CHARMS FOR BILITIS:
THE LANGUAGE OF DEBUSSY’S ANCIENT MUSICAL PERSONA

A Thesis in
Music Theory and History

By
Kristen M. Rhodes
© 2015 Kristen M. Rhodes

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

May 2015
The thesis of Kristen M. Rhodes was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Taylor A. Greer  
Associate Professor of Music Theory  
Thesis Adviser

Mark C. Ferraguto  
Assistant Professor of Musicology

Sue E. Haug  
Director of the School of Music

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
Abstract

Within the eclectic amalgamation of styles in the music of Claude Debussy, a mystical sense of nostalgia permeates his compositional output. Specific musical features evocative of ancient eras appear throughout his works, suggesting that the conception of an idealized past was a significant part of his aesthetic. In fact, Debussy was a pivotal participant in a larger cultural fascination with all things ancient that began in the last half of the 1800s. Sparked by a sharp increase in archaeological discoveries and further fueled by widespread disillusionment with the new industrial society, the ancient world became a popular setting for fantasies of a lost paradise. Archaic settings became vehicles for the collective imagination to project various commentaries on modern society, thus allowing for controversial and forbidden subjects to be approached under the guise of “history.” Thus, the portrayals of the ancient world in the late 19th century did not depict true history, but rather a highly romanticized version of the past that represented a longing for simpler times.

This particular aspect of Debussy’s musical personality found its most convincing voice through Pierre Louÿs’ poetry about a fictional Greek poetess named Bilitis. Throughout his career, Debussy composed a number of works based on these poems: the vocal work Trois chansons de Bilitis in 1897-98, incidental music for the performance of the poetry in 1901, and the piano duet Six épigraphes antiques in 1914. Debussy’s writings reveal that he was acquainted with the character of Bilitis as early as 1894, with evidence suggesting that she may have influenced the well-known orchestral composition, Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune.

Debussy’s continual return to Louÿs’ poems during a twenty-year time span suggests that Bilitis served as a mythical muse that inspired his musical nostalgia. Her influence can be found in numerous instrumental compositions that evoke a similar archaic mysticism yet have no text
from which to derive meaning—the “ancient” subtext is communicated entirely by a set of compositional features that have established associations with a particular conception of the past. Specifically, I have identified three categories of intervallic, melodic, harmonic, and textural features that form a particular compositional idiom that I have labeled as Debussy’s “Ancient Persona.” These features draw upon and add to the musical conventions associated with antiquity that were established by his predecessors and comprise a significant aspect of Debussy’s overall compositional style. In that respect, Debussy’s musical aesthetic can be viewed as having a symbiotic relationship with its historical context: it shaped his vision as much as he contributed to it.
# Table of Contents

List of Musical Examples ........................................................................................................ vi
List of Figures ......................................................................................................................... viii
Acknowledgments .................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT ....................................................................................... 1
   Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 2
   Revival of an Imagined Past ................................................................................................. 4
   Musical Signs of the Times ................................................................................................... 10
   Songs of Bilitis ....................................................................................................................... 23

Chapter 2. MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS .......................................................................... 30
   Motivic Interval Cell .............................................................................................................. 35
   Melodic Arabesque ............................................................................................................. 42
   Chant Arabesque .................................................................................................................. 49
   Pan’s Flute Arabesque ......................................................................................................... 55
   Archaic/Mystical .................................................................................................................. 65
   Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 76

Chapter 3. BEYOND BILITIS ............................................................................................... 78
   Ancient Instrumental Works ................................................................................................. 80
   Bilitis Goes to Egypt ............................................................................................................. 89

Chapter 4. CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................... 107

Appendix A. Translations ....................................................................................................... 111
Appendix B. Incidental Music ................................................................................................. 121
Appendix C. Ancient Artifacts ............................................................................................... 141

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................ 148
List of Musical Examples

Ex. 1: Antigone’s entrance; Camille Saint-Saëns, Antigone, I. “Prologue,” mm. 5-6 .........................................................17
Ex. 2: Chromatic tetrachord without half-steps; Camille Saint-Saëns, Antigone, II. “Parode,” mm. 34-50 .........................18
Ex. 3: Tetrachord sequence; Camille Saint-Saëns, Antigone, IV. “Stasimon,” mm. 106-114 ........................................18
Ex. 4: Modal harmonies and chordal texture of Hymne à Apollo; Gabriel Fauré, Hymne à Apollo, mm. 22-31 ..........22
Ex. 5: Polyphonic texture and chromaticism of Hymne à Apollo; Fauré, Hymne à Apollo, mm. 53-58 .........................22
Ex. 6: Symmetrical fourths in octaves; Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, II. “Pour un tombeau sans nom,” mm. 18-21 ..........................................................36
Ex. 7: Symmetrical fourths and the motivic interval cell; Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, IV. “Pour la danseuse aux crotales,” mm. 38-41 ..................................................36
Ex. 8: Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 7-10 ..........................................................38
Ex. 9: Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 17-18 ..........................................................38
Ex. 10: Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, II. “La Chevelure,” mm. 17-19 ..........................................................40
Ex. 11: Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, III. “Le tombeau des Naiades,” mm. 9-12 ..................................................41
Ex. 12: Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, III. “Le tombeau des Naiades,” mm. 15-18 ..................................................42
Ex. 13: Chant arabesque; Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, VI. “Pour remercier la pluie au matin,” m. 29-32 ..........50
Ex. 14: Bilitis theme generated by motivic interval cell; Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 1-4 ..................................................51
Ex. 15: Circular phrase elision of the Bilitis theme; Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 7-11 ..........................................................53
Ex. 16: Expanding chant arabesque; Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm.13-16 ..........................................................53
Ex. 17: Chant countermelody; Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm.13-16 ..........................................................53
Ex. 18: Tetrachord palindrome and expanded chant arabesque; Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” m. 17-19 ..................................................54
Ex. 19: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 27-30 ..............................54
Ex. 20: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 31-33 ..............................54
Ex. 21: Incidental music flute arabesques .................................................57
   a. Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], II. “Les Comparaisons”
   b. Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], X. “La Danseuse aux crotales,” mm. 5-18
Ex. 22: Scalar structure of arabesque; Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], II. “Les Comparaisons” ....59
Ex. 23: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, II. “Pour un tombeau sans nom,” mm. 8-11 ..................................................59
Ex. 24: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, III. “Pour que la nuit soit propice,” mm. 27-29 ..............................................60
Ex. 25: Syrinx motive; Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” m. 1 ......................................................61
Ex. 26: Fragmentation of the syrinx motive; Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 12-16 ..........62
Ex. 27: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, V. “Pour la danseuses aux crotales,” mm. 15-18 ..............................................62
Ex. 28: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, V. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 17-19 ..............................63
Ex. 29: Arabesques generated by melodic fragments .................................................64
   a. Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 10-11
   b. Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 15-16
   c. Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 17-19
Ex. 30: Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], X. “La Danseuse aux crotales,” mm. 11-13 .................66
Ex. 31: Reduction of parallel chords and suspensions; Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 17-19 ..................................................67
Ex. 32: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 21-22 ..................................67
Ex. 33: Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, III. “Le tombeau des naiades,” mm. 9-12 ..............................................69
Ex. 34: Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 4-11 .................................71
Ex. 35: Debussy, Les Chansons de Bilitis [incidental music], “Finale,” mm. 1-3 .................................72
Ex. 36: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 31-36 ..........................73
Ex. 37: Harmonic reduction of parallel fifths in “La Flûte de Pan;”
   Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, I. “La Flûte de Pan”. .................................................73
Ex. 38: Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 7-10 ................................................................. 75
Ex. 39: Debussy, *Danses*, I. “Danse sacrée,” mm. 1-3 ........................................................................................................ 81
Ex. 40: Chant fragments generate a full chant arabesque ................................................................................................. 82
   b. Debussy, *Danses*, I. “Danse sacrée,” mm. 8-12
Ex. 41: Debussy, *Danses*, II. “Danse profane,” mm. 37-40 .......................................................................................... 83
Ex. 42: Debussy, *Masques*, mm. 1-4 .............................................................................................................................. 83
Ex. 43: Debussy, *Masques*, mm. 81-82 .......................................................................................................................... 84
Ex. 44: Debussy, *Masques*, mm. 22-27 .......................................................................................................................... 84
Ex. 45: Debussy, *Images* (1ère série), “Hommage à Rameau,” mm. 1-4 .......................................................... 85
Ex. 46: Debussy, *Images* (1ère série), “Hommage à Rameau,” mm. 43 .......................................................... 86
Ex. 51: Primary melodic themes in "Canope” ..................................................................................................................... 92
Ex. 53: Comparison of chant arabesques in *Six épigraphes antiques* and “Canope” ................................................. 93
   a. Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, VI. "Pour remercier la pluie au matin," mm. 29-32
Ex. 55: Flute theme reduction; Debussy, *Préludes* (book 2), “Canope,” mm. 7-10 .................................................. 95
Ex. 56: Symmetry of “Canope” Chords ..................................................................................................................... 96
Ex. 59: Debussy, *Préludes* (book 2), “Canope,” mm. 9-12 ......................................................................................... 100

vii
List of Figures

Fig. 1: Gustave Moreau’s costume sketches for the 1881 rendition of Gounod’s *Sapho* .................................................14
Fig. 2: Debussy's musical otherness ..........................................................................................................................32
Fig. 3: Characteristics of Debussy's ancient persona ..................................................................................................34
Fig. 4: Diagram of palindrome in “Pour la danseuse aux crotales,” mm. 40-41 .................................................................37
Fig. 5: Art Nouveau advertisements ..........................................................................................................................46
Fig. 6: Overlapping interval cells in “Hommage à Rameau,” mm. 3-4 .................................................................85
Fig. 7: Canopic burial urns ........................................................................................................................................90
Fig. 8: Pitch content of the Bilitis theme and the “Canope” chant .............................................................................97
Acknowledgments

I would first like to acknowledge all of the music theory and history professors at Penn State for sharing with me their vast wealth of knowledge and opening my eyes to fascinating new ways to think about music. I have experienced more musical, intellectual, and personal growth over the past two years than I ever could have imagined! I would also like to acknowledge Kenneth Burky, my undergraduate piano professor at Duquesne University, for sparking my love of Debussy’s piano preludes. Mr. Burky was a formative figure in my overall musical growth and made an indelible mark on my life for which I am forever grateful.

I would like to express my love and gratitude to my family and Bradley for their unconditional support and encouragement in my lifetime pursuit of all things musical. I must tip my hat to Bradley and my dad for all of the time they spent listening, feigning interest, and politely nodding their heads as I babbled on endlessly about topics that they didn’t understand.

I am extremely grateful to Professor Mark Ferraguto, not only for serving as my second reader, but for helping me to improve my writing skills over the past couple semesters in the classes that he taught. I am also thankful to Professor Ferraguto for igniting my newfound interest in strange historical oddities and unusual happenings.

And last but not least, an extra special “thanks” to my theory professor, mentor, fellow appreciator of metaphors, and thesis advisor extraordinaire, Professor Taylor Greer. Without his expertise, guidance, humor, quasi-therapy sessions, and insight into my often chaotic mental processes, this paper would either never have happened, or it would have ended up with a page count numbering in the thousands. I am forever grateful for his unique perspectives, comments, advice, and ability to help me organize my thoughts, often quite literally, with scissors and piles of papers scattered on the floor of his office. From the beginning when I approached him with a
forest full of seemingly unrelated ideas, he somehow saw the trees. Professor Greer understood what I was trying to say even when I could not yet articulate my thoughts beyond such non-descript words as “stuff” and “things.” Most of all, he had faith in my ability to tie together all of the strands of such a multi-faceted topic—one that can be likened to a wheel with an endless amount of spokes pointing in all directions. Without Professor Greer, the “spokes” would have overtaken my “wheel”.

This section would not be complete without acknowledging my gratitude to Claude Debussy, not only for composing some of the most luxurious combinations of sounds ever to be written for the piano, but for daring to be unique. His non-conformist attitude and witty critiques of musical and societal conventions strongly appealed to my deeply held values. My dad raised me to embrace individuality, think outside of the box, and follow my passion, with the instruction to “learn the rules so you know how to properly break them.” Debussy embraced my dad’s mantra like few other figures in history—he learned the rules at some of the most prestigious music institutions in Europe, and then he swiftly and unapologetically broke them, espousing a revolutionary compositional ideology that still puzzles theorists today. To quote Albert Einstein, “it gives me great pleasure indeed to see the stubbornness of an incorrigible nonconformist warmly acclaimed.”
“Imbeciles can find something to ridicule in a fundamentally beautiful idea, and you can be certain there is more likely to be beauty in the work of those who have been ridiculed than in those who calmly trail along like sheep to the slaughterhouse for which they have been predestined. Remain unique!”

– Claude Debussy
CHAPTER 1:

HISTORICAL CONTEXT
Introduction

Within the repertoire of Western music, very few composers have such a distinctive and recognizable sound as Claude Debussy (1862-1918). Defining this sound, however, can be elusive. His music is an enigma that often defies categorization and traditional methods of analysis. Having been shaped by a wide variety of trends, movements, and ideas, Debussy’s style directly reflects the rich cultural landscape of fin-de-siècle France. His oeuvre is an amalgamation of musical styles and techniques, which has allowed for a wide variety of interpretive and analytical perspectives.

Amongst the many styles, themes, and narratives that exist in Debussy’s music, a mystical sense of nostalgia is present throughout the span of his compositional output. Titles with mythical connotations conjure up images of ancient pagan reveries while non-Western sonorities, sinuous chromatic lines, whole-tone passages, and exotic flourishes create a primitive and sensual atmosphere. Unconstrained by beats, barlines, or regular phrase groups, Art Nouveau-inspired melodic arabesques continuously unravel above static harmonies. This metric ambiguity elicits a dream-like suspension of time congruent with the idea of fantasy. Parallel fifths, modal block chords, pentatonicism, and other references to historical musical styles further invoke reminiscences of bygone eras. Such features are pervasive throughout Debussy’s works, suggesting that the conception of an idealized past was a significant part of his aesthetic.

This particular aspect of Debussy’s musical personality found its most convincing voice through Pierre Louÿs’ poetry about a fictional Greek poetess named Bilitis. Throughout his career, Debussy composed a number of works based on these poems: the vocal work Trois chansons de Bilitis in 1897-98, incidental music for the performance of the poetry in 1901, and the piano duet Six épigraphes antiques in 1914. Despite the large time span between all of these
works, each one contains a distinct set of musical characteristics that I have titled Debussy’s “Ancient Persona.”

Debussy’s ancient persona was not a new idea. Rather, it was a continuation of a larger cultural fascination with all things ancient. Nostalgia became quite prominent during this era due to the massive societal changes sparked by the Industrial Revolution. The advent of modern technology sped up the pace of life, prompting people to reexamine their values, ideals, and beliefs. The ancient world became a vehicle for the collective imagination to project various commentaries on modern society, thus allowing for controversial and forbidden subjects to be approached under the guise of “history.” Thus, the portrayals of the ancient world in the late 19th century did not depict true history but an idealized version of the past that represented a longing for simpler times.

In particular, the ancient Greco-Roman world became a popular setting for fantasies of a lost paradise. Peter Lamothe suggests that this was a means of asserting the Roman identity inherent in French history—and, by extension, France’s claim to being the most worthy inheritor of the Roman empire’s grandeur.¹ Jann Pasler posits that, rather than being reactionary, it was a vision of France’s future as rooted in the Mediterranean, as opposed to northern Europe, a source of recent cultural “decadence.”²

Beginning in the mid-19th century, new archaeological discoveries sparked curiosity and intrigue, prompting the emergence of countless artistic works with “ancient” themes. Theatrical productions of ancient Greek and Roman dramas premiered on stages throughout Europe, and concert halls became venues to hear modern recreations of ancient musical manuscripts. A

---

¹ Peter Lamothe, “Theater Music in France, 1864-1914” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008), 158.
connection between ancient Greek music, chant, and folk song was forged and began to take on exotic and Oriental elements. These creations shaped the cultural depiction of the past and helped set the stage for Debussy’s ancient persona to emerge. In that respect, Debussy’s musical aesthetic can be viewed as having a symbiotic relationship with its historical context: it shaped his vision as much as he contributed to it.

**Revival of an Imagined Past**

The *fin-de-siècle* French revival of the ancient world began in 1841, though not in France but in Prussia. In what would be the first significant attempt at a revival of Greek tragedy since 1585, the Potsdam court of Friedrich Wilhelm IV requested a production of Sophocles’ *Antigone* from Ludwig Tieck and Felix Mendelssohn. While using a contemporary Romantic idiom, Mendelssohn worked with classical scholars so that his melody followed as closely as possible to Sophocles’ original verbal and metrical scheme. The successful production was exported elsewhere and, in 1844, set off the ancient revival in France with its debut at the Paris Odéon.

Two years later, in 1846, the École Française d’Athènes was established, giving France its own scholarly venue for archeological and historical studies of ancient Greece. At the time of the École’s founding, little factual information was known about ancient Greek culture, and the dominant perception was of a stoic and ethical society. This is evidenced by Gounod’s 1851 opera *Sapho*, which treated the world of ancient Greece as a symbol for moderation, restraint,

---

3 For a more detailed investigation and critique of the conditions surrounding the Western world’s fictional interpretation of Greek music, see Kostas Kardamis, “Challenging the Canon: Towards a History of Neo-Hellenic Music” (paper presented at the SMI and RMA Joint Annual Conference, Dublin, Ireland, July 9-12 2009).

and simplicity—all of the qualities that Gounod and librettist Emile d’Augier saw lacking in the works of their contemporaries.  

In the ensuing years, Greek dramas were performed on an increasingly regular basis. The ancient subjects and themes were given an ideal forum in 1869 with the first performance at the Roman theater at Orange. This massive open-air theater had immense proportions—the stage was 128 feet across, and the venue held as many as 12,000 people. The theater dates from Roman antiquity, thus providing audiences with an authentic “ancient” experience.

The rapidly growing popularity of ancient-themed theatrical and musical productions was fueled by the rise in archaeological discoveries. The public was fascinated to learn factual information about past cultures, which, up until this point, had only been understood through the lens of imagination and folklore. With this increased awareness came expectations of a more convincingly antiquated style of music for “ancient” subjects. For the audience, this equated to simple textures and the church modes. Composers who set ancient texts to a modern compositional idiom began to lose their appeal, including the once beloved Massenet. His 1872 score for Les Erinnyes was criticized for “not even a hint of the ancient modes.”

The next decade brought about a surge in research that would greatly impact the composition of ancient music. Between the years of 1876-79, Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray, a Belgian musicologist and composer, published three books on antique music. Around the same time, François-Auguste Gevaert set out to prove the then-universal assumption

---

5 Jeffrey Buller, review of Koch Schwann’s 2-CD recording of Sapho, performed on March 15, 1992, conducted by Patrick Fournillier, Opera Quarterly 12, no. 1 (1995): 175.

6 In 1888, the Roman theater at Orange became the Théâtre antique d’Orange and explicitly hosted antique-themed dramas.


8 Lamothe, “Theater Music in France,” 162.

9 Ibid.
that the middle ages inherited the eight modes directly from Greco-Roman antiquity, and that the creators of Gregorian chant therefore knowingly employed melodic-scalar constructs that had been familiar for centuries. These studies of the ancient and medieval modes comprised his multi-volume *Histoire et théorie de la musique de l’antiquité*, which was published between 1875-1881. Gevaert’s work set the standard for subsequent research and provided composers with guidance on the recreation of ancient music.

Gevaert’s research—and, by extension, the music that was composed based on his writings—reflects the ‘Hellenocentric’ approach to history that was typical of every nationalistic 19th-century historical narrative. From the mid 19th century onward, a mythical neo-classical purity was propagated by historians and embodied by the emerging Hellenic society in the West. This historiographical construct forged an uninterrupted continuity from ancient times to the modern era, and much of the music, writings, and research of this period have an underlying subtext that appoints France as the heir of ancient Greece’s legacy.

