

# *Mystères limpides: Time and Transformation in Debussy's Des pas sur la neige*

Debussy est mystérieux, mais il est clair.  
—Vladimir Jankélévitch

STEVEN RINGS

## INTRODUCTION: SECRETS AND MYSTERIES

Vladimir Jankélévitch begins his 1949 monograph *Debussy et le mystère* by drawing a distinction between the secret and the mystery. Secrets, per Jankélévitch, are *knowable*, but they are known only to some. For those not “in on the secret,” the barrier to knowledge can take many forms: a secret might be enclosed in a riddle or a puzzle; it might be hidden by acts of dissembling; or it may be accessible only to privileged initiates (Jankélévitch cites exclu-

sive religious orders). Mysteries, by contrast, are fundamentally *unknowable*: they are mysteries for all, and for all time. Death is the ultimate mystery, its essence inaccessible to the living. Jankélévitch proposes other mysteries as well, some of them idiosyncratic: the mysteries of destiny, anguish, pleasure, God, love, space, innocence, and—in various forms—time. (The latter will be of particular interest in this article.) Unlike the exclusionary secret, the mystery, shared and experienced by all of humanity, is an agent of “*sympathie fraternelle et . . . commune humilité*.”<sup>1</sup>

---

An abbreviated version of this article was presented as part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison music colloquium series in November 2007. I am grateful for the comments I received on that occasion from students and faculty. I am also indebted to Michael Puri, Alex Rehding, Anne Robertson, and the reviewers for this journal for their trenchant reactions to earlier written drafts of the paper.

---

<sup>1</sup>Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère* (Neuchâtel: Baconnière, 1949), pp. 9–12 (quote, p. 10). See also his later revision and expansion of the book, *Debussy et le mystère de l'instant* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1976), pp. 15–19. Remaining citations in the present article refer to the original 1949 edition, unless the later edition is explicitly specified. Translations from either edition are mine.

Debussy's music, Jankélévitch famously pronounced, is a music of the mystery, not of the secret. It does not hide its truths behind hermetic codes or arcane formalisms, but instead lays bare essential mysteries of existence, making them palpably present to experience: "no musician has gone as far as Claude-Achille in the suggestion and transcription of the mysterious. The inexpressible that Debussy expresses resembles an enigma that, we might say, is meant to be loved, but not solved."<sup>2</sup>

"But not solved. . . ." The implication is clear: we are not to treat mysteries as secrets. That is, we are not to approach them as puzzles to be solved, ciphers to be cracked, doors to be unlocked. In short, we are not to *analyze* mystery. Jankélévitch easily could have quoted Debussy himself on the matter: "Grownups tend to forget that as children they were forbidden to open the insides of their dolls—a crime of high treason against the cause of mystery. And yet they still insist on poking their aesthetic noses into things that don't concern them! Without their dolls to break open, they still try to explain things, dismantle them and quite heartlessly kill all their mystery."<sup>3</sup> There is much to relish here, most notably the masterful twist that allows Debussy to patronize adults by comparing them to children, who know better than to analyze their pleasures. Citations of these (or similar) words from the composer have become a familiar ritual in Debussy criticism, offered as an admonition by those not inclined to analysis, and as an expression of anxiety by those who are.<sup>4</sup>

With Jankélévitch, the admonition against analysis rises to the level of an ethical indictment. He condemns the tendency to "seek out

in all problems the secret of technical construction," considering the latent "scientism" of this approach a "philosophical indiscretion, mistaking for a secret the constitutional and nuclear mystery of existence."<sup>5</sup> Jankélévitch's exclusive religious societies, quintessential cultures of the secret, are all too easily compared to communities of musical analysts trained in highly specialized approaches—methods accessible only to the initiate. (It is hard to imagine that he did not intend the comparison.) The analyst not only does violence to music's mystery, but exhibits something approaching a pathology—a "maniac antihedonism," manifested in a desire to flee from music's most potent effects: "Technical analysis is a means of refusing to abandon oneself spontaneously to grace, which is the request the musical Charm is making."<sup>6</sup> Analysis, in short, is in league with the ideology of the secret and is anathema to mystery.

The scholarly literature of course abounds in analytical and theoretical studies of Debussy's music. Jankélévitch's view, if accepted, would force us to regard all this work as, at best, orthogonal to what is most important in the composer's music, or, at worst, deeply damaging to it. Some analysts may be untroubled by this indictment, finding Jankélévitch's notion of mystery too woolly to support rational academic discourse in the first place. Others may wish to dismiss Jankélévitch on more philosophical grounds, holding his

<sup>2</sup>Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>*Debussy on Music*, ed. and trans. François Lesure and Richard Langham Smith (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 13. The quote comes from Debussy's first published essay for *La revue blanche*, dated 1 April 1901.

<sup>4</sup>Roy Howat, for example, begins his monumental analytical study of Debussyan form and proportion with this very citation. See his *Debussy in Proportion: A Musical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. ix. Edward Lockspeiser offers a characteristic admonition against analysis in *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. II (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 234. Though Lockspeiser does not quote Debussy in this particular passage, he does approvingly cite Jankélévitch.

<sup>5</sup>Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 102. *Charme* is a special term of art for Jankélévitch, denoting a sort of unanalyzable poetic grace; Arnold I. Davidson discusses the concept in his introduction to Abbate's translation (pp. vii–xiii). Abbate has extended and elaborated on Jankélévitch's arguments in her much-discussed article "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 505–36, in which she stresses the importance that Jankélévitch places on the antimetaphysical materiality of music as experienced in performance. Echoing the passage quoted above, she states that "dissecting the work's technical features or saying what it represents reflects the wish not to be transported by the state that the performance has engendered in us" (pp. 505–06). These ideas of course have a history: most obviously, the notion that analysis is a form of "dissection," which turns a living body into a corpse, is a familiar trope in Romantic criticism.

claims of musical ineffability suspect.<sup>7</sup> Some readers, however, may find this division of labor more or less satisfactory, falling, as it does, along familiar and well-fortified disciplinary battle lines. In this view we are left with two nonintersecting, irreconcilable discourses on Debussy's music, one of them immersed in the fascinations of form, the other immersed in the fascinations of meaning (meanings worldly or mysterious, legible or ineffable). This split, familiar and comfortable for some, will nevertheless feel intellectually crippling for others. Not only does it divide the scholarly community into two populations who do not communicate with one another, it also closes off a wealth of insight into the ways in which the sounding details of Debussy's music (variously refracted or constructed through different analytical discourses) might give rise to meanings (variously refracted or constructed through different interpretive discourses).

Perhaps the most effective end run around Jankélévitch's binary is to demonstrate that analysis need not always work in the way he says it does. Analysis, at its best, need not be a means of "solving" a piece—of decoding it like a secret—but instead a process of making us more alive to it as a material, sonic phenomenon. The endeavor, thus conceived, aims not at knowledge understood in some discursive sense, but at intensified experience, which yields a different sort of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> The view was articulated long ago by David Lewin, who suggested that the "goal [of analysis] is simply to hear the piece better, both in detail and in the large. The task of the analyst is 'merely' to point out things in the piece that strike him as characteristic and important (where by 'things' one includes complex relationships), and to ar-

range his presentation in a way that will stimulate the musical imagination of his audience. . . . Analysis simply says: listen to this . . . now remember how that sounded . . . hear the relation . . . etc."<sup>9</sup> From this perspective—analysis as an invitation to listen, to experience intently—Jankélévitch's charge of "maniac antihedonism" rings especially false. The charge will surely come as a surprise to those who find analysis and all of its attendant activities—listening, playing, singing, reflecting, recomposing—a means of experiencing music's physicality and immediacy, its presence effects and meaning effects, as acutely as possible.<sup>10</sup> The experiences so constructed are of course not extra-discursive; they are constructed by the analytical act itself. I do not mean to naturalize analysis; it is a very special kind of activity, with an admittedly charged ideological and institutional history. The analytical encounter with music should not be facilely equated with our countless other encounters with music, all richly interwoven in the fabric of our everyday lives, and all saturated with meaning.<sup>11</sup> I simply wish to stress that, rather than reflecting a desire to flee music's effects, the act of analysis is often undertaken in an effort to intensify those very effects. If a charge is to be made against analysis so conceived, it would more properly be one of *hedonism*.<sup>12</sup>

If the mystery that Jankélévitch detects in Debussy is indeed *experienced*, can analysis—understood as a process of constructing an intensified experience—make us more attentive

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 10–19; idem, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 5–6, 145–72; and Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), esp. pp. 1–31.

<sup>8</sup>Jankélévitch calls such experiential knowledge drastic, as opposed to gnostic; Abbate's article "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" has given those terms new currency. One of the claims of the present article is that music analysis can lead to drastic knowledge.

<sup>9</sup>David Lewin, "Behind the Beyond: A Response to Edward T. Cone," *Perspectives of New Music* 7 (1969), 63, main text and n. 5.

<sup>10</sup>On "presence effects" and "meaning effects," see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>11</sup>See Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Nicholas Cook discusses the differences between modes of listening informed by musicological discourse and more everyday modes of listening in *Music, Imagination, and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>12</sup>That charge has of course been made. It is an implicit subtext, for example, in much of Gary Tomlinson's "Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer," *Current Musicology* 53 (1992), 18–24. See especially his comments on close listening on pp. 21–22.

to that mystery, or is it simply the wrong mode of attending for the task? To work our way into the question, we should first note that Jankélévitch understands the Debussyan mystery as a function not of obscurity, but of *clarity*. To capture the idea, he adopts the paradoxical locution of the *mystère limpide*, the lucid mystery: "What could be less labyrinthine than the nude, arid simplicity of the *Étude pour le cinq doigts*, of *Tierces alternées*, or of *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum*? Whereas all secrets require complication and profundity, Debussy is intelligible [*patent*] because his mysteries are clear! *Debussy is mysterious, but he is clear*. The lucid mystery—epitomized by death—is this not the mystery *par excellence*?"<sup>13</sup> Jankélévitch's notion of the lucid mystery is part and parcel of his broader critical project, which involves, among other things, a Gallic reaction against Teutonic profundity. The *mystère limpide* is as much a polemical construct as it is a positive assessment of Debussy's style.<sup>14</sup> I will not delve into these broad ideological issues here, but instead simply adopt Jankélévitch's idea heuristically, as a way to get at the problem of contemplating artworks that we value as mysterious. For the idea provides an opening, suggesting that clarity need not diminish a work's mystery.

Analysis is well suited to clarity. It can focus one's hearing of a piece or passage, making available a sharpness of perception where pre-

vious experience may only have been vague or inchoate. When we do not want clarity, this may be a problem; some scholars have indeed suggested that it is a problem in Debussy analysis. Richard Taruskin, for example, states that analysis of Debussy's music runs the risk of "valu[ing] an ounce of light over a pound of shadow," a view that "does not accord very well with the Symbolist scale of values."<sup>15</sup> Taruskin's statement suggests that the best approach to Debussy's music might be a sort of analytical soft focus—one in which we do not seek to listen to the music too closely. Jankélévitch's comments should give us pause, however. If one of the vehicles of Debussy's enigmas is indeed clarity, might not the "light" shed by analysis be used to bring that clarity into yet sharper relief, making our experience not one of *less* mystery, but of *more*?

I will test that idea in the following pages. But first, another question demands attention. If a mystery is clear, is it not clear immediately—that is, on first listening, without any discursive intervention (analytical or otherwise)? And would this not stop us in our tracks at this point and oblige us to cease talking and simply listen to Debussy's music in silence? Jankélévitch, perhaps surprisingly, says no. While music is for him fundamentally a sounding surface—a sensuous, material phenomenon—it is nevertheless a surface that wills our close attention and invites our contemplation. Through contemplation, the surface opens onto depths. These are not Teutonic, metaphysical depths, however; they are depths created by the work's reticence to disclose itself all at once: "The impression of depth is suggested to us by the very effort that will be necessary to delve into the intentions of the philosopher, or the musician, or better yet, will be suggested by the time required to actualize all that is virtual in the text or the musical work; depth, which is a spatial metaphor, is in short the projection of the time required for

<sup>13</sup>Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère*, p. 11. Jankélévitch contrasts the *mystère limpide* with the *mystère occulte*, which he associates with various mystical movements in vogue in intellectual Paris in the 1880s, including Rosicrucianism and Pre-Raphaelitism. He recognizes the influence of these movements on Debussy, but suggests that the composer's development traced a path from the *mystères occultes* of early Pre-Raphaelite essays such as *La Damselle élue* to the genuine *mystères limpides* of mature works like *Pelléas*: "The distance from the *Damselle* to *Pelléas* . . . traverses the complete distance between the *mystère occulte* and the *mystère limpide*" (ibid., p. 13). On the early influence of the Pre-Raphaelites on Debussy, see Richard Langham Smith, "Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites," this journal 5 (1981), 95–109.

<sup>14</sup>Jankélévitch's animus toward the Austro-Germanic tradition was a driving force in his thought; it underlies his briefs against both analysis and hermeneutics. See the introductory essays by Arnold I. Davidson and Carolyn Abbate in Abbate's translation of *Music and the Ineffable*, pp. vii–xx.

<sup>15</sup>Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 4: *The Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 92. Taruskin offers the comment specifically with reference to an interpretation of the large-scale tonal scheme of act IV, sc. 4 of *Pelléas*.

actualization."<sup>16</sup> The "time required for actualization" is not the same as the time in which music unfolds. Jankélévitch instead describes it—memorably—as "perpendicular" to musical time:

It takes time for the listener to discover these virtualities, and for the spirit to delve into the core of this immanence: there is a time for sinking in, and this time, perpendicular to the time of the performance (if one dares to use such language), is the time that the listener spends in delving into the thickness of this meaning devoid of meaning. . . . And time is necessary, moreover, to familiarize oneself with unfamiliar beauty, with harmonies that may be alien to our habits of listening. . . . "Deep" music is like a rich essential nature in a human being: one cannot appreciate the personality and the resources in the first afternoon's encounter. . . .

