

Debussy, Pentatonicism, and the Tonal Tradition

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This article presents a historical and analytical assessment of one of the important components of Debussy's musical style: his pentatonic practice. This practice, while often radical, nevertheless also partakes of a tradition of nineteenth-century pentatonicism that itself can be understood in relation to the larger context of tonal history—a point well illustrated by a favored cadential device of Debussy's, the “plagal leading-tone.” I explain this intersection of the pentatonic and tonal traditions, and through a Schenkerian analysis of *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, I reveal Debussy's innovative and far-reaching reformulation of structural norms in response to those traditions.

Keywords: Claude Debussy, pentatonic scale, diatonic scale, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, Schenkerian theory, Schenkerian analysis, plagal cadence, ô, historiography, tonality

INTRODUCTION

Beginnings and endings are the customary concern of historians and the necessary concern of composers. But history, unlike works of art, often confounds the notion of “beginning,” “ending,” and even the notion that the two are opposites. When in 1864, for instance, a new word—“pentatonic”—was used to characterize a very old music, it signaled both a beginning and an ending. Carl Engel's *The Music of the Most Ancient Nations* contained the first published use of that term in English and apparently predated the emergence of analogous terms in other European languages. As such, Engel's “pentatonic” represents the beginning of a particular

path of discourse. It also, however, represents the end of a long process of discovery and conceptualization—a moment when an idea had become important enough and stable enough to justify linguistic reification. What Du Haldé in 1735 had presumably heard in the music of Chinese monks who “never raise or lower their voice a semitone” (265);¹ what Rameau in 1760 had described as a peculiar scale of “only five tones” (191),² Roussier in 1770 as a scale “whose gaps always seem to await other tones” (33),³ and Laborde in 1780 as a scale “in which there is neither fa nor ut” (1:146);⁴ what Burney stumbled upon in his study of the “mutilated” scales of Greek music and elsewhere referred to simply as the “Scots scale” (425, 46); what Crotch identified as “the same kind of scale as

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1 “Mais en chantant ils ne haussent et ne baissent jamais leur voix d'un demi ton . . .”

2 “Ils veulent qu'il n'y ait que cinq Tons dans leur Lu . . .”

3 “. . . leur gamme, dont les lacunes semblent toujours attendre d'autres sons . . .”

4 “. . . dans lesquels il n'y a ni fa, ni ut . . .”

that produced by the black keys of the piano-forte,” (quoted in Crawford 1820/1967, 339) and Fétis as “a tonal system in which the semitone frequently disappears” (1849, xxi): in 1864 these became, once and for all, “the pentatonic scale.”

The scale Engel christened “pentatonic” would much later come to be associated with certain composers in the European tradition, above all with one who was himself christened that very year. On July 31, shop-keepers Manuel and Victorine Debussy baptized their first child, baby Achille-Claude, and soon thereafter sold their china shop and left their home in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, ultimately settling in Paris. For the composer, of course, these events marked (unambiguously) the beginning of a life; a composer’s work, on the other hand, exists within history, and the historian who contemplates this work enjoys a more flexible perspective. Debussy the critic clearly appreciated such historiographic subtleties when he assessed Wagner as “a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a sunrise” (1988, 82).

In this article I will consider Debussy himself as both sunset and sunrise by examining his music with respect to not only pentatonic history but also to the history of diatonic tonality—in particular, the device I call the “plagal leading tone.” In the end, and with a little help from Heinrich Schenker, I will demonstrate the richness of Debussy’s response to those histories in the form of his piano prelude *La fille aux cheveux de lin*.

And since the sunset/sunrise distinction (whether meteorological or music-historical) can only be discerned in context, I will briefly mention, by way of foreshadowing some of my case studies, the varied and fertile context of Debussy’s life as a musician, critic, and composer: his early studies with Madame de Fleurville, a purported pupil of Chopin; his employment under Tchaikovsky’s devoted patroness, Nadezhda von Meck in 1880 and his subsequent trip to Russia; his fond visit with Liszt in Rome; the troubled but hopeful state of French music at the time, and Debussy’s high regard for French composers of years past; his infatuation with the music of Wagner, who, even after that infatuation turned

sour, exerted an inescapable presence that Debussy referred to as “the ghost of old Klingsor” (1987, 54); and, of course, that celebrated event a quarter century after the double christening just described: the 1889 Paris Exhibition.

THE PENTATONIC TRADITION: LITERATE EUROPEAN PENTATONICISM, THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS

“We can hardly overestimate the impact made on Debussy at this still formative period by the revelation of this entirely novel exotic music.” So writes Edward Lockspeiser (1962, 113), on Debussy’s attendance at the 1889 Exhibition and the “exotic” sounds of the Javanese gamelan and Vietnamese theatre. According to Debussy’s friend Robert Godet, “Many fruitful hours for Debussy were spent in the Javanese *kampong* of the Dutch section listening to the percussive rhythmic complexities of the gamelan with its inexhaustible combinations of ethereal, flashing timbres” (quoted in Lockspeiser 1962, 113). The music of 1889 would, years later, arouse wistful reminiscences in Debussy’s writings, and one piece—*Pagodes*, from the piano collection *Estantes*—would bear the gamelan’s unmistakable influence even at the remove of over a decade. *Pagodes* is certainly Debussy’s most sustained and ambitious pentatonic effort, exemplary for its subtle, atmospheric use of pentatonicism. It demonstrates an earnest engagement with the purely musical possibilities of the pentatonic scale, notably through manipulation of pentatonic subsets, supersets, and transpositions. David Kopp (1997) has detailed the almost minimalistic shifts of pitch-content throughout the piece, gradual additions to and deletions from a pervasive B-pentatonic scale (277–83). I will only mention here how Debussy—as “sunrise”—exploits the pentatonic scale’s set-theoretic attributes in idiosyncratic ways that counteract an otherwise ostensibly tonal surface.

The pentatonicism of *Pagodes*’ opening texture, shown in Example 1(a), is divided between the tonic triad of the left hand and a tetratonic melodic motive. That tetrachord (set-class 4-23[0257]) is a favorite infra-pentatonic resource of

(a) mm. 3–4 *delicatement et presque sans nuances*

(b) mm. 23–24

Toujours animé

(c) mm. 27–29

revenez du 1^o Tempo

(d) end

retenu

aussi *pp* que possible

(laissez vibrer)

EXAMPLE I. Debussy, *Pagodes* (1903)

Debussy's, one that avoids the sweetness and triadic-tonal associations of the major third but instead features the austere intervals of the second and fourth. The varied return of this material at measure 23 (given in Example 1[b]) at first appears to offer a pentatonically "complete" rendition of the melodic material, as all five tones are present in the upper voices. However, a closer look reveals a juxta- and superposition of two intervallically identical tetrachordal sets (the original $\frac{2}{3}/\frac{5}{6}$ along with $\frac{1}{2}/\frac{5}{6}$), a result of the canonic treatment of the theme. The tetrachord's stark intervallic content is made most explicit in the codetta to the first main section (measures 27–9), the tetratonic theme in Example 1[c], which is accompanied by familiar Debussian "organum": the resulting counterpoint in parallel "thirds" (i.e., $\frac{2}{5}$, $\frac{3}{6}$, $\frac{5}{2}$, and $\frac{6}{3}$) contains only perfect intervals. (A fully pentatonic organum of this sort would contain a single major third, $\frac{1}{3}$, beside its four perfect fourths—a perhaps overly differentiated interval structure for Debussy's purposes.⁵) Similar pentatonic fragmentation continues throughout the piece, which makes the dissonant (i.e., ostensibly unresolved) final sonority, provided in Example 1(d), all the more striking: the last measure simply freezes the ubiquitous pentatonic figuration, and it is this stillness (emphasized by the indication *laissez vibrer*) that quietly invites the listener at last to truly behold the pentatonic set as one complete entity.

Not only the pitch material of *Pagodes*, but its counterpoint, shimmering figuration, and title all suggest, as Constanin Brailoiu wrote in his extensive (albeit error-ridden) essay on Debussy's pentatonicism, "a distinct category generated in the atmosphere of the World Exhibition" (1959, 390).⁶ Nevertheless, no other piece in Debussy's oeuvre contains the same combination of pentatonicism and exoticism. As it happens, scholars have questioned the facile

ascription of Debussy's pentatonic style to a supposed epiphany at the Paris Exhibition. Indeed, pentatonicism can be heard in music Debussy composed before 1889. Richard Mueller (1986) has argued that Debussy's prior knowledge of both the pentatonic and whole-tone scales prepared him to hear (and to remember) certain elements of those Javanese performances (160–61). Even Brailoiu admits that 1889 was not the beginning of the composer's apparent acquaintance with the scale (1959, 413). What's more, Debussy expressed a wary skepticism toward musical exoticism in any case.⁷

What most scholars have failed to appreciate, however, is the true extent of pentatonic practice in the Western tonal tradition *before* Debussy. Numerous earlier practitioners of pentatonic exoticism might be mentioned, including Weber and Kalkbrenner (both using borrowed material), and Debussy's elder contemporaries Offenbach and Saint-Saëns: compare Example 2 and Example 1(a). And exoticism accounts for only one part of the "pentatonic tradition." In the aforementioned, pentatonically momentous year of 1864, for instance, Gounod's *Mireille* premiered to the sound of a pentatonic shepherd's call, given in Example 3. One day, Gounod would hear a similarly pentatonic opening as a juror at the Académie des Beaux-Arts (along with Saint-Saëns), charged with assessing Debussy's Prix-de-Rome *envoi*, the symphonic suite *Printemps*: compare Examples 3 and 4.⁸

plainly wrong: Brailoiu's excerpt from "Soupir" ends in mid-phrase, omitting notes that weaken his point; his excerpt from "La Cathédrale engloutie," meanwhile, contains a misprint (411–13) (in fact, Debussy's original does not include the purported mutation).

