Reverie, Schmaltz, and the Modernist Imagination

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Commerce has killed letters; our society is such that true art cannot find its place in the sun.

Henri Feuchère (1886)¹

In a review of the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune published in October 1895, Henry Gauthier-Villars (writing under one of his pseudonyms, “L’ouvreuse du cirque d’été”—“The usher at the Cirque d’Été”) described the piece’s relationship to Mallarmé’s poem: “It is not easy to follow as a gloss [of the poem],” Gauthier-Villars averred, but it is nonetheless “an exquisite orchestral tableau, setting up a general impression of the poem to which this dream-music [musique de rêve] is deliciously suited.”²

“Musique de rêve”: it is a descriptor for Debussy’s music that we have long taken for granted, indelibly linked—as it already was for Gauthier-Villars in 1895, upon hearing the Faune prelude—to a Mallarméan Symbolism. Symbolist poetry has often been considered a decisive element in the development of Debussy’s style. John Crotty’s article on the Prélude observes that “the compositional task that [Debussy] devised for himself was to create a musical language analogous to the literary model provided by symbolist poetry.”³ John Clevenger, in his influential 2002 dissertation on the development of Debussy’s style, maintained that this development cannot be properly understood without an account of the impact of Symbolism

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1. Henri Feuchère, “Chronique,” Le Scapin, March 5, 1886, 1–2, here 2: “Le commerce a tué les Lettres; notre société est ainsi faite que l’art véritable ne peut y trouver de place au soleil.”
on the young Debussy: “to ignore or underestimate the impetus Symbolism had on Debussy’s stylistic development,” he writes, “is to fundamentally misconstrue Debussy’s place in the history of style.” Clevenger goes on to posit that the distinctiveness of Debussy’s style arose in large part through the process of “forging psychologically convincing musical correlates” for Symbolist poetic techniques. More recently, David Code’s biography of Debussy has invoked the composer’s appreciation for poetry as a way of accounting for the “sophistication” of his mature musical sensibility. Code writes that it was through his “intensive readings” of modern French poets, including Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé, that Debussy refined his “literary sensibility,” and “it was through close collaboration with Mallarmé in particular, in the years around his thirtieth birthday, that this sensibility first achieved the extraordinary sophistication—as exemplified in the Prélude à l’aprèsmidi d’un faune—that was to secure him the pivotal place he now occupies in all histories of modern composition.”

To the extent that Debussy’s music has so often been heard as musique de rêve, this “rêve” has tended to be understood in a distinctly Symbolist context, a soundworld born of Debussy’s careful and sustained reading of an especially rarefied strain of modernist poetry. That Debussy was enamored with the poetry of the Symbolists, and especially that of Mallarmé, is, of course, beyond dispute. Even so, it hardly follows that the distinctive aspects of his style as it was heard by his immediate contemporaries can be linked unproblematically to “psychologically convincing musical correlates” for Symbolist poetic techniques or to the composer’s “intensive readings” of this poetry. Gauthier-Villars suggests, in fact, precisely the opposite: the Faune prelude was “not easy to follow” as a reading of Mallarmé’s poem, delivering only a “general impression” of it. We might wonder, then, what made this music sound like “musique de rêve,” “deliciously suited” to Mallarmé’s poetry, to Gauthier-Villars in 1895, when Debussy was still little known in the Parisian musical world—and before the sedimentation of a distinctly Debussyan modernism that, after the turn of the century, would claim a near monopoly on the sound of dream-music, Symbolism, and Mallarmé in the French imagination.

I will argue in this article that the Prélude à l’aprèsmidi d’un faune, often understood retrospectively as the first significant glimpse of the composer’s mature style and thereby of French musical modernism writ large, has become detached from a musical culture in which musique de rêve was very much en vogue. That is, to isolate Debussy’s unique response to a particular strain of literary modernism as the only or defining element of his “Symbolist” style is to ignore a significant body of cultural and specifically aural reference points that would almost certainly have informed what a Parisian listener

of the 1890s would have heard as *musique de rêve*: an array of widely popular genres of piano music and song that purported to evoke states of dream and reverie. My claim, in brief, is that the emergence of Debussyan modernism—the transition from the early style of the 1880s and early 1890s to the “mature” style of the *Nocturnes* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, for which the *Faune* prelude acts as a kind of pivot—was conditioned and to a significant extent made possible by a *fin-de-siècle* soundworld constituted by genres marketed for popular consumption by the petite bourgeoisie.

To hear Debussy in the context of this soundworld is to shift our attention away from Symbolist esoterism toward the vexed relationship in late capitalism between high-art modernism and mass culture. In the sections that follow, I investigate the tropes and conventions of two interrelated genres, each casting the *fin-de-siècle* fixation on dreaminess in a different light: the salon reverie and the slow waltz. Though seemingly distant from Debussy’s modernist preoccupations, these genres are central to the question of what Debussy’s *musique de rêve* might have sounded like to contemporary ears. This question also muddles aesthetic categories that a retrospective historiography (one that, of course, culminates in Debussy’s mature style) has kept separate: that is, the distinction between, on the one hand, musical dreaminess as a harbinger of an esoteric Symbolist modernism, and, on the other, the dreaminess that became fodder for a body of music that revels in cliché and overwrought sentimentality.

In the decades since Debussy wrote the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, this second category has often gone by the name of “schmaltz.” Derived from the Yiddish word for chicken fat, “schmaltz” has become a term of disparagement that implies artery-clogging excess, music that indulges its audience’s desire for the tacky and hyperemotional. Coined in the 1930s in the United States to describe “sweet bands” that were playing watered-down jazz, “schmaltz” has since become a more expansive category, one that can be difficult to distill into precise musical descriptors. Nonetheless, much like

6. H. Brook Webb’s “The Slang of Jazz,” published in 1937, defined “schmaltz” as the “opposite of jazz, hot, swing”: Webb, “Slang of Jazz,” 184. Webb cited an interview with Benny Goodman from that same year in which “schmaltz” equated to “the music of a sweet band,” music that could be otherwise characterized as “commercial”; a “most contemptuous term” (179). Doris McFerran, writing in the *American Mercury* in 1941, defined “schmaltz” simply as “highly sentimentalized singing”; she did not explicitly connect the sentimentalism to selling records, but in the context of the article as a whole—an explainer on the jargon of the radio industry—one could perhaps take the commercialism for granted: Doris McFerran, “Radio Has a Word for It,” *American Mercury*, November 1941, 578–81, here 579. Of course, in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, the distinction between “hot jazz” and “swing” on the one hand and “schmaltz” on the other was closely bound up with the racial politics of the American music scene: “schmaltz” was knockoff, second-rate music, commercialized by white musicians for white audiences and parasitic on the style of edgier, more innovative African American bands. On the competition between sweet bands and swing bands in the 1930s and 1940s, see Lopes, *Rise of a Jazz Art World*, esp. 99–111.
Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart when tasked with characterizing pornography, discerning critics have long believed that they know it when they hear it: music that is designed to please and to sell; music that partakes of clichéd, mawkish sentiment set to clichéd chord progressions. I am, admittedly, playing somewhat fast and loose with the term: “schmaltz” is not a word native to Paris circa 1895. Nonetheless, my contention is that music very much like what would later be denigrated as “schmaltz,” situated at a beguiling intersection of dreamy sentimentality and a newly ascendant mass culture, came into existence decades before the term entered the lexicon of American English in the 1930s, and, furthermore, that this repertoire has more historical significance than subsequent hierarchies of musical value would have us suppose. To tell the story of the origins of this proto-schmaltz—this schmaltz avant la lettre—is to tell a story about the origins of modernism, an attempt to hear modernism in the context of its aural world.

Sounds of Reverie

Musique de rêve was a booming business for Parisian music publishers in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s: reveries, idylls, and other dreamily titled pieces (“Sous bois,” “Paysage,” “Méditation”) published in this period easily numbered into the hundreds. Reveries and like pieces, furthermore, developed a shared language of musical dreaminess (some of which was borrowed from the older, related pastoral topos)—long pedal points, repetitive ostinato patterns, and a pronounced preference for rolled chords and arpeggios. All of

7. While in general the phenomenon of “schmaltzy”-sounding music has not received a great deal of musicological attention, there is some discussion of such music, and the harmonic clichés associated with it, in Frank Lehman’s work on film music: Lehman, Hollywood Harmony. Lehman traces the chromatic harmony characteristic of the “sound” of film music to the Romantic idioms of Wagner, Tchaikovsky, and Liszt. The repertoire considered below—and the late nineteenth-century salon and domestic sheet music repertoire more broadly—might, however, be understood as mediating this relationship; that is, low-prestige genres of commercial sheet music were instrumental in popularizing certain aspects of late Romantic chromatic harmony and associating them with clichéd emotional states—associations that were then drawn on, and further entrenched, by film music composers beginning in the 1920s and 1930s.

8. “Schmaltz” in this broader (though not ahistorical) sense invites comparison with the art-historical phenomenon of “kitsch,” a word that came into use somewhat earlier than “schmaltz,” among German art critics in the second half of the nineteenth century. Like schmaltz, kitsch is associated with mass consumption and has been often derided for a supposed lack of aesthetic value. One of the most forceful arguments of this kind was made by Clement Greenberg in 1939, for whom the defining quality of kitsch was that it is parasitic on a preexisting, “fully matured cultural tradition.” Kitsch borrows from this tradition “devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system and discards the rest. . . . [W]hen enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new ‘twists,’ which are then watered down and served up as kitsch”: Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 10–11. On the cultural history of kitsch, see Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity; Dorfles, Kitsch; and Holliday and Potts, Kitsch!
these features are in evidence in the “Réverie” from Léopold Dauphin’s *I miei fantoccj: Monsieur Polichinelle en voyage*, an orchestral suite for a children’s puppet show “ballet” published in 1879 (and dedicated, incidentally, to the young son of Stéphane Mallarmé) (see example 1).

Reveries also shared distinctive harmonic characteristics. One of the most readily identifiable was a post-cadential plagal progression at the very end of a piece, in which, in a gently piquant gesture of final closure, a b6 scale degree resolves down to the fifth of the tonic triad, typically over a tonic pedal point. Such progressions commonly took the form of a simple iv–I plagal cadence (as in Paul Chabeaux’s “Idylle,” published in 1872; see example 2), or a bVI triad that resolves to I (as in Angelo Dal Vesco’s *Rêve d’un ange*, published in 1873; see example 3), but they could also play out in other ways. In Georges Villain’s wistfully titled *Demain!*, published in 1878 in the *Journal de musique*, the final authentic cadence is followed by two plagal cadences: first a straightforward IV–I and then a chromatic variant, a bVII7–I progression in which the b6 in the soprano voice in the first plagal cadence is changed to a b5, which then resolves down to b5 in the final measure (see example 4).

The b6–b5 ending had remarkable staying power in piano music and songs through the 1880s and into the 1890s, as demonstrated, for example, by Paul and Lucien Hillemacher’s setting of Sully-Prodhomme’s “Soupir,” published in their collection of *Vingt mélodies* in 1882, which introduces a bVI triad five measures from the end (following its final authentic cadence three measures earlier) (see example 5), and Pauline Viardot’s “Rêverie,” published in her *Six mélodies* in 1892, in which a final descent in the soprano

**Example 1**  Léopold Dauphin, “Réverie” from *I miei fantoccj: Monsieur Polichinelle en voyage* (piano score, Paris: Girod, 1879), mm. 3–9
Example 2  Paul Chabeaux, “Idylle” (Idylle et sérénade, Paris: Benoit, 1872), mm. 80–88

from 1 to 3 closes with an augmented VI triad that resolves to the tonic (see example 6). So common was the 3–5 ending in this repertoire that examples could be easily multiplied into the dozens. 9 This harmonic device

9. Other instances of this phenomenon (by no means an exhaustive list) include Georges Lamothe, “Le printemps: Idylle” (Les saisons, Paris: H. Avrillon, 1869); Edoardo Aromatari, Mélancolie: Romance sans paroles (Paris: Durand, 1874); Victor Dolmetsch, “Paysage” (Trois morceaux caractéristiques, Paris: Henri Lemoine, 1878); Edoardo Aromatari, “Désir: Romance sans paroles” (Fleurs de printemps, printed in the Journal de musique, October 12, 1878); Baronne Willy de Rothschild, “Rêve!” (Dix mélodies, Paris: Hartmann, 1879); Eugène Gautier, “Vos jolis yeux” (Journal de musique, March 1, 1879); Théodore Lack, “Duo” (Petites études romantiques, Paris: Henri Lemoine, 1879); Charles-Marie Widor, “J’ai dit aux
Example 3  Angelo Dal Vesco, *Rêve d’un ange: rêverie* (Paris and Lyon, 1873), mm. 138–44

was, to be sure, hardly peculiar to commercial sheet music in the 1870s and 1880s. A penchant for $VI$ is a common Romantic trait, linked—like pedal points, rolled harmonies, and other textural characteristics of reveries—to the pastoral topos from the early nineteenth century onward, and plagal progressions of the sort listed above, deployed in expressive and idiosyncratic ways, can be found scattered through the compositions of Chopin, Liszt, and other Romantic composers.10 But in the repertoire of reveries, idylls,

French composers; see, for example, “Träumerei” from Richard Strauss’s opus 9 (published in 1884). On the circulation of sheet music among urban centers in the nineteenth century, see Scott, Sounds of the Metropolis.

