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Climax as Orgasm: On Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse*

This article discusses the relationship of musical climax and orgasm by considering the case of *L'isle joyeuse*, a piano piece that Claude Debussy (1862-1918) began in 1903, completing it in the Summer of 1904 soon after starting a sentimental relationship with Emma Bardac, née Moyse (1862-1934), his second wife and the mother of his daughter Claude-Emma, alias 'Chouchou' (1905-1919). By exploring the genesis of the piece, I suggest that the creative process started as the pursuit of a solitary exotic male fantasy, culminating in Debussy's sexual encounter with Emma and leading the composer to inscribe their shared experience in the final, revised form of the piece.

The erotic component of the piece has been stressed by, among others, Michael Klein, who speaks of 'undeniable sexual energy' close to the point where, he says, 'the music reaches orgasm.'¹ This description of the final climax seems justified and indeed throws new light on the ways in which music and sexuality are intertwined in the individuals' experience, including, potentially, the listener's. Now, while Klein's insights into the piece are stimulating, he does not justify the use of the word *orgasm*, which he takes only as a hyperbolic substitute for climax. By exploring the role of music in the actual life of the actors, this article makes a case for orgasm being more than a literary metaphor.

At a theoretical level, an ecological approach to music perception suggests that music can afford sexual behaviour and representations in particular situations. I privilege here a discussion of analogies between climax and orgasm, not because I think that orgasm is the essence and purpose of sexual pleasure, as generally thought, but rather because it is well suited for a systematic analysis of the formal relationships between sex and music.²

¹ Michael Klein, 'Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse* as Territorial Assemblage', *Nineteenth-Century Music*, 31/3 (2007), 28-52 at 36.

² For a critique of the 'orgasm imperative' see Hannah Frith, *Orgasmic Bodies. The Orgasm in Contemporary Western Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); André Béjin and Michaël Pollak,

Of course, the very nature of sexual intimacy makes it very difficult, indeed almost impossible, to reconstruct such an experience with any degree of certainty and detail. The only thing about the Debussys' sexual life that is absolutely beyond doubt, is the fact that a sexual encounter occurred in the winter of 1905, nine months before the birth of Chouchou in October. Nevertheless, such an empirical exploration is called for, despite many lacunae and conjectures. Conjectures are not methodological weaknesses or deviances, but fundamentals of any historiographical operation.³ And this is all the more so when dealing with certain kinds of human activity and a particular kind of art, namely sexuality and music, whose epistemologies are defined by secrecy and hermeneutical uncertainty.

Such an interdisciplinary approach, based on musicological, sexological, narratological and historical literature, might allow us to go beyond a number of current assumptions about the role of sex in artistic creation. The Freudian concept of sublimation, implying that the powerful excitations from individual sources of sexuality are discharged and utilized in other spheres, has become a paradigm for explaining the role of the libido in artistic creation.⁴ Yet, commentators have often found this idea unsatisfactory. For Paul Ricoeur, it is an 'empty concept' that fails to make intelligible the dialectics 'of the desire and the Other of desire'.⁵ For Georges Didi-Huberman, the notion that art transforms instinctual energies into beauty and culture, thus calming down unsatisfied desires, does not make it possible 'to interpret, and even simply to describe, cultural productions, those fatally impure objects' marked, in his view, by destruction and discontent (*Unbehagen*).⁶ Especially disturbing, for our methodology, is the difficulty of relating the hypothesis of sublimation to actual biographical traces beyond the global assumption that some kind of 'libidinal economy' is at work.⁷

By renouncing general explanations in favour of a case-by-case approach, a micro-historical description of sexual experiences and their relation to the creative process might better honour Freud's basic intuition about art, namely that sexual

'La rationalisation de la sexualité', *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, Nouvelle série Vol. 62 (1977), 105-125.

³ Carlo Ginzburg, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop Journal*, No. 9 (Spring, 1980), 5-36; Simon T. Kaye, 'Challenging Certainty: The Utility and History of Counterfactualism', *History and Theory*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Feb., 2010), 38-57.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sex* (New York and Washington: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co., 1920) (French ed. 189).

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 512.

⁶ Georges Didi-Huberman, 'Postface: des images et des maux'. *Invention de l'hystérie* (Paris: Macula, 2012), 392.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974).

drives are important for artistic creativity, and that access to the artist's intimacy is the proper way to understand how and why. This genetic approach implies from the start a parting of company with Klein, whose hermeneutics of the musical work disregards biographical materials altogether; indeed, he never mentions sketches nor other traces of the creative process, and the mere biographical contextualization of his analysis to the effect that 'Debussy composed *L'isle joyeuse* in the summer of 1904 while on an extramarital holiday on the island of Jersey with Emma Bardac'⁸ is actually misleading.

Now, the assumption that sex does matter for art has never gone without resistance. This often goes in the name of idealistic or moralistic conceptions of artistic creativity. François Lesure, the great biographer of the composer, thought it vain 'to try to explain Debussy's oeuvre by his sentimental life (*expériences amoureuses*).'⁹ This article will seek to demonstrate quite the opposite, and to connect these insights with broader biographical issues. Debussy's marriage with Emma Bardac in 1908, a 45-year-old woman he first met as the mother of a pupil, Raoul Bardac, has often been described as resulting from social ambition rather than from love and desire. Of course, social ambition can sometimes also fuel desire, but this is the contrary of discarding desire altogether. Mary Garden, a friend and a favourite performer of Debussy's music (she was the first *Mélisande*), wrote laconically in her notebooks: 'His first wife was young and poor. His second was old and rich.'¹⁰ A distorted vision of his private life, including hostile allusions to Emma's Jewish origin, emerged in 1904 shortly after the beginning of their initially adulterous relationship at a time when Claude was married to Lilly Texier and Emma to Sigismond Bardac.¹¹

Public opinion at the beginning of the last century was opposed such a relationship, partly as a matter of age. In this 'golden age of male adultery', four out of five mistresses were younger than deceived wives, who were in turn mostly younger than her adulterous husbands; and fewer than one out of three women involved in adulterous relationships were forty years old or more. Anne-Marie Sohn points out that 'psychologically, though not legally, adultery stopped being a crime between 1880 and 1900.'¹² From a legal point of view, even though divorce was reinstated in France in 1884, it was not until December 1904 that the law allowed

⁸ Klein, 'Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse*', 32.

⁹ François Lesure, *Claude Debussy. Biographie critique* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 12.

¹⁰ Quoted in Gillian Opstad, *Debussy's Mélisande: The Lives of Georgette Leblanc, Mary Garden and Maggie Teyte* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), 121.

¹¹ See Myriam Chimènes, *Mécènes et musiciens. Du salon au concert à Paris sous la III^e République* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 195.

¹² Anne-Marie Sohn, 'The Golden Age of Male Adultery: The Third Republic', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Spring, 1995), 469-490, 473 and 483.

adulterous lovers to remarry, something that in their case would have to wait until January 1908. Claude Debussy's and Emma Bardac's liaison was thus not only a violation of the laws of marriage, but also a transgression of the norms of adultery.

The idea that a woman of his own age *could not* be the object of desire of the composer appeared as early as October 1904, when news of their liaison distressed Lilly to the point that she attempted suicide. The writer Pierre Louÿs who, like other friends outraged by Claude's abandonment of his first wife, took Lilly's side, writing to his brother:

'The husband left with a forty-something years old Jewish woman, Mme S. Bardac, I think you know Bardac, at least he came to your office. Very used to his wife's escapades, he smiles to whoever seeks news about her: "She has just seduced the last fashionable musician, but I'm the one who's got the money. She will come back to me"'.¹³

Louÿs was a well-known anti-Semite and anti-Dreyfusard and also a libertine fond of young girls, a recurrent theme of his literary work.¹⁴ His entire vision of life and society went against acknowledging the charms of a 42-year old Jewish woman.

On November 4, news of Lilly's tragic and spectacular suicide attempt (by shooting herself in the stomach) appeared in several newspapers. No names were given, but the characters of this *fait divers* were not hard to recognize. *Le Figaro* speaks of 'Mme D..., a very pretty young woman, married to a very distinguished music composer', namely 'M. D...'.¹⁵ In these texts, Lilly's feminine charms are systematically underlined and Emma's systematically ignored.¹⁶ The fact that many of Debussy's friends, with or without ideological motivations, disapproved of his liaison with Emma Bardac to the point of total rupture, was a cause of deep distress for him. The long conflict with Lilly, eventually including a legal obligation to pay her pension, did not help to calm things down. And not only the composer's inner and musical circles, but also Emma's family reacted negatively. Her uncle, the influential financier Daniel Iffla Osiris, disinherited her shortly before his death in 1907; back in 1879, when Emma was 17 years old, she had married Sigismund Bardac in a synagogue build by Osiris,

¹³ Pierre Louÿs to Georges Louis, October 1904, quoted in Lesure, *Claude Debussy*, 266: 'Le mari est parti avec une juive de quarante et quelques années, Mme S. Bardac, je crois que tu connais Bardac ou que du moins il est venu dans ton cabinet d'affaires. Très habitué aux fugues de sa femme, il répond au souriant à ceux qui lui demandent de ses nouvelles : "Elle vient de se payer le dernier musicien à la mode, mais c'est moi qui ai l'argent. Elle me reviendra.'

¹⁴ Jane Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 173.

¹⁵ 'Un drame parisien,' *Le Figaro* (4 November 1903), 4. 'Mme D..., une jeune femme, fort jolie, mariée à un compositeur de musique très distingué.'

