



DOUZE ÉTUDES
by CLAUDE DEBUSSY
A Pianist's View

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MARGIT RAHKONEN

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Margit Rahkonen

***Douze Études* by Claude Debussy – A Pianist's View**



Fig.1. Debussy in the French seaside town of Pourville, where he composed the Douze Études. The photograph was taken in 1904 by Emma Bardac, who later became his wife.

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Margit Rahkonen

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Helsinki 15.11.2016
Margit Rahkonen

Introduction

Liszt as the starting point

The twelve piano *Études* of Claude Debussy became a permanent part of my life in the 1990s while I was pursuing my artistic doctoral studies at the Sibelius Academy. The theme of my five doctoral concerts, however, was not the music of Debussy, but rather of Franz Liszt. The twelve *Études*, plus a few ‘water pieces’ by Debussy and Ravel included in the programmes, were meant to demonstrate the continuation and development of Liszt’s pianistic techniques and harmonic experiments in these later composers’ piano works.

My first attempt at the doctoral thesis dealt with the sound colour of the piano. I wanted to see how a pianist could influence the sound of individual tones without using the pedal, even going so far as asking some of my colleagues to see if they could do it. Somewhere along the way, after banging my head on the wall at having to study statistics in order to record and analyse the results, I lost interest – but not in the sound colour of the piano itself. For having extended the piano’s potential, Liszt was for me a colourist composer, not only in his daring experiments with harmony, but also through addressing the pedals, the keyboard registers, the different attacks – whatever it took to express in piano music the whole spectrum of human life, from pathetic and banal to noble and divine.

During my student years, I became acquainted with a fair number of concert etudes, naturally including many by Chopin and Liszt, but

I remember having played only one from the Debussy collection, *pour les arpèges composés*. I wasn't very familiar with the Debussy Études during my doctoral studies, and the task of learning them abounded with the delights of discovery. I knew of course of Chopin's influence on Debussy, but my Liszt-filled head kept forming all kinds of Liszt connections, no matter what I was playing or reading. Liszt arrived in Paris as a young boy and lived there for twelve years. He grew into adulthood in that musical capital of Europe of the time, and French language and culture were to remain important to him for the rest of his life. My way of thinking about Debussy's writing Études in the first place and his apparent look back in time were thus imbued with the doings and thoughts of Liszt the romantic piano virtuoso *par excellence*.

My concert programme notes on Debussy's Études began to grow and finally took the form of the thesis for my artistic doctoral degree at the Sibelius Academy.¹ That text has remained the basis for this book. In the rewriting process, the language has changed from Finnish to English, corrections and changes have been made, and numerous amendments written. Many of them have arisen from the Debussy literature published since I wrote my thesis.

At the time of Liszt's death, Debussy was a young man, three weeks away from his 24th birthday, with 60 compositions to his name.² All of the works considered important today still lay before him. Debussy had met Liszt in 1886 and heard him play for his guests a programme including *Au bord d'une source*, his transcription on Schubert's *Ave Maria*, and possibly, an unnamed third piece, which might well have been something from his late output.³ Anyone acquainted with Liszt's late piano works knows that some of them can be deviously tricky, despite their apparent simplicity. Even though Liszt was hardly the main catalyst in the birth of the Études thirty years later, his influence

¹ *Henki, sointi ja tekniikka. Claude Debussyn 12 etydiä pianolle*, Sibelius-Akatemia (*Spirit, Sound and Technique. Claude Debussy's Twelve Études for Piano*), EST 3, 1994.

² Lesure 1977.

³ For more about Debussy's meeting with Liszt, see Lesure 1994, 73–74, Walker 1997, 475 and Howat 2009, 166–168.

was such that no pianist–composer of Debussy’s generation could escape it.

‘Quite apart from the technique, these *Études* will be useful in making pianists understand that you can’t go in for music without good hands!’⁴ In this, as well as in some other comments on the *Études*, Debussy seems to express satisfaction at having created something that would be difficult to play, a rare remark from him. He had edited Chopin’s etudes and was well acquainted with their difficulties. The etudes had impressed Liszt in the 1830s, and Liszt’s way of playing them had made Chopin envious.⁵ One can only imagine what Chopin’s etude for octaves, for example, might have sounded like in Liszt’s hands. Debussy treats octaves rather differently from Chopin, and his octave *Étude* seems to make a jest, if not outright fun, of some of the basic elements of Lisztian thundering – octave leaps, interlocking octaves, doublings. On the other hand, the other *Étude* dealing with octave stretches, *pour les accords*, requires, for Debussy, an unusual amount of sheer strength. Of course, it still needs to be executed in French: *sans lourdeur*. The leaps bring to mind the left-hand octaves in Chopin’s etude-like 16th Prelude. Debussy writes similar leaps for both hands in mirroring movements and builds the octaves up into chords in a Lisztian manner, reminiscent of the riding (or dancing, why not?) Mazeppa in a passing moment of nonchalant omnipotency. Would Debussy have written such an *Étude* for chords if Liszt had never existed?

About the sources

As late as the 1990s, there still seemed to be surprisingly little literature on the Debussy piano *Études*. The main sources for my thesis were Debussy’s own writings, his letters, the biographies of Vallas and Lockspeiser, the books of Robert E. Schmitz, Marguerite Long, and Alfred Cortot as well as the recently (1991) published Durand-Costallat edition of the *Études* with its commentary by Claude Helffer. This

⁴ To Durand 27.9.1915.

⁵ Walker 1989a, 184. Liszt is known to have played some of the etudes in his recitals.

critical edition was revelatory in that it showed the ambiguity of many markings of the composer, in spite of his supposed extreme accuracy. The editor's comments also shed light on the historical background of the *Études*. This edition, together with some later remarks on it by researchers such as Roy Howat, has been the score I have used in practicing and writing about the *Études*.

Today there exists much more literature on Debussy and his music than at the time of my original writing project. The Debussy centenary celebrations of 2012 alone produced a great number of texts and recordings. I have not discussed recordings in this book, and recordings have not played an important role in this writing process, except for those made by Debussy himself.⁶ Of later ones, the most meaningful have been Samson François' recording of five of the *Études* (7, 8, 10, 11 and 12), which he made in 1970, just before his death (new release by EMI in 2010), and Mitsuko Uchida's 1990 recording of the complete set (Philips).

The critical complete edition of Durand, *Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy*, which also includes the *Études* volume, has by now been finished,⁷ and a definitive publication of letters with commentary *Claude Debussy: Correspondance 1872–1918*, edited by François Lesure and Denis Herlin, appeared in 2005. Unfortunately, it is so far available only in French. Jann Pasler states in her excellent review on Debussy research during the first decade of the 21st century⁸ that by 2012, the year of her review, no 'new full-scale scholarly examination of the composer and his oeuvre' had been published, and she voices the need for a retrospective look on Debussy's work and position. A treatise focusing on the evolution of Debussy's style and ideas throughout his career as a composer has yet to be written.

Three of the books I have come across during recent years deal solely, or very significantly, with Debussy's piano music: Roy Howat's

⁶ Debussy recorded altogether about fifty minutes of music, 14 piano pieces (Welte rolls) and four song accompaniments (audio recordings). Original recordings were made in 1904 and 1913 and republished by the Pierian Recording Society in 2000.

⁷ The complete piano works of Debussy were also published by G. Henle Verlag 2012.

⁸ Pasler 2012, 197–216.

The Art of French Piano Music (2009), Marianne Wheeldon's *Debussy's Late Style* (2009) and Paul Roberts's *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (1996). All have been extremely helpful and informative, but the last of these particularly delighted me in that the writer seems to share my interest in the Liszt–Debussy musical lineage. Roberts discusses the web of influences between Liszt and Debussy more extensively in the chapter 'Debussy and the Virtuoso' than anyone else I have seen, even to the degree that Charles Timbrell in his *Music & Letters* review of November 1996 reproaches Roberts for neglecting Chopin in favour of Liszt. Roberts discusses the whole of Debussy's piano oeuvre from many valuable and interesting viewpoints, also giving each *Étude* his separate attention. At the end of the book is a French–English glossary of terms used by Debussy in his piano scores.

All of Debussy's letters cited in this book may be read in their original French in the *Correspondance* (i.e. *Claude Debussy: Correspondance 1872–1918*. Édition établie par François Lesure et Denis Herlin, annotée par François Lesure, Denis Herlin et Georges Liébert. Paris: Gallimard, 2005). When citing a letter from Debussy I have only mentioned the recipient and the date of the letter. The translations are mine, although with the aid of existing English translations from several sources.

Performers' knowledge

The first and foremost authority in trying to learn and understand a written composition is, naturally, the score. The performer approaches the score humbly, knowing that a great number of secrets hide within it. Usually this is a time of wonderful excitement, joy and curiosity. The performer enters the play armed with extensive knowledge of how to handle the instrument in question, understanding of the tradition behind the score, and information gathered from possible previous experience with the composer's other works as well as from studying other repertory. Some of the secrets of the score may reveal themselves over the course of working on the piece, and some will perhaps remain hidden, but even then the performer must make

choices. Sometimes the performer is forced to make well-informed guesses on what the composer's intentions might have been.

In his written, very detailed markings, Debussy hints at particular directions, but the sound and the colour for a single tone or a longer section are borne of the player's imagination and will. Debussy invites the pianist to imagine and to listen, to feel, and to listen again. The sound, unique in each performance, is produced by a combination of many factors, among them the written notes and directions in Debussy's score, the so-called extramusical information connected to the work, the instrument, the feeling of the keys under the fingers, and the cooperation of the musician's mind with the movements of the hands and the arms and the whole body.

Many legendary pianists have emphasised the importance of the score, especially the Urtext editions, in the process of forming an interpretation. Some have even voiced the opinion that everything can be found in the score. Yet all musicians know that the inspiration and solutions for turning the written score into sound and solving the problems in it can be found in many places apart from the score itself. Taking these and one's own sentiments seriously by no means signifies disrespect for the score or for the composer's intention, the latter in particular a very problematic, yet unavoidable question. A live performance of almost any work offers the player enormous freedom and scope for improvisation. The paradox of Debussy's music is that despite his sometimes fussily detailed performance instructions, room for freedom still exists, often to a much greater degree than with many other works generally classified as classical or art music.

In writing this book, my own experiences as a pianist were as important as the literary and other sources I used. Without a personal history of mental and physical work at the piano, I would never have written about Debussy's music. I performed the *Études* in my doctoral recitals and on numerous other occasions after that, talked about them, and also recorded them (Finlandia 1994). My aim in this book has not been to present my solutions for the technical problems the *Études* pose, except in some fairly minor cases, but rather to open up some of the many interpretational possibilities for the pianist-reader by approaching the *Études* from different angles. Some of

the angles are prescriptive and personal and will not interest every reader. I have included these because other pianists' personal views on works I have been working on have sometimes opened up new venues to myself – albeit sometimes also contrary to those the writer or speaker has presented. I hope that the list of sources together with the footnotes provides a reasonably comprehensive, although certainly not complete, reading list on what is available on the subject of the *Études* at this time. This attempt has perhaps at times led to a prolific use of the 'further reading' approach. I hope that a pianist might find these pointers practical in finding more information on a subject not discussed deeply in my text.

Instrumental (in this case pianistic) and musical experimentation as well as research in one form or another are everyday tools of the trade of a musician working seriously on a piece of music. This always involves analysis, whether its results are expressed in words or as a musical performance. Writers and researchers such as John Rink, Nicholas Cook and others have discussed musical analysis from the performer's point of view. According to Rink, 'Performers often understand music along the same lines as those carrying out "rigorous [traditional, theoretical] analysis", but in different terms ... "Analysis" is not some independent procedure applied to the act of interpretation, but rather an integral part of the performing process'. Nevertheless, Rink also emphasises the fact that a successful performance, one that produces 'a musically cogent and coherent synthesis' and 'achieves "resonance" among its listeners', needs yet something else. Rink hints at what this might be in mentioning informed intuition and a performer's individual artistic prerogatives as guiding factors (Rink 2011, 39, 36, 56).⁹ Those guiding factors have undoubtedly had a role in helping me, among other things, in pondering the meaning of other

⁹ For Rink's thoughts on 'conciliatory spirit' between analysis and performance, as well as the topic of intuition, see also Rink 2005. Lester (2005, 214) suggests that if performances were more widely recognized as relevant to analysis, 'the focus of analysis could shift from finding the "structure" of a piece to defining multiple strategies for interpreting pieces', because performance decisions, arising from many different perspectives, 'likely reflect a much wider range of structural options than analyses'.

arts for the *Études*, Debussy's personality traits, the importance of the visual look of the score, Debussy's concept of piano sound, and in choosing the points of my comments on the individual *Études*.

Debussy didn't give his *Études* any titles or names, not even as an afterthought. I have done so, perhaps somewhat immodestly. These descriptive attributes are, again, totally personal. Associations which different people have with a particular piece of music can differ wildly from each other. For example, I have always associated the *Étude pour les tierces* with water and sensuality, so I was first totally baffled and then delighted to read that in another player, the same music evokes an image of a melancholy and arid landscape. It is an excellent and informative exercise to try to see which features of the music can produce such an association, and what means would be needed to turn that image into sound. Perhaps someone else can do the same exercise with my titles. There is no final truth in music, yet we must try to find what is true to each of us.

BIRTH AND BACKGROUND OF THE ÉTUDES

Germany declared war on France on 3 March 1914. That same day, Debussy wrote to Durand in a worried tone, ‘The consequences of a war are unknown and innumerable’, and a few days later, ‘You know that I am not cold-blooded at all, let alone military-minded’ (To Durand 8.8.1914). The turn of events during the following weeks was dramatic and discouraging. Debussy felt both helpless and depressed: ‘At no point in history have war and art made good company, one must take sides without even having the right to deplore it ... Fighting counts for nothing, such successive shocks and revolting horrors suffocate and break the heart. I am not talking about the two months during which I haven’t written a note or even touched the piano; that is not important in the light of what is happening, I know that very well, but I can’t help but to think about it with sadness – at my age, lost time is lost forever’ (To Durand 21.9. 1914).¹⁰

After having returned to Paris from a short stay in Angers during the scare of the advancing German troops, he wrote, ‘If I dared to, and if I didn’t dread the sense of pompousness which haunts this kind of work, I’d be happy to write *Marche héroïque* ... but ... to play the hero in all tranquillity, well away from the reach of bullets, seems to me ridiculous’ (To Durand 9.10.1914).¹¹ About a month later Debussy did manage to write, not a march, but *Berceuse Héroïque*, a short piano piece (which he orchestrated in December) as a contribution

¹⁰ Debussy’s own words: ‘On a beau lutter, tant de coups successifs, tant d’horreurs révoltantes, étreignent et broient le coeur.’

to *King Albert's Book*, which was to be published in aid of the Belgian war relief. On New Year's Day he wrote to his friend Robert Godet, 'As far as music goes I have come to the point where I no longer know what it is; the familiar sound of piano has become odious to me' and described the *Berceuse* as a result of his 'ramblings' (divagations). 'It [writing the *Berceuse*] is all I could do, the vicinity of the Germans hampers me physically' (To Godet 1.1.1915).

Around November the troops settled down to trench warfare. Everyday worries of life in Paris troubled increasingly those not directly involved with the war actions. In spring 1915 Debussy returned to some old ideas he had once had for chamber music. These were ultimately to emerge as the *Six Epigraphes Antiques* for piano four hands. They were followed a little later by *En blanc et noir* for two pianos, in which he alludes directly to the war. The advances paid by his publisher Durand for forthcoming works were still building up, and in order to earn his right to them, he agreed to make a new edition of Chopin's piano works and the Bach sonatas for violin and keyboard, German editions being unobtainable because of the war.

Debussy did not particularly enjoy editing. 'I find the Chopin "manuscripts" truly terrifying! ... How can you expect three manuscripts, certainly not all in Chopin's hand, to agree with each other?' (To Durand 24.2.1915). Later he also peevishly criticised Bach, a composer he otherwise admired: 'Never edit the *Sonatas for violin and piano* of J. S. Bach on a rainy Sunday! ... When the old Saxon Cantor is short of ideas, he starts off with anything at all, and he is really merciless ... If some friend – or publisher – had gently advised him to stop writing on, say, one day of the week, we should have been spared some hundreds of pages through which we have to wander between long rows of dreary bars which succeed one another relentlessly, repeating the same rascally little *subject* or *counter-subject*' (To Durand 15.4.1917).

¹¹ Besides Vallas (1973, 252) and others, this quote is referred to by Arun Rao, whose concise and informative paper, *Claude de France: Debussy's Great War of 1915* (Dublin Institute of Technology, 2015) may also be read in <<http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=aaconmusbk>>

In July, Debussy and his family left Paris for the familiar small town of Pourville, located by the sea, which he called ‘mon élément vital’ (Long 1972, 41). He had rented a villa called *Mon coin* (My corner) ‘on the west cliff, overlooking both the sea and the pebble beach’ (Helffer 1991, XV).¹² Although barely a hundred kilometres from the front, Pourville was nevertheless peaceful, and since his illness was also giving him some respite, Debussy was able to set to work on some ideas that were going round in his head: ‘I was able once again to think in musical terms, which I had not been able to do over the last year. It is certainly not essential that I write music, but it is still all I am able to do more or less competently. I must humbly admit to the feeling of latent death within me. Accordingly, I write like a madman or like one who is condemned to die the next morning’ (To Godet 14.10.1915).

In August he continued to work on the *Études*: ‘It is endlessly time-consuming (prenant). Does it not annoy you that some of them are pure technique, but without being too severe?’ (To Durand 7.8.1915). By the end of September the *Études* were finished, and Debussy was satisfied – a not very common occurrence. Being a composer for whom achieving a desired result was often slow and laborious, he must have found it extremely satisfying to work in a fit of invigorating inspiration, having freed himself of the pressing weight of inertia. ‘The six remaining *Études* are now finished, I only have to copy them out now. I have to confess I am very pleased to have finished them and I feel, without being unduly vain, that they will occupy a very special place’ (To Durand 27.9.1915). After making a clean copy, he wrote to his publisher, ‘Phew! ... The most intricate of Japanese prints is child’s play compared to the writing of some of the pages, but I’m really pleased! Some good work’ (To Durand 30.9.1915). In addition to the troublesome handiwork, Debussy at times had to fight with other practical problems: ‘For some days I’ve been in the same conditions as Russia! That’s to say, ... no more of the manuscript paper “Quarto Papale” ... In order to finish the six *Études* ... I’ve had to employ

¹² Less than thirty years later in 1942, the beaches of Pourville became an actual part of the war scene in the Battle of Dieppe in World War II.

a devilish cunning worthy of the Boches' (To Durand 28.8.1915).¹³ Later, he describes with his characteristic ironic modesty the *Études* as containing 'a thousand ways of treating pianists as they deserve ... It's not always very amusing, but it is sometimes very clever' (To Caplet 22.7.1916).

In December 1915, shortly before an operation to prevent his cancer from spreading, Debussy composed the short, solemn *Élégie* for piano and the song *Le Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de maison*, a setting of a poem of his own in which he expressed his sympathy for the children suffering from the ravages of war. He composed nothing throughout the following year.¹⁴ Towards the end of 1916, he started work on the violin sonata, and the following spring he still found the energy to appear as the pianist in the premiere of both this and the cello sonata. In the autumn, his condition deteriorated so radically that he seemed to be 'leading a life of waiting in an ante-room, a poor traveller who is expecting a train that never comes' (Long 1972, 46).

Debussy died on 25 March 1918 while Germans were launching their final offensive and Paris was being bombarded. Two and a half years earlier, the *Études* had been composed in a joyous burst of

¹³ Boche: Debussy uses this contemptuous slang term, used especially to refer to a German soldier, in World War I or II, often in his letters, even once when referring to his Bechstein instrument ('mon piano "boche"') when having it tuned to sound 'à la française' (To Durand 29.5.1915). In his vocabulary, the word does not seem always to be loaded with hatred, but sometimes, rather, with a kind of strained, uncomfortable familiarity – and is used in the aforementioned example even in a jocular tone. Understandably enough, the tone changes according to the ongoing situation and Debussy's own mood, possibly also according to the recipient of the letter. In a letter to Stravinsky, he writes: 'How could we not have foreseen that these men were plotting the destruction of our art, just as they had planned the destruction of our country? Worst of all is this racial hatred which will end only with the last of the Germans!' (To Stravinsky 24.10.1915).

¹⁴ During the cold winter of 1916–1917, he did, however, compose a piece for piano called *Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon*, which was not discovered until 2001.

¹⁵ Within a short time span he also composed *En blanc et noir* for two pianos and two chamber music sonatas (one for cello and piano and another for harp, flute and viola), then about a year later a third one (for violin and piano).

creative energy.¹⁵ They were to remain Debussy's last substantial work for solo piano. The *Études* were written in war-time circumstances by a composer who was seriously ill, but for him the enjoyment of being able to work and create music transcended everything else. After having finished six of the *Études*, Debussy wrote a happy-sounding letter to Durand making excuses for being late with his Chopin editing because of the work on the *Études*, proposing a simple cover design for them, and worrying about time passing too fast for him to be able to take care of his garden. He recounts how a dead branch of a tree poked him in the eye, probably, as he says, as revenge for his having returned to music and having let his garden 'die in peace' (To Durand 19.8.1915). Perhaps the spirit of mind in which the *Études* were composed might tell us something about how they could sound. They are infused with joy, energy, the happiness of being alive, and filled with the wonders of life – in all of its many facets.

THE ÉTUDES AND THEIR CONTEXT

Reception

I've invested a lot of passion and faith in the future of these Études. I hope you'll like them, both for the music they contain and for what they denote.

Debussy to Durand 28.8.1915

The Études were long thought to have premiered on 14 December 1916 at a concert arranged by Countess Orłowski for the victims of war. The performer was Walter Morse Rummel, a pianist of German–English descent, born in Berlin and later Americanised. Marcel Dietschy, among others, mentions in his book *La Passion de Debussy* (1962) a letter from Debussy to Rummel dated 26 November 1916, on the basis of which he assumes that Rummel performed the complete cycle.¹⁶ It has been established, however, that Rummel played only four of the Études on that occasion.¹⁷ This seems, indeed, to have been the European premiere of any of the Études. The honour of the world premiere apparently goes to an American pianist, a student and friend of Debussy, George Copeland, who performed the *arpèges*

¹⁶ 'Vous pouvez certainement mettre la 1ère audition pour les *Études* de C. D. à moins qu'on ne les ait jouées dans Sirius ou Aldéran' (You may certainly call the performance of the *Études* a premiere, unless they have been played at Sirius or Aldéran) (To Rummel 26.11.1916).

¹⁷ See, e.g. *Correspondance*, footnote to the letter 26.11.1916.

composés and *sonorités opposées* in New York on 19 November 1916, and again in early December in Boston.¹⁸

In any case, Debussy did not wish to offer the *Études* to Ricardo Viñes, who until then had premiered most of his works for piano; he did not like the claim that Viñes understood his music better than anyone else, and criticised his playing as being dry (Segalen 1961, 107–108). This is an interesting comment since Viñes's piano student, composer Francis Poulenc, claimed that 'No one could teach the art of using the pedals better than Viñes' and that he 'somehow managed to extract clarity from the very ambiguities created by the pedals' (Lockspeiser 1965, 35). Clarity is certainly an important element in both Poulenc's and Debussy's piano music, but quite different pedalling needs to be employed in order to achieve clarity in the two composers' works.

Debussy and Rummel became acquainted sometime around 1910, and on his Paris debut in 1913, Rummel played both books of *Images*. According to Timbrell, Rummel premiered at least ten of Debussy's piano works, among them the first known performance of the complete second book of *Préludes*. Rummel, whom Debussy regarded as a friend, seems to have been a warm and open-hearted person, an intellectual cosmopolite and also something of a mystic. (Timbrell 1987, 28 and 2003, 265)

In 1914 Debussy wrote Rummel a recommendation, which was translated into English and published in the *Musical Record* (XLIV D, p. 147). He praises Rummel's efforts as composer and describes him as a widely cultured person with fresh musical approach of his own.¹⁹ Yet, despite his obvious esteem for Rummel as both a person and a pianist, Debussy in September 1916 refused him – albeit in extremely

¹⁸ Dunoyer 2000, 113. See also Timbrell 2003, 264. George Copeland (1882–1971) studied with Carl Baermann, Teresa Carreño and Harold Bauer. Copeland made several recordings in the 1930s and 1940s. These include works by Debussy, but not the *Études*. About Copeland's performance in the US, the critic of *Musical Courier* wrote on 14.12.1916: 'These [Études], in themselves, are not so absorbing as some of the composer's more familiar pieces, but as played by Mr. Copeland they acquired a delicate tone and glowing imagery that were surpassingly beautiful.'

¹⁹ *Correspondance*, footnote 6 to letter 100, 1914.

polite words – another recommendation for a teaching position in Geneva:

What you are asking is a very delicate matter ... not that the grounds for it were lacking, far from it. It's just that there is the problem of how to do it ... I can't recommend you to the dilettantes as the best pianist of modern times, that would sound like an advertisement [prospectus] ... I am sincerely grateful for you for having reawakened in me an appetite for music at a time when I fully believed I could never work at it again. And more specifically, one must pay homage to your prodigious understanding of music from Bach to Mussorgsky—and, by the way, to Debussy—I cite the name only for reasons of euphony. (To Rummel 30.9.1916)

No evidence seems to have survived for subsequent generations of the reaction to Rummel's first performance of the *Études*, and not one of his recordings contains anything by Debussy.

