

# Present Absence: Debussy, Song, and the Art of (Dis)appearing

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## PRESENCE AND ABSENCE IN THE EARLY SONGS

To show how Debussy's music seems to present the absence of things, Vladimir Jankélévitch resorts to the metaphor of scent. As invisible as the air in which it is carried, scent is nevertheless a material trace of departed presence. Debussy's nocturnal music, Jankélévitch suggests, works in a similar way; just as darkness sharpens the nonvisual senses, so the *pianissimo* of Debussy's music is amplified by the silence that surrounds it. This is the context for an effusive play of language that tries to catch music in the flickering of its logical contradictions: "By means of the presence of absence, which is present absence, absent presence, the presence of music, a multi-present presence, the presence of presence itself becomes evasive; the fact of presence becomes a glimpse; prose becomes poetry."<sup>1</sup> Some readers

will resist Jankélévitch's own move from prose to poetry, but his linguistic *pas de deux* signals a tension constitutive of Debussy's music as a whole, and of his songs in particular. Unpublished in his lifetime, Debussy's early songs often set poems in which the metaphor of scent marks the threshold between presence and absence. There may be more famous examples of this trope of French *mélodie*—Fauré's "Le parfum impérisable,"<sup>2</sup> to mention one—but Debussy's early settings of the poetry of Théodore de Banville and Paul Bourget provide an extended study on a recurrent theme: the

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present, la présence de la présence devient elle-même évasive; le constat de présence devient entrevision; la prose se fait poésie." The sentence is part of a passage in which Jankélévitch discusses two orchestral movements, *Les parfums de la nuit* and *Soirée dans Grenade*, "two nocturnes completely filled by the mystery of absent presence." Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère de l'instant* (Paris: Plon, 1976), 191–92.

<sup>2</sup>For discussion see Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 170–77.

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<sup>1</sup>"Grace à la présence de l'absence, qui est absence présente, présence absente, présence musicienne, présence multi-

capacity of music to render present what poetry marks as absent.

One of Debussy's earliest works, "Nuits d'étoiles," is a setting of Banville composed in 1880 when the composer was just seventeen. It may be hard now to read the poem as much more than a conventional collection of lyric topics—the starry night with its soft breeze and scents, the music of the lyre carrying dreams of past love, and the poet's attempt to conjure the presence of the absent beloved: "Je revois à notre fontaine / Tes regards bleus comme les cieux; / Cette rose, c'est ton haleine, Et ces étoiles sont tes yeux." (I see again in our fountain / Your glances blue like the skies / This rose, it is your breath / And these stars are your eyes.) Debussy's youthful setting may not be his greatest work, but it shows how completely he had already absorbed this central topic of Romantic song. The space of the nocturnal garden might even recall Eichendorff, as vision gives way to sound, scent, and the touch of the breeze. As the garden offers a metaphor for the contained space of music, so dreaming stands in for music's unloosening of linguistic order. The blurring of boundaries allows an exchange between interiority and a containing landscape in which presence is quite literally *revoked*—called back, by means of the voice.<sup>3</sup>

Debussy found his text in Banville's collection *Stalactites* (1846), where it is titled "La dernière pensée de Weber."<sup>4</sup> The poem is prefaced there with a passage from E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Kater Murr* depicting the beginning of a dream:

I thought I was walking in a beautiful garden where gillyflowers and roses bloomed entangled together beneath dense, dark bushes, spreading their sweet fragrance through the air. A wonderful shimmering light, like moonshine, rose in music and song, and as it touched the trees and flowers with its golden

glow they quivered with delight, the bushes rustled and the springs whispered with quiet, yearning sighs. However, then I realized that I myself was the song echoing through the garden, and as the glory of the notes faded so must I too pass away in painful melancholy!<sup>5</sup>

Banville was of course not alone in drawing on Hoffmann's vision of music; there are clear resonances between this passage and Baudelaire's "Harmonie du soir" (written in 1857, and set by Debussy in 1889).<sup>6</sup> The trope by which the soul mingles with the landscape was a commonplace of Romanticism, but the musicalization of French poetry in the second half of the nineteenth century, from Banville and Baudelaire to Verlaine and Mallarmé, was distinctive in increasingly pursuing this idea within the materiality of language itself. The dissolving of grammatical and metrical orders, and the foregrounding of an oscillation between sonority and signification, allowed poetic language to embody the very condition it sought to suggest. In the same way, the recurrent poetic topics of later French song are not so much illustrated as they are embodied within the material processes of music. The songs of Fauré or Debussy are not *about* gardens any more than they *represent* the self-contained space of the soul. Rather, they *present* a state of immersive plenitude for which the garden stands as a metaphor.

This aesthetic attitude pervades Fauré's songs, from "Mai," op. 1, no. 2 (1862)<sup>7</sup> to the late cycles *La chanson d'Eve* (1910) and *Le jardin clos* (1914), both to poems by Charles Van Lerberghe. Fauré perfected a style of song writing in which the piano accompaniment contains, like the closed space of the garden, the lyrical line of the singer. The constant texture, generally made of a simple arpeggiated figure, belies the subtlety of harmonic inflection, a

<sup>3</sup>All these topics are found in Debussy's early settings of both Banville (the scent of flowers in "Les roses" and "Le lilas," the gentle breeze in "Zéphir," the self-containment of dream and love in "Aimons nous et dormons") and Bourget (for instance in the three settings Debussy first made of his poetry: "Silence ineffable," "Musique," and "Paysage sentimental," all from 1883).

<sup>4</sup>For an explanation of the title, see Arthur B. Wenk, *Claude Debussy and the Poets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 13.

<sup>5</sup>Banville quotes Hoffmann in the French translation by Loève-Veimars. The English translation used here is by Anthea Bell in E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (London: Penguin, 1999), 147.

<sup>6</sup>The first stanza of this poem includes the lines "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir," which later provide the title for the fourth of the *Préludes pour Piano*, Book I.

