12 Debussy's 'rhythmicised time'

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Introduction

We love Debussy's music intimately and yet detailed knowledge of it often seems remote and elusive.[1] Doubtless Debussy would have been delighted, for the realisation that he had denied analysts and theorists their quarry and encouraged some writers to assert, metaphorically at least, the unknowable intangibility of his music would have suited him very well, as we know from his dismissive comments about harmonic analysis and so on. One can imagine his pleasure growing at the recognition that one of the most successful pieces of Debussy scholarship – in the analysis of his music – to come in the post-war years is Roy Howat's *Debussy in Proportion*, a brilliant study that, in revealing a crucial aspect of Debussy's compositional process, raises an inescapable question of what it means for our perception of the music: he takes us into a mysterious domain. *Debussy in Proportion* proves beyond doubt that Debussy used Golden Section and other ancient proportional devices in his music,[2] for the examples Howat adduces, and others that have come to light since, are too compelling to be coincidence or the result of dark, subcutaneous forces. For example, in 'Reflets dans l'eau' the music reaches its loudest level in bar 58; bar 58 out of 94 bars is 0.62 of the piece, which is very close to Golden Section (the golden proportion is 1 : 1.618).[3] Having established this, however, we then have to ask, as Howat and many others have done, how we listen to proportion in music. We have a fairly good notion of how we experience pulse, metre, phrase, and such associated elements in the rhythmic cosmos as Cone's 'structural downbeat', and we can extrapolate from our experience theoretical systems of some complexity, but how do we respond at a deeper, more analytical level to proportion and ratios? After all, we do not know that we have been subject to Golden Section until the end of a movement or work, so the benefits are in one sense retrospective. On the other hand, we are willing to say that we feel a work is well proportioned, which indeed reflects a retrospective analytical decision. Architects use the same Golden Section proportions in buildings and rooms in buildings – the inner spaces – when there is no possibility that the eye could embrace the full effect simultaneously. Time and space cohabit in the world of proportion. Debussy would, I am sure, have enjoyed the mystery he had created in his musical universe for posterity.[4]

The mystery deepens when we look around at the complex problems Debussy's pursuit of pleasure have posed in the domain of harmonic and tonal theory. His refutation of the unified cosmos he inherited from his predecessors (Boyd Pomeroy would debate, to some extent at least, the scope of this unity in the nineteenth century; see chapter 9) has led to the partitioning of his pitch world into genera, which freely alternate and intertwine, inspiring David Lewin's view, cited by Arnold Whittall in chapter 14, that we comprehend such music no longer through a 'hierarchically stratified context', but rather through '"transformational networks", which treat the musical material as a mixture of motivic and harmonic components in a logically evolving . . . context'. So the music, or rather our theoretical grasp of it, 'splinters into fragments';[5] it can no longer offer the theorist and consumer of theory the reassuring notion of unity and organic form that Schenker bestows on Mozart and Beethoven, and Allen Forte on Schoenberg and Webern.

Even if we consider the ternary forms Debussy was so devoted to, the *sense* of reprise that is vital in an ABA form – and here we have only to think of the significance form takes on in the writings of Carl Dahlhaus and other German writers – often seems to evaporate or get compromised, though perhaps not in the 'anti-reprise' manner of Varèse, who undermines recapitulation even as he engages with repetition in a closing section. Debussy takes us a step or two closer to 'moment forms', which

> verticalize one's sense of time within sections, render every moment a present, avoid functional implications between moments, and avoid climaxes, they are not beginning–middle–end forms. In contrast to the possibly displaced beginnings and endings and multiply-directed time . . . a composition in moment time has neither functional beginning nor ending.[6]

In one area there is still the prospect of a coherent explanation of Debussy's music, if this is what we still aspire to. Debussy talked of his idea of music as 'colours and rhythmicised time', albeit in the context of rebutting formal stereotypes.[7] He did not leave us many clues as to the technical nature of his music, but this is one of the few comments that has come down to us, and it is a valuable one. It has done little to alter the pitch-centredness of much writing on Debussy, which in any case faithfully reflects the traditions and interests of generations of theorists and analysts, and has been very successful; rhythm is still the ugly duckling of theory, in spite of corrective publications in the past couple of decades. Unfortunately, the study of rhythm carries with it a great deal of unresolved baggage, the exposition of which, let alone its resolution, would take several volumes the size of this Companion. Nevertheless, there are a small number of places to look for

a suggestive treatment of rhythm in Debussy.[8] That this number is small may be worrying, but our concerns should be tempered by the knowledge that Debussy's treatment of rhythm shows many more congruities with the nineteenth century than, for example, his treatment of harmony: the flattening out of climaxes implicit in moment form and the destruction of the 'beginning–middle–end logic of the dramatic curve'[9] in some modernistic art and music does not pertain in Debussy; the reverse is true (except in isolated instances, especially in the late works). For this chapter a few topics are explored without inappropriate – in this context – grappling with the knotty theoretical issues behind them. The conclusion at each stage is that rhythm can receive independent consideration, and its analysis provides a rich base from which to explore and explain the music. Effectively pursued it answers structural questions. As to how we choose to analyse the 'colours' of Debussy's letter, that is another, even more elusive question.

A temporal dichotomy

Julian Epstein offers us a fundamental temporal dichotomy between 'chronometric' and 'integral' (sometimes referred to as 'experiential') time.[10] The one is more 'purely mechanistic': 'emphasis within this domain is metrical accent, largely mechanical and virtually automatic, associated mainly with those beats of a measure (or larger dimensional levels) that are strong'.[11] Integral time is unique to each work, being formed from the experience of each work: since its elements are not predetermined in the manner of chronometric time, 'the strong pulses of rhythmic patters arise contextually. Because temporal phenomena cannot demarcate themselves, rhythmic strengths and weaknesses . . . are effected by events in other domains such as harmony (in its progression, tension and relaxation, stability and instability), melodic contour, cadence.'[12] There is a sense that while chronometric time belongs to music in its notated form, with its bar lines denoting metre, performed music, the individual work alive in real time, often with the bar lines dissolved in a 'performative' sense, inhabits the domain of integral time. These are the two polarities of rhythmic analysis or the study of time in music. It is predicated on the existence of two worlds, which might also be conveniently labelled 'metre and rhythm', as if the vocabulary were not already sufficiently compromised; they both imply hierarchical organisation, but metre-centred theory allows a higher level of abstraction in the sense that it is 'all about regularity of duration . . . meter arises from series of equal durations separating accents, with

non-metrically-accented material filling the intervals between'.[13] In contrast, 'rhythmic analysis' founds its hierarchical structure upon the differentiation of accented and unaccented events in the manner advocated by, for example, Walter Berry.[14]

Perhaps in an ideal world, a world in which the performance is the 'real music' and the score a necessary abstraction, we would merge the two; it would be preferable, perhaps, to ignoring one or the other as so often happens. On the other hand, since phrases, melodies, sections often begin at the point of metrical accent, and melodies often climax and cadence at the point of rhythmic accent, there is not necessarily an undesirable level of abstraction in the one or arbitrariness in the other: if one accepts the duality, they can coexist very nicely. One of the two poles is encountered separately in Parks's chapter 'Meter' in *The Music of Claude Debussy* in which accent is permitted to be the determinant of metrical hierarchy (in a rhythmic sense) – see below; in Kramer's *The Time of Music* the emphasis is on metre and greater metrical groupings (hypermeasure and hypermetre[15]); rhythmic analysis here is considered a somewhat irritating and limited mode of enquiry.[16] A rapprochement between them is undertaken in Christopher Hasty's book *Meter as Rhythm*,[17] which spawned the separate analytical riposte to a review by Justin London; it culminates in a penetrating analysis of the opening of Debussy's Violin Sonata.[18] I hope that the metrical and rhythmic analyses that follow are sufficiently transparent to stand without a great deal of independent theoretical preparation.