5 It is precisely the differentiation of intervals in a scale that contributes the tonal principle of "position-finding" (Browne 1981, 7).

6 Brailoiu (1959), for instance, cites several instances of pentatonic "mutation" in Debussy, though none are convincing to me, and two are

7 Not long after the Paris Exhibition, Debussy is said to have rejected *Lakmé* as "sham, imitative Oriental bric-à-brac" (quoted in Lockspeiser 1962, 208). Years later, Debussy criticized others of his contemporaries: "Rather than drawing upon any instinctive ingenuity within themselves, they dig up ideals whose foundations were laid in the Stone Age, or serve up crude imitations of Javanese music. There's nothing either new or astonishing about that" (quoted in Debussy 1988, 265).

8 The assessment of the Académie was, famously, negative, though Gounod himself is said to have defended the work (Nichols 1998, 42).

EXAMPLE 2. *Saint-Saëns, Marche Orient et Occident (1869), 3 measures before rehearsal 4*EXAMPLE 3. *Gounod, Mireille (1864), Overture, beginning*EXAMPLE 4. *Debussy, Printemps (1887), i, beginning*

EXAMPLE 5. *Vogler, Pente chordium (1798), beginning*

The scope of the pentatonic tradition can be further appreciated by considering that F#-pentatonic theme: neither Debussy, nor Chopin before him (recall Chopin's Etude in G \flat , op. 10, no. 5), was the first to discover the peculiarly pleasing sound so unassumingly contained in the black keys of the piano. As early as 1798, Abbé Georg-Joseph Vogler (though surely not the first himself),⁹ composed an all-black-key piece entitled simply, and enigmatically, *Pente chordium* (given here in Example 5), what I can only guess was an attempted allusion to ancient Greek music. (Debussy's first *Épigraphe Antique*, "Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été," makes a similar allusion, as well as a typical conflation of the pastoral with the primitive.)

Debussy would have no doubt noticed the scalar commonality of Asian and Scottish music, which Engel called "quite inexplicable" (1864/1909, 128). And though the Scottish influence on Debussy is seldom considered, he was indeed susceptible to this northerly exoticism (as it were). The musical borrowing in Debussy's *Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire* follows the practice of, for instance, J.C. Bach, whose opus 13 keyboard concertos featured variation

movements on such popular songs as "The Yellow Hair'd Laddie"—as well as of Beethoven and Haydn, who gladly harmonized a large number of Scottish songs for an insatiable public. Newly composed Scottish-style pentatonicism appears in music throughout the nineteenth century, including in Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Loewe, and Brahms. The pentatonicism of Debussy's piano prelude *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (which I will discuss in depth later) calls to mind Debussy's earlier, unpublished *mélodie* of the same name, which set poetry from Leconte de Lisle's *Scottish Songs*.¹⁰

Another category of pentatonicism (unmentioned by the writers cited above, but alluded to by Riemann), the "religious pentatonic," figured prominently in Liszt's sacred (and sacred-inspired) music.¹¹ Pentatonic passages in Debussy's *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* suggest certain correspondences with Liszt's *St. Elisabeth* (compare Examples 6 and 7) as well as with Wagner's *Parsifal* (compare Examples 8 and 9). As I describe below, the *religioso* coda in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* may have exerted a lasting influence on the melodic vocabulary of nineteenth-century composers, not least of all Debussy.

Finally, it might be supposed that a further, non-signifying brand of pentatonicism—as it were, "coloristic" pentatonicism—is more uniquely Debussian. But this isn't entirely right either: pentatonic and added-sixth flourishes enlivened the tonic triads of Chopin, Liszt, and Thalberg (whose

9 We have, for instance, a letter from Robert Burns who recounts a sort of pentatonic party trick: "Mr. James Miller . . . was in company with our friend [Stephen] Clarke; and talking of Scotch music, Mr. Miller expressed an ardent ambition to be able to compose a Scots air. Mr. Clarke, partly by way of joke, told him to keep to the black keys of the harpsichord, and preserve some kind of rhythm, and he would infallibly compose a Scots air." Letter from Burns to George Thomson (November, 1794) quoted in Johnson 1972, 188.

10 For a discussion of the two pieces, see Briscoe 1981.

11 Riemann (1882/1965, 279) mentions the pentatonicism of Gregorian chant.

La voix de la vierge erigone

4 *f*

Je — fau — chais — l'E — pi de fro — ment, ou — bli — eu — se — de l'as — pho —

EXAMPLE 6. Debussy, *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911), *II/2*, measures 4–6

EXAMPLE 7. Liszt, *St. Elisabeth* (1862), “*Miracle of the Roses*”

“Fantasy on *Il Trovatore*” is quoted in Example 10), to say nothing of the English harp virtuoso Elias Parish-Alvars, who in the 1830s apparently pioneered the pentatonic harp glissando (Example 11), so characteristic of Debussy’s orchestral music.

In this quick survey of the pentatonic tradition, I have noted many correspondences and connections, but ultimately I am concerned less with proving specific influence than with calling attention to a vast body of repertoire and a broad historical span, in which pentatonic techniques can be seen. Much more could be said regarding nineteenth-

century pentatonicism, its genesis, its conceptual underpinnings, and the various interconnections among its several strands.¹² For now, I will simply note that the music I have cited here represents only a small sampling from a surprisingly extensive, even convoluted history.¹³

¹² For this, see Day-O’Connell (2007).

¹³ This history extends back to the early eighteenth century. One of the first relevant examples I have found occurs in a Handel aria, “Caro Amor” (from *Il pastor fido*), which begins with a simple pentatonic invocation by Mirtillo, the “faithful shepherd” of Guarini’s pastorella. Its pentatonicism is, to be sure, incidental to an ultimately triadic melodic design, a quality that it shares with many other examples.

Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia.

Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia.

Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia.

f *cresc.* *f* *cresc.*

EXAMPLE 8. Debussy, *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*, V, 9 measures from end

pp

EXAMPLE 9. Wagner, *Parsifal* (1881), I, end

To recognize this history is not to minimize Debussy's undeniable contribution. But the composer of such extraordinary pentatonic works as *Pagodes*, *Voiles*, and *Les collines d'Anacapri* must not be perceived as *only* a "sunrise," when so

much of his pentatonic output suggests such strong connections with tradition. At the same time, however, connections with tradition do not necessarily render a composer "traditional"; the rest of my article is motivated by this awareness.

Andante

pp leggerissimo

8va

6

6

6

6

6

6

6

8va

8va

8va

EXAMPLE 10. *Thalberg, Fantasy on Il Trovatore, op. 77 (1862), beginning*

sdruciolando

pp

(E#)

30

8va

ppp

32

ff

(A#)

EXAMPLE 11. *Parish-Alvars, Serenade, op. 83 (1846), end*

THE TONAL TRADITION AS PENTATONIC:
THE PLAGAL LEADING TONE

Having considered Debussy's place in the pentatonic tradition, I wish to return momentarily to Carl Engel, whose term "pentatonic" likewise participated in a tradition, albeit one more of scholarship than of sound. A newly coined word is a sort of gift to a scholarly community, but all the same, something is lost the moment thought is concretized and thus constricted. Indeed, I feel that the poverty of conventional accounts of nineteenth-century pentatonicism can be partly blamed on the very existence of that term, "pentatonic," and its ostensible transparency. After all—and as Engel's predecessors (quoted earlier) remind us—"pentatonic" connotes more than its etymological literalism ("five-toned").

This is no doubt true of most terms (certainly "diatonic"), but especially so in the case of a "marginal" musical material that is inevitably interpreted with respect to prevailing norms. As David Kopp (1997) writes,

The standard model for pentatonic music operating within a diatonic framework entails a single anhemitonic pentatonic scale overlaying diatonic scale degrees $\hat{1}$, $\hat{2}$, $\hat{3}$, $\hat{5}$, $\hat{6}$. This collection is used as the basis for melody, while the remaining diatonic pitches are supplied by subsidiary lines or chords, facilitating full-fledged presence of the common tonal functions. Familiar instances of this technique underlying entire pieces are Chopin's black key etude (op. 10, no. 5) and Debussy's prelude, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*. These so-called 'pentatonic' works take place within a relatively conventional tonal context (263).¹⁴

Kopp's point accurately describes pentatonic music throughout the nineteenth century, including those passages I've cited above, in which pentatonicism is expressed monophonically

or decoratively, or else is accompanied by fully diatonic chords.¹⁵

Yet as F. A. Gevaert wrote in his widely read *Traité d'harmonie théorique et pratique* (among the first significant descriptions of pentatonicism in France), "pentaphonic melodies [can be] associated with a completely heptaphonic harmonization without losing their scent of suave tranquility" (1905, 61).¹⁶ Indeed, as we will see later, the musical language of *La fille* is too hastily dismissed as "so-called 'pentatonicism'"; rather, it depends precisely on a flexible interplay between the pentatonic and the diatonic, one that is facilitated by the inherent relationship between those two systems. The nature of that relationship has been alluded to above but will be more properly introduced now; its status with respect to Schenkerian theory will be explored later.

