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Describing Prosody in Debussy's Songs

ABSTRACT

Studies on 19th- and early 20th-century French song, the *mélodie*, have always emphasized the importance of prosody: it seems that many composers were aware of the difficulties in setting to music French poetry with its often-irregular metrical structure. Moreover, a certain focus was placed on the literary nuances of the poetic texts, especially in settings of Symbolist poetry. Yet, prosody is difficult to examine with conventional methods of analysis even though it is essential to the listener's perception. Analyses of prosody need to take several aspects into account, not only the relation of musical rhythm to speech, but also the range of the vocal part — in the complete song as well as in individual phrases — and the melodic movement inside this range. An analysis of selected songs by Claude Debussy might confirm the general assumption that his vocal music tends toward a declamatory vocal style close to spoken language. By concentrating on the melodic line and its relation to the text, we may obtain analytical results of more immediate relevance to the listener's perception. Both performance analysis and sound studies have increased our sensitivity to the overall structure of musical works, e.g. through visual depictions of spectra or tempo curves. Here, a similar method will be used in which scores of selected *mélodies* are partly transferred into visualisations of their global vocal contours, which might help us obtain a deeper understanding of their prosodic design.

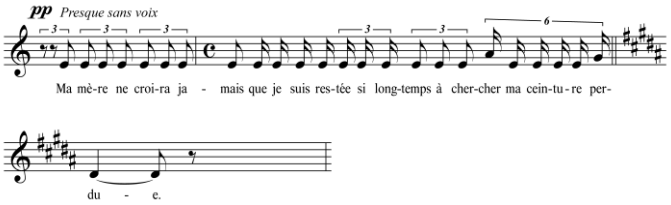
1. INTRODUCTION

'I strongly advise you to provide yourself with the score of *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Claude Debussy, if you do not have it yet, as its music is meticulously adapted to Maeterlinck's text — or the *Chansons de Bilitis,* also by Debussy, based on three poems by Pierre Louÿs. Those are true wonders in the art of 'speaking' French in music' (Strauss and Rolland 1994, 48).[1]

This is the advice the French writer Romain Rolland gave to Richard Strauss in a letter from 9 July 1905, when the German composer was seeking help in adjusting his opera *Salome* to accommodate the original French text by Oscar Wilde and its prosodic requirements. As we can see in his correspondence with Rolland, Strauss had some difficulties understanding the specific nature of French vocal music (especially when dealing with word accents) — and the aesthetic of nuance in Debussy for that matter.[2]

Let us take a look at the music Rolland views as an ideal of text-setting for the French language: not at the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* (cf. Kunze 1984), but a detail from the lesser known *Chansons de Bilitis,* a cycle of three songs (L 97/(90), 1897/98), that is often compared with *Pelléas* due to its declamatory style (Hardeck 1967, 139; Rumph 1994; Flothuis 1996, 58). Stefan Jarociński even considered it 'to be the summit of Debussy's achievement in the field of vocal music' (Jarociński 1976, 127).

In the first song, *La flûte de Pan,* Bilitis, the female speaker of the prose poem, describes an erotically charged encounter with a man. Some time has passed since they played the flute together and came into physical contact. The poem concludes with her saying: 'My mother will never believe that I have stayed so long to look for my lost girdle' (translation from Bernac 1978, 196).



Ex. 1. Debussy, *La flûte de Pan,* bars 25–27 (vocal part only).

This short concluding passage (Example 1) from Debussy's song may serve as an (albeit extreme) example of Debussy's vocal style: annotated 'presque sans voix' (nearly without voice), the vocal part stays in the lower register and stays for most of the time on the same pitch. As in almost the entirety of the song, there are no melismas in this extract. The mute *e* (*e muet*) of 'perdue' at the end is, as often in Debussy, indicated by a shorter tied note on the same pitch. The only variances in pitch at the end of this phrase are perhaps not so much 'melody' in the conventional sense, as they are an attempt to correspond to the inflections of speech. This correspondence to speech might also explain the sophisticated rhythm of the vocal part, which is relatively fast-paced and complex and seems to reproduce the irregular rhythm that results from speaking this sentence. Its rather hastened pace could then be seen as the equivalent to the parenthetical and coy remark, quoted above, that concludes this first song.

