Simon Trezise[*1]

[*]*Trinity College Dublin, Republic of Ireland*

[1]strezise@tcd.ie

Desperately Seeking a 'Debussy Style' in the Performance of the Orchestral Music

ABSTRACT

In a period when particularity in performance rapidly dwindles into generality, this paper casts a critical eye over Debussy performance in recent decades. The precept is that close attention to detailed readings of contemporary sources, such as exist for music of the Classical period, leads performers to modify their performances so as to create a style that they consider suitable for music of the period. As these readings become reflexive the performances take on general, non-specific characteristics; they merge back into the broad stream of performance. For the most part Debussy's music has not been subject to close reading by theorists or practitioners of historically informed performance. Nevertheless, there existed in the years following his death performers informed of his preferences in performance, such as his preoccupation with nuance. This paper asks where the rivers and tributaries of Debussy performance have taken us in the last few years. Has the tendency been towards generalised music making with little attention to specific qualities suited to the composer and his period?

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Mary Garden was Debussy's favourite Mélisande and probably most favoured performer. We can hear it in an interview for the BBC in 1961.

This alerts us to an important primary consideration as we speculate on what a Debussy style for orchestral music might sound like. His objection to operatic sopranos lined up as potential Mélisandes is that they sang in a *performerly* way; they didn't *become* Mélisande by submitting themselves to the language and character of his musical and dramatic creation. Latterly, many performances are all about achieving the note accurately, making it sound attractive with vibrato and other vocal seasonings, and confronting us with the words as grammatical constructs laid out on paper and converted into tone through whatever technical qualities the singer might possess. All very performerly.

Arnold Bax, the English composer, inspired a similar response from Debussy. After accompanying the *Ariettes oubliées* for 'some American singer' in 1909, Bax was told that he had 'interpreted his songs very sensitively, but in rather too pianist a fashion' (Nichols 1992, 223). There it is again: implicitly 'too singerly', and now 'too pianistically'.

For the work I'm undertaking here, Richard Langham Smith has been crucial in isolating key aspects of what constitutes the spirit of Debussy in performance, in his opening chapter for the book *Debussy in Performance* (Smith 1999). I aspire to build on his work and move it towards orchestral music.

By 'Debussy style' I will eventually consider anything from the most general basic principle to the tiniest detail. Indeed, I strongly believe that one of the fundamental flaws of much so-called 'authentic' performance is its preoccupation with broad details, e.g. instruments and Urtexts, and failure to engage with the more microscopic issues of performance, like the rhythmic relation of metric upbeats and downbeats.

Starting with the thorny issue of *Werktreue*, Debussy certainly expected his annotations to be respected just as much as he expected pianists and conductors to listen to his detailed instructions, usually given in person or as amendments, which supplemented his scores. Regarding information not found in the scores, we could shrug our shoulders and ask 'Who cares what Debussy wanted — how can we know?', but unless we want to dilute our response to Debussy every time we perform his music, it surely behoves us to set off as if we believe that a composer has such authority, especially when so much evidence of his intentions is available to us.

To illustrate my points I have alighted on three recorded performances that are demonstrably antithetical in some way or other to the Debussy style.

The opening of 'Nuages' is marked *Moderato* and notated in 6/4. I'm sure we can agree with Ira Braus when he argues that there are good reasons for following early interpreters of 'Nuages' in playing 'Nuages' in 6/4 rather than 3/2 time.[1] Why not, indeed? Since the composer wrote in his clefs, his key signature, and then decided to place a 6 on top of a 4, one may surely suspect that Debussy would have boxed the ears of conductors who placed some form of accent on every other crotchet. Many early conductors gently shape the groups of three crotchets to arrive at a sense of duple time, without upsetting the two-bar phrasing. Leopold Stokowski's marked-up score reveals that he conceived the opening two bars as a sub-phrase of four (Figure 1).

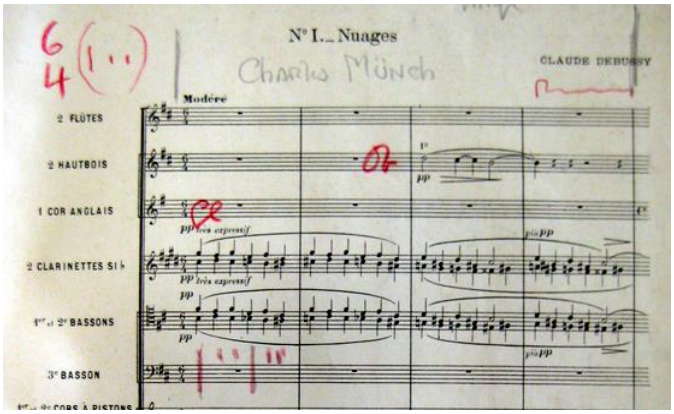

Fig. 1. 'Nuages', bb. 1–4, full score annotated by Stokowski, University of Pennsylvania Library.