Pulse/beat

Pulse is an aspect of how we hear time passing in music. It is the smallest denominator, but it is neither the smallest rhythmic element in a composition nor the largest; it is usually something in the middle. Even when it is not literally present, one senses its existence, but the composer has to establish it in some way: in the performance of music we do not usually 'see' the score. Pulse is regular in much music of the common-practice period. Each manifestation of it may not be precisely the same length as the previous pulse or the next (we know this well from measuring performance practice), but there is a common thread that usually runs the length and breadth of a composition uniting them within a common framework, which is why we still experience it when the sound marking the timepoint of its initiation has been suspended, as in the oft-encountered hemiola.

Varèse was influenced by Debussy in many ways: alongside Stravinsky he is close to him in history and style, but he quickly moved away from

Debussy's treatment of rhythm. For long stretches in his music ties over the bar line and changing time signatures not only obscure a regular pulse, they often prevent one being established at all; witness, for example, the opening of *Octandre*. Debussy, on the other hand, makes conspicuous use of a regular pulse in almost all of his music. Even when he opens a work with ties over the bar line and irregularly placed rhythmic events, he usually issues a corrective within a few bars, thereby establishing regular pulse and with it a yardstick against which to measure subsequent musical events. From its establishment as a near-universal background feature in most of Debussy's music, pulse is sometimes foregrounded as a gestural feature: the stakes are raised and in extreme cases Debussy might even take a step closer to the post-war avant garde and Eimert's espousal of *Jeux* as 'the vegetative circulation of form' (see the discussion of 'Gigues' below).[19]

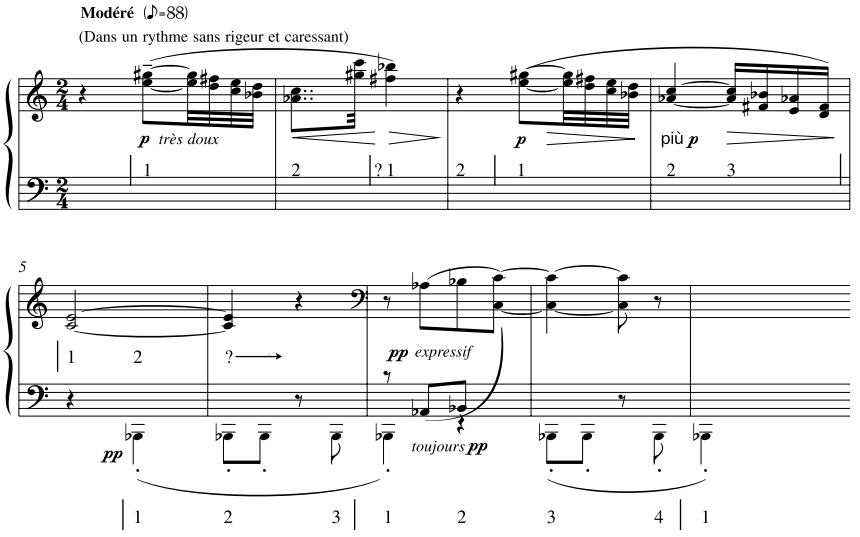
From the analyses that follow it is apparent that Debussy sometimes challenged the hegemony of regular, unitary pulse, perhaps by setting two conflicting metres against each other, but there is usually a common thread against which one is heard as a disruptive element, and one metre is usually firmly established by the end.

Metre

The next level up from pulse and beat is metre and motive, as Epstein designates them.[20] It is useful to make this distinction, because not all music reflects the notated metre, which is the manifestation of time signature and bar line. Waltzes sail along nicely reiterating metre as they circulate, but motivic combinations often contradict the notated metrical patterning in other types of music. Curiously for our study, Debussy was very fond of dance music, especially in his early works. His later music contains numerous references to dances and marches – albeit subsumed into grander designs. All of which is highly suggestive. Even a cursory rhythmic analysis of his music quickly discloses a deep-seated and extensive adherence to regular metre, which in many works is often contradicted by nothing more radical than a hemiola in the manner of a waltz.

We mean by this that the patterns established in the melody or accompaniment are a direct reflection of the metre indicated in the time signature. Most banally this is the low–high–high, i.e. strong–weak–weak, accompaniment to a waltz theme, which does the two most elementary things required to confirm metre: provide a downbeat accent and then the one or two (in a waltz) continuing, evenly spaced temporal events to constitute a pattern.[21] When this process is repeated the satisfying hierarchical integrity of the marking of time passing in music is realised: the beginning of each

Example 12.1 'Voiles': metrical ambiguities (bars 1–9)



bar (in this instance) forms a second level of pulse, which rises then to the next level, which is hypermeasure or phrase (the rhythmic equivalent).[22]

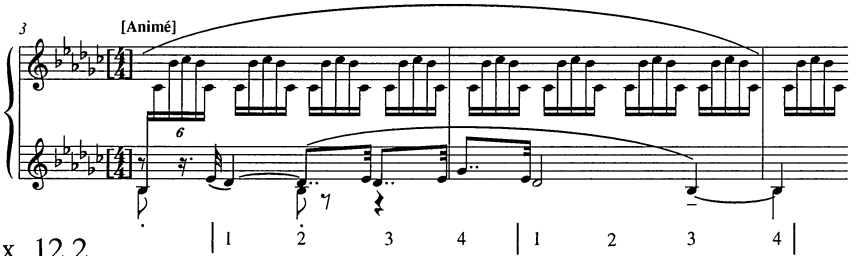
A brief survey of the first book of *Préludes* gives a rounded view of Debussy's treatment of metre. These works accurately reflect many aspects of Debussy's music and so constitute an excellent starting point for this investigation.

No. 1, 'Danseuses de Delphes', presents a straightforward and immediate agreement between motive and meter, which is analogous to the relative simplicity of its diatonic pitch organisation. The rising three-note motive in crotchets is completed on the third crotchet of the 3/4 bar and the metrical conclusions we reach on this evidence are confirmed in the slightly varied repetition of bar 2. Less common in Debussy's music in general are the changes of time signature (to 4/4 in bars 4 and 9).

No. 2, 'Voiles', is the polar opposite in its tonal and rhythmic structure. Its famously exclusive whole-tone pitch organisation (apart from the pentatonic B section) is mirrored by the many accentual ambiguities that obscure its notated metrical structure of 2/4. The *Prélude* starts on the second beat of the bar. When the right hand begins to establish a duple metre, a left-hand ostinato begins in the bass, again on the second beat. Its grouping resembles 3/4 in bars 3–4 and 4/4 in bars 7–8. Regular metrical groupings are finally assured in the B′ section when the left-hand ostinato is transmuted into a regular ♩. ♪ figure (Example 12.1).

