The Debussyist Ear: Listening, Representation, and French Musical Modernism

ALEXANDRA KIEFFER

In a letter of February 1901 to composer and music critic Paul Dukas, Debussy wrote: “It is not useful for music to make one think [penser]! It is enough that music force people to listen [écouter], despite themselves, despite their little everyday problems.”1 It was a theme that would return many times in Debussy’s correspondence and published writings in ensuing years: again and again, he extolled the virtues of listening. In 1903 Debussy wrote to Charles Levadé that “the art of orchestration is better learned by listening to the noise of leaves rustling in the breeze than by consulting treatises in which the instruments look like anatomical speci-

---

1“Il est . . . inutile que la musique fasse penser! Il suffirait que la musique force les gens à écouter, malgré eux, malgré leurs petits tracas quotidiens.” Debussy, letter to Paul Dukas (11 February 1901); in Debussy, Correspondance 1872–1918, ed. François Lesure and Denis Herlin (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 586 [emphasis original]. Translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

2“L’art d’orchestrer s’apprend mieux en écoutant le bruit des feuilles remuées par les brises qu’en consultant des traités où les instruments prennent l’air de pièces anatomiques.” Debussy, letter to Charles Levadé (4 September 1903); in Correspondance 1872–1918, 775.

3“Ce qui me tente infiniment plus c’est d’aller écouter le vent sur la montagne avec vous . . !” Debussy, letter to Robert Godet (18 December 1911); in Correspondance 1872–1918, 1471 [ellipsis original].

4For example, James H. Johnson, in his Listening in Paris: A Cultural History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) argues that the first few decades of the nineteenth century transitioned from “listening for sounds, ideas and emotions to listening for abstract meaning” [Johnson, Listening in Paris: A Cultural History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 271]. While this characterization paints in broad strokes, the prototype of Romantic musical listening—a purified listening attentive to abstract musical parameters (melody, harmony and so on) and the...
Debussy consistently invoked a specific sense of écouter identified with a heightened acuity and aliveness to outer auditory perceptions, often identified with the sounds of nature. Further, as James Hepokoski has observed, Debussy used this idealized listening as a means of countering the sterility of academic rules of composition. In a 1901 article in *La Revue blanche*, his alter-ego, “Monsieur Croche,” laments that “musicians only listen to music written by practiced hands—never the music that is inscribed in nature.”

In an interview of 1909 he maintained that the ills of contemporary musical composition stemmed from an insufficient attentiveness to the sounds of nature: “We attach too much importance to musical writing [l’écriture musicale], formula, and craft [métier]! We don’t listen [écoute] to the thousand noises of nature all around us; we do not pay enough attention to this music of such variety that [nature] offers us in such abundance. It envelops us, and we have lived in the midst of it until now without perceiving it.” Debussy’s exhortation to listen, then, purportedly turned into a compositional project: indeed, in an interview in 1910 he asserted that his own compositional practice was a matter of “rendering” sounds in the world around him. “All the noises that we hear around us can be rendered [rendus]. Everything that a fine ear perceives in the rhythm of the world around us can be represented musically. Certain people wish above all to conform to rules; for myself, I want to write only what I hear.”

Debussy’s profession that he wanted to “write only what [he] hears”—however hyperbolic a claim it may be—can be understood as part of a broader conversation in early-twentieth-century Debussyism on music and audi-

---

5On attaché trop d’importance à l’écriture musicale, à la formule et au métier! On n’écoute pas autour de soi les mille bruits de la nature, on ne guette pas assez cette musique si variée qu’elle nous offre avec tant d’abondance. Elle nous enveloppe, et nous avons vécu au milieu d’elle jusqu’à présent sans nous en apercevoir.” Debussy, “La Musique d’aujourd’hui et celle de demain” (interview), *Comœdia* (4 November 1909); in *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, 296. Citations of Debussy’s interviews generally require the necessary caveat that Debussy on a few occasions expressed disgruntlement with the way in which his comments were construed by his interviewers, and to some extent they should be regarded with caution (see Donellon, “Debussy as Musician and Critic,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], esp. 51–52). However, Debussy’s complaints in this regard focused on statements involving Beethoven and Wagner, claiming that his interviewers distorted his intentions to be more provocatively critical and dismissive of the revered masters of nineteenth-century music. Debussy’s statement above on listening and academic formulas is reminiscent of many of his own writings. In any case, it is not necessary to regard the words quoted above as exact utterances of Debussy himself in order to appreciate that they arose from and were participatory within a Debussyist paradigm of listening.

The term “Debussysme” is by no means a simple one, as the meaning of the term debussysme and the historical actors to which it referred were fluid and contested even in Debussy’s time. I use the term loosely to describe a music-historical phenomenon that crystallized around Debussy’s music between 1901 and 1910 and that elevated this music as the exemplar of a new musical aesthetic. I do not, however, mean the term to suggest a monolithic block of agreement on the nature of the aesthetic project that Debussy’s music was imagined to represent or even unquestioned support of all of Debussy’s compositions as fulfilling such a project [hence the inclusion of Pierre Lalo, who wrote critically of Debussy’s compositions after 1905]. “Debussyst” is not to be conflated with “Debussy’s circle,” as the connections I am most interested in tracing are discursive rather than social [though all three of the critics addressed here had at least some level of contact with Debussy]. For general overviews of Debussy reception and debussysme in this period, see, e.g. Christian Goubault, *La critique musicale dans la presse française de 1870 à 1914* [Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 1984], and Brian Hart, *The Symphony in Theory and Practice in France, 1900–1914* [PhD diss., Indiana University, 1994].

Within the complex machinations over Debussy’s music that played out in the Parisian musical press in the first decade of the century, prominent critics sympathetic to Debussy’s music persistently maintained that this music had a special, if elusive, mode of contact both with sensation and with the non-musical “outside” of sound. In this article I explore how a small group of “Debussyst” critics construed these relationships between music, sound, and the mediating apparatus of listening. The writings of these critics speak to an important moment in musical modernism: preoccupied by the intricacies and complexities of sensation—often understood in a specifically auditory sense—they interrogated in new ways the act of attending to sonorous material. Debussy’s music, in other words, became the occasion for the articulation of a novel way of thinking about music and its relationship to the listening subject and, consequently, of a problem of sensory knowledge that resonated across multiple cultural spheres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For the purposes of this article, I focus on three key figures in the critical discourse surrounding Debussy’s music in the first decade of the century: Pierre Lalo, son of composer Édouard Lalo and the regular music critic for *Le Temps* beginning in 1898; Louis Laloy, co-editor of the *Revue d’histoire et de critiques musicales* (later the *Revue musicale*) in 1902 and of the aesthetically progressive offshoot of the *Mercure de France*, the *Mercure musical*, in 1905, as well as a friend of Debussy and the only critic whose judgment Debussy explicitly and repeatedly endorsed; and composer Paul Dukas, who wrote reviews for a number of journals including the *Revue hebdomadaire*, the *Revue musicale*, and *Le Figaro*. All three of these critics were informed and influenced by the charged, overdetermined cultural politics of the early-twentieth-century Parisian musical world, a discursive field that has been aptly explored by such scholars as Jann Pasler, Jane Fulcher, and Brian Hart. To the extent that an exclusive focus on Lalo, Laloy, and Dukas necessarily narrows the scope of my argument, however, it also enables a close reading that can tease out the nuances of their texts. My intent is not to make these three figures stand for the whole of “Debussysme”—a music-historical phenomenon that encompassed any number of diverse and differing points of view—but rather to point to them as early [and influential] proponents of new ideas about the importance of Debussy’s music and its relationship to listening and sensation. It was a conversation that Debussy’s music helped to catalyze, but also one that, in turn, exerted a
The word sensation and its closely related cousin sensibilité were multivalent and connotatively slippery: they could refer to inner emotional states as well as outer sensory impressions. If, however, eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century French writers on music tended to mean the former, these Debussyist critics inflected the meaning of sensation toward the senses. Indeed, Debussyan sensation was continually, if somewhat enigmatically, associated with the depiction of nature in Debussy’s music. Lalo’s 1901 review of the first two Nocturnes ("Nuages" and "Fêtes") already coupled the music’s "sensations" with a representational project: "What pretty, fine, and profound painting of things that one finds in these two short pieces! What subtle sensations of the night, of the wind, of the passing clouds in the sky in the first piece! What a dazzling and delicate impression of dances, lights and distant noises we have from the second!" The success of the piece’s "painting of things" (peinture des choses) arises from the "sensations" and "impressions" contained in them, which encompass auditory aspects (the "distant noises" of "Fêtes") fused with other sensory modalities. Lalo’s 1902 re-

---


15"Debussy se montre, comme précédemment, préoccupé de déterminer le caractère dominant de son œuvre par la notation d’une série de sensations plutôt que par les déductions d’une pensée musicale en relation directe avec l’expression poétique." Paul Dukas, “Chronique musicale,” La Revue hebdomadaire [Feb. 1901], 276.