10. Thomas Keith Nelson has extensively demonstrated the pastoral—and more specifically, in his terminology, “Arcadian”—associations of $VI$ in the early nineteenth century, with a particular focus on Schubert’s songs: Nelson, “Fantasy of Absolute Music.” Following Schiller, Nelson understands this “Arcadian” pastoral as closely bound up with fantasy: it is “regressive and escapist, and thus doomed to an unhappy outcome” even as it “facilitate[s] fantasies of pastoral happiness and innocence, of immanence with nature and transcendence of vision” (385–86). This intertwining of the pastoral with fantasy in the first half of the nineteenth century, and its
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persistent musical association with $b^6$, prefigures the use of $b^6$ to evoke dream and reverie in later salon and commercial sheet music—a process of dissemination in which Liszt likely played a major role.

¹¹. The abundance of concluding plagal cadences in this repertoire might also be understood within a broader tendency in French music of the period toward plagal harmony. As
Around the late 1870s and into the early 1880s, reveries began to demonstrate an inclination toward certain kinds of "enriched" harmonies, especially added-sixth chords, coloristic uses of seventh chords, and dominant ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth chords. Benjamin Godard’s *Rêverie pastorale*, published by Durand in 1878, opens in a gently rocking 6/8 meter, with rolled harmonies, including a variety of seventh chords, often occurring on beat 4 of the measure; a vi7 chord in measure 25, for instance, is followed by a I7 in measure 27 (after which another seeming vi7...)

Andrew Pau has demonstrated, plagal structures are characteristic of French song, specifically those of Gabriel Fauré (whose early songs, Pau writes, treat plagal harmonies in a “relatively superficial manner”) and Henri Duparc (whose songs “feature plagal effects at a deeper structural level”): Pau, “Plagal Systems,” 82.
in G is retrospectively cast as a ii\(^7\) in D) (see example 7). The tendency to indulge in such sonorities became increasingly pronounced in the mid-1880s, as in a “Rêverie” by a twenty-year-old Jacques Durand—who would later take over his father’s music publishing firm and become Debussy’s exclusive publisher\(^{12}\)—published as one of his *Six morceaux pour piano* in 1885 (and printed as a music supplement in the Parisian daily *Le Figaro* in July of that year). In measures 36–37 Durand unfolds a succession of seventh chords as part of a circle of fifths sequence: a V\(^7\)/IV in measure 36 resolves, on the downbeat of measure 37, to a IV\(^7\) chord, immediately followed by a IV\(^7\)/IV and then, in the next measure, an A half-diminished seventh chord that only retrospectively reveals itself to be a predominant ii\(^\#7\) in the context of a brief tonicization of G minor (see example 8). Perhaps more notably, Durand’s strategic deployments of nonchord tones (for example, the pedal points on the downbeats of measures 30 and 36, and the upper neighbor tones in the alto voice in the first half of measure 42, which provide the ninth and eleventh over a dominant pedal) create an overall sound infused with an abundance of enriched sonorities.

To the twenty-first-century ear, such harmonies can sound hackneyed or clichéd, entirely explicable in the context of functional harmony, their added

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12. According to Jacques Durand’s memoirs, published in 1924, Durand first met Debussy in 1884, when Durand’s father, Auguste Durand, decided to publish Debussy’s winning Prix de Rome cantata; they do not seem to have become well acquainted, however, until a few years later. Jacques Durand entered the composition class of Ernest Guiraud, Debussy’s composition teacher at the Conservatoire; in 1886. See Durand, *Quelques souvenirs*, 28–30, and Orledge, “Debussy, Durand et Cie.”
notes merely bestowing a luscious halo on standard harmonic progressions. It is easy to hear such harmonies as part of a style—a collection of purely formal, unselfconscious aesthetic features that characterize the musical production of a particular historical time and place (or of a particular composer).13

Example 8 Jacques Durand, “Rêverie” ([Six morceaux pour piano], Paris: Durand Schoenewerk, 1885, also published as a music supplement in Le Figaro, July 1, 1885), mm. 33–43

13. See, for example, the discussions of style in Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, 197–208, and Davis, *General Theory*, 75–119. A basic premise of Davis’s theory of visual culture is that styles of pictorial depiction “have materially affected human visual perception. They constitute what might literally be called ways of seeing” (6).
But in the context of French music of the mid-1880s, it may be more helpful to hear such harmonies—like the $i^6-\frac{5}{2}$ endings—not as elements of a style but as signifiers of a *topos* (or, more broadly, a “topic family,” to borrow a term from James Hepokoski), a way of evoking a mood appropriate to the dreamy atmospheres conjured up by idylls and reveries. Even within a piece, such harmonies could be “turned on” to convey a heightened sense of nocturnal mystery. An example is Georges Marty’s *mélodie* “Idylle” of 1886, a setting of a poem by Édouard Guinand, which opens with a refrain that describes a brown-haired girl rushing through a forest as night falls:

Où vas-tu, Colette ma brune,
Courant d’un pas svelte et discret?
Sur l’horizon monte la lune,
La nuit descend sur la forêt.

La soirée est tiède, embaumée
Par les effluves d’un beau jour;
Et l’on entend sous la ramée,
De doux bruissements d’amour.

Où vas-tu, Colette ma brune,
Courant d’un pas svelte et discret?
Sur l’horizon monte la lune,
La nuit descend sur la forêt.

Au bord du bois, une ombre passe,
Se glissant sous les chênes verts:
C’est Jean! C’est Jean!
Il dévore l’espace,
Sa vie emplirait l’univers!

Ah! Je vois, Colette ma brune,
Où tu cours d’un pas si discret.
Sur l’horizon monte la lune,
La nuit descend sur la forêt!

*Where are you going, Colette, my brunette, hurrying with a step that is light and careful? The moon rises over the horizon; night descends over the forest.*

*The evening is warm, perfumed with the fragrance of a beautiful day; and one hears, under the leafy canopy, sweet rustlings of love.*

Where are you going, Colette, my brunette,
hurrying with a step that is light and careful?
the moon rises over the horizon;
night descends over the forest.

At the edge of the wood, a shadow passes,
creeping under the green oaks:
It’s Jean! It’s Jean!
He engulfs space,
his life would permeate the universe!

Ah! I see, Colette, my brunette,
where you are hurrying with such a careful step.
The moon rises over the horizon;
night descends over the forest!

The opening of the song establishes a repetitive ostinato pattern suited to the character of an idylle, oscillating gently between tonic and supertonic harmony (see example 9). In the refrain and first stanza of the song, the accompaniment does little to unsettle this peaceful, lilting tone, as the text describes a balmy evening and “doux bruissements d’amour” under the canopy of a forest—all standard idylle imagery (whispered endearments under forest foliage being a particular specialty of the “Sous bois” subgenre of the idylle). In the second (and final) stanza, however, the mood of the text subtly shifts at the mention of a “shadow” passing at the edge of the wood—the presence of the ghostly Jean, to whom (as we learn in the final refrain) the light-footed Colette is hastening. In association with the beginning of this stanza, Marty’s harmony enters a new soundworld in measure 29 with a luscious I7 chord (see example 10). Subsequently, in measures 30–31, a V7/IV “resolves” deceptively to G minor (vi in the key of B-flat), but the persisting tonic pedal produces another seventh sonority—a G minor 7 chord. An arrival on D-flat in measure 34 sets up a D♭ pedal that, continuing for five measures, creates additional seventh sonorities (including another “I7” chord, a D-flat major seventh, in measure 37) before a V7 of IV serves as a pivot chord back to F major (in which it is a German augmented sixth chord). For the mysterious, purposefully obscure second stanza of the song (Who is Jean? How might his life “permeate the universe”?), Marty introduces a new harmonic palette. While the underlying harmonic progression can be largely explained through voice leading (as the bass successively resolves down by step from F to D♭ to D♭ beneath largely stepwise motion in the inner voices), the piano accompaniment luxuriates unnecessarily in the resulting seventh sonorities. The result is a stanza that is “marked,” differentiated from the material that precedes it, with an enriched harmonic vocabulary—what we might refer to as “reverie harmony.” Examples like these—in which the enriched vocabulary of reverie harmony is “turned on” for a specific and local descriptive purpose—became fairly
common in the mid-1880s, not only in piano music and songs but in dramatic music as well. *Saint-Mégrin*, an *opéra-comique* by the brothers Paul and Lucien Hillemacher that premiered in Brussels in 1886, uses reverie harmony for an arioso in act 3 in which Catherine de Clèves, the duchesse de Guise, reflects on the “golden dream” opened up to her by her illicit love for the title character of the opera:

Sur mon amère destinée,  
Un rayon a passé dans un beau rêve d’or!  
Son souvenir m’enivre encor  
Comme un parfum qui reste à la rose fanée.

*In a beautiful golden dream,*  
*a ray of light has passed over my bitter destiny!*  
*His memory fascinates me still,*  
*like a perfume that lingers on a faded rose.*

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\[\text{mf} \quad \text{animez un peu}\]

\[\text{rit.} \quad \text{Au bord du bois, une combe passe,}\]

\[\text{animez un peu}\]

\[p \quad \text{crescendo}\]

\[31\]

\[\text{crescendo}\]

\[f \quad \text{Se glissant sous les chênes verts,} \quad \text{C'est Jean!}\]

\[mf \quad \text{crescendo}\]

\[34\]

\[f \quad \text{Jean' il dévore l'espace,} \quad \text{Su}\]

\[f \quad \text{...}\]
The Hillemachers set the text of this “golden dream” over a series of voluptuous harmonies on downbeats in measures 21–24, rendered as rolled chords in the piano reduction:15 a $V^9$ chord followed by a tonic added-sixth chord and then a major ninth chord on G (VI) in measure 23, which audaciously slides down a half step on the downbeat of the next measure to become a G-flat major ninth chord (see example 11).

In and of themselves, such harmonies are not necessarily anything remarkable; added-sixth chords, to be sure, were hardly a shocking novelty by 1886.16 It was not that such sonorities had never been heard before. They were, however, very much coming into fashion—at the same moment that a general fascination with reverie and dream was taking hold of the French cultural imagination. (It was no accident that this particular arioso from Saint-Mégrin was chosen to be featured as a music supplement in Le Figaro as publicity for the opera.)17 As Steven Huebner has observed with respect to the influence of Massenet on Debussy’s Prix de Rome cantata, compositional techniques did not need to be “remarkably bold” in order to be “modern,” since “for a short period between 1870 and 1885, Massenet represented what was new in French music, at least in that music destined for large audiences.”18 After 1885, what was “new” in French music was increasingly the

15. I have been unable to locate an orchestral score of Saint-Mégrin, though it seems reasonable to surmise that these chords were played by a harp.
16. Jeremy Day-O’Connell has shown that some of the earliest instances of the added-sixth chord in nineteenth-century music can be traced to the harpist Elias Parish Alvars, who popularized a special effect (enabled by the mechanical construction of the harp) that Day-O’Connell refers to as a “pentatonic glissando”: Day-O’Connell, Pentatonicism, 152–57. (This connection to the harp reinforces the association of the added-sixth chord with the topos of the pastoral, which, as noted above, fed into early treatments of the reverie topos.)
17. On the role of music supplements as publicity for theatrical productions in this period, see Pasler, “De la ‘publicité déguisée.’”
Example 11  Paul and Lucien Hillemacher, *Saint-Mégrin*, act 3, arioso “Sur mon amère destinée” (piano score, published as a music supplement in *Le Figaro*, March 10, 1886), mm. 16–24
enriched-harmony-drenched sound of reverie, as realized by the generation after Massenet (many of them Massenet’s own students), composers who won the Prix de Rome in the late 1870s and early to mid-1880s: Paul Hillemacher (Prix de Rome 1876) and his brother Lucien (Prix de Rome 1880), Georges Hüb (Prix de Rome 1879), Georges Marty (Prix de Rome 1882), Paul Vidal (Prix de Rome 1883), Xavier Leroux (Prix de Rome 1885)—as well as, of course, Debussy (Prix de Rome 1884).19 And as enriched harmonies, increasingly tied to the topos of reverie, came into fashion, fashionable young composers—like Hüb, the Hillemachers, Marty, and Leroux—all began to use them in ever-greater abundance.20 Melding reverie harmonies with an advanced post-Wagnerian chromaticism, these composers created a new soundworld, distinct from that of their teachers and predecessors.21

What better use for reverie harmony, then, than to accompany an emerging, modern school of poetry that was itself inclined toward evoking atmospheres of dreamy obfuscation? Settings of Baudelaire’s poems began, as Helen Abbott has shown, in the 1870s within the realm of the popular chanson.22 By the late 1880s, however, settings of Baudelaire—together with those of Verlaine, which were becoming newly popular with

19. Lucien Hillemacher, Marty, Vidal, and Leroux were all students of Massenet; Hüb studied with Henri Reber and Debussy with Ernest Guiraud. On Debussy’s choice to study with Guiraud, see Huelner, “Between Massenet and Wagner.” On Prix de Rome cantatas by Massenet’s students (specifically Lucien Hillemacher, Marty, and Vidal), see Médicis, La maturation artistique, 95–107.20. It is difficult to date precisely the beginning of this “enhanced” reverie topos in the mélodies and piano music of the jeune école. While much scholarly effort has been expended on identifying and dating Debussy’s early manuscripts, unpublished manuscripts for other composers of the jeune école in this period have largely been lost to the historical record, making a comprehensive account of their early compositions (and contemporaneous comparisons with Debussy’s manuscripts) impossible. To judge from the published works of these composers—a subset of their compositional output that likely biases our sample toward the light and accessible, and for which dates of composition (as opposed to publication) are largely impossible to determine—reverie harmony was solidly in place by 1886 or so, and occasional hints of it had begun to appear in commercial sheet music by around 1882–83; Marty’s mélodie “Il faut aimer,” for instance, first published in 1883 (Paris: Hartmann), contains passages of enriched harmonies for coloristic effect. In general terms, I am less interested in tracing the origins of particular harmonies than in situating the 1880s as a decade in which these harmonies collectively took on new importance as the signifier of a topos associated with dream and reverie—that is, when they transitioned from being a curiosity, used in isolated, varied instances for idiosyncratic expressive ends (for instance, in Chabrier’s Dix pièces pittoresques or Édouard Lalo’s ballet Namouna), to being a widespread phenomenon invested with a constellation of communal meanings. On possible precedents for the harmonic experimentation of these composers, see Médicis, La maturation artistique.