No. 3, 'La vent dans la plaine', immediately establishes a strong pulse through regular iterations of a sextuplet figure and left-hand B♭. In common

Example 12.2 'La vent dans la plaine' (bars 3–5, beat 1)

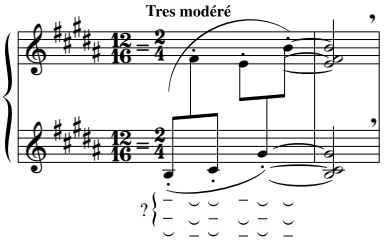


with many other works by Debussy, the two bars of essentially undifferentiated crotchet events establish the hypermetric unit (two bars) in advance of the metre, which arrives in an ambiguous form in bar 3 with the accent falling on beat 2 and then defining a 4/4 grouping across the bar for a two-bar span (Example 12.2).[23] This sets the first metrical unit (bars 1–2) and the metrical unit defined by the melody out of synchronisation with each other. Not until bar 9 is there agreement between left and right hands. The second-beat accent continues to feature, as in bar 34.

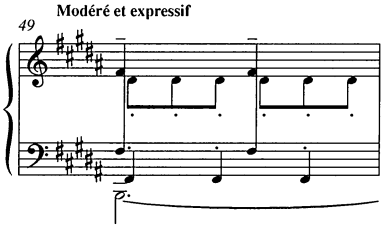
No. 4, 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir', is a specimen of Debussy's rare use of an irregular time signature, 5/4. In passages of greater flow and longer-breathed ideas, the *Prélude* nevertheless falls predominantly into a regular 3/4, which begins in bar 3. In other words, the reticent irregularities of the first bars are soon superseded by bars of metrical regularity.

In No. 5, 'Les collines d'Anacapri', the hypermetric unit of two bars is established first without making any clear commitment to the dual metrical schemes indicated in the time signature (12/16 and 2/4), which are to intertwine throughout the piece. In bar 8 we first hear the duple division of the bar (2/4) and finally in bar 14 we encounter the 12/16 metre, albeit with the accent on the second quaver. Cross rhythms are avoided in the A and A′ sections of this ternary composition by the simultaneous use of mainly quaver patterns in the 2/4 metre against triplet-semiquaver patterns of the 12/16. The opening of the *Prélude* (Example 12.3a) hints ambivalently at another organisation, triplet quavers (one might hear the quavers in pairs or triplets), which are taken up in the B section. Although Debussy does not indicate a change of time signature in the score, this section is effectively 6/8 superimposed upon 3/4 (Example 12.3b), but the resemblance to bar 1 indicates that the quaver pattern is directly derived from the A section's opening – a derivation that is confirmed in bar 63 when the bar 1 figure is restated in 6/8 metre (Example 12.3c). Even so, the conjunction of 3/4 and 6/8 was a favourite of Debussy's and produced some of his most characteristic cross rhythms and polyrhythms.

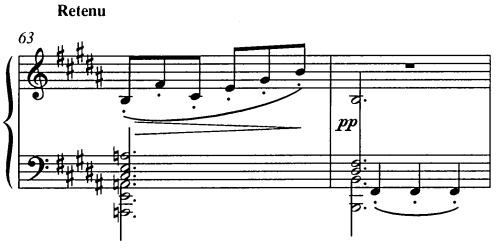
Example 12.3(a) 'Les collines d'Anacapri' (bar 1)



(b) 'Les collines d'Anacapri' (bar 49)



(c) 'Les collines d'Anacapri' (bar 63)

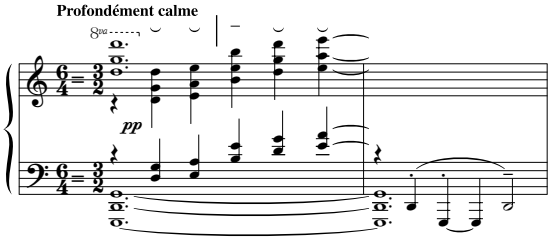


Passing over *Prélude* No. 6, 'Des pas sur la neige', which is discussed in more detail below, we come to the Lisztian turbulence of No. 7, 'Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest'. There are metrical complexities aplenty, but the basic metre is established by bar 3 after two bars in which beats 1 and 3 are accented; in bar 3 beats 2 and 4 receive secondary accents that consolidate the 4/4 metre.

No. 8, 'La fille aux cheveux de lin', starts serenely with a monodic figure of the sort established as a Debussy archetype in *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune*. In bars 1–2 'La fille' glides languorously across the bar line without creating a clear strong–weak pattern in accord with the notated metre of 3/4. In the light of bars 1–2's repetition scheme the obvious reading would be of a three-minim group in 3/2. Emphasis shifts away from this with the tie across the bar line in bar 7, which breaks up the hitherto regular hypermetric unit as well as initiating an unambiguous transition to 3/4, which is completed in bar 14.

No. 9, 'La sérénade interrompue', sounds like an *étude* for Debussy's Spanish triptych 'Ibéria'. Played in a suitably accurate, neutral manner

Example 12.4 'La cathédrale engloutie' (bars 1–2)



(in other words without gratuitous accents at the start of bars 2, 6, 8, etc.), the opening two bars might as easily be interpreted in duple as in triple time. Not until bar 9, where a falling offbeat figure is played, can we be sure of the 3/8 time signature.

Writ large, No. 10, 'La cathédrale engloutie', expands the 3/4–6/8 dichotomy of 'Les collines d'Anacapri' in a broad 6/4–3/2 juxtaposition (expressed in the time signature itself). One might wonder where the binary division of the bar implied by 6/4 occurs, however, for much of the writing is unambiguously in three minims to the bar. In bar 1, where the minim is not in control, one imagines that the intention is to persuade the pianist to allow the B to flow up to the syncopated E, if not the whole crotchet melody, thus avoiding even the slightest hint of an accentual pairing of E–B and D–E (Example 12.4). In bar 16 this inference is confirmed in the varied B major repetition of the opening, for the left hand is clearly presented with a 6/4 grouping, encapsulated in the left hand's change of direction at the midway point of the bar.

No. 11, 'La danse de Puck', clarifies its duple metre (the time signature is 2/4) early on, though the accentual pattern often emphasises the quaver (4/8). The 3/4 section sports some of the most complex cross rhythms in the first book of *Préludes*, particularly in bar 41.

No. 12, 'Minstrels', is unambiguous in its correlation of motive and notated metre: a regular 2/4 pattern is established from bar 1.

By the time of Debussy's last creative flowering, most of which took place in the glorious summer of 1915, there are sporadic hints that regular metre is beginning to lose its grip. There are more changes of time signature and longer stretches in which either pulse or metre is obscured. Nevertheless, as Aysegul Durakoglu has shown (see below, pp. 252ff.), in the *Etudes*, one of the most considerable products of this most productive summer, regular metre is still a central resource. Perhaps if Debussy had been granted a few more years we would have seen him moving closer to the rhythmic changes apparent in the music of Stravinsky and Varèse.

