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THE FETES GALANTES OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY

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The Fêtes Galantes of Claude Debussy

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Table of Contents

List of Musical Examples	vi
Introduction	1
The 1892 <i>Fêtes galantes</i>	5
The 1904 <i>Fêtes galantes</i>	. . . . .	18
Conclusion	. . . . .	36
Selected Bibliography	. . . . .	41
Supplementary Sources	. . . . .	43
Recital Programs	. . . . .	45

List of Musical Examples

Example 1. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1882 version, mm. 1-6.	9
Example 2. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1892 version, mm. 1-2.	9
Example 3. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1882 version, mm. 7-10.	10
Example 4. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1892 version, mm. 3-4.	10
Example 5. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1882 version, mm. 12-17.	11
Example 6. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1892 version, mm. 5-6.	11
Example 7. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1882 version, mm. 18-19.	12
Example 7a. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1892 version, mm. 7-8.	12
Example 8. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1882 version, mm. 24-28.	13
Example 8a. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1892 version, mm. 11-12.	13
Example 9. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1882 version, mm. 31-24.	13
Example 9a. <i>Clair de lune</i> , 1892 version, mm. 13-14.	14
Example 10. <i>En Sourdine</i> , mm. 1-3.	15
Example 11. <i>En Sourdine</i> , mm. 5-10.	15
Example 12. <i>En Sourdine</i> , mm. 26-27.	16
Example 13. <i>Fantoches</i> , mm. 1-4.	18
Example 14. <i>Les Ingénus</i> , mm. 1-4.	23
Example 15. <i>Le Faune</i> , mm. 1-3.	23
Example 16. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 1	24

Example 17. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 4-5.	24
Example 18. <i>Les Ingénus</i> , mm. 9-12.	26
Example 19. <i>Les Ingénus</i> , mm. 14-15.	26
Example 20. <i>Les Ingénus</i> , mm. 21-26.	27
Example 21. <i>Les Ingénus</i> , mm. 31-35.	28
Example 22. <i>Les Ingénus</i> , mm. 37-38.	28
Example 23. <i>Les Ingénus</i> , mm. 39-41.	29
Example 24. <i>Les Ingénus</i> , mm. 48-49.	29
Example 25. <i>Le Faune</i> , mm. 4-6.	30
Example 26. <i>Le Faune</i> , mm. 7-12.	31
Example 27. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 1-3.	32
Example 28. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 4.	33
Example 29. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 9-11.	34
Example 30. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 17-18.	34
Example 31. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 22-23.	35
Example 32. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 36-37.	36
Example 33. <i>Colloque Sentimental</i> , mm. 46-48.	37

INTRODUCTION

The songs of Claude Debussy (1862-1918) hold a significant standing in the classical repertoire. Even though Debussy contributed to all genres of composition, the corpus of his output lies in his piano compositions and his songs.¹ His love for poetry engaged him in a lifetime of song composition which, between the years 1879 and 1915, fostered the creation of eighty-seven songs. Debussy drew from works by twenty-three different poets and wrote five of his own texts.² By virtue of his song composition alone, Debussy would have been a distinctive and individual figure in music.³

Debussy's early songs grew out of the tradition of nineteenth-century art songs in which the piano had been elevated from mere harmonic accompaniment to a level of equal importance with the vocal line. The piano and voice work in a cooperative effort to express the poetic text. Debussy's highly personal treatment of the poetry, known for its smoothness and attentiveness to the natural rhythm and flow of the French language, give his songs a flavor similar to the heightened recitative one finds in Lully, Rameau, and Wagner. The piano joins with the voice in nuances which enhance the expression

¹Rita Benton, ed., Claude Debussy Songs 1880-1904 (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1981), vi.

²Margaret G. Cobb, The Poetic Debussy: A Collection of His Song Texts and Selected Letters (Boston: Northeast University Press, 1982), xiv.

³Oscar Thompson, Debussy: Man and Artist (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1965), 276.

of the sung poetry.⁴ Debussy's melodies, because of their exotic scales and poetic attentiveness, are unique. They are melodic without being highly tuneful, declamatory without lapsing into mere recitative, and they are suitable for the sophisticated texts he has set.

Even in his early songs, Debussy is innovative in constructing new harmonic textures, melodic designs, and chord structures.⁵ In his maturity, Debussy's innovations flourish into a highly-pronounced personal style of harmonic and textural coloring. Debussy broke from the highly chromatic, yet functional, style of the nineteenth century Romantic composers and turned to the church modes, whole-tone and pentatonic scales. He employed highly decorative chords with unresolved sevenths, ninths, or thirteenths to fashion his harmonies, which became components of color replacing functional harmony. Because of his coloristic qualities, Debussy was associated with the Impressionists, a school of painters who were active a generation before Debussy.⁶

In choosing his texts Debussy turned to the poetry of his French contemporaries. In Paris Debussy frequented the literary salon of Stéphane Mallarmé where he heard Mallarmé, along with other French Symbolist poets Paul Verlaine and Pierre Louys, do readings of their work. The style of the Symbolist poetry, similar in some ways to Impressionist painting, had a deep influence on Debussy's musical style. In Symbolist

⁴Martin Cooper, French Music from the Death of Berlioz to the Death of Fauré (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 276.

⁵James R. Briscoe, "Debussy d'après Debussy: The Further Resonance of Two Early Melodies," Nineteenth Century Music 5 (1984): 85.

⁶Alfred Frankenstein, "The Imagery from Without," High Fidelity (September 1962): 61.

poetry, an idea gained importance largely by its relationship to the idea that followed it. Clear thought and logical construction were abandoned in favor of emotional construction.⁷ The first stanza of Verlaine's *En Sourdine* is an example of the juxtaposition of two ideas whose relationship is emotional:

Calm in the half light
made by the tall branches,
let our love be imbued
with this deep silence.⁸

The setting described in the opening two lines of the poem is elevated by the final two lines. The simple pastoral setting becomes a device that is able to effect two lovers. Debussy's music took on the characteristics of the Symbolist poetry by rejecting traditional logical construction (harmonic progressions) in favor of emotional construction (coloristic harmony) where sonorities, rather than chord-progressions, govern the musical language.

