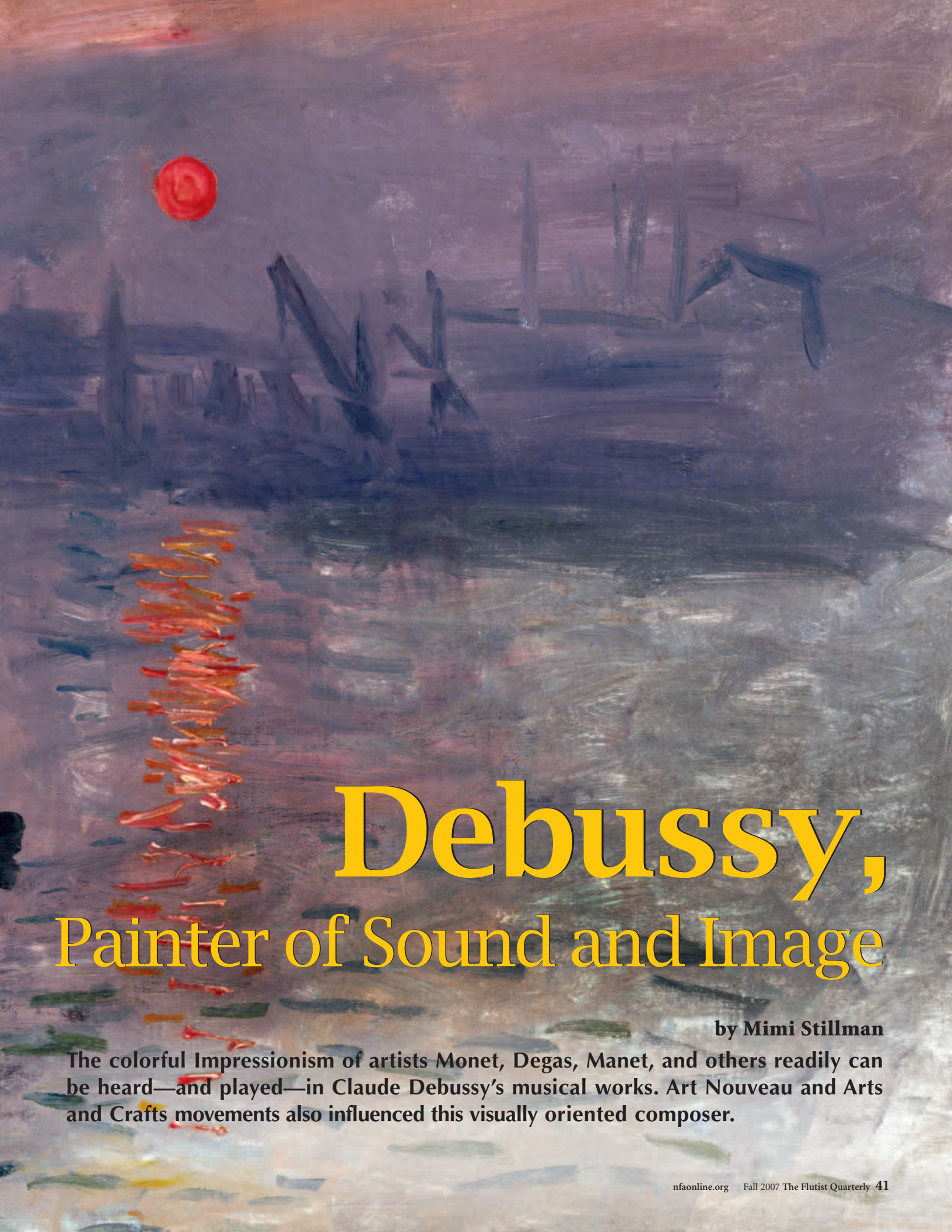


Debussy, Painter of Sound and Image

by Mimi Stillman

The colorful Impressionism of artists Monet, Degas, Manet, and others readily can be heard—and played—in Claude Debussy's musical works. Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts movements also influenced this visually oriented composer.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) wrote some of the most beautiful and evocative flute music ever written—"Syrinx" for solo flute, the Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp, and the prominent flute solos of *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* are iconic staples of our repertoire. Considering additionally the flute parts of the orchestral *La mer, Nocturnes,* and *Images*, the opera *Pelléas et Melisande*, and the ballets *Jeux* and *Khamma*, it is clear that Debussy gave the flute a significant role throughout his corpus. Several elements that recur throughout his flute writing show the influences of artistic styles such as Impressionism and Art Nouveau and literary styles and themes such as the symbolist emphasis on color and dreams. Analyzing Debussy's flute writing in its artistic context provides valuable insight for us as interpreters.