The "depth" of the temporal work is, in short, another name with which to designate reticence, the spirit that withholds and does not reveal all its resources at first . . . [it] unfolds itself little by little, for patient, attentive ears: its depth calls out to ours.<sup>17</sup>

Jankélévitch's comments are clearly relevant to our present work, suggesting that we do not become fully attentive to Debussy's clear mysteries through the simple fact of the music hitting our ears. The mysteries emerge into their full clarity only once we have inhabited the perpendicular time of musical reflection, carefully directing and redirecting our "patient, attentive ears" to the music's many sonic presences.

In what follows I want to do just that, by listening closely to Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* (Préludes, book I, no. 6). The discussion of the piece is detailed; the reader may find it necessary at times to draw on the patience that Jankélévitch counsels. But it is my hope that patience will be rewarded in an intensified experience of certain of the work's sonic presences, and via them, certain of its *mystères limpides*. Chief among the Prélude's mysteries, I suggest, is the mystery of time, as re-

fracted through consciousness, emotion, and memory.

The discussion begins by exploring the work's ostinato in depth; a chronological pass over the piece follows. The chronological organization is a choice, not a default, meant to develop and focus a particular experience of the Prélude as it unfolds in time. The matter of temporal succession is indeed crucial and prompts an excursus in the second half of the article on the ways in which we might hear the work as a whole to encode temporality. The discussion moves freely between technical analytical language and other styles of descriptive and interpretive language. The technical discourse is transformational theory, but its formalities are worn lightly.<sup>18</sup> I have sought to blend the transformational observations into the overall interpretive narrative in an effort to suggest that the technical is not a privileged mode of interpretation, but merely one species of discursive mediation (among several) via which we can become attentive to the Prélude's presence effects and meaning effects.<sup>19</sup> In drawing on analytical and hermeneutic language,

<sup>18</sup>The analysis is far from a "complete" transformational account of the piece (were such a thing even possible); it instead explores only those details that are central to the hearing I will develop. Arnold Whittall has recently suggested that "many of Debussy's most individual works might one day be illuminated from within the parameters of [transformational] theory." Arnold Whittall, "Debussy Now," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 280. The present article, however partial, represents one contribution to such a broader project. My analysis takes its inspiration from David Lewin's magisterial reading of Debussy's essay "A Transformational Basis for Form and Prolongation in Debussy's 'Feux d'artifice,'" in *Musical Form and Transformation: 4 Analytic Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 97–159. For an additional suggestive application of transformational methods to Debussy's music, one that also engages in questions of meaning and interpretation, see Rebecca Leydon's analysis of the second movement of the Cello Sonata in her *Narrative Strategies and Debussy's Late Style* (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, 1996), pp. 146–67.

<sup>19</sup>On the value of avoiding a hierarchical relationship between analysis and hermeneutics—one in which all hermeneutic statements are treated as dependent on analytical statements for their "validation"—see Lawrence Kramer, "Analysis Worldly and Unworldly," *Musical Quarterly* 87 (2004), 119–39. Kramer recommends not a reversal of hierarchy, with hermeneutics now taken as primary, but rather a negation of any hierarchical ranking between the analytical and the hermeneutic, in what he calls a "principle of nonpriority" (p. 125).

<sup>16</sup>Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, p. 69. Jankélévitch is not speaking only of Debussy here, but of "deep" (i.e., reticent) music in general; Jankélévitch's archetypes for such music—in addition to Debussy—include Fauré, Mompou, Ravel, and Falla.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

the article deploys discourses anathema to Jankélévitch for Jankélévitchian ends. In the conclusion I will evaluate the degree to which this paradoxical effort succeeds, returning to the ideas about secrets and mysteries with which I began.

Let us, then, direct our “patient, attentive ears” to Debussy’s *Prélude*. Example 1a (pp. 184–85) is a lightly annotated score of the piece. The annotations are cued to a rotational interpretation of the form in ex. 1b (p. 186).<sup>20</sup> The double-rotational, binary reading (A–B–A’–B’, followed by a coda) agrees with other published analyses of the piece, though it is certainly not the only formal hearing possible.<sup>21</sup> Rather than surveying the rotational reading at this point, I will discuss it as the chronological pass progresses.

#### FOOTSTEPS, FOOTPRINTS

We hear the ostinato immediately in m. 1. It persists, with a few telling interruptions, throughout the piece, serving as a focal point of attention when it is present and becoming even more conspicuous in its momentary absences. The ostinato acts as a sort of perceptual and interpretive fulcrum: a fixed point around which all other musical and semantic signifiers revolve; the interaction between the ostinato and its surroundings provides one of the central fascinations of the *Prélude*. The effect is a familiar one from Debussy’s music, in which a single melodic or motivic element is reiterated in ever-shifting harmonic and textural contexts. It is a critical commonplace to interpret this effect in impressionist terms, with the shifts in

harmony or texture acting like the shifts of light and atmosphere around a stack of wheat, or Rouen Cathedral.

Debussy enigmatically marks the ostinato *Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d’un fond de paysage triste et glacé* (this rhythm should have the sonic quality of a sad and frozen landscape). The pairing *triste et glacé* suggests the inseparability of affect and frozen environment, or rather, their mutual infusion of each other. The resulting affective field—aligning cold, winter, and despair on one side, and their excluded opposites (whose absence we feel pointedly) on the other—is familiar from a vast range of European literature. It remains a remarkably durable meteorological trope in French Symbolism, from Baudelaire to Laforgue.<sup>22</sup> In Debussy’s *Prélude* this is not merely a poetic idea; it is something we are to *hear*—it is to be projected sonically in the ostinato’s *valeur sonore*, specifically in its rhythm. The way in which the *Prélude* gives sonic embodiment to such an idea is the subject of the discussion to come. Note for now that Debussy draws our attention immediately to the ostinato’s temporal dimension, alerting us to the centrality of time in the *Prélude*.

What is perhaps most striking about the marking, however, is what it does *not* say. It does not say anything about *footsteps*. And yet the resemblance can hardly be missed if one has the *Prélude*’s title in mind.<sup>23</sup> If these are

<sup>20</sup>For an overview of rotational theory, see James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 611–14.

<sup>21</sup>For similar readings, see Arnold Whittall, “Tonality and the Whole-Tone Scale in the Music of Debussy,” *Music Review* 36 (1975), 262; idem, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 22–27; and Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music* (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon, 1997), p. 91. The five main subsections of the reading (A–B–A’–B’–coda) follow exactly the divisions of Richard Parks’s analysis, though he hears these as five variations in a variation form, making no mention of binary patterning. Richard Parks, *The Music of Claude Debussy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 225.

<sup>22</sup>Though no work (poetic or pictorial) is known to have served explicitly as inspiration for Debussy’s *Prélude*, its field of potential poetic intertexts is rich, embracing Baudelaire (*Chant d’automne, Brumes et pluies*), Mallarmé (*Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd’hui*), Verlaine (*Colloque sentimental*), Louÿs (*Le Tombeau des naïades*), Laforgue (*Couchant d’hiver*), and—reaching back to include a medieval text well known to Debussy—Charles duc d’Orléans (*Yver vous n’estes qu’un vilain*).

<sup>23</sup>As in all of the *Préludes*, the title comes at the end of the movement, enclosed in parentheses and following an ellipsis, allowing us perhaps to hold our knowledge of it in abeyance when hearing the piece. But once we are sensitized to the footstep-like qualities of the ostinato, the resemblance is hard to shake. Most commentators have indeed taken it for granted that the ostinato represents the *pas* of the title. See, for example, Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*, p. 23; and Bruhn, *Images and Ideas*, pp. 89–96. In such interpretations, Debussy’s title acts an enabling hermeneutic window onto the piece, of Lawrence Kramer’s first type: a textual inclusion. See his *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 9–10.

a. annotated score.

**A** **a<sub>1</sub>** **a<sub>2</sub>**  
 Triste et lent (♩ = 44)

*pp* *p* *expressif et douloureux* *m.d.*

*più pp*

*Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé*

**B** **b<sub>1</sub>** **b<sub>2</sub>** **b<sub>2</sub><sup>+</sup>**

*pp* *expressif* *Retenu* //

**A'** **a'<sub>1</sub>** **a'<sub>2</sub>**

*pp* *p* *più p* *m.d.*

*Cédez*..... **(2/4)** *Retenu*..... //

*En animant surtout dans l'expression* *p* *expressif et tendre* *Retenu*..... //

*m.g.* *m.g.* *sempre pp*

Example 1: Debussy, *Des pas sur la neige*.

a. (continued)

STEVEN  
RINGS  
Debussy's  
*Des pas sur  
la neige*

Example 1 (continued)

indeed footsteps, we are then in the presence of not only a landscape but a subject moving through that landscape—a persona making the *pas sur la neige*.<sup>24</sup> Rather than uninhabited impressionist images like the Monet examples above, one thinks, perhaps, of an isolated figure in a winter scene of Pissarro or Sisley. Pissarro's *Snow at Louveciennes* (plate 1) is exemplary.

But Debussy's performance indication remains enigmatic: it is the *landscape*, we are told, that the rhythm is to resemble—yet the rhythm resembles the actions of a subject. Subject and surroundings are hard to distinguish; they permeate one another, just as the tiny figure in Pissarro's painting threatens to disappear into the snowy background, to become a feature of the landscape, lost amid the far more prominent trees. Jankélévitch identifies this close identification of persona and environment as the *mystère ambiant*, in which "l'âme 'est

un paysage' comme le paysage est un état d'âme" (the soul "is a landscape" just as the landscape is a state of soul).<sup>25</sup>

This mystery becomes clearer still with the realization that the *pas* in the title may be translated not only as "footsteps" but as "footprints." Footprints are traces of a past subjective presence on (or in) the landscape; the environment becomes a frozen record of past human presence and action. Footprints also freeze a past temporal process in space, engraving it on the ground: a temporal act is given spatial extension. Thus, if we hear the ostinato as somehow iconic of *footprints*—as frozen, sonic traces of a past human presence—the temporal unfolding of the *Prélude* tracks not a process unfolding in time before our ears, a subject trudging in the here and now, but instead the record of that act—a frozen landscape marked off by rhythmic footprints.<sup>26</sup>





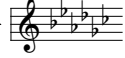

But we can no more completely accept this

<sup>24</sup>The concept of a musical persona is of course indebted to Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974). On hearing music as iconic of human action, see also Fred Maus, "Music as Drama," *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (1988), 56–73.

<sup>25</sup>Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère*, p. 31.

<sup>26</sup>For apposite comments along these lines, see Taruskin, *Oxford History*, IV, 78.

b. formal outline.

		measures*		
Rotation 1 (15 mm.)	A	a <sub>1</sub>	1-4	
		a <sub>2</sub>	5-7	
	B	b <sub>1</sub>	8-11 <sup>2</sup>	↔ = CHR ↓ = WT, DIA
		b <sub>2</sub>	11 <sup>3</sup> -13	
		b <sub>2+</sub>	14-15	WT
		<hr/> <hr/>		
Rotation 2 (16 mm.)	A'	a <sub>1</sub> '	16-19	ACOUSTIC (B <sub>b</sub> , A <sub>b</sub> )
		a <sub>2</sub> '	20-25	 →  + CHR lh
	B'	b <sub>1</sub> '	26-28 <sup>3</sup>	↔ = CHR ↓ = DIA
		b <sub>2</sub> '	28 <sup>4</sup> -31	
<hr/> <hr/>				
Coda (incipient 3rd rotation?)			32-36	HARMONIC (B <sub>b</sub> , C#)

\* Superscript = beat (e.g., 11<sup>2</sup> = m. 11, beat 2)

Example 1 (*continued*)

“subject-less” hearing than completely accept its opposite. The Prélude at once invites us to infer the presence of an acting and experiencing subject and at the same time makes that subjective presence tenuous, allowing it to slip away, or flicker in and out of focus, disappearing into the snowy environment. Debussy

heightens this mystery by developing the Prélude’s here-and-now mimetic aspects with exquisite precision, making it difficult to discount fully the idea that the music might be tracking present-oriented processes, both psychic and physical, even as it calls those processes into question.



Plate 1: Camille Pissarro (French, 1830–1903, *Snow at Louveciennes*  
ca. 1869, oil on panel, 32.3 x 47.5 cm.).  
Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Larned Coburn Memorial Endowment, 1973.673.  
Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

Present physicality registers in the finest details of the ostinato. The D–E and E–F dyads are immediately suggestive of right-foot/left-foot alternation.<sup>27</sup> They are also, appropriately, “one step apart” within the diatonic gamut. If S means “transpose one diatonic step up” and S<sup>-1</sup> (ess-inverse) means “transpose one diatonic step down,” then S(D–E) = E–F and S<sup>-1</sup>(E–F) = D–E. In the interpretive tradition of transformational theory, we can construe S and S<sup>-1</sup> as thematized musical “actions.” These musical actions vividly enact the depicted *physical* action: S, and its formal inverse S<sup>-1</sup>, enact the walking mo-

tion “right-leg-to-left-leg,” and its somatic inverse, “left-leg-to-right-leg.”<sup>28</sup>

A heel-toe motion *within* each two-note step is also evident and remarkably precise: the E “toe” of the D–E step shares the same note with the E “heel” of the E–F step, just as toe and heel of consecutive steps coincide on the ground, with weight shifting from one leg to the other. This relationship is altered when the E–F step returns to D–E across the bar line; D

<sup>27</sup>As noted in Bruhn, *Images and Ideas*, p. 90.

