

# Meter as a Formal Delineator in Two Debussy *Préludes*

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## Introduction

Debussy's music is rich with fluctuations in meter, hypermeter, and phrasing. At times, these fluctuations can be uniquely composition-specific delineators of form. One can witness what I refer to as "metric profiles" at work in his music, which I simply define as unique metric-activity facets in a given span of time, facets that can recur elsewhere in a work to create a sense of formal recall and unity. Such a span can be said to possess a metric profile if metric activity, be it local or hypermetric, creates an identifiable metric experience that, to loosely borrow from Cooper and Meyer (1960: 4), is "marked for consciousness." Cooper and Meyer's original discussion references downbeat accent as the event so marked in order to create meter. In a metric profile, I may refer to a certain order of local states of metric orientation, as found in "Danseuses de Delphes," or I may refer to the use of a particular ordering of suggested hypermetric orientations within a section or entire work, as occurs in "Le vent dans la plaine."

Richard Cohn's (1992: 197) discussion of the opening eight measures of the scherzo to Ludwig van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony – the "call to attention," to use Cohn's term – and those measures' implications of future events serve as an apt example. The scherzo is a movement that William Kinderman (2009: 297) deems "one of Beethoven's most fascinating essays in metric manipulation." Beethoven provides us with an interesting rhythmic/metric eight-measure opening that puts forth an intentional metric-orientation duality (see Example 1). As Cohn (1992: 197) has noted, the eight-measure span, by its very length, comprises a "pure duple span well suited to establish the four-measure hypermeter that pervades the exposition." But, he goes on to state "[t]hese par-

ticular eight measures, however, make a messy job of it." Cohn teases out tonal, registral, and timbral events to illustrate how an accentual 2+3+3 grouping scheme among this eight-bar span creates conflict. Cohn goes on to note that "there are implicit duple/triple conflicts" that immediately follow in mm. 9–56, at numerous hierarchical levels. Though Cohn does not explicitly define the role of these measures as harbingers of duple/triple interplay, he unquestionably suggests this in his essay. One can argue that the presence of a duple span shifting to triple provides us with a "profile" of sorts, that – most significantly – foreshadows the duple/triple interplay first heard at the *ritmo di tre battute* indication at m. 177.<sup>1</sup> Below, I briefly expound on his observations to demonstrate this.

If we take all the attacks at face value, we note a tendency for activity that groups in two-bar units, as shown in Orientation A. This orientation frames mm. 1–8 in a conventional  $a+a+b$  quasi-sentential statement – albeit one with minimal content – in a standard 2+2+4 measure arrangement, complete with the acceleration in rhythmic activity in the "continuation" segment of this quasi-sentence.<sup>2</sup> A convenience of this hearing is that it creates broad four-bar hypermeter in mm. 1–8 that, as Cohn suggest, paves the way for the clear continuation of that hypermeter commencing at m. 9.

Cohn then outlines reasons why we may hear something far more interesting than this. Given the timbral and dynamic primacy of the double-forte strings in orchestral-unison entrances over the timpani,<sup>3</sup> we may hear something more in line with what is shown in Orientation B, a mix of A and B, or perhaps even some other orientation. Orientation B's portrayal of the listening experience, which draws upon Christopher Hasty's the-

<sup>1</sup> Regarding this interplay, Justin London (2004: 55) notes "William Caplin (1981) makes the distinction between *notated* vs. *expressed* meters – that is, between what we write and what we hear – and this example is a paradigmatic case of this distinction." Here, I simply use the term "perceived meter," which may or may not be in accord with the time signature.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of conventional sentence structure, see Caplin 1998: 10. The coupling of terms "presentation" for the first four measures of a standard-length sentence and "continuation" for the last four is seen in Caplin, and is in slight contrast to Schoenberg's use of "continuation" (1967: 21ff) in his *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*. Here, I am using Caplin's sense of "continuation."

<sup>3</sup> Leon Botstein (2000: 171) notes "Beethoven's ear for instrumental color, texture and timbre was, as Bekker (1918) suggests, integral to his compositional process."

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**Example 1.** Beethoven, Symphony no. 9, ii; mm. 1–12; Variant metric orientations that foreshadow the *ritmo di tre battute* hypermeter.

*Molto vivace*  $\text{♩} = 116$

Winds and Brass

Timpani

Strings

(oboe 1)

(violin 2)

A:  $\underline{2} \quad + \quad \underline{2} = 4 \quad \underline{2} \quad + \quad \underline{2} = 4 \quad \underline{4}$

B:  $\underline{2} \quad \underline{2? \ 3!} \quad \underline{3} \quad \underline{4}$

ory of projected meter,<sup>4</sup> acknowledges Orientation A's potentials, but then re-evaluates events in real time as the passage unfolds.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the duple orientation that was coaxed by the timpani entrance in m. 5 is gradually overridden by the more significant consecutive attacks at three-measure intervals at mm. 3, 6 and 9.<sup>6</sup> This is summarized in Example 1 with a strike-through of the 2 (duple) at m. 3, a question mark, and then a re-evaluated orientation of 3 (triple) spanning mm. 3–8. Just as a criminologist profiles the actions of the pursued, as listeners we profile actions exhibited in these opening bars, and note a potential for this motive's thematic presentations to quickly shift from a potential duple orientation to that of triple.