Debussy's favorite Symbolist poet was Paul Verlaine. Of Debussy's eighty-seven songs, eighteen (nearly one-fourth) are settings of Verlaine texts. Debussy's first meeting with Verlaine came at a young age through his piano teacher Madame Antoinette-Flore Mauté, Verlaine's mother-in-law. Verlaine resided with Madame Mauté during the time

⁷Henry C. Phillips, "The Symbolists and Debussy," Music and Letters 13 (1932): 298-311.

⁸Pierre Bernac, The Interpretation of French Song (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1978), 177.

in which Debussy was studying in her home.⁹

Debussy set his first Verlaine poem, *Fantoches* (Marionettes), in January of 1882. *Fantoches* was taken from a series of poems that drew its inspiration from a set of paintings entitled *Assemblée dans un parc*, but more commonly known as *Fêtes galantes*, by the eighteenth-century artist Antoine Watteau.¹⁰ The scenes of Watteau's *Fêtes galantes* are filled with people (small dogs and children are included) promenading, playing games, singing or being entertained in large, well shaded parks. The scenes, where nature seems to enfold man into its maternal bosom, are very elegant and refined. However, the occasional presence of an ominous statue, or a blank or questioning expression on a face, creates a melancholy tone amidst the elegance and refinement.¹¹ The juxtaposition of contrasting ideas and a desire to return to nature are two very prominent characteristics shared by the *Fêtes galantes* paintings and Symbolist poetry. Verlaine's poetry captures the essence of Watteau's paintings.

Debussy found a wealth of inspiration in Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*. He set a total of eight songs from the collection, attempted an opera-ballet (1913), and as late as 1915 planned a theater piece based on them. Earlier, he had grouped six of the songs into two separate song cycles which he entitled *Fêtes galantes*. The first set was composed in 1892 and the second set in 1904.¹² Because of their poetic and artistic associations

⁹Arthur Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 22-23.

¹⁰Briscoe, 4.

¹¹Bernac, 178.

¹²Wenk, 222.

spanning almost two centuries of French culture, Debussy's songs may be seen as his musical reflection of a uniquely French sensibility.

The 1892 *FÊTES GALANTES*

In 1882 Debussy set five poems from Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*. None of these, however, was composed with the intent of forming a cycle. They were individual songs related only in terms of their origin, poetic bonds and dedication to the singer Madame Blanche-Adelaid Vasnier for whom they were composed.

Beyond her personal performances of Debussy's songs, Mme. Vasnier, along with her father Eugène-Henri Vasnier, provided financial support for Debussy. The Vasniers encouraged Debussy to be innovative and individual in forging his personal style. It was, in fact, Eugène-Henri Vasnier who led Debussy to the works of Verlaine and Mallarmé. Debussy had already been reading the Symbolist poet Théodore de Banville and in 1882 set for Mme. Vasnier Theodore de Banville's poem *Fêtes galante*. De Banville, like Verlaine, had drawn his inspiration from Watteau's paintings.¹³

In 1892, ten years after their original composition, Debussy grouped three songs: *En Sourdine* (Muted), *Fantoches* (Marionettes), and *Clair de lune* (Moonlight) and published them under the title *Fêtes galantes*. This set of songs, often referred to as a cycle, is not cyclic in respect to harmonic or thematic relations or a narrative plot. The group is bonded solely by the Symbolist style of each of the poems.¹⁴ In the

¹³Briscoe, 81-85.

¹⁴Susan Youens, "Debussy's Song Cycles," *NATS Journal* (September/October 1986): 15.

musicological literature, the terms "group," "set," "cycle," and "series," are used in referring to the *Fêtes galantes*.

By 1892 Debussy was no longer composing for Mme. Vasnier. His threefold relationship (beneficiary, composer/accompanist, lover) with Vasnier had faded. Consequently, when publishing the *Fêtes galantes*, Debussy dropped the Vasnier dedications from the 1892 songs. Two manuscripts of *En Sourdine* (one is dated 1892 and the other is undated) are dedicated to Catherine Stevens. Mme. Stevens, who rejected Debussy's proposal of marriage, was an amateur singer whom Debussy accompanied in the early 1890s.¹⁵

The published version of *En Sourdine* is dedicated to Madame Robert Godet. Her husband, Robert Godet, a Swiss journalist and musicologist, met Debussy in 1888 and became one of his closest life-long friends.¹⁶ Debussy dedicates the other two *Fêtes galantes* songs to two ladies who were members of an amateur choral group which he conducted from 1893 to 1904. Madame Lucien Fontaine, wife of Lucien Fontaine, an arts patron and founder of Debussy's choral group, receives the dedication of *Fantoches*. *Clair de lune* is dedicated to Madame Arthur Fontaine whose husband was a brother to Lucien. Debussy was often a guest in the homes of the Fontaine families.¹⁷

By 1892, Debussy had made great strides toward his musical maturity. Consequently, his *En Sourdine* and *Clair de lune* of 1892 are considered closer to recompositions than revisions. *Fantoches* remains the closest to the original composition.

¹⁵Cobb, 301.

¹⁶Ibid., 295-296.

¹⁷Ibid., 294-295.

Debussy never published any of the 1882 versions of these songs. However, posthumous publications include *Clair de lune* (1926) and *En Sourdine* (1944) under the title *Calme dans le demi-jour*. The original *Fantoches* remains unpublished.¹⁸

The recomposition/revision of *Clair de lune* shows some striking contrasts and similarities in comparison to the original version. The dynamic markings and time signatures of the 1892 composition provide an expanded setting of the poetry. Dynamic and tempo contrasts, long phrases and melodic lines are more extensive. The poetry of the 1892 version is more intimately expressed through a broader pallet of agogic durations and accents. The early version is in a meter of 3/8. The second version is in 9/8 with the added markings *très modéré*. The initial dynamic of the first version is *piano*. The second version is *pianissimo* with an added *très doux* for the piano introduction and an indicated *très doux et très expressif* upon the entrance of the voice.