¹⁶ See also 'Le théâtre et la vie,' *Le Temps* (4 November 1903); *Le Petit Journal* (4 November 1904); 'Un divorce à l'horizon,' *Le Journal* (4 November 1904).

and inaugurated that very day.¹⁷ Partly because of this lost inheritance, the Debussys' financial situation was never stable; in fact, the composer's economic problems were to become more serious than they had been during his marriage with Lilly and before, when he led a somewhat bohemian life.¹⁸ Even though his second marriage was a step up on the social ladder, the result was not a happy bourgeois life – far from it.

As the affair went public, it also influenced the reception of his music. After Ricardo Viñes's first performance of *L'isle joyeuse* and *Masques* at the Société Nationale on 18 February 1905, critic Jean Chantavoine evoked Beethoven, distinguishing between true compositions and those 'scribbled (*barbouillées*) for money', and he readily defined Debussy's new works as '*barbouillages*'.¹⁹ Another critic said, without further comment, that these works 'are not worth his earlier productions'.²⁰ Later, in October 1905, according to Edward Lockspeiser, the composer was 'very much aware that the hostile reception of *La Mer*, especially by critics who had greeted *Pelléas*, resulted from personal, rather than musical, reasons'.²¹

This negative image, born in the aftermath of the Dreyfus Affair, re-emerged in later narratives influenced by anti-Semitic prejudice such as Léon Vallas's biographies published in 1932 and 1944, the latter written at the time of the Vichy regime. Debussy's liaison to Bardac, says Vallas, was a 'serious affair (*grave aventure*)' whose only motivation was his material interest to 'be introduced in the then all-powerful Jewish society, as this society was entitled to deliver commercial benefits, official backing, and government subsidies for music'.²² Contrary to that view, the story of *L'isle Joyeuse*, among many others, shows the intensity of their erotic and sentimental relationship and the important role music played in it.

¹⁷ Dominique Jarrassé, *Osiris, mécène juif et nationaliste français* (Le Kremlin-Bicêtre: Editions Esthétiques du divers, 2009).

¹⁸ Denis Herlin, 'An Artist High and Low, or, Debussy and Money,' *Rethinking Debussy*, 149-202.

¹⁹ Jean Chantavoine, *Revue hebdomadaire* (March 1905?), quoted in Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy et son temps* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1932), 242.

²⁰ Georges Servières, 'La saison musicale à Paris (1904-1905)', *Revue universelle* (1905), 369. '...ne valent pas ses productions antérieures'.

²¹ Edward Lockspeiser, *Claude Debussy* (Paris: Fayard, 1980), 262: 'Debussy a clairement conscience que l'accueil hostile réservé à *la Mer*, en particulier par des critiques qui ont vanté les mérites de *Pelléas*, est dû à des raisons personnelles, plutôt que musicales.'

²² Léon Vallas, *Achille-Claude Debussy* (Paris: PUF, 1944), 46-47; quoted in Sara Iglesias, *Musicologie et Occupation: Science, musique et politique dans la France des années noires* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 2015), 180: '...grave aventure... / ...entrer dans la société juive, alors toute puissante et seule dispensatrice des bénéfices commerciaux de la musique, des appuis officiels, des subventions de l'Etat.'

‘A Tuesday in June 1904’

The idea that Claude Debussy composed *L’isle joyeuse* on the island of Jersey in the Summer 1904, during the few days he spend there in the company of Emma Bardac, is an historiographic legend, that makes this piano piece a sort of snapshot of the beginnings of their relationship.²³ Another tale on the origins of the work, equally persistent in the literature, sees it as a musical transposition of the mythological cult to Aphrodite, by taking at its word an allusion Debussy made in 1914 to a famous painting at the Louvre: ‘it is a little bit like *L’Embarquement pour Cythère*, with less melancholy than in Watteau.’²⁴

Neither account is true. A first draft of the work existed already in June 1903, when Debussy played it for Ricardo Viñes, the Catalan pianist who first performed it in concert on the 10 February 1905.²⁵ Also, the wording of the comment on Watteau – ‘a little bit like... less than...’ – argues against viewing the painting as the main source of the music; it is likely, given the late date of the statement, that the association between them came well after the completion of the piece. According to Viñes, the composer had already evoked a pictorial inspiration for his music in 1903 – not by Watteau, though, but by Turner, whose paintings he had just discovered in London at the National Gallery, and none of which represented an island.²⁶ In 1907, the composer said that the origins of the work were ‘purely imaginary’,²⁷ and this rings true as the most likely scenario.

On the other hand, Debussy’s correspondence shows that the piece was revised in August 1904, a few days after his sojourn with Emma on the island of Jersey.²⁸ The 1903 manuscript being lost, it is hard to determine the exact nature of the revisions made during the preparation of the final manuscript for its upcoming publication by the publisher Jacques Durand. In a letter to Durand, Debussy deemed them ‘*excellentes*’ without giving any detail, yet implying that they went beyond a few corrections or *retouches*.²⁹ It is certain that they included at least the addition of a passage noted in

²³ Klein, ‘Debussy’s *L’isle joyeuse*’, 32; Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996), 101-102.

²⁴ Claude Debussy to Désiré Walter, 13 July 1914, in Claude Debussy, *Correspondance (1872-1918)*, Denis Herlin and François Lesure (eds.) (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 1835. See Denis Herlin, ‘Introduction’, in Claude Debussy: *L’isle joyeuse* (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 2011), XVIII.

²⁵ Ricardo Viñes, ‘Journal inédit de Ricardo Viñes (Ravel-Debussy-Duparc),’ *Revue internationale de musique française* 1/2 (June 1980), 226.

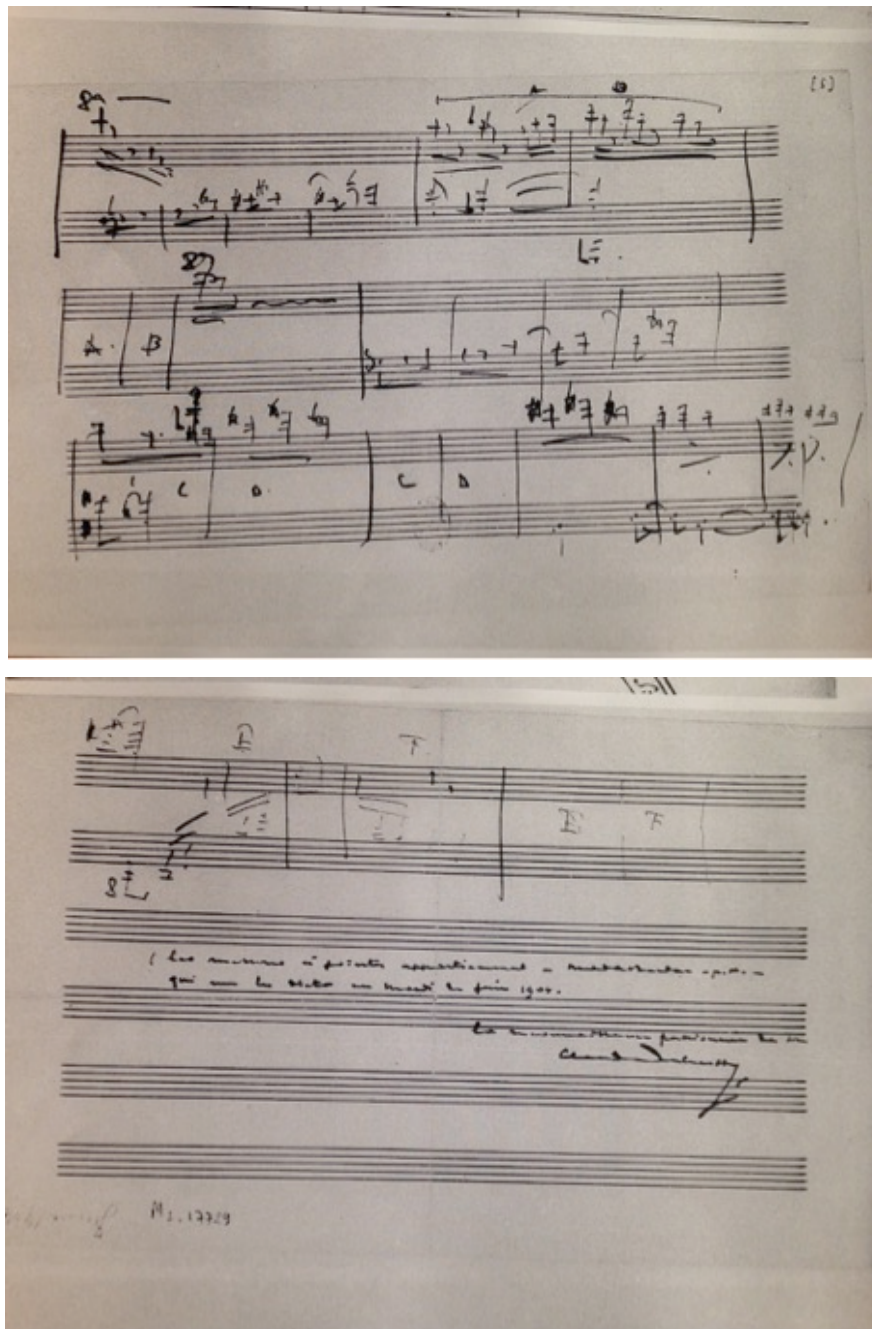
²⁶ *Ibid.* See <https://artuk.org> for the inventory of Turner’s paintings at the National Gallery, accessed 13/12/17.

²⁷ ‘Transcription des entretiens de Segalen avec Debussy’, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 2204.

²⁸ Claude Debussy to Jacques Durand, letters undated [between 31 July and 4 August 1904], 5 August, 11 August 1904, *Correspondance*, 859-862.

