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Debussy and Recollection: *trois aperçu*

ABSTRACT: I take the position that Debussy's treatment of the past is strategically significant in each of the three works considered in the article. Textual and musical concerns mesh in the song "De rêve," from *Proses lyriques,* when a state of recall colors the condition of the present. In *Pour le piano* overt references to Baroque- and Classical-era compositional procedures mask temporal play of an entirely different kind. In "Golliwogg's Cakewalk," from *Children's Corner,* the allusion to a comedic effect deflects attention from the scathing critique that represents the central message of the work.

KEYWORDS: Debussy, Wagner, recollection, "De rêve," *Pour le piano,* "Golliwogg's Cakewalk"

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Introduction | De rêve | Pour le piano | Golliwog's Cakewalk | Conclusion | Bibliography

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> I love music passionately, and through my love I have forced myself to break free from certain sterile traditions with which it is encumbered.
> Claude Debussy(1)

[1] The topic of recollection in Debussy can be broached in any number of ways. I will explore the means by which recollection assumes strategic significance in portions of "De rêve," *Pour le piano,* and "Golliwogg's [sic] Cakewalk." One of the central concerns in each of these works is the manner in which Debussy both invokes and impedes communion between old and new compositional practices. The article thus seeks to address Debussy's positioning of the "present"—his present—as the

fashioning of a musical language that is at once backward and forward oriented; said in another way, Debussy's allusions to aspects of the past—both musical and extra-musical in nature—are responsible for shaping a future based upon generative procedures antithetical to those of the precursors he calls to mind. It may even be that Debussy's "now" represents an emergence predicated upon remembrance of the past for the very purpose of eclipsing it.

[2] By design the three studies that follow are intended to be independent of one another—the only real common thread among them relates to approach. In valorizing the concept of *aperçu* I mean to provide glimpses into the imaginative space of what came to fill Debussy's *tabula rasa*. Here, the vague term recollection will come to take on a plurality of meanings, including memory: in an intra-psychic sense; as nostalgia; as the "anxiety of influence"; as the allusion to historical musical styles; and as the after-image of a particular historical work (Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*).(2) This tack is reflective of the very backdrop against which Debussy composed, for *fin-de-siècle* Paris (c. 1890–1914) was a Mecca for interdisciplinary leanings in the arts and the sciences alike. Moreover the era possessed a palpable collective consciousness of the rapid changes that were taking place along cultural, economic, and societal lines—perhaps even to the extent of sponsoring the burgeoning cross-disciplinary focus itself.(3) Interrogations into the nature of time, encountered in virtually all modes of *fin de siècle* intellectual thought, served as one of the more ubiquitous and hence unifying rubrics of the era.(4) The case is no different for Debussy, where temporal issues are explored via the manner in which the past is accessed, metaphorically brought to life, and subsequently challenged in each of "De rêve," *Pour le piano*, and "Golliwogg's Cakewalk."

[3] Time consciousness was often coupled with another of the era's concerns, namely for the spatial, as the two domains are connected in intricate ways. Indeed, as Stephen Kern so eloquently points out, the numbing changes in technology and culture in the 40 years punctuated by the close of World-War I sponsored the institution of new modes of experiencing time and space as witnessed in the many artistic and scientific advances of the period.(5)

[4] Innovation was encountered at every turn: in the world of art Cézanne, Picasso, and van Gogh collectively critiqued perspective, figure-ground relationships, and the expanded role of color and light in painting; Proust, Joyce, and Woolf challenged the temporal flow of novels and the continual shaping and reshaping of the past, the present, and the future by plumbing the depths of an individual's consciousness; on entirely different fronts there was the conquering of the globe by Peary who reached the North Pole in 1909, and Amundsen the South Pole in 1911; and finally, with one brush-stroke Einstein's theories of relativity placed before humanity the humbling concept of a dynamic universe.

[5] It is necessary neither to inventory nor to understand the quantity, the scope, or even the pace of change in the Western world during Debussy's lifetime; it is enough to grasp something of the tenor of the era, and to remember that the dissemination of information—be it of trends in the arts, of regional or world events, or even of political propaganda—was more widespread and more instantaneous than at any earlier point in history. The invention of the telegraph, the telephone, and in interesting ways the cinema, contributed to the simultaneous contraction of the earth and the expansion of the landscape of the mind.(6)

[6] Such, then, was the cultural and creative backdrop for Debussy. And being both in and of the era, Debussy sought to reflect the pitch of its experimental nature, and spoke openly of doing so, as the following familiar 1913 quotation attests:

Is it not our duty?[to] find the symphonic formulae best suited to the audacious discoveries of our modern time, so committed to progress? The century of aeroplanes has a right to a music of its own. Let those who support our art not be left to waste away in the lowest rank of our army of inventors, let them not be outdone by the genius of engineers!(7)

In a compositional sense Debussy answered his own call to duty in numerous ways, and the retooling of temporal and spatial concerns was principal among them.(8) Here that retooling is intimately linked to the notion of recollection.

[7] Although an oversimplification of a complex issue, much of what might be deemed the unfolding of the drama in a musical composition dating from the common-practice era does so in tandem with the unidirectional flow of the timeline. As a result, the manner in which earlier and later events inform one another in a piece, say, by Haydn—while not without consequence—is inscribed in predictable ways. Even the powerful notion of "surprise" in tonal repertoires is often attributable to temporary challenges issued against, but never replacing, the orderly move toward the inevitable.(9) All of this was to change with Debussy, who came to question the very impact that "earlier" and "later" might hold in a musical sense, and in so doing, uniquely positioned what accrual of information was to mean in every one of his works.

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[8] "De rêve" is the lead song in the cycle *Proses lyriques* (1892–95).(10) The fact that we have recourse to the interaction of textual and musical concerns makes this piece ideal for an initial pass at recollection in Debussy's music. What is more, Debussy himself penned both the poetry and the music of the cycle.(11)

[9] I will limit discussion here primarily to the opening of "De rêve." The complete poem and a reproduction of mm. 1–18, however, are provided below.(12)

Figure 1. "De rêve," Debussy's poem and its English translation

Example 1. "De rêve," mm. 1–18

I. "De rêve"

La nuit a des douceurs de femme,
Et les vieux arbres, sous la lune d'or,
Songent! à Celle qui vient de passer,
La tête emperlée.
Maintenant navrée, à jamais navrée,
Ils n'ont pas su lui faire signe . . .
Toutes! Elles ont passé:
Les Frêles, les Folles,
Semant leur rire au gazon grêle,
Aux brises frôleuses la caresse
charmeuse des hanches fleurissantes.
Hélas! de tout ceci, plus rien qu'un blanc frisson . . .
Les vieux arbres sous la lune d'or
Pleurent leurs belles feuilles d'or!
Nul ne leur dédiera
Plus la fierté des casques d'or,
Maintenant ternis, à jamais ternis:
Les chevaliers sont morts
Sur le chemin du Graal!
La nuit a des douceurs de femme,
Des mains semblent frôler les âmes,
Mains si folles, si frêles,
Au temps où les épées chantaient pour Elles!
D'étranger soupirs s'élèvent sous les arbres:
Mon âme c'est du rêve ancien qui t'étreint!