<sup>7</sup>Like Debussy's "Nuit d'étoiles," Fauré's "Mai" was also written when its composer was just seventeen.

combination which generates endlessly modulated shadings within a contained space. “Exaucement” (Fulfillment), the first song of *Le jardin clos*, exemplifies this merging of a lyric subject with the space of the nocturnal garden in which the speechlessness of the environment is the pre-condition for the emergence of musical presence. “O jardin muet!,” exclaims the poet in “Jardin nocturne,” from *Mirages* (1919)—not a silent garden, as some translations have it, but a garden without language. Fauré responds by confining the vocal line to a monotone, the better to hear the melodic line of the piano, whose presence has been the speechless song of the garden all along. Verlaine’s *Romances sans paroles* (Songs without Words), published in 1874, signal a similar aspiration, that poetry should become music.<sup>8</sup> And as Katherine Bergeron has shown, the process by which a musicalized French poetry gave rise to the “unsinging of the *mélodie française*” makes for a complex and dynamic relationship: music that wants to speak without words (*Lieder ohne Worte*) inspires poetry that wants to speak without words (*Romances sans paroles*), which, in turn, inspires music to speak “presque sans voix.”<sup>9</sup>

In poetry that takes the nocturnal garden as a metaphor for the space of art itself, the visibility of objects is displaced by an auditory landscape (the gentle splashing of fountains, the movement of leaves on the breeze) and the present-absence of scent. In taking such poetry into song, the auditory environment is actualized and foregrounded while the residual acts of narrative or visual description, on which the poetry had previously hinged, fall away. Music—sounding music, in all its sensuous presence, rather than the poetic idea of music—appears to realize presence with embodied directness. It is telling that Banville, the poet, quotes the lines above from Hoffmann and no more, because the next few lines of the source reverse its music’s “dying fall”: “But then a

gentle voice said: ‘No! that sound means bliss, not annihilation. I will hold you fast with strong arms, and my song will rest within you, for it is as eternal as longing!’ It was Kreisler who stood there before me, speaking these words.”<sup>10</sup> For the musician, Kreisler, song does not fall away like words, but “rests within you” and “holds you fast with strong arms”;<sup>11</sup> the absence denoted by the linguistic sign is counteracted by the sonic fullness of music. If the closed interiority of song is like the closed space of the nocturnal garden, it is because both afford not only the site of desire but also the mute promise of its fulfillment. The fact of loss is answered by the promise of appearing; that, in brief, is the central dynamic of words and music enacted in the piano song. If Banville’s poem, like countless others, stages present absence in order to evoke the appearance of an absent presence, Debussy’s music momentarily delivers that presence with powerful sensuous fullness. It is no coincidence that one of the most striking of all Debussy’s early songs was his setting in 1884 of Mallarmé’s *Apparition* (Appearing), signaling the theme that defines his music all the way to the late *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* of 1913.<sup>12</sup>

The erotic charge of music’s promise (“my song will rest within you, for it is as eternal as longing”) derives precisely from this relationship. In staging the gap between words and music, voice and piano, line and harmony, the piano song is a paradigmatic form of musical desire. Desire, as a fundamental category of human life rather than desire for anything in particular, is characterized by Jean-François Lyotard as “the movement of something that goes out toward the other as toward something that it itself lacks. This means that the *other*

<sup>8</sup>Debussy set six poems from this collection as *Ariettes oubliées* (first published in 1888, then revised and republished in 1903).

<sup>9</sup>Bergeron, *Voice Lessons*, 181. *Presque sans voix* is Debussy’s performance direction to the singer for the final line of “La flûte de Pan” from the *Chansons de Bilitis*.

<sup>10</sup>Hoffmann, *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*, 147.

<sup>11</sup>Hoffmann’s formulation “I myself was the song echoing through the garden” is not only exactly contemporary with Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, but also anticipates the later “deed of music made visible” in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* in the lovers’ duet that takes place in the nocturnal garden of act II (“I myself am the world”).

<sup>12</sup>I explore this theme in Julian Johnson, “Vertige!: Debussy, Mallarmé and the Edge of Language,” in *Debussy’s Resonance*, ed. Steven Huebner and François de Médicis (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2017).

. . . is present to what desires, and it is present in the form of absence."<sup>13</sup> This is the structure of desire articulated, time and again, in the poems chosen by Debussy and his contemporaries for song settings. The *topoi* of love, longing, and landscape, in all their myriad forms, are so many variants of the structure of desire—not desire for the object as such, but desire to overcome lack, desire that absence should turn into presence (the original sense of the verb “to want” means “to lack”). Song stages a very particular form of this movement of desire as a “want” predicated on lack. In the economy of the piano song, the linear and monophonic voice is incomplete and desires the harmonic totality of the resonant piano; the voiceless (linguistically mute) piano is incomplete and calls out for the enunciation and articulation of the singing voice. Across its highly charged gap of nonidentity, the piano song thus stages the economy of desire between words and music.

This is why the central topic of all vocal music is desire for the beloved—or, more particularly, desire that the beloved should appear. The invoking of presence is, first and foremost, an act of the voice, an act that Debussy frames repeatedly in his early songs. “Aimons nous et dormons,” for example, evokes a space that is equally that of the erotic and the musicalized body. It is as much about the piano song itself as it is about two lovers: “tant que tu cacheras / ta tête entres mes bras!” (as long as you hide / your head in my arms) is realized by the sound of the voice nestled in the chords of the piano—figuratively and sonically, the head of the singer in the arms of the pianist.

This has nothing to do with the actual singer and the actual pianist. And yet, sometimes it does. It certainly did in the case of Debussy’s early songs where it is almost impossible to separate out the economy of aesthetic desire from the specific and biographical version that runs in parallel. The story is well known but can hardly be ignored.

Debussy was eighteen when, in October 1880, he found work as an accompanist for the

<sup>13</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *Why Philosophize?*, trans. Andrew Brown (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014), 20.

singing class of Madame Moreau-Santi. It was here that he met Marie-Blanche Vasnier (1848–1923), then aged thirty-two and married to Eugène-Henri Vasnier. Debussy developed a close friendship with both of them, but it is his relationship with Marie-Blanche that has justly preoccupied musicologists; a relationship that lasted six years, and provoked the songs that it did, can hardly be taken lightly. The first of the songs written for and dedicated to Madame Vasnier date from early in 1881. Over the next three years, more than twenty further songs were written for and dedicated to her and, before leaving for Rome in 1885 following his award of the Prix de Rome, Debussy gave her a book of “Chansons” (the so-called *Receuil Vasnier*) containing thirteen of these.<sup>14</sup> Writing in 1984, James Briscoe doubted that Debussy had a full-blown affair and suggested instead that “we may conclude, less sensationally, perhaps, that Debussy’s relationship with Madame Vasnier was that of a rather young man in love with love.”<sup>15</sup> Since then, the broadly accepted view is that it was rather more. Margaret Cobb is clear that Vasnier was the composer’s “first great love,” that “Debussy was completely infatuated with her” soon after their first meeting, and that the relationship probably did not end until after his permanent return from Rome in 1887.<sup>16</sup>