Charles Timbrell gives a list of pianists who actively performed Debussy's music during his lifetime.²⁰ Of those eighteen artists, Rummel, Copeland and Viñes had the largest number of Debussy's works in their repertoire (Timbrell 2003, 262–263). No doubt there were many others who would occasionally include something of Debussy's *Préludes* or earlier works in their programmes. Rummel was not the only one to play the *Études* while Debussy was alive. Some were performed at least by Marguerite Long, Madeleine Chossat and Marie Panthès, who, at a concert in Geneva in early 1918, played seven of Debussy's *Études* alongside the 'corresponding' études by Chopin (Helffer 1991, XVII).²¹ Isidor Philipp (1863–1958), who is sometimes mentioned as an authority on Debussy, is characterised by Howat as 'a pianist who ... had little sympathy for Debussy's music' (Howat 2011, 132). In a magazine interview by Warren Potter, Philipp tells how Debussy came to him with the *Études* in 1915 to consult him

²⁰ Walter Rummel, George Copeland, Ricardo Viñes, Harold Bauer, Norah Drewett, Franz Liebich, Theodore Szántó, Richard Bühlig, Felix Fox, Heinrich Gebhardt, Rudolf Ganz, Alfredo Casella, Marie Panthès, Jane Mortier, Edouard Risler, Elie Robert Schmitz, Victor Staub, Ennemond Trillat.

on technical matters, confiding that in his opinion, the *Études* were ‘demand pieces’, ‘written to order’ for the publisher.²²

The *Études* were not, it seems, often performed during the inter-war period. One major exception was Eduard Steuermann, who, encouraged by Arnold Schönberg, performed them at his recitals. Somewhat surprisingly, the first recording of the complete *Études* was made as early as February 1938 for Decca on 78 rpm discs by Adolph Hallis, a South African student of Tobias Matthay.²³ The Debussy *Études* began to attract wider interest after the Second World War, when Olivier Messiaen and Pierre Boulez used them as material in their analysis and composition classes (Helffer 1991, XVII). Of the well-known pianists around the middle of the 20th century, Walter Gieseking (1895–1956) and Samson François (1924–1970), a student of

²¹ According to Brown (69–70), Wheeldon (55–56) and others, the pianist, composer and musicologist Robert Godet, a life-long friend of Debussy, suggested this correspondence in a draft for an article, which Panthès had asked him to write. Godet tells about this in a letter to Debussy on 23.1.1918: ‘A pianist of great talent, it is incontestable, and a redoubtable facility, Mme Panthès, who often performs the *Images*, *Estampes*, or *Préludes*, has made something of a cult of your *Études*, which she does not hesitate to share with her numerous clientele (students and public). And you see that she has it in her head to establish by means of recitals a manner of comparison between you and Chopin, in order to make clear the true or claimed sympathy of spirit she supposes unites you across planetary spaces. Some *Préludes* and I believe, in faith, all the *Études* will serve to mark the differences and resemblances as much in inspiration as in relations of technique’ (Wheeldon 2009, 56). The suggested pairs of *Études* were: *pour les cinq doigts* – op. 10 no. 4; *pour les tierces* – op. 25 no. 6; *pour les sixtes* – op. 25 no. 8; *pour les octaves* – op. 25 nos 9 and 10; *pour les degrés chromatiques* – op. 10 nos 2 and 7; *pour les arpèges composés* – op. 25 no. 1; *pour les accords* – op. 10 no. 11. Wheeldon further discusses the presence of Chopin and other ‘compositional personae’ in chapter three of *Debussy’s Late Style*.

²² *Musical America*, August 1934, 15.

²³ The Hallis recording preceded Charles Rosen’s 1951 recording, long thought to have been the first, by 13 years. ‘This [Hallis] recording was reviewed in the December 1938 issue of Gramophone magazine, and a copy of the complete recording is part of IPAM’s collection’ (e-mail from Donald E. Manildi, the curator of International Piano Archives at Maryland, 6.9.2016). A CD copy of the recording exists also in the music library of University of Pretoria, where Senior Information Specialist Isobel Rycroft confirmed the above information (e-mail 7.9.2016).

Alfred Cortot and Marguerite Long, found a place for the *Études* in their repertoire.

Both Debussy's contemporaries and his biographers have to some extent disagreed over the *Études*' status among Debussy's piano works. Francis Poulenc (1899–1963), possibly the most notable member of the Les Six group of composers, recalled Ravel's attitude in 1920 towards the last works of Debussy:

Ravel was a paradox incarnate and, when he was with a young composer he emphasised, I think, his paradoxical attitude. I learnt therefore... that all Debussy's late work, which I adored and was one of the few that did – that's to say *Jeux* and the piano *Études* – all that was not 'good' Debussy; that, from the musical point of view, Debussy's old age was unproductive. (Nichols 1987, 116–117)

Nadia Boulanger, who, being a teacher, was a mentor to several generations of composers, said in 1926 that the last works by Debussy were clearly weaker than the earlier ones. In her view, this was made understandable by war-time circumstances and Debussy's illness (Parks 1973, 2). On the other hand, Léon Vallas, in his biography of Debussy of 1933, wrote of the *Étude* collection: 'This extremely artistic work exemplifies in its fascinating pages all the composer's characteristic processes – harmonic, rhythmic, and pianistic – besides being invaluable from the point of view of piano technique, an art which, thanks to Debussy's own influence, had been considerably altered, if not transformed, during recent years' (Vallas 1973, 257).

The change over the decades in the attitude to the late works is illustrated by, for example, the way in which the important and influential Debussy specialist, Edward Lockspeiser (1905–1973), revised his view. In his first biography of Debussy from 1936 (third edition), he divides Debussy's works into three periods, the last of which, 1904–1918, he calls 'a period of decline'. 'The piano works written during those terrible last years have little value ... Few of these are played nowadays: they are too dull ... the *Douze Études* were intended primarily as technical exercises' (Lockspeiser 1944, 133, 150). However, nearly 30 years later in his two-volume biography, Lockspeiser does not directly comment on the musical value of the

Études, but briefly describes their process of composition, recognising the latter part of 1915 as ‘one of the most fertile periods in the whole of Debussy’s creative life’. He ascribes the fleeting negative reaction to Debussy in the 1920s more as a fashionable trend than as one of aesthetics: ‘Today we are compelled... to view values of precision and imprecision in artistic expression in a different light. Precision is not entirely virtuous; imprecision is not wholly to be condemned. The aesthetic proclaimed by Debussy required their fusion’. (Lockspeiser 1965, 212, 209, 229–230) Lockspeiser, who had studied with Nadia Boulanger in the 1920s, was, in his early thirties, fairly young at the time of his first book on Debussy. Today, in the 21st century, it might be difficult to even recognise the ‘imprecision in artistic expression’ to which Lockspeiser refers, especially in connection with the Études. In the fifth edition of Lockspeiser’s 1936 Debussy biography, published in 1980 and extensively revised by Richard Langham Smith, the Études receive unreserved acclaim and are seen to ‘present a synthesis of... Debussy’s... conception of the piano’ as well as ‘bold visions of the pianistic art of a future generation’ (Lockspeiser 1980, 160–162).

Alfred Cortot (1877–1962)²⁴ is not known to have promoted Debussy’s music in any particular way, although he did perform some of Debussy’s works in his recitals, and among his recordings are those of Childrens’ Corner and the first book of the Préludes. Cortot

²⁴ Alfred Cortot made a career not only as a soloist and chamber musician (as a member of the famous Cortot–Thibaud–Casals Trio, for example); he was a versatile influence in musical life, also politically. At the government’s Office of Fine Arts, Cortot organized the Oeuvre Fraternelle des Artistes, which arranged work opportunities for unemployed musicians during the war (Holoman 2004, 353). In the only known letter from Debussy to Cortot, Debussy declines Cortot’s request to perform in the concerts he planned: ‘Don’t doubt my sympathy towards the Fraternelle. It’s just that I haven’t conducted an orchestra for two years. Never having been brilliant at that task, I am now, believe me, even clumsier... I have decided not to play publicly any more... the war has touched me heavily’ (To Cortot 16.10.1915). Cortot had studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Decombes (one of the last of Chopin’s pupils), and Diémer. Although Chopin and Schumann constituted the backbone of his repertoire, Erik Tawaststjerna wrote in 1953 (117): ‘Of our contemporary pianists, Cortot has got closest to Debussy and Ravel.’

devotes a section to Debussy in his collection of articles entitled *La Musique française de piano*, published in 1920.²⁵ He gives a brief account of each composition, the *Préludes* individually, and picks out characteristic features. The *Études*' musical content is, he stresses, inspired ('a whole unsuspected gamut of pianistic sensations... striking and original... audacious novelty'). He notes the importance of the set as a summary of Debussy's piano technique and its didactic significance, regarding it as the first collection of studies 'in which the principles of modern virtuosity are affirmed by an important composer' (Cortot 1922, 23). He nevertheless deals with the collection as a whole, without going into single *Études*. In spite of Cortot's praise for the *Études*, they might not have represented the kind of 'pictorial' Debussy which perhaps was closer to his heart.²⁶

Elie Robert Schmitz (1889–1949), a pianist who worked under Debussy's direction, placed his teacher's *Études* on a par with Bach's *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier* and the etudes of Chopin and Szymanowski, as the 'mature works of musical giants' (Schmitz 1966, 191).²⁷ A similarly warm attitude was displayed by Marguerite Long (1874–1966)²⁸, a major interpreter of contemporary French music of her time. She also performed some of the *Études*: 'In the

²⁵ This essay, *La musique pour piano de Claude Debussy*, was originally published in the special Debussy number of *La Revue musicale* in December 1920.

²⁶ Cortot's writing on the late piano works is discussed in Wheeldon 2009 (127–130) as one of the examples of early appraisal of Debussy's late works.

²⁷ Schmitz was a great champion of contemporary music. After studying at the Paris Conservatoire he appeared as a soloist, conductor and lied pianist. In 1920 he founded the American Society Pro Musica (first under the name of the Franco-American Music Society), which was to become one of the leading US music organisations. It was through this Society that Ravel and Bartók, for example, were performed in the USA.

²⁸ Marguerite Long studied at the Paris Conservatoire under Marmontel, who had also been Debussy's teacher, and also taught there. Later, she founded a conservatoire of her own, and with violinist Jacques Thibaud, the Long–Thibaud Competition in 1943. Long premiered Ravel's piano concerto in G and the *Tombeau de Couperin* suite, among other things, and wrote memoirs entitled *Au Piano avec Claude Debussy*, *Au Piano avec Maurice Ravel* and *Au Piano avec Gabriel Fauré*.

twelve *Études* for piano are twenty years of Debussy's research and consideration of every aspect of technique. They... are, I believe, his last great achievement' (Long 1972, 41). Although Schmitz and Long both worked with Debussy, it should be noted that their books about him were not published until several decades after his death.

Walter Giesecking (1895–1956), the 'French-born German', is known to subsequent generations of pianists for the great number of recordings he made, and perhaps particularly for his recording of the complete Debussy works for piano in the early 1950s. Giesecking regarded Debussy as the only post-Liszt composer to create a completely new piano style (Giesecking 1964, 110). The Debussy repertory he performed seems to have consisted most often of the *Préludes* and other 'middle-period' piano works by Debussy, although I do not know whether he ever included any of the *Études* in his programs.

Predecessors

What a pity that Mozart was not French. He would have really been worth imitating!

Debussy on Music, 298

Despite his interest in foreign music and exotic cultures, Debussy despised imitators and wanted French music to draw its fundamental vitality from native roots. He wanted regeneration based on respect for the special features of his own culture. Early music, and especially the French clavecinists, provided plenty of ideas for his music, and he often expressed admiration for them. In the preface to his *Études*, he refers to 'our old masters, our admirable harpsichordists'. In an article in which he bemoans Handel's being overshadowed by Bach and Alessandro Scarlatti's extensive output's sinking into oblivion, he writes, '...perhaps it is wrong always to play the same things, which might make quite decent people think that music was only born yesterday; whereas it has a past whose ashes are worth stirring, for within them lingers that unquenchable flame to which the present will always owe something of its radiance' (Debussy 1962, 53).

Interest in so-called early music was gradually awakening in France, as elsewhere, at the end of the 19th century. Camille Saint-Saëns compiled the first complete edition of Rameau's harpsichord pieces in 1895, and Claudio Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* was first performed in Paris in 1904. Vincent d'Indy, composer and founder of the Schola Cantorum specialising in early music in Paris, had been studying and editing Rameau's manuscripts from the 1880s onwards, and d'Indy, likewise Arnold Dolmetsch and others, performed as yet unknown works for harpsichord by Lalande, Destouches and Rameau. Debussy appears to have respected the restoration work carried out by d'Indy (*Debussy on Music*, 111, 115), but he did criticise the contemporary style of performing old music: 'There's talk of Rameau... "he's boring", but no one cares to admit his performance style has been forgotten. It certainly won't be M. d'Indy, the Schola contractor, who's going to revive it' (To Godet 14.10.1915. Letters). Debussy and d'Indy differed radically in their political views and musical ethics, but this did not make them blind to each other's professional strong points.

Debussy heard performances of Rameau's operas *Castor et Pollux* and *Hippolyte et Aricie* and praised the music highly for its elegance, good taste, and lyricism. In his opinion, this music was totally French: simple, clear and balanced (*Debussy on Music*, 112–113, 124). He referred to the French clavecinists in numerous writings. In an article dated January 1913 – the year the second book of *Préludes* was published – he regrets the general indifference to Rameau and Destouches as well as Couperin, 'the most poetic of our harpsichordists', whose 'tender melancholy' he likens to a Watteau landscape (*Debussy on Music*, 273). In November of the same year he writes about Couperin: 'We should think about the example Couperin's harpsichord pieces set us: they are marvellous models of a grace and innocence long past. Nothing could ever make us forget the subtly voluptuous perfume, so delicately perverse, that so innocently hovers over the *Barricades mystérieuses*' (Ibid., 296).

Two years later, Debussy set to work again to continue charting the potential of his instrument on the basis of what he had already been doing in some of the *Préludes*, such as *Les tierces alternées* and *Feux d'Artifice*. In a letter to Durand (19.8.1915), he ponders whether

to dedicate his *Études* to Chopin or to Couperin: 'I respect and admire them so and am so grateful to both masters, those admirable "prophets".' After some hesitation, he finally dedicated his *Études* to Chopin, with whom he had felt a close affinity as a composer from the early days of his piano studies. A dedication to Couperin would perhaps have been more politically correct, making a point of the French origins of the *Études*. Chopin, however, was a musical figure who also was strongly connected to France through his years in Paris. The pride and happiness Debussy felt after having completed his *Études* may have awakened the desire to show these feelings in the dedication which would link the collection with the corresponding work of the Polish master.²⁹

Chopin's pianism was the starting point for Debussy's piano works. The ideal of piano playing in which virtuosity is always in the service of the musical content, as well as the interest in infinitely soft nuances, a full yet transparent sound, and the elegant use of rubato and pedals was probably absorbed by Debussy primarily via the music of Chopin. Editing the works of Chopin may well have provided the initial impetus for the *Études*. The letter quoted above from Debussy to his publisher continues in an ironical vein: 'I know I am not quite so dead that my contemporaries, be they colleagues or otherwise...will not fail to compare us [Chopin and Debussy] to my disadvantage.'

Marguerite Long tells us that of all the great masters, Debussy most admired Bach, Liszt and Chopin (Long 1972, 12). The connections between the music of Chopin and Debussy are obvious. Those between Liszt and Debussy (or Bach and Debussy) are more hidden. Debussy himself writes of Liszt's 'tumultuous genius' and admires his 'fire and chaos', while recognizing the music's problematic qualities (*Debussy on Music*, 142, 119). Debussy met Liszt on three occasions in Rome while staying there on his Prix de Rome scholarship,³⁰ heard

²⁹ Debussy considered this dedication carefully. In general, the reasons for composers' dedications may be manifold. Chopin dedicated his *Etudes* op. 10 to Liszt ('mon chér ami') and op. 25 to Liszt's mistress Marie d'Agoult. The transcendental etudes of Liszt are dedicated to his childhood teacher Carl Czerny. Debussy also makes a playful reference to Czerny in the title of his first *Étude*.

³⁰ Lesure 1994, 73–74. See also p. 8.

him play and admired his use of the pedals, which he later described as a manner of breathing.³¹ Liszt advised the young Debussy to listen to early church music by such composers as Orlando di Lasso and Palestrina. A previously unfamiliar area of music opened up for Debussy, whose interest in it continued until the end of his life. After hearing a Mass by Palestrina in the winter 1893 he described it as ‘extremely beautiful... the effect is of utter whiteness, and emotion is not represented...by dramatic cries but by melodic arabesques. The shaping of the music is what strikes you, and the arabesques crossing with each other produce something which has never been repeated: harmony formed out of melodies!’ (To Poniatowski, February 1893 [sic]).

It has been pointed out (Dent 1916, Lockspeiser 1965, et al.) that Liszt was the one who first began to fully explore the particular property of piano sound: the percussive beginning and gradual fading of the tone, with its in-built character of illusion. Debussy uses many instructive terms for percussive effects: *acuto*, *àpre*, *eclatant*, *incisive*, *sonore martelé*, *strident*, *strepitoso* (Mallard 1979, 73) and often seems to inspect the sound effects which may be created by varying the attack and the pedalling. Infinite possibilities of sound layers and overtones, helped by the use of the pedals, would have interested Debussy in Liszt’s piano writing. Howat points out a number of echoes of Liszt in the piano music of Debussy.³² He also speculates that the meeting with Liszt in 1886 may explain an interesting similarity between the bell-like ostinato in Liszt’s *Trauermarsch* (No. 3 of the *Historische ungarische Bildnisse*) – one of Liszt’s most recent compositions at the time – and bars 17–20 of the *Prélude Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest* (Howat 2009, 167–168). It is, however, rather unlikely that Debussy was more widely acquainted with the works of Liszt’s latest period.

Today it is well recognised that the late works of Liszt pointed the way to Impressionism and on to atonalism (*Nuages gris*, *Unstern*, *Bagatelle sans tonalité*). It is less well known that even in his earliest published piano works of the 1830s, Liszt was to some extent already

³¹ In a letter to Durand 1.9.1915.

³² For example, an echo of *La Campanella* in bars 49–52 of the *Étude pour les notes répétées* (Howat 2009, 166).

addressing the same questions of harmony and keyboard technique as in the works of his later periods. Serge Gut (1981) has examined Liszt's use of certain compositional techniques typical of Debussy: the whole-tone scale, open fifths, superimposed fifths and fourths, pentatonic mode, and the use of chords of the seventh and ninth, finding numerous examples in his works of the 1830s and 1840s. It may also be noted in passing that pieces of young Liszt, such as *Apparitions I* and *II* of 1834, are packed with expression marks and descriptive instructions in the manner of Debussy. The pieces in the third book of *Années de pèlerinage*, composed by Liszt mostly in the late 1870s, contain some non-functional harmonic progressions very modern for the times, their purpose being specifically to create timbre. Several of the pieces, furthermore, are experimental in form. It is here that we may also find a predecessor to the water music of Ravel and Debussy: *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este*. Busoni told his wife in a letter from 1919 that Isidor Philipp had witnessed Debussy's stupefied reaction on hearing the piece for the first time (Busoni 1935).³³

Études and other arts

He had such a perfect gift of embodying in sound vital impressions, whether direct or suggested by imagination, the plastic arts or literature, that he had been able to give the full measure of his art in a domain of sensations hitherto almost closed to music.

Cortot 1922, 6

I love pictures almost as much as music.

Debussy to Varèse 12.2.1911

I feel more and more that music, by its very essence, is not something that can flow inside a rigorous, traditional form. It consists of colours and rhythmicised time.

Debussy to Durand 3.9.1907

³³ '...wie Debussy davon verblüfft gewesen!' (Letter from Ferruccio to Gerda Busoni 24.9.1919).

“Imagine a large orchestra augmented with the sound of human voice ... Music especially designed for the open air ... would float from the tops of the trees, through the light of the open air, and any harmonic progression that sounded stifled within the confines of a concert hall would certainly take on a new significance. Perhaps here is the answer to the question of how to rid music of all those petty mannerisms of form and tonality ... The mysterious collaboration between air currents, the movement of leaves, and the perfume of flowers would combine together in such a marriage with the music that it would seem to live in each one of them” (*Debussy on Music*, 93–94).

Debussy wrote these lines for the periodical *Gil Blas* on 19 January 1903. He begins the article, which also contains concert reviews, with a lament: ‘No one in France cares any more for the barrel organ!’ The tone of the article is ironical, a mixture of clowning and seriousness. ‘Both [people who go to open-air concerts and those who go to Concerts Lamoureux] ... have a right to their own emotions, but there are those...who are stirred only by “music in the open air”, which, as it’s practised today, is just about the most mediocre thing one can think of...I like to imagine more impromptu happenings that blend more completely with the natural surroundings.’ The subject of the writing is, again, the state of music in France and Debussy’s quest for liberated, new and fresh French music. The ‘mysterious collaboration’, an experience in which sound, movement, colour, scent and touch mingle as a single sensual experience, easily ties in with Symbolist ideas, Debussy’s understanding of music as ‘the art that is the closest to nature’ (SIM 1.11.1913) and his belief in the firm link between the genres of the arts.

Although the connection between the Debussy *Études* and other arts cannot and does not need to be taken for granted in the way it can with his earlier piano works, the subject is by no means irrelevant for a performer of the *Études*. Though there may be no direct references to places, matters or events – notwithstanding his humanising the intervals of sixths as ‘pretentious young ladies’ (To Durand 28.8.1915), his artistic core and character remained unchanged despite the trials he experienced at various stages of his life. His likings remained much the same, and he continued to feel a close affinity with literature and

the visual arts. His inherent way of viewing the world, likewise the sources of his insights and emotional experiences, are unlikely to have undergone a radical change, despite the new direction of his mode of self-expression, in this case his musical idiom.

Debussy's sensitivity to all sensual experiences is reflected in his recollection of a childhood journey to Cannes. He speaks of sensory memories – of a visual image of the railway seeming to lead directly to the sea; of the scent of roses more intoxicating than anything he had yet experienced; of a Norwegian carpenter who sang 'from morning to night – Grieg songs, perhaps?' (To Durand 24.3.1908).

Debussy's close relationship with literature and painting was undoubtedly partly a legacy of the Romantic era, yet many contemporary writers and painters of his also seemed to speak strongly to him. His closest circle of friends consisted not so much of musicians and painters as of writers and poets. Being a music critic and essayist himself, he was in contact with others who wrote about music. His extensive correspondence with music critic and writer Louis Laloy subsequently shed light on many aspects of his life. It was also Laloy who wrote the first biography of Debussy, in 1909. One of Debussy's oldest friends was the poet and novelist Pierre Louÿs.

Literature, especially poetry, was a study that accompanied Debussy throughout his life. Verlaine, Mallarmé, Maeterlinck, Huysmans, Baudelaire, Valéry, d'Annunzio, Gide, Poe, Wilde – all were writers whose works meant much to him. Paul Dukas, in a review of the *Nocturnes* in February 1901, calls Debussy 'unclassifiable' in the sense of being a follower of a certain teacher or of a school of composition. He sees the roots of Debussy's language in the works of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé, although Debussy never translates their sentiments directly. Instead, Dukas writes, his compositions are symbols of symbols, expressed in a new musical language (Dukas 1948, 531–532). Jarocinski (1977, 125) claims that almost all of Debussy's harmonic innovations were first manifest in the songs he composed to texts by Symbolist poets. The French language and literature are inextricably intertwined not only in his songs and other works dealing directly with words but with Debussy's musical language itself.



Fig. 2. Claude Monet (1840–1926): Seashore and Cliffs of Pourville in the Morning, 1882. Tokyo Fuji Art Museum Collections.

Both Debussy and Monet visited Pourville several times. Monet fixed its scenery, beaches, cliffs and fields on canvas in numerous paintings. One of the best known is probably the *Cliff Walk in Pourville* with its two female figures gazing at the sea in 1882, the same year as the picture shown above. That summer seems to have been particularly productive for him. Monet, like many other painters, often repeated the same subjects, sometimes even from the same perspective and angle, enjoying their various guises created by the light in various types of weather and times of day. *Seashore and Cliffs of Pourville in the Morning* has a bluish cast with touches of dark black-brown, perhaps somewhat unusual in comparison with the other sea-and-cliff views. Debussy is known to have rented a cottage on a cliff with a view over the seashore, possibly very similar to this one. Although Debussy grew to detest the term impressionism, with which his name was invariably linked, he had high respect for the work of the impressionist painters: ‘You do me a great honour by calling me a pupil of Claude Monet’, he wrote to Émile Vuillermoz in a letter dated 25.1.1916.

‘Meetings with symbolists? Enthusiasm about impressionism?... The only artist Debussy talked about constantly at this time [sometime in the 1890s] was one we can be sure he never met, Degas’, wrote Robert Godet, who met Debussy in 1889 and became a lifelong friend (Godet 1926, 71).³⁴ Debussy’s first concert confined exclusively to his own works occurred in 1894 at a gallery holding an exhibition of new paintings by Renoir, Gauguin and Sisley. He does not appear to have been particularly interested in Impressionist painting but did admire its predecessor, William Turner. He was fascinated by old Japanese art, characterised mainly by clarity, precision, decorativeness and, from the European perspective, an exotic distance: a combination of the unreal and the realistic. He was also enthralled by the works of James McNeill Whistler, whose paintings (the *Nocturnes*, for example) combine Japanese decorative elements with French Impressionist ideas. Debussy’s thinking had a great deal in common with the writings on Impressionism by Jules Laforgue and reflections on the art and nature of Whistler, with which Debussy was quite familiar. The new and shocking schools of thought borne in painting circles probably reinforced Debussy’s own ideas and had an important effect on the emergence and development of his persona as a composer (Botstein 2001, 151).³⁵

Debussy’s interest in visual arts increased during the last decade of the 19th century, as illustrated by the history of his orchestral *Nocturnes*.³⁶ ‘The title *Nocturnes* is meant to designate ... all the

³⁴ Robert Godet (1866–1950) was a musicologist and writer.

³⁵ Jules Laforgue (1860—1887), a Symbolist poet and essayist, influenced Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, among others. His interest in painting is claimed to have signified that he tried to create a counterpart to Impressionism in literature.

³⁶ Sketches from 1892 for a work by the name *Trois Scènes au Crépuscule*, thought to be the precursor for the *Nocturnes*, connect to the symbolist poet Henri de Régnier. Two years later, Debussy worked on *Trois Nocturnes* for solo violin and orchestra, where he studied ‘various combinations inside one colour, like a painter might make a study in grey’ (Debussy to Eugène Ysaÿe 22.9.1894). This is probably the first time Debussy draws visual analogies with his own music. At the end of the same year he composed the first version of piano *Images*, likening in his commentary the atmosphere of the second piece, *Sarabande*, to ‘an old portrait’ (Roberts 1996 131–132, 134).

various impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests', wrote Debussy in his program notes for the performance of the two first movements of *Nocturnes* in 1900 (Roberts 2008, 139). His talk of colour in his orchestral works very often simply refers to orchestration, the combination of instrumental timbres. In *La Revue Blanche* 1.7.1901 (*Debussy on Music*, 45), the character of Monsieur Croche, created by Debussy in his writings, talked 'about an orchestral score as if it were a painting, without ever using technical terms'.³⁷ M. Croche would therefore discuss music in his own terminology, derived from the visual, in the way that Debussy advises the pianist in the *prélude Des pas sur la neige* (Footprints in the Snow) about ten years later. For example, beneath the first motif, he wrote, 'Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé' (This rhythm should have the aural value of a melancholy, icy landscape).³⁸

Another painter who might be mentioned in connection with Debussy is Odilon Redon, a symbolist whose work contains elements of surrealism. Debussy and Redon knew each other from their student years,³⁹ and Redon had presented Debussy with one of his works as a gift after a performance of *La Damoiselle élue*, for which Debussy thanked him in a short letter (20.4.1893). Debussy also mentions Redon in a letter from 1913, referring playfully to his daughter: '... your *grosse-petite-amie* Chouchou, whose imagination has recently been widened by a piano teacher, a woman dressed in black, with the

³⁷ 'He drew [a parallel] between Beethoven's orchestra, which he spoke of in terms of black and white (and therefore giving a marvellous scale of greys) and Wagner's, which he said was like a kind of multi-coloured putty, perfectly evenly spread, where he could no longer differentiate between the sound of a violin and that of a trombone.'

³⁸ Many French artists of the time had painted snow scenes, so the inspiration for the prelude could easily be of visual origin. Madame de Romilly, a student of Debussy, recounts that 'he had a predilection for the landscapes by the Scandinavian painter Frits Thaulow and for the painting of Monet.' There was a painting (or several) of Thaulow's, whose work also included winter scenes, in Debussy's apartment. See, e.g. Roberts 1996, note 3 to Chapter 6 and Nichols 1992, 52–58.