This mindset is especially evident in the numerous translations of ancient Greek music that were produced in the 1880s and ‘90s. Throughout this time, archaeologists all over Europe were unearthing fragments of ancient Greek music inscriptions. Most of these discoveries were translated into Western notation and performed for the public, events which were widely covered by the print media. Although the scholars undoubtedly believed that they were accurately translating the ancient musical symbols, these modern recreations were Westernized and encouraged the view of ancient Greece that existed in the public’s imagination. These pieces

---


12 Ibid., 3.
relied heavily on Gevaert’s studies and reflected his assertions that the modes, scales, and tuning systems of ancient Greece and the modern Western world were one and the same.

One of the most significant marriages between music and archaeology began to formulate during the early 1890s as the École Française d’Athènes attempted to excavate the southern slopes of Mt. Parnassus. By the end of 1892, they had found almost the complete assemblage of ashlar blocks that formed the Athenian Treasury at Delphi. Fourteen of the blocks were inscribed with parts of two second-century B.C. hymns to Apollo notated with Greek music.¹³

Starting in the summer of 1893, the Delphic music inscriptions were examined, restored, transcribed, and analyzed by Otto Crusius, Henri Weil, and Théodore Reinach.¹⁴ They pieced together four stone fragments containing vocal notation to restore what would eventually be known as the "first" Delphic hymn.¹⁵ The project was covered in numerous journals and newspapers, which credited Reinach with translating the hymn into Western notation.¹⁶ Because he was the longstanding editor of Revue des études grecques, Reinach had a considerable amount of control over the publication and dissemination of the hymn.¹⁷ To officially present the results, he planned to have the music performed live at the annual plenary meeting of the Association pour l’Encouragement des Études Grecques en France. Instead of having his transcription of the hymn sung a cappella, as was the standard practice, Reinach sought out Gabriel Fauré to compose a new accompaniment. One would think that a scholarly man of a reputable academic organization would have strived for authenticity,

---

¹⁴ For photographs of the original ancient Greek fragments, see Appendix C.
¹⁶ Reinach’s complete musical transcription of the hymn, along with photos of the original stone fragments, is included in Appendix C.
yet Reinach chose to prioritize contemporary aesthetics over historical accuracy. In his private life, he similarly sought to infuse a modern vision of ancient Greek life into his daily trappings. He even built a replica ancient Greek villa in the south of France (with modern plumbing discreetly hidden) in order to live out his ancient Greek fantasies.\textsuperscript{18}

As planned, Fauré’s newly composed hymn, titled \textit{Hymne à Apollon}, was premiered at the meeting in the spring of 1894. The Association’s annual meeting took place in the Hémicycle of the École des Beaux-Arts, which would have provided Paul Delaroche’s mural painting of Phidias, Ictinus, and Apelles as an appropriately Hellenic backdrop.\textsuperscript{19} According to a report in the New York Times on April 29, 1894, a vocalist named Madame Remacle sang the hymn first in French and then in the original Greek. The article also notes that she was dressed in “ancient Greek costume.”\textsuperscript{20}

Fauré’s \textit{Hymne à Apollon} was widely disseminated, performed, and even appropriated by pop culture. In England, an article in the \textit{Musical News} from 1894 reported that performances had been held in Athens, Paris, Brussels, and other cities. The article noted the significance of the hymn, stating that “this most interesting find has made no little stir in the world of music, for we possess only a few fragments of ancient Greek music, and none of these are of the importance of this lengthy piece of music.”\textsuperscript{21} The hymn eventually made its way to America, where it was performed in late October of 1895 at the season’s inaugural tea of the Women’s University Club

---

\textsuperscript{18} Samuel Dorf, “Musicology, Archaeology and Fauré’s \textit{Hymne à Apollon} (1894)” (paper presented at the annual American Musicological Society and Society for Music Theory joint conference, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, November 6-9, 2014).

\textsuperscript{19} Solomon, “The Reception of Ancient Greece,” 512. Images of Delaroche’s mural are included in Appendix C.


in New York City.\textsuperscript{22}

Although the popularity of the hymn was short-lived, a byproduct of its influence is still witnessed today by millions of people worldwide: the Olympic Games. This internationally renown event owes its founding to Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who longed to create a modern version of the ancient Greek Olympic games. By 1894, Coubertin had garnered enough support to organize an International Athletics Congress in Paris at which attendees would vote on reinstating the games. To elicit enthusiasm—and hopefully sway the vote—Coubertin published an essay, “Le Rétablissement des Jeux Olympiques,” which appeared in \textit{La Revue de Paris} the day before the Congress. This issue also contained an article by Reinach, “Une page de musique grecque,” which described ancient Greek music and, more specifically, the Delphic hymn.\textsuperscript{23}

To further convince the international community, Coubertin fashioned a grand Hellenic spectacle for the Congress’ opening ceremony. On June 16, 1894, nearly 2,000 people filled the amphitheater of the “New Sorbonne,” which had been recently decorated with the neoclassical allegory “Bois sacré” by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes.\textsuperscript{24} Following the opening remarks, the attendees were treated to what would be the most elaborate and influential performance of \textit{Hymne à Apollon}. Jeanne Remacle once again sang the hymn, this time with an accompaniment by a choral group and a row of harps, all of which were conducted by Fauré.\textsuperscript{25}

According to Coubertin’s memoirs and other eyewitness accounts, the performance impacted the success of the Congress. Coubertin reflected that “the two thousand persons present listened in a religious silence to the divine melody risen from the dead to salute the Olympic

\textsuperscript{22} “Women’s University Club Tea,” \textit{The New York Times}, October 27, 1895, 8. The performance was held in the Berkeley Athletic Association Building on Forty-Fourth Street.
\textsuperscript{23} Solomon, “The Reception of Ancient Greece,” 518.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid. An image of “Bois sacrée” is included in Appendix C.
Muses of the 1800s and early 1900s celebrate the restored Olympic Games, igniting a renaissance across the darkness of the ages.”

He also wrote:

“A sort of subtle emotion emanated as if the ancient eurhythmy had wafted across the distance of the ages. In this way Hellenism infiltrated the vast enclosure. In these first hours, the Congress had become a success. From this moment I knew, consciously or not, that no one would vote against the restoration of the Olympic Games.”

The decision to reinstate the Olympic Games marked the peak of a unique period in which admiration for the Hellenic spirit permeated French culture. In this last decade of the 1800s, the artistic desire to study, imitate, and improve upon an imagined legacy of ancient Greece had risen to a fever pitch. Mythological beings served as the subjects of Symbolist literature, sculptures of heroic Hellenic warriors were incorporated into architecture, and nymphs, satyrs, gods, and goddesses graced the canvases of French artists. Music evoking the ancient world now had a defined set of semiotic signs that audiences not only associated with ancient themes, but had come to expect from music with even remotely ancient-sounding titles.

**Musical Signs of the Times**

Despite changing aesthetic values and trends, the ancient-themed musical works that were produced in the last half of the 1800s are connected by certain compositional features that signified the past. While this ancient musical language was expanded with each new generation of composers, certain core characteristics remained unchanged. The use and evolution of this set of musical symbols also reveals the prevailing cultural perceptions of the ancient world. By looking at some of the works from the 1880s and ‘90s with which Debussy and his audience


27 Ibid.

28 In 1896, an official “Olympic Hymn” was composed by Spyros Samaras. The cover illustration for the sheet music, included in Appendix C, provides an interesting glimpse of the public’s vision of the Olympic Games.
would likely have been familiar, we can gain an understanding of the musical imagination of the culture in which Debussy’s ancient persona emerged.

In the decades leading up to Debussy’s first major compositions, the ancient began to take on exotic and Orientalist qualities. Just as technological advances in archaeology fueled the interest in the past, innovations in travel and an expansion of trade routes brought about a growing fascination with far-away lands. The allure of the exotic was further ignited by the Paris Exposition Universelles, which, beginning in 1878, housed foreign pavilions of different national traditions that formed a “rue des nations.” These grand displays of colonial power featured groups of people from Asia, Africa, and the near-East, all displayed in neat little replicas of their home villages like animals at a zoo. The public perceived these “others” in a manner akin to that of a circus sideshow—curious and entertaining. They were generally thought of as primitive savages, far removed from the modern, “civilized” world of technology. However, the exotic music, dances, and costumes were incredibly enticing, and their influence made its way into French culture. The association of the exotic with the primitive resulted in the incorporation of exotic harmonies, colors, and textures into musical depictions of ancient subjects.

The new vogue for an exotic-flavored ancient world is particularly evident in Gounod’s 1884 revision of his debut 1851 opera Sapho. A comparison of both versions reveals a marked difference in the way that ancient subjects were imagined and portrayed musically. In the 1851 opera, the character of Sappho exhibited qualities that were honored in French women of that time: she was chaste, dutiful, and courageous—a patriot and revolutionary, with an admirable resolve and heroism. To compose the music, Gounod turned away from the rich orchestration

---


and elaborate stage effects of his contemporaries and instead turned towards Gluck for his model. His combination of Romantic harmonies with simple melodies created music reminiscent of a bygone era.

Gounod and d’Augier’s 1851 depiction of ancient Greece was based on the contemporary experience of classic Greek literature. *Sapho*’s opening march drew its inspiration not from what was known about the actual Olympic games, but from the solemn academic processions of Gounod’s own day. Jeffrey Buller, in a review of a modern recording of *Sapho*, remarks that the slow, deliberate pacing conjures up a vision of French schoolchildren slowly making their way through the texts of Virgil and Euripides. This experience is one that most audience members would have remembered well from their school days. Thus, Gounod’s vision of ancient Greece reflected elements of life in contemporary France.

The initial version of *Sapho* debuted in France on April 16, 1851, and although it received a good deal of attention, it was a flop. A particularly harsh review in *The Musical World* heaped criticism upon criticism, after which the authors concluded: “Against these drawbacks we are able to render but few compensating qualities.” According to the review, the public was equally nonplussed. The end of each act was met with silence and the audience exhibited “the coldest indifference at the conclusion,” factors which compelled the authors to pronounce the opera a failure. According to a later article, the production at the Royal Italian Opera on

---

31 Buller, review of *Sapho*, 174.
32 Ibid., 175-6.
33 Gounod & d’Augier’s *Sapho* also reflected the current state of politics. With parallels between ancient Greece and pre-revolutionary France, the opera was a thinly veiled criticism of the French government and originally banned by the censors.
34 “M. Gounod’s *Saffo*,” *The Musical World*, August 16, 1851, 518.
35 Ibid.
August 9th of 1851 did not fare any better, and one critic is said to have curtly dismissed it as “full of pretension and empty of merit.”36

Thirty years after its initial failure, Gounod revisited the opera and, after undergoing extensive changes, a new and improved Sapho premiered in 1881. In this version, the chaste early nineteenth-century heroine was replaced with a decadent fin-de-siècle fantasy of Sappho as courtesan.37 The additions and changes exhibit a new conception of the ancient world as both exotic and erotic. One such revision transformed a fairly innocent duet between Glycère and Pythéas into a scene of drunkenness and lust. Rather than a simple recitative, Glycère enters to the sounds of a grand exotic flourish with harp, triangle, cymbals, and major seventh chords resolving by tritone.38

In addition to the music, new costumes and sets reflected the trend for exotic visions of Sappho. One of the existing costume sketches by Gustave Moreau, shown in Figure 1, depicts an unusually decadent wardrobe for the courtesan Glycère. Samuel Dorf describes this image as a courtesan who perhaps shopped at the same clothing store as pagan Thaïs or Salome.39 Dorf also remarks that the sketch for the character of Phaon, which consists of a gossamer cape, long feminine fingers and hair, a flowing cloak, and a pleated and ruffled blouse, stands in sharp contrast to the patriotic revolutionary image of the 1851 production.40


38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.
Audiences and critics responded much more positively to the enticing and lusty recreation of Sapho. The May 1, 1884 issue of the *Monthly Musical Record* quotes M. Moreno as writing: “This is, above all, a rare specimen of fine lyric declamation, such as we find in Gluck, but with all the color of modern art, though the work preserves the calm grandeur and cold serenity of ancient times.” Another article states that even the music that remained from the original version was met with praise. According to a review from 1884, “the brilliant Parisian audience bestowed hearty applause upon many numbers belonging to the edition of ’51.”

As evidenced by the two versions of Sapho, the connection between the ancient and the exotic became more pronounced in the latter part of the 19th century. This trend is also evident in

---

**Fig. 1:** Gustave Moreau’s costume sketches for the 1881 rendition of Gounod’s *Sapho*.


---

41 Images contained in Dorf, “Seeing Sappho in Paris,” 293.
the works of French composer Camille Saint-Saëns, whose longstanding “sensibility toward the music of antiquity and archaism” was considered noteworthy by his contemporaries.  

He was also known as a pioneer of exotic sound colors: not only was he the first Frenchman to incorporate the pentatonic scale in his 1872 opéra comique La Princesse Jaune, but he also explored the augmented seconds of Arabic music, imitated the sounds of Arab orchestras, and, according to Jann Pasler, sought to create musical heterogeneity and coexistence.

In 1888, following the demand for a more authentically “ancient” style of music to accompany Greek texts, Saint-Saëns was commissioned to replace Mendelssohn’s 1844 incidental music for Antigone. Pasler states that Saint-Saëns’ objective was to treat the performance as a vehicle for achieving previously unimagined historical realities, brought to life most effectively in the exploitation of an archaeological setting such as the Théâtre Antique at Orange. Saint-Saëns, in a commitment to historical accuracy, first studied the gold-standard—Francois-Auguste Gevaert’s Histoire et théorie de la musique de l’antiquité —before embarking on the “reconstruction and restoration of Sophocles’ masterpiece with a discreet music allowing the listener to discern every word of the verse.”

Saint-Saëns described his compositional approach in a preface to the score, revealing much of the burgeoning musical symbolism for the ancient world. Here, Saint-Saëns explains that he wrote the choral passages in unison as a means of reproducing the performance of Greek tragedy as accurately as possible. He noted that the text written in lyric verse was “based on

46 Ibid.
scales more complex than those of the modern major and minor modes.”^48 Likely he was referring to the church modes, which Gevaert attributed to the ancient Greeks.

The influence of Histoire et théorie de la musique de l’antiquité can also be witnessed in the instrumentation of Antigone, which followed Gevaert’s assertions that the sound of citharas can be replicated by harps and that modern flutes, oboes and clarinets best represent ancient Greek wind instruments.^^49 Thus, in addition to a few strings, Saint-Saëns’ orchestra primarily featured two oboes, two clarinets, and harps. The instruments were scored either in unison with the chorus or in “a musical embroidery” around the singing, following Gevaert’s descriptions of the “rudimentary polyphony practiced by the ancients.”^50

Solomon notes that Saint-Saëns ventured even further towards authenticity by employing actual Greek tonoi and chromatic tetrachords: "pykna" ("clusters") of E-E♭-D and B-B♭-A, and the "fixed" notes D-G-A-D', all according to Aristoxenian guidelines.^^51 The two tetrachords—D-E♭-E-G and A-B♭-B-D—follow Gevaert’s explication of the Greek ton lydien.^^52 Much of the main motivic material of Antigone is based on these pitch groups, including Antigone’s theme, which is constructed entirely on the chromatic tetrachords as shown below. Saint-Saëns addresses this in the preface, explaining that the "curious" chromatic slides that accompany Antigone's initial entrance, shown in Example 1, and Eurydice's subsequent exit were inspired by the Orestes papyrus.^^53


^49 Olin, “Reconstructing Greek Drama,” 54.


Saint-Saëns found melodic inspiration in the decorations found on ancient Greek vases, writing that he “made a line drawing, heightened with tinted places whose charm comes from extreme simplicity." The instrumental parts very closely mirror the simple, scalar vocal lines, with very few leaps larger than a fourth. Amongst all of the parts, the melodic lines contain relatively little compositional variety and rely heavily on thematic recycling. The majority of the score is constructed upon a limited amount of recurring fragments and patterns, most of which are based on a perfect fourth and take the form of diatonic and chromatic tetrachords. Frequently, the half-step of the chromatic tetrachord is removed to form a short three-note pattern, shown in Example 2. These perfect fourth figures are repetitively sequenced, inverted, and set to different modes, as illustrated in Examples 2 and 3. This intervallic pattern is a significant component of Debussy’s ancient persona and will be discussed at length in Chapter 2.
The use of modes, repetitive fragments, and stark, hollow textures of parallel octaves, fourths, and fifths present a distinctively “ancient” soundscape. Overall, Saint-Saëns’ *Antigone* can be characterized by its sheer simplicity. This, in fact, was the composer’s intention—in the
preface, he instructed the listener to enjoy the simplicity rather than seek “the kaleidoscopic effects” of modern music.54

Saint-Saëns’ historically informed compositional approach reflects the environment of the 1880s and 1890s, one that was cultivated by the rapid growth in discoveries of ancient musical artifacts. The archaeological fragments were reassembled by scholars and translated into modern Western notation, a process that was quite difficult. Upon the discovery of the Delphic hymn, the translation process conducted by Reinach and his team was documented and publicized in journals throughout Europe and America. An 1894 article from The Academy reported on this undertaking, noting that Reinach was “greatly assisted by the discovery that almost all the signs employed are identical with those assigned by Alypius to the chromatic variety of the Phrygian tone.”55

Despite the efforts to remain accurate and authentic, one can sense a Westernization of the music even at this early stage in the translation process. The article states that the time is “five-eights,” and warns that “several of the progressions sound unusual to our ears.”56 To conclude, the article paraphrases a statement by Reinach: “M. Reinach points out how greatly the style of the music is varied to suit the sentiment of the poetry, and suggests a comparison with Wagner.”57

Reinach’s translation of the fragments exhibits the influence of Gevaert and other composers of the time.58 Another article from 1894 notes the hymn’s use of the chromatic

55 “The Greek Hymns from Delphi,” The Academy, June 2, 1894, no. 1152, 459.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Reinach’s translation of the hymn is included in Appendix C.
tetrachord, which is described as “a fourth composed of two intervals of a semitone and one of a minor third, on which the ancient Greek chromatic system is based.” Consider ing that this is the same collection of intervals used by Saint-Saëns in Antigone, it is clear that this was the standard interpretation of this particular facet of ancient Greek music. The article goes on to describe the melody as “partly diatonic and partly chromatic” and in the Dorian mode, which is explained using our modern Western conception of the modes. Additionally, the article notes that the octave is divided into fourths, another technique employed by Saint-Saëns, presumably to reflect the ancient Greek predilection for symmetry and precise mathematical divisions.

Fauré’s newly composed accompaniment further assimilated the world of ancient Greece with that of 1890s France. He employed many of the same techniques as his contemporaries, such as sparse textures, parallel octaves and fifths, an emphasis on fourths, and the use of modes. The speeches and addresses that took place at the hymn’s debut performance on April 12, 1894 were recorded and published, giving additional insight into both the compositional decisions and the audience expectations.

The event began with opening remarks by archaeologist and art historian Maxime Collignon. Based on the published account of the event, ancient music was perceived as simple and unsophisticated, and the audience clearly expected ancient Greek music to sound strange to modern ears. Collignon stated:

Every indication is that the ancient Greeks did not achieve a development comparable to that reached in our modern art. Polyphony existed, but it was limited to two voices; agreement of three voices, basic to our harmony, remained unknown. Moreover, even harmony in two parts was only perm issible when two instruments, or an instrument and a voice, were in concert. When two or more voices sang together, it was invariably in unison or at the octave; and the recent work of one of our young composers is there to prove that the effects of this genre, sometimes exquisite, ultimately become

---

monotonous.\textsuperscript{60}

The instrumentation of Fauré’s hymn followed the same strategy as his predecessors, reflecting the widespread influence of Gevaert’s writings. In Reinach’s address prior to the performance, he explained the choice of instruments:

Flute and cithara provided the regular accompaniment for these types of hymns. We have replaced the cithara with a harp, which is an instrument of the same class; as for the ancient flute, it is represented here by the harmonium, since we lack clarinets. This double instrumental accompaniment was suggested by a phrase in the poem...\textsuperscript{61}

Reinach’s transcription of the ancient fragment was divided into five sections, suggested by the separate marble blocks on which the hymns were originally inscribed.\textsuperscript{62} This is transferred into Fauré’s composition, with five sections labeled A through E. Fauré follows Reinach’s time signature of $\frac{5}{4}$ to render the cretic meter of the original.\textsuperscript{63} The meter creates an offbeat sense of asymmetry that is heightened by the lack of tonicization in the harmonic structure, which primarily alternates between A minor and E major as tonal centers. The predominant texture, shown below, is one of rolled modal chords atop open fifths that mostly move by fourths and fifths.