Mimi Stillman

Debussy, who wrote "J'aime les images presque autant que la musique" ("I love images almost as much as music") was an extremely visually oriented composer.[1] His own writings and the recollections of those who knew him attest to the close linkage of music with visual art in the composer's creative mind. *La Mer, Images, Estampes*, and the piano *Préludes* are just a few of his numerous pieces inspired by visual images, and the parallels between his music and Impressionist art have been frequently studied.[2] Among the artists and styles he is known to have admired are Manet, Degas, Monet, Turner, Rodin, his friend Camille Claudel, the English Pre-Raphaelites, and Japanese prints.[3] Less known but equally important is the composer's fascination with Art Nouveau, a movement that flourished in Europe between 1880 and 1900.

The Ornamental Line of Art Nouveau

In the late 1880s, Debussy embraced the Art Nouveau style that was in vogue at the time.[4] It grew out of Impressionism and was connected to the English pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts movement. Art Nouveau artists thought of utilitarian objects, furnishings, and tools as works of art, and developed a highly decorative, intricate style of representing figures and nature. They focused on the line, especially in the winding curlicues of vines, flowers, and women's hair.[5] Debussy's cantata *La Damoiselle élue* (1887–88), based on the text by British poet and pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, reveals the influence of the Art Nouveau movement in its cover illustration by Debussy's friend Maurice Denis (image on page 45).[6] In the illustration, the winding curves of the woman's hair are characteristic of this highly stylized and symbolic art form. Lines moving upward represented positive emotions such as happiness and hope, and downward lines conveyed sadness and emotional decline.[7]

The Art Nouveau concept of the ornamental line, the "arabesque," which originally referred to a motif in Arabic art, is connected to a central theme in Debussy's musical thought. The composer considered the musical arabesque to be an ornamented line, curving "naturally" or in accordance with "nature," just as the Art Nouveau artists celebrated the shapes in nature.[8] The arabesque appealed to his admiration for natural instinct over academic rules. He composed two *Arabesques* for piano in 1888–89, the year before he heard Asian music for the first time. He wrote about the arabesque in baroque music: "that was the age of the 'wonderful arabesque,' when music was subject to the laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself."[9] The musical evocation of nature was one of Debussy's ultimate goals in music, and he expressed his conviction that "composers alone have the privilege of capturing all of the poetry of the night and day, of the earth and of the sky, to reconstitute their atmosphere and to give rhythm to the immense palpitation of nature."[10]

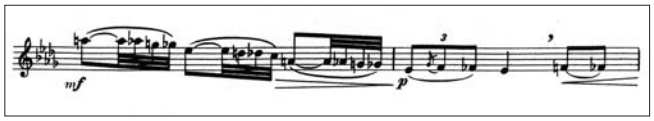
Debussy found the "wonderful arabesque" especially in the intricate, curving contrapuntal lines ("harmony formed out of melodies") in Bach and in the Palestrina and Orlando de Lassus masses he heard in Rome as a young Prix de Rome winner and later at the church of Saint-Gervais in Paris.[11] The Javanese music that Debussy heard at the 1889 Exposition Universelle appealed to his preexisting concept of the arabesque because of its ornamented lines. The native musicians, who had never attended a conservatory, formed their curving, arabesque-like melodies "instinctively" and "naturally."[12]

Debussy frequently wrote arabesque-like lines for the flute. For example, in "Syrinx," winding runs give the piece a sense of spontaneity. Debussy wrote it in 1913 as incidental music for his friend Gabriel Mourey's play, *Psyché*, in which the music was to represent the last melodies Pan played on his flute before his death.[13] In the opening motif, the repetition and 32nd notes gracing the principal tones lend an air of tentative improvisation. As the music develops, Debussy's runs cover a growing range. In example 1, the flute line cascades downward in chromatically patterned 32nd notes. The descending line and decrescendo from *mf* to the *p* in the next measure is in keeping with the