Again, the pentatonic scale, as commonly understood by Western musicologists, coincides with a subset of the Western major scale, as shown in Example 12: $\hat{1}$ – $\hat{2}$ – $\hat{3}$ – $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$. (It differs in this regard from the octatonic and whole-tone scales, with which it is so often unthinkingly associated.) Scale degrees $\hat{4}$ and $\hat{7}$ are thus absent, along with the melodic semitones and the harmonic tritone that they normally entail. Consequently, as Engel himself pointed out, "On the other hand there are two *minor thirds* which in our diatonic scale do not occur, viz., from the third to the fifth, and from the sixth to the octave" (1864/1909, 15).

Engel's observation is crucial, though it bears refining: the minor third, $\hat{3}$ – $\hat{5}$, in fact forms a structural element of classical

¹⁴ Pomeroy (2003) similarly writes that the "true nature" of the pentatonic scale, even in Debussy, "resides in decorative embellishment of the tonic triad" (159).

¹⁵ Even Vogler's *Pente chordium* (given in Example 5), despite its complete restriction to the pentatonic scale, strongly implies a diatonic framework in the many dominant chords and authentic cadences that are expressed by its simple two-part texture.

¹⁶ Gevaert was describing Wagner's "Valhalla" motive, the first four scale-degrees of which, incidentally, correspond to the beginning of Debussy's *La fille*. He mentions other pentatonic passages in Wagner, as does Lenormand (1915/1940, 87). On Wagner and Debussy, more below.

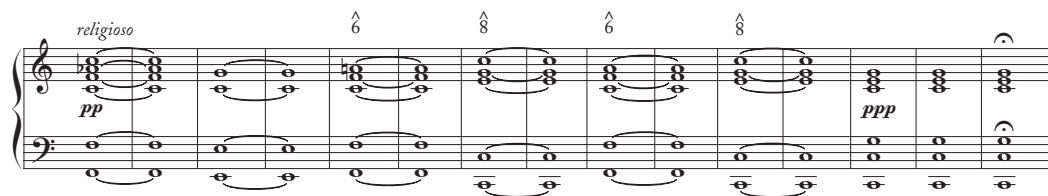
EXAMPLE 12. *The pentatonic scale compared to the major scale*

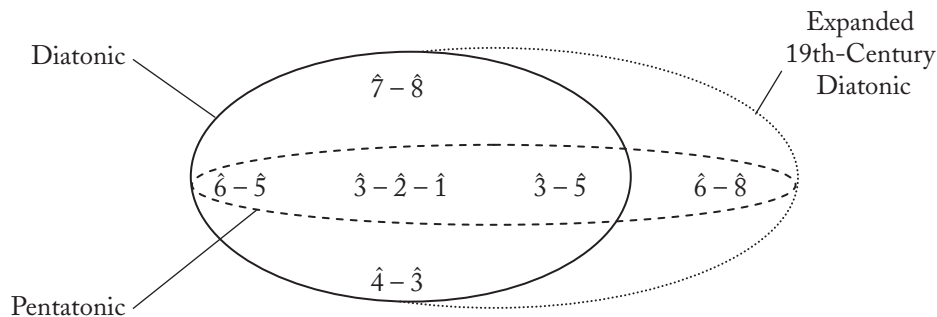
diatonic tonality, comprising as it does two notes of the (stable) tonic triad. The pentatonic scale's other minor third, however, does present a melodic anomaly: in the absence of the leading tone, scale degree $\hat{6}$ assumes special prominence and stands in a "stepwise" relationship to the tonic in addition to its straightforward classical role as the upper adjacency to $\hat{5}$. This strangely "subtonic" $\hat{6}$ —what one Dvořák scholar has ironically referred to as the "problem" of pentatonic $\hat{6}$ (Beveridge 1977, 33–34)—may or may not be exploited in a given pentatonic piece. Nevertheless, as a structural feature, it is the single most "marked" element (in terms of melodic motion, arguably the *only* "marked" element) of the pentatonic scale, vis-à-vis the major scale.

All the same, diatonic tonality itself adopted various expansions of melodic practice in the course of the nineteenth century, including relaxations of classical stepwise scale-degree tendencies. Importantly for the present discussion, $\hat{6}$ came to be used in a way that suggests the term "plagal

leading tone": "plagal" because of its harmonization in the context of a plagal cadence, and "leading tone" because of its resolution upward to the tonic note. The plagal leading tone was a significant innovation in the history of tonal melody: plagal cadences before about 1830 strictly observed scale-degree tendencies, with step-wise or oblique voice leading ($\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$ or $\hat{4}$ – $\hat{3}$ or $\hat{1}$ – $\hat{1}$). One of the earliest uses of a "third-wise" plagal leading tone ($\hat{6}$ – $\hat{8}$) occurs in a work long hailed for its innovations in other domains, and one that Debussy acclaimed as "the perfect masterpiece of romantic ardor" (1988, 266): Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (Example 13).

The plagal leading tone thus corresponds to the most characteristic aspect of the pentatonic scale—the subtonic $\hat{6}$. It nevertheless involves only two of that scale's requisite five tones; moreover, its harmonization generally entails $\hat{4}$ in a lower voice, a note strictly foreign to the pentatonic scale. For these reasons, I consider the plagal leading tone to be (for lack of a better word) "pentatonic-ish": a marginal diatonic technique that is strongly reminiscent of a central pentatonic technique. This conceptual overlap, so awkwardly conveyed in words, is better represented schematically, as in Example 14, which includes both "classical" and "non-classical" (i.e., expanded) strands of the tonal tradition. In thus identifying a point of contact between the plagal leading tone and pentatonicism *per se*, however, I make no claims of historical priority, much less of "cause" or "effect" (such claims are, after all, scarcely provable). Suffice it to say that the two techniques are structurally similar; for a composer

EXAMPLE 13. *Berlioz, Symphonie fantastique (1830–32), i, end*



EXAMPLE 14. *Melodic possibilities in diatonic and pentatonic usage: the plagal leading tone as a marginal diatonic technique that is strongly reminiscent of a central pentatonic technique*

such as Debussy, who was demonstrably conversant with both, those structural similarities would inevitably interact in the musical imagination (albeit at some subconscious level). (The analyst who is likewise conversant with both techniques will appreciate the key-defining nature of the unaccompanied pentatonic theme of Debussy's *Les collines d'Anacapri*, which Kopp [1997], inattentive to its plagal leading tone, declares tonally ambiguous [266].¹⁷)

17 The $\hat{6}-\hat{8}$ with which this theme ends is, admittedly, hardly a straightforward example of a plagal leading tone: it is unaccompanied; it is metrically awkward (at least as far as Debussy's notation is concerned, for what that's worth barely a measure into the piece); and the theme's five notes are all held, producing a dissonant pentatonic sonority rather than a cadential tonic. Nevertheless (and compelling though Kopp's "soft pentachord" is in the remainder of his analysis), it is difficult not to hear the harmonic implication of the arpeggiated supertonic, $\hat{2}-\hat{4}-\hat{6}-\hat{8}$, which resembles several (*un*-ambiguous) cadences discussed below (and which does, it must be said, confirm what emerges as the key of the piece). The "sunrise" that Kopp celebrates needn't blind us to the tonal tradition that underlies this and other aspects of the piece.

To put it another way: while analysts naturally gravitate toward the clearest examples of a phenomenon, I believe it would be wrong to take such examples as most representative of the act of musical composition. In assessing Debussy's pentatonic sensibility, we must consider the broader tradition of tonal harmony and melody, in addition to the pentatonic tradition *per se* (broad though it is in its own right, as we've seen). After all, when faced with a blank sheet of staff paper, composers do not normally reach for the textbook, whether real or figurative—least of all Debussy, who so scorned academicism—but draw upon a lifetime of musical experience and a set of organically formed intuitions concerning the language of tone. In pointing out the similarity between the pentatonic scale and the plagal leading tone, I intend to question the ostensibly uncontroversial distinction between pentatonicism and diatonic tonality, or at least to question the historical and analytical usefulness of such compartmentalizing. As Debussy himself wrote, "The soul we possess has been inherited from a vast number of completely unknown people and compels us to act in one way or another without as a rule, leaving us much choice" (Lockspeiser 1962, 3–4). We will see that Debussy's inheritance included the plagal

leading tone no less than it did the more celebrated pentatonic scale.

* * *

Finally, I should make it clear that I follow Daniel Harrison in identifying $\hat{6}$ as the epitome of “plagal” harmony, $\hat{7}$ the epitome of “authentic” harmony (Harrison 1994, 26–27).¹⁸ Notably, every non-tonic triad in a major key contains exactly one of those defining scale degrees (while the tonic triad contains neither). Nevertheless, these two brands of harmony are not equal. As even those scholars who have exposed a plagal undercurrent in nineteenth-century music admit, plagal harmony remains comparatively peripheral. Harrison himself, who is intent on theorizing a “Plagal system,” acknowledges that the authentic “is by far the more privileged and common structure in tonal music by virtue of the comparative strength of its functional connections” (1994, 97).¹⁹ For one thing, common-practice tonality, in its essence, involves the dramatic opposition between tonic and non-tonic, and this opposition is aptly expressed through the tonic and dominant triads: the dominant triad contains the two notes that neighbor the tonic note on either side, $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{2}$. In contrast, the subdominant triad contains the tonic note itself and hence necessarily bears an affinity with the tonic triad, which is why the standard plagal cadence is “softer” and “weaker” than the authentic cadence (requiring “compensation,” as Deborah Stein puts it [1983, 166]²⁰) and is, according to the conventional view, of no structural significance.