But it is not Marie-Blanche Vasnier I am interested in here, so much as her body. Or, to be more precise, the *idea* of her body that Debussy evoked in his music. Which is to say, not her body at all, but the way in which these songs stage the presence and absence of a musicalized body. The physicality of the songs Vasnier inspired in Debussy is clear in the dedication of the title page he inscribed on the volume he gave her: “To Madame Vasnier. These songs which only lived through her, and which will lose their charming grace, if ever

<sup>14</sup>See Roger Nichols, *The Life of Debussy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>15</sup>James R. Briscoe, “‘To Invent New Forms’: Debussy’s *Diane au bois*,” *Musical Quarterly* 74/1 (1990): 131–69, at 146.

<sup>16</sup>Claude Debussy, *The Poetic Debussy: A Collection of His Song Texts and Selected Letters*, ed. Margaret C. Cobb, trans. Richard Miller (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1982), xvii.

they no longer pass through her melodious fairy mouth. The eternally grateful author."<sup>17</sup> Vasnier's high, agile, coloratura voice is present throughout the songs of this period, but in two quite different kinds of song. On the one hand, it is the voice of a sensuous and eroticized presence in which the lyric subject merges with the sonic landscape; on the other, it is the voice of artifice and masked characters in songs of a distanced and alienated subjectivity. The division is powerful, marked most obviously in the early settings of Verlaine, Banville, and Bourget; at one moment the young composer seems to demand that full presence should be realized, here and now, while in the next, he laments his lack with spiteful bitterness. In opposite ways, both types of song have to do with a kind of erasure of the subject. The first is ecstatic (dissolving the bounded subject into the sonic environment), and the second is ironic (dissolving the self-possessed subject into empty historical forms and the artifice of masks and ventriloquized voices).

#### FÊTES GALANTES

The juxtaposition of these polarized types of song is exemplified in Debussy's settings of the poetry of Paul Verlaine. There are twenty of these in all, eleven of them settings of poems from Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* (1869). Because many of the early songs were not published during Debussy's lifetime, and those that were often appeared several years after their composition, the extent of his prolonged fascination is often missed. Two published sets of three songs each, *Fêtes galantes I* and *Fêtes galantes II*, appeared in 1903 and 1904, suggesting that these are relatively mature works. In fact, not only were the songs of the first set composed in 1891–92, but even then they were new versions of settings Debussy had already made in 1882. At that time, Debussy had conceived them as part of a group of five songs he had also titled *Fêtes galantes*.<sup>18</sup> In other words, rather than

two sets published a year apart, we have to consider *three* sets of *Fêtes galantes*, each written approximately a decade apart—1882, 1891–92, and 1904. Although there were no more song settings of Verlaine after 1904, there were unrealized plans in later years (1913–15) for an *opéra-ballet* titled *Fêtes galantes*,<sup>19</sup> and suggestions that the characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, so ubiquitous in Verlaine's poetry, still haunt the late instrumental sonatas.<sup>20</sup> In short, the elusive figures of Verlaine's nocturnal landscapes flicker in and out of Debussy's entire output.

Debussy's first musical encounters with the *commedia* figures were in settings of Banville. "Fête galante" and "Sérénade," dating from 1882, both present a stylized imitation of an ornamental, eighteenth-century deportment, a musical dressing-up that complements the artifice of the characters pictured in the poems. There is a hard edge here to Debussy's stylized use of Vasnier's coloratura voice. Harlequin serenades in vain (Columbine has closed her shutter) and, in his efforts to be heard, the voice becomes distorted and verges on the grotesque. But it is Debussy's setting of Banville's "Pierrot" (1881) in which this hardness is most marked. An extraordinarily bitter piece, opening angrily in the piano with bare percussive octaves in the right hand and tetchy off-beat snapping in the left, it quotes, over and again, the opening phrase of the popular French song "Au clair de la lune." The repetitions, obsessive and increasingly dissonant, sound like a taunt, while the voice adopts a historical character, complete with mock eighteenth-century ornaments and arpeggiated lines, to narrate a tale rather than summon a presence. As in many of these early settings, when the words run out the voice continues with virtuosic vocalise, ending with a flourish of trills and a high B.

These settings of Banville overlap with Debussy's encounter with Verlaine. Unpub-

<sup>17</sup>"À Madame Vasnier. Ces chansons qui n'ont jamais vécu que par elle, et qui perdront leur grace charmeresse, si jamais plus elles ne passent par sa bouche de fée mélodieuse. L'auteur éternellement reconnaissant." See Cobb, *The Poetic Debussy*, xviii.

<sup>18</sup>See James R. Briscoe, *Songs of Claude Debussy*, vol. I (New York: Hal Leonard, 1993), 12–17.

<sup>19</sup>See Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 204–16. Though Debussy never wrote an opera-ballet based on Verlaine, Fauré did. His *Masques et Bergamasques*, op. 112, comprised of movements of previously composed music, was first performed in 1919.

<sup>20</sup>See Marianne Wheeldon, *Debussy's Late Style* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 153, n. 43.

lished in Debussy's lifetime, *Fêtes galantes pour Madame Vasnier* (1882) consists of five settings of Verlaine's poetry that interleave presence and absence. "En sourdine" and "Clair de lune" (the second and fourth of the set) explore sensuous presence as a kind of ecstatic union of the lyrical subject and an absent beloved through a merging of the body with the containing landscape. By contrast, "Pantomime," "Mandoline," and "Fantoche" (songs 1, 3, and 5) are detached and ironic, deploying a historicized musical style to evoke the *commedia* characters of Verlaine's poems as distant and alienated figures. Where the two slower songs (nos. 2 and 4) create a musical space of quiet interiority and plenitude, the framing songs present fleeting glimpses of multiple characters in swiftly moving and fragmented scenes. Long before Schoenberg turned to the *commedia* figures in *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) or Stravinsky in *Petrushka* (1911), Debussy had already begun to explore their uncanny displacements of subjectivity. But the neat juxtaposition suggested here, of two kinds of texts and two kinds of subjectivity, is only the starting point for songs that explore the gaps between them.