Night
And
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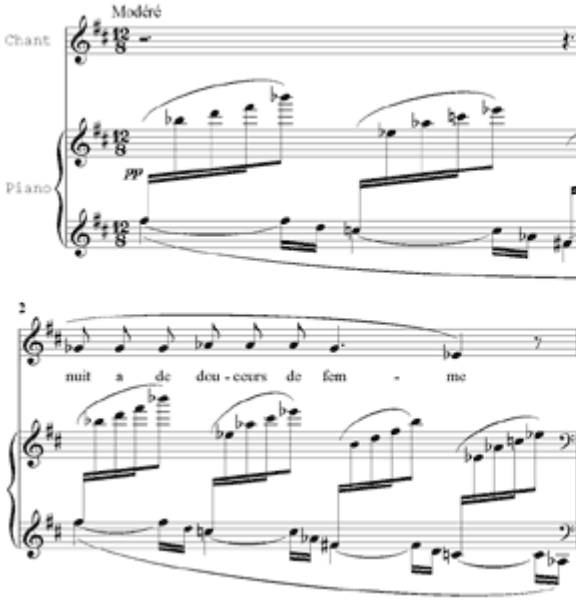

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Lines one through five of the poem correspond to mm. 1–18 of the music. In these opening measures the ever-changing musical surface features the commingling of non-diatonic and diatonic passages coupled with shifts in rhythm, tempo and dynamics, all of which highlights a phasing between two musical traditions, the present (Debussy's present) and the past, and the shift among realms is underscored textually.(13) The non-diatonic framework from the opening of the piece gives over (in m. 6 and following) to a tonal span initially suggestive of B minor, and with it comes Debussy's textual/musical shift into a recollected past. Before the end of the excerpt, chromaticism nearly undermines the tonal orientation, but ultimately abates with the arrival of the A major chord in m. 18. Yet the seemingly disparate soundscapes represent a tightly knit structure.

[10] Figure 2 proposes a three-sectioned segmentation of mm. 1–18. Here is the text:

Figure 2. "De rêve," mm 1–18 (text), division into three sections

Section 1 (mm. 1-5)		Section 2 (mm. 6-13)		Section 3 (mm. 14-18 downbeat)	
mm. 1-2	mm. 3-5	mm. 6-9	mm. 10-13	mm. 14-15	mm. 16-18
La nuit a des douceurs de femme, Et les vieux arbres, sous la lune d'or, Songent! *** Night has the softness of a woman, And the old trees, under the golden moon, Reflect!		à Celle qui vient de passer, La tête emperlée. *** upon the recently deceased, Her head covered with pearls.		Maintenant navrée, à jamais navrée, *** Now regretting, forever regretting,	

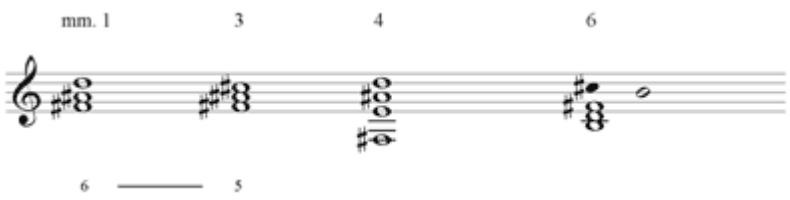
(click to enlarge)

In section 1, a narrative sequence leads from a metonymical relationship to a concluding injunction.[(14)] In the former, an attribute of womanhood (softness) stands for night and all that it entails; in the latter, the injunction “Songent!” [Reflect!] breaks the effemeral hold of the first two lines and is multiply directed—toward the personified trees, the narrator, and in equal measure to the poem’s reader. In section 2 descriptive prose replaces the earlier figurative language and introduces a temporal change to a state of recall. The image of “the recently deceased/Her head covered with pearls” is unleashed from memory by the initial word of line 3, “Songent!” [Reflect!] The recollection proves to be short-lived, for it is interrupted in section 3 by another swerve. In “Maintenant navrée, à jamais navrée” [Now regretting, forever regretting] “Maintenant” acts in the same manner as “Songent!” had before it, triggering the move from one temporal state to another, and by so doing establishes the correct orientation of a regret.[(15)]

[11] The musical setting meshes with the temporal shifts in the text. For instance, B minor is in play over much of mm. 6–13; but its hold is equivocal, for the tonal language of the passage captures the spirit of days past, but stops short of assimilating fundamental traits of the common-practice period, such as complete deference to the gravitational pull of a single tonic. Metaphorically, something remains of the earlier time, and yet it is not wholly available to a present whose connection to it is through recollection. It is with these curious issues in mind that we retreat to the outset of “De rêve.”

[12] Much is transpiring in the opening two measures, where at least three distinct arpeggiating strands interact; the lower edge of the piano 扭 gesture unfolds the familiar Debussyan sound of a harmonically non-functional French augmented-sixth chord; and at the upper edge, the piano 扭 right hand toggles between an augmented triad 椤hose root, for agogic and other reasons (see below), is F♯椄nd an A-flat major chord. The voice, setting the initial line of the poem, underscores pitches of the piano 扭 upper arpeggios. The F-sharp augmented triad starts out as a non-diatonic event 桍arrying whole-tone implications that while not explored thoroughly in this article, are realized elsewhere in the song.(16) The "present" is made palpable in the non-functionality of the F-sharp augmented chord with respect to the harmonic procedures of Debussy 扭 classical- and romantic-era forebears. But later in the passage virtually the same sonority is redefined as a functional altered dominant, something quite familiar to Schubert, Schumann, and others.(17) Refer to Example 2. It is not so much that the sounding of B minor in m. 6 retrospectively defines m. 4 as V/B minor 椄lthough this is significant 椤ather, gradual transformation of the sonority 扭 role occurs early in the passage when the uppermost note in the first chord expresses a common voice-leading technique (a 6–5 linear motion over a stationary bass) as the pitch D moves to the pitch C♯ in the course of mm. 1–3.(18)

Example 2. "De rêve," contextualizing thread one, mm. 1–6



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But once so altered, the opening sonority is recast in a tonal role and when D natural returns in m. 4 it functions within the context of an

intensified functional dominant harmony, leading (melodically) through an accented passing tone, and on to scale degree one of B minor in m. 6. The past emerges from the future, or said in a different way the past is culled from an individual 担 memory recalling a bygone era. And as with all such recollections, that which is invoked takes shape as an imperfect

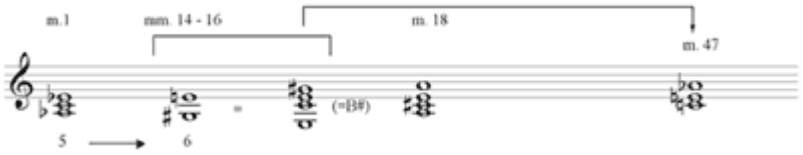
image of what actually transpired in another time, and at another locale.[(19)]

[13] The effect of the opening is made all the more powerful by the fact that shifting between present and past is a recurring feature of the song, and on each occasion is predicated upon a similar connection between textual signal words and the move from one tonal syntax to another.[(20)]

[14] Another of the three threads from the opening of “De rêve” unfolds in similar fashion. While the arpeggiated A-flat major chord is a subsidiary event in mm. 1–2, it comes to assume a dominant role in establishing the swerve to A major—the key area that takes hold in m. 18 and beyond. Example 3 (below) will help to illustrate.