Another example of what one could arguably call a metric profile is found in Gretchen Horlacher's analysis of Bartok's "Change of Time," *Mikrokosmos* no. 126 (Horlacher 2001). Her analysis of the opening bars' metric projections is shown in Example 2. She illustrates how select accentual events and melodic-tone prolongations put forth a nested pattern of accent that is consistently nine eighth notes in length, as shown, à la Hasty, by solid inverted-arch arrows. In sum, even though we will sense metric irregularities in the first phrase, we can begin to entertain the possibility that the opening B-flat in m. 2 is a beginning and m. 1 is anacrusis, allowing a potential nine-pulsed span to emerge. Horlacher notes

<sup>4</sup> A primary component of Hasty's model of projection is that a given durational and accentual pattern harbors with it an expectation that it will be repeated. When it is, it begins to instill a sense of metric orientation. For more on Hasty's concept of metric projection, see his "Chapter 7: Meter as Projection" in *Meter as Rhythm* (Hasty 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Also see Cohn's (1992) Example 3, p. 197, upon which Orientation B in Example 1 is based; Orientation B intermingles Hasty's model of metric perception with Cohn's reading.

<sup>6</sup> Botstein also notes (2000: 181) "No instrument was better suited to assist in [fostering punctuation and discontinuity in orchestral textures] than the timpani." Thus, Orientation A's prizing of the timpani as hypermetric downbeat has its merits, but those are, in my opinion, subject to the duality described in Orientation B.

**Example 2.** Gretchen Horlacher; Example 2 from “Bartók’s ‘Change of Time’: Coming Unfixed,” in *Music Theory Online* 7/1 (Horlacher 2001).

The image shows a musical score for a piano part, labeled "part 1" and "Allegro pesante" with a tempo marking of a quarter note = 250. The score consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat). The time signature starts as 2/4, changes to 3/4 at measure 4, 3/8 at measure 6, 5/8 at measure 8, and returns to 2/4 at measure 10. Dynamic markings include *f*, *sf*, and *p*. Below the score, there are arrows and dashed lines indicating rhythmic groupings and relationships between measures, with some arrows marked with an 'x' and a question mark.

if we allow ourselves to follow the new possibilities that arise out of the first phrase [mm. 1–4], we are more prepared to expect the next ‘interruption’ [the 3/4 bar at m. 6 that follows the 2/4 bar in m. 5], or at least to be less distracted by it, for we may have come to value beginnings that occur every nine eighths.

Though the Beethoven and the Bartók examples differ greatly, they share the quality of being uniquely “marked” or noteworthy with regards to their metric activity. In both cases, such activity occurring in one passage early in the work influences the manner in which we structurally hear an ensuing passage.

Finally, I must mention that certain temporal events described in the above examples cannot be clearly defined as “metric,” yet they exist in a broader metric context, and for this reason, I maintain use of the term “metric profile.” For example, given Orientation B’s reading of the Beethoven, the initial two-bar event is not “metrically” established in the Hasty sense, in that the given rhythmic event did not clearly recur to instill perceptual meter, but rather, was disrupted by two ensuing three-bar events in mm. 3–8. And, in the Bartók, if one is to compare the engaging contrasts between the two “metric” readings – one through his time signature use and the other suggested in the Horlacher analysis, we note that the first reading is also not “metric” in the Hasty sense unless one subsumes all 18 eighth-note pulses within mm. 1–4, 5–8, and after into a broader metric unit with inner syncopations. But

each measure is composed in a way that the listener can certainly feel Bartók’s notated “meter” of 2/4 – 3/4 – 3/8 – 5/8. Technically, one could refer to these local units as having “mensural” identities (defined by length) rather than “metric” identities (defined by perception of periodicity), ones that are presented in an engaging contrast to the nine-eighth-note span that perceptually emerges. In both the Beethoven and Bartók, however, the mensural and metric identities of given spans are in constant dialogue. As we will see in my discussion of Debussy’s “Danseuses de Delphes,” there is a span within a metric profile that is arguably “mensural” (it is a singular quadruple-length span), but one that is very much situated within a broader “metric” profile.

Debussy’s metric profiles rarely if ever suggest the rapid changes in orientation as seen in the Bartók example, but they do go somewhat beyond the hemiola-like shifts between duple and triple that we see in the Beethoven example. Horlacher (2001) notes, with regards to the use of Hasty’s model for meter, that “a processive perspective [such as Hasty’s, as opposed to a “fixed” view of meter] is especially appropriate when metrical irregularity is frequent because it allows irregularity to assume a substantive role in shaping a piece’s time.” And, one could add, in shaping its form.

Existing analytical approaches to Debussy’s metric irregularity engage local fluctuations at the phrase level, as seen in discussions by Richard Parks (1999: 193), Christopher Hasty (1999), and

Simon Trezise (2003). Other approaches to Debussy's flexible metric palette are indirectly seen, for example, in the work of Avo Somer (2005), who illustrates the manner in which conventional thematic models (particularly Caplin's specific notion of sentence) provide stylistic contexts for irregular phrase lengths (which, on a higher level, often foster irregular hypermetric events).

In the two analytical essays that follow, similar to the various approaches mentioned above, I trace metric irregularities by way of unearthing "expressed" meter and, in some cases, even implied but incomplete hypermeter. I then frame and define metric profiles and demonstrate how they project large-scale formal narratives that work hand in hand with more traditional formal signifiers based in thematic and tonal contrast. As will be seen, I do not graphically apply direct Hastian analytical symbols, but his approach is strongly implicit within my profile framing.

