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Chapter 10

‘Song just beyond the nation, or Debussy via Verlaine’

Helen Abbott

The national idiom of the *mélodie* privileges the French poetic tradition. The leading organisation in France promoting the *mélodie* today defines the genre as follows:

La mélodie française est une forme musicale pour voix chantée et piano composée à partir d’un texte poétique. [...] La mélodie française s’attache à raffiner élocution et forme musicale, pour ‘coller’ au plus près du poème, dans sa forme et son contenu.¹

[The French *mélodie* is a musical form for voice and piano composed on the basis of a poetic text. [...] French *mélodie* seeks to finesse diction and musical form, so as to ‘stick’ to the poem as closely as possible, in both form and content.]

In this understanding of the genre, the poetic text is the underlying driver of each song. Yet to enable a musical setting to “‘stick” to the poem as closely as possible’ is rarely straightforward. This is especially true when a poem uses non-French forms (such as the Malay verse form, the *pantoum*, which rose to prominence in the mid-nineteenth century in France) and/or references non-French content, as is commonly the case especially in the

¹ Le Centre International de la Mélodie Française: <http://www.melodiefrancaise.com/> (accessed 15 November 2019). Translation my own.

Romantic and early post-Romantic eras.² Even when selecting poems from their own hallowed vernacular tradition, late nineteenth-century French *mélodie* composers may find themselves transported well beyond France, navigating different cultural loci and national idioms. The extent to which the mediation of other cultures shapes a *mélodie*'s form and content will be the focus of the analysis here, through an examination of a key poet-composer pairing of the French *mélodie* repertoire: Paul Verlaine and Claude Debussy. Verlaine was Debussy's poet of choice; while Debussy composed around one hundred songs over the course of his career, from the early 1880s through to 1915, around twenty per cent of his *mélodie* output used Verlaine's texts. A contextual analysis seeks to demonstrate how it was partly through Verlaine that Debussy shifted his attention towards cultures just beyond the nation, and away from the more far-flung 'exotic' locations that are more often associated with his music, such as the respective influences of Chinese pentatonicism or Indonesian gamelan.³ The importance of Verlaine's poetry for shaping Debussy's *mélodie* writing will be examined through a close reading of a pivotal set of songs at a key point in Debussy's career, the *Trois mélodies de Verlaine*, composed in 1891, but not published until 1901. These settings of poems from the poet's *Sagesse* collection of 1881 explore how the landscapes and seascapes of Belgium and England provide a source of inspiration for the poet, which the composer navigates through a complex set of decisions around prosody and repetition. Questioning the 'Frenchness' of these poems, and Debussy's response to them, lies at the heart of this investigation. Given Debussy's status as one of the exemplars of

² On the importance of the *pantoum*, see: Michèle Aquien, *Dictionnaire de poésie* (Paris, Livre de Poche, 1997), p. 212. On *romantisme* and its effect on national-cultural identities, see: Claude Millet, *Le Romantisme: Du bouleversement des lettres à la France révolutionnaire* (Paris, Livre de Poche, 2007), pp. 36–47.

³ Roy Howat, 'Modernization: From Chabrier and Fauré to Debussy and Ravel', in Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter (eds), *French Music Since Berlioz* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2006), pp. 197–221 (p. 208).

French musical style, and considering the significant intervention that French poetic language makes in his music, we might find ourselves better able to understand the status of *mélodie*'s 'Frenchness' as an art form that mediates various national idioms and cultural loci in such a way as to enable the composer to 'stick' his music to the poetic text through means which are neither binding nor circumscribed. This investigation also plays into broader questions surrounding music, nationalism, and 'Frenchness' for a composer who was also beginning work on musical projects which draw on ideas from just beyond the nation (whether the Belgian libretto of *Pelléas et Mélisande* or the English pre-Raphaelitism which inspired *La Damoiselle élue*, amongst other things). Such musical projects serve as a reminder that 'Frenchness' in Debussy's case can be both problematically constructed and complicatedly perceived.

Debussy never sets texts to music in a language other than French.⁴ In so doing, however, Debussy accesses cultures as diverse as China, Persia, and Spain, particularly in the early part of his song-writing career. The impetus to compose music which references these cultures is filtered through the lens of texts written in French by contemporary French authors. For example, Debussy set Marius Dillard's 'Rondel chinois' (c.1881), Armand Renaud's 'Flots, palmes, sables' (as *Mélodie persane*) (c.1882), and Théophile Gautier's 'La Manola' (as *Séguidille*) (c.1883).⁵ These 'exotic' cultures, 'tantalizingly different from one's native culture' and conjuring up 'faraway landscapes', undoubtedly served Debussy's compositional growth at this early stage of his career.⁶ Debussy's interest in texts which draw

⁴ Even for his 1883 cantata *La Damoiselle élue*, Debussy uses a French translation by Gabriel Sarrazin of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel*, drawn from Sarrazin's 1883 anthology *Poètes modernes d'Angleterre*.

⁵ Marie Rolf, 'Oriental and Iberian Resonances in Early Debussy songs', in François de Médicis and Steven Huebner (eds), *Debussy's Resonance* (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2018), pp. 272–300.

⁶ Rolf, 'Oriental and Iberian Resonances', p. 272.

on other cultures beyond France echoes the cultural trend for exoticism in nineteenth-century French literature.⁷ But it also establishes, through contrast and comparison, how his own style can appropriate idioms from elsewhere while also developing an art form which is resolutely French. As Marie Rolf has argued, ‘Debussy’s initial attraction to foreign values and artistic expressions may have triggered his attempts to compose transculturally – that is, to imitate and adopt the stylistic and formal conventions of other cultures.’⁸ Matthew Brown, too, observes how Debussy also excelled at ‘creat[ing] works based on vernacular idioms from other cultures’.⁹ In the *mélodies* of his early career, this meant infusing his music with sounds typically associated with that other culture. For *Rondel chinois*, Debussy allows his music to be permeated with pitch organisations characteristic of East Asian music, using pentatonic inflections and a modal canvas.¹⁰ In *Séguidille*, Debussy openly adopts Spanish musical formulae including quick triple metre, slow harmonic rhythm, chromatic inflections, and a descending tetrachord.¹¹ This seems to suggest that Debussy is drawn – through his reading of the texts – to overtly incorporate musical idioms from well beyond France.