[15] In stage one of the contextualization 5–6 technique converts root and fifth of the A-flat major chord into root and third of what in stage two becomes the functional $V^{5\#}$ / A major. C is retained as common tone in

Example 3. “De r 陋 e,” contextualizing thread two, mm. 1–18



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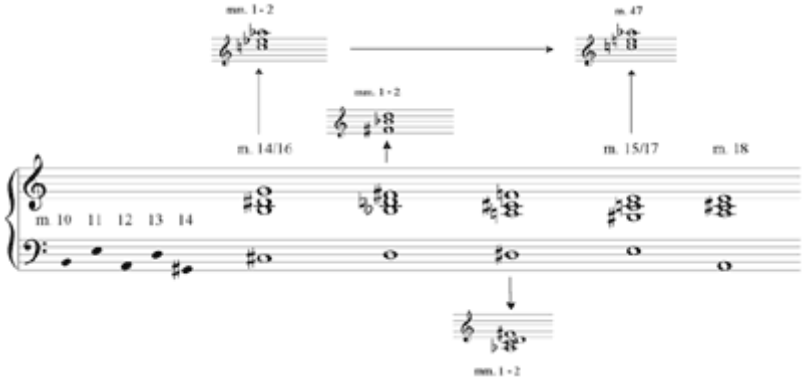
each of the earlier sonorities, but with the tacit understanding that the pitch functions as B♯ in the progression to C♯ in m. 18. Later in the song (m. 47), the sonority here read as altered V/A returns as an augmented chord in the varied repetition of the head motive.

[16] The process outlined above is akin to the earlier move to B minor. But a fascinating and edifying

Example 4. “De r 陘 e,” an interpretation of mm. 14–15 / 16–18



progression occurs just in advance of m. 18 and the arrival of A major; at the point of maximum dissonance in terms of music *and* poetry (mm. 14–15, repeated in mm. 16–17), allusional reference is made to each of the sonorities of mm. 1–2. Example 4 will help to illustrate. The series of augmented chords in mm. 14–17

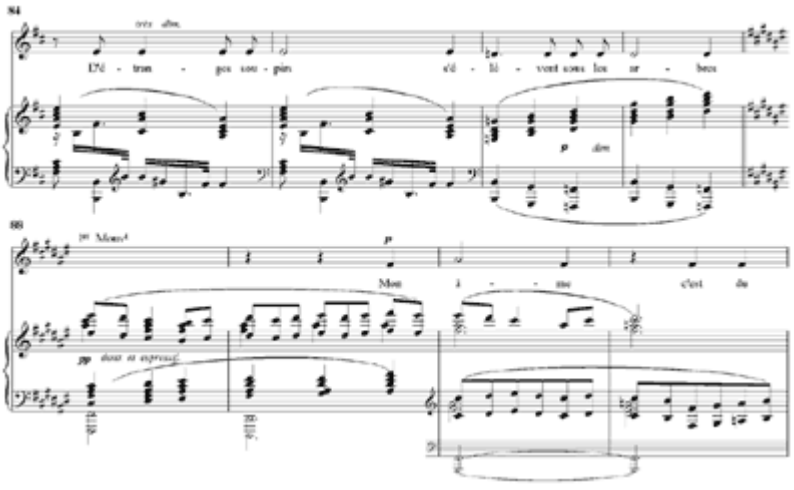
(click to enlarge)

emerges at the tail end of a sequence of descending fifths (mm. 10–14). These same augmented chords either replicate, or—in a manner consistent with Lewin's "law of the nearest way"[(21)] 楛 xpress slick familial relationships with the three principal sonorities from the opening measures of "De rêve";

the text in mm. 14–17 is a present tense lament of a lost past: “Maintenant navrée, a jamais navrée” [Now regretting, forever regretting].

[17] A corollary to the 6–5 voice-leading motions expressed at the opening of “De rêve” effects a link between the song’s initial and its concluding measures. Example 5 reproduces mm. 84–99.

Example 5. “De r 陋 e,” mm. 84–99



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The temporal orientation in the text changes from the immediate present to a distant past populated by Grail knights, the latter reflective of the realm wherein the protagonist's soul ultimately resides; the shift is triggered by "D'étranger soupirs" [Strange sighs] issuing from an otherworldly "ancient dream." This inward turn

of emotions is accompanied by the inward resolution of the B–F tritone (registrally accented in the left-hand piano gesture across mm. 84–87). F, the later event, slides to F♯ in m. 88, and B (prolonged in mm. 84–87) is ultimately transferred into an inner voice, and moves to A♯ in m. 88. The tonal focus on F♯ major from m. 88 through to

the conclusion of the song effectively provides another context for the 6–5 voice leading procedure encountered in mm. 1–3 (refer to Example 2), for on *textual* grounds it is plausible to interpret each of the two F♯-major sonorities, the one in m. 3, and the one here, as consequent to the antecedent represented by the F ♯ augmented

triad in mm. 1–2.[22]

[18] The foregoing argument is further substantiated from a performance standpoint, for it is telling to note that the projection of the three distinct accompanimental strata in mm. 88–91 cannot be effected as written: a subtle fissure between mm. 87–88 prohibits the lowest of the three stratum from operating in sync with the other two, and in a metaphorical sense, the bass line remains in the temporal domain of the preceding phrase. It takes pronouncement of the textual message in the vocal line following m. 89—"Mon âme c'est du rêve ancient qui t'étrient!" [My soul is of an ancient dream embracing you]—to redress the schism between strata, for once the textual message has been uttered, all participants in the setting again operate in the same temporal dimension: coming together, as it were, in the world of dream, memory, and recollection. In the end the present merges with the past in a reformational sense, without ever capitulating to that which cannot be recreated.