**A metrically ambiguous profile, its varied restatement, and a metric resolution in "Danseuses de Delphes"**

Léon Vallas (1933: 208) notes Debussy's inspiration for the title "Danseuses de Delphes" to be an ancient Greco-Roman sculpture exhibited in the Louvre. The sculpture is of three bacchantes in an arm-in-arm circular dance. Debussy's musical depiction of dance here evokes "the ancient" in a collective and admittedly anachronistic sense,<sup>7, 8</sup> and is imbued with expressive, linear chromati-

cism that lends to it an air of sensuality.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Debussy's rolling of the blocked chords in mm. 4.2–5 in his piano-roll recording, rather than simply being construed as contemporary performance practice, may be heard as an Attic evocation of the lyre.<sup>10</sup>

On its surface, it appears to possess a fairly clear A B A' ternary design. In mm. 1–10, similar to a binary dance's first reprise, an opening five-measure theme is stated that cadences in or on the dominant, depending upon one's interpretation, and a composed repeat follows in mm. 6–10. A contrasting area spans mm. 11–24, and a return of the theme spans mm. 25–31. One could argue that mm. 11–31 comprise a binary dance's second reprise, albeit without repeat, with an incipient-ternary<sup>11</sup> return of A' at m. 25. Yet – as Boyd Pomeroy (2003: 169–172) has noted – such a construal is not without its issues. Specifically, he notes that a marked return to the tonic at m. 21 is misaligned with the return of its opening thematic material (A') at m. 25. If one takes the clear return of the opening thematic material as the A' point of reprise, then the delayed return of A' makes for a rather imbalanced three-part design.<sup>12</sup> The observations on meter that I put forth here do not fully explain away this surface thematic-area imbalance. However, they provide a structural narrative for the late return of the theme as a point of gradually achieved metric clarity rather than any recapitulation in the standard formal sense of that word.

<sup>7</sup> The anachronisms here are an evocation of the Baroque sarabande (see Howat 1997: 95) in the opening two measures (albeit with no overt beat-two emphasis), and imitation of the tonal plan and thematic statement process of a Baroque binary dance's first reprise, complete with composed repeat (Debussy rarely directly repeats entire nearly-identical phrase groups, as is done here). These events serve as "anachronistic triggers," so to speak, e.g., evocations of a past style or topic in order to evoke an even older era to which that style or topic may have little actual relevance.

<sup>8</sup> James Hepokoski (2009: 201) has also noted the opening two measures of "Danseuses" as an example of one of Debussy's formulaic openings, specifically, Hepokoski's category of the "Modal/Chordal Opening," whereby "chords in equal time values [can suggest a] [...] designated context [such as] [...] primeval times."

<sup>9</sup> Paul Roberts (1996: 243), with regards to this prelude, notes "Debussy's dancers, while noble and mystical, convey a cool eroticism."

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Bellman's (2014) ongoing research on Attic topics in Debussy has influenced me to interpret the rolled chords in this passage in this light. I hold the opinion that the more pronounced rolled chords in Debussy's own performances, more likely than not, had topical meanings (such as tolling bells in "La Cathédrale engloutie") rather than resulting simply from whim or contemporary performance practice.

<sup>11</sup> I intend this as a loosely comparable application of Berry's (1986: 48–49) formal category. It does not meet his suggested requirement that the second half be of comparable length.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of such formal misalignments in tonal literature, see Peter Smith (2005: 37ff), who uses the term "dimensional noncongruence" to describe, among other things, instances where tonal return and thematic reprise are non-aligned.

**Example 3.** Contrasting metric orientations and a broader metric profile in “Danseuses de Delphes,” mm. 1–20.

**Triple-meter orientation**  
 (“stately dance”)

mm. 1–2 (and 6–7)

3 + 3  
 (in 3/4 time)

*Lent et grave* ( $\text{♩} = 44$ )  
*doux et soutenu*

**Duple-meter orientation**  
 (“dotted-rhythm duple”)

mm. 3–4.2 (and 8–9.2)

quadruple span

2 + 2

**Ambiguous metric orientation**  
 (“suspended meter”)

mm. 4.2–5 (and 9.2–10)\*

bracketed (mm. 4–5 shown)

suspended metric orientation

mm. 11–14

3 + 3  
 (broad trochée rhythms in 3/2)

*doux mais en dehors*

mm. 15–16.2

quadruple span

mm. 16.2–20, bracketed (mm. 16–20 shown)

suspended metric orientation

\*Note: m. 10 differs from m. 5 in that it is a 4/4 bar ending with a half note rather than a 3/4 bar ending in a quarter note (see score).

A summary of that narrative is as follows. As shown in Example 3, the opening theme (mm. 1–5 and its repeat in 6–10) comprises three mildly contrasting ideas, each with its own metric orientation or lack of thereof. The details of each orientation within this profile will be addressed shortly. The music spanning mm. 11–20 clearly contrasts the opening, giving the effect of a “B” section of sorts. However, as illustrated by the aligned, corresponding passages in Example 3, its metric profile can be seen as an outgrowth of the same broad profile heard in mm. 1–5. Both of these areas also share a significant cadential arrival on F, the dominant of the overall tonic, B-flat. Given the metric instability of both spans of music from mm. 1–5 (and its repeat in 6–10) and 11–20, mm. 21–24 can be construed as a transition, both tonally and metrically, into a state of restoration of the work’s opening triple-metered dance. That four-bar span is metrically stable overall, but features syncopated gestures among mm. 21–22 that hold clear metric perception at bay. The final measures, 25–31, align the thematic reprise with the prelude’s clearest span of metric and hypermetric stability, whose repetitive gestures occur every two bars and form clear four-bar hypermeter through the remainder of the prelude.<sup>13</sup>

Let us re-engage the correspondences between the two manifestations of the profile suggested in Example 3. I present the three contrasting gestures in mm. 1–5 in stages:

*Stage 1:* The opening gesture’s stable triple meter in mm. 1–2 is projected by a direct repetition of a three-beat musical idea. I label this as the “stately dance” figure in Example 3.