21. These harmonic developments were, of course, unfolding in the context of an overarching Wagnerian influence that is difficult to overstate; on the Wagnerian aspects of French harmony in this period, see, in particular, Huebner, French Opera, and Médicis, La maturation artistique, esp. 169–226.

composers—were increasingly conjuring up dreamy sonorous worlds with reverie harmony. Baudelaire’s “L’invitation au voyage” was a particularly good candidate for such harmony, opening with an invitation to dream or imagine the delight of living in a world of “luxe, calme et volupté” (abundance, peace, and pleasure).

Hüe’s setting of the poem, published in his *Vingt mélodies* in 1890, sets these words with enriched subdominant harmony: first, in measure 38, a IV$^7$ chord in which the seventh, in the upper voice of the accompaniment, “resolves” down to produce an added-sixth chord on the final beat of the measure; and then, after a vi triad, a dramatically rolled subdominant added-sixth chord in measure 40 that resolves directly to I for the arrival of measure 41 (see example 12). At the very end of the song—with the final return of the refrain—a weak authentic cadence in measures 80–81 (accomplished with a leading tone half-diminished seventh chord) is followed by a tonic pedal and a return of the enriched subdominant harmony of measures 39–40, a repeated move from a subdominant seventh chord to a subdominant added-sixth chord (see example 13). The song ends with an enriched plagal cadence with a $\flat^6-\flat^5$ resolution in an inner voice, as a supertonic half-diminished seventh chord moves to the tonic in measure 89.

The overall soundworld of Hüe’s “L’invitation au voyage” thus drew in important ways on that of the reverie/idyll complex as it had developed through the 1880s: a tendency toward coloristic uses of seventh chords, a general avoidance of pure triads, especially on strong beats (due not only to the uptick in seventh chords but also to the liberal use of nonchord tones on downbeats), and the progressive attenuation of dominant function as a primary signifier of musical closure, as plagal resolutions—especially the now clichéd $\flat^6-\flat^5$ ending—gained new prominence. Leroux’s “Recueillement,” published in 1892—a setting of “En sourdine” from Verlaine’s *Fêtes galantes* that rather confusingly bears the same title as an unrelated poem from Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal*—takes these characteristics still further. One of its recurring motives (introduced as Verlaine’s narrator instructs his companion to “Ferme tes yeux à demi”—“Close your eyes halfway”) is an oscillation between a tonic added-sixth chord and a $\flat VI^7$ (see example 14). Leroux ends the song without a proper authentic cadence at all, instead building to a climactic supertonic major ninth chord in measure 42 that dissolves into a

23. “L’invitation au voyage” had of course already inspired settings by Henri Duparc and Emmanuel Chabrier in 1870—two settings that, in very different ways, foreshadowed and (especially in Duparc’s case) influenced later developments in the mélodie. On Duparc and his place in the history of the mélodie, see Noske, *French Song*, and Faure and Vivès, *Histoire et poétique*. However, other settings of “L’invitation au voyage” from the mid-1860s through the late 1880s were far more proximate to the domain of the popular chanson than to what today is considered to be mélodie, from Jules Cressonnois’s 1865 setting in volume 3 of his *Harmonies* (Paris: Reté, 1865) to later settings by Jean-Grégoire Pénavaire (1879), the Hillemacher brothers (1882), and Benjamin Godard (1889). On early settings of this poem, see Abbott, “Performing Poetry as Music.”
in measure 43, followed by a $bV^7$ at the end of measure 43 that then “resolves” to a tonic added-sixth chord in measure 44 (see example 15). The song closes with two punctuating “half-plagal” cadences through measures 45–47—first a leading tone diminished seventh chord that resolves to the tonic, followed by a leading tone diminished eleventh chord, both cadences containing the familiar $b^6$–$^5$ resolution in an inner voice. A set of conventions and clichés that began, in the early 1870s, in the low-prestige, domestic genre of piano reveries and idylls—the persistent $b^6$–$^5$ ending being one of the most audible signifiers of this lineage—had become, in the musical imaginations of Hüe, Leroux, and others in their circle of up-and-coming young composers (the so-called “jeune école”), part of a toolkit for rendering the far more rarefied dream-states evoked by modern poetry.