<sup>28</sup>An exact pairing between “right>left”/S and “left>right”/S<sup>-1</sup> (or, for that matter, the reverse) is of course not the point. What matters is the deeper structural isomorphism: S and S<sup>-1</sup> are formal inverses, each of the other, just as “right>left” and “left>right” are somatic inverses, each of the other.

“heel” now follows F “toe.” One might propose that the pattern can still be interpreted as iconic of a transfer of weight: F and D belong together within the tonic D-minor triad—the “transfer of weight” now occurs through the medium of the music’s “grounding” harmony.

Whether one finds that idea plausible or strained, the fact that the footsteps do not progress continually stepwise (for example: D–E, E–F, F–G, G–A, and so on) but instead repeat the same two dyads, is of the essence for the piece. The numb alternation between D–E and E–F emphasizes the somatic experience of repeated physical action—right foot, left foot, right foot (again), left foot (again), . . . —rather than projecting a sense of distance traversed, or of forward progress. The footsteps fall on a snowy ground in which each step is indistinguishable from the last, and attention turns to repetitive physical effort. The footsteps make half-note impressions in the snow on the D4 ground (note the down-stemmed half notes).<sup>29</sup> One cannot resist observing that D is also the piece’s *Grundton*. Debussy would not like that pun, but he would be very sensitive to the fact that the D4 half notes—the snowy footprints—are *blanches*.

This well-nigh Straussian mimetic specificity is dissonant with the popular conception of Debussy as a “vague impressionist.” But recall in this connection the composer’s famous complaint (in a letter to Durand of 1908, one year before the composition of the *Prélude*) that he was “trying to write ‘something else’—*realities*, in a manner of speaking—what imbeciles call ‘impressionism,’ a term employed with the utmost inaccuracy.”<sup>30</sup> Leon Botstein glosses Debussy’s comment: “Debussy understood, as

many did not, impressionism’s recasting of realism.”<sup>31</sup> He continues:

In an overwhelming number of Debussy’s instrumental compositions and works for piano without text there is a reality at the core of the musical experience, as the composer himself asserted. . . . Real emotion and feelings in the world . . . were the goals in Debussy’s musical project until very late in his career. . . . For Debussy . . . music is an act of expression responding to the human being in life, creating consciousness through sound in response to the external world.<sup>32</sup>

Botstein’s comments, following on Debussy’s own, are apposite here and invite us to hear certain aspects of the *Prélude* as iconic of real-world action (even as other sonic details steadfastly resist such hearings). But there remain crucial respects in which the ostinato resists real-time iconic interpretation. Most notable is the tempo: the steps move by at a glacial twenty-two beats per minute. Compare this with those other famous musical footsteps in the snow (ex. 2).<sup>33</sup> One can easily imagine walking at Schubert’s tempo; in some performances we might even feel that the tempo is too brisk to match the sentiments of the protagonist. It is, nevertheless, a real-world walking tempo; Debussy’s is not. This suggests that the time of Debussy’s music does not map onto real time in any simple way. There is a significant gulf between Schubert’s temporalities and Debussy’s, a product of the shift in constructions of time in European culture from the first decades of the nineteenth century, the age of Kant

<sup>29</sup>The care with which this image is presented notationally—with the D–E, E–F steps falling on half-note, D4 footprints “from above”—is characteristic of Debussy’s meticulous attention to the appearance of the score. See David Grayson, “Editing Debussy: Issues *en blanc et noir*,” this journal 13 (1990), 243–44.

<sup>30</sup>François Lesure and Roger Nichols, ed. and trans., *Debussy Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 188.

<sup>31</sup>Leon Botstein, “Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy’s Break with Tradition,” in *Debussy and His World*, ed. Jane E. Fulcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 150. Botstein traces Debussy’s linking of impressionism and realism to the theories of Jules Laforgue. See also the chapter “Impressionism and Realism: Debussy’s Réalités,” in Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland, Or.: Amadeus Press, 1996), pp. 113–23. David Grayson also speaks of a realist impulse in Debussy’s work, particularly as it is used to balance out the Symbolist element in *Pelléas*. David Grayson, “Waiting for Golaud: The Concept of Time in *Pelléas*,” in *Debussy Studies*, ed. Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 26–50, esp. p. 45.

<sup>32</sup>Botstein, “Beyond the Illusions of Realism,” p. 160.

<sup>33</sup>Interestingly, though surely coincidentally, Schubert’s protagonist also trudges on a D ground.



Example 2: Schubert, *Gute nacht*, mm. 1–6.

and Goethe, to the first decades of the twentieth, the age of Bergson and Proust.<sup>34</sup>

The slowness of the steps suggests enervation, a motion almost stopping—perhaps even a loss, or a slipping away, of our sense of the physical. The loss of motion and physical impulse is most palpable in the yawning gaps between the steps. For it is not simply that Debussy's footsteps are "too slow." The heel-toe rhythm within each step is quite close to a natural walking pace, and all out of proportion with the frozen expanse between the steps. (The pianist performing the work is well aware of this discrepancy, as she works to realize Debussy's rhythmic notation.) The result is a sort of temporal expansion and contraction, in which different phases of the music suggest different rates of temporal unfolding. Within each footstep, there is a clear, purposeful temporal impulse, suggesting physical effort, but between the steps the temporal flow slackens, becoming indistinct: the tiny rhythmic subdivisions of the heel-toe rhythm do not help us as listen-

ers to subdivide the entire half-note span from beat 1 to beat 3 (or beat 3 to beat 1). When the ostinato is first heard in m. 1, there is no clear frame of metric reference below the level of the half note. The effect of temporal stasis is heightened by the piano's sonic decay. If, as Suzanne Langer famously observed, music makes time audible, then the *lack* of musical activity between the steps in m. 1 might seem to slow or stop time—to freeze it into what Jonathan Kramer has suggestively called "vertical time."<sup>35</sup> Kinetic action thus shades into frozen temporality, physical impulse into stasis.

#### SECTION A (MM. 1–7)

After one measure of footstep vamp, a lyrical gesture enters in the right hand in m. 2.<sup>36</sup> The gesture is flowing and irregular, almost improvisatory, in contrast to the numb repetition of the ostinato. If the ostinato immediately invites a richly textured mimetic hearing, the

<sup>34</sup>As Debussy's friend Louis Laloy observed in 1914, discussing the "secret correspondences" between Debussy and Bergson, "such a music could not be produced except in the same environment as such a philosophy, and vice versa." Quoted in Jann Pasler, "Debussy, *Jeux*: Playing with Time and Form," this journal 6 (1982), 74. Pasler also notes that Bergson himself expressed an affinity for Debussy's music. For a recent discussion of the relevance of Bergsonian *durée* to Debussy's music, see Michael Klein's remarkable article "Debussy's *L'Isle joyeuse* as Territorial Assemblage," this journal 31 (2007), 41–48. As Klein notes, Adorno also heard Bergsonian temporality in Debussy's music. For a broad and accessible treatment of the many cultural factors contributing to the shift in temporal sensibilities around the turn of the twentieth century—encompassing not only literature, philosophy, and art, but also technology and other aspects of material culture—see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003, orig. edn. 1983).

<sup>35</sup>Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 110. Jonathan Kramer discusses "vertical time" in *The Time of Music* (New York: Schirmer, 1988), pp. 54–57. See also Klein's discussion of the "eternal present" in "Debussy's *L'Isle joyeuse*," p. 33, n. 9. To the thinkers cited by Klein, we might add Maeterlinck, who characterized time as "an immense, eternal, motionless Present." Maurice Maeterlinck, *Thoughts from Maeterlinck*, ed. Esther Stella Sutro (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1903), p. 185, cited in Grayson, "Waiting for Golaud," p. 32, n. 22.

<sup>36</sup>One might detect a subtly ironic dialogue here with melody-and-accompaniment textures in nineteenth-century piano miniatures: the measure of vamp preceding the entry of the melodic line at once suggests a Mendelssohn song without words while at the same time ironically distancing itself from such a model by the austerity of the texture, the glacial tempo, and the semantic freight of the accompaniment figure. In the same 1901 review cited toward the beginning of this article, Debussy calls Mendelssohn an "elegant and facile notary" (*Debussy on Music*, p. 14).

melodic line pulls back from such explicit iconicity. This is not to say that it cannot be made to bear semantic content, but simply to observe its far greater underdetermination in this regard when compared with the ostinato. Throughout, the *Prélude* exhibits a play between gestures that suggest iconicity or seemingly literal representation and those that resist this kind of literalism. Thus another mystery, which we might call the mystery of representation in the *Prélude* (and in Debussy's *Préludes* in general). Such mystery prizes open various "semantic gaps" in the music—as that between the right and left hands in mm. 2–4—within which our interpretive activity is given considerable freedom of motion.

There is a "temporal gap" between the hands here as well. In contrast to the halting time of the ostinato—kinetic impulses shading into frozen, vertical stasis—the melodic line moves steadily forward, if not purposefully, then at least with a certain directional focus toward the cadential A in m. 4. The line further focuses on the metric interstices between the footsteps, its points of arrival and departure falling largely on beats 2 and 4, the very beats where time and motion earlier seemed to go slack. This suggests the possibility that the music might at times project of a sort of "temporal polyphony," with two (or more) incommensurate species of temporality unfolding simultaneously (I will address this idea further in the "temporal excursus" below).

We should be careful, however, not to overstate any *opposition* between upper voice and ostinato in mm. 2–4. The upper line moves in loose coordination with the footsteps: the every-two-beats impulse of the ostinato is loosely maintained one beat later in the upper line. Further, the ascending third B $\flat$ –C–D in the upper part in m. 2 can be heard to respond to the overall ascending third D–E–F of the ostinato. Both elapse over roughly the same period of time, and the melodic C–D, in even eighth notes, smoothes out the uneven heel-toe rhythm in the ostinato.<sup>37</sup> The upper part thus

<sup>37</sup>As noted by Michael Puri in his talk "Caught in the Throes of Memory," presented at a conference on music and memory at the University of Virginia in April 2006.

does seem to respond to, or interact with, the ostinato, despite their evident differences. The interest thus resides not in a crisp opposition, but in how we choose to figure the relationship(s) between ostinato and lyrical gesture, and how their interaction engages the semantic issues already mobilized.

We can begin by observing Debussy's performance indication for the upper voice in m. 2: *expressif et douloureux*. The marking at once recalls and contrasts with the *triste et glacé* of the ostinato, investing those impassive terms with a personal, or subjective, charge. The lyrical gesture is thus at once less iconic than the footsteps and yet seemingly shot through with subjective consciousness: expressivity enters the frozen landscape; numb sadness is replaced by *douleur*. The *douleur* registers sonically in the work's first three-note simultaneity, as the melodic B $\flat$  in m. 2 sounds against the sustained {D, E}, creating a dissonant [026] stab. The moment was prepared in m. 1: there the footsteps established a pattern of alternating dissonance and consonance, with the dissonant {D, E} dyad in the first half of the measure relieved by the consonant {D, F} in the second. The melodic B $\flat$  sounds in the dissonant phase, entering in the expansive pause between the D–E and E–F steps on beat 2, where our ears will be most sensitive to it. The harmonic stab seems to set the melodic line in motion—the subtle forward trajectory of the line arises in part from the way the dissonant B $\flat$  asks for resolution, which finally arrives on the cadential A in m. 4, as analyzed in ex. 3.<sup>38</sup> The cadential effect of the A is not only harmonic and dynamic (note the hairpin), it is also metric: the note falls on beat 3, aligning with the steps and seemingly closing the temporal gap between the parts. The cadential A aligns, moreover, with the steps' consonant segment and yields the work's first root-position triad. The D-minor chord's consonance

<sup>38</sup>B $\flat$ 4 and A4 are the only two half notes in the phrase. One might also count the tied G4 in mm. 3–4 as an ersatz half note; it converges on the concluding A4 from below, just as the B $\flat$ 4 converges on it from above. Beyond the informal linear reading of ex. 3, I will present no large-scale linear or quasi-Schenkerian account of the piece. Marion Guck offers a Schenkerian reading in her article "One Path Through Debussy's ' . . . Des pas sur la neige,'" *In Theory Only* 1 (1975), 4–8.

Example 3: Sketch of *Des pas sur la neige*, mm. 2–4.

Example 4: Transformational networks involving the four diatonic collections.

gradually settles into the ear as the phrase trails off. With the harmonic consonance there is also a sort of temporal consonance, as the upper voice is absorbed into the ostinato's vertical stasis.

This kinetic profile encourages us to hear the *douloureux* B $\flat$  as a perturbing element, which sets the upper voice in motion. We might also hear it as the agent of the various conceptual dissonances between the parts, as the wedge or lever that distances the melodic line conceptually from the accompaniment; with its resolution, the two parts seem to fall into phase. Note that B $\flat$  is the only black key in the opening seven measures; as in so much of Debussy's piano music, the black-key/white-key topography of the keyboard plays a central role in the work. It is only with the resolution of the perturbing black-note B $\flat$  to the white-note A that the first subsection of the piece—labeled  $a_1$  in exs. 1a and 1b—finds a point of repose, allowing  $a_2$  to emerge in m. 5.

As it does, the music undergoes multiple shifts: textural, rhythmic, harmonic. These shifts cause  $a_2$  to sound in many ways like a resolution of the various tensions and uncer-

tainties in  $a_1$ . Most notably, the parts now move in perfect alignment, with upper and lower registers in lock step, the ostinato footsteps regulating the pulse in the middle of the texture. Further, the music of  $a_2$  unfolds a purely white-note diatonic collection: having resolved the stab of the perturbing B $\flat$  through the melodic work of mm. 2–4, effectively clearing out the painful effect of the sole flatted pitch, the music can now proceed in a placid, flat-free environment, one in which the temporal and expressive aporiae of section  $a_1$  have been erased (or perhaps momentarily forgotten).