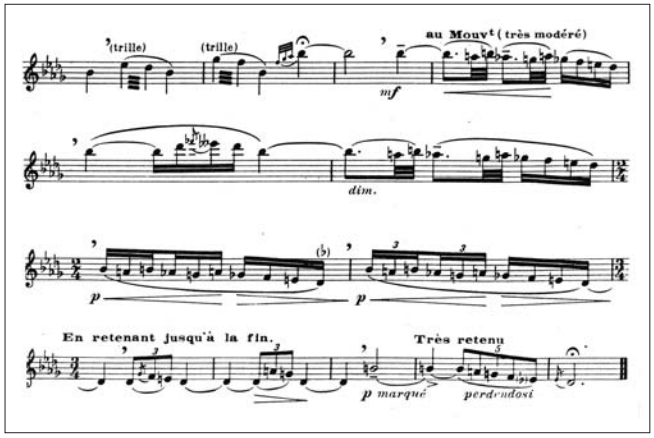
PREVIOUS PAGES: IMPRESSION: SUNRISE, LE HAVRE, 1872 (OIL ON CANVAS), MONET, CLAUDE (1840–1926) / GIRAUDON, MUSEE MARMOTTAN, PARIS, FRANCE / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY; ABOVE: IRA PEPPERCORN

Art Nouveau practice of connecting falling lines with emotional decline and diminishing of energy.

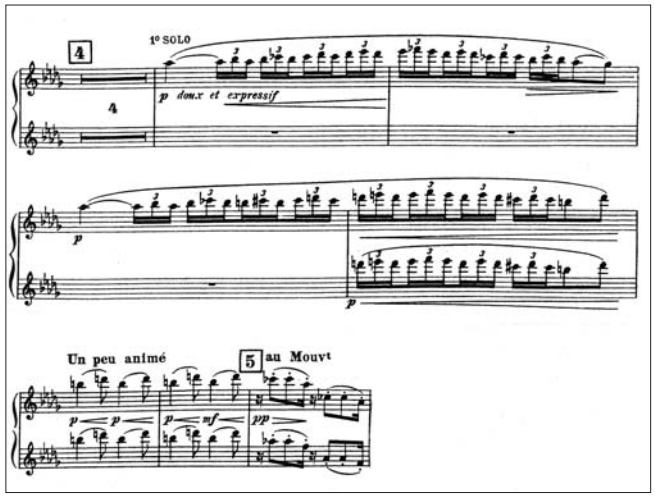
Ex. 1



After the climax (see example 2), Debussy takes the flute line progressively lower until the end of the piece, using the winding arabesque of the opening theme. With the hushed *p* dynamic and *perdendosi* marked on the descending whole-tone scale, Debussy has the flute virtually fade away into the atmosphere.

Ex. 2

Several passages from *La mer* also evoke the Art Nouveau arabesque, notably the flute solos after measure 4 in the first movement (example 3), De l'aube a midi sur la mer (From Dawn to Noon on the Sea). Debussy's use of conjunct motion provides gentle oscillations within the arching flute line. The lines rise, then fall, both in range and in dynamic, revealing how Debussy's flute writing is linked to an Art Nouveau ideal.

Ex. 3



In contrast with "Syrinx," where the composer injected a variety of intervals to give his scales an exotic "otherness" for his musical portrayal of an ancient Greek theme, these solos from *La mer* keep to stepwise motion, connoting smoothness and sunlight dappling the waves.

Impressionism's Colors

While the arabesque element in Debussy's flute writing can be linked to the Art Nouveau style, other elements in his music for the instrument are closely related to Impressionist art, especially his musical treatment of color. Impressionism grew out of the rejection of established styles by an innovative circle of French artists including Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, and Berthe Morisot.[14] Inspired by their colleague Edouard Manet, the English painter J.M.W. Turner, Japanese prints, and other influences, these artists rebelled against the highly formalized academic styles of the official Salon exhibitions sponsored by the French government. Originally rejected by the Salon, they exhibited at the Salon des Refusés sanctioned by Emperor Napoleon III, then at the Impressionist exhibitions starting in 1874. Their major innovations included painting out of doors *en plein air* rather than in the studio; relying on the senses rather than tradition; new techniques including the pointillism of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac or those derived from photography by Edgar Degas and others; and a realist interest in nature, as in Monet's efforts to capture the different effects of light in his water lilies, haystacks, and other series of paintings. The term "impressionist" was first used pejoratively in a review of Monet's 1872 painting "Impression: sunrise" (opening image). The name stuck and was adopted by the painters themselves. Monet's fascination with light and color in this painting is characteristic of Impressionism. His thick, disjointed brushstrokes convey the essence of forms, ocean, and light rather than their distinct features.