In the central processional part of 'Fêtes', Debussy marks the score with a variety of slurs over triplets or triplets-plus-the-following note (Figure 2).

[1] See for example Claude Debussy, 'Nuages', NBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Arturo Toscanini. CD, 1952, bb. 1–13,

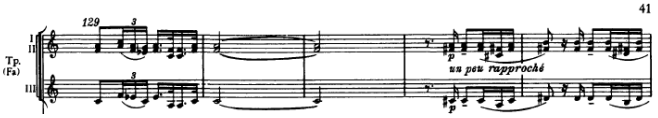

Fig. 2. 'Fêtes', bb 129–33.

Most post-war conductors present the trumpet triplets detached or staccato; they then either alter the woodwind continuation of the idea to match the brass or they accept two forms of articulation of the same identically articulated motive. In Boulez's performance from 1995, the slurs over the triplets have been removed.[2]

In 'Sirènes' there are many quiet dynamic markings that seriously challenge the instincts of the conductor and orchestral musician. There are few moments more extreme in Debussy's notation than the sublime moment of resolution in the central section. Here the normally strongly centripetal character of the music, its tendency to settle into constricted ostinatos and registers is suddenly relieved when the chorus rises to an Ab major chord. It's a most extraordinary moment; yet Debussy requires the quiet dynamic, reinforced by *diminuendo*s, to be held right up to the start of the chord; great restraint is required as this extract starts *piano* (Figure 3).

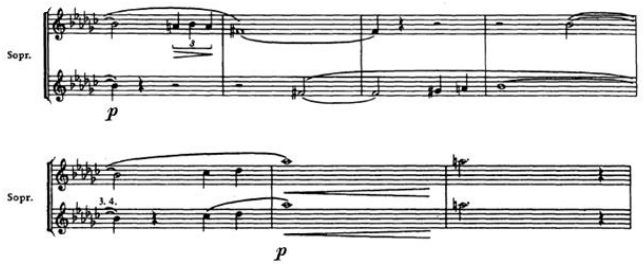

Fig. 3. 'Sirènes', bb. 67–73.

Boulez begins his *crescendo* at least a bar early and pays scant attention to the dynamics of the climactic bar, b. 72, which start *piano* and build to *mf* in b. 73.[3] Not only does the resolutory bar begin *piano*, it is marked *très expressif* (very expressive), which indicates greater particularity of articulation than performances typically allow at this point; musicians are swept up in the generalised emotion of release but not necessarily in the emotion of Debussy's 'Sirènes'.

These performances are the first two of my antitheses to what I understand to constitute a Debussy style. The third antithetical performance is offered to make a more subtle point, which I will come to later, because Colin Davis pays more attention to Debussy's markings than either Toscanini or Boulez.[4]

Are we right to emphasise fidelity to the notation, even though there can be no definitive Urtext? Chopin's texts are frequently modified in performance. Debussy, however, has one foot at least in the modern era, where the text is often allowed greater authority, and the best evidence of all is the word and act of conductors who had occasion to be guided by the composer. As is well known, Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht was visited by Debussy during rehearsals of *Nocturnes*. He received detailed instructions on what he should be playing and presumably how. This doesn't mean that his recordings, or those of other conductors with comparable access, are necessarily a direct reflection of Debussy's intentions, but the fact that Gabriel Pierné, Piero Coppola, and Ernest Ansermet, like Inghelbrecht, are mostly careful to follow Debussy's 6/4 time signature, include the slurs in the brass parts, and hold back the dynamics in Sirènes demonstrates that they knew something.

Toscanini, Boulez, and Davis are 'performerly' in different ways — to go back to Mary Garden. Toscanini by this stage in his career enacts his distorted version of the text in a drill-sergeantly way, allowing the most obvious motivic figures to dominate — the two-note shape — regardless of time signature. Of 'Nuages' gently mutating soundscape, its underlying sadness and mystery, there is little trace. Boulez often seems to take the line of least resistance, allowing players to do what they are most accustomed to. Colin Davis is the most responsive to Debussy's notation and the more likely to render a performance in what I understand to be the Debussy style, but where he arguably falls short takes me into other aspects of this style.