The plagal leading tone, then, in its most typical harmonization, IV–I (or ii_5^6 –I), represents a complete departure from tonal norms: to imbue $\hat{6}$ with leading-tone character, if only by association, is to confer some hint of dominant function upon a chord that has no right to it. In this way the plagal leading tone effects a subtle but profound deformation of the tonal hierarchy.²¹ It is precisely these functional complications that we will later see explored in *La fille*.

THE PLAGAL LEADING TONE IN PRACTICE

The plagal leading tone was one of Debussy’s favorite cadential devices, though again it was by no means unique to him. The end of Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* resembles that of Tchaikovsky’s *Romeo and Juliet* in more than just their programmatic content (a lover’s transcendence in death), but in their final cadence, a plagal leading tone that results from arpeggiating the supertonic, $\hat{2}$ – $\hat{4}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{8}$ (compare Examples 15 and 16). In both cases, too, the use of $\flat\hat{6}$ shortly before this plagal leading tone—a variation that I call the “Picardy sixth”—yields a poignant contrast (descending, chromatic versus ascending, pentatonic) that is both musically and programmatically effective. The structural cadence of *Prélude à L’après-midi d’un faune*, shown in Example 17 (measures 105–06), uses the same gesture, $\hat{2}$ – $\hat{4}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{8}$; and

progressions. By contrast, I see the plagal leading tone as providing a compensation integral to the cadence itself. Consequently, it is because of the plagal leading tone that I would want to temper Notley’s (2005, 129) claim that plagal harmony inherently “does not suggest orientation toward a goal,” as well as Pomeroy’s (2003) observation that “In Debussy’s diatonic writing the quality of harmonic goal-directedness . . . is often undermined through the characteristic presence of a (strictly non-functional) pentatonic patina” (157). Just this sort of goal-directedness, as we will see, manifests itself in the plagal leading tone at local, as well as structural, levels.

Later, however, we will encounter other harmonizations of the plagal leading tone that complicate this point somewhat.

¹⁸ Elsewhere, Harrison states that $\hat{6}$ is “present in *virtually all* plagal situations” (my emphasis) (91); he never explains what the exceptional situations would be.

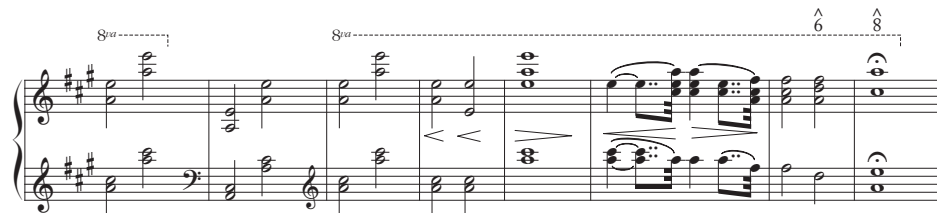
¹⁹ See also Notley 2005; Stein 1983. Richard Kaplan (1996) faults Harrison for even proposing a plagal system in the first place, calling it “the musical equivalent of antimatter” (127–28).

²⁰ The “compensation” Stein finds in selected songs of Hugo Wolf involves repetition and interaction with middle-ground dominant

EXAMPLE 15. *Tchaikovsky, Romeo and Juliet (1869), measures 517–524*

EXAMPLE 16. *Debussy, Pelléas et Mélisande (1902), end*

EXAMPLE 17. *Debussy, Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un faune (1894), end*

EXAMPLE 18. Wagner, *Lohengrin* (1848), *Prelude*, end

here the plagal leading tone seems to refer to the very beginning of the piece in reversing the opening motive's famous, harmonically ambiguous chromatic descent from $\hat{6}$.²² This cadence employs a complete dominant-ninth, which is to say a chord that contains both $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ and hence a mixture of plagal and authentic elements.²³ To be sure, the $\hat{5}-\hat{1}$ bass strongly evokes the authentic realm. But if the presence of $\hat{6}$ slightly tempers this authentic orientation, its prominent third-wise resolution boldly asserts plagal function, mocking the conventional (authentic) leading tone by cavalierly striding over it. Notice as well how Debussy's orchestration minimizes the normally stronger of the two notes: $\hat{7}$ is heard only in a lone horn, while $\hat{6}$ is doubled in two octaves throughout the strings. More often, though, Debussy's dominant-ninth, -eleventh, and -thirteenth chords omit the leading tone altogether (as in the first cadence of this piece which, lacking a

conventional leading tone, nevertheless completes a modulation to the key of V using a plagal leading tone).

Perhaps Wagner's cadences were in Debussy's ear as well: recall the sublimely ethereal plagal leading tone at the end of the *Prelude* to Wagner's *Lohengrin*, provided in Example 18. More interestingly, the endings of both *Pelléas* and the *Prélude* contain a detail reminiscent of the end of *Tristan*: the use of $\sharp\hat{4}$ within an ill-resolving half-diminished seventh chord, $\text{vii}^{\sharp 7}/V$.²⁴ In the case of the *Prélude* (see Example 17 above, now at measure 108), Debussy appropriates that chord for a strange new harmonization of the plagal leading tone, a cadence that represents a contraction of Wagner's (which in turn represents a contraction of a classical cadential prototype), as demonstrated in Example 19. Debussy has thus compounded the paradox of the plagal leading tone: the scale degree that is at once plagal and a leading tone has been wedded to a chord that is itself at once a subdominant (that is, a chord that properly leads to V) and a dominant (specifically, an applied dominant).²⁵

22 In fact, the first cadence of the *Prélude* (at the modulation to V in measures 29–30) also employed a plagal leading tone, this one foreshadowed by the opening theme in a different way: the cadential pitches G \sharp –B occur prominently in the third bar of the theme.

23 Harrison (1994) describes such “functional mixture” even in simple triads, in which the harmonic “attitude” is determined not only by the functionally decisive “agents” ($\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$) but by other scale degrees as well (60–1); Swinden (2005) refers to “plural function,” which arises primarily from a conflict between the bass note and the upper voices.

24 The chord at the final cadence of *Tristan* is actually an augmented sixth chord ($\flat 5-6-1-3$), enharmonically equivalent to the half-diminished seventh chord in question ($\sharp 4-6-1-3$).

25 A linear interpretation of this half-diminished seventh chord would minimize this paradox, even as it would underscore the “step-wise” behavior of subtonic $\hat{6}$.

EXAMPLE 19. Cadences from Debussy and Wagner, with hypothetical model: (a) Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, measure 108; (b) Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, end (transposed up a fourth); (c) authentic cadence with plagal confirmation

I have isolated the plagal leading tone so as to further pluralize the precedents of Debussy's musical language. I have also tried to indicate some of the syntactic and expressive value of this distinctive gesture. As a closural device, furthermore, the plagal leading tone also bears narrative possibilities, as can be appreciated through a consideration of *La Mer*; later, I will demonstrate the more deeply structural application of the plagal leading tone in *La fille aux cheveux de lin*.

La Mer, though subtitled "symphonic sketches," contains details involving the skillful and far-reaching regulation of $\hat{6}$, particularly at the ends of its three movements. If the first movement ("De l'aube à midi sur la mer") opens with an unremarkable $\hat{6}$ —the modest $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ ostinato that comprises the initial melodic idea—the movement ends by showcasing this degree through the astounding sleight of hand shown in Example 20. The final measures' lumbering alternation between I and vi seems to set up a straightforward (if non-classical) tonal polarity, but the culminating chord is actually a combination of the two, I^{add6} . In the end, $\hat{6}$ is neither resolved (whether classically or pentatonically) nor retained (as happens, memorably, in Mahler's "Der Abschied"), but simply dissolves by means of a brazen feat of orchestration. The major triad that is left makes a

slightly unconvincing ending, and in any case can scarcely be heard as an arrival *per se*.

The second movement ("Jeux de vagues") ends with a similarly "subtracted" added sixth (the glockenspiel's C \sharp), a detail that is further complicated by tonal ambiguity throughout this passage. The tonic E is suggested by the key signature and by the cadential progression that signaled the movement's final section (measure 245, the resolution of a whole-tone set and its altered dominant-seventh subset into a long-sustained E^{add6} chord). On the other hand, two subsequent melodic figures suggest B as tonic, if only by implication: as shown in Example 21, the piccolo's diatonic line (D \sharp –E–F \sharp –G \sharp –A \sharp) and the harp's pentatonic gesture (C \sharp –D \sharp –F \sharp –G \sharp) both break off in the course of their would-be cadential ascents, at the leading tone of B and the plagal leading tone of B, respectively. The opposition between the two tonics comes to a head with the enigmatic melodic fragments of the final measures. Measure 258 is the crucial convergence of two events, which, ingeniously, attain and then swiftly annul melodic closure: 1) the high B in the violins seems to resolve the harp's dangling G \sharp pentatonically, as $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{8}$ of B; 2) simultaneously, however, the flutes, in imitation of the harp, land on G \sharp and sustain it until the end. In short, the moment compels the listener to consider two different

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system features piano accompaniment with chords labeled *I* and *vi*. The second system continues the piano part with dynamics *ff* and a *retenu* marking. The third system introduces woodwinds and strings (*ww., str.*) and brass/timpani (*brass, timp.*), with dynamics *ff₂*, *p*, and a tempo change to *a tempo*. The piece concludes with a final chord labeled *I* (add 6).