⁷ See for example: Pierre Jourda, *L’Exotisme dans la littérature française depuis Chateaubriand*, 2 vols (Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1938–1956); Kate Marsh, *India in the French Imagination: Peripheral Voices, 1754–1815* (London, Pickering and Chatto, 2009); Jennifer Yee, *Exotic Subversions in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (Leeds, Maney, 2008). On the similar impetus by German and Russian writers to objectify ‘exotic’ or ‘other’ lands (and especially ‘the Orient’), see also Loges [pp. 25–26 in current full manuscript] and Bullock [pp. 71–74 in current full manuscript].

⁸ Rolf, ‘Oriental and Iberian Resonances’, p. 290.

⁹ Matthew Brown, *Debussy Redux: The Impact of His Music on Popular Culture* (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 2012), p. 6.

¹⁰ Rolf, ‘Oriental and Iberian Resonances’, p. 279.

¹¹ Rolf, ‘Oriental and Iberian Resonances’, pp. 283–288.

However, over time, Debussy's choice of poetic texts allows him to cultivate a compositional practice that tempers such overt cultural appropriation. While we may find more 'exotic' references in texts set to music in the early 1880s, his extensive engagement with the poetry of Verlaine allows him to develop ways of navigating encounters with cultures just beyond France, using techniques which are less clearly marked as 'other' in the musical language that Debussy goes on to deploy. Still in his early stages of song-writing, Debussy set poems by Verlaine which draw on the Italian *commedia dell'arte* tradition such as 'Clair de lune' (1882) or 'Pantomime' (1883). In these settings, Debussy allows himself to incorporate aspects of Italianate vocal style, such as short passages of melisma and/or vocalises. In later Verlaine settings, including his second version of *Clair de lune* (1891), Debussy begins to deploy text-setting techniques which are now identified as more 'typically French', favouring a note-per-syllable approach for the vocal line, avoiding strophic form, and adapting harmonic rhythms to the text rather than structuring the text according to a pre-existing harmonic frame. In this sense, the development of Debussy's emphasis on more 'French' characteristics can be observed in the way he sets Verlaine's poetry to music over the course of his career. He set seventeen Verlaine poems in total, from his earliest settings composed for the coloratura soprano Marie-Blanche Vasnier around 1882, to the late group of songs published as *Fêtes galantes* (second series) in 1904.¹² While Debussy also repeatedly sets a number of poems by French poets such as Banville, Baudelaire, Bouchor, Bourget, Mallarmé, and even Villon, no other poet sustains his attention for as many songs or so persistently across his career.

¹² Margaret Cobb, *The Poetic Debussy: A Collection of His Song Texts and Selected Letters*, translations by Richard Miller, revised second edition (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 1994), pp. xv–xvi.

Verlaine's poetry is not intense, serious poetry in the way that we might observe in the poetry of Baudelaire or Mallarmé, for example, but it does display a sophistication of verse technique which allows Debussy to exploit the poet's 'jeu déclamatoire' ['rhetorical play'].¹³ This feature of Verlaine's poetic language resonates with that characteristic of *mélodie française* which sees the French language idealised through concise and sophisticated poetic construction. In the *mélodie*, we are encouraged to hear the timbral richness of the French language through its subtly nuanced prosody.¹⁴ Pierre Bernac suggests that Debussy had a 'prodigious instinct' for 'the prosody of the literary text and [...] the rhythm of speech'.¹⁵ In fact, the artistry of French *mélodie* so often hinges on the balance between the artifice of French verse and the supposed naturalness of its speech rhythms. Debussy's was a significant compositional voice for shaping how music could privilege the naturalness of the French language. As Michel Gribenski has pointed out, 'il se peut que Debussy, au nom du naturel, s'écarte délibérément de scansion par trop artificielles' ['it is possible that Debussy, for the sake of naturalness, deliberately distances himself from poetic scansion which is too artificial'].¹⁶ For Debussy to navigate this privileging of the (natural) French language, his repeated attention to Verlaine's poetry speaks volumes. At a turning point in his musical development, Debussy composed the *Trois mélodies de Verlaine* (1891), setting poetic texts that invite Debussy to consider their 'Frenchness' and the options he had

¹³ Mylène Dubiau, 'Discours poétique et discours musical: interférences, lectures interprétatives', *Champs du signe*, 24 (2007), 11–70 at 11. Translation my own.

¹⁴ Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 161–2.

¹⁵ Pierre Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song* (London, Kahn and Averill, 1977), p. 154.

¹⁶ Michel Gribenski, "'Chanter comme des personnes naturelles": Apocope de l'e caduc et synérèse chez Debussy et quelques-uns de ses contemporains', *Cahiers Debussy*, 30 (2007), 5–57 at 32.

available to him, musically, for writing *mélodie française*. The focal point of the analysis which follows will be an examination of how ‘French’ these songs are, given the underlying impetus of the texts. Being attentive to how Debussy might continue to mediate different cultures at this point of his career, through specific text-setting techniques (prosody and repetition), will allow a close reading of these songs to unpack Debussy’s musical vocabulary as he navigates both the naturalness and the artifice of Verlaine’s French verse lines. If a decade earlier Debussy was overtly ‘quoting’ musical idioms from East Asia or Spain, here we begin to observe a composer whose growing knowledge of Verlaine’s poetry enables him to create songs which reach just beyond the nation, allowing the composer to both promote and critique the versions of ‘Frenchness’ that lie at the heart of *mélodie française*.¹⁷