Metrical units/hypermeasure and beyond

As we ascend the hierarchy, the compromises and contrivances of rhythmic analysis can be more irksome. Nonetheless, the principle remains constant: the tendency of pulses to accumulate into groups of two or three (and multiples thereof) continues so that single metrical groupings (bars) now form themselves into units of two or three. This next level can be subsumed under the general heading of phrase and then period, for which a substantial study exists in William Rothstein's *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music*.[24] His focus is music of tonal common practice, a point that alerts us to the weakening of aspects of phrase structure that Debussy's at least partial denial of tonal grammar and voice leading entailed.

Without the 'rhythm' of recurring harmonic events in the tonic–dominant grouping, other factors have to take their place, which necessarily challenge Rothstein's definition of phrase, or at least encourage us to develop it further:

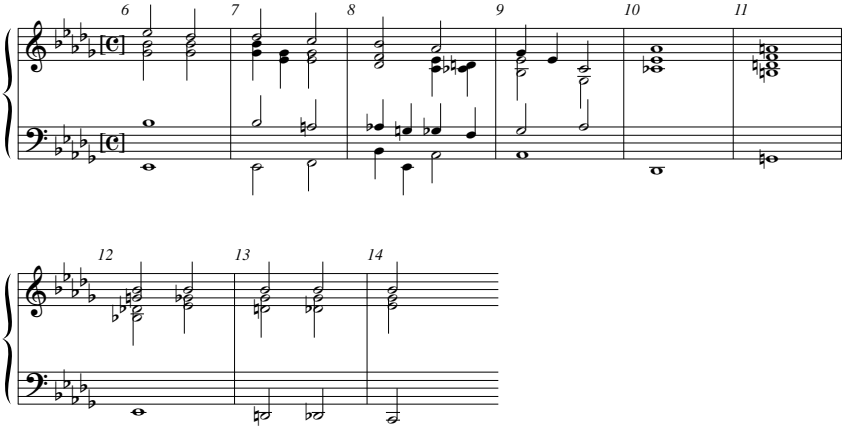
> [Definitions by Roger Sessions and Peter Westergaard] describe a motion with a beginning, middle, and end; but Westergaard's describes a *tonal* motion with a rhythmic component . . . rather than a rhythmic motion with an unspecified tonal component.[25]

As we move further up the hierarchy to phrase groupings ('periods'), which produce formal sections, the expanses of music have become such that one might cynically argue that we are now in the domain of formal analysis. Edward T. Cone and others have again shown how rhythm operates at these high levels. Notions of cadential arrival and departure have been grouped around Cone's seductive heading 'structural downbeat'.[26] After all, music moves through time, so if we do divide a piece into five sections, say ABACA, as in a rondo, one still expects other parameters to be the agents of that formal grouping. In sonata form the development section, or a significant part of it, takes on the role of an extended upbeat to the moment of tonal and thematic return, the structural downbeat. In Classical music, harmony, voice leading, texture and other elements all contribute to a unified manifestation of a greater rhythmic movement that, in Kramer's evocative description, gathers hypermetric elements into a single linear process:

> The temporal form of a tonal piece typically consists of a move towards a point of greatest tension that is usually remote from the tonic, followed by a drive back towards the tonic. The return of the tonic is an event of rhythmic importance, a structural downbeat, a point of resolution, the goal.[27]

Applying this to Debussy, we at once miss the defining power of 1–IV–V–I progressions and their many associates. Even in the early and in some

Example 12.5 Nocturne: harmonic reduction (bars 6–14)



ways atypical Nocturne (1892), the opening bass line tips us off to Debussy's early exaltation of his pleasure and the concomitant displeasure of his professors of theory. This bass line runs B♭–E♭–A♮–D♭(bar 1), all crotchets (the last one suspended over the bar where there is a I^6_3 arpeggiation), which denies the tonal association of leading note (A♮) and provisional tonic (B♭). The main theme, beginning in bar 6, arranges itself in four-bar phrases based on two-bar subphrases (much of Debussy's music takes the two-bar unit as its starting point) with the promise of Romantic harmonic phraseology in the sense that the phrase begins partway through a tonal progression on iv of B♭ minor (the piece is in D♭ major but there is a strong, Chopinesque B♭ minor lean at the start; cf. the Scherzo in B♭ minor/D♭) and would then, if this were Chopin, move through to the dominant–tonic parts of the harmonic phrase (see Example 12.5). Debussy blunts this, indeed pulls a veil over it, by allowing the V^9 of B♭ minor in bar 7 to progress to a $B♭^7$ chord with a prominent A♭ in the tenor voice. The phrase ends in bar 9 on an even blunter chord, that of $A♭^7$ (there has been no suggestion as yet of a tonic D♭ major triad).[28] Nevertheless, thanks to this dominant seventh, and the preceding dominant minor ninth on F, there is a strong dominant 'charge' in this phrase, which needs to find release (or 'discharge', to use Daniel Harrison's useful term[29]); this becomes significant in a few bars' time, but even in the Romantic context of this Nocturne, Debussy's harmonies are not going to respect conventional tonal voice leading. The next four-bar phrase might be more properly described as comprising four separate one-bar phrases (or we might follow Hasty's example and relinquish this all-too-loaded vocabulary); these one-bar units progress in parallel dominant ninths rooted on D♭ (so the V^7 is released to the tonic, but with its seventh flattened), G, E♭ (bars 10–12). The bass line connecting the E♭ minor chord

in bar 12 to the reprise of the main theme on bass C in bar 14 travels in a chromatic descent E♭–D♮–D♭–C. This bass line seems to carry the 'dominant charge' mentioned above in bars 6–9: if we take the harmonies away and consider the bass, we see the residue of a tonal progression in A♭ (dominant of D♭) as the bass descends through what might have been the grammatically 'correct' dominant-of the-dominant on D♮ (it would be the chord B♭^{7}), to D♭ (part of a V$^6_4$ of A♭), to C, the first inversion of A♭ (at this point I part from Harrison, for 'dominant charge' would not apply to a descending line in his dualist system, but in the voice-leading sense intended here the descending line would be paired with rising semitones as leading notes resolve upwards, which is a crucial aspect of the linearity of the tonal system and therefore of phrase rhythm). At this juncture Debussy could have boarded the tonal gravy train and modified the chords to support the implications of the bass, but instead we hear a minor-seventh chord on C (C–E♭–G♭–B♭) as the endpoint of a series of harmonies that subvert tonal progression, not least in bars 10–12 where there is a sense of weightlessness or disconnection. All this illustrates an interim stage in Debussy's departure from the Conservatoire textbooks and inhalation of air as fresh and as inter-galactic as Schoenberg was to experience a full decade-and-a-half later.