²⁹ Debussy to Durand, 11 August 1904, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 860.

one of the three remaining sketches of the work.³⁰ In this source, held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Roy Howat recognized the first draft of bars 117-144 of the published score (see Pl. 1).³¹



Pl. 1. Third sketch for Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse*,
Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 17729, fos. 5 and 6 .

³⁰ Two of the three sketches, respectively held at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin and the Bibliothèque de la Principauté de Monaco, were published in Debussy's *Œuvres complètes*, whereas the third sketch is only transcribed, without the verbal mention. See Claude Debussy, *Œuvres complètes*, Série I Vol.3, *Œuvres pour piano 3*, Roy Howat (ed.) (Paris: Durand – Costallat, 1991); 'Appendice', 170; and 'Fac-similés' 2 & 3, n.p.

³¹ Roy Howat, *Debussy in proportion: A Musical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 62; *id.*, 'En route for *L'isle joyeuse*. The Restoration of a triptych', *Cahiers Debussy* n°18 (1995), 38 f5.

The musical part of the sketch is followed by a written statement by the composer, with a date:

(these bars belong to Mada[me] Bardac – *p.m.* – who dictated them
to me on a Tuesday of June 1904.
The passionate acknowledgement of
Claude Debussy³².

There is no reason to doubt that Debussy's words alluded to a real encounter with Emma Bardac that took place on 'a Tuesday in June 1904'. We do not know if the composer wrote the musical sketch on that very day in the company of Emma or later, or if he wrote it some days after that. The wording suggests that the verbal comment came later, maybe years after the episode, as a reminiscence on the origins of the couple. But it is not impossible that it was written down on that very day in June, together with the musical part, as bearing witness to a shared awareness of the moment. In this last case, the musical fragment would be the recording in real time of the transformation of 'Madame Bardac' in '*p.m.*', '*petite mienne*' (my little own). In his letters to Emma, Debussy, for the rest of his life, was to use this expression by Jules Laforgue, which in the original 1886 poem suggests a shared and lasting regular intimacy:

*'Ô ma petite mienne, ô ma quotidienne
Dans mon petit intérieur
C'est à dire plus jamais ailleurs!
Ô ma petite quotidienne!...'*³³

Either as the result of a single instant or of two separated moments, the musical part *and* the verbal part of the third sketch for *L'isle joyeuse* form a sort of private monument to the birth of their love. By the form it belongs to, and probably inaugurates, the series of Debussy's 'musical gifts' to Emma - very short compositions with a few loving words that he would offer her in the following years as a present for her birthday (4 June) or for Christmas.³⁴

I suggest that this 'Tuesday in June 1904' in the third sketch for *L'isle joyeuse* alludes – in a way that is elliptical for strangers but that was transparent for the lovers

³² Claude Debussy, sketch [n°3] for *L'isle joyeuse*, 'Esquisses diverses', Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms 17729, folios 5 and 6. 'les mesures ci-jointes appartiennent à Mada[me] Bardac – p. m. –qui me les dicta un mardi de juin 1904. / la reconnaissance passionnée de son / Claude Debussy.

³³ Jules Laforgue, *Ô géraniums diaphanes*, in *Derniers vers*, in Debussy, *Correspondance*, 855 f2.

³⁴ Robert Orledge, 'Debussy's Musical Gifts to Emma Bardac', *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 60 No. 4 (Oct., 1974), 544-556.

– to one of their first sexual encounters. Claude and Emma met in 1903, and ‘before the end of that year’, says Lesure, ‘a complicity developed between them, with dedications and gifts of manuscripts.’³⁵ The erotic charge of their relationship increases in the Spring of 1904. On Monday 6 June, Claude wrote to Emma to thank her for the flowers she sent him in response to his dedicating *Trois Chansons de France* to her. ‘Forgive me, I kissed all these flowers as if they were a living mouth; might that be mad? But you cannot hold that against me – it would be like holding against the wind that’s blowing on you.’³⁶ Three days later, on Thursday 9 June, in a ‘lettre pneumatique’, he invited her to come to his apartment on the rue Cardinet, in the 17th district of Paris:

Thursday
[9 June 1904]

‘It is raining hard on the city (*Il pleut fortement sur la ville*)’. Would you be very nice to me by granting me a few moments this afternoon? – I’d like so much to have you once ‘all alone’ without any counterpoint or development. -

If you’d like to come to my place, I’d be madly happy, but you’ll do as you like, so that it will be where you wish.

This does not come from a madman, but from a pure and a little bit anguished desire (*un pur désir un peu angoissé*).

All yours.

Claude Debussy³⁷

There was in fact a downpour in Paris on Thursday 9 June 1904: at the Parc Montsouris weather station, near the south border of the city, the register for the day was 15.7 mm.³⁸ It was actually the rainiest day of this fateful spring, when the lives of Claude Debussy and Emma Bardac changed forever. The first words of the letter alluded both to the weather and to the verses by Paul Verlaine, ‘*Il pleure dans mon cœur / comme il pleut sur la ville*’, that Debussy had set to music in 1887, as a *mélodie* in the cycle *Ariettes oubliées*.³⁹ This poem, first published in 1874, contained a secret allusion

³⁵ Lesure, *Claude Debussy*, 259.

³⁶ Claude Debussy to Emma Bardac, Monday [6 June 1904], Debussy, *Correspondance*, 844: ‘Pardonnez-moi si j’ai embrassé toutes ces fleurs comme une bouche vivante ; c’est peut-être fou ? Vous ne pouvez tout de même m’en vouloir – pas plus qu’à un frôlement du vent, du moins.’

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 845. ‘jeudi / [9 juin 1904] / “Il pleut fortement sur la ville.” Voulez-vous être très gentille et m’accorder quelques instants cet après-midi ? - Je voudrais tant vous avoir une fois ‘toute seule’ sans contrepoint ni développement - / Si cela vous plaît de venir chez moi, j’en serai follement joyeux, mais vous ferez comme il vous plaira et ça sera, alors, où vous voudrez. / Tout ceci n’est pas d’un fou mais un pur désir un peu angoissé ! / Tout vôtre. / Claude Debussy.’

³⁸ ‘Climatologie à Paris-Montsouris (75) en juin 1904,’ <https://www.infoclimat.fr/climatologie-mensuelle/07156/juin/1904/paris-montsouris.html> (accessed 3 October 2017).

³⁹ Debussy, *Correspondance*, 845f.

to Arthur Rimbaud and had also been set to music in 1888 by Gabriel Fauré under the title 'Spleen'. And Verlaine's text really is about spleen: '*Quelle est cette langueur / Qui pénètre mon cœur?*'; and also: '*Pour un cœur qui s'ennuie, / Ô le chant de la pluie!*' By implicitly recalling the missing verse, '*Il pleure dans mon cœur*', Debussy seems to allude to his existential suffering while evoking for her, involuntary or not, *two mélodies* loaded with sensuality, for Emma Bardac had had a liaison with Fauré back in 1892. Was this a way of sharing the guilt, the desire of venturing together into uncharted territory? Indeed, it is hard to ignore the erotic implications of this letter, with the 'pure and a little bit anguished desire' of 'having' this woman 'all alone' in his apartment for 'a few moments in the afternoon' for an encounter 'without counterpoint or development.'

In Debussy's letter these last musical terms have an equivocal, perhaps even obscene resonance, in the first meaning of the word *obscene* – out of the scene. Yet, they are borrowed from the public field of music aesthetics, expressed in the composer's musical criticism. In *Monsieur Croche antidilettante*, both words have negative connotations: 'Was there not an annoying disproportion between the theme and the developments it supposedly gave way to?' asks Debussy on the handling of folk tunes by Russian composers, going on to denounce how 'imperious counterpoints summoned them to forget their peaceful origins.' He also deplores César Franck's 'grey, tiresome and obstinate developments' and praises Paul Dukas's avoidance of 'parasitical developments'.⁴⁰ There are many other examples of how development and counterpoint were at the time two keywords against which Debussy's style defined itself. They bring together the vertical axis of the present and the horizontal axis of duration as a metaphor associating in a single aesthetic image the temporalities of music and love. For Debussy, an encounter with no counterpoint or development ought to be brief and joyful, far away from conventions, and close to nature – an encounter very much like his own music.

In Claude's letter to Emma, the musical metaphors also aim at seducing a woman who is a performer of his music. Before the start of their relationship, she was fascinated by the *mélodies* she sung accompanied by composer Charles Koechlin, to whom she asked many questions about the composer, before trying to meet him in

⁴⁰ Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche antidilettante* (Paris: Librairies Dorbon-aîné / Nouvelle Revue française, 1921), 34, 108, 47, 42: 'N'y avait-il pas là une gênante disproportion entre le thème et ce qu'on l'obligeait à fournir de développements ? / ...d'impérieux contrepoints les sommèrent d'avoir à oublier leur paisible origine / ...ces développements en grisaille fatigante et obstinée... / développements parasites.'

person. According to Mary Garden, both herself and Lilly Texier were first attracted to him by the charm of *C'est l'extase langoureuse*, a *mélodie* from *Ariettes oubliées*, first published in *L'illustration*. Speaking of 'the erotic in Debussy's music', Julie McQuinn notes that 'women were drawn to a man whom they had never met through experiencing his music, whether performing it or watching and hearing it performed'⁴¹. The sensual aura of Debussy's music was acknowledged at least since the first performance of *L'après-midi d'un faune* in 1894, well before Nijinsky's scandalous 1912 performance, described by Lynn Garofala as the dancer's 'erotic autobiography'.⁴²

Of course, the composer was very much aware that his music contributed to his personal aura. In a letter to '*Chère petite mienne*' sent from Moscow in 1913, he writes:

Back from the rehearsal I want to tell you – in great haste – that I love you! That you are my absolute little own (*ma petite Mienne absolue*)! and also, that I am nevertheless so unhappy...!