*Stage 2:* This span of music features a local shift to duple orientation, projected by binary groupings of quarter notes alternating between

diatonic and chromatic pitches in the ascending bass line in mm. 3–4.1. This duple span is propelled by contiguous dotted-rhythmic figuration. The strong downbeat at m. 3 and the agogic arrival at 4.2 define the four-beat boundary housing the brief duple orientation. As Pomeroy has noted (2003: 170), the chromatic ascending bass motive (B<sub>♭</sub>–B–C–C<sub>♯</sub>) is also a rhythmic augmentation of the opening melody that “leads to the music’s temporary overspilling of its metrical confines.” As that same chromatic line spanned single metric units in mm. 1 and 2, its augmentation into four beats may also be associatively heard as an expansion of the original metric unit (now as two duple groups within a broader span of four pulses). The final arrival of the melody note D, resolving the V<sup>+</sup> (F<sup>+</sup>) sonority’s C sharp, also adds weight to m. 4.2’s sense of arrival. As with many metric readings in Debussy’s music, retrospective hearing is involved in this perceptual grouping. I name this the “dotted-rhythm duple” figure in Example 3.

*Stage 3:* In mm. 4.2–5, we experience dissolution of meter. Even though the span in 4.2–5 comprises six total quarter-note pulses, there is an absence of clear accentual cues needed to reorient a convincing return to triple meter at 4.2 given the recent shift to duple. Thus, mm. 1–5 cannot be explained away as a simple hemiola-like interplay between duple and triple orientations. In mm. 4.2–5, the steady rhythms, the gentle cascade of the modal melody, the lack of any clear periodic contour within the bass harmonization, and the parallel voice-leading negate any accentual cues that could overtly suggest metric orientation.<sup>14</sup> Debussy’s careful notation of uniform articulation (soft, “slurred staccato” attacks with implicit half-pedal) assists in this task as well.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, his

<sup>13</sup> The four-bar hyper meter is as follows: mm. 25–28 and 29–32(!). Note that, although there is no actual thirty-second measure, m. 31’s low B-flat (the work’s final articulation) offers a sense of downbeat for the perceived two-measure half of the four-bar hypermeter in m. 29 through the imagined m. 32. The fermata over that final articulation’s chord (m. 31) also provides a perceptual m. 32 of sorts.

<sup>14</sup> Accentual cues in the bass line obfuscate a clear return to 3/4 at 4.2. The nature of the line changes from that of an arpeggiating descent (D–A–F–D) in 4.2 (offbeat) through 4.3 to a series of downward moving tones at the quarter-note level (D–C–B<sub>♭</sub>) beginning at 4.4. The D–G–C motion in eighth notes (also beginning at 4.4) initiates a descending fifths progression that does not continue. These factors may add a subtle accentual weight (an additional possible perceptual downbeat) to 4.4, which is another factor in fostering an overall metric ambiguity from 4.2 through 5.

<sup>15</sup> One may also cautiously mention Debussy’s Welte-Mignon piano-roll performance (Debussy 2000) of this span (4.2–5), whose evenness in articulation and stress seems to avoid any implied return of triple meter.

**Example 4.** Compressed bass-line/harmonic shifts in mm. 16–18.

( 3 / 2 / 1.5 )

time-signature notation here fosters in the performer a distraction from metric hearing.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the elongation of the last agogic arrival in the composed repeat – from quarter in m. 5 to half note in m. 10 – further negates any possible “return to triple” interpretation, as mm. 9.2–10 comprise seven quarter note pulses (as compared to the aforementioned six pulses in 4.2–5). I refer to this as the “suspended meter” figure in Example 3.

This three-stage theme in mm. 1–5 possesses somewhat sentential qualities that are duplicated at a larger scale in 11–20. Measures 1–2 comprise a one-measure basic idea and its repetition, mm. 3–4.2 a continuation to an agogic first-inversion tonic arrival (but not a cadence),<sup>17</sup> and then mm. 4.2–5 the motion to a half cadence.<sup>18</sup>

A varied and expanded duplication of this profile is heard in mm. 11–20. Its first stage, as shown in Example 3, spans four bars. Each of its twice-stated “basic ideas” can be heard as a broader 3/2 measure, as shown. Its first two beats motivically reference the dotted-duple figures, its third beat the lyre-evoking modal cascade first heard in mm. 4.2–5 (now inverted in ascent).

The singular quadruple span in mm. 15–16.1 corresponds with 3–4.1 in a number of ways. We see the same arguably idiosyncratic use of 4/4 in m. 16 as is seen in m. 4 (see footnote 16), and, again, a steady stream of dotted figures is heard, clearly continuing to an agogic arrival at 16.2. A contrast in material at m. 15 creates a marked juncture, and, just as the sense of arrival at 4.2 creates a local juncture to frame the mensural identity of that quadruple span, so it does at 16.2. Additionally, the offbeat bass melody of C–A–B–C creates a clear four-beat prolongation of C major that shifts to a supertonic first-inversion D minor seventh (the music loosely suggests a local tonal center of C in mm. 15–17), supported with the agogic arrival of F in the bass at 16.2.

