

Touching Debussy, Teaching Alchemy

By Catherine Kautsky



“Sound is touch at a distance.”

I heard this quote at a recent talk given by Radio Lab creator, Jad Abumrad, and I couldn't get it out of my mind. Over and over it repeated itself. Mothers sing to babies after they put them down as a way of continuing physical contact, Jad told us. So, is that why music feels so primordial? And is that why we talk so much about a performer's “touch” at the piano? Or music “touching” us?

Then came the thought: If all sound is touch at a distance, then Debussy is touch close by. I know of no other music that *feels* so good in the fingers or vibrates so sympathetically in the air.

And finally: Aha! That must be why I find this music so particularly rewarding to teach. The students and I are touching each other with sound. And, if the piano is an extension of our own bodies, albeit a large and clumsy one, then as we play Debussy we *feel* good in every sense of the word. These students are fairly dancing on the keyboard, at one physically with their bellicose instrument and making *shapes*, both musical and physical, that satisfy them. Might that be why college auditionees tend to play Debussy better than anything else on their audition programs? With Bach and Beethoven, they stiff-

en; with Debussy, they melt.

They relax, they dance,
and their souls shine

through.

But wait a minute. How paradoxical is this that an icon of the 20th century, a man who revolutionized harmony and dispensed with two centuries of tonal writing, should prove more accessible than musical giants whose harmonic language we've imbibed since infancy?

So many mysteries. Music full of dissonances that feels like easy listening. Myriad instructions that impart increased freedom to the performer. Amorphous content that comes with the most specific of names. Traditional sympathies that simultaneously flirt with the illicit.

Could it be precisely those ambiguities that so attract? Might our students be most comfortable in these murky waters, where one need only formulate questions and provide no definitive answers? Might they enjoy a world without clear delineations, a dream world that exonerates them from strict laws? Perhaps they enjoy cavorting in the hidden shadows, amidst Debussy's kindly apparitions rather than in the sunlight of Bach's complexity or Beethoven's irrefutable logic?



I think the answers are all “yes.” But having established this music’s fundamental appeal, now let’s look more closely at teaching Debussy. How and why does such subtle work successfully transfer into the heads and hearts of inexperienced students?

It can’t hurt that much of this literature isn’t enormously technically demanding: non-virtuosos can still be Debussy *aficionados*. And pianists of all ages with small hands will find themselves comfortable in almost all of Debussy’s piano music. (An interesting exception to this, for my own hand, is *Soirée dans Grenade*, where the spacing of the large chords forces me reluctantly to leave notes out.) Jane McGrath’s article in this same issue gives suggestions on appropriate repertoire for younger students, but I’ll reiterate just a few ideas, while still pointing out their treacherous moments. The *Arabesque No. 1* is an old favorite, but its insistence on 2s against 3s makes it rhythmically challenging. *La fille aux cheveux de lin* rewards with its lovely melody; but the six flats are daunting, and fingering is tricky. Both *Golliwogg’s cakewalk* and *Le petit nègre* are perennially popular, with their irresistible *joie de vivre* and syncopated rhythms, but their origins in the entrenched racism of minstrel shows entail discussion, if not avoidance.

Assuming one conquers assembled hurdles here and elsewhere, the fun begins. For this is story music and it even arrives replete with illustrations. If a student doesn’t respond to “mere” sound, her emotions may get triggered by the image of Peter Pan, a pagoda, or a Spanish dancer. Or perhaps she will relate to the story of a wayward prince (see *Ce qu’a vu le vent de l’Ouest* with its source in Hans Christian Andersen’s “Garden of Paradise”), a buried cathedral (*La Cathédrale engloutie* taken from the Breton legend of Ys), or a wayward mermaid (*Ondine* from La Motte Fouqué’s *Undine*.)

The vast majority of these stories take place in far-off lands and, with the notable exceptions of an angry west wind and sizzling fireworks, this music is rarely aggressive. In fact, on the contrary, it specializes in understatement, and it is the exceptional piece that hazards a brash demeanor. There’s little anger or strident assertion here, and a student’s relationship to the piano changes: she can embrace rather than assault, caress rather than strike. This music provides a gentle moment in a performance art that regularly speaks of one’s “attack” at the instrument.

Which brings us back to touch and the feel of Debussy. *Doucement* is a comforting directive. Students who pound their way through Beethoven sonatas and Chopin etudes, over-reacting to the high-voltage energy of those compositions, are set free to calmly enjoy Debussy’s preference for soft dynamics and slower tempos. Not only do they have the time and space to coax beautiful sounds from

their instrument, but they learn that dynamic gradations don’t end at *piano*—a whole subterranean world exists that encourages them to listen more and more closely.

