

Claude Debussy's *Pour le piano* (1901):

A Performer's Guide

by

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ABSTRACT

The music of Claude Debussy has its own language. It is challenging for performers who are not familiar with Debussy's musical style to produce the subtle tone colors or understand the proper atmosphere. There are many scholars, researchers, and pianists who have shown interest in Debussy's piano music and who provided critical comments and interpretive suggestions. However, the work *Pour le piano* has varied interpretive suggestions given the consistent presence of the work in popular piano repertoire.

This document creates a closer interpretation of Debussy's piano music, specifically the three movements of *Pour le piano*, for enthusiastic music students and professionals. The focus of this work is to guide performance and interpretive aspects. A brief introduction of Debussy's life reveals historical and contemporary influences on *Pour le Piano*. A closer look at compositional models which form the basis of *Pour le piano*, helps one recognize these compositional characteristics and correctly create a particular performance atmosphere. This analysis is followed by performance suggestions for fingerings, pedaling, how to isolate difficult passagework, and interpretive suggestions based on two recordings by Magda Tagliaferro and Caio Pagano. A more comprehensive understanding of *Pour le piano* not only leads to correct performances, but also wider proliferation and study of this piece among pianists

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Without the kind, critical comments, and editing of my document by Dr. Alexandra Birch, this document will not be neat. During my drafts and preparation, her comments and criticism pushed me to think harder and critically.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Claude Debussy composed and published *Pour le piano* in 1901. The work was premiered a year later on 11 January 1902 by Ricardo Viñes for the Société nationale de musique at the Salle Érard. It quickly entered the repertoire of several well-known pianists. *Pour le piano* consists of three movements, Prelude, Sarabande, and Toccata, modeled on historical genres of the keyboard suite from the Baroque period.

This thesis offers a guide for the performance and interpretation of *Pour le piano*. It utilizes sources in support of the score including contemporary correspondence with Debussy, published scholarship of Debussy's music, and pianists who received musical insights from Debussy himself, namely Robert Schmitz, Marguerite Long, and Maurice Dumesnil. Moreover, this work pays particular attention to the interpretations of two performers: Magda Tagliaferro, who knew Debussy; and Caio Pagano, who studied with Ms. Tagliaferro. Technical problems always arise when performers learn a piece. Because performance tips are not to be found in most studies of *Pour le piano*, this paper will recommend useful fingerings for difficult passages, discuss the use of all three pedals with examples, and examine specific technical problems in each movement all within an historical and scholarly context. The goal of this document is to offer recommendations that will be helpful in the performance and pedagogy of the work.

Listening to pianists from the past to the present play Debussy's *Pour le piano* is always fascinating. The interpretation and understanding of the work have changed over time. To understand Debussy's intentions, it is important to gather sources from the

historical background and from pianists who received musical insights directly from Debussy. The study of historical background explains how Debussy combined Baroque structural models with Romantic harmony and a uniquely French affect in *Pour le piano*. It also helps pianists to understand Debussy's characteristics and to make decisions regarding interpretation. Moreover, insights and ideas gained from recordings by Magda Tagliaferro and Caio Pagano will help pianists achieve an accurate interpretation informed by direct interaction with the composer. To supplement historical background and recordings, I offer pedaling techniques that produce different colors in various passages based on the various interpretations available and my own expertise. I also examine fingerings suggested by Magda Tagliaferro, Caio Pagano, and the editors Frederik Palme, and Hans-Martin Theopold, discussing the strengths and weakness of each example. Finally, I provide solutions for technical issues from each movement to help pianists with difficult passages.

CHAPTER II

DEBUSSY'S LIFE AND WHAT INFLUENCED HIM AROUND 1888-1901

At the end of the nineteenth century, composers including Debussy faced rapid social change parallel with a phase of experimentation and new expression in music. When Debussy was 26 years old, he paid himself for his first trip to the Bayreuth Festival in Germany. There, he attended Wagner's operas *Parsifal* and *Die Meistersinger*, and was profoundly struck by the sound and phraseology, the intensity of color, and the harmonic novelty.¹ A year after, in early August 1889, he returned to the Bayreuth Festival for *Tristan und Isolde*. Augustin Savard, a friend of Debussy at the Villa Medici in Rome, reported in 1885 that the composer was already familiar with *Tristan*, having completed a piano reduction of it.² At the end of the performance, Debussy expressed the opinion that there was too much singing and explanation of the plot.³ The French composer Ernest Guiraud received a letter in which Debussy said, "It saddens me to feel myself growing away from it [*Tristan*]."⁴ Debussy was particularly interested in the chromatic harmony and the so-called "Tristan chord," which indeed is incorporated into *Pour le piano*.

In 1889, Debussy attended the Exposition Universelle. This festival was located at the Champ de Mars, in Paris. The World's Fair combined political, economic, and cultural

¹ Stephen Walsh, *Debussy: A Painter in Sound*, first United States ed. (New York Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 37.

² Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, Fourth Edition (NY: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1963), 27.

³ Walsh, *Debussy*, 68.

⁴ François Lesure, and Roger Nichols, *Debussy Letter*, trans. by Roger Nichols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 83.

events and featured the Eiffel Tower, built for the occasion,⁵ as well as the phonograph, presented for the first time by Thomas Alva Edison.⁶ As part of the diplomatic and cultural exchange, countries presented musical events. At the Javanese village, Debussy was confronted with non-Western classical music that he had never heard before. He attended a live performance of the Javanese gamelan orchestra. The term gamelan refers to a set of instruments from Java, Bali, and Indonesia. There were many instruments such as gongs, angklungs, genders, and one melody instrument, either flute or bowed rebab.⁷ The instrumental sounds are delicate. The gong repetitively vibrated like a drone. Overall, the sound was very energetic but not violent. These are the main characteristics that Debussy absorbed from the Javanese gamelan orchestra.⁸ Robert Godet, a journalist, novelist, and musicologist, reported in 1926 that “Debussy spent extremely fruitful hours in the *kampong javanais* of the Dutch section, where he went countless times, attentive to the polyrhythmic percussion of a gamelan [ensemble]...”⁹ Debussy was highly interested in gamelan and also wrote to his close friend, Pierre Louÿs (a poet and writer), on 22 January 1895, “Remember the music of Java which contained every nuance, even the ones we no longer have [a] name for. The tonic and dominant had become empty shadows of use only to

⁵ Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 1.

⁶ Fauser, *Musical Encounters*, 7.

⁷ Walsh, *Debussy*, 66.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Fauser, *Musical Encounters*, 198.

stupid children.”¹⁰ This letter shows Debussy’s clear affinity for gamelan music. Roy Howat also states that “...after Debussy first heard gamelan in 1889, the crucial catalyst may have been his re-hearing of it in 1900, just as he was most ripe for it”.¹¹ The extensive offering of Asian arts and cultures led him to be more creative in his music. This change is evident in *Pour le piano*, especially in its weakening of tonic and dominant, the use of long pedal points, the modes that appear in the Toccata (rather than major/minor keys), and its energetic and at times sinewy, fragile, delicate sounds.

THE THREE MOVEMENTS OF *POUR LE PIANO*

Pour le piano consists of three movements: Prelude, Sarabande, and Toccata. The tempos are fast-slow-fast, in order, an arrangement associated with the solo sonata. However, Debussy borrowed the titles of the movements from the Baroque suite. The Prelude is vigorous and adventurous, with a fiery cadenza. The Sarabande is charming and elegant, in slow triple meter as is conventional for this dance type. The Toccata has a crystal-like character; it is iridescent through scales and arpeggio figures, and in the end, the powerful final chord bursts out majestically.

¹⁰ Lesure, and Nichols, *Debussy Letter*, 48.

¹¹ Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 115.

PRELUDE

A Prelude, according to Robert Armstrong, “is a piece of music in free style that precedes something else.”¹² Composers during the Baroque period used the Prelude as an introduction to prepare for another movement or section. It never stood alone as an independent work. There are many examples by various composers of dance suites that open with a Prelude followed by other movements. Examples for keyboard from J.S. Bach include the six English Suites (BWV 806-811) and the Partitas No.1 and No. 5 (BWV 825 and 829). G.F. Handel also included Preludes in his keyboard suites, such as HWV 434 in B-flat Major, HWV 428 in D Minor, HWV 437 in D minor, and HWV 430 in E Major. Jean-Philippe Rameau composed his Suite in A minor, RCT 1 for harpsichord in which the Prelude begins the suite as an introduction. Other French dance suites tended to begin with an Allemande or a titled piece. There are no examples from the French Baroque of Preludes comparable to that of *Pour le piano*.

Debussy included some traditional elements in this Prelude such as using Baroque dance forms, the use of four-part writing, and a closing cathedral organ texture. He added some pianistic elements such as a virtuosic cadenza preceded by a caesura that is followed by a pianistic dislocation placement. Finally, he used some Romantic stylistic features such as harmonic development around a major/minor key relationship and fragmented melodic cycle. All of these elements form a solid structure and provides unity to this Prelude.

On the other hand, Debussy reinterpretation of older musical technique such as the repeated augmented sixth chords influenced by Richard Wagner, a long pedal point,

¹² Robert Eric Armstrong, “An Historical Survey of the Development of the Baroque Solo Keyboard Suite in France, England, and Germany,” DMA document, West Virginia University, 2011.

dislocation placement, and the whole-tone scale that he discovered at the Exposition Universelle in 1889. These are all musical ideas that Debussy reinterpreted in his own way.

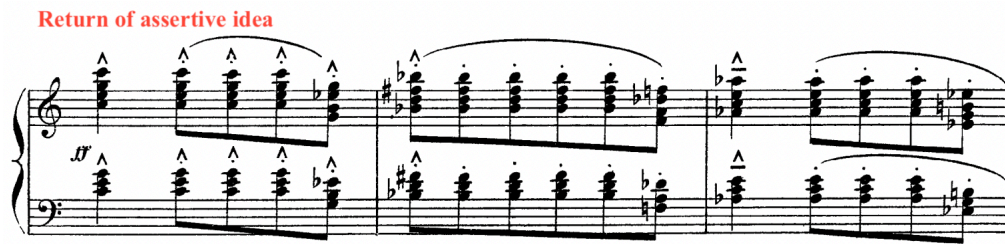
The Prelude suggests elements of sonata-form. The first section, mm. 1-58, resembles an exposition. It begins with an assertive introduction, mm. 1-5, that establishes A minor (Example 1). The main figuration of the exposition, arpeggiated chords over an A pedal, begins at m. 6. A brief interlude in mm. 24-26 connects to a restatement of mm. 6-17, creating an *aba* design in the first group. The interlude this time (mm. 39-40) becomes a transition to a return of the introduction theme from the beginning of the Prelude, now transposed to C Major and continued in big, *fortissimo* chords (Example 2). This transformed version of the opening serves as a “climax theme” to end the exposition in a fiery way.

First section **assertive introduction**
Assez animé et très rythmé

f *non legato*

dim. *p* **main figuration (arpeggiated chord)**
un peu retardé

Example 1. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 1-5.



Example 2. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 43-45.