\textsuperscript{60} Solomon, “The Reception of Ancient Greece,” 507.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 505-6.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 514.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 515.
Ex. 4: Modal harmonies and chordal texture of *Hymne à Apollon*
Gabriel Fauré, *Hymne à Apollon*, mm. 22-31

The middle section of the piece moves into a busier texture that suggests a primitive form of polyphony, albeit one that was composed by a modern musician. Within the linear accompaniment parts, Fauré included the chromatic tetrachords and added his own spin by placing them in a more exotic harmonic palette and expanding the chromaticism, as shown in the following example.

Ex. 5: Polyphonic texture and chromaticism of *Hymne à Apollon*
Fauré, *Hymne à Apollon*, mm. 53-58
The *Hymne à Apollon* was one of many works inspired by a particular vision of the past, and in the last decade of the 1800s, a great many composers turned to ancient mythological themes. Already by 1890, Erik Satie had begun to experiment with arcane Greek titles (“Gnossiennes” and “Gymnopédies”), ancient Greek scales, quintuple meter, and tetrachordal melodies. Saint-Saëns continued to produce numerous Greek text settings, such as the hymn “Pallas-Athéné” [Op. 98], which mirrors Fauré’s *Hymne à Apollon*. Within this thematic sub-genre, ancient courtesans became an increasingly popular subject, as evidenced by Saint-Saëns’ setting of *Phryné*, a fourth-century BC Boeotian prostitute, and Jules Massenet’s setting of *Thaïs*, another ancient courtesan. It was precisely this atmosphere that gave birth to another ancient courtesan named Bilitis, a fictional Greek poetess created by Pierre Louÿs and depicted musically by Debussy.

**Songs of Bilitis**

Throughout Debussy’s oeuvre, compositions with mythological subjects abound. Even in the earliest stages of his compositional development, his attraction to the ancient world, pagan themes, and mythological figures is evident. One of the landmarks in the development of Debussy’s ancient persona is an unfinished orchestral and vocal composition called *Diane au bois*, which tells the story of how the god Eros seduced the chaste Diana. The piece was a setting of poetry by Banville, who held up the ancient ideal of a supreme relationship between poetry and music. Speaking of this in 1872, Banville stated: “music must necessarily and inevitably return to its function in Greece and the ancient civilizations of the Orient where it was the twin sister of poetry.”

---

Debussy began this piece in 1883 as a student in Ernest Guiraud’s composition class at the Paris Conservatory and continued working on it during and after winning the Prix de Rome. The work opens with Eros playing a flute, which Paul Meecham connects to the flute of the Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune and the first scene of Pelléas et Mélisande, both of which were written several years later, in 1893. Though this unfinished piece is rather unremarkable in the grand scheme of Debussy’s output, the mythological subject matter foreshadows a significant and often overlooked aspect of his compositional aesthetic that would develop and mature throughout his career.

Ten years after beginning Diane au bois, Debussy became close friends with Pierre Louÿs, an eccentric Symbolist poet and Classical scholar who was a regular in the literary circles in Paris and abroad. A man of insatiable intellectual curiosity and passionate devotion to art, at once a sensuous pagan and a refined aesthete, Louÿs celebrated the free life of ancient Greece and proclaimed sensual fulfillment a condition essential to artistic creation and spiritual development. Louÿs, who lived wildly and recklessly, found Parisian life far too restrictive. For him, ancient Greece came to symbolize a type of moral and sexual freedom that was forbidden in contemporary society, and he was determined to reinstate Greek sensuality in the modern world. His preoccupation with ancient Greece was more of an obsession than an interest—he even altered his name to make it appear more Greek.

---


67 Upon contracting tuberculosis, Louÿs’ doctor instructed him to change his lifestyle, whereupon Louÿs lived even more recklessly and spent money like crazy.


69 Pierre Louÿs’ real name was Pierre Louis.
Considering Debussy’s predilection for ancient mythology, one can imagine that he was quite enamored by Louÿs’ passionate knowledge about such matters. In 1894, a year after the two men began their friendship, Louÿs published a controversial book of erotic poems titled *Les Chansons de Bilitis, traduites du grec pour la premièrfois par P.L.* Louÿs claimed that the poems were his translations of works by a 2nd-century B.C. student of Sappho named Bilitis. The poems were divided into three sections, each representing a different stage of her life: her childhood in Pamphylia, her studies with Sappho on Lesbos and marriage to Mnasidika, and her last years in Cyprus serving Aphrodite as a courtesan. The book closed with four epigraphs on her death, followed by a section of scholarly notes.

This book of poems, however, was nothing more than an ingenious hoax that allowed Louÿs to legitimately write about forbidden subjects under the guise of history. Because of his background in classical literature and extensive knowledge about ancient Greece, Louÿs was able to successfully perpetrate his counterfeit translation. The templates of the *Bilitis* poems were cunningly designed by Louÿs to imitate the mainstays of classical literature, and he included details and certain Greek words that related specially to ancient Greek culture.70

The elaborate scheme was actually quite preposterous: Louÿs even invented a German scholar named G. Heim, whose name was created from the German word for secret or mystery, “geheim.” In Louÿs’ hoax, the fictitious G. Heim played the role of the archaeologist who initially discovered the poetry. Heim was cited throughout the work to bolster its credibility. Ironically, the fraud was discovered and exposed by a real German scholar, H.H. Stuckenschmidt, whose last name is translated literally from German as “forger of fragments.”71

---

70 Christopher Astilla, “Between the Staves: Adaptations of Debussy’s *Six épigraphes antiques* and Creative Tasks of the Performer” (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2007), 11.
71 Ibid., 15.
Though the character of Bilitis was fictional, her persona was based on actual women—
teens, rather. Many of the poems were influenced by Louÿs’ sexual exploits with young Algerian
girls, such as the sixteen-year-old Meriem ben Atala, whose initials appeared in the dedication of
the poetry collection. Additional Bilitis poems were published a few years later that drew
influence from another young Algerian girl with whom Louÿs had an extensive affair, Zohra ben
Braham. H.P. Clive explains that “Zohra’s unashamed sensuality and her freedom from sexual
hypocrisy formed…a pleasing contrast with the puritanical and, in his [Louÿs’] opinion, perverse
moral code which governed French society.”

Through this made-up Greek courtesan, whom Debussy considered to have “the most
persuasive voice in the world,” it seems as though he had found the ancient musical persona to
which he had unsuccessfully sought to give voice in Diane au bois. Because of his close
friendship with Louÿs and their frequent discussions of possible creative collaborations—very
few of which ever came to fruition—it is certain that Debussy knew of the Bilitis poems well
before they were published. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the fictional Greek poetess may
have influenced one of his most famous compositions, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune. In
1894, following its premiere, Debussy sent an illustrated copy of the score to Louÿs with a note
attached that read “some flute airs to charm Bilitis.”

While this note subtly connects Bilitis with the music of the Faun, she was given her own
musical setting in 1897 with Debussy’s Trois chansons de Bilitis. Composed for voice and piano,
these songs originate in the first section of Louÿs’ Chansons, which centers on Bilitis’ youth.

---

73 Letter to Pierre Louÿs dated Sunday, October 16, 1898; quoted in Debussy Letters, ed. François Lesure
74 Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music.” In The Cambridge Companion to Debussy,
Specifically, the songs focus on Bilitis’ sexual relationship with a young man named Lykas and her subsequent loss of innocence. The three poems Debussy selected for his brief song cycle express the major aspects of Louÿs’ narrative by invoking what Barthes refers to as the “cardinal points” of the relationship between Bilitis and Lykas: the attraction, the consummation, and the termination of the relationship.\textsuperscript{75}

Debussy gave Bilitis additional musical treatment in 1901 when he composed incidental music for the scandalous debut performance of the poetry. The music, scored for two flutes, two harps, and celesta, was intended to accompany a recitation of twelve of the Bilitis poems for a performance at the Variétés, which never took place. The only performance during Debussy’s lifetime was at \textit{Le Journal} on Feb 7, 1901.\textsuperscript{76} This salacious private performance for 300 invitees was quite risqué and included nude models posing in tableaux. A reporter for \textit{Le Journal} wrote that these women allowed the spectators to believe themselves “transported to the great age of pure nudity.”\textsuperscript{77} The music was never published, and it only resurfaced in 1954 when Leon Vallas, to whom Lilly Debussy had entrusted the remaining parts, revived the work and commissioned Pierre Boulez to reconstruct the celesta part.\textsuperscript{78}

Bilitis made her last official appearance in 1914 with the \textit{Six épigraphes antiques}, a reworking of thematic material from both the \textit{Trois chansons} and the incidental music. Originally composed for piano duet, Debussy transcribed the \textit{Épigraphes} for solo piano the


\textsuperscript{76} Rachel Iwaasa, “Fragmentation and Eros in Debussy’s \textit{Chansons de Bilitis} and \textit{Six épigraphes antiques}” (DMA Thesis, University of British Columbia, 2006).

\textsuperscript{77} McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” 128.

\textsuperscript{78} Iwaasa, “Fragmentation and Eros.”
following year. There was even mention of an orchestral version, but this incarnation of Bilitis never came to fruition.

Although the friendship between Debussy and Louÿs dissolved, his attachment to Bilitis remained throughout his career. Because of Bilitis’ multiple appearances between 1894 and 1914, I believe that the fictional Greek poetess was a central figure in Debussy’s compositional aesthetic. Additionally, within this twenty-year time span, Debussy composed many instrumental pieces that employ a remarkably similar musical language despite the absence of any connections to the poems.

Many scholars have mentioned these mystical, mythical, and nostalgic elements of Debussy’s compositions. Edward Lockspeiser used the phrase “Debussyan paganism” to describe his musical evocations of ancient Greece. Unfortunately, the significance of such themes has been largely overlooked. Within the current literature, studies of Debussy’s allusions to the past and analyses of the musical techniques he uses to convey these ideas are relatively non-existent. Neither have there been many in-depth inquiries into the broader connections between Debussy’s music and the “ancient” musical culture in France during the last half of the 1800s. The lack of substantial research into such a pervasive element of Debussy’s music has left a gaping hole in Debussy studies. I believe that a deeper look at Debussy’s musical depictions of an imagined ancient world can provide new insights into his compositional aesthetic from which a clearer understanding of his music and its underlying narratives can be derived.

In the next chapter, I will take a closer look at Debussy’s Bilitis music and identify the specific compositional techniques that evoke the sensualized ancient world of Louÿs’

---

79 Marianne Wheeldon, Debussy’s Late Style (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2009), 6.

imagination. Using a series of short excerpts taken from *Trois chansons*, the incidental music, and *Six épigraphes antiques*, I will define and categorize the features of these pieces that contribute to Debussy’s antique compositional idiom. The examples, along with my analyses, illustrate the ways in which Debussy drew upon the ancient-themed compositions of his predecessors and transformed these pre-established musical signifiers of the past into his own unique ancient musical persona.
CHAPTER 2:

MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS
The music and the culture of the late 1800s exerted a great deal of influence on Debussy’s musical interpretation of the ancient world. Because of the widespread consumption of ancient-themed compositions, Debussy had at his disposal a vast array of musical signs that held strong associations with an imagined version of the past. To create the music of Bilitis’ fictional world, Debussy incorporated many of the features of the compositions discussed in Chapter 1, such as sparse textures, prominent use of modes, and parallel fifths, fourths, and octaves. In doing so, he expanded upon these previously established musical conventions to develop his own ancient musical persona.

Debussy’s ancient persona is an aggregate of many different musical features that can be found in most of his compositions. Static progressions and non-functional harmonies intermingle with drones, ostinati, metric displacement, and exotic scales to create the luxuriously blurry soundscape for which Debussy’s music is most widely known. The characteristics of his trademark compositional style contribute to the exotic, ambiguous, static, and pastoral qualities of his music, all of which help to convey the atmosphere of the Bilitis poems. As illustrated in Figure 2, this vast network of features combines and overlaps to convey a general sense of “otherness.”
Fig. 2: Characteristics of Debussy’s Musical Otherness
Individually, these musical features have no set meaning; all have the capacity to evoke multiple different associations depending on the context in which they appear. In Debussy’s Bilitis songs, however, these general characteristics are filtered into three categories of specific characteristics that define the intervallic, melodic, harmonic, and textural makeup of Debussy’s ancient persona. The first category describes a specific interval pattern that generates much of the motivic and thematic material. The second category focuses on two types of melodic arabesques—one that resembles chant and another that evokes the sound of a flute. The third category consists of the harmonic and textural elements that give the Bilitis songs their distinctively archaic sound and link the music with mystical religious traditions of the past. These characteristics provide meaning and define the “otherness” as not only far away geographically, but far away chronologically.

Just as the exotic, ambiguous, static, and pastoral qualities of Debussy’s music are the byproduct of a vast web of overlapping and shared characteristics, the three categories of his ancient persona are likewise interconnected. All three categories are intimately related such that each category is entirely dependent on the others. As shown in Figure 3, the motivic interval cell generates the content of the other two categories, both of which have shared attributes. The result is a network of musical features that work synchronously to paint a sonic picture of Bilitis’ ethereal ancient world.
### Characteristics of Debussy’s Ancient Persona

#### Motivic Interval Cell

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melodic Arabesque</th>
<th>Archaic/Mystical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melodies resemble chant and flute</td>
<td>Melodic lines and outer voices of chords resemble chant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly diatonic; very little chromaticism</td>
<td>Monophonic line played solo or doubled in octaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generated by motivic interval cell</td>
<td>Chant melodies accompanied by soft sustained chords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing melody formed by interval cell superimposed on top of pitches</td>
<td>Outer voices of chords generated by motivic interval cell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4, P5, and 8ve provide melodic structure</td>
<td>Parallel 4ths, 5ths, and 8ves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on fourths</td>
<td>Emphasis on fourths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prominent use of tetrachords</td>
<td>Mostly diatonic; very little chromaticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symmetrical pitch/interval content</td>
<td>Implies multiple modes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winding, arch-shape revolves around pitch</td>
<td>Non-goal-directed harmonic progressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begins and ends on the same pitch; linear peak is an octave above or below</td>
<td>Harmonic movement by fourths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward motion driven by fragmentation, addition, and repetition</td>
<td>Plagal motion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structurally important pitches prolonged</td>
<td>Lack of dominant causes weak cadences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stretched out by embellishments and the filling in of large intervals</td>
<td>Homophonic chordal texture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elongated via gentle rocking motion between two pitches</td>
<td>Block chords constructed on top of P5s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metrically ambiguous</td>
<td>Hollow sonorities of a 5th and 8ve with no 3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymmetrical phrasing</td>
<td>Simple rhythmic content, clear steady pulse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uneven rhythms; metrical displacement</td>
<td>Harmonically ambiguous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmonically ambiguous</td>
<td>Metrically ambiguous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implies multiple modes</td>
<td>Prolongation of structurally important chords</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-goal-directed or driven to cadence</td>
<td>Symmetrical chord progressions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 3:** Characteristics of Debussy’s Ancient Persona
Motivic Interval Cell

Nineteenth-century interpretations of ancient Greece and the compositions of Debussy’s predecessors laid the groundwork from which the music of Bilitis arose, particularly in terms of the interval content. Drawing upon the long-standing association of the perfect fourth (P4) with both the ancient and the pastoral, Debussy places a strong emphasis on this interval to construct the songs of Bilitis. The importance of this interval is evident in the extensive amount of harmonic movement by fourths and melodic phrases that span a fourth. In particular, the P4 frames a short interval pattern that plays a principal role in the structure of the Bilitis music.

The motivic interval cell consists of a M2 and a m3, which in set theory would be labeled as set class [0,2,5]. In fact, the three-note motive formed by this interval pattern is a variant of the 19th-century interpretation of the ancient Greek chromatic tetrachord. This simplified version, which reduces the tetrachord to three pitches by eliminating the half-steps, can be found throughout the pieces discussed in Chapter 1, including Example 2 from Saint-Saëns’ Antigone.

Additionally, like his predecessors, Debussy often uses this three-note pattern and the two pitches of a P4 to create symmetry, as illustrated in Example 6. Thus, the Bilitis music draws upon the association of ancient Greece with mathematically equivalent proportions. However, Debussy does this in a manner that sounds improvisatory, unstructured, and asymmetrical, which will be demonstrated in the musical examples throughout this chapter.

---

81 I will be using Arabic numerals along with the following abbreviations when referencing specific intervals: M for major, m for minor, P for perfect, + for augmented, and ø for diminished.
Ex. 6: Symmetrical fourths in octaves
Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, II. “Pour un tombeau sans nom,” mm. 18-21

In this excerpt, C is the central axis around which two P4s are symmetrically positioned, adding a sense of static circularity to the ambiguous tonality and meter. A similar phenomenon occurs in the left hand of Example 7, in which an E♭ octave is evenly split in half by two P4s separated by an M2. In the last two measures of the excerpt, the P4s are filled in with M2s and m3s to form the motivic interval cell, which generates a descending black-key pentatonic scale.

Ex. 7: Symmetrical fourths and the motivic interval cell
Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, IV. “Pour la danseuse aux crotales”, mm. 38-41

As demonstrated in Figure 4, the last two measures contain an even larger palindromic symmetry that is upside-down, reversed, overlapping, and circular, ending with the same three notes with which it began.
Although the motivic interval cell is indeed a subset of the pentatonic scale, it is not confined to one specific tonality. Depending on how it is used, the interval cell generates melodic material that aligns with many different modes and harmonic settings to convey the affect of the poetry. The motive also takes on another layer of symbolic importance through its presence and absence in the music. Because of its placement in relation to the text, the motivic interval cell comes to represent the idyllic pastoral paradise of Bilitis’ youth. The next three examples from Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis* illustrate the interval cell in several different harmonic contexts and demonstrate how it acquires meaning through its connection to the text.

The first excerpt is from the opening song of *Trois chansons*, “La Flûte de Pan.” The text describes a peaceful Arcadian setting, with passages that mention the ancient festival “day of Hyacinths,” the “song of the green frogs,” and a panpipe made of reeds, which is a reference to the mythological figure of Pan and his flute. The interval cell creates short recurring figures

---

82 A complete translation of the text of *Trois chansons* and the incidental music is included in Appendix A. All English translations quoted in the narrative align with the translations contained in the Appendix.
that connect this three-note motive with the picturesque outdoors of Bilitis’ youth.

Ex. 8: Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 7-10

In the text, Bilitis’ reminisces about an instance in which her lover, Lykas, taught her how to play the flute. She is sitting on his lap, and he softly echoes her melodies on the panpipes. As illustrated above in Example 8, the vocal part is largely created from the interval pattern while a flowing triplet line mimics the sound of the panpipes. Underneath, the motivic interval cell generates P5s in the bass. Shortly afterward, the motive is used to depict the two young lovers playing their flutes, as shown in Example 9.