A series of syncopated attacks follows the F arrival at 16.2. Similar to mm. 4.2–5 and 9.2–10, metric perception is skewed. Contrastingly, the absence of perceptual meter in mm. 16.2–20 is the result of more overt saturating accentual irregularities rather than the downplaying of marked accents heard earlier in mm. 4.2–5. We note, in mm. 16–18, a broader process of compressed,

<sup>16</sup> I propose that Debussy may have used what I refer to as “anti-metric notation” here. He may have barred this opening as he did to ensure that the gesture in mm. 4.2–5 downplayed potential metric stress. Had he, for example, placed his parenthetical 4/4 bar at m. 3 and returned to 3/4 in m. 4, this notation would have accommodated the four-beat duple orientation, as well as the agogic arrival at 4.2, while also providing a returning 3/4 notational context for the gentle cascade that follows. Pomeroy (2003: 305, n. 37) raises the question as follows: “Since the effect of the rhythmic adjustment is a (retrospectively understood) relocation of the downbeat to the second crochet, one wonders why Debussy did not notate the 4/4 bar in bar 3 rather than bar 4.” Perhaps it was to avoid an obvious map for accentuation to the performer (to avoid an overtly “metric” rather than fluid performance), by way of this idiosyncratic but effective notational solution.

<sup>17</sup> The agogic arrival of I<sup>6</sup> at 4.2 is preceded by an increase in surface rhythmic activity in m. 3 (consistent dotted figures), a common method of initiating a sentence’s continuation phrase (Caplin 1998: 42). Following this agogic arrival is a more substantive half-cadence, completing the quasi-sentential structure in m. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Somer (2005) cites numerous examples of Debussy’s use of the sentence in the late chamber sonatas.

bass-driven harmonic events that negate metric orientation, from that of 3 quarter-note pulses to 2 pulses to 1.5 pulses (see Example 4). The half-to-quarter F–E bass motion in m. 16 is compressed in 17 to two quarter notes. The C arrival, in turn, spans 1.5 quarter notes before the articulation of the A-flat harmony in m. 18. In the following phrase, the repetitive nature of the thrice-repeated figure in mm. 18–20 (see score) gradually begins to reinstate a sense of triple meter, but one with inner syncopations that work to hold that perception of stability at a distance.

As mentioned above, the returning tonic harmony that initiates the ensuing passage of mm. 21–24 (see score) can present a formal conundrum to the listener. Does this mark the point of an A' reprise, or do we assign higher value to the return of the opening theme at m. 25 and deem *it* the point of reprise? If we take metric events into account, we witness a metric profile moving from stability to ambiguity in three successive statements (1–5, 6–10, and 11–20), leading to a final metric-stability resolution from m. 25 on, which supports an interpretation that assigns a tonal and metric transitional role for mm. 21–24. Tonally, though this passage begins on B-flat with clear, homophonic texture, its harmonic motion is highly chromatic. Metrically, though periodic and stable in and of itself, it continues a syncopated offbeat motive first featured in m. 15 and again featured in mm. 18–20; both previous locations are associated with metric ambiguity. Finally, there is what one might deem an “afterthought reprise” in m. 25, one whose function is to offer a reminiscence of the opening idea rather than a full-fledged return.<sup>19</sup> This return of the opening theme affords itself the metric stability of continuous hypermeter at both the duple and quadruple hypermetric levels, as mentioned.

### The role of hypermetric profiles in clarifying facets of arch form in “Le vent dans la plaine”

As with many of Debussy’s works, “Le vent dans la plaine” is a musical depiction of a force of nature. Given its windstorm-depicting faster tempo

(*Animé*; quarter note = 126),<sup>20</sup> many of its broader phrases are forged on a hypermetric level; thus, metric profiles discussed in this analysis are generally hypermetric. The prelude comprises three contrasting thematic gestures that I name as follows (see Example 5):

1. the opening ostinato-like “murmur gesture” with main theme, whose octave-displaced rapid half-step figures mimic a wind-like white noise
2. the “cascade” gesture, comprising descending E-flat minor seven and C half diminished tetra-chords in alternation, and
3. the thunder-depicting “turbulent apex” at the center of the prelude.

Under the subheading of seven-part design on the form diagram (see Example 6), the lower-case letters a, b, and c, correspond to these three gestures respectively. Their order of occurrence creates a potential seven-part design based strictly on change in theme. Or, one could weakly argue for a ten-part design given the musical contrasts between each successive lower-case letter. Yet, such interpretations suffer from thematic myopia, and clearly ignore tonal, motivic, formal-functional, and hypermetric cues present in the music. When such cues are taken into account and conjoined with sections’ hypermetric profiles, I argue that a five-part design perceptually emerges on a broader scale, as shown in Example 6 with upper case letters A, B, C, B’ and A’.

There are two specific events in the music that aid in a five-part hearing of the form. One is a formal-function and pitch-contrast juncture amid an otherwise unchanging gesture at m. 15 (between a and a’ or A and B in Example 6’s form diagram), and the other the opposite – new material at m. 28 that contrasts on the surface, but arguably links with mm. 22–27 to form a broader C section spanning mm. 22–34.

Let us first address the juncture at m. 15. Among mm. 1–14, the clear, identical return of the opening murmur in mm. 13–14 helps to frame the local contrasting cascade gesture of mm. 9–12 inside this larger area labeled “A.” A tonal prolongation of B-flat Phrygian (as suggested in the bassline

<sup>19</sup> An “afterthought reprise” tends to suggest a closing rather than thematic-presentation function. I would argue for its presence here and in other Debussy works, such as “La fille aux cheveux de lin” or “Reflets dans l’eau.”

<sup>20</sup> In his piano roll recording, Debussy stays fairly true to this brisk tempo, slowing a bit for the “cascade” gestures in mm. 9–13 (see Example 5), and pressing slightly beyond the quarter = 126 tempo in certain passages.