EXAMPLE 20. Debussy, *La Mer* (1905), *i* ("De l'aube à midi sur la mer"), *end*

notes (the flutes' G# and the glockenspiel's C#) as unresolved submediants.²⁶ This ending, incidentally, calls to mind another remarkable ending, though one at the opposite end of

the rhetorical spectrum: the climax of *Tristan* (in B major) features a similar rising triplet motif and, more to the point, an emphasis on the sixths above E major and B major triads.

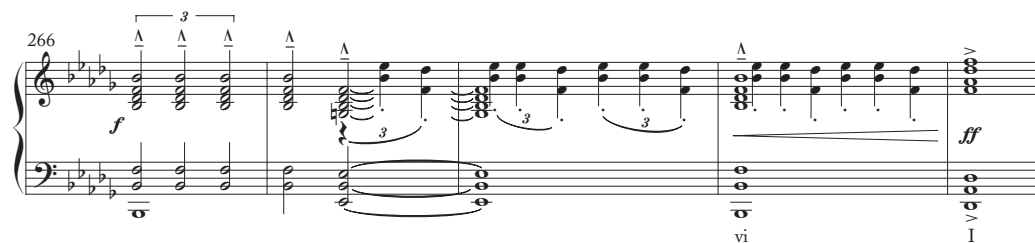
These two pitch-classes connect with the tonality of *La Mer* as a whole, which, judging from the endings of the outer movements, can roughly be considered to be D \flat major: D \flat (=C#)

26 Strictly speaking, the glockenspiel's C# does eventually find a resolution to B, albeit in another instrument, and a frail one at that—a barely audible harp harmonic.

EXAMPLE 21. Debussy, *La Mer*, ii (*Jeux de vagues*), measures 249–end

EXAMPLE 21. Debussy, *La Mer*, ii (*Jeux de vagues*), measures 249–end

EXAMPLE 21. [continued]

EXAMPLE 22. Debussy, *La Mer*, iii ("Dialogue du vent et de la mer"), measures 266–70

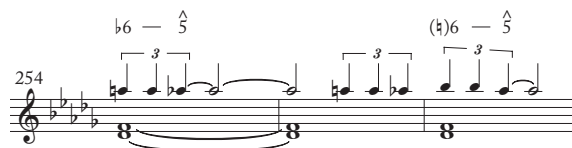
and A^b ($=G^\sharp$) are $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{5}$ of D^b . More significantly, the melting together of E-pentatonic and B-pentatonic recalls the opposition, and then melting together, of I and vi at the end of the first movement. The third movement ("Dialogue du vent et de la mer"), on the other hand, does finally achieve a forceful resolution in its structural cadence, shown in Example 22: its majestic vi–I not only serves as a triumphant Picardy sixth in response to the equivocating motif that pervades the movement, $b\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$ – $b\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$ (Example 23), but also recalls, and decisively settles, the elusive close of the first movement. The dramatic impact of *La Mer* surely depends in part on how it teasingly reserves a straightforward (though non-classical) resolution until the end of a multi-movement work.

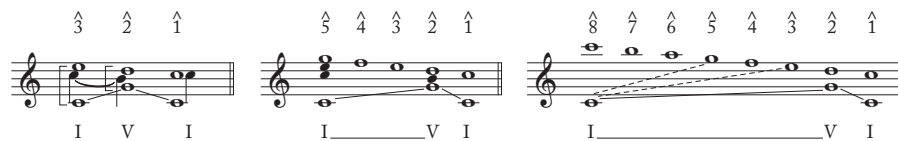
While this brief analysis of *La Mer* has highlighted some inspired and effective features, it has focused almost exclusively on endings and hence leaves the vast majority of the

piece uncommented on. We might prefer to make observations that elucidate the "pentatonic-ish-ness" of an entire piece. As we will see, Debussy's piano prelude *La fille aux cheveux de lin* lends itself well to just such an analysis. Before finally turning to that piece, I will digress by reviewing the theory that makes serious claims to such analytical holism: that of Heinrich Schenker.

SCHENKER, REDUCTION, AND THE URSATZ

For Schenker, the tonic-dominant polarity held an almost mystical primacy: "May the musician always carry in his heart the image of the bass arpeggiation! Let this triangle be sacred to him! Creating, interpreting—may he bear it always in ear and eye!" (1979, 15). That being said, the leading tone *per se* was of relatively little importance in Schenker's mature theory, according to which tonal melody achieves coherence and completion only in a descent through $\hat{2}$ to the tonic. (In fact, in Schenker's and other German theories, this $\hat{2}$ shares with $\hat{7}$ the title of "leading tone"; I will, nevertheless, continue to use that term in its more familiar, narrow sense.) As for the subdominant, Schenker in his harmony treatise faced a predictable (and perennial) problem arising from his derivation of the major scale from a series of ascending perfect fifths: $\hat{4}$, uniquely among the scale degrees, cannot be so derived and instead enters awkwardly as the fifth *below* the tonic. Consequently, Schenker referred to the subdominant

EXAMPLE 23. Debussy, *La Mer*, iii ("Dialogue du vent et de la mer"), measures 254–56



EXAMPLE 24. Heinrich Schenker, *three forms of the Urlinie* (from *Der freie Satz*)

note as “extraneous,” “the representative of another, more remote, system, rather than . . . an organic component of the [major scale], which, according to Nature’s intention, originated from a series of rising fifths alone” (1954, 40).²⁷ Such theoretical niceties aside, the more musically concrete question of chord succession likewise drew an adamant opinion (now from his later *Free Composition*): that the plagal progression I–IV–I “express[es] no motion whatsoever” (1979, 14).

Schenker’s insistence on melodic descent, on stepwise melodic motion, and on authentic, as opposed to plagal, progressions, would seem to distance him from the question of the plagal leading tone. His assessment of Debussy as a “brainless French nonentity” (2004, 45) would seem to further distance him from the subject of this article. Nevertheless, Schenker has provided a uniquely elegant and lucid account of musical logic, unity, and drama. Even if that account is dogmatic and limited in the particulars, the ultimate musical qualities that he describes (though by no means universal) do transcend compositional style—and transcend as well Schenker’s own rather narrow musical tastes. I will focus on only one of those qualities, namely contrapuntal coherence, formalized by Schenker in the concept of the *Ursatz*.

For Schenker, any well-composed tonal piece possesses a single, global melody, which is however perceived only

subliminally, and the outline of which is evident only through analysis. This global melody, termed the “structural line,” relates to the actual melodic content of the piece through levels of abstraction corresponding to the compositional technique of “prolongation.” The structural line of a given piece assumes one of the three logically possible forms given in Example 24: a stepwise descent to the tonic starting from either 3, 5, or 8. In each case the structural line is bound up with the underlying harmonic progression or “bass arpeggiation,” I–V–I; the coordination of structural line with bass arpeggiation produces counterpoint known as the *Ursatz*, the “fundamental structure.” As the deepest foundation of the actual (“surface”) events of a piece, the structural line acquires an organic quality of the utmost psychic importance. It “signifies motion, striving toward a goal, and ultimately the completion of this course. In this sense we perceive our own life-impulse in the motion of the fundamental line, a full analogy to our inner life” (1979, 4).

Schenker’s theory is clearly animated by organicist priorities, but it ultimately derives from basic observations about tonal melody: above all, that the various notes of a tonal melody are unequal in importance and, indeed, are subject to considerations of voice-leading. For Schenker, straightforward relationships exist among those notes, even notes that are temporally separated at the musical “surface.” Schenkerian methods thus reveal hidden melodic connections: Example 25, for instance, clarifies the underlying classical behavior of $\hat{6}$ in Berlioz’s otherwise revolutionary cadence. The structural line of a given piece emerges from

27 In the mature theory of *Free Composition*, Schenker gives up scalar derivations, preferring instead the derivation of the triad from the overtone series.

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The top system is a piano score for a piece marked 'religioso' and 'pp'. It features a series of chords and melodic lines. The bottom system is a Schenkerian reduction of the same passage, showing the underlying harmonic structure with notes and accidentals. The reduction is labeled with '8' and '6' above the notes, indicating the scale degrees involved in the cadences.

EXAMPLE 25. Berlioz's $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{8}$ cadences (Example 13) subjected to Schenkerian reduction

analogous voice-leading connections, organized hierarchically in longer and longer spans extending far beyond the confines of the phrase and the affairs of the musical surface.

Matthew Brown's analysis of *Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un faune* points up the fragility of the plagal leading tone when subjected to Schenkerian reduction. The plagal leading

tones at the two most important cadences of the piece—at measures 30 and 106—are construed by Brown as participating in inner-voice passing motion within dominant harmony, $\hat{7}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$ (in the latter case only tenuously suggested by Debussy's actual voice leading; compare Example 26 and Example 17) (1993, 141). Felix Salzer's analysis of the

The image shows a musical score for measures 79–106 of Debussy's *Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un faune*. The score includes measure numbers (79, 83, 86, 90, 92, 94, 96, 100, 104, 106) and harmonic analysis (I⁶, V⁶, I¹³, VI⁶, II, V⁴, $\frac{5}{3}$, I). The analysis is attributed to Matthew Brown. The score includes a 'Nb' (Note) indicating a specific harmonic feature.