The introductions of the two songs, in representation of their title, share a common portrayal of descending moonlight. Example 1 shows the moonlight of the early composition arriving in a series of descending major and minor triads that include a left-hand coloristic non-chord tone. In the second version (example 2) the moonlight is depicted in a linear pattern of descending and repeating tones rather than the vertical pattern of the earlier version. The linear movement of the descending pentatonic scale provides a gentle, wafting descent.

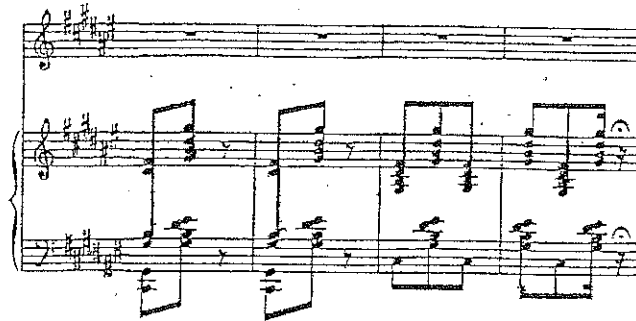
¹⁸Ibid., 35-50.



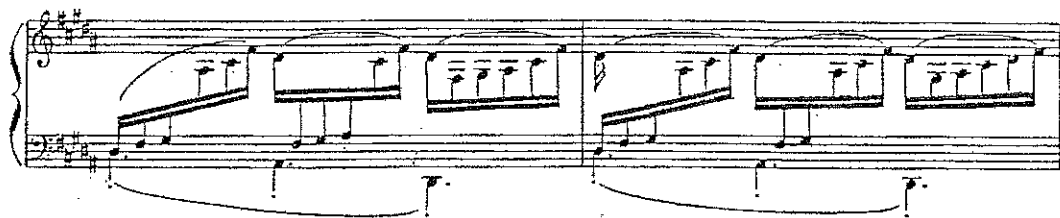
Example 1. *Clair de lune*, 1882 version, mm. 1-6.

Example 2. *Clair de lune*, 1892 version, mm. 1-2.

The introduction in both versions of *Clair de lune* ends in a series of repetitions. The first setting is completed with four measures of chordal inversion while the second setting consists of two measures of pentatonic scales. The scale passages give the later *Clair de lune* an expansive, sustained effect while the triadic inversions of the early version is more disjunct. Examples 3 and 4 reveal their vertical and horizontal relationship.



Example 3. *Clair de lune*, 1882 version, mm. 7-10.



Example 4. *Clair de lune*, 1892 version, mm. 3-4.

The vocal lines of the two songs contrast in much the same manner as the piano introductions. The *Clair de lune* of 1882 tends to be triadic in nature and contains many leaps of a fourth or fifth. The melody, however, is not without chromatic or diatonic passages; indeed, the contrast of these passages accentuates the leaps. An important aspect of the first *Clair de lune* is that it was written for a specific singer (Mme. Vasnier) who possessed a high agile voice which would lend itself to skips and leaps.¹⁹

¹⁹Corneel Mertens, "Debussy, (Achille-) Claude," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 4 (1980): 301.

This aspect appears even more important when one considers the *Fantoches* of the same year which contains leaps ranging from a fifth to a ninth.

Debussy is consistent with the agogic stress in each of the settings and shows that his mastery of setting the French language was present even in his youth. One need only to examine the opening line of each setting to find agogic similarities. The syllabic stresses and patterns, as displayed in examples 5 and 6, remain close.

Example 5. *Clair de lune*, 1882 version, mm. 12-17.

Example 6. *Clair de lune*, 1892 version, mm. 5-6.

Throughout the two pieces, Debussy is consistent in his relationships of long and short syllables. In examples 7 through 9a, one can see that speech-song and melodic writing are present in both songs.



Example 7. *Clair de lune*, 1882 version, mm. 18-19.

This musical score snippet shows a vocal line in treble clef and piano accompaniment in grand staff. The key signature has three sharps. The vocal line contains the lyrics "vont charmant mas-ques et ber-ga-mas-ques". The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed sixteenth and thirty-second notes.

Example 7a. *Clair de lune*, 1892 version, mm. 7-8.

Tris - tes sous leurs dé - gui - se - ments - fan -
tas - - - - - ques

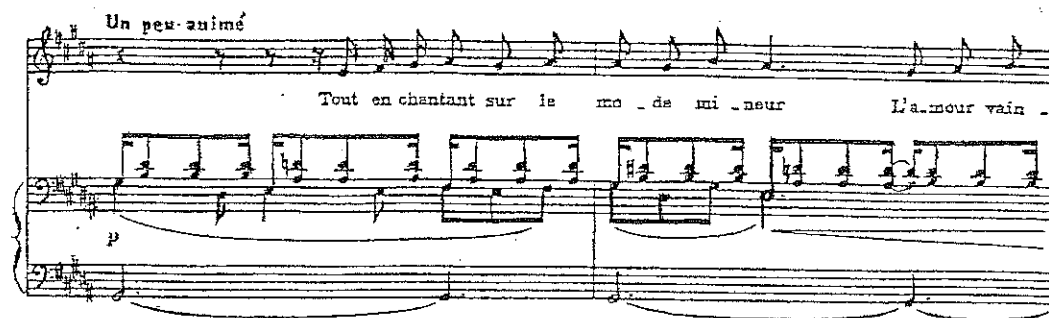
Example 8. *Clair de lune*, 1882 version, mm. 24-28.

Tris - - - - - tes sous leurs dégui - se - ments fantas - - - - - ques.

Example 8a. *Clair de lune*, 1892 version, mm. 11-12.

Tout - en chan - tant sur le mo - de - mi - neur

Example 9. *Clair de lune*, 1882 version, mm. 31-34.