**Example 5.** Three contrasting thematic gestures in “Le vent.”

Gesture no. 1: “Murmur and theme” gesture (mm. 1–4 shown)

**Animé** (♩=126)  
*aussi légèrement que possible*

Gesture no. 2: “Cascade” gesture (mm. 9–12 shown)

Gesture no. 3: “Turbulent apex” gesture (mm. 28ff)

sketch in Example 6) also contributes to this framing. At m. 15, the murmur figure continues, but with a very audible contrast; there is a new pitch, B double-flat, and a retrospectively heard new terminating contour to the thematic statement. Notice (Example 7) how the statement in mm. 3–4 descends where as the new version at mm.

15–16 ascends.<sup>21</sup> The ensuing melodic statement in mm. 19–20 (see score) is a step higher over the pedal B double-flat, lending this passage a migratory quality. No such melodic sequence is heard in the opening fourteen measures. This migratory, inverted-arch version of the theme is heard again in the larger B' area in mm. 34–43. The B' section's

<sup>21</sup> The bass motion in the “cascade” gesture foreshadows this contrast (see Example 5, no. 2); see the bass descent into m. 11.1 and the ascent into m. 13.1. Also, the descending contour heard in mm. 4 continues in diminution in mm. 5–6, just as the ascending contour heard in m. 16 continues in diminution in m. 17.

**Meter as a Formal Delineator in Two Debussy *Préludes***

**Example 6.** Form diagram for “Le vent dans la plaine.”

Seven-part design based on surface changes in gestures and themes (each span of maintained thematic content is underlined):

a w/theme b a a' w/theme in tonal motion C<sub>1</sub> C<sub>2</sub> a' w/theme in tonal motion a w/theme b a

Refined five-part formal design (with increased sensitivity to tonal and motivic variants):

A: mm. 1–14 (with local a-b-a)    B: 15–21 (B derived of a)    C: 22–34.1 (elision @ 34) C<sub>1</sub> C<sub>2</sub>    B': 34–43 (B' derived of a)    A': 44–59 (a-b-a)

Some hypermetrically-driven formal unifiers:

Underlined groups connected with ampersand (“&”) connote hypermetric relationships or expectations of hypermeter

| A                      | B                | C <sub>1</sub>  | C <sub>2</sub> | B'                | A'                |
|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| mm. 1                  | 15               | 22              | 28             | 34                | 44                |
| 1-2 3-6 7-8 9-12 13-14 | 15-18 19-21      | 22-24 25-27     | 28-30 31-33    | 34-35 36-39 40-43 | 44-49 50-53 54-59 |
| (2) (4+2) & (4+2)      | (4 & expected 4) | (3 & 3 & 3 & 3) | (2) (4 & 4)    |                   |                   |
| (6 & 6)                | (actually 4+3)   | (6 & 6)         |                |                   |                   |

hypermeter suggested in initial B section is now realized

mm. 44–49: (4+2=6)\*  
mm. 50–53: b + a are now conflated into two two-bar statements\*  
mm. 54–59 (codetta): (2+4=6)\*

\*Although six-bar events in 44–49 and 54–59 within this section are not contiguous (and thus not hypermetric), their six-bar identity fosters a metric-group kinship with the initial A section. Also, bars 50–53 comprise the conflation of the b-a portion of the local a-b-a into a four-bar gesture, forming a palpable compression of the six-bar phrase group previously heard in mm. 9–14.

**Example 7.** Contrasting thematic presentations of main theme in “Le vent” (mm. 3–4 and 15–16 shown).

**Example 8.** Three-bar hypermeter in  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  gestures (and changes in figuration between B and C sections in the  $C_1$  example).

Example 8a: mm. 21–24 (C section begins at m. 22).

Change in figuration initiation C section ↓  $C_1$  gesture:

8b: mm.  $C_2$  “turbulent apex” gesture.

migratory qualities are heightened by the downward transpositions of its statements, from  $G\sharp$  to E (see bass sketch in Example 6), with an ultimate arrival on B-flat that initiates  $A'$  at m. 44.

Given those subtle thematic and pitch-collection contrasts, the listener can group the outer A and  $A'$  areas in the five part design against the motivically and texturally similar B and  $B'$  sections,<sup>22</sup> which, in turn, will help the listener to frame the inner area as a potential, singular C section. Yet, both hearing the juncture that initiates the C section at m. 22 and hearing what I've labeled as  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  as a single formal area are tasks that Debussy has rendered challenging. Both tasks are greatly informed by hypermetric events.

The seamlessness between B and C at m. 22 is, in part, brought about by a play on hypermetric expectations (see summary of hypermetric events in Example 6). The first statement of the theme (mm. 15–18) is four bars long, as it was in the A section, but the second statement (19–21) is cut short one bar as the sixteenth-note figuration's contour slightly changes at m. 22 (between B and C; see Example 8a). The listener's "reach" to complete the hypermeter hazes the formal seam in the music.  $C_1$ , in turn, builds to the thunder clashes in the turbulent apex of  $C_2$ . Yet, they are also formally wedded by a unique triple-hypermetric orientation, as shown in the hypermeter summary in Example 6. Specifically,  $C_1$  and  $C_2$  each

<sup>22</sup> As a kind of tonal "signal" of the returning B-flat arrival of  $A'$  in m. 44, Debussy uses contrastingly brief whole-step (as opposed to half-step) figurations among the murmur gesture in mm. 43.3–43.4.

comprise a pair of three-bar phrases that establish the broader triple-meter hypermeter.<sup>23</sup>

There are also other, perhaps more subtle, hypermetric connections at play among these five sections. If we account for the introductory function of mm. 34–35, akin to mm. 1–2, we note the framing B and B' sections' 4+4 hypermetric kinship. The initial B (mm. 15–21), as discussed, clips the potential hypermeter short in order to segue into the C section. The B' section (mm. 35–42), however, pays that promissory note – to borrow from Edward Cone (1982) – and provides a clear 4+4 hypermetric pair. In that way, the unified triple-hypermetric C section is flanked by music that first references and then completes quadruple hypermeter in its respective B sections.