And that’s just the start of the touch phenomenon. The choreography of this music is amazing. First off, it demands “handing” more than “fingering.” One can grab handfuls of notes all at once rather than being troubled with all those individual note-heads, and that feels and sounds great (Excerpt 1).

The sheer movements of the hands are like a dancer on the keyboard—not for nothing did Debussy write *Arabesques*. The arabesque as dance position, as sought-after curve in the visual arts, and as circular direction in the music itself, all match up to bring art, music, and performer into joint orbit. The hands cross gracefully. They spread to span the keyboard. One hand perches on top of the other as Debussy juxtaposes black keys against white (Excerpt 2).

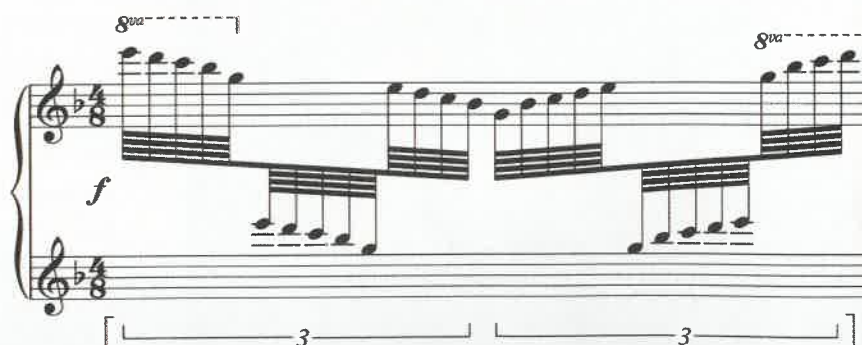
Throughout, there is leisure and elegance. Small wonder that Debussy was appalled by the Germans and touted his “unshakeable conclusion...that Beethoven wrote really rather

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badly for the piano.”²¹ Beethoven’s tolerance for the harsh and the awkward must have mortally offended the refined Debussy, with the value he placed on an unmitigated surface beauty. I picture Debussy writing in silk and velvet while Beethoven was a genius peasant in burlap!

Not for nothing do I mention fabrics. The intersections of sight, touch, smell, and sound, so beautifully expressed in Baudelaire’s

Excerpt 1: *Feux d’artifice* from *Préludes*, Book 2, m. 25. Note the convenient handfuls of notes here as well as the hand crossings.



poem “Correspondences” and echoed in Debussy’s title *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir*, taken from another Baudelaire poem, are a telling reminder of Debussy’s attraction to synesthesia, the idea that senses swirl together, unimpeded by separate labels. They are thus free to echo the mysterious blending of emotions, harmonies, and sensations that characterizes Debussy’s work. If, indeed, as Debussy proudly intoned, “Art is the most beautiful deception of all,”²² then why trouble oneself with categories that only serve to impose logic on an illogical universe? And if the senses can blend, perhaps other physical “laws” can bend as well. Need

time always move forward? Need one reside in only one space at a time? Debussy’s sense of both time and space are reflected in his layering techniques, manifested so often by the use of three staves when two might easily have sufficed (Excerpt 3).

The layers in *Voiles* or *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir* seem to emerge from different chambers, and high and low registers take on spatial as well as sonic distance (Excerpt 4).

Once different spatial worlds coexist, neither interacting nor colliding, so can different perceptions of time. Time no longer marches as a unit inexorably toward a goal; it can move simul-

taneously at different rates, it can be waylaid, it can even—as in *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*—come to a standstill. It is now malleable—as plastic as the feel in one’s hands or the flexible shape of an arabesque, as diffuse as sound echoes from different spheres.

By now, you may be wondering how one can possibly hope to teach time and space travel or mind-altering perception—or even why one would wish to do so. Letting sci-fi peek into the august walls of the practice

Excerpt 2: *Brouillards* from *Préludes*, Book 2, m. 1. Note the LH on the white keys, while the RH sits above on the blacks.

Modéré
extrêmement égal et léger
la m.g. un peu en valeur sur la m.d

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Excerpt 3: *Canope* from *Préludes*, Book 2, m. 18.
Note the three staves.

Excerpt 4: *Voiles* from *Préludes*, Book 1, mm. 10-11. Note the three very independent layers.

room might be reason enough, but, more compellingly, this is the beginning of a revolution in Western music. Stravinsky changes meters every bar and gives syncopation a new lease on life with *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1913. Ives introduces a random flute into a solo piano work with the *Concord Sonata* in 1915. Schoenberg defies tonality with his “jumping spots” in *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11, No. 3, in 1909. Debussy is equally radical, but he achieves his revolution with a typical French decorum, cloaking his innovations in pleasure and sensuality, not affront or shock. He eschews the wild abandon of Stravinsky, the brazen juxtapositions of Ives, the brutal contortions of Schoenberg, leading us gently across frontiers we don’t even know we’ve crossed. Try identifying a key in *Canope* or a consistent meter in *Feuilles mortes*. And notice the warring juxtapositions, vertical and horizontal, harmonic and emotional, in *Pour les arpèges*—

es composés. All this in defiance of laws which had governed the musical universe for centuries (Excerpt 5).