Example 9a. *Clair de lune*, 1892 version, mm13-14.

Perhaps the similarities in the fundamental text setting of the two versions give impetus to references of the 1892 version as a revision. But it is the more mature Debussy who, ten years later, enhances the text by musically expansive measures, linear phrases, and longer duration to key words. The most striking textual contrasts of the two text settings are the words or syllables which Debussy highlights in terms of extended duration. Words such as *opportune*, *bonheur*, and *lune* are given twice their earlier value.

In *En Sourdine*, Debussy's text setting technique is very Impressionistic. The poetry begins..."Calm in the half light / made by the branches, / let our love be imbued with this deep silence".²⁰ The piano has sustained chords in the left hand while the right hand sounds a nightingale song (see example 10). The voice calmly enters with a repetitive note (D-sharp) then briefly rises, by only a fourth, before returning to the initial pitch that ends the opening phrase. The subsequent phrases are small in compass

²⁰Bernac, 177.

and center around the D-sharp. The nightingale continually sounds throughout the first stanza (see example 11).



Example 10. *En Sourdine*, mm. 1-3.

Example 11. *En Sourdine*, mm. 5-10.

By using the nightingale song, Debussy parallels the ideals of the Symbolist style. Symbolist poetry offers the nightingale as a representation of nature. In Symbolist terms, man seeks relief from human suffering through nature. Nature then becomes the

supplication for human distress.²¹ The nightingale is hushed half-way into the song as the lovers contemplate themselves rather than their surroundings. Its theme sounds again in the final verse of the poem where the poetry proclaims that the nightingale will sing and become the voice of their despair.

The third and fourth stanzas of *En Sourdine* are set with Impressionistic accompaniments. In the third verse the accompaniment moves forward in a rhapsodic series of diminished chords in triplet rhythm. The rhapsody provides an impression of the lovers sensual feelings:

Half close your eyes,
fold your arms across your breast,
and from your sleeping heart
forever drive away all purpose.²²

The accompaniment of the fourth verse, shown in example 12, depicts a gentle wind and blowing grass through rocking triplet chords.



Example 12. *En Sourdine*, mm. 26-27.

²¹Wenk, 36.

²²Bernac, 177.

Fantoches has been described as a "perfect partner" for *En Sourdine* and *Clair de lune*. It lightens the group without detracting from the tone of the other two songs.²³ In *Fantoches*, Verlaine has created a short drama using characters from the *commedia dell'arte* which are common figures in Watteau's *Fêtes galantes* paintings. The characters in *Fantoches* include the mute Scaramouche, the crude Pulcinella, and a verbose doctor whose scantily dressed daughter is pursuing a handsome Spanish pirate.²⁴ The manuscript's title page reveals that the order of the songs, initially, was to be *En Sourdine*, *Clair de lune*, *Fantoches*. Upon publication *Fantoches*, for sake of contrast, was placed between *En Sourdine* and *Clair de lune*.²⁵ Functionally, then, *Fantoches* is a scherzando which separates the two slow movements.²⁶ The witty and superficially charming character of *Fantoches* nearly hides the musical and poetic subtexts that make it a worthy partner of the sophisticated accompanying songs.

It is easy to imagine the gesticulating characters of Scaramouche and Pulcinella in the chromatically scurrying thirds which open the piece.²⁷ An identifiable theme, shown in example 13, occurs in the left hand and is repeated throughout the piece in its original form or in a transposed, abbreviated form. The theme serves as an introduction to each of the characters in the drama. It appears in the vocal line three times: the entrance, the ending phrase of the doctor, and the final line of the poem.

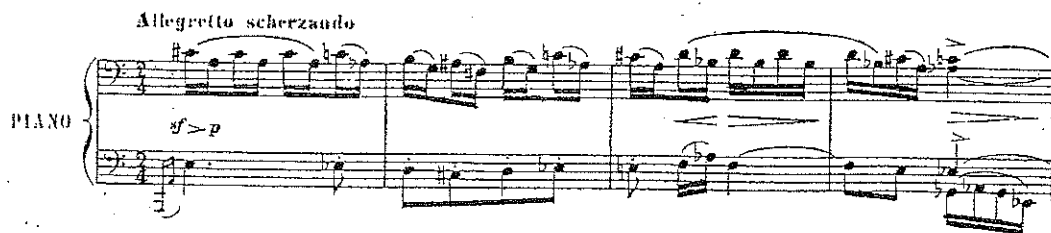
²³Mertens, 302.

²⁴Wenk, 228.

²⁵Cobb, 119.

²⁶Bernac, 179.

²⁷Wenk, 229.



Example 13. *Fantoche*, mm. 1-4.

The character of the daughter is aptly portrayed by a supple melody which juxtaposes staccato and legato phrases. On the words *piquant minois* the accompaniment softens to arpeggiated chords that alternate every two measures with the staccato figure of the opening theme. The image of the girl is further painted by the continuing melody which contains a playful leap of a ninth and frolicsome phrase of *la, la, la's*.²⁸

The opening motive returns for the final vocal line of the piece where the "amorous nightingale proclaims the distress (of the pirate) at the top of his lungs".²⁹ The pirate is not seen in the short "drama" of *Fantoche* but he is heard through the voice of the nightingale. The concept that man has a desire to return to nature as a relief from human suffering is a common theme in Symbolist poetry. Nature then responds to man's desire by becoming the conciliation for his distress.³⁰ In this instance, the voice of the nightingale becomes the mouthpiece of the pirate and expresses for him the distress that he is feeling. Debussy responds to the poetry by establishing the relationship of the pirate

²⁸Ibid., 130.

²⁹Bernac, 179.

³⁰Wenk, 36.

and the nightingale through the use of the opening motive. Therefore the superficial *Fantoches* becomes a companion piece which is appropriate not only in terms of musical balance, but in expressive integrity.