³⁹ According to Lesure (1994, 73) Redon, along with Debussy and Vidal, was present at the dinner 8.1.1886 where Liszt was the guest of honour of Ernest Hébert, the director of Villa Medici.

appearance of an Odilon Redon drawing and that of a nihilist messing around with bombs (qui a l'air d'un dessin d'Odilon Redon et d'une nihiliste en rupture de bombes)' (To Toulet 18.1.1913).⁴⁰

The works of Debussy's late period progressed from softly-outlined Impressionism towards a sharper Expressionism and Abstract art. This may be discerned in the tone of the *Étude pour les huit doigts*, in the almost serial-sounding opening and the hammered sounds of the *Étude pour les notes répétées* as well as in the almost grotesque, heavy dance rhythms of the *Étude pour les accords* and the 'empty' white silences of its middle section. Wassily Kandinsky, the pioneer of abstract art, discusses Debussy in his book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, written in 1910:

The most modern musicians, like Debussy, create a spiritual impression, often taken from nature, but embodied in purely musical form. For this reason, Debussy is often classed with Impressionist painters on the grounds that he resembles these painters in using natural phenomena for the purposes of his art. Whatever truth there may be in this comparison merely accentuates the fact that the various arts of today learn from and often resemble each other. (Kandinsky 1912, Chapter III)

Kandinsky, 'a visual musician', saw abstract art as the most profound artistic expression and music as its counterpart. He goes on to say that the link with the Impressionists is not sufficient to describe Debussy's significance: Debussy is 'deeply concerned with the internal content (of what he experiences)', and contrary to the composers of more pragmatic music, he, 'over and above the notes, aims at making an integral use of the integral values of his impressions'.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Debussy's description brings to mind Redon's charcoal drawings, which Redon called his 'noirs' (blacks). These had been Redon's main occupation all through 1880s (Gibson 2011, 29). The drawings often depict strange visions and mystical beings. 'My drawings are self-defining; they inspire. They determine nothing. Like music, they place us in the ambiguous world of indeterminate' he wrote (Ibid., 22). Composer Ernst Chausson, a friend whose home Debussy visited several times, was a collector of art and owned works of Redon. Redon was familiar with Debussy's music and is known to have played both violin and piano. For Redon's painting *Silence*, see p. 119.

⁴¹ More about Kandinsky's text on Debussy in Jarocinski 1981, 58.



Fig. 3. Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944): *Composition VII*, 1913. The State Tretjakov Gallery, Moscow.

In the course of three decades, Wassily Kandinsky created ten paintings which he called Compositions. Composition VII, considered one of his main works, was painted in 1913, two years after the writing of Concerning the Spiritual In Art. It appears to have been painted during the span of a few days in November, yet it is a synthesis of years of planning and experimenting, as is Debussy's Étude collection, also completed in an unusually short time. Kandinsky's art is often compared with Schönberg's music – somewhat in the same way that Monet's is imagined to be connected with Debussy's. All comparisons and interpretations of this sort are necessarily personal. Many of Kandinsky's paintings, their colours, with their special kind of energy, invention and handling of multi-dimensional space, seem to me to inhabit the same world as Debussy's late works. In Composition VII, rhythmicized colours of a sound galaxy, bits and pieces of timbres, lines and contrasting moods move through space and time with great purposefulness and energy.

Of Debussy's stage works, at least half remained unfinished. There were various reasons that many of the works begun – often commissions taken for money – were never completed. The ones he did finish can safely be classified as masterpieces. The fact that he seriously tried his hand in five opera subjects, three works of

incidental music, four dance works or ballets and once in 'tableaux vivants' would at least seem to point towards an interest in stage medium.

Dance, the combination of music and movement, was not foreign to Debussy as an art form, as witnessed by his ballets and perhaps also by his enthusiasm for the Degas pastels mentioned by Godet – which are studies of movement.⁴² In an article for SIM (1.11.1913), Debussy not for the first time deplores the state of music in France. The extraordinary attention received by the premiere of Stravinsky's *Sacre* and the disappointing reception of his own *Jeux* were hardly six months behind, and seeping into his writing one can find Debussy's struggle to find new ways of expression, the pull towards what he calls pure music, 'a less cluttered kind of music'. An article in SIM by d'Indy a few months earlier on the subject of film music might have spurred Debussy's imagination to develop the solution he puts forward in a mocking tone: 'Unfortunately we are too set in our ways...There remains, however, one means for renewing the taste for symphonic music among our contemporaries: to apply to pure music the techniques of cinematography.'⁴³

Debussy refers to his *Études* and *Sonatas* as 'pure music' in a letter to Stravinsky 24.10.1915. The expression can be interpreted in many ways. Debussy might have meant the pursuit of ever clearer, 'less cluttered' texture and timbre as well as the leaving out of all that would connect the music directly to anything outside of the music itself. The relationship between Debussy and Stravinsky was

⁴² On his mantelpiece Debussy had a miniature sculpture given to him sometime in 1890s by Camille Claudel, whose work he admired. The beautiful work in bronze, *La Valse*, presents a couple completely engrossed by each other, immersed in the movement and in the music we cannot hear. Roberts (1996, 308–310) mentions the sculpture in connection with writing about *pour les octaves*.

⁴³ Debussy here gives film the role of an interpreter of music: 'Author [composer] would no longer be betrayed; we would be free from any false interpretations...the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!' Debussy's style of writing is ironic and ambiguous, so often typical to him. It is nevertheless fascinating to play with the thought what would have been born out of collaboration between Debussy and a film director in the world and time a few decades later.

complex, since Stravinsky, 20 years younger than Debussy, became his rival for the position of leading avant-garde composer fairly soon after his arrival in Paris in 1910 and actually took the lead with *Sacre*.⁴⁴ Debussy recognized his genius, but disagreed strongly with Stravinsky's musical aesthetics. Stravinsky's 'modernist anarchy' probably became another strong catalyst in Debussy's quest to renew his own language, which meant rethinking and concentrating on the 'purely musical issues of form, technique and expression' in the *Études* (Davies 2000, 156).

The *Études* have no names with visual allusions or references to literature or dance. Still, there are the two dedications, which direct our thoughts to a certain refined kind of pianism (Chopin) and technical work at the piano (Czerny). Debussy also links his music to a practice of the early French clavecinists in the foreword (Couperin). Every *Étude* has performance instructions which not only pertain to the loudness or length of sound, but have to do with human emotions or physical movement, starting with the clearly prescriptive beginning of the first *Étude*, with its reference to a dance (gigue), and followed with *brusquement*, *leggiero* (many different ones), *mormorando*, *il canto dolce marcato*, *con fuoco*, *ballabile e grazioso*, *un poco agitato*, *joyeux et emporté*, *les basses légèrement expressives*, (*poco*) *scherzando*, *dolce or doux* (used often with different characterizations), *smorzando*, *semplice*, *souple et ondoyant*, *expressif*, *strident*, *dolente*, *expressif et profound*, *lointain*, *mais clair et joyeux*, *appassionato poco a poco*, *expressif et pénétrant*, *calmato*, *lusingando*, *lumineux*, *elegantemente*, *un poco pomposo*, *giocososo*, *sans lourdeur*, *sensible*, *perdendosi*, and *sec*.

A pianist is naturally always free to build an image or a story from any score with or without performance instructions – or to think of any music as 'pure', without any allusions to anything else whatsoever. Still, even the score of the *Études* tell us more than mere signs for notes can convey. Debussy did not totally abandon making allusions in his last years, either: the name that he first considered for the two-piano work *En blanc et noir*, composed very near the time of the

⁴⁴ Boulez vehemently discards the thought of Debussy's 'fear of being overtaken by Stravinsky' (Boulez 1991, 155).

Études, was *Caprices*, after Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos* etchings (To Durand 7.8.1915). The very last piano composition of Debussy's, *Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon* (Evenings lit by burning coals), written a year and a half after the *Études*, in February–March 1917, and given in gratitude to his coal merchant, received its name from a poem by Baudelaire.

Novelties in the *Études*

I am considered a revolutionary, but I have invented nothing. I have only presented something old in a new manner. There is nothing new in art.

Debussy 1987, 285⁴⁵

Jankelevitch calls Debussy a poet from a country that does not exist (Jarocinski 1977, 10), and it might well be argued that the time has come to estimate the quality of Debussy's music without considering his nationality or the possible characteristics of this nationality. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that for decades Debussy and his music were considered a symbol of Frenchness, however its characteristics were defined, and in many musical circles, it still is so today. The epithet 'musicien français', which he used to sign the works of his last years, is even engraved on his tombstone, virtually becoming a cliché with the passing of time. Debussy undertook travels in foreign countries for study and work purposes, but he was always most happy to return home. During the time he spent in Italy as a young man on his Prix de Rome scholarship, for example, he was so homesick that he was hardly able to compose anything at all because he was separated from French culture, art and cuisine. 'No one, except possibly Debussy, was further from being a barbarian,' writes André Suarès, himself most obviously a Frenchman, in describing Ravel and foreign influences in his music (Nichols 1987, 29).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Debussy in a 1908 interview by Charles Henry Melcer for *The American*.

⁴⁶ André Suarès (1868–1948) was a French writer, poet and critic. He published an essay on Debussy in 1922.

Despite having studied at the Paris Conservatoire, Debussy looked upon himself as a self-taught composer. His determination to define his own terms as a composer in the confines of deeply felt cultural identity resulted in the oeuvre which still today is often seen to represent the very essence, *l'esprit*, of French music.

Debussy's *Études* are, of course, concert etudes, not composed primarily as technical studies or for pedagogical purposes. In all great concert etudes, the work necessary to meet the considerable technical demands makes sense to the player because the musical content is worth the trouble. Debussy strove to go even further: to renew the language of music and to meet the requirements of an etude in this more up-to-date language. It may be argued that the renewal did not manifest itself so much in his use of a new kind of material as in the creation of new processes for handling this material (DeLone 1977, 60). The *Études* do not signify anything in the nature of a revolution in Debussy's output, but they do use rare elements on a much wider scale than before. According to Helffer, the *Études* bear traces of elements formerly alien to Debussy: allusions to Chabrier (*octaves, notes répétées, arpèges composés*) and Stravinsky (*agréments*) (Helffer 1991, XVII). The Stravinsky–Debussy acquaintanceship seems to have been most fruitful in the years 1910–1915. Debussy was familiar with *Petrushka* and sight-read with Stravinsky the duet version of the score of *Rite of Spring* before its scandalous premiere in Paris on 28 May 1913. Debussy's *Jeux*, which got a mild and somewhat bewildered reception, had been heard for the first time only two weeks earlier, on 15 May.

Many writers, Helffer among them, have pointed out similarities between *Jeux* and the *Études*, and *Jeux* has been characterised as Debussy's 'most modern score' (e.g. Salmenhaara 1968, 72). Wheeldon refers to 'the often fragmented and discontinuous forms' in the works of the last period, which 'attest to a new complexity that appears to be deliberately "going against" musical convention' (Wheeldon 2009, 1). Boulez mentions the thorough working-out (of motifs) that is entirely individual in character and technique (Boulez 1990, 312). Jakobik comments on the timbre and texture of the late works, *Jeux*, the *Études*, the last songs and the sonatas, mentioning the thinned-out texture, and claims that Debussy played a significant part in

paving the way for atonalism (Jacobik 1977, 151).⁴⁷ In other words, the handling of time, texture and timbre all point towards a change in Debussy's thinking.

Attitudes to the works of Debussy's last period were for a very long time ambivalent. The changes in an idiom regarded as impressionistic and the absence of orchestral and indeed all large-scale works (apart from *Jeux*) seemed a step backwards which was interpreted as a consequence of his illness and the climate created by the war. Some of the outward features can indeed be explained in this way. Wheeldon mentions changes that took place while Debussy was composing the sonatas and *Études*: he made 'all outward signs of foreignness and experimentation' disappear and alluded to ties with a French past, 'real or imagined'. He displayed more interest than before in his own status among French composers, likewise the future reception of his works (Wheeldon 2009, 14). Wheeldon also points out that in drawing parallels between the etudes of Chopin and Debussy, Godet could not find a counterpart for five of them: the fourths, eight fingers, embellishments, repetitions, and opposed sonorities (Ibid., 66–67).⁴⁸ These are *Études* dealing with those pianistic problems which are not directly handled in the Chopin collection, or, in scarcely any other etude collection written before 1915. As least as remarkable as this is the fact that Debussy's way of dealing with the already much-handled problems, for example thirds, is totally novel and much more variable in its approach towards the particular problem than, for example, Chopin's.

The *Études* as a collection

As is the case with the definition of any composition genre, the 'concert etude' tends to become rather shadowy at its borders. It is typically understood as a work composed around a technical idea,

⁴⁷ Jacobik points out that in some episodes of *Jeux*, Debussy creates vibrating sound fields which come close to being atonal or noise-like, although Debussy still treats atonal sound as a mode of tonality rather than as an independent quantity (Jacobik 1977, 152).

⁴⁸ This is discussed in Chapter 'Reception'.

which is then developed into an artistic work in such a way that in a competent performance, the technical starting point will not take precedence over the musical content. It should be possible to listen to the composition as a piece of music, not as an exercise. Chopin and Liszt have been seen as the main founders of the genre.⁴⁹

Composers have often given their etude collections titles which tell something about the character of the music and signify the fact that the pieces, whatever their level of difficulty, were not meant only as technical studies: *Études mélodiques* (Heller), *Études caractéristiques* (Henselt), *Études symphoniques* (Schumann), *Études tableaux* (Rachmaninoff), to mention a few. The individual etudes in a collection may also have descriptive names – a tradition which even contemporary composers have continued. Debussy chose not to practise either custom. He was following Chopin's example but perhaps also showing his need and ability to transcend time and place in his late compositions (Wheeldon 2009, 79). Another feature demonstrating the same need may be that in his *Études* Debussy uses far more Italian than French performance instructions and all in all more descriptive Italian words than in any of his other piano works. This is particularly notable in light of the war-time circumstances at the time of composition.⁵⁰

Debussy gives each individual *Étude* a name indicating the technical cause for its composition. Rather than composers of concert etudes, the predecessors of this practice are more easily found among writers of finger exercises and pedagogical studies, as imaginative and delightful music as the best of this category may also be. Among French predecessors are, for example, the etude for the independence of fingers and the etude for rhythm (*Étude pour l'indépendance des doigts, Étude de rythme*) in Saint-Saëns's op. 52 (1877) and the two etudes for thirds and one for chromatic scales (*Tierces majeures et mineures, Tierces majeures chromatiques, Traits chromatiques*) in his

⁴⁹ Chopin's *Douze grandes études* op. 10 were published in 1833 and followed by the other dozen, op. 25, four years later. Liszt's twelve childhood exercises were transformed into *Grandes études* 1837–1839 and appeared in the final version of 1852 as *Études d'exécution transcendante*.

⁵⁰ More about this in Chapter 'Touch', pp. 62.

op. 111 (1892). The two opuses together also contain three preludes and fugues, which easily translate as études in polyphony to any professional pianist. It would be surprising if Debussy had not been familiar with or at least known of the existence of the piano études of Saint-Saëns.

Debussy's *Études* were not composed in the order in which they were finally published. At the end of August 1915, Debussy wrote to Durand, "The six *Études* I have written so far are almost all "on the go": don't worry, there'll be some calmer ones! I started with these because they're the hardest to write and to get some variety ... the easiest combinations of the original *datum* are soon used up" (28.8.1915). The final order was not a foregone conclusion, however: *pour les cinq doigts* is the only *Étude* that retained its position throughout.

Order in the fair copy

I *pour les cinq doigts*

II *pour les Sonorités opposées*

III *pour les accords*

IV *pour les Arpèges composés*

V *pour les huit doigts*

VI *pour les Sixtes*

VII *pour les Octaves*

VIII *pour les Quartes*

IX *pour les degrés chromatiques*

X *pour les notes répétées*

XI *pour les Tierces*

XII *pour les agréments*

Final order

I *pour les cinq doigts*

II *pour les Tierces*

III *pour les Quartes*

IV *pour les Sixtes*

V *pour les Octaves*

VI *pour les huit doigts*

VII *pour les degrés chromatiques*

VIII *pour les agréments*

IX *pour les notes répétées*

X *pour les Sonorités opposées*

XI *pour les Arpèges composés*

XII *pour les accords*⁵¹

Although the order of the *Études* may not ultimately greatly affect the interpretation of an individual *Étude*, comparison of the two orders may provide interesting additional viewpoints and help in establishing the tempos of single *Études* as well as the tempo relationships between them. This is a complex issue because in the case of Debussy, the words ‘fast’ and ‘slow’ sometimes seem to lose all meaning. Debussy gives general tempo instructions for seven of the *Études*, but even in some of those cases, the words rather indicate a general direction than state an absolute. Some *Études* are clearly fast. Others are obviously slow or slower, yet some of them may be interpreted as having a quick pulse, even though their mood, sometimes related to harmonic developments, may suggest that they are slow, or at least it provides a possibility for that kind of interpretation. Examples here could be *pour les tierces* or *pour les arpèges composés*.

In the earlier order, there are some rather sharp contrasts between the *Études*. The jolly five-finger *Étude* right at the beginning is followed by opposing sonorities in all their profundity. Both books begin with a quick *Étude* but end with a slow one, as if defying the traditional virtuosic ending. Instead of a great build-up of keyboard technique, the collection ends with a study of ornaments, like a deliberate tribute to the early French clavecinists. The final order, however, proceeds more calmly. In the musical sense it is more logical and coherent, but it is pianistically more demanding: placing the *Étude* for eight fingers at the end of Book I after the jubilant final cadence of the *Étude* for octaves easily comes as an anti-climax unless it is brought off with understated yet brilliant ease. The same may be said of the *Étude* for

⁵¹ Debussy’s seemingly illogical use of upper- and lower-case initial letters prevailed in the first and later editions. In reply to my enquiry, Juhani Härmä, Professor of Romance Philology at the University of Helsinki, told me in an email of 10.4.2015 that the use of upper-case letters in normal French texts has changed virtually not at all in a hundred years. He reckons that their use may have been determined by Debussy’s own logic, and that Debussy possibly more or less used them according to whim or his mood at the time. It seems, in any case, unlikely that the visually sensitive composer, who did pay attention to even the appearance of the title pages of his compositions, would not have considered this detail carefully. It is therefore interesting to speculate on his reasons for placing intervals, sonorities and arpeggios in a class of their own.

chords, which may appear too tame if played too slowly or without the necessary energy.

Debussy does not seem to strive for any traditional etude-collection key system. The final order begins in C major and ends the first book in G-flat major, which stands in a tritone relationship to the first *Étude*. Since a tritone divides an octave in two halves, it does seem a suitable place to stop and take a breath. Book II then begins and ends in A, the relative minor of the starting key, although the twelfth *Étude* makes its final point in the major.

Five-finger exercises entail playing intervals of seconds. The first book proceeds from the first *Étude* for five fingers via ever-wider intervals to an octave and ends by returning to a rare type of scale exercise for eight fingers. The second book begins in the same way, but this time with chromatic scales. One might think that chromatics would narrow the finger work down to the smallest possible intervals on the piano, but there is a way to continue even further: the interval of prime in the ninth *Étude*. The eighth *Étude* before that is a jumble of different figures where now one, then another interval breaks into the foreground to present its own character. Having got stuck on repetitions in the ninth *Étude*, the only way out is to play several notes and intervals at the same time – chords. The tenth *Étude* includes sonorities created by opposing one-note levels in different registers as well as sound levels formed out of chords. The eleventh then breaks chords into all kinds of arpeggios, while the twelfth ‘simply’ takes chords as chords. Viewing the order of the *Études* from this angle, with intervals the central thought and the music reduced to a collection of gestures of movement and distance, doesn’t perhaps carry a pianist very far and serves mostly as play. Nevertheless, in the *Études*, Debussy built a fruitful playground for many kinds of thoughts and ideas as well as for pianistic experiments.⁵² Somehow

⁵² In writing about Wagner’s *Leitmotifs*, Boulez states, ‘To find in Debussy any thorough working-out that is entirely individual in character and technique, but comparable in quality to Wagner’s late works we must turn to much later works [than *Pelléas and Mélisande*], such as *Jeux* or the piano *Études*’. In the *Études*, the intervals would be these *Leitmotifs*, which Jean-Jacques Nattiez also mentions in his foreword *On Reading Boulez*, in referring to ‘the development techniques based on a matrix of intervals’. (Boulez 1990, 312, 18)

he managed to arrange the *Études* in such a way that they follow each other logically in terms of relations between tempi, centers of harmony and characters. While many different arguments may be put forward for the ultimate order of the *Études*, the combination of the twelve *Études* is demanding, but pianistically and musically comfortable to perform.

Heinrich Neuhaus (1888–1964), one of the great pedagogues of the 20th century, traces the evolutionary line of pianism from the Bach *Inventions* via some of the etudes by Clementi and Cramer to the etudes of Chopin, Liszt, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff and Debussy (Neuhaus 1973, 105). Many other composers were also instrumental in developing the etude from a pedagogical work into a composition that could and would be performed in professional piano recitals. The heyday of the virtuoso concert etude lasted about 90 years and in its way reflects the piano's golden era. Chopin composed his etudes in the 1830s, and Liszt wrote the final versions of his about 20 years later. Of their contemporaries, Schumann also took an interest in expanding the idea of an etude, as did Charles Alkan, who composed numerous technically taxing and original etudes.

During the ten last years of Debussy's life, etudes by Stravinsky (op. 7), Prokofiev (op. 2), Scriabin (op. 65), Saint-Saëns (op. 135), Szymanowski (op. 33), Rachmaninoff (opp. 33 and 39) and others were published,⁵³ the collections by Rachmaninoff, Scriabin and Szymanowski being comparable in size to those of Debussy. Since Debussy's death, however, virtually no collection of concert etudes has become universally favoured by pianists. Not until the piano etudes of Ligeti were published in the early 1990s has there been any sign of filling this gap in modern piano literature, although numerous interesting and imaginative works and concert etude collections do exist (Sorabji, Bolcom, Kapustin, Whittall, Ohana – who deliberately continued Debussy's example, etc.).

⁵³ There naturally exist many more fascinating etudes composed and published in smaller combinations around the same time period as Debussy's, for example Bartók's spellbinding three etudes op. 18 from 1918. The first book of Busoni's astonishing cornucopia of exercises, studies and compositions, *Klavierübung*, appeared the same year.

The sound and musical substance of the Debussy *Études* do not necessarily give any impression of being exercises in piano technique. Yet Debussy himself proudly drew attention to this feature in his letters. Neuhaus' *The Art of Piano Playing* (originally in Russian, 1958) is still regarded as one of the important milestones of pedagogical piano literature. Neuhaus divides piano technique into categories warranting special practice. Although Debussy's *Études* are not known to have been used very much in the circles of the Russian piano school, they appear to cover Neuhaus' categories rather well:

1. A single note: *notes répétées, sonorités opposées*
2. Five-finger technique: *cinq doigts* and others
3. Scales: *degrés chromatiques, cinq doigts, huit doigts*
4. Arpeggios: *arpèges composés, agréments*
5. Double notes: *tierces, quarts, sixtes, octaves*
6. Chords: *accords*
7. Leaps: *accords, octaves*
8. Polyphony: almost all of the *Études*. Linear textures proceeding at distinctly different levels are a constant and one of the most inherent features of all of Debussy's music. Here this aspect is particularly noticeable in *pour sonorités opposées* and *pour les agréments*.

In building pianistic technique, the *Études* are particularly useful in relation to Debussy's other works, for much of other French music, and that of some later composers. True, the new may also throw light on the old: having studied the sound world of Debussy and his innovative technical devices, we will probably also hear new potential for new renderings of works by Chopin, Liszt and other earlier composers. Debussy's *Études* are a means for us to sharpen our ears and train our fingers in order to achieve an ever-richer command of nuance, quick movements, timbres and layers. With the exception of some special passages, they do not concentrate on physical stamina. Many etudes of the Romantic era are technically-speaking marathon tests of the performer's physical endurance. The Debussy *Études*, in contrast, could in most cases be likened to a varied obstacle course, full of unexpected turns.

MUSICAL AND PERFORMANCE ISSUES

The Étude spirit

Any improvement of technique is an improvement of art itself.... [The piano] is the most intellectual of all instruments.

Neuhaus 1973, 2, 64

The concert etude from the Romantic era onwards may be so varied that the only common denominator is perhaps a certain condensing: the repetition of some technical problem and typically, its practice from as many angles as possible. Numerous composers since Debussy have each in their own way expanded the musical and technical resources of handling the instrument, but the apparent ease with which the artist actually plays still seems to be an essential element of the nature of virtuoso music in general. The technical difficulties should not be perceptible in the execution of a work. Two hundred years before Debussy's *Études* were published, François Couperin stressed the merits of musical beauty and expressive musicianship in the foreword to his *Pièces de Clavecin*. Even though Couperin's oeuvre contains, among others, virtuoso works for the harpsichord, he too confessed a preference to being 'moved rather than astonished' (Couperin 1979, XXIII). The musical content should define the execution, not the other way round, and there is no reason why music could not move the listener as well in virtuoso work as in a technically simple piece. Refined intellect, light execution and elegant perfection

are characteristic of French culture in general and also leave their mark on the music of Debussy, including the *Études*.

Debussy was extremely well aware of the difficulties in his *Études* and in letters to his publisher mentioned the new pianistic problems they posed: ‘...this music soars over the peaks of technical difficulties! There will be some hefty records to break’ (To Durand 1.19.1915). He sounds proud of having produced elegant and joyous music in spite of its technicalities: ‘You will know, as well as I do, that there is no need to make the technical side more miserable just so as to appear more serious, and that a touch of charm never hurt anyone. Chopin proved it, and made it into a challenge ...’ (To Durand 28.8.1915). Virtuosity as such was not his goal. ‘The attraction of the virtuoso is very like that of the circus for the crowd. There is always hope that something dangerous may happen. Mr. X [Ysaÿe] may play the violin with Mr. Y [Colonne] on his shoulders; or Mr. Z [Pugno] may conclude his piece by lifting the piano with his teeth’ (Debussy 1962, 22). In view of their technical demands, the Debussy *Études* may be classed as virtuoso pieces, but their impact often depends more on solid musicianship and sensitivity than on virtuosity itself. There is no place here for strong-man blustering. Instead, Debussy sometimes presents the player with seemingly impossible acrobatics in the execution of sound effects, dynamics and extremely detailed touch marks. Charles Rosen compares Ravel and Debussy:

The greatest contributions to the piano technique by each of these composers were made, it seems to me, by Debussy in his *Études* and by Ravel in *Gaspard de la Nuit*. In their approach to the keyboard and to piano technique, their attitudes are once again in strongest contrast. In Debussy, the pianist is required to solve certain technical problems that arise out of compositional experiments: Ravel, on the other hand, starts with the instrument and the player’s technical capabilities and builds his music around these considerations. In Debussy’s *Étude* in fourths, for example, the composer’s main concern is the creation of a work of music using only fourths as the principal musical interval, and the harmonic problems that this gives rise to. The unfamiliar technical problems for the pianist of rapidly alternating fourths is a result and not a cause of the music. (Rosen 1979, 37)

This, perhaps, is the very reason why technique does not step into the foreground in the Debussy *Études*. Its presence can be taken for granted as being of secondary importance. Just as the Debussy *Études* are his summary of the virtuoso keyboard tradition, they also epitomise his development as a composer.