What an opportunity to contrast the old and new, to introduce students to whole tone and pentatonic scales, novel forms, and rhythmic innovation (Excerpt 6).

What a chance to look at triads in new ways (Excerpt 7) to explain that tonality, function, and triads are not synonymous, and to see that one can be in two keys at once. What a soothing introduction to dissonance.

And if the leap is made and the 20th century befriended, then one can begin to explore seriously the technical and musical challenges posed by Debussy. First and foremost, the pedal. What young pianist doesn’t enjoy the luxury of creating a smear here and there? That’s an understatement; the pedal has an inexplicable allure which seems to extend far beyond its sonic potential. Students like the feel of it—it provides a chance for another part of their body to engage with the body of that giant beast we’re all trying to tame. And, what I neglected to say about all those auditionees thriving on Debussy is that the pedal is their best buddy. In fact, they’re on much too close a “footing.” As an antidote, I recommend fractional pedals and detailed advice on the very easy art of foot-quivering—as well as the far less easy art of letting the ear boss the foot around. Debussy did write an occasional pedal indication (see the end of *Voiles*), but, just as he was loathe to provide fingerings or metronome markings, he didn’t wish to dictate the use of pedal. As quoted by Maurice Dumesnil, he

Excerpt 5: *Pour les arpèges composés* from *Études*, mm. 28-33.
Note the unexpected juxtapositions.

Excerpt 6: *Cloches à travers les feuilles* from *Images*, Book 2, m. 3. Note the three layers of whole-tone scales.



said “pedaling cannot be written down: it varies from one instrument to another, from one room or one hall, to another. . . . Trust your ear.” The ear needs to learn to voice down non-harmonic tones, to exercise particular discretion in lower registers and in stepwise passages, and to employ half-pedals and flutter-pedals as a first line of defense. When Debussy writes a long, held bass note, as he does, for instance, in the first movement of *Pour le piano* (Excerpt 8), he is giving a pedal indication, but not permission to “floor it.” After exhausting the possibilities of half pedals and half changes as well as redistribution between the hands, one can move on to the possibility of using the *sostenuto* pedal—probably a student’s first introduction to the mysterious middle pedal. We know that Debussy himself didn’t have this pedal on his own instrument, but he had certainly encountered it on other instruments of the day. Approach with caution, however, for it’s a temperamental contraption. I use the *una corda* with far more abandon; Debussy rarely indicates its use, but any composer who lives in a

Excerpt 8: *Prélude* from *Pour le piano*, mm. 6-15. Note the long A in the bass, an implicit pedal indication.



Excerpt 7: “General Lavine”—eccentric— from *Préludes*, Book 2, mm. 1-2. Note the succession of unrelated triads.



world of *pianissimo* and *pianississimo* and dreams of a “piano without hammers” would surely be on good terms with the “soft” pedal when used with discretion.

With or without the *una corda*, I find that my students not only never play softly enough, but don’t even know they should want to play softly enough. They haven’t yet figured out that a whisper is far more wondrous than a yell. They need to learn that they will both communicate more and hear more themselves if they play softly and coax the instrument to yield to



their desires, rather than bludgeoning it into a display of its innate percussive nature. Musical playing exists in inverse relationship to decibel level; we hear better when we aren't accosted by loud noise, and even for very loud music, I make my students practice

softly and slowly. With Debussy, soft and slow is a permanent state rather than a phase one passes through.

We're also more flexible when we aren't pounding. If Leon

Fleisher is right that playing the piano is

an exercise in anti-gravity, then Debussy's music is gravity's

death knoll. Flight is a favorite topic;

characters like the fairies in *Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses* are always airborne; few cadences or even strong downbeats pull them to earth (Excerpt 9).

You can see them cavorting on a tightrope in the illustration whose caption Debussy stole to entitle his prelude (Example 10).

Excerpt 9: "*Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses*" from *Préludes*, Book 2, m.1.

Rapide et léger



As is often the case, Debussy says it best: "I'm after music that is supple and concentrated enough to adapt itself to the lyrical movements of the soul and the whims of reverie." That flexibility has both physical and musical implications, and it releases students from the iron grip of the metronome and stamping feet. (Though not, I hasten to add, from correct rhythm and good taste in *rubato*.) This is the perfect place to learn that not all eighth notes are created equal, and Debussy tries to help with indications for *rubato* and shifting tempi. Students are delighted to be granted license, but it's interesting that most err first in the direction of rigidity. We've trained them too well, and now we have the task and the joy of advocating disciplined freedom (Excerpt 11).