What the Impressionists did in art, Debussy did in music. He turned away from the established style of composition, overturning tradition and creating his own individual style, which would influence generations of composers. Though he was trained at the Paris Conservatory in the academic style, Debussy rejected aspects of common practice harmony and musical structures and forms he deemed rigid in favor of music that emphasized color, texture, and counterpoint. He explored new vistas of aural color, unlocking every instrument's unique timbre and creating new combinations of sound through his orchestration.

Fin-de-siècle artists and commentators linked music synesthetically with the visual arts, describing music in visual terms and images in terms of sound. Paul Gaugin wrote that "color…is vibration just as music is."[15] Charles Baudelaire pointed out that "the art of the colorist is evidently in some respects related to mathematics and music."[16] Renoir was probably the first to apply the term Impressionism to music in speaking to Richard Wagner in 1882.[17] Wagner, whose operas were immensely popular in late 19th-century France and were a formative influence on

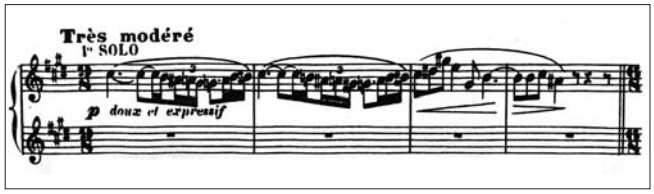
Debussy, had articulated the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an art form encompassing music, drama, poetry, and dance. The Russian composer Alexander Scriabin's compositions, including *Poem of Fire* and *Poem of Ecstasy* and his use of the color organ, which projected colored lights as it played, are vivid examples of the synesthetic commingling of art forms.

Debussy's music was often compared to visual art, and in particular the Impressionist style. The program note writer at the 1905 premiere of *La Mer* connected the composer's orchestration with painting a "palette of sounds…by skilful brushstrokes designed to convey in gradations of rare and brilliant colours the play of light and shade and the *chiaroscuro* of the ever-changing seascape."[18] The critic and writer Camille Mauclair, who wrote one of the earliest books on Impressionism, compared Debussy to the Impressionists: "The landscapes of Claude Monet are in fact symphonies of luminous waves…and the music of Monsieur Debussy, based not on a succession of themes but on the relative values of sounds in themselves, bears a remarkable resemblance to these pictures. It is Impressionism consisting of sonorous patches."[19] Debussy himself declared that "Music has this over painting … it can bring together all manner of variations of colour and light—a point not often observed though it is quite obvious."[20] Acknowledging his friend the critic Emile Vuillermoz's comparison of him to Monet, Debussy wrote, "you do me a great honour by calling me a pupil of Claude Monet."[21]