24. Daniel Harrison characterizes the leading tone diminished seventh chord as “functionally mixed”—that is, its resolution to the tonic triad combines the $7–1$ resolution of the authentic cadence with the $b^6–^5$ resolution of the plagal cadence: Harrison, *Harmonic Function*, 64–72.

```
77  Lent

Là, tout n’est qu’or - dre et beau - té,         Lu - xe,

pp


81  express.

cal - me, et vo - lup - té.__________________ calme

86  rall.______________________________

et vo - lup - té.______________________________

suivez__________________________
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Reverie Transfigured

But is this truly “Symbolist music”? Or is it something else—something more akin to schmaltz? Such composers as Hüe and Leroux have not, to be sure, tended to figure in the story of French modernism. To the extent that they have garnered any scholarly attention at all, it has reinforced their exclusion from the harmonic “adventurousness” represented by Debussyan modernism. More broadly, the topos of reverie has not figured in scholarly treatments of the development of Debussy’s style. Such discussions, until very recently, have tended to limit Debussy’s stylistic influences to well-known art-music composers of earlier generations (Chopin, Gounod, Franck, Mussorgsky, Liszt, Wagner, and others); that is, scholars have understood Debussy as a singular, even isolated innovator who synthesized some of the more radical harmonic exploits of these older composers in his own, idiosyncratic way.

25. See, for example, Richard Langham Smith’s New Grove articles on Hüe and Leroux. Hüe’s early songs, he writes, “are firmly grounded in the salon tradition”; it was not until after 1910 that Hüe’s “harmonic language advanced considerably, absorbing the added-note harmonies and static effects of the Impressionists, while remaining essentially traditional”. Smith, “Hüe, Georges.” Of Leroux, Langham Smith observes that he “appears in several photographs with young composers of that generation, but the path he was to follow was conservative rather than adventurous. He was strongly influenced by the traditional harmony teaching of his professors at the Conservatoire, Dubois and Massenet. . . . He continued using a similar harmonic style well into the 20th century”; Smith, “Leroux, Xavier.”

26. Prior to the 2020 publication of François de Médicis’s valuable and wide-ranging study of Debussy’s early years, La maturation artistique de Debussy, the two major studies of the precedents for and origins of Debussy’s style were Briscoe, “Compositions of Claude Debussy’s Formative Years,” and, more recently, Clevenger, “Origins of Debussy’s Style.” Both Briscoe and Clevenger emphasize the importance of the French compositional milieu in which Debussy came of age as a necessary starting point for understanding his style in his formative years. Neither scholar, however, considers members of the jeune école such as Hüe, the Hillemachers, or Marty who, like Debussy, were drawing on the reverie topos in their compositions through the 1880s and early 1890s. Clevenger’s account of the French musical world in this period—though impressively exhaustive in its treatment of the instruction at the Conservatoire, and significantly more in-depth than that of Briscoe—is defined exclusively by an older generation of composers, largely Conservatoire professors, who had attained some measure of prestige by the time Debussy was first starting to compose in the early 1880s. As Huebner has persuasively argued, Clevenger also significantly underestimates the importance of Massenet for understanding Debussy’s style in this period: Huebner, “Between Massenet and Wagner.” Médicis, in addition to considering well-known influences on Debussy’s stylistic innovations (Wagner, Russian composers, the Javanese gamelan), situates Debussy’s stylistic development within a broader context of French music at the time that included younger composers (including the Hillemachers, Marty, and Leroux). Even so, his treatment of these lesser-known composers centers on large, high-prestige genres (such as operas and Prix de Rome cantatas), their song settings and piano music remaining largely unexplored.

27. Briscoe summarizes his overview of Debussy’s early compositional style: “From the beginning, Debussy recombined somewhat isolated traits [of the music of other composers] that he sensed as most liberating, explored them in the formative compositions, and began the
Reverie, Schmaltz, and the Modernist Imagination 313

But as listening even cursorily to his early songs and piano compositions will reveal, Debussy too wrote music that took part in the conventions and clichés that made up the reverie/idyll topic family.28 Most audible signifier of the reverie topos—the $6-\frac{5}{3}$ plagal ending—abounds in Debussy’s music through the 1880s and early 1890s: “Réverie,” a setting of a text by Théodore de Banville, composed in 1880; “Musique,” composed in 1883 to a text by Paul Bourget; “Apparition,” Debussy’s first Mallarmé setting, composed in 1884; “C’est l’extase” from the Ariettes, paysages belges et aquarelles, to a text by Verlaine, composed in 1887 (the collection was republished in 1903 as the Ariettes oubliées); “La mort des amants” from the Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire, also composed in 1887; the first of the Images (oubliées) for piano (“Lent: mélancolique et doux”), composed in 1894. (The list could go on.) Debussy was also, incidentally, fond of ending pieces with $b$III–I cadences, as in “Recueillement” from the Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire and the famous “Clair de lune” from the Suite bergamasque. Less common than the various ways of treating $6$, $b$III–I resolutions nonetheless also appear in the reverie repertoire of the 1880s as another way of evading a final authentic close, as in Jean-Grégoire Pénavaire’s setting of “L’invitation au voyage,” published in 1885.29

One might object that this music of Debussy’s formative years tells us little about the composer’s eventual trajectory toward a mature, and more decidedly “Symbolist,” style.30 The famous opening of the Prélude à l’après-midi...

28. Among those who, in the late 1880s, understood Debussy as an apparently unremarkable part of the jeune école was Emmanuel Chabrier (whose use of “consonant” seventh chords in the overture to his 1887 comic opera Le roi malgré lui is often cited as a precursor for Debussy’s own coloristic uses of seventh chords). Chabrier wrote to his publisher in 1889 that he did not want to set a poetic text that consisted of “egg whites” (“glaires”)—poems about love “in the time of little flowers, or in April and May; let’s give those two months a rest.” He went on to admonish the jeune école for the music they wrote to such texts: “little [Charles] Bordes, Chausson, Marty, [Pierre de] Bréville, Huc, Debussy, etc., have composed refined, ingenious music, but it is a little tormented, often sad, tearful, regretful,” such that when singing it, one seems to be “giving the audience the last rites”: Emmanuel Chabrier, letter to Enoch and Costallat, June 29, 1889, in Chabrier, Correspondance, 648 (“Ce que je ne veux pas, ce sont ces glaires où l’on s’ame au temps des petites fleurs ou pendant avril et mai; laissais reposer ces deux mois de l’année . . . [1] petit Bordes, Chausson, Marty, Bréville, Huc [sic], Debussy, etc., ont compost des musiques recherchées, ingénieuses, mais un peu tourmentées, souvent tristes, éplorées, navrées, tant et si bien que . . . quand on chante ça, on a l’air de . . . donner les derniers sacrements à l’auditoire”).


30. To the extent that the idiom of “salon” music of the 1880s has been recognized as a component of Debussy’s music in this period, it has been quickly dismissed as irrelevant to
d’un faune, after all, demonstrates a distance from syntactical harmony that is hardly to be found in the reveries or Symbolist song settings by others of the jeune école discussed above. The prelude begins with a chromatic descending line played by a lone solo flute, its melody suggesting the tonic E major in measure 3 only to confound the listener’s ear in measure 4 with the entrance of a dreamy A-sharp half-diminished seventh chord in the oboes and clarinets, reinforced with a sweeping glissando in the harp (see example 16).31 In measure 5, the A-sharp half-diminished seventh transforms into a B-flat minor-major seventh chord; after a measure’s rest, we hear the move from the A-sharp half-diminished seventh to B-flat minor-major seventh repeated in measures 7–8. Matthew Brown has observed that “few passages in the standard repertory are more obscure than the opening of the Prélude,” whose “sinuous flute theme and . . . shimmering accompaniment seem quite removed from the familiar world of common-practice tonality.”32 This tonal “obscurity” in the opening of the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune has often been heard as a sonic manifestation of Mallarméan poetics, a close analogue of the Symbolist experimentation with words freed from the tyranny of denotative meaning.33 David Michael Hertz has written that understanding Debussy’s true artistic self, a juvenile acquiescence to artistic norms of the day that Debussy himself would soon discard; see, for example, Howat, Debussy in Proportion, 38–39. Code, writing about Debussy’s 1884 setting of “Apparition,” observes that “some characteristic inflections of [Debussy’s] song style are already audible in the dreamy, one-note incantation of the first three words over delicately oscillating accompaniment (though the full-blooded salon lyricism that launches the second stanza—‘It was the blessed day of your first kiss’—is less prophetic)”: Code, Claude Debussy, 27. Roger Nichols asserts that at the age of thirteen Debussy was already improvising in a style that would be recognizable as Debussyan, in contrast to the derivative nature of his compositions in his early years: “His written compositions at that time were poor imitations of Massenet, but the noises coming from the piano were authentic Debussy”: Nichols, Debussy, 8.


33. For the purposes of this discussion, I set aside many fine analyses of the Prélude that are concerned more with formal coherence and the nature of Debussy’s craft than with the piece’s place in the history of style (though the distinction is, to be sure, never hard and fast). William Austin’s touchstone account of the Prélude, for example, understands Debussy’s “blurriness” in formal terms rather than Symbolist ones (“Debussy’s music characteristically evades or blurs all sorts of classifications and abstractions. It is unique. Yet it is not blurry itself, but supple, precise, clearly articulated, and balanced”: Austin, “Toward an Analytical Appreciation,” 74). Moreover, while the issue of meaning is a recurring one in accounts of Debussy’s Symbolism, it is far from the only way of understanding how Symbolist poetry might have influenced Debussy’s aesthetic values; James Hepokoski, for example, proposes that “In the Faune he created an eloquent musical analogue to the prevailing Decadent and Symbolist ideal of interior, rather than exterior, growth. This is a musical counterpart of the centripetal subtlety and ambiguity of Mallarmé in the Faune poem, the scaled-off, private luxury of Des Esseintes’s house in Huysmans’s A Rebours, the exotic, interior vegetation of the Maeterlinckian hothouses or serres chaude”: Hepokoski, “Formulaic Openings in Debussy,” 56–57.
Example 16  Claude Debussy, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, mm. 1–15

(continued)
Example 16  continued

\begin{music}
\begin{notation}
\end{notation}
\end{music}
Example 16  continued

Fl. 1, 2, 3
Ob. 1, 2
Cl. 1, 2
Bn. 1, 2
Hn. 1, 2
Hn. 3, 4
Hn. 1
Hn. 2
Vn. 1
Vn. 2
Va.
Vc.
Cb.

(sourdine)  Div.  pp
(sourdine)  pp  Div.
(sourdine)  pp  Div.  (sourdine)
pp  pp

(continued)
Example 16  continued
Example 16  continued

(continued)
Example 16  continued
“tonal ambiguity in music parallels” the Symbolist tendency toward “a kind of open-ended evocation of meanings.”34 The A-sharp half-diminished seventh chord in measure 4 of the Faune prelude, because it does not straightforwardly point to a tonal center, “destroy[s] the standard expectations of the periodic sensibility” (i.e., the common practice); consequently, “Mallarmé’s aesthetic closely resembles the aesthetic of Claude Debussy, who also intentionally reduced the specificity of meaning in his art.”35 For Clevenger, the opening of the prelude likewise demonstrates Debussy’s adeptness at suggesting a tonic only to subsequently undermine and efface it; indeed, he writes, “tonality could hardly be veiled more effectively or evoked more subtly” than in the Faune prelude.36 More broadly, Clevenger identifies “tonal veiling”—a collection of compositional techniques that obscure functional harmony and relationships to tonal centers without doing away with them entirely,—as Debussy’s “central stylistic advance,” one that “can be closely linked to techniques of Symbolist poetry, in which obscured contextual meaning, achieved in part through the use of contorted verbal syntax and unconventional vocabulary, produces evocative poetic effects.”37

Yet even as it thwarts, in a particularly radical and striking way, the expectations relating to common-practice functional harmony, the extraordinary opening of the Faune prelude, in a more historically local sense, generates its dreamy atmosphere in large part by borrowing and adapting aural associations from the preexisting topos of reverie. Among the most obvious of these associations are the harp glissando, a textural effect that had long been linked to dream and reverie, and the prominence of the instrumental timbre most evocative of the pastoral idyll, the solo flute. But the radical stasis engendered by the beginning of the Prélude also recalls reverie precedents in more subtle ways. The passage owes its static, somnolent character not simply to the immediate effect of the unexpected A-sharp half-diminished

34. Hertz, Tuning of the Word, xii.
35. Ibid., 68.
37. The six techniques that Clevenger enumerates are “subtonic nullification” (the use of $b^7$, especially near cadences, to undermine the prevailing tonic); withholding cadences for long stretches of time; nonsyntactical harmonies; “harmonic disjunctions and harmonic parenthesis,” in which functional tonality is temporarily interrupted or suspended; whole-tone scales (or “hexatonic collections”); and “special sonorous effects,” which include enriched harmonies, seventh chords, and extended tertiaí harmonies: ibid., 49–54. Of course, in some degree all of these techniques preceded Debussy’s own use of them, and some can even be said to have been prevalent in music before 1880, such as “subtonic nullification” (which was a common feature of the reverie topos, even in its original “popular” or “salon” form in the 1870s) and the withholding of cadences (which can be found in the music of earlier Romantic composers, most notably in that of Wagner). On the other hand, the extended use of whole-tone scales became part of Debussy’s style only after 1900.
38. Ibid., 49.
seventh chord (and its tonal distance from the tonic E) but also to the B-flat seventh that follows and the subsequent repetition of both sonorities—a technique that Clevenger refers to as “bichordal oscillation” and that is near-ubiquitous in Debussy’s mature style, significantly contributing to the impression of harmonic stasis that is so characteristic of it.39 The harmonic oscillation continues in measures 11–12 as the flute melody begins over again, this time harmonized with a D major seventh that alternates with a G\(^\flat\)\(^3\) chord in the final third of each measure (over a low D held over in the contrabasses).

Harmonic stasis was a feature of many salon reveries, typically achieved with long pedal points, textural monotony, few points of cadential articulation, and small-scale repetition (either of stock patterns in the accompaniment or of short melodic units, or both) (see, for instance, example 1). In the more harmonically advanced (and Wagner-influenced) music of the *jeune école*, stasis could be generated in other ways, as is evident in Leroux’s “Recueillement” (see example 14). The harmony in measures 17–20, swaying from I\(^\text{VII}\) to \(b\)VI\(^6\) and back and then to an E half-diminished seventh chord in measure 20, is, functionally, a simple tonic prolongation, rendering the role of the passage within the overall tonal scheme of the song far more straightforward than that of the complex tonal relationships at the beginning of Debussy’s *Prélude* (in which an arrival on the tonic E in the bass is withheld until measure 21). But the surface-level effect of Leroux’s harmonies in this passage is to produce subtle gradations of harmonic coloring, accomplished by moving individual voices by half step—similar to the shimmering harmonic change from A-sharpØ7 to B-flat\(^\natural\)\(^3\) to accompany the first horn’s stepwise ascent from E to F in measures 4–5 of the *Prélude*, or to the harmonic oscillation between D major seventh and G\(^\flat\)\(^3\) chords over an unchanging bass in measures 11–12. In each case, the coloristic effect of the oscillation is due in large part to the use of complex sonorities as entities in themselves rather than as dissonances that resolve to other chords, largely divesting the half-step motion of functional import.40