Do you realize what you say when you write me 'I don't know how to avoid begrudging your music'... There is some reason to be mad, isn't there? To begin with, between you and the music, it's the music that could be jealous! And if I still compose it, this music you so mistreat, it's just because I owe it to having met you, loved you, and the rest! You can be sure that if I happened not to write it any more, you would be the one who would stop loving me. For neither the limited charm of my conversation, nor my physical appearance, would help me to keep you.⁴³

Unfortunately, we don't know Emma's actual reasons to 'begrudge' the music of her husband, since her own letter has not been published. There are too many things we don't know about her, starting with her side of the correspondence. In any case, by this time their life together was far from being an island of joy. According to Robert Orledge, 'married life with Emma was anything but idyllic. She was frequently ill, constantly possessive and extravagant, and far less easy to pacify than the naively devoted Lilly had been'. On the other hand, he continues, 'the fault was by no means

⁴¹ Julie McQuinn, 'Exploring the erotic in Debussy's music', *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Simon Trezise ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 119.

⁴² Quoted in Penny Farfan, 'Man as Beast: Nijinsky's Faun', *South Central Review*, Vol. 25, No. 1, *Staging Modernism* (Spring, 2008), 74-92.

⁴³ Claude to Emma, 8 December 1913, Debussy, *Correspondance*, 1717. 'En revenant de la répétition je veux – en grande hâte – te dire que je t'aime ! que tu es ma petite Mienne absolue ! et que je suis quand même bien malheureux...! / As-tu bien remarqué que tu m'as écrit "Je ne sais pas comment je ferai pour ne pas garder rancune à ta musique"... Crois-tu qu'il n'y a pas de quoi perdre un peu la tête ? D'abord, entre toi et la musique, s'il y avait quelqu'un qui pourrait être jaloux, c'est bien la musique ! Et, si je continue à en faire et à l'aimer, c'est bien parce que je lui dois, à cette musique que tu traites si mal, de t'avoir connue, aimée et le reste ! Sois bien sûre que s'il m'arrivait de ne plus en écrire, c'est peut-être bien toi qui cesserais de m'aimer car, ce n'est, ni le charme un peu restreint de ma conversation ; ni mes avantages physiques qui pourraient m'aider à te retenir ?'

all Emma's. It was she, not Debussy, who wrote to her lawyer to enquire about a trial separation during a matrimonial crisis in 1910'.⁴⁴ Still, the 1913 letter from Russia shows that throughout their marriage, music remained almost anthropomorphic, as an imaginary lover, rival, or companion or some combination thereof. And this was by no means idiosyncratic. Alban Berg used similar words in 1907 to claim his love to his fiancée Helene after confessing the 'infidelity' of his listening with passion to Mahler's *Third Symphony*.⁴⁵

The eroticization of music went beyond the realm of the couple. It can also be found in the context of Debussy's friendship with Pierre Louÿs, whose *Chansons de Bilitis* he set to music first in 1897 in three *mélodies*, and then in 1901 as incidental music for a recitation to *tableaux vivants* whose rehearsals Louÿs described with delight: 'I'm spending all my afternoons this week with naked women'.⁴⁶ After the show, *Le Journal* (a paper for which Louÿs often wrote) praised 'a gracious, ingeniously archaic music', and 'the precious contribution of [the women's] impeccable shapes': 'the viewers felt transported to the great age of pure nudity'.⁴⁷ According to McQuinn, 'in the case of Debussy, every possible relationship seems to have carried with it an erotic tinge, and thus a web of relationships filled with erotic possibilities, all orbiting around a music that defied convention'.⁴⁸

In June 1904, the desire of a married man to invite a married woman to his apartment while his wife was out might not have been that of a madman, as in Debussy's disclaimer in his letter to Emma, but it still rings like madness today. An encounter did take place that Thursday, though, given what Debussy wrote on a copy of *Printemps*, an 1882 work just published by Durand: 'This copy belongs exclusively / to Madame Bardac: / 9 June 1904, a day when it rained to make one lose faith in every kind of Spring. / And yet, there it was'.⁴⁹ It is difficult to know whether Claude and Emma made love that day, in the few moments they had been alone during Lilly's absence. On 19 June, from St Rémy-la-Chevreuse, thirty-five kilometers

⁴⁴ Robert Orledge, 'Debussy the man', *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, 21-22.

⁴⁵ Alban Berg to Helene Nahowski, n.d. [1907], in Alban Berg, *Briefe an seine Frau* (Munich and Vienna: Albert Langen / Georg Müller, 1965), 21.

⁴⁶ Quoted in McQuinn, 'Exploring the erotic', 128. See David Grayson, 'Bilitis and Tanagra: Afternoons with Nude Women'. *Debussy and His World*, Jane Fulcher (ed.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 117-140.

⁴⁷ *Le Journal*, Paris, 8 February 1901, quoted in McQuinn, 'Exploring the erotic', 128. '...une musique gracieuse, ingénieusement archaïque', / 'le précieux appoint de leurs forms impeccables' / 'les spectateurs purent se croire transportés aux grandes époques de la nudité pure'.

⁴⁸ McQuinn, 'Exploring the erotic', 119.

⁴⁹ Debussy, *Correspondance*, 2219. 'Cet exemplaire appartient uniquement / à Madame Bardac: / 9 juin 1904, jour où il pleuvait à / perdre l'espoir de tout[e] espèce de Printemps, / et pourtant...il était là. / Claude Debussy.'

of this paper? Not quite. The evidence suggests that in 1903, before his liaison with Emma Bardac, Debussy's fantasy was focused on the 'purely imaginary' cliché of an exotic and joyous island, leading him to start basing a musical piece on it. This also appears in his using the old word *isle* in the title, rather than the modern *île*. Roy Howat has noted striking similarities with Balakirev's *Islamey*, an 'oriental fantasy' full of sensuous resonances, pre-eminent in Viñes's repertory.⁵⁵ In September 1903, Debussy wrote down in a letter an idea for the title of *De l'aube à midi sur la mer*, the first movement of *La Mer*: '*Mer belle aux îles sanguinaires*', the name of an archipelago near Corsica, as if the very first image for his symphonic masterwork was also an island he had never seen.⁵⁶ Later on, in 1904, this fantasy contributed to eroticizing his relationship with a woman he felt was capable of fulfilling it, so much so that he revised his recent piano piece to insert a trace of that desire. In other words, I argue that *L'isle joyeuse* inspired the trip to the Isle of Jersey, rather than the other way around.

Sources suggest, then, that the revision of the 1903 manuscript started on 'a Tuesday in June 1904', with a sexual encounter preceded or followed by a moment musical during which Claude played a still unknown composition that expressed his exotic/erotic fantasy, to which Emma responded by 'dictating', i.e. by singing. This definitely sounds like the most likely scenario. It is hard to believe that Debussy would have left indications that something essential happened precisely in that month to the effect that his *pur désir un peu angoissé* had been physically frustrated; it is hard to believe that a moment of unfulfilled passionate love can be alluded to as an *instant serein*. Nevertheless, we cannot completely rule out that things went otherwise. In that other scenario, *L'isle joyeuse* was invested in June with the yearning for a forbidden love, and its climaxes were the dreamed-of form of delights still to come; Claude and Emma made love for the first time in July 1904 at the Grand Hotel of the Isle of Jersey, and that day, quite extraordinarily, *L'isle joyeuse* was their shared fantasy come true: the sonic image of their intersubjective sexual script.⁵⁷

True, this windy English island close to the Normandy coast does not have the erotic charm of Gauguin's Marquises Islands, or that of Madagascar which inspired

⁵⁵ Roy Howat, 'Russian Imprints in Debussy's Piano Music', *Rethinking Debussy*, Elliott Antokoletz and Marianne Wheeldon (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 42-47.

⁵⁶ Debussy to André Messager, 12 September 1903, *Correspondance*, 789.

⁵⁷ John Gagnon, *An Interpretation of Desire. Essays in the Study of Sexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Ravel to compose the sensual *Chansons madécasses* without ever going there.⁵⁸ But the dream machine of the travel agencies always depends on technology, and Jersey's Grand Hotel, with its direct access to the beach, was a fashionable resort – 'the largest, the best appointed, and the leading hotel in the Channel Islands', according to a 1905 advertisement.⁵⁹ And it does seem that these days on the island, between the end of July and the beginning of August,⁶⁰ were indeed happy and joyous: 'But this country is a delight, I'm at peace which is better still, and I'm completely free to work, which hasn't been the case for a long time... [...] The sea (*la Mer*) has behaved beautifully toward me and shown me all her guises', wrote Debussy, who at that time was composing *La Mer*, a work he had drafted without ever having much direct experience of the sea nor of the beach, a place he did not particularly like, except for that fateful Jersey sojourn.⁶¹ In the same letter to his editor, he provided the dedication for the second book of *Fêtes galantes*: 'In appreciation of the month of June 1904', followed by the letters 'A.l.p.M.' [*à la petite Mienne*] 'It's a little mysterious', he added, 'but one has to make some contribution to legend, doesn't one?'⁶²

The third sketch suggests that Emma Bardac, far from becoming just a passive character in Claude Debussy's fantasy, played an active role in what must have been a shared scenario. And we might even speculate that her willingness to play it, and to share with him her own fantasy, contributed to their mutual seduction. 'Debussy claimed that the passage in question had been dictated to him by Emma Bardac', writes Roy Howat, 'but it was maybe a poetic license.'⁶³ This sceptical comment brings her close to the conventional image of the muse rather than to that of an active partner of the aestheticization of life through music. But what exactly is poetic license? And why couldn't we take Debussy at his word here? Is it so *absurd* to imagine a scene of ecstatic love where a singer whispers a whole-tone scale to a composer: F, G, A, B, C# ... D# ...? Yes, it is impossible to know. But Lesure observes that sending flowers, like Emma

⁵⁸ Federico Lazzaro, 'Chansons madécasses, modernisme et érotisme. Pour une écoute de Ravel au-delà de l'exotisme'. *Revue musicale OICRM* 3/1 (2014), http://revuemusicaleoicrm.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RMO_vol.3.1_Lazzaro.pdf (accessed 16 January 2018).