‘In Bach’s music it is not the character of the melody that stirs us, but rather the tracing of a particular line, often indeed of several lines, whose meeting, whether by chance or by design, makes the appeal’ (Debussy 1962, 23). The musical arabesques that so fascinated Debussy appear again before our ears and eyes in his *Études*. The lines are etched with classical precision, but they are also brushed with the softness of a cloud. Yet not even in the slow *Études* is Debussy really any longer what Erik Tawaststjerna described as ‘a dreamer who stands on the Pont des Arts in Paris on a cloudy day, cloaked in a soft haze of chestnut green and sandstone grey.’ Only momentarily does he ‘halt the action and unfold before us a static soulscape’ (Tawaststjerna 1992, 117–118). The *Études* revel in action and represent just as much the physical as the spiritual side of Debussy.

Dynamics

One hot morning I arrived as usual at the chalet [Habas] for breakfast and to pass the day working there; Debussy stood before me in full glare of the sun. ‘You realize?’ I gave a start, not knowing what he meant. ‘You know, that G sharp must be played piano. I have been thinking about it all night long.’

Long 1972, 13–14

Composers of the Romantic era widened the scale of dynamics in piano playing from both ends. This tradition was continued by many composers of the 19th century, although in different musical styles: Schönberg and Berg as well as Debussy demanded detailed touches and the tiniest possible differences in dynamics. However, Debussy differed from most of his contemporaries in that he preferred the quiet end of the dynamic scale. Loud, all-embracing and overpowering sound is not typical of Debussy, even in his orchestral music. There

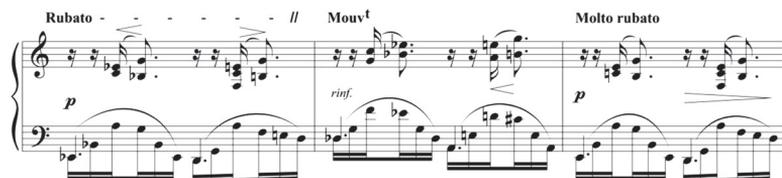
is always a particular transparency in his orchestration as well as in his piano writing.

The dynamic markings in Debussy's *Études* range from *ppp* to *ff* and are extremely detailed, but the expressions *a peine* (hardly audibly) and *perdendosi* (disappearing) lower the level of sound even below *ppp*. Most importantly, Debussy uses *p* and *pp* with various additional instructions. The dynamic marks are often coloured with accents, other stress marks and verbal instructions such as *sff sec*, *f sonoro*, *p marqué*, *pp mormorando*, *pp volubile*, *pp lontan* or *pp subito*, *armonioso*. The dynamic scale thus seems to be infinitely graded and wide, despite listing considerably closer to the softer end.

The *Études* operate to a great extent in the region of piano and pianissimo. The *Étude pour les Sixtes*, which begins *mezza voce*, is 59 bars long. There is a momentary forte in bar 16, a strong crescendo lasting one-and-a-half bars beginning in bar 31, and one quickly vanishing mezzoforte. All of the other dynamic marks are *p*, *più*, *p* or *pp*. The 88 bars of the chromatic scales *Étude* contain only four forte bars; the rest are all played pianissimo. Although in the middle of the opposing sonorities *Étude* is a four-bar crescendo that builds up to fortissimo, the dominant nuance is pianissimo. And so it continues – the only marking not used a single time is *mp*. Also less popular is *mf*. Perhaps Debussy felt that these half-way nuances were too pale and imprecise. Only in the octave and chord *Études* is the dominant dynamic forte. Even here though, the middle section of *pour les accords*, about one third of the length of the piece, stands out as a striking contrast to its surrounding sections because of its slow tempo (*lento, molto rubato*) and its infinitely soft dynamics (*pp, più pp, ppp, a peine, perdendosi*).

Debussy does make extensive use of crescendo and diminuendo marks. In most cases, the dynamics change very frequently, and sometimes extremely sharply (e.g., *Étude V*, bar 3; *Étude IX*, bar 71; *Étude X*, bar 51; *Étude XII*, bar 37 and 38). The player may also be required to play several lines with different dynamics simultaneously through different harmonies, as in *pour les sonorités opposées*. Bars 32–34 of *pour les cinque doigts* are in turn an excellent example of small-scale dynamics combined with agogic ones. Successful

interpretation of the marks may result in music that almost literally speaks: music made of unknown vowels and consonants combined into words, spoken by different voices. Each of the three bars has a different tempo marking: *rubato* – *mouv't* – *molto rubato*. The same rhythmic figure consisting of semiquavers and a dotted quaver is repeated twice in each bar. Yet each has a different dynamic: *piano*, *rinforzando*, *diminuendo* or *crescendo*.



Ex. 1. Étude I, bars 32–34

The dynamics are constantly shifting in the music of Debussy; the sound slowly undulates or quickly rocks, hovers in the distance surrounded by mist, or rushes past at a startling speed. Debussy can in fact be said to have exploited a feature of the piano that for other composers has been an obstacle to overcome: the inevitable, gradual vanishing of the sound once the hammer has left the string. This concept must be assimilated if, as Debussy wished, the piano is to be made to sound like a hammerless instrument. Achieving it by means of dynamics demands infinite suppleness, precision, a keen ear and a sensitive command of action in the player. Differentiation and precise regulation of the soft nuances, especially at quick tempos, is possibly one of the most difficult things for a pianist to master. Debussy's dynamics are basically a question of adjusting the volumes in relation to one another, and not so much of an absolute dynamic scale. As Chopin said, 'You can be struck dumb with astonishment at unexpected news, equally whether it is shouted out loud, or barely whispered in your ear' (Eigeldinger 1991, 57).

Touch

In Debussy's own circle they used to say that he played the piano like Chopin. In fact, his touch was delicious, sweet, easy and mysterious, made for fine nuances and intimacy, without jerks or interruptions; he used the pedals with infinite art, and, like Chopin, he preferred pianos with a tone sweet to an extreme.

Cortot 1922, 22

[Chopin] made me practise first of all constantly varying the attack of one single note, and showed me how he could obtain diverse sonorities from the same key, by striking it in twenty different ways.

F.-Henry Peru, in Eigeldinger 1991, 32⁵⁴

The theory of touch assumes that the piano permits not only dynamic gradations of sound (pp, p, mf, etc.), but at a given intensity, additional variations of timbre...Whether this is possible or not is a hotly contested issue...In any case, the perception of tone quality, even if not scientifically measurable, is an important illusion.

S.v. 'Touch'. The Harvard Dictionary of Music 1972

What the listener hears as a pianist's touch is ultimately a combination of dynamics, agogics, articulation, use of the pedal and the slight noise of the key being pressed. Whether countless pianists, composers and critics throughout decades have been dealing only with an illusion when attempting to convey and assess the quality of touch is still an unresolved question. However, research has been done on piano hammers, particularly the hammer shanks' vibration, which appears to indicate that piano touch is a verifiable phenomenon (Richardson 2000, 112). In a concert situation, other factors inevitably arise as well, visual ones in particular. A live performance – its enchanting birth, its transience – is thus very different from listening to a performance

⁵⁴ Peru's background as a Chopin student is somewhat unclear (Eigeldinger 1991, 174–176). However, many students of Chopin's witness to his paying a lot of attention to teaching touch, among them Mikuli: 'He treated different types of touch very thoroughly, especially the full-toned [tonvolle] legato' (Ibid., 32).

that, though recorded 'live', is essentially 'dead' in the sense that it always repeats itself in the exactly same way. The connections between the different senses are a field in which the research carried out on our capacity for amodal experience supports that of many artists of transcending the borders between sight, hearing, touch and smell. Such links were obviously important for a composer such as Debussy, who felt a close affinity with the visual arts, and who spoke of the colours of sound as a reality.

In pondering the problems surrounding the use of the pedal in a letter to Durand on 1 September 1915, Debussy mentions Marie Jaëll, the famous pianist and pedagogue who studied with Liszt and wrote several books about piano playing, the principal one being *Le Mécanisme du toucher* (1897). Jaëll studied the connection between touch and vision in the course of her work as a teacher and stressed the significance of timbres and sensitive fingertips. Lockspeiser reckons that Jaëll's thinking coincided closely with Debussy's (Lockspeiser 1965, 46.). Maurice Dumesnil, a noted pianist who in his day made a special study of the music of Debussy, paid particular attention to the fingertips in his book *How to Play and Teach Debussy* (1932): 'Play chords as if the keys were attached to your fingertips and rose to your hand as to a magnet' (Thompson 1940, 251). Both Liszt and Chopin considered touch as the key to high-quality piano playing: 'All technique originates in the art of touch and returns to it' (Liszt in Eigeldinger 1991, 17). 'Well-formed technique, it seems to me [is one] that can control and vary (*bien nuancé*) a beautiful sound quality' (Chopin; *ibid.*, 17).

According to Marguerite Long, 'Debussy was an incomparable pianist. How could one forget his suppleness, the caress of his touch?... He played mostly in half-tint but, like Chopin, without any hardness of attack...without ever becoming disordered in sonorities in which harmonic subtleties might be lost' (Long 1972, 19). 'He...played it [*Sarabande*] as no one could ever have done, with those marvellous successions of chords sustained by his intense *legato*' (*Ibid.*, 23). E. Robert Schmitz says that Debussy used a colour scale precisely as rich and nuanced in his playing as he wrote on paper for other pianists to perform. He also demanded of his players absolute precision in

executing even the tiniest instruction on the page (Schmitz 1966, 35, 39). Debussy's attitude is also illustrated by the story he often told of a pianist who announced that he wished to play 'freely' at a certain point. In recalling this, Debussy was in the habit of saying, 'There are some who write music, some who edit it, and there is this gentleman who does what he pleases.' When Long asked what he had said to the pianist, he replied with the utmost contempt, 'Oh, nothing, I looked at the carpet, but he will never tread on it again' (Long 1972, 13).

The timbres or sound colours of Debussy's piano music are naturally bound to his harmonies, but in addition to this innate harmonic colour, they have to do with how the pianist manages the instrument, i.e. the keys and the pedals. A pianist needs a highly developed ability to control touch, the way the fingers press down on the keys, in order to produce the gradations in colour that Debussy demands. His precise attention to the signs indicating touch causes pianists many a headache because it is not always clear how the combinations of marks can be realized. As well as the ordinary staccato dot, he used a short horizontal line, vertical and horizontal accents, all piled one on top of the other in different combinations, and often descriptive instructions in words as well. In *pour les sonorités opposées* (bars 38–40), the same chord is marked in three different ways: *doux* (softly), *marqué* (marked) and *expressif et pénétrant* (expressively and penetratingly).

The image shows a musical score for three measures of a piano piece. The key signature has four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#) and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo and mood markings are '(9) Animando e appassionato' and '(8) poco a poco'. The first measure is marked 'p doux' and features a chord with a horizontal line above it and a staccato dot below it. The second measure is marked 'p marqué' and features a vertical line above the chord. The third measure is marked 'p expressif et pénétrant' and features a horizontal line above the chord, a vertical line above it, and a staccato dot below it. The bass line consists of quarter notes with staccato dots. The dynamic marking 'pp' is present at the beginning of the third measure.

Ex. 2. Étude X, bars 38–40

Debussy's markings are often so detailed that if the player was able to execute them precisely and as indicated, the interpretation might, in theory, follow almost automatically. The performer nevertheless must still decide how to interpret the various combinations of accents and lines, and this is by no means always easy. As is often the case, musical notation is an inadequate conveyor of information: the interpretation of one and the same sign may differ according to context.

The most ambiguous of the touch signs is possibly the horizontal tenuto line, the dash. Debussy's instruction *les notes marquées du signe – doucement timbrées* in the Prelude *Tierces alternées* tells the player that the notes indicated with the line must be given a soft, tender sound colour. In this case, the marked notes (intervals of thirds) form a soft melody line on the surface formed by the surrounding pianissimo thirds. The instruction at this specific point does, however, apply to that point only and cannot necessarily be generalised. Louis Laloy described the technique as follows: 'Where notes are surmounted by a small stroke, these are not to be detached, since what the composer desires is a transparent tone, achievable through bold but not harsh attack, followed by the release of the keys and a prolongation of the sound by means of the pedal' (Thompson 1940, 251). It is not clear from the quotation whether Laloy was referring to some particular point in the composition or to the interpretation of the tenuto line in general, but again his instruction can hardly be applied to all of Debussy's music without encountering any problems. It does seem obvious, however, that the marqué or tenuto lines (dashes) are not necessarily bound to a non-legato touch. Paul Roberts says that 'Debussy's stress marks can often be interpreted ... as a slight sustaining of sound with the pedal.' As an example, he quotes bar 67 of *Movement in Images*, in which Debussy gives the instruction: 'all the notes marked with the sign – must be sonorous but not hard, the rest very light but not dry' (Roberts 1996, 299). According to Marguerite Long, the dash may signify weight, attack, or change of sonority, and sometimes the player just has to rely on intuition (Long 1972, 20).

The horizontal line under a note often seems to correspond to an exclamation mark in literary discourse. In speaking, an exclamation mark is not necessarily expressed by a louder voice; it may sometimes

be denoted by timing, or again with some significant voice timbre or intonation, whatever that may mean in playing the piano. In any case, a note or figure thus marked acquires extra meaning to make it stand out from its environment. The marking *en dehors*, prominently, is a stronger and more general manifestation of the same thought.

Debussy's use of a tenuto sign would easily provide enough substance for broader study. In the *Études* he uses it at least in the following ways:

- To indicate the dynamics as a sort of little accent, i.e. to make an individual note, motif or line slightly louder than the surrounding texture (e.g. *Étude I*, bars 6–9, 17–20, 21–23; *Étude V*, bars 11–12), or to underline the culmination of a crescendo (*Étude I*, bar 99)
- To stress the significance of a note or some other musical idea by means of timing: to let the listener wait for the note marked a moment longer than the note values would suggest, or to make it slightly longer. Combined with a staccato dot, its meaning would then tend towards a portamento touch (e.g. *Étude XII*, bars 1–6) or be approximately the same as that denoted by the term tenuto (*Étude II*, bars 13 and 14). Taken as such, the sign in fact indicates releasing the key rather than pressing it. Debussy uses the term tenuto very sparingly, and not once in the *Préludes*. In the *Études* it appears at one point, in bars 43 and 44 of *pour les notes répétées*. There is also a horizontal line above these same two *piano* chords at the end of very sharp diminuendos, its purpose perhaps being to give some extra weight to the chords.
- To make a timbre distinct from the rest of the texture, such as bell-like effects in the bass (e.g. *Étude II*, bars 53–56; *Étude IV*, bars 43–45; *Étude V*, bars 68–71)
- Debussy's markings sometimes seem to anticipate what a player might do had no performance marks been given. A tenuto line may sometimes act as an order: do not play this point staccato (e.g. *Étude II*, bars 73 and 76, combined with vertical accents).

In his *Études* Debussy uses staccato dots, tenuto signs, and horizontal and vertical accents in nine different combinations. Only once does he combine three signs: a dot, a tenuto line and a horizontal accent, in bars 33–35 of the chords *Étude*. These signs are often also combined with *sf*, *sfz* or *rf*, which to my mind allude not only to volume but also to tone and touch. The horizontal accents may, it would seem, appear at any dynamic level, whereas the vertical ones occur mainly in connection with forte and fortissimo dynamics. The exceptions (vertical accents in piano and pianissimo dynamics) are in *pour les agréments* (bars 1, 32, 42) and *pour les notes répétées* (bars 66–74). The fewest signs for touch appear in *pour les sixtes* and *pour les sonorités opposées*, both of which use only the staccato dot and the tenuto line, and those two never together. There are also relatively few touch marks in *pour les tierces*, *pour les huit doigts* and *pour les arpèges composés*, where the signs are either concentrated on an individual note or a very short passage. In the other *Études*, there are either many signs or they are extremely close together, as in, for example, *pour les octaves* and *pour les cinq doigts*. Judging from this, the *Études* fall roughly into four main categories:

- *Études* that are slow or fast but that operate on similar levels of touch for a long time (*tierces*, *huit doigts*, *sonorités opposées*)
- *Études* that are divided into shorter sections in which the prevailing touches vary from one to another (*sixtes*, *octaves*, *arpèges composés*, *accords*, *agréments*),
- *Études* in which the prevailing touch is constantly broken by contrasting elements (*cinq doigts*, *degrés chromatiques*),
- *Études* in which motifs, phrases or passages with different touches frequently alternate or overlap (*quartes*, *notes répétées*).

Debussy combines different legato and non-legato touches, changing at lightning speed and marked with subtle distinctions, and at the same time often demanding sharp dynamic variations. Together with different uses of the pedals, this generates an endless variety of timbres. The resulting multitude of timbres resembles the

shimmering of light in a landscape. The contours are shaped by the layering of the harmonies in time, and the outlines are etched from the arabesques formed by the pitch layers.

Leggiero is a word diligently cultivated by Debussy. In only four of the *Études* does it not appear at all. Twice it is included in the performance instructions to indicate the general nature of the *Étude*; elsewhere, it often also appears in its superlative form as *leggierissimo*. From time to time there is some confusion about the term. It literally means just ‘lightly’, but many dictionaries add translations such as gracefully, delicately, or, associating the word with quick motion, nimble. In Debussy’s music, *leggiero* relates to timbre and character, not to non-legato or tempo as such. This is made clear by the instructions for *pour les huit doigts: Vivamente, molto leggiero e legato* and *pour les agréments: Lento, rubato e leggiero*. *Leggiero legato* – with a light touch and bound together – also occurs in *pour les cinq doigts*, as the instruction for the nimble semiquaver figuration in bar 35. Although the mark *leggiero* is by far the most often combined with *p* and *pp*, it should nevertheless be noted that for Debussy, a light touch in no way necessarily means the same as a soft touch, as shown by *sempre f ma sempre leggierissimo* in bar 60 of *pour les huit doigts*.

The *Études* abound in words relating specifically to timbre: *acuto* (sharp, piercing, penetrating), *strident* (piercing, grating, penetrating), *lumineux* (luminous, light), *armonioso* (harmonious – which Liszt had already used in the meaning of sonorously), *sonore* (sonorous, ringing, weighty), *martelé* (hammering), *mormorando* (whispering), *pénétrant* (penetratingly), *sec* (drily), *pincé* (plucked, pizzicato). The expression *en dehors* (prominently, to bring out; also outside), sometimes used by Debussy, may refer just as easily to timbre as to dynamics. Bringing out something in the texture isn’t necessarily merely a question of loudness. *En dehors* isn’t used in the *Études*, but Debussy uses *lointain* or *plus loin* in *Études* III, X and XII. In *pour les Sonorités opposées*, Debussy wants the clarion call in bars 31–33 to sound quietly in the distance, but clearly and joyously at the same time (*pp, lointain, mais clair et joyeux*). The words *lointain, loin, de plus près, de plus loin* (far away, nearer, further away) obviously refer to dynamics, but also to timing and colouring; we are listening to sound travelling in time and space.

In his scores Debussy usually gives the performance instructions in his native French. In the *Préludes*, Italian terms appear only by way of exception. The vocabulary in the score of *Jeux* is for the most part French, as is that of *En blanc et noir* for two pianos. In the *Études*, by contrast, there are far more traditional Italian terms than in his other compositions. Italian is so dominant that one whole *Étude* (*pour les tierces*) has not a single word in French. This may have to do with the nature of the pieces as studies, and also with the fact that he had thoroughly immersed himself in Chopin's manuscripts before composing the *Études*. In addition to conventional Italian terms (*dim.*, *rit.*, *subito*, etc.), he also uses words not common for him but introduced by his predecessors (such as *stretto* – Chopin; *armonioso*, *strepitoso* – Liszt; *lusingando* – Chabrier). For some reason, he even translates expressions he had usually given in French into Italian – sometimes inaccurately, as Helffer points out in his critical commentary of the new edition of the *Études* (Helffer 1991, 105). A quick study of Debussy's use of French and Italian in his *Études* does not appear to follow any clear logic, although François Couperin also used both French and Italian in his compositions – when he supplied any instructions, that is – according to the style or *affect* of the piece in question and according to his conscious policy of 'les goûts réunis'. Debussy's thinking at the time of himself as a composer of 'pure music', of *Études* and *Sonatas*, may have been reflected in his use of other verbal expressions as well. For some composers, use of the vernacular in their compositions has been a way of expressing solidarity to their own cultural heritage. Since Debussy nowhere appears to have commented on his personal practice, we can only speculate as to the reasons. As has been demonstrated in many contexts, a composer's life situation is by no means directly mirrored in the music written at the time. Debussy's ill health does not seem to be reflected in the flowing vitality any more than the anguish caused by world events at the time. Considering when the *Études* were written, it is astonishing that the question of language, usually important to national sentiment, seems to have become immaterial, or in any case, that the mother tongue of the composer gave way to the more universal language of music.

Agogics⁵⁵

You know, I am always curious to hear my own music. I always find changes in it. It comes, it goes, it deforms itself. The nuances change, the tempos fluctuate.

Debussy 1910⁵⁶

An unfinished six-page manuscript exists of the *Étude pour les Arpèges composés* in which only the key and the sextuplet figures resemble the *Étude* now known by that name. A version also exists of the first four bars of this same *Étude* that Debussy wrote in an album in January 1918, supposedly from memory (Helfffer 1991, 105, 121). If this is really so, it is astonishing to see just how different the music sounded in Debussy's mind at that moment. There are between these four bars and the printed *Étude* so many differences that the quote from an interview cited above is certainly proved true.⁵⁷

Debussy's agogic signs are in line with his other notation: he wants to be as precise and as detailed as possible. He nevertheless seems to find the flexibility to which he alludes above both fascinating and even desirable. He does not give any metronome numbers for the *Études*; instead, he lets the performer choose the range within which to operate. Marguerite Long reports that when she was his pupil, he would scorn at playing with a metronome, while at the same time demanding on numerous occasions that she maintained a steady tempo (Long 1972, 45). He told Ricardo Viñes, a pianist once favoured by both Debussy and Ravel, that he wanted to compose music that was so free as to sound improvised (Demuth 1962, 25). The publisher appears to have asked Debussy to supply the *Études* with metronome marks, for Debussy replied in a letter, 'You know what I think about

⁵⁵ 'Agogics' may refer to either all the music's tempo and timing events or merely to the player's use of micro-time, which the composer did not directly note on paper. The term is here used in its broader meaning.

⁵⁶ Debussy in an interview by Louis Vuillemin for *Comoedia* 17.12.1910 (Debussy 1987).

⁵⁷ The 'whole-tone siren song' (marked by vertical lines in the right hand) written for the left hand on different pitches; a *rubato* in the second bar, missing from the printed score; *molto dolce e moderato* instead of *dolce e lusingando*; also differently marked dynamics, ties and articulations.

metronome marks; they are right for a single bar, like “roses, with a morning’s life” (To Durand 9.10.1915).⁵⁸

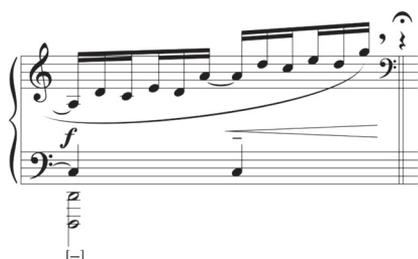
Debussy’s practice as regards metronome marks varies considerably. Eight of the twelve Préludes in Book I have them, whereas only one in Book II does. The violin and cello sonatas have them, but the sonata for flute, harp and viola does not. Debussy voiced the reason for his dislike of the metronome in a conversation with the conductor of *La Mer* in 1905: ‘But I don’t feel the music the same way every day’ (Simeone 2003, 107). The fact that he did sometimes write the metronome instructions was probably due to requests from the publisher, individual musicians or conductors. ‘Although I have no confidence in metronome marks, I’ll do what you ask’, he wrote to Edgar Varèse, adding some metronome numbers to Varèse’s score of *Pélleas and Mélisande* (To Varèse 12.7.2010). Their absence from the *Études* adds further weight to the conjecture that Debussy did not particularly want any circus virtuosity in his *Études*.

Debussy is most liberal with his verbal instructions on tempo in *pour les sixtes* and *pour les agréments*, where, on average, every other bar has them. What is more, like *pour les cinq doigts* and *pour les quartes*, these have marks all the way through, and not just in a specific section such as the middle (as in *pour les notes répétées*, *pour les sonorités opposées*, *pour les arpèges* and *pour les accords*), or at the final build-up (*pour les tierces*). There are also fairly frequent tempo instruction marks in *pour les octaves*. As a whole, this *Étude* is nevertheless rather straightforward, for the mark in most cases serves either to give a certain motif the required breadth (bars 25, 27, 33, 35) or refers to the cadences of longer passages (as in, for example, bars 20 and 48). The *Études* that keep their eyes most firmly on the road ahead are *pour les degrés chromatiques*, in which the only tempo

⁵⁸ ‘Vous savez mon opinion sur les mouvements métronomiques: ils sont justes pendant une mesure, comme “les roses l’espace d’un matin”.’ The expression used by Debussy has become a cliché in French and is a quotation from the poem *Consolation à M. du Perrier* by François de Malherbe (1555–1628). In this connection I have an opportunity to offer my apologies, long overdue, and to correct an oversight: my warmest thanks to Professor Jukka Havu for tracking down the quotation for me over 20 years ago. Today the origin is also told in a footnote to the letter in question in the *Correspondance*.

indication is *scherzando*, *animato assai* at the beginning, and *pour les huit doigts*, where the initial *vivamente* reaches its climax in the final *accelerando*. They are the last Étude of Book I and the first of Book II, thus linking the two volumes together if the collection is performed as a whole.

Seven Études have fermatas and respirations (*Luftpausen*, breath marks, marked by commas above the staff). Debussy's way of combining rests, fermatas and breath marks is to some extent bewildering, and their precise placement in the note text is sometimes unclear.⁵⁹ There seems to have been some confusion between a breath mark and a quaver rest in the interpretation of the manuscripts (Helffer 1991, 105). At the end of bar 110 in *pour les cinq doigts*, there is a crotchet rest with a fermata over it on the bar line. This is preceded by a breath mark, which in this case most probably means ending the sound (and lifting the pedal) *subito*, cutting it short to emphasize the excitement of the upwards scale to the final joyous cadence.



Ex. 3. Étude I, bar 110

In *pour les octaves*, Debussy uses a comma to underline the importance of the brief, jubilant motif that follows (bars 25, 26, 28, 32, 34) and again at the end as if to cut short the last semiquaver in bar 118. In other words, not necessarily to lengthen the crotchet rest that begins next bar, but to warn the player not to rush over it in the heat of the *con fuoco... crescendo... accelerando* of the previous measures. The agogics and dynamics support each other: the extra

⁵⁹ Roy Howat, one of the editors of *Oeuvres Complètes*, writes that in the manuscripts some of the *fermata*–quaver and *fermata*–breath mark combinations are impossible to distinguish from each other and may therefore be misprints (Howat 2009, 239).

time gives the player the technical assistance to prepare the following dynamic layer and to lend the subsequent notes psychological weight and credibility. Debussy's background as an accomplished pianist seems in all probability to have helped and inspired him to develop the notation of his piano music.