Ex. 9: Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 17-18
These two measures occur after the vocalist sings a phrase that translates to “We are so close that we have nothing to say to one another; but our songs want to converse, and our mouths are joined as they take turns on the pipes.” Using the motivic interval cell, the piano depicts the two flutes answering each other in a musical dialogue. As the innocent sound of an F#-major chord is sustained, the interval cell spins into a flowing line of sextuplets. The left hand playfully flits above and below the right hand’s fluttering line, “answering” the motive in contrary motion. In the next measure, the harmony changes to an A7 chord, and the A# and D# of the motive create a sumptuously dissonant sonority. This striking harmonic change and the absence of the left hand “answering” figures suggest that the two mouths have united on the flute.

For the second song of Trois chansons, the motivic interval cell is reserved specifically for the intense climax of the poetry, which further establishes meaning. In stark contrast to the bucolic innocence of the first song, slinking half-step descents are smothered in rich chromatic harmonies to create a highly erotic soundscape. Debussy’s music paints the seductive, dream-like atmosphere of the text, in which Bilitis indulges in a lucid memory of a sexual encounter with Lykas. The dissonances create a sense of anticipation that is heightened by rhythmic tension in the piano’s two-voice texture of parallel octaves on the beat and block chords in between.

All of the instability builds up to the climactic moment in which the sexual act is consummated. The text, which translates to “I was becoming you; you were entering me like my dream,” is musically reenacted in a single measure. Here, the two voices of the piano become one as the block chords merge with the octaves. The chromatic, dissonant sounds that led up to this point give way to pastoral bliss as the interval cell appears for the first and only time in this piece, sounded prominently by bass octaves. In the vocal line, this moment is approached by a pair of fractured interval cells in which two P4s are connected by the chromatic passing tones D#
and $D\flat$, as illustrated by the blue arrows below. This gives way to an unobstructed interval cell at the end of the phrase, which fades as the foggy dissonances return. By appearing only in the climax, this motive further symbolizes the pleasure of Bilitis’ youth.

Ex. 10: Debussy, Trois chansons de Bilitis, II. “La Chevelure,” mm. 17-19

A similar phenomenon happens in the melancholic third and final song of Trois chansons. The innocence of the pastoral is literally crystallized into ice, which parallels Raymond Monelle’s description of Debussy’s pastoral style as one where “the image of innocence, of happy love, is rendered crystalline, is slightly colored with risk.” In this piece, Bilitis is old and bitter, Lykas is long gone, and the lush greenery is frozen underneath the ice and snow. The prominent use of fourths maintains the pastoral feel, yet they too are covered with icy dissonances and minor-mode sonorities. A never-ending line of what William Gibbons so aptly describes as “incessant wintry sixteenth notes” fills in perfect and augmented fourths while a repetitive line of half steps is set to a pastoral dotted-eighth rhythm. Underneath, a musical fog lingers in the lower register of the piano with sustained left-hand chords. The piano’s trance-like repetition and haunting left-hand sonorities convey Bilitis’ emotional numbness as she trudges along a monotonous journey to nowhere.

---


However, when Bilitis speaks of the nymphs and satyrs of her youth, the affect changes from despair to hope. The tedious dotted-rhythm half steps cease, and the fourths are no longer filled in with dissonances. Diminished and augmented chords now become major and minor triads filled in with diatonic sixteenth notes. In the vocal line, the interval cell appears, conveying a brief glimmer of optimism amidst the bleak frosty landscape. As such, this three-note motive becomes inextricably linked with Bilitis’ nostalgia for the halcyon days of her youth.

In the following example, Bilitis encounters a man who asks her what she is looking for, and she replies: “I am following the track of the satyr. His little cloven hoof prints alternate like holes in a white cloak.”

Ex. 11: Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, III. “Le tombeau des Naiades,” mm. 9-12

She then finds out that the nymphs and satyrs are all dead, yet the interval cell remains a prominent feature of the music. Her joy has now become bittersweet and melancholy, and the interval cell serves as a symbol of the childhood she now mourns.
Ex. 12: Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, III. “Le tombeau des Naiades,” mm. 15-18

On its own, this three-note group of intervals might not seem that significant. However, it is a noteworthy feature of the music due to the frequency with which it occurs and its strategic placement that coincides with important lines in the text. More importantly, the particular ways in which this interval cell is used constitute a substantial aspect of Debussy’s ancient persona.

While the three notes formed by the interval pattern do occur as a single entity, as in the previous examples, the motivic cell is often the source for larger figures that are formed when the interval pattern is continuously superimposed on top of a series of pitches.

**Melodic Arabesque**

The lines generated by the motivic interval cell form a particular type of melody that I have labeled as a “melodic arabesque.” Although the word “arabesque” has been used throughout the history of Western classical music to describe melody, nowhere else does the
term appear with such frequency as it does in the literature on Debussy. Many scholars have
spent a great deal of time discussing Debussy’s arabesque-like melodic lines. E. Robert
Schmitz, in his analyses of Debussy’s piano works, notes the ways in which Debussy’s
“ornamental patterns” are repeated, transformed, and coordinated into a “tonal decorative art.”85
Boyd Pomeroy describes an “ornamental conception [that] finds its most characteristic form in
harmonic inactivity, without the dimension of chord progression to distract from the ‘curve’ and
‘contour’ of the melodic arabesque.”86 Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, in her exhaustive studies on
Debussy’s use of ornament, characterizes the arabesque as an undulating line that “winds down”
and “rolls up” through a series of ascending and descending curves to create a sense of
“timelessness.”87 Debussy himself used the word quite often, and his writings reveal a penchant
for using the term to describe a certain type of melody. He considered arabesque to be “the
principal of ornament,” which was “the basis of all kinds of art.”88

Despite the frequency with which this word appears throughout Debussy’s writings, he
states that his conception of “arabesque” has nothing to do with dictionary definitions.89 We are
only given contextual clues regarding its meaning. We can, however, surmise that Debussy
associated arabesque with the past. In his review of Bach’s Violin Concerto in G, a piece which
he held up as an example of a pure “musical arabesque,” he explained that “the primitives—
Palestrina, Vittoria, Orlando di Lasso, etc.—had this divine sense of the arabesque. They found

86 Boyd Pomeroy, “Debussy’s Tonality: A Formal Perspective,” in The Cambridge Companion to Debussy,
87 Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, "Debussy’s Arabesque and Ravel's Daphnis et Chlöe." Twentieth-Century
88 François Lesure and Richard Langham Smith, eds. Debussy on Music: the Critical Writings of the Great
89 Ibid.
the basis of it in Gregorian chant, whose delicate tracery they supported with twining
counterpoints.” He went on to say that Bach reworked the arabesque by making it
more flexible, more fluid...He imbued it with a wealth of free fantasy so limitless that it
still astonishes us today. In Bach’s music, it is not the character of the melody that affects
us, but rather the curve. More often still it is the parallel movement of several lines whose
fusion stirs our emotions.90

Debussy often lamented the state of modern music, and his derision of compositional
rules, structures, and forms was no secret. He was quite sure that Bach shared his loathing of
musical conventions and claimed to know Bach’s thoughts on such matters. He asserted,

We can be sure that Bach, the essence of all music, scorned harmonic formulae. He
preferred the free play of sonorities whose curves, whether flowing in parallel or contrary
motion, would result in an undreamed of flowering, so that even the least of his countless
manuscripts bears an indelible stamp of beauty.91

This era, according to Debussy, was the “age of the ‘wonderful arabesque,’ when music
was subject to laws of beauty inscribed in the movements of Nature herself.”92 In writings such
as these, he expresses a longing to return to a pure, uninhibited conception of music that, in his
imagination, was the basis of music in the ancient past and in “uncivilized” cultures. Bhogal
aptly summarizes Debussy’s nostalgic view of the arabesque: Debussy believed that ornament
was old but he wasn't sure how old, and nor did its precise age seem to matter, since he deemed
decorative figures special by sheer virtue of their historical remoteness.93

The connection between the arabesque and the ancient world was not merely a construct
of Debussy’s imagination. In fact, the term “arabesque” originates in an ancient Islamic art style,
where abstract, intricate patterns were repeated across the surface as a means of mesmerizing the

90 Lesure and Smith, Debussy on Music, 27.
91 Ibid., 84.
92 Ibid.
93 Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, Details of Consequence: Ornament, Music, and Art in Paris. (New York:
viewer to ponder the infinite mysteries of Allah. A similarly repetitive and intricate visual conception of arabesque was a defining feature of the fin-de-siècle Art Nouveau movement. This “new art” arose out of a disillusionment with modernity and a longing for the beauty of a lost era. In a reaction against the regularized, exterior urban world of industry and mass manufacture, these artists promoted a utopian vision in which the outside world was replaced with an interior world of intimacy, femininity, and nature. As with the Symbolists, the aim was not to create literal representations of nature, but to convey sensual impressions and escape the restrictions of the real and visible world. Art Nouveau was an outgrowth of the Arts and Crafts movement, whose founder, William Morris, was determined to revive the medieval tradition of craft as art. Therefore, despite its name, this “new art” was nostalgic and did not express the new century.

Just as Debussy sought to free music from artificially imposed rules and structures, Art Nouveau artists sought to free the line from its traditional task of description by allowing it to pursue a life of its own. Thus, the arabesque line was always in motion, growing like a natural being. Asymmetrical and undulating, these whip-like lines often took the form of flower stalks and buds, vines, tendrils, insect wings, and other sinuous natural objects.

As seen in the images in Figure 5, arabesques amass an energy that consumes the entire space. Lines based on plant life frame the image and fill the backdrop, while long flowing hair—a fin-de-siècle symbol of the erotic—serves as the catalyst for more arabesque figures.

---

96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
Seduction and fantasy emanate from these images, both of which are advertising posters (one for perfume and the other for beer) from La Belle Époque. Subtle undertones of mythology and exoticism add an alluring mystique that presumably equated to high sales for the companies advertising their products.

**Fig. 5:** Art Nouveau advertisements

These whimsical and enticing visual lines are musically translated into Debussy’s melodic arabesques. This metaphor maps the aural domain onto the visual domain, with the direction and shape of a two-dimensional line representing the register, contour, duration, and rhythmic activity of a melodic line. Characterized by the same type of curves as its visual counterpart, the arabesque melody has an arch shape that often winds above and below a single pitch. As seen in the females’ hair in Figure 5, the visual arabesque grows out of an object or

---

100 For a conceptual mapping of the metaphor ‘melody is line’ in regards to Debussy’s arabesque, see Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, "Debussy's Arabesque and Ravel's Daphnis et Chlōë," *Twentieth-Century Music* 3, no. 2 (2006): 171-199.
shape, starting with a larger curve that gradually swirls into smaller, more intricate spirals. Similarly, the melodic arabesque sprouts from a short motivic idea, forming a larger ascent and descent that breaks off into smaller figures. Through repetition and subtle alterations, these short fragments generate new material and bring about linear growth. Through this process of generation and regeneration, the melody becomes a dynamic force of energy and motion.

In the Bilitis music, the motivic interval cell is the primary source of generation, transformation, and expansion of the melodic arabesques. The interval cell—a m3 and a M2, or vice versa—is superimposed on top of itself to create a growing melodic line. The melody is seemingly “stretched” through embellishments and prolongations of structurally important pitches and the stepwise filling-in of larger intervals. The sense of growth is intensified by extra beats or short phrases added to a longer phrase or phrase group, often appearing at the moment at which the line seems to be reaching a conclusion. Metrical ambiguity and uneven phrase groupings completely overwhelm the symmetry of the interval content, transforming a highly structured and ordered series of pitches into what sounds like a spontaneous melodic outburst.

Visually, the energy and forward motion of the Art Nouveau arabesque creates the illusion of movement in an inanimate two-dimensional space. Musically, Debussy’s arabesque achieves the opposite effect: the illusion of suspended time. Harmonic and tonal ambiguity, irregular meters, uneven phrases, and melodic recycling create the perception of stasis. As noted in Bhogal’s study on the cognitive effects of the arabesque, the absence of a periodic pulse allows profuse rhythmic details to “expand” the metric moment.101 This sense of temporal immobility is at odds with the arabesque’s energy-laden motion, a contradiction that blurs the perception of musical time. Ironically, the particular type of linear activity adds to the perception

of inertia as well. The symmetry within the pitch content, along with the limited amount of pitches that are used, creates forward motion that recoils backwards on top of itself. Through the subsequent layering of the interval pattern, the line continues to spiral forward and backward, gently writhing around a central pitch. Thus, the active arabesque melody sounds languorous rather than goal-directed, flowing through a circular loop rather than striving toward a final cadence. Hepokoski describes this melodic effect in Debussy’s music as a “mysterious florification” that is “all vertical, inward, involuted, like the closed mind feeding on itself...static circles within circles, as the inner foliage grows thicker, not spatially longer.”

Static yet full of energy. Symmetrical yet asymmetrical. Moving forward while moving backward yet moving nowhere at all. All of these contradictions attest to the arabesque’s inherent power of distortion. The result is an improvisatory, free-flowing, and dynamic melodic line that continuously unravels within a dream-like suspension of time. Such effects are particularly well-suited for musical depictions of fantasy, seduction, mythology, and nostalgia—all of which are synonymous with the Bilitis poems. According to Hepokoski, these techniques not only create a musical “other” but also suggest some type of sacred or mystical experience. Hepokoski states that these melodies

exorcise the expectation of the conventional world by defying traditional periodic syntax, by blunting the expectation of functional harmony in favor of vague, tonal suggestion, and quite often, by negative, the presumption of the forward thrust of time itself through their emphasis on circularity and return. They evoke the free-floating dream, relatively unattached to the emphatic, unambiguous statement and explicit linear time which characterize normal, secular experience.

Bhogal reaches a similar conclusion in her analysis of Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, however she links the “otherness” of the melodic arabesques with the exotic and the ancient. She

---

103 Ibid., 54.
describes *Faun’s* arabesque as “a sensuous melody whose mesmerizing repetition, intricate chromatic/whole-tone motion, and metric weakness converge in Debussy’s evocation of a chronologically remote and culturally distant other”\(^\text{104}\) (emphasis mine).

Although the melodic arabesques of the Bilitis songs differ from *Faune* in terms of scale and mode, both achieve the same effect and define the “otherness” of Debussy’s music as culturally, geographically, and chronologically distant. While the highly chromatic type of arabesque featured in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is beyond the scope of this paper, I have identified two types of melodic arabesques that are prominent in the Bilitis music: the Chant Arabesque and the Pan’s Flute Arabesque. Their cognitive effects and association with nature, sensuality, fantasy, mythology, and the ancient world paint a convincing musical portrait of Bilitis as an exotic “other” from the past.

**Chant Arabesque**

The chant arabesques harken back to the music of the middle ages and beyond. With the use of church modes, a limited number of pitches, a small range, and a relaxed, steady pace, these melodies refer to the music of a legitimate historical era, thus pointing the listener’s thoughts towards the past. In *fin-de-siècle* France, the “antique” modes transported the listener to a time before major and minor were the established norm. The precise date was irrelevant; modal music symbolized any “long ago”—be it the end of the middle ages or the dawn of the Hellenistic period in ancient Greece. Thus, chant arabesques communicate the setting of the Bilitis poetry as having existed in some distant era.

\(^{104}\) Bhogal, “Debussy’s Arabesque,” 180.
The use of chant also confers a mystical and sacred aspect onto the music. Images of medieval monks and friars, whose simplistic songs reverberated through gothic cathedrals, evoke thoughts of worship, sacrifice, and arcane rituals. The inherent “otherness” of the music diminishes the traditional Christian associations with chant and points toward a more esoteric and archaic form of spirituality, suggesting the mythological paganism of Bilitis’ world.

Debussy’s chant arabesque is characterized by a swaying, circular contour that moves primarily by steps and small leaps. The melody often fills in an octave with gentle, back-and-forth gestures that prolong important pitches and lazily move the line from one end of the octave to the other. Upon reaching the octave, the chant usually returns to the same pitch on which it began, giving the chant arabesque a circular feel. The rhythm is unhurried and free, and while a clear pulse is present, the sense of meter is quite vague. The chant arabesque often appears as a monophonic line either played solo or doubled in octaves. When an accompaniment is present, it is simple and uncluttered, usually consisting of soft, sustained chords and hollowed-out sonorities built upon fourths, fifths, and octaves.

These characteristics are exemplified in the following example. In this excerpt from *Six épigraphes antiques*, Debussy’s instruction of “chanté” indicates the medieval nature of the following melody:

\[ \text{Ex. 13: Chant arabesque} \\
\text{Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, VI. “Pour remercier la pluie au matin,” m. 29-32} \]
This solo chant arabesque emphasizes an E octave with a gentle, swaying motion in Dorian mode. The motivic interval cell begins the chant and generates a winding line that prolongs the initial E until the third measure, as shown by the arrow. Following the prolongation, the interval cell initiates an octave descent. The soft, lilting motion is rhythmically free, but the almost exclusive use of quarter notes keeps the line anchored to a clear pulse.

While small chant lines such as the one shown in Example 13 appear throughout the Bilitis music, one chant in particular is given thematic precedence. This chant arabesque, which I will be referring to as the “Bilitis Theme,” opens and closes both the incidental music and its 1914 counterpart, *Six épigraphes antiques*. The simple theme perfectly captures the essence of the corresponding poem, which is as pastoral as pastoral can be: Bilitis and her friend Sélénis watch their flocks from the shade of an olive tree, run in the meadow, pick flowers, and look for crickets. In the incidental music, before the poetry is recited, the chant-like melody sets the mood with its carefree rhythms and curved contour. In these first four measures, a solo flute gives the audience their first glimpse into the primitive and enchanting ancient musical world of Bilitis.

Ex. 14: Bilitis theme generated by motivic interval cell
Debussy, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 1-4

The entire melody is generated by the motivic interval cell, beginning with G, A, and C. The interval pattern is continuously applied to each of these pitches to spell out an F-pentatonic scale. However, the melodic line climbs up a G octave, eliminating any sense of F as the tonal center. Upon reaching the high G, the melody reverses course and lazily floats back down
through the same series of pitches. On the descent in m. 2, both instances of a m3—from F to D and C to A—are drawn out in a breezy back-and-forth gesture, furthering the sense of growth and blurring the symmetrical content of the line.

The phrasing, rhythm, and meter further nullify any sense of order and structure. The chant has an improvisatory feel, and the combination of triplets, dotted-eighths, and straight eighth notes allows the arabesque to freely float through time and space. It is unconstrained by measures, and the meter has no effect on the phrasing—the barlines are merely conveniences for the musicians. The first phrase contains an odd-numbered seven beats, followed by another three-beat phrase tacked onto the line in the manner of a musical afterthought. This short phrase descends to F, creating momentum and energy that pushes beyond the third beat towards a resolution on G. This G occurs on the first beat of the next phrase, simultaneously ending and beginning another iteration of the Bilitis theme. The elision, demonstrated in the example below, adds to the feel of circularity.

**Ex. 15**: Circular phrase elision of the Bilitis theme
Debussy, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 1-4

After the second occurrence of the theme in G, it is transposed up a P4 to C. This time, after ascending the octave, the melody does not return to the initial C, but gathers momentum through the repetition of the back-and-forth thirds. The arabesque line continues to expand and grow as the thirds unfold into a new melodic idea, as shown in the following example.
Ex. 16: Expanding chant arabesque
Debussy, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 7-11

No longer resembling chant, these flute-like arpeggiated figures spiral around a Gmin$^9$ chord and intensify the swaying motion of the melody with rapid linear undulations. Each time the arpeggio bottoms out on G, the second flute enters with an unprepared suspension that quickly steps from F down to D. In the last three measures of this piece, shown below, this seemingly inconsequential three-note figure is transformed into a chant-like countermelody that incorporates the bottom G of the arpeggios.