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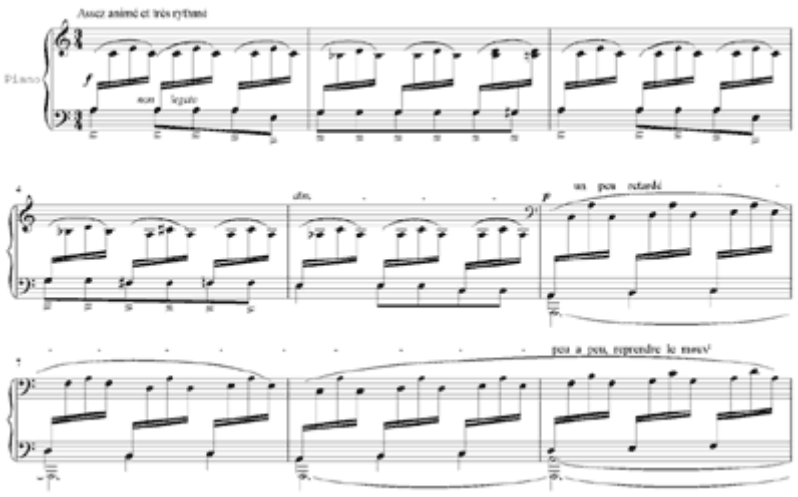
[19] Quite a different sense of recollection is encountered in *Pour le piano* (1901) than is the case in "De rêve." In *Pour le piano* a historically- and a self-aware Debussy[23] come together and openly engage with earlier traditions through overt references to Baroque genres expressed in the titles of each of the Suite's movements: "Prélude," "Sarabande" and "Toccata."[24] What transpires in the work, however, is an interrogation of the musical past spawning a present that Debussy claims for himself. And in this regard the Suite is manifestly representative of Debussy's lifelong struggle with that which Harold Bloom, in different contexts, has described as the crippling awareness of what it is to be a late-comer—one forced to establish ones own place in history.[25]

[20] From a musical perspective,

Example 6. "Prélude," mm. 1–27

engagement with the past begins in the initial measures of the “Prélude.” Example 6 reproduces the work’s opening 27 measures. In the introduction (mm. 1–6 (downbeat)) the melody is in the bass voice, and features a descending arpeggiation through the A minor chord: the pitch A at the outset giving over to E and C in m. 5, before reaching low A in m. 6. Tonally,



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registrally, and gesturally, this bass-voice melody would not be out of place in any number of compositions dating from the 18th century.[(26)] The Baroque seal is all the more apparent in the descending tetrachord expressed in the bass, where A is prolonged in mm. 1–3, G and F in m. 4, and E in m. 5. The complete setting of these same measures, however, witnesses Debussy in contact with old-world

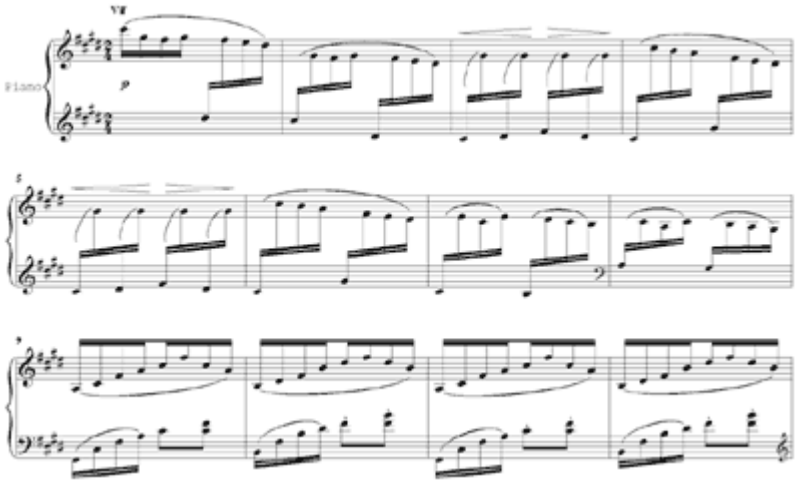
sensibilities in the planing effects (hereafter "chordal parallelism") heard in mm. 2 and 4, as well as the whole-tone harmonizations entering at the end of m. 4 and extending through m. 5.[(27)]

[21] The stage, as it were, has been set, and from an aesthetic point of view the remainder of the "Prélude" represents a clever study in the juxtaposition of two temporal realities separated by nearly 150 years, for at certain moments one reality dominates, while at others the two realities collide: the introduction yields to a span of music (mm. 6 -10) which is decidedly of an earlier era; but as the excerpt in Example 6 continues the present, Debussy's present, begins more-and-more to assert itself, until the past is modernized to such an extent that it no longer holds sway. A telling moment occurs when the perpetual mobile of the steady sixteenth-note rhythm is interrupted by silence (on the downbeat of m. 26) before heading "back to the Baroque" in m. 27.

[22] I will not provide a catalogue of

Example 7. "Toccata," mm. 1–33

the "Prélude's" gestural affinities with various past compositional procedures. Suffice it to say that the events thus far encountered are restricted neither to these initial measures, nor to the opening movement of the Suite. In point of fact recollection of the past serves as a touchstone for the future throughout *Pour le piano*. Example 7 reproduces the opening 33 mm. of the



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final movement “Toccata.” Measures 1–8 subtly juxtapose syntaxes expressive of new and old compositional practices. The effect is established in m. 1, where the absence of the pitch E casts the first five sixteenth notes in a pentatonic context (the new).[(28)] But the larger sweep of the measure subsumes the pentatonic effect within a diatonic framework (the old)

predicated upon an initial leap from $\hat{1}$ down to $\hat{5}$ and a descending scalar motion from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{1}$. The alternation between pentatonicism and diatonicism is most noticeable in mm. 3–4 and mm. 5–6, but from m. 6 onward the earlier practice comes to dominate, and at that with Baroque élan.[(29)] The scene changes abruptly in mm. 9–12, where a

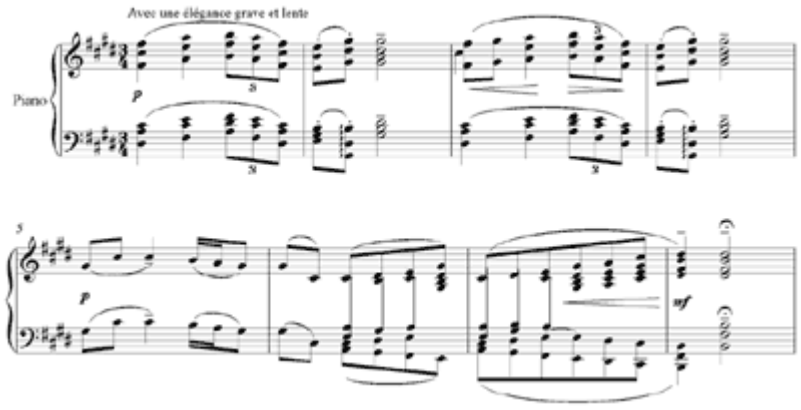
modal flavor takes hold, and forward motion stalls. In short, mm. 9–12 represent an attempt to establish a present from the past.

A short-lived Classical-era vignette appears in mm. 13–20. It is based upon a descending major scale featuring a bright tone, and the establishment of a light mood—all of which is supplanted after m. 21, and from m. 26 a near daemonic sequential passage takes hold, a passage inconceivable in the days of Bach or Beethoven—or perhaps better, in the days of Couperin or Berlioz.(30)

[23] To review, the “Prélude” is preludial in its declaration that recollection will dominate the compositional landscape of *Pour le piano*; the “Toccata,” too, however, measures up to its name, being very much in the nature of an improvisation. In many ways, it is the middle-movement “Sarabande” that is the most difficult to characterize: for although in terms of tempo, rhythmic design, and transparency of form the movement is true to the French Baroque conceit that a sarabande must emulate a slow menuet, its harmonic palette is more consistently *progressive* than that of either the “Prélude” or the “Toccata.”