16"Cette puissance et cette fraîcheur de la sensation ne donnent pas seulement à la musique de M. Debussy le charme extraordinaire et presque magique qu’elle exerce sur nous; elles lui donnent encore son unité et son harmonie." Pierre Lalo, Le Temps [24 Oct. 1905].


18"[Debussy’s] esthétique est une esthétique de sensation, et c’est là une principe peu compatible avec le but véritable du grand art." D’Indy, Cours de Composition musicale, vol. 3 (Paris: Durand, 1950), 231 [emphasis original]. “Sensation” was used to describe not only the music of Debussy himself but also that of the jeunes debussystes, who were often seen as emulating Debussy’s style. Camille Mauclair, writing on Miroirs, noted of Ravel: “As subtle a technician as Debussy, I perceive in him simpler ideas, more direct sensations” [Mauclair, “Sensations récentes,” Courrier musical 9 [1 July 1906]: 434]. Extolling the virtues of Dukas’s opera Ariane et Barbe-bleue, premiered in 1907, Edouard Dujardin asks, “Did we not discover precisely in Ariane the delicateness of an impressionist art which can express the subllest nuances of sensation?” [Dujardin, “Le Mouvement symboliste et la musique,” Mercure de France 72 [1 March 1908], 15].

19The malleability of the word sensation extended back at least into the seventeenth century, when sentiment and sensation [which at the time were used interchangeably] were understood in opposition to reason. For an excellent overview of the words sensation and sensibilité through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Georgia Cowart, “Sense and Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Musical Thought,” Acta musicologica 56 (1984): 251–66.

20La jolie, fine et profonde peinture des choses qu’on trouve en ces deux coures pièces! Les subtiles sensations de la nuit, du vent, des nuages passant dans le ciel que donne la première! L’éhloissante et délicate impression de danses, de lumières et de bruits lointains qu’on emporte de la seconde!” Lalo, Le Temps [8 January 1901].
view of Pelléas, too, emphatically praised the music’s fidelity of representation:

The image is so faithful and the transposition so marvelous that the music here equals the landscape itself; we are touched by the same joy and the same sadness. Listen to the scene in which Pelléas guides Méliande through the cavern at the edge of the surf; listen to this murmuring of the wind and the water, this muted beating of the waves; see these clouds passing in the sky, and this illumination of the orchestra when suddenly the brightness of the moon appears, and say that it is possible to render with a more heightened intensity, in a language that is more novel and more subtle, the mystery of the night and the sea.21

Invoking typical Romantic ideas about music and expressivity, Lalo’s praise for Pelléas does not exclude an element of inner emotional states: “The human emotion,” he adds, “is not less than the sensation of nature” in the opera. But he juxtaposes and intertwines this Romantic aesthetic of emotional expression with encomiums to the music’s fidelity to outer realities of nature, which arises from the music’s privileged relationship to sensation.

Lalo continued to praise these qualities of the Nocturnes and Pelléas et Méliande in future reviews: in his 1905 review of La mer he reiterated that Pelléas contained “an intensity, a freshness, a delicacy of prodigious sensations . . . a sensibility so natural, so direct, so immediate, that the same thrill that one felt in seeing the depicted things themselves passes completely into his music.”22 In his 1910 review of the orchestral Images, he challenged his reader: “Imagine the departure from the cave in Pelléas, or the scene on the terrace, or that in the grotto, or for that matter Nuages from the Nocturnes, and tell me if you do not feel enveloped in the quivering of the air and the caress of the light, if you are not before this music as before nature.”23 In Pelléas and the Nocturnes Lalo celebrated what he perceived as a music of immediacy, music that gives direct access to the whole of things. The music does not imitate nature in any secondary or derivative sense; it exists in a relation of pure identity with nature. As he wrote in 1910: “Short, elusive images, almost magical in their accuracy [justesse]: they appear and pass by; they have said all, not repeating themselves and not insisting; images that are evocations, not descriptions and not paintings; in which there is neither minutia of detail nor imitations of reality, but the suggestion of life and of the soul of things.”24 Pelléas et Méliande does not give appearances, but inner essences: it does not imitate reality but evokes it. The appeal of Pelléas et Méliande and the Nocturnes, according to Lalo, was their ability to render nature completely and unproblematically present.

With respect to Debussy’s compositions after 1905, however, Lalo’s opinion was quite

21L’image est si fidèle et la transposition si merveilleuse que la musique vaut ici le paysage lui-même, vous pénétre du même bonheur et de la même tristesse. Écoutez la scène où Pelléas guide Méliande dans la caverne au bord des flots; écoutez ce frémissement du vent et de l’eau, ce sourd battement des vagues, voyez ces nuages passant dans le ciel, et cette illumination de l’orchestre lorsque apparaît soudain la clarté de la lune; et dites s’il est possible de rendre avec une intensité plus aiguë, en un langage plus subtil et plus nouveau, le mystère de la nuit et de la mer.” Lalo, Le Temps [20 May 1902].
22“Ce qui saisit, ce qui séduit, ce qui captive dans l’art de M. Debussy . . . c’est une intensité, une fraîcheur, une délicatesse de sensation prodigieuses . . . une sensibilité si naturelle, si directe, si immédiate, qu’elle passe tout entière dans sa musique, le même frémissement qu’on aurait en voyant les choses elles-mêmes qu’elle dépeint.” Lalo, Le Temps [24 October 1905]. There are some misapprehen-
23“Songez à la sortie du souterrain dans Pelléas, ou à la scène de la terrasse, ou encore à celle de la grotte, ou bien aux Nuages des Nocturnes, et dites si vous ne vous sentez pas enveloppé du frémissement de l’air et de la caresse de la lumière, si vous n’êtes pas devant cette musique comme devant la nature.” Lalo, Le Temps [26 February 1910].
24“Images brèves et fugitives dans leur justesse presque magique: elles apparaissent et passent; elles ont tout dit, ne se répètent et n’insistent pas; images qui sont des évocations, non des descriptions et des peintures, où il n’y a ni minutie de détails, ni imitations de la réalité, mais la suggestion de la vie et de l’âme des choses.” Lalo, Le Temps [26 February 1910].
different. As his notorious 1905 review of La mer demonstrates, the ideals of sensation and immediacy could be as much a critique of Debussy’s music as an endorsement of it. “As soon as sensation no longer sustains and animates this music,” Lalo wrote, “it seems fragmented and arbitrary.”

This failure of sensation results not only in a fragmented musical surface but also a lack of presence as the music devolves into mere derivative reproduction. “For the first time, in listening to a picturesque work of M. Debussy, I have the impression not of nature itself, but of being before a reproduction of nature: a marvelously refined reproduction, ingenious and industrious, too much perhaps, but a reproduction despite it all . . . . I do not hear, I do not see, I do not sense the Sea.”

If, in Lalo’s view, the Nocturnes and Pelléas et Mélisande had been able to “evoke” the essence of nature without representing it, La mer failed on this score: it was merely a reproduction. The problem with La mer was that it did not render present the sea. Opposing the categories of sensation, on the one hand, and representation as reproduction on the other, Lalo’s standard of evaluation for Debussy’s music privileged a total identification of this music with nature that was only accessible through fidelity to sensation.

Lalo, too, similarly opposed Debussyan sensation to a derivative, and rationalized, representation. Because music “cannot represent any object,” he argued, it “appeals only to sensation.” Going on to describe the trajectory of European music, Lalo adds: “The Western mind, frightened of anything which escapes reason, wanted to make music inoffensive by transmuting sensation into concepts.”