Debussy's reinterpretation of older musical techniques (new model) employed a long pedal point. In the Classical and Romantic periods, the pedal point appeared when the music modulated to the dominant key or to a relative major/minor key, in order to maintain a chromatic mediant under a progression, or to maintain NCTs in progressions including ii⁷. The early Romantic pedal point usually sustains no longer than two to four measures. However, Debussy's use of an extended pedal creates a ringing sound, similar to the sound of the gong that he discovered at the Exposition Universelle in 1889. In gamelan, the sound is delicate and the percussion section has polyrhythmic patterns and perfect fourth and fifth intervals that move without resolving.¹³ As he explained in his letter to his aforementioned friend, Pierre Louÿs, on 22 January 1895, "Remember the music of Java which contained every nuance, even the ones we no longer have [a] name for. The tonic and dominant had become empty shadows of use only to stupid children."¹⁴ Javanese gamelan is subtle music based in a different theory system in which the Western listener cannot immediately recognize tonic and dominant. The central instrument of the gamelan, a resonant metal Gong, sustains notes over the entire ensemble, like a continuous drone sound. Debussy's

¹³ Fauser, *Musical Encounters*, 198.

¹⁴ Lesure, and Nichols, *Debussy Letter*, 48.

use of the pedal point originated from his fascination with gamelan and new sonorities in composition. In the exposition of the Prelude, he used the long pedal point for a full 18 measures (which also establishes the tonic) (Example 3).

Example 3. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 6-23.

On the other hand, the idea of the long pedal point might also come from Bach's organ music. As Roy Howat reported in his book, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*, in the mid-1890s Debussy and Ernest Le Grand would spend Sunday afternoons playing duet transcriptions by Bach.¹⁵ At the beginning of the *Prelude*, the long pedal point passage is reminiscent of Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in A Minor*, BWV 543, a piece for organ (Example 4).

¹⁵ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 156.

Example 4. Bach, Prelude and Fugue in A minor (organ), BWV 543, mm. 10-22

It could be hard to tell exactly whether Debussy used Bach's Prelude and Fugue as a model or the sustained sound from Javanese music (in particular the Gong). On one hand, Debussy possibly took the characteristic of the Gong and used it in the prelude. On the other hand, it could be possible that Debussy was inspired by J. S. Bach and brought Bach's idea into his Prelude as evidenced by his use of the pedal harmonically. I would be inclined to think that Debussy was inspired by J. S. Bach. Seeing from the movement title, the long pedal point, the four-part writing, and the organ sound at the coda would be the evidence for me to reinforce that Debussy carried on Bach's idea into his prelude.

As Paul Robert said about this Prélude, “[Debussy] reinterpreted the keyboard style of Bach”.¹⁶ This piece begins with two voices, growing to three in measure 6 and finally reaching four-part writing from measures 14 to 23 (Example 5). The four voices do not function equally in Debussy’s Prelude. As shown in Example 5, the alto has the main melody, the tenor a countermelody, the bass is a pedal point, and the soprano is the accompaniment. Moreover, Debussy avoided placing the melodic line above the accompaniment figure for pianistic and harmonic reasons. He thought that many composers wrote the melody on the top line with accompanimental figures in the bottom line. He once told Ms. Long that ‘The fifth finger of virtuosi, what a pest it is!’.¹⁷ Also, he wanted the melody and accompaniment to support each other, so that the main melody does not stand out in an obvious way. He thought that “harmony should never be sacrificed to the melodic idea. Harmony is intimately allied with melody, which is general in a kind of shaded relief.”¹⁸ This concept is demonstrated in Example 5 where the alto melody (D4) in measure 14, acts as a melody and accompaniment at the same time, blending the melody and accompaniment from the beginning.

¹⁶ Paul Robert, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996), 5.

¹⁷ Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, trans. by Olive Senior-Ellis (Letchworth: Herts, Aldine Press, 1972), 13.

¹⁸ Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, 13.

The image shows a musical score for Debussy's 'Pour le piano' Prelude, measures 13-18. The score is written for voice and piano. The voice part is divided into four parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The piano part is written for the right and left hands. Red arrows point from the voice part labels to the corresponding staves. The music features a complex harmonic structure with chromaticism and a key change.

Example 5. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 13-18.

In Sonata form of the Classical and early Romantic periods, a minor key typically modulated to a relative major key. Debussy, however, in this Prelude, seems influenced by Richard Wagner. The development of the introduction theme, m. 43, finally explodes in C major, the relative major key.¹⁹ The powerful and percussive passage reaches the climax at measure 57 (Example 6). It builds up by augmented chords in a circle of fifths. Debussy loved Wagner's rich harmonic language and sensuous glow.²⁰ During the Classical and Romantic periods, the augmented sixth chord prepares the dominant and the modulation to the new key (augmented sixth → dominant → new key area). The augmented sixth chord is typically pre-dominant, but in this case, Debussy used the augmented chord in the dominant key area. Perhaps Debussy developed this use of augmented chords in 1885, when he completed his piano reduction of *Tristan* by himself.²¹ After the development of the introduction theme, Debussy used an "electrifying *glissando*", as Paul Robert

¹⁹ E. Robert Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), 68.

²⁰ Walsh, *Debussy*, 59.

²¹ Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, 27.

described, as a link to the theme (Example 7).²² The *glissando* creates a virtuosic passage. Composers from the Classical and Romantic period would not use a sweeping virtuosic gesture like a *glissando* in piano music (with the exception of Liszt). Debussy's harmonic closure and return to C major is emphasized by structural virtuosity and the inclusion of the *glissando*.

Example 6. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 43-45.

Example 7. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm.46-48.

The descending whole-tone scale appears after the repeated augmented chords (Example 8). The whole-tone scale creates an open character, equalizing each note and removing the mandate for resolution of the repeated augmented chords to dominant. It also gives the listener a mysterious and unstable feeling. Debussy said in a music journal in

²² Roberts, *Images*, 179.

1913 that “In these times, when we are so preoccupied with trying out various different ways of educating people, we are gradually losing our sense of the mysterious.”²³

4

Example 8. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 57-58.

The developmental middle section is from m. 61 to m. 96. This section divides into two parts. The first, mm. 59-74, combines the sixteenth-note figuration with transpose introduction motives. The second re-introduces the stepwise, quarter-note melody from mm. 6 to 7 and combines variants of it with sixteenth and triplet-eighth variants of the head motive. The sixteenth-note figuration introduced in measure 59 will be present throughout the development. There are constant sixteenth-notes but in a narrow melodic range in contrast to the sixteenth-note arpeggios in the first part of the Prelude. The retransition, measure 91 to 96, consists only of the sixteenths and step melody without the head motive; it prepares for the return of material from mm. 6 at mm. 97.

The Romantic Fragment is a musical idea that breaks into a shorter group of notes. Composers use melodic motive or theme to transform into segments. It was popular during the late Romantic period, typically in almost every composition, especially German

²³ Claude Debussy, “Three Articles from Music Journals, [Article III], 1913.” Chap in *Source Readings in Music History: The Twentieth Century*, Volume 7, revised edition, ed. Oliver W. Strunk, and Leo Treitler, 164-166 (New York: Norton, 1998), 164.

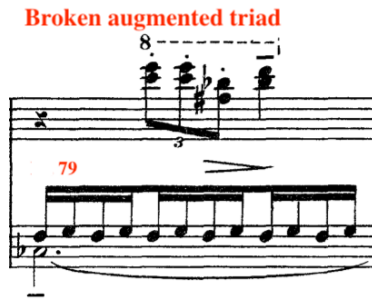
compositions. It is the element that composers used to characterize the movement. Each fragment could be a complete motive, incomplete motive, or develop further within the movement. As Charles Rosen explained, “The Romantic Fragment is, therefore, a closed structure, but its closure is a formality: it may be separated from the rest of the universe, but it implies the existence of what is outside itself not by reference but by its instability”.²⁴

Debussy recycles the introduction theme, using it over and over in various transformations. For instance, in the development, a fragment of the introduction theme appears as a melody in the low and high register (Example 9 and 10). It shows that melodic fragmentation provides unity, thematic clarity, and closure to the entire movement with the cyclical return of a familiar theme.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for Debussy's *Pour le piano*, Prelude, measures 59-64. The first system, starting at measure 59, features a piano (*p*) dynamic and a *dim.* marking. A red box highlights a fragment of the first theme in the right hand, and a red arrow points to its recurrence in the left hand at measure 62. The second system, starting at measure 62, features a *sempre pp* marking. A red box highlights the same fragment in the left hand.

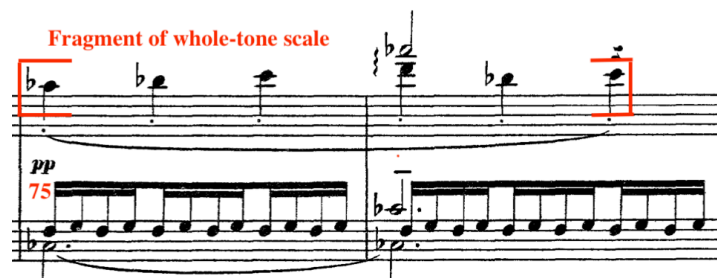
Example 9. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 59-64.

²⁴ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 50-51.



Example 10. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 79.

The whole-tone scale also appears in the development section as a fragment in measure 75-76 (Example 11). The slow sections of Debussy’s piano work at times combine a long pedal point and tremolo as a drone. (As heard in *Pagodes* from *Estampes*, *Reflets dans l’eau* from *Images* book one, *Cloches à travers les feuilles* from *Images* book two, and “Serenade for the Doll” from *Children’s Corner*.) Here in *Pour le Piano*, the pedal point and sixteenth-note figuration enhance the whole-tone melody and elevate the whole-tone fragments to the level of the melodic fragment and restatement of the primary theme.

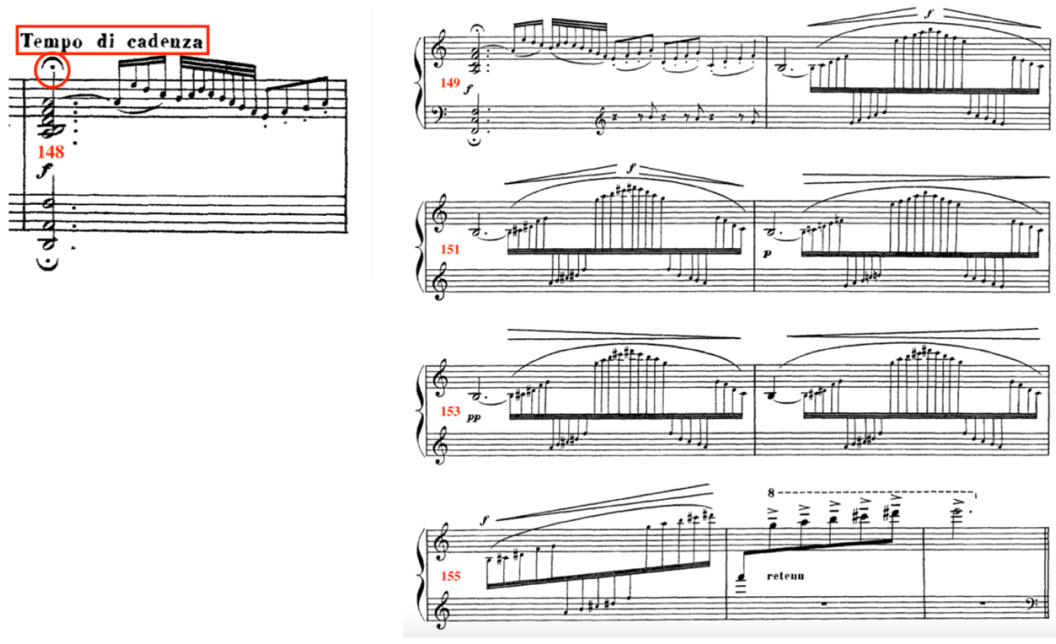


Example 11. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 75-76.