The French verse line underwent substantial changes during the course of the nineteenth century, with a loosening of the rhythmical frame which allowed, ultimately, for the development of both free verse and prose poetry while also renewing traditional metrical forms. Verlaine was an instrumental figure in the development of French verse form, whose technical prowess lay in poetic strategies for lightening the weight of verse metre. This included opting for shorter line lengths (to avoid any hackneyed formulae associated with the hallowed *alexandrin*) and offsetting expectations by changing the traditional syllable count (the *vers impair*, for example). This ‘lightness’ of feel had attracted critics’ attention with the publication of his collections *Fêtes galantes* (1869), *La Bonne chanson* (1870), and *Romances sans paroles* (1874), all of which inspired major French composers working in the *mélodie* genre (including, notably, Debussy and Fauré).¹⁸ But in 1881, Verlaine published a

¹⁷ One way of reading this is to use Dayan’s ‘song as universal’ approach, which suggest that song, in nineteenth-century French poetic thinking, ‘is always already beyond the nation’ because it ‘exists in a sphere where there are (and can be) no nations’ [See pp. 186 in current full manuscript]

¹⁸ For a detailed account of Verlaine settings, see Ruth L. White, *Verlaine et les musiciens* (Paris, Minard, 1992), which collates over 1,500 settings of Verlaine’s poetry by 650 different composers.

new collection of poetry, *Sagesse*, which had an altogether different feel to it, in both form and content. The publishing house for this collection was the Brussels-based *Société générale de librairie catholique*, signalling Verlaine's attempts to rehabilitate his public persona following the scandal of the 1870s which had seen him leave his wife Mathilde Mauté in order to pursue an affair with Arthur Rimbaud. The Rimbaud affair infamously resulted in a tempestuous fracas which had landed Verlaine in prison in Belgium between 1873 and 1875, following which time Verlaine spent a significant period living and working in England. It was in the period following his release from prison that Verlaine composed his *Sagesse* poems. Whatever the circumstances of the composition of the collection, *Sagesse* signalled a markedly different verse writing for Verlaine, vacillating between the conversational and prosaic, and between the refined and abstract, while overtly exploring prosodic invention.¹⁹ This rhythmic-accentual play may well have been one of the attractions of the collection for Debussy, who likely encountered the book in its second edition, published by the more established French poetry publishing house Léon Vanier in 1889.²⁰ Divided into three parts, and becoming progressively less confessional in tone and more concise in metrical form as the collection progresses, the three poems selected by Debussy all come from the final section:

1. La mer est plus belle que les cathédrales (poem III/XV)

¹⁹ Paul Verlaine, *Œuvres poétiques*, edited by Jacques Robichez (Paris, Garnier, 1969), pp. 172–173.

²⁰ We know from Debussy's correspondence that he knew about *Sagesse* that year: in a letter to René Chansarel dated 24 April 1889, he writes of Verlaine's poetry collections: '*Jadis et naguère* m'a plu infiniment. *Sagesse*, hélas! est épuisée.' ['I liked *Jadis et naguère* a lot. *Sagesse*, sadly, is out of print.'] Claude Debussy, *Correspondance*, edited by François Lesure and Denis Herlin, (Paris, Gallimard, 2005), p. 73. Translation my own.

2. Le son du cor s'afflige vers les bois (poem III/IX)
3. L'échelonnement des haies moutonne à l'infini (poem III/XIII)

In these poems, Verlaine plays with prosodic techniques which lighten weight but intensify density including:

- displacement of the expected caesura (shifting where the natural 'pause' in the verse line should fall), such as in 'Le son du cor', where Verlaine alternates the placement of the caesura in the decasyllable between the standard 4 + 6, with the occasional 6 + 4, and lines which thwart both/either reading(s);
- diaraesis (extending word length by pronouncing two vowels separately, forming different word and line emphasis), such as in 'La mer est plus belle', where Verlaine uses the word 'patiente' in an extended 3-syllable pronunciation, creating different word emphasis ('pa-ti-ente');
- contre-rejet (placing a word at the end of a verse line which belongs syntactically to the next sense unit, creating unusual rhyme emphasis on that word), such as in 'L'échelonnement des haies', where Verlaine creates the phrase 'mer | Claire dans le brouillard clair' with the word 'mer' forming the line-end of the preceding line, and garnering double emphasis with the (repeated) rhyme word 'clair(e)'.

These features enable a composer like Debussy to experiment with patterns of stress and intonation, including through inventive interaction between the vocal line and the piano underlay in response to the (disrupted) metrical line. Such prosodic features also encourage attention to the possibilities afforded by repetition, including the extent to which homophonic wordplay and motivic devices can mirror each other. Under this lens, it may be possible to

read the prosodic play and the repetitious design features as serving to create songs that at once renew and undermine the *mélodie française* idiom. Debussy, in this sense, may find himself reaching just beyond the national idiom precisely because he uses Verlaine's poetry from *Sagesse* which itself navigates an uncertain path between 'Frenchness' and cultural otherness because its potential meanings pull in different directions, inflected by different times and places at the moment of instantiation of the poem, and of the poem-as-song.

The prosodic profile of each poem varies because each text deploys different stanza length, verse metre, and rhyme scheme:

1. 'La mer est plus belle': 4 x 6-lines, 5syll, ABABCC.²¹
2. 'Le son du cor': sonnet, 10syll (usually 4+6), ABBA ABBA CCD EED.²²
3. 'L'échelonnement des haies': 4 x quatrains, 7syll. ABBA CDDC EFFE GHHG.²³

The patterning of stresses is never regular in these poems, because Verlaine has either selected non-traditional line lengths through *vers impairs* of 'La mer est plus belle' and 'L'échelonnement des haies' or deployed a word order which disrupts phrasing of the

²¹ For a metrical analysis of this poem, see: Métrique en ligne

https://crisco2.unicaen.fr/verlaine/index.php?navigation=textesauteurs&auteur=VER_5&code_text=VER202_6

(accessed 15 November 2019).