Ex. 17: Chant countermelody
Debussy, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm.13-16

In the 1914 version of the song, this descending tetrachord chant is further expanded into larger chant arabesques, some of which are shown below. The following examples demonstrate the growth of an arabesque from a small fragment into a long melodic line. In the following excerpt, the tetrachord and the descending sixteenth-note gesture unfold into a winding chant line. The tetrachord, which now appears a fifth lower, begins on middle C and forms an intervallic palindrome, as demonstrated below in blue. Starting with the final C of the

---

$^{105}$ I will be labeling chords as follows: major sonorities will be abbreviated with a capital “M” and minor sonorities will use the lowercase abbreviation “min.” Extended chords will be identified with superscript Arabic numerals (e.g. Gmin$^9$ indicates a G minor seventh chord with an added ninth; AM$^7$ indicates an A major seventh chord). The superscript “7” will be used to indicate a dominant seventh chord (e.g. G$^7$).
palindrome, the descending tetrachord provides the structure of the rest of the melody. Each small phrase sprouts out of one of the pitches of the tetrachord, as highlighted in red.

Ex. 18: Tetrachord palindrome and expanded chant arabesque
Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” m. 17-19

Later in the piece, the chant is transformed once more, shown below in Example 19. In this instance, the final C of the intervallic palindrome unravels into an octave ascent, with lower-neighbor gestures initiating each half of a C-Mixolydian scale in a melodic sequence.

Ex. 19: Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 27-30

The ascending arabesque line is continued in the next measure, where it reverts back to the descending tetrachord on the original tonal center of G. While the chant line was previously played by the second piano, it is now transferred to the first piano. The second piano doubles the melody an octave higher and a fifth lower in parallel root position triads.

Ex. 20: *Six épigraphes antiques*, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 31-33
Pan’s Flute Arabesque

In the Bilitis music, Debussy conjures up the pagan god Pan with a particular style of flute arabesque characterized by improvisatory modal flourishes and ametrical rhythms. This type of flute arabesque differs from the ornate, seductive flute lines of Faune and Syrinx that, according to Arthur Wenck, contribute to Debussy’s “flute mask.” Borrowing a term from theater to categorize and define the significant stylistic traits of Debussy’s music, Wenck argues that the “flute mask” consists of intricate, chromatic, flute-like arabesques that emphasize the interval of a tritone. Such melodies appear throughout the Bilitis songs, conveying the exotic and seductive nature of the poetry. However, these chromatic arabesques are not unique to this collection of songs, nor do they personify the primitive, austere aura of the music. This is accomplished by a simpler style of melodic arabesque that also resembles the flute, yet lacks the intricacy and chromaticism described by Wenck. Although Wenck does not entertain the possibility of a second “flute mask,” the Bilitis music offers evidence of an additional flute-centric style. These simple, modal melodies espouse a more diatonically-conceived style of flute writing that I have labeled as the “Pan’s Flute Arabesque.”

The Pan’s flute arabesques deviate from the limited range, steady pulse, and austere solemnity of the chant arabesques. Abstract rhythms, short note durations, and rapid, odd-numbered figures create a much more active line whose contour undulates with a greater speed and intensity. Despite the name, the Pan’s flute arabesques are not always played by a wind instrument. Rather, Debussy uses the piano to capture the idiomatic characteristics of the flute with trills, grace notes, and sweeping scalar flourishes.

106 Wenck’s list of Debussy’s “masks” consists of flute, ancient, Spanish, Ragtime, and Pastoral.

Aurally and symbolically, the flute arabesques communicate multiple aspects of Pierre Louÿs’ poetry. In the poems of Bilitis’ early life, the pan flute is a prominent object in the narrative. This instrument has strong idyllic associations and provides a significant pastoral *topos* in the poetry;\(^{108}\) likewise, the Pan’s flute arabesques provide an equally significant pastoral feel to the music. The flute lines are often directly related to the text, specifically the scenario in which Bilitis and Lykas play their flutes together. Here, the interplay of two flute arabesques in the music furthers specific points of action in the narrative.

Because of the flute’s rich history of associations with the ancient world, these arabesques convey the primitive and mythological themes of the poetry. Specifically, the pan flute, or syrinx, refers to a half-man/half-beast named Pan who pursued nymphs while accompanying them on his flute. According to folklore, this flute gets its name from a nymph named Syrinx, who, to escape Pan, was transformed into reeds. Pan then cut the reeds and crafted them into the flute with which he became associated. The syrinx is thus an erotically charged instrument: through making music, Pan literally has Syrinx on his lips.\(^{109}\)

Pan was of great interest to Debussy, and he returned to this fictional character throughout the corpus of his work. Julie McQuinn categorizes all of Debussy’s “Pan” works as tangling into one vast erotic arabesque. She describes the flute arabesques of the Bilitis music as “the flute of the Faun, the flute of Lykas, the flute of Pan, with its inward curling, its ornamental stasis, fluid lines leading nowhere, suspended in the air. Pan’s music draws the nymphs languorously in. This is the music of seduction.”\(^{110}\)

---


\(^{109}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{110}\) Ibid.
Throughout all of the Bilitis music, Pan seduces the listener with modal flute melodies that create an ideal backdrop for Louÿs’ poetry. For the incidental music, scored for two harps, a celesta, and two flutes—the preferred late 19th-century instrumental palette for depictions of ancient music—Debussy made ample use of the flute duo. Using a stereotypical flute-like compositional style, he capitalized on the instrument’s capacity to reinforce the narrative during the short musical blurbs in between each poem, as shown in the following excerpts.

a. Debussy, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* [incidental music], II. “Les Comparaisons”

![Ex. 21: Incidental music flute arabesques](image)

Both examples are remarkably similar, with melodic lines characterized by winding, arch-shaped contours, fast scalar flourishes, long trills, and frolicking grace notes. The pitches of many of the stepwise up-and-down figures are symmetrical, a subtle aspect that is overridden by
irregular rhythms, a vague sense of pulse, and, in Example 21b, a metric displacement that gives the triple meter a duple feel. The snaking contour of the scalar flourishes along with an elusive sense of tonality and unclear meters creates a definite sense of “otherness” and conveys the seductive, dream-like nature of the poetry. The use of modes gives the music what the audience would have perceived as an authentic ancient sound, and the dotted rhythms, leaps, and grace notes enhance the pastoral setting.

Both excerpts also illustrate specific actions in the poetry, which is recited before and after each example. Prior to the beginning of Example 21a, the poetry depicts Bilitis and her friends growing into puberty and begins with the line, “Sparrow, bird of Kypris, accompany our first desires with your notes.” The flute lines, with their trills and grace notes, effectively recreate the chirping songs of the sparrows. Example 21b and a very similar reprise are heard before and after a poem that describes a dancer named Myrrhinidion performing a striptease: “suddenly you clap your castanets! Arch yourself on tip-toe, shake your flanks, fling your legs, and may your crashing hands call all the lusts in hordes about your fiercely twisting body.” The winding motion of the triplet figures and rapid scales accurately depict the slinky movements of the dancer’s body. The grace notes and staccatos allude to the clapping castanets and the dancer’s flinging limbs, while the trills suggest some type of rattling percussion instrument.

Furthermore, these excerpts demonstrate the regenerative, growth-like qualities of the arabesque. Each of these flute lines is formed out of only a few melodic fragments, such as the three-note step-wise descent with grace notes, the fast scalar gesture, the rapid five-note ascent and descent, and the eighth-note triplet figure. These thematic seeds grow into long arabesques that, from a broad structural viewpoint, unravel into large scales. For example, as demonstrated
below, the first flute begins on a high B♭, and through a series of smaller ascents and descents, eventually winds its way down an octave plus a sixth to end on D.

Because the previous examples were composed for flute, classifying them as “flute-like” is belaboring the obvious. Of course the melodies are flute-like—they were composed specifically for that instrument. However, the piano parts in *Trois chansons* and *Six épigraphes antiques* contain the same type of melodic arabesques that were originally composed for flute in the incidental music. The next example, from *Six épigraphes*, contains a whole-tone flute arabesque that occurs multiple times in the incidental music. This arabesque was composed specifically for the flute, yet it reappears in the piano music of *Six épigraphes*.
Aside from the fact that this arabesque was originally composed for flute, the rhythmic figures and melodic shapes capture the sounds associated with high-pitched woodwind instruments. One could argue that this example is flute-like simply because it was originally composed for the flute. However, many of the arabesques composed specifically for the piano are almost indistinguishable from those written for the two flutes in the incidental music. The piano music below, from *Six épigraphes antiques*, is evidence that Debussy was not merely transferring music from one instrument to another. He clearly sought to evoke the sounds of the flute on the piano through the use of certain compositional techniques.

![Ex. 24: Debussy, Six épigraphes antiques, III. “Pour que la nuit soit propice,” mm. 27-29](image)

Like *Six épigraphes*, *Trois chansons* are entirely dependent upon a piano for the flute arabesques. In the opening measure of “La Flûte de Pan,” shown in Example 25, the initial seven notes of the right-hand figure evoke the seven tones of the pan flute.  

111 Steven Rumph has observed that this scalar figure “imitates the syrinx, portraying the vigorous sweep of the traditional seven reeds across the mouth.”  

112 The syrinx motive recurs throughout the first song

---

and reappears once again at the end of the *Chansons*, leading Rumph to describe it as a type of seductive ritornello.\footnote{Gibbons, “Debussy as Storyteller,” 14.}

![Ex. 25: Syrinx motive](image)

Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” m. 1

The syrinx motive is similar in shape and contour to many of the other flute and chant arabesques, particularly the Bilitis theme. In many of the arabesques cited thus far, the line moves up through an octave (or nearly an octave), lingers on the top pitch, and descends through the reverse series of pitches with a more drawn-out rhythm. In the syrinx motive, the B-Lydian scale stops one note short of reaching the octave, creating anticipation when it lands on A#. The upward pull from A# to B is denied, and the line descends with three-note figures that emphasize the BMaj\(^7\) chord underneath. The descent has an elongated rhythm and follows a near-symmetrical series of pitches, with only the E\(^\#\) missing.

As shown in Example 26, the motive is later stretched into a two-octave scalar ascent. Similar to the growth of the Bilitis theme, the motive is fragmented into the two groups of descending three-note figures, beginning on A# and D#. This pair of stepwise gestures is repeated, which further expands the line. With yet another reduction, the line blossoms into a stand-alone figure that is perched atop a new harmonic and textural idea in mm. 15-16.
A very similar flute arabesque appears in the fifth song of *Six épigraphes*, “Pour la danseuses aux crotale.” Like the syrinx motive, the scale in Example 27 implies several different modes. The arabesque centers on B and splits the octave exactly in half by emphasizing the tritone, F. After winding through the two-measure-long scale, the descending line is transformed through rhythmic elongation and melodic embellishments. The first beat of mm. 15 and 16 provides the rhythmic pattern and primary pitches of the next two measures. The first three pitches of the scale, B-A-G, are embellished in m. 17 and, along with the motivic interval cell, continue in an outline of a pentatonic scale, as shown below.

Ex. 26: Fragmentation of the syrinx motive

Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, I. “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 12-16

Ex. 27: Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, V. “Pour la danseuses aux crotale,” mm. 15-18
The same processes of fragmentation and expansion appear in the first piece of *Six épigraphes*. In the following example, the first piano contains another similar scalar figure that emphasizes a P4 and whose first three notes also generate a series of shorter figures that advance the linear growth, as illustrated below. Both lines of the first piano part line are played mostly in thirds, mimicking the two flutes of the incidental music.

Ex. 28: Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Éte,” mm. 17-19

This excerpt is from the opening song of *Six épigraphes*, which presents and expands the original Bilitis theme. After the theme is heard almost exactly as in the incidental music, Debussy presents quite a bit of new material. As a testament to the regenerative power of the arabesque, most of this new material is constructed upon fragments of previous thematic ideas.

As mentioned earlier, the chant arabesque in the second piano is the third generation of a descending suspension-like figure. This short three-note gesture, which I will be referring to as the “chant figure,” first appeared in the second flute of the incidental music. Here, as with other sections of the Bilitis music, the flute and chant arabesques feed off of one another in a manner where fragments of one propel the growth of the other. The following diagram illustrates the original chant figure, its first incarnation, and its subsequent transformations into both chant and
flute arabesques. Also note that the ending gestures of the flutes in Example 29b are prominent figures in 29c, which further shows the extent in which the fragments are interconnected.

Ex. 29: Arabesques generated by melodic fragments

In *Six épigraphes*, shown in 29c, the chant figure now appears in the lower voice of the first piano’s flute arabesque and generates the rest of the lower line. In the upper flute line, the motivic interval cell begins and ends what could be interpreted as a B♭-Lydian or an F-major scale and generates linear growth via repetition and shorter note durations. The starting pitches of the three-note figures in both flute lines outline tetrachords a P4 apart: B♭-A-G-F in the upper line and F-E-D-C in the lower line. In the upper flute line, each of the pitches in this stepwise
tetrachord line initiates a descending motivic cell in the manner of a vine sprouting tendrils. The lack of a clear tonic creates an ambiguity that causes the unraveling arabesques to seemingly hang in the air, moving yet motionless, suspended in some long ago fantasy that exists only in the imagination.

Throughout all of the Bilitis pieces, the interaction between the flute and the chant arabesques forms a distinctive texture that outlines modal chord progressions. The melodic lines are frequently underscored by a stark homophonic accompaniment built upon low register parallel fifths generated by the motivic interval cell. All of the musical elements are united in a harmonic and textural soundscape fit for a 2nd-century B.C. goddess.

**Archaic/Mystical**

In the Bilitis songs, the motivic interval cell and the arabesques are woven together in modal harmonies and austere textures that evoke thoughts of mystical and arcane religious rituals. Traditional Western progressions and the standard major/minor opposition are replaced with modal harmonies, non-goal-directed progressions, and harmonic motion by fourths. The frequent homophonic chordal texture breaks the cardinal voice-leading rule prohibiting parallel fifths and octaves. Sonorities containing all perfect intervals, such as those found in Example 30, create the hollow, open sound associated with primitive music. With the absence of the third, these entities imply neither major nor minor, increasing the tonal ambiguity and lack of harmonic direction. Coupled with chant arabesques doubled in octaves and melodic lines resembling florid organum, the antiquated religious connotations are quite evident.
My assertion that these musical characteristics possess strong archaic, spiritual, and mystical qualities is supported by Hepokoski’s analyses of Debussy’s music. He affirms that chords with a “mysterious” modal quality suggest primeval times, ecclesiastical austerity, quasi-mystical reverie, or uncommon experience in general.\(^{114}\) He describes parallel fifths as “archaic” and claims that “stepwise quasi-modality evokes ecclesiastical connotations and disorients the listener from the world of functional harmonic practice.”\(^{115}\)

These ancient, mystical textural and harmonic effects are a byproduct of multiple factors. Often, disparate lines interact in a particular manner and can be reduced to a series of modal homophonic chords. This is exemplified by the interplay between the chant and flute arabesques illustrated in Example 31. The repetition of the motivic cell in the upper flute arabesque can be reduced to a series of parallel P4s that move though a descending B♭ tetrachord. When the lower flute arabesque is incorporated, the first piano is essentially comprised of parallel first inversion triads, as demonstrated in the reduction below.

The chant line in the second piano doesn’t align with the first piano, which incorporates the same suspension idea that originated with the initial appearance of the chant figure in the incidental music. This creates a chain of suspensions that have more than one possible point of resolution, further distorting the notion of time as the harmonic confusion becomes more

\(^{114}\) Hepokoski, “Formulaic Openings,” 48.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 55.
pronounced. In the diagram below, a middle line is added to show the pitches to which the chant’s suspensions resolve as well as the possible points of resolution. Notice that the chant’s resolutions are a doubling of the top flute line, further evidence of the connection between two seemingly unrelated lines of music.

![Diagram](image)

**Ex. 31:** Reduction of parallel chords and suspensions
Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Ète,” mm. 17-19

The flute and chant arabesques are further fleshed out and transformed a few measures later, as shown in the following example:

![Example](image)

**Ex. 32:** Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Ète,” mm. 21-22

In this example, the flute arabesques are expanded into longer descending figures. Additional pitches are added to the bottom of the descents, forming a C-major and an A-minor...
chord at the end of m. 21. At the end of the next measure, an additional dyad is included that suggests an F-major chord.

In the second piano, the chant arabesque is simplified and played in low octaves. The opening tetrachord is reduced to the motivic cell of G-C-A in the second half of both measures. At the end of the second measure, this A now functions as \( \frac{3}{4} \) in F major, thus suggesting that the entire two-bar chant is an embellished ii\(^7\)-V-I in the key of F major. In a subtle, off-sync, and convoluted manner marked by suspensions and added notes, all of the arabesques support this common progression in a truly Debussyan fashion, turning a traditional cadential formula into a harmonically ambiguous, ancient-sounding layering of voices.

Just as with the motivic interval cell, the modal chord progressions, parallel fifths and octaves, and plagal motion take on a symbolic importance and come to represent the idyllic pastoral paradise of Bilitis’ youth. In the beginning of Chapter 2, I discussed the appearance of the motivic interval cell in the third song of *Trois chansons* at the moments when Bilitis reflects upon the nymphs and satyrs of her youth. With the appearance of the interval cell, the highly chromatic soundscape sheds its dissonances to create diatonic tetrachords and bare triads embellished with appogiaturas. The change in harmony and texture coincides with Bilitis’ nostalgia, thus attaching meaning to these features.
Although the surface initially seems rather busy, this example, like the previous one, can be reduced to a series of modal chords. As highlighted above, the left hand of the piano provides the roots of the chords while the right-hand octaves supply the fifths. The thirds are filled in by the sixteenth notes of the middle voice and, in the second line, by the top note of the left-hand chords. The octaves and fifths move primarily by third, outlining root position triads in the first line and first inversion triads in the second line. The unusual harmonic motion creates a highly ambiguous modal progression.

In the key of F# Aeolian, the first line consists of i-III-v-IV, with the IV replaced by a P5 above E to complete the line. The G# of the previous chord implies that this is an E-major chord, the modal ♭VII in F# Aeolian. In the second line, the tonality is not quite so clear and could be...
interpreted as either G- or C-major. In both keys, a #4 provides Lydian inflections—C# in the G-major chords, and F# in the C-major chords.

While multiple lines often work together to create a thick modal texture, an archaic effect is also conveyed by just the opposite: stark textures and monophonic chant lines. The spiritual connection to chant adds a sense of sacredness to the music, which is effectively utilized in the solo chants that begin the incidental music and *Six épigraphes*. These introductions resemble a musical invocation to the gods, which is congruent with the first line of the opening poem, *Chant Pastoral*: “we must sing a pastoral song, invoke Pan, god of the summer wind.” Following the musical invocation of Pan, the chant is doubled in octaves and underscored by homophonic block chords situated on open fifths.
Ex. 34: Debussy, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* [incidental music], I. “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 4-11

Harmonic motion by fourths illustrates the pastoral setting of the poetry and brings about gentle plagal cadences that provide moments of resolution while evading tonicization. In the first two measures (mm. 4-5), the movement from C-major to G-minor then B♭-major to F-major introduces the main harmonic ideas: relationships of a fourth, modal mixture, and ambiguity. A number of different tonal centers are implied as the music wavers between Dorian, Aeolian, and
Major, and the absence of leading tones eliminates the pull to a tonic or dominant. The lack of harmonic goals lends the accompaniment a distinctively lazy, dreamlike feel to match the text.

To conclude the incidental music, the Bilitis theme is treated to an incredibly ascetic texture consisting almost entirely of octaves and fifths. As the flutes remain silent, the two harps provide a bare texture, filling in only a few chords with a third. Underneath the theme, a line of bass octaves slowly walks up a G-Mixolydian scale in a solemn, chant-like procession. The bass line stops short of completing the scale, finishing the ascent on F♮ before initiating the minor v-i cadence with a descending fifth.