2. PROSODY IN FRENCH SONG

2.1 Prosody, *Mélodie,* Debussy

This short passage from *La flûte de Pan* illustrates the characteristics of French song and Debussy's vocal style in particular. Although the importance of word-tone relations and prosody are evident in this repertoire and have often been emphasized, it is not at all clear how to analyze the compositional process in a precise manner with regard to prosody. The goal of this paper is to present some preliminary thoughts related to the analysis of prosody. Furthermore, I would like to advocate paying closer attention to this aspect of vocal music, especially for repertoire in which details of prosody are of prime importance.

This is certainly the case with regard to the so-called *mélodie,* the French art song of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

[1] All translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[2] In his response from 15 July, Strauss tells of having found in *Pelléas* 'the same nonchalance […] that has always puzzled me with regard to all French music. Why does the Frenchman sing differently than he speaks?' (Strauss and Rolland 1994, 50).

Composers of *mélodies* debated frequently about prosody. Frits Noske, in his *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc*, has shown how the concern for correct prosody became a characteristic feature in the transition from the traditional *romance* to the more nuanced *mélodie* (Noske 1970; on the French *mélodie* see also Flothuis 1996, Faure and Vivès 2000). Katherine Bergeron, in her *Voice Lessons* from 2010, suggested some further cultural contexts for the prosodic sensibility of French song, such as language education or developments in literary history, especially poetic and theatrical declamation (Bergeron 2010).

Charles Gounod has been identified as one of the first French song composers who tried to deduce the rhythm of songs to some degree directly from spoken language (Marschall 1988, 110). The importance given to prosody may be attributed to certain linguistic difficulties: French poetry, unlike that of other languages such as German, is not determined by a regular succession of stressed and unstressed syllables but by the number of syllables contained in a verse. This means that stressed syllables may occur in an irregular sequence that makes setting the text to music difficult, especially in strophic form (see Deloffre 1969; Scott 1980; Coenen 1998; etc.). This is of course even more the case when prose is set, as in *Pelléas*, *Chansons de Bilitis* or Debussy's own prose poems *Proses lyriques* and *Nuits blanches.*

The problem becomes even more apparent — and I won't enter further into the details of this difficult matter — if we take into account that there may be a certain flexibility in the placement of stressed syllables. This was, incidentally, a fact that Richard Strauss found exasperating in dealing with French music.[3]

Debussy's vocal music is of course an extreme example of nuanced prosody. His approach — at least in parts of his vocal oeuvre — is often described as 'declamation', and the importance of prosody in his vocal music, although rarely analyzed more thoroughly, is evident to many listeners. Still, we should remember that his music forms part of a specific French tradition of vocal music. Jules Massenet is one of his most important predecessors in this field. In Massenet's song cycles, we even find spoken passages comparable to the melodrama (Linke 2010; see also Marschall 1986, 1988 and 2009; Schneider 1998). Debussy himself used spoken text without musical accompaniment in his stage version of *Chansons de Bilitis* (L 102/(96), 1900/01), which later formed part of his *Six épigraphes antiques* (L 139/(131), 1914–1915, cf. Orledge 1982, 245–9).

2.2 Analysing Prosody

But how can we grasp these musical aspects on a more elaborate analytical level? The relationship between word and music — *Wort-Ton-Verhältnis*, as German musicology tends to call it — is without doubt one of the fundamental questions in the analysis of vocal music. Nevertheless, there is astonishingly little research on the subject in general (among others: Gruhn 1978; Dürr 2004; Lodes 2006). The basic question of *how* a composer set a text to music — on a structural level — is often only dealt with in broad categories. We are used to thinking about the relation between music and text primarily on a semantic level, asking the (important) question as to what vocal music is trying to 'express'. Maybe we should reflect a little more, however, on the structural issues of vocal music — which are of course closely linked to the creation of musical meaning. I would argue that the prosody of vocal music offers enough to analyze even if we set aside the question of musical meaning in the first step — and only in the first step. Given that it is currently unclear how prosodic analysis would work, I would like to refer to some of the difficulties such an endeavor would face and propose some observations on Debussy's music.

First, we would need a clear definition of prosody. The term is rarely discussed in musicological reference literature such as lexica or encyclopedias. The *New Grove* contains a short and rather general article on 'text-setting' (King 2017) and none on prosody. The article 'Prosodie' in *MGG* limits its definition of the term by dealing exclusively with poetry and music of Antiquity (Pöhlmann 1997), as does the *Riemann-Musiklexikon* in the first part of its short entry. The second part of the latter article, however, although concerned with the field of linguistics, is more helpful. It informs us that prosody denotes the non-lexical, supra-segmental phonetic characteristics of speech, such as:

– accent;
– intonation;
– duration;
– pauses in speech;
– rate of speaking;
– rhythm (Zaminer and Randhofer 2012).