²² For a metrical analysis of this poem, see: Métrique en ligne

https://crisco2.unicaen.fr/verlaine/index.php?navigation=textesauteurs&auteur=VER_5&code_text=VER196_6

(accessed 15 November 2019).

²³ For a metrical analysis of this poem, see: Métrique en ligne

https://crisco2.unicaen.fr/verlaine/index.php?navigation=textesauteurs&auteur=VER_5&code_text=VER200_6

(accessed 15 November 2019).

decasyllable by placing either a preposition ('avec', l. 6) or a proclitic ('le', l. 11) at the fourth syllable where a caesura might normally be expected. These decisions signal how Verlaine conceptualises his verse design as different from regular French verse, and Debussy's response to these metrical-prosodic innovations is telling. For the two poems using *vers impairs*, Debussy in fact adds extra syllables into the verse line in some instances, as if wanting to make these lines more 'correctly' French (since a hexasyllabic or octosyllabic line are more standard French verse metres). Specifically, in l. 20 of 'La mer est plus belle', Verlaine has suppressed a syllable that would normally be counted syllabically in French versification because a vowel is placed between another vowel (preceding) and a consonant (following): 'Qui s'y ri-ent plus clairs'. Debussy, in his setting of the poem has re-instated the vowel that Verlaine has (unusually) suppressed, by granting a full separate note to the second syllable of 'ri-ent' (Figure 1):



[CAPTION: Figure 1. Debussy, 'La mer est plus belle', m. 31]

Similarly, in l. 14 of 'L'échelonnement des haies', Debussy has added a syllable to 'roulée', pronouncing a postvocalic 'e' that would normally be elided (silent), setting it instead on two separate notes (albeit connected by a slur marking) to create 'roulé-e' (Figure 2):



[CAPTION: Figure 2. Debussy, ‘L’échelonnement des haies’, m. 25]

For Michel Gribenski, the extra postvocalic ‘e’s in these two songs might echo some of Debussy’s earlier song-writing techniques, in which he used melisma rather than a strict note-per-syllable approach, and Gribenski muses on a possible reason for this: ‘ces lectures peuvent cependant s’expliquer par un figuralisme mélodique sous la forme d’un mélisme expressif, voire imitatif’ [‘these responses could however be explained by vocal-line word-painting in the form of an expressive or even imitative melisma’].²⁴ Gribenski’s hypothesis of imitative word-painting is an interesting one. For ‘ri-ent’, which means ‘laugh’, and ‘roulé-e’, which means ‘rolled’ or ‘curled’, these supposed imitative melismas might indeed in some way illustrate the meaning of each word. But there may also be other explanations, especially since these instances of adding extra syllables to a French verse line – by any poet – in the Debussyian repertoire are extremely unusual. For a composer like Debussy at this stage of his career to modify the metrical profile established by the poet (including making supposed scansion errors) may imply an interest in negotiating the artifice of French verse in line with the changing tastes of a late-nineteenth-century French audience for whom free verse and prose poetry were becoming increasingly dominant forms. It may also suggest an attempt to

²⁴ Gribenski, “Chanter comme des personnes naturelles”, 32.

rehabilitate the text's 'Frenchness' by creating a setting that renders the text more 'natural' precisely by disregarding official metrical count and expected prosodic stress.

These poems by Verlaine display an uncomfortable 'Frenchness', which may help to account for their apparent prosodic unevenness. In the manuscript version of 'La mer est plus belle' sent to the poet's friend Lepelletier, Verlaine gave the poem a different title: 'La mer de Bournemouth' ['The sea at Bournemouth'], and a copy owned by Harry Kessler states 'Bournemouth, Angleterre, été 1876' ['Bournemouth, England, summer 1876']. Similarly, two manuscript versions of 'L'échelonnement des haies' survive, for which the version sent to Lepelletier bears the title 'Paysage en Lincolnshire' ['Lincolnshire countryside'], and a copy owned by Kessler copy states 'Stickney, on a Sunday 1875'. It would seem far-fetched to suggest that Debussy knew that these were poems 'about' English scenery (and that such a fact alone would prompt the composer to use a particular prosodic disruption). But it is entirely valid to surmise that Debussy was aware of Verlaine's time spent living and working abroad in England, since this was well-known in the cultural and artistic circles of Paris, especially during the period of the late 1880s when Verlaine sought to re-enter public life (albeit mostly unsuccessfully). The presence of a number of unusual prosodic decisions by Debussy alerts us to the possibility that the composer may be negotiating layers of potential meaning which would enable him to mark his songs as *mélodie française*, even when the qualities of the texts' 'Frenchness' are called into question.

A consideration of 'Le son du cor' may help to clarify this point. The sonnet's opening line already alerts a French reader familiar with poetry to resonances with a famous Vigny poem, 'Le Cor' which itself opens with the lines:

J'aime **le son du Cor**, le soir, au fond **des bois**,

Soit qu'il chante les pleurs de la biche **aux abois**...

[I love the sound of the Horn, of an evening, deep in the woods,
Whether it is singing the tears of a trapped bitch in distress...]