The return closely parallels the A-minor section from m. 6 forward. The repeat of this portion in the first section (mm. 27 - 42) is removed in the recap. Instead, the

continuation at measure 118 goes straight to a return of the *fortissimo*, aggressive variation of the introduction theme, still with a C tonal center. Debussy thus duplicates his juxtaposition of the low, dark A-minor figuration with the expansive, *marcato*, loud, C-Major version of the head motive. There is an A-minor variation of the head motive, mm. 127 to 133, that moves into a passage recalling the development. Very quiet and mysterious, this development passage ascends to connect to a brilliant cadenza in measures 148 to 157. A surprising fermata appears followed by a cadenza. The pause before the cadenza resembles the main feature of structural virtuosity from the concerto variation of sonata form. After the pause, people will expect the soloist to improvise and show virtuoso skill.²⁵ Debussy offers an improvisatory flourish of size and scope large enough to create a grand and vigorous ending. (Example 12).

²⁵Rosen, *The Classical Style*, 196.



Example 12. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 148-157.

The final chords of the closing six measures of the Prelude are grand and majestic. Here Debussy imitated the cathedral organ²⁶, another allusion to Baroque style. The final chord progression ends in a perfect authentic cadence (a: V⁷ - i), providing expected closure for a work so grounded in convention (Example 13).



Example 13. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 157-162.

²⁶ Claude Debussy, *Pour le piano*, ed. Roy Howat (Durand, 2004), introduction page.

Pianists during the 19th century tended to play the melody slightly before or after the bass, a technique called “dislocation placement”. They wanted to imitate the resonance of other instruments’ sounds. For example, in string instruments, vibrato and portamento extended expressivity, and this displacement attempts to capture a sound similar to organ or strings on the piano.²⁷ This performance practice is subtly indicated in the engraving of the score itself with the displaced grace notes in the bass before the primary attack of the chords (Example 13). Other composers, including Franz Liszt, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, and Frédéric Chopin wrote the bass slightly before or after the melody to give more expressive quality or rubato in a pianistic way.

This Prelude from *Pour le piano* comes from a time when Debussy was still developing his ideas that led him in new directions afterwards.²⁸ He already was very creative and liked to compose using new models. His teachers also reported that during his time in Paris Conservatory in 1872, he had a proclivity for experimental harmonies and did not want to modulate “until he felt like it.”²⁹ The aesthetic of his music was all about colors. The whole-tone scale that appears in the exposition, development, and cadenza; the augmented chord that is unexpectedly repeated in the dominant key area; the quality of drone sound in the development; the fluid and tremulous accompaniment at the beginning of the exposition; the sweeping *glissando* that carries music to the climax of the piece; and

²⁷ Clive Brown, *Performance Practices in Johannes Brahms’ Chamber Music* (Germany: Bärenreiter-Verlag Karl Vötterle GmbH & Co. KG, Kassel, 2016), 15.

²⁸ Robert, *Images*, 6.

²⁹ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 5.

the sustaining pedal point prolonged for eighteen bars that merges so well with the melody in the tenor part, are all new models that Debussy developed.

SARABANDE

The Sarabande was one of the most popular Baroque instrumental dances. It originated in Latin America and was later introduced into Italy, France, and Germany retaining its French name.³⁰ Originally, the dance was accompanied by Spanish guitars,³¹ tambourine, castanets, or percussion instruments.³² Guitar strumming patterns combined with a freely ornamented, homophonic texture in a characteristically slow tempo. It is in triple meter with an emphasized/leaning on the second beat of the second measure. Robert Schmitz described the Sarabande as, “a dance of grave character, not as imposing as pavane, but slower than the minuet”.³³ The rhythm and melody are usually simpler than other dances.³⁴

The Sarabande from *Pour le piano* is a dignified dance in triple meter and ABA’ form. The A section occurs from measures 1 to 22; B from measure 22 to 41, and the final section, A’, is from measure 42 to the end.³⁵ The beginning is marked as *Avec une élégance grave et lente*, “with a grave and slow elegance”.³⁶ The beginning emphasizes six-part

³⁰ Richard Hudson, and Meredith Ellis Little, “Sarabande” *Grove Music Online* (January 2001), <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000024574?rskey=8fRbrH&result=1>.

³¹ Betty B. Mather, *Dance Rhythms of the French Baroque: A Handbook for Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 291.

³² Armstrong, *An Historical Survey*, 26.

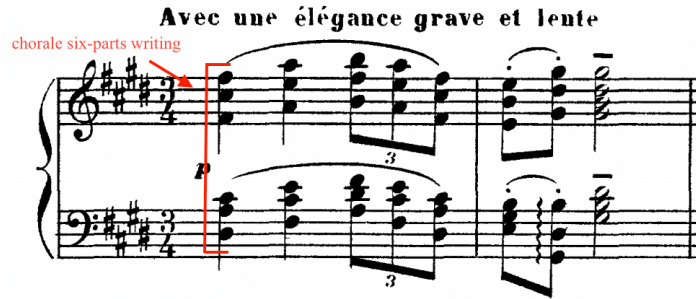
³³ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 71.

³⁴ David Schulenberg, *Music of the Baroque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 243.

³⁵ Claude Debussy, *Pour le piano*. 2nd ed., ed. by Maurice Hinson (Alfred Publishing Co., 1990), 3.

³⁶ Claude Debussy, *Pour le piano*, ed. by Regina Back, and fingering by Frederik Palme (Bärenreiter, 2007), XXII.

writing and an unaccompanied solo³⁷ (Example 14). The simplicity of the texture evokes an antique Baroque character dance. The harmonic texture also remains grand and elegant in its simplicity, supporting the rhythmic character of the Sarabande.



Example 14. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 1-2.

Interestingly, Debussy recalls the original Spanish instrumental origin of the Sarabande rather than exclusively relying on historical French and German models. The strumming guitar is one type of accompaniment in the Sarabande, and Debussy exclusively places this figure in the left hand. The first type of strumming guitar figure occurs before the leaning of the second beat. This type appears the most in this movement, in measures 2, 4, 16, 18, 43, 45, 63, and 64. It provides a graceful emphasis of the beat to be accented (Example 15).

³⁷ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 71.

Regina Back published a new critical scholarly edition in 2007 (Urtext), incorporating new research. Back provides a detailed critical commentary on the publication history of the work with some general performance practice suggestions.

Avec une élégance grave et lente

graceful gesture before leaning on the second beat

Example 15. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 1-4.

The second type occurs when a *crescendo* begins to build up to the climax. This type expands the texture while the wide range of chords allow the piano strings to vibrate and give a majestic and stately gesture. This type occurs in measure 19, and in measure 53 to 55 (Example 16).

strumming pattern that builds up to the climax

Example 16. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 53-55.

The third type occurs only once when the texture changes from the major mode to the minor mode (mm. 50). The strumming figure here allows the texture to change smoothly and maintain a mellow flow in the music (Example 17).

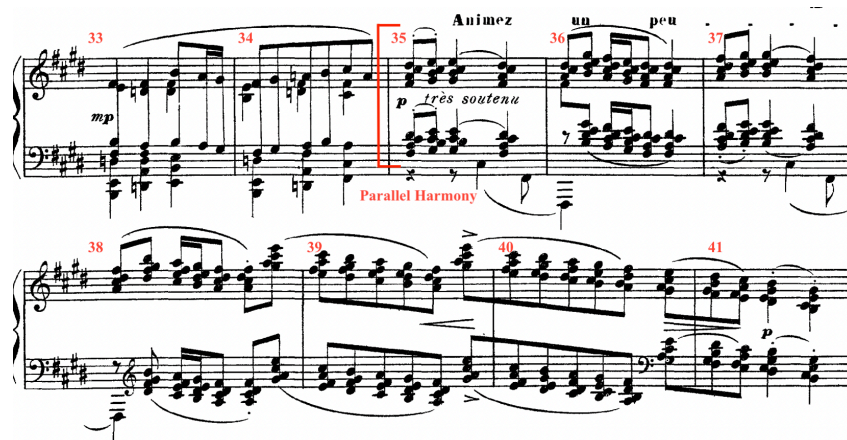
Example 17. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 48-50.

The last type is the simple accompaniment type. In the last six measures, the strumming figure ascends and provides a sense of closure in the penultimate notes of the Sarabande (Example 18).

Example 18. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 67-72.

The typical Sarabande is always embellished with a great deal of ornamentation to refresh the repetitive pattern. Historically, the ornaments served to connect the harmony and impart stress and accent within musical lines. However, Debussy did not use any ornaments either explicitly written in the music or implied in performance practice in the Sarabande.

Debussy planning parallel harmony. Starting from the beginning, the parallel harmony begins within the six-part chorale writing (Example 14). The same parallel harmony occurs almost everywhere in this movement and is often indicates the return of the theme. In measures 35 to 41, the parallel harmony weakens the tonality of the F-sharp key area (Example 19).³⁸ The expected transition in measure 41 would return to the tonic (G[#]),³⁹ but Debussy’s rhythmic adherence to the Sarabande form blurs the downbeats and creates an ambiguous closure of the B section.



Example 19. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 33-41.

Debussy experimented using parallel harmony since he was a student at the conservatory. The harmony teacher at the conservatory, Émile Durand, reported that “In his realization of the “given bass,” [Debussy’s] jury detected about half a dozen errors involving parallel fifths or octaves!”⁴⁰ The notebook of Maurice Emmanuel, a friend of

³⁸ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁰ François Lesure, *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography*, trans. and revised ed. by Marie Rolf (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2019) first published 2003, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 29.

Debussy, reflects a similar interest in parallel harmony in a conversation between Debussy and Ernest Guiraud:

Guiraud: What on earth is that?

Debussy: unresolved, floating chords. The tone must be made to sink. Then one finishes where one wishes; one goes out by whatever door one will. Thenceforth the terrain is enlarged. And the nuances.

Guiraud: But when I do *this* it must resolve:



Debussy: Why? What the hell does it matter?

Guiraud: Then you find this pleasing?



Debussy: Yes, yes, I most certainly do. [Then, he plumps down other chords]



Guiraud: But how do you get out of that? I don't deny that what you do there is pleasing. But it is theoretically absurd.

Debussy: There is no such thing as theory. If something pleases the ear then that's all that matters.

Guiraud: With an exceptional talent that may pass, I grant you. But how will you teach music to others?

Debussy: Music can't be taught

Guiraud: Oh come! You forget, my friend, that you spent ten years at the Conservatoire.

Debussy: I know that what I say is absurd. (How does one reconcile that?) Certainly I can feel free because I attended classes—and I only left the fugue class because I knew it all.⁴¹

⁴¹ Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, 17-18.

Later, the idea of gentle and floating harmony appeared in many works such as the Violin Sonata, Cello Sonata, *La Cathédrale engloutie*, *Le vent dans la plaine*, *Canope*, *Voiles*, *La Mer*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Estampes*, *Soirée dans Grenade*, *Images* Book one and two etc.

The whole-tone collection appears again, mm. eleven to fourteen.⁴² Theorist Gary Karpinsky mentions that the root progression of the dominant-seventh chords outlines a whole-tone collection [D, E, F#, G#, A#]. Such writing indicates an ambiguous harmonic direction before the returning of the main theme in measure fifteen (Example 20).

Example 20. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 11-14.