The trajectory of Western progress, according to Laloy, was the suppression of sensation in favor of the idea. Debussy’s music, consequently, contravened this Western impulse toward rationality by reclaiming sensation: “Only with Debussy did deliverance come; it was sudden and effortless . . . . nature was opened up, quivering, rustling, radiant, and unlimited.”

Yet, if Lalo extolled the role of sensation in Debussy’s music as a guarantor of immediacy, a means of eliminating barriers between the music and the objects of its representation, for Laloy the matter was somewhat different. While Lalo venerated sensation in the Nocturnes and Pelléas et Mélisande as a conduit to immediate contact with nature, Laloy’s account of sensation explicitly foregrounded the mechanism of mediation between nature and the listening subject. Debussy’s music synthesized the insights of Symbolism—which “attempts a new alliance between the senses and the mind”—and Impressionism, in which “what must be represented . . . are not objects which have already been chosen and taken out from the whole, but the complexity of sensations as they reach our eyes.”

For Laloy, the role of sensation in Debussy’s music, as in Symbolism and Impressionism, was to reconsider the very nature of sensation by separating it from the world of perceived things. Each in its own way—Symbolism, Impressionism, and Debussy’s music—all participated in a common project in which the relationship between sensory data and subjective awareness is put into question. As Laloy

---

25) “Dès que la sensation ne soutient et n’anime plus cette musique, elle apparaît fragmentée et arbitraire.” Lalo, Le Temps (24 October 1905).

26) “Pour la première fois, en écoutant une œuvre pittoresque de M. Debussy, j’ai l’impression non point d’être devant la nature elle-même, mais devant une reproduction de la nature: reproduction merveilleusement raffinée, ingénieuse et industriouse, trop peut-être; mais reproduction malgré tout. . . . je n’entends pas, je ne vois pas, je ne sens pas la Mer.” Lalo, Le Temps (24 October 1905).


Debussy’s music was accordingly imagined to enact a radical revaluation of the nature of listening. It bracketed and isolated the ear from the other senses (as vision, in Laloy’s account, is bracketed in Impressionist painting) in order to interrogate the raw material of auditory sensation. Debussy’s “is a music which obeys no precept, only the laws of sensation: a purely auditory music, just as Impressionist painting is entirely visual.” 32 Sensation for Laloy takes on an obvious Impressionist aspect, but not in the sense that he imagines Debussy to transpose the visual qualities of Impressionist painting into sound, as more recent proponents (and detractors) of Debussy’s music’s supposed “Impressionist” quality in musicological literature have tended to claim.33 Rather, for Laloy, the comparison with Impressionism emphasized a process through which a particular sense is isolated so that its mode of operation can be interrogated.34 What Impressionism does for vision, to follow Laloy’s argument, Debussy does for audition.35 In support of his arguments, Laloy cites the art critic Jules Laforgue, who celebrated the Impressionist eye much as Laloy celebrated Debussy’s delicate ear.36

At the same time, Laloy juxtaposes this aesthetic of sensation with an aesthetic of the symbol, a rhetorical move that—though it conjures up a different set of cultural reference points—likewise complicates his construction of sensation. Immediately after proclaiming, in the 1910 “Debussysme” article, that “each note [in Debussy’s music] is sensation,”37 he notes the influence of Symbolist poetry on Debussy’s music and describes it as “a music of allusion, of indication, itself like the symbol of a different music, which will forever be unassayable, as it would uncover the very roots of existence.”38 The music given to us in sensation appears as the “symbole d’une autre musique”—a music which must forever remain unheard, beyond the possibility of perception.

Thus, unlike Lalo’s promises of absolute immediacy and access to the whole of nature—to be “before this music as before nature”—Laloy’s aesthetic is also, and simultaneously, an aes-
thetic of the symbol. A similar juxtaposition of sensations and symbols appears in an earlier, 1901 article on the *Nocturnes* by Dukas. Shortly after he describes Debussy’s music as the “notation of a series of sensations,” Dukas makes a rather different set of claims on this music, maintaining that, above all, Debussy’s music occupies the realm of the symbol. He avoids the facile transposition of sentiments, Dukas writes, in favor of “l’art de tout transposer en images symboliques” in the manner of Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Mallarmé.39 Thus, Dukas concludes, “the majority of his compositions are . . . symbols of symbols.”

In fact, in the first part of these *Nocturnes*, in which the “décor” is made up of the slow unwinding of the clouds in an unchanging sky, ending their slow march “dying away in a grey sweetly tinted with white,” the music does not have for its object the perceptible expression of such a meteorological phenomenon, as it is thought. It makes allusion to it, it is true, through the continual floating of sumptuous chords, in which the progressions rise and descend, evoking the movement of aerial architecture. The imitation, distantly, exists. But the final signification of the piece still remains symbolic, and, as different as it can seem from the preceding works of the author, this *Nocturne* shares a common trait with them: it translates analogy by analogy in the manner of a music in which all the elements—harmony, rhythm, and melody—seem, in some way, dispersed into the ether of the symbol and as though reduced to an imponderable state.40

To the extent that “Nuages” “represents,” Dukas argues, it does so only “distantly,” through the mediation of the symbol. The piece does not represent reality in any kind of plenitude. Instead it distances itself from natural resemblance with multiple levels of analogy, creating a chain of deferred signification. As in Laloy’s “Debussyism” article, the rhetoric of the symbol in Dukas’s assessment of Debussy’s music appears to contravene, or at least resist assimilation by, the paens to the immediacy of sensation in Lalo’s account. If Lalo imagines sensation to grant access to “things themselves,” to the raw materiality of experience prior to its differentiation into representational categories, then the layers of signification in Dukas’s symbol interpose multiple barriers between objects of representation and our subjective awareness of them. In contrast to representation based on resemblance, the inner workings of the symbol are opaque, closed-off to knowledge and observation. Despite his characterization of Debussy’s music as the “notation d’une série de sensations,” he ultimately trumps sensation with the symbol, in which, he claims, the “final signification” of “Nuages” lies.

This juxtaposition of sensation and symbol is far from a thoughtless inconsistency on the part of Laloy and Dukas; rather, it points to specific constructions of the two terms and the relationship between them. For Lalo, the symbol—in contrast to allegories, which are “calculées et raisonnées”—must be “revealed by intuition, the sole equal of the real.” “The poet will only be a poet,” he goes on, “if he is initiated by nature into the analogies that compose the universe.”41 Even in its opacity, the symbol for Laloy contains an elemental affinity with natural truth and the structure of reality. Indeed, the functions of the symbol, as Laloy articulates them, often begin to closely resemble his conception of the functions of sensation. Like sensation, symbols provide the

---


41“Calculées et raisonnées, ces transcriptions perpétuelles ne mériteraient que le nom d’allégories; elles seront symboles, si elles ont été révélées par l’intuition, seule égale au réel. Le poète ne sera poète que s’il est de nature initié aux analogies qui composent l’univers.” Laloy, “Claude Debussy et Debussysme,” 509.
means of genuine access to nature, and its rules are those of nature itself; yet sensation, like the symbol, is not transparent to consciousness. The inner workings of sensation are opaque to knowledge and do not operate purely on the basis of intuitive resemblance: “the retina has its necessary illusions, and therefore its own truths.” Rather than the opposite of sensation, the opacity of the symbol, for both Laloy and Dukas, is installed within sensation. It is an element of sensation that cannot be eliminated. Both symbols and sensation contain a dual character as simultaneously illusion and truth: precisely because its always-veiled mechanism of translation prohibits straightforward adequation with objects, the symbol contains a higher truth than that of more rational means of representation like allegories. Implicitly, the opacity of the symbol becomes a figure for the opacity of sensation. This alignment of sensations and symbols—and the characterizations of sensation in the writings of Lalo, Laloy, and Dukas more broadly—points to treatments of sensation in a very different cultural sphere: the science of sensory physiology in the late nineteenth century.