In an apparent borrowing of Vigny's text, Verlaine deploys the same imagery and rhyme pairing (bois/abois) in the opening and closing lines of the first quatrain of his own sonnet:

Le son du cor s'afflige vers les bois, [//]

Parmi la bise errant **en courts abois.**

[The sound of the horn cries out in the direction of the woods. [//]

Amidst the violent gusts of a chill wind]²⁵

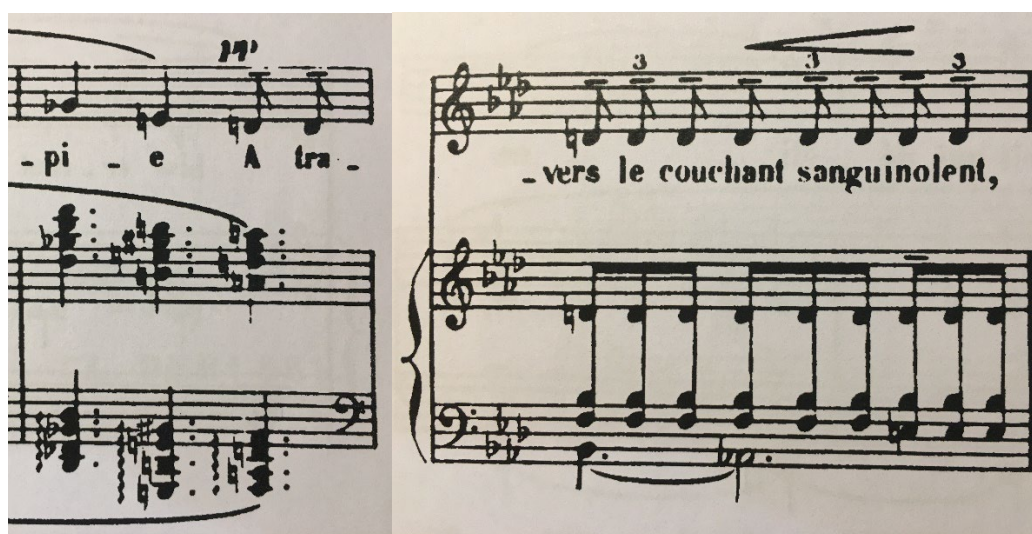
Where the Romantic-era poet Vigny writes politely in evenly-weighted *alexandrins*, Verlaine's decasyllables question balance and emphasis, inviting readers to consider where they might breathe or pause in the line (rather than relying on convention). Specifically, l. 11 of the sonnet raises questions for the reader, who by this point may have been persuaded that the poem is a regular 4 + 6 decasyllable. Were the reader to follow this pattern of emphasis in this line, placing the usual accentual stress on the fourth syllable, they would find themselves doing so on a proclitic (the definite article 'le'):

²⁵ Note that Vigny's and Verlaine's homophonic word play makes it difficult in an English translation to capture the multiple and implied meanings of 'aux abois' as distress, desperation, (an animal) caught in a trap, and of 'abois' as barking, baying (of dogs).

A travers le | couchant sanguinolent

[Across the blood-streaked setting sun]

Debussy's response to this prosodic uncertainty is to smooth over the caesura by setting the line on one note (D natural), using (triplet) quavers for each syllable, with a longer note duration for the final syllable. In this respect, Debussy makes no distinction in terms of metrical weight, and requires the line to be performed without a caesural pause (Figure 3):



[CAPTION: Figure 3. Debussy, 'Le son du cor', mm. 27–28]

In fact, smoothing over a potential caesura has been Debussy's approach throughout the song, avoiding the foregrounding of the traditional 4 + 6 caesura and privileging instead the full sense unit in his vocal line phrasing. This decision raises other issues in performance, in terms of how a singer might breathe each sense unit in a song marked 'Lent et dolent' ['Slow and mournful'], and which Debussy recasts without written-in rests (most notably for the entirety of the second quatrain, mm. 14–21). Where a reading of this poem might have invited resonances with traditional French verse (in the Vignian sense), instead Debussy's reading privileges the sense of being out-of-kilter with one's own voice, because breath and stress is rendered in such a way that the singer is expected to foreground neither. The poem's

lexis might suggest something more emotive ('s'afflige', 'douleur', 'agonie', 'navre') [(('is distressed', 'pain', 'agony', 'saddens')], but Debussy's rendering of it in song captures a lyrical displacement which derives from rejecting traditional French verse norms. He casts it, musically, through smoothing-over prosodic accent, diminishing the options for breaking up the phrases through breaths, and keeping the mood in suspense by persistently delaying resolution to the tonic (f minor) until the final plagal cadence, which in any case never feels quite like it resolves anything.²⁶ The artifice of verse is cast aside in favour of a moderated, natural delivery of the poem, which then calls into question the text's connection with its own 'Frenchness', heightened by a tonal framework that reinforces uncertainty by mixing chords borrowed from the parallel major to the minor (particularly around the submediant) and by deploying whole-tone material across extended passages. In one sense, this song becomes 'quintessentially Debussyian'.²⁷ In another, it calls into question how we might locate this song. If we view it as the central song of a set of three, then its centrality is not only tonally ambiguous but also only very loosely connected, musically, to the outer two songs.²⁸ If we acknowledge that the status (or ordering) of the songs as a set of three was not fixed, then

²⁶ Roy Howat comments on how this technique is an important feature of Debussy's 'musical revolution' in which he anticipates the tonic from the start (in this instance, through an open fifth, including the F but with B flat at its 'root'), but then 'spend[s] most of the piece delaying its resolution.' Howat, 'Modernization', 205–207. Avo Somer also comments of this song in particular how 'the tonal focus is altogether ambiguous not only during the extended, structurally dissonant non-tonic opening but indeed throughout the song. The F-minor tonic appears only at the very end.' Avo Somer, 'Chromatic Third-Relations and Tonal Structure in the Songs of Debussy', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 17:2 (1995), 215–241 at 221.

²⁷ Somer, 'Chromatic Third-Relations and Tonal Structure', 221.