Debussy maintained the model of the Baroque character dance in this Sarabande. It is in triple meter with emphasis on the second beat of the second measure. The primary theme is in a wide-spaced interval which allows one to hear six-part writing completely and without an accompaniment. Moreover, he used the strumming guitar figure to create graceful and mannered gestures. Surprisingly, he did not use ornaments throughout the

⁴² Gary S. Karpinski, "Structural Functions of the Interval Cycles in Early Twentieth-Century Music.", *International Journal of Musicology* 4 (1995), 187-188.

whole movement as ornaments impart stress and accent, but Debussy preferred a delicate touch “which allowed one to hear fluid transparency.”⁴³ This may be a reason why he did not want any direct stress and accent to interrupt his transparent legato line. In addition, the new idea such as parallel harmony occurs many times which gives a gentle character. The whole-tone collection also appears as new models he used in this movement. It gives an ambiguous harmonic direction which I explain earlier in the Prelude section. These features let his music float over the keys throughout the Sarabande.

⁴³ Virginia Raad, *The Piano Sonority of Claude Debussy* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1994), 25.

TOCCATA

The word, “Toccata” originates from the Italian word *toccare* which means “to touch,” a reference to the “touching” of the key.⁴⁴ The Toccata was popular in the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Most works were composed for keyboard, harpsichord, pianoforte, and organ as eponymously suggested. The elements in Toccata combined brilliant scales and arpeggio passages, polyphony, imitation, occasional ornaments, and broken chords. The piece typically closed with a fugue. These elements showed off a virtuoso technique with the dexterity of fingers. Toccatas are typically composed in a free tempo with an improvisatory style.⁴⁵

Debussy’s Toccata was highly influenced by J.S. Bach’s writing. The opening of Debussy’s Toccata had the same key signature and sixteenth-note figuration of Bach’s Partita for solo violin, BWV 1006 (Examples 21 and 22).



Example 21. J. S. Bach, Partita for solo violin, BWV 1006, Prelude, mm. 1-6.

⁴⁴ John Caldwell, “Toccata” *Grove Music Online* (January 2001), <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000028035?rskey=F1WCVu&result=1>.

⁴⁵ Hye Won Lee, “The Toccata and the History of Touch: A Pianist’s Survey of the Symbiosis of Style and Performance Practice of Selected Toccatas from Froberger to Muczynski,” DMA doc. (The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2008), 39.



Example 22. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 1-8.

The harmonic elements alternate between clear tonal key areas (Major/Minor) and modes. This combination between mode and tonal key areas gives a characteristic of tonal ambiguity and fluidity throughout the movement. For instance, the opening begins in C-sharp Aeolian mode (measure 1 to 6, and 62 to 69), moves to C-sharp Major in measures 198 to 205, and 228.⁴⁶

Debussy used the basic elements from the historical models of a toccata to form the melody and accompaniment consisting of scales, broken chords, and arpeggios throughout the piece.⁴⁷ From the opening to measure 6, the melody is formed by a scale-like figure in C# Aeolian. (Example 22). The opening melody begins at measure 1, then an echo of the material begins immediately in measure 2. It is a repetition in an octave lower. The broken interval and descending scale-like present in measures 3-4, follow by repetition in measures

⁴⁶ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 76.

⁴⁷ William Paul Brown, "A Comparative Study of Toccatas for Piano by Schumann, Debussy, Ravel, Prokofiev, and Busoni." DMA doc. (Indiana University, 1979), 27.

5 and 6.⁴⁸ In measures 13 to 20, the melody returns and changes to broken chords in the right hand with the left hand falling in stepwise motion in E Major (Example 23).⁴⁹

Example 23. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 13-20.

From measures 81 to 104, the polyphonic texture increases with the music breaking into four distinct layers. The right hand has delicate running arpeggio figures while the left hand has three independent voices: the top line melody, the middle line syncopated rhythm, and the pedal in the bass (Example 24). This passage requires full control of the keyboard to be able to play arpeggios smoothly while maintaining the *pianissimo* dynamic.

Example 24. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 81-84.

⁴⁸ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 76.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

In measures 105 to 113, the texture becomes contrapuntal, exchanging the melody between the hands with alternating arpeggios in sixteenth notes. The figure returns in measures 236 to 239 (Example 25).

Example 25. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 105-108.

At the end of the Toccata, the final cadence appears as a tritone (G to C#/D^b), creating a sense of incomplete closure in measures 254 to 260 (Example 26). Howat mentions a similar harmonic evasion in the final chords of Liszt's B minor Sonata (1854) which also ends in this Tritonal cadence (F to B).⁵⁰

Example 26. Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 254-267.

⁵⁰ Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music*, 166.

Debussy met Liszt in 1886 at the Villa Medici in Rome and was inspired by Liszt's performances and his compositions. Part of the performance, Liszt performed his *Au bord d'une source* to Debussy. We can see some of Liszt's ideas in Debussy's piano compositions as well such as *L'isle joyeuse*, where the left hand at measure seven recalls Liszt's *Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este*, measure forty-four to forty-seven.

This Toccata is a great example of neoclassicism. It is virtuosic and contains brilliant writing for piano but is based on historical models of virtuosity and harmonic development. The simple patterns that Debussy used consist of scales, broken chords, and arpeggios taken from early harpsichord models.⁵¹ Moreover, the opening theme was inspired by Partita for solo violin, BWV 1006, by J. S. Bach. Apart from the old models, the harmonic aspect points to ambiguity with exchanges between modes and tonal key areas. This harmonic aspect haunted Debussy and returns in all three movements, finally culminating in a truly Romantic tritone ending in the final thirteen measures of the Toccata.

⁵¹ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 75.

CHAPTER 3
PERFORMANCE PRACTICE
PRELUDE

FINGERING

Fingering is a primary concern for all pianists and is fundamental in the study of each new piece. Good fingering avoids unnecessary movement of the hands and should be suited to the technique, reach and anatomy of the individual. In this Prelude, I combine the fingering from the published editions by Hans-Martin Theopold (Henle edition), Frederik Palme (Bärenreiter edition), with my own. This provides a more comprehensive view of some possible fingerings intended to provide better guidance for piano students, advanced pianists, and performers.

The first fingering suggestion addresses the problem of holding a long pedal point (A1) in the left-hand, in measure 6. In the Henle edition, Hans-Martin Theopold, an eminent scholar and pianist suggested using the thumb to play the melody while the pinky holds A1 (Example 20). Theopold's fingering is logical, but if pianists cannot expand their hands over an octave, another option is to use the *sostenuto* pedal to sustain A1 (see more explanation in my pedaling suggestions). Pianists can fully concentrate on the melodic line without worrying about the bass pedal point (Example 27). This fingering helps pianists to maintain the legato touch on the melodic line and it helps balance both hands beautifully.

The image shows three systems of musical notation for Example 27. The first system starts at measure 6, marked 'p' and 'un peu retarde'. It features a blacked-out section in the upper staff and a red line in the lower staff labeled 'Theopold Puripat'. The second system starts at measure 7 and includes the instruction 'peu à peu, reprendre le mouvt'. The third system starts at measure 10. Fingering numbers (1, 2, 3, 5) are placed below notes throughout the passage.

Example 27. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 6-12.

The next fingering suggestion is dealing with a big leap between bass pedal point and interval melody, where pianists often roll or break the chord that must be played together. In measure 16 it is impossible to play the bass pedal point (A1) together with interval melody (G[#]3-D4) only in left-hand as Debussy wrote. The obvious solution is to play the interval melody (G[#]3-D4) in the right-hand while the left-hand rearticulates the second downbeat (Example 28). In doing so, the flow of the melodic line will not stop on the first beat of measure 16.

The image shows a single system of musical notation for Example 28, measure 16. It is in treble clef. The right-hand part (R.H.) has a melodic line with fingering numbers 2, 1, 3, 5, 3, 2, 5, 2, 1, 4, 1. The left-hand part (L.H.) has a bass line with a large leap from A1 to G#3, with fingering numbers 5, 5, 3, 5. A red line connects the G#3 in the R.H. to the G#3 in the L.H. The measure is marked '16' at the beginning.

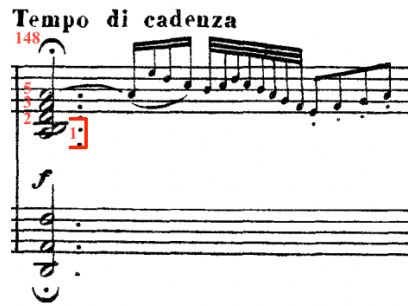
Example 28. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 16.

In measure 59 the sixteenth-note figuration appears in the right-hand after a descending whole-tone scale. At very high speed, using only a two-finger pattern (e.g. RH 2, 3) one may not have enough time to release and press down again. The resulting sixteenth-note figuration sounds unstable, and on new instruments, players should assume that the key action of the piano might not respond consistently. Avoiding the same fingering twice helps pianists escape this problem. Rather than the fingering 1-2, or 1-3, or 2-3, or 2-4, or 1-4 all the way through, Frederic Palme, editor of the *Bärenreiter* edition, suggests changing fingering to a 3-2-3-1 pattern (Example 29). This helps pianists not to worry about the evenness of the sixteenth-note figuration passage, and gives him a better control of the keys.



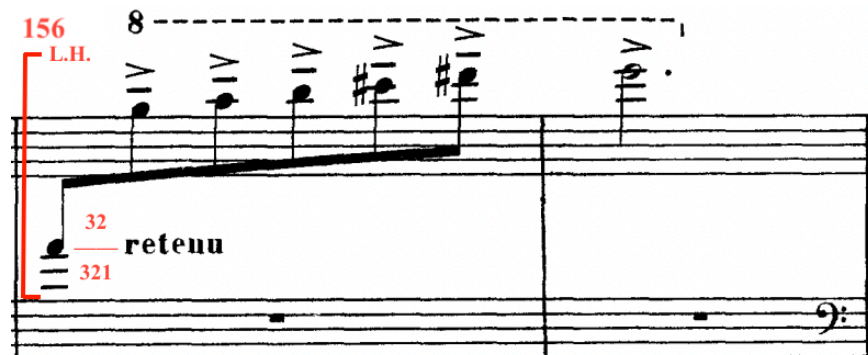
Example 29. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 59.

In a large chord in measure 148, when it is appropriate, pianists sometimes use a single finger to play more than one note. The right-hand thumb can be used to play two notes in the fermata chord (A3 - B3) to achieve a clear sound and appropriately strong top note (Example 30). I do not suggest using the fingering 1-2-3-4-5 because it loses strength as the hand moves away from the strong thumb to the weaker pinky and is awkward for pianists with smaller hands.



Example 30. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 148.

At the end of cadenza in measure 156 and 157, a single note requires enormous strength. Using two or more fingers on a single note helps pianists to gain a powerful strike. Fingering 3-2 or 3-2-1 in the left-hand makes the best powerful strike on notes that have many dynamic markings: *forte*, *tenuto*, and *accent* (Example 31). Moreover, using more than one finger helps pianists guarantee that the fingers will not slip off the black keys. Lastly, in example 31, from the second eighth-note onward, Debussy suggested that the right-hand plays on each note. However, since pianists use more than one finger on a single note, it is not necessary to use the right-hand in this passage to effectively create power. Rather, if the left-hand plays from F6 to E7 it is more effective because the left-hand performs a consistent dynamic volume to the last note in measure 157.



Example 31. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 156-157.

The fingerings I suggest is based on my experience and a critical interpretation of the available published scores. The primary considerations were sustaining long bass pedal points, consistency of rapid notes, tone projection, powerful strikes on single notes. My aim is to provide more fingering options for pianists who is struggle finding the suitable fingerings in difficult passages, tone color, and technical problem.