Dance is the model for this piece and many others, and it serves to open a whole array of other issues.

For dance is often a barometer of social trends and Debussy found himself caught between the traditional dances of the monarchy—Sarabandes ("Hommage à Rameau" from *Images*, Book I), Menuets (from *Suite Bergamasque*), Waltzes (*Valse romantique*)—and the new-fangled trends represented by "unruly" blacks who imported minstrel shows, cakewalks, and ultimately jazz—*Minstrels*, *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*, *Le petit nègre*. Debussy opens himself to political commentary here,



Example 10: "*The Fairies are Exquisite Dancers*" by Arthur Rackham, from *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* by J.M. Barrie.

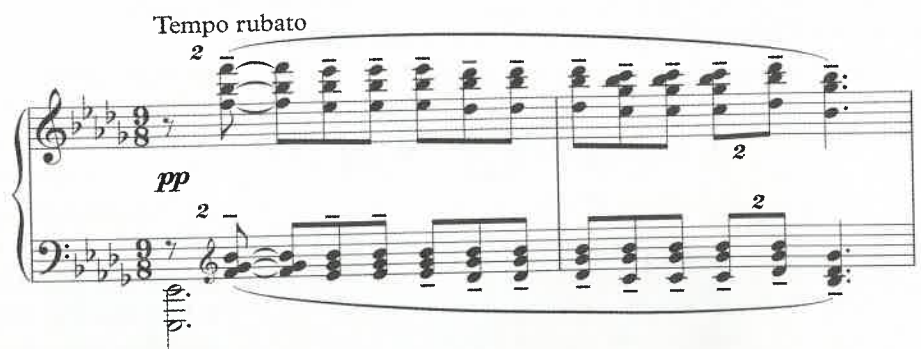
not because he himself announced political stands, but rather because his titles immerse us in the Parisian world he inhabited. The references

extend far beyond the world of dance. Not only are we introduced to the issues of race implicit in the cakewalk and

its assumed primitive origins, we also learn about the world of colonialism through works such as *Canopes* and *Danseuses de Delphes* where beautiful objects appear fresh from lands newly dominated by the French. We grapple with gender roles when we meet the woman with the flaxen hair as well as her look-alikes in *La damoiselle élue* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*. And we meet

nationalism head-on when "*La Marseillaise*" appears at the end of *Feux d'artifice* one year before the start of World War I. Just as fiction, poetry, and art may fire the imaginations of our students, so can history. Archeological digs that unearth treasure and dislocate villagers, blond women with swirling hair and blank gazes who turn out to be disenfranchised

Excerpt 11: *Clair de lune* from *Suite bergamasque*, mm. 15-16. Debussy makes it clear here that the light of the moon cannot be captured in mechanical subdivisions.



citizens, nationalistic appeals which annihilate the enemy: these are true stories that Debussy tells. They open up another way to make music real to our young charges.

Finally, throughout our perusal of Debussy's piano music we butt up against writers and artists whose sentiments are strikingly close to Debussy's. There are Verlaine and Mallarmé, for whom the sounds of words carry greater significance than the logic of a sentence; there's Proust, for whom a musical theme conveys more meaning than any spoken language; and there's Edgar Allen Poe, whose gloomy dungeons and "perverse imps" resonate with Debussy's darkest imagination. There's Redon whose symbolist paintings present the same enigmatic beauty that Debussy portrays in sound; there's Matisse, whose circular designs echo Debussy's love of arabesques. And of course, there are always the impressionists, whose label Debussy disdained, but whose art carries a continued association with this music of colors and innuendo. Baudelaire captures the French sensibility perfectly when he invokes *luxe, calme, et volupté* in his poem, "Invitation to the Voyage," and we do our students an immense favor if we invite them on a similar voyage. We can then fire their imaginations with Debussy's colors, introduce them to modernism, teach them pedal and dynamic control, instruct them in history and literature, and allow their bodies and hands to touch and be touched by this deeply sensual music.

What more could one want? ▲

¹ *Debussy Letters*. Selected and edited by François Lesure and Roger Nichols. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1987, p. 216.

November 25, 1909, Letter to Andre Caplet.

² Debussy, Claude. *Debussy on Music*. Translated and edited by Richard Langham Smith. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, p. 85.

³ *Debussy Letters*, p. 13. October 19, 1885, Letter to Eugene Vasnier.



Catherine Kautsky, Chair of Keyboard at Lawrence University, has played on five continents and is the author of *Debussy's Paris: Piano Portraits of the Belle Epoque*. Her CD of the

Debussy Preludes was said to "bring out all the power, majesty, and mystery of Debussy's conception," and a CD of the Brahms Sonatas for Piano and Violin will be released shortly. Ms. Kautsky has won the Lawrence Excellence in Teaching Award and holds a named professorship.

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