**Sensory Knowledge in Late-Nineteenth-Century Science**

After all, it was science, Laloy claimed, that taught the Impressionists about the retina. If such claims are often regarded as more or less a truism about Impressionism, they nonetheless raise difficult and far-reaching questions about the role of contemporary science in high-art culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with implications for music as well. The *idée fixe* of sensation in Debussyist discourse appeared following several decades of radical change in scientific conceptions of the nature of sensation and sensory perception. Johannes Müller’s doctrine of specific sense energies, propounded in his *Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen für Vorlesungen* published in 1834, famously observed that the same stimulus produces different sense impressions on different senses—that, for example, sunlight produces the sensation of warmth to the skin but the sensation of light to the eye—and maintained that, in consequence, the nature of sensory impressions depends more on the nature of the sensory apparatus that produces it than on the stimulus that provokes it. Müller’s theories on the constitutive role of the sense organs in constructing perception would become foundational for the work of his student, Hermann von Helmholtz, who became the single most influential contributor to nineteenth-century sensory physiology. As Helmholtz put it in 1853, “The organs of sense do indeed give us information about external effects produced on them, but convey those effects to our consciousness in a totally different form, so that the character of a sensuous perception depends not so much on the properties of the object perceived as on those of the organ by which we receive the information.”

Thus, well before sensations and symbols were coupled in the writings of Debussyist critics, a controversial “sign theory of perception” had appeared in Helmholtz’s *Handbuch der physiologischen Optik* (published both in Germany and in French translation in 1867). Helmholtz’s sign theory posited that the mind receives perceptions as signs rather than images or copies; that is, rather than a relationship of natural resemblance between perceptions and objects, Helmholtz argued that the interposition of the senses necessitates that the link between perceptions and objects be constructed: “Our perceptions of things cannot be anything other than symbols, naturally given signs for things, which we have learned to use in order to control our motions and actions.”

---


trary signifier; it is “naturally given,” a necessary connection between sign and referent dictated by the physical mechanisms of our sense organs. If the world of objects beyond our perceptions of them must be forever opaque, the means by which objects are translated into perceptions nonetheless depends on a bodily mechanism that operates according to a certain set of rules.

Because the link between perceptions and reality cannot be intuited, the perceiving subject in Helmholtz’s theory must learn the proper way of reading the symbols given in perception. “When we have learned to read those signs in the proper manner, we are in a condition to use them to orient our actions such that they achieve their intended effect.” The only truth of perception for Helmholtz is a “practical truth,” a matter of correctly interpreting the signs of perception such that we can successfully navigate the world around us. Reading perceptions correctly involves lateral coordination among different senses, yielding a set of structural relationships among perceptions of various types—for example, between vision and touch in the act of holding a book. As we become accustomed to this coordination, the labor involved in it is progressively removed from subjective awareness, generating the illusion of unmediated experience. In Tim Lenoir’s words, “The constructive labor involved in seeing is thus itself hidden from view; nature comes to stand as the immediately given.”

Further, the realization of this “hidden labor” in the workings of the senses generated an attempt among sensory physiologists to somehow recuperate it and bring it into subjective awareness. As they came to realize that the operations of the senses were to a significant extent detached from our normal ways of thinking about perception—that, for example, we are not aware of the blind spot within our field of vision where the retina attaches to the optic nerve—physiologists came to the conclusion that we are deceived not only by the physical limitations of the senses but by mental habits of processing sensory data that gloss over and hide those limitations. It is because of mental processes that the mechanisms and deficiencies of the senses lay outside our awareness and it is mental processes that give sensory knowledge its false veneer of totality and completeness. Thus, in Helmholtz’s work on acoustics, for example, the cultivation of heightened attention to auditory stimuli became a central theme, typified by his development of special resonators to aid the sense of hearing. By isolating and amplifying a single pitch—including the faintest of upper partials—from any collection of simultaneously sounding pitches, the resonator brings to conscious awareness sounds that we can physically hear but typically disregard, recovering a level of sensation that operates beneath the level of conscious perception. As David Pantalony writes, resonators “were a mechanical means for uncovering the underlying basic sensations that had been distorted by mental processes.”

Although such developments in late-nineteenth-century German sensory physiology may not appear to be of immediate relevance for understanding Debussy or Debussyism, the prevalence of these ideas in a wide range of cultural discourses in France attests to the extent of their influence. In part, this influence can be attributed to major shifts in the dissemination of scientific knowledge in France, as in the rest of Western Europe, in the second half of the nineteenth century. The increasingly specialized nature of scientific research, coupled with a burgeoning interest in scientific advances and their implications by the general public,

---

44Helmholtz, *Helmholtz’s Treatise on Physiological Optics*, 443.
46David Alexander Pantalony, *Rudolph Koenig (1832–1901), Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894) and the Birth of Modern Acoustics* [PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2002], 71. Benjamin Steege similarly notes, “Helmholtz’s practice of a virtuoso of attentiveness to sound consisted of myriad efforts to restore the presence and immediacy of sensation to the ear. Instruments like the spherical resonators or the undamped piano strings, while they modeled the resonant functioning of the ear on the one hand, were also recuperated as tools for regulating attention to singular elements of aural sensation on the other hand” [Steege, *Helmholtz and the Modern Listener* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 79].
generated the need for a class of vulgarisateurs—nonspecialist science writers, largely independent from the professionalized culture of science centered around the Académie des Sciences, who wrote about the latest scientific discoveries for consumption by large bourgeois audiences.\textsuperscript{47} Books on acoustics alone included Auguste Laugel’s 1867 _La Voix, l’oreille, et la musique_, Rodophe Radau’s 1867 _L’Acoustique, ou les phénomènes du son_, a volume of Hachette’s “Bibliothèque des merveilles”; Pietro Blaserna’s 1877 _Le Son et la musique, suivis des causes physiologiques de l’harmo-}

The inaugural issue of the _Revue musicale_ in 1902 (a journal cofounded by Jules Combarieu and Louis Laloy, soon to become one of Debussy’s greatest advocates) contained a Helmholtz-influenced article on acoustics entitled “L’œil et l’oreille” by Auguste Guillemin; three years later the same journal printed one of Combarieu’s Collège de France lectures entirely devoted to Helmholtzian acoustics.\textsuperscript{50} A 1902 article by Jean Marnold in the _Courrier musical_ on Debussy’s harmonies explicitly cited Helmholtz as an authority on the nature of consonance.\textsuperscript{51}

More generally, as Helmholtz’s ideas were disseminated, in France as in Germany, through an expanding network of popular science discourses, they parked a public debate over the relevance and implications of sensory physiology for theories of knowledge. Helmholtz’s treatises were translated into French soon after their initial printings in German, and reviews of his work appeared regularly not only in scientific journals like the _Revue des cours scientifique_ and the _Revue scientifique de la France et de l’étranger_ but also in more general philosophical and intellectual journals like the _Revue de métaphysique et du morale_.\textsuperscript{52} The sign theory


of perception appeared prominently in the work of such intellectuals as the positivist philosopher Hippolyte Taine, considered a major influence on literary naturalism, and the philosopher-turned-psychologist Théodule Ribot, editor of the Revue philosophique. Taine’s 1870 *De l’intelligence* included lengthy discussions of the physiological aspects of sense perception and adopted Helmholtz’s views wholesale: “Our pure visual sensations,” Taine maintained, “are merely *signs*. Experience alone teaches us their meaning; in other words, experience alone associates with each the image of the corresponding tactile and muscular sensation.” Ribot's 1874 *La philosophie de Schopenhauer* ends with an explicit attempt to validate Schopenhauer’s idealism by linking it to Helmholtz’s sign theory:

[Helmholtz] declares that the given of the senses can only be considered as symbols that we interpret; that one cannot conceive any analogy between such a perception and the object that it represents; that the first is simply the spiritual sign of the second; a sign that is nevertheless not arbitrary, because it is the nature of our sensory organs and of our mind that we imposed on it. . . . Thus what Schopenhauer calls appearances, Helmholtz calls symbols.54

The engagement with Helmholtzian accounts of sensory knowledge in French discourses continued into the 1890s and beyond: the *Revue des deux mondes*, for example, published a lengthy (posthumous) review of Helmholtz’s work in 1896, which included a thorough explanation of the sign theory of perception.55

Ribot’s amalgamation of Schopenhauerian idealism with a Helmholtzian sign theory of perception, as well as the questions it raises with respect to the role of physiological theories of perception in late-nineteenth-century conceptions of idealism, is particularly suggestive in light of the well-known influence of Schopenhauer on Symbolist aesthetics. Any number of critics and poets with Decadent and Symbolist affinities professed admiration for Schopenhauer. As Shehira Doss-Devezac observes, Schopenhauer’s “emphasis on the interpreting subjective self, and the importance given to nature seen as symbol were to become central creeds in the symbolist aesthetic.” And the reception of Schopenhauer among French writers and intellectuals was largely shaped not by *The World as Will and Representation*—which wasn’t published in French translation until 1888—but by Ribot, as well as, subsequently, a collection of excerpts of Schopenhauer’s writing translated by Jean Bourdeau and published as *Pensées, maximes et fragments* in 1880.57 Just two years before the appearance of his famous “Symbolist Manifesto” in 1886, Jean Moréas authored an article in the *Revue indépendante* devoted to Schopenhauer’s philosophy that quoted extensively from Ribot.58 Remy de Gourmont wrote retrospectively in 1912 that “our philosophical education, for some, was already made through the Schopenhauer of M. Bourdeau and of M. Ribot.