And we might apply these categories to music and receive categories such as the following:

– musical accent (e.g. by metric);
– pitch;
– tone duration;
– pauses;
– note values and tempo;
– rhythm.

But if we do so, we should remember that we have both categorical systems in vocal music (linguistic and musical prosody), since it features text with its own 'prosody' (its metric, accents, etc.) regardless of any setting and we have the accents, pitches, durations, etc., as given in the musical setting. That is one reason why musical prosody is such a complicated matter: we have to think of it as a two-layer system. Analysis would therefore have to reflect on the relation between these two layers.

One of the most important aspects of linguistic prosody is the positioning of word stresses or accents. If we consider the most obvious problem of prosody in text-setting — how does a composer realise the accents of a text correctly in his musical version? — we should understand that accents in music may be distributed in different ways, with only the most important one being the metric position of syllables. (And in Debussy's music, where meter is often quite flexible, this is maybe not even always the most important one. This is another thing Strauss had difficulties understanding.[4]) Other ways to produce ac-

[3] In his letter to Rolland quoted above, Strauss refers to Debussy's unusual prosodic solutions in *Les Ingénus* ('selon le terrain et le vent') and in *Pelléas* ('une petite fille qui pleure au bord de l'eau'), seemingly searching for a kind of consistency that French vocal music does not necessarily have (Strauss and Rolland 1994, 50).

[4] In a letter to Rolland from 2 August 1905, Strauss observed three different prosodic realisations of the word 'cheveux' in *Pelléas et Mélisande* (Strauss and Rolland 1994, 58–9). A part of the problem seems to be that Strauss did not understand (or did not want to accept) that

centuation in music may be duration, volume, melisma, tonal register, etc., and this is another example of the intricacies we are dealing with when talking about prosody in vocal music.

Going back to the example of Debussy and accepting the general notion that large parts of his vocal music are 'close to speech', the question remains: what does that mean exactly and how can it be described analytically? In order to examine this, we should ask ourselves conversely: what differences are there between singing and speaking? In a non-exhaustive list, one could mention, using the same categories as above (and generalizing quite a bit):

– accent or word stress: are usually indispensable in speech, may be suspended or become less important for musical reasons, even to the extent of prosodic errors;
– pitch (or intonation): usually less variance in speech than in music, with more use of the same pitches (and of course without reference to a tonal system); furthermore, music can make more use of leaps and they can be quite large;
– pauses: are determined by different factors in music than in speech;
– rate of speaking/duration (also tempo on a more general level): usually short 'notes' when speaking, may be longer when singing, but also shorter if we think of some virtuoso arias;
– rhythm: music of the Classical tradition usually has rhythmical regularities of some kind, whereas speech usually does not or at least this is not the primary intention of most speakers.

And two other points related to pitch, but on a more global level, might be added:

– register: with the speaking voice usually being in the middle, whereas the singing voice may use pitches that are significantly higher or lower;
– ambitus: the speaking voice usually has a more restrained ambitus, except maybe in extreme emotional conditions.

2.3 Prosodic Contours in Debussy

Concentrating on the last two points, register and ambitus, one may observe that they can be helpful in characterizing compositional approaches towards vocal music and in comparing them. Performance-sensitive research has made us more aware of the overall shape of musical works, of aspects that traditional methods of analysis sometimes tend to overlook.[5] Moreover, performance studies as well as sound studies have often used graphical depictions in order to make their points. Although this paper does not present results from performance studies but rather from analyses of musical scores, it is still helpful to visualize certain aspects of musical works in order to achieve a better understanding of them.

Hereafter, graphs of vocal parts of selected works by Debussy are presented. In doing so, several things have been set aside: first of all, the piano part, of course, but also text and thus even important aspects of prosody such as word stresses — but this aspect of prosody has been the least neglected in previous research. That is why this is not a suggestion for a 'method of analysis', so much as a way to gain a deeper understanding of certain details, as a first approach towards a piece of vocal music. And even if this is nothing more than a partial depiction of a score (or at least its vocal part), it may allow a different, filtered view.