There are also loose similarities between the A sections' hypermetric profiles. The similarities exist, albeit in perhaps more of a referentially mensural rather than literally hypermetric way. If we construe the opening two bars as introduction, we may be able to sense a kind of 4+2 kinship between these two flanking A areas in mm. 3–14 and 44–end (see Example 6). In the initial A, the four-bar theme is followed by the two-bar murmur gesture in mm. 3–8, and the four-bar cascade is also followed by the two-bar murmur in mm. 9–14. This 4+2 phrasing is again maintained at the onset of A' in mm. 44–49, even in light of a slightly altered thematic presentation.<sup>24</sup> The ensuing 4+2 that might have resulted in mm. 50–55, from a simple restatement of mm. 9–14 – with its four-bar cascade and two-bar murmur, is instead conflated into four bars among 50–53 as alternating figures of “cascade” (for 1.5 measures) and “murmur” (for half measures), thus taking events that once spanned six bars and compressing them into four. Note the earlier version's quarter-note bass notes in fifths, which serve as agogic arrivals in the middle of the second and fourth bars of the cascade gesture (at m. 10.3 and 12.3). And then note how these are replaced with fragments of the murmur gesture for half-measure spans at mm. 51.3 and 53.3. Debussy, in turn, transforms

the ensuing murmur gesture into a formally distinct coda in mm. 54 and after.

Finally, although Debussy is completely successful in dissolving metric and hypermetric orientation in the final measures,<sup>25</sup> we note that mm. 54–55 comprise a two-bar repetition of an idea, followed by a four-bar span that completely effaces meter. This is perhaps another mensural reference to the combination of two- and four-bar spans to create broader six-bar spans featured in the A sections.

### Concluding remarks

Regarding the early twentieth century, Edward Cone (1968: 82) notes “At this point (in music's history) metric and hypermetric articulation have gone too far, and it is not surprising to find that with Strauss, Mahler and especially Debussy, a new, looser, sometimes anti-metrical principle begins to emerge.”

It is true that Strauss, Mahler and “especially” Debussy, have, to an extent, abandoned conventional metric practices. Cone's observations raise the question: in what manner is this “new, looser principle” in Debussy “antimetric?” As has been illustrated in these analyses, Debussy's metric constructs can be highly unconventional, and the “anti-metrical principle” on display is imbued with structure and strategy. In “Danseuses de Delphes,” an opening metric profile serves as a source for an expanded variation on that profile in the works' ensuing section. And in “Le vent dans la plaine,” we see Debussy working on a broader, hypermetric canvas in order to give each section its own hypermetric identity in order to provide retrospective contrast between formal junctures that might otherwise escape perception. In both preludes, the metric profiles imbue spans of music with crafted yet subtle identities that, in turn, are strategically employed as formal delineators.

The irregularities with which Debussy imbues his metric and hypermetric constructs become, in many ways, points of focus – angularities that

<sup>23</sup> The three-bar pairs in C<sub>1</sub> are also clearly distinct from one another by overall (but not exclusive) use of the two different whole-tone collections for each span. The second span is, in essence, a sequential half step higher.

<sup>24</sup> Here in A', Debussy presents two complete and contiguous downward statements of the melody in mm. 44–47, which arguably serve to cancel out and contrast the “migratory” inverted arch versions heard in B and B'.

<sup>25</sup> Note the strategic spacing of attacks of the ascending major triad cocooned within the murmur gesture, from four quarter-note spans in mm. 54, 55 and 56 (on beat two of each measure), to a five quarter-note span in m. 57 (on beat three).

take on formal significance in most innovative and engaging manners. The sense of perfection we often experience in Debussy's forms remains – in many ways – ineffable, but it is my hope that

this discussion can provide some insights into the manner in which he uses meter along with more traditionally analyzed musical parameters to support the subtle rendering of his forms.

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## Meetrum vormilise piiritlejana Debussy kahes prelüüdis

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Debussy muusika meetriline ja hüpermeetriline struktuur võib raamida, ühendada ja seega ka kuulde- lisealt piiritleda muusika vormilisi üksusi. Kõnealusel uurimuses kirjeldatakse, kuidas meetrilised sünd- mused osalevad Debussy I vihiku kahe prelüüdi, „Danseuses de Delphes” („Delfi tantsijatarid”) ja „Le vent dans la plaine” („Tuul lagendikul”) vormistruktuuri moodustumises. Debussy muusikale omase muutliku meetrumi kontekstis võivad meetrilised sündmused omada spetsiifiliselt kompositsioonilist tähendust. Mainitud kompositsioonilisel spetsiifiliste sündmuste taasilmnemine teose mõnes teises ko- has vaid kinnistab nende vormiga seonduvat rolli. See kehtib eriti siis, kui nende sündmustega hõlmatud ajavahemikku kuulatakse vormiliselt tervikliku üksusena nii esmasel kui ka järgnevatel ilmnetistel. Juhul kui meetriliste sündmuste järgnevus loob eelkirjeldatud tingimustele vastava ajavahemiku, mõistetakse ajavahemikku meetriliselt identifitseerivaid jooni „meetrilise profiilina”. Sellised profiilid võivad tekkida nii meetrilise, hüpermeetrilise kui ka mõlema kombineeritud toime tulemusena. Mainitud profile võib osalt kasutada ka meetrumi laiema rolli illustreerimiseks, mida see pealkirjas viidatud muusikaväliste narratiivide edastamisel mängib.