53“Nos sensations visuelles pures ne sont rien que des signes. L’expérience seule nous en apprend le sens; en d’autre termes, l’expérience seule associe à chacun d’eux l’image de la sensation tactile et musculaire correspondante.” Hippolyte Taine, *De l’intelligence*, vol. 2 (Paris: Hachette, 1870), 120.

54[Helmholtz] déclare que les données des sens ne peuvent être considérées que comme des *symboles* que nous interprétons; qu’on ne peut concevoir aucune analogie entre telle perception et l’objet qu’elle représente; que la première est simplement le *signe* spirituel du second; signe qui n’est pas arbitraire toutefois, puisque c’est la nature de nos organes sensoriels et de notre esprit qui nous l’a imposé. . . . Ainsi ce que Schopenhauer nomme apparaences, Helmholtz l’appelle *symboles*. Théodule Ribot, *La philosophie de Schopenhauer* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1903), 159–60 (first published 1874).


57The caveat should be made that some French intellectuals would have read Schopenhauer in German (Jules Laforgue, who studied philosophy in Berlin from 1881 to 1886, is a classic example).

. . . ‘The universe is my representation’: this formula entered all the brains into which anything entered.”\textsuperscript{59} In this light, the “Schopenhauerian” influence on Symbolism should be considered at least in part as a Schopenhauer refracted through the psychological modernist Ribot and embedded in a culture of porous boundaries between philosophy and the burgeoning sciences of psychology and sensory physiology.\textsuperscript{60}

And though the Helmholtzian natural sign is quite different from Mallarmé’s arbitrary signifier, the network of meanings attached to the symbol in Symbolist discourse included accounts reminiscent of Helmholtz. The enigmatic nature of sensory knowledge appears as a theme early on in Symbolist writings: Moréas’s 1886 manifesto, for example, asserted that for Symbolists “the depictions of nature, the actions of human beings, all concrete phenomena would not manifest themselves; these are but appearances perceptible to the senses and destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial ideas.”\textsuperscript{61} Like Laloy’s appeal to the science of the retina, further, these accounts of sensation were often validated with quasi-scientific language. Writing in Le Décadent in 1887, Édouard Dubus remarked that “we take as given the reality of the exterior world, but it is a constructed reality. The causes of aesthetic emotion are found in the differentiation of the movement of matter, perceived through means of the senses.”\textsuperscript{62} Still more clearly, in 1891 critic Achille Delaroche, in the preeminent Symbolist journal La Plume, wrote: “Modern science has proven that the external world is but a manifestation of energy, the place of sensory symbols, the opacity of our representations. These appearances obey mysterious laws of substitution, and we are not masters able to modify them as we wish: they impose on us like the strongest illusion, but only as such . . . It is thus as pure symbol, and as the clothing of the idea, that the Poet should consider the external world.”\textsuperscript{63} Delaroche captures every element of sensation as a natural sign: the world beyond sensation is mysterious and inaccessible, occluded by the interposition of an opaque mediator outside of subjective control.

This wider context allows us to position Lalo, Laloy, and Dukas in relation to a dialogue on sensory knowledge with wide salience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a dialogue caught up in the implications of what Jonathan Crary has called the “irreversible clouding over of the transparency of the subject-as-observer” that played out through the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{64} Each of the music

\begin{footnotes}
\item[60] Notre éducation philosophique, à quelques-uns, avait déjà été faite par le Schopenhauer de M. Bourdeau et celui de M. Ribot . . . ‘L’univers est ma représentation,’ la formule avait pénétré dans toutes les cervelles où il pénètre quelque chose.” Remy de Gourmont, Promenades littéraires, vol. 4 (“Souvenirs du Symbolisme et autres études”) [Paris: Mercure de France, 1927] [first published 1912].
\item[63] “Techniques of the Observer,” 70. Crary locates the beginnings of this historical development in physiological studies of vision in the 1820s and 1830s, going on to claim that “modernist painting in the 1870s and 1880s and the development of photography after 1839 can be seen as later symptoms of this crucial systemic shift, which was well underway by 1820.” Studies of the physiology of hearing, however, lagged somewhat behind those on vision. While Helmholtz’s work on acoustics and hearing had precursors in the work of August Seebeck, Georg Simon Ohm, and others, many of the basics of the mechanism of audition were only discovered by Helmholtz in the 1860s. In any case, my claim is not that Debussyst discourses were caught up in some diffuse epistemic shift in conceptions of sensory knowledge; rather, it is that plausible chains of
\end{footnotes}
The prominence of sensation in Debussyist discourses after the turn of the century, then, must be understood as the product of a historical moment in which, in multiple cultural spheres, sensation had been put into question as a reliable means of data about the objective world. We might speculate that sensation became so compelling for these Debussyist critics precisely because it had been made problematic: the act of listening could no longer be taken as given but needed to be carefully examined, subjected to a heightened level of attention.

The views of Lalo, Laloy, or Dukas cannot, of course, be thoughtlessly transposed onto Debussy. Indeed, to make such a transposition would typify the very ironing out of discursive complexity that a robust cultural-historical account of the period is best equipped to provide. Still, these critics offer us one kind of historicized hermeneutics, a window into the interpretive strategies through which Debussy’s music was imagined to relate to key aesthetic and intellectual issues of its time as well as the complex ways in which this music was participatory within its musical culture. And there is a way in which the writings of Lalo, Laloy, and Dukas help demarcate the outlines of a discursive field with which Debussy, too, was in dialogue—as evidenced by Debussy’s own fixation on a particular kind of listening. If reception is understood not simply as a passive or derivative process but as an active and productive one—a process through which musical meanings are produced and by which composers themselves can be deeply affected—then we might understand Debussy’s complex views on music and listening, as well as his compositional practice, as engaged with similar questions and problems as the ones that motivated the Debussyist preoccupation with sensation, even if Debussy himself—almost necessarily—approached these questions in very different ways.66

66Richard Taruskin, drawing on the work of Scott Messing, has observed the intertwining of reception and compositional influence with respect to Stravinsky’s neoclassicism: “One is tempted to say that by misreading Stravinsky so early as a classicist and a positivist [Jacques] Rivière actually turned him into one. For one is influenced not only by anxiety but also by praise, the more so when the praise is at once so intelligent and so hyperbolic. It is not so hard to understand why, just emerging from a milieu in which he was ranked far below Glazunov [and even behind Maximilian Steinberg, his teacher’s son-in-law],
At the very end of “Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” from Debussy’s first book of Preludes (1909), a horn call suddenly materializes. *Pianissimo*, voiced as parallel $\frac{3}{4}$ chords over a tonic pedal point, modally inflected with a Lydian $\#4$, and swathed in resonating aftereffects deep in the bass and high in the treble, the figure is directed to be played *Comme une lointaine sonnerie de Cors* (ex. I).

This figure is something of an interpretive enigma. The Prelude takes its title (which appears only at the end of the piece, as in Debussy’s other preludes) from a Baudelaire poem, “Harmonie du soir” from *Les Fleurs du mal*. But the poem makes no mention of horns:

Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige
Chaque fleur s’évapore ainsi qu’un encensoir,
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir,
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!