The fermatas clearly lengthen the sounding note on only three occasions: *pour les sixtes*, bar 6; *pour les sonorités opposées* bar 61, and *pour les arpèges composés*, bar 45. Elsewhere, combined with a rest, they no doubt indicate a breather before beginning the next line and thus releasing the pedal.

Rubato is often thought of as an expressive device associated specifically with the Romantic era, although agogic flexibility has very likely always played a part of musical performance. The degree to which various expressive devices were measured out – or denied – has varied to suit the ideologies and tastes of different eras, and many composer-musicians and pedagogical treatises of the 17th and 18th century have left us some information about the matter. In the 19th century, the understanding of the term included also speeding up and slowing down of the tempo, but the use of rubato varied from one player to another to a fairly great degree. This has been reported by listeners, and it can also be heard on the existing recordings of pianists active at the end of the 19th century.

'Chopin's *rubato* possessed an unshakeable emotional logic. It always justified itself by strengthening or weakening of the melodic line, harmonic details, by the figurative structure. It was fluid, natural, it never degenerated into exaggeration or affectation' (Chopin's student Mikuli in Eigeldinger 1991, 50). Liszt described Chopin's playing in his book about the Polish composer, thus in the first edition:

Chopin's playing exquisitely conveyed this agitation by which he would cause the melody to undulate like a little boat on the crest of a wave. In his writings, this manner, which gave such a peculiar flavour to his playing, was indicated by the words *Tempo rubato*: stolen, suspended, interrupted time, flexible movement, at once abrupt and languid, like a candle flame flickering in a soft breath. He eventually stopped adding this mark in his publications, convinced that no intelligent person could fail to perceive this rule of irregularity. All of his music should thus be

played with that accented and prosodic rocking back-and-forth, although its secret is difficult to discern if one has not often heard such playing oneself. He appeared enthusiastic about teaching this way of playing to his many students. (Liszt 1852, 69–70)

Marguerite Long felt that the approach to rubato in the music of Chopin and Debussy should be the same: ‘*Rubato* does not mean alteration of line or measure, but of nuance or *élan*.’ She also recounted that in some works, such as the *Étude pour les notes répétées*, Debussy demanded a disciplined, metronome-like handling of the tempo (Long 1972, 25, 42, 46, 74).

Recordings exist of Debussy’s performances of several of his own works: five of the *Préludes* (*Danseuses de Delphes*, *La Cathédrale engloutie*, *La Danse de Puck*, *Minstrels* and *Le vent dans la plaine*), the whole *Children’s Corner* suite, *Feuillet d’album*, *Valse lente* and *La soirée dans Grenade*, and of his accompanying Mary Garden in three songs and an aria from the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1904. All of the solo pieces were recorded on piano rolls in 1913, to be played on a Welte Mignon player piano; in contrast, the recordings made with Mary Garden are acoustic. Due to the deficiencies of the early recording technology, the solo playing especially gives only a rough impression of how the performances actually sounded and how Debussy’s playing must have been at its best. Numerous factors of the recording process as well as the regulation of the mechanism of the playback instrument affect the achieved result in almost all of its aspects, and the listener is hard-put to figure out which features of the playing are original Debussy and which are caused by the recording mechanism or by later handling and editing.⁶⁰ The recordings do, however, give the listener some idea of the rather simple and dignified mode of performance. One can try to listen to Debussy’s rubato on, for example, in his recording of *La plus que lente*, which sounds refined

⁶⁰ Howat (1997, 102) speculates that particularly Debussy’s type of pianist, one who was interested in nuances and shadings and used a lot of half-pedalling, would not come off well on the Welte recording mechanism, which favoured players with decisive touch and pedalling. He suspects that this was the reason why people who had heard Debussy play live were disappointed in his recordings. In his book about French piano music (2009, 312–319), Howat discusses the recordings in detail.

and nuanced both in regard to pedalling and the rubato even in this salon-type waltz.

Debussy's language of agogics and rhythm is rich and at the same time subtle: he seems to want to notate the human touch on the instrument. The variance in the agogics called by the music is so subtle that it cannot possibly be recorded perfectly in writing, but its absence makes the music sound rhythmically lifeless. The dense markings create an impression of rubato in the music performed, and the infinitely small stresses in the dynamics and touches further contribute to this effect. Debussy nevertheless leaves plenty of room for the player's own view of the tempo. The term *rubato* appears both in the *Étude* scores, in characterising both shortish motifs (*Étude* I, bars 71 and 73; *Étude* II, bars 13 and 14) and the way to interpret longer phrases (*Étude* IV, bars 30–33; *Étude* IX, bars 58–62). The instruction for *pour les agréments* is *Lento, rubato e leggiero*. That for *pour les octaves* is, however, not rubato but *librement rythmé*. In other words, he seems to be asking for a free, airy yet firm handling of rhythm. The presence of a rhythmic pulse is essential in this *Étude*. The instruction *Décidé, rythmé* in *pour les accords* may be imagined as denoting an almost military bearing, to which the middle section, *Lento, molto rubato*, constitutes a sharp contrast. Exceptionally, Debussy here specifies the relative tempos of these sections by indicating that one quaver of the middle section corresponds to one dotted crotchet in the preceding section.

As is well known, Debussy absorbed some of the ideas and rhythms of African American musicians, entertainers and dancers who started to arrive in Europe at the turn of the century. He admits this freely in the names of some of his piano pieces: *Minstrels*, *Golliwog's Cake-Walk*, *The Little Nigar*, *General Lavine – Eccentric*. In return, jazz musicians later borrowed harmonic structures from Debussy. The ninth *Étude*, *pour les notes répétées*, carries along some ragtime rhythms and other gestures, and one could easily imagine hearing in it echoes of banjos and drums as well. Something reminiscent of entertainment music is in a gesture which Debussy repeats in many of his works: the – at times jarringly – sudden change from a rhythmically pulsating section into a freely melodic texture, often with chromatic nuances,

as in *pour les notes répétées* (47–58) or in *pour les arpèges composés* (46–49). The latter, in all its gracefulness, also contains a couple of passing moments of clownery (43–44).

Debussy's rhythmic notation is not always precise. The example often quoted is the Prélude *Feux d'artifice*, which has line after line of imprecisely marked rhythms. Yet here again, his notation is visually extremely clear: the notes are grouped in such a way that the player easily grasps how to fit them in the bar, even though they cannot be accurately calculated mathematically. A corresponding case in the *Études* is *pour les arpèges composés*, where a pianist may suffer in vain trying to get an exact count of all the little notes in the arpeggios, which lack triplet, septuplet and other such numbers. The inexactness of small note values is a historical practice, although Debussy, in applying a sort of reduced rhythmic notation, may simply be trying to make life easier. His interest in the visual arts in fact seems to serve the music and make the performer's job clearer, since in most cases the player can safely trust the visual impression of the figure. The complete edition has carefully tried to preserve the fidelity to Debussy's manuscripts in the vertical placement of figures. Problems may nevertheless sometimes arise in interpreting rhythms. Helffer alludes to Debussy's inaccuracy in correcting misprints and his tendency to confuse semiquavers and demisemiquavers with each other. Bar 39 of *pour les arpèges composés*, for example, is not mathematically correct in either of the available manuscripts or in the first edition (Helffer 1991, 105).

The performer of Debussy's music meets some other notational puzzles concerning use of time as well, the most famous being the beginning measures of *La Cathédrale engloutie* and the marking *le double plus lent* at the end of the Toccata in *Pour le Piano*. Convincing enough proof exists in these two cases for the performer to advocate not taking the mathematics too literally.⁶¹ Debussy seems sometimes to add in words an augmentation which he has already written directly into the note text.

⁶¹ Earwitness accounts of Debussy's playing as well as his recording of *Cathédrale engloutie*, also the composer-supervised orchestration of the work. About the marking in the Toccata, Marguerite Long recounts that Debussy told her to ignore it (Long, 43).

Since the *Études* have no metronome marks, the choice of tempo is left to the performer. The general instructions issued by Debussy often refer to the overall character of the piece rather than to the tempo, which is thus only indirectly given. The tempo markings are in most cases slightly vague and leave scope for flexibility. Two of the marks are unequivocally slow (*Lento*), and three are quick (*Animé*, *Vivamente* and *Animato assai*). The fastest *Études* are at the beginning of each Book (I and VII) and the end of Book I (VI). The fastest of all tempos (*Presto*, *Prestissimo*) are absent entirely:

<i>cinq doigts</i>	Sagement – Anime (Mouv't de Gigue)
<i>tierces</i>	Moderato ma non troppo
<i>quartes</i>	Andantino con moto
<i>sixtes</i>	Lento
<i>octaves</i>	Joyeux et emporté, librement rythmé
<i>huit doigts</i>	Vivamente, molto leggiero e legato
<i>degrés chromatiques</i>	Scherzando, animato assai
<i>agréments</i>	Lento, rubato a leggiero
<i>notes répétées</i>	Scherzando
<i>sonorités opposées</i>	Modéré, sans lenteur
<i>arpèges composés</i>	–
<i>accords</i>	Décidé, rythmé, sans lourdeur

Pianist Paul Jacobs mentions ‘a static element’ in Debussy’s music, being of the opinion that Debussy’s tempos should be viewed in the light of history and that they reflect the Wagnerian extremes, especially in the slow ones (Jacobs 1979, 43). Debussy’s own recorded performances themselves do not display these extremes of tempo, although, as mentioned earlier, it is difficult to know how much trust we can put in these old piano roll recordings. There are, however, many suspended moments in Debussy’s music regardless of tempo. Examples of such timeless moments in the *Études* are the beginning of the middle section of *pour les accords* (*molto rubato*) and the beginning of *pour les sonorités opposées*, and possibly the end of bar 6 in *pour les sixtes*.

Debussy’s touch marks, aiming at extreme precision, and his frequently changing agogic marks go hand in hand: their aim is to

colour and illuminate details of the music and to make the movement within the music audible. The pieces are tight-knit, for there is nothing uncertain in their forms, yet at the same time they are flexible. The agogics operate on the horizontal plane, the dynamics on the vertical, and the timbres add the third dimension, depth. By means of his harmonies and scales, Debussy gives his music more room to operate in a space in which the architectonic constructs are no longer rigid. The musical entities he creates move freely about in space. This music demands the performer as well as the listener to loosen the grip and go with the flow in order to be able to reach out into new worlds.

Pedalling

To these... carefully placed... and sometimes merely absurd pedal indications I much prefer Liszt's brief note to his transcription of the *Tannhäuser* Overture: 'Verständiger Pedalgebrauch wird vorausgesetzt' [it is assumed that the pedal will be used with understanding] after which you will, of course, not see a single pedal indication in the text.

Neuhaus (1973, 159)

Liszt's pedalling was something that Debussy still remembered thirty years after hearing him play. Liszt was, after his youngest years, essentially a self-taught pianist who developed his piano technique along with his composing process, working out ways to realize on the piano the ideas he wanted to turn into sound. He also researched the possibilities of the instrument, including the pedals, for new kinds of sounds. In the music of Debussy, the necessity of using the pedal can be taken for granted, and its importance to the sounding end result cannot be over-exaggerated. Debussy does not, as a rule, give pedalling instructions, but expects it to be used 'with understanding'. This affords the pianist endless potential for experimentation, ingenuity and study. The pedal occupies a fundamental role in highlighting the harmonies, picking out lines, creating timbres and even constructing the dynamics. In spite of several attempts, no precise method of indicating the use of the pedal has yet been devised. Liszt had already

addressed the subject and developed a way to mark his vibrato pedal effect (as in the *Petrarch Sonnet 123*). Lockspeiser mentions the book *Les Pédales du piano* (1892) by Georges Falkenberg, a pupil of Massenet, which was most probably familiar to Debussy. This book presents a detailed method for notating the use of both the loud and the soft pedal (Lockspeiser 1965, 46). Debussy debated the role of pedal marks both in his own music and in producing a new edition of Chopin's piano works, but seems to have given up and left the use of the pedal mainly to the performer's discretion. He did not undertake to invent a more accurate way of marking the use of the pedals in the way that he did for indicating touch. He nevertheless did keep mulling over the problem, though only in one letter to Durand does he really refer to it:

Despite my respect for Saint-Saëns's great age, what he says about Chopin's pedalling isn't entirely true. I have very clear memories of what Mme Mauté de Fleurville told me. [Chopin] recommended practising without pedal and, in performance, not holding it on except in very rare instances. It was the same way of turning the pedal into a kind of breathing which I observed in Liszt when I had the chance to hear him in Rome. I feel that Saint-Saëns forgets that pianists are poor musicians, for the most part, and cut music up into unequal lumps, like a chicken... In theory we should be able to find a graphic means of representing this 'breathing' pedal... it wouldn't be impossible. (To Durand 1.9.1915)⁶²

Debussy's first piano teacher was Mme Mauté de Fleurville, who claimed to have been a pupil of Chopin. Despite having no concrete proof to the claim, Debussy always spoke of his teacher with the greatest respect and greatly valued her knowledge about piano playing in general and about Chopin in particular. In a conversation written down by Victor Segalen in 1908, Debussy said he had heard only two fine pianists in his life, 'my old piano teacher, the *petite femme grosse* [little fat lady] who made me play Bach and who herself played Bach

⁶² Durand had communicated to Debussy some thoughts which Saint-Saëns expressed in *Le Courrier musical* 15.5.1910 (Footnote 3 to the above-mentioned letter in *Correspondance*).

with a liveliness such as one no longer hears today... the other one was Liszt, whom I heard in Rome' (*Correspondance* 2207).⁶³

Marguerite Long, E. Robert Schmitz and Alfred Cortot all pay considerable attention to the use of the pedal in Debussy's music. Reporters of Debussy's playing almost always take pains to describe his skilful and colourful use of the pedal. Recordings made at the beginning of the century reproduce the player's use of the pedal relatively well. Judging from Debussy's own recordings, his use of the pedal was extensive, but noticeably clear. As mentioned earlier, however, it is impossible to say how far the old piano roll recordings can be trusted.

The pedal marks in Debussy's piano music are extremely few and far between. Unkari found pedal marks in only 11 of his piano works, and in each of these at only one or two (and once three) points (Unkari 1993, 66). Two of the *Études* have pedal marks. In *pour les octaves* bar 49, there is the instruction *con sordina* (*sic* – in the older Durand edition *con sordino*), and ten bars later *Garder la sourdine, la pédale forte sur chaque temps*. This translates as 'use the soft pedal, and change the sustain pedal on each beat', i.e. in this case three times in the bar. The two-and-a-half measures marked *les 2 Ped.* beginning in bar 79 are interesting in that the nuance is *ff*. In other words, Debussy uses the soft pedal here specifically to create a special timbre, and not to achieve a pianissimo. At this point the text consists of quick octave progressions that begin delicately and with the soft pedal, to produce an almost harpsichord-like effect. The pedal instructions provide a clear indication of how to construct the whole passage, culminating in brilliant Lisztian fortissimo octaves. In this case, the forte pedal is used both to change the timbre and to create a crescendo effect. *Pour les agréments* has a mark that does not directly mention the pedal but that needs it: *reprendre avec la m.d. sans refrapper* – press the keys silently with the right hand. When the pedal is lifted, this 'silent' touch highlights a narrower section of the three-and-a-half octave

⁶³ Such sayings should, of course, be taken with a grain of salt. Debussy's student Madame de Romilly mentioned in her memoirs that her playing of the Liszt's *Rhapsodies* made him recall his memories of the great Nicholas Rubinstein, whose magnificent performances had remained with him' (Nichols 1992, 54).

chord, thus paving the way for the next musical idea. This keyboard technique, admittedly already used by the Romantics (such as Schumann) is sometimes useful also elsewhere in playing Debussy's music.

Roberts describes the features of Javanese *gamelan* music and the reflection of its sound in the piano music of Debussy. 'Debussy's piano style is fundamentally percussive. This might seem a paradox, considering his mastery of delicate nuance and understatement; but it is also a truism, for the piano is essentially a percussive instrument, with hammers hitting strings ... One of the remarkable features of Javanese gamelan music is the way it shows us that percussion is a phenomenon of resonance as much as accentuation'. He notes that Debussy's exploitation of resonance is but one aspect of his writing for the piano, but one which causes the listener to recognise the music as Debussy's. (Roberts 1996, 157–8) The sonorities created by Debussy and typical of his piano music are founded on his skillful, richly-imaginative ability to exploit the instrument's harmonics.

The *Études* for thirds, embellishments, opposed sonorities and arpeggios, particularly, open up a wide field of challenges for experimenting with the pedals.⁶⁴ Executing Debussy's multi-layered and ambiguous chord structures and their subtle changes, and separating their horizontal planes – melodic, rhythmic, touch and timbre – require versatile and sensitive pedalling, pressing the soft and loud pedals to varying degrees and exploring their combinations. The pedal becomes an extension of the fingers, as it were, in cases where the figure on the page cannot literally be achieved with the fingers.

Although pedal marks proper are almost totally absent, many hints as to how to use the pedals are actually written into the notation.

⁶⁴ A short study by Mart Ernesaks (2014) points to the fact that, otherwise than often is thought, the use of the 'loud' pedal does not as such amplify the sound. Astonishingly little research seems to have been conducted into the complex combinations of pedal, volume, the various piano registers and different touches, or into the way these combinations are perceived. See, e.g. Lehtonen et al.: 'Analysis and modeling of piano sustain-pedal effects.' *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 2007 September, 122/3: 1787.

Long note values or notes otherwise marked as sustained are actually pedal marks. Octave figures marked legato often fairly clearly dictate the use of the pedal (e.g. Étude VIII, bars 17–19). It remains for the performer to decide how Debussy intended various combinations of staccato dots and slurs to be executed. In some cases they may refer to both touch and pedals (e.g. Étude III, bars 62–63; Étude X, bars 68 and 70; Étude XII, bar 51).

Composers in the Romantic era were already exploring the piano's extreme registers. The music of Debussy, too, spreads widely across the keyboard; hence long notes tied with a slur can only be produced with the help of the pedal. Open-ended slurs over notes are very common and mean that the sound should continue beyond the written note value. Often they continue the final notes (Études IV, VII, VIII and XI), but they may also occur elsewhere (e.g. Étude X, bars 56 and 71). At the end of *pour les arpèges composés*, the notes of the A-flat major chord spread over four octaves are not only marked with 12 slurs but also with the instruction *laissez vibrer*. Sometimes the omission of a pedal is further ensured by the word *sec*, as at the end of Étude XII.

A whole manual could be written on the varied uses of organ points in compositions, drawing on the music of Debussy, as Schmitz remarks (Schmitz 1966, 32). As a rule, organ points also act as something in the manner of pedal marks (e.g. Étude II, bars 63–70). The problem with pedalling organ points is often that since they live a harmonic life of their own and cause dissonance in the rest of the texture, the sound of the modern grand piano can easily become muddy. Use of the middle (third) pedal is nevertheless very seldom necessary. A transparent multi-layered texture is a typical Debussy characteristic. This clarity can generally be achieved with imaginative use of the pedal (partial changes, half- and quarter-pedals, vibrato pedal) and with the help of precise touch and good balance between the notes of chords.

Debussy's pianos do not appear to have had what is known as the third, middle, selective tone-sustaining or *sostenuto* pedal. This mechanism had indeed been invented in the mid-19th century, but it started to spread only after Steinway began fitting its pianos with

it in 1874.⁶⁵ This does not mean that Debussy would not have been familiar with the device. There were three-pedal Steinways available in the circles where he moved, and Ricardo Viñes owned a three-pedal Pleyel grand in the 1890s (Howat 2009, 288).

In the course of his life, Debussy had various Bechstein, Blüthner and Pleyel instruments, grands and uprights. He often received them as a compliment from a piano manufacturer, and he does not seem to have been particularly unhappy with any of them. The Blüthner grands of the early 20th century were quality instruments. Their special feature, still in use today, was an invention called *aliquot*, which affected the sound of the top registers through sympathetic vibration. Next to each group of three strings in this range was a fourth string that was not struck by the hammer but that vibrated when the relevant key was struck, producing harmonics and thus giving the top register a brighter tone. The quality of the instrument did not, however, appear to have been of any great significance to Debussy during the actual process of composition.⁶⁶ In spring 1913 he hired an upright piano from Bechstein's for his study⁶⁷ and mentioned it in May two years later in a letter to Durand from Paris: 'Thank you for the piano tuner...he came just in time to fix my "boche" [German] piano so that it can be played in French' (To Durand 29.5.1915). Eigeldinger claims that Debussy had a particular liking for his Bechstein piano because of its light touch and its sensitivity to nuances, and points out that these were precisely the qualities which Chopin appreciated in Pleyel instruments (Eigeldinger 1991, 128). At the time he was

⁶⁵ Boisselot had presented the mechanism at the Paris World Exposition as early as 1844. 'In the 1930s, when a dry neo-classicism was the musical climate of the day, the performers tried to "clean up" the sonority of Debussy's piano writing, advocating, as did Robert E. Schmitz, the use of the middle, or sostenuto, pedal. Historically, Debussy's pianos – he had a Bechstein upright and a Blüthner grand – were not equipped with this device (European pianos, in general, did not have them)' (Jacobs 42).

⁶⁶ 'Debussy famously liked to open its [his Blüthner grand's] lid to show visitors the extra strings, shutting it again before it was played', writes Howat, who traces the history of Debussy's instruments (2009, 310–312).

⁶⁷ Letter to Émile Vuillermoz 18.3.1913.

composing the *Études* in Pourville, Debussy had in his use a small, dismantlable upright piano (piano démontable), sent to him by Maison Pleyel (To Durand 22.7.1915).⁶⁸ But whatever sort of piano he composed his *Études* on, he most certainly knew what a piano could ideally produce, and his demands as regards nuancing and pedalling were made accordingly.

Fingering

Debussy was not in the habit of writing fingerings in his piano music; this reflects his nature as a composer and very probably also as a pianist. It seems likely that he would have created both the pedalling and the fingering as he went along. This would have been in accordance with the fact that he did not have a reputation of practicing piano for hours at a time. Consequently, he also did not have the career of a stage virtuoso, nor an interest in becoming one. The aim of his markings is to give the player as precise a picture as possible of how the music should ultimately sound; how to transform the image into sound remains the player's problem. Debussy acquitted himself well in his own early piano studies and developed into a highly expressive pianist. Nevertheless, in describing his playing, his contemporaries generally speak of the interpretative aspect, especially sound, touch and pedalling, and make no mention of any particularly virtuosic or exceptional technical keyboard skills. The remarkable qualities of his playing had to do with the skill of creating sound colours and nuances and with the ability to make people listen. It may, of course, be said that the two aspects, interpretation and technique, cannot be distinguished from each other and that an inept 'technician' is not able to produce a credible interpretation. Still, the comments do tell something about the direction of Debussy's interests. In the closing years of his life, Debussy felt his strength and his keyboard skills

⁶⁸ A dismantlable upright could be taken apart for easy moving and then put together again. The Pleyel upright may have been somewhat similar in structure to the corresponding Gaveau instrument, which is presented in the 1906 catalogue of the firm. For more about Debussy's pianos, see Howat 1997, 100–101, and Howat 2009, 310–312.

dwindling to such an extent that he refused to perform his *Études*. He wrote to Fauré, who apparently had enquired about the matter: 'I don't play the piano well enough to risk performing my *Études*... A special phobia attacks me in public: I don't have enough fingers, and all of a sudden I don't know where the pedals are! It is sad and perfectly harrowing' (To Fauré 29.4.1917). In an interview in 1914 he said: 'It is true that I can adequately perform some of the *Préludes*, the easiest ones. But others... make me quiver' (Lesure 1914, 4). It is thus possible that fingering his *Études* would have been too troublesome. Following consultations with his publisher, he wrote a foreword to the *Études* that reads as follows:

Quelques mots... By way of introduction

These *Études* are deliberately presented without fingering for the following reasons:

It is only logical that a single set of fingerings will not suit all shapes and sizes of hand. Some modern editors try to get around this by piling different fingerings on top of one another, which only serves to add to the confusion... Music then starts to resemble some strange mathematics, producing an inexplicable phenomenon, whereby the fingers unaccountably multiply.

The story of Mozart who, as a child prodigy on the harpsichord, finding himself unable to span all notes in a chord, fondly imagined he could hit one with the end of his nose, does not really resolve the problem; and in any case may owe more to the imagination of an over zealous editor than to reality.

Our old Masters – I might mention here 'our' admirable harpsichordists – never indicated any fingering, undoubtedly relying on the intelligence of their contemporaries. Similarly, it would be invidious to doubt that of today's virtuosi.

In conclusion: the absence is an excellent exercise, removes the temptation to change the composer's fingering merely for the sake of contradiction, and confirms the old saying anew, 'Your own best servant is yourself.'

Chercons nos doigtés! – Let us discover our own fingerings.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Debussy's Foreword in English translation from the Durand-Costallat edition.

Debussy does not seem to be aware of – or he wants to discard Couperin’s fingering instructions in *L’Art de toucher de Clavecin* (1717). Though he knew and admired the works of Couperin, Rameau and the other early French composers, his actual knowledge of them was probably limited.⁷⁰ It also might not have been in his character to spend his time in figuring out the solution to something that he considered to be the performer’s problem. It is therefore very much up to the player to try out and establish the fingerings that are most suitable and convenient. Debussy frees the pianist to find the fingerings that will best express the nature of the music.

Even though the *Études* do have a firm tonal basis, Debussy’s scales can seldom be classified as major or minor. Hence, individual solutions have to be found for the fingering of both scales and the figures derived from them. Tempos and fingerings exist in a relationship of mutual dependence. In some of the *Études* fast tempos are expected in order to bring off the brilliance of the texture and the flamboyant spirit of the music. Fast tempos combined with the soft

⁷⁰ Kati Hämäläinen discusses Couperin’s fingerings in chapter 3.3 of her book *François Couperin: L’Art de toucher le Clavecin. Cembalon soittamisen taito* (Sibelius-Akatemia, EST 2, 1994): ‘In his book... Couperin provides fingerings for some places in his 1st and 2nd books of harpsichord works. In several modern editions these fingerings have been added to their appropriate places in the score.’ She also mentions some other French clavecinists – Nivers, Raison, de Saint-Lambert, Corrette, and Dandrieu – who included fingering instructions in their works. Wheeldon, as well, mentions Couperin’s fingering instructions and debate included fingering instructions in their works. Wheeldon, as well, mentions Couperin’s fingering instructions and debates Debussy’s relationship to Couperin wondering how much Debussy actually knew about early music (Wheeldon 2009, 67–70). Between 1871 and 1888 the London firm Augener published a complete edition of Couperin’s *Pièces de Clavecin*, edited by Friedrich Chrysander and Johannes Brahms. This includes Couperin’s references to his *L’art de toucher*. For instance, the *Sixième Ordre* (which includes *Les Baricades Mistérieuses*, referred to by Debussy in his writings) has instructions in six places to look at page 66 (*‘Voyez ma Méthode, page 66’*), where Couperin gives detailed fingerings for passages. I do not know how widely the Augener editions were available in France, or whether Debussy had access to this particular one, but it certainly does not seem impossible.

dynamics largely favored by Debussy sometimes present a special challenge and demand particularly careful consideration of fingering and pedalling.