The 1904 *FÊTES GALANTES*

In the month of June 1904, nearly thirteen years after the first set of *Fêtes galantes* were composed, Debussy returned to Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* and set three new poems: *Les Ingénus* (The Ingenuous Ones), *Le Faune* (The Faun), *Colloque Sentimental* (Sentimental Colloquy). One author speculates that Debussy returned to Verlaine after such a long absence to pay homage to his favorite of poets.³¹ Debussy had become a masterful composer who, through complete command of his language and craft, was able to express his texts economically and yet with complete regard and sensitivity to the poetry. This time the texts chosen by Debussy look at Watteau's *galant* parties with a more sardonic point of view. Debussy set the bitter-sweet love poems during a time of personal transition, and, at this juncture in his life, was sharing Verlaine's bitter outlook on love. It was in this month (June 1904) that Debussy left his marriage to engage in a relationship with Emma Bardac, who would eventually become his second wife.

Debussy's dedication of this new group of *Fêtes galantes* reads "...to thank the month of June, 1904". The dedication was followed by the letters: A. l. p. m. (*A la petite Mienne* - for my little dear - Debussy's salutation in his letters to Emma Bardac). In a letter to the publisher Jacques Durand, Debussy asks that the dedication not be

³¹Stefan Jarocinski, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism* (London: Elenburg Books, 1986), 123.

forgotten. He went on to explain that "It's a bit mystifying, but something has to be done for legend".³²

The second set of *Fêtes galantes*, with its narrative poetic form, rejects the common practice of Symbolist poetry which generally relies on suggestiveness and ambiguity rather than a narrative approach in fashioning its plot. The narrative plot is also a departure from Debussy's usual choices for song cycles, having composed only two narrative cycles (*Fêtes galantes II* and *Trois Chanson de Bilitis*) in his maturity.³³

In *Les Ingénus*, the first in the group, the narrator (a man recalling his youth) speaks of the awakening of young men's desires. *Le Faune*, the second song, tells of a couple who enjoy serene moments in a park. Their enjoyment is mocked by an old terracotta faun who predicts an unhappy sequel to these moments. In the final song, *Colloque Sentimental*, the two lovers return to the park as ghosts and converse about their former relationship which ended, as presaged by the faun, in less happy terms.³⁴

Debussy provides cohesion for the group through mood and tone. Pierre Bernac speaks of "a mysterious haze (which) seems to blur these three pictures".³⁵ An air of mystery flows from phrase to phrase of each piece and the "open" (non-resolute) endings carry into the introduction of the next song.

³²Cobb, 159.

³³Youens, 14-15.

³⁴Bernac, 83-185.

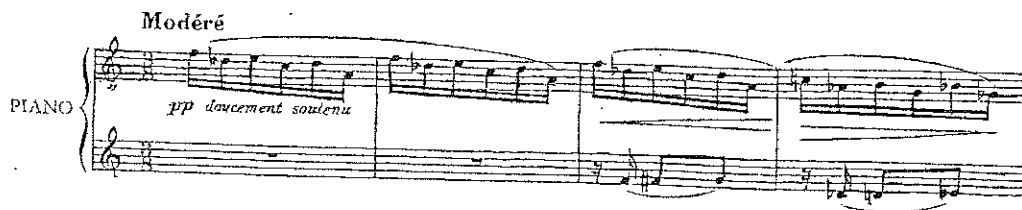
³⁵Ibid., 182.

The tempo and texture changes of *Les Ingénus* carry a mysterious sense of expectation. The final lingering sonority carries into the contrasting opening solo flute-line of *Le Faune*. In *Le Faune* the mystique lies in its incessant ostinato bass-line which is veiled by parallel chords and melodies sounding above it. Its final sonority is simple when compared to the thicker texture of the previous song. However, it too has a lingering quality. As in *Les Ingénus*, *Colloque Sentimental* contains many texture and tempo changes that carry the mysterious haze to the final bar where a staccato quarter note indicates that the song and the group is finished.

In each song a monophonic opening, characteristic of Debussy's mature style, plays a role of primary importance. Debussy uses these openings as gestures that merge the sound into the previous silence and invite the listener into the song.³⁶ The effect is that of refocusing one's attention from one painting to another when viewing in a gallery. Debussy also uses the opening motive throughout each song as a device which reestablishes a mood or recalls a particular character.

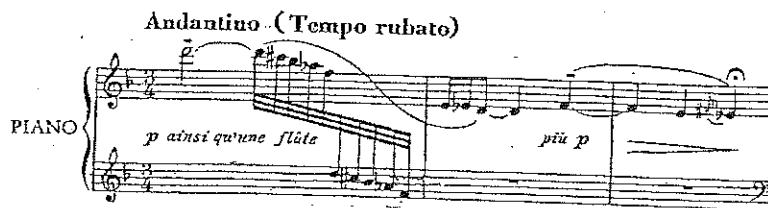
The opening motive of *Les Ingénus* (see example 14) is continually repeated throughout the first stanza of the song. The melodic motive is dropped after the completion of the first stanza, but the rocking eighth-note rhythm is maintained until the final six bars of the piece where it is halted to achieve a contrast that carries the poetry from past to present.

³⁶James A. Hepokoski, "Formulaic Openings in Debussy," *Nineteenth Century Music* 8 (Summer 1984): 45.



Example 14. *Les Ingénus*, mm. 1-4.

The opening monophonic flute-line of *Le Faune*, as in Debussy's *L'Après midi d'un Faune*, immediately provides the image of the mythological half-man, half-animal flutist. The flute-lines share the same melodic contour, and they serve to signify primitive gratification and desire.³⁷ In *Le Faune* the theme (see example 15) is presented three times (at the beginning, middle and end) as a constant reminder of the presence of the faun.



Example 15. *Le Faune*, mm. 1-3.

³⁷Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 131.

The monophonic opening of *Colloque Sentimental* (example 16) is brief (one measure). Its content of duple, triple, and syncopated rhythms also contrasts with the rhythmic simplicity of the previous song.



Example 16. *Colloque Sentimental*, m. 1.