[24] Example 8 reproduces the opening 22 mm. of the “Sarabande."

Example 8. “Sarabande,” mm. 1–22



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"Avec une élégance grave et lente" to use the composer's words, the surface-level gestures and voice-leading procedures of the passage are: strongly goal oriented toward C♯ in m. 22; decidedly modal in character; and replete with chordal parallelisms. The descending tetrachord in the bass beginning in m. 19 (C♯–B–A–G♯) recalls the similar Baroque thumbprint employed in the first-movement "Prélude," as does the

bass-line arpeggiation of the tonic chord in mm. 19–22 (C♯, downbeat of m. 19, giving over to G♯ on the downbeat of m. 20, with E entering in m. 21, and C♯ in m. 22).

[25] Recollection, however, saturates the complete passage on another count and signals Debussy 担 grappling with a much more immediate past, for the choice of a half-diminished seventh as the movement 担 initial vertical sonority is provocative:

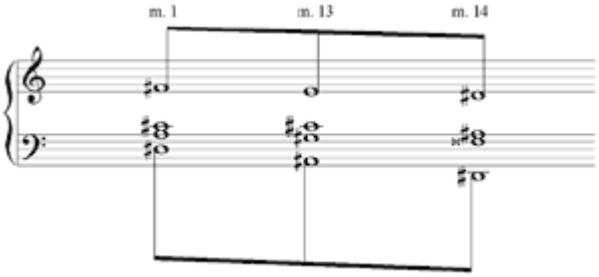
without meaning to overstate the issue, marked usage of half-diminished seventh sonorities (post 1865) had the potential to invoke the ghost of Wagner, and when interrogating Debussy 担 repertoire, one must remain sensitive to the fact that that ghost was never fully exorcised. But a single sighting does not an association make, and especially given Debussy 担 complex and shifting attitude toward Wagner.[31] Yet there are subtle ways in which Wagner, if not embraced in the larger scope of *Pour le piano*, does provide a frame of reference for Debussy in his, Debussy's, promotion of a personal identity.[32]

[26] I contend that the appearance of half-diminished seventh sonorities at critical junctures in the "Sarabande" is anything but serendipitous. Roy Howat's observation that the first *and* second chords in the original version of the "Sarabande" are Tristan laden helps to substantiate my point, for chord two in the earlier version of the piece contains C natural in the place of C♯, and the quality of the resultant sonority is half-diminished.[33]

[27] Refer again to Example 8, and in particular to the event encountered on the downbeat of m. 13. In a Wagnerian context the sonority might well have served as pre-dominant harmony in the key of D, for such would be the fate of a bona fide Tristan chord with A♯ as its bass and C♯ as its uppermost note. But the chord on the downbeat of m. 13 does not continue to an A7 sonority. Instead, locally, the Debussy harmony is an altered dominant progressing to I of D♯ for the cadence in m. 14; what is more, the cadence itself qualifies the opening measures of the movement, as Example 9 will help to illustrate.

In the reading, the D♯ half-diminished seventh sonority of m. 1 is interpreted as incipient tonic harmony prefiguring the cadential gesture in mm. 13–14. Poetically stated, the initial harmony refuses to function as a Tristan chord would: in this case—given the bass note D♯—as a preparatory event for V / G.[(34)] But in terms of goal directedness, the opening of the "Sarabande" is unsettled on other counts. The return of the initial half-diminished seventh chord at the end of m. 1, coupled with the bass motion by descending perfect fifth (D♯–G♯), is suggestive of a G ♯ phrygian setting. The reading is made problematic, however, by the strong-beat incursion of the E major sonority on the downbeat of m. 2,

Example 9. "Sarabande," mm. 1–14 (in reduction)



(click to enlarge)

which has the effect of *separating* the D♯ from the G♯, and thus denies any sense of definitive cadence. Further, attention to the motion by parallel tenths between the outer voices of m. 1 supports a more tonally focused orientation with the E major chord of m. 2 as tonic harmony; that is to say, the chordal parallelisms of m. 1 surreptitiously project an extended linearized V6/5 of E, which moves to I / E on the downbeat of m. 2.

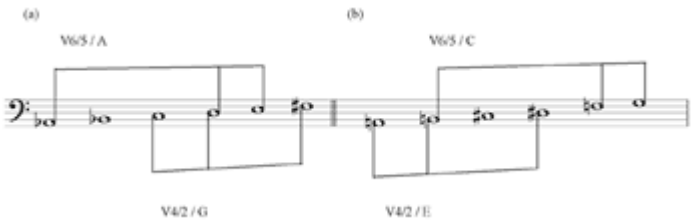
[28] The point is that ambivalence or even antagonism toward a single governing stability is de rigueur from the head of the "Sarabande."[(35)] In fact, the suggestion that D♯ represents tonic in m. 14 is only true in a fleeting sense, for the ultimate function of D♯ (and of chordal events predicated upon it) is more properly regarded as supertonic of C♯—the goal both of mm. 1–22, and of the movement as a whole. This last statement takes on greater significance via accrual of the following information: the middleground bass line across mm. 1–14 arpeggiates a G♯ minor triad—G♯ in mm. 1–4 giving over to B in m. 8 and D♯ in m. 14.

[29] Wedged between the tonally schizophrenic “Prélude” and the only slightly more stable “Toccata,” the “Sarabande” links the outer movements together by redirecting the tonal orientation encountered in the “Prélude” toward a different ultimate goal at the end of the Suite. All of this is part of a larger story, however, for additional inter-connective webs unify the three movements of *Pour le piano* and invoke further Wagnerian recollections in the form of veiled allusions.

[30] The “Prélude” features a conflict between two conventionally related tonal centers: A minor and C major. And although A minor ultimately prevails, the outcome is by no means a foregone conclusion, as C major remains a prominent force in the movement as late as the fourth-to-last measure. Recognition of the shifting between A and C in the “Prélude,” however, is significant with respect to Wagnerian recollection as an undercurrent in *Pour le piano*, for A and C are the two tonal regions pitted against one another early on in *Tristan und Isolde*.[(36)] And yet while at the deepest structural level the tonal struggle in the two preludes—Wagner’s and Debussy’s—is identical, the surface-level gestures of the earlier work have little bearing on those of the later: in a word, Debussy carefully shrouds the evocation of his precursor. What is more, the shrouding itself may well represent a cleansing act.[(37)]

[31] A significant portion of Debussy’s “Prélude” is based upon either one or the other of the two whole-tone scales (see Example 10). For instance, mm. 57–96 (or fully

