with the sacred rites. I have made
mysterious Nature my religion. I do not believe that a man is any nearer to God
for being clad in priestly garments, nor that one place in a town is better adapted
to meditation than another. When I gaze at a sunset sky and spend hours
contemplating its marvelous ever-changing beauty, an extraordinary emotion
overwhelms me. Nature in all its vastness is truthfully reflected in my sincere
though feeble soul. Around me are the trees stretching up their branches to the
skies, the perfumed flowers gladdening the meadows, the gentle grass-carpeted
earth . . .and my hands unconsciously assume an attitude of adoration . . .To feel
the supreme and moving beauty of the spectacle to which Nature invites her
ephemeral guests!—that is what I call prayer.¹³

¹³ Vallas, Claude Debussy Life and Works, 224-225. "Henry Malherbe" (pseudonym) interviewed Debussy
on behalf of the Excelsior. The article appeared on February 11, 1911.
Conversely, Debussy's musical inspiration could traverse the space of a church to more "worldly" realms. One can imagine a young Debussy, despondent, alone, sitting in a small church in Rome, and the light of inspiration he was given upon hearing “the melodic lines unroll and expand, reminding you of the illuminations in ancient missals.” His next statement, poignant in its transparency, is significant. “And those are the only occasions when my real musical self has given a slight stir.” Debussy eventually realized that his experience of the melodic lines unrolling and expanding, and the subsequent stirring of his “real musical self,” was built on the foundations of plainchant.
A line of chronological influence in Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans* would place the Renaissance chanson in the foreground. Farther back would be the arabesque, and still farther back would be the “delicate tracery” of “Gregorian chant…supported with twining counterpoints.” In Debussy’s music, this includes mode use, a plainchant style in the refrains, and plainchant aspects in the arabesques. The connection to Renaissance music and plainchant has specific implications in performance, and the presence of arabesque and plainchant influence also have performance practice implications.

To begin, there is the question of authentic performance. To what extent should our present understanding of Renaissance practice influence the performance of Debussy’s *Chansons*? How does current thought about performing Renaissance music compare to the ways Debussy and his contemporaries performed early music? How much do we know about the early-music style of groups like the Chanteurs de St. Gervais and the vocal style they employed? Twenty-first century performers of Renaissance music maintain a largely straight tone with a lean vocal approach, rather than the more Romantic approach of substantial voices, using vibrato and large dynamic contrasts.

Debussy did not speak much about performance practice. He quoted Portia in Merchant of Venice about the “folly” of trying to quantify good taste: “‘The man that hath no music in himself…let no such man be trusted.’” Those people who are only preoccupied with the
formula that will yield them the best results, without ever having listened to the still small voice of music within themselves, would do well to think on these words.”¹ He believed strongly that the “beauty of a work of art is something that will always remain mysterious; that is to say one can never find out exactly ‘how it is done’.”² There were few occasions he spoke about specific performances. He praised Ysaïe’s playing of Bach’s Violin Concerto in G “as only he is capable of doing. Without any sense of having intruded on the music, he has a freedom of expression and a spontaneous, natural beauty of tone—essential gifts for the interpretation of music.”³ In his praise of the performance of his “Mélisande,” Mary Garden, he relates hearing in the fifth act—Mélisande’s death—“the voice I had secretly imagined—full of sinking tenderness, and sung with such artistry as I would never have believed possible.”⁴ By these comments, one would extract that Debussy’s desired qualities for performance are restraint, yet with freedom and spontaneity, natural beauty of tone, and expressive tenderness and artistry. The word delicate appears in his praise of the Schola’s performance of Rameau’s Castor et Pollux: “Never has such a delicate feeling of the voluptuous found such perfect expression! It fills the heavenly air with such light.”⁵ It is difficult to tease out Debussy’s comments here, whether they were about the composition, the performance, or both together.

¹ Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music, 277-278.
² Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music, 279.
³ Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music, 26.
⁴ Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music, 227.
⁵ Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music, 112.
Studying Debussy’s review of *Castor et Pollux* given by the Schola Cantorum may indeed be a way to understand his ideal in performance practice. Debussy drew a contrast between the ideal French music and what he viewed as German Romanticism:

We have however, a purely French tradition in the works of Rameau. They combine a charming and delicate tenderness with precise tones and strict declamation in the recitatives, none of that affected German pomp, nor the need to emphasize everything with extravagant gestures or out of breath explanations, the sort of which seem to say “you are a singular collection of idiots who understand nothing and would easily believe that the moon was made out of green cheese!”

The reference here to “delicate tenderness with precise tones and strict declamation” is particularly instructive.

Debussy also valued “clearness of expression” and “conciseness and precision of form.” In 1906, he wrote to his friend Louis Laloy praising his enthusiasm for Rameau. Disparaging “Gluck’s deceitful grandiloquence, Wagner’s bombastic metaphysics, and the old Belgian angel’s false mysticism” (probably a reference to Franck), he laments the modern loss of “the perfect taste and strict elegance” that Rameau’s music represented, which he felt had become rare in French music. Though primarily describing compositional styles, these descriptions give a good direction to what Debussy viewed as the ideal qualities of French early music. His descriptive ideals of composition could well be extrapolated as ideals of the performance of music as well, and for his own renditions of *Trois chansons* in the ideal French style.