Some observations can be made by means of these visualizations. It is not enough just to indicate the ambitus of a piece by indicating the extreme pitches; we might also consider *when*, *where* and *to what extent* certain areas of the complete range are used, in other words: to describe what might be called the *tessitura* of a song. We might also understand the way musical phrases are shaped in a certain piece of vocal music, the way a melody 'moves' inside the range, its global 'contours', so to speak.[6] Even though all these things can also be extracted from the score, it is more likely to arrive at an overview this way.

The graphs (Figure 1 and Figure 2) depict the vocal lines of two songs by Debussy from different periods, the one above dating from 1882, the other one ten years later in 1892.[7] Interestingly, these are two settings of the same text, *En Sourdine* by Verlaine (see also Leßmann 2013). We clearly see differences in the treatment of the voice: the earlier setting not only has a higher ambitus, but also uses the higher areas of that ambitus more extensively. Phrases usually begin from above. The second setting, on the contrary, starts in the lower region of the ambitus (which is generally lower) and reaches its extremes in both directions shortly before the end. Phrases usually begin and end in a relatively lower range. One could interpret this as a dramaturgy that moves from artificial speaking to singing.

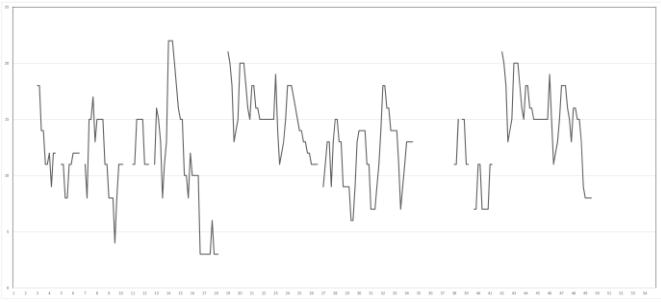


Fig. 1. Debussy, *En sourdine (*1882), graph of the vocal part.

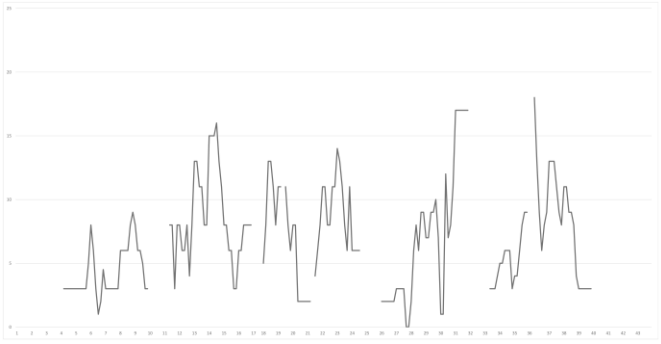


Fig. 2. Debussy, *En sourdine,* from *Fêtes galantes* (1er recueil, 1891–1892), graph of the vocal part.

Equally instructive is the second comparison (Figure 3 and Figure 4). Here we have two settings of another Verlaine poem, *Le Son du cor,* by Debussy and Charles Bordes. Whereas De-

Debussy does not always use the *Akzentstufentakt,* where metric emphasis coincides with strong bar positions.

[5] Performance studies concerned with Debussy have so far concentrated on his instrumental music, an exception being some of the essays in Briscoe (1999).

[6] Under different premises, the term contour has been used as an analytical tool for instrumental music (Morris 1993).

[7] The graphs use pitch classes, sometimes with minor simplification, when many fast notes are sung. Contrary to standard set theory, they respect octave positions.

bussy's *mélodie* has a prosodic dramaturgy comparable to his second setting of *En sourdine*, Bordes's song has not only a larger ambitus overall (the different axes of the diagrams have to be considered), but also much more agitated movement inside each phrase.

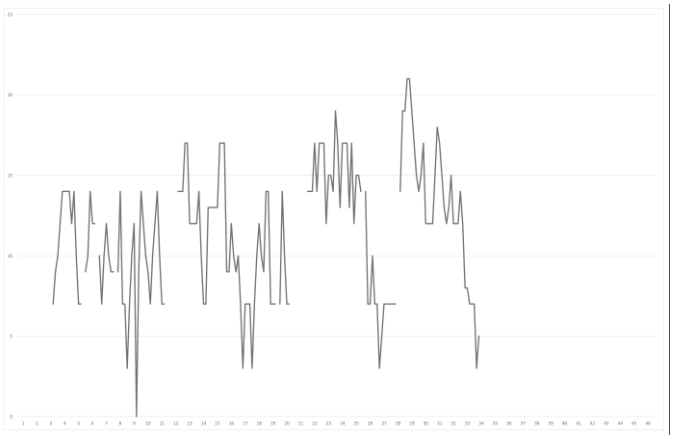


Fig. 3. Charles Bordes, *Le son du cor* (1896?), graph of the vocal part.