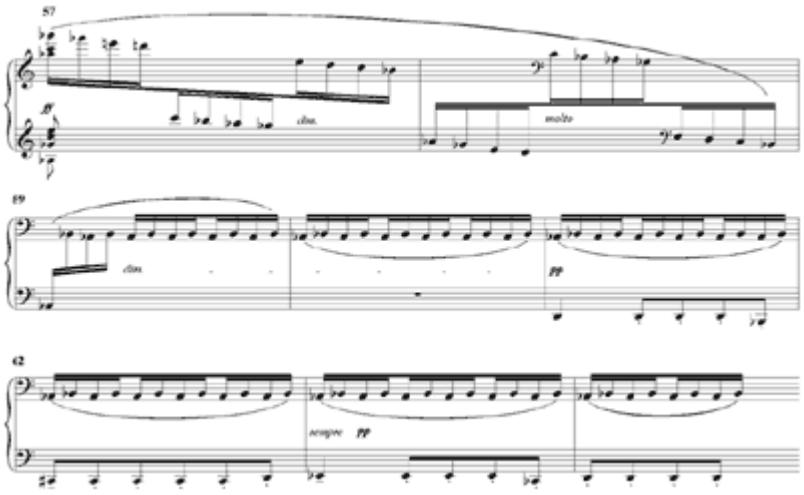
Example 10. “Prélude,” partitions of the whole-tone scales



(click to enlarge)

Example 11. “Prélude,” mm. 57–64

one quarter of the movement) derive entirely from the whole-tone scales outlined in Examples 10(a) and 10(b).[(38)] Although potentially amorphous events given the regularity of their intervallic structuring, Debussy carefully partitions the two scales in ways that allow various sonorities to acquire dominant functionality at particular moments over the course of the passage. V / A and V / C dominate, underscoring the



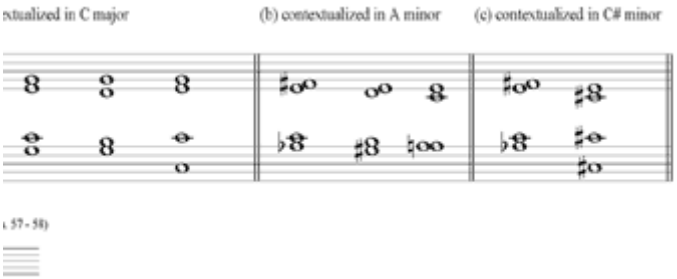
(click to enlarge)

principal keys of the “Prélude” and maintaining the Wagner-based recollection.[39] But a vivid reference to another dominant chord exists in the context of the whole-tone scale encountered in the passage excerpted in Example 11. The sonority at the head of the passage carries with it multiple functions: locally it represents altered ♭VI of C; when it returns in m. 71 (and following) the sonority is increasingly associated with A minor (A flat in the bass equaling the

enharmonically respelled leading tone of A); a third meaning, however, reflects an inter-movemental tonal bond between mm. 57–58 in the "Prélude" and both the "Sarabande" and the "Toccata," as these two measures of the "Prélude" forecast C♯, the ultimate key of the later movements, in the guise of its V. Example 12, below, models the three progressions in which the whole-tone sonority of mm. 57–58 participates, in

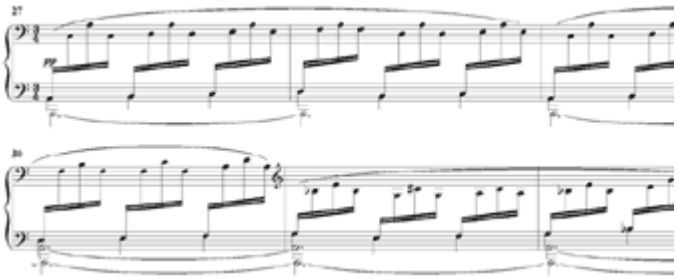
turn reflecting the move to I / C major, I / A minor, and I / C♯ minor.

12. The sonority of mm. 57–58 in the le," contextualized



(click to enlarge)

Example 13. "Prélude," mm. 27–47



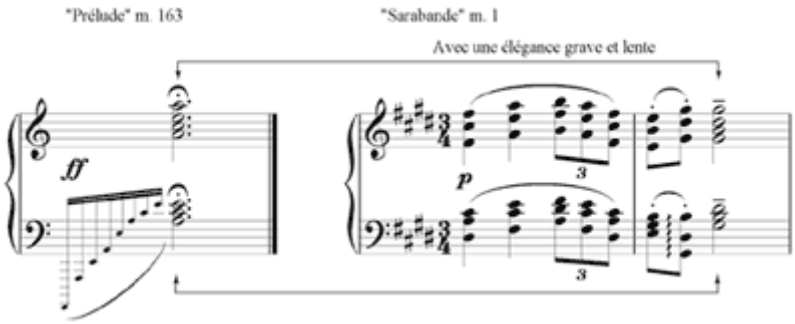
(click to enlarge and see the rest)

[32] Additional Wagnerian recollections exist in *Pour le piano*, and at that embrace both intra- and inter-movemental concerns. Refer to Example 13. These measures again lay bare the opposition between the principal tonal regions of the Suite's first movement, but they also serve as a conduit enabling communication with significant moments in the *Tristan* "Prelude." Beginning as a repetition of m. 6 and ff., the material in Example 13 initially unfolds in A minor. By m. 43, however, A minor has given way to C major. In fact, mm. 43–47 prolong C by means of an underlying I–V–I harmonic progression; and yet Debussy's distortion of the tonal past is unmistakable in these later measures, where whole-tone harmonization of the bass line's descending linear tetrachord accounts for the vertical events above B♭ in m. 44, A♭ in m. 45, and above F♯ in m. 46 (the latter of which is contextualized as an altered secondary dominant chord (V / G)). In fact, both whole-tone scales are in play in mm. 43–47—the consonant skips by perfect 4th in the bass at the end of mm. 43, 44, and 45 reference the two symmetrical scales: C–B♭–A♭ from the one are coupled with G–F–E♭ from the other.

[33] In mm. 41–42 Debussy signals that C major is at hand. Prior to m. 41, the passage in Example 13 had been a near verbatim repetition of the "Prélude's" opening—the ultimate goal of which was the return of A minor in m. 27. But in m. 41, the direct repetitions of the stepwise ascent from F to B—linearizing the two most active pitches in V^7 of C—combine with the F major chord articulated on each beat in mm. 41 and 42, and the appearance of the F major chord is illuminating; while containing both A and C, the chord never-the-less *separates* the two principal tonal regions of the "Prélude," and does so in a manner analogous to the procedure employed by Wagner at the first heightened cadential moment in *Tristan*. The reciprocal nature accorded F in the Wagner "Prelude" (simultaneously VI / A and IV / C) is thus appropriated as part of Debussy's imaginative space, and made his own in *Pour le piano*—in a trenchant sense, Wagner is recalled here so as to be surmounted.(40)

[34] It is in the light of the triple recollection of Wagner—in the Teutonic composer's "suggestions" of A minor and C major *plus* his "deflective" F—that we return to the sonority encountered at the opening of the second movement of the Suite. I have already established

Example 14. *Pour le piano*, inter-movement connections



(click to enlarge and see the rest)

that in an intra-movemental sense the D♯ half-diminished seventh sonority in m. 1 of the "Sarabande" carries multiple functions, at once: participating in a G♯ phrygian modal progression; representing incipient tonic chord in D♯ major; and serving as pre-dominant chord in C♯ minor. While perhaps not altogether mutually-exclusive, it is the latter of these interpretations that proves to be the more far-reaching with respect to the Suite as a whole, for C♯ is the

ultimate key in the "Sarabande" and in the ensuing "Toccata." But in typical Debussyan fashion, the D♯ half-diminished seventh of m. 1 comprises a third and altogether different function: it provides a back-reference to the earlier "Prélude."