Whilst broader issues such as tempo, as demonstrated so well by James Briscoe (1999), are obviously critical, the smallest details are equally responsible for creating a sense of authenticity in the performance of Debussy's music. They bring us to his concept of nuance and recall a composer who could spend hours adjusting the sound of just one note in a chord. In Debussy's recordings and piano rolls we find that like many of his contemporaries he had a different approach to meter and rhythm than more recent performers. I don't mean here to revive Robert Philips's point about greater rhythmic freedom, which doesn't always seem to apply to Debussy, but about the treatment of the barline or the end of a phrase. The tendency in modern performance is to play the last beat of a bar at *at least* the same rate as the previous beats, and at the end of phrases to extend the last beat and perhaps leave a gap before the start of the next phrase. Debussy doesn't.[5]

This manner of moving from bar to bar and phrase to phrase makes it easier to understand the slurred triples in 'Fêtes'.[6]

Although the issue of how performers move to the beginning of a new bar or phrase may seem like a micro-detail, it does in fact alter the way we hear the music. It is certainly a factor that separates Boulez, who often slows down at the end of bars and phrases or inserts a brief pause between them, or both, and conductors who were in contact with the composer, like Inghelbrecht.

Colin Davis's careful fluctuations of dynamic in 'Sirènes', which are often so faithful to the score markings, are attended by extended triplets, for example. These extended triplets slow down the music, compromising the forward movement of the line. His placement of the downbeat is typically slightly retarded.

We might argue that one effect of retarding the start of bars and phrases is over-accentuation and rhythmic lethargy. It also

[2] See Claude Debussy, 'Fêtes', Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Pierre Boulez, 1995, bb. 132–47.

[3] See Claude Debussy, 'Sirènes', Cleveland Orchestra conducted by Pierre Boulez, 1995, bb. 68–73.

[4] See Claude Debussy, 'Sirènes', Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Colin Davis, 1982, bb. 66–75.

[5] See Claude Debussy, 'Danseuses de Delphes', *Préludes Book 1*, played by Debussy (piano roll), 1912, bb. 1–5.

[6] See Claude Debussy, 'Fêtes', Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire conducted by Piero Coppola, 1938, bb. 140–47.

breaks up the sense of line by delaying its continuation. Arthur Hartmann, a famous violinist who enjoyed a close friendship with Debussy, prepared a transcription for violin and piano of the prelude 'La fille aux cheveux de lin'. He worked out the details with Debussy and performed it with him. Violinist and composer seem to have been in close harmony in matters of performance, so it is of great interest that Hartmann rejected Kreisler's performance of it, because instead of 'presenting the long line, in one breath, at the opening […] he breaks it into jerky groups' (Hartmann 2003). Heifetz is singled out for performing the transcription as it was conceived. I appreciate this isn't quite the same as what Boulez and Davis do, but both involve the fragmentation and over-accentuation of the line, which is pertinent.

So to careful attendance to the notated score we can add a continuous line and freedom from excessive accent. These are characteristics of the early recordings of *Nocturnes*.

Listening to that remarkable piano roll of Debussy playing the first of his piano preludes, we hear this approach to the downbeat or phrase, alongside a tendency not to play chords and octaves together. Octaves in particular Debussy believed should be unevenly weighted — a conviction that is amplified by non-simultaneous playing. In orchestral terms I would like to draw a parallel between spread piano chords or octaves and string portamento. Both have largely died out, at least in the form Debussy would have known them. They are considered rather ancillary to matters like instrument choice and tempo by historically informed performers, most of whom ignore them as manifestations of stylistic choices somewhat separate to the 'essence' of the work. Spreading chords, sliding between notes, and so on may be coded as artefacts of period convention which pass away with time to be replaced by others, such as continuous vibrato.

Fortunately, the portamento style lingered on long enough to be heard somewhat in *Nocturnes*, even if one suspects that it was on the way out by 1930. Gabriel Pierné's performance of 'Nuages' from 1930 is gliding, sinuous, continuous, and above all expressive, not disembodied as is often heard now.[7]

Debussy never knew the modern style of string playing, though he might have come across its harbingers. His favourite violinists played with portamento, variable vibrato, great expressive particularisation, and so on. We know from recordings that the orchestras had much in common with the soloists. The Debussy style, if it is to mean something, has to take account of the detailed response to phrasing, articulation, etc., not just broader issues like tempo and instrumentation.

I cannot leave this subject without mentioning recent attempts to apply historical principles to the orchestral music by the Belgian group Anima Eterna Brugge with Jose Van Immerseel. I quote at length from their vision statement:

> Anima's role in giving a new lease of life to the mainstream repertory involves going back to the sources, shedding excess ballast, and sending back into the world music that is incredibly good, pure, fresh, as if reborn! As it strives to accomplish this mission, three beacons keep the orchestra firmly on course: the masterpieces which it wishes to serve by getting as close as possible to the ideal interpretation; the instruments which hold the access codes to the composer's world; and the sonic result that is presented to you, dear public: not the resonance of a hall, the manifestation of an orchestra or the visiting card of a conductor, but the true sound of a score and its creator.[8]