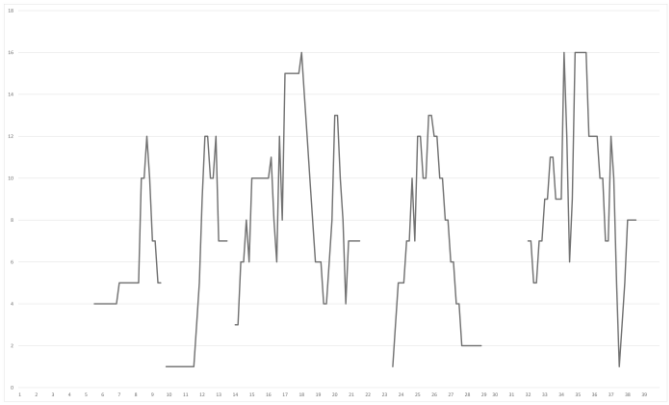


Fig. 4. Debussy, *Le son du cor,* from *Trois mélodies* (1891–92), graph of the vocal part.

These and other observations from these graphs may be used for a detailed analysis. It would of course at some point be necessary to go back to the score and re-integrate the piano part, the poetic text and many other features into our assessment. Instead of doing so now, a more detailed analysis of the first example shall be attempted here, *La flûte de Pan*, from *Chansons de Bilitis.*

3. 'I SCARCELY HEAR IT': CLOSENESS TO SPEACH IN DEBUSSY

The vocal graph of *La flûte de Pan* (Figure 5) shows a very restricted ambitus in a low range. The voice moves quite a bit (except at the end), its phrases being short and rather ornate. Globally, however, there is much less movement in comparison to all the other examples. The visualization confirms the impression of declamatory style.

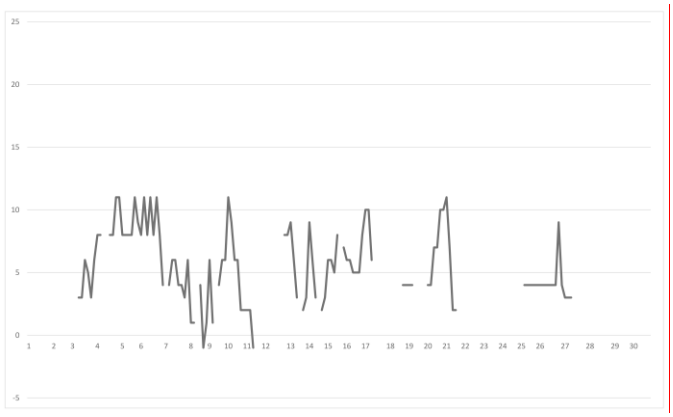


Fig. 5. Debussy, *La flûte de Pan,* from *Chansons de Bilitis* (1897–98), graph of the vocal part.

One could argue similarly regarding factors of speech vs. music mentioned above that apply more or less in this case where music becomes speech-like:

- musical accent is determined by word accent;
- pitch is less variable than in other vocal music (even by Debussy);
- pauses are not primarily determined by musical factors such as form;
- the rate of speaking/singing is at least in parts quite elevated;
- rhythm in some of the phrases is determined by the inflections of speech;
- the register is quite low;
- the ambitus is comparably restrained.

In a letter to the poet Pierre Louÿs, author of *Chansons de Bilitis*, Claude Debussy characterized these songs — in a rare moment of speaking about his own music: 'Are you going to tell me now what my three little pieces added to the pure and simple experience of hearing your text? Nothing, my old friend, I would even say that they awkwardly distract the listeners' emotion' (Debussy 2005, 425).

But how does it work, then, to add 'nothing' to text as a composer? And is it really possible to compose, as Bergeron put it, 'a dispassionate *mélodie*, without expression, without imitation, and almost entirely without melody' (Bergeron 2010, 170)? As Hermann Danuser has observed regarding this song, the slightest differences become constitutive (Danuser 2004, 154); but how can they be described?