The thematic material of the opening continues throughout the narrative first stanza. While these *Fêtes galantes* are all in a narrative form, *Colloque Sentimental* actually uses the character of a narrator. The middle section of the song consists of a conversation between two lovers. After the lover's conversation, Debussy uses the opening material, presented in example 17, to refocus the attention away from the lovers back to the narrator.



Example 17. *Colloque Sentimental*, mm. 4-5.

Freed from the bonds of conventional harmonic progression and form, Debussy relies on coloristic harmonies, melodic cells, texture, and his speech-song to express the text. The result, a stylistic development found in his mature works, is an economical means of expression where sonority, rather than process, quickly gives an impression of the text.³⁸ Debussy's scales and harmonies cultivate an image of the phrases and individual words of the poetry. Rather than relying on unfolding harmony and form in governing his music, he composes in small cells that flow logically, even if at times abruptly, from one to another. The voice and piano continually serve the text. Debussy, in a letter to his wife Emma, described his philosophy of text setting:

Music...begins at the point where the word is incapable of expression; music is made for the inexpressible. I would like it to appear as if coming out of the shadows and from time to time returning there while always remaining a discrete presence.³⁹

In the pastoral scene of *Les Ingénus*, young lovers are enjoying their first sensual awakenings on a warm autumn evening. The poetry opens:

The high heels contend with the long skirts,
so that, according to the ground and wind
one caught an occasional glimpse of the lower part of legs,
too often intercepted!⁴⁰

³⁸Jarocinski, 123.

³⁹Benton, vi.

⁴⁰Bernac, 182.

Example 18 displays Debussy's musical interpretation of the scene. The piano, through chromatic sequences and whole-tone clashes, paints the struggle of the high heels with the skirts. The voice enters in a simple melodic statement about the heels. It pauses and then sings a melody that reflects the uneven terrain.



Example 18. *Les Ingénus*, mm. 9-12.

In example 19, Debussy emphasizes the word *interceptés* (intercepted) with a breath and a decidedly slower tempo. The harmony in these two measures suddenly becomes quite simple in an expression of the boys' chagrin which lasts only a brief moment.



Example 19. *Les Ingénus*, mm. 14-15.

The tempo resumes and the following whole tone scale, void of the half-step, whole-step relationships found in diatonic scales, expresses the indifference of the boys' brief embarrassment.

Next, insects, responsible for granting sudden flashes of white napes, are discretely heard in the left hand of the piano through Debussy's musical caricature of darting bugs and swatting girls (see example 20).

Parfois aus - si le dard d'un in - sec - te ja - loux In - qui - é - tait la

côté des bel - les sous les bran - ches,

Example 20. *Les Ingénus*, mm. 21-26.

Debussy, as seen in example 21, portrays the boys' excitement, caused by such a sight, through an animated tempo and a gradually thickening piano texture. The accompaniment and voice steadily ascend on the phrase "and this was a feast for our doting young eyes".⁴¹ The piece, with its longest and highest note, reaches its climax on the word *fous* (foolish).

⁴¹Ibid., 183.

Toujours animé

Et ce régal comblait nos jeunes yeux de fous.

Toujours animé

p *cresc.* *scen.* *do*

f *dim.*

Example 21. *Les Ingénus*, mm. 31-35.

Example 22 shows a short two measure transition in which Debussy economically counters the climax with descending chords in the piano and a slowing of the tempo to half speed. The transition depicts the fall of evening and prepares the mood for the subsequent poetry. "The evening descended, an uncertain evening of Autumn:"⁴²

Le double moins vite

Le double moins vite

pp

1136

Example 22. *Les Ingénus*, mm. 37-38.

⁴²Ibid.

Debussy paints the picture of this equivocal evening with a stroke of melodic ambiguity, half and whole steps of the melody falling in an unpredictable pattern (see example 23).



Example 23. *Les Ingénus*, mm. 39-41.

The poetry continues: "the fair ones, dreamingly hanging on our arms, / softly murmured then such spacious words..."⁴³ The piano accompaniment thins in response to the young women's spacious words. In the final phrase, "that our souls ever since trembled and are amazed," the accompaniment, shown in example 24, is stilled so that the poetry is paramount.⁴⁴



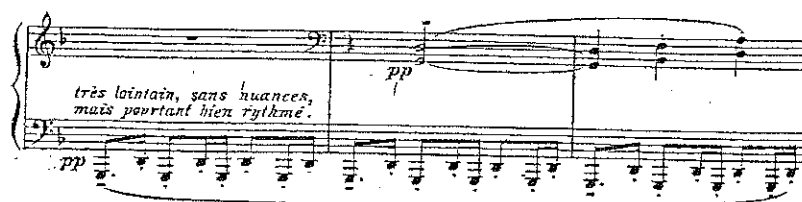
Example 24. *Les Ingénus*, mm. 48-49.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Debussy then brings the accompaniment out of the shadows. A simple appoggiatura figure in the vocal-line creates a dissonance between the voice and piano which underscores the amazement that the character is feeling. Through the treatment of the text Debussy, like the Symbolist poets, succeeds in creating cohesion through atmosphere rather than functional syntax (see example 24).⁴⁵

The construction of *Le Faune* is the simplest of the three songs. It opens with a cadenza-like monophonic line which imitates a flute (see example 13). The left hand then imitates a drum in an octave ostinato figure that continues throughout the entire song (see example 25).



Example 25. *Le Faune*, mm. 4-6.

Upon the initiation of the ostinato drum the texture becomes two-voiced. The right hand of the piano predominantly consists of block chords moving in parallel motion. The simple rhythms of these chords remain subversive to the drumming rhythm of the left hand while the voice and flute-line hover over the two other textures. The combination of these elements creates a tri-level texture; static bass, ambiguous middle level that blurs tonality, and a melodic level that remains rhythmically aloof from the

⁴⁵Ibid., 184-185.

other two levels. This tri-level texture, one of Debussy's early innovations, is prevalent in his songs.⁴⁶

The introduction of *Le Faune*, as seen in example 26, uses augmented triads in long ascending harmonic planes to accentuate the intrigue already present in the ostinato. The parallel chords allow Debussy to create intensity without traditional functional harmony. The chords are related only in emotional terms. The ambiguity caused by the non-functional harmony is consistent with the stylistic qualities of the Symbolist poetry which relies on indirection and suggestion.⁴⁷



Example 26. *Le Faune*, mm. 7-12.