The way the pedal is used plays a significant role in deciding the fingerings. As mentioned before, the pedal is inevitably paramount in Debussy's piano music, and it is not always even possible to separate decisions concerning fingering from those concerning the pedalling. In *pour les tierces*, for example, the fingerings, tempo and pedal have to be considered as a whole. Not using the pedal is a rare exception, usually a means of seeking some special timbre or an unusual effect.

In *pour les notes répétées*, the fingering options are numerous and depend on whether the player uses a wrist or a finger staccato, and the type of colour aimed at. In *pour les sixtes* and *pour les accords* in particular, the size of the player's hands will affect the fingering. In *pour les huit doigts*, Debussy addresses fingering in a footnote attached to the *Étude*. In it he justifies the name 'for eight fingers' by saying that use of the thumbs would in this *Étude* require difficult acrobatics in performance. This is not necessarily true, so the solution to the problem is ultimately a matter between the player and his own conscience.

Debussy continued the path mapped out by Chopin and Liszt in the search for a new, individually fashioned technique and obliged each player of his music to carry that tradition forwards.

THE *DOUZE ÉTUDES*: PLAYFUL WORK AND SERIOUS PLAY

I Étude – Enjoy your exercises!

pour les ‘cinq doigts’ d’après Monsieur Czerny – for ‘five
fingers’ after Mr. Czerny
Sagement – Animé (Mouvt de Gigue)

In his entertaining *La Carnaval des animaux* from 1886, Saint-Saëns likens pianists to animals, knowing that at some stage in their studies, it is the inevitable fate of all budding pianists to tackle the beastly finger exercises and scales in his *Pianistes*. Chopin for his part mentioned in his unfinished sketch for a piano method that the most natural hand position follows from placing the long middle fingers on black keys. He recommended that beginners start learning scales from B major or other scales with many black keys, and designated C major as the most difficult one (Eigeldinger 1991, 34). Both Chopin and Liszt begin their own etude collections in C major, following the traditional major-minor key scheme. In contrast, while Debussy also begins his *Études* collection with a five-finger exercise, he follows their example only as far as the first *Étude*.

Debussy calls C major a ‘fiery key’,⁷¹ which goes along well with the peppery character of the *Étude*. In heading his piece *d’après Monsieur Czerny*, he makes playful but also respectful homage to

⁷¹ Debussy on Music 276.

one of the godfathers of all piano etudes, who also was a student of Beethoven and a one-time childhood teacher of Liszt. Nothing about Debussy's personal relationship with Czerny's etudes is known to this writer. It is conceivable that his beloved daughter Chouchou brought Czerny's exercises home to practise, reminding Debussy of his own childhood lessons.⁷² The set-up could be likened to the opening of the *Children's Corner* suite, in which *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum*, also in C major, evokes memories of Clementi's exercises. Debussy's instruction is to play, at first, *sagement*: properly, sensibly, wisely. The imaginary player does not, however, need much enticing away from the keyboard. A disturbance in the guise of an A flat already enters the scene by the second bar and begins firing at the conscientious pupil with a catapult. Marguerite Long describes this note, to be played with a bent finger, as the pizzicato plucking of a guitar string, recalling that Debussy, with a chuckle, called it 'a quick pinch' (Long 1972, 43).

Debussy's adherence to the traditional key scheme ceases before it has hardly begun. The next Étude is built on the D-flat–B-flat axis, which is already making its presence known here. The A-flat trouble-maker, being the dominant note in the key of D flat, is in fact seductively alluding to the rogue key right in the second bar. A challenge to the steadily rising and falling five-finger figure soon appears in bars 7–10 (*Animé*, with *Mouv't de Gigue* added in parentheses – perhaps prompted by Debussy's recent editing of Bach) in the form of a downwards, jazzy chromatic gesture. The battle can now begin: D

⁷² Faultless finger technique has always been one of the hallmarks of French piano playing. Many French and French-trained pianists born in the late 19th century and who therefore studied with teachers from Debussy's generation have told about long practise hours spent on exercises and studies. Marguerite Long was a strong advocate of Czerny's etudes and exercises, as witnessed by, among others, her students Gaby Casadesus (1901–1999) and Daniel Wayenberg (b.1929) (Timbrell 1999, 93, 96). A student of Isidor Philipp, Jean-Marie Darré (1905–1999), recounted 'hours and hours of technique every day, Czerny, Moszkowski, Kessler, Moscheles, Alkan and so on' (Ibid., 87). Lucette Descaves (1906–1993) herself a Long-student, professor and also teaching assistant of Yves Nat (1890–1956; in Paris a student of Louis Diémer), made her students practice a lot of Czerny as well (Ibid., 28, 103, 160).

flat versus C; black keys versus white; steady, rolling figures versus nimble ones difficult to predict. Debussy's allusion to a dance tempo might be useful to keep in mind. The texturally often-complex French gigue is slower than its Italian counterpart, as a dance somewhere in the moving-but-not-too fast category. The referral to a gigue has probably been added as a warning against an overly speedy tempo.

Among these fleeting events Debussy manages to slip in several malicious little technical gibes. In the five-finger Étude, he includes contrary motion (bars 15–16), unison runs (bars 42–44, 46, 62, 69, 97–98), a light, quick *leggiero legato* touch (bars 34–36), a light finger *staccato* (bars 72, 79, 83), quick hand movements from one place to another (bars 23–26, 55, 59), *crescendos* for the weak fingers (bars 44, 47, 55), and a left-hand exercise in which the little finger has to hold a note while the others trace figures above it, *pianissimo* and *leggiero*, of course (bars 50–58). The Étude requires a light, precise finger technique that skims the hurdles with cat-like agility but which, if necessary, is also capable of a quick dab of the paw (*brusquement* in bar 12, vertical accents in bars 24–27, *rinforzando* in bar 33, *sf* in bar 44, quick octave shifts between the hands in bar 63). The field expands throughout the Étude, from a narrow initial gesture around middle C to quintuplets spinning upwards *accelerando* from bar 91 and finally, to a five-octave *strepitoso* – noisy, boisterous – run covering six bars. Here D-flat major makes one last attempt to deviously cut short the bass progression beginning in bar 106 towards the victorious C-major chords of the final cadence. The pianist, that playful beast, has once again triumphed over himself.

One cannot help being amazed at the contrast between conditions at the time the Études were composed, in the middle of war and illness, and the *joie de vivre* and humour of this Étude in particular. The simple joy of creation has swept all else aside. Debussy alludes to a similar feeling in a letter to André Caplet in the summer of 1912, after completing the score for his ballet *Jeux*: 'How I was able to forget the troubles of this world and write music which is almost cheerful, and alive with quaint gestures...? I suppose we must believe that the absurdly stern Mother Nature sometimes pities her children' (To Caplet 25.8.1912).

II Étude – Underwater world

pour les Tierces – for Thirds
Moderato, ma non troppo

The tempo marking here, *moderato, ma non troppo*, poses something of a problem. Is it a warning to not play too fast or too slow? The marking is different from what Debussy had written in the manuscript: *Modéré* and beneath it *Grave*, which would appear to support a mood that is serious rather than jauntily virtuosic. It must, however, be remembered that as a rule, Debussy's tempo marks seldom point to any especially fast tempos and that this is in any case an etude, not a nocturne. Yet this 'richly sensuous piece' is 'a study in sound as much as an exercise in tricky pianistic progressions' (Roberts 1996, 304).

The instruction over bar 1 reads *piano, legato e sostenuto*. The term *sostenuto* also appears elsewhere in the *Études*: in *pour les tierces*, bar 33 (*pp, dolce sostenuto*); in *pour les quarts*, bar 44 (*p, sostenuto*); at the beginning of *pour les sixtes* (*mezza voce, dolce sostenuto*); in *pour les octaves*, bar 109 (*p, sostenuto e marcato*); and in *pour les agréments*, bar 27 (*p, dolce sostenuto*). The tonal undercurrent at the beginning of *pour les tierces* is warm and soft, and flows like water through the fingers, an impression created simultaneously by D-flat major, B-flat minor and B-flat major.⁷³ Light may momentarily shine through the water as well, bringing a clear glimpse of the seabed (C major in bars 8–9 or B-flat major in bars 21 and 23). Most of the time the thirds rock forwards and backwards in short waves, only occasionally rising up to crash on the rocks by the shore (bars 13–14) before being swept down again over the boulders (bars 31 and 33) or tossed onto the long seashore (bar 42). The wind whips up the waves (*Animando*, bars 59–62) and the storm at last reaches the shore (*Con fuoco*, bar 67), but at this point the film breaks. We have been looking at a narrow, closely-cropped view kept in motion by the forces of nature. Nowhere is there any sign of its being touched by a human hand, nor should there be: the musical content of this *Étude*, its timbral counterpoint and

⁷³ Howat remarks on Wagnerian echoes in bars 43–44, *Tristan* chords rising by thirds, which also appear in the *Prélude Les tierces alternées*, bars 121 and 123 (Howat 2009, 170).

overlapping, shifting harmonies are extremely sensitive to technical pollution.

Étude pour les Tierces may well be regarded also as a pedalling study. Generally, it needs only a light half pedal, although the pedals are often rather long. Quick changes are required more to achieve differences in articulation than to change or clear the harmony. Simultaneously with the thirds progressions, there are almost always at least two other voices, often over such a wide span that smooth voice leading is only possible with the help of the pedal. The long organ points, especially the B flat lasting 13 bars (15–27), may tempt the player to use the middle pedal, but ultimately this is not necessary. Instead, the player should aim at sensitive nuancing of the dynamics within the voice and optimum balance between voices. It is often more important to see the movement of the sand on the seabed than to focus the light on each grain floating in the water.

Chopin in his corresponding etude (in G-sharp minor, op. 25 no. 6) writes thirds progressions exclusively for the right hand, apart from the four bars at the mid-point. In the Chopin etudes, the featured technique as a rule is clearly assigned to one hand only. In this pianistic sense, the Debussy *Études* often come closer to Liszt's etude writing, and of course to the polyphonic thinking of Bach. In his teaching, Liszt also stressed the importance of strong fingers and their training, whereas Chopin did not wish to draw any special attention to mechanical exercise. Judging from what his pupils said, Chopin's method relied greatly on supple hands and sensitive fingers. However, today on a modern concert grand, players need strong, independent fingers in order to perform Chopin's etudes. The artist working on the Debussy *Études* needs to think in the manner of both Liszt and Chopin. Whereas Chopin's etude for thirds has many repetitions of figures, long scales and long chromatic progressions in a quick tempo, all of which challenge the fingers, the tempo of Debussy's *pour les tierces* is slower, and the different types of figures alternate more quickly. This *Étude* therefore requires less stamina but even greater sensitivity in the individual fingers. Chopin's thirds progressions create a magnificent, radiant web of sound, while Debussy's style constantly shifts melodic patterns.

In the Debussy *Étude*, executing figures and patterns formed by the thirds demands effective use of all five fingers of the hand as well as wise use of hand weight. Using the weight of the hand to help bring out different levels can be exploited far more than in the Chopin *etude*. This is often practically unavoidable if the player is to achieve a legato and the shifts of colour.

The figuration is more varied in Debussy's *Études* than in the works in this genre by Chopin, as shown also by the two *etudes* for thirds. While Chopin has long chromatic passages in thirds, Debussy has only short ones (bars 38–40 and 53–58), but the additional voice carried along at the same time complicates the fingering. Chopin has similar figures in bars 15–16 and Debussy in bar 25. The descending seventh chords in Chopin's bars 27–34 are reminiscent of Debussy's bars 30–37, but once again, Debussy varies his figures more. Debussy reflects Liszt-Paganini techniques, e.g. in writing for alternating hands in bars 46–47 and 70, and in crossing hands in bars 71–72. Chopin does not use these techniques in his *etude*, nor does he employ the melodic embellishing employed by Debussy in bars 11–12, which is further expanded in bars 63–67 and finally resolves on *con fuoco* and *molto stretto* repetitions of thirds in three layers, requiring strong arm technique. There is already a premonition of this in bars 13 and 14, where the steady undulation is momentarily interrupted in the *Rubato*→*Accel.*→*Rit.* passage. Open virtuosity enters the picture only at the end of the *Étude*, as the tempo and volume increase.

In most of the Debussy *Études*, holding the shape together is at times difficult due to the brief, fragmentary phrases and frequent tempo changes. *Pour les tierces* is in this respect as clear as can be. It falls into three major sections: bars 1 to 14, bars 15 (*Tempo I*) to 44, and bars 45 (*Tempo I*) to 76. The basic tempo wavers at the junctions but then settles down again, and from bar 59, it gathers speed to the final build-up. The oscillation between and occasional blending of key timbres, variation in the melodic line, use of different touches and sudden dynamic increases (only eight of the first 59 bars rise above piano or pianissimo) divide the longer sections into smaller units. In these, the tempo variations are confined to only subtle agogic nuancing. Chopin ends his brilliant, soaring *etude* after a valiant

final descent into a chordal cadence, with a firm but reassuring hand. Debussy for his part ends his more peaceful and reflective *Étude* with an *accelerando* (the *Tempo I* in bars 73 and 76 points to the tempo of the corresponding motif in bar 67 rather than to the opening *moderato*) that is cut short by an almost violently defiant *tutta la forza*. Something surges up from under the water.

III *Étude* – Ancient dances and melodies

pour les Quartes – for Fourths
Andantino con moto

‘[Some of] the *Études* aim at special sonorities, among them ‘*Pour les quartes*’, where you will hear some unheard-of things, even though your ears have been broken in to many a “curiosity” (Debussy to Durand 28.8.1915, Helffer 1991, XI). Although Scriabin had already begun to base compositions on chords made up of fourths in the early years of the 20th century, he did not compose an *etude* for fourths (his last three *etudes*, op. 65 of 1911–1912 are for ninths, sevenths and fifths). This undertaking fell to Debussy, and the result is one of the most beautiful pearls in the *Étude* necklace.

The transparency and airiness of the texture in this *Étude* are reminiscent of *pour les arpèges composés*, while the contrasts in timbre point to *pour les sonorités opposées*. The melodic arabesques have something reminiscent of *pour les sixtes*, and the harmonic colour (Debussy weaves the textures around F major in an almost teasing way) and many of the details evoke associations with *pour les agréments*. It is as if Debussy has picked the best of these *Études*, mixed them and blown a bubble shimmering in all the colours of the rainbow to float on a fresh breeze of pentatonic scales beyond the reach of chromatic gales. An almost painful wistfulness springs from the fact that the music is so physical, somehow bound to physical movement, and at the same time far away (waving a silk scarf, dancing, disappearing ...). The parallel fourths bear the feeling of a distance in time, medieval organum, while the pentatonic mode arouses images of times of antiquity or the orient and its exotic dances.

The tempo marking, *Andantino con moto*, likewise alludes to movement not too slow, but with the fast note values coming up later on, the tempo cannot be too fast either. Debussy has written the beginning of this *Étude* in such a way that the bar lines are actually unnecessary. The melismatic, flowing *dolce* line of the beginning fades away, and the *Ritenuato–Stretto–Ritenuato* gesture, *forte, sonore, martelé*, takes the foreground in measures 7–8, 10–11 (and respectively in 37–41) and 17–18. The change in pulse and sonority should be sudden, but not angular, too literally measured or exaggerated. There are numerous marked tempo changes. The *Étude* is divided into phrases each a few bars long that fade away *ritardando* or *diminuendo*, like the echoes of the oriental metal and wooden percussion instruments accompanying a dance. The versatile and compact use of fourths in turn lends coherence to a piece that is about to evaporate in the player's hands, like mist into the air. Various timbres can be achieved by paying close attention to the oft-repeated touch signs and imaginative use of the pedals.

Debussy has taken very special trouble in this *Étude* to mark off the different sound and dynamics of the horizontal lines (e.g. bars 5, 8, 14, 25, 50, 51 or the bass in bars 60–62). In all 85 bars of the *Étude*, there are only a few that do not bear some kind of dynamic mark on a scale ranging from *ff* through *f*, *mf*, *p*, *più p*, *pp* and *più pp* to *estinto*. *Forte* is further characterised by *sfz*, *sonore martelé* and accents, and *piano* by such additional attributes as *dolce*, *mormorando*, *expressif*, *scherzare* [sic], *leggiere*, *marqué*, *con tristezza* and *volubile*.

In the middle section (bars 49–64), the music builds up to an intensive climax by alternating the *scherzare* motif with rippling runs in fourths, during which the bass ostinato in fourths eggs the dancers on, like drum beats, to ever more magnificent displays. The rhythmic density of this episode sets an effective contrast to the agogic airiness of the outer sections – the opposite of the arrangement in the last *Étude*, *pour les accords*.

Pour les quartes may be regarded as having its Book II counterpart in *pour les agréments* constructed nearly in the same way: in both *Études*, bars 5 and 6 pause to seek a new direction, proceeding via a *stretto* to new vistas and finally to the long build-up that in *pour les quartes* features runs rippling down in fourths and in *pour les*

agréments, downward chord progressions. *Pour les agréments* then goes back to remind the player of the beginning; *pour les quartes* likewise returns to the C–F axis of the beginning, in *dolce sostenuto*. The tonal centre of the first half of the *pour les quartes* is F, even though the only strong F-major cadence is in bar 18. There is a second, weaker one in bar 25, from which a solitary wind solo (the hand movements of Scheherazade?) leads to a section marked *Ballabile e grazioso*, dancelike and graceful. Nostalgic memories of the middle section (*con tristezza, lontanain* – sadly, far away) lead towards an almost extinguished (*estinto*) conclusion. The C in the last bar is a good example of the inconceivably polished endings in the *Études*. The performer has to give careful thought to the significance of the last note in order to decide how to execute it.

Long lines in double fourths, especially in legato, are rare in piano literature. The player has to address their technical execution and fingering as a novel problem, making the decisions yet bearing in mind Debussy's precision as regards articulation and sound. True, pianists have from time to time been obliged to play progressions in fourths with one hand, as a part of sixth-chords at least since the sonatas of Beethoven. Ravel wrote some progressions in fourths that form melodic lines in his Toccata of *Tombeau de Couperin* (1917), as well as a glissando of fourths already in *Alborada del gracioso* (1904–1905). Scriabin employed different kinds of fourths plentifully in his harmonic structures, and in the eighth sonata (1913), there is even a repeated melodic motif in fourths which looks and sounds quite familiar to the player of the *Études*. Yet there is something very special in the wealth of poetic imagination and various ways with which Debussy treats the interval in *pour les quartes*.

IV Étude – Nocturne

pour les Sixtes – for Sixths
Lento

Debussy did not place himself beyond the occasional attempt at pictorial description of music. 'For a very long time the continuous

use of sixths had reminded me of pretentious young ladies sitting in a salon, sulkily doing their tapestry work and envying the scandalous laughter of the naughty ninths'. He then continues the letter in this jocular tone, taking the blame for the self-induced compositional sin: 'So, then I go and write this study in which my concern for sixths goes to the lengths of using no other intervals to build the harmonies; not bad! Mea culpa' (To Durand 28.8.1915). Nevertheless, Debussy succeeded in ridding himself of the images of sulkiness and envy – hardly words that spring to mind in connection with *pour les sixtes*. It may be possible to point to a certain restraint in the limited dynamics and falling melodic lines, however; likewise to restlessness and agitation in the *agitato* section. The sounds, shapes and form of the *Étude*, the *mezza voce*, *dolce sostenuto*, beginning with its slowly undulating curves which return at the end after the more restless middle section, bring to mind a Chopin Nocturne. But could not the supple lines and agogics also evoke, say, a lazy afternoon, and the transparent dolce-hued harmonies an open-air world, or indeed, why not graceful, unpretentious old ladies?

Schmitz claims that Debussy's *pour les sixtes* is the complete opposite of the Chopin etude in sixths (D-flat major, op. 25, no. 8). He writes that he could imagine that Debussy went so far as to design his own *Étude* to bring out all the properties not found in the Chopin etude (Schmitz 1966, 201). On the other hand, a fairly recent, well-designed disc text tells us that precisely this, of all the Debussy *Études*, is most clearly in the spirit of Chopin. These two opinions are not necessarily in conflict, depending on whatever 'the spirit of Chopin' is taken to mean. I personally am inclined to agree with Schmitz's thought of difference, though there are indeed some easily-recognised similarities between Debussy and Chopin's etudes for sixths. Among these are the somewhat wistful melancholy of some of the melodic spans, and the fresh and for the most part fairly light sound world.

Pour les sixtes would appear to have been the first of the *Études* to be completed by Debussy. It contains several references to the influence of Chopin, maybe thanks to the work on the Chopin volume that Debussy had recently finished. There are similarities with Chopin's

posthumously published etude in A-flat major (*Nouvelle Étude*): Chopin bars 13–14/Debussy bar 38; Chopin bars 29–30/Debussy bar 43; the similar modulations in Chopin bars 29–36 and Debussy bars 42–45 (Wheeldon 2009, 61–66). Debussy told Marguerite Long that he had practised this Chopin etude a great deal (Long 1973, 37).

The key D-flat major is the same in both etudes for sixths, though in Debussy's, it is mostly just an indication. At the end, Debussy nevertheless returns, as if with a sigh, to the D-flat major: two pairs of sixths – D-flat–B-flat and A-flat–F – linger on together with the final dominant-tonic affirmation A-flat–D-flat in the bass, which is filled out into a triad at the last moment by an F three octaves higher. In both the Debussy and the Chopin etudes, the right hand begins tracing the melodic arch in the same register, and even with exactly the same pair of sixths. The beginning of both etudes is marked *mezza voce*, but the sound is very different. In Chopin's, the left hand enters at the same time as the right with an active accompanying figure to which the low bass adds fullness. In Debussy's, by contrast, the left hand draws a thin, monophonic line from the second bar onwards, in counterpoint to the sixths. Chopin requests that his etude be played *molto legato*. Lending variation to the long legato lines in the right hand are the shorter left-hand slurs and a few changes in the articulation. The dominant touch in the Debussy *Étude* is also legato. Although the touches and articulations vary far more often in Debussy's than in Chopin's etudes, there are here fewer individual touch marks applying directly to the tone quality than in most of the other Debussy *Études*. There are no accents at all, nor any combinations of dots and dashes. Instead, there are numerous indications of dynamics and agogics.

Throughout the *Étude*, Debussy gives many different indications for agogic flexibility. The movement momentarily halts at the end of bar 6 (*ritenuto* and *calando*, ending in a fermata); at other times, it simply becomes more concentrated or smoothly makes way for the next idea. It is interesting to reflect on the difference in the transitions between bars 6–7 and 33–34. The characters of the two harmonic changes are beautifully written into the texture. At the end of bar 33, the quaver rest marked with a pause supplements the preceding *ritardando* (*molto rit.*) and *diminuendo* (*dim.*, *p*, *piu p*). The moment

of silence that ensues from releasing the pedal belongs to the end of the bar as its logical continuation and draws the attention towards the delicate bass movement (D-flat–G-flat, pp). By contrast, in bar 6 the sound does not really end. The tossed-up sixth continues its journey, as it were, indefinitely somewhere in space. The result is a feeling of standstill that is further enhanced by the steady C major in the left hand. The rest at the beginning of bar 7 is then part of the next phrase – its beginning as at the beginning of the *Étude*.

Debussy has marked the return to an earlier tempo in three ways: *Mouv't* (bars 7, 27, 29, 34, 36 and 38), *au Mouv't* (bars 16 and 21) and *1er Mouv't* (bar 46). The middle one of these may indicate that a steady tempo should be maintained, in contrast to *animando* or *ritardando*, and not a return to the original *Lento*. Only the last of the indications is unambiguous. No wonder Debussy mentioned that it was interesting to follow the different behaviour of the nuances and tempos in his compositions from one performance to the next.⁷⁴

Sometimes a performer faces the question of how best to combine certain performance directions with the written note values, as in bar 33 of this *Étude*. The rhythmic augmentation written into the score as note values seems to tell us the same thing as the given direction *molto rit.*, and observing both causes a feeling of double effect. Howat (1997, 81–82; 2009, 213) wisely recommends a common-sense approach here, and also points out a similar problem in *pour les quarts*, bars 7 and 37.

Extreme dynamics and sharp dynamic contrasts have been ironed out in this *Étude*. The overall effect is soft: *p*, *espressivo*, *dolce sensibile*. There is a brief increase to a melodic, sonorous *forte* in bar 16 and a slightly longer one in bar 32. In the interim passages, the rhythmically more active *un poco agitato* idea marked *staccato* adds some spice to the sweetness. The Chopin etude also has a trace of *agitato* generated by the dip into a minor key, the altered figure in the left hand and the long, tension-raising A-flat organ point in bars 13–21. Both etudes carry their sixths along in long melodic units. The right-hand melody

⁷⁴ Cited in Chapter 'Agogics': 'You know, I am always curious to hear my own music. I always find changes in it. It comes, it goes, it deforms itself. The nuances change, the tempos fluctuate.'

sixths in the Chopin etude proceed almost throughout in leaps of a second or third, whereas Debussy's intervals are usually wider. In this particular Chopin etude, the left-hand part is almost as difficult as the right, and the left hand proceeds in much wider leaps than the right. Debussy writes sixths for both hands at the same time in over half of the bars in his *Étude*.

Some of the difficulties in performing the passages in sixths arise from the fact that the player is constantly obliged to use the weak fingers (fourth and fifth) and that the hands are tensed because of the broad intervals. Reducing the weight on the thumb side often makes the hand more mobile and gives the weak fingers extra support. The fingerings have to be planned with the utmost care, but creating an impression of legato depends on not only the fingering but also the tempo and the use of the pedal. Schmitz recommends the use of the *sostenuto* pedal, but this is not necessary.

The vital difference between the technical execution of the Chopin and the Debussy etudes for sixths is not only in stamina but also in tempo. In the Chopin etude, the sixths glide at a steady pace without pausing to rest, like a racing bike once set in motion. Debussy travels on foot, and stops now and then to meditate, to listen, to pick an apple... Playing the sixths legato is technically more difficult in Chopin's *vivace* than in Debussy's *lento*. Particularly if the player has a small hand, the strength and independence of the fingers and the flexibility of the wrist – about which Chopin had much to say to his pupils – are sorely tested. However, these attributes are also required in the Debussy *Étude*. In addition to the horizontal flexibility, the vertical mobility of the wrist is important in playing staccato.

V Étude – Joy of living

pour les Octaves – for octaves

Joyeux et emporté, librement rythmé

Light, space and energy are words that spring to mind in connection with *pour les octaves*. It is an *Étude* painted in bold primary colours, with a good-sized brush. The subject could be, say, a *fiesta* in the

bright southern sunshine. The nature of the octave, a broad, clear-sounding interval, has influenced the character of the whole *Étude*. The triple metre adds a touch of dance and the thrill of movement, maybe a whirling waltz.⁷⁵

The way in which the intervals move in the Debussy *Études* could, to simplify slightly, be seen as changing according to the size of the interval in question. The five fingers in the first *Étude* play a lot of dense scale- and trill-like figures, i.e. intervals of a second. The *pour les cinq doigts* does, however, also introduce many and varied elements to provide contrast, which simultaneously clear more space to move about in. The thirds also operate in fairly constricted spaces, for the most part in tight chains that together form broader arches and only at the end open out into a sixth (bar 63) and then into two octaves (bars 67). The gestures in *pour les octaves* are, by contrast, large, as can be seen from the very first bar. Small intervals and chromatics are there as spice and are not vital structural elements of the long *legato* lines, as was often the case with the Romantics and in Chopin's great octaves etude.