My aim in pointing out so much detail is also to show that even this early on in Debussy's career, and in a work that looks back as much as this, the harmonic phrase is not quite the driving rhythmic force in the linear sense required by Rothstein. Rhythmic momentum comes from other factors such as the *crescendo* at the end of the second phrase (bars 12–13), and the extended reprise of the opening bass line (a kind of recitative) in bars 51–4, which generates the 'unaccent' needed for the rhythmic articulation of the return of the main theme in A′ (of this ternary form).[30] (Even when there appears to be a linear, rhythmic harmonic movement, as in the V–I succession from bars 11 to 12, Debussy uses various blunting techniques to deflect us from the harmonic upbeat–downbeat inference that might otherwise have been drawn.) Later he generates harmonic tension by changing the tonal genus, e.g. from a diatonic collection to a whole-tone one.

Shaping of the melody, dynamics, texture, agogic accent, dynamic accent, the number of voices playing, repetition of themes, recurring harmonies and other factors shape one's perception of 'phrase' and hypermeasure in Debussy and articulate the tension–release schemes essential to the definition of a rhythmic structure (at least the sort of rhythmic structure Debussy apparently sought). Without the defining properties of the tonal phrase some familiarities have been removed, and one should be prepared for a little flexibility in recognising and analysing Debussy's alternative structures. Pursued in this way the Nocturne poses few obstacles to the extension of the style of hypermetric analysis undertaken by Kramer.

Pursuing the argument that there is a rational connection between ideas in Debussy's music, which no longer depends upon tonal voice leading, we should consider the many passages in his music that are devoted to escalation – the generation of climactic moments that articulate the broader rhythmic structure. Such passages follow a pattern that can, even at risk of over-generalisation, be categorised as follows:

interruption–alienation–preparation–escalation–confirmation

These passages often begin with a breaking off from an established idea; 'alienation' often takes the form of substituting a new pitch grouping, such as the whole-tone scale; 'preparation' might entail the institution of an ostinato; escalation sometimes deploys a great deal of repetition, often sequential, heightening dynamics and related devices; 'confirmation' may involve a return to, or renewed use of, triadic material, a loud dynamic, and other, related devices. Such passages take on great prominence in Debussy's music (see below).

Parks cites the climax of the slow movement of the String Quartet in bar 76 as an example of Debussy's use of Golden Section.[31] It is the point of greatest affirmation, featuring a return to the triadic genus from whole-tone collections with a *forte* restatement of the central section's main theme after a succession of whole-tone harmonies. It is approached by a rising tide of sequential repetitions beginning in bar 62 (fig. 13), *piano*. Debussy characteristically marks a return to *piano* at each new beginning in the escalation (a marking more honoured in the breach than in the observance by performers). Clearly bar 76 is a point of maximum rhythmic stress: Parks marks it thus (level 3 – the highest value in his three-level hierarchy for the movement), and we have to remember that Parks is employing an 'experiential' scheme for his analysis founded on 'successive-attack activity . . . loudness, sonorous density, and placement of the theme in the extreme upper register'.[32] If we now stand back from accent as the main agent of division and consider the more 'neutral' claims of hypermetre, we find the slow movement's climax following a logical ordering of the metrical hierarchy: as elsewhere there is a tendency towards irregularity in the sense that groupings of two are often followed by a grouping of three, but since this recurs it becomes a regularity; at the highest level such irregularities are subsumed into larger regularities (Example 12.6). In Table 12.1 we find a structure rising up from a consistently maintained pulse, through regular metrical groupings, to a clear hypermetric outcome. The notations of the table rise from the metre (bars) in the bottom row; the duple and occasionally triple groupings of bars in row a; row b shows how larger groups are

Example 12.6 String Quartet, slow movement: melody line (bars 62–79)

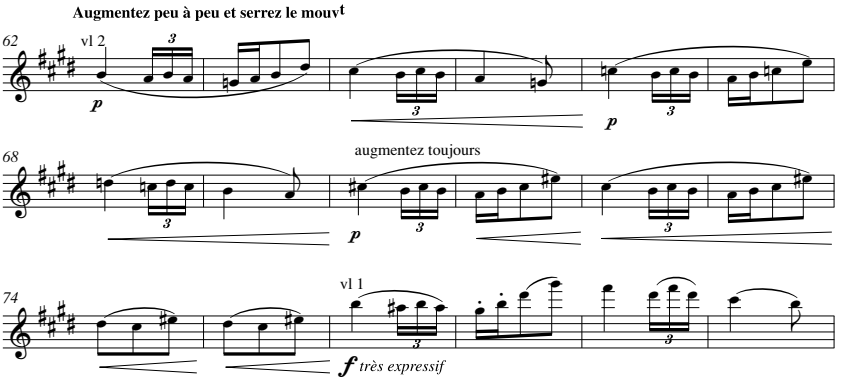


Table 12.1. *String Quartet, slow movement: hypermetric analysis of central climax (bars 62–84)*

	62	63	64	65	66	67	68	69	70	71	72	73	74	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84
d																							
c																							
b																							
a																							

arrived at as we rise through the metrical structure. In row c, the second-highest level analysed here, we see how the aggregated groupings articulate the linear progressions towards the structural downbeat of bar 76, the *forte* restatement of the main theme of the central section, on row d. (The largest number of vertical strokes indicates the strongest metrical accent; Parks uses similar notation but his accents are based on rhythmic properties of the music, which do not always coincide with metric accents, though in bar 76 metrical and rhythmic accent do coincide.)

Returning now to the pattern advocated above for the articulation of this rhythmic structure through escalation, we find many aspects of it confirmed: all rhythmic activity stops in bar 61 and the patterns obtaining in bar 61 are dropped (interruption); the triadic genus of bar 61 is replaced by the whole-tone scale (alienation); a new ostinato is established (preparation); tempo and dynamic are gradually heightened, and tension is further increased by sequential restatements of the theme (escalation); the apex is reached with the triad of G♯ minor, *forte* dynamic, expressive intensification and an expanded, definitive restatement of the main motive (confirmation).

In voice-leading terms there is a profound disjunction between bars 61 and 62 that Schenkerian analysis would, to put it mildly, find uncomfortable. In rhythmic terms the passage is comprehensible within a broad, congruent scheme.

Examples of rhythmic structure

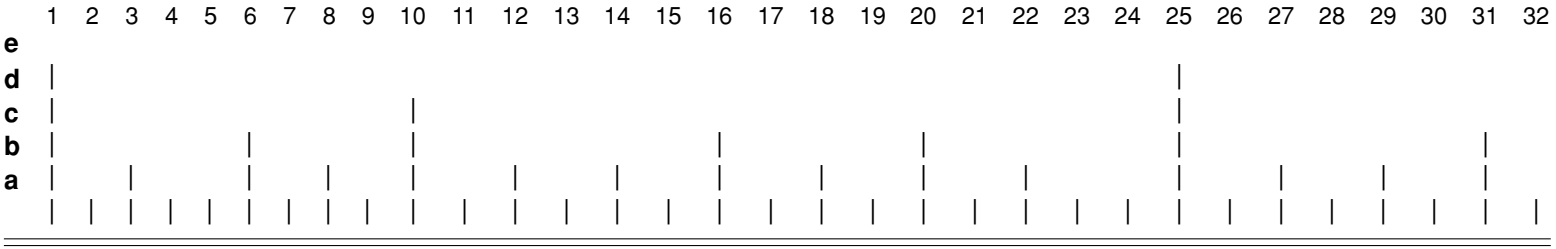
'Jardins sous la pluie'

Having considered the concept of metrical and rhythmic levels, we now take some examples that cover different aspects of rhythmic structure. We begin with 'Jardins sous la pluie' (*Estampes*, 1903) in which we encounter Debussy following principles reminiscent of those of the String Quartet in a characteristic, toccata-like context. It is in a sort of rondo form with a lyrical interlude (not quite central section). The rondo theme is nothing more than a brief snatch of a popular lullaby 'Do, do, l'enfant do' that Debussy was evidently strongly attracted to. It's the sort of snippet of melody that runs around and around in one's head on the way to work; the only way to be free of it, if you're Debussy, is to 'compose it out'.