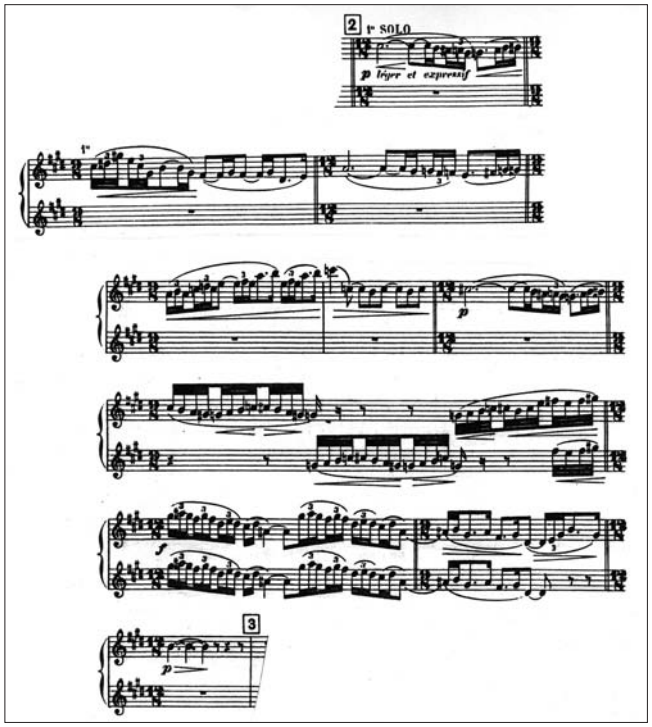
Performing Debussy's Tone Colors

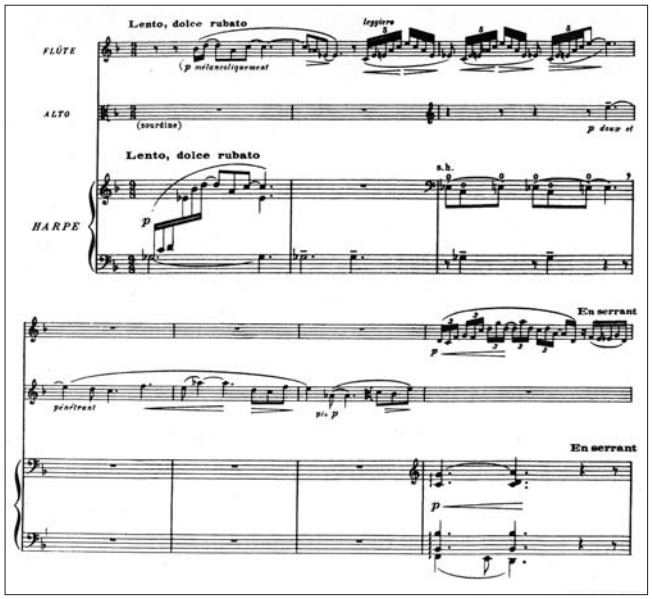
Debussy's music affords us, as flutists, the opportunity to employ a wide range of tone colors, and perhaps no music exemplifies this more strikingly than the solo flute opening of *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune*. A whole orchestra sits silently onstage while Debussy, with a single flute, breaks centuries of tradition in just over three measures. The tritone outlined by the C-sharp–G compass of the passage is harmonically nebulous; a tonal center of E Major is only hinted at in the third measure (example 4). Marking the passage *p* and *doux et expressif*, Debussy uses the haunting timbre of the flute's low register and veiled quality of C-sharp to convey a mood of mystery and indolence. In performance, we can focus the audience instantly in on the flute solo with a very soft but lush tone and carefully calibrated gradations of dynamics and vibrato.

Ex. 4



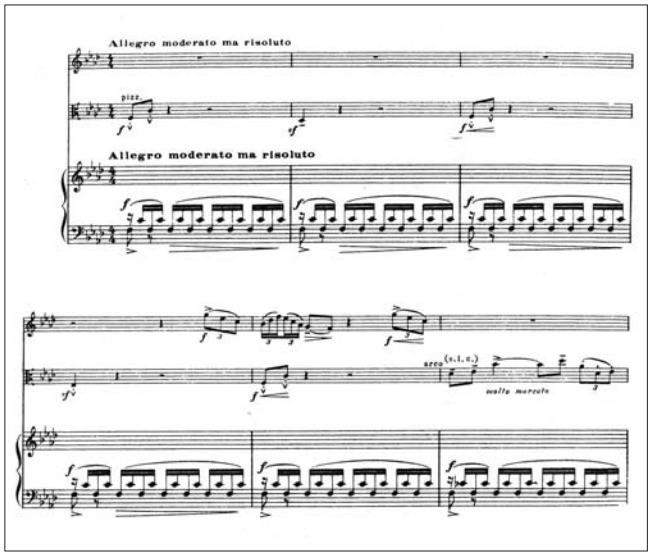
At measure 2 (example 5), the opening theme recurs with variations and orchestral activity. This time, some of the passages recall Debussy's use of the Art Nouveau arabesque, especially the way first and second flutes hand off the chromatic runs in measure 27. The many crescendos and decrescendos invite the flutist to shade the tone colors with coolness and warmth, opening up for a singing *f* at measure 28.

Example 5

Debussy's use of tone colors is especially dramatic throughout his Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp, in which he virtually melds the instruments together in seamlessly shifting combinations of sound. The first movement, Pastorale, opens with the harp playing a rising figure picked up by the flute (example 6). After the flute's arpeggiated hairpins, the viola enters in unison with the flute on an E. Here, the performers must blend timbres, dynamics, and vibrato to dovetail smoothly.