The little network of ex. 4a sketches the shift from the one-flat diatonic collection of  $a_1$  to the no-flat collection of  $a_2$ , using key signatures as shorthand. The same key signatures may be found in the first two rows of the rightmost column in ex. 1b. In that column—which sketches aspects of the pitch content of each section—key signatures indicate the piece's purely diatonic passages (the *Prélude*'s notated signature of course remains one flat throughout). The transformation that takes the one-flat collection to the no-flat collection in ex. 4a is  $-1\flat$ , which subtracts one flat from a

diatonic signature.<sup>39</sup> The network is arranged from left to right on the page to model the transformation's chronology in the piece, as  $a_1$  proceeds to  $a_2$ . The " $B\flat \rightarrow B\sharp$ " annotation beneath the arrow indicates that the effect of the transformation is to replace the *douloureux* black note  $B\flat$  with the affectively blank white note  $B\sharp$ .<sup>40</sup>

Examples 4b and c present similar networks. It will be useful to explore them briefly here, though the relationships are somewhat abstract for now; we will hear their concrete aural significance in the piece momentarily. Example 4b shows a network similar to that in 4a, but now involving two flat-heavy signatures: five and six flats. A glance at ex. 1b confirms that these signatures correspond to the diatonic collections presented in the flat-heavy arabesques heard in sections  $b_2$  and  $b_2'$  (more on these arabesques below). Like the network in ex. 4a, the left-to-right layout of the network in ex. 4b follows the chronology of the piece, but at a different level, taking the five-flat collection of  $b_2$ , in Rotation 1, to the six-flat collection of  $b_2'$ , heard at the analogous location in Rotation 2. The operative transformation is  $+1\flat$ , which adds one flat to the signature. As the annotation " $C\sharp \rightarrow C\flat$ " indicates, the effect of the transformation is to replace  $C\sharp$  with  $C\flat$ .

The complementary nature of networks in exs. 4a and 4b is evident:  $-1\flat$ , which links the relatively flat-free signatures in 4a, is replaced in ex. 4b by its inverse,  $+1\flat$ , which links the relatively flat-heavy signatures. The networks proceed toward the work's two diatonic extremes: no flats in 4a and six flats in 4b. Most strikingly, the two transformations have the

effect of yielding *the same pitch class*,  $B\sharp/C\flat$ , shown by the annotations beneath the arrows.  $B\sharp/C\flat$  is a pivotal pitch class in the piece. For now we can observe that the polar-extreme collections, no flats and six flats, *invert into each other* around  $B\sharp/C\flat$ ;<sup>41</sup> this is one of the ways in which  $B\sharp/C\flat$  is "pivotal." The relationship is shown by the vertical arrow in ex. 4c, which combines the networks of exs. 4a and 4b into one larger network. The two polar-extreme collections connected by the vertical arrow are in fact directly juxtaposed in section  $a_2'$ , which functions as the Prélude's crux (see the rightmost column of ex. 1b, in the row for  $a_2'$ ). As we will see, inversion-about- $B\sharp/C\flat$  plays a critical role at this crux-moment, shunting us downward along the vertical arrow in ex. 4c, from the blank, white-note collection to the accidental-saturated six-flat collection.

Example 4c adds two additional looped arrows, showing that the no-flat and six-flat collections both invert into *themselves* around D.<sup>42</sup> We already know how prominent D is in the piece, as the ground on which the footsteps fall, and as the work's *Grundton*. Inversion-about-D thus stabilizes the right-hand side of the network, orienting the no-flat and six-flat collections with respect to the work's frozen "ground." We can therefore conceptualize these as the work's two polar tonic collections, despite the notated key signature. (There are other good reasons—less formal ones—to hear these as the work's tonic collections, as we will see.) In this view, the two remaining diatonic collections (one- and five-flats) become collections *manqués*: defective or incipient versions of the two tonic collections. In ex. 4c, the unstable collections *manqués* on the left-hand side of

<sup>39</sup>This is an example of what Julian Hook calls a "signature transformation." I will treat the concept very informally here. See Julian Hook, "Signature Transformations," in *Music Theory and Mathematics: Chords, Collections, and Transformations*, ed. Jack Douthett, Martha Hyde, and Charles Smith (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008), pp. 137–60. The present discussion also has points of contact with Dmitri Tymoczko's "Scale Networks and Debussy," *Journal of Music Theory* 48 (2004), 219–94.

<sup>40</sup>The interaction between  $B\flat$  and  $B\sharp$  here, as well as that between the one-flat and a no-flat collection, recalls similar issues at the outset of Debussy's *Canopes*, discussed by David Lewin in "Some Instances of Parallel Voice-Leading in Debussy," this journal 11 (1987), 59–72.

<sup>41</sup>That is, if we take the white-note diatonic collection (the C-major scale) and invert it around  $B\sharp/C\flat$ , the result will be the six-flat diatonic collection (the G $\flat$ -major scale), and vice versa. The same effect is achieved if we invert around F, a tritone away from  $B\sharp/C\flat$ . F and  $B\sharp/C\flat$  are also the only two pitch classes that the no-flat and six-flat diatonic collections share.

<sup>42</sup>Any major scale inverts into itself around  $\hat{2}$ . C major thus inverts into itself around D; G $\flat$  major inverts into itself around A $\flat$ . Pitch-class-inversion-around-A $\flat$  is the same as pitch-class-inversion-around-D. Inversion-about-D-or-A $\flat$  is a quintessentially pianistic inversion: the pattern of white and black keys reflects symmetrically around D and A $\flat$ .

Example 5 consists of three parts: a, b, and c. Part a shows a piano score with a D-minor chord in measure 4 and a G-major chord in measure 5. Part b shows the pitch-class inversion around D, with a label 'pc inversion around D'. Part c shows the exact pitch inversion around D4, with a label 'exact pitch inversion around D4'.

Example 5: D-minor chord that ends  $a_1$  inverts into G-major chord that begins  $a_2$  (mm. 4–5).

the network gravitate toward the tonic collections on the right, which are stabilized by inversion-about-D.

We *hear* inversion-about-D as we cross the threshold from  $a_1$  to  $a_2$ , and enter our first tonic collection. Example 5 shows the inversion, as the cadential D-minor chord that ends  $a_1$  in m. 4 flips around D to become the G-major chord that begins  $a_2$  in m. 5. The inversion has a striking aural effect, resulting from the change in register, the shift from minor chord to major chord, the richly resonant new voicing, and the new position of the footsteps, which had been *below* the harmony and are now *above* it. The inversion is realized almost perfectly in pitch space. Example 5c shows what the exact pitch-space inversion would be, with a close-position D-minor triad flipping around the D above middle C to a close-position G-major triad. The notes that do not behave in this way in the music (ex. 5b) are the G in the bass, which sounds one octave too low, and the extra D, on the middle line of the bass clef. The low G and the added D give the G-major chord considerably more tonal heft than the D minor and a stronger root quality. G major also accrues metric weight by its placement on the downbeat. These factors combine to give the chord a potential tonic charge, as though the preceding cadential D minor has served in retrospect as a sort of modal dominant, and the entire  $a_1$  section as a four-measure anacrusis to the structural downbeat of m. 5. This interacts well with ideas already proposed regarding  $a_2$ 's resolution of the textural and conceptual aporiae in  $a_1$ , as well as the white-note collection's resolution of the one-flat collection *manqué*. All of this aurally underwrites the sense of the white-note set as one of the work's two tonic

collections.<sup>43</sup> The music is able to settle in to this tonic region by being leached of the impulse that drove the melodic line in  $a_1$ ; that leeching is enacted by the  $-1_b$  transformation of ex. 4a, which removes the perturbing B $\flat$ . In place of B $\flat$ 's *expressif et douloureux* impulse, there is now blank, white-note numbness.

But the music here at least begins to *move*, or so it seems. The progressive potential of S and S $^{-1}$ , heard thus far only in the go-nowhere alternation of the footsteps, is now unleashed in progressive stepwise motion in the outer registers: a chain of Ss in the treble and a chain of S $^{-1}$ s in the bass. This suggests that the motion-stasis pendulum has swung decisively in favor of motion. Or has it? Examples 6 and 7 provide analytical perspectives on  $a_2$  that encourage us to keep the dichotomy at least somewhat alive. Examples 6a and 7a present the progressive, stepwise hearings just described, which unleash S and S $^{-1}$ . But, as ex. 6b shows, there is another, much more static way to hear the descending chords in the bass: they palindromically invert into each other in pitch-class space. The center of inversion is once again D, our grounding pitch class. This hearing might seem like a stretch, but it interacts compellingly with the passage's modal ambiguity, analyzed in 6c. The progression may be heard in either D Dorian or G Mixolydian; the latter hearing is abetted by the various factors discussed above that lend the G chord of m. 5 a tonic heft. The two hearings create a sort of inversive balance of harmonic progressions;

<sup>43</sup>This is in contrast to Dmitri Tymoczko's claim that the one-flat collection is the tonic collection for the entire piece. See Tymoczko, "Scale Networks," p. 288, n. 61.

a. as descending diatonic steps.

$S^{-n}$ :  $n$  diatonic steps down

b. as inversionally balanced.

Both arrows: pc inversion around D

c. as a harmonic progression in D Dorian or G Mixolydian.

Example 6: Analytical perspectives on the bass chords in mm. 5–6.

the first and last chords of the passage both seek to lay claim to tonic status.<sup>44</sup> This attenuation of obvious harmonic directionality—does the progression lead *to* or *away from* its tonic?—both helps us to hear a certain inversional logic to the passage and problematizes our earlier impression that the music moves forward here in any simple sense.<sup>45</sup>

The inversional hearing of ex. 6b becomes more persuasive still when we notice the thoroughgoing influence of inversion-about-D in the inversional wedge created by the soprano and bass, as analyzed in ex. 7b. The inversion between the outer voices is realized exactly in

pitch space. When we combine this inversional wedge with ex. 6b, the result is a sort of inversional loom that organizes both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the passage. The loom binds the two dimensions together and creates a curiously static picture of this otherwise progressive music. Most strikingly, even though the reiterated D4 half notes of  $a_1$  are now gone, the continuing influence of D-as-ground is strongly felt, as D is the fixed point around which all of this inversional activity occurs. The footsteps, beginning always on D4, appropriately sound in the pitch space directly between the two inversionally wedging registers of mm. 5–6. If the pianist chooses to play the upper-staff notes with the left hand, the inversional structuring is physically palpable, with the inverting left hand leaping over the anchoring right-hand footsteps.

But this balanced texture does not last long. The bass descent stops at D2 on beat 3 of m. 6; the melodic D5 that enters on beat 4 is the inversional partner of that D2. The inversionally wedging pattern is thus maintained until both outer voices reach the grounding pitch-class D. But at this point the upper voice proceeds one step further, to E5, reattaining the melodic apex first gained in m. 3. Notably, this gesture produces the most vivid echo yet of the footsteps in the upper line: the D5–E5 in the right hand beginning on beat 4 of m. 6 echoes the initial D4–E4 footstep, with the heel-toe snap once again smoothed rhythmically into eighths. This

<sup>44</sup>Inversion-about-D maps the two tonic-candidate harmonies onto one another, just as it mapped  $a_1$ 's cadential D minor onto  $a_2$ 's initiating G major, as modeled in ex. 5. The "flipping around D" in that example makes it suggestive to think of D minor and G major here as dual tonics of a sort, both of them anchored by the D ground. The dualism is not properly Riemannian, however, as it is the minor triad that radiates upward off of the grounding D, and the major triad that radiates downward. David Lewin has nevertheless provided a theoretical model that accounts for the possibility of such minor *Oberklänge* and major *Unterklänge*. See David Lewin, "A Formal Theory of Generalized Tonal Functions," *Journal of Music Theory* 26 (1982), 23–60. I am grateful to Brian Hyer for encouraging me to think about the dualistic aspects of the passage.

<sup>45</sup>This descending harmonic progression from G to D suggests that the operative division of the D octave in the piece is a plagal one (at G) rather than an authentic one (at A). This impression is confirmed not only by the *Prélude*'s careful avoidance of any A-centered music, but also by its concluding plagal cadence, which reiterates the G–D plagal motion through four descending octaves in mm. 33–36.

a. as descending and ascending diatonic steps.

The image shows two staves of music. The upper staff (soprano) has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5. Above these notes are three upward-pointing arrows, each labeled 'S'. A larger curved arrow above the entire sequence is labeled 'S<sup>3</sup>'. The lower staff (bass) has a bass clef and contains a sequence of notes: D3, C3, B2, A2. Below these notes are three downward-pointing arrows, each labeled 'S<sup>-1</sup>'. A larger curved arrow below the entire sequence is labeled 'S<sup>-3</sup>'. A box with the number '5' is in the top left corner.

S: One diatonic step up ( $S^n$ :  $n$  diatonic steps up)  
 $S^{-n}$ :  $n$  diatonic steps down

b. as an inversional wedge.

The image shows two staves of music. The upper staff (soprano) has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It contains a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The lower staff (bass) has a bass clef and contains a sequence of notes: D3, C3, B2, A2, G2, F2, E2. Curved arrows connect the notes between the two staves, showing an inversional relationship. A box with the number '5' is in the top left corner.