PEDALING

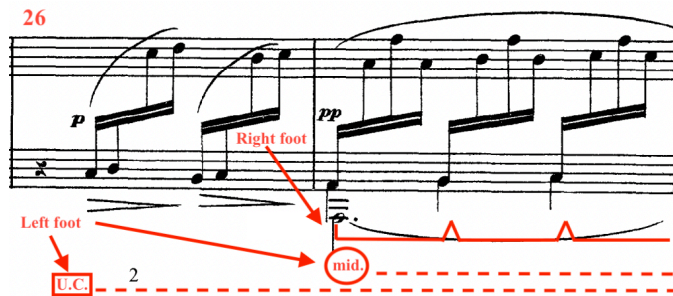
Correct pedaling is one of the most difficult tools for pianists. The main purpose of the pedal is to sustain, even after fingers have left the key. Pedals also can create a richer tone, assist with *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, and change the tone colors.

In Debussy's piano music, Maurice Dumesnil said that pedaling must be used in the runs, arpeggios and passages which give sonorous, harmonic, and vibrating standpoint.⁵² However, the pedals should not be used to cover or blur mistakes. As Debussy said in a letter to Jacques Durand in 1915, "abusing the pedal is only a means of covering up a lack of technique, and that making a lot of noise is a way to drown the music you're slaughtering! In theory we should be able to find a graphic means of representing this 'breathing' pedal...it wouldn't be impossible".⁵³ In this Prelude, pedaling should be employed with attention to color and sonority, as Debussy suggested, rather than to blur technique.

⁵² Maurice Dumesnil, *How to Play and Teach Debussy* (New York: Schroeder & Gunther, 1932), 12.

⁵³ François Lesure, and Roger Nichols, *Debussy Letter*, trans. by Roger Nichols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 302.

The first pedaling issue starts in measure 6 to 23. There are three possibilities for pedaling this passage. Firstly, students often press the sustaining pedal all the way through. Sustaining through the whole passage creates a subtle character at the beginning of the statement but after two measures, the sound is too indistinct. Secondly, more advanced students would probably do a tremolo pedal, kind of ‘butterfly’ pedal alternating rapidly between full and half pedal. This advanced technique allows the strings to be slightly touched by the damper clearing the sound in increments while the strings still vibrate. However, around measures 16 to 18, the melody blends with the accompaniment creating too much of one texture when only using the butterfly pedal. To solve this problem effectively, the third possibility is to use the left foot to press down the *sostenuto* pedal at the downbeat of measure 6, and release at the end of measure 23. Meanwhile, the right foot is used to press the sustaining pedal on every beat from measure 6 to 23 (Example 32). This helps the long pedal point (A) sustain throughout the passage. With this pedaling, the melody stands out clearly and blends perfectly with accompaniment and bass pedal point. Measure 6 to 23 repeats again in measure 27, creating a more mysterious atmosphere. Comparing measure 6 and measure 27, the dynamic in measure 6 is in *piano*, but the dynamic at measure 27 is *pianissimo*. To emphasize this change, use the *una corda* pedal in measure 27 to change the tone color subtly, along with the sustaining pedal and *sostenuto* pedal. I know it sounds weird and very complicated because the left foot needs to press two pedals at the same time (*una corda* and *sostenuto* pedal). Even though this combination takes some practice, it is highly effective and appropriate in this passage.



Example 32. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 26-27.

From measure 41 to 42, the sustaining pedal can be used to build a *crescendo* and should remain down until the arrival of the C Major chord (mm. 43). When the repeated augmented chords occur in measure 43, changing the sustaining pedal every time the chord changes, creates an enormous sound like that of a sustained organ, and opens the sound of the *fortissimo* (Example 33).



Example 33. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 41-47.

Due to the *fortissimo* chords at measure 43, the tone color must be sharp and voice out the top note explicitly. The successive chords seem easy to approach. But once pianists

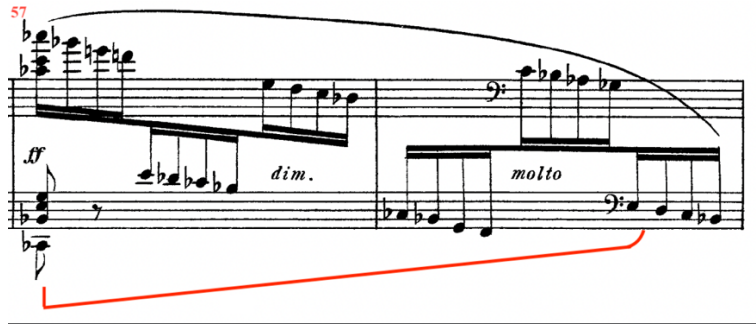
play up to the original tempo, players might get stiff hands. Try to reduce the repeated chords and play the scheme of each chord (Example 34). Use fingers grabbing the chord and quickly jump to the next position without making any sound in the next chord. Relaxing physically and through the entire arm will help with dexterity between jumping chords and what is originally written is less difficult.



Example 34. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, a reduction from mm. 43-46.⁵⁴

The sustain pedal can also be used to reduce the resonance in passages and create a *diminuendo*. In measure 57, the sequence of chords rises to a *fortissimo* climax followed by a descending whole-tone scale. To emphasize the *diminuendo*, the pedal can be incrementally released to clear out the resonance quickly before the arrival of tremolo in the right hand in measure 59 (Example 35).

⁵⁴ I have created this exercise for relaxation of arms and dexterity of chord placement.



Example 35. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 57-58.

In the developmental middle section, the pedal can be used extensively without disrupting the harmony. Because whole-tone fragments appear throughout the section, every note in the scale is a whole step apart from each other. This writing creates an uncertain harmonic character in the passage because all the notes are equalized (no leading tone). Pressing down the sustaining pedal only a quarter helps create a mysterious character in the color as well as the harmony (Example 36).⁵⁵



Example 36. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 74-82.

⁵⁵ The damper slightly raised from the strings (shallow vs. deep pedal) creates a “quarter pedal” where the damper still slightly touches the surface of the string. When this type of sustained pedal is used alongside the *una corda* pedal, it changes the color and mutes the sound creating a beautiful *pianissimo*.

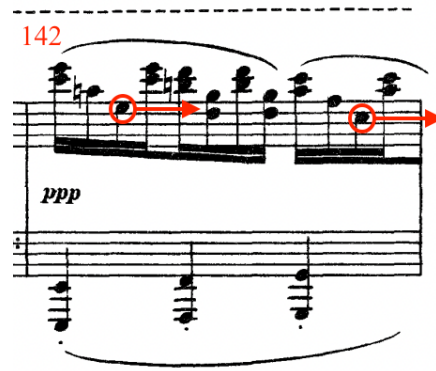
From measure 142 to 147, the right hand has descending parallel chords while the left hand has ascending octaves. The sustained pedal must be changed every beat (partial pedal changes).⁵⁶ Changing the pedal on each beat allows the damper to return slightly to the strings, clear some of the sound, and thin the texture for clarity. Partial pedal changes work well without sounding didactic and with the *pianississimo* the *una corda* pedal can also help to play as quietly as possible (Example 37).

The image shows a musical score for Example 37, consisting of three systems of music. The first system is measure 142, marked 'ppp'. The second system is measure 143, with an '8' above the first measure and 'cre' and 'scen' in the bass line. The third system is measure 146, with 'do' and 'molto' in the bass line. Red lines indicate partial pedal changes on every beat.

Example 37. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, mm. 142-147

Moreover, this broken descending chord (mm.142-147) is in a very difficult place to play. There is a small trick here by holding the thumb until the next chord, which supports your hand for the next note. In the example 38, the thumb stays until the second downbeat which will be a core for the third and fifth fingers to find the distance easier.

⁵⁶ Joseph Banowetz, *The Pianist's Guide to Pedaling* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 11.



Example 38. *Pour le piano*, Prelude, 142.

The pedaling creates variety of tone color and dynamic volumes. Based on various pedaling suggestions, I give attention to the dynamic markings (*crescendo* and *diminuendo*), I differentiate the texture, and blend together the same harmonic (whole-tone passage). All of these suggestions stand out at best if pianists listen to the sound, resonance, and vibrating of strings carefully.

INTERPRETATION

This Prelude is brilliant and virtuosic, combined with bravura technique. The opening theme is powerful and strong in the bass, followed by a long pedal point passage. The theme comes again when the *fortissimo* chords burst out in both hands, joined by the virtuosic *glissando* that is in a pianistic way. The beautiful whole-tone in the middle section has extremely soft dynamics and coloring. The left-hand holds the A-flat pedal point which calms down the music. The conclusion begins at the cadenza which gives a free tempo in an improvisatory style ending with a majestic organ-like passage.

Starting from the beginning, the first subject must be powerful, driven forward, *non legato*, and in a steady tempo. Do not try to be too musical or too romantic. Robert Schmitz

alerted that young pianists frequently misunderstand the Prelude by changing the basic character of “masculine virility and sharp harmonic color”.⁵⁷ In measure 6, the long melodic line begins with an uncertain tempo. As Debussy indicated the tempo marking “*un peu retardé-peu à peu reprendre le mouvt*” (slightly hesitant-gradually return to an original tempo),⁵⁸ starts a little slower than the original tempo then builds it back to a tempo, two measures later. One common mistake is that the sixteenth-note accompaniment in the right-hand always covers the melody. Touching the surface of the keys (pressing down not more than half-length of the key) in the sixteenth-note accompaniment helps pianists avoid having the accompaniment part take over the melody part. Keep listening to the beautiful singing voice in quarter-notes by pressing down with firm fingers to the bottom of the keys. The sound must be *legato* without blurring the pedals. Thinking of the melody as a sturdy grandchild of the great organ toccatas of J. S. Bach helps pianists imagine the organ sound with great clarity of texture between layers.⁵⁹ The A pedal point must remain all the time without hiccups or disconnection (measure 6 to 23, 27 to 38, and 97 to 114). The dynamic should gradually increase to reach *fortissimo* at measure 43. Here as Ms. Long reported, “the composer thought one might begin it a little sooner than indicated”.⁶⁰ Pianists might consider starting the *crescendo* from measure 38 or 39 to let the *crescendo* grow smoother.

⁵⁷ E. Robert Schmitz, *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), 70.

⁵⁸ Claude Debussy, *Pour le piano*, Edit. by Regina Back, and fingering by Frederik Palme (Bärenreiter, 2007), XXII.

⁵⁹ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 70.

⁶⁰ Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, trans. by Olive Senior-Ellis (Letchworth: Herts, Aldine Press, 1972), 23.

In measures 43 to 57, the sturdy and powerful percussive chord must present the same tempo as the opening section (measure 1 to 5) which is powerful and driven forward.⁶¹ Firm fingers and fast attack in this passage keep the powerful chords at the same dynamic level. Pianists must remember that even though this section is one of the climaxes, the sound should not be too harsh or forceful. Consider producing a grand, more rounded sound, and not vertical attack. The electrifying *glissando* (measures 46, 50, 118, 122, and 126) starts with a *crescendo* to *fortissimo* must be swept away (fast *glissando*) to create a dramatic effect before the arrival C Major chord.⁶²

In the whole-tone section, measures 71 to 96, the whole-tone melody sounds like the tinkling of a musical toy.⁶³ Imagine this section as we listen to toy music. Produce a ringing and light sound in the whole-tone melody (R.H.) by using the tip of the fingers to brush the key. This results in a gentle and ringing sound. The sixteenth-note figuration in the middle section is murmuring as a background, with the stability of the A-flat pedal point in the bass part. Maintain the sound evenly in these two parts in the left-hand with an absolute, clock-like precision of tempo.⁶⁴ From measure 79 to 82, the fragment of the opening theme in triplet rhythm interrupts the whole-tone melody and presents a flash of light.⁶⁵ Focus on the tone production by projecting the top note in the right hand. The *diminuendo* effect at the end of each fragment gives a different color between the whole-

⁶¹ Paul Robert, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996), 315.