Example 14 will help to illustrate. By juxtaposing the ending of the "Prélude" and the beginning of the "Sarabande," Example 14(a) draws attention to registral connections among contiguous moments in the two movements. Such a device frequently appears in Debussy's multi-movement compositions, and assumes the role of a reinterpretive swerve.(41) More insightful with respect to the Wagnerian argument, however, is the anachronistic join proposed in Example 14(b). In it, the D♯ half-diminished seventh sonority of the opening of the "Sarabande" is regarded in a manner akin to that of an authentic Tristan chord, *progressing* to the dominant of G in m. 46 of the "Prélude," which in its turn moves to V7 and I of C in m. 47.(42)

[35] The reading in Example 14(b) is predicated upon the fact that although later in terms of its temporal positioning, the D♯ half-diminished seventh chord of the "Sarabande" conceptually precedes that which actually occurs earlier in the Suite: motion to the heightened G7 in the "Prélude" en route to I / C.(43) But more significantly, the reading establishes yet another role for the opening of the

"Sarabande": the movement's initial half-diminished seventh chord, pointing forward *and* backward in time, represents a profoundly pivotal moment in *Pour le piano*, a moment upon which the whole of the drama turns. And from the vantage point of the whole, the "Sarabande" recalls the past (i.e. the "Prélude"), and projects into the future (the "Toccata") in an overt sense via association with Baroque genres, and subtly, through the secret nexus of specific Wagnerian affiliations. In *Pour le piano*, then, the distant and the immediate past are submerged under the weight of Debussy's fashioning of the present.

***

[36] A third distinct approach to recollection and its role in positioning the past appears in one of Debussy's most direct Wagnerian summonings, namely in "Golliwogg's [sic] Cakewalk," the last of the six piano miniatures in Debussy's 1908 collection entitled *Children's Corner*.

[37] At first blush, it may appear as though the central project of "Golliwogg's Cakewalk" is the intermingling of "low" and "high" art-forms within a single work—something quite common in Debussy's Paris:[(44)] the low here derives from the use of a dance form associated with ragtime music and early African-American culture, and is further reflected in the title's reference to a black minstrel doll and veritable racist symbol; the high, on the other hand, devolves from the parody of what are arguably the most recognizable measures from any of Wagner's operas—namely, the opening passage of *Tristan und Isolde* appropriated in the middle section of the ABA structure of "Golliwogg's Cakewalk." Were the case to be as simple as this, irony might well be deemed the dominant trope for the piece, and would contextualize the Wagnerian reference in a satirical light. But reflection on the mix of musical detail and extra-musical allusion leads to a much bleaker assessment, one with tragedy at its core.

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[38] I must make a digression at this point, for in referring to irony, satire, and tragedy (and earlier in the article to metonymy), I am drawing on the work of the cultural historian Hayden White (1973) and less directly on that of the literary critic Northrop Frye (1957). White's argument is involved, and runs to levels much deeper than it will be necessary to document here. In fact, I rely almost entirely upon two exceptional glosses of White in web articles by Joshua Walker (2002), and Hans Kellner (1997).[(45)]

[39] In Walker's words, White's starting point is that "all historical explanations are rhetorical and poetic by nature." They represent fictions that project particular ideological stances (anarchist, radical, conservative, liberal), expressed through the choice of certain modes of emplotment adopted in the telling of the story (romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire), and are reflective of particular apprehensions of historical fields (formist, mechanist, organicist, or contextualist), affiliated with one or more of four dominant tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or irony).

[40] My concern here is quite limited, for I will only assess aspects of the explanatory strategies adopted by a work's author—in this case Debussy—as a means of presenting a premise in the guise of historical fact. A portion of Walker's summation chart appears below—the portion concerned with the affinity between dominant trope, its function, the mode of emplotment signified by the use of a particular trope, and the associated notion that there is an ideal moment in time where the author projects "all is as it should be."

Chart 1. Extracted from Walker, "Hayden White's Metahistory"

Dominant Trope	Trope Function	Mode of Emplotment	Location of Perfection
Metaphor	Represent	Romance	Past
Metonymy	Reduce	Tragedy	Close Future
Synecdoche	Integrate	Comedy	Present
Irony	Negate/Transcend	Satire	Distant Future

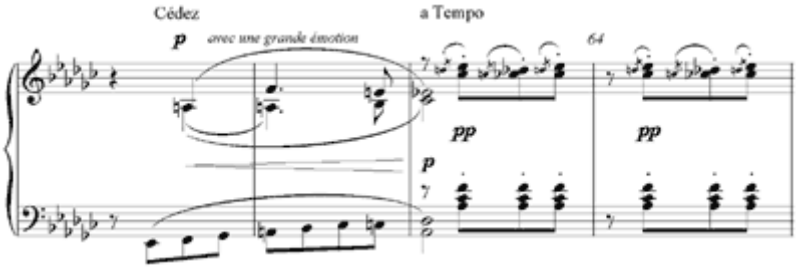
[41] Each of the dominant tropes reflects a particular strategy with respect to the relationship of parts to whole. With metaphor, a direct one-to-one connection exists between the subject and the object, expressed algebraically as A = B. By contrast, metonymy establishes a part-to-whole relationship wherein an attribute of the subject is made to stand for the subject itself—the locus classicus is reflected in the statement "he is all heart." From representation (the function of metaphor is to represent), metonymy moves to the level of reduction. Representation is an unattainable idealization, and thus metaphor must draw upon romance as a mode of emplotment while looking toward a past wherein A is *said* truly to have been equal to B—something that is no longer possible; such idealism is anathema in metonymy, which takes as its default tragedy. And yet with metonymy, the near future holds promise, for upon its arrival the inherent flaws of the past and of the present will be overcome. In the integrative function of synecdoche, an external attribute is said to represent the thing itself, giving rise to identifications such as "Whitehouse" for "Presidency," or more playfully, perhaps, "cheesehead" for "Wisconsonite"—the latter proposed here both to reflect the comic nature of the statement (synechdoche's mode of emplotment is comedy), and as a means of valorizing the present (the moment in time with which the mode is most concerned). By contrast, irony looks to negate as a means of transcending that which is other than it could or should be. The author's adoption of a satirical tone, strategic or otherwise, in part at least speaks to the belief that the present holds little promise: nirvana lies out of reach in the distant and unforeseeable future.[(46)]

***

[42] Returning to the Debussy let me start by considering the possibility of

Example 15. "Golliwogg's Cakewalk," mm. 61–64

humor, either comical or satirical—the distinction between the two need not concern us for the moment. The very juxtaposition of Wagner, or better, the juxtaposition of the aural experience and the visual spectacle encountered at Bayreuth (Wagner's exclusive shrine to opera), and at the opposite end of the spectrum the sights and the sounds of the music hall on a Saturday night, would have