It is the laughing satyr who is the central figure in this song. The two melancholy lovers, present in fewer than half of the measures of the piece, are subordinate.⁴⁸ It is the

⁴⁶Briscoe, 6.

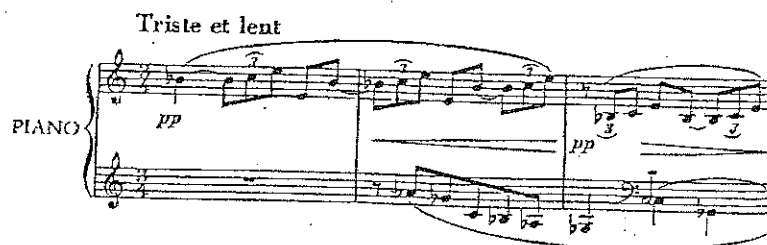
⁴⁷Youens, 15.

⁴⁸Wenk, 237.

faun's prediction of the unhappy moments to come that relates *Le Faune* to the next song (*Colloque Sentimental*) which is the most frequently and extensively discussed song in both *Fêtes galantes* groups.

The poetry and characters of *Colloque Sentimental* make it one of the most moving of Debussy's songs.⁴⁹ The scene is a solitary icy park where two ghosts (male and female) evoke the past and discuss their once-happy relationship. The spectres are the same couple who previously enjoyed the serene moments in *Le Faune*.⁵⁰ The preface and denouement are presented by a narrator.

The two lovers are represented in the introduction of the song by two contrasting lines derived from a G-flat whole-tone scale. The top voice (female) with its ascending direction reflects a positive attitude concerning the meeting. A bit of foreshadowing is visible here. Each time the line ascends to its highest point it drops an octave and is forced to start again. Such are the hopes and remaining musical lines of the female character (see example 27).

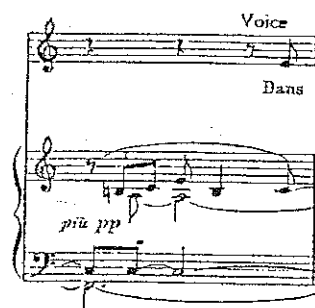


Example 27. *Colloque Sentimental*, mm. 1-3.

⁴⁹Mertens, 303.

⁵⁰Bernac, 186.

The lower voice (male) displays a negative attitude by opposing the top voice in a descending direction. The rhythmic pace of the two voices slows to a resolution in the third and fourth measures. Debussy uses the G-flat in measure three as an upper neighboring-tone which resolves to the F in the fourth measure.



Example 28. *Colloque Sentimental*, m. 4.

An E-natural is present but Debussy is far too subtle to compose a simple outward resolution. He, in fact, blurs the G-flat whole-tone scale by introducing A and B natural. Thus he provides a quick transition (one measure) away from the opposing melodies that represent the two lovers into a clear-cut major harmony where the attention is focussed upon the narrator (see example 28).

Debussy separates the narrator from the actual scene through transitions, thinning textures, and melodic styles. In the opening statement of the narrator, Debussy assigns an unaccompanied, solitary, chant-like melody to introduce this stark scene (see example 25). The texture of the narrator throughout the song remains very thin. When the narrator speaks of the lovers, a simple two-voiced texture using their opening themes begins to sound in the accompaniment. Debussy inverts the rhythm of the themes in

response to the poetic idea that the lovers no longer look the same - "Their eyes are dead and their lips are weak" (see example 29).⁵¹

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system features a vocal line in treble clef with the lyrics "Leurs yeux sont morts et leurs lèvres sont" and a piano accompaniment in bass clef with a piano (p) dynamic and triplet markings. The second system continues the vocal line with "molles, Et" and the piano accompaniment with a piano (p) dynamic, a *molto* marking, and a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking.

Example 29. *Colloque Sentimental*, mm. 9-11.

In the second stanza Verlaine repeats the opening text. Debussy mimes the repeated text by reusing the chant-like melody. However, as seen in example 30, he responds to the new portion of the text with new music that sings a cadential-sounding skip of a fourth on the final two notes. The cadence formally closes the preface.

The image shows a musical system with a vocal line in treble clef and a piano accompaniment in bass clef. The vocal line is marked *retenu* (retained) and has the lyrics "spectres ont évoqué le passé." The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* (pianissimo) and features a long, sweeping melodic line that concludes with a cadential skip of a fourth on the final two notes.

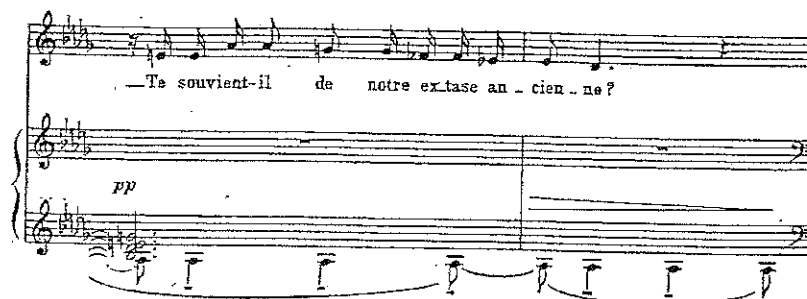
Example 30. *Colloque Sentimental*, mm. 17-18.

⁵¹Ibid., 185.

A smooth and quick transition is made by a single syncopated A-flat that turns into a pedal-point which lasts for the entire colloquy of the two past lovers.