⁵⁹ https://www.theislandwiki.org/index.php/Grand_Hotel, accessed 27 December 2017. See Diane Enget Moore. 'Debussy in Jersey, Summer 1904', <http://www.litart.co.uk/jersey.htm> (accessed 5 October 2017).

⁶⁰ Herlin, 'Introduction', XVII.

⁶¹ See Rémy Campos, *Debussy à la plage* (Paris, 2018).

⁶² Claude Debussy to Jacques Durand, undated [between 31 July and 4 August 1904], Debussy, *Correspondance*, 859. Translation in Moore, 'Debussy in Jersey'. 'Mais ce pays est ravissant, j'y suis tranquille ce qui est encore mieux et je travaille en toute liberté, ce qui ne m'est pas arrivé depuis longtemps... [...] La Mer a été très bien pour moi, elle m'a montré toutes ses robes. [...] pour remercier le mois de Juin 1904 ; suivies des lettres A. l. p. M [*à la petite Mienne*]'.

⁶³ Roy Howat, 'Avant-propos', in Debussy, *Œuvres complètes*, XII.

did, was at that time something ‘more masculine than feminine’,⁶⁴ to which Claude replied by writing a passionate letter. And it is also an active role that the musician-lover acknowledges by saying that these bars were *dictated* by his performer-lover, and that therefore they *belong* to her. Thus, he acknowledges that his music is also partly that of this woman who, by the same token, he claims belongs to *him* – for as much is implied, literally, by *petite mienne*.

It could be objected that Emma’s theme, far from representing a kind of alterity, is nothing but a whole-tone scale, one of the most typical traits of Debussy’s music. How can a specific semantics of desire be attached to it? This connects with broader issues on the reception of Debussy. The thematic role of the whole-tone scale in *L’isle joyeuse* (first performed in January 1905) corresponds to a turning point in the social perception of his style. Whole-tone scales, already a technical trait of his music, became a true aesthetic claim around the controversial first performance of *Pelléas* in 1902. ‘Everywhere a vague singing, a sad dawn... and the whole-tone scale. It’s musical impressionism’, wrote Raymond Bouyer in 1905 on *L’isle joyeuse* and other recent works by Debussy and Ravel.⁶⁵ Two years later, in his article ‘Debussy et les debussystes’, Emile Vuillermoz coined the ironic expression ‘*faire du Debussy*’, inciting several other critics to define his much-imitated style; the whole-tone scale is prominent in what M.-D. Calvocoressi called ‘*le système harmonique de M. Debussy*’.⁶⁶ In 1911, Arnold Schoenberg explained in his *Harmonielehre* that the whole-tone scale he used in 1905 in his symphonic poem *Pelleas und Melisande* did not owe anything to Debussy, thus showing that this novelty had become a landmark in the history of music.⁶⁷

Debussy’s *système harmonique*, especially the whole-tone scale, was a symbol of himself, and also a crucial element for the sensual quality of his music. In *L’isle joyeuse*, the whole-tone scale is structurally important throughout the piece, but only with Emma’s theme does it become a melody that a lover of Debussy’s music like, say, Emma Bardac herself, might sing or hum while thinking of him. From that point of view, the bars ‘dictated’ by Emma to Claude ‘on a Tuesday in June 1904’ result from

⁶⁴ Lesure, *Claude Debussy*, 260.

⁶⁵ Raymond Bouyer, ‘L’impressionnisme en musique et le culte de Beethoven’. *Revue bleue. Revue politique et littéraire* (January-June 1905), 606. ‘Partout un chant vague, une aube triste... et la gamme par tons. C’est l’impressionnisme musical...’

⁶⁶ Emile Vuillermoz, ‘Debussy et les debussystes’. *La Nouvelle presse* (3 March 1907); M.-D. Calvocoressi, ‘Les Histoires naturelles de M. Ravel et l’imitation debussyste’, *La Grande revue* (10 May 1907), 514, quoted in Marianne Wheeldon, ‘Debussy, le debussysme et les *Chansons de Charles d’Orléans*’, in *Regards sur Debussy*, Myriam Chimènes and Alexandra Laederich (eds.) (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 211-212.

⁶⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 393.

an injunction saying more or less: *my desire is that you write down for my pleasure the musical image of your desiring self*.

Now, once Emma Bardac's participation in the creative process is acknowledged, *L'isle joyeuse* is still, of course, a piece by Claude Debussy. This is true of his identifying the twenty-seven bars 'dictated by Emma' as a separate entity in the first place. Like other 'musical gifts' to her, the third sketch for *L'isle joyeuse* might be seen itself as a musical work, a 30-second piece of piano music. It's time now to have a look at these bars 'dictated' by Emma, as they appear in the manuscript (see Pl. 2).⁶⁸



PL. 2. Debussy, *L'isle joyeuse*, autograph manuscript, bb. 117-44
Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 977, pp. 4-5

At bar 117 we hear distinctly in the low register, *piano* but '*expressif et en dehors*', a new theme ascending by whole tones followed by a major third (F, G, A, B, C#, D#,

⁶⁸ The autograph manuscript is available at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b52000086z>.

G) on a progressively distorted ternary rhythm: let's call it 'Emma's theme', since it 'belongs' to her. This happens against the ongoing background of the right hand 3/8 fast descending and ascending arpeggios on G and B, with G in the bass – a dominant sonority, given the emphatic C major of the previous bars 112-114. Key to the expressive tension is the rhythmic contrast between the two-bar hypermetrical beat of the right hand and the rubato-like slowing down of the pulse of the left-hand melody, from a quaver to a dotted crotchet between bars 117 and 122. Once its highpoint G at bar 120 is reached, the ascending new theme merges with a descending three-notes motif G-F-E, which is repeated in an augmented form at bars 123-126. (Significantly, since it gave a more dynamic pace to the whole passage, the adding of bars 123 and 124 was the only difference, except for notational conventions, between the sketch and the revised manuscript).⁶⁹ This twice descending suffix compensates for the previous upward momentum of Emma's theme, while harmony fluctuates between G, Gb and Ab with raised fifth, thus undermining the dominant sonority.

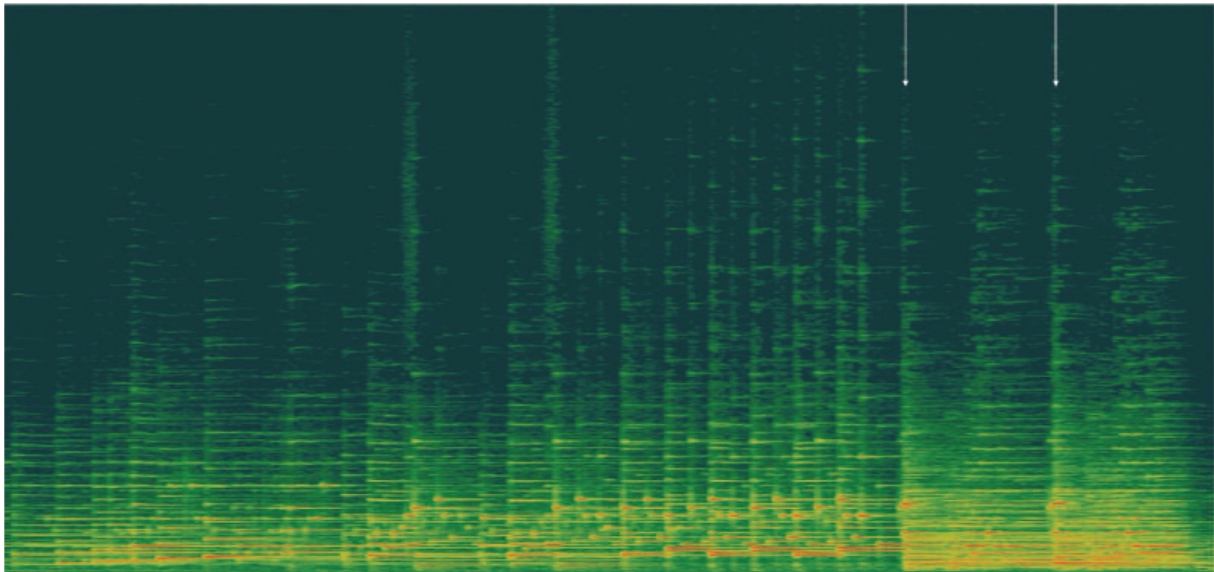
At bar 129, prepared by the bass on Bb, this whole material is transposed a semitone higher, with Emma's theme starting on Gb and the right-hand arpeggio playing Ab and C – like Ab major without the fifth, except that the bass wanders through B and A. Over this unstable harmony, the melody in the left hand wavers down from the new Ab highpoint, but this time without repeating this last, thus accelerating the pace. The overall acceleration is still enhanced at bar 137 by the verticalization of the four first notes of Emma's theme in medium register sonorities, F-G and A-B. The hemiola of this bell-like motif, played in crotchets against the 3/8 rhythm of the upper register, builds momentum through a dramatic crescendo, where the now confirmed dominant sonority prepares a clear resolution on a C major triad at bar 141. The tonic is twice hammered forte, with a grace note D#, and twice prolonged in vertiginous four-octave arpeggios.⁷⁰

The nearly thirty seconds 'dictated' by Emma, even if they flow without interruption from the preceding section, constitute a self-contained form with strong inner momentum, from low dynamics and elongated rhythm to an accelerated pace in higher register and intensity, and whose complex harmony encompasses a broad

⁶⁹ Row Howat sees this feature as a furtherance of long-range proportional symmetries. Independently from this, the modification enhances acceleration throughout the passage covered by the sketch. See Howat. *Debussy in Proportion*, 62.