Prelüüdis „Danseuses de Delphes” portreteeritakse arhailist teemat, põimides sellesse barokliku sa- rabandi siiruse, viimasele omaselt aeglase ja staatiliselt kolmeosalise meetrumi, saabumise dominandi- le esimese lausegrupi lõpus ja mainitud lausegrupi väljakirjutatud korduse, milles peegelduvad kahe- osalise tantsu esimesele osale omased vormilised konventsioonid. Prelüüdi rõhutatult akordilist algust võib ühtlasi kuulda viitena lüürale. Samas häirib selle algset, esimeses kahes taktis selgelt artikuleeritud kolmeosalist meetrumit üsna peatselt järgnev muusikalõik, mida raamistavad neli korrapäraselt impuls- si on retrospektiivselt tajutavad neljaosalise meetrumi avaldusena. Kirjeldatud neljaosalisel meetrumil põhinev lõik on ühtlasi seostatud toonika rõhutatud saabumisega. Sellest hetkest edasi liigub muusika leebelt juba mainitud dominandi poole, põhinedes meetriliselt defineerimatul ja identselt artikuleeri- tud kvartharmoniate järgneusel, millele paralleelne häälejuhtimine annab spetsiifilise värvi. See kõik toimub taktides 1–5. Nagu öeldud, kordub kogu lõik väljakirjutatud kordusena taktides 6–10 ning on sisuliselt identne selles, mis puudutab fraseerimist, ja pisut erinev mõnevõrra laiendatud dominandile saabumise poolest (vrd. takte 5 ja 10). On huvitav, et Debussy kasutab mainitud vormilõigu meetrilist profiili – mis hõlmas teatavasti kahte stabiilsel kolmeosalisel, kahte neljaosalisel meetrumil põhinevat ja kahte dominantu suubuvat meetriliselt määratlematut lõiku – uuesti taktides 11–20. Muusika, mis kõne- alustele taktidele omakorda järgneb, muutub järk-järgult nii meetriliselt kui ka hüpermeetriliselt püsiva- maks, võimaldades teost alustaval kolmeosalisel meetrumil viimaks ühemõtteliselt juurduda.

„Le vent dans la plaine” kujutab tormi, mis algab vaikselt, kasvab marulise kulminatsioonini ning vai- bub siis taas. Teost alustav saatepartii *ostinato*, mis moodustub kahest oktavi kaugusel olevast pool- toonist *b-cis* ja mida vaikselt, kiiresti ja vahelduvalt esitatakse, jäljendab omalaadset valget müra, mida tajutakse tuule kohinana kõrvus. Kasutades ABCBA vormi, õnnestub Debussyl siin oskuslikult ühendada rangelt sümmeetriline vormiline struktuur teose aluseks oleva efemeerse programmilise ideega. Pea- miselt hüpertasandil avalduv meetriline aktiivsus on mainitud sümmeetrilise vormi teenistuses, lastes defineerimatu meetrumi „udul” aeg-ajalt iseloomulikul viisil hajuda. Helitööd raamivad A-osad seostu- vad nii püsiva früügia laadiga sarnase helirea ja selle toonikaheli *b* kui ka kahe- ja neljataktiliste üksuste vaheldumise leebe artikuleerimise, või meetrilisele struktuurile viidates, sarnaste kuetaktiliste üksuste poolest. Teose mõlemad B-osad on nii faktuuri kui ka muusikalise retoorika poolest A-osadega väga sarnased. Siiski võib neid viimastest kergelt eristada, lähtudes teose peamotiivi lõpufiguurist, mis siin pigem ülespoole liikudes vormib ümberpööratud kaare, ning võrdlemisi tugevalt artikuleeritud nelja- osalisest hüpermeetrumist, mis A-osa hüpermeetrilisele mudelile kaks-pluss-neli selgelt vastandub. A- osast eristuvad B-osad ka helistikulise ebapüsivuse tõttu. Huvipakkuv on ka see, kuidas B-osas (taktid 15–22) viidatakse kaks korda neljataktilise hüpertakti moodustumise võimalusele, mis aga viimase takti

„ärakaotamise“ teel tühistatakse. Kirjeldatud pinge lahendatakse teises B-osas (taktid 36–43), milles eelnevalt viidatud neljaosalised hüpertaktid lõpuks ka tegelikult realiseeruvad. Teose C-osa hõlmab sisuliselt kahte retoorilises plaanis erinevat alaosa. Mainitud kaks alaosa ühendab tervikuks kolmeosalise hüpermeetriumi pidev kasutamine, suurem sisemine kontrastsus alaosadega A ja B võrreldes ning sirgjoonelisem liikumine kulminatsiooni, tormi haripunkti poole, mis on tulvil piksekärgatustena tõlgendatavaid muusikalisi figuure (taktid 28–34). Piksekärgatusi on kujutatud plahvatuslike, takte 28, 30, 31 ja 33 alustavate ja pea kogu klaveriregistrilt haaravate žestidena, millele alati järgneb summutatud kaja. Kolmeosaline hüpermeetrum, mis valitseb nii tormi haripunktile liikumist kui ka viimase saabumist (piksekärgatused), aitab kuulajal tajuda mõlemat löiku laiema üksuse (C-osa) alaosadena ning tunnetada kogu teose sümmeetrilist ülesehitust.