Every arrow: pc inversion about D

Example 7: Analytical perspectives on soprano and bass in  $a_2$  (mm. 5–7).

event seems to stun the footsteps themselves into silence in m. 7—for the first time in the piece, the ostinato does not sound. The moment is dense with interpretive possibility. One might detect a dissolution of the ostinato's iconic identity; the footstep character has gradually permeated the entire texture in mm. 5 and 6, with the initial D–E footstep finally appearing explicitly in the upper voice, the voice that had differed so pointedly from it in the opening phrase ( $a_1$ ).<sup>46</sup> This disperses not only the ostinato's iconic force but also its steady motoric drive, which had previously kept the piece moving. The music thus comes to a halt, as though unsure how to proceed.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup>The initial footstep's [D, E] pitch-class dyad is also frozen harmonically in the outer voices of the sonority that spans the bar line between mm. 6 and 7 (the melody's sustained E5 and the bass's sustained D2).

<sup>47</sup>Note how this cadential moment in m. 7—which concludes subsection  $a_2$ —differs from the cadence in m. 4, which had concluded  $a_1$ . The earlier cadence was achieved through a sort of coalescence, a coming-into-focus of the upper part and the ostinato; the latter results from dissolution, a drifting-out-of-focus of the momentarily integrated texture, as the rhythm breaks down and the sustained chord falls apart into the descending melodic line. This sensitizes us to the great variety of cadential effects in

From one interpretive perspective, one might imagine the loss of contact here with the persona, as the strongest iconic marker of its presence disappears—the subject flickers into invisibility. Or perhaps one simply loses sight of the persona's trace—the footprints followed—and confronts instead only the unblemished white of the frozen landscape. Alternatively, one might choose to hear the ostinato's pause as itself highly iconic of present experience, suggesting a pause in the persona's progress, or perhaps the persona's momentary loss of consciousness of the footsteps, which nevertheless proceed (one thinks of Schubert's Gretchen losing awareness of her spinning wheel). This latter reading interacts with the notion of semiotic dispersal, suggesting a dissolution of conscious focus on the present (represented by the trudging steps), perhaps caused by a plunge back into thought, or maybe memory.

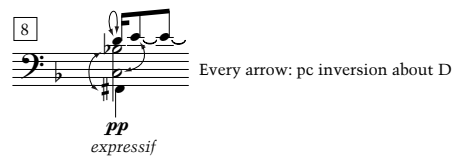
A retrospective character is evident in the cadential fall of m. 7, which works over certain

Debussy, and the ways such varied effects can be heard to enact sharply differing affective or cognitive states (closure vs. opening up, resolution vs. unraveling, etc.).

compositional issues from the previous measures. One of the more abstract issues is the inversional structuring around D, which pervasively patterns the cadential gesture (see the right-hand side of ex. 7b). Less abstractly, the descent from E5 explicitly recalls, via rhythm and contour, the descent from the same note in m. 3. This similarity draws our attention to another lack in m. 7: the absent B $\flat$ , last heard in the parallel descending gesture in m. 3. The cadential fall in m. 7 carefully avoids any note B (B $\natural$  or B $\flat$ ), skipping instead from C to A, which suggests an awareness of the sensitive nature of diatonic note-class B in the piece: it is so far the only diatonic note to have appeared in two chromatic forms (B $\flat$  and B $\natural$ ). The two variants have further embodied affective polar extremes: *douloureux* B $\flat$  and expressively blank B $\natural$ . The avoidance of both in the cadential fall of m. 7 creates a conspicuous absence.

## SECTION B (MM. 8–15)

B $\flat$  is the only pitch class that did not find its inversional-partner-about-D within the A section. That inversional partner is F $\sharp$ /G $\flat$ . This underscores the sense of B $\flat$  as a perturbing element in the section, which creates an imbalance in the inversional field around the grounding D.<sup>48</sup> That imbalance is resolved in the whole-tone chord that begins section B in m. 8, in which B $\flat$  reappears (along with the *expressif* marking). As ex. 8 shows, B $\flat$  is now paired with its inversional partner, F $\sharp$ , which sounds prominently in the bass. The entire chord in fact exhibits inversional structuring about D, as the arrows in the example show. The logic of inversion-about-D is thus transferred from the blank, white-note realm of a<sub>2</sub> to the accidental



Example 8: Inversional structuring of whole-tone chord, m. 8, beat 1.

rich music of b<sub>1</sub>. The aural character of the music changes dramatically: warm seventh chords and whole-tone sonorities replace the earlier austere triads; the melodic genus, previously diatonic, now becomes largely chromatic. The footsteps have also changed position: first heard at the bottom of the texture in a<sub>1</sub>, then migrating to the middle in a<sub>2</sub>, they are now at the top, with all other material sounding below. The low register creates a sense of digging deep, of dredging something up, something perhaps connected with the *douloureux* B $\flat$ , which has now been recovered and worked into the inversional scheme.

Example 9 clarifies the textural situation, showing how b<sub>1</sub> divides into three strata. Stratum (a) is the footsteps, at the top of the texture. Stratum (b) is the alto and tenor, in oscillating chromatic semitones. Stratum c is the passage's largely chromatic bass line, which presents three closely related gestures ending on C $\sharp$ /D $\flat$ . The alto in mm. 8–10 of stratum (b) worries over the B $\flat$ –B $\natural$  motion implicit in the shift in collections over the bar line between mm. 4 and 5, modeled transformationally in ex. 4a. In its first two quarter notes in m. 11, the alto reverses course to project the motion C $\natural$ –B $\natural$ /C $\flat$ . This motion is associated with the collectional progression sketched in ex. 4b, from the five-flat collection to the six-flat collection, as yet unheard in the Prélude. The alto pulls the tenor along with it in these motions, sometimes in parallel, sometimes in contrary motion, but always by semitone, moving within a chromatic genus.

The bass line in stratum (c) introduces the first hint of harmonic functionality to the music. (We have already heard, in ex. 6c, how the modal ambiguity of mm. 5–6 attenuates the harmonic functionality in those measures.) The bass line in mm. 8–10 circles around G $\sharp$ /A $\flat$  before leaping to C $\sharp$ /D $\flat$ , creating a strong sense

<sup>48</sup>The reader can activate the relevant aural impression in this way. At the piano, with the pedal down, first play a D4/D5 octave. Then, using a note-against-note, first-species texture, play a converging contrary-motion wedge using white notes only: D4/D5–E4/C5–F4/B4–G4/A4. The first-species verticalities are exactly those white-note pairs that map onto each other under inversion-about-D. Then play those pairs in various registers, keeping the pedal down and allowing them to settle into the ear. While this white-note inversional field rings, play a B $\flat$ 4. The note will stick out painfully, seeking its inversional partner about D, which is F $\sharp$ /G $\flat$ .

Example 9: The three strata of  $b_1$  (mm. 8–11).

of the latter as a functional root of a dominant harmony.<sup>49</sup> The sense of harmonic bass function invests the upper voices with tonal energy, as participants in a purposeful tonal harmony,  $V^7/G\flat$ , which emerges in the second half of mm. 8–10 and the first half of m. 11. This transforms  $B\sharp/C\flat$  and F into tendency tones—or, more aptly in the present context, *notes sensibles*. Example 10 illustrates, presenting the two *notes sensibles* as flagged half notes.  $B\sharp$  and F had previously inverted blankly into one another within our frozen, white-note music of  $a_2$ . Now they are invested with harmonic purpose; the effect is like the return of feeling to a numb limb. Or perhaps like the recovery of a momentarily lost self-awareness; as Brian Hyer has observed, to call a pitch a *note sensible* “is to ascribe sentience to it.”<sup>50</sup>

The beamed half notes in the bass of ex. 10 project the strongly functional  $A\flat$ – $D\flat$  bass line, which seems to announce an imminent  $G\flat$  tonic. Unflagged open note heads at the left-hand side of the example indicate the whole-tone pentachord with which the passage begins. I have respelled some of the notes in the example so that the dominant chord is more clearly recognizable as  $V^7/G\flat$ ; the chord is in

Example 10: Emergence of  $V^7/G\flat$  in mm. 8–11.

fact spelled “correctly” in m. 10 of the music. The anticipated  $G\flat$  tonic is included in parentheses at the right side of the example. Two arrows depart from the *notes sensibles*,  $C\flat$  and F, showing their strong tendency to call forth (à la Fétis)  $B\flat$  and  $G\flat$ , respectively.

The respelling of  $B\sharp$  as  $C\flat$  is worth pausing over. I have so far developed a narrative in which white notes are figured as either representative of the frozen landscape, or of a certain mental forgetfulness or numbness (one that is obviously closely entwined with, and manifested in, the landscape, as per Jankélévitch’s *mystère ambiant*). The black note  $B\flat$  has been figured as a painful intrusion on that landscape.  $B\flat$  indeed acts as a *note sensible* in m. 2, part of the sole tritone dyad of the one-flat diatonic collection. It exhibits the directionality of this kind of note, pulling toward resolution on A. Furthermore, it is a *sentient* note; Debussy’s performance indication in m. 2 suggests as much, investing the  $B\flat$  with a subjective intensity and conscious presence notably absent from the marking for the ostinato in m. 1.  $B\sharp$  in  $a_2$  was a quintessential white note in this story, a *note insensible*, mechanically participating in the inversional formalities of exs. 6b and 7b. It also came on the scene in m. 5 as the antidote

<sup>49</sup>Interestingly, the “circling around  $G\sharp/A\flat$ ” in beats 1–3 of mm. 8–10 participates in the inversion-about-D story. The three-quarter-note gesture in mm. 8–9 ( $F\sharp$ – $G$ – $G\sharp$ ) serially inverts into that in m. 10 ( $B\flat$ – $A$ – $A\flat$ ) around D. This is obvious when we recognize that the other axis of inversion for inversion-about-D is  $A\flat/G\sharp$ , the goal tone of both of these mini-chromatic *Züge*.

<sup>50</sup>Brian Hyer, “Tonality,” in *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, ed. Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 731.

to the painful B $\flat$ . But to respell B $\sharp$  as C $\flat$ , the seventh of a dominant harmony on D $\flat$ , is to invest the note with subjective charge, turning the insentient white-note B $\sharp$  into the ersatz black-note C $\flat$ , a *note sensible*.

As already observed in connection with ex. 10, the *notes sensibles* call forth a G $\flat$  tonic. Does it arrive? In the event, yes and no. The V $^7$ /G $\flat$  of mm. 8–11<sup>2</sup> does in fact yield a G $\flat$  chord on beat 3 of m. 11, but the chord is in second inversion, and the soprano F $\sharp$ , rather than resolving to G $\flat$ , persists, resulting in a major-seventh chord.<sup>51</sup> Further, the G $\flat$  tonicity of the music that follows (mm. 12–13) is thrown into doubt by the perturbing presence of C $\sharp$ .<sup>52</sup> This is our five-flat (not six-flat!) music, which pointedly avoids C $\flat$ . Recall that we already discussed this collection, in connection with ex. 4, as a collection *manqué*, a deficient or incipient version of the flat-loaded tonic collection. The five-flat collection gravitates toward the six-flat collection via +1 $\flat$ , which replaces C $\sharp$  with C $\flat$ .

The *notes sensibles* thus do not fully achieve the goal of bringing forth G $\flat$ . What *is* achieved, however, is a music quite unlike anything heard thus far: an arabesque. Up to m. 11, the music has been halting, held back by a plodding insistence on the meter, especially beats 1 and 3, anchored by the footsteps. Now, in mm. 12–13, the footsteps disappear for the second time and melodic activity is smoothly flowing, freely drifting across bar lines and creating in the left hand a melodic arabesque that unfolds in a gently undulating three-beat pattern:



The music bears the hallmarks of the Debussyan arabesque: curvilinear melody, fluid rhythm and freedom from the bar line, har-

<sup>51</sup>The tenor-register F $\sharp$  does resolve correctly, however, as does the alto C $\flat$  (though spelled once again as B $\sharp$ ). This is shown clearly in ex. 9, stratum (b), m. 11.

<sup>52</sup>It is unclear what modal center one might want to hear in the music of b $_2$ . If one clings to G $\flat$  as tonic/final, the music might be heard as projecting G $\flat$  Lydian. On the other hand, one may hear a prolongation of V $^7$  of D $\flat$  in mm. 12–13, suggesting D $\flat$  Ionian. The G $\flat$ /D $\flat$  ambiguity reenacts, one semitone lower, the G/D ambiguity of a $_2$ , discussed in connection with ex. 6c.

monic stasis, repetition, triplet ornaments.<sup>53</sup> These characteristics project a highly different sense of time than the footsteps music—a floating time, unanchored to the effortful physicality of the ostinato. The arabesque's attendant imagery of sinuously twisting vines and verdant growth is also suggestive of a departure from the frozen present. The return of arabesque-like music in Rotation 2 will provide an opportunity for us to explore the significance of this music in greater depth.

For now, the departure from the frozen present is brief: the footstep rhythm returns abruptly in m. 14. The rhythm is now thrown into the bass, outlining a very unsteplike tritone. The unexpectedness of the interruption is enhanced by its early metric placement: it follows the only non- $\frac{4}{4}$  measure in the piece, the  $\frac{2}{4}$  of m. 13. The effect is of a sudden, unexpected return to present physicality. In fact, when heard iconically, it is remarkably suggestive of a *stumble*—a stumble that jars one back to consciousness of one's physical surroundings, and out of reverie. The whole-tone music of m. 14 might even be heard as an awkward effort to regain balance. However we choose to hear it, the interruption of m. 14 makes clear that something has failed, something connected with the interrupted arabesque of the previous measures. This failure brings about the pronounced caesura and *Retenu* in m. 15 and marks the end of the first rotation.