Ex. 35: Debussy, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* [incidental music], “Finale,” mm. 1-3

*Six épigraphes concludes in a similarly austere manner, with the second piano repeating a series of parallel chords that outline a P4. As illustrated in the following example, these triads are a continuation of the tetrachord “chant figure” discussed earlier, doubled in octaves by the roots of the chords and the first piano’s melody. The repetition of these four triads gives way to the solo Bilitis theme, whose initial phrase ascends into a high octave. The oscillating thirds of the theme extend the melodic line an octave lower, whereupon short fragments unwind into a plagal cadence in G Dorian.*
Ex. 36: Debussy, *Six épigraphes antiques*, I. “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’Été,” mm. 31-36

As demonstrated in the previous examples, parallel fifths are a main driver of the harmonic motion in many of the *Bilitis* songs. In fact, the entire harmonic structure of “La Flûte de Pan,” the first song of *Trois chansons*, is based on parallel fifths. The following example is a harmonic reduction demonstrating the important role of this interval. The few transitional bars that contain no fifths have been omitted in order to clearly see the linear movement of the fifths. Most move by seconds, thirds, and fourths to follow a path generated by the motivic interval cell, as illustrated in red. The rare instances of large leaps are reserved for important points in the text and to mark new sections in the formal structure.

Ex. 37: Harmonic reduction of parallel fifths in “La Flûte de Pan”
Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, I. “La Flûte de Pan”

In this piece, the use of the motivic interval cell reflects certain aspects of the narrative. As highlighted in blue, the middle of the piece contains an altered version of the interval cell that
raises the P4 to a +4. Curiously, this section occurs at the most sensual and erotic verse of the text: “We are so close that we have nothing to say to one another; but our songs want to converse, and our mouths are joined as they take turns on the pipes.” The motivic interval cell and the fifths also relate to the text via its absence in the last line of Example 37. After lazily floating back and forth, the bass fifths are almost entirely absent from mm. 22-24, and when they return in m. 25, the linear movement is much more active and covers a larger range. At this point in the text, Bilitis suddenly emerges from her timeless reverie and realizes that it has gotten late. She worries that her mother will never believe the excuse she has come up with to cover for her meeting with Lykas. Initiated by the absence of fifths and subsequently driven by their more active movement, the music is no longer dreamy but depicts “real” time and the “real” world. Here, the rhythms adhere strictly to the 3/4 meter while the piano enacts literal representations of the green frogs of which Bilitis speaks. As soon as the vocal line ends, the interval cell appears, guiding the movement of the fifths once more as the music returns to the floating, dream-like sounds of suspended time. This is symbolic of Bilitis’ state of mind, suggesting that her worries have been superseded by an inward retreat to the timeless fog of blissful memories.

The chords built upon these parallel fifths create an opposition between two competing tonics, with one or both mostly approached by plagal motion. The tonal uncertainty is compounded by chords built on non-diatonic scale degrees, such as the frequent alternations between two major chords built on 1 and Š3. The harmonic ambiguity that characterizes the Bilitis songs is aptly summarized in the following four-measure excerpt of “La Flûte de Pan,” which is a microcosm of the entire piece.
Following a measure of alternating E-major and F#-major chords punctuated by E octaves, the left hand enters into a series of parallel fifths generated by the motivic interval cell. Amongst the flowing line of triplets, the right hand supplies the thirds of the chords in a progression of descending fourths. B-major and C#-major chords function as the subdominant and dominant in F#-major, with the E-major chord standing out as the modal ♭VII. However, the harmonic movement by fourths dulls any sense of F# as tonic. With only one instance of V-I in F#, the music is heard as a series of plagal cadences from F# to C# and E to B. This reading is much more plausible, considering the end goal of the progression is B-major, which soon
becomes B-minor. In a subtle manner, the E-major and F#-major chords set up the arrival in B-major/minor by functioning as the subdominant and dominant. Plagal motion fuels the modal progression of V-ii-IV-I-i that arrives in B, enhancing the pastoral quality of the music.

Such nuanced harmonic progressions and allusions to multiple tonalities are defining traits of Debussy’s ancient persona. In the context of homophonic chordal textures, parallel fifths, chant lines played in octaves, and stark sonorities with no third, Debussy’s signature harmonic ambiguity is embedded with meaning and placed in a long-forgotten era. Combined with pastoral flute lines, repetitive fourths, and melodic fragments that unravel into arabesques, Debussy creates a most appropriate backdrop for the songs of Bilitis. With his three collections of Bilitis works, Debussy bridges the gap between fantasy and reality by bringing to life a figure who once only existed in the depths of Pierre Louÿs’ imagination.

**Conclusion**

While all of the musical features discussed in this chapter can be categorized according to their function as intervalllic, melodic, harmonic, or textural, they are not separate entities. The ancient and mystical nature of the music is not a result of a single compositional technique but the interaction between many interrelated elements. Some might call this ancient style a “mask,” which is a term borrowed from theater that some scholars, such as Arthur Wenck, have adopted to describe different aspects of a composer’s style. However, a mask is a disguise that denotes a momentary change of character, and the ancient traits of Debussy’s music are neither temporary incidents nor do they stray from his core aesthetic principles. Rather, these features are intimately related in a vast network of overlapping musical characteristics that give his music its distinct “Debussyan” sound. Thus, the compositional attributes of the Bilitis music are an
embodiment of Debussy’s essential compositional self—musical personality traits that constitute one facet of this stylistically diverse composer. In the next chapter, I will go beyond the Bilitis music to show how the ancient side of Debussy’s musical persona is voiced in purely instrumental compositions. By looking at the ways in which the music evokes a sense of ancient nostalgia without the aid of textual or poetic references, it becomes evident that Debussy’s ancient persona encompasses much more than just the Bilitis songs and formulates a unique dialect of his overall compositional vocabulary.
CHAPTER 3:

BEYOND BILITIS
Through the inspiration of a fictional poetess named Bilitis, Debussy participated in the French cultural fascination with the ancient world that began in the last half of the 1800s and continued into the early 1900s. Debussy’s own distinct compositional voice added to the evolving and expanding musical vocabulary of an imagined past, thus influencing future artistic works with his particular conception of antiquity. Moreover, this ancient musical persona was not just an occasional stylistic mannerism reserved for settings of Symbolist poetry, but a distinct compositional voice that appears in numerous works throughout his career. In this chapter, I will present several short excerpts of instrumental works as well as a detailed study of an entire piano prelude, all of which give voice to Debussy’s ancient persona. In these examples, all three categories of musical characteristics identified in Chapter 2—the motivic interval cell, the melodic arabesques, and the archaic/mystical harmonies and textures—combine to evoke the mystical, ancient sounds inspired by a fictional 2nd-century B.C. Greek poetess.

Although Debussy’s music is most commonly identified as a precursor to modernism, his penchant for certain “historical” sounds is often mentioned in passing. Several scholars have noted Debussy’s affinity for ambiguous modal harmonies, parallel fifths and octaves, melodic figures based on P4s, and other sounds that allude to antiquity. In his study on Debussy’s parallel harmony, Mark DeVoto attributes an “ancient” sound to Debussy’s use of parallel diatonic chords, particularly pure triads, and particularly with classically forbidden parallel intervals—octaves and perfect fifths.116 Julie McQuinn describes the “archaic sense of

---

religiosity” of the cello’s open parallel fifths in “La Damoiselle élué” as part of a larger illustration of the “mystic, pagan vein that runs through many of Debussy’s works.”

These compositional features create an underlying subtext that adheres to Leon Botstein’s definition of nostalgia as a music-historical category: the suggestion and presentation of better days long gone whose status is largely mythological. Botstein notes that such musical nostalgia was increasingly common in the early 20th century, as evidenced by the amount of works that evoke a sensibility of loss for a past that neither listener nor composer could have experienced or known. Debussy indeed took part in this cultural nostalgia with a wide range of vocal and instrumental compositions that suggest a distant, idealized past. While detailed analyses of all such works is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief survey of but a few instances of Debussy’s ancient persona demonstrates to what extent Debussy returns to his archaic compositional idiom throughout his career.

**Ancient Instrumental Works**

In 1904, Debussy’s ancient persona appears in a set of pieces for harp and string quintet, whose titles of “Danse sacrée” and “Danse profane” provoke thoughts of ancient pagan rituals. Mark DeVoto points out the similarities between the Danses and the Bilitis music: “Though no specific religious dimension to the ‘sacred’ is indicated, there is more than a little suggestion of Debussy’s feeling for the pastoral aesthetic of ancient Greece, in the similarity of the Danse

---

119 Ibid.
sacrée idiom to that of the *Chansons de Bilitis* incidental music of 1900 and the *Danseuses de Delphes* of 1909.\(^{120}\)

The mental imagery insinuated by the title is reinforced by the primitive sounds of chant arabesques, modal harmonies, parallel octaves and fifths, and hollow sonorities. The strings set the ancient mood by opening with a melody that resembles the excerpts from Saint-Saëns’ *Antigone* in Chapter 1. As illustrated in Example 39, the motivic interval cell creates a simple chant line played in octaves. With the same billowing motion as the Bilitis chants, the convex line ascends and descends almost symmetrically. The loose rhythm denies a clear sense of meter, and the chant seemingly hovers in a moment of suspended time.

![Example 39](image)

**Ex. 39:** Debussy, *Danses*, I. “Danse sacrée,” mm. 1-3

The strings then give way to the harp, a consummate instrumental symbol of both the ancient and the ethereal. Here, the chant is expanded and given a modal block chord texture that encircles the tonal centers of D and G. The outer notes of the harp chords are constructed entirely by two fragments of the previous chant in mm. 1-3, as in Example 40. Highlighted in

\(^{120}\) DeVoto, “Some Aspects of Parallel Harmony,” 475.
red, the motivic interval cell contains a P4 and M2 that move in opposite directions. A similar three-note figure, highlighted in blue, spans a P5 with a P4 and M2 that move in the same direction. As demonstrated below, these two melodic fragments provide the seeds out of which the chordal chant arabesque unravels.

a. Chant fragments: Danse sacrée, mm. 1-3

DeVoto describes the parallel harmony of “Danse sacrée” as an emblem of serene clarity, or perhaps of sacred purity, so as to reflect the title more literally.¹²¹ This austerity is contrasted in the second piece, “Danse profane,” by fuller textures, a faster tempo, chromaticism, and a more illustrious harmonic palette. Despite the divergent atmosphere, the motivic interval cell and the three-note figure from the previous chant (illustrated in Example 40) continue to serve as melodic fragments, appearing strategically throughout the piece to create moments of contrast. As highlighted in Example 41, the two P4/M2 figures create strands of chant lines played in octaves by the strings. The pizzicato articulation adds a percussive feel that creates a brutish, skeletal sound.

The carnal, savage side of Debussy’s ancient persona that is hinted at in “Danse profane” comes out in full force in *Masques*, also composed in 1904. This fiery piano solo is characterized by a percussive, guitar-like texture created by a melodic line filled in with chords and open fifths on the off-beats. The frenzied rhythms waver deliriously between the $\frac{6}{4}$ indicated by the time signature and a fast $\frac{3}{4}$ feel. In the first four measures, shown below, the staccato P5s fall in between an accented melodic line that outlines the late 19th-century interpretation of the ancient Greek chromatic tetrachord.

The main melodic, textural, and rhythmic ideas presented in the first four measures are continued and expanded throughout the piece. The fifths are often transformed into chords and dissonant sonorities that exploit the harsh, close-voiced sound of major and minor seconds. In a contrasting middle section, the open fifths are stretched out into jarring octave clusters of M2s,
as shown below. Notice that the left hand’s melody outlines a three-note figure that is only a half-step different from the motivic interval cell.

![Musical notation]

**Ex. 43:** Debussy, *Masques*, mm. 81-82

All the while, the entire piece is driven by primal dance rhythms. The flustering metrical perception of Example 42 is drawn out into dizzying syncopations, such as those seen in Example 44.

![Musical notation]

**Ex. 44:** Debussy, *Masques*, mm. 22-27

A much more serene vision of antiquity appears in “Hommage à Rameau,” the second piece in Debussy’s first book of *Images*. In this piano solo, Debussy pays tribute to a revered Baroque composer and theorist who, in Debussy’s mind, served as the figurehead of a purely French stylistic tradition. Nevermind that the composition sounds nothing like the works of Rameau—Debussy’s evocation of a lost past is more of a subtle statement that simultaneously condemns the “mediocrity” of modern music, lambastes the public’s poor taste, and elevates the French heritage of “greatness” to which Debussy was the appointed heir.¹²²

¹²² Throughout his career, Debussy expressed increasing frustration with the current state of music, which he felt was suffering from mediocrity. As a critic, he often railed against what he perceived was a lack of originality.
As shown in Example 45, Debussy begins his eloquent panegyric with a chant arabesque that unravels out of the motivic interval cell.

Ex. 45: Debussy, *Images* (1ere série), “Hommage à Rameau,” mm. 1-4

As in the Bilitis music, the undulating chant line is played in octaves and softly drifts up and down a series of pitches mostly contained within an octave. In the second phrase, the line is expanded with neighbor tones added to the motive. For example, in m. 3, the A# in the first two figures embellishes the motivic cell of B-G#-F#. Similarly, in m. 4, the first two triplet figures simultaneously expand the cells of C#-A#-G# and B-G#-F#. The diagram below highlights the overlapping interval cells in the pitch content of mm. 3-4.

Fig. 6: Overlapping interval cells in “Hommage à Rameau,” mm. 3-4

The entire piece is essentially a continual fragmentation and elaboration of the initial four measures. As it is transposed, inverted, shortened, and elongated, the chant line influences the harmonic structure and generates several countermelodies, such as the ostinato figure shown
below. This gesture, played in octaves by the left hand, creates an austere, devout atmosphere by its exclusive use of perfect intervals.

Ex. 46: Debussy, Images (1ere série), “Hommage à Rameau,” m. 43

A similar reverence for the past can be found in the first book of Préludes. Amongst the sprightly, playful allusions to mythological characters in “Danseuses de Delphes” and “La danse de Puck,” “La Cathédrale engloutie” is a somber tone painting of a submerged church that, according to the ancient Briton myth, rises out of the sea off the coast of the Island of Ys. Along with modal chord progressions, medieval chant lines, and short motives based on P4s, Debussy uses the piano’s timbral capabilities to create an effect that mimics the tolling bells and reverberant acoustics of a grand underwater cathedral. This atmosphere is created in the first two measures of the piece as a widely spaced sonority lingers above and below a series of stacked fourths and fifths. Because of the pentatonic pitch collection, the last three sonorities spell out the motivic interval cell starting on E and B.

The dotted whole note chords are a mainstay throughout the piece, creating the submerged, “sunken” feel implied by the title. Fourths, fifths, and octaves generate most of the chords, dictate the harmonic motion, and provide the structure of the melody. The ascetic harmonic palette gradually becomes more colorful, beginning with the excerpt shown in Example 48. In between the sustained outer chords, Debussy incorporates an additional P5 to the stacks of perfect intervals and situates both hands a second apart in the same octave, introducing seconds, thirds, and sixths to the harmonic scheme. While the left hand appears to be in a separate $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, the right hand symmetrically ascends and descends, creating a chordal palindrome.


In the second book of preludes, Debussy’s ancient persona influences his depiction of fluttering fairies in “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses.” The first measure sets the tone for the rest of the piece with rapid arpeggiated flourishes split between the hands. The right hand outlines the hollow P5/octave sonority that has come to represent a distinctively “ancient” sound, while the left hand thirds create a dizzying sense of bitonality.
The flourishes consist of a five-voice texture, with each voice moving along the path of the motivic interval cell. These lines appear throughout the piece, both in the midst of the busy arpeggiated flourishes as well as in uninterrupted melodic figures, as shown below.

Despite the stylistic diversity of the above-mentioned pieces, each one utilizes a particular musical language that has established associations with the ancient world. By incorporating these compositional characteristics into his works, Debussy effectively creates a musical landscape that, as with the Bilitis works, evokes fantasy, mystery, and nostalgia for the past. The precise date and era matters not—the effect is of some unknown “ago,” long forgotten by the machinations of modern society. While ancient Greece was often the setting upon which such fantasies were projected, the geographical location is just as irrelevant as the date and time. Greece was merely a convenient vehicle to communicate a sense of antiquity that the audience
would have readily understood. In reality, Greece was just one of many ideal settings for exotic fantasies of the past.

**Bilitis Goes to Egypt**

As with artistic depictions of ancient Greece, Egyptian-themed music increased in popularity throughout the second half of the 1800s. Initiated by David’s *Le Désert*, other French composers followed suit in composing music that was both ancient and exotic. As discussed in Chapter 1, Gounod’s 1881 revision of *Sapho* reflected the growing trend for Orientalist depictions of the ancient world. Massenet’s *Thaïs*, for instance, is set in Egypt; similarly, Saint-Saëns’ *Piano Concerto No. 5* evokes Egypt and quotes an Egyptian folk song, and his *Dance of the Priestesses* represents an exotic, archaic world, whose distance from Judeo-Christian Europe is underscored by allusions to paganism. It appears that, at least musically, Egypt and Greece were interchangeable symbols of an exotic and primitive land of fantasy.

Debussy was just as intrigued with the imagined sounds of Egypt as his predecessors. Although he had never even stepped foot in the country, Debussy described his favorite music as “those few notes an Egyptian shepherd plays on his flute: he is a part of the landscape around him, and he knows harmonies that aren’t in our books.” It is in this locale where the flute of the Egyptian shepherd merges with Pan’s flute, and the spirit of Bilitis emerges once again in the purely instrumental context of a piano prelude.

In “Canope,” the tenth piece of his second book of *Préludes*, Debussy gives his compositional take on archaeology, though not in the same scholarly sense as pieces such as

---


124 Debussy on Music, 147.
Reinach and Fauré’s *Hymne à Apollon*. For this prelude, Debussy draws his inspiration not from an actual historical artifact but from the idea of the artifact. Rather than seeking to authentically recreate a specific ancient inscription or manuscript, the music seems to be more of a reference to the fantasies sparked by these ancient fragments, as the mind of the beholder tries to imagine the stories behind the objects.

The title “Canope” is a reference to canopic jars, which were urns used in the ancient Egyptian mummification process. Specifically, these plain, undecorated vessels were used to store the organs of the deceased. Debussy is known to have had two such urns on his writing desk,¹²⁵ and they seemingly find an aural equivalent in the solid block chords and relatively simple melodic lines of “Canope.”

![Canopic burial urns](image)

**Fig. 7:** Canopic burial urns

Similar to death, the afterlife, and life’s great unknowns, the entire prelude conveys a questioning mystique that is best described by Vladimir Jankélévitch’s term *mystères limpides*, or “lucid mysteries.” Steven Rings argues that the mysteries of Debussy’s music emerge into

---

their full clarity only once we have inhabited the perpendicular time of musical reflection and analysis, which results in an “intensified experience of certain of the work’s sonic presences, and via them, certain of its mystères limpides.” Ring’s argument is clearly manifested in the deceptive simplicity of “Canope.” Through the use of his ancient compositional idiom, Debussy imbues one of his least technically-challenging preludes with a vast trove of mystères limpides that are only fully revealed by thoughtful analysis.

Like ancient artifacts buried beneath a pile of ruins, a rich and complex structure lies just below the seemingly modest surface of “Canope.” Initially, the piece appears to be a mishmash of random melodic fragments pieced together above dissonant harmonies and interruptions of chords in unrelated keys. However, as the following analysis will demonstrate, the disjointed appearance of “Canope” is but an illusion. All of the seemingly unconnected elements are tied together by a framework presented in the first six measures of the piece that has direct correlations to the Bilitis music. While “Canope” contains many fascinating mysteries to be discovered, this overarching network of relationships is the primary focus of my analysis. The harmonic content is of particular importance, for it here that the elements of Debussy’s ancient persona are fully matured and developed. The result is a highly ambiguous yet elaborately constructed harmonic structure that informs all elements of the piece and saturates the sounds of Egypt with the spirit of Bilitis.

Throughout “Canope,” multiple strands of melodic lines float above solid block chords in the low register. Like the Bilitis music, the undulating arabesque melodies are modal, chant-like, and fragmentary. Short melodic snippets are interspersed between three main thematic

---

statements, which I will be referring to as the “Chant Theme,” “Percussive Theme,” and “Flute Theme.”

a. Chant theme

Ex. 51: Primary melodic themes in “Canope”

The Prélude begins with a reincarnation of Bilitis in the ancient and mysterious chant theme. As shown in Example 51a, this theme is introduced by the outer voices of a series of modal block chords in the first three measures. The motivic interval cell generates the chant line, which ascends and descends a D octave with a gentle swaying motion, as illustrated below.