Octaves have been composers' favourite medium of showy piano writing in the past couple of hundred years. Chopin composed two octave etudes: one for legato octaves (B minor, op. 25 no. 10, *Allegro con fuoco*) and the other for light wrist-staccato octaves (G-flat major, op. 10 no. 9, *Allegro assai, leggiero*). Debussy expresses himself succinctly, as was his custom. In his *Études*, the legato and staccato octaves, and likewise the chromatic octaves divided between the hands, which incorporate big leaps and carry the other notes inside the octave interval, are all served up in the same cocktail. With ingenious invention, he has managed to include almost all the octave applications of the Romantic–Lisztian tradition. The experienced pianist that Debussy was, he must have been well aware that octave technique is often a stumbling block for pianists, and must have taken a great deal of delight in designing an *Étude* that would contain as many octave tricks as he could think of. He seems to have been interested in the sound produced by different types of octaves

⁷⁵ Debussy kept on his mantelpiece a beautiful miniature bronze, *La Valse*, which sculptress Camille Claudel gave him as a gift sometime in the 1890s (Roberts 1996, 308–310).

and combinations thereof, and in the challenge posed by binding as many varieties as possible together in a functional composition. To illustrate, his *strepitoso-ff* passage at the climax really does justice to the age-old, thundering sound associated with octave-playing. The end of the Étude builds up via a *crescendo* and *accelerando* in the brilliant traditional manner.⁷⁶ Only in very small units, such as the four semiquaver figures in bars 5–7, does Debussy draw a legato Chopinesque line. But not even then is it possible for the fingers to glue the figures together, any more than it is possible for a small-handed player in the Chopin etudes. Once again Debussy exploits the special nature of his instrument, for a true legato is in fact impossible due to the piano's mechanism. Only the illusion of a legato can be created, chiefly by finely adjusting the dynamics and by using the pedal.

The impression of clarity and brightness is enhanced by the Étude's strong anchoring on E major: three decisive V7–I cadences like a joyous gesture of a fist banged on a table at the beginning, at the end and in bar 84. In bar 23, the same parting shot actually leads down a semitone to E-flat major. In these cadences, the player may once again seek a path through Debussy's jungle of horizontal and vertical accents, dots, lines and various degrees of forte as each of the four cadences is marked in a different way. Closer inspection reveals that the marks are completely logical and derive from their different musical contexts. A strong cadence-like sense also lies ahead in bar 37, in A-flat major, reappearing like a gentle memory in bars 93–94. The return to E major via the note B in the bass leads subtly to the C at the end of bar 108. Along the way, the Étude explores whole-tone scales and pentatonic mode, for example in bars 40–43, in the middle section in bars 43–83, and on the black keys in bars 105–106. Adding spice to the colour menu are the chromatic figures in bars 31, 32 and 82.

The broad dynamic range is reminiscent of the mighty octave tradition of Romantic pianism. *Ff*, which Debussy generally uses quite sparingly, occurs several times in this Étude, and is lent further weight by accents. One of the sources of the energy charge in this Étude is the fact that the strong dynamic planes always grow out of

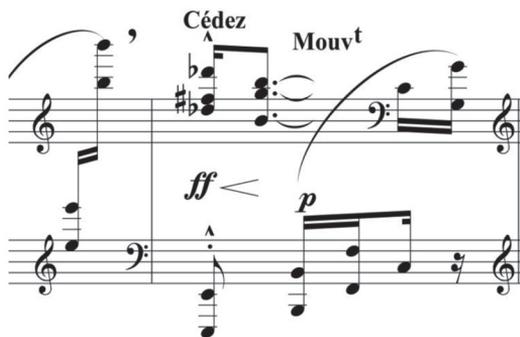
⁷⁶ Five of the twelve Études end on a powerful, virtuosic gesture.

crescendos, after which Debussy begins a new crescendo starting at *subito piano* level. In other words, he does not subside to a quiet level via a calming diminuendo, apart from when he is paving the way for the biggest climax in the middle section. In bar 49, he sets off from the softest level in the whole *Étude*: *pp, con sordina* (with soft pedal).

The middle section contains no fewer than three pedal marks – extremely rare for Debussy. In addition to the mark *con sordina*, he orders the player to continue making use of the soft pedal and, furthermore, to use the loud pedal, changing it on every beat from bar 59 onwards (*Garder la sourdine, la pédale forte sur chaque temps*). Nine bars later, the player automatically lengthens the pedal for the whole bar because of the bass. The *strepitoso ff* octaves, in which the player can add resonance and sense of volume by using the pedals throughout the bar, are followed by the interesting mark *les 2 Ped.* spanning two-and-a-half bars. The result is an exciting contrast of timbre. The intensity remains the same, but the use of the soft and loud pedal while at the same time playing *fortissimo* creates a momentary shock effect: the bull-fighter's red cape for a moment obscures his view. It is quite amusing that out of the four pedal marks in the whole collection, three are in this one *Étude*, where, in comparison with most of the other *Études*, the use of the pedal poses no particular problem.

There is no tempo indication proper at the beginning of *pour les octaves*. The player is simply told that the spirit of the music is *Joyeux et emporté*, joyful and carried away, and *librement rythmé*, which could be translated as 'with rhythmic freedom' or 'freely rhythmical', and very probably does not mean the same thing as *rubato*. A clear pulse is a characteristic element of this *Étude*. Perhaps the meaning could be understood as something like 'don't play like a robot, but let the music breathe freely'. Debussy has not been altogether able to resist the temptation to notate this freedom on paper. Note further the agogic gesture repeated four times (bars 25, 27, 33, 35) and deriving from the combination *breath mark – Cédez* → *Mouv't*.

There is another breath mark before the final cadence, which could be interpreted to mean cutting the note off suddenly, and quickly releasing the pedal, or possibly a moment's breather before



Ex. 4. Étude V, bar 25. The e octave just before the bar line can be taken an octave lower. This was a change suggested by Debussy to Walter Rummel in a letter from 3 December 1916. It is printed in the Durand–Costallat edition (Oeuvres complètes). In bar 24, the semiquaver rest, which appears in all other similar bars at the end of the lower staff, is missing in the score, apparently by mistake.

the quaver rest that begins the next bar. This is again a great example of Debussy’s striving for precision and his passion for detail. The quaver rest should have the length of a quaver of the basic tempo (Mouv’t), but it is preceded by a short intake of breath after the four bars of accelerando. Contrasting with the rhythmic freedom is the *très également rythmé* (very evenly rhythmic) of the middle section. Framing the pointillist toccata-like character of the middle section are the wildly whirling webs of timbre in the outer sections.

VI Étude – Playful paws

pour les huit doigts – for eight fingers

Vivamente, molto leggero e legato

Playing the piano requires infinitely quick fine-motor skills – possibly faster than in any other human activity. Separately, these movements may be humanly impossible. But because they are executed in fast chains they are, despite all the odds, possible. Playing a virtuoso etude is therefore a *tour de force* of fine-motor precision. The necessary movements have to be polished until they are so fast, precise and

economical that they follow one another almost in the nature of a reflex.

In *pour les huit doigts*, Debussy observes the model of the traditional finger exercise in the sense that he repeats the same figure in long sequences, fast and in different positions. The scale and trill technique practised in the first *Étude, pour les cinq doigts*, is here further refined. As Schmitz (1966, 205) points out, both *Études* to some extent contrast playing on the white and the black keys; the colour backdrop of the first *Étude* is, however, C, whereas here it is G flat. In addition to the first *Étude*, marked *Animé*, this sixth and last *Étude* in Book I is the only one of the set with a clearly quick tempo: *Vivamente*. Also familiar from the first *Étude* are the numerous requests here to play *leggiero* and *legato*. Exceptional and very enlightening is *sempre f ma sempre leggerissimo* in bar 60. I have pointed out before that for Debussy, *leggiero* specifically means light, not non-*legato*. Nor, it may now also be noted, does it mean just a quiet tone; rather, it means a new kind of timbre. So how should bars 60–61 be played? If *sempre forte* is taken to mean that each quaver should be played accented to achieve a forte sound, the result is not necessarily light, but rather heavily hammered. The solution should perhaps be sought by nuancing the dynamics within the figures, by balancing the dynamics between the hand by means of a legato touch and a very light pedal.

The uninitiated might be misled into thinking that *pour les huit doigts* would be easy. After all, apart from nine bars, it is played throughout with one hand – and indeed only one note – at a time! But as anyone who has ever performed it will know, that would be the wrong conclusion. Playing the notes evenly and controlling the piano keys are anything but easy. The left and right hands rapidly alternate (synchronisation), play close together (danger of collision) and sometimes cross (quick hand movements; control of the weight of the hand; elastic arm movement). The texture is so thin – for the most part a single line – and proceeds in the same way the whole time that even the smallest unevenness in the line will be heard. The pedal can be used only very sparingly, to lightly alter the tone. Keeping the touch clear and light without losing the impression of legato, executing the slight accentuations and the crescendo–diminuendos, and above all

keeping a damper on the overall dynamics (five of the Étude's seven pages are to be played *pp*) pose a challenge indeed. Help may to some extent be obtained by means of thinking of the hands as paws and employing flexible wrist rotation, in which the finger movements remain exact but very subtle.

In this Étude, Debussy makes an exception to refraining from fingerings. In a footnote he writes: "The changing position of the hand makes use of the thumbs awkward. Its execution would become acrobatic."⁷⁷ This may well be the case for some hands, though the instruction also leads the player to wonder just what technique Debussy in fact used himself. Since in the foreword to the Études he urges the player to work out the fingerings for himself, this footnote should be interpreted as a piece of advice rather than as an absolute prohibition. Above all it is, of course, essential to play with whatever fingerings sound best. Marguerite Long wrote that with Debussy's permission, she used her thumbs in playing this Étude (Long 1972, 45). Even in the Baroque, 'playing without the thumbs' was surely no end in itself. But should the player wish to use this Étude specifically as a finger exercise, by dispensing with the thumbs, it works out fairly comfortably, and promises plenty of fun.

'Fun' is in fact one of the key words for *pour les huit doigts*. It has the same humour and feeling of a jolly chase as the first Étude, only taken further, to Chaplinesque lengths. The hands keep very close together until they seem to lose their bearings after the wild glissandos, ending up playing together, scrambled against each other in bars 40–41. A new start from the beginning follows, but it ends no better. The chase finally ends after a frantic seven-bar scuffle, as if startled by the closeness, on a quiet G flat played by both hands as far apart as possible.

In addition to the idea of not using the thumbs, there are a couple of other hints of Baroque practices in this Étude: the binary form, typical in the Baroque, and the fact that the superimposed position of the hands is distantly reminiscent of playing on two manuals (Wheeldon 2009, 70). The Étude *pour les huit doigts* also has some

⁷⁷ 'Dans cette étude, la position changeante des mains rend incommode l'emploi des pouces et son execution en deviendrait acrobatique.'

interesting similarities with the F-sharp minor Impromptu, op. 102, by Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924) of 1909.

VII Étude – The art of *jeu perlé*

pour les degrés chromatiques – for chromatic notes
Scherzando, animato assai

‘The wind abuses its chromatic privileges’, writes Debussy on a cold February day (To Durand, 29.2.1908). According to Schmitz, Debussy usually uses chromatics ‘at transitions, at pictorial tensing in the texture, either as a humorous twist or in the mounting fury of elements, and the wind particularly’ (Schmitz 1966, 26). One might imagine that it would be difficult to extract anything new from chromatics after the Late Romantics had made such lavish use of this musical device, easily associated with images of nature and the emotions and tensions inherent in them. Debussy nevertheless succeeds in giving chromaticism a breath of fresh air. The falling chromatic line or progression seems to have completely lost its traditional sighing, mournful affect, just as the ear fails to detect in the rising scale the clichéd background music of a horror film.

The score for the ballet *Jeux* contains many details easily associated with the *Études*. At the beginning of the ballet, some very thin, chromatically rising intervals are heard. Chromatic scales moving in opposite directions are played by the flutes and violins. The ballet ends pianissimo with a disjointed falling chromatic progression landing on the note A – also an important note in *pour les degrés chromatiques*. The topic of the ballet is tennis, but the game is played in more mysterious circumstances than usual: at night, in a park and by three people. Much of the time is spent looking for the lost ball. But in *pour les degrés chromatiques*, the listener can keep his eye on the ball the whole time and follow the players’ movements in the bright autumn sunshine. Contributing to the impression of constant movement is the quick tempo (*animato assai*), in which individual seconds join together in long, sliding progressions. The only complete rests in this piece of continuous demisemi-quavers, with no sound at

all, are at the beginning of bars 39 and 40, where they come as an unexpected shock, like missed heartbeats. The toccata-like character of this *Étude* resembles *pour les huit doigts* and also *pour les notes répétées*. The texture weaves in a wide variety of figures consisting of semitones. Sometimes the figures are clearly in the forefront as melodic motifs, perkily playful (*scherzando*) at the beginning, then biting sharp (bars 57–58), or as eloquent counter-melodies (bars 19–20). At times they join in duets (bars 15, 17, 39–42), while at others they provide accompaniment *leggierissimo* (e.g. bars 11–14). The motifs revolve on the spot around their own axis or band together in long scales.

The word *legato* does not appear once in this *Étude*, but the long phrase marks do look like legato ties, and only as an exception are there any indications of articulation in the chromatic lines. In contrast to these, Debussy introduces some resonant major seconds, spiky accents, quick, daring leaps and snatches of melody made of soft chords that sound like modal or whole-tone scales.

Right at the beginning there is a skilfully veiled reference to the key, A minor, of Chopin's chromatic etude, op. 10 no. 2 (and also of the so-called *Winter Wind Étude* op. 25 no. 11, in which chromatics occupy a major role as well). The pentatonic whole-tone melody, first presented as a single line (bars 11–14), later recurs, expanded into chords over an organ point A in the bass (bars 43–46). A questioning counter-melody in half-steps appears in bars 25–29, followed by its repetition a fifth higher (bars 28–33). The original melody repeats itself again with the organ point and its doubling in the treble (bars 63–66), this time surrounded by a completely different sound colour (bars 63–66). Finally at the end, it is heard in A flat colouring, transformed, soft and distant at the end of the *Étude* (78–88), where it slowly disappears (*più pp...smorzando*) into an evaporating A-minor seventh chord. All the while, chromatic patterns weave their arabesques around the song-like melody and continue their comments whenever it is absent.

Lightning fast agility is required not only in the fingers' reaction to one another in the scale patterns, but also in crossing the hands, opening and closing the hand, and controlling the weight of the arm as the left hand transfers from the melody to the bass notes. The

hands often move very close to and even on top of each other, as in the previous *Étude*. The long scale patterns are mainly assigned to the right hand, but the left also has opportunities for plenty of different exercise figures, such as in bars 53–63. In a technical sense, chromatic scales could not be practised more diversely. Both hands take an equal part in expressing the musical content: the right hand mostly brings out the sound of the wind, the left hand gives the wind something to carry, a song or a memory. Sometimes they change roles. Care must be taken in synchronising the hands to ensure a smooth run, so that the listener can enjoy the breath-taking speed and the sound of the wind whistling round his ears.

VIII *Étude* – An imaginary catalogue

pour les agréments – for embellishments

Legato, rubato e leggiero

Pour les agréments, the last of the *Études* to be written, was originally placed at the end of the collection. This place of honour might be viewed as a tribute to the harpsichordists of days gone by, and especially Couperin, to whom Debussy considered dedicating them. Maybe he also had a special regard for this full-bodied yet transparent-sounding *Étude* in which he created an unbelievably rich collection of musical embellishments. Facing the listener is a musical tapestry, or a magnificent *haute couture* masterpiece fashioned by modern methods while also honouring Renaissance and Baroque traditions. Or maybe it is gossamer-thin embroidered ceremonial sail. Once again, Debussy's own commentary about it alludes to water; in a letter, he mentions that the *Étude* 'borrows the form of a Barcarolle on a somewhat Italian sea' (To Durand 12.8.1915). A barcarolle, or boat song, is suggested by the rocking 6/8 pulse and the shifting moods. The major-key colours (F, C, E, B) with their occasional splashes of wistfulness are undoubtedly associated more readily with southern waters than with the cold seas of the north. A fragment of a gondola song can be heard in bars 12–13 and 24–25. Meanwhile, the arpeggio figures conjure up images of guitars, tambourines and serenades.

These are all combined in the passage that begins in bar 33 and works up slightly to an *animando crescendo*, as in the corresponding passage of *pour les quarts* starting from bar 49. Leading to this is the recurring rhythm in the bass and the descending, almost Stravinsky-like triad runs, which paint a glorious splurge of colour. The passage ends via *diminuendo* on *pianissimo*. The return to the beginning in preparing for the final sections of the two *Études* is amazingly similar in bars 65–66 of *les quarts* and bar 42 of *les agréments*. Finally, the last bars almost mirror each other, *estinto* (extinguished) in the former, *à peine, pp* (hardly at all) in the latter.

Schmitz (1966, 210) drew up a long list of the embellishment models used by Debussy in this *Étude*:

- Arpeggiation terminating in a mordent (measures 1–2, etc.)
 - Less ornate and more openly spaced form, converging straight into the note without a mordent (3–4)
 - Fermatas (1, 42) and, by duration (5–6 and others)
 - Upper and lower changing notes around a chord (1, in section starting from 35, 42) and around notes (accompaniment starting at 11)
 - Cadenza passage work in mixed conjunct and disjunct motion over fairly large compass (7–8, 31, 48–50)
 - Appoggiaturas (end of measure 3, within patterns of measures 9–10, and countless others)
 - Grace notes (11–12, 15, 30, 31, 32–33, etc.)
 - Broken chords (17, 27–29)
 - Runs and turning notes in triads (section starting at 35)
- ... and an infinite variety of passing, upper, and lower auxiliaries.

Wheeldon nevertheless points out that actual proof of Debussy's familiarity with French Baroque ornamentation practices as manifest in this *Étude* is confined to the title and the first six bars. Her view is that ornamentation is not an integral part of the *Étude*; rather, it is just a symbolic gesture at the beginning and end (Wheeldon 2009, 69). In a great many of his letters and other writings, Debussy mentions not only Couperin but also Rameau, Destouches, Lalande and

Daquin. D'Anglebert at least, and Couperin in particular, addressed the interpretation of ornaments. There is no precise information telling what performances Debussy heard, what scores he had examined, how well he actually knew French music of the Baroque and its practices, or how far his ornaments are consciously borrowed from the past. From the point of view of the performer of this *Étude*, this is not necessarily of any great significance, any more than are the rules and recommendations for the execution of ornaments. Once again, however, a line can be drawn from Chopin to Debussy. At the time, Chopin's way of adding ornaments to his music, in his *Nocturnes*, for example, gave completely new meaning to ornaments and embellishment in general. Debussy often wrote about musical arabesques, referring to lines freely drawn with music. In this *Étude*, he has compiled an imaginary catalogue in sound, as it were, of those tortuous ornamental lines.

Debussy's pun 'étude... pour les agréments, – pas ceux des pianistes, diront les virtuoses volontiers facétieux' (not for the pleasure of pianists – as those purposely facetious virtuosos would declare) (to Durand 12.8.1915) plays with the word *agrément*, which has two principle meanings in French: 'embellishment' and 'pleasure'. The reader may understand the statement in two ways: even in all its complexity, this *Étude* is not a rewarding medium for showing off a virtuoso technique because it is almost completely lacking in circus elements. Secondly, Debussy might also have suspected that the *Étude* would cause the player too much trouble to be pure pleasure. And indeed, in no way is it light entertainment, despite its ornamental nature. Executing the notes on the page – beginning with the articulation of the first bar and ending with an almost inaudible *pianissimo* in the last – is the intricate filigree work of a craftsman, and a casual attitude to the note values may lead to a surrealistically shapeless result. Nevertheless, as in *pour les quartes*, *pour les sixtes* and *pour les arpèges composés*, this *Étude*, with its wealth of detail, defies a strictly mathematical approach. For improvisation is also part of the ornament-performing tradition. The instruction is *Lento, rubato e leggiero*. It requires a capacity for agogic nuancing and spontaneity, kept in check by the *bon goût* (good taste) demanded by both the early

harpsichord masters and Chopin. *Pour les agréments* is an elegant yet serious salutation from the past, from the days of Chopin, Mozart and Couperin, from Spain during the time of the Moors, and even from Ancient Greece. The bearer of the message is Debussy, ‘the poet of a no-man’s land, a country that does not exist’.⁷⁸

IX Étude – Ragtime for percussion

pour les notes répétées – for repetitions
Scherzando

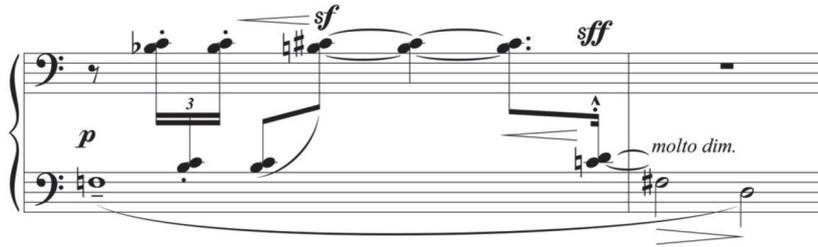
Could the forefather of the repetition effect be the *hoketus* or *hiccup* used as a means of embellishment by medieval singers? The repetitions in the sonatas by Scarlatti already sound clearly virtuosic, but as a virtuoso effect used by piano composers, repetition did not really take root until the 1820s, after Erard had developed an escapement mechanism that reacted sufficiently fast to the player’s touch. Numerous composers of the Romantic era did indeed make use of this device as a detail in works for the piano, but Debussy’s concert Étude seems to have been the first of its kind.⁷⁹ It is undoubtedly easy to invent exercises in repetition as a technical trick, but the expressive potential of a note repeated as such and always at the same pitch must have seemed very limited before the 20th-century broadened the concept of what music may or may not comprise. Debussy, who regarded colouring the same chord (see Étude X, bars 38–40) and even the same note in different ways as an integral element of piano timbre had no such inhibitions, and rather than creating mere effects for repeated notes, he painted them into many-coloured music.

⁷⁸ Vladimir Jankelevitch in the Preface to Jarocinsky 1977.

⁷⁹ This kind of pianistic repetition technique hasn’t been of great interest to later composers, either, although treating the piano as a percussion instrument has often been a characteristic of the way composers write for the keyboard today. Interestingly, Marguerite Long says that Roger-Ducasse wrote her two ‘very difficult’ etudes, one of which was for repeated notes. Debussy was present at a concert in spring 1917 at which Long played these etudes for the first time (Long 1972, 11).

As Schmitz and others have pointed out, *pour les notes répétées* sounds almost atonal in places. Strictly speaking, it is not atonal of course, but the mixture of whole-tone scales and chromatics does generate a similar aural image. Many of the passages incorporate groups of ten or more notes which the ear may easily conceive of as a tone row. Debussy's tendency towards national chauvinism with regard to music and culture is well-known. Debussy, however, appears to have been highly suspicious of the rise of the new German school of composers. Schönberg, Webern and Berg are all said to have broken free from tonal centres around 1910 (Schönberg's piano pieces op. 11 and op. 19 date from 1909 and 1911). In a press interview made in 1914, Debussy expressed his sympathy for the 'young Hungarians', Bartók and Kodály ('a noteworthy feature of their music is the obvious affinity between its spirit and that of the modern French'), but said he had not heard anything by Schönberg: 'My interest was roused by the things that are written about him, and I decided to read one of his quartets, but have not yet succeeded in doing so' (*Debussy on Music*, 318–319). Later, he did, however, become acquainted with Schönberg's music and may have referred to it among other dangerous non-German influences in a press article from 1915 (*L'intransigeant* 11.3.; *ibid.*, 323), the year he wrote the *Études*. In other words, he seems to have felt little more than distaste for the idea of serial composition. It is fascinating, however, to reflect on the similarities that may be arrived at from more or less opposite directions. Even the concept of impressionistic atonalism has been introduced.

Pour les notes répétées could be described as a capriccio-toccata in rondo form. In tempo, it is one of the most straightforward *Études*, so the capriccio or scherzando quality derives from the variation in the articulation and touch, the quick flashes of dynamic effects in the rather thin sound-weave, and the well-timed rests. The pedal must, for understandable reasons, be used very sparingly, but it can effectively colour some of the build-ups, *sforzatos* or, for example, the *pp-espressivo* in bars 28–39. The whole *Étude* has only half a dozen bars in which it is necessary to use the pedal in order to execute the notes on the page. One interesting and typical Debussy detail is the end of bar 77: the *staccato* touch is tied to the beginning of the next



Ex. 5. *Étude IX*, bars 77–78

bar. The markings can be realized also without pedal, but it is possible to create an almost glissando impression in blending the F in the bass to F the sharp, if the pedal is used skillfully.

The repetitions are played using three or two fingers, sometimes more neatly with the thumb (bars 58–61). Sometimes they are divided between the hands. The *Étude* seems at times to be borrowing timbres, timing and mood from different contexts: Japanese *kabuki* (bars 37–47) as well as variety, as in the Prelude *Minstrels*, where Debussy uses repetition to create a *quasi Tambouro* effect. *Pour les notes répétées* dances on the rope between ragtime and atonalism, an irresistible combination. The sound of repetitions can sometimes be mechanical, sometimes drumming, sometimes even more loose and colourful, almost like the plucked strings of a balalaika or a banjo.

Roy Howat, pointing to the ragtime feeling in *pour les notes répétées*, warns that it should not be played too fast. The same goes for *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, *Minstrels*, and *General Lavine*, all of which incorporate influences from popular music (Howat 1997, 87–88). As in *pour les degrés chromatiques*, the expression mark here is *scherzando*, which, despite all the precision these *Études* demand, may be interpreted as indicating an easy-going approach rather than a strict, machine-like tempo. Debussy also uses *scherzando* or *scherzare* to characterise some details in *pour les cinq doigts*, *pour les tierces* and *pour les arpèges composés*.

X Étude – The essence of piano sound

pour les Sonorités opposées – for contrasting Sonorities
Modéré, sans lenteur

It is noteworthy that among his twelve Études, Debussy has included one where the pianist's main concern is sonority. In doing so, he has clearly indicated the importance of sound colour both as a musical and a pianistic phenomenon. The tenth Étude examines sonorities by contrasting them, placing them side by side, and overlapping them. The player's job is to make the ear sensitive, to seek the factors that make the sonorities different, and to work out the solutions for producing them. Again, sensitivity and imagination in employing both pedals is of utmost importance. The Étude is a tribute to piano timbre in general and to the rich potential for variation permitted by the instrument's mechanism as well as the player's skills and imagination.