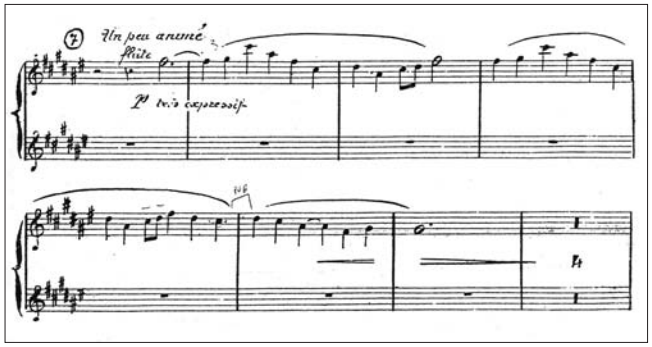
Ex. 6

Debussy creates a poignantly delicate texture with his nuanced use of the three instruments. With great economy

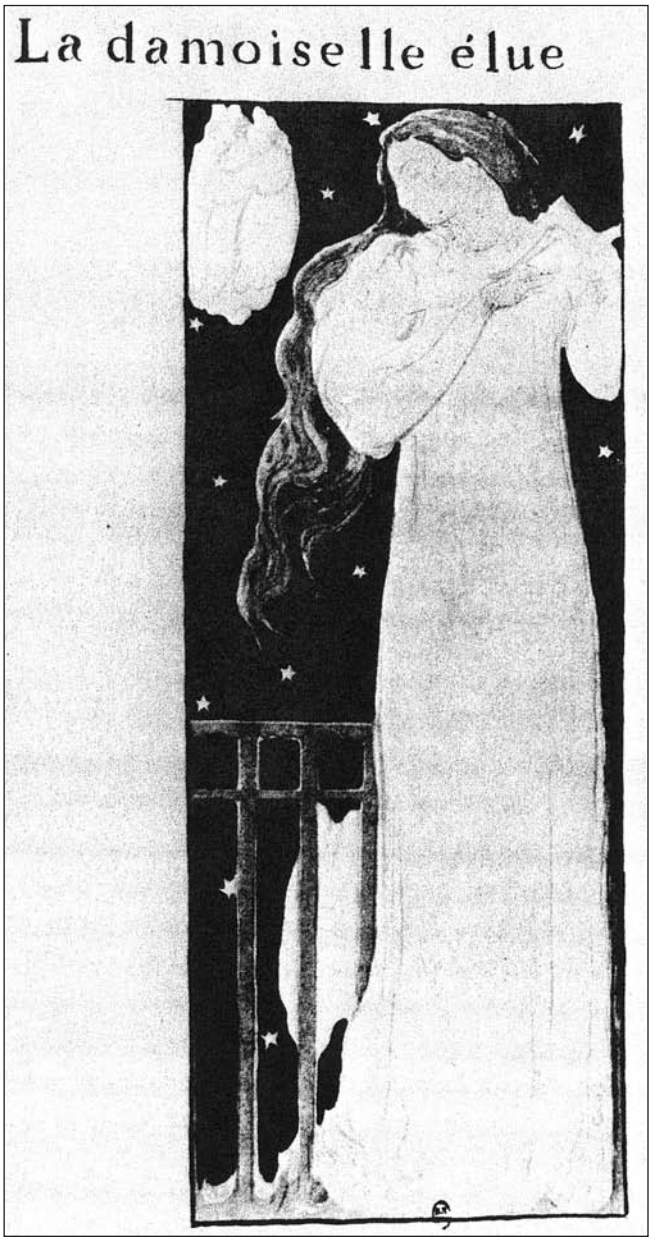
What the Impressionists did in art, Debussy did in music. He explored new vistas of aural color, creating new combinations of sound.

of means, Debussy transforms the mood for the opening of the Final to one of resolute energy and rhythmic drive (example 7). Here, the harp lays the foundation with rapid alternations of a perfect fifth, the viola interjects pointed pizzicatos, and the flute enters with an accented, rhythmically varied motif. Debussy highlights the plucked string element of both harp and viola, and brings out the percussiveness of flute articulation with his use of accents. In performance, we tongue the accent notes strongly to mimic the plucking of viola and harp.

Ex. 7

In *Nuages*, the first of his orchestral *Nocturnes*, Debussy makes dramatic use of tone colors to evoke clouds. The title resembles that of the series of "Nocturne" paintings by J.M. Whistler, another painter whom the composer admired.[22] At measure 7, the flute begins an extended solo based on a pentatonic scale (example 8). Debussy used the pentatonic and whole-tone scales throughout his works in his move away from traditional harmony, because they avoid the clear tonicization of major and minor scales. The flute, together with harp, floats above suspended strings, creating a calm, lyrical character.