"Pantomime" announces its self-conscious artifice with a theatrical introduction: an abrupt dotted figure plus trill forming a parody of a fanfare (ex. 1). (Forty years later, Stravinsky found a similar tone for *The Soldier's Tale*.) Throughout the song, regular rhythmic figures suggest stability while the chromatic slippage says otherwise. The clowning of the pantomime, in which the voice and piano constantly collide and rebound off one another, comes to a rhetorical close with an exaggerated perfect cadence at the end of the penultimate stanza (m. 44). At which point, in utter contrast, the fourth and last stanza takes off in a completely different musical tone for the rapturous dreaming of Columbine. The accompaniment, previously hard-edged and percussive, now dissolves in harp-like arpeggiations, and the voice, for the first time, finds a lyrical fullness in its drawn-out descent. And what is it that surprises the dreaming Columbine? A sudden sense of subjective presence conferred by the sound of the voice: "Columbine rêve, surprise / De sentir un coeur dans la brise / Et d'entendre en son coeur des voix." (Columbine is dreaming, surprised /

At sensing a heart caught in the breeze / And at hearing voices in her heart.)

For this brief moment, in the heterotopic space opened up by the final stanza, the studied detachment and theatricality of the pantomime collapse into interiority as the noisy third-person narration gives way to listening and quiet presence. The youthful Debussy can't resist lingering on this moment by having the voice perform itself. Not only does he repeat the line "*Et d'entendre en son coeur des voix*," but he also sets it in a chromatically complex coloratura before ending the song with fourteen measures of wordless vocalise. The vocal postlude returns us to the theatrical world of the opening; if tentative augmented triads on the piano form a trace of an alternative kind of space, they are rapidly closed down by the unequivocal final cadence. The opening song of the set not only juxtaposes absence with a fleeting moment of dreamt presence, but also frames the latter by insisting that it takes place only through the artifice of theater.

Carolyn Abbate has drawn attention to a similar strategy in "Mandoline," pointing out that the whole song is framed by the gesture of the piano in the first and last measures—to all intents and purposes, the mimetic representation of a single plucked note on the mandolin. Like the opening and closing of quotation marks, the piano figure marks the content of the song as an indirect statement—one made in the absence of the speaker. But the device points to a whole series of moves by which both poem and song stage a sense of distance. As Abbate has it:

Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* are ekphrases of landscapes by Watteau. Both paintings and poems deal with the same series of images: courtiers in a garden, talking, singing, and playing, or listening to music. In "Mandoline" Verlaine adopted an ironic voice that reflects the belated mood of Watteau's iconography: these are not real shepherds and shepherdesses, but "givers of serenades" and "pretty listeners" playacting at pastoral identities, who talk in an eighteenth-century aristocratic garden far removed from prelapsarian Arcadia.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Carolyn Abbate, "Debussy's Phantom Sounds," in *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 145–84; at 162–63.

41  
Et pi-rou-et-te qua-tre-fois, Et pi-rou-et-te qua-tre fois

45 *pp* *Andante*  
Co-lom-bi-ne

48  
rêve, sur-pri-se De sen-

50  
tir un coeur dans la bri-se

Example 1: "Pantomime" mm. 47–58.

How does Debussy evoke this sense of "human serenades past and silenced" in a real and present song? As Abbate points out, "making a song out of this poem must resurrect the very singing it has dismissed as lost." On one level,

she suggests, Debussy ignores this paradox in a song in which "innocence is everywhere," but at the same time both song and singer are clearly framed through devices of ironic distancing. After the words run out, the voice continues

52

Et d'en

ten - dre en son coeur des voix, Et

55

*ritenuto*

d'en - ten - dre en son coeur des voix. Ah

*ritenuto*

Tempo I  
*pp*

57

Example 1 (continued)

with wordless vocalise across a rapidly spiraling series of modulations before the song closes with the “plucked” string. Debussy’s song, Abbate concludes, “captures in real time at least two imaginary times: the absent past, when simple serenades were heard all the time, and the present of dead and silent gardens.”<sup>22</sup>

In one way, the vocalise at the end *is* the serenade, but, at the breathless tempo of this song, it necessarily borders on self-parody, a sense reinforced by its chromatic instability (making it a distant relation to Beckmesser’s failed serenade in Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*). The propensity to chromatic collapse has been present from the start. What begins with the dogged regularity of diatonic strummed chords and rigorously syllabic word setting is quickly re-routed, first by chromatic slippage in the harmonic underlay and then by the drawn-out melismatic fall in the voice (on “*chanteuses*,” mm. 11–14). But Verlaine does more than oppose the evocation of past pleasures to present emptiness. The musicality of the poem lies within the landscape; it is the trees that sing while the costumed revellers merely gossip, and for all the rich images of their appearance, equating the luxurious silk (*soie*) of their clothes with their pleasure (*joie*), in the final verse the rhyme scheme underlines the disparity between the mute ecstasy (*extase*) of the moonlit landscape and the empty chattering (*jase*) of the mandolin.

“Fantoche,” the fifth and last of the *Fêtes galantes pour Madame Vasnier*, similarly avoids any hint of the lyrical first person by insisting on the detachment of narration. The repetitive and often mechanical rhythms of the vocal line suggest the regular patterns of Baroque music, while the chromatic ritornello, with its impulsive ebb and flow of dynamics, marks the song as noisily modernist (for which the “Spanish guitar” topic provides a familiar legitimation). But it is once again the voice whose excesses project a subject every bit as shadowy and fragmented as the little drama of *commedia* characters that it narrates. Skittish throughout, in the final measures it becomes the nightingale

who shouts at the top of its voice (“*clame . . . à tue-tête*”) the distress of the separated lovers, once again exceeding the boundaries of the poetic text to become a wordless and virtuosic coloratura that disappears in a series of trills.

One reading of this extreme use of the voice is that the young composer was choreographing, through musical performance, an embodied *jouissance* he craved beyond music. But this is somewhat contradicted by the fact that Debussy employs the vocal excess of Vasnier’s coloratura, not as an overflowing of ecstatic presence, but as something quite opposite, a mark of artifice and the alienated interactions of the *commedia* figures. There is a strange kind of masochism here. Seated at the piano, Debussy can view the bodily excess he has composed, but only as a distant trace of what he cannot have. And if the coloratura preempts some of the composer’s later writing for solo flute, it is perhaps because the young Debussy was already playing out a version of the myth of Syrinx. Like Pan himself, he compensates for the absent object of his desire by evoking her presence in music sounded through the instrument he has made of her body.