#### SECTION A' (MM. 16–25)

The ostinato returns in m. 16 and creates a sense of rebeginning. The D $^4$  half notes (figured above as footprints, *blanches*) also return. This underwrites a correspondence with the opening measures, signaling the onset of a second rotation. The idea of rotational form is especially apt in the present interpretation, as it suggests a process of repeated action, of re-

<sup>53</sup>These characteristics of the arabesque are discussed in Gurminder Bhogal's valuable article "Debussy's Arabesque and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*," *Twentieth-Century Music* 2 (2006), 171–99. Bhogal also provides citations of the many other discussions of the Debussyan arabesque in the secondary literature. Debussy's own well-known published comments on the arabesque may be found in *Debussy on Music*, pp. 27 and 84.

tracing the same ground in an attempt to achieve some goal, albeit one that remains unclear. The second rotation thus begins a process of “trying again,” of starting over in an attempt to succeed where the first rotation failed.<sup>54</sup>

There are notable changes in the second rotation, however. The first three measures of  $a_1$ , mm. 16–18, return not to the diatonic purity opening, but to an acoustic-collection variant of it, adding an  $A\flat$  to the previous one-flat collection.  $A\flat$  was the melodic highpoint of the stumble in m. 14. The music thus seems shaken up still, with whole-tone and  $A\flat$  residues in evidence throughout the first measures of the second rotation. The  $A\flat$  is present not only in the right hand, but also in the left hand’s repeated  $G-A\flat-B\flat$ , which sounds beneath the ostinato, perhaps suggesting a new (or residual) layer of cognitive activity.<sup>55</sup> This new layer disappears in m. 19, however, as the melodic cadence on  $A_4$  once again clears out the psychic tension. The familiarity of the turn to the  $a_2$  music in m. 20 (as  $a_2'$ ) is strangely welcome—a return to the balance and clarity of mm. 5–7, however numb and mechanical.

Then—the work’s crux. The music of mm. 20–21<sup>1</sup> tracks exactly that of mm. 5–6<sup>1</sup>. But on beat 2 of m. 21 the melodic pattern breaks:  $B\sharp_4$ , instead of progressing up diatonically to  $C_5$  via  $S$ , is enharmonically respelled as  $C\flat_5$ . (Debussy marks the disruption by breaking the continuous slur of mm. 5–7 into two slurs in mm. 20–22; the seam falls between  $B\sharp$  and  $C\flat$ .) The reader will recall the earlier interpretation of the  $B\sharp/C\flat$  enharmony as thematic for the piece. Specifically, I stated that “to respell  $B\sharp$  as  $C\flat$  . . . is to invest the note with subjective charge,

<sup>54</sup>As Warren Darcy notes, in some rotational works “the successive rotations become a sort of generative matrix within which [a] *telos* is engendered, processed, nurtured, and brought to full presence.” Warren Darcy, “Die Zeit ist da’: Rotational Form and Hexatonic Magic in Act 2, Sc. 1 of *Parsifal*,” in *A Companion to Wagner’s Parsifal*, ed. William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2005), p. 216. Darcy and Hepokoski call this process “teleological genesis.” The notion of *telos* is perhaps too strong for Debussy’s *Prélude*, but the idea that the two rotations act to achieve, or bring to fulfillment, a single, highly desired event, is apposite, as we will see.

<sup>55</sup>The  $G-A\flat-B\flat$  ascending third echoes the ascending  $D-E-F$  third of the footsteps, just as the melodic ascending third  $B\flat-C-D$  had in m. 2.

Example 11: No-flat collection inverts into six-flat collection at crux (m. 213).

turning the insentient white note  $B\sharp$  into the ersatz black note  $C\flat$ , a *note sensible*.” Debussy now makes the respelling explicit, investing the blank  $B\sharp$  with  $C\flat$  sentience. The sentient  $C\flat$  triggers a seismic shift in the left-hand harmony: instead of progressing down diatonically to a D-minor chord via  $S^{-1}$ , the music lurches to  $D\flat^7$  at m. 21<sup>3</sup>. The melodic interval in the bass line is an awkward step indeed: an augmented second from  $E$  to  $D\flat$ . Though the lurch from the expected D-minor triad to the surprising  $D\flat^7$  is most naturally heard as a semitonal displacement, it may also be interpreted to project the operative inversion around  $B\sharp/C\flat$  that maps the no-flat collection into the six-flat collection: in ex. 11, the D-minor triad, when inverted around  $B\sharp/C\flat$ , yields a  $D\flat$ -major triad, the root harmony of the  $D\flat^7$  chord. We might also understand the earlier respelling of the melodic  $B\sharp$  as  $C\flat$ —indicated by an arrow above the staff in ex. 11—as forecasting this inversion, inverting the melodic  $B\sharp$  itself into  $C\flat$ . Thus understood, it is the *inversion* that invests the numb  $B\sharp$  with the sentience of  $C\flat$ , just as that inversion takes the numb white-note collection to the subjectively saturated six-flat collection. The seismic shift thus shunts downward along the vertical arrow in ex. 4c, as noted before, moving us between the work’s two D-balanced polar collections.

The  $D\flat^7$  chord of course recalls the same harmony (in various enharmonic spellings) heard in mm. 8–11. There the harmony called forth a *manqué* version of  $G\flat$  major in mm. 11<sup>3</sup>–13 (including  $C\sharp$  and avoiding  $C\flat$ ). Beginning at the crux-moment of m. 21<sup>3</sup>, by contrast, a genuine six-flat collection emerges in

the right hand, extending through m. 25, with the *note sensible* C $\flat$  now remaining throughout the new arabesque melody. Again, the associations of the arabesque with vegetal (not winter) imagery are apt; the D $\flat$ 7 chord, for its part, sounds lush and rich, in stark contrast to the icy triads of the previous measure-and-a-half. The left-hand harmonies surge upward by semitone, as though swelling with psychic energy at the music's final achievement of the six-flat tune.<sup>56</sup>

But there is a problem: the footsteps are stuck. From the crux of m. 21<sup>3</sup> through the end of m. 24, the footsteps repeat E–F, rather than alternating, as before, with D–E. In fact, step structuring via S and S<sup>-1</sup> is disrupted in various ways around the crux-moment: the melody violates the expectation of diatonic ascent by S in m. 23 by enharmonically repeating B $\sharp$ 4 as C $\flat$ 5; the harmony violates the expectation of diatonic descent by S<sup>-1</sup> in the same measure by lurching from E minor to D $\flat$ 7; and the footsteps, rather than alternating between S and S<sup>-1</sup>, as before, now get stuck on the reiterated E–F, projecting no S/S<sup>-1</sup> alternation at all. The stepwise alternation of the footstep motive was last distorted in the stumble of m. 14, where it was bent into a repeated tritone. That moment was read above as a somatic interruption, as the stumble impinged upon (and ended) the fragmentary arabesque. At the crux, there is the reverse, as a now fully realized C $\flat$  arabesque impinges on and distorts the walking music.

I have already explored in detail the ways in which the D–E, E–F footsteps may be heard as iconic of an alternating right-left (or left-right) walking motion. By maintaining that understanding, the repeated E–F step creates the improbability of a single footstep repeated seven times.<sup>57</sup> What are we to make of this repeated

footstep? We could simply discard the original notion of alternating steps manifested in the D–E, E–F ostinato, and treat the mimesis more flexibly. I suggest, however, that it will be productive to take the problem seriously and consider the repeated E–F as genuinely iconic of a repetition of a single footstep. I suggest further that we can interpret it as *one* footstep—a single physical action—*heard seven times*. One can imagine the effect like the scratch of a record, as the needle skips back to repeat the same step over and over. We can thus hear the seven-fold iteration as an “unfolded” presentation of a single, highly charged moment.

Above this repeated step, however, we have a tune that unfurls continuously over five measures. If we are to interpret the footsteps as indeed reiterating the same moment—the same step—we would seem here to have a genuine instance of “temporal polyphony”: two temporalities unfolding simultaneously. Earlier I suggested this possibility in connection with subsection a<sub>1</sub>; the idea is far more vivid here. In order to theorize the issue more fully, I will now momentarily step out of the chronological narrative in order to think carefully about the ways in which we might hear the *Prélude* to encode time.

#### A TEMPORAL EXCURSUS

The following discussion draws on some familiar concepts from narratology and Russian formalism to help us think about time in Debussy's *Prélude*.<sup>58</sup> Using them, I will propose six modes of temporal interpretation we might adopt when hearing, playing, or imagining the *Prélude*, considering possible relation-

<sup>56</sup>The melodic apex and temporal center point of this climactic passage—the A $\flat$ 5 of m. 23<sup>4</sup>—coincides exactly with the piece's golden section (GS). On the pervasiveness of GS proportioning in Debussy's music, see Howat, *Debussy in Proportion*. The melodic apex reattains the highest pitch in the *Prélude* thus far: the A $\flat$ 5 from the stumble of m. 14.  
<sup>57</sup>There is a delectable irony here for the performer: it is only at this moment that the pianist is obliged to alternate hands in realizing the footstep ostinato, as indicated by Debussy's m.g. indications in mm. 22 and 23.

<sup>58</sup>The following discussion engages issues of musical narrative. The focus and scope of this article prohibit me from surveying the vast literature on the subject of narrative in music (pro and con). For a thorough recent survey and defense of theories of musical narrative—one that addresses objections to the concept by Jean-Jacques Nattiez and Carolyn Abbate—see Byron Almén, “Narrative Archetypes: A Critique, Theory, and Method of Narrative Analysis,” *Journal of Music Theory* 47 (2003), 1–39. For another recent defense, see Michael Klein, “Chopin's Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 26 (2004), 23–55. One issue that I sidestep here, which Klein addresses with admirable clarity, is the problem of the mimesis/diegesis distinction in musical narrative.

ships between the time the *Prélude* takes and the time(s) it evokes.<sup>59</sup>

**A temporally congruent hearing.** In this interpretation, the events or processes depicted in the piece occur in order and occupy the same duration as the piece itself. Thus, if a performance of the *Prélude* lasts five minutes, the *Prélude* depicts or enacts a process that itself lasts exactly five minutes in the imaginary world evoked by the piece.<sup>60</sup> The events depicted in m. 36 occur exactly five minutes after those in m. 1, and all events in between flow at a coordinated and even regular rate; the clock time of the piece and the imaginary temporality are exactly aligned.

To draw on a well-worn distinction from Russian formalism, this hearing maps story and discourse (or Viktor Shklovsky's *fabula* and *syuzhet*) exactly onto one another. The story is the series of events depicted in the narrative; the discourse is the way in which those events are told in the words of the narrative itself. The chronology of the discourse need not follow the chronology of the story, nor do their durations as they unfold in time need to be of the same length (indeed, they rarely are). A simple example: when one reads the sentence "The storming of the Bastille lasted approximately four hours, from beginning to end," the process of reading takes considerably less time than it took the events themselves to unfold. (And this is a mild example. Consider the sentence "Centuries passed.") Further, if I say "The storming of the Bastille lasted approximately four hours, from beginning to end, on the afternoon of July 14; prior to that, the Estates General had convened in Versailles on May 5," the discourse not only condenses temporality, but also reverses chronology. The temporally con-

gruent hearing rejects such compressions and reversals, however, detecting an exact chronological and durational isomorphism between story and discourse in the *Prélude*.

**A chronologically ordered but variably paced hearing.** In this hearing, the events depicted in m. 36 do indeed occur after the events depicted in m. 1, but they do not necessarily occur exactly five minutes later in the imaginary world of the piece. More generally, in this interpretation the events of m.  $n+1$  occur after the events of m.  $n$ , but not necessarily at the temporal interval of one measure (or the clock-time equivalent) in the imaginary world. The chronology of the musical discourse thus follows the chronology of the story, but at variable rates (in a temporally stretchable or compressible way). I drew on such ideas of stretchable or compressible time in the discussion of the footsteps. This is also an eminently familiar idea from the world of number opera, in which recitatives and various action scenes unfold in loose correspondence to "real time" (that is, they are temporally congruent), whereas arias typically slow time drastically, by expanding a single moment of reflection.

**An anachronous hearing.** I adapt the term from Gérard Genette, who defines anachrony as any violation in the order of story events as they are told in the narrative.<sup>61</sup> In this hearing, the events depicted in m.  $n+1$  of the *Prélude* need not necessarily occur after those depicted in m.  $n$  in the imaginary world. Musical depictions of memory represent a complex, and perhaps problematic, instance of anachrony. If a musical "memory episode" reenacts a past event, the events rehearsed in the episode do indeed "happen before" those preceding and following the memory episode in the musical flow. On the other hand, the memories are *brought into* the present and rehearsed there. That mental recovery and rehearsal may indeed occur in chronological sequence with surrounding events.

STEVEN  
RINGS  
Debussy's  
*Des pas sur  
la neige*

<sup>59</sup>I paraphrase here from Michael Klein, "L'Isle joyeuse as Territorial Assemblage," p. 33, n. 9, who traces thinking along these lines to Thomas Clifton and Jonathan Kramer. Klein also presents a sensitive discussion of the play of time (specifically narrative time and lyric time) in Chopin in "Chopin's Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative," drawing on the ideas of Raymond Monelle.

<sup>60</sup>The notion here of an artwork's "imaginary world" takes its inspiration from Kendall Walton's theories of fiction, especially as presented in *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>61</sup>Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 35–36 and passim.

Less problematic instances of musical anachrony are easily adduced in the operatic literature; in the prelude to *La traviata*, we track through the events of the opera in essentially reverse order, hearing the music of Violetta's act III illness first. Britten's *Billy Budd* begins with Vere in the present, reflecting on the mysteries of human nature, before moving backward in time to recount the events that led to that reflection. Closer to the present subject, David Grayson has explored possible instances of anachrony in Debussy's *Pelléas*.<sup>62</sup>

**A temporally polyphonic hearing.** This hearing recognizes the possibility that the music might present incommensurate temporalities unfolding at the same time: different contrapuntal strata of the music, for example, might enact events in the imagined world that unfold at different rates. This hearing, though radical, is an instance of what cultural historian Stephen Kern has called the phenomenon of temporal "simultaneity": the simultaneous presentation of multiple, and perhaps conflicting, temporalities in an artwork. Kern detects the phenomenon in many artistic works and movements from around the time of Debussy's *Prélude*, extending from visual art (Picasso's analytical cubism) to literature (Joyce's *Ulysses*).<sup>63</sup> The possibility of a temporally polyphonic hearing is central to the present hearing of Debussy's *Prélude*, as the previous discussion has demonstrated, and as I will explore further.