Even the obfuscation of tonal syntax and suspension of tonal centricity, so startling in the *Faune* prelude and so central a feature of Debussy’s later style, could become part of the topos of reverie in its more advanced, “Symbolist”

39. Ibid., 61–64. “Reiteration, defined as the immediate restatement of a short compositional unit, typically one or two measures in length, is perhaps Debussy’s single most recognizable stylistic staple, occurring prominently in almost every piece he ever wrote. . . . Reiterations in general, and bichordal oscillations in particular, constitute the chief means by which Debussy produces static harmony, which has long been recognized as the principal characteristic of what has traditionally been called musical Impressionism” (62).

40. This aspect of *jeune école* harmony sets it apart from Wagnerian harmony, despite the clear influence of Wagner on these young composers. For example, the half-diminished seventh in measure 20 of Leroux’s “Recueillement”—a chord that is inevitably freighted with Wagnerian baggage—is treated as mere harmonic color to embellish the underlying tonic prolongation.
guise. For example, Eugène Lacroix’s setting of Mallarmé’s “Apparition,” published in 1894 (and therefore appearing shortly before the premiere of the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune in December of that year), opens with a tonally underdetermined accompaniment, with tremolos in major thirds (first B♭–D, then A–C♯) floating ethereally in the upper register of the piano (see example 17). Ostensibly in G minor, the opening measure is vaguely suggestive of tonic harmony, though it alternates with F-sharp minor harmony of which the C♯, emphasized in the vocal part, pulls toward D—an instance of bichordal oscillation. The ensuing ten measures do nothing to more definitively establish G minor (or, for that matter, D), instead progressing through a series of triads connected by voice leading, with no discernible connection to a governing tonic (the major third tremolos in the piano moving down by step while the voice moves up by half step). Finally, in measure 13—at the word “vaporeuses” in the text—the piano accompaniment suddenly opens up into a dreamily rolled half-diminished seventh chord on B♭, followed by a succession of nonsyntactical parallel half-diminished seventh chords all containing the common tone of D♭/C♯ (which is sustained by the singer)—a progression of chords that, even as it adds richness to the previously sparse texture, does nothing at all to orient the listener toward a tonal center. Much as in the opening of the Faune prelude, the tonally nonconfirming half-diminished seventh chord (not to mention a succession of them in parallel) thwarts musical “meaning” as understood in the context of functional harmonic syntax, but it lends a very clear meaning (in the more literal sense) to Lacroix’s setting of “Apparition”: that this is musique de rêve, music that speaks to us of Symbolist dreamworlds.41

What was so distinctive about the Prélude was that it radicalized the preexisting language of reverie in a way that was genuinely novel—not only in the domain of harmony but also in its treatment of meter, texture, and orchestral

41. Little known though he was, Lacroix, by 1894, had already acquired a modest reputation for writing musique de rêve. In 1891 the Mercure de France had printed a Symbolist prose poem by Charles Merki entitled “La mer spoliatrice,” noting that music for a reading of the poem had been composed by Lacroix. The prose poem is the very epitome of the Symbolist predilection for dreamy imagery, opening with an evocative description of its subject: “Like a vague, blue enchantment, dreamlike, the sea’s lake-like stillness stretches to infinity, under the pallid glow of a strange twilight.” Charles Merki, “Proses de décor: La mer spoliatrice,” Mercure de France, January 1891, 46–49, here 46 (“Tel qu’un enchantement vague et bleu, de rêve, la mer étend à l’infini son immobilité de lac sous la blafarde lueur d’un insolite crépuscule”). What Lacroix’s music for the occasion sounded like is unfortunately lost to the historical record, but a reviewer for the Revue des livres nouveaux, surveying recent attempts in the genre of the prose poem in 1893, praised “La mer spoliatrice” for its atmosphere of “dreams in which the soul can soothe itself, especially if one accompanies the reading with the musical accompaniment that is its complement”: Gaston d’Hailly, “Chronique,” Revue des livres nouveaux, June 1, 1893, reprinted in d’Hailly, Le Clère, and Litou, Les livres en 1893, 25:278 (“rêves dans lesquels l’âme peut se bercer, surtout si l’on peut accompagner cette lecture de l’accompagnement musical qui en est le complément”).
Example 17  Eugène Lacroix (text: Stéphane Mallarmé), “Apparition” (Paris: Gounin-Ghidone, 1894), mm. 1–18

Calme

La lune s’étirait.

Des séraphins en pleurs révant l’archet aux

dirigés, dans le calme des fleurs va pour ainsi,

pp

ppp

ppp
sonority, as Debussy exported reverie signifiers from their small-scale origins in song and piano music into a far more ambitious form. From the start, the opening flute solo—the archetype of the Debussyan “arabesque”—exhibits a fluidity uncharacteristic of the music of Debussy’s contemporaries. As Gurminder Bhogal has written, this melody’s supple, rhythmically uneven undulation from C# down to G and back—inspired, so Debussy wrote to Mallarmé, by his reading of the poem—directs the listener to attend to the decorative theme in itself rather than through a hierarchized relationship between melody and accompaniment, enabling Debussy to “do away with notions of center and periphery.”

A similar observation might be made about the interplay between “foreground” and “background”: when the woodwinds, harp, horns, and muted strings enter in measures 4–5, the texture unveils itself as a delicately crafted composite of distinct instrumental layers, with the first and third horn lines emerging out of a hazy mist of woodwind and muted string sonority.

The refined, exquisite subtlety of sensibility in these measures—reminiscent of Debussy’s later description of music, in a letter of 1907 to his publisher Jacques Durand, as “made up of colors and rhythmicized time”—already begins to suggest the ways in which Debussy’s use of reverie harmony differed from that of others in the jeune école. He does not use these harmonies for “surface-level” color over an easily discerned and more or less conventional

Example 17 continued

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</table>

42. See Lloyd, “Debussy, Mallarmé, and ‘Les Mardis.’”
43. Bhogal, Details of Consequence, 102.
44. While the Faune prelude is not as radical in this respect as some of Debussy’s later orchestral compositions, such as the Nocturnes and La mer, the layered nature of his orchestration—what Mark DeVoto describes as his “heterophonic orchestra”—is a key element of his mature style: DeVoto, “Debussy Sound,” 180–85. With respect to Debussy’s novel treatments of meter, see also Trezise, “Debussy’s ‘Rhythmicised Time.’”
45. Claude Debussy, letter to Jacques Durand, September 3, 1907, in Debussy, Correspondance, 1030: “Elle est de couleurs et de temps rythmés.”
harmonic background (as in Leroux’s “Recueillement”). Indeed, his radicality lies in large part in the extent to which his music effaces the distinction between surface-level decoration on the one hand and large-scale tonal and formal structure on the other. (Though this task was not fully achieved in the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, it had nonetheless become apparent, as attested by the many competing readings of the work’s notoriously challenging form.)

From this perspective, what most set Debussy apart from his contemporaries was that he used reverie harmony as more than a topos, more than a mere signifier of reverie; these harmonies instead became part of a style.46 But because of its aural likeness to a preexisting topos, the style was, from the outset, embedded in a complex of social meanings that Debussy himself did not create, meanings that made his music audible to its first audiences as musique de rêve. In one of the few analytical accounts of Debussy’s music from this period, Gustave Robert, in November 1895, wrote that it “has the distinguishing characteristic of being almost outside of all tonality.”47 Before going on to enumerate some of the ways in which Debussy achieved his compositional effects (including a penchant for continually modulating rather than remaining in a stable key, and almost never using a chord in its “natural state,” as a triad without added notes), Robert qualified, “it is not enough to say that he uses [these techniques]. They are known and practiced by all musicians. What is particular to M. Debussy is that he uses them constantly.”48

The Faune prelude was a turning point in Debussy’s career—not the one that would catapult him to fame and notoriety (which would occur about seven years later, with the premiere of Pelléas et Mélisande), but one that nonetheless began the process by which he pulled away from the jeune école of which he had previously been a fairly unremarkable member. It was the Faune prelude that indelibly linked Debussy’s name with Mallarmé’s and gave Debussy’s extensions and intensifications of previous

46. The question of modernism and style is a vexed one, but the case I advance here departs in important ways from accounts of Debussy’s music that have understood his modernist achievement as the transcendence or negation of style; see, for example, Goehr, “Radical Modernism.” From a very different methodological orientation, Code—though he does not foreground the issue of “style” as such—understands the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune as a harbinger of a modernism in which musical sonorosity and immediacy, indelibly associated with the past—that is, with Romanticism—give way to music as written; thus in the modernist future foretold by the Prélude, “the conventional syntax of Romantic expression, shattered by analysis, will have to be acknowledged as arbitrary”: Code, “Hearing Debussy Reading Mallarmé,” 548. My account proposes, rather, that sonorosity and immediacy were “baked into” Debussy’s style—even as that style developed into a mature modernism—in large part because of aural associations forged in the context of the reverie topos.

47. Gustave Robert, “Musique,” La revue illustrée, November 15, 1895: “La musique de M. Debussy présente cette particularité d’être presque en dehors de toute tonalité.”

48. Ibid.: “A l’emploi, ce n’est pas assez dire. Ces procédés sont connus et pratiqués de tous les musiciens. Le propre de M. Debussy est d’en faire un usage constant.”
harmonic practices—especially those associated with reverie—the hazy aura of “Symbolism.” If they belong to a “Symbolist” musical style, it is because Debussy made them so: not because he invented them from whole cloth to “correspond” to or analogize Symbolist poetic techniques, or because he was the only composer of the time to combine such harmonic techniques with a poem by Mallarmé (as evidenced by Lacroix’s setting of “Apparition”), but because he further distilled, refined, and radicalized them, elevating the reverie topos to a newly serious register of art-music culture and linking it to a Symbolist poem in a way that caught the public imagination. In April of 1895, a satire in the Mercure de France would anoint Debussy as the composer who “aspire to the heritage of Mallarmé.” Marty, on the other hand, was merely “un ébéniste”—a maker of fine cabinetry.49

There is nonetheless reason to think that reverie conventions may have persisted in Debussy’s aural imagination, even after he had consolidated the style that would make him one of the most influential composers of the twentieth century. The orchestral Nocturnes, composed between 1897 and 1899 (after he had largely completed the score for Pelléas et Mélisande), are widely recognized as a major advance in Debussy’s style and a definitive break with all that came before him; in Mark DeVoto’s words, these pieces “are arguably this composer’s farthest-reaching leap forward into the future of music.”50 Though not as well known as “Nuages,” the first of the three Nocturnes (famous for the tonally underdetermined, statically floating dyads of its opening), the third and final one, “Sirènes,” was equally daring, a piece in which, as Arthur Wenk observes, Debussy “pushed his exploration of static harmony to its limits,”51 creating what Richard Parks describes as a “het- erophonic and labyrinthine soundscape.”52 As the piece slowly winds to a close, otherworldly whole-tone harmony, pianissimo, at measure 135 (rehearsal 12) yields to a G₆ chord in measure 137, and the piece’s final iteration of a recurring whole-tone motive, “doux et expressif,” sounds in the trumpet (an echo of the same motive, a tritone lower, in the cor anglais four measures earlier) (see example 18).53 With the conclusion of the trumpet motive in measure 139, the divided strings, still pianissimo, settle into the G₆ sonority, with gentle, undulating ripples in the mezzo-soprano chorus offering the only deviation from the underlying harmony; finally, in measure 142, as the motion of the piece has almost completely stilled, the harmony transforms into the tonic B major—that is, a bVI–I cadence.

51. Wenk, Claude Debussy, 62.
53. Example 18 is transcribed from Claude Debussy, Nocturnes (Paris: Fromont, 1900).
Example 18  continued
Example 18  continued

Fl.

Hp. 1

Hp. 2

Chorus

Vn. 1

Vn. 2

Va.

Ve.

Cb.
Example 18  continued
La valse lente

My claim, then, is that crucial to understanding the emergence of Debussy’s mature style—without discounting the many ways in which this style was singular and original—is that it shared an aural world with the salon reverie. “Abstraction,” writes art historian T. J. Clark on modernist painting, “is parasitic on likeness, however much achievement in abstraction may depend on fighting that conclusion to the death.” A similar observation might be made about late nineteenth-century reveries: their ability to effectively convey the prevailing fashion for Symbolist dreamworlds was dependent on an established musical vocabulary, even as “Symbolist” adaptations of this vocabulary, in Debussy’s music above all, increasingly and purposefully distanced it from the repertoire in which such associations had been forged.

Yet to position the Faune prelude as the culmination of a simple evolution of musical reverie from lowbrow salon style to Symbolist esotericism would be to ignore a great deal of the heterogeneous soundworld of the fin de siècle—parts of which can contextualize the supposed trajectory toward Symbolism in a very different way. Not all instances of reverie harmony dating from the 1880s straightforwardly serve to invoke reverie-like atmospheres. Paul and Lucien Hillemacher’s “Ballerina,” from their collection of Vingt pièces of 1884, in F major and a mock-stately 6/4 meter, contains liberal uses of reverie harmony to project a comically grand and magisterial effect—“energico pomposo,” to cite the Hillemachers’ performance direction. The piece opens with a two-measure dominant preparation at a Lento tempo, at the end of which a rapidly ascending scale delivers us to a tonic “arrival” and a Moderato tempo in measure 3—which is, however, a tonic arrival only in the bass, with a dominant ninth chord, in grand, arpeggiated flourishes, suspended over it (see example 19). The piece revels in this sonority for two full measures before it is succeeded by an E major triad, still over the tonic pedal, finally “resolving” to a true tonic triad in measure 6. Other instances of coloristic “reverie harmony” occur throughout the piece, including occasional tonic major seventh chords (for example, in measure 13) and, in measures 19–21, a succession of seventh chords in the middle register descending almost in parallel, over a tonic pedal, to accompany a descending melodic sequence (see examples 20 and 21).

Why should a piece about a ballerina clothe itself in such harmonies—harmonies that were coming to be associated with daydream and reverie and whispered endearments in idyllic pastoral settings? The title of the piece connotes a very specific form of urban, Parisian entertainment intended for the middle and upper classes; that the Hillemachers chose to call the piece “Ballerina” rather than “Ballerine” or “Danseuse” particularizes the

54. Clark, Farewell to an Idea, 364.
Example 19  Paul and Lucien Hillemacher, “Ballerina” (Vingt pièces, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1884), mm. 1–7

Example 20  Paul and Lucien Hillemacher, “Ballerina” (Vingt pièces, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1884), mm. 12–14
piece still further, associating it with the Italian ballerinas, including Carlotta Grisi, Giuseppina Bozzacchi, and most recently Rita Sangalli, who were among the biggest stars of the Paris Opéra ballet in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Metrically, moreover, “Ballerina” evokes a topos quite different from that of reverie: the left-hand accompaniment consistently divides the notated 6/4 meter into two halves, with a repeating rhythmic pattern characteristic of a waltz. More specifically, with a tempo indication of \( q = 152 \), “Ballerina” is suggestive of a slow waltz.55

Example 21  Paul and Lucien Hillemacher, “Ballerina” (Vingt pièces, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1884), mm. 19–21