---

6 Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, 112.

7 Ibid.

8 Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, 172.
All of this would suggest that performers of the *Trois chansons* should exercise restraint in vocal tone and production—limiting excessive use of vibrato, keeping a fairly lean vocal tone, and avoiding extremes of dynamics. Debussy’s markings for the first two chansons never rise above *mezzo forte*. The *forte* and *fortissimo* markings in the winter sections of the third chanson are clearly outliers—extremes used deliberately for effect. Those unusually loud dynamics should still be executed with some judiciousness. Careful enunciation is paramount to maintain clarity in the diction and expression of the text, but this should not be overly dramatized. In questions of expression, restraint and elegance should prevail. Delicacy, clarity, and conciseness (all of which Debussy praised in his writing) should override bombast, drama and extravagance (all of which Debussy derided in the most vigorous terms). Strict elegance and good taste are the watchwords.

Other aspects can be highlighted in order to elucidate the music’s form and style. The arabesques can be emphasized with restraint and good taste. In the first five measures of the first chanson, for example, the triplets should be brought out with clarity, but delicately. In keeping with the tempo marking at the beginning of the piece, *Très modéré soutenu et expressif* (very moderate, sustained, and expressive), the tempo should not drag, and the line should move forward. There is a delicacy that the direction *soutenu* combines: a tenderness that can be brought forth to express the text, not extravagantly, but with a “delicate feeling of the voluptuous,” as Debussy described Rameau’s *Castor et Pollux*. Even with the sustained or steady approach, lightness and clarity should prevail. There should be only sparing use of rubato, delicately applied, to Debussy’s direction

---

“expressif.” In duets (such as in measure 6) it is essential that the two voices be exactly aligned. The triplets should be kept light and sung in a steady tempo.

In the second chanson, Debussy marks each of the choral voices léger (lightly), and this should be conscientiously observed. The delicate affect is made more explicit by the pp dynamic and the staccato markings in the chorus. Here there is an upward lightness of approach in the chorus, which brings out the onomatopoeia. The bass’s descending scales and arabesque motives should never be heavy, nor should any of the arabesque motives. English-speaking singers should be careful to sing “la” with a bright, French [a], which stays forward in the mouth and which will help maintain the overall character of the choral accompaniment to the solo.

In the third chanson, the arabesques of the summer section can be made even more contrasting to the winter sections through the piano dynamic, and the staccato in this section has a different, lighter, and more dancing quality than the staccato in the winter sections. The only forte in this section occurs at the end of a crescendo in measure 29 on the word par followed by an immediate diminuendo. This forte should be kept in character with the rest of the section; the crescendo to par and subsequent diminuendo are the natural effect of the rising and falling in pitch of the lines in measures 27-31. The bass and tenor, however, have to be especially careful to get softer here, since their lines are ascending. All of the parts not marked staccato in the summer section should be legato. This is especially necessary in measures 22 - 25, marked doux, where there is a shift from the chorus to a quartet and also from staccato to legato. In measures 25-34 the triplet arabesques are predominantly conjunct, and after the few staccato notes, they
should be approached in very legato manner. Otherwise, even in the staccato sections, the approach is very light and delicate.

Debussy sometimes uses dynamics to bring out the poetic structure. This is especially apparent in the first chanson, where Debussy marks the couplets in the text with changing dynamics. Performers should pay careful attention to these subtle changes to make the design of the text clear to the listener.

In each of the three chansons, there is a change of rhythmic character in the middle; performers should highlight this by emphasizing the different rhythmic attributes. In the first chanson, this occurs in measures 18-19 with the text *par de ca ne de la la mer*. The second chanson has a change of texture and a distinctive rhythm that can be highlighted beginning in measure 26 and the following solo line *Jeunes gens*.

The plainchant aspects of the music, especially in the refrains, should lead the performers to a plainchant approach in singing it. Debussy’s *soutenu* direction at the beginning of the first chanson can be taken as a way to approach the piece in a Solesmes-inspired chant style. Remembering Gapp’s observation that the Solesmes singers “glide with flexibility and ease from one note to another,” the lines should flow naturally and effortlessly with no trace of anything heavy, dragging, choppy, or jerky. The solo refrain in the second chanson should also be approached this way, as it lends itself to a smooth, sustained plainchant style. The summer refrain the third chanson, beginning with the upbeat to measure 11, has a style more in line with a *soutenu* plainchant approach than the jagged winter sections that surround it.

---

In addition, the restatements of the refrains should be highlighted. The plainchant style of the singing monks of Solesmes can be brought into effect here. Gapp observed that they brought out the stressed words by only a slight inflexion of the voice, due partially to a slight volume increase and perhaps also to increased enunciation, including emphasizing the consonants. This approach can be used to good effect throughout *Trois chansons* and can be especially helpful in the reiterations of the refrains.