**An instantaneous hearing.** This hearing, radical in a different way, suggests that the *Prélude* depicts no passage of time at all. In hearing the ostinato as iconic not of *footsteps* but *footprints*, we might be led to this mode of temporal understanding and treat the *Prélude* as a snapshot of a frozen expanse, which we may survey, but which itself does not evolve in time. Alternatively, one could understand the music as presenting a snapshot of an instant of *lived*

*experience*, one in which the vertical density of a psychological moment is sliced up and unfolded horizontally, given temporal extension within the music. One might imagine this as analogous to a linear spreading out of the transparencies from an anatomy text: the various layers of some complex, dense, multifaceted body are presented and contemplated one at a time, rather than simultaneously.<sup>64</sup>

**A temporally indeterminate hearing.** The proponent of this hearing recognizes that the piece unfolds in time, but argues that it is inappropriate to try to be too specific about just how the music's temporality relates to the time of some depicted world and its events. One might argue that this is a *Prélude*, after all, not a piece of program music, and there need be no determinate relationship between the time of the piece and any other depicted or imagined time. In the extreme version of this view, there need be nothing depicted at all—the piece is a work of absolute music referring to nothing but itself. The *Prélude*'s temporalities are thus purely musical and have no relationship to any other worldly or imaginative temporalities.

Different readers will find some of these modes of experiencing time in the *Prélude* more congenial (or plausible) than others. A single listener might further choose to adopt different perspectives on different occasions when playing, hearing, or imagining the piece. Several of these perspectives have already been evident (to varying degrees) in the discussion to this point. To draw some of these disparate temporal threads together, and to demonstrate the interpretive efficacy of some of the modes of conceiving musical time just surveyed, I will now present one particular way we can organize our temporal experience of the music thus far, via a narrative account of events up to and including the crux-moment.

<sup>62</sup>Grayson, "Waiting for Golaud."

<sup>63</sup>Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918*, pp. 67–81.

<sup>64</sup>The notion of the instant is an *idée fixe* in Jankélévitch's writings on Debussy. The idea appears in the 1949 monograph and is extended and developed in the 1976 revision *Debussy et le mystère de l'instant*. Jankélévitch explicitly discusses *Des pas sur la neige* in terms of the poetics of the instant on pp. 293–95 of the revised text.

We can hear the densely packed crux-moment of mm. 21ff. as enacting a Proustian *moment bienheureux*—a “felicitous moment” in which a memory resurfaces.<sup>65</sup> The G $\flat$  memory, only partially and inaccurately reanimated in section b $_2$ , now rushes back in all of its fullness. The process follows the stages of the Proustian narrator’s famous episode with the madeleine, in which partial but failed attempts to retrieve a memory—which had initially arrived unbidden with the taste of the cookie and the tea—are followed by a complete reemergence of the memory, which, despite the intervening effort, also arrives somewhat by surprise, as though unwilling.<sup>66</sup> The interpretation of the crux as a Proustian *moment bienheureux* allows us to make sense of both the temporal polyphony of the passage and the instantaneity of the E–F footsteps. For the Proustian narrator’s memory finally comes flooding back in all its fullness *in an instant*. He remembers not a momentary impression, but a whole string of activities from his youth (Sunday mornings with his aunt, time spent in the town square, running errands through the streets, etc.). The memories are of events with temporal extension, but they arrive in a moment of *no temporal extension*. Debussy’s music enacts this temporal dichotomy, as the remembered arabesque unfolds within the expanded instant of the E–F step.

Tracing the earlier stages of this process, we can hear the B $\flat$  stab in m. 2 as the initial, unexpected upsurge of the memory. The footsteps serve as a sort of somatic trigger for this psychic upsurge (just as the madeleine serves as a trigger for Proust’s protagonist). The memory set in motion is only inchoate, however, and drifts away (resolution to A in m. 4).

The numbness that follows in a $_2$  comes as something of a relief; but the absence of the memory is noted in the pause of m. 7, which also represents a dissolution of focus on the physical activity of the present. Then, in mm. 8ff., the B $\flat$  is brought back *deliberately*, in an attempt to recover the memory’s source with greater clarity. The effort is only minimally successful, however, yielding an arabesque fragment.<sup>67</sup> This initial arabesque is marred, however, by the Lydian C $\sharp$  and is further broken off prematurely by the somatic interruption of m. 14. With the rebeginning of Rotation 2 the persona retraces the initial steps that led to the first memorial upsurge, just as Proust’s protagonist deliberately seeks to re-create the conditions of the first taste of the madeleine. This effort ultimately succeeds: at the crux-moment the memory emerges in all of its fullness.

These ideas interact suggestively with the transformational actions sketched in ex. 4. The –1 $\flat$  transformation of ex. 4a models the slipping out of consciousness of the initial B $\flat$ , pulling the music back into white-note forgetfulness/numbness. The +1 $\flat$  of ex. 4b models the work that must be done to recover the G $\flat$  memory more fully after the failed attempt of section b $_2$ , turning the five-flat collection *manqué* into the six-flat tonic collection by replacing the Lydian C $\sharp$  with the sentient C $\flat$ . The sentient C $\flat$  returns exactly at the onset of the crux, with the respelling of B $\sharp$  as C $\flat$  in the right hand in m. 21, triggering the “seismic shift” that yields up the full memory. We can interpret this respelling as modeled by the vertical arrow in ex. 4c, inversion about B $\sharp$ /C $\flat$ , which takes us from the forgetful white-note music to the complete recollection of the six-flat music, as flat-note sentience floods into the previously blank, white-note diatonic space.

<sup>65</sup>My interpretation of a musical *moment bienheureux* here is indebted to Michael Puri’s discussion of Proust in his dissertation, *Theorizing Memory in Maurice Ravel’s “Daphnis et Chloé”* (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2004). On the Proustian *moment bienherueux* in general, see Roger Shattuck, *Proust’s Way* (New York: Norton, 2000).

<sup>66</sup>Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 1, *Swann’s Way*, trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrief and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D. J. Enright (New York: Modern Library, 2003), pp. 60–64.

<sup>67</sup>The retrospective nature of the arabesque is not only “internal” to the piece, but is also historical and stylistic: the arabesques in the *Prélude*—especially that in section b $_2$ ’ (mm. 28<sup>4</sup>–31)—closely resemble the texture and harmonic palette of Debussy’s own *Deux arabesques* of 1890, as well as the lyrical, flowing styles of Massenet and Delibes. Debussy himself associated the arabesque with early music—Palestrina, Victoria, Bach—though there is little in the *Prélude* to suggest those composers. More suggestive is the fauxbourdon accompaniment that eventually surfaces in section b $_2$ ’, extending the musical retrojection back even further.

This hearing adopts a perspective on the events of Rotation 1 that largely corresponds to a chronologically ordered but variably paced hearing. To the extent that we treat the memory episodes as rehearsing events that “happen before” those of the present-tense action of the *Prélude*, the hearing also engages aspects of anachronous hearing (though we should take into account the caveats already mentioned about memory episodes in this respect). The variable pacing of the hearing is especially attractive here and suggests fluctuating experiences of time and duration as the persona trudges along, drifting in and out of awareness of the physical present, and in and out of memory. We need not specify, for example, the length of clock time that elapses during the failed memory episode in section  $b_2$ . Indeed, it seems suggestive to leave this question open, in order to engage the experience of being “lost in thought,” only to emerge later (as here, suddenly, at m. 14) without being aware how much clock time has passed. The complex temporality of the ostinato can be understood in this hearing as a product of the persona’s affect (*triste et glacé*), which distorts the perception of present time and action: melancholy and numbness here slow or perhaps blur the awareness of the footsteps in time.<sup>68</sup> These ideas are relevant as well to the hearing of section  $a_2$  as crisscrossed by a static inversional loom.

Proustian ideas further interact suggestively with Debussy’s performance indication in m. 1, and with Jankélévitch’s *mystère ambiant* more generally. Proust’s narrator experiences certain objects and elements of the environment as, in some sense, porous to consciousness: they seem almost to absorb consciousness and then reemit it as they take on personal significance. This quality is most vivid in the narrator’s accounts of various objects and

<sup>68</sup>In this sense, the tempo of the footsteps—not only Debussy’s marking—gives us crucial insight into the psychological state of the persona. In Peircean terms, the ostinato acts as a sign on two levels, in a manner discussed by Raymond Monelle: it is *iconic* of footsteps, but those footsteps—in their slowness, their distorted temporality—are then *indexical* of the persona’s psychic state. See Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 19.

places from his childhood summers in Combray: the steeple on the church, the varnished stairs in the house, the hawthorns along Swann’s way.<sup>69</sup> Debussy’s performance indication encourages us to conceive of the *Prélude* similarly—the snow and the footsteps in it are porous to the persona’s *tristesse*, both absorbing and reemitting it. That idea is given its most vivid sonic embodiment in the ostinato, in ways explored above.

I introduced this story as one particular way to organize our temporal experience of the *Prélude*. As Fred Maus notes, we should recognize the provisional, heuristic, and incomplete nature of any story that we tell about a piece of music; the music will always exceed, and in some ways elude, any single story.<sup>70</sup> All these narratives will contain omissions or indeterminacies, which analysis and interpretation need not fill or resolve definitively. They are also selective, highlighting some aspects of the music and neglecting others. (For example, the Proustian story, with its focus on a present persona, does not engage fully with the ways in which the ostinato might be heard as iconic of a trace left by a now-absent subject, an idea proposed toward the beginning of the article.) Further, Maus observes that no single story needs to be “felt as obligatory” for all listeners, or for the same listener on different occasions.<sup>71</sup> This does not mean, of course, that all narratives will be equally compelling. The Proustian narrative, as a heuristic framework, is quite compelling for our purposes, especially in the ways it focuses our attention on the temporal *mystères* of the crux-moment, encouraging us

<sup>69</sup>Proust, *Swann’s Way*, pp. 85–91 (steeple), 36 (stairs), 193–97 (hawthorns).

<sup>70</sup>Maus, “Music as Drama.” See also Maus, “Music as Narrative,” *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (1991), 1–34. Lawrence Kramer discusses similar issues regarding the play between hermeneutic “contingency” and musical “autonomy”—the excess of musical presence that remains after any hermeneutic act—in *Musical Meaning*, pp. 1–28, 145–72, and *passim*.

<sup>71</sup>Maus, “Music as Drama,” p. 68. For stories about the *Prélude* that differ considerably from the Proustian one I tell here, see Bruhn, *Images and Ideas*, pp. 89–96; and Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 22–27.

STEVEN  
RINGS  
Debussy's  
*Des pas sur  
la neige*

Example 12: Parenthetical chromatic progression interrupts diatonic descent (mm. 20–27).

to seek out their consequences in the music that follows, to which I now turn.<sup>72</sup>

#### SECTION B' AND CODA (MM. 26–36)

The arabesque-memory dies away in the melodic cadence of m. 25. The effect of the episode, however, lingers into  $b_1'$  (mm. 26–28<sup>3</sup>). The chromatic impulse of the harmony in the *moment bienheureux* overflows into section  $b_1'$ , as the chromatically upsurging seventh chords of mm. 23–24 are answered by the chromatically sinking minor triads of mm. 26–27<sup>2</sup>. The effect is of psychic energy cresting and ebbing away. Strikingly, the chromatic descent in  $b_1'$  is broken at the very moment that the *diatonic* descent in  $a_2'$  was broken: after the third chord of the sequence. Instead of the expected E-minor triad (or some enharmonic variant thereof) at m. 27<sup>3</sup>, there is a D-minor triad. Even more strikingly, this is exactly the triad expected at the crux-moment in  $a_2'$ , at m. 21<sup>3</sup>, when we heard the  $D\flat^7$  that initiated the memory episode. The voicing and register of the D-minor chord make the connection explicit.

As shown in ex. 12, we can hear the chromatic progressions of mm. 21<sup>3</sup>–27<sup>2</sup> as an extended parenthesis that interrupts the expected arrival of the D-minor harmony. Harmonies proceed chromatically within the parentheses, and diatonically outside of them. The parentheses enclose the *moment bienheureux* and its aftereffects. The example draws a vivid picture: the steady stepwise progress of the descending chords (via  $S^{-1}$ ), iconic of a physical process in the frozen present, is interrupted in

the musical flow by a rising and then falling surge of half-step motion ( $hS$  and  $hS^{-1}$ ), iconic of the psychic surge and ebb caused by the memory. The arrival of the D-minor chord in m. 27<sup>2</sup> can thus be heard to signal the persona's full return to consciousness of present surroundings, as the effects of the *moment bienheureux* finally drift away entirely. Appropriately, the D minor in m. 27 returns us to the piece's *Grundharmonie*.

Section  $b_2'$ , in mm. 28<sup>4</sup>–31, then comes as a surprise, or perhaps a culmination: it presents the complete arabesque alone, unobscured by footsteps and surging harmonies and filled out with diatonic fauxbourdon accompaniment (intensifying the sense of stylistic/historical retrospection; see n. 67). The connection with memory is now made explicit in Debussy's performance indication: *Comme un tendre et triste regret*. The moment may be interpreted as a memory of the crux-moment itself, as the music revisits (and fleshes out harmonically) the arabesque first heard in the right hand. A different understanding may be more persuasive, however: we need not necessarily understand  $b_2'$  as occupying some precise moment within the temporal flow of the persona's experience—itsself a memory of an “earlier event.” Instead, the music can be heard to present here the remembered arabesque alone and unobstructed. It is as though the music says: “*This is what was remembered.*” Interpreted in this way, the music of  $b_2'$  does not “happen after” that of  $a_2'$  in any simple sense. Rather, it occupies no specific location along the temporal chain of the persona's experience. It is instead a narrative element, one that allows us as listeners a direct experience of the memory itself, just as Proust's narrator goes on to tell us in great detail about his childhood in Combray after the madeleine episode (“*This is what was remembered*”).