55. In a general sense, the waltz had, of course, long been fruitful material for “crossover” between the domain of popular culture and that of art-music composition. For instance, Stephen Rumph has written about the prominent waltz topic in Fauré’s 1870 mélodie “Tristesse,” the “banal popular tone” of which, he observes, “reeks of a studied indolence”: Rumph, “Fauré and the Effable,” 524. Debussy, too, would employ waltz topics in varied contexts throughout his compositional career, examples including “Harmonie du soir” from the Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire (1889) and “Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” from the first book of piano preludes (1910). On the waltz and its relationship to western European art music in the nineteenth century, see, in particular, Van der Merwe, Roots of the Classical, 238–70.

56. Waltz tempos varied widely through the nineteenth century. Derek B. Scott has observed that in the first half of the century “the tempo of the waltz altered to suit fashions in women’s dresses,” with slower tempos in the early years of the century to accommodate narrow skirts followed by faster tempos in the 1820s when fuller skirts came into fashion: Scott, Sounds of the Metropolis, 118. Faster tempos were generally associated with lower social classes, since the requisite faster twirling mandated a tighter hold on one’s partner, exceeding the limits of propriety among the aristocracy. Though metronome markings are not especially common in salon and commercial sheet music published in the 1870s, those that exist indicate that “Viennese”-style waltzes were felt in one, tempos tending to fall between \( \dot{q} = 70 \) and \( \dot{q} = 90 \). Victor Dolmetsch’s Petite valse, first published in 1878 (Paris: Alphonse Leduc) and republished in a collection of Quinze pièces two years later (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1880), contains the tempo direction “pas trop vite” coupled with a metronome marking of \( \dot{q} = 80 \), though generic salon waltzes in collections for pedagogical use (which are more likely to contain metronome markings than other varieties of sheet music) could have metronome markings as slow as \( \dot{q} = 66 \). Gatien Marcaillou’s L’art de composer et exécuter la musique légère, first published in 1852 and republished in 1887, states that the waltz should be played at \( \dot{q} = 76 \): Marcaillou, L’art de composer, 10. Even at the slower end, these tempos are somewhat faster than Viennese-style waltzes in international ballroom dancing today. Current tempo standards for the slow waltz (or “English waltz”) in ballroom dancing, at \( \dot{q} = 30 \), are likewise slower than “slow waltzes” composed in the 1870s and 1880s. The orchestral suite from Delibes’s Sylvia, published in 1876 (see further below), contains a metronome marking of \( \dot{q} = 42 \) for the “Valse lente.” Dolmetsch’s
The *valse lente* was, in fact, a popular feature of Parisian ballet at the time, pioneered by Léo Delibes—a composer who began his career writing for boulevard theaters—in the ballet *Sylvia*, premiered in 1876 at the newly opened Palais Garnier.\(^{57}\) A story of forbidden love between a nymph and a shepherd in classical Arcadia, *Sylvia* was written for Sangalli, who danced the title role; publicity for the ballet (which was included in the published score) depicted Sangalli on a swing made of flowered vines, reclining and looking dreamily into the distance (see figure 1). Though *Sylvia* did not elicit resounding praise from the Opéra *abonnés* (partly on account of problems with the staging), Delibes’s music was well received by the Parisian press, the first-act *valse lente* in particular garnering accolades.\(^ {58}\) Danced by Sangalli and set in a moonlit forest, the *valse lente* was accompanied by a harp playing on downbeats and on beat 3 of every other measure (and of every measure later in the piece), over which violins played a delicate melody (see example 22). A reviewer for *Le Figaro* observed that “the *valse lente* danced by Sangalli has the charm of dreamy melodies—a songbird trailing her tired wings!”\(^ {59}\) H. Moreno (the pseudonym of Henri Heugel) noted in *Le ménestrel*, “Finally, a melody in triple time, made up of charming sighs and indolent accents, which the author titles ‘valse lente’”—a formulation indicative of the novelty of the *valse lente* at the time.\(^ {60}\) (Moreno went on to castigate salon dancers “for whom nothing is sacred” and who “will have no scruples in hastening the tempo of the *valse lente*, which will become a very pretty *valse rapide*.”)\(^ {61}\) Three years later, on the occasion of a performance of an orchestral suite from *Sylvia*, *Le Figaro*’s Auguste Vitu admired “the delicate, almost moonlit music” of the ballet and singled out the “chastely voluptuous rhythm” of the *valse lente*, which he pronounced a masterpiece.\(^ {62}\) As late as 1894, Adolphe Jullien still recalled the “exquisite languor” of *Sylvia*’s *valse lente*.\(^ {63}\)  

1880 collection of *Quinze pièces* contains a “Valse lente” with a tempo marking of \(\dot{\omega} = 44\). The Hillemachers’ own *Vingt pièces* also includes a “Valse lente” (see below) with the instruction “tempo di valser lento,” specified as a slightly faster \(\dot{\omega} = 56\)—about the same tempo as “Ballerina” (approximately \(\dot{\omega} = 51\)).\(^ {57}\) Though Delibes did not ascend through the same channels as other “serious” art-music composers, his music was heard, as Pasler has observed, as the embodiment of a quintessentially French grace and clarity in the 1860s and 1870s: Pasler, *Composing the Citizen*, 377–83.  

On the premiere of *Sylvia*, see Guest, “*Sylvia.*”  

Bénédict [pseud.], “Opéra,” *Le Figaro*, June 16, 1876: “La ‘valse lente’ dansée par la Sangalli, a le charme des mélodies rêveuses; c’est un oiseau chanteur qui traîne ses ailes fatiguées!”  

H. Moreno [Henri Heugel], “Semaine théatrale,” *Le ménestrel*, June 25, 1876, 235–36, here 235: “Enfin une mélodie à trois temps, faite de charmantes langueurs, de paresseux accents, que l’auteur intitule *valse lente*.”  

Ibid.: “nos danseurs de salon, pour lesquels rien n’est sacré . . . ne se feront aucun scrupule de presser le mouvement de la valse lente, qui deviendra une fort jolie valse rapide.”  


Delibes’s *valse lente* thus took the dance most emblematic of nineteenth-century urban entertainment, slowed it down, and transposed it into a dreamy, Arcadian setting, one entirely in keeping with the aesthetic of reveries and idylls. After *Sylvia*, other composers began to include *valses lentes* in ballets and other theatrical works. Charles-Marie Widor’s ballet *La korrigane*, premiered in 1880, contained a *valse lente* in its second act, described as “delicious” by Moreno in *Le ménestrel* and “full of charm and poetry” by D. Magnus in *Gil Blas*. Édouard Lalo’s unorthodox ballet *Namouna*, premiered at the Opéra in 1882, included a *valse lente* danced by Sangalli;

### Figure 1
Poster for the ballet *Sylvia* featuring ballerina Rita Sangalli. Lithograph by Antonin-Marie Chatinière (1876). Used by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Example 22  Léo Delibes, *Sylvia, ou La nymphe de Diane*, act 1, “Valse lente” (piano score, Paris: Heugel, 1876), mm. 1–13

Johannes Weber, writing in *Le temps*, described the piece as “distinguished and graceful.”

The act 2 finale of Robert Planquette’s *opéra-comique* Rip, first performed in Paris in 1884 (after an earlier London premiere of the

English-language version in 1882), included a short valse lente, coming just after Rip van Winkle drinks the wine that sends him into a decades-long slumber; the number was praised by Vitu in Le Figaro for its “mysterious and, as it were, twilit color.” A fairy-tale ballet produced at the Folies Bergère in 1887, Le château de Mac-Arrot, with music by Henri Cieutat, used a valse lente as the pas de deux for the ballet’s lovers, a piece chosen as publicity for the ballet in Le Figaro’s music supplement.

The Hillemachers’ “Ballerina” might be considered to be in dialogue with the valse lente as it emerged from Parisian ballet—as a kind of parody, perhaps, of a valse lente as performed by Sangalli. The piece is evocative not only of the tempo and meter of valses lentes, but also—with its overabundance of rolled chords—of the harps that tended to accompany them. (Widor’s valse lente in La korrigane, like Delibes’s in Sylvia, was accompanied by harps throughout, rendered as rolled chords in the piano reduction.) Like the accompaniment in Sylvia’s valse lente, moreover, the rolled chords in “Ballerina” consistently articulate beats 1 and 3 of each half of each 6/4 measure.

The valse lente became increasingly popular in the years following the premiere of Sylvia, and was commonly used as fodder for salon and commercial sheet music—beginning with the “Valse lente” from Sylvia itself, which was published in multiple arrangements following the premiere of the ballet, first in Delibes’s own two-hand piano arrangement and subsequently (often paired with the similarly popular “Pizzicatti” variation from the ballet’s finale) in arrangements by other composers. Many of the period’s most successful and prolific “salon” composers wrote valses lentes: Victor Dolmetsch’s Quinze pièces pour le piano, published in 1880 (Paris: Alphonse Leduc) included one, as did Raoul Pugno’s 1882 Trois airs de ballet, drawn from his fairy-tale ballet La fée cocotte (Paris: Heugel). Salon composers Francis Chassaigne, M. Husson, Antonin Marmontel, and Émile Bourgeois all wrote valses lentes. In 1883 Le Figaro even published a valse lente “by

66. Auguste Vitu, “Premières représentations,” Le Figaro, November 12, 1884: “couleur mystérieuse et pour ainsi dire crépusculaire.” The original English-language version that premiered in London, titled Rip van Winkle, did not include the valse lente, which was presumably added for the Parisian performances.

67. Le Figaro, July 6, 1887.

68. Delibes’s own piano arrangement of the entire ballet was published in 1876 by Heugel, who also concurrently published his arrangements of the “Valse lente” and the “L’escarpolette” movements separately. In the same year, Heugel also published a four-hand piano arrangement of the complete ballet and a shorter suite (which of course included the popular “Pizzicatti”) by Renaud de Vilbac. Other piano arrangements of the “Valse lente” by Alexandre Croisé (1880, with the “Pizzicatti”), A. Trojedli (1882), and L. Girard (1883) soon followed, as well as transcriptions for piano and flute (Paul Taffanel, 1880), piano and violin (M. Marsick, 1881), and piano and cello (Ad. Fischer, 1883). All were published by Heugel.

Mozart” that had ostensibly been recently rediscovered in Strasbourg (and that, though fairly tame in its harmonic language, nonetheless sounds far too much like the Parisian salon to have plausibly been written by Mozart). More broadly, many waltzes that were not explicitly presented as valse lente began to direct performers toward slower tempos; the first of Pugno’s Deux valse of 1884 (Paris: Heugel), for example, though not labeled “valse lente,” has a tempo of “Mouvement assez lent” with a performance indication of “très expressif.”

Furthermore, though the idea of a valse lente was a novelty when Sylvia premiered in 1876—leading the reviewer for Le ménestrel to surmise that Delibes’s waltz would speed up such that it could be danced in the salons—slower waltzes began to infiltrate salon and ballroom dancing in Paris in the early to mid-1880s, releasing the “slow waltz” from its previously exclusive association with ballet. Advertisements for instruction in the steps of the slower “Boston waltz” began to appear in Parisian newspapers in 1883 (see figure 2), and the dance steadily ascended in popularity thereafter. In Jean Lorrain’s 1885 collection of poetry Modernités, the slow waltz was a stand-in for marital indiscretion: the poem “Valse lente” recounts a conversation at a ball between an upper-class woman (“thin and blonde, in pale blue satin” and bedecked in diamonds) and her jealous husband, who complains about

![Figure 2](image-url)
having to watch her waltz with other men: “That a husband should witness his wife’s slow waltzes!”

The Hillemachers’ collection of *Vingt pièces*, in addition to the pompously grand “Ballerina,” contains another piece suggestive of the dreamy connotations that were becoming attached to the *valse lente*, one that they in fact explicitly titled “Valse lente,” the style of which conjures not the overwrought drama of the ballet stage but the intimate space of the salon. The piece opens at a *pianissimo* dynamic, with the left hand outlining a simple waltz pattern—a pattern curiously defamiliarized by a bass that, beginning on scale degree 1, moves by step down to scale degree 6 and back, with incomplete tonic harmonies suspended above it (see example 23). A delicate but somewhat aimless, floating melody begins on the anacrusis to measure 6; largely avoiding the tonic scale degree, this ethereal melody does little to reinforce the weak sense of D major established by the harmony, and the circling bass line, detached from the static tonic sonorities in the middle register, forestalls any sense of tonal teleology. Even after introducing more harmonies from measure 14, the piece assiduously avoids dominants for almost the entirety of the first twenty-eight measures (the only suggestion of dominant function, though still lacking a leading tone, is a v\(^7\) of iii in measure 20), before a cadential six-four in measure 29 prepares a dominant eleventh chord in measure 30 that resolves to the tonic to close off the piece’s A section. While largely avoiding dominants, “Valse lente” does not avoid seventh chords, which, in the context of the aimlessly wandering harmonies, are used purely for color: a passing vi\(^7\) sonority in the opening tonic prolongation, a recurring iii\(^4\) through measures 22–26, a tonic major seventh chord in measure 23, and a suggestion of an A major seventh in measure 19 (taking into account the prominent G\(^\#\) in the melody).

While very different in their overall effect, then, both “Ballerina” and “Valse lente” rely on harmonies that were just then becoming linked with the dreamy soundworld of reverie. But the seventh chords in “Valse lente” and the complex vertical sonorities of “Ballerina” can also be understood as exaggerations or elaborations of existing conventions associated with *valses lentes*. Slow waltzes of the early 1880s tended to revel somewhat more than their faster counterparts in dissonances and accented nonchord tones, their opening phrases often beginning with a nonchord tone on the downbeat in the melody. The first melodic phrase of Chassaigne’s *Valse lente* opens with \(^\#\) on the downbeat over tonic harmony (see example 24); in the first of Pugno’s *Deux valses*, the middle section begins with subdominant harmony (A major), with the melody landing on an added sixth (F\(^\#\)) on the downbeat (see example 25); and the first downbeat of the melody in Bourgeois’s *Valse lente*, after a two-beat anacrusis, is a leading tone, generating the impression

Example 23  Paul and Lucien Hillemacher, “Valse lente” (Vingt pièces, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1884), mm. 1–31
Example 24  Francis Chassaigne, *Valse lente* (Paris: E. Beauvois, 1882), mm. 15–30

of a tonic major seventh chord that is subsequently repeated in the next measure (see example 26). *Valses lentes* also often embellished their melodies with chromatic motion in the inner voices, as in the opening phrase of the first of Pugno’s *Deux valses* (see example 27) and the B section of Dolmetsch’s “*Valse lente*” (see example 28)—much like the Hillemachers in, for example, measure 7 of “*Ballerina*” (see example 19; the ascending parallel chromatic motion in the middle register from a major-minor seventh to a fully diminished seventh chord occurs throughout the piece).

Even if slow waltzes tended somewhat more toward these techniques than other waltzes, they can all be found in the broader waltz repertoire of the time (many of them, as Peter van der Merwe has argued, the result of melody that was becoming increasingly independent of accompaniment in late nineteenth-century popular music, generating sonorities like major

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**Example 26** Émile Bourgeois, *Valse lente*, op. 15 (Paris: Durand, 1887), mm. 7–18

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**Example 27** Raoul Pugno, “*Mouvement assez lent*” (*Deux valses*, Paris: Heugel, 1884), mm. 1–4
seventh and added-sixth chords that do not resolve by traditional means). The insight of the composers of \textit{valses lentes} was that many of the distinctive aspects of what I have called “reverie harmony” already existed embryonically in the waltz; all that was needed to transform them into the sound of “delicious” daydream was to play them more slowly. The sound of reverie as it began to develop in the mid-1880s was not, in other words, entirely native to reveries and idylls: it was in part borrowed from, and evolved in tandem with, the soundworld of the waltz, and particularly of the slow waltz. The harmonies of “Ballerina” and “Valse lente” make this indebtedness particularly clear, as the Hillemachers took techniques that were already associated with the dreamy, in-vogue \textit{valse lente} and ratcheted up the “deliciousness” of the chords for comedic effect (in “Ballerina”) or further exaggerated their capacity to generate an aimless dreaminess (in “Valse lente”). (At the same time, the \textit{valse lente} took on some of the characteristic tendencies of reveries; for instance, the \textit{valse lente} in Widor’s \textit{La korrigane} ends with a $b\text{VI}–b\text{I}$ resolution over a tonic pedal, as does Chassaigne’s 1882 \textit{valse lente}, while a \textit{valse lente} published in 1887 by J. de Cor-de-Lass (Paris: A. Michael, M. Rosen & cie) ends with a $b\text{VI}–\text{I}$ punctuating cadence.)