⁶² Robert, *Images*, 79.

⁶³ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 69.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

tone melody and the fragment of the opening theme. From measure 87 to 90, the fragment of the opening theme is also in triplet rhythm. However, the grouping of two-notes slur creates a hemiola. Show the pattern two against three by emphasizing on the first note of each two-notes grouping. The whole-tone melody switches from the right-hand to the left-hand in measure 91. Therefore, try not to play too soft (*pianissimo*) in measure 91 to allow more space for a *decrescendo* until the end of measure 96. The music here fades away (*perdendosi*); pianists should differentiate the sixteenth-note figuration in the accompaniment part (R.H.) and the melody part (L.H.) by carefully blending both lines smoothly.

In the recapitulation in measure 97, the music remains the same until measure 126. From measure 126 to 132, it is not advisable to mix the chords when they change from one to another. It is better to focus on the melody in the left-hand and press a three-quarter pedal clearly shows the syncopation without being too dry. The result gives more tension and drama in this passage because the split hands rhythm impacts the music differently. In measure 142, the contrary motion passage is floating from the outer register to inner register – a very delicate and light touch is required.⁶⁶ Interestingly, Magda Tagliaferro⁶⁷ and Caio Pagano⁶⁸ do the *ritardando* from measures 146 to 147. The intention is to highlight the crescendo and point to the climax; they both expand the texture wider to

⁶⁶ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 68.

⁶⁷ Magda, Tagliaferro, “*Le Piano français de Chabrier à Debussy*,” Released 24 March 2014, track 6, Erato, Warner Classics, compact disc.

⁶⁸ Caio, Pagano, “*French Piano Music: Franck, Satie, Debussy, Ravel*,” Recorded February 1995, track 9, Soundset Recording, compact disc.

increase the volume. This prepares the arrival chord in the *Tempo di cadenza* (mm. 148) strongly and firmly. It is an option for pianists to experiment with this idea, even though Debussy did not indicate a *ritardando* in measures 146 to 147.

The Cadenza (*Tempo di Cadenza*) from measure 148 is a free improvisation in the traditional manner.⁶⁹ Pianists can try to experiment with the free tempo by holding back the tempo at the first four sixteenth-notes or making a small *ritardando* in the last four eighth-notes. Either way, pianists should maintain a tempo proportional to the original tempo where the tempo di cadenza return sounds natural.

⁶⁹ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 68.

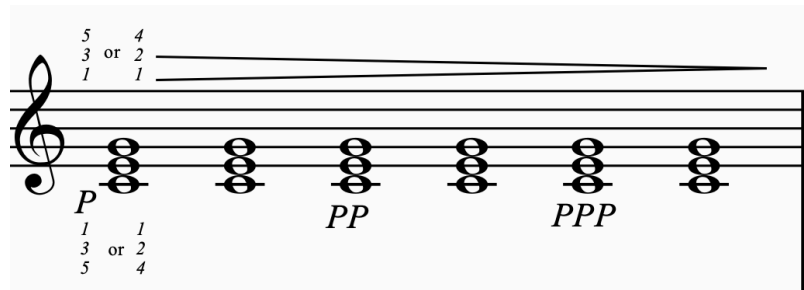
SARABANDE

FINGERING & DYNAMIC

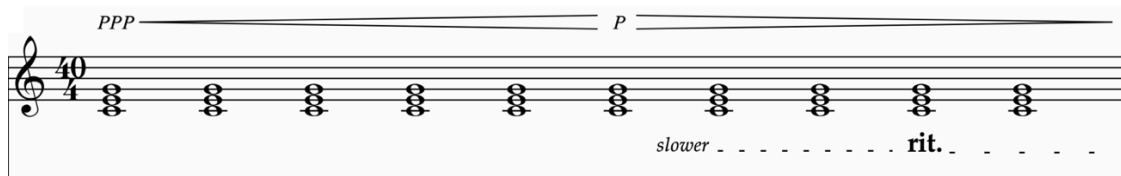
The difficulty in this movement consists in finding *legato* fingerings and controlling the dynamics. Most of the time, the dynamic stays in *mezzo-piano*, *piano*, *plus piano*, *più piano*, and *pianissimo*; pianists must differentiate between those dynamics precisely. This precision in soft dynamics is more difficult than mastering control in loud dynamics. To improve dynamic control, I include the exercises for controlling various dynamics by Maurice Dumesnil. Moreover, the fingering I suggest is based on producing *legato* sound to convey Debussy's musical ideas.

To perfectly control various dynamics on the keyboard, Maurice Dumesnil suggested exercises he created for this purpose. First, press down the sustaining pedal. Next, playing the C Major chord starts from *piano* dynamic, repeat the chord six times, getting softer until the *pianissimo* (Example 39). Listen carefully and make sure that all three notes sound together, and no note stands out from one another. Once you reach your limit of *pianissimo*, keep practicing and seek to play even softer.⁷⁰ After that, try a delicate shading by playing the same chord but starting from *pianississimo*, increasing slightly to *piano*, and diminishing back to *pianississimo* (Example 40). Listen carefully to the tone production and the wave of vibration. At the end, pianists should have better volume control and mellow coloring. Once this exercise is simple, pianists can apply this method in the Sarabande.

⁷⁰ Dumesnil, *How to Play and Teach Debussy*, 8.



Example 39. Dumesnil's exercise for improving dynamic control.⁷¹



Example 40. Dumesnil's exercise for improving dynamic control.⁷²

There are many places that start from *piano* to *pianissimo* and to *pianississimo*. For example, measures 12 to 14, a *piano* dynamic begins in measure 12, *plus piano* at measure 13, and *pianissimo* at measure 14. First, play the entire measure 12 in a *piano* dynamic, *pianissimo* in the second time, and *pianississimo* in the third time. Apply the same in measures 13 and 14. This seems to be exaggerated and might take too much time to practice by just only dynamic controlling, but it gives enormous results once pianists have mastered it.

The next exercise by Dumesnil is to practice the polyphonic production of chords. This exercise aims to highlight the melody that is not in the top register. Beginning with the C Major chord, bring out the root as is labeled in black in example 41.⁷³ When you

⁷¹ Dumesnil, *How to Play and Teach Debussy*, 8.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 10.

press down the note that you want to voice, the finger must be firm and more stable than other fingers without bent or loose joints. The result is strengthening independent fingers. Moreover, pianists could do a variation on this exercise by playing the *staccato* articulation on the note labeled in black. It makes the fingers aware of the note you want to play loudly. Apply this exercise in the Sarabande at measure 23. Practice voicing starting from bass part, and up to soprano part in a *piano* dynamic. After you can bring the voicing out clearly, include the dynamic (*crescendo and diminuendo*) in this passage as well.

The image contains two musical staves, each showing a sequence of parallel chords. The top staff is in C major and the bottom staff is in D major. Both staves show a sequence of parallel chords with fingerings indicated above and below the notes. The top staff has fingerings: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 above the notes and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 below. The bottom staff has fingerings: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 above the notes and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 below. The notes are grouped into chords, and the sequence is repeated three times.

Example 41. Dumesnil’s exercise for bringing out a single note.

There are many cases of parallel chords that need to be played *legato*. Surprisingly, many pianists insist to play parallel chords with all fifth-fingers. Using fifth-fingers all the way through loses the *legato* touch that Debussy demanded. In the opening, the left-hand has parallel chords which could easily be played with finger *legato* (Example 42). Connect the chords by using third, fourth, and fifth finger (Example 42). Of course, the note C[#]4 (left-hand, 1st and 2nd beat) cannot be totally *legato* because the note is repeated in the following

chord, but using the bass as an anchor it helps connect the chords. The sustain pedal should not be used to create an artificial or blurred *legato* sound.

Example 42. *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 1-2.

Another possibility for finger *legato* is at measure 6 to 7 (Example 43). Although the *legato* can be achieved by the sustain pedal, using connected fingering creates a more elegant phrase.

Example 43. *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 6-7.

All these examples are mainly focused on *legato* sound. As this Sarabande is in an elegant, severe, and exquisite manner, *legato* touch is a priority. Thanks to the use of

Dumesnil's exercises, pianists may achieve a *legato* touch without using the sustaining pedal. This way it will be possible to listen to the continuation of the *legato* line.

PEDALING

In this Sarabande, when Debussy shifted the melody from top-register to mid-register or an octave higher/lower, he changed the tone color and dynamic as well. The *una corda* pedal can be perfectly used to change the tone color in this movement. I discuss some possibility of using the *una corda* pedal, which creates more variety within the piece.

In measure 10 to 11, the top melody shifts to the mid register. The dynamic changes from *mezzo-forte* (mm. 10) to *piano* suddenly (mm. 11). Simultaneously, the parallel chords in the left-hand at measure 11 are a whole-tone scale. Those changes bring a more mysterious character, and the *una corda* pedal helps pianists create such atmosphere (Example 44).

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff contains the melody, and the bottom staff contains the accompaniment. Measure 10 is marked with a red '10'. In measure 11, the melody shifts to a lower register, and the dynamic changes to *p*. The left hand plays a whole-tone scale. A red line with a box labeled 'U.C.' indicates the use of the *una corda* pedal starting in measure 11.

Example 44. *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 10-11.

The melody in the Sarabande usually stays on the top register, but when it moves to an inner-voice, the sustaining pedal should be all the way down within the same harmony. In measure 23, the melody shifts to the inner-voice while the tenuto chords stay

on top and bottom; blurring the texture by using the sustaining pedal gives a grave and spiritual character (Example 45).

The image shows a musical score for three measures (23-25) of a Sarabande for piano. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The music is marked 'pp' (pianissimo) and includes the instruction '[au Mouv]'. The score shows a complex texture with many overlapping notes. A red line with a box labeled 'U.C.' is drawn below the bass staff, indicating the timing of the sustaining pedal.

Example 45. *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 23-25.

The sustaining pedal always presses down right after fingers presses the note. However, pressing down the sustaining pedal very late reduces the vibration of the string. It is good to do so when the music has a sudden change of dynamic (eg. *mezzo-forte* to *piano*). In measure 29 to 31, the dynamic starts from *mezzo-forte*, *crescendo*, and *subito piano*. The continuing legato pedal is not enough to make the *subito piano* happen, even if pianists control dynamic by fingers very well. Here, press the sustaining pedal as late as possible before fingers press the second eighth-note – this most effectively creates the *subito piano* (Example 46).

The image shows a musical score for measures 29-31 of a Sarabande from *Pour le piano*. The score is written for piano and consists of two staves. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The music features a descending melodic line in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand. A red bracket at the bottom of the score indicates a pedaling technique, with a red arrow pointing to a box labeled "late pedaling" in measure 31. The dynamic marking "mf" is present in measure 29.

Example 46. *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 29-31.

The sustaining pedal can increase tension when the direction of the music moves forward. From measure 38 to 41, the descending successive chord gives a straightforward direction; the sustaining pedal can help this passage in two ways. The first way is to change the sustaining pedal on every first note of the phrase. This way the pedal gives a little clearer accent at the beginning of the phrase and the sound is not too muddy in between. The second way is to use a tremolo pedal (butterfly pedal) fluttering all the way through until the main theme return (mm. 41). This way creates an exquisite atmosphere with the sound mixed beautifully. Either way works well in this passage. However, pianists should judge this based on the hall and the instrument. If the hall or piano has more resonance, pedaling the first way is good to clear out the muddy sound. But if the hall or the piano is too dry, pedaling the second way seems suitable (Example 47).