Placed amid these three framing songs, “En sourdine” and “Clair de lune” make a complete contrast. Compared to the fleeting appearing and disappearing of masked figures in the odd-numbered songs, the calm spaciousness of the even-numbered songs delivers a sense of ecstatic presence. Verlaine’s “En sourdine” is another version of the topic with which we began, the union of lovers with the closed landscape that contains them. Debussy’s first response relies on relatively conventional musical devices: a long tonic pedal defines the harmonic containment, while still articulating a clear structure by moving to the dominant at the end of each stanza. A breaking out of lyrical intensity in the third, and a mounting sense of progression through the fourth, offers an early version of Debussy’s musical enactment of the dynamics of appearing, before the fifth stanza returns to the tonic pedal. In an attempt to find a musical corollary to the poignant reversal of the last couplet of Verlaine’s poem (Voix de notre désespoir / Le rossignol chantera) (That voice of our despair / The nightingale will sing). Debussy not only takes the voice to its registral

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 168.

highpoint but then, to give it more weight, repeats the line in an altered musical setting.

"Clair de lune" opens with lines that make explicit the equivalence of the beloved with the landscape: "Votre âme est un paysage choisi / Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques" (Your soul is a choice landscape / Where charming maskers and bergamaskers go). The piano's "preluding" anticipates both the lute mentioned in the poem and the dainty dance steps of the revellers. It sets the tone for a song that largely avoids dissonance, remaining essentially diatonic until the chromatic alternations in m. 24 (for "tristes") and in mm. 25–28 for the play of identity suggested by the revellers' "disguises." If anything, Debussy plays down the air of dissonance implicit in Verlaine's poem in order to make a song that only delicately inflects its otherwise harmonious space.

All five of these songs remained unpublished during Debussy's lifetime. In 1903, when he finally saw the publication of *Fêtes galantes I*, there was no hint that, as noted earlier, the songs in the collection had been composed in 1891–92 and were revisitings of three of the settings in the Vasnier collection of 1882. Debussy not only returned to his past in order to rewrite it, but he also covered his traces in doing so, a self-conscious masking reflected in the changing dedication of these songs. Although the three songs of *Fêtes galantes I* are dedicated to respectably married women (identified through their husbands' names as Madame Robert Godet, Madame Lucien Fontaine, and Madame Arthur Fontaine), a manuscript source of the 1891 version of "En sourdine" shows a dedication to Mademoiselle Catherine Stevens, with whom, James Briscoe notes, "Debussy was romantically involved at the time."<sup>23</sup> It is hard not to suspect Debussy of a profound and knowing irony here. Settings of poems that distance erotic presence in the past, through the unreality of the *commedia* figures, are first dedicated to Blanche Vasnier, ten years

later, with that relationship firmly in the past, he dedicates new settings of the same poems to someone else, with whom his relationship will become, just as inevitably, a thing of the past. In 1904, dedicating *Fêtes galantes II* to Emma Bardac, "with thanks for the month of June" (the month in which they became lovers), he flamboyantly marked the passing of another relationship (to his first wife Lilly Texier) and the beginning of a new one with the woman who would become his second wife.

*Fêtes galantes I* sets only three of the five poems used in *Fêtes galantes pour Madame Vasnier*. The omissions and new ordering are both significant. Where the earlier collection interleaved two songs of ecstatic presence between three songs of alienated absence, the later reverses this pattern: "Fantoques," the only *commedia* song to be retained, is now framed by "En sourdine" and "Clair de lune."<sup>24</sup> "Fantoques" is the least changed. Debussy removes the earlier text repetitions and passages of vocalise at the end of stanzas 1 and 3 and replaces them with simpler passages of "la-la-la" (a distant echo of the now absent "Mandoline"). The principal change occurs at the end of the new version. Gone are the elaborate vocal trills and passages of chromatic coloratura; now the voice ends more modestly and the piano takes over the trills. This change makes for a much more pronounced sense of disappearing, as the brightness of vocal display in the earlier version gives way to something that melts quickly back into the shadows. The piano scurries briefly in its lowest register before ending with three muffled plucked strings on the very low A of the keyboard.

The other two songs are completely new versions that nevertheless retain some features of the earlier settings. The conclusion of those scholars who have made detailed studies of both pairs of settings is essentially that the later ones demonstrate Debussy's development as a composer.<sup>25</sup> This is uncontroversial enough,

<sup>23</sup>Catherine Stevens was the daughter of Belgian painter Alfred Stevens. Marie Rolf points out that Debussy proposed to her in 1895, but was refused. Marie Rolf, "Debussy's Settings of Verlaine's 'En Sourdine,'" in *Perspectives on Music*, ed. Dave Oliphant and Thomas Signal (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1985), 205–33, at 208.

<sup>24</sup>One source, from 1891, has the order "En sourdine," "Clair de lune," "Fantoques," but the order had changed by the time they were published. See Briscoe, *Songs of Claude Debussy*, 11.

<sup>25</sup>See Roger Nichols, "Debussy's Two Settings of 'Clair de Lune,'" *Music & Letters* 48/3 (1967): 229–35; Marie Rolf, "Debussy's Settings of Verlaine's 'En Sourdine.'"

but the relationship between the versions is more interesting than a simple progressive narrative suggests, not least in terms of what changes and what remains. The rewriting of “En sourdine” is particularly telling. Although it is the earlier version that is marked “dans une sonorité très voilée,” it is the later song that is far more veiled. Where, in 1882, the opening vocal line glides down like a languorous sigh from its initial high F#, ten years later the center of gravity has definitively shifted; no longer for the light, high soprano of Blanche Vasnier, the later song is written for a darker toned mezzo who begins it by declaiming the opening line on a single note, a low D# (ten years passing, it seems, is marked by a fall of a minor tenth). Where the earlier version is conventional in its structure and word-setting, the later is far more asymmetrical and without the rests in the vocal line that had earlier separated each phrase.