EXAMPLE 26. Matthew Brown, analysis of Debussy, *Prélude à L'Après-midi d'un faune*, measures 79–106. (See Example 17, measure 106 for comparison.)

Prélude similarly focuses on stepwise relations; now the plagal leading tone of measure 30 isn't just subsumed but is altogether omitted—perhaps not surprisingly, as Salzer uses this piece to illustrate the deeper-level neighbor-note motion (5–6–5) that he claims is “typical . . . of Debussy's individual style and French Impressionism in general” (1962, 209). Likewise, in Salzer's analysis of the piano prelude *Bruyères*, the plagal leading tones at measures 8, 14 (Example 27[a]), and 44 are assimilated into a 5–6–5 neighbor figure, which motivates voice-leading at various levels of structure (1962, 222–23). In fact, the structural line of *Bruyères*, according to Salzer (a student of Schenker's), involves precisely that neighbor motion, accompanied by the tonic chords of each of the prelude's three sections, I–II#–I (Example 27[b]). Thus, while Schenkerian assumptions reveal a hidden classical identity for Debussy's otherwise pentatonic-ish $\hat{6}$, the resulting analysis is unorthodox in lacking the two features of a proper *Ursatz*: a full descent in the structural line and the requisite bass arpeggiation I–V–I.

These interpretations, though reasonable as far as they go, suggest that Debussy's plagal leading tone might be thought of as a stylistic fingerprint, rather than as containing any deeper voice-leading potential.²⁸ I would claim that even a stylistic fingerprint can shed light on the state of a musical system (such as common-practice tonality) and that regardless of its contrapuntal integrity the plagal leading tone does represent, as I said earlier, “a subtle but profound deformation of the tonal hierarchy.” But we will also see that such a deformation can indeed reverberate beyond the musical surface, extending to the very depths of contrapuntal structure. In the following analysis, I accept the Schenkerian invitation into those depths.

THE STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF A PENTATONIC
SENSIBILITY: *LA FILLE AUX CHEVEUX DE LIN*

Replete with plagal leading tones—more than any other work of Debussy's—*La fille aux cheveux de lin* has inspired analytical results akin to those of Brown and Salzer. Adele Katz (1945) cites *La fille* as “the best illustration of Debussy's use of the neighbor note as an extension of the older technique” (254), and Richard Parks (1989) describes a piece governed by “neighbor-note motions around D \flat [5], complicated by frequent changes of register” (14). Even Jeffrey Kresky, who takes seriously the importance of melodic thirds in the piece, and who does at least recognize the existence of the 6–8 cadences, ultimately finds classical behavior embedded in Debussy's peculiar $\hat{6}$ (1977, 151–54). Like Salzer and Brown, these writers have marshaled Schenkerian methods in support of intricate elucidations of an essentially classical $\hat{6}$. But an analysis of *La fille* will prove most illuminating if theoretical assumptions themselves are altered in observance of the cadences that so thoroughly typify the piece. If rather than puzzling at the irregularities embodied by the plagal leading tone—namely, its rising melodic contour, its melodic gapped-ness, and its plagal (or quasi-plagal) harmonization—we instead accept them as reasonable, then we will find ourselves in a position to discern structural connections that have eluded others.

The fortunes of $\hat{6}$ do comprise a recurring question throughout the piece, and one that is broached straightaway: Example 28 shows the main theme, an unaccompanied arpeggio that extends from 5 *down* to $\hat{6}$ and back again. This theme thus emphasizes those two scale-degrees but obscures their classical adjacency relationship, by fracturing a major second into a minor seventh. Moreover, in traversing this adjacency via a chain of thirds, the theme also prefigures a broader opposition in the piece: that between steps and leaps. The entire prelude, in fact, will alternate between passages of stepwise and of “gapped” melody.

28 Nadia Boulanger (1926, 168) describes Debussy's V¹¹ cadences in the Preludes as a “cadential formula,” supposedly derived from Chabrier.

(a) Excerpt (mm. 10–14) of Salzer's analysis, with corresponding music for comparison

The image displays a musical score for Debussy's *Bruyères*, measures 10 through 14. The score is presented in two systems. The top system shows the original musical notation for piano, featuring a treble and bass staff. The music is in E-flat major (three flats) and 3/4 time. It includes various musical notations such as triplets, dynamics (*mf*, *p*), and articulation marks. The bottom system shows Salzer's analysis of the same measures. It uses a simplified notation where notes are represented by dots on a staff. Roman numerals (I, II, V) and the letter 'N' are used to denote harmonic functions. A bracket labeled 'I' spans measures 10-12. A bracket labeled 'V' is under measure 13. A bracket labeled 'I N' spans measures 14-15. A dashed line with an 'N' above it extends from measure 15 to the right. A vertical double-headed arrow connects the two systems, indicating the correspondence between the original music and the analysis.

(b) *Ursatz* for entire piece

The image shows the *Ursatz* (fundamental structure) for the entire piece *Bruyères*. It consists of a single system of musical notation, showing the treble and bass staves. The notation is simplified, with notes represented by dots on a staff. The piece is in E-flat major (three flats) and 3/4 time. The *Ursatz* is a single melodic line in the treble staff, with a corresponding bass line in the bass staff. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and bar lines.

EXAMPLE 27. Felix Salzer, analysis of Debussy, *Bruyères* (from *Structural Hearing*)

Très calme et doucement expressif (♩ = 66)

The musical score for Debussy's "La fille aux cheveux de lin" (1910) is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 1-11, and the second system covers measures 12-19. The tempo is marked "Très calme et doucement expressif" with a quarter note equal to 66 beats per minute. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/4. The score is for piano, indicated by the "p" dynamic marking. The melody in the right hand is characterized by a pentatonic ascent (5-6 || 5-6-8) and a "post-cadential retreat". The bass line provides harmonic support with chords and arpeggios. The score is annotated with figured bass notation (5, 6, 8) and a "dim." marking.

EXAMPLE 28. Debussy, *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (1910), beginning (with analysis showing the equivocal voice-leading of measures 1–3 as well as the emerging middleground of measures 1–11)

As the opening phrase continues, an important harmonic element is introduced as well, in the cadence of measures 2–3. Not only is this plagal cadence the first cadence in the piece, but its subdominant triad is the first bona fide chord of the piece; indeed, the cadential progression IV–I comprises virtually the sole harmonic content of measures 1–4. Melodically, $\hat{6}$ now assumes a fully non-classical guise as plagal leading tone, which in light of the foregoing enigmatic arpeggio can be heard to fulfill a twice-attempted pentatonic ascent (albeit with “changes of register,” to use Parks’s words): $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ || $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{8}$. (See Example 28 again.) Continuing

past the cadence, however, the melody retreats stepwise down the tetrachord, $\hat{8}$ – $\hat{7}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$. Thus, classical and non-classical $\hat{6}$ are seen to mingle.

The modest but distinctive events of these four measures will recur throughout the piece, above all the cadential procedure of the plagal leading tone. Plagal leading tones in various harmonizations and in various keys punctuate this short piece at no fewer than seven points (at measures 2–3, 9–10, 12–13, 15–16, 18–19 [thrice repeated], 30–31, and 35–36, the final cadence). These cadences (and a small number of others, to be discussed in due course) delimit

		<i>m.</i>	<i>gapped melody</i>	<i>cadence</i>	<i>stepwise melody</i>
A	Theme 1	1	undulating arpeggio (m7)	PLT (I)	stepwise retreat
		5	pentatonic melody	Auth. (VI)	stepwise link
	Theme 1	8	undulating arpeggio (m7)	PLT (I)	stepwise retreat (extended)
		12	rising figuration (pentatonic)	PLT (I)	stepwise retreat
	Theme 2 (modulations & development)	14			“organum” theme (modulating)
		15	rising figuration (m7)	PLT (IV)	stepwise retreat
		16			development of stepwise retreat*
		18	(*)	PLT (VI)	
	(climax & retransition)	19	rising figuration (pentatonic)	PLT (VI)	
		20	(twice)	PLT (VI)	
		21	(thrice)		varied “stepwise” retreat*
		23	(*)	Half	
A'	Theme 1	24	undulating arpeggio (m7) [†]	Half	
	Theme 1	28	undulating arpeggio (m7)	PLT (I) [‡]	stepwise retreat
	Theme 2	33			“organum” theme (non-modulating)
		35	rising figuration (pentatonic)	PLT (I)	

*The two variations of the stepwise retreat that flank the climax each lack one note of the scale.

[†]Recapitulation of Theme 1 is accompanied by parallel organum, in the manner of Theme 2.

[‡]Penultimate cadence to I via deceptive resolution to vi.

EXAMPLE 29. *Formal and paradigmatic analysis of Debussy, La fille aux cheveux de lin*

several brief melodic strains that together form, roughly speaking, an expanded two-part structure (proportioned, incidentally, by a near-perfect golden mean). The paradigmatic analysis of Example 29 indicates the three basic classes of material that constitute the piece (all of which were introduced in the first phrase) and the strongly reinforced pattern of progression from one paradigmatic class to the next: 1) “gapped” melody (either pentatonic or its minor-seventh-chord subset); 2) cadence; and 3) stepwise melody. But the cyclical structure implied by this analysis belies the very non-cyclical, registrally progressive contour of the melody at

the largest level of structure, the trajectory of which is established in the second strain.