Example 47. *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 38-41.

The *una corda* pedal can give an exquisite coloring in measure 49 to 50. It fits perfectly here because the mode changes from major to minor, the chord change from open position (mm. 49) to closed position (mm. 50), and the dynamic changes from *piano* to *plus piano* (Example 48).

Example 48. *Pour le piano*, Sarabande, mm. 49-50.

The *una corda* pedal is very useful in this movement. It helps pianists depict a wider variety of colors. The *una corda* pedal can differentiate registers, change the tone color, and articulate dynamics precisely. All these examples are pointless if pianists do not listen carefully to all minute details. Do not be afraid to use the *una corda* pedal more often and adapt it to suit your own style.

INTERPRETATION

This Sarabande has a graceful and elegant character. The opening theme is like a chorale six-part writing in a grave tempo. It emphasizes the second beat of the second measure, which is typical in a Sarabande. The melodic line is presented in different layers such as: melody without accompaniment, solo melodic line with an accompaniment, and wider chords that expand as the tension increases. The middle section (mm. 23) is mysterious and solemn. The pulsing dissonance chords surround the mute trumpet-like melody.⁷⁴ The music then finally blasts out (mm. 56) in a majestic and grand character, followed by the subtle chordal figure and transparent strumming guitar accompaniment.

The opening is with grave and slow elegance. Keep the exact value of notes and keep tempo steady. Follow the expansion of the phrase by listening to the six-part writing (mm. 1-4) of the unaccompanied solo (mm. 5), to the solo with accompaniment (mm. 6-12), and widely spread chords (mm. 13-14).⁷⁵ Play each phrase in an expressive way by moving fingers in close contact with the keys. In measure 2, play the strumming guitar figure (left-hand) in an elegant manner. Keep the mood by rolling the left-hand chord calmly. The second beat of measure 2 should pause slightly longer. It must be present in a graceful gesture in which leaning on the second beat is appropriate. In measure 9, the melody moves up to a high register in a brighter sound. Emphasize the top voice where a faster finger speed helps produce a brighter color. Two measures after (m. 11), the melody line shifts back to the middle register in *piano* dynamic. The whole-tones are also present

⁷⁴ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 74.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

in four voices which change to a mysterious character.⁷⁶ Use the *una corda* pedal to change the tone color until measure 14. The strumming guitar occurs again at measure 19 expanding the texture to a wider range. The dynamic starts from *mezzo forte* with a *crescendo* within the same measure. Caio Pagano broadens the texture by rolling chords slower in the left-hand. He did a small *ritardando* on the second and third beat as well to help the *crescendo* more effectively.⁷⁷

The B section (section two),⁷⁸ measures 23 to 41, has a spiritual feeling and is more dissonant. The upper part and lower part have dots which presents the *portato* articulation. Do not assume that the dots affect the inner voice. In the right-hand, Debussy separated the voices clearly by writing stems up in the accompaniment part and stems down in the melody part. The melody sounds like a mute trumpet.⁷⁹ Play this section in a grave tempo, using the *una corda* pedal to mute the tone color with expressiveness. The mute trumpet melody must remain expressive at all times. Pianists must have full control of sound to differentiate the melody and accompaniment. Start building the texture by taking out the *una corda* pedal at measure 27. The melody moves then from a low register to a middle register (mm. 27-28), to the top register (m. 29-30), before shifting back to the middle register (m. 31-32). The tension in the melodic line is first created with these registral shifts. Then, add the intensity by building up the dynamics level from *pianissimo* (m. 23) to *mezzo*

⁷⁶ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 72.

⁷⁷ Pagano, “*French Piano Music: Franck, Satie, Debussy, Ravel*,” track 9.

⁷⁸ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 75.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

forte (m. 29), to *crescendo* (m. 30), back to *piano* subito (m. 31) and *pianissimo* (m. 32). Listen carefully and pay full attention to the sensibility, which requires a lot of control on the keyboard for a successful elegant character. The music then animates a little in measure 35. It builds up from a mysterious character (m. 35) and increases the intensity when the successive chord flows in the descending direction in measure 38. Here, let the music flow gracefully with a sustained a full value of each chord. Comparing the two recordings of Magda Tagliaferro⁸⁰ and Caio Pagano,⁸¹ from measures 35 to 41, the tempo by Magda Tagliaferro flows steady and faster than Caio Pagano. I think Magda Tagliaferro's perspective is to keep the pacing like what Marguerite Long reported that Debussy told her “to the metronome”.⁸² Tagliaferro's tempo is straightforward, and the sonority of each chord is firm. On the last eighth-note of measure 39, she stresses the chord longer to broaden the texture and intensity before dropping the dynamic back to *piano* in measure 41. While Caio Pagano’s tempo is very sustained, it clearly helps the listener differentiate between the background (accompaniment) and foreground (melody). Moreover, with every first downbeat of each measure (from measures 36 to 38), he slightly plays the bass before the melody. The music becomes more expressive and not mechanical. Then, he slightly pushes the tempo forward in measure 39 and slows down in measure 41 to let the descending chord flow along the musical direction. In my opinion, I would combine the idea of tempo choice (by Magda Tagliaferro), which pushes tempo forward at measure 39

⁸⁰ Tagliaferro, *Le Piano français de Chabrier a Debuss*, track 6.

⁸¹ Pagano, “*French Piano Music: Franck, Satie, Debussy, Ravel*,” track 9.

⁸² Long, *At the Piano with Debussy*, 23.

and split the note between the bass and the melody (by Caio Pagano). As a result, the music flows gracefully without sounding mechanical.

The theme comes back at measure 42. It is majestic and dignified, compared to measure 1 that is grave and slowly elegant. Then, it moves to the climax at measure 56. The chords should burst out, but with a steady tempo. The range expands in four octaves between left-hand and right-hand. One must remember that holding each chord for its full value is very important because it gives full strength and allows the vibration of the sound. From measure 67 to the end, it is transparent and bell-like. When pressing down the chord in the right-hand, keep the arm weight light but with firm fingertips and joints. Let the sound ring as bright as you can by voicing the top note but keep it quiet (*pianississimo*) for an intimate ending. The strumming guitar figure (left-hand) must be light as the wind blows away.

TOCCATA

FINGERING & TECHNIQUE

The Toccata is one of the most challenging pieces in Debussy's piano music. It requires dexterity in running notes which in many places show awkward hand positions. However, a further look at each hand position reveals that many notes form a chord and similar patterns. The fingerings I provide are based on block chords which help pianists recognize the pattern and memorize the passage easier.

The first passage in this Toccata deals with running notes in an unusual hand position, measure 13. Before playing the running notes, pianists need to first be familiar with the pattern of notes. At the beginning, play all the notes in each beat together (Example 49) to form a blocked pattern. This is what we call block chord exercise. It is a common tool for pianists to recognize the pattern and helps memorize the passage. After knowing the direction of block chords, play the actual notes and stop on the first sixteenth-note of the next group (Example 50). Increase the speed once you get more comfortable with the passage. Also practice the reverse grouping (Example 51) and the group of eighth (Example 52). My exercise helps the running notes go smoothly and comfortably in crossing fingers over the thumb.



Example 49. Block chords exercise. Toccata, mm. 13-16.



Example 50. Rhythmical exercise. Toccata, mm. 13-16.

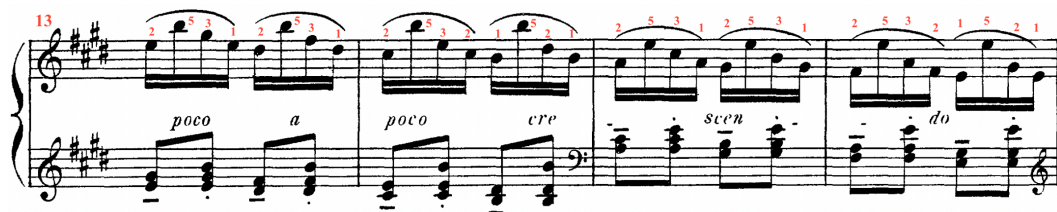


Example 51. Rhythmical exercise, reverse grouping. Toccata, mm. 13-16.



Example 52. Rhythmical exercise, grouping in septet. Toccata, mm. 13-16.

The fingering in measures 13-16 is sometimes confusing for pianists. A possible fingering for this awkward pattern is to use the second finger over the first finger in each group of sixteenth notes (Example 53). This gives more flexibility, better muscle memory, and no confusion in each group of sixteenth notes.



Example 53. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 13-16.

The broken arpeggio looks complicated in measure 26 and it is hard to find good fingerings. However, if pianists group the broken arpeggio in each beat, the broken arpeggios are essentially chords formed in ascending motion. Apply the same block chord exercise in this situation and now it is easy to recognize the finger pattern (Example 54).

Once pianists get familiarized with the pattern, turn the blocked chords into an original written exercise to practice for speed and clarity (Example 55).



Example 54. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, block chord from measures 26-32.



Example 55. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 26-32.

At measures 91 onwards, there is a simple and rigid block fingering suggested in several editions (Example 56). The problem with this common fingering is in the hand position between D4-F4 and A^b4. The fourth finger, as one moves to the thumb on A^b, can be stuck from the side of the black key (F[#]4) next to the F4. As a result, the thumb on the A^b (black key) can easily slip incorrectly to other keys. A possible solution to avoid the stuck problem is to do block fingering as shown in example 57. This takes some practice, but it solves the slip movement of the thumb (Example 57).

Example 56 shows a musical score for a piano (p) passage. The score consists of two staves. The upper staff contains a melodic line with a series of eighth notes. Above the first four notes, the fingerings 4, 1, 2, and 1 are written in red. Above the next three notes, the fingering 3 is written in black. The lower staff contains a bass line with a few notes. The dynamic marking *p* is placed below the first staff.

Example 56. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 91.

Example 57 shows a musical score for a piano (p) passage, similar to Example 56. The score consists of two staves. The upper staff contains a melodic line with a series of eighth notes. Above the first four notes, the fingerings 5, 2, 4, and 2 are written in red. Above the next three notes, the fingering 3 is written in black. The lower staff contains a bass line with a few notes. The dynamic marking *p* is placed below the first staff.

Example 57. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 91.

As all examples shown above, all fingering suggestions are based on block pattern. It is an essential skill that pianists should be able to recognize in these difficult passages. Almost everywhere in this Toccata, the complicated running notes always form by chord inversions, scale patterns, and repetitions that transpose up and down. Once pianists recognize patterns in the passage, it helps pianists find proper fingerings and memorize.

PEDALING

In this Toccata, many passages consist of different kind of articulations. The sustaining pedal could help pianists produce precise articulation. It also helps to create a different atmosphere, tone color, and to control dynamics. The pedaling I suggest in this movement is to simplify certain points for pianists; I also suggest certain places to consider using the sustaining pedal to differentiate sonorities.

In measure 9, the left-hand articulation consists of four sixteenth-notes (*legato*), followed by two eighth-notes (*staccato*). Press down the sustaining pedal from the first beat and pull up on the second downbeat to highlight the clarity of articulation (Example 58).

The image shows a musical score for two staves, treble and bass clef. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). Measure 9 is marked with a red '9' above the treble staff. It contains a left-hand passage with four sixteenth notes (G4, A4, B4, C5) followed by two eighth notes (D5, E5). A red bracket is placed under the first four notes, and a red line is drawn under the first beat. Measure 46 is marked with a red '46' above the treble staff. It shows a right-hand passage with a long pedal point (F#4) and a series of sixteenth notes (G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5). A red bracket is placed under the first four notes, and a red line is drawn under the first beat.