⁷⁰ Dmitri Tymoczko, 'Scale Networks and Debussy', *Journal of Music Theory*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Fall, 2004), 219-294 at 254-263.

dominant – tonic cadence, G major to C major. The temporal shape of the whole passage can be visualized in a spectrogram (See Pl. 3).



Pl. 3. Spectrogram of *L'isle joyeuse*, bb. 117-44, after the 1961 recording by Magda Tagliaferro (the arrows indicate the two C major chords at bb. 141 and 143). Courtesy of Simon Garrette

This shape, which elaborates a new theme – ‘Emma’s theme’ – with a steady upwards intensity curve leading to a sustained climax, is far from giving way to silence. The passage ends at bar 144, not on a closing C major triad but on an open C arpeggio with no third, and it fuses with the following C major section. Indeed, when the third sketch is over, we are still far from the section leading to the final apotheosis, which actually begins at bar 186. In short, the third sketch depicts an open-ended climax. Given the biographical context, as a climax ‘dictated’ by a woman and not followed by silence, can we say it is a feminine orgasm?

On climax as (male) orgasm, and vice-versa

To answer that question, we need to discuss what it can possibly mean to speak of orgasms in music. Let’s start with Michael Klein’s comment: ‘the music reaches orgasm’.⁷¹ This alludes to the arrival of the A major chord in bar 252 of *L'isle joyeuse*, three bars before the end. For him, orgasm is synonymous with, and/or a metaphor for, climax, and specifically, ‘culminating climax’. Dropped in the middle of a technical, even if idiosyncratic, description of Debussy’s score where climax has

⁷¹ Klein, ‘Debussy’s *L'isle joyeuse*’, 36.

already been used, the word introduces a climactic poetic gesture in a prosaic scholarly text. And since in English orgasm is one of the meanings of climax, the poetry lies here in literality, as if taking the form at its word. But if orgasm is a kind of experience, what does it mean to say that music is its subject? Here there is no human subject at all, this orgasm exists without anyone experiencing it, and it is neither masculine nor feminine. Such an attribution of agency to the music is consistent with Klein's interpretation of the piece as a 'territorial assemblage' in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*, i.e. free of 'intention and history', free also of 'the authorial voice'.⁷²

This can be compared to the very human 'musical orgasm' Christopher Chowrimootoo hears at the end of the first act of Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice*, when the protagonist Gustav von Aschenbach sings 'I love you' in the presence of young Tadzio. I quote him at some length:

Britten heightens the theatricality of this ending with the kind of 'grand climax' and 'blatant emotion' that the opera was said to reject. In musical terms, it is perhaps best described as a total crescendo -dynamic, rhythmic, textural and registral - followed by a sudden brass-punctuated climax accompanying Aschenbach's apparently wordless cry. However, given opera's long-standing generic association with *jouissance*, we might think of other terms here. The sense of post-coital calm is captured by the sustained bass drone, combined with the tenor's 'almost spoken' descending third on the words 'love you', that immediately follow the climax. ... Indeed, the proximity of the passage to an evocation of orgasm marks it as one of the most conspicuous examples of 'body music'.⁷³

The author makes of this 'musical orgasm' a kind of operatic 'grand climax', characterizing it, quite tautologically, by its likeness to 'an evocation of orgasm'. This is based in two traits, the 'total crescendo' and the vocal falling third. While the analogy with the experience of a real orgasm may seem obvious, it does not have much to do with sonic expressions of climactic pleasure, like rhythmical 'aah's and 'ooh's. Rather, the capability of this musical form to 'evoke' an orgasm is mediated by a generic convention -opera's alleged Lacanian *jouissance*- and by a dramaturgical context -the eroticized gaze of the male protagonist on the object of his desire. For this reason, it is indisputably a masculine orgasm, if any. The music expresses the character's fantasy; it tells what the text and the bodies do not tell. But since the characters are not by any means supposed to have sex, the representation of this

⁷² Klein, 'Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse*', 50.

⁷³ Christopher Chowrimootoo, 'Bourgeois opera: *Death in Venice* and the aesthetics of sublimation', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 22/2 (July 2010), 175-216 at 204.

passage as an orgasm is the triple result of a musical form, *and* a context, *and* the willingness of the author to activate the affordance of form and context by writing ‘musical orgasm’ in the first place⁷⁴.

Chowrimootoo conflates two senses of the word *climax*: the first, ‘grand climax’, designates the whole passage; the second makes of climax an instant or a point, indeed a *high point*, which gives way to the ‘post-coital’ phase. Also for Klein, the culminating-climax-as-orgasm is a point in time, while resulting from a process driven by ‘sexual energy’. This mirrors an ambiguity in the musicological literature. In a 1984 paper on Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*, Kofi Agawu noted that the word *climax* derives from the Greek *ladder* or *staircase*, thus denoting ‘an arrangement of figures in ascending order of intensity’, whereas nowadays it ‘refers to the highest point only of a given process’. To avoid confusion, he uses *highpoint*, and never uses *climax* at all.⁷⁵

An ‘ascending order of intensity’ also characterizes climax as a figure of speech in classical rhetoric, for which the *Encyclopédie* gives this example from Cicero, where it happens twice in a row: ‘You do nothing, you attempt nothing, you think nothing that I don’t not only hear of, but also see and openly perceive’.⁷⁶ Such rhetorical climaxes can combine with erotic music climaxes, as in John Dowland’s madrigal *Come again*: ‘To see, to hear, to touch, to kiss, to die / With thee again in sweetest sympathy’, says the text; the passage is built on a rising motif that culminates in a sustained highpoint on the word ‘die’, before gently descending.⁷⁷

Now, as the upper ladder of a staircase, orgasm is always part of a longer sexual act, and, far from being just a point in time, it has its own duration and rhythm.⁷⁸ Both point and section are needed to describe musical phenomena that can be characterized as orgasms. Both are present in Leonard B. Meyer’s definition of a ‘statistical climax’, namely ‘a gradual increase in the intensity of the more physical attributes of sound, the arrival at a tensional “highpoint”, followed by a usually rapid decline in activity – a falling-away to quiet and closure.’⁷⁹ Statistical climax is so named ‘because the intensity of the secondary parameters that shape such processes [intensity, pitch, rate of note

⁷⁴ See Eric F. Clarke, *Ways of Listening. An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷⁵ Kofi Agawu, ‘Structural ‘Highpoints’ in Schumann’s ‘Dichterliebe’’, *Music Analysis* 3/2 (Jul., 1984), 159-180 at 160.

⁷⁶ *Nihil agis, nihil moliris, nihil cogitas, quod ego non audiam, non videam, planeque sentiam.*

⁷⁷ See Clive Pageth, ‘The 10 sexiest moments in classical music’.

<https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au>, 14 February 2016.

⁷⁸ Kenneth Mah and Yitzchak M. Binik, ‘The nature of human orgasm: A critical review of major trends’, *Clinical Psychology Review* 21/6 (2001), 823–856.

⁷⁹ Leonard B. Meyer, ‘Exploiting Limits: Creation, Archetypes, and Style Change’, *Daedalus*, Vol. 109, No. 2, *Intellect and Imagination: The Limits and Presuppositions of Intellectual Inquiry* (Spring, 1980), 177-205 at 189-190.

succession, timbre and tempo] can be measured and quantified'. When such a climax becomes a 'powerful statement of majestic affirmation', Meyer calls it 'apotheosis'.⁸⁰ It is opposed to 'syntactical climax', where parameters 'move from a state characterized by relative mobility, ambiguity, uniformity, or irregularity, to one of relative stability, coherent process, and clear form.'⁸¹ Even if a climax can be both statistical and syntactical, as in some symphonic recapitulations, the first type is most pertinent here.

The ways in which evolving parameters converge or diverge are explored in Austin T. Patty's study of 'pacing scenarios', a sophisticated description of how nineteenth-century classical music arrives at climaxes and moves on from them. The analysis of such spots of the music of Dvorák or Brahms leads him to a four-case categorization: *surge*, *struggle*, *tumble* and *settle*.⁸² This classification is useful for discussing potential 'musical orgasms' such as the 'total crescendo' alluded to above – a *surge* in his vocabulary. On the other hand, *climax* only designates for him highpoints without duration nor specification. Brad Osborn makes the point in his study of 'terminally climactic forms' in rock music where, taking the opposite stance, *climax* is a *section*.⁸³ In recent years, he argues, experimental rock songs often end with 'climax sections' characterized by new thematic material and some enhanced parameter (like a new melody sung and played in a higher pitch and louder, such as Radiohead's *Faust Arp*). These rock climaxes, like the operatic 'grand climaxes' alluded to above, can be quite long; Osborn's prototypical example is The Beatles' *Hey Jude*, whose final section lasts about half the song. It is probably no accident that in these two studies the classical music specialist tends to equate climax with instant gratification, whereas the rock specialist hears climaxes that go on. Typical paces for representing desire are arguably influential in the definition of many music genres.