Pulse is based on a minim and the notated metre is 2/2. Note grouping establishes pulse and metre in bar 1, as it does a four-semiquaver subdivision of the main unit of pulse. The duple grouping of the pulse is mirrored on the next level by metric units founded on two bars, though as in the String Quartet example above, there are extensions to three bars, beginning in bars 3–5. The point of departure for the piece, the first downbeat, is the opening, which gives us the most cursory statement of the 'Do, do, l'enfant do' fragment. The piece now proceeds to inhale and exhale excitedly through a series of escalations and confirmations, culminating in the triumphant E major cadence in the last three bars. Tonally its points of arrival are marked by returns to the triadic genera of F♯ minor/major, C minor, D♭ major, F♯ major, B minor (not fully established) and E major. All are accompanied by the 'Do, do, l'enfant do' fragment. In between these triadic points of arrival (characterised by different levels of certainty and emphasis), alternative genera are employed, including the ubiquitous whole-tone and octatonic collections. The paradigm adumbrated above (from interruption to confirmation) consistently applies.

In terms of metrical units the first phase of the process is probably capable of several interpretations, but if Table 12.2 effects a successful interpretation of the hypermetric structure, it is apparent that the opening two-bar–three-bar unit has reverberations at a higher level, which indicates the efficacy of this type of analysis in unveiling parallelisms at different structural levels in the best Schenkerian manner. Table 12.2 follows the same notational principles as Table 12.1 with the greatest number of vertical

Table 12.2. *'Jardins sous la pluie': hypermetric analysis (bars 1–32)*



strokes indicating the strongest metrical accent, the hierarchy rising logically through duple and ternary groupings to the first point of release in the repeated As in bar 25 that preface the return of the lullaby theme in bar 27.

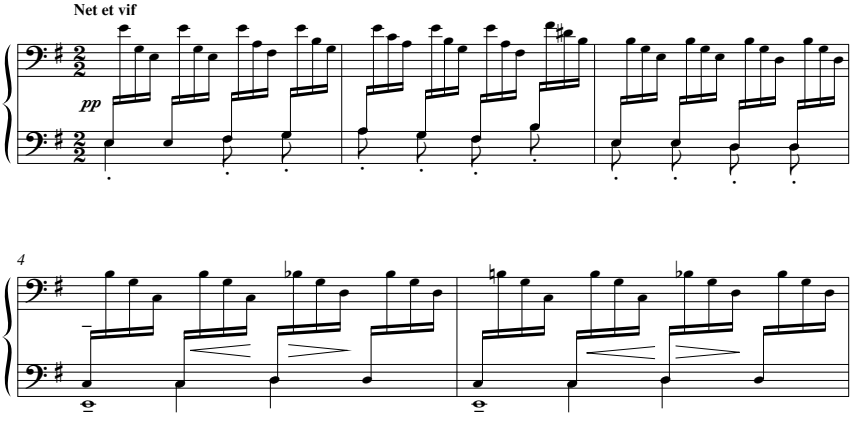
Even more striking than this relatively neutral level of working is the more distinctively gestural or motivic character of the rhythmic play of this composition. The opening five bars accommodate a playful gesture that reverberates throughout the piece both in the microcosm and in the macrocosm. The particularity of this gesture is the manner in which the first statement so rapidly degenerates: in bars 1–2 we get a strong exposition of motive, tonality and metre, with the promise of resumption and affirmation in bar 3, hence the 'Do, do, l'enfant do' rhythmic unit used in these bars. Instead of the proposed affirmation, tonal and motivic focus rapidly decays from bar 3, and we soon begin a long period of escalation towards the delayed affirmation (in other words, the 'downbeat' aspect of the temporal structure is prematurely subsumed into a long afterbeat, from which Debussy extricates himself in a variety of ways in pursuit of the upbeat and consequent recycling of the gesture in new guises). Much of the playfulness of this composition stems from this gesture, not least the manner in which several of the main stress points – the structural downbeats – are not restatements of the theme but prefatory, thematically neutral gestures, such as the *ff* D♭ major arpeggiations in bar 47 and G♯–F♯ trill in bar 126, both of which lead to the theme being treated as a consequent. On the other hand, the theme itself does occupy the arrival or antecedent point in bar 43, the C minor passage, but it is superseded in terms of accent within just a few bars by the D♭ major arpeggiations (Example 12.7).

This and other factors ensure that 'Jardins sous la pluie' engages us first and foremost as an exercise in rhythmic play. As a tonal exercise it is puzzling and disparate. Formally we have no very great desire to hear this tiresome snippet of melody arrayed in rondo or any other form (lest this be misunderstood, the original song is delightful, but most of the notes are omitted and its character wholly transformed by Debussy), for form is the great exponent of reprise, and the form of this work seems to be at the disposal of stretching and retarding the moments of upbeat preparation: stretching in the vastly long preparation for the G♯–F♯ trill (bars 100–25) and retardation in the ravishing lyrical episode that precedes bars 100–25 with its limpid, non-escalatory phrases of seven and eight bars framing a more characteristically short-breathed central part, distantly based on 'Nous n'irons plus au bois' (the whole section is from bars 75–99).

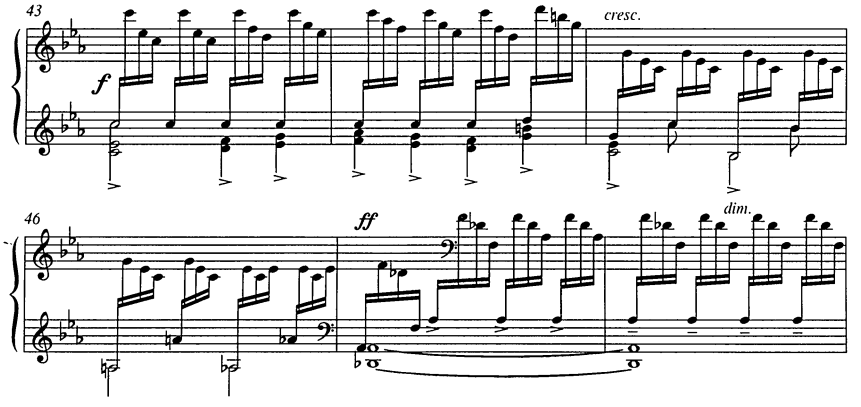
'Des pas sur la neige'

The subject of some of the most celebrated writing on Debussy's tonal structures, 'Des pas sur la neige' is a triumph of harmonic disjunction.[33] No two

Example 12.7(a) 'Jardins sous la pluie' (bars 1–5)