The Hillemachers, to be sure, were an anomaly: their slow waltzes do not sound like other examples of the genre. But their play with the \textit{valse lente} reveals—as play often does—an aesthetic kinship that otherwise remains covert, a kinship that would recede entirely from audibility through the second

half of the 1880s and into the 1890s as the reverie topos became ever more aligned with the rarefied aesthetic of modernist poetry. Both “Ballerina” and “Valse lente” dabble in methods of arresting the forward motion of tonal harmony that would later become hallmarks of Symbolist haze—“Ballerina” by accumulating vertical sonority and thereby scrambling straightforward tonal function (for example, with suspensions of dominants over tonic pedal points), “Valse lente” by avoiding dominants altogether, instead using seventh chords (largely minor sevenths) that do not generate expectation of a resolution.

One might be tempted to think that such techniques are indicative of an incipient proto-modernism, works that point toward later developments in the music of Satie and Debussy. The arresting of the forward direction of tonal harmony has, after all, always ranked among the most significant of these developments. Despite the eventual capitulation to a more or less conventional cadential formula in measures 29–31 of “Valse lente” (and again at the end), it is difficult to believe that Satie had not heard this piece when he began to write his Gymnopédies in 1887—compositions that, notwithstanding the pseudo-antique aura conjured by their titles, are essentially valse lentes, reproducing one of the genre’s standard accompanimental patterns. (Further reinforcing the similarity, the Hillemachers’ “Valse lente,” like Satie’s Gymnopédies, maintains the same accompaniment and melody throughout, the only point of contrast in the piece’s B section being a tonal shift flatward.) As for Debussy, in 1882 he had attempted to pass off the Hillemachers’ setting of Sully-Prodhomme’s “Ici-bas,” from their recently published second volume of Vingt mélodies, as his own composition; at the very least he was aware of their music, and perhaps, as a very young composer, he even had ambitions to emulate their accessible post-Massenet style, characterized by the gently soft-focus harmonies that were becoming associated with the reverie topos.

74. “Ici-bas” was one of two songs that the young Achille copied and, on different occasions, presented as his own compositions; the other was Émile Pessard’s “Chanson d’un fou” from his joyeusetés de bonne compagnie of 1873, a bawdy song about the allure of different categories of women. Discussing Debussy’s pretended authorship of Pessard’s song, devised to trick his friend Paul Vidal in 1879, Clevenger dismisses the subterfuge as a childish prank, since the “entirely conventional” harmonic style could have held little interest for Debussy; he concludes that Debussy committed the deception “in jest, not as a dishonest means of bolstering his image as a nascent composer”: Clevenger, “Origins of Debussy’s Style,” 921; see also Vidal, “Souvenirs d’Achille Debussy.” While Clevenger’s charitable reading may hold for “Chanson d’un fou,” “Ici-bas” (which Clevenger does not discuss) is somewhat different case. It had a text by a serious modern poet that had been set by other respected composers of the time (notably Fauré, in his opus 8); moreover, it was not part of the prank involving Vidal. (Vidal makes no mention of “Ici-bas” in his “Souvenirs,” and the Hillemachers’ Vingt mélodies, in which “Ici-bas” appeared, was not published until 1882.) François Lesure dates Debussy’s plagiarism of “Ici-bas” to his time with the von Meck family: Lesure, Claude Debussy, 39. “Ici-bas” is also less strictly “conventional” in the sense intended by Clevenger in characterizing “Chanson d’un
And yet, to focus on the Hillemachers, or any composers of 1880s reveries, as forerunners of a Debussyan (or Satiean) modernism is perhaps somewhat beside the point. The harmonies in “Ballerina” and “Valse lente” that avoid and weaken the dynamism inherent in dominant function were not additions grafted onto the underlying waltz; they wereaurally recognizable as extensions and exaggerations of the idiom of the waltz itself. In the soundworld of the 1880s, in other words, such harmonies were distinctly modern—indeed, were a sonic emblem of urban modernity—but by virtue of the very social meanings that assured their modernity, they could not be modernist, at least as that term has been understood to apply to Debussy’s mature style.75

Indeed, however dreamy in character it may have been, the valse lente was ultimately antithetical to the aesthetic precepts underlying Symbolism: the waltz was the commercial product of a very recent incarnation of urban modernity, one in which a manufactured aesthetic of dream, reverie, and romance was inseparable from the site of its manufacture in modern, urban spaces. Robert Cazin’s short story “Figure de poudre de riz” (Rice powder face), serialized in the Revue illustrée in 1896, foregrounds the slow waltz as an agent of modern disenchantment. Recounting an upper-class evening’s entertainment, its prose is minutely attentive to material details of the décor, the women’s clothing, and above all, the lighting. At the beginning of the story, supper has just ended, in rooms with “little restaurant tables” that,

fou”; while by no means shocking in its harmonic language, it nonetheless relies considerably on enriched harmonies (with the use of nonchord tones especially) and is not dissimilar in style to the songs that Debussy himself was writing at the time. Both “Chanson d’un fou” and “Ici-bas” were published under Debussy’s name as late as the 1930s.

75 The complex relationship between “modernism” and “modernity” has been a recurring topic of interest in literary and film studies; see, for example, Mao and Walkowitz, “New Modernist Studies,” and Friedman, “Definitional Excursions.” The understanding of “Ballerina” and “Valse lente” presented above, however, cuts against the grain of the common account of Debussyan modernism in which certain formal innovations—most notably the phenomenon of parallel seventh and ninth chords, typically traced in a neat lineage from Chabrier to Satie and then Debussy—are isolated from the musical contexts in which they initially appeared; see, for example, Taruskin, Oxford History, 4:59–72. Yet this narrative was itself an invention of modernism, already solidly in place by 1907; see Calvocoressi, “Les ‘Histoires naturelles.’” To isolate the parallel seventh or ninth chord as an abstracted formal innovation—often, as in Taruskin’s account, characterized as a direct response to Wagner, an attempt to deflate the metaphysical pomposity with which Wagner had invested dominant function—is to disregard the extent to which these innovations appeared in an aural culture in which freer treatments of seventh and ninth chords, especially in “popular” registers of culture, were becoming more and more widespread. The proliferation of such sonorities necessarily conditioned composers’ musical imaginations and contextualized the way in which audiences would have heard the more “radical” parallel sevenths that began to appear in the late 1880s. (At least for early audiences of Chabrier’s parallel sevenths in the overture to Le roi malgré lui of 1887, this does not seem to have been a particularly noteworthy development; the parallel sevenths were not remarked upon in any reviews of the opera in the Parisian press.)
in the light of lamps with pink paper shades, “looked like a fête galante.”

The focus of the opening scene, however, is the ballroom, lit not with the rosy lights of the restaurant tables but with the white light of electric bulbs from overhead chandeliers—a room “brilliant with lights, in which the music and dance spoke of love and pleasure. In an atmosphere of soft nuances, the crystals of the chandeliers sparkled on the ceiling tiles.”

The title character, Bijou, is a pale girl “with the pretty nose of a young Jewess, and the young mouth of a pretty girl,” “blonde, made up entirely of pale and vaporous nuances, in the piercing clarity of the electric lights.” The male protagonist of the story is a sad, earnest poet named Engel, who does not seem to belong in the modern world; we first encounter him accompanying himself at the piano, singing a naive but strangely touching melody: “While the poet, as though in a dream, relived the ingenuous ideas of his soul and the pains of his life, the men and women listening to him forgot that they were jaded, and something spoke in them.” Engel is nonetheless awed by the beautiful Bijou and tries to waltz with her. She stops him almost immediately, complaining that he does not know how to dance, and she soon finds another partner.

“The waltz continued noiselessly over a fine Persian carpet—the Boston waltz, stepping, gliding, with the obsession of an incessant back-and-forth; turning and turning again, slowly, sweetly; enveloping, and decorating the music with lively arabesques; a white waltz, cold and perverse, like flirtation.”

Bijou—marked as Jewish, another coded symbol of a suspect urban modernity—had not wanted to dance with Engel because he did not know the slow Boston waltz; his only knowledge of the waltz came from the village fair in act 2 of Faust, which he had seen at the Opéra and had once tried to imitate. Instead, Engel watches Bijou dance with a younger, more fashionable man who knows the steps of the fashionable, slower waltz. As he watches, “Bijou’s partner, forgetting himself, leaned on her a little, such that

76. Cazin, “Figure de poudre de riz,” 106: “les petites tables de restaurant, qui... prenaient un air de fête galante, à la lumière des menus abat-jour de papier rose.”
77. Ibid., 110: “cette salle de fête, ensoleillée de lumières, où la musique et la danse parlaient d’amour et de plaisir. Dans une atmosphère de nuances douces, les cristaux des lustres étincelaient aux lambris du plafond.”
78. Ibid., 109: “avec un joli nez de jeune Juive, et une jeune bouche de jolie fille”; “blonde et toute en nuances pâles et vaporeuses, dans la clarté pénétrante des lumières électriques.”
79. Ibid., 108: “Pendant que le poète, comme en rêve, revivait les idées ingénues de son âme et les peines de sa vie, les hommes et les femmes qui l’écouteaient ne savaient plus qu’ils étaient blasés, et quelque chose parlait en eux.”
80. Ibid., 110: “La valse allait sans bruit, sur un fin tapis de Perse, la valse-boston, marchée, glissée, avec l’obsession d’un va-et-vient incessant; tournant et détournant, lentement, doucement; enveloppante, et dessinant la musique en arabesques vivantes; valse blanche, froide et perverse comme le flirt.”
the young man’s soft and almost transparent shirt pressed lightly on the young girl’s breast; she was no longer thinking about anything, ever chasing after her pale virgin’s dream . . . in the enchantment of the music and the dazzling brilliance of the white lights.”

Modernism and Schmaltz

Incapable of assimilation into the ethos of an emerging modernism, the valse lente took a very different trajectory from the Symbolist transformations of musical reverie that were taking hold in the compositions of the jeune école. A contest for amateur composers announced in Le Figaro musical in September 1892 aptly illustrates this divergence. The composition in question, which the announcement dubbed a “valse chantée,” was to be a setting of a poem by Armand Silvestre entitled “La valse des étoiles,” printed in the same issue. A text quite literally about stars waltzing in the heavens, its first two stanzas alone invoke nearly every saccharine cliché of nocturnal poetry (nightingales, exhaling flowers, stars, dream, dance), written from the perspective of a lovelorn, heartbroken narrator:

Dans la nuit s’éteignaient les bruits et les couleurs.
Du rossignol la lointaine cadence
Montait, mêlée à l’haleine des fleurs.
Et je vis dans mes yeux en pleurs,
Les étoiles entrer en danse.

En un étrange tourbillon
S'enlaçant, entre elles, sans trève,
Elles emportaient au sillon
De leurs pas mon âme et mon rêve.
Elles valsaient, valsaient toujours,
Et, de leur valse enchantéresse,
Partageant la rythmique ivresse,
J’oubliais mes tristes amours!

81. Ibid., 111: “Et le danseur de Bijou, oubliant d’être compassé, la pressait un peu, de sorte que la chemise molle et presque transparente du jeune homme s’appuyait légèrement sur le décolletage de la jeune fille, qui ne pensait plus à rien, courant toujours après son rêve de vierge pâle . . . dans l’enchantement des musiques et dans l’éblouissement des lumières blanches.”

82. Le Figaro musical was an offshoot of the large-circulation daily Le Figaro that published sheet music for home music making.
rose up, mingled with the exhalations of the flowers.
And, in my tearful eyes, I saw
the stars begin to dance.

Entwined together
in a strange whirling without respite,
they bore my soul and my dream
along the path of their steps.
They waltzed, forever waltzed,
and, intoxicated by the rhythm
of their bewitching waltz,
I forgot my sad loves!

Selected from among ninety-six submissions, the winner of the contest was a
Mme M. Schloss, whose composition was printed in the December issue;
the second-prize winner, Alfred Delbruck, had his waltz printed the follow-
ing January. Both compositions take liberal advantage of conventional signi-
fiers of reverie. The introduction to Schloss’s “Valse des étoiles” begins with
rolled chords in the piano accompaniment, after which the piano takes up
quicksilver descending arpeggios—standard reverie fare (see example 29).
The waltz largely remains on the more high-minded and dignified side of

Example 29 M. Schloss, “La valse des étoiles” (Le Figaro musical, December 1892), mm. 1–6
reverie conventions, however, conveying the topos mainly through texture rather than with indulgent harmonies. Though Schloss borrows a few common characteristics of waltz melodies, such as chromatic neighbor tones, the piece generally avoids the harmonic clichés associated with popular waltzes, and is directed to be played in standard waltz tempo (see example 30).

Delbruck, on the other hand, labeled his waltz “Valse lente” and leaned heavily into many of the most clichéd tropes of the genre. The first four measures of the valse lente in Delbruck’s piece (mm. 25–28) prominently emphasize scale degree 7 as a nonchord tone over tonic harmony (see example 31). Delbruck was fond of embellishing his voice leading with chromatic “passes” in inner voices, as well as crooning chromatic motion in the melody, such as a descent from ♭6 through ♯5 to rest on ♭5 in measures 8–9 of the piece’s introduction (see example 32). At the same time, he made fuller use than Schloss of harmonies characteristic of the reverie topos—coloristic uses of seventh chords (especially vi7) and an overabundance of nonchord tones on downbeats. In measures 141–43, rolled chords in the accompaniment generate quintessential “reverie” harmonies. First a ninth and an eleventh are suspended over dominant harmony,

Example 30  M. Schloss, “La valse des étoiles” (Le Figaro musical, December 1892), mm. 19–26
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Example 31 Alfred Delbruck, “La valse des étoiles” (Le Figaro musical, January 1893), mm. 25–32

Example 32 Alfred Delbruck, “La valse des étoiles” (Le Figaro musical, January 1893), mm. 8–9
“resolving” down to a $V^7$ chord on the third beat of measure 142 (as C and E♭ move down to B♭ and D; see example 33); in the following measure, the bass delivers an arrival on the tonic E-flat, while Ds in the right-hand chord on beat 2 create a momentary, incidental tonic seventh sonority that subsequently resolves down to a tonic added-sixth chord on beat 3. Delbruck ends his waltz with the most familiar of all reverie conventions: as the tempo slows dramatically (“Beaucoup plus lentement”), the harmony progresses from IV to ii$^6$ to I, with the final $i_6$ resolution foregrounded in the upper voice of the accompaniment (see example 34).

Delbruck’s “Valse des étoiles” attests that the sound of the valse lente and that of the popular language of reverie were, to the 1890s ear, still close to one another. But this valse chantée is something quite different from both the popular waltzes published in droves through the 1880s and the Hillemachers’ playful commentaries on them in “Ballerina” and “Valse lente.” As a setting of a poetic text (prefaced by a recitative-like introduction) and clearly not intended to accompany dancing, Delbruck’s “Valse des étoiles” does not properly belong in the realm of popular entertainment; neither does it knowingly comment on the conventions of popular entertainment, as the Hillemachers’ compositions do. Though composed only eight years after the publication of the Hillemachers’ Vingt pièces, “Valse des étoiles” speaks to a different moment in the history of the reverie topos, one in which the distinctive sound-world of reverie had separated from the waltz, having become ever more saturated with enriched harmonies and increasingly associated with the hermeticism of Symbolist poetry in the music of the jeune école. Delbruck’s valse chantée was, in effect, reimporting reverie conventions—that is, elements of the reverie topos that developed as it became independent of the sound of the popular valse lente—back into a waltz idiom, capitalizing on their newly Symbolist associations in order to render a text about nightingales, dreams, and waltzing stars.