Chaque fleur s’évapore ainsi qu’un encensoir,
Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu’on afflige;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

Le violon frémit comme un cœur qu’on afflige,
Un cœur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!
Le soleil s’est noyé dans son sang qui se fige . . .
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir!  

(The time comes when, vibrating on its stem, each flower exhales like a censer;
sounds and perfumes circle in the evening air;
melancholic waltz and languorous vertigo!)

Each flower exhales like a censer;
the violin quivers like an afflicted heart;
melancholic waltz and languorous vertigo!
The sky is sad and beautiful like a great altar.

The violin quivers like an afflicted heart,
a tender heart that hates the vast and black nothingness!
The sky is sad and beautiful like a great altar;
the sun has drowned in its own clotting blood.

A tender heart that hates the vast and black nothingness
recalls every vestige of the luminous past!
The sun has drowned in its own clotting blood . . .
Your memory shines in me like a monstrance!

Debussy’s earlier setting of “Harmonie du soir” from the *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire* (1889) includes no horn calls, nor do the forty-nine measures of “Les sons et les parfums” preceding the final four. Why did Debussy end the Prelude in this way?

The oddity of the ending is heightened by the tangible resonances between the rest of the Prelude, particularly the opening, and Baudelaire’s poem. In particular, the “valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige” of the fourth line manifests in a modified waltz topic that opens the Prelude and recurs throughout the piece. Already in the 1889 setting of “Harmonie du soir,” Debussy set the “Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige” line as an identifiable, if unorthodox, two-measure waltz—heavy downbeats on an octave A in the bass followed by two light upbeats, embellished with *pianissimo* figuration in the treble. The third measure (m. 16), setting the word “vertige,” omits the downbeat and shortens the “waltz” to a $\frac{3}{4}$ measure—as though in a vertiginous echo of the final two beats from the preceding measure (ex. 2).

Similarly, in “Les sons et les parfums,” the opening is rhetorically suggestive of a waltz, with a heavy downbeat in the bass followed by upbeat chords in the treble, the bass line outlining a simple $1–5–1$ pattern. Yet, here the “waltz” is rhythmically distorted: though the Prelude as a whole is in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, the opening figure unfolds in a supple $\frac{5}{4}$ that gestures toward but is not assimilable into a waltz rhythm. By m. 3 the waltz has broken up into fragments. Now, while the A—emptied of any ca-
Example 1: Debussy, “Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir,”
from Préludes, Book 1 (Durand, 1910).
Example 1 (continued)
Example 1 (continued)
pacity to anchor a stable tonality—presents, ghostlike, in the bass, we hear eerie echoes of the melodic figure just heard in m. 2, the descending fourth from F♯ to C♯, in a lower register while parallel and inert dominant 6 chords sway listlessly just underneath. The notated meter has reverted to 3/4, but as the A in the bass articulates every fourth quarter note through mm. 3–5, the rhythm still does not conform to a waltz topic. Only in m. 9 does a clear 3/4 meter emerge.

The opening “waltz” music recurs three more times through the course of the Prelude, first in m. 24, then, modified, in m. 31, and finally, in a fragmented form, in m. 44. Taking a cue from the final line of Baudelaire’s poem (“Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensoir!”), discussions of this Prelude often treat the fragmentation and deconstruction of the waltz topic as acts of memory and recollection.68 Paul Roberts writes that “the music captures the faded, half-grasped memory of a popular dance” and that these waltz allusions “are all part of the fugitive remembrances that lie at the heart of the Prelude [and Baudelaire’s poem].”69 Matthew Brown notes that Debussy “transformed the prelude’s waltz rhythms in order to reflect the poet’s insights about the permanence and volatility of human memory.”70 Undeniably there is a certain nostalgia inherent in Debussy’s invocation of a waltz topic in the first place; the waltz by this period represented a lost nineteenth-century culture associated with refinement, romance, and high society.71

But Debussy did not choose the final line of the poem to be the piece’s enigmatic, after-the-fact “title”; rather, he chose the third line—one describing the immediate, present-tense sensory impressions of sounds and scents. Baudelaire’s poem itself is almost entirely in the present tense [with the exception of “Le soleil s’est noyé dans son sang qui se fige”], the first three stanzas describing a kind of hyperaesthetic, altered mental state. It is only the final stanza that introduces memory, and this final stanza does not require that we interpret everything prior to it as a memory; it suggests, rather, that the present-tense sense impressions described through the first three stan-

68Nicholas Routley, in contrast, considers the horn calls as evocative of Wagner due to the similarity of the “encore plus lointain” direction and Wagner’s “immer enfornter” direction for the hunting horns in act II of Tristan. While intriguing, this interpretation is somewhat under-­evidenced [the distant horn call is, after all, quite common]. See Routley, “Debussy and Baudelaire’s ‘Harmonie du soir,’” Musicology Australia 15 [1992]: 77–82.
71Relatedly, with respect to Ravel’s Valses nobles et sentimentales, composed two years after the first book of Debussy Preludes, Michael Puri writes that the “fragmentation, distortion and disordering of the waltzes as they reappear in the Epilogue . . . are the effects of an oblivion which, at the end of the long nineteenth century, was in the process of transforming the waltz from a cultural monument into a ruin” (Puri, “Memory and Melancholy in the Epilogue of Ravel’s Valses nobles et sentimentales,” Music Analysis 29 [2011]: 26).
Thus, without disputing that this Prelude implicates itself in memory and nostalgia, we perhaps should not assume that the sense impressions described in its title—*les sons et les parfums*—are necessarily absent, present only in memory; perhaps, indeed, we might think of the piece as enacting a kind of interpenetration of perceptions and remembrance. Are the falling-fourth figures in m. 3 echoes or memories? Is the initial melodic figure to which they refer (at the end of m. 2) an acoustic reality or a mental figment? The very undecidability of these questions—the ambiguity almost necessarily suffused through a piano piece which invokes recollections of a specifically auditory, musical nature—suggestively raises the possibility that we might understand this piece as a kind of fragmented reenactment of a listening experience. Rather than explaining the fracturing and recombining of waltz motives in this piece as nothing more than the development of a musical idea, they might rather be understood in relation to a sonic event—a hearing of a waltz—rather than a musical text. In this reading, the distorted waltz rhythms that begin the piece, as well as the near-continuous manipulations of melodic fragments from the waltz throughout its duration, might be conceived as auditory fragments literally “tournant dans l’air du soir”—even as, at the same time, they “tournent” in the consciousness of Baudelaire’s narrator.

From this perspective, the horn calls at the end of the Prelude—when, finally, we come to the long-withheld stable arrival on A, reaffirmed with a bass that drops down an octave to the lowest pitch on the piano—act as a final sonic interjection in this assemblage of dislocated sounds. The horn calls are notated in such a way as to suggest effects of physical resonance, with lingering upper partials shimmering in the upper register of the piano. Their sudden appearance seems to call the listener back from a musical process caught up in increasingly disjointed fragments of the waltz theme—from a messy subjective interiority, perhaps—to empirical, sonic reality. Though the horn calls seem to materialize from nothing, the stepwise descending G♯–F♯–E motive, followed by the low A in the bass, in mm. 51 and 53 was prefigured earlier in the piece by the dramatic descending gestures that initiated the waltz motive in mm. 31 and 37. In m. 31, this motive is a half step lower than its later appearances (in the context of an entire passage shifted down a semitone, as though sonically distorted); in m. 37, however, we hear the motive outlining the same pitches, in the same register, as those in the horn calls at the end of the piece—a stepwise descent from G♯ to F♯ to E followed by an A low in the bass.