Debussy borrows the nightingale theme from *En Sourdine* to introduce the dialogue of the ghosts. By using the nightingale theme, he gives a musical reminder of a time when the lovers were ready to surrender to their love. Texture and colorist chords are used to differentiate between the two lovers. The woman's excitement about the meeting is characterized by rich chords while her former lover's cold and insensitive curt replies are set to single-note textures or diminished chords.

Debussy entwines his speech-song melodies with legato melodies to illustrate the conversation. In example 31, the woman's anticipation is evident in the quick-moving speech-song of her first entrance "Do you remember our past ecstasy?"⁵²

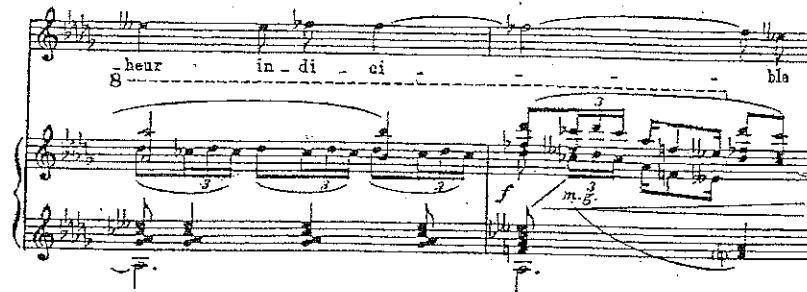


Example 31. *Colloque Sentimental*, mm. 22-23.

The man answers in a contrasting legato melody. The woman congenially becomes more legato but is countered by an abrupt quarter-note "No". In the phrase "Ah! the rapturous days of inexpressible happiness when our lips met!" the woman continues in an expansive

⁵²Ibid.

melodic line that climaxes on the word *indicible* (inexpressible).⁵³ The texture of the accompaniment becomes highly syncopated. As the woman tries to express that one-time joy the nightingale sounds in the piano accompaniment as if to express it for her (see example 32).⁵⁴



Example 32. *Colloque Sentimental*, mm. 36-37.

The woman's excitement is coolly met with nondescript major chords and the man's reply of "It's possible".

The woman now reminds the man of their former hopes. In example 33, his response is that "Hope has flown, vanished toward the dark sky".⁵⁵ The darkness is emphasized by the voice singing its lowest note (A-flat) on the word *noir* (black). It is the same pitch that has been sounding, sometimes in obscurity, sometimes alone, throughout the dialogue. This hopeless dark sky has clouded the entire colloquy.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Wenk, 240.

⁵⁵Bernac, 185.



Example 33. *Colloque Sentimental*, mm. 46-48.

The narrator reenters and, in near silence, closes the now wordless drama. The couple march through the wild oat grass (symbolic of their wastrel passions) where only the night hears their words.⁵⁶ Debussy sounds the nightingale theme to end the piece and consequently the group. There is no mention of a nightingale in the *Colloque Sentimental* poetry but, by using the nightingale theme from *En Sourdine*, Debussy maintains the poetic bonds of the poetry and draws a musical connection between his *Fêtes galantes* of 1892 and 1904.

⁵⁶Youens, 14.

CONCLUSION

The *Fêtes galantes* from Watteau's eighteenth-century Rococo paintings to Verlaine's nineteenth-century Symbolist poetry and Debussy's twentieth-century Impressionist music touch three centuries of creative output and encompass three disciplines of the arts: painting, writing and music. The artists of each discipline found a common thread of perception and ideology and expressed it in their own terms.

Throughout his career, Debussy was drawn to the poetry of Paul Verlaine. A total of twenty-two years span his first and last settings of Verlaine texts. Verlaine, in echoing the juxtaposition of blissful and unrequited love found in Watteau's paintings, provided Debussy with texts that were congruous with his emotions and suitable to his music. The twenty year old Debussy of 1882 was attracted to the blissful elements found in Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* and chose to set poems that shared his idealistic sentiments. Ten years later, he was still captivated by the Verlaine's lush poetry. However, in the interim Debussy greatly matured as a composer. Consequently, when combining *En Sourdine*, *Fantoche*, and *Clair de lune* into a set, he found his original compositions to be outdated. Debussy then recomposed *En Sourdine* and *Clair de lune* and provided them with broader accompaniments and vocal-lines. His harmonic pallet increased from simple triadic inversions to coloristic chords and unconventional scales which enabled him to express the text without the constraints of traditional harmonic progression.

By 1904 Debussy had experienced several broken relationships; most notably the bitter ending of his first marriage. Debussy, in search for texts which would express his emotions, returned to Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* and chose poems that spoke of love with a sardonic tone. The contented lovers found in the first *Fêtes galantes* are dramatized as unrequited couples in *Les Ingénus*, *Le Faune*, and *Colloque Sentimental*. Debussy, fully aware of the poetic bonds, links the two groups through the use of the nightingale theme heard in *En Sourdine* (1892 *Fêtes galantes*) and *Colloque Sentimental* (1904 *Fêtes galantes*). Through the use of a musical motive, Debussy imparts his subtle commentary on his own affairs.

While the 1892 *Fêtes galantes* reveal a marked development in Debussy's musical growth, the second set of *Fêtes galantes* offer a refined level of his mature style where sonorities in which a single chord, note, melodic motive or silence economically provides an impression of the text. Fully proficient in setting his native language, Debussy, in his late songs, strikes a complementary balance between text and music. The speech-song writing in the *Fêtes galantes II* is polished to a degree that the music and poetry interact logically, seamlessly, and without hierarchy. Debussy emphasizes the element (text or music) which best expresses the poetic idea.

The Symbolist poetry itself is enough to draw connections between the two *Fêtes galantes* song cycles. Debussy's stylistic growth during the twelve years which separated the two *Fêtes galantes* did not deter him from maintaining the bonds of the poetry. An effort to identify the second group as a continuation of the first is plausible but not necessary. Each group is complete within itself and they can be very satisfactory when performed together. Debussy, in both sets, displays his mastery of the French language

and his dedication to serving the text. His Impressionistic style captures the essence and ideals of the Symbolist poetry.

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