Example 33  Alfred Delbruck, “La valse des étoiles” (Le Figaro musical, January 1893), mm. 141–44
In other words, it was precisely as art-music composers, Debussy foremost among them, were radicalizing the reverie topos, converting it into modernism, that musicians in a different stratum of Parisian culture were
converting it into something like schmaltz. More than that: the two were intimately intertwined. In 1893, Debussy wrote a letter to Ernest Chausson complaining that music should be a “hermetical science, protected by texts that require long and difficult interpretation, such that it would discourage the herd of people who use music with the flippancy with which they use a handkerchief.”

He went on to propose a “Society of Musical Esotericism”—a phrase that is often invoked to illustrate his elitist tendencies and his deliberate detachment from the commercial musical culture around him. Equally revealing of Debussy’s diagnosis of his compositional situation, though, is the (less frequently quoted) paragraph immediately preceding the sentence quoted above: “Just as [Henri de Régnier] spoke to me about certain words of the French language that have become tarnished through too frequent use by the ugly world [vilain monde], I was thinking to myself that it was the same for certain chords whose sonority has been made common [banalisée] in music for export.” Debussy does not specify what these chords are, chords “whose sonority has been made common.” I suspect, however, that it was precisely the chords that, by 1893, had become staples of the reverie topos: added-sixth chords, coloristic uses of seventh, ninth, and eleventh chords, dominant thirteenth chords, and so on—chords that could now be heard in compositions as lowly as Delbruck’s “Valse des étoiles.” But these chords were, of course, likewise characteristic of Debussy’s own music in the early 1890s; they are the very chords that, still today, we continue to associate with an “impressionist” or “Debussyan” style.

The letter to Chausson captures a truth about music in a world defined by consumer capitalism that Claude Debussy was perhaps one of the first composers of the Western art-music tradition to recognize: that the esoteric, the hermetic, is always in danger of becoming the vulgar, assimilated to the debased taste of the “vilain monde.” In such a world, the task of modernism—the task that Debussy set himself as he began to forge his mature style—was to create a kind of art that could not become subject to “banalisation,” an

83. Claude Debussy, letter to Ernest Chausson, September 3, 1893, in Debussy, Correspondance, 144: “Vraiment la Musique aurait dû être une science hermétique, gardée par des textes d’une interprétation tellement longue et difficile qu’elle aurait certainement découragé le troupeau de gens qui s’en servent avec la désinvolture que l’on met à se servir d’un mouchoir de poche!”

84. See, for example, Michel Faure on the Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire: “[Debussy] want only a limited run of 150 copies, on luxury paper! Debussy does not care at all about the money he could make from these melodies. His goal is to be exceptional”: Faure, Histoire et poétique, 144 (“[Debussy] ne veut qu’un tirage limité à cent cinquante exemplaires, sur papier de luxe! Debussy ne se soucie aucunement de l’argent que ces mélodies pourraient lui rapporter. Son ambition est d’être rare”).

85. Debussy, Correspondance, 144: “Comme [Henri de Régnier] me parlait de certains mots de la langue française dont l’or s’était terni à trop fréquenter du vilain monde, je pensais en moi-même qu’il en était de même pour certain accords dont la sonorité s’est banalisée dans des musiques d’exportations.”
kind of art that no amount of familiarity and repetition would make pleasing to the petit bourgeois consumer. Debussyan modernism and Delbruckian schmaltz are thus doubly bound to one another, because they share a common set of stylistic antecedents in the reveries and valses lentes of the 1880s, and because the impulse to create a hermetic, modernist style was spurred at least in part by a reaction against the banalisation of reverie in schmaltz. It is in this respect, perhaps, that Debussy was at his most Symbolist: in the conviction that the stylistic idiom of true art should be separate from that of the vilain monde, just as Mallarmé had insisted on making his poetic language difficult and inscrutable in order to distinguish it from the language of gossip columns.

Yet long after debussysme had become the widely recognized sound of French modernism, Debussy himself would undertake a valse lente (or a parody of one). La plus que lente—the “slower than slow” waltz, or, in Roy Howat’s formulation, “the slow waltz outwaltzed” —was composed in 1910 and published as a music supplement in Le Figaro in August of that year. The piece did not make much of an impression on the musical press; Gaston Carraud, writing in La liberté, commented merely that it “should be understood as a mediocre joke.”

Carraud in this instance was being more “Debussyan” than Debussy. La plus que lente turns on its head the system of musical values that Debussy’s own music had been instrumental in establishing in French high-art culture: it makes audible the easy, charming coexistence of Debussyan harmonies with the popular idiom of the valse lente that, earlier in his career, Debussy had scrupulously avoided. La plus que lente, true to its name, abounds in typical waltz fare. The piece’s “hook,” introduced in the opening measures, 88. Notably, the vilain monde for Debussy (as for other bohemian artists of the time) was not constituted by the lower classes—which were invested with a kind of gritty authenticity—but by the petite bourgeoisie, an artifact of the reorientation of Parisian social life and the emergence of the “nouvelles couches sociales” (in Léon Gambetta’s famous coinage) in the later years of the nineteenth century; see Sick, “Le concept de classes moyennes.”
87. As Andreas Huyssen has observed, “Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture”: Huyssen, After the Great Divide, vii.
89. Le Figaro, August 7, 1910.
91. Debussy had, admittedly, composed a Valse romantique in 1890 (published the following year by Choudens), likely inspired by Chabrier’s Trois valses romantiques for two pianos of 1880. Debussy’s waltz, however, at a standard waltz tempo, is stylistically suggestive of waltzes by Chopin and bears little resemblance to popular salon waltzes of the time (which is perhaps what the designation “romantique” was meant to convey). Though it slips into a somewhat more “Debussyan” (or, perhaps more aptly, Chabrier-esque) idiom in measure 27—coinciding with a performance direction of “Tempo rubato”—this rubato section likewise avoids the melodic and harmonic clichés associated with valses lentes of the 1880s.
is a melody that consistently lands on scale degree 7 on downbeats over tonic harmony in the bass—a familiar sonority in *valses lentes* (see, for instance, example 26), though Debussy, flatting 3, fills out his harmony with a tonic minor-major seventh chord rather than the more common major seventh (see example 35). Alongside its popular waltz features, the piece is infused with a distinctively Debussyan idiom throughout, sprinkled with passages that one would not expect to hear in a popular salon waltz, such as progressions of ascending parallel seventh chords in measures 86–88 and 94–96 (see example 36). But Debussy ends *La plus que lente* with the most clichéd trick in the book. The tempo slowing to “Plus lent,” the bass descends by step as the harmony searchingly progresses through an F-flat dominant ninth chord and then an E-double-flat dominant seventh, finally landing on the “right” dominant—a D-flat seventh—in measure 138, which resolves to G-flat on the downbeat of measure 140 (see example 37). In the remaining nine measures of the piece, over a tonic pedal (and as the tempo slows still further), the tenor voice performs a chromatic descent in octaves, beginning with 7 in measure 140 (generating a I7 sonority, the last of many throughout the piece) and ending with a 9–5 resolution in measures 145–46; though the 9 in this case is, curiously, notated as #5 (perhaps to avoid a double flat), the aural cue is unmistakable.93


93. Concluding a piece with a chromatic descent in an inner voice, often starting from 7, after the final authentic cadence was not uncommon in the repertoire of 1880s reveries. The
Example 36  Claude Debussy, *La plus que lente*, mm. 94–97

Example 37  Claude Debussy, *La plus que lente*, mm. 132–48
According to the violinist Arthur Hartmann, writing for *Musical America* in 1930, Debussy played *La plus que lente* for him shortly after composing it in 1910.94 (Debussy’s enthusiasm for the piece, in Hartmann’s recollection, contrasted with the reaction of his wife, Emma, for whom mention of the piece occasioned “a faint smile of derision.”) The impulse for writing it, Hartmann relates, was Debussy’s “discovery” of the Romani musicians clad in red jackets who played in the newly opened Hotel Carlton in Paris. Debussy later orchestrated it for piano, strings, clarinet, flute, and cimbalom—a standard Romani ensemble—both supporting Hartmann’s account of the composer’s fascination with “ces messieurs qui portent l’habit rouge” and suggesting that the previously scorned popular music of the petite bourgeoisie became available to his creative imagination once it could be consumed as the exoticized product of a racial Other.95 Hartmann believed that Debussy’s true motivation was to write a “best-seller,” though his response to the piece was positive: “‘Nom d’une pipe,’ or something similar, I exclaimed, ‘c’est très bien ça . . . mais comment l’appellez-vous?’” (Emma’s answer: “the production of a Summer.”)96 Hartmann went on to find fault with performers who, in recent years, had misinterpreted this lighthearted piece. “When I hear violinists, the best and most famous of them, playing ‘with emotion’—slowly, gravely, so many of them taking it so seriously—my wistful memories linger on those days when Debussy could gurgle with happy laughter [at Hartmann’s comedic antics].”97

When Hartmann returned to this episode in his (unpublished) 1941 memoirs, however, he was far less charitable: he now considered *La plus que lente* to be a “willowy, salon-like effusion.” “Musically, the piece, notably in its

\[ \frac{b^7}{b^6} - \frac{b^6}{b^5} \]

ending can be found, for example, in Amédée Dutacq’s “Âme en fleur,” published in the *Journal de musique* in 1881, and in Charles Delioux’s *Rêverie sur l’eau*, published in the same journal in 1882. Debussy himself ends “La mort des amants,” the final song in the *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*, published in 1890 (also, incidentally, in G-flat major), with a descent from \( \frac{b^7}{b^6} \) to \( \frac{b^6}{b^5} \) in octaves in the middle register over a tonic pedal, resolving to \( \frac{b^5}{b^5} \) in the final measure.


95. Notwithstanding Debussy’s sudden interest in the musicians at the Hotel Carlton, Romani performers (and imitations of their music published as commercial sheet music) had been a major component of the sound of Parisian popular music for decades. As Annegret Fauser observes, “Gypsies were perceived as a race and yet as a musically authentic part of the popular culture of their host country because of their nature-related life style”: Fauser, *Musical Encounters*, 256. Romani musicians often performed in hotels and at upper-class entertainments; the short story by Robert Cazin discussed above, “Figure de poudre de riz,” opens with the image of young women excitedly ascending a grand staircase to a hall “where the Romani musicians, in the loggia, had resumed playing their irritating, savage music”: Cazin, “Figure de poudre de riz,” 105 (“où les tziganes avaient repris, dans la loggia, des musiques énervantes et sauvages”).

96. Hartmann, “La plus que lente.”

97. Ibid. *La plus que lente* was arranged for violin and piano by Léon Roques and published by Durand in 1910, the year in which the original piano version was published.
middle section, is an excellent Chaminade and nothing more.” Reiterating his initial assessment of Debussy’s intentions, he added a qualifier: “My first impression was the correct one: Debussy had attempted a best-seller, and, in my judgment, failed utterly.” Moreover, the violinists who were misinterpreting La plus que lente were no longer simply taking it too seriously but playing it “with that abomination which has helped vitiate the art of violin playing and which today seems to be generally known as ‘schmaltz.’”

If in 1941 Hartmann heard interpretations of La plus que lente as unbearably schmaltzy, it may have been because something very much like “schmaltz” had been latent in Debussy’s valse lente all along. Debussy’s return to the valse lente in 1910 suggests that the status of the sounds of the vilain monde in his compositional imagination was more complex than we tend to suppose. While Hartmann is surely correct that La plus que lente was not meant to be taken seriously—that is, that it does not attempt to convey deep or sincere emotion in the manner of, say, a Romantic lied—it is difficult to agree with his assessment that, in Debussy’s conception, the piece has nothing of the sentimental about it. Debussy’s own performance of La plus que lente, recorded on a piano roll for a Welte-Mignon player piano in 1912, differs considerably from his renderings of his other compositions on the piano rolls, as Jocelyn Ho has observed, especially with respect to the frequency with which he “expressively” breaks synchronicity between the hands (something that in many other pieces, including “Danseuses de Delphes,” “La danse de Puck,” and “The Snow Is Dancing,” he does not do at all). Moreover, even if Debussy’s own tempo for La plus que lente was, as Hartmann claimed, faster than that of the “schmaltzy” violinists, the end of the piece, with its excessive, drawn-out rallentando and its clichéd $B_VI^{aug}$–I resolution—not unlike the drawn-out rallentando and $\bar{6}$–$\bar{5}$ resolution at the end of Delbrück’s “Valse des étoiles”—is surely not merely an invitation but an injunction for the performer to indulge in something very much akin to “schmaltz.”

The nature of the satire in La plus que lente is to call attention to how easily a characteristically “Debussyan” sound could be remelded with the sound of the salon waltz, a sound that, for a time, had coexisted and cross-pollinated with the reverie topos that Debussy himself transformed into the style of French modernism. To hear Debussy’s music vis-à-vis a (pre)history of schmaltz is to recognize that the radical idiosyncrasy so vaunted by the modernists was constantly evolving in tandem with—and could never truly free itself from—an aural culture defined by mass production, by repetition, by cliché. It is precisely because of the intervention of repetition and cliché that we in the twenty-first century cannot hear Debussy’s compositions of the

98. Hartmann, Claude Debussy as I Knew Him, 80.
99. Ibid., 81.
1880s and early 1890s—or those of Hüe or Marty or others of the *jeune école*—as they might have sounded to their contemporaries, before the definitive break between modernism and schmaltz.

**Works Cited**


Huebner, Steven. “Between Massenet and Wagner.” In Médicis and Huebner, Debussy’s Resonance, 225–53.


In a review of 1895, Henry Gauthier-Villars described Claude Debussy’s Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune as “musique de rêve,” a descriptor that has been attached to Debussy’s style ever since. Partly because of the importance of the Prélude within his compositional development, the distinctive sound of Debussy’s “dream music” has often been understood as a response to the hermetic and difficult literary style of French Symbolists, especially that of Stéphane Mallarmé. Yet Gauthier-Villars’s appellation of “musique de rêve” also invoked a specifically sonic (and largely forgotten) set of cultural reference points, an aural backdrop crucial for understanding Debussy’s early style in the 1880s and early 1890s—the widespread cultivation of the topos of reverie in French music in the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Settings of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé by Debussy and his young contemporaries around 1890 were infused with signifiers of dream and reverie that trace back to salon genres of the 1870s and that cross-pollinated with the harmonic language of the newly fashionable valse lente in the early 1880s. Hearing Debussy’s early works in the context of this reverie topos and its aural kinship to the popular valse lente sheds light on the extent to which the radical idiosyncrasy so vaunted by modernists was constantly evolving in tandem with—and could never truly free itself from—an aural culture defined by mass production, repetition, and cliché.

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