Further, the sonic profile of the horn calls is present in outline for several measures before their arrival. In the bass, a low A pedal point establishes itself in m. 46. In the high treble, the upper C⁴ octave, which from the beginning of the piece has acted as a key point of articulation as the ending sonority of the “waltz” music (cf. mm. 2, 25, and 32–39), sounds five times through mm. 46–49, including on two downbeats (mostly as D♭s as part of diminished-seventh chords on E). It is as though aspects of the horn calls, if not their melody in discrete form, were already present—as though the sonic reality of the horn calls had been intruding upon and shaping the disintegrating waltz themes. The “outside” reality of the horn calls, in other words, gradually comes to the forefront of the listener’s musical attention as though they have already been sounding while his mind was preoccupied with the lingering echoes and fragments of the waltz. Simultaneously outside and deeply internal to the Prelude, the final horn calls clarify and contextualize the entire rest of the piece to which they initially seem unrelated—much as the final line of Baudelaire’s poem (“Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor!”) clarifies the preceding lines as addressed to an absent beloved.

“Les sons et les parfums” performs a certain kind of instability in the relationship between the “musical” and the “sonic.” Quite explicitly, by virtue of its title, the piece is positioned in a specific relationship to sound: even paired with the most prototypically multisensory of poetic texts—the Baudelairean *correspondances*
suggested by the juxtaposition of sounds and perfumes—the Prelude asks us to consider hearing as a distinct and isolable register of experience. In a certain sense the juxtaposition of sensory modalities in the title is enabled by precisely this conception of sound as isolable, able to be cordoned off from sensory experience understood as a totality (in order to then be rejoined with another equally isolable sensory modality).72

Concurrently, there is, in some degree, an element of inscription or rendering at work in “Les sons et les parfums”: it suggests a sonic world beyond that of the Prelude which the Prelude itself merely represents. The horn calls at the end are a topical signifier, to be sure; but Debussy’s depiction of them goes beyond what is necessary to invoke the topic of the horn call. They call us to a particular kind of heightened auditory attention, a hearing of partials resonating in an imagined acoustic space. And they direct a self-reflexive attention to their own, physical sonority—not simply as sonority qua sonority but as directed toward a representational object, a sonic phenomenon outside the boundaries of the musical composition. They are an act of rendering that foregrounds the interposition of music, as a representational medium, between the listening subject and the sound of the horns. Further, the entire piece—particularly in retrospect—continually interpenetrates the musical setting of the Prelude with the “sounds” of a waltz as a performed event. Abstracting sonic fragments from their musical instantiation in the waltz, the Prelude treats these fragments as material entities, intermingling with scents in the evening air. The material quantity of sound is then reinstated in the music of the Prelude, intruding upon it, ultimately confusing the boundaries between the two. To what degree are we to understand the notes of “Les sons et les parfums” as composed music and to what degree as recollections or renderings of sonic events?

Questions like these are not restricted to “Les sons et les parfums.” Despite Debussy’s own protestations against musical imitation in a review of Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony in 1903,73 suggestions of sonic “events” recur with some frequency in his oeuvre, particularly in the piano music—the sound of the rain in “Jardins sous la pluie” from Estampes (1903), for example; the wind in “Le vent dans la plaine” (Préludes, Book 1, 1909); the whole-tone bells in “Cloches à travers les feuilles” (Images, Série II, 1907); the noisy disruptions of “La sérénade interrompue” (Préludes, Book 1, 1909). But if we might understand aspects of these pieces, as in “Les sons et les parfums,” as gestures toward sonic “inscription” in some qualified sense, self-consciously muddling the distinctions between composed music and represented “sound,” they also challenge and complicate Debussy’s statements on his supposed allegiance to listening. These pieces, after all, are hardly illustrative of what Debussy himself professed to do when, for example, he claimed that “all the noises that we hear around us can be rendered”; that “for myself, I want to write only what I hear.” “Les sons et les parfums”—like “Le vent dans la plaine,” “Cloches à travers les feuilles,” and the rest—is not simply a “rendering” of sounds. Why, then, did Debussy make such statements? And how might we understand what these pieces actually accomplish, if they contravene Debussy’s own proclamations on the issue?

The apparent disjunction between rhetoric and music-compositional practice is particularly conspicuous in Debussy’s response to Lalo’s review of La mer in October 1905. The day after the review appeared, Debussy wrote to Lalo defending the piece. “I cannot follow you,” he wrote,

when you take [La mer] as a pretext for finding suddenly that my other works lack logic and are supported only by a tenacious sensibility and an

72Caroline A. Jones has argued that the “bureaucratization” of the senses—that is, their isolation into discrete registers of experience—is a specifically modern phenomenon. See Jones, Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg’s Modernism and the Bureaucratization of the Senses (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. 389–435.

73Voyez la scène au bord du ruisseau! . . . [Le] rossignol en bois et [le] coucou suisse . . . appartiennent plus à l’art de M. de Vaucanson qu’à une nature digne de ce nom . . . . Tout cela est inutilement imitatif ou d’une interprétation purement arbitraire.” Debussy, “M. F. Weingartner.—Reprise de ‘La Traviata’ à l’Opéra Comique,” Gil Blas (16 February 1903); in Monsieur Croches et autres écrits, 96.
ostinate searching after the picturesque . . . a catch-
word under which one puts things that have nothing
do with what this word exactly represents?

You say—saving your biggest rock for last—that
you neither see nor sense the sea, through these
“three sketches.” That is indeed a big assertion, and
who is going to decide it for us? I love the sea; I have
listened to it with the passionate respect that it
deserves. If I have transcribed badly what was dic-
tated to me, this does not concern either of us. And
you will concede to me that all ears do not perceive
in the same way.74

Like so many of his other writings on music
aesthetics, Debussy’s letter appeals ultimately
to écouter; indeed, his defense of La mer rests
on it. He has listened to the sea in the proper
manner (“with the passionate respect that it
deserves”), and this should suffice. The nature
of his “transcription”—the final artistic prod-
uct—matters less than the way in which he
listened.

But surely we cannot plausibly hear La mer
as a symphonic “transcription” of ocean sounds.
Indeed, in a letter to André Messager written in
1903 while he was working on the score in
Burgundy, Debussy was somewhat more cir-
ccumstantial about the piece’s relationship to
the ocean: “You will tell me that the Ocean does
not exactly lap the hills of Burgundy! . . . And
that this effort might resemble the landscapes
painted in a studio! But I have innumerable
memories; these are better, to my mind, than
the reality, the charm of which usually weighs
too heavily on the mind [pèse généralement
trop lourd sur votre pensée].”75 Privately, and—

74 Je ne puis vous suivre quand vous en prenez prétexte
pour trouver tout à coup, que mes autres œuvres manquent
de logique et ne se soutiennent que par une sensibilité
tenace et une recherche obstinée de pittoresque . . . mot
bannière sous lequel on range des choses qui n’ont rien à
voir avec ce que représente exactement ce mot? . . . Vous
dites, —gardant votre pierre la plus lourde pour la fin, que
vous ne voyez ni ne sentez la mer, à travers ces ‘trois
esquisses.’ Voilà qui est bien gros d’affirmation et, qui va
nous en fixer la valeur? . . . J’aime la Mer; je l’ai écouter
avec le respect passionné qu’on lui doit. Si j’ai mal transcrit
ce qu’elle m’a dicté, cela ne nous regarde pas plus l’un que
l’autre. Et vous me concéderez que toutes les oreilles ne
perçoivent pas de la même façon.7 Debussy, letter to Pierre
Lalo [25 October 1903], in Correspondance 1872–1918, 928.

75 Vous me direz [ . . . ]que l’océan ne baigne pas
précisément les coteaux bourguignons . . . ! Et que cela
pourrait bien ressembler aux paysages d’atelier ! Mais j’ai
d’innombrables souvenirs, cela vaut mieux, à mon sens,
perhaps more importantly—in the midst of the
compositional process, Debussy utterly reversed
his earlier preference for écouter over penser:
the sounds of the ocean must not overpower—
make inaudible—thought. This letter would
seem to confirm precisely the charge that Lalo
made in his review of La mer—that the piece’s
relationship to the ocean is mediated, that it
generates an impression not of “nature itself,”
but of a “reproduction of nature.” What, then,
to make of Debussy’s protestations to the con-
trary two years later?