The second strain (measures 5–7) upholds the foregoing paradigms, even as it offers a sort of harmonic corrective to the plagal orientation of its predecessor: the melody, though pentatonic, is now accompanied by several dominants.²⁹ Its

29 The outstanding similarity of this strain to Mussorgsky’s “Promenade” theme from *Pictures at an Exhibition* (which extends beyond the pentatonic melody to texture, rhythm, and even the penultimate applied dominant chord) indicates another important source of Debussy’s

The musical score for measures 12-16 of Debussy's 'La fille aux cheveux de lin' is shown. The key signature is G-flat major (Gb). The score is in 3/4 time. The middleground melody is highlighted with a bracket and an analysis of its pentatonic motifs. The analysis shows the progression of the middleground melody from Gb6 to Gb8, then to Cb6, and finally to Cb8. The score includes dynamic markings (p, ppp, p) and a tempo marking (Mouv.).

EXAMPLE 30. Debussy, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, measures 12–16 (with analysis)

cadence, in fact—a rather sudden, unmotivated (and, as it turns out, short-lived) tonicization of E \flat major—is the one straightforwardly authentic cadence in the entire prelude. That key (VI \sharp) will become important later in the piece; for now, the high E \flat thus attained ($\hat{6}$), forges a middleground connection with the D \flat of the opening theme, which in turn is restated in the third strain as well (measures 8–11). In other words, the classical neighbor figure ($\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$) that was somewhat tenuously implied in the first strain is emphatically expressed in the middleground over the course of these first eleven measures, as illustrated in Example 28.

But it is precisely at the middle- and background levels that *non*-classical $\hat{6}$ will eventually dominate. Indeed, Example 30 shows how subsequent plagal leading tones (at measures 12–13 and 15–16) drive a middleground melody that ascends in consistently pentatonic motifs. This ascent accomplishes the chief modulation of the piece: to the key of IV, the pentatonic scale of which is in

fact outlined by that middleground melody itself. (And now it must be considered that Debussy's use of register is, *pace* Parks, rather *un*-"complicated": a simple audit of melodic peaks throughout the prelude brings the middleground and, ultimately, the background progressions into considerable relief.)

This ascent reaches a point of crisis at the piece's climax in measure 21 (at *mf*, the dynamic pinnacle of this serene prelude), following a modulation to E \flat major. In Example 31, a jarring C \flat major triad grows out of a $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{8}$ cadence in E \flat and its three subsequent repetitions—first in the original tenor register, then an octave higher, and finally, though abortively, an octave higher still, in the established register of the structural ascent. That last, feigned repetition breaks with its model precisely at the moment of cadence, skipping $\hat{6}$ altogether and leaping instead from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{8}$; in so doing, it avoids what would have been the first chromatic intrusion into the structural ascent (C \sharp) and hence reverses the tonal trajectory of the piece in preparation for the recapitulation soon to come.³⁰ Moreover,

pentatonicism not considered in my discussion above. The Asian offerings at the 1889 Exhibition too easily overshadow in historians' minds a pair of concerts of Russian music conducted there by Rimsky-Korsakov. (Though again, Debussy's contact with Russian music had preceded that Exhibition.)

30 A reluctance to include chromaticism in the structural melody would also partly account for the leaping melody in measure 6 and the related cross-relation D \flat /D \sharp , though the avoidance of semitones is surely the more important factor.

EXAMPLE 31. Debussy, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, measures 18–22 (with melodic reduction)

(a) Classical modulation and retransition (b) *La Fille*, mm. 18–21

EXAMPLE 32. Chromaticism and its negation in “authentic” and “plagal” modulation

the requisite post-cadential retreat (measure 22) also skips this note, using instead the gapped motif E \flat –D \flat –B \flat . The curious neglect of melodic C \sharp , and its sublimation harmonically into C \flat , function to destabilize the local plagal leading tone

($\hat{6}$ of VI \sharp), just as a classical retransition destabilizes the local (authentic) leading tone ($\hat{7}$ of V)—in both cases global scale-degree $\sharp 4$, as explicated by Example 32. (And further play between C \sharp and C \flat ensues in the inner voices, measures 22–3.)

EXAMPLE 33. Debussy, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, measures 22–24

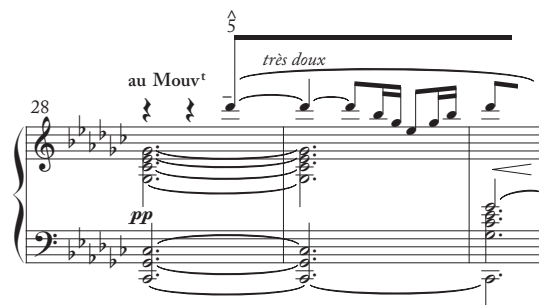
Pivotaly, the sudden insertion of a $C\flat$ major triad at this moment turns $\hat{1}$ in the key of $VI\sharp$ into $\hat{6}$ in the key of I. More to the point, the reassertion of IV (the chord), conjures up the key that had preceded this climactic passage: $VI\sharp$ thereby reveals itself to have been something of a parenthetical digression with respect to IV, just as it had been in measures 1–11, with respect to I.³¹ This sonority, $IV/\hat{6}$, will be as important at the structural level as it has been at the foreground level both at this climax and in the first cadence of the piece.

Thus far, the melodic ascent has outlined a span of a ninth from $\hat{5}$ up to $\hat{6}$ —that is, a reversal of the opening arpeggio's distinctive boundary tones (the seventh from $\hat{5}$ down to $\hat{6}$).

Whereas the *step* $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ existed just beyond the upper and lower bounds of that theme, it exists comfortably within the ninth in question, once at either extreme. This neighbor motion was instantiated in the lower portion of the structural melody, as was illustrated earlier in Example 28. The higher $\hat{6}$, $E\flat_6$, which was so dramatically introduced at the piece's climax, will likewise eventually connect with $\hat{5}$. For the time being, however, progress in the structural melody pauses while subtle manipulations of $\hat{6}$ play out in the lower registers: Example 33 shows how an *upper* neighbor $\hat{7}$ thrice decorates $\hat{6}$, first as part of prolongations of IV ($\hat{4}$ – $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ in the bass, measures 22–3), then as part of a bona fide dominant seventh half-cadence preceding the recapitulation. The recapitulatory tonic (measure 24) contains a telling added sixth that seems to echo the unsettled $E\flat_6$ of the structural melody and that, by implication, minimizes the contrapuntal import of the preceding dominant (whose $\hat{7}$ “resolved” to that $\hat{6}$). The structural meaning of that $E\flat_6$ as an upper neighbor becomes clear at the final, octave-transposed statement of the theme shown in Example 34; this return of the opening $D\flat$ invokes a resumption of classical behavior and thus implies a satisfying parallelism with the events of measures 1–8.

Example 35 synthesizes all of these observations in a more explicitly Schenkerian manner. From this perspective,

³¹ The climax in measure 21 calls to mind the (almost as unexpected) $E\flat$ major triad of measure 6 because of two further similarities: 1) these two chords share an otherwise unique rhythmic idiosyncrasy, being struck on beat 3 and then held over the barline; and 2) these moments both involve the leap of a rising fourth, $B\flat$ – $E\flat$. From the perspective of the paradigmatic analysis as well, measure 21 represents the most salient moment in the piece; all other paradigmatic anomalies (indicated by white space in Example 29) can be thought of either as ambiguous material straddling paradigmatic classes (as per asterisked comment before measure 18 and before measure 23) or as emphatic reiterations of paradigms (measure 14; measure 16; measure 33) and pairs of paradigms (from roughly measure 18 to measure 27).



EXAMPLE 34. Debussy, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, measures 28–30

the first 28 measures represent the first half of a background interruption structure (albeit a *rising, pentatonic* one, $\hat{5}-\hat{6} \parallel \hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{8}$), elaborated by a large-scale transfer of register—the very interruption that was vaguely foreshadowed by the main theme itself (Example 28, measures 1–3).³² The final cadence of the piece, then (Example 36), consummates this pentatonic interruption, extending the structural line to its highest point with one last plagal leading tone.³³

Of all the $\hat{6}-\hat{8}$ cadences in this piece, only the first and this last cadence employ triads as cadential chords: IV–I previously, ii–I here. (In all the other cases, some chordal additive—seventh, ninth, etc.—appears in the long-note chords of the

left hand.) But those two plagal chords (IV and ii), so similar in function, differ in an important respect: as I discussed earlier, IV contains the tonic note, which deprives the IV–I cadence of the sense of dramatic opposition so characteristic of the authentic cadence. The ii–I cadence, on the other hand, contains no common tones. In this regard, the final cadence of *La fille* is unique among similar cadences throughout the piece: of the other six plagal leading tone cadences, all but one (measures 15–16) melodically anticipate the arrival pitch and all but two (measures 9–10 and 17–18) contain the tonic note in the cadential chord of the left hand. The final cadence does neither; it is, in a way, the ideal harmonization of the plagal leading tone, a further assimilation of dominant function into the plagal realm, aptly reserved for a structural cadence.