Using original instruments and 'shedding ballast', whatever that means, here they are in the central section of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (at the time of writing they had not recorded *Nocturnes*).[9]

Period instruments are obviously heard here, and there are half-hearted slides, but where does this string sound come from? It's a bit like having a cat licking one's ear. Is it the product of 'shedding excess ballast'. What comes in its stead? How is this 'the true sound of the score'? To refer it to some of the aspects of the Debussy style considered here, we have a constantly delayed downbeat with gaps between phrases and we have fairly inexpressive string playing, even when the strings slide. The rationing of vibrato is perhaps one reason the string playing sounds so odd — to my ears that is. There are recordings of the Colonne Orchestra from 1906 that demonstrate clearly how much the string players used vibrato and slid all over the place.

Does any of this matter? The text is ours to play with and critics seem perfectly happy with Boulez and the likes of Charles Dutoit. If we accept that Debussy be allowed to mutate with taste, and that musicians will naturally wish to be performerly, then we can stop here.

After all, we have no idea how Beethoven's music sounded and only a vague notion of what might constitute a Schumann style, for instance. Their light is nevertheless undiminished. However, once early recordings become available, they are crucial in supplementing other types of evidence, for they enable us to get much closer to Brahms, Debussy, and others. They help us to better understand notation that might otherwise be freely interpreted. If we play 'Nuages' in the robotic way of some modern performances with each crotchet evenly accented as the conductors beat 6, we hear neither a duple nor triple meter. Boulez and Dutoit, who do this, are alert enough to the numbers not to accent alternate crotchets, but they miss all the clues that Debussy envisaged a duple division, with subtly shifting patterns resulting — just as any programmatic interpretation of the movement makes desirable. With this and expressive string playing, including portamento, Debussy's affective demands are readily met.

In 'Fêtes' we find Debussy slurring triples on the last quaver of the bar. Some don't run into the next bar; some do. The articulation reminds us of aspects of nineteenth-century phrasing in which the slurs carry the anacrusis over into the next bar, like in the big tune of Brahms's First Symphony Finale — an articulation that many modern conductors struggle with. Comparing this slurring with Debussy's piano playing, we encounter an approach to last beats of bars and phrases quite at variance with modern performance techniques in which the carryover is often delayed and certainly rarely hurried. Combining this and other pieces of evidence, not least the testimony of early recorded performances, alerts us to the way in which performerly instincts of today subvert Debussy's

[7] See Claude Debussy, 'Nuages', Orchestre des Concerts Colonne conducted by Gabriel Pierné, 1930, bb. 9–20.

[8] <https://animaeterna.be/en/het-orkest-aan-de-bron/>, accessed 30/06/2023.

[9] See Claude Debussy, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, Anima Eterna Brugge conducted by Jos van Immerseel, 2012, bb. 55–73.

intentions and alert us to what one might consider distorted conceptions of the central procession.

In 'Sirènes' Debussy's structural conception of his material is so radical that it is overwhelmingly difficult for a performerly instinct to carry out the letter of the notation. Yet the score is unequivocal: the approach to the climactic, resolutory A♭ major chord should be played *piano* with various *diminuendo*s. The A♭ chord and accompaniment start quietly and are articulated in various ways. All this should discourage an instinctive speeding up as well as the premature loudness that we hear in most performances. On the other hand, Debussy's fussy approach to triplets in his coaching of musicians, plus the imperative that the ends of bars should move without delay to the next bar, should discourage the instinct to slow down with the *diminuendo*s that precede the climactic chord. Immerseel's bizarre historicism seems to me merely to fuel the Richard Taruskin-style criticism of the historical performance movement.

In my abstract I ask if we still have a Debussy style in orchestral performance today. My answer is not much, but there is a willingness to experiment and performers are no longer afraid of being expressive. This can be heard in a recent set of recordings by Stéphane Denève, for instance. In such a climate we might reclaim the spirit of Debussy's world, if not the letter, even if the superlative French woodwind players of the pre-war years, who could play so rapidly and quietly, are gone; and it is hard to teach a modern violinist to use portamento meaningfully when so many conservatoires have pronounced it a capital offence. Playing Debussy requires attention to micro-detail but that detail is ultimately subsumed into a larger rhythmic conception.

I'd like to end on a positive note with a performance of *Nocturnes* that seems to encapsulate many of the points I have made. Given by Inghelbrecht in the early 1930s it manages to be intensely expressive, yet detail is at the disposal of a continuous line. It is usually faithful to the text.[10]

KEYWORDS

Debussy, Nocturnes, Performance Practice, French Music, Performance Analysis.

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[10] See for example Claude Debussy, 'Sirènes', Orchestre du Festival Debussy conducted by Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht, 1932 and 1934, bb. 140–47.