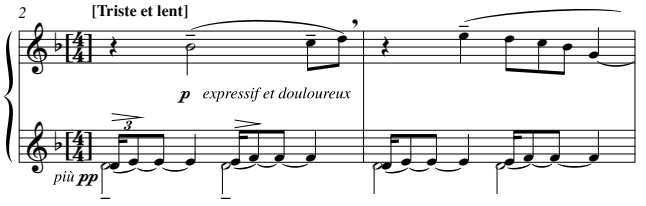
(**b**) 'Jardins sous la pluie' (bars 43–8)



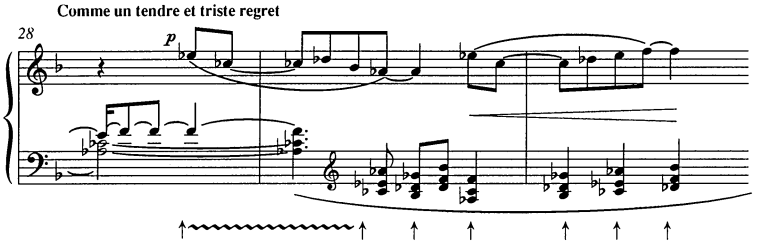
sections employ the same tonal materials, though there are intersecting elements and a clear tonic note. Both the title and the instructions to the performer connote mental and physical movement. The subject is undefined, but we know that at some point in the piece the subject experiences a 'tendre et triste regret', which affirms and closes the many currents of the work and presents a stark juxtaposition of two related genera in the closing parts, namely G♭ major (bars 29–31) and D harmonic minor (32–end). The various other harmonic genera encountered earlier on, including the whole-tone scale, are discarded. The juxtaposition in the last two sections is also between a tendency in favour of the ostinato established at the beginning and against it (it is first suspended in bar 7). In the penultimate section (bars 29–31) the ostinato is entirely discarded and then ritually incorporated into the first two bars of the closing section (bars 32–3).

In terms of texture, mood and pitch centricity the work *sounds* unified, but there is another connecting thread that meshes every part of the work

Example 12.8(**a**) 'Des pas sur la neige' (bars 2–3)



(**b**) 'Des pas sur la neige' (bars 28–30)



together: the polarisation of two metrical poles, one implied by the time signature of four crotchets in a bar (4/4), which opposes the duple time implications of the ostinato (2/2). As the ostinato continues in bar 2, melody springs up awkwardly against it, limping in a syncopated, incomplete way and emphasising the crotchet beat; it stumbles on to the end of bar 3 where it is held over. Like the ice and snow, the scene is frigid, but as we progress through this remarkable piece memories melt through the ice, and with them the two disparate metrical organisations also melt into each other until there is a period of the greatest freedom when the left and right hands coordinate in two liberating bars of quadruple time, first in the fulfilled liberation of the melodic impulse (bars 28–9) from the limping version of bars 2–3 (Example 12.8), and then in the ritualised restatement of the ostinato in the right hand with a new, ostinato-like figure in the left. The *Prélude*'s rhythmic premise is consistently explored in the piece, resulting in pauses, interruptions, diversions and so on.

'Gigues'

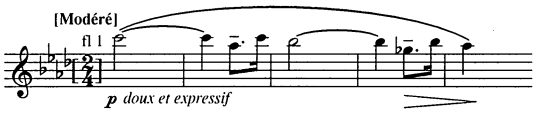
The orchestral *Images* (1905–12) deserve to be considered the pinnacle of Debussy's achievement as a composer for orchestra rather more than the oft-cited *Jeux*. Their extraordinary richness is manifested in almost every aspect of composition, from the orchestral sound itself to the breathtaking beauty of the sectional transitions in 'Ibéria' (a sublime response to Wagner's art of transition?). It was in a letter of 1907 to his publisher about work

on *Images* that Debussy spoke of his new, 'immaterial' music, which he could no longer handle like a 'robust symphony, walking on all four feet (sometimes three)', an oblique reference perhaps to his three-movement and somewhat symphonic *La mer*.[34] He continued with the intriguing claim that his music 'consists of colours and rhythmicised time'.[35] There are five movements in this extensive work, three of which belong to 'Ibéria'; they are flanked by the single-movement 'Gigues' and 'Rondes de printemps' (some conductors have rearranged the order in performance so that the set ends with the more extrovert 'Ibéria', including Eduard van Beinum, whose live recording with the Concertgebouw of 1948 presents the work in this revised order[36]).

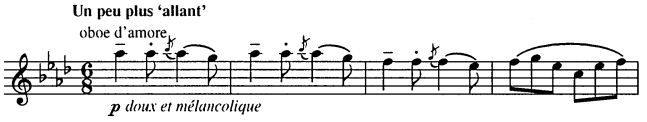
As Robin Holloway has shown, Wagner is rarely entirely absent for long as a presence in Debussy's music; even when the musical detail of his voice is absent, other aspects of Debussy's demon seem to emerge, as here in 'Gigues' where the tempo markings allow the interpreter a high level of freedom. The only specific marking is the *Modéré* at the start, after which there are a series of qualifiers and reversions. The same situation prevails in the vast Prologue (and much of Act I) of *Götterdämmerung*, where the conductor has to look back to the start of the Three Norns scene, bar 1 of the opera, to find a definitive tempo marking by which to gauge the appropriate tempo for the love duet; and Wagner, like Debussy, had little trust in metronome markings. On the other hand, Debussy also had little patience for very subjective interpreters who used his music as a springboard for their own ruminations on life, so 'Gigues' requires a great deal of empathy if it is to be realised with the precision and sense of what is right that its creator presumably wanted. At least one can say that the intention is to have the temporal structure rooted in one central tempo with perhaps the first twenty bars slightly slower than much that ensues (subsequent *a tempo* markings appear to apply to the *plus allant* of the oboe d'amore's theme).[37]

Metrically the work consistently combines and interleaves 2/4 and 6/8, the first heard at the beginning with the flute motive and the second first and most strongly defined by the oboe d'amore. Debussy follows his favoured procedure of introducing the rhythmic world of the piece in the order hypermetric unit followed by metre. The duple metre is in fact only hazily outlined by the harp in the introductory section; the oboe d'amore then plainly establishes the duple division of the bar in its melancholy 6/8; a fresh, more nervous metrical element is then introduced at figure 3, the motivic basis of which resides in the introduction and which might, in another context, be notated as 4/8. These three elements are joined later by various other ingredients, such as the *Le sacre du printemps*-like ostinato figure at fig. 11 ('Gigues' came first), closely followed by a sensual

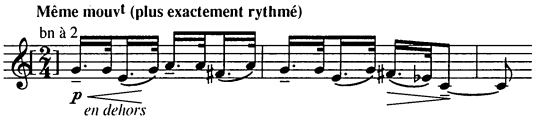
Example 12.9(**a**) 'Gigues' 'slow music' (bars 3–9)



(**b**) 'Gigues' '*moderato* music' (bars 21–4)



(**c**) 'Gigues' 'fast music' (bars 43–4)



flute theme that is extensively developed and forms the basis of the main climax.