The syncopated rhythm of the accompaniment is common to both versions, but whereas, in 1882, it is confined to repeated right-hand chords, in 1892 it generates the piano’s arabesque figure starting on the high G# that, in the closing measures, will be identified with the voice of the nightingale. This high G# was already heard in the 1882 version, picked out by the left hand in m. 2. In a similar fashion, the sixteenth-note triplet figure that characterizes the arabesque of the later song is a contraction of the triplet motif of the earlier (m. 2, right hand; see ex. 2a and ex. 2b). But, as David Code points out, the harmony is quite different: the 1891 version opens over a clear statement of the “Tristan” chord (in m. 5, in the exact position in which it appears at the start of Wagner’s opera; in m. 1, an octave higher).<sup>26</sup> The key of Debussy’s 1891 song is ostensibly B major but the repeated G# is like a spinning coin that might resolve in one of two ways. Unlike Wagner’s resolution through chromatic ascent, Debussy’s goes the other way—turning the G# into the triplet ornament that begins the arabesque, descending past B major (m. 6) to

the dark sonority of D# minor, timed with the arrival on the final syllable of “notre amour” in m. 8.

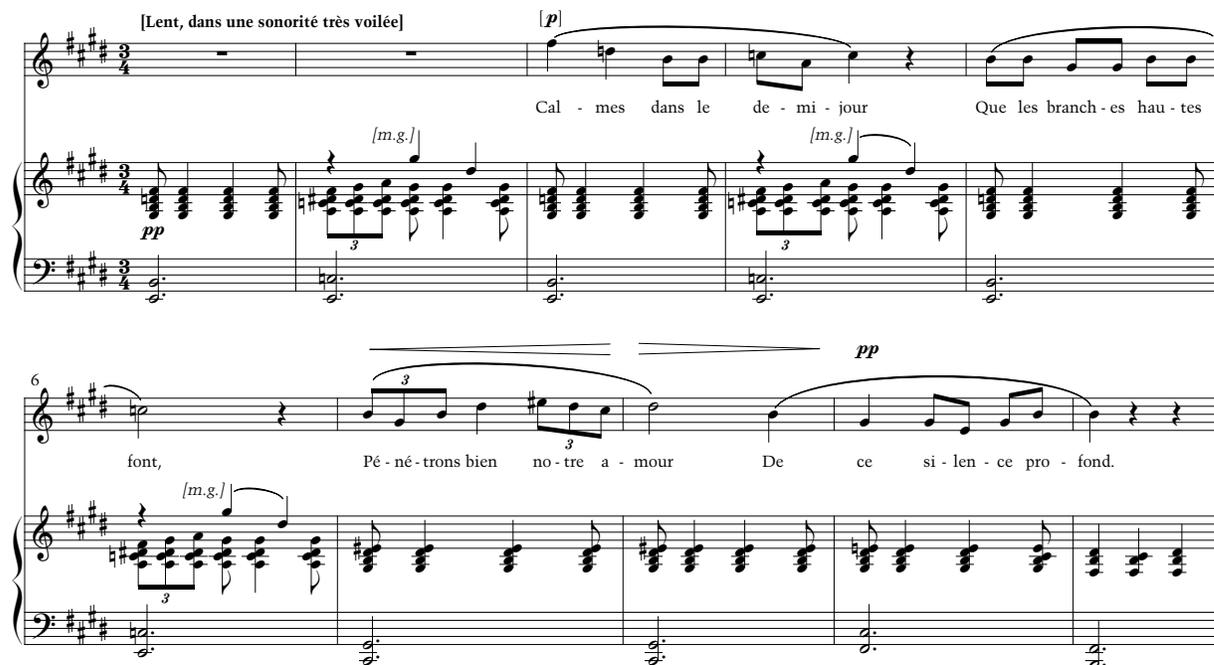
The broader shape of the two versions naturally shows some commonalities. The later version shares with the first a sense of rising motion through the middle section (stanzas 3 and 4), having in common the triplet rhythms and ostinato figures of the accompaniment and a broad sense of ascent in the vocal line. But in Debussy’s treatment of the final couplet of Verlaine’s poem the two versions differ profoundly. In the 1891 version the voice makes a gradual ascent from its low D# (“laissons-nous persuader,” m. 26) to the high point of the vocal line so far, the E# in m. 31. After a re-ascent through mm. 33–35, this E# acts as a long-range leading tone for the high F# reserved for the climactic couplet of the final stanza—“Voix de notre désespoir, / Le rossignol chantera” (see ex. 3, m. 36). Only in this final, descending phrase of the song (marked *doux et expressif*) does Debussy allow a lyrical intensity that, in 1882, had been present from the very start (beginning on the same high F#). What in 1882 was a pervasive lyrical excess is now withheld until the very end. But here, precisely at the end, it is already a sign of what is lost—an absence marked by the mournful singing of the nightingale that was, we now realize, present from the very beginning. There is no need to repeat the line of text.

The force of this gesture is underlined by the fact that it returns at the end of the third and final song of *Fetes galantes I*. The new version of “Clair de lune,” like that of “En sourdine,” has a desolate quality not present in the earlier one. For all the delicate gamelan-like patterns in the piano, the mournful countermelodies in the middle of the texture (in mm. 9*ff.* and again at mm. 13*ff.*) are like the mute voices of the “paysages tristes” of which the poem speaks. If Verlaine’s exquisitely dissonant image, of revellers who sing of love but in a minor key and who do not seem to believe in their own happiness, is not quite matched in Debussy’s first setting, it defines the entire mood of the second one. For all the calm continuity conferred by the regularity of the accompaniment figure, Debussy’s control of harmonic inflection evokes a poignant sense of distance throughout. The

<sup>26</sup>David Code, “The Song Triptych: Reflections on a Debussyan Genre,” *Scottish Music Review* 3 (2013): 1–40, 16.

a. "En sourdine" (1882), mm.1-10.