Wheeldon demonstrates that the beginnings of *pour les sonorités opposées* can be traced to *Berceuse héroïque*, written ten months earlier, as Debussy's contribution to a war album expressing sympathy and support for Belgium after the German invasion. Despite its original programmatic stimulus, the Étude is nevertheless proof that Debussy here is leaning towards absolute music – 'the *dolente* beginning, clarion call and various programmatic elements [of the *Berceuse*] are all transformed within the Étude' – and a possible indication that Debussy was troubled by a sense that he had not made use of the compositional potential within the confines of a programmatic content. (Wheeldon 2009, 72, 77–78)

Pour les sonorités opposées appears in a discarded sketch under the name *sonorités remplacées ou expulsées* (substituted or expelled sounds) (Helffer 1991, 104). The final name emphasises the contrasts built into the music. There is a somewhat similar opposition of distant piano registers in the Prélude *La Cathédrale engloutie*, but because of the harmonies, the different levels there support each other and create a broad, homogeneous block of sound, the bells tolling in the water. The Prélude immerses itself in the piano sound, whereas the Étude examines it from within – almost analysing its consistency.

The initial mood is reminiscent of the beginning of the ballet *Jeux*: the sounds of different orchestral instruments are heard in the darkness; a middle-register A (piano) replies to a tripled G flat played in three octaves (violins and flutes), then a low G sharp (percussion). The three layers that persist throughout the *Étude* have been established. A major seventh (or minor second) is followed by a tritone that with the note G sharp constitutes the first note of a *dolente* motif made up of descending seconds. The melodic lines mostly operate within a very narrow range. The pianist has to make large physical movements because all of the piano's registers are in use, but the movements within the music are, at the start, sometimes very small and almost turn in upon themselves. In this respect, the *Étude* is reminiscent of the *Prélude Des pas sur la neige*; an echo of the sad and icy motif can also be heard in bars 5 and 6 of the *Étude*. Little by little the sadness in the *Étude* is dispelled (from *dolente*, bar 4 to *expressif et profond*, bar 7). With the introduction of the joyous motif (*clair et joyeux*, bar 31) and its repetition, heard from a closer distance, a feeling of excitement and a sense of movement sets in (*animando e appassionato*, bar 38), leading to a boisterous, dance-like swirl until the colour suddenly changes and the light grows dim (bar 51, *pp subito*). The organ point in the bass persists for a moment, then gives up and descends a whole tone into F sharp. The motif from bar 31 is heard again in bar 59, then from further away (bar 67) and then further still (bar 70). At the end, the music briefly calms the openly inflamed emotions and calls the movements to a halt (*calmato* → *lento* → *calando*). The bright, cheerful call vanishes into the distance.

The fact that Debussy does not primarily seek to alter his sonorities by big dynamic contrasts is telling. The *Étude* operates almost throughout at the levels of *p* and *pp*. The changes that take place are small but meaningful. He marks the changes of timbre with astounding clarity in bars 38–40. The one single chord is marked here to be played in three different ways: always *piano*, but stressing different aspects: *doux*, *marqué* and *expressif et penetrant* (see example 2). The key signature of the *Étude* is E/C sharp. The organ points on F, G sharp and F sharp provide the background colour – Debussy's direction is *profond* – but the chromatic slides obscure

the sense of steady tonal relations. The events of the closing bars bear out this major/minor, steady/unsteady dichotomy: the interval of fifth, E–B of the pentatonic-sounding *clair et joyeux* motif floating in the bass as the bright, soft major-key chords soar to the heights. All seems set to end well on a heavenly E major when the last chord suddenly shatters the mood: the *smorzando* is violated, *forte*, a fifth (C sharp–G sharp) continues sounding deep in the bass, and the treble path leading to E makes a steep plunge into the middle register. It is somewhat surprising that there are not many kinds of touch marks in this particular *Étude*. Debussy uses only the common staccato dot and the vertical dash (the tenuto line), and even the combination of these two is missing.

Debussy uses many elements to construct his opposing sonorities: low and high (registers), far and near (dynamics), sad and happy (motif structure), thin and thick (individual notes and chords), sharp and soft (touch marks, arpeggios, differentiation of chords), legato and staccato (touch and pedal), static and mobile (agogics), sudden and gradual (agogics and dynamics), same and opposite directions (interval directions, linear progressions). Similar oppositions are naturally found in other works by Debussy as well; the *Étude* is something of a summary (Schmitz 1966, 215). *Pour les sonorités opposées* is the only *Étude* among the thirteen Debussy piano works chosen ‘at random’ for a textural analysis by Holden. Comparing it with the other works chosen for study, he finds that ‘quite unlike any previously discussed work the *Étude* presents an unusually large amount of different textures and materials. By skilfully placing these materials in “opposition” to each other, Debussy succeeds in texturally articulating the composition’s phrases and sections’ (Holden 1977, 5). Maybe this – the numerous and varied textural materials and the way they are made to interact – is why this *Étude* is so reminiscent of a story unfolding.

XI Étude – The afternoon of a nymph

pour les Arpèges composés – for compound Arpeggios
(No tempo or performance instruction)

Pour les arpèges composés is based on the gentle key of love, A-flat major, in which this sweet, alluring (*dolce e lusingando*) and playful nymph of an etude waves her goodbye. Debussy did not give this Étude even a hint of a tempo marking. At her Chopin-Debussy recital in 1918, Marie Panthès connected *pour les arpèges composés* with Chopin's A-flat major etude op. 25. Schmitz, on the other hand, called it 'an imaginative and modernized tribute to the Liszt conception of transcendental etudes, and one in which a certain amount of humor enters into play, particularly in the central section' (Schmitz 1966, 216).

As in the light-as-a-feather arabesques of Liszt's *La Leggerezza*, lightness and virtuosity are synonyms and share a natural ease in *pour les arpèges composés*, recalling Debussy's words to Durand: 'a little charm never spoils anything' (28.8.1915). Echoes of *Minstrels*, and even of the early E-major *Arabesque* may be caught in the *un poco pomposo* and *scherzando* moods of the middle section and the sunny E-major sound. It is perhaps the impressionistic tones of this Étude that connect it more clearly with the early compositions of Debussy than with any of the other Études. This may explain why *pour les arpèges composés* is still one of the most popular Études in the collection and among those most frequently performed. It is easy to see it as a continuation of the water-music tradition as well. The sparkling pyrotechnics of *Feux d'artifice* are reflected on the surface waves, and a slightly wistful, seductive (*lusingando*) and at times even mischievous Ondine undulates on the rippling arpeggios – this time possibly somewhere in the direction of Spanish waters.

Once again the basic dynamic level is p–pp, from which the different stresses, accents and contrasts emerge. The arpeggios travel from one hand to the other. Smooth cooperation is needed to realise the softly caressing (*dolce e lusingando*), rhythmically flexible arpeggios and lithe melodic lines in the middle section. There the tendency towards A-flat major leaves room for E and B major, which is the traditional way of using the lowered enharmonic keys of the

mediant and submediant employed by, for example, Chopin. The lively, bright-sounding motifs here give the music a pungency and an almost angular rhythmic quality: for a moment the harp is replaced by a guitar, a mandolin or percussion. In the middle section, the arpeggios are short and often assume an ornamental guise. Debussy gives the player various expressive instructions: *lumineux* (with light), *elegantemente* (elegantly), *un poco pomposo* (slightly pompously), *giocoso* (happily, playfully), *scherzare* (joking), *pincé* (pizzicato).

Debussy's 'lightened' rhythmic notation often makes the text easier to read than a mathematically correct version would. Many things nevertheless remain unclear. Claude Helffer, in the critical comments on the latest Durand–Costallat edition, notes numerous differences between the manuscript and the first edition. In *pour les arpèges composés*, many of these concern problems of notating the semiquaver, demisemiquaver and hemidemisemiquaver beams. The semiquaver of the melodic motif beginning in the second bar of the *Étude* is clearly written to be played as the final note of the sextuplet and is undoubtedly meant to be played as such in corresponding places elsewhere, such as from bar 16 onwards. The left-hand hemidemisemiquaver in bar 11 – also according to the manuscript – should thus be played simultaneously with the last note of the right-hand sextuplet. In practice, precise rhythmic notation in bar 12 would probably be impossible. If the player wishes to regard the short note in the melody running through the middle voice as a hemidemisemiquaver, then the descending arpeggio must be played freely. From bar 25 – where the texture changes so that the tempo seems to accelerate, though this is not actually the case – the editions vary. We cannot presume to know for certain whether Debussy intended the B in the left hand to be a crotchet or a quaver. In bar 39, which is rhythmically unclear both in the manuscript and the first edition, the time signature would appear to be 4/4.

A second, unfinished manuscript version exists of *pour les arpèges composés*, discovered in 1977 by Roy Howat (completed by Howat and published by Theodore Dresser Co.). Debussy's two versions have virtually nothing in common but their key and their use of arpeggios. *Étude Retrouvée* is a charming but to some extent

conventional composition with a thinner texture and less finished form than those of the later version.⁸⁰ Debussy usually destroyed his unfinished compositions if he was not satisfied with them, so the extant early version of *pour les arpèges composés* is a rarity. Even in the manuscript of the complete *Études* Debussy gave to his wife, the ingenious end of *les arpèges composés* has still not acquired its ultimate form. The ultra-light *ppp* A-flat major arpeggio at the end of the *Étude* finished by Debussy resonates, thanks to the pedal, over five octaves. If executed skilfully, it creates an aural impression of an unreal rainbow of overtones vibrating in the air. Debussy used a slightly similar pianistic gesture, but one differing completely in sound colour and character, to end the *Étude pour les huit doigts*.

Étude pour les arpèges composés epitomises the contradiction often encountered by the player in the music of Debussy: natural, free handling of the tempo and capturing the fine agogic nuances can only occur after close study of the notation and speculation on what Debussy possibly intended in the problem spots. As always, only a knowledge of the ‘rules’ can permit this freedom. The life of the interpreter would nevertheless be too easy if the rules were absolutely clear. As with the reader who has optimistically pored over page after page of precise instructions, by C.P.E. Bach, for example, on how to interpret Baroque ornaments, the ultimate advice for the interpreter of Debussy’s music is that all of the details must be read in context, and above all, executed with good taste – whatever that may be taken to mean.

XII Étude – Sound and silence

pour les accords – for chords
Décidé, rythmé, sans lourdeur

Debussy marks his *Étude* for chords *sans lourdeur*, not heavily. There is no marking for tempo, which thus remains for the performer to

⁸⁰ Roy Howat compares the *Études* in an article entitled ‘A Thirteenth *Étude* of 1915: The original version of “Pour les arpèges composés”’, *Cahiers Debussy*, nouvelle série 1. Geneva 1977 (Minkoff).

decide. There is no denying that the idea of laborious movement does tend to be associated with a slow tempo. Yet heaviness in piano music may be the result of many other factors: an absence of nuancing, thick use of the pedal, a laboured, heavy touch, unclear phrasing. Clear phrasing is extremely important in the beginning and in the end sections of the *Étude* operating with almost mechanically even quavers ('decisively, in rhythm'). Debussy's articulation marks are as usual precise, and the phrasing is indicated not with slurs but with dynamics. Two things in particular may be noted in Helffer's comments on this *Étude*: in bar 16, the right-hand octave on G could justifiably be replaced by an octave on B, and in bar 86, the left-hand grace notes should be played on the beat as marked in the manuscript and in the Durand-Costallat edition of 1991.

Étude pour les accords could be seen as Debussy's *Mazeppa*. It is written in distantly dance-like 3/8 triple meter, which continues throughout the *Étude*, but is soon broken into hemiola-like groupings or units of two semiquavers. Numerous accents and other articulation marks disrupt the pulse and give the music a feeling of constant confrontation. Regardless of the prohibition against heaviness expressed in the performance instructions, one can sense something of Stravinsky's *Sacre* here. In the middle section, the meter changes to 6/8. The scene also shifts completely and is given a *Lento, molto rubato* character, at moments almost meterless, followed by a dramatically prepared and built return to the beginning. It is the most Lisztian *Étude* in the set, in the sense that it practises an openly virtuosic pianistic command of quick arm movements: long leaps and quick grasping of chords encompassing an octave. The first problem is quite simply hitting the right notes, as in the *Mephisto Waltz* or the closing section of the second movement of Schumann's *Fantasie*. Due to Debussy's exceptionally obvious handling of the piano as a percussion instrument here and his way of employing rhythmical changes and accents, the names of yet two more composers readily spring to mind: Bartók and Stravinsky. In her 1918 recital, Marie Panthès paired this *Étude* with Chopin's etude in E-flat major, op. 10 no. 11. One remote connection between these two is that both hands play chords at the same time, but the etudes are essentially far removed from each other

in every respect.⁸¹ It would be more tempting to liken *pour les accords* to Chopin's etude op. 25 no. 4, both of which are written in A minor. In both, the left hand has to struggle with similar problems of hitting the right key, and the melody is in syncopated rhythms, as in Debussy's bass line starting at bar 21. A comparison of the Debussy *Études* with the etudes of Chopin and Liszt would undoubtedly be an interesting topic for study, one that would require in-depth analysis.

Pour les accords is difficult to play both accurately and well. It is an advantage if the player has a very flexible hand with a good stretch. The player with a small hand may have difficulty reaching some of the chords in this *Étude* – which is as a rule extremely rare in Debussy's piano music.⁸² The quick movement of the arm is of primary importance, to ensure that the fingers are ready in place in time. The hand cannot be left to linger over the keys for a moment longer than is absolutely necessary; the player must be constantly aware of the direction and continuity of the movement. Vacating the keys is just as important as reaching them. It might be better to remember Liszt's advice about the hands gliding over the keys rather than Debussy's general principle about letting the fingers grow into them. Ballet dancers say they sometimes try to express the idea that the ground is somewhere they *visit*, the air the place they *inhabit*. Nijinsky's revolutionary choreography for Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* brought the dancers back to earth, with their feet turned inwards, yet the movements and leaps in this choreography demand tremendous effort and an awareness of direction. As in *pour les accords*, the technique must be light so that the weighty content can be lightly expressed. The floor, or in the *Étude* the piano key, is something to be used as a runway for take-off, not as something to be pushed down. The following exercises may be useful:

⁸¹ For the comparisons between the Chopin and the Debussy *Études*, made in 1918 by Robert Godet, see François Lesure, 'Chopin-Debussy par Robert Godet', *Cahiers Debussy* 3, Paris 1976.

⁸² Marguerite Long (1972, 67) mentions a span of a ninth in *Hommage à Rameau* that Debussy arranged as a syncopated rhythm rather than making it an arpeggio.

- Octave leaps without the middle notes of the chord
- Various rhythm exercises, speeding up the leap
- Playing chords separately, without octave leaps
- Practising leaps with eyes closed
- Accenting different notes in chords with different fingers in turn
- Awareness that the second fingers of both hands often hit the corresponding keys
- Posture check: because the wide, quick movements are executed with both arms as if mirroring each other, it is important to adopt a balanced sitting position and make sure the shoulders are not tense so that the arms can move freely.

Roberts reckons that Debussy may have been referring to *pour les accords* in his letter to Durand of 12.8.1915: ‘And then there’s another [Étude] with breaks in the left hand with almost Swedish gymnastics’. He then dryly remarks that the right hand really does behave in the very same way here (Roberts 1996, 314).⁸³ Despite the fact that *pour les accords* requires more strength and stamina than any of the other Debussy Études, the player must bear the instruction *sans lourdeur*, not heavily, in mind. The volume marking at the beginning is *f*, not *ff*. The first three quavers constitute a *crescendo–diminuendo*, not a group of three heavily-accented chords. The dot-and-line combination on the very first quaver requires a different handling from the third quaver with a mere staccato dot.

⁸³ Readers as ignorant as I am of the history of Swedish gymnastics may be interested in the following information I found on the internet: ‘Swedish gymnastics was an invention of the early 19th century, and was intended to improve the physical fitness of the general public in schools, in the military and as a medical healing process...The creator of Swedish gymnastics was Per Henrik Ling, a master of the sport of fencing who was active during the early 19th century...Ling’s Swedish gymnastics programmes contained four distinctive categories – medical, aesthetic, military and pedagogic...Swedish gymnasts competed in the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, and this greatly increased the visibility and popularity of Swedish gymnastics as a national sporting activity.’ <<http://www.livestrong.com/article/366973-history-of-swedish-gymnastics>> Accessed 13.11.2016.

The articulation marks on the two-quaver groups are worth close inspection. Bars 33–35 have a combination of three articulation marks (dot, line, horizontal accent, enforced with *sfz*), the only one in any of the Debussy *Études*. Attention must be paid to the difference in timbre of the accents in bars 36 (dot, vertical accent, *sff*), and 37 & 38 (dot, vertical accent, *sff* and dot, line, *sff*). Altogether, bars 33–38 alone constitute a veritable study of forte touch.

The soft, fluffy *pp* and *ppp* harmonies and agogic world of the middle section are a tremendous contrast to the determined energy of the outer sections. Atypically, Debussy ensures a sufficiently slow tempo within the confines of *molto rubato* by indicating the length of the quaver in relation to the preceding passage. Schmitz aptly reminds us that ‘Debussy almost always writes *rubato* into the score with the note values’, and that the *molto rubato* here refers to ‘the general mood of the performance’ without justifying an arbitrary handling of the note values (Schmitz 1966, 221).

In *pour les sonorités opposées*, Debussy contrasts different layers of sound. In *pour les accords*, he juxtaposes two degrees of force: loud, spiky and inflexible vs. soft, smooth and flexible. He reflects on the opposing characteristics of chords. By virtue of its sound, a chord may be massive and powerful, but because of its capacity for inner mutation, flexible and multi-nuanced as well. The notes outlining the C-major triad in bars 33–38 are especially strongly coloured. Meanwhile, alongside the sturdily-constructed C-major cadence appears a softer yet equally eloquent level of more uncertain tonality, ready to continue the story from *in Tempo*. Bars 37 and 38 contrast a C octave, played *sff*, and a B-flat ninth chord marked *p marqué*. Neither is a consequence of the other, nor are they mutually dependent. They both lead independent lives, separate yet equally strong. Out of the chords in the slow section Debussy builds grace notes and gentle, mysterious melodies in which the leap idea of the opening section reappears as a distant memory. The rhythmic, vigorous motif has been transformed into an airy gesture that vanishes into silence.

Silence was important to Debussy in many senses: what exists between the lines or notes is vital to the whole. Debussy’s silences were his reply to the intolerable excesses of the Romantic era. While

working on *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy wrote in a letter filled with enthusiasm and exclamation marks about having discovered something new: 'I've gone looking for music behind all the veils *Mélisande* wraps around herself ... I've found, quite spontaneously, something which I think is quite unusual as a means of expression namely Silence!' (To Chausson 2.10.1893). Arkel, in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, sings, 'Il faut parler à voix basse maintenant ... l'âme humaine est très silencieuse' (we must now speak in a low voice...the human soul is very silent).

One of the challenges of Debussy's music is to reach for the silence which resides at the core of his music. His abundant, specifically quiet dynamic markings often guide us towards silence, and perhaps also towards silent listening. Several paintings of Odilon Redon, with names referring to the concept of silence, recall this profound trait within Debussy's music. In the symbolist manner, Redon's paintings often present a face with downcast or closed eyes and evoke an atmosphere of mystical inwardness. Sometimes a finger is placed on the lips, directly emphasizing the need to suppress all worldly sound. The quietness of the face is sometimes surrounded by a soft hue or by bright red, blue, or yellow. *Le Silence* at the Abbey of Fontfroide (seen below) is positioned above the door of the library – the one leading out of it. Perhaps one interpretation of the placement could be that the inward silence, usually connected with deep thinking, concentration and libraries, should be carried out of the room into everyday life as well.

This same spirit can be found, paradoxically, in the study of chords. In the last of his *Études* Debussy contrasts sound and silence, two kinds of strengths. The static silences at the beginning of the *molto rubato* section of are full of life, but not of the sounds of physical activity. In composing his *Études*, Debussy came close to his personal complete silence. We cannot know what sort of music he would have composed after the Sonatas had he lived another twenty or thirty years, as he could well have done. Would he, like Liszt, have made his idiom more avant-garde, increasingly restrained, ascetic and forever quieter, or would he have placed different elements in a stronger opposition; would he ultimately have arrived at some sort

of perfect classical clarity? Would he, as his odyssey continued, have looked more and more inwards or outwards? As interesting as these questions are, from the performer's point of view, they are futile. The music that Debussy left us is such that reaching toward its centre, to our own understanding and ability to convey that understanding in sound, is a journey that has no end.



Fig. 4. Odilon Redon (1840–1916): *Le Silence*, 1910–1911. Abbaye de Fontfroide, Corbières, near Narbonne.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion – or confusion? ‘The story of “Debussy now” is, above all, a story of unfinished business’, states Arnold Whittall at the end of his article discussing ‘the current state of Debussy interpretation from the formal and hermeneutic perspectives of theory and analysis as well as of composition’.⁸⁴ Whittall calls for analyses which focus on the nature and richness of Debussy’s work as such rather than on its effect on others.⁸⁵ The discourse around Debussy’s music continues, and discoveries are still being made. The composer in his early decades was looked upon as a rebellious sketcher; in his late years was suspected of having lost his best compositional senses; and for some time after his death, was considered old-fashioned. Ultimately, however, he has become a lasting national landmark in French music – and far beyond. His style and harmonic language have even hurdled traditional classical music venues to other musical genres and been adapted to all kinds of circumstances;⁸⁶ the Debussy sound has become so familiar to us that it is difficult, especially for younger generations, to connect it with any kind of radicalism. In the overwhelming entity of Debussy’s music and all-round Debussyisms, the piano *Études* with their special features form only a small portion. Still, dressed in their classic-looking garb, the *Études* present a unique facet of the composer’s work.

The Debussy *Études* remain fairly unfamiliar to the public at large, although numerous recordings have been released in recent decades.

⁸⁴ Whittall 2003, 278.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Brown 2012.

Even for professional pianists, they sometimes occupy a rather peripheral role in the piano repertoire. The study of the great etudes of the Romantic era is included as a matter of course in the basic keyboard curriculum, whereas Debussy's and more recent etudes are easily regarded as specialisation. This may be to some extent because piano teaching throughout the world is still largely founded on the traditions of the Romantic era, in which both the 'old' and 'new' schools of German composing have held firm rule. The divergences and variances between German and French culture in general have applied to music more specifically for centuries. However, it seems that as the pianists' staple repertoire – both students' and concertizing artists' – is slowly broadening out in the direction of more recent music, the Debussy *Études* are finally carving a niche for themselves.⁸⁷

High-quality works of art often share an ability to tolerate many different interpretations and approaches. The emphasis in the interpretation of the *Études* naturally varies from one performer to another. Nevertheless, a command of technique is essential in order to handle the musical material; furthermore, the *étude*-ness here also calls for extreme sensitivity of ears and fingers. The sound world of the Debussy *Études* is more intimate, more transparent and more detailed than that of the brilliant 19th-century etudes brimming with oft-admired 'masculine' strength. Perhaps the biggest challenge, as always, is getting to the very heart, the *esprit*, of the composition. The nature of Debussy's idiom and the fertile disparity between the basic

⁸⁷ That the concert etude is by no means *passé* as a musical genre was made evident at two unconnected Helsinki events in spring 2015. The international Musica Nova contemporary music festival, for example, included a recital of eleven piano etudes by seven different composers. Also, in order to encourage students to explore lesser-known contemporary etude repertoire, one of the obligatory works in the Vesa competition for piano students at the Sibelius Academy was an etude composed after 1900 – excluding those by Rachmaninoff, Scriabin and Debussy. Besides the fact that the 42 competitors had chosen etudes by 18 different composers – all but one by different composers from those played in the earlier competition – the additional fact that Debussy was among those excluded suggests that his *Études* do indeed count as standard fare.

idea of the concept of 'étude' and Debussy the composer are precisely what set his *Études* apart.

Not only did Debussy's idiom lead future composer generations in new directions, but he also led pianists into rethinking the concept of piano sound itself, not of the piano coached into an orchestra or a singer. The challenges of repetitions, double thirds, intervals of fourth, playing the instrument without using the thumbs – he made a study of all of this compositional and technical potential and created from it enchanting worlds of sound. In the *Étude pour les agréments*, he took the idea of embellishment, usually the humble servant, and treated it as an independent and richly expressive element of the music as a whole.

Although interest in sonority *per se* may be one of the general trademarks of French music (Jarocinsky 1977, 11), no one before Debussy had shown such concrete respect for the piano's sonority, for piano's timbre as such and its potential as a basic building block of a piano composition. Debussy's harmonies in combination with his instrumental timbres appear sometimes loaded with meaning, as if they each contained a clear if wordless message. The changing harmonies accompanying the repeated languorous flute line in the *L'Après-midi d'un faun* are almost sensed or felt rather than actually heard – and vice versa: the changes of balance and expression inside one repeated chord in measures 38–40 of the *Étude pour les Sonorités opposées* can almost be perceived as vibrations of harmonic colour.

'Poetics, in its proper sense, means the study of the work to be made.'⁸⁸ Debussy's 'work to be made' was to concretize his idea of what piano études could be. His 'poetics', his musical study on the idea of etude, engendered a collection of truly sensuous piano etudes – a statement which may not easily apply to any composer but Debussy. In Notes on the Month's Concerts for SIM, the monthly bulletin of Société Internationale de Musique, Debussy discusses a performance of Chausson's *Poème* for violin and orchestra (15.1.1913) and ends his review with: 'Fine music this, and full of ardor'. He then plunges directly into a poem on which Guy Ropartz had based

⁸⁸ '...poétique, au sens propre, veut dire étude de l'oeuvre à faire.'
Stravinsky in *Poétique musicale* (Dayan 2011, 143).

his orchestral composition *À Marie endormie*. The poem presents a picture of the beginning of a sultry afternoon, rather similar perhaps to an afternoon of a faun:

‘At midday, when I came into your shady cottage
You slept, succumbing to the heat of the day.
Your hair flowed loose, so black and endless:
And seeing you there, the wings of love began to beat
In the depths of my heart.’⁸⁹

Debussy responds, ‘To these deliciously sleepy lines, M. J. G. Ropartz has written some rather troubled music. It would be love music, if it were not for the fact that Guy Ropartz’s muse is rather severe and not very sympathetic to the games of love. And why are the “wings of love” in C major? That is always a fiery key, however carefully it is handled.’⁹⁰ Debussy thus reveals two crucial sides of his personality, strongly present in his collection of *Études*: that of the ‘poet’ composer intimately familiar with sensual pleasures and that of the infinitely careful artisan with an analytic ear for words, and for music.

⁸⁹ Auguste Brizeaux (1803–1858): *À Marie endormie*.

⁹⁰ *Debussy on Music*, 276.

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I've invested a lot of passion and faith in the future of these Études. I hope you like them, both for the music they contain and for what they denote.

Claude Debussy to his publisher 28.8.1915

The collection of twelve Études, Debussy's last substantial piano work was written during World War I, when the composer was already seriously ill. In spite of the tragic circumstances surrounding their birth, the Études are filled with energy, light and the delight of invention. For a pianist, they present an inspiring challenge both from interpretative and technical viewpoints.

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