As 'Gigues' is a moderately paced movement, unified in tempo (though subject to various speedings up and slowings down), one might not expect from it such a diverse temporal experience as it invariably yields. The sensation is of listening to a combination of slow, moderate and fast music – a superimposition of three movement characters in one (Example 12.9). The polyrhythmic character is omnipresent, and can be categorised into the three elements of (a) the hypermetric unit, (b) the 6/8 duple division of the bar, and (c) the nervous 4/8 motives. They overlap, fade in and out, play together, and in the closing pages their coalescence dims in favour of the two-bar hypermetric unit with which the piece began. The climax at around fig. 18 (bar 182) has the voluptuous flute melody outlining the duple division of the bar superimposed on 4/8 material; like so many of Debussy's climaxes, the apex or structural downbeat is short-lived and collapses into a *Jeux*-like chromatic descent for piccolo, flute and solo violin, which reinstates movement founded on the hypermetric unit – an abrupt reduction in activity.

'Gigues' is a study in rhythm, Debussy's *Pacific 231*, but infinitely more subtle and variegated than Honegger's metrical *tour de force*.

Etude No. 3, 'Pour les quartes'

In his highly detailed doctoral investigation of four of the piano *Etudes*, Aysegul Durakoglu posits these general points about rhythm in Debussy: Debussy's piano music makes extensive use of 'contrapuntal lines [in the]

stratification of piano sound in layers. . . . At the source of his conception lies Debussy's treatment of rhythm in each line.'[38] He argues that Debussy took much from the past, including the use of

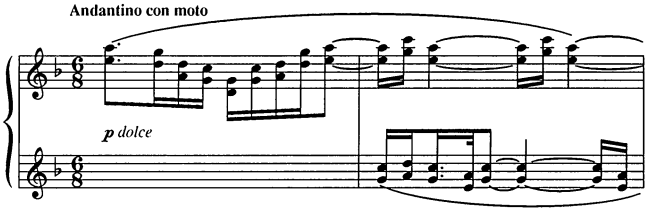
> rhythmic modes deriving from . . . ancient Greek theory; the repetition of the rhythmic patterns in different lines reflecting . . . isorhythmic technique in Renaissance polyphony; the idea of arabesque and ornament lying at the essence of all art according to Debussy, and the use of ties over bar lines giving a sense of measureless time [such as] one can find in the long melodies of . . . Gregorian Chant.[39]

Durakoglu describes the sense of 'freedom and flexibility' encountered in 'Pour les quartes' and notes the collage-like effect created by 'abrupt changes in the regular flow of music'.[40] These are characteristic features of Debussy's late music and suggest that he was moving ever closer to modernist constructions of musical structure. The sheer diversity and range of metrical arrangement is illustrated by Durakoglu's list of rhythmic patterns in the piece: their rhythmic modes encompass the trochaic, dactylic, iambic, anapaestic, tribraic and amphibraic, a list that does justice to the flexibility of the music, but not to Durakoglu's view that Debussy used ancient Greek modes in a systematic way redolent, for instance, of the isorhythmic motet.[41]

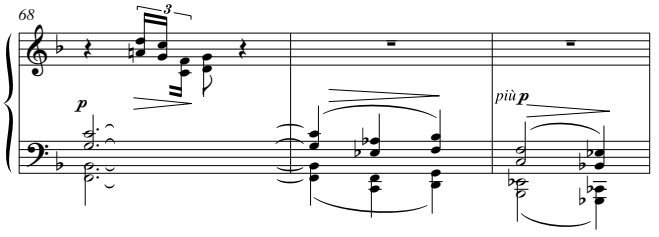
Debussy makes little attempt at the start of 'Pourles Quartes' to establish regularity of pulse or metre (Example 12.10a).[42] If account is taken of the contrapuntal interlocking of the organum-like lines traced by the left and right hands, the six beats of the metre have been accounted for by the end of bar 2, but only via a multiplicity of accentual patterns. Moreover, the need for confirmation through repetition upon which rhythmic theory is often founded is denied us, for the flowing lines manifest constant renewal and change prior to the regularisation of accent and, as the *stretto* indicates, change of pace in bar 7, which is also short-lived. Ties and a reduction of contrapuntal activity in bars 4–6 weaken what little definition there has yet been of the 6/8 metre, and with it the harmony loses its token F major focus in favour of chromatic collections in bars 6 and 7. A 3/4 metre is more effectively asserted, as indicated above, in bars 7–11, but abrupt changes of pattern and pace deny us confirmation, and the music returns to a hesitant espousal of 6/8 in bars 13–19. The extremely assertive F major cadence in bars 18–19 is surprising in context, sounding somewhat gratuitous, or at the very least premature in a harmonic and rhythmic sense.

In this opening section Debussy fully explores the potential of withholding temporal certainties from us, and the assertion of this strategy in the premature cadence drives the point home. Elements of this section invade the next, which reinforces Durakoglu's use of the term 'collage'. However,

Example 12.10(a) *Etude* 'Pour les quartes' (bars 1–2)



(**b**) *Etude* 'Pour les quartes' (bars 68–70)



the temporal character of the music is slowly mutating, for in bars 29ff. a diatonic genus is predominant and with it comes growing metrical regularity, especially with the downbeat C struck in bar 30 (the downbeat having been withheld in the previous bar). Repetition and regularity also clarify the hypermetric structure: the reiteration of the 3/4 stretto bars (10–12) in the new section (bars 37–42) changes their character entirely, making them a point of rhythmic release rather than tension-building.

The *Etude* falls into four sections, the third of which begins in bar 43 followed by a change of key signature to A major in bar 46 (the triadic connotations of this are not present). Rhythmicised motives, repeated, begin a passage of escalation, which changes the rhythmic character of the piece from localised effect to broad upbeat–downbeat patterning. From bar 53 the pulse is dramatically foregrounded with a striking bass figure on D♭–A♭ which survives in a regular, metrical form for three bars minus a beat. Its new form in bar 56 is potentially destabilising, for it shifts the accent away from the beginning of the bar to beat 2, but regular rhythmic patterning in the right hand continues in bars 56–7. After one bar both left- and right-hand patterns are resumed (in bar 59), but the accent has shifted to beat 2 in the right hand, beat 3 in the left, which reflects the increasing urgency of the music (the rhythmic sequence implied here matches the melodic one). This climactic section is almost strident in its rhythmic character, but it is not an isolated phenomenon of the sort that would encourage avant-gardists of the 1950s to squirrel this *Etude* away as a clairvoyant essay in moment form: great metrical clarity was imminent in section 2, and in the final section

(the fourth) a chorale-like simplification of texture and music gesture sings confidently of the newly won triple metre (see Example 12.10b). The incorporation of material from earlier sections (reprise is too strong a word) confirms the synthetic workings of this music and the rejection of the inherently unstable 6/8 metre with which the work began. There is, in short, a sturdy underpinning of rhythmic process here.

It seems that as our understanding of Debussy's tonal language takes a leap forward through the realisation that alternate approaches to the old organicist one are the order of the day, rhythm must surely take its place as a vital element in the Debussyan analytical cosmos. It is an area rich in potential and yet scantily explored so far. Moreover, Debussy himself gave us clues as to the importance of time in his music, not least in his careful proportioning of so many works.