Example 8





This drawing by Debussy's friend Maurice Denis illustrates principles of Art Nouveau that are reflected in Debussy's work.

Debussy's flute writing is distinctly expressive in its use of tone color, images, timbre, and arabesque-like passages in his flute writing. The compelling kinship of music and visual art in Debussy's mind encourages us to keep our eyes, as well as our ears, open when interpreting the exquisite flute music of this great master of sound and image. ❋

Mimi Stillman is a soloist and chamber musician at concert halls and festivals throughout the United States, Europe, and Mexico. Stillman teaches masterclasses at universities and flute societies, presents lecture recitals, is a published author on music and history, and is devoted to educational outreach.

At 12, Stillman was the youngest wind player ever admitted to the Curtis Institute of Music, where she received her BM studying with Julius Baker and Jeffrey Khaner. On her CD* MIMI*, she recorded her award-winning book of arrangements of Debussy's songs,* Nuits d'Étoiles: 8 Early Songs *(Presser). A PhD candidate in history at the University of Pennsylvania, she wrote her master's thesis on* Debussy: The Influence of Asian Music on Claude Debussy: A Study in Cultural Contact. *Her Web site is mimistillman.org.

Endnotes

1. Claude Debussy to Edgard Varèse, in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. 1 (London: Cassell, 1962), 113.
2. Jean-Michel Nectoux, "Portrait of the Artist as Roderick Usher," in *Debussy Studies*, ed. Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 108-38; Nectoux, *Harmonie en bleu et or: Debussy, la musique et les arts* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).
3. Debussy to Jacques Durand, March 1908, in *Debussy Letters*, ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 188; Madame Gérard de Romilly, "Debussy professeur," in *Cahiers Debussy* (Geneva: Minkoff, 1978), New Series 2, 3-10; Recollections of Dolly Bardac, Robert Godet, Jacques Durand, and Ricardo Viñes in *Debussy Remembered*, ed. Roger Nichols (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1992); Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. 1, 183.
4. Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. 1, 118-21; *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
5. Roberta Waddell, ed., *The Art Nouveau Style* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), ix-x.
6. Nectoux, *Harmonie en bleu et or: Debussy, la musique et les arts*, 78-87; Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1996), 50-51.
7. For the connection between Debussy's melodic writing and Art Nouveau, see Julie McQuinn, "Exploring the Erotic in Debussy's Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, 134; Caroline Potter, "Debussy and Nature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, 145; Boyd Pomeroy, "Debussy's Tonality: A Formal Perspective" in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, 158-61.
8. Debussy, "Du goût," *S.I.M.* (1913), in *Debussy on Music*, ed. François Lesure and Richard Langham Smith (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 278-79.
9. Debussy, in *Musica*, October 1902, in *Debussy on Music*, ed. François Lesure and Richard Langham Smith (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 84.
10. Review for the *S.I.M.*, November 1913.
11. Debussy to Eugène Vasnier, November 24, 1885, in *Debussy Letters*, 14; Debussy to André Poniatowski, February 1893, *Debussy Letters,* 40-42.
12. For Debussy's relationship with nature, see Caroline Potter, "Debussy and Nature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, 137-51; for more on Debussy and Asian music, see my master's thesis, *The Influence of Asian Music on Claude Debussy: A Study in Cultural Contact* (University of Pennsylvania, 2003).
13. Anders Ljungar-Chapelon, Preface to "Syrinx" (Sweden: Autographus Musicus, 1991), 3.
14. For more on Impressionism, see Grace Seiberling, "Impressionism," *Grove Art Online*, Oxford University Press, 4-28-2007, http://www.groveart.com.
15. Paul Gaugin to André Fonteinas, March 1899, in Linda Nochlin, *Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, 1874-1904* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1966), 178.
16. Quoted in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. 2 (London: Cassell, 1965), 17.
17. Ibid., 19; Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, vol. 1, 92n.
18. Ibid., 16.
19. Quoted in Lockspeiser, vol. 2, 18.
20. Ibid., 16.
21. Debussy to Emile Vuillermoz, January 1916, *Debussy Letters*, 313.
22. Jane Bathori in *Debussy Remembered*, 180; Dolly Bardac in *Debussy Remembered*, 199; Nectoux, *Harmonie en bleu et or: Debussy, la musique et les arts*, 104-11; Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 139-41.

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