The “pentatonic-ish-ness” of *La fille* is, indeed, more than a fingerprint but bears novel structural possibilities with respect to Schenkerian models, chiefly the interrupted *Ursatz*. To equate this piece, as did Kopp (quoted earlier) with Chopin’s black-key Etude—both “operating within a diatonic framework”—is to overlook the profound and transformative implications of pentatonicism in the hands of Debussy. (Unlike *La fille*, the Etude expresses a strong dominant-tonic polarity and reduces clearly to an orthodox Schenkerian $\hat{3}$ -line, thus truly manifesting what we normally mean by “diatonic tonality.”³⁴) What is interesting about *La fille* is not the degree to which the pentatonicism in the piece is (or is not) systematized (apparently Kopp’s concern), but

32 Concerning interruption, Schenker writes (1979, 36): “As a linear progression of a third, the fundamental line $\hat{3}-\hat{1}$ represents the smallest range of composing-out, the ultimate unity which cannot be further split. Therefore, the fundamental line $\hat{3}-\hat{1}$ admits of only one form of division, the *interruption* $\hat{3}-\hat{2} \parallel \hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$. The initial succession $\hat{3}-\hat{2}$ gives the impression that it is the first attempt at the complete fundamental line.” In a pentatonic context, then, the “third” $\hat{5}-\hat{8}$ admits of an analogous division, as illustrated by *La fille*.

33 The outer-voice parallel octaves (E_b-G) of this final cadence suggest a connection with the E_b cadence in the second strain, measure 6 ($B-E_b$ also in parallel octaves), the moment that represented the first humble motion within the protracted structural ascent.

34 Nevertheless, the two pieces do resemble one another even more curiously than Kopp mentions: in their largely pentatonic melodic material, their common key, and their inclusion of a striking applied dominant (V/vi) as early as the second phrase. The structural (authentic) cadence of the Etude (measures 66–7), moreover, strongly resembles the retransitional half cadence of *La fille* (measure 23) in rhythm, melody, voicing/voice-leading, and texture.

1 3 6 10 13 16 21

5 N 6 8 6 8 6 8 6 8 (b) N

IV I V¹¹ I V¹¹ I C^b: V¹¹ I IV (VI[#]) IV

G^b: I (VI[#]) I

EXAMPLE 35. Debussy, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, linear analysis

rather the ways in which a pentatonic sensibility intersects with musical closure within that “diatonic framework” and subsequently resonates throughout the musical structure.

Meanwhile, Kopp’s contrasting of *La fille* with *Pagodes*, as justified as it is for many reasons, can be seen, in one respect anyway, as another misplaced invocation of the sunset/sunrise dichotomy. Beneath *Pagodes*’ somewhat intractable pentatonic figuration lies a slow-moving bass, the progress of which provides an instructive contrast with *La fille* vis-à-vis the foregoing analysis. Notwithstanding the thoroughgoing pentatonicism that permeates virtually every measure of *Pagodes*, the bass progresses in an altogether straightforward fashion, presenting 3–2–1 descents (the prototypical *Urlinie* succession) throughout. (Example 37 gives a rhythmic reduction.³⁵) The placement of these descents—at the end of

each of the piece’s four thematic strains—and the variation in their respective durations—note, for instance, the pronounced lingering on 2̂ in the final strain—indicate a relatively conventional, narrative sense of temporality, as compared to the timeless, arresting pentatonicism of the discursive surface. *La fille* and *Pagodes*, then, each in its own way, exhibit *both* conventional and radical interpretations of scalar norms.

CONCLUSIONS: DEBUSSY AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF TONALITY

I began this essay with a historiographic question, applying Debussy’s critical heuristics of “sunset” versus “sunrise” to Debussy himself. In this regard it is worth noting another of Debussy’s comments on Wagner, whom he considered to be “more tonal” than Berlioz: “Wagner develops in the classical manner. Wagner merely abandoned the perpetual perfect cadence” (quoted in Lockspeiser 1962, 204–05). “Merely?” Although we may never know the degree to which this comment was intended to be ironic or

35 A wholesale *Schenkerian* reduction of *Pagodes* is impractical—for one thing, the opulent pentatonic textures too often preclude harmonic clarity (to say nothing of contrapuntal clarity). Concerning my Example 37: note that Debussy’s measure 92 and measure 94 are half-measures (i.e., 2/4). Hence, my reduction, which observes an unchanging quadratic hypermeter, places a hyper-measure in the middle of Debussy’s measure 93.

EXAMPLE 35. [continued]

EXAMPLE 36. Debussy, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, end

calculatedly polemical (two pervasive modes of Debussy's criticism), it certainly suggests a concern with the nature and history of musical closure, a concern shared by Debussy's contemporaries.

In 1919, the year after Debussy's death, the Italian pianist, conductor, composer, and critic (as well as, it so happens, champion of Debussy) Alfredo Casella completed a prodigious history of Western music, in which he sought "to trace the gradual formation and development, during the slow

course of centuries, of the principal elements of our magnificent edifice of modern music." As a lens through which to view this development, from 13th-century polyphony to the music of Stravinsky and Schoenberg, Casella employed a novel course of action, presenting one hundred musical examples chosen to illustrate variations on a

technical formula to which composers have had recourse during the last few centuries, and which summarizes the principal characteristic features of the wonderful modern tonal system.

1 5 9 13 17 21

25 29 33 37 41 45 49 53 (elision)

57 61 65 69 73 77

81 85 89 93 98

3 2 1

3 (2) 3 2 (3 2 1) 3 2 (3 2 1)

3 (2) 3 2 1

EXAMPLE 37. Debussy, *Pagodes*, *rhythmic reduction (4:1) of bass*

This formula could be no other than the *perfect cadence*, i.e., the traditional ‘full close’ obtained by the progression from the *dominant* to the *tonic*.³⁶

Casella’s *The Evolution of Music Throughout the History of the Perfect Cadence* is an ambitious piece of musical scholarship, unprecedented in its approach.³⁷ In my own small amendment to Casella’s study (as it were), I hope to have demonstrated a pair of peculiar, perhaps unforeseen results: that Debussy’s pentatonic vocabulary looks backward more than has been supposed (certainly in its stylistic and semantic debts, as was shown earlier, but also, as in the case of *Pagodes* at least, in its large-scale melodic syntax); and that meanwhile, Debussy’s ostensibly straightforward, common-practice vocabulary—what could be more accessible, more tonal,

than *La fille aux cheveux de lin*?—might be seen to break with the past in profound ways having to do with the logic of musical closure within a pentatonically inflected diatonicism.

* * *

In the very year that *La fille* was published, Schenker himself published the first volume of *Counterpoint*, which opened with the following apocalyptic assessment of the state of music.

We stand before a Herculaneum and Pompeii of music! All musical culture is buried; the very tonal material—that foundation of music which artists, transcending the spare clue provided by the overtone series, created anew in all respects from within themselves—is demolished (1987, xvii).

One cause of this decline, Schenker later explains, is modern composers’ flirtations with the church modes and with “exotic” scales such as the pentatonic (1987, 20ff.). Schenker’s impatience with these imported systems (or as he calls them, “so-called systems”) relates ultimately to his concern with contrapuntal structure. “Those exotic people still lack diatony [i.e., the *Ursatz*], and that is the reason for the irrational character of their music (1987, 22).

And conscious that musical exoticism was practiced by his own heroes, Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms, Schenker took care to add,

Skillful artists, still, have always successfully limited the problem of musical exoticism in practice. They solved it by attempting to make the original melodies of foreign peoples (often original only because of their imperfections and awkwardness) accessible to us through the refinements of our two tonal systems. They expressed the foreign character in our *major and minor*—such superiority in our art, such flexibility in our systems! (1987, 28)

By demonstrating the structural richness and integrity of *La fille*, I do not aim to “validate” Debussy’s style with respect to (even loosely interpreted) Schenkerian principles. (Debussy’s music has no need for such pleading on its behalf; and Schenker’s xenophobic chauvinism does not warrant a

³⁶ The author’s preface (dated 1919) to Casella (1924/1964, iii). In this work, Casella does not mention anything resembling the plagal leading tone. Interestingly, however, Casella’s 1911 piano piece *A la manière de C. Debussy* ends with a plagal leading tone in the bass (ii⁶–I, just as in *La fille*)—thus vindicating a contemporary’s judgment that “there is in the world of music, no innovation that could escape the infallible eyes and ears of Casella” (Jean-Aubry 1920, 40).

³⁷ Nevertheless, this interest in the cadence was widespread at the time. René Lenormand (1915/1940), composer and founder of the Société Nationale de Musique, praised what he called the “modern school” (with Debussy as its “chief”) for using a “special kind of termination,” ending on chords other than the bare tonic triad (82). (For Debussy’s status as “chief,” see x, note.) August Halm (1900), on the first page of his *Harmonielehre*, wrote, “All of music is nothing more than an enormously advanced variation of the basic musical structure, that is, the cadence, the primal seed of which is the dominant, with its inner motion to the tonic” (“Die ganze Musik aber ist auch nichts anderes als eine ungeheuer erweiterte Variation der musikalischen Urform, d. i. der Kadenz; deren Urkeim aber ist die Dominante mit ihrer inneren Bewegung zur Tonika”) (5). This “enormously advanced variation” would almost seem to prefigure the mature theory of Schenker, were it not for Schenker’s (1979, 17) insistence on the ontological distinction between the authentic cadence and the *Ursatz*. But Schenker surely doth protest too much, as the cadential connotations of the *Ursatz* are hardly coincidental. (Schenker was in fact unsympathetic to Halm’s views, though the two maintained occasional and civil correspondence.)

response in any case.) But I do hope to have celebrated Debussy's discovery of a remarkable and previously unexplored "flexibility" in the diatonic system, a discovery ultimately motivated by the composer's wholesale—and yet wholly uncompartimentalized—investment in both pentatonicism and the tonal tradition.

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