Ex. 52: Debussy, Préludes (book 2), “Canope,” mm. 1-3
This theme mirrors the Bilitis chants in its shape, structure, and circular motion. Although it spans more than an octave, the line clearly emphasizes a D octave in a manner similar to the Bilitis chants: the line begins and ends on D, with the higher octave marking the peak of the linear arch. Also, like the Bilitis chants, one side of the octave is elongated by a light wavering motion. In “Canope,” the ascent is stretched out by the first five chords, which circle around the initial D. This is strikingly similar to one of the chant arabesques in *Six épigraphes antiques*, as demonstrated below.

a. *Six épigraphes antiques*, VI. “Pour remercier la pluie au matin,” mm. 29-32

![Ex. 53: Comparison of chant arabesques in *Six épigraphes antiques* and “Canope”](image)


Initially, the other two themes appear to be quite different from the chant theme. While the chant theme is diatonic and adheres to a steady quarter-note pulse, the “percussive theme” and the “flute theme” are chromatic, rhythmically more active, and unhinged from any sense of pulse or meter. Beneath their exotic surfaces, however, both themes can be reduced to simple chant lines that allude to the tonal center of D.

The second theme (the “percussive theme”) captures Debussy’s unique ability to create extremely nuanced sound colors by exploiting the timbral capacities of the piano. Repeated pitches, grace notes, and staccato articulations give this theme a distinctively percussive sound.
that hints at Debussy’s fascination with the Javanese gamelan ensemble. At its core, though, the percussive theme is essentially a triadic outline of the tonic and dominant in D. In mm. 7-8, this theme is first introduced as a monophonic line that suggests an A-major chord, adding the third and fifth to the A sustained in the lower staves. In the next two measures, the percussive theme is played in octaves and slightly altered to provide the seventh of an A7 chord, which functions as 4 in D major. This can be seen in the example below, with the allusions to A major highlighted in red and D major in blue.

Ex. 54: Debussy, Préludes (book 2), “Canope,” mm. 7-10

The sinuous, winding “flute theme” is introduced in the very next measure. Hidden beneath the chromatic motion of the arabesque is a simple stepwise line built upon the first five notes of a D-minor scale. As illustrated in Example 55, this theme is comprised of two small fragments: a half-step upper-neighbor gesture on 5, and a D-minor tetrachord with a chromatic

---

127 Debussy’s fascination with the Javanese gamelan is well documented, and several scholars have studied the influence of this Eastern ensemble on Debussy’s compositions. “Canope” is often cited as one such piece that exhibits Debussy’s gamelan-inspired compositional style.
passing tone between ˘ and ˇ on the descent. Ultimately, this theme can be reduced to a five-note diatonic chant that symmetrically rises and falls D minor, as shown below.

Although all three of the melodic themes suggest D as the tonal center of “Canope,” any definitive sense of tonality is negated by the underlying harmonies. The melodic fragments serve a higher purpose, part of which is to reinforce the overwhelming ambiguity that permeates every aspect of the prelude. More importantly, the melodic allusions to D support one half of the “Canope”’s bipolar tonality. As the harmonic analysis will reveal, the melodic lines ultimately feed into an intricate structure based upon the opposition between D minor and C major.

Debussy reveals the “secret” of the harmonic mysteries in the Bilitis-esque introductory section of “Canope.” Within the first six measures, the chant theme lays out the main tonal areas, foreshadows the large-scale harmonic plan, and conveys the elusive and ambiguous character of the prelude. The chant’s modal chords set the ancient, quasi-religious atmosphere as they enter at a slow, steady pace reminiscent of a solemn funeral procession. Hepokoski considers these opening chords to be a progeny of the “Modal/Chordal Opening,” in which, in its purest form, a statement of four quiet chords in equal time values arises out of the initial
silence and creates a swaying, static circularity. Interestingly, one of the works that Hepokoski references as a historical antecedent of this type of introduction has a similarly morbid subject matter. He cites Saint-Saëns’ *Le Pas d’armes du Roi Jean* (1852), which evokes the funeral cortège of a soldier.

These opening chords provide the first hint of harmonic ambiguity and dream-like disorientation. Following a quarter note rest that causes a skewed sense of meter, the chords begin a somber march that fluctuates between D Aeolian and D Dorian. As mentioned earlier, the first five notes of the chant theme wind around the initial D-minor chord. If we consider these first five chords as a prolongation of D, then the entire series of chords is nearly symmetrical, with the exception of the high C chord. As demonstrated in Example 56, the symmetrical pitches D-G-A-D divide the octave in half by two P4s separated by a M2.

![Example 56: Symmetry of “Canope” Chords](image)

Because it is excluded from the symmetry, this C chord is singled out as being somehow different than the others. Furthermore, this C chord and its lower counterpart in m. 1 also

---

happen to be the sole major chords in a progression comprised entirely of minor chords. Already, the C-major chord is marked as a potentially significant element. This is further supported by the descending fifth from G to C in the left hand of m. 3, which interferes with the cadence in D and submits the first challenge to D’s supremacy. In doing so, Debussy subtly pits D minor and C major against one another, foreshadowing the primary tonal opposition of the piece.

The opening chant theme also previews the key harmonic areas of the prelude. Throughout the piece, the most prominent sonorities are built upon the five pitches of the chant theme: D, E, G, A, and C. When the upper D is included, this group of six pitches divides the octave symmetrically in half with the motivic interval cell, forming the same intervallic palindrome as seen in the Bilitis theme. Figure 8 shows the identical interval structure of the pitches in the “Canope” chant theme and the Bilitis theme. Both spell out a pentatonic scale, though not in what is perceived as the “key” of the melody but in what would be the ♭VII (for example, the Bilitis theme is “in” G, but the pitches outline a pentatonic scale in F). With the structure of the prelude built on this series of pitches, the spirit of Bilitis is suffused throughout the entire piece.

![Fig. 8: Pitch content of the Bilitis theme and the “Canope” chant](image-url)
After the opening presentation of the chant theme, the fairly stable tonality of D minor/Dorian is suddenly uprooted in m. 4 with the first of several brief “interruptions” of chords in flat keys. In each instance, the drastic intrusion of extremely distant tonalities seems unrelated to the predominately “white-key” tonality. However, all of the “flat” chords follow an intervallic path similar to the chant theme and, by extension, the Bilitis theme. In the first interruption, three major chords—E♭, A♭, and G♭—are constructed on top of open fifths whose roots outline an inverted motivic interval cell. The motion of the opening chant chords is projected onto a “flat” key in the manner of a ghostly apparition from the past.

These chords are also set apart metrically by the false sense of meter created by the opening quarter rest. As illustrated in Example 58, the rest causes the perception of two bars in a steady, regular $4\times$, followed by the unexpected insertion of the three flat chords in a measure of $\frac{3}{4}$. The skewed sense of meter further disrupts the musical equilibrium before settling back into a solid D-minor chord. Following this chord, the chant theme is heard in low octaves, continuing with a metrically displaced $\frac{3}{4}$ to include the low A in m. 7.

Regardless of how one hears the metrical grouping of the first six measures, the layered entrances in m. 7 further distort any sense of metric regularity. The temporal disorientation is accompanied by the harmonic confusion of overlapping chords, as illustrated below. Here, the A
on the downbeat of m. 7 has three different functions: the last pitch of the chant, the fifth of the D\(^7\) chord, and the root of an A-major chord.

Immediately following the multi-functional A in m. 7, a shift in tonality is enacted by the change in the D sonority from minor to dominant seventh. The percussive theme enters on C\(\#\), clashing with the seventh of the D chord and subtly implying A major. Interestingly, this is the first instance of a leading tone, the scale degree that provides the strongest reference to one specific tonality. However, Debussy withholds this leading tone and its accompanying A-major chord until m. 7, the very moment where D is officially dethroned of its status as tonic. The allusion to A major fades during the second iteration of the percussive theme as the melody is altered to coincide with the underlying D\(^7\) sonority, anticipating the resolution in G.
Upon arriving in G minor, all of the pitches contained within the chant theme—D, E, G, A, and C—are present in some form. The flute theme enters and refers back to D minor, while the high E in the top staff and the upper-neighbor fragment on A subtly reflect upon the previous allusion to A. Once the descending line arrives on D, the harmony anticipates C major with a change from G minor to G major. The high E is retained in the upper staff, and combined with the G, D, and B♭, an Em7 chord is quietly present in the background.

At this point, we begin to see that the overall harmonic plan is governed by the opening chant and constructed around D and C. G is of secondary importance, as it serves as the dominant to C. The remaining two pitches of the chant, E and A, are subservient to D through their roles as dominant and secondary dominant. The D7 chord in mm. 7-10 ultimately functions as a V7/V in the key of C major, which, following an “interruption” of E♭7, arrives in m. 14. Here, as shown in Example 60, the root position harmonic movement by fourths enacts a gentle plagal motion that alternates between C-major and F7 chords. Like the Bilitis music, the chordal movement from tonic to subdominant creates a rustic, pastoral atmosphere.
Despite C’s temporary status as tonic, the references to D are not eliminated. As if reliving a memory, the upper two staves contain pitches that point back to the E♭7 chord of m. 13 while a short melodic fragment in the top staff outlines a D-minor triad.


With this, Debussy sets into motion a chain of dual harmonies that emphasize the tonal juxtaposition foreshadowed by the lone C-major chords in the introduction. As highlighted in Example 61, the entire prelude serves an overarching opposition of D minor and C major that climaxes in m. 20 with the simultaneous sounding of both dominant-seventh chords. The following page contains a harmonic analysis of the middle section of “Canope,” with harmonic references to D and C highlighted by an opposing color scheme. Areas related to D are highlighted in warm colors, red and orange, while sonorities that suggest C are highlighted in cool colors, blue and purple.
Debussy reserves a final touch of Bilitis’ harmonic magic for the coda, which is set up by the return to the chant section in m. 26. The solid sense of D minor/Dorian in the chant builds the anticipation for a final resolution in D. Like the introduction, the tonality is interrupted by a series of “flat” chords, however in this instance, the chords follow the exact movement of the chant theme. Above a descending fifth gesture in D♭, the “flat chords”—E♭-B♭-A♭-E♭—split the octave symmetrically in half with two P4s separated by a M2.

The “flat chords” give way to three “non-flat” chords that follow a similar path, moving from E-major to A-major and F-minor. These three chords further set up the expectation of arrival in D by enacting a V-I in the dominant, A major. Additionally, the roots of the A-major and F-minor chords outline the fifth and third of a D-minor chord, seemingly gearing up for a D minor conclusion.

This, however, does not happen. Instead, Debussy shatters expectations with a C-major sonority sustained underneath the final four measures, during which the “true” tonic is never revealed. In doing so, he concludes the piece in a hauntingly vague way that masterfully summarizes the ambiguous mystique of “Canope.” Although this ending may initially seem unsettlingly vague, a consideration of the harmonic conflicts presented throughout the piece proves the last four measures to be a most perfect conclusion.

In the last four measures, the music appears to resolve in the key of C, suggested by a soft, sustained C-major chord. The right hand of this sonority contains two stacked fifths comprised of the three main tonal characters in “Canope’s” drama—C, G, and D—which adds a ninth to the C-major chord. Furthermore, the flute theme in the top staff fills in the seventh—B♭—and extends the C chord to include the eleventh and thirteenth. However, a more plausible hearing is that, rather than stretching the C-major chord into its upper partials, the melodic line refutes the key of C with a clever yet subtle allusion to D. The melody in the last two measures is an abbreviated version of the flute theme, heard in its complete form during the previous two measures. The final descent never reaches its goal of D and stops short on the third of the C-major chord. Despite the consonance with the underlying C-major harmony, this E is far from conclusive. Previous occurrences of this theme have conditioned the listener’s expectations, and the weight of the descending line compels the ear to mentally fill in the missing D.

This “phantom” D is not just a figment of the listener’s musical expectations—it is lingering on top of the sonority and sustained by the damper pedal. Shortly after all of the notes have been played, a stunning aural effect occurs: as the remnants of the final two measures hang
in the air, the D seems to emerge from the wash of sound, as if the ghost of Bilitis lightly whispers one last pitch, casting doubt on the supremacy of C.

Almost every scholar who has studied “Canope” has a strong opinion as to the “real” tonality of this piece, and the consensus seems to be split between D minor and C major. However, I conclude that neither answer is “correct”—to assign one specific tonality to the piece would detract from the real depth and mystery of “Canope.” The entire essence of the prelude lies in the shadowy intrigue of uncertainty, a sensation that is totally diluted by the notion of a conclusive tonality. As the harmonic analysis has shown, Debussy crafts the entire piece around a structure of tonal polarity. He takes great care to allude to dual tonalities, and he specifically composes a conclusion that references both D and C. To walk away from this piece with a clear sense of tonic would be to miss out on the ultimate musical mystery that Debussy’s ancient persona has so eloquently constructed.

This reading can be drawn out further in such a way that highlights the ancient inspiration that lies at the heart of “Canope” and Bilitis. By and large, these works are primarily constructed with short fragments, and the very nature of the fragment is one of incompletion and uncertainty. A fragment, whether in art, literature, music, or archaeology, is but a small piece of a whole entity. Because the whole object is either unknown or unseen, the beholder must mentally reconstruct the missing details, an act that draws the imagination into a richly associative way of thinking. Fragments are powerfully suggestive and force active engagement in a way that a unified, organic whole simply cannot.

In both “Canope” and the Bilitis music, then, it is quite appropriate that Debussy builds the works with musical fragments. He withholds important information, providing only shards of melodic themes set to vague rhythms and ambiguous harmonies that imply multiple tonalities
and meters. In doing so, Debussy draws upon our subconscious need to populate empty spaces, which, according to Balachandra Rajan, is the very nature of creativity. Thus, the music initiates the same sense of wonderment, speculation, and uncertainty evoked by the archaeological remnants of a long lost society.

The listener must fill in the details and come up with his or her own conclusions; he or she must actively engage with the music by partaking in an internal act of creativity in which composer and audience alike share the responsibility of deriving meaning. Roy Howat alludes to this in his study of esotericism, suggesting that Debussy’s abandonment of conventional styles was a direct recourse to the unconscious mind. Howat concludes that Debussy’s harmonic language is one in which listeners are challenged to draw upon their inner resources to grasp a meaning that is nowhere explicitly stated. Steven Rings asserts that the act of thoughtful analysis is a crucial step toward understanding the mysteries of the music, yet I must add that when the mysteries cross over into the realm of the imagination, an absolute answer will forever remain out of reach. Perhaps this is what Debussy had in mind when he wrote: “For it is music alone that has the power to evoke imaginary scenes at will, to conjure up the intangible world of fantasies secretly shrouded within the mysterious poetry of the night, the thousand indistinguishable noises made by moonbeams caressing the leaves.”

---


CHAPTER 4:

CONCLUSION
Claude Debussy’s music is typically viewed through the lens of modernism. His rejection of traditional compositional structures and formulae unarguably paved the way for the breakdown of tonality that arose in the 20th century. Much of these innovations were fueled by his rebellion against conventional forms, structures, rules, and practices. It was this deep-seated disgust for what he considered to be a dangerous decline in public taste and a proliferation of “mediocre” music that led him to look outside of the traditional Western line of musical thought for solutions to a musical crisis.

In this quest to break free from imposed musical constructs, it is widely noted that Debussy found inspiration in the music of other cultures. Many of the techniques influenced by Eastern tuning systems and Oriental percussion ensembles opened the door for future composers to enter into atonality and serialism. What is not so often discussed is the influence of antiquity on Debussy’s musical innovations. A considerable number of his works exhibit a sense of nostalgia that, rather than pointing towards the future, seems to look back in time. This suggests that for Debussy, who sought to save the arts from the destruction of poor taste, perhaps music’s salvation lie in the past—or, more specifically, his imagined version of some long-forgotten era.

This fantasy was manifested textually through his choice of pagan titles and settings of poetry depicting nymphs, fauns, satyrs, and other mythological creatures. More importantly, Debussy’s nostalgia was voiced musically through a specific set of compositional techniques that conveyed an “ancient” atmosphere. This stylistic idiom drew from the musical symbols established by the surge of ancient-themed compositions in France during the last half of the 1800s. Although this era gave birth to modernity, creative artists, poets, and musicians from this period also rebirthed the ancient world—or, at least, an imaginary version of the ancient world.
These works shaped the public's perception of the past and presented Debussy with a vast range of musical techniques that audiences would regularly associate with antiquity.

By expanding upon and combining these techniques with his own unique stylistic voice, Debussy created an ancient musical persona that formed a significant component of his overall compositional aesthetic. These features are particularly evident in Debussy’s musical realizations of Pierre Louÿs’ controversial Bilitis poetry. Debussy returned to this fictional Greek poetess several times throughout his life: she appears in the Trois chansons de Bilitis of 1898, a little-known bit of incidental music composed for a scandalous recitation of the poetry in 1901, and the Six épigraphes antiques of 1914. Despite the wide time frame between these works, all three collections share the same compositional features. Furthermore, these characteristics appear in numerous other instrumental works with no textual or extra-musical references to confer meaning. Though the figure of Bilitis is not explicitly related to these pieces, her influence is made known through the pervasive use of the same compositional techniques that brought her story to life.

As the analyses presented in this paper have shown, the characteristics of Debussy’s ancient persona comprise a significant dialect of his musical vocabulary. This idea challenges the commonly-held view that equates Debussy with modernity and suggests that antiquity played just as much, if not more, of a role in shaping Debussy’s musical personality. Because this topic has been relatively unexplored, an enormous realm of possibilities is open for further investigation.

Debussy’s ancient persona is just one line of inquiry that leads down a fascinating and unchartered rabbit hole that encompasses an eclectic variety of topics. Throughout my research, I struggled to maintain focus, as I was continually tempted to veer down countless other paths to
explore the connections between Debussy’s “ancient” music and theories of memory, perception, time, and nostalgia that overlap with archaeology, exoticism, and underground erotica circa the late 1800s. While I would love to wander down these paths at some point in the future, my most immediate plan is to expand this paper to include a larger and more detailed survey of Debussy’s “ancient” works. These analyses would add to the categories and characteristics of Debussy’s ancient persona and provide an excellent springboard for a comparison between Debussy’s ancient works with those of both his predecessors as well as his contemporaries in music, art, theater, and literature. Similarly, a comparison between the late 19th-century ancient-themed art, music, and literature with that of the early 20th century would likely provide a great deal of fascinating insight into the extent of the societal, ethical, moral, and ideological changes experienced by a culture within a relatively short amount of time.

This paper has barely scratched the surface of a topic that is ripe for further investigation, and the ideas for future research presented here are but a few in a vast sea of intriguing possibilities. It is my hope that this paper will provoke others to challenge popular notions about Debussy’s music and continuously dig deeper into the artistic mind of a beautifully outspoken musical iconoclast.
APPENDIX A:

TRANSLATIONS
I. Chant Pastoral

(music)

Il faut chanter un chant pastoral, invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été. Je garde mon troupeau et Sélénis le sien, à l'ombre ronde d'un olivier qui tremble.

Sélénis est couchée sur le pré. Elle se lève et court, ou cherche des cigales, ou cueille des fleurs avec des herbes, ou lave son visage dans l'eau fraîche du ruisseau.

Moi, j'arrache la laine au dos blond des moutons pour en garnir ma quenouille, et je file. Les heures sont lentes. Un aigle passe dans le ciel.

L'ombre tourne: changeons de place la corbeille de figues et la jarre de lait.

Il faut chanter un chant pastoral, invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été.