The Solesmes style fulfills Debussy’s ideals of clearness of expression, conciseness, and precision of form. In addition, the lauded attributes of “charming and delicate tenderness” combined with “precise tones and strict declamation” are a good start in finding an authentic performance approach for *Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans*.

---

CHAPTER EIGHT
CONCLUSION

Claude Debussy’s compositional voice is uniquely identifiable, the product of many experiences and influences. One significant influence that has been underappreciated was that of early music, specifically his encounters with the performances of Charles Bordes and the Chanteurs de St. Gervais, the Schola Cantorum, and Solesmes. Those encounters inspired Debussy and gave him a fresh perspective that allowed him to break free from the constraints of the Conservatoire, where he felt his artistry stifled by a strict education suffering from the hegemony of German and Italian music. The return to earlier ideas and ideals, especially those of the Renaissance (when France held a more central place in music), was a way to capture both the prevailing spirit of French nationalism and to fill the creative gap that he felt in his own artistic expression. There were two threads to this exploration: one thoroughly focused on earlier French composers and the other centered around still earlier composers whose work long predated the stringent compositional rules of the Conservatoire.

Bordes and the Schola introduced Debussy to the early French masters. He became enamored of the music of Rameau, and he wrote reverently and often about Couperin. He spoke with delight about the chansons of Janequin and Lejeune in his reviews. Through their work, he saw a pathway to a purely French music, free from the power of outside forces: “It will take France innumerable years to work out of that influence, and when we look back upon the original French writers such as Rameau,
Couperin, Daquin, and men of their period, we can but regret that the foreign spirit fastened itself upon that which would have been a great school.”

At the same time, he often sought inspiration from early composers who worked in the very countries whose influence he rejected in the music of his day. The music of Palestrina, Victoria, Lassus, and Bach belonged to a time before what Debussy viewed as the foreign takeover of French music, and he embraced it as part of the “universal” influence. Even though none of these composers was strictly French (Lassus, the Franco-Flemish composer, comes closest), French musicians nevertheless claimed them as part of their own history. By invoking the composers that he called “the primitives,” Debussy felt that he placed himself on the right side of music history. From them, he learned the arabesque, which he associated with Bach and the primitives who “found the basis of it in Gregorian chant.”

Debussy was careful to distinguish between influence and imitation. Speaking of Goethe and Bach, he said, “[Their] works will remain monuments of beauty, unique and incapable of repetition. Their influence is like that of the sea or the sky, universal.”

The specific outcome of his encounters with the primitives, with early French composers, and with the plainchant of the Solesmes monks was Debussy’s use of the arabesque and modes. These attributes are present in much of Debussy’s music, but they are especially central to the style of the Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans. In Trois

---

1 Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music, 233.
2 Ibid, 27.
3 Claude Debussy, Debussy on Music, 83.
chansons, he took the arabesque and used it in ways conspicuously influenced by the Renaissance chanson, including its use in recurring melodies, form, texture, and text painting. Arabesques in the *Trois chansons* define tonality and create texture. The melodic motives, often arabesques or arabesque-like in shape and rhythmic quality, combine like building blocks to construct phrases, creating form. Arabesques also illuminate the meaning of the text through text painting.

The arabesque helped Debussy to make a break from his youthful training at the German-influenced Conservatoire. Through the arabesque, his compositions take on a linear quality that is more Renaissance than Romantic in character and that is crucial to Debussy’s unique voice. This linear quality (partly derived from plainchant) is particularly apposite for setting the poetry of Charles d’Orléans, and the *Trois chansons* revive and reimagine the Renaissance chanson in Claude Debussy’s idiosyncratic style.

Mode is equally essential to the distinctive sound of the *Trois chansons*, and it is important to understand the role of Debussy’s visit to Solesmes in developing his knowledge and understanding of modes. It is significant that modes seem to have been the center of the conversations that Gibbs reported in his account of meeting Debussy at Solesmes. Though the date of the visit is in dispute (a question that could benefit from further research), there seems little doubt that the visit took place and that it either sparked or continued Debussy’s interest in modal scales. That interest is fully realized in the *Trois chansons*, which represent in some significant ways the unification of Debussy’s focus on the arabesque and his encounters with plainchant.
Understanding the significance of plainchant, mode, and the arabesque together provides a lens through which to examine more of Debussy’s music. This perspective can broaden the understanding of various forms of the arabesque put forth by Bhogal and inform further investigation of Debussy’s use of this technique as outlined by Pomeroy. It would be especially appropriate to look at his choral works and solo songs from this vantage point. It would also be interesting to explore the possibility of a relationship between the plainchant rhythm as it was sung at St. Gervais and Solesmes and the rhythmic approach in Debussy’s vocal music. Setting the text “as one speaks,” as he sought to do in *Pelléas et Mélisande* presents an intriguing parallel with the ideas of Dom Mocquereau on the subject.

The significance of early music and of plainchant is central to understanding Debussy’s compositional style, and keeping this in mind as we perform and listen to Debussy’s music can be both enlightening and inspirational. At the heart of Debussy’s uniquely French voice is the plainchant-influenced arabesque, which he called “the root of all kinds of art.”

---

4 Claude Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, 27.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