From Bach to The Beatles, statistical climaxes are a common way of ending a piece of music. And the etymology of the word *apotheosis* –the accessing of a mortal hero to the status of a god- implies that there can be one, and only one of them in any given work, namely at the end. This was Gustav Mahler's view, when, in a letter to Richard Strauss, he spoke of how at some point of the finale of his First Symphony 'the conclusion is merely apparent (in the full sense of a 'false conclusion')', since, he continues, 'my intention was to show a victory in which victory is furthest from the protagonist when he

⁸⁰ Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History, and Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 204.

⁸¹ Meyer, 'Exploiting limits', 190.

⁸² Austin T. Patty, 'Pacing Scenarios: How Harmonic Rhythm and Melodic Pacing Influence Our Experience of Musical Climax', *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Fall 2009), 325-367.

⁸³ Brad Osborn, 'Subverting the Verse-Chorus Paradigm: Terminally Climactic Forms in Recent Rock Music', *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 2013), 23-47 at 26n20.

believes it is closest – this is the nature of every spiritual struggle – for there it is by no means simple to become a hero.⁸⁴ The vocabulary of hero and victory pertains to epic literature, and the notion of ‘spiritual struggle’ gives it a broader scope, as a narrative on a human subject who is normatively male, perhaps inspiring the designation of previous highpoints as ‘premature’ in some accounts of Mahler’s music.⁸⁵

This view on the unicity of climax was also Vincent d’Indy’s, who as a preeminent composer and teacher and the leader of the Société Nationale de Musique and the *Schola Cantorum*, was Debussy’s most important rival in the French musical field. D’Indy was the theoretician of the *sonate cyclique*, a reinterpretation of Beethoven’s sonata form through the motivic working of César Franck, based on the return of its initial materials, up to a triumphant resolution. This model had a strong normative value: after hearing a work by his pupil Alfred Roussel, d’Indy reproached him with the lack of ‘any sense of emphatic statement in the [last] movement.’⁸⁶ In this first symphony by Roussel, subtitled *Le poème de la forêt*, written in 1904-1906 at the time of the quarrel between *d’indyistes* and *debussystes*, Brian Hart detects the influence of Debussy, whose own works seldom ended with climaxes at all, at least in the years prior to *Pelléas and Mélisande*’s first performance in 1902.

Marianne Wheeldon claims that Debussy’s earlier incursion in the *sonate cyclique*, with his String Quartet in G minor (1893), was purposefully aimed at having the work performed at the Société Nationale at a time when he was still actively looking for recognition by his colleagues. The following year, once this recognition was achieved, he premiered there *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, a piece that seems to disappear in a harmonically instable *ppp*.⁸⁷ According to Simon Trezise, ‘climaxes that dissolve almost before they have begun and whose function does not seem designed to signpost a clear point of formal departure, such as a recapitulation, have been viewed as essential qualities of both Debussy’s style and the Impressionist movement in music.’⁸⁸ At the opposite end of the scale, d’Indy’s own works, already at the time of his first *Symphonie cévenole* (1887), and later with what Hart calls his ‘message-symphonies’, ended with monumental climaxes loaded with narrative

⁸⁴ Mahler to Strauss, 19 July 1894, *Correspondence*, 1888-1911 (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 37; quoted in ‘The Finale of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony: Long-Range Musical Thought’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, Vol. 112, No. 2 (1986 - 1987), 257-279 at 261.

⁸⁵ Baxendale, ‘The Finale of Mahler’s Fifth Symphony’, 260; Richard A. Kaplan, ‘Temporal fusion and climax in the Symphonies of Mahler’, *The Journal of Musicology*, 14/2 (1996), 213-232 at 226.

⁸⁶ Vincent d’Indy to Alfred Roussel, paraphrased in Brian Hart, ‘Vincent d’Indy and the Development of the French Symphony’, *Music & Letters*, 87/2 (May, 2006), 256 n. 105.

⁸⁷ Marianne Wheeldon, ‘Debussy and *La Sonate cyclique*’, *The Journal of Musicology* 22/4 (Fall 2005), 644-679.

⁸⁸ Simon Trezise., *Debussy: La mer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 51.

content, as in the triumph of good over evil in his Second Symphony (1909), or with the triumph of France over Germany in the Third (1915-1919), the latter represented through the massive orchestration of a Gregorian chant.⁸⁹

Such statistical climaxes, Meyer observes, are easy to grasp by anyone, a trait that in his view makes them more egalitarian than syntactical ones. Through them, 'by literally overwhelming the listener', 'unity is established, so to speak, by the transcendence of the sublime'.⁹⁰ Alex Rehding comments: 'The power of such music to overwhelm could also harbour the seeds of certain totalitarian features: the apotheosis is a climax that does not permit objections'.⁹¹ Rehding is talking here about 'monumental music' for public commemorations, something quite the opposite of musical representations of affects and intimacy. Yet the parallel with orgasms is useful, not least because it highlights the paradoxes of *scale*; in music, a love scene can be as grandiose as a political event, and even the most private feelings can be 'monumental'. Orgasm is clearly not a totalitarian ideological device, but it definitely is an overwhelming experience, for which no education is needed, and to which it is really hard to *object*.

To what extent, then, do all statistical climaxes and apotheosis afford descriptions as orgasms? As much is implied in Susan McClary's claim that tonality itself channels 'images of desire' eventually leading to 'metaphorical ejaculation', as exemplified by works of Beethoven and Mahler.⁹² This is related to her feminist critique of gender prejudice in music theory and reception history, epitomized by the use of 'feminine endings' for cadences that fall on a 'weak' beat (i.e. a metrical upbeat). Contrary to this last case and other examples, though, her claim on apotheosis-as-ejaculations is not based on verbal reception materials, but on her interpretation of the music alone. This implies a strong conjectural dimension, and exposes it to Richard Taruskin's objecting to 'argument by analogy' on the grounds that 'it easily confuses analogy with identity, forgetting that analogies identify similarities within disparities'⁹³.

Now, critics acknowledge that 'there is something right about [her] descriptions of the music itself', and urge the reader to listen 'with McClary in hand' the

⁸⁹ Hart, 'Vincent d'Indy', 248-253. See also Brian Hart, 'The symphony in Debussy's world', *Debussy and his world*, 181-201.

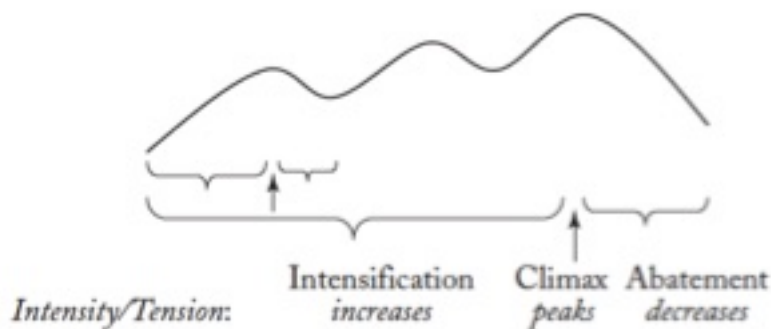
⁹⁰ Meyer, 'Exploiting limits', 190.

⁹¹ Alexander Rehding, 'Liszt's Musical Monuments', *19th-Century Music*, XXVI/1, 52-72 at 56.

⁹² Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings. Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), 125 and 127.

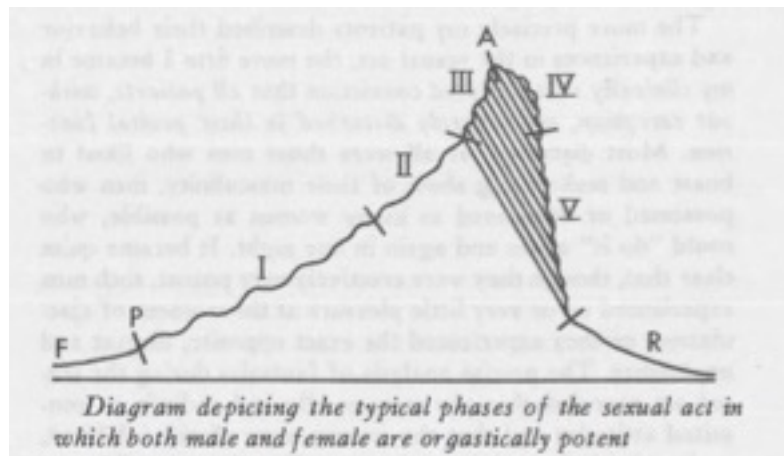
⁹³ Richard Taruskin, 'Material Gains: Assessing Susan McClary', *Music & Letters* Vol. 90 n°3 (Aug. 2009), 453-467 at 464.

recapitulation of the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth, where she famously heard 'the consequent juxtaposition of desire and unspeakable violence'.⁹⁴ In Nicholas Cook's words, her interpretation 'builds on the objective properties of the musical trace in such a way as to construct and communicate a quite distinctive way of experiencing the passage'⁹⁵. McClary's general argument on 'metaphorical ejaculations' can be illustrated by comparing a graph of the standard intensity curve for musical climaxes, defined by Austin Patty as a 'pattern of growth and decline'⁹⁶, and the graph Wilhelm Reich included in his 1942 book *The Function of Orgasm*:⁹⁷



EXAMPLE 3. *The intensity curve*

Pl. 4. Intensity curve from Austin Patty, 'Pacing Scenarios', 328



Pl. 5. Graph for orgasm from Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of Orgasm*, 103.
F = forepleasure, P = penetration, A [C?] = climax, R = relaxation.

⁹⁴ Nick Zangwill, 'Susan McClary and musical formalism', *The Musical Times* Vol. 155 n°1929 (Winter 2014), 63-69 at 64.

⁹⁵ Nicholas Cook, 'Theorizing Musical Meaning', *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 2001), 170-195 at 183.