²⁸ David Code proposes that the *Trois mélodies de Verlaine* form part of a 'Debussyan genre', that of the song triptych. David Code, 'The "song triptych": reflections on a Debussyan genre', *Scottish Music Review*, 3:1 (2013), 1–40.

considering them in the light of Debussy's compositional response to Verlaine's *Sagesse* poems, it may be apposite to recall that, like 'La mer est plus belle' and 'L'échelonnement des haies', this poem, too, bears a manuscript inscription of another place just beyond France.²⁹ In the copy owned by Kessler, Verlaine has written a note that traverses a different national border, even closer to home: 'Jehonville, Belgique (ressouvenir de Charleville, hiver 1872)' ['Jehonville, Belgium (remembrance of Charleville, winter 1872)'] where Charleville references Rimbaud's French hometown close to the Belgian border. This uncertainly French song, using a poetic text inspired by the Belgian countryside just across the border from Verlaine's lover's French hometown, referencing a famous French Romantic poem but deploying prosodic techniques that eschew the French poetic tradition, set to music by a French composer who tries to re-naturalise the poetic language by exploring the possibility of a more prosaic and 'natural' delivery of French language in his vocal compositions while creating a wholly new 'French' musical sound, takes on an altogether different hue.³⁰ This song, like its counterparts in the set, criss-crosses the borders of 'Frenchness' at frequent

²⁹ The first song is dedicated to Ernest Chausson; the second two songs are dedicated to Robert Godet. The first two were premiered together in Paris on 16 January 1904; the third song received its premiere as a stand-alone song on 6 December 1905. The three songs were published as a set by Hamelle in 1901, but then republished by different publishing houses, including no. III by Fromont in 1907 (as a stand-alone song), and no. II and no. III as a pair entitled *Deux mélodies* by Jobert in 1924 (including a version with English words in a singing translation by M.D. Calvocoressi). See: Centre de Documentation Claude Debussy, http://debussy.fr/cdfr/catalog/oeuvre_85.php (accessed 23 January 2020).

³⁰ Shortly after completing these *Trois mélodies de Verlaine* in 1891, Debussy went on to write his own prose texts for his *Proses lyriques* composed in 1892–1893. In addition, Debussy was shortly to begin sketches for *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1893, setting the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck's prose text to music for his opera that was to première in 1902.

turns, drawing on neighbouring influences from just beyond the nation to develop a set of connections that expand the vocabulary and reach of the poem and the music alike.

For Verlaine, the sources of inspiration stemming from the English channel, forests on the Belgian-French border, and the hedgerows of the English countryside, operate to enact cultural-specificity, as much as they do to extract *correspondances*. We could read these poems as inspired, broadly, by the natural world since nothing overtly in the poem texts themselves express specific source locations. Reading along these lines, we could look, then, to see how Debussy has ‘represented’ the sea in diaphanous chromatic-arpeggiated figurations in the piano accompaniment, spanning the compass of the keyboard, throughout ‘La mer est plus belle’, for example.³¹ But as Caroline Potter has argued, for Debussy, any attempts to reproduce natural phenomena in music can only ever be suggestive, since more direct musical formulae risk rehearsing tired clichés. The composer can instead evoke the motion of water in more suggestive non-identical repetitive motifs.³² In this case, Debussy’s alternation between B major and d minor ascending arpeggiated sextuplets in the first six bars of ‘La mer est plus belle’ sets up a palpable swaying motion that is then developed through the song with harmonic and rhythmic variations on this pattern. Non-identical repetition emerges as a key feature of Debussy’s writing as much as it does of Verlaine’s, albeit serving different functions. Both the poet and the composer negotiate the slippage between specificity of a given cultural reference, and the possibility of reading and hearing such ideas as ones that transcend national-cultural specificity. Verlaine’s playfulness with the French language draws on frequent close phoneme repetition (not just for line-end rhyme) and paronomasia.

³¹ Debussy would go on to compose his symphonic sea sketches, *La Mer*, between 1903 and 1905.

³² Caroline Potter, ‘Debussy and nature’, in Simon Trezise (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2003), pp. 137–151 (p. 147).

These non-identical sound repetition techniques create resonating chambers within the poem, setting off undertones and overtones which resonate out beyond the text itself, as in a musical setting. Debussy's own musical language deploys techniques of non-identical repetitious sound reinforcement, in particular repeated motifs which are varied through rhythmical expansion or contraction. Where Verlaine's sound-repetition techniques are constructed on the specificity of the French language, Debussy's are not, but nor do they emerge from nowhere. The interplay between the poet's linguistic strategies and the composer's responses is tightly knit, but not linear or causal. As Mylène Dubiau has argued:

Les nouveautés des recherches poétiques de la fin du XIX^e siècle vont soulever des questionnements chez les compositeurs: ce sont justement ces défis qui attirent Claude Debussy vers la poésie de Paul Verlaine. Ses textes, confrontant le compositeur à des impasses de réalisation musicale, vont l'amener à repenser toutes ces conventions établies.³³

[The innovations in poetic techniques at the end of the nineteenth century were to give rise to concerns on the part of composers: these were precisely the challenges that attracted Claude Debussy to the poetry of Paul Verlaine. His texts, bringing the composer face to face with impossible quandaries for how to realise them in music, were to lead Debussy to rethink all the established conventions.]

³³ Mylène Dubiau, 'La musique de l'enjambement verlainien: essais debussystes', *Revue Verlaine*, 12 (2014), 125–150 at 131.

This meant, for Debussy, not trying to map or mirror the playful challenges of Verlaine's poetic language within his setting, but to shift his attention elsewhere in the score to create a musical design that responded to such challenges without resorting to cliché or artifice, moving beyond the circumscribed nature of existing musical and text-setting conventions by working with, not against, the challenges posed by the French poetic text.³⁴

Verlaine's phoneme repetition and paronomasia is frequent in all three poems selected by Debussy for the *Trois mélodies*. For example, in l. 12 of 'Le son du cor', he repeats the word 'air' but deploys two different meanings of the term, one literal, one figurative:

Et l'**air** a l'**air** d'être un soupir d'automne

[And the air has the air of an autumn sigh]

Similarly, in ll. 2–3 of 'L'échelonnement des haies', Verlaine exploits different nuances of meaning of the adjective 'clair', meaning both light (bright) and clear (transparent), while also hinting at other meanings of the term, such as obvious, evident, or distinct, while not allowing us to be certain of which meanings are implied:

mer // **Claire** dans le brouillard **clair**.