[Lent, dans une sonorité très voilée] *[p]*

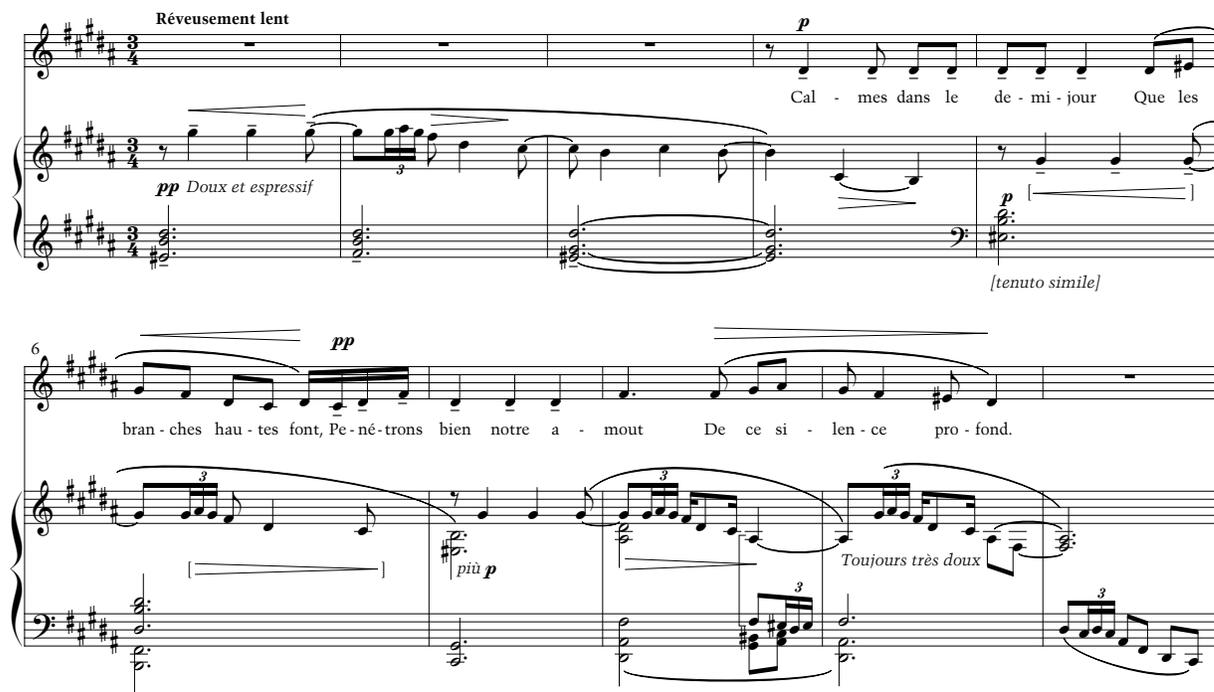


Cal - mes dans le de - mi - jour Que les branch - es hau - tes

font, Pé - né - trons bien no - tre a - mour De ce si - len - ce pro - fond.

b. "En sourdine" (1892) (*Fêtes galantes I*), mm.1-9.

Révésement lent *p*



Cal - mes dans le de - mi - jour Que les

bran - ches hau - tes font, Pé - né - trons bien notre a - mout De ce si - len - ce pro - fond.

Toujours très doux

Example 2

23

mi Chasse à ja - mais tout des - sein.

*molto dim.* *pp*

26

*Intimement doux* [Plus lent]

Lais - sons - nous per - su - a - der Au souf - fle ber - ceur et doux

*pp*

29

*Animé*  
*poco cresc.*

Qui vient à tes pieds ri - der Les on - des de ga - zon

*poco cresc.*

31

[rit.] *p* *poco cresc.*

roux. Et quand, so - len -

*mf dim.* [e rit.] *p*

Example 3: "En sourdine" (1892) (*Fêtes galantes I*), mm.29–43.

34  
nel, le soir Des chènes noirs tom-be-ra, Voix de no-tre dé-ses-poir, Le ros-si-gnol chan-te-ra.

39  
ra.

*pp* *m.d.* *m.g.* *m.g.* *m.d.*

*En se perdant*

Example 3 (continued)

setting of “Ils n’ont pas de croire à leur bonheur” (mm. 17–18) takes the mezzo voice to its high point of the song thus far, on the upper F $\sharp$ , not just once but four times. It is to this same F $\sharp$  that the voice rises in the closing lines. Three times in a row (in mm. 23, 24 and 25) a richly elaborated V $^7$  of B major promises the fullness of presence that the song desires and that “makes the birds dream in the trees and the fountains sob in ecstasy.” The shift to B $\flat$  major (m. 26) strains for transcendence but, instead, delivers an enharmonic turn to the darkness of D $\sharp$  minor (m. 27) just as the voice reaches its climactic F $\sharp$  (*pianissimo*). The link to the parallel moment in “En sourdine” is powerfully made: both lines reach the height of their longing only to collapse back to emptiness (ex. 4).

There is not space here to explore the retreat from presence in the mournfully empty *Fêtes galantes II*, but my discussion would be incomplete without noting that the third and final song of the later collection, “Colloque sentimental,” contains a lengthy quotation from

“En sourdine.”<sup>27</sup> In an extended passage, the later song has the piano recall the song of the nightingale from the earlier, while the voice delivers a dialogue about past presence and present absence. At the rising of the vocal line for “Ah! les beaux jours de bonheur indicible” (Those beautiful days of inexpressible happiness) the voice seems to want to rise toward the same climactic F $\sharp$  once more (though here it would be G $\flat$ ). The line rises slowly from E $\flat$  to E $\flat$  to F $\flat$  (mm. 35–37) as if it were pushing against the weight of the past. But it reaches no higher; in place of the former brightness of the F $\sharp$  it remains on F $\flat$  for “indicible” while the mournful song of the nightingale laments in

<sup>27</sup>The relation between the two is discussed by Stephen Rumph in “Debussy’s *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*: Song, Opera, and the Death of the Subject,” *Journal of Musicology* 12/4 (1994): 484–85 and 489. It should be clear that my own reading of these songs differs from Rumph’s view that, in these songs, “Debussy pronounced the death of the subject” (490).

17 *mf* *dim.*

Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bon - heur Et leur chan - son se mêle au clair de

*mf* *p e molto dim.*

This system shows measures 17-19. The vocal line begins with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a decrescendo (*dim.*) leading to a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a more melodic line in the left hand, also marked *mf* and *p e molto dim.*

20 *p* **Tempo I**

lu - ne, Au cal - me clair de

*pp* [*sim.*]

This system shows measures 20-21. The tempo changes to **Tempo I**. The vocal line is marked *p*. The piano accompaniment is marked *pp* and includes a *[sim.]* (sostenuto) marking over the right hand.

22

lu - ne triste et beau, Qui fait rê -

*pp*

This system shows measures 22-23. The vocal line continues with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piano accompaniment is marked *pp*.

24

ver les oi - seaux dans les ar - bres Et

*pp* *pp*

This system shows measures 24-25. The vocal line continues with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piano accompaniment is marked *pp*.

Example 4: "Clair de lune" (1891) (*Fêtes galantes I*), mm.17-32.