Example 58. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 9.

Using the sustaining pedal in passages that consist of long pedal points and running arpeggios is a must to create sonorous, harmonic, and vibrating sound. Never use only fingers velocity in the fast passage.⁸³ In measure 50, press the sustaining pedal all the way through and press it again when the F pedal point repeats in measure 54. This clears out

⁸³ Dumesnil, *How to Play and Teach Debussy*, 12.

the vibration of the strings and resets the dynamic back to the *piano* dynamic (Example 59). It is good to use the sustaining pedal this way when the passage has only running arpeggios and a pedal point as the ground bass.

Example 59. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 50-56.

There is a case when pianists need to change the pedal, even though the long pedal point still sustains. From measure 81 to 84, press the sustaining pedal on the downbeat of each measure to let the melody stand out from running arpeggios and pedal points (Example 60). The result may lose the calm and quiet atmosphere, but the melody in the left-hand thumb remains clear.

Example 60. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 81-84.

Next, in the rising scale-like figure without accompaniment, the sustaining pedal can give the impression of a flickering new tone color. Press down the sustaining pedal on the first beat and start releasing up until the end of the scale. This makes a crisp and *pianissimo* dynamic (Example 61).

The image shows a musical score for measures 137 and 138. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). Measure 137 begins with a dynamic marking of *pp subito*. The melody is a rising scale-like figure. A red bracket under the bass line indicates 'releasing up little by little'. The score is numbered 137 and 138.

Example 61. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 137-138.

There is one chromatic passage that asks for a tricky use of the sustaining pedal because the bass pedal point overlaps with the two-note slur. In example 62, measures 221 to 224, the pedaling suggestion is based on harmonic change. The sustaining pedal changes every down beat and on bass pedal point as well. The sustaining pedal differentiates each group of two-note slurs.

The image shows a musical score for Example 62, which is the Toccata from the suite Pour le piano. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It is divided into two systems. The first system, starting at measure 221, shows a syncopated bass line with a 'cresc.' marking. The second system, starting at measure 225, shows a more complex texture with a 'molto cresc.' marking. A red line with a sawtooth pattern is drawn below the bass line, indicating the use of a sustaining pedal.

Example 62. *Pour le piano*, Toccata, mm. 221-227.

The sustaining pedal is a great tool for pianists to explore and find a different shade of color. I like using the sustaining pedal to produce precise articulations and to point out the syncopations (m. 221-223) showing the G basses. The pedal can identify the articulation clearly and communicate the music to the listener. However, the sustaining pedal should not muddle the harmony or cover technical issues that pianists might have in the piece. Use the pedal wisely and feel it as part of your soul and interpretation.

INTERPRETATION

The Toccata has a crystalline characteristic. It is a triumphant ending of the suite. The goal of this movement is not about the fast speed, but precision and clarity, a reminder of the harpsichord toccatas of the Baroque. It combines fierce syncopation, electrifying running notes, and finally liberated ending.

The opening character is sparkling with light touch. The fingers must lift out after one another with no accent on the downbeat.⁸⁴ In measures 3 and 5, when the *crescendo* and *diminuendo* (hairpin) occur, the right-hand plays G[#] as a pedal point and the left-hand plays the melody. Bring out the left-hand with proper dynamic control on the hairpin effect and a light touch on G[#]. From measures 9 to 12, give a little stress on the downbeat of each measure to distinguish the harmony. In the recording by Caio Pagano, it is interesting that he used the pedal to differentiate the harmony. He used the pedal in measures 9 and 11 by pressing down the sustaining pedal on the downbeat and lifting on the second beat when the eighth-note staccato begins.⁸⁵ Therefore, the F Major chord (mm. 9 and 11) has a gentle character, whereas the B Minor chord (mm. 10 and 12) has a crisp character. From measures 13 to 16, the articulation in the left-hand consists of tenuto and staccato. The stress should be on each tenuto note. Also, differentiate the articulation by pressing the sustaining pedal on tenuto and lift on staccato. In measures 17 to 20, the eighth-note in the left-hand has a strong pulse, but the stress is created by the right-hand on the second sixteenth-note of each beat.⁸⁶ In measures 21 to 25, the melody in the left-hand must not merge to sound as a chordal texture. It should stand out with light touch and staccato. The dynamic is *subito piano* at measure 21, I suggest pianists play *mezzo-piano* and save the *piano* dynamic in measure 23, when it comes to *più piano*. Measures 26 to 49 have a mysterious character which pianists could use *una corda* pedal to help. The effect of

⁸⁴ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 78.

⁸⁵ Pagano, *French Piano Music*, track 10.

⁸⁶ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 78-79.

harmonic tension can build up by stress on the first beat and resolution on the second beat.⁸⁷ Legato in both hands and keeping an even sound is required. In measures 50 to 61, the texture has a liquid quality. Make the arpeggio pattern flow with great dynamic control (*crescendo* and *diminuendo*).

In measure 78, the texture changes to a syncopated pulse in the left-hand, while the right-hand maintains the arpeggio figure from the previous section. Use fingertips to play the arpeggio figure and lighten up as much as possible. Such lightness helps one prepare the texture and set the mood for the melody that is going to begin in measure 81. When the melody enters, bring it out expressively. This whole section should flow without hesitation or hiccups. Pianists must be very sensitive to using the sustaining pedal because it can cover up the melody easily. Using half-pedal rather than full pedal avoids a muddy sound. With the arrival of *fortissimo* in measure 115, the melody needs to explode while the running arpeggios must remain precise in the outline. The eighth-note syncopated rhythm should not interrupt either the melody or arpeggio accompaniment. Also, holding the full length of eighth-note value is important. From measure 137 to 154, keep the tempo steady, clear, and articulate the melody in the left-hand. In measure 155, keep the tremolo figure in the left-hand steady with a strong pulse.

The main theme comes back in measure 198; this entire section is powerful and grand. It requires full strength and contrasts with the arpeggio figure in *piano* dynamic at measure 206 to 209. The chromatic harmony should be precisely built with a dynamic plan from measure 221 to 227.

⁸⁷ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 79.

From measure 249, the syncopated rhythm in the left-hand must be broader. Holding each chord slightly longer gives more strength and a gigantic sound. The final chords at measure 259⁸⁸ must sound like a “glorious fanfare of victory”.⁸⁹ A fast attack speed in each chord help pianists create an enormous sound.

⁸⁸ Older editions printed “le double plus lent” in measure 259. Both Bärenreiter and the latest Durand edition by Roy Howat ignore that recommendation.

⁸⁹ Schmitz, *The Piano Works*, 80.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this study is to guide piano students, advanced pianists, and performers in the performance and interpretation of *Pour le piano*. To fully understand the work, *Pour le piano*, it is important for pianists to know the background of Debussy's life during the time he composed this work and apply historical context to performance and stylistic choices. Debussy was one of the most innovative French composers in the Impressionist period, inspired by everything from exoticist materials at the Exposition Universelle, to the harmonic language of Richard Wagner, and the pianistic and artistic influence of his contemporary colleagues. *Pour le Piano* is an excellent synthesis of a number of these elements, and yet remains underperformed in the piano literature compared to *Estampes*, the *Petit Suite*, and other works.

Technical issues often compound and over-complicate learning new repertoire. For *Pour le piano* I provide the fingerings, discuss all three pedals, and examine specific technical problems creating a comprehensive reference for the performance and pedagogy of this work. The technical solutions provided here would also be applicable to other Debussy compositions for the piano. The recordings by Magda Tagliaferro and Caio Pagano have a unique personality that make their interpretations distinctive and worth consideration. Instrumental pedagogy often has a legacy of technique passed to future students, and this analysis is my continuation specifically addressing *Pour le piano*. Through a close read of biographical and compositional influence combined with a detailed discussion of performance practice, this accompanying guide to the score will not only promote the wider performance of *Pour le piano* but offers solutions for more accurate and

historical presentations of this wonderful piece. From here, this study will lead me to write more performer's guides on other Debussy's piano compositions such as *Estamps*, *Children's corner*, Prelude book one and two, etc. Hoping to interpret Debussy's intention precisely.

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A BRIEF SUMMARY

Debussy, Claude. *Pour le piano*. Edited Ernest-Günter Heinemann, and fingering by Hans-Martin Theopold. Henle, 1984.

Ernst-Günter Heinemann's edition contains the short 1987 preface to *Pour le piano* by Lesure.

Debussy, Claude. *Pour le piano*. Edited by Regina Back, and fingering by Frederik Palme. Bärenreiter, 2007.

A new critical scholarly edition (Urtext), incorporating new research. The back provides a detailed critical commentary on the publication history of the work with some general performance practice suggestions.

Debussy, Claude. *Pour le piano*. Ed. Roy Howat. Durand, 2004.

This edition is the most reliable. Generated from Debussy's manuscript, this edition provides a helpful foreword with details such as changes in articulation and dynamics. Howat points out a few dynamic markings that make better sense if we know where exactly Debussy placed them. (There were some small mistakes in their placement by the publisher in the original edition.)

Debussy, Claude. *Pour le piano*. Second edition, Edited by Maurice Hinson, Alfred Publishing Co., 1990.

The edition provides the historical context of *Pour le piano*, analysis of each movement, and some performance recommendations.

Dumesnil, Maurice. *How to Play and Teach Debussy*. New York: Schroeder & Gunther, 1932.

This book was endorsed by Debussy's wife, Emma Bardac, before publication. Dumesnil suggests studying the *pianissimo* sections of the work in order to understand and render a proper mood. He also offers a method for practicing chords in which the melody is not in the top voice, and he teaches pedal technique that is adjusted for dynamics and articulations.

Dunoyer, Cecilia. *Marguerite Long: A Life in French Music, 1874-1966*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Marguerite Long is another great virtuoso pianist that worked with Debussy in the last few years of his life. This book presents her memories of Debussy, including some of their conversations, notably about pedaling, dynamics, and tempos in *Pour le piano*.

Fausser, Annegret. *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005.

The author provides an overview of the search for a French identity, and presents the opinions of French composers concerning German music.

Howat, Roy. *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

The author is a pianist and music scholar who specializes in French music. Howat describes the notational practices of those composers, hoping that performers can read music precisely in the way that the composer (Debussy) meant. By studying facsimile scores and Debussy's historical sources, Howat suggests connections between the Prelude from *Pour le piano* and the music of Bach.

Lesure, François. *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography*. Translated and Revised edition by Marie Rolf. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2019.

French musicologist François Lesure provides the first comprehensive accounting of Debussy's life.

Schmitz, Robert E. *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950.

Robert Schmitz, a pianist and writer that was active in Debussy's circle, is the earliest comprehensive source on Debussy's piano music. Concerning *Pour le piano*, Schmitz offers some historical background and a brief look at the form of the Prelude, Sarabande, and Toccata. Moreover, he discusses the most frequent issues confronted in performance and clarifies common technical errors. He also discusses the various kinds of sensitive touches that help pianists to develop clarity of sound.

Walsh, Stephen. *Debussy: A Painter in Sound*. First United States edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018.

Stephen Walsh presents the life of Debussy with some insight and details that Lesure did not include. In particular, a chapter titled "New Rules, Old Morals," discusses why Debussy had a love-hate relationship with Richard Wagner and suggests ideas that Debussy gained by attending the world's fair Exposition Universelle of 1889.

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