[Light-coloured sea in the clear fog]³⁵

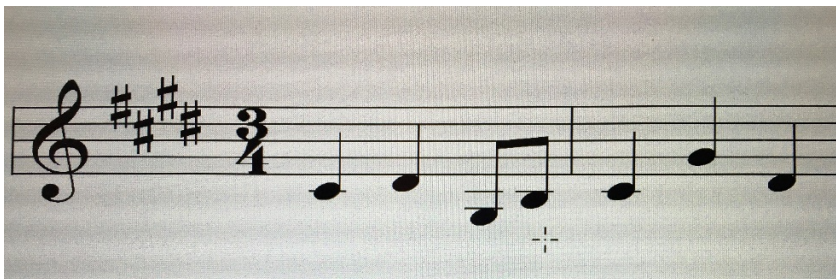
The undecidability of meaning here is important, poetically. The pairing of almost identically-sounding terms is, however, complicated by the metrical difference, where 'claire'

³⁴ This is contrary to what Caballero has suggested elsewhere in this volume, that Debussy's Verlaine settings offer a 'nearly literal reflection of each word, image, or emotional tenor' [See pp. 240–241 in current full manuscript].

³⁵ Other translations are possible, such as 'Clear sea in the clear fog' or 'Bright sea in the see-through fog'.

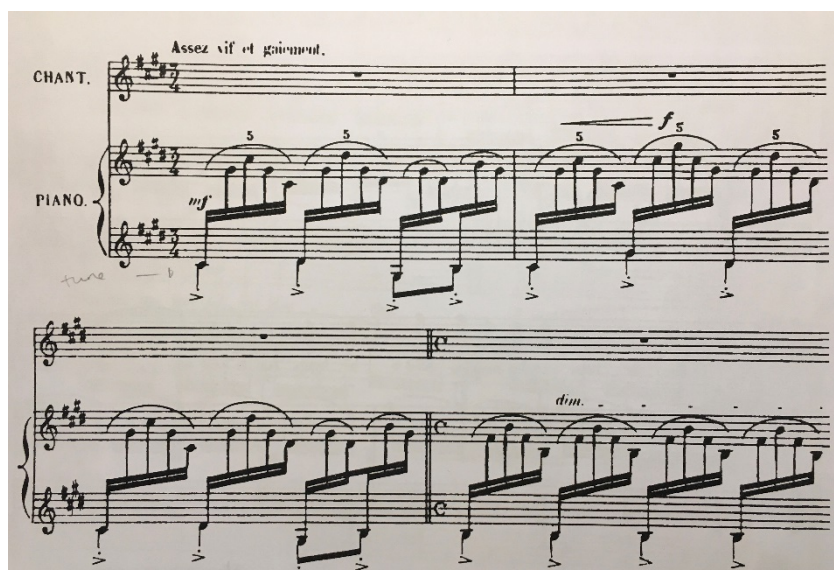
is two-syllables as a result of its feminine ending, and ‘clair’ is one syllable, rhyming aurally (but not visually) with ‘mer’ (sea) at the end of the previous line. In addition, the sea here is used as an analogy (‘like the sea’, or ‘sea-like’ rather than as a direct image.³⁶ Verlaine signals that his reader is to avoid taking the words at face value, at once allowing them to be the same and different, serving different functions, but reinforcing each other in meaning even as they diverge in sense.

Debussy’s handling of these aural-repetitious features is, on the face of it, wholly unremarkable, in that he makes no efforts to do draw direct attention to the polyvalent meanings of the poetic emphasis created by the matching sounds. Instead, he creates new layers of aural-repetitious features which complicate our capacity to hear the repetitions at work in the poetic text alone. Perhaps the most striking example of how Debussy’s music over-rides the repetitions of the text comes from ‘L’*échelonnement des haies*’ which opens with a strident repetitive four-note piano motif, over three-bars (Figure 4):



³⁶ It should be noted that each of these terms ‘air’, ‘clair’, and ‘mer’ feature prominently in the first poem in the set, ‘La mer est plus belle’, such as in ll. 19–22:

Et puis, sous les cieux
Qui s’y rient plus **clairs**,
Elle a des **airs** bleus,
Roses, gris et verts ...



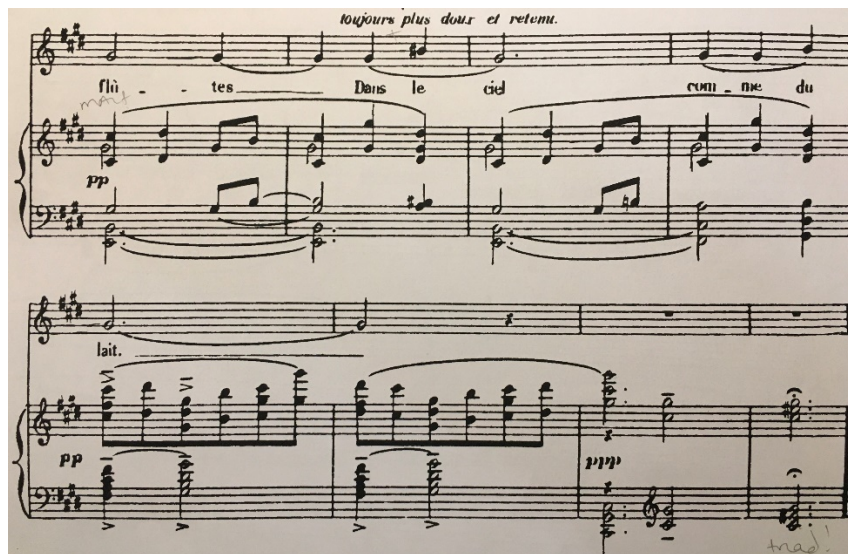
[CAPTION: Figure 4. Debussy, 'L'échelonnement des haies', mm. 1–4]