(music)

II. Les Comparaisons

Bergeronnette, oiseau de Kypris, chante avec nos premiers désirs ! Le corps nouveau des jeunes filles se couvre de fleurs comme la terre. La nuit de tous nos rêves approche et nous en parlons entre nous.

Parfois, nous comparons ensemble nos beautés si différentes, nos chevelures déjà longues, nos jeunes seins encore petits, nos pubertés rondes comme des cailles et blotties sous la plume naissante.

Hier je luttai de la sorte contre Melanthô mon aînée. Elle était fière de sa poitrine qui venait de croître en un mois, et, montrant ma tunique droite, elle m'avait appelée: Petite enfant.

Pas un homme ne pouvait nous voir, nous nous mimes nues devant les filles, et, si elle vainquit sur un point, je l'emportai de loin sur les autres. Bergeronnette, oiseau de Kypris, chante avec nos premiers désirs!

(music)

I. Pastoral Song

(music)

We must sing a pastoral song, invoke Pan, god of the summer wind. I watch my flock and Sélénis watches hers, in the round shade of a trembling olive tree.

Sélénis is lying in the meadow.

She rises and runs, or searches for grasshoppers, or gathers flowers with grasses, or washes her face in the cool water of the brook.

And I, I tear the wool from the blond backs of the sheep to fill up my distaff, and I spin.

The hours pass too slowly.

An eagle passes in the sky.

The shade turns, let us move the basket of figs and the jar of milk.

We must sing a pastoral song, invoke Pan, god of the summer wind.

(music)

II. Comparisons

Little Sparrow, bird of Kypris, sing with our first desires!

The fresh bodies of the young girls are covered with flowers like the earth.

The night of all our dreams is approaching and we talk of it amongst ourselves.

Sometimes, we compare together our beauties so different, our hair already long, our young breasts still small, our puberties round like quails and hidden under the nascent down.

Yesterday, I fought this way with Melanthô my elder. She was proud of her breasts which had grown in a month, and, pointing to my flat tunic, she called me Little Child.

Not a single man could see us, we got naked in front of the girls, and, if she won on one point, I won by far on the others. Little Sparrow, bird of Kypris, sing with our first desires!

(music)

III. Les Contes

Je suis aimée des petits enfants; dès qu'ils me voient, ils courrent à moi, et s'accrochent à ma tunique et prennent mes jambes dans leurs petits bras.

S'ils ont cueilli des fleurs, ils me les donnent toutes ; s'ils ont pris un scarabée ils le mettent dans ma main; s'ils n'ont rien ils me caressent et me font asseoir devant eux.

Alors ils m'embrassent sur la joue, ils posent leurs têtes sur mes seins ; ils me supplient avec les yeux. Je sais bien ce que cela veut dire.

Cela veut dire: "Bilitis chérie, dis-nous car nous sommes gentils, l'histoire du héros Perseus ou la mort de la petite Hellé."

(music)

IV. Chansons

(music)

«Ombre du bois où elle devait venir, dis-moi, où est allée ma maîtresse ?
-- Elle est descendue dans la plaine.
-- Plaine, où est allée ma maîtresse ?
-- Elle a suivi les bords du fleuve.

-- Beau fleuve qui l'as vue passer, dis-moi, est-elle près d'ici ?
-- Elle m'a quitté pour le chemin.
-- Chemin, la vois-tu encore ?
-- Elle m'a laissé pour la route.

(music)

-- Ô route blanche, route de la ville, dis-moi, où l'as-tu conduite ?
-- À la rue d'or qui entre à Sardes.
-- Ô rue de lumière, touches-tu ses pieds nus ?
-- Elle est entrée au palais du roi.

-- Ô palais, splendeur de la terre, rends-la-moi !
-- Regarde, elle a des colliers sur les seins et des houppes dans les cheveux, cent perles le long des jambes, deux bras autour de la taille."

(music)

III. Stories

I am beloved of the little children; as soon as they see me, they run to me, and clutch my tunic, and take my legs in their little arms.

If they have gathered flowers, they give them all to me; if they have caught a beetle, they put it in my hand; if they have nothing, they caress me and make me sit down in front of them.

Then they kiss me on the cheek, they put their heads on my breasts; they plead with me with their eyes. I know well what that means.

That means: "Dear Bilitis, tell us again because we are nice, the story of the hero Perseus or the death of little Hellé."

(music)

IV. Song

(music)

"Shade of the woods where she was to come, Tell me where did my mistress go?"
"She went down onto the plain." -
"Plain, where did my mistress go?" -
"She followed the banks of the stream."

"Beautiful river, who saw her pass, tell me, is she near here?"
"She left me for the path."
"Path, do you see her still?"
"She left me for the road."

(music)

"O white road, road to the city, tell me, where did you lead her?"
"To the golden road which enters Sardis."
"O, road of light, do you touch her bare feet?"
"She went into the palace of the king."

"O palace, splendor of the earth, give her back to me!"
"Look, she has collars on her breasts and tassels in her hair, a hundred pearls along her legs, two arms around her waist."
V. La Partie d’Osselets

Comme nous l'aimions toutes les deux,
ou nous l'avons joué aux osselets.
Et ce fut une partie célèbre.
Beaucoup de jeunes filles y assistaient.

Elle amena d'abord le coup des Kyclôpes,
et moi, le coup de Sôtôn. Mais elle,
le Kallibolos, et moi, me sentant perdue,
je pria la déesse !

Je jouai, j'eus l'Epiphénôn,
elle le terrible coup de Khios, moi l'Antiteukhos,
elle le Trikhias, et moi le coup d'Aphrodité
qui gagna l'amant disputé.

Mais la voyant pâlir, je la pris par le cou
et je lui dis tout près de l'oreille
(pour qu'elle seule m'entendit) :
« Ne pleure pas, petite amie,
ous le laisserons choisir entre nous. »

(music)

VI. Bilitis

Une femme s'enveloppe de laine blanche.
Une autre se vêt de soie et d'or.
Une autre se couvre de fleurs,
de feuilles vertes et de raisins.

Moi, je ne saurais vivre que nue.
Mon amant, prends-moi comme je suis:
sans robe ni bijoux ni sandales,
voici Bilitis toute seule.

Mes cheveux sont noirs de leur noir
et mes lèvres rouges de leur rouge.
Mes boucles flottent autour de moi libres
et rondes comme des plumes.

Prends-moi telle que ma mère m'a faite
dans une nuit d'amour lointaine,
et si je te plais ainsi,
n'oublie pas de me le dire.

(music)

V. The Game of Jacks

Since we both love him,
we played jacks with him.
And it was a famous game.
Many young girls watched it.

First, she cast the throw of the Kyclôpes,
and I, the throw of Sôtôn. But she,
the Kallibolos, and I, feeling I'd lost,
I prayed to the goddess!

I played, I had the Epiphénôn,
she the terrible throw of Khios, me the Antiteukhos,
she the Trikhias, and I the throw of Aphrodite
which won the disputed lover.

But, seeing her grow pale, I took her by the neck
and I told her everything in her ear
(so that she alone could hear me):
"Do not cry, little friend,
we will let him choose between us."

(music)

VI. Bilitis

One woman envelops herself in white wool.
Another clothes herself in silk and gold.
Another covers herself in flowers,
green leaves and grapes.

I, I can only live naked.
My lover, take me as I am:
without dress or jewels or sandals,
here is Bilitis alone.

My hair is black with its blackness
and my lips are red with their redness.
My curls float around me free
and round like feathers.

Take me just as my mother made me
in a night of love long ago,
and if I am pleasing to you thus,
do not forget to tell me so.

(music)
VII. Le Tombeau sans nom

(Mnasidika m'ayant prise par la main
me mena hors des portes de la ville,
jusqu'à un petit champ inculte
où il y avait une stèle de marbre.
Et elle me dit : « Celle-ci fut l'amie de ma mère. »)

(accompanied by 4 measures of music)

Alors je sentis un grand frisson,
et sans cesser de lui tenir la main,
je me penchai sur son épaule,
afin de lire les quatre vers
entre la coupe creuse et le serpent :

« Ce n'est pas la mort qui m'a enlevée,
mais les Nymphes des fontaines.
Je repose ici sous une terre légère
avec la chevelure coupée de Xanthô.
Qu'elle seule me pleure.
Je ne dis pas mon nom. »

(music stops)

Longtemps nous sommes restées debout,
et nous n'avons pas versé la libation.
Car comment appeler une âme inconnue
d'entre les foules de l'Hadès?

(music)

VII. Les Courtesans Égyptiennes

Je suis allée avec Plango
chez les courtisanes égyptiennes,
tout en haut de la vieille ville.
Elles ont des amphorae de terre,
des plateaux de cuivre et des nattes jaunes
où elles s'accroupissent sans effort.

Leurs chambres sont silencieuses,
sans angles et sans encoignures,
tant les couches successives de chaux bleue
ont émoussé les chapiteaux
et arrondi le pied des murs.

Elles se tiennent immobiles,
les mains posées sur les genoux.
Quand elles offrent la bouillie,
elles murmurent : "Bonheur."
Et quand on les remercie,
elles disent: "Grâce à toi."

(music)
Elles comprennent l'hellène et feignent de le parler mal pour se rire de nous dans leur langue ; mais nous, dent pour dent, nous parlons lydien et elles s'inquiètent tout à coup.

(music)

IX. L'eau pure du bassin

"Eau pure du bassin, miroir immobile, dis-moi ma beauté. - O Bilitis, ou qui que tu sois, Thétys peut-être ou Amphitrité, tu es belle, sache-le.

"Ton visage se penche sous ta chevelure épaisse, gonflée de fleurs et de parfums. Tes paupières molles s'ouvrent à peine et tes flancs sont las des mouvements de l'amour.


-- Eau claire du bassin, ta fraîcheur repose. Reçois-moi, qui suis lasse en effet. Emporte le fard de mes joues, et la sueur de mon ventre et le souvenir de la nuit."

(music)

X. La Danseuse aux crotales

(music)

Tu attaches à tes mains légères tes crotales retentissants, Myrthinidion ma chérie, et à peine nue hors de la robe, tu étières tes membres nerveux. Que tu es jolie, les bras en l'air, les reins arqués et les seins rouges!

Tu commences : tes pieds l'un devant l'autre se posent, hésitent, et glissent mollement. Ton corps se plie comme une écharpe, tu caresses ta peau qui frissonne, et la volupté inonde tes longs yeux évanouis.

Tout à coup, tu claques des crotales ! Cambre-toi sur tes pieds dressés, secoue les reins, lance les jambes et que tes mains pleines de fracas appellent tous les désirs en bande autour de ton corps tournoyant!

(music)
Nous applaudissons à grands cris, soit que,
souriant sur l'épaule, tu agites d'un frémissement
ta croupe convulsive et musclée,
soit que tu ondules presque étendue,
au rythme de tes souvenirs.

(music)

XI. Le Souvenir de Mnasidika

Elles dansaient l'une devant l'autre,
d'un mouvement rapide et fuyant;
elles semblaient toujours vouloir s'enlacer,
et pourtant ne se touchaient point,
si ce n'est du bout des lèvres.

Quand elles tournaient le dos en dansant,
elles se regardaient, la tête sur l'épaule,
et la sueur brillait sous leurs bras levés,
et leurs chevelures fines passaient devant leurs seins.

La langueur des leurs yeux, le feu de leurs joues,
la gravité de leurs visages,
éttaient trois chansons ardentes.
Elles se frôlaient furtivement,
elles pliaient leurs corps sur les hanches.

Et tout à coup, elles sont tombées,
pour achever à terre la danse molle...
Souvenir de Mnasidika, c'est alors que tu m'apparus,
et tout, hors ta chère image, me fut importun.

(music)

XII. La Pluie au Matin

(music)

La nuit s'efface. Les étoiles s'éloignent.
Voici que les dernières courtisanes
sont rentrées avec les amants.
Et moi, dans la pluie du matin,
j'écris ces vers sur le sable.

Les feuilles sont chargées d'eau brillante.
Des ruisseaux à travers les sentiers
traînent la terre et les feuilles mortes.
La pluie, goutte à goutte,
fait des trous dans ma chanson.

Oh! que je suis triste et seule ici!
Les plus jeunes ne me regardent pas;
les plus âgés m'ont oublié.
C'est bien. Ils apprendront mes vers,
et les enfants de leurs enfants.

We applaud with great cries, whether,
smiling over your shoulder,
you shake with a shiver your convulsive and muscular
behind, or you undulate almost extended,
to the rhythm of your memories.

(music)

XI. The Memory of Mnasidika

They danced one in front of the other,
with a rapid and fleeing movement;
they seemed always to wish to enlace each other,
and yet they never touched,
except with the tips of their lips.

When they turned their backs in dancing,
they looked at each other, heads on their shoulders,
and the sweat shone on their raised arms,
and their fine hair flowed across their breasts.

The languor of their eyes, the fire in their cheeks,
the seriousness of their faces,
were three ardent songs.
They grazed each other furtively,
you bent their bodies on their hips.

And suddenly, they fell,
to finish the supple dance on the ground ...
Memory of Mnasidika, it was then that you appeared,
and everything, other than your image, was unwelcome.

(music)

XII. The Morning Rain

(music)

Night is ending. The stars are fading away.
Now the last courtesans have gone in
with their lovers.
And I, in the morning rain,
I am writing these verses in the sand.

The leaves are loaded with shining water.
Streams across the paths
carry the earth and the dead leaves.
The rain, drop by drop,
is making holes in my song.

Oh, how sad and alone I am here!
The youngest do not look at me;
the oldest have forgotten me.
It is good. They will learn my verses,
and the children of their children.
Voilà ce que ni Myrtalé, ni Thaïs, ni Glykéra ne se diront, le jour où leurs belles joues seront creuses. Ceux qui aimeront après moi chanteront mes strophes ensemble.

(final music)
I. La flûte de Pan

Pour le jour des Hyacinthies,
il m'a donné une syrinx faite
de roseaux bien taillés,
unis avec la blanche cire
qui est douce à mes lèvres comme le miel.

Il m'apprend à jouer, assise sur ses genoux ;
mais je suis un peu tremblante.
Il en joue après moi,
si doucement que je l'entends à peine.

Nous n'avons rien à nous dire,
tant nous sommes près l'un de l'autre;
mais nos chansons veulent se répondre,
et tour à tour nos bouches
s'unissent sur la flûte.

Il est tard,
voici le chant des grenouilles vertes
qui commence avec la nuit.
Ma mère ne croira jamais
que je suis restée si longtemps
à chercher ma ceinture perdue.

II. La chevelure

Il m'a dit: « Cette nuit, j'ai rêvé.
J'avais ta chevelure autour de mon cou
J'avais tes cheveux comme un collier noir
autour de ma nuque et sur ma poitrine.

« Je les caressais, et c'étaient les miens;
et nous étions liés pour toujours ainsi,
par la même chevelure, la bouche sur la bouche,
ainsi que deux lauriers n'ont souvent qu'une racine.

« Et peu à peu, il m'a semblé,
tant nos membres étaient confondus,
que je devenais toi-même,
or que tu entrais en moi comme mon songe. »

Quand il eut achevé,
il mit doucement ses mains sur mes épaules,
et il me regarda d'un regard si tendre,
que je baissai les yeux avec un frisson.

Translation: Trois Chansons de Bilitis

I. The Pan-pipes

For the festival of Hyacinthus
he gave me a syrinx, a set of pipes made
from well-cut reeds joined
with the white wax
that is sweet to my lips like honey.

He is teaching me to play, as I sit on his knees;
but I tremble a little.
He plays it after me, so softly
that I can scarcely hear it.

We are so close that we have
nothing to say to one another;
but our songs want to converse,
and our mouths are joined
as they take turns on the pipes.

It is late:
here comes the chant of the green frogs,
which begins at dusk.
My mother will never believe
I spent so long
searching for my lost waistband.

II. The Hair

He told me: "Last night I had a dream.
Your hair was around my neck,
it was like a black necklace
round my nape and on my chest.

"I was stroking your hair, and it was my own;
thus the same tresses joined us forever,
with our mouths touching,
just as two laurels often have only one root.

"And gradually I sensed,
since our limbs were so entwined,
that I was becoming you
and you were entering me like my dream."

When he'd finished,
he gently put his hands on my shoulders,
and gazed at me so tenderly
that I lowered my eyes, quivering.
III. Le tombeau des Naïades

Le long du bois couvert de givre, je marchais;
Mes cheveux devant ma bouche
Se fleurissaient de petits glaçons,
Et mes sandales étaient lourdes
De neige fangeuse et tassée.

Il me dit: "Que cherches-tu?"
Je suis la trace du satyre.
Ses petits pas fourchus alternent
Comme des trous dans un manteau blanc.
Il me dit: "Les satyres sont morts.

"Les satyres et les nymphes aussi.
Depuis trente ans, il n'a pas fait un hiver aussi terrible.
La trace que tu vois est celle d'un bouc.
Mais restons ici, où est leur tombeau."

Et avec le fer de sa houe il cassa la glace
De la source qui jadis riaient les naïades.
Il prenait de grands morceaux froids,
Et les soulevant vers le ciel pâle,
Il regardait au travers.

III. The Tomb of the Water Nymphs

I was walking along in the frost-covered woods;
in front of my mouth
my hair blossomed in tiny icicles,
and my sandals were heavy
with muddy caked snow.

He asked: "What are you looking for?"
"I'm following the tracks of the satyr -
his little cloven hoofprints alternate
like holes in a white cloak."
He said: "The satyrs are dead.

"The satyrs are dead, and the nymphs too.
In thirty years there has not been such a terrible winter.
That's the trail of a he-goat.
But let's pause here, where their tomb is."

With his hoe he broke the ice
of the spring where the water-nymphs used to laugh.
There he was, picking up large cold slabs of ice,
lifting them toward the pale sky,
and peering through them.
APPENDIX B:

INCIDENTAL MUSIC
III. - LES CONTES

Assiez vif et très rythmé

1ère Fl.

2ème Fl.

1ère Hpe

2ème Hpe

Col.
IV. CHANSON

Lent et expressif

1ère Fl.
2ème Fl.
1ère Hpe
2ème Hpe
Cél.
V. - LA PARTIE D’OSSELETS
VII. - LE TOMBEAU SANS NOM

Triste et lent
VIII - LES COURTISANES ÉGYPTIENNES
IX. - L'EAU PURE DU BASSIN

1ère Fl.

2ème Fl.

1ère Hpe

2ème Hpe

Gêl.

Modéré
X. - LA DANSEUSE AUX CROTALES
XII. - LA PLUIE AU MATIN

Modéré

1ère Fl.  
P très expressif et très souple

2ème Fl.  
P très expressif et très souple

1ère Hpe  
pp

2ème Hpe  
pp

Modéré

Cbl.  
pp
APPENDIX C:

ANCIENT ARTIFACTS
Hymne à Apollon

Théodore Reinach’s translation of the Delphic inscriptions

Original ancient Greek fragments with musical inscription.  

Photograph of the original stone at Delphi  
(Music notation is inscribed above the main Greek text)  
Source: Public domain
Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Bois sacré cher aux arts et aux muses*
(The Sacred Grove, Beloved of the Arts and Muses) ca. 1884-1889.
H. 460; L. 1040 cm. Oil on canvas. Muses des Beaux Arts de Lyon.

Paul Delaroche, *Hémicycle des Beaux-arts*
1853; mural in oils and wax.
Paul Delaroche, *Hémicycle des Beaux-arts*
Left side portion

Paul Delaroche, *Hémicycle des Beaux-arts*
Central portion
Paul Delaroche, Hémicycle des Beaux-arts
Right side portion
Olympic Anthem
Cover of the original sheet music; composed in 1896 by Spyros Samaras.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


“Art Nouveau and the Psychology of Interior Space.”  

“M. Gounod’s Saffo.” *The Musical World,* August 16, 1851, 517-519.


Bennett, Joseph. “Some Recent Music in Paris.” *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 25, no. 495, May 1, 1884.