(click to enlarge)

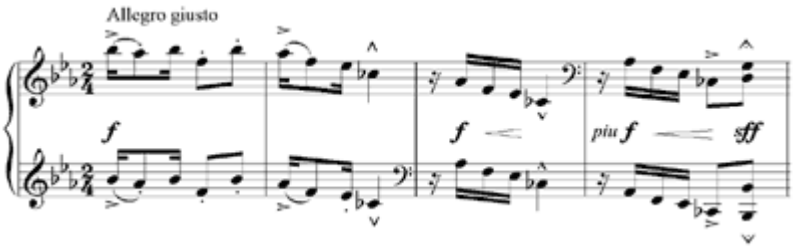
brought a smile to the face of any number of Debussy's contemporaries quick enough to catch the association; and the association is unmistakable in "Golliwogg's Cakewalk." But conspicuous in its absence from the middle portion of Debussy's piano piece—where the opera's initial cello line is clearly placed on display—is an *authentic* presentation of the very

harmony that continues to engender much critical thought

even today, nearly 150 years after its Wagnerian contextualization: the 揟ristan?chord itself.[(47)] Example 15 reproduces mm. 61–64 of 揳olliwogg 扭 Cakewalk,?where Debussy summons from memory (viz. recalls) the melody of the opening of Wagner 扭 opera. A veiled reference to the "Tristan" chord is heard in m. 63 of "Golliwogg's Cakewalk," beginning with the after-beat accompaniment to the melody of the previous measure. But a registral fracture occurs between the tune begun in m. 61 and the stock-in-trade cakewalk figure of m. 63 (the backdrop for the chord), and thus the Wagnerian melody and its principal harmonic affiliate are disassociated from one another. What is more, by rearranging the order of pitches in the sonority in m. 63 of "Golliwogg's Cakewalk" from their canonical placement as initially experienced in Wagner's opera, Debussy distorts the "Tristan" chord. In Example 15, for instance, Debussy embeds Wagner's bass note F in an inner voice. The imperfect recollection of Wagner in the middle portion of "Golliwogg's Cakewalk," then, poses as many questions as it answers.

[43] A more powerful citation of the "Tristan" chord does, however, occur much earlier in "Golliwogg 扭 Cakewalk," namely, in the very

Example 16. "Golliwogg 扭 Cakewalk," mm. 1–4 and mm. 10–13



(click to enlarge and see the rest)

opening measures of the work (see Example 16). The “Tristan” chord unfolds a number of times over the course of mm. 1–4, but it is projected as a *linear* event, which is anathema to the sonority 担 initial use at the opening of the opera.[(48)] Beginning in m. 2, left- and right-hand octave doublings cascade

downward through the four pitches of the 撝ristan?chord while bringing about an overall crescendo in the dynamic level. In mm. 10 and 11 the 撝ristan?chord is rendered vertically, its natural state from the head of the 揚relude?(see the boxed material in Example 16(b)), and Wagner 担bass note F is restored in its proper register. It is

at the opening of the cakewalk,

then, and not in its middle section, that Debussy most closely evokes the memory of his precursor. And yet even here, things are veiled, for Debussy 担 close positioning of the chord places Wagner 担 upper pitch G♯ in the tenor register. Further, it and Wagner 担 B natural are enharmonically respelled (as A flat and C flat, respectively). Real authenticity, it would seem, is just beyond reach.

[44] And now for the primary point: in each of Examples 16(a) and 16(b), Debussy projects the famous Wagnerian gesture as but a component of low art, and at that art doubly damned in its affiliation with "non-Aryan" and "non-white" music. In terms of Hayden White's trope functions, it is clear that neither representation nor integration is at issue: the fracturing between the quotation from the opening melody of the opera and the attendant "Tristan" chord is too deliberate to allow either function to prevail. Romance and comedy, the respective modes of emplotment affiliated with representation and integration, are thus not the driving forces at work in "Golliwogg's Cakewalk." But what of the remaining trope functions, reduction, and the pair negation/transcendence? One could make the case for either, for it is tenable to suggest that Debussy's distortion of Wagner represents satire at its finest, ironically projecting Wagner in a context completely foreign to that which Wagner so carefully cultivated for himself: negation, then, is invoked in the service of transcendence. And yet the flaw in the preceding argument is that such a stance would call upon a degree of altruism not readily identifiable with Debussy. Suffice it to say that Debussy was not terribly interested in leaving to posterity acknowledgment of his worth. In other words, a statement such as "to the distant future I submit my toils" is out of character for one whose adopted moniker ran "Claude Debussy, musicien français." Instead, metonymy seems the most valid of the four dominant tropes in "Golliwogg's Cakewalk," and in support of the claim, we need but turn to an extra musical clue provided by the composer himself.

[45] As though to underline his condemnation of Wagner, Debussy 担 own illustration for the frontispiece of the complete collection (i.e. for the original edition of *Children 担 Corner*) features, among other things, an Elephant in a winter 担 scene 栏 lluding both to "Jimbo 担 Lullaby," the second of the collection 担 six pieces, and to "The Snow is Dancing," the fourth of the six (see Figure 3). The elephant holds in its trunk a tether. At the opposite end of the tether is connected a helium-filled balloon, upon which appears the grotesque image of the "Golliwogg 担" face. At any moment, the balloon, and with it Wagner, will be released to the four winds: to be forgotten in the dismissive sense of the word, and in the process making possible a brighter future, a near future, a future with someone *other* than Wagner at its center.

[46] Were Debussy's extra-musical message to be put into words, his statement might read "lamentably, the best that Wagner has to offer is to be dismissed as light, black-faced entertainment." Taken in such a light the mode of emplotment for "Golliwogg's Cakewalk" is tragedy rather than satire. And without meaning to place too fine of a point on the matter, here

Figure 3. Debussy's Frontispiece for *Children's Corner*

(click to enlarge)

Wagner is associated with a mode of past conveyance, given lift by helium or by hot air, while Debussy is the vessel ushering in "the century of aeroplanes," the near future with a "right to a music of its own."(49)

***

[47] Each of the three works discussed in the article recalls antithetical musical practices. In "De rêve," aspects of an outmoded musical language are affiliated with dream recollection, where what remains after waking is never wholly consistent with respect to the dream, but can be projected accurately enough so as to place the image of the thing itself before others. In *Pour le piano* the past, appearing in the guise of Baroque and Classical genres and techniques, is initially embraced, later mitigated, and ultimately undone in a process remarkable for its kinship with the emergence of self-awareness in developmental terms. With "Golliwogg's Cakewalk," Debussy's evocation, berating, and subsequent dismissal of Wagner ultimately releases him, Debussy, from the burdens of the past. In all three cases Debussy draws upon various forms of recollection in order to bring the past and the present into direct contact, as though to supply a musical analogue to the following aphorism: it is only by confronting our demons that the cathartic act of their management can commence.

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