This motif returns, almost identically, at the end of the first stanza, marking the change of stanza (mm. 9–11). A variant reappears in between the third and fourth stanzas (mm. 21–24), this time transposed up the octave, with the vocal line intervening on the words 'Tout à l'heure déferlait / L'onde' ['Just now a wave broke'] (ll. 13–14), and the piano rhythmic figuration reduced from quintuplets to a quadruple semiquaver pattern (Figure 5):



[CAPTION: Figure 5. Debussy, 'L'échelonnement des haies', mm. 21–24]

On the final instance of non-identical repetition of the motif, the rhythmical density is removed altogether, and the motif is then used to loosely structure a codetta as the song draws to a close (Figure 6):



[CAPTION: Figure 6. Debussy, 'L'échelonnement des haies', mm. 29–36]

The prevalence of this motif throughout the song is not, in any sense, directly inspired by Verlaine's poem. It is used to loosely demarcate the starts and ends of stanzas (although it is not used between stanzas two and three), but the C# - D# - G# - B motif itself has no referential value in relation to Verlaine's poem. In fact it over-rides the poem's imaginative fragmenting of meaning through polysemic words and hypallage by providing a clearly audible recurrent soundbite.³⁷ The dominance of the piano's musical material over that of the voice in this song is perhaps further reinforced by the fact that Debussy also – unusually for him in his song-writing practice – doubles the vocal line entry in mm. 5–6. To build in non-identical repetition which exploits the same pitches but progressively lightens rhythmical density offsets the poem's increasing intensification of surplus and potential meanings.

³⁷ The nouns 'échelonnement' (l. 1) and 'agilité' (l. 8) blur meaning through associations created with other words in their more usual grammatical forms, the verb 'échelonner' ('to spread out'), and the adjective 'agile' ('nimble'). Similarly, 'vague' (l. 9) suggests double meanings connected with the 'wave' of the sea referenced in l. 2, but also the notion of being 'hazy' or 'unclear'. See also: Alan English, 'Verlaine: Blurred Images and Ambiguous Text', in Alan English and Rosalind Silvester (eds), *Reading Images and Seeing Words* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 123–136 (pp. 130–133).

Verlaine's vocabulary choices thwart the possibility of pinning down meaning, and this undecidability invites scrutiny of what the poetic line is able to achieve. Debussy has enabled it to achieve something different, and something extra through the addition of music. But its referentiality is wholly tempered as a result. When Verlaine himself later wrote about this poem, in his account of his time as a French teacher in England during the late 1870s, he described 'the pleasingness of the scenery about Boston' as 'a pleasingness which compensated even for its excessive flatness.'³⁸ In a sense, Debussy's intervention – adding in a prominent motif that is not prompted in any way by the poem – compensates for the excessive multivalence of the poem. It operates in the opposite direction – taming the undecidability by offering something more straightforward, and making that motif increasingly clear, rather than increasingly diffuse as the song progresses. Whether or not Debussy was aware of Verlaine's connection to the Lincolnshire countryside in this poem becomes irrelevant, in the end. For Verlaine, the poem serves as a 'sketch' to capture 'a landscape which was exquisite in its rich sweetness of pasture and trees', and where 'both sides of the road, which were fringed with fine quickset hedges, were studded, so to speak, with big sheep and nimble colts roaming free'.³⁹ For Debussy, the poem serves as a frame upon which to capture a soundscape that required no external source, as he sought – as François Lesure has put it – to 'compose "for himself alone"'.⁴⁰

³⁸ Paul Verlaine, 'Notes on England: Myself as a French Master', *Fortnightly Review*, 56:331 (1894), 70–80 at 71.

³⁹ Verlaine, 'Notes on England', 72.

⁴⁰ François Lesure writes of the *Trois mélodies de Verlaine* completed in December 1891: 'Enfin, dans le domaine de ses essais "pour lui tout seul", il achève en décembre trois mélodies sur des poèmes de Verlaine'. [Finally, among his attempts to compose "for himself alone", he completed three songs on Verlaine's poems in

The circuits of transmission from the poetic idea, to the poetic composition, to the musical idea, to the musical composition, via channels of reading and performance, mean that the possibility of a song inhabiting just one national idiom or tradition is fundamentally at odds with the creative act of song-making. We can observe, through a close reading of key aspects of Verlaine's texts and Debussy's setting of those texts, how 'typically French' features are created alongside, and in conversation with other sources of inspiration which, in this case, come from locations relatively close to home. Because we can trace the origins of these songs to sources just beyond the nation, in Belgium and England (at least for Verlaine), does not mean that this is where they need to reside. It is, in fact, through the interaction of culture-specific locales and language-specific features, that the denaturing and re-naturalising of the song is able to take place. Even when a song enters another language, such as in the form of an English singing translation (for which there is in any case limited evidence of a performance or reception history), it can never throw off the underlying qualities of its 'Frenchness', which is indissolubly written into the song's fabric by Debussy precisely because he has avoided clichés and existing formulae associated with the French text-setting tradition. Debussy recasts what is possible in terms of metrical-prosodic setting of normally silent syllables, in particular, but also invites a more prosaic, less poised reading of the poems. He has been able to do so because it is Verlaine's poetry, and because he has selected poems by a poet who is himself experimenting with images, sources, constructs, prosodies, and the very essence of what it means to be a French poet in late nineteenth-century France. Debussy's settings of three *Sagesse* poems by Verlaine have not necessarily travelled far from France in their design, but in selecting these poems for composition, Debussy has

December']. François Lesure, *Claude Debussy: Biographie critique* (Paris, Fayard, 2003), p. 124; English translation by Marie Rolf (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2019), p. 98.

brought them back into the French fold from just beyond the nation's land and sea borders, serving also in some way to rehabilitate the poet who had been exiled both physically and morally from his home nation. What we encounter with the *Trois mélodies de Verlaine* is an interweaving tapestry of various lifetimes of cultural experiences, inflected in different ways by different cultural, linguistic, national, and temporal, perspectives. To which, ultimately, we can now also add our own.