Peter Dayan, in his reading of Debussy’s writ-
ings on music, parses the difference between
Lalo’s review and Debussy’s response as rest-
ing on a distinction between a traditional mode
of representation and a Mallarméan, critical
mode of representation that calls the possibili-
ity of representation into doubt: “Whereas Lalo
was distinguishing between good musical rep-
resentation [which would seem natural] and
bad musical representation [which would seem
like a secondary reproduction, a reproduction
of a reproduction], to Debussy all musical rep-
resentation, to put it simply, is bad; all musical
representation has that secondary character that
both Debussy and Lalo see as mechanical.”76

For Dayan, Lalo doesn’t understand the subtle-
ties of a Mallarméan suspicion of representa-
tion. Lalo wanted Debussy to represent well
rather than badly, and Debussy’s response, in
turn, rejects “Lalo’s notion that one should feel
before the work of art that one is before na-
ture.”77 Rather, “Debussy’s aesthetic logic, like
Mallarmé’s, pushes us towards a point of view
from which the appearance of beauty is depen-
dent on the erasure of meaning.”78

Dayan’s account of Debussy’s aesthetic as
Mallarméan, however, raises a crucial difficulty.
Unlike Mallarmé’s, Debussy’s medium was not
one that was inescapably saturated with refer-
cences to a world outside itself; indeed,
Mallarmé’s revolutionary syntax was a strat-

76 Dayan, “Nature, Music, and Meaning in Debussy’s Writ-
ings,” 217.

77 Ibid., 216.

78 Ibid., 221.
egy toward the specifically semantic nature of language. Debussy, on the other hand, had the historically available option for aesthetic creation that was truly “abstract,” removed from all reference to the world of things. If Debussy believed that “all musical representation . . . is bad,” then why would he have said that he “transcribed” the sea at all—much less claim again, five years later, that “for myself, I want to write only what I hear?”

In his reading of Debussy’s letter, Dayan writes that “if La Mer is to be judged as music, it cannot be judged as transcription; it must not be seen as the incarnation of an impression.” But Debussy’s rejection of any arbitration of accuracy of representation—the idea that La mer cannot be “judged as a transcription”—was not a rejection of representation altogether. Debussy does not dispute Lalo’s assumption that La mer should make present the sea, of or the role of sensation in this act of making-present; indeed, Debussy would seem to endorse this goal as meaningful and important by referring to Lalo’s denial of it as the harshest critique in the review. Rather than seeking a Mallarméan arbitrary signifier purposefully divorced from the reality of the sea, Debussy, much like Lalo, attempted to salvage music’s relationship to the world with the immediacy of listening and sensation—a higher form of representation that must, however, acknowledge the interposition of an opaque mediator that prevents any objective arbitration of its veracity. Debussy’s objection to Lalo was not premised on whether La mer should make present the sea, but whether Lalo was in a position to say that it doesn’t.

Thus, Debussy’s letter to Lalo reproduces the very same opposition as the one that emerged from the writings of Lalo and Laloy—the opposition between a representation that is allied with heightened, attentive receptivity to auditory sensation, on the one hand, and one that is complicit with false, inattentive habits on the other. Put another way, the binary between academic rules and artistic freedom that recurs so frequently in Debussy’s writings can be recast as a binary between auditory attentiveness and false, conventional habit. Debussy recognized representation as a highly problematic undertaking, necessarily premised on a mysterious interface between perceiving subject and objective world; his response, however, was not to abandon a representational project but to put new scrutiny on the interface—on the act of listening—as an attempt to make a representational project viable.

What distinguishes Debussy from Lalo, then, is not the question of whether music should be premised on a relationship to nature, but the difficulty that this project entailed. For all that he extolled the virtues of attentive listening, in practice this listening proved insufficient to the demands of musical composition as a practice of writing. Debussy wrote to Lalo that “I cannot follow you when you take [La mer] as a pretext for finding suddenly that my other works lack logic and are supported only by a tenacious sensibility.” For Debussy, sensibilité was simply not enough to hold together the musical surface, as Lalo so vociferously insisted.

79Mallarmé’s assertion that poetry should emulate music depended on precisely this (Romantic) ideal of music as abstract and removed from reference to the external world. In this sense, Debussy’s appeal to “transcription” coheres Mallarmé’s own account of the nature and purpose of music. See in particular Mallarmé’s essays Crise de vers, La Musique et les lettres, and Le mystère dans les lettres. Other figures associated with Symbolism, including Paul Verlaine and Théodore de Wyzewa, conceived music in similarly abstract ways; for more on the role of music in Symbolist poetics, see, e.g., David Michael Hertz, The Tuning of the Word: The Musico-literary Aesthetics of the Symbolist Movement (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987); Heath Lees, Mallarmé and Wagner: Music and Poetic Language (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Joseph Acquisto, French Symbolist Poetry and the Idea of Music (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).


81Debussy’s remarks in this regard are suggestive of recent scholarship on Cézanne and later Impressionism. Kathryn Tuma argues: “The practice of Cézanne, as well as the ideology of Impressionist visual and pictorial theory, locates itself historically within the context of fracturing paradigms of representational realism as doubts grew about the transparency of the sign as it functioned to refer to a world. For many of the Impressionists, and for Cézanne, the possibility of equivalence—the relationship supporting the very possibility of painterly realism—was fundamentally bound up with the definition, not to mention the effective persuasive rendering, of visual ‘sensations’” [Tuma, Cézanne, Lucretius, and the Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century Science [PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2000], 88–89].
Debussy found himself torn between opposing demands: an ideological commitment to heightened listening and sonic realism, on the one hand, and the demands of compositional craft on the other. Buried deep in Debussy’s own espousal of listening as the solution to métier and écriture musicale was a deep ambivalence on the question of whether the inherent artifice of musical construction could ever be truly overcome.

Consequently, Debussy’s rhetorical position, in his letter to Lalo as well as in published articles and interviews, in favor of listening, rendering, and “transcription”—however musically unrealized this position may seem to have been from a twenty-first-century point-of-view—is, if not descriptive of Debussy’s actual compositional practice, nonetheless revelatory of both the way in which he sought to position himself vis-à-vis an existing music-compositional tradition and the ultimate, unsurpassable limitations of this positioning. The entire paradox of Debussyism was that for all its complaints about the mediating apparatus of technical procedures—including Debussy’s own—Debussy’s compositional practice could not dispense with them: he remained within a paradigm of musical composition that required technical procedures even as it required, also, the denigration of them. Debussyism, in other words, was caught in a kind of double bind in which compositional artifice was recognized as the antithesis of some imagined, natural “Real” but was also necessary as the only potential means of approaching that Real.

In the same 1901 letter to Paul Dukas in which he issued the admonition to listen instead of think, Debussy expressed precisely this frustration: “I confess that I’m no longer thinking entirely musically, or at least, hardly at all, while still being profoundly persuaded that Music ever remains the most beautiful means of expression that there is; only I find in the works—whether they be old or modern, which anyway is only a question of dates—an extreme poverty, a well-known inability to escape from the work-table; it is always lit by a sad lamplight, never by the sun.”

Abstract.

Musicologists have long recognized that “sensation” played an important role in the musical culture of debussysme. Close readings of the writings of Debussy and his circle in the first decade of the twentieth century reveal that a key, though often overlooked, aspect of Debussyist sensation is a specifically auditory one—a special mode of attentive listening that claims a privileged knowledge of the natural phenomenon of sound. This account of sensation and listening, which both recapitulates and critiques central components of Helmholtzian sensory physiology, puts Debussy and Debussyism in dialogue with a network of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discourses on the limits of sensory knowledge and resultant problems of representation. Considering Debussyism in this light demonstrates the extent to which musical culture in this period negotiated a modernist crisis of representation salient across high-art culture around the turn of the twentieth century even as it inflected this problem specifically toward issues of sound and listening.

Keywords: Claude Debussy, Debussyism, Louis Laloy, Pierre Lalo, Hermann von Helmholtz

82. “Je puis avouer que je ne pense plus, ou presque plus, musicalement tout en étant profondément persuadé que la Musique reste à jamais le plus beau moyen d’expression qui soit; seulement il m’apparaît dans les œuvres — qu’elles soient anciennes ou modernes, ce qui d’ailleurs n’est qu’une question de dates — une pauvreté extrême, une incapacité notoire à s’évader de la table de travail; c’est toujours éclairé par la lampe triste, jamais par le soleil.” Debussy, letter to Paul Dukas (11 February 1901), in Correspondance 1872–1918, 586.