At the end of this paper I would like to consider that question and offer some tentative interpretations of *La flûte de Pan* with regard to the text, understanding that they can only serve as a preliminary step towards an understanding of the song.[8] Susan Youens has made some similar observations on the same song in her study on *Chansons de Bilitis* (Youens 1986; further important contributions are Roy 1991; Rumph 1994; Grayson 2001). Here, however, the intention is rather to present a method of prosodic analysis.

If we accept the hypothesis that this song attempts a convergence of song and poetic declamation, we may nonetheless see significant differences across different phrases of the song. The closeness to speech does not imply that one phrase is set like the other. There are, on the contrary, remarkable differences.

[8] As the score is easily accessible, I renounce providing further musical examples.

If we compare the first and second phrase, we see a slight, but remarkable increase in speed supported by the piano part. Is the first phrase ('For a Hyacinthus day') more solemn in character in order to reflect the religious nature of these festivities, the Hyacinthia, and does the slightly more agitated second phrase, now in a ternary beat with smaller note values, express the joy of Bilitis in receiving the present, a flute cut from reeds? This flute is of course topical in Debussy's music in general (*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*; *Syrinx*). Furthermore, it is obviously meant to serve as an erotic motif in this poem (Wenk 1976, 180).

The next phrase, which describes this flute in more detail and adds Bilitis's lips as another indicator of eroticism, develops both aspects, ritual and joy, a step further. The repetitions of a short simple motive — more unusual in this declamatory style than elsewhere — together with the repeated piano chords may allude to recitation-like chant (Hardeck 1967, 139, has compared this song to psalmodic recitation), whereas the short melismatic figures (equally rare in this context) on 'blanche', 'qui' and 'lèvre' might be used to express pleasure (b. 4–6).

The next phrase features a simple style albeit with many variants. The note values seem to be in accordance with the inflections of spoken language. Pitch changes of repeated notes are organized according to meter and beat. While the voice does not really use recognizable motives, the piano introduces triplets as a recurring motive for the flute (b. 7–9, see also b. 17).

During the statement 'He plays it [the flute] after me, so softly that I scarcely hear it' (all translations of the poem according to Bernac 1978, 196) the voice moves from pianissimo even further into a decrescendo and reaches the lowest range of its ambitus so that the listener can 'scarcely hear it' (b. 9–11).

If it can be assumed that repetition is the main criterion for a musical figure to become a motif, the next part introduces a motif that (together with the piano) illustrates the pleasure of amorous closeness ('We have nothing to say, so close are we to each other', b. 13–14). The repetitive structures in the vocal part and more so in the piano part might also illustrate the mutual aspect of music- and love-making ('But our songs wish to respond [to each other] and from time to time our mouth joins upon the flute', b. 15–17).

After the laconic assessment 'It is late' on a single, lower note (b. 18–19), Bilitis hears the frogs' song and the music grows more enthusiastic on account of the accelerated rhythm and comparably more diastematic motion (b. 20–21). The phrase quoted at the beginning of this paper concludes the song.

It is not a coincidence that it is this poem that Debussy chose to set in such a restrained manner, as the text favours articulations of austerity or even renouncement in relation to expression: the hesitation of the trembling Bilitis while learning to play the flute, the softness of her playing, followed by the statement 'we have nothing to say [to each other]' and so on. That is why the French singer Pierre Bernac recommended singing this *mélodie* in the simplest way possible: 'Bilitis should choose a clear, pure colour in her voice, with nothing passionate in it' (Bernac 1978, 196). Yet, as this analysis tried to show, this low level of expression does not indicate inexpressiveness. Rather, the aesthetic of nuance caused a shift in the level of expression, with minor changes (especially, but not only in the vocal part) becoming semantically significant.

4. CONCLUSION

Without being able to give definite answers or even without providing elaborate tools for analysis, this paper tried to draw our attention to the fact that prosody — even though its importance for Debussy's music is undisputed — still remains an aspect of vocal music that is difficult to analyze.

I suggested some categories of analysis concerning the complex field of word-tone relations that might be taken into account when trying to describe the prosodic design of vocal music. The question of the correct placement of stressed syllables inside the metric structure of a piece of music has been considered in some traditional research, especially that which deals with French art song, since prosody was a major concern for many of its composers. But if we define the term 'prosody' more widely and take a look, for example, at the treatment of ambitus, range and tessiture or the shape of musical phrasing, we might gain some new insights into vocal music — and particularly into the songs of a composer who placed great emphasis on prosody, Claude Debussy.

KEYWORDS

Form, Melody, Vocal Music, Musical Perception, Prosody.

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