26  
san - glo - ter d'ex - ta - se les jets d'eau, Les grands jets d'eau  
*pp*  
*pp* *più pp*

28  
svel - tes par - mi - les mar  
*morendo*

30  
bres.  
*m.g.* *m.g.*

Example 4 (*continued*)

the piano. No wonder Katherine Bergeron talks of “unsinging”; it is as if, in these songs, the voice renounces the very presence it should confer.

#### THE ART OF (DIS)APPEARING

But does it? There are several narratives by which we might tell the story of Debussy’s twenty-two-year fascination with the poetry of Verlaine. There is a story about musical technique that demonstrates how Debussy developed as a composer. There is a biographical story that accounts for these songs in terms of

Debussy’s own loves and losses. And there is a historical story of musical style, by which Romantic effusion gives way to modernist reserve. All of these are more-or-less true, but they miss a key element of what these songs do: that, in different ways, they all explore the idea of presence and absence. The chronological reading, so readily mapped onto biography or style history, obscures this recurrent concern. In a purely literal sense, Debussy did not abandon writing for the voice in 1904. Aside from the ongoing work on uncompleted opera projects, further songs were still to come (the settings of Villon and Mallarmé). And contemporary with the

mournful emptiness of *Fêtes galantes II* is the *jouissance* of *L'Isle joyeuse* and the expansive affirmation of presence in the closing measures of *La mer*.

What changes is the manner in which presence and absence are configured. If the early songs oppose one against the other, the later works propose a more dynamic interaction, replacing the hard either/or of absence/presence with a continuous flickering between appearing and disappearing. The difference is marked in the observation of Jankélévitch that while we cannot know things in themselves, in their substance, we can perhaps know them in the "manner of their appearing."<sup>28</sup> This dynamic movement is not easily caught in language, he insists, since language always wants substantives; but "apparition" is without a substantive, "it is the advent-to-the-other which is itself the only substance."<sup>29</sup> Music is, of course, just such a process—an art of coming to presence, of appearing and disappearing. It is, to borrow a phrase from Mallarmé, a "dispersion volatile," perpetually vanishing into thin air.<sup>30</sup> And while that may be true of all music, it is surely foregrounded in the uniquely evanescent music of Debussy.

Which brings us back to Debussy's songs and their reflection on the essential gaps in which they are made. Susan Youens has pointed to "Debussy's increasing doubt that any composer could set poetry to music without a perceptible gulf between the two worlds of ordered word and ordered sound."<sup>31</sup> She goes on to cite a comment by his close friend, Paul Dukas: "Do not fool yourself, poems cannot be set to music. . . . Poetry and music do not mix;

they never merge."<sup>32</sup> We might both agree and disagree; the fact that words and music do not merge is surely key to the value of song. In Debussy's hands, certainly, song shows itself as "as a means of deconstruction," as in Lawrence Kramer's remark about the German Lied, that it "seeks to differ from the text by continually deferring a full resemblance to it."<sup>33</sup> Debussy foregrounds this aspect of song, placing words and music in a relation that destabilizes both and accentuates their "asymmetry" (to borrow another term from Kramer).<sup>34</sup>

Debussy's fascination with Verlaine's poetry, over more than two decades, hinges perhaps on the shared understanding that the advent to presence is possible only as a fragile moment of appearing against a background of absence (hence the *tristesse* that pervades the *Fêtes galantes*). The subject in these poems is always nonidentical with itself, caught between the alienations of artifice on the one hand, and the loss experienced even amid the ecstasy of erotic containment on the other (a *désespoir* that the nightingale will always sing). In a similar way, the broader trajectory of Debussy's songs, and of his music as a whole, is characterized by constant movement, an endless arabesque of appearing and disappearing, coming to presence and evanescent flight. It is, in Jankélévitch's resonant metaphor, an art of (dis)appearing in which "the fugitive, in her flight, traces beyond the horizon a mystery of absence which presence has dislodged."<sup>35</sup>



<sup>28</sup>Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien. 1. La manière et l'occasion* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980), 18. The philosopher Martin Seel similarly insists that aesthetic perception "is concerned not with some of its objects' appearances [Erscheinungen] but with their process of appearing [Erscheinen]." See Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>29</sup>Jankélévitch, *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi*, 35.

<sup>30</sup>Stéphane Mallarmé, "La Musique et les Lettres," in *Igitur, Divigations, Un coup de dés* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 372.

<sup>31</sup>Susan Youens, "A Gradual Diminuendo: Debussy and the 'Trois Ballades de François Villon,'" in Oliphant and Zigel, *Perspectives on Music*, 69–99, 70.

<sup>32</sup>The original appears in *Musica* 101–02 (February–March, 1911), 38–40, 58–60. Cited by Youens, "A Gradual Diminuendo," 80.

<sup>33</sup>Lawrence Kramer, *Franz Schubert: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>34</sup>Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 7, and chap. 5, "Song," 125–70. See also "Song as Paraphrase," *New Literary History* 46/4 (2015): 573–94.

<sup>35</sup>"Le fuyard, dans sa fuite, poursuit au déla de l'horizon un mystère d'absence que la presence a delogé." Jankélévitch, *Debussy et le mystère de l'instant*, 59.

### Abstract.

Debussy's early song settings of Théodore de Banville and Paul Bourget foreground the Romantic topic by which the singing voice revokes lost presence. The closed aesthetic space of music becomes, in these

songs, the space of the nocturnal garden in which the souls of lovers merge with the containing landscape. But Debussy's fascination with the poetry of Paul Verlaine, over a period of twenty-two years from 1882 to 1904, juxtaposes such evocations of intense sensuous presence with songs of alienated absence and ironic distance. The poems Debussy set from Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes* (1869) provoke both kinds of song, the latter embodied through the shadowy figures of the *commedia dell'arte*. In the case of two such poems, "En sourdine" and "Clair de lune," Debussy produced two different settings of the same

text, ten years apart. The usual account is that these show the composer's progression from Romantic lyricism to a more sophisticated but withdrawn style, a development paralleled by a biographical story moving from his youthful passion for the dedicatee of the early songs, Marie-Blanche Vasnier, to the breakdown of his first marriage in 1904. But neither the stylistic nor the biographical narrative provides an adequate account of the Verlaine songs, and both miss their exploration of the economy of desire at the heart of the piano song. Keywords: Verlaine, Jankélévitch, absence, presence, desire