<sup>72</sup>Though biographical “evidence” is not necessary to underscore the suggestiveness of a given narrative, it is worth noting that Debussy and Proust knew one another, though they were not close. Lockspeiser presents a humorous account of one of their meetings in *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. I, p. 135.

Though we achieve the six-flat tonic collection here, the *notes sensibles* C $\flat$  and F are left hanging and unresolved: G $\flat$ -as-tonic-harmony never emerges.<sup>73</sup> C $\flat$ <sup>6</sup> in m. 30<sup>4</sup>, the highest pitch in the piece thus far, does not call forth b $\flat$ <sup>5</sup>, but instead arpeggiates downward through an unresolved D $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> arpeggio, via three iterations of the arabesque's characteristic sighing figure.<sup>74</sup> Ascending left-hand chords move in contrary motion to this descent, reaching over the c $\flat$ <sup>5</sup> highpoint to d $\flat$ <sup>6</sup> in m. 31<sup>4</sup>, which sits atop a strangely unsatisfying D $\flat$ <sup>6</sup><sub>3</sub> chord. The lack of resolution gives the memory *itself* an unfulfilled, retrospective quality, as though directed toward a remembered but still unattained G $\flat$ . This idea suggests a seeming regress of recollection within recollection, the ultimate object of which continues to recede out of reach into the past. Only the memory's affective shell, tender and regretful, is evident.<sup>75</sup>

The striking disjunction between the unsatisfying D $\flat$  triad and the following coda—Puri aptly calls it a “harmonic non sequitur”<sup>76</sup>—closes off the possibility of G $\flat$  resolution and further detaches the memory from the snowy present. In a piece in which the music so often

flows across formal boundaries, the disjunction is especially jarring: the D $\flat$ <sup>6</sup>/D $\flat$ <sup>5</sup> octave at the end of m. 31 shifts enigmatically and without motivation up to the D $\flat$ <sup>6</sup>/D $\flat$ <sup>5</sup> octave that begins the coda. The footsteps return, now in octaves at this higher register. Their rebeginning suggests the onset of a potential third rotation, but that incipient rotation quickly dissolves. If the steps as originally heard seemed immediately underfoot in the temporal here and now, they now sound distant, as though the persona is slipping once again from our interpretive reach. The widely spread concluding D-minor harmony entirely avoids the corporeal middle register of the piano, where all earlier somatic activity took place, further reinforcing the sense of the persona's physical disappearance.

But we still hear the ostinato, however distant. Is it possible that it is now *the footsteps* that are remembered? The high, octave-doubled ostinato can easily be heard as a recollection of the ostinato of the piece's opening, which seemed to unfold in the present tense (even as it triggered the past). This redoubling of memorial activity—a further regress of the piece into the past—represents a final, anachronous fold in the temporal fabric. This anachronous complexity combines with the earlier break in narrative continuity (the out-of-time presentation of the memory episode in b $\flat$ <sup>2</sup>) to create a thoroughly disintegrating effect at the *Prélude's* close, calling into question the very psychic continuity of the persona, whose identity seems to melt away (or die, *morendo*) with the music itself.

#### CONCLUSION: SECRETS AND MYSTERIES (AGAIN)

In the introduction I asked whether analysis must by definition be allied with Jankélévitch's secret, or whether, by contrast, it might not provide a mode of attending whereby we become more alive to a work's *mystères*. I framed the issue in terms of the kind of musical engagement analysis can provide, leading not to a decoding but to an intensified experience of music's materiality, its physical sound, which might bring a clear mystery into yet sharper relief. The reader may wonder, however, whether the discussion above is still beholden

<sup>73</sup>We might thus choose to hear a D $\flat$  Mixolydian modality here, rather than G $\flat$  Ionian. As before in section b $\flat$ <sub>2</sub> (see n.52), the D $\flat$ -or-G $\flat$  ambiguity reenacts, a semitone lower, the D-or-G ambiguity of mm. 5–7. The “semitone lower” idea relates directly to the semitonal shift in m. 21<sup>3</sup> from the expected D minor to the actual D $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> that begins the memory episode. D-or-G thus represents an ambiguity in the frozen present, while D $\flat$ -or-G $\flat$  represents a parallel ambiguity in the remembered past.

<sup>74</sup>The same descending arpeggio acted as a cadential gesture in the first appearance of the arabesque, in mm. 23–24, but there it sounded a third lower, beginning on A $\flat$ <sup>5</sup> rather than C $\flat$ <sup>6</sup>. Puri hears the sighing figure as a sublimation of the footsteps' “snap rhythm” (“Caught in the Throes of Memory”).

<sup>75</sup>This idea, of a continuous regress of memory, is not particularly Proustian, though it seems apt for the *Prélude*. What is Proustian is the *regret* attached to the memory. In *Time Regained*, the narrator reflects that the very work of reanimating memory itself leads to suffering and regret, as one bores through the “thickness of time” to uncover past experiences with greater clarity and focus. It is thus not the memories themselves that are painful; rather, the pain and regret arise from the effortful act of recollection itself. See Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, vol. 6, *Time Regained*, trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrief and Terence Kilmartin, esp. pp. 262–66, 297–304, and 505–07. I am grateful to Michael Klein for drawing my attention to this connection.

<sup>76</sup>Puri, “Caught in the Throes of Memory.”

to the ideology of the secret. I have, after all, drawn attention to many details in the piece that one would not likely notice without the intervention of hermeneutic and analytical effort. I have even gone so far as to construct a Proustian narrative around the *Prélude*. Are these not the very kinds of secrets—revealed by the guild practices of a music theorist, no less—that Jankélévitch would warn us against?

Perhaps. But some reflection may lead us to wonder whether Jankélévitch's distinction between the secret and the mystery is really so clear-cut when we are in the act of aesthetic contemplation. Recall the sonic details highlighted by the analysis, the special temporal quality of the ostinato, the harmonic stab of m. 2, the sonic effect of the various shifts in diatonic collection, and so on: were these details really *hidden* before, like secrets? Or were they always there, waiting to be heard—perhaps even *clear*—in the music's sounding surface? If an analytical or interpretive statement makes us more attentive to a sonic detail of one kind or another, have we necessarily succumbed to the ideology of the secret? To be sure, some of the relationships pointed out above are less sonically immediate than others, but no observation is so esoteric that it cannot be experienced with a small amount of aural focusing (likely at the piano). One exercise along these lines is discussed in n. 48; it sensitizes us to an aural effect that is itself highly *limpide* in its structure, even though we may become fully attentive to it only by inhabiting the "perpendicular time" of musical reflection and re-creation.

Discursive intervention need not always be an act of ferreting out what is hidden or esoteric, but can instead be an act of directing attention with great focus to a material phenomenon, seeking to develop an experience of the phenomenon that is as richly tangible as possible. To keep us focused on the materiality of artworks, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht urges us to engage in *deictic* talk about them—talk that focuses attention on details in the physical artifact (talk that "points to"), and that does not lapse into metaphysical interpretation.<sup>77</sup> It is

hard to imagine a more deictic perspective than Lewin's view of musical analysis: "Analysis simply says: Listen to this . . . now remember how that sounded . . . hear the relation . . . etc." Analysis of course does more than just point—it also constructs experience, asking us not only to listen, but to listen in a particular way, a way shaped by the theoretical discourse. Nevertheless, analysis, at its most effective, can be a powerful way of drawing our attention closely to the sonic material of music, and focusing our aural attention on its presence effects in deictic fashion. This is surely one of the reasons many musicians and scholars continue to find the analytical act deeply satisfying.

It is possible to draw a distinction, however, between analytical observations and hermeneutic observations in this regard—between, say, the various sonic effects just discussed and the Proustian narrative. For, while Gumbrecht may or may not agree with my assertion above regarding the deictic character of music analysis, it is clear that he is at pains to draw a bright line between the deictic and the *hermeneutic*, suggesting that reflection on a work's *meaning* blunts our sensitivity to it as a physical phenomenon: "If we attribute a meaning to a thing that is present, that is, if we form an idea of what this thing may be in relation to us, we seem to attenuate, inevitably, the impact that this thing can have on our bodies and our senses."<sup>78</sup>

But is this always true? Do Foucault's virtuosic observations about spectators, mirrors, and representations in *Las Meninas* distance us from the myriad physical details of Velázquez's painting? Do Cone's ruminations on Schubert's health really make us *less* attentive to the sonic effect of that E $\sharp$  in the sixth *Moment musical*, the note that he made famous?<sup>79</sup> Isn't the opposite in fact true: that both of these interpretations—and many others—draw us into the physical details

cepts overlap somewhat, I use *deixis* here as a synecdoche for the entire complex.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xiv.


<sup>79</sup>Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970), pp. 3–16; Edward T. Cone, "Schubert's Promissory Note: An Exercise in Musical Hermeneutics," this journal 5 (1982), 233–41.

<sup>77</sup>Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, pp. 91–132. *Deixis* is closely related to two other ideas that Gumbrecht presents: "epiphany" and "presentification." As these con-

of the work in the process of interpreting them, making us more alive to their material presences? Such interpretive writing, when effective, is capable of “bringing us to our senses” in the most literal meaning of that phrase, as Joseph Dubiel has noted in a related context.<sup>80</sup> The bright line that Gumbrecht draws between the deictic and the hermeneutic thus strikes me as dubious—the sensitive hermeneutic observation, like the sensitive analytical observation, can have a strongly deictic character.

The reader can evaluate the degree to which the Proustian narrative above succeeds in this regard. To the extent that it seems a distraction from the work’s sounding surface—an overly elaborate story that gets in the way of one’s present experience—it fails as a deictic gesture (though it may still have other interpretive values). On the other hand, to the extent that it makes one more attentive to the complex ways in which Debussy’s *Prélude* unfolds in time and evokes a network of other times in the process, it has succeeded deictically, making some of the *Prélude*’s temporal *mystères* more palpably present to experience.

The most prudent position thus would seem to be to avoid any blanket statement on the necessary relationship between talk about music and musical experience. The former may enhance as well as inhibit the latter, in ways that are often unpredictable and vary case by case. In any event, we must avoid the mistaken assumption that talk about music *necessarily* displaces musical experience: that to say something is always to retreat from the physical to the metaphysical. Gnostic intervention and drastic experience need not be antithetical, the former blocking access to the latter, or worse, representing a desire to flee it, as Jankélévitch and Abbate suggest.<sup>81</sup> For talk can often lead us

back to the physical with renewed focus, gnostic intervention feeding into heightened drastic awareness. Experience intensified through contemplation is no less intense for that. The drastic moment need not come upon us all at once through a sort of discursive asceticism; it is something that we can cultivate and prepare for, focusing our attention, and listening closely. By listening in this way to Debussy, we might hear, along with Jankélévitch, mysteries that deepen as they grow clearer. 

---

*cal Society* 59 (2006), 488–501; and Ian Quinn, “Minimal Challenges: Process Music and the Uses of Formalist Analysis,” *Contemporary Music Review* 25 (2006), 283–94.

### **Abstract.**

Vladimir Jankélévitch heard Debussy’s music as a sonic manifestation of certain nuclear mysteries of existence: mysteries of death, destiny, anguish, pleasure, love, space, and—in various forms—time. To describe these mysteries, he developed the paradoxical locution of the *mystère limpide*, the “lucid mystery.” Debussy’s mysteries are lucid, Jankélévitch argued, in that they are not hidden behind arcane codes or hermetic formalisms, but are instead palpably present to experience, sensually manifest in the music’s sounding surface. As such, they prove resistant to hermeneutic and analytical attention, which, per Jankélévitch, seek always to penetrate beyond sounding surfaces in search of hidden meanings.

This article takes Jankélévitch’s ideas as a point of departure in both a positive and negative sense, adopting his notion of the *mystère limpide* as a valuable heuristic in Debussy study, but challenging his highly limited views of analysis and hermeneutics. The article takes as its focus Debussy’s *Prélude Des pas sur la neige* and explores the ways in which it can be heard to manifest *mystères* of time, representation, and consciousness. It does this, however, with the aid of analysis and hermeneutics, drawing on transformational theory, familiar concepts from narratology, and Proustian notions of memory. In short, the article deploys discourses anathema to Jankélévitch for decidedly Jankélévitchian ends. The conclusion explores the degrees to which such a paradoxical effort succeeds, ultimately arguing that discursive intervention—technical or otherwise—need not be a means of seeking out hidden meanings, but can instead be a means of drawing us closer to music as a physical, material phenomenon. Key words: Claude Debussy, Vladimir Jankélévitch, time, memory, Marcel Proust, transformational theory.

---

<sup>80</sup>Joseph Dubiel, “Analysis, Description, and What Really Happens,” *Music Theory Online* 6.3 (2000).

<sup>81</sup>For additional reactions to the gnostic/drastring opposition as presented by Abbate, not necessarily similar to mine, see Lawrence Kramer, “Music, Metaphor and Metaphysics,” *Musical Times* 145 (2004), 5–18; Karol Berger, “Musicology According to *Don Giovanni*, or Should We Get Drastic?” *Journal of Musicology* 22 (2005), 490–501; Michael Puri, review of *Programming the Absolute* by Berthold Hoeckner, *Journal of the American Musicologi-*