⁹⁶ Patty, 'Pacing Scenarios', 328.

⁹⁷ Wilhelm Reich, *The Function of Orgasm. Sex-Economic Problems of Biological Energy* (1942) (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973), 103.

The shapes are roughly the same, even if Patty's graph allows for several peaks of growing intensity and a slow abatement, whereas in Reich's there is only one peak and the tension drops much faster. Reich developed his 'bioelectrical' model as part of a study of 'sex economy', claiming that the 'orgasm formula' – 'tension → charge → discharge → relaxation' – was the very 'life formula'.⁹⁸ However, we do not need to assume Reich's essentialist views on orgasm and life to note the analogy between Patty's generic intensity curve and his picture of the 'typical phases of the sexual act'. The analogy is not only one of visual shapes but also one of temporal scale. 'Duration from five to twenty-minutes', writes Reich under his graph; the data could be refined, but the duration of the sexual act is clearly comparable to that of many pieces of music, including most movements of the classic repertoire. A comparison could also be made, at an anthropological level, between the temporal settings of the rituals of love-making and those of concert-going, where applauding is a 'terminally climactic form'.

Even if Reich claims that his model applies both to male and female, he clearly grants a normative status to masculine experience, as shown by the abrupt descent that precedes the 'relaxation' phase. Robert Scholes has claimed that 'the archetype of all fiction is the sexual act. (...) For what connects fiction – and music – with sex is the fundamental orgasmic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution.'⁹⁹ This metaphor is also based on the normative value of masculine orgasm, thus exposing it to feminist critique. 'Those of us who know no art of delaying climax or, reading, feel no incipient tumescence, may well be barred from the pleasure of this 'full fictional act'', writes Teresa De Lauretis, in reaction to Scholes' implicit belief in the 'inherent maleness of all narrative movement'.¹⁰⁰ McClary, in turn, says that Scholes is 'guilty of both essentializing and universalizing what is in fact a particular version of 'the sexual act''; yet she does take Scholes' point, by claiming that *male* 'orgasmic rhythm' has archetypal status for narratives in patriarchal cultures.¹⁰¹

What is, then, a narrative climax? In his study of 'narrative tension', Raphaël Baroni says that 'knot (*noeud*) and *dénouement*' are essential to the very notion of plot (*mise en intrigue*) in literature, drama, and cinema', since they 'structure the narrative through the plotting of events, as stages of an interpretive path that corresponds to the

⁹⁸ Reich, *The Function of Orgasm*, 286.

⁹⁹ Robert Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1979), 26; quoted in McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 126.

¹⁰⁰ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice doesn't. Feminism, semiotics, cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 108.

¹⁰¹ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 126.

development of a tension.¹⁰² This view, which Baroni inherits from narratologists like Vladimir Propp and A. J. Greimas, actually goes back to Aristotle, who said in the *Poetics* that a plot should have ‘a beginning, a middle, and an end’, and also, that its ‘denouement’ [*lusis*] should be ‘the result of the plot itself’¹⁰³, i.e. rather than of the events it represents. The fact that humans can take pleasure in knowing these last through *mimesis* is a decisive aspect of the Aristotelian ‘paradox of tragedy’, which makes of *catharsis* the result of stories that end with disaster and death¹⁰⁴.

In contemporary literature, a typical *dénouement* is the finding of the killer in a thriller as the result of an ‘interpretive path’ followed by both the detective of the story and the reader. Other typical cases might be, in epic or dramatic narrative, knowing who the victor and the loser of a battle are, or whether the hero manages to win his ‘spiritual struggle’ at the end of the story. This narrative *dénouement* is always a *cognitive* event, in the sense that it results from new information about the plot, like discovering the killer’s identity or the hero’s fate.

Many musical climaxes are undisputedly linked to cognitive events of this kind. As much is implied in Mahler’s comment on false and true conclusions, where the musical climax itself brings news of the hero’s ‘victory’, and the same is true, in a still more explicit way, of d’Indy’s final apotheosis. Most programme music and operatic scenes operate on similar premises. Eero Tarasti’s narratological perspective, based on the theories of A. J. Greimas, also suggests narrative *dénouements* that do not depend on verbal elements, for instance when in Chopin’s *Polonaise-Fantasia* op. 61 the struggle between the musical themes reaches a point (b. 262) where ‘the true identity’ of a theme that until then had a subordinated, negative function, is finally ‘revealed’.¹⁰⁵ Meyer’s syntactical climaxes like, say, the recapitulation in a sonata form, also have a crucial cognitive element, namely the recognition of the exposition’s material. In a similar vein, Baroni makes a case for instrumental music being an ‘abstract’ version of narrative, where ‘the pleasure one can take from it depends of the more or less tortuous

¹⁰² Raphaël Baroni, *La tension narrative. Suspense, curiosité et surprise* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 40-41: ‘...noeud et dénouement, qui structurent le récit à travers la mise en intrigue des événements, sont avant tout des étapes dans le cheminement interprétatif, qui se définissent en rapport avec le développement d’une tension.’

¹⁰³ Aristototele, *Poetics* 1454a. See Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit. 2. La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 67-77.

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L’expérience esthétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 164-176.

¹⁰⁵ Eero Tarasti, ‘Pour une musicologie de Chopin’. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 15/1 (1984), 72: ‘...la véritable identité de ce thème qui a fonctionné comme négactant est révélée.’

ways that lead to the final *dénouement*'¹⁰⁶. In such approaches, narrativity as such, independently of any specific semiotic medium, appears as the key to aesthetic climax.¹⁰⁷

At the receptor's level, Baroni associates the *noeud/dénouement* pair with a succession of inner states of tension and harmony, a 'dysphoric imbalance' followed by a 'euphoric rebalance'.¹⁰⁸ And he suggests that this can have a libidinal basis, namely the 'scopic drive', described by Roland Barthes in *Le Plaisir du texte*: 'All the excitement lies in the *hope* of seeing the sex (the high school boy's dream) or of knowing the end of the story (the satisfaction of fiction).'¹⁰⁹ Even if he doesn't speak here of sublimation, Barthes is drawing from Freud and Lacan to propose his famous distinction between spoken *plaisir* and unspeakable *jouissance*. This structuralist reading of Freud was inspirational for Robert Scholes and other American narratologists like Peter Brooks, whose ideas were integrated, together with the critique of their male bias, into feminist theories.

Now the reading of Freud can take one in different directions. In 1977, Brooks derived what he called 'Freud's masterplot' from 'Beyond the Pleasure principle' (1920), the article that introduced the notion that Eros and Thanatos (rather than libido opposed to the reality principle) are at work in every human being. 'The aim of all life is death', writes Freud. Brooks comments: 'plot mediates meanings with the contradictory human world of the eternal and the mortal'.¹¹⁰ The view of death as the organizer of narrativity connects with Aristotle and the unhappy endings of ancient tragedy, yet does not rule out sexual pleasure. On the contrary: if 'desire is the wish for the end', writes Brooks, 'the story of Scheherazade is doubtless the story of stories'.¹¹¹ And since music cannot go on for a thousand nights, a musical ending should 'represent its own finitude', as Federico Monjeau puts it.¹¹² The notion that orgasms have a connection with death, frequent in madrigals by Dowland or

¹⁰⁶ Raphaël Baroni, 'Tensions et résolutions : musicalité de l'intrigue ou intrigue musicale ?', *Cahiers de narratologie* 21 (2011), 15-17.

¹⁰⁷ H. Porter Abbott, 'Narrativity', *Handbook of Narratology* 2nd ed. Vol. 2, Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, Wolf Schmid (Eds.) (Berlin/Boston : De Gruyter, 2014), 587-608.

¹⁰⁸ Baroni, *La tension narrative*, 133. 'déséquilibre dysphorique' / 'rééquilibrage euphorique'.

¹⁰⁹ Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 20; quoted in Baroni, *La tension narrative*, 260: 'Toute l'excitation se réfugie dans l'espoir de voir le sexe (rêve de collégien) ou de connaître la fin de l'histoire (satisfaction romanesque).'

¹¹⁰ Peter Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', *Yale French Studies* 55/56, *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise* (1977), 280-300, at 300.

¹¹¹ Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot', 299.

¹¹² Federico Monjeau, *Un viaje en círculos. Sobre óperas, cuartetos y finales* (Buenos Aires: Mardulce, 2018), chap. 9.

Monteverdi, can be likened to Georges Bataille's description of masculine orgasm as the *petite mort*.¹¹³

There is a limit, though, to narrativity as a key to both musical and sexual pleasure. In music not all climaxes are cognitive events, and what makes them climaxes is not their role in a plot but their phenomenological shape; in this, they are different from literary climaxes, whose experienced *tempo* and duration vary from reader to reader. Also, from a psychoanalytical perspective the actual temporality of the sexual act does not mirror that of sexual desire in general, whose phenomenology tends to merge in the opaque experience of the unconscious. Adding to that, both music and sex often rely on non-conceptual representations, whose experience is not reducible to attributing them a role in a plot. Of course, this is not to deny that sex involves a cognitive dimension, one that is intimately linked to affects and pleasure. Richard Shusterman has convincingly argued, against a dominant tradition in aesthetics, for sexual experience to be a kind of aesthetic experience, at least in some situations.¹¹⁴ For Jean-Marie Schaeffer, aesthetic experience definitely involves a cognitive dimension, concentrated in the notion of aesthetic attention.¹¹⁵ At a much simpler level, sex involves cognition because each partner perceives the bodily presence of the other whose physical attributes and behaviour are indeed a crucial source of pleasure. And even solitary sex is, more often than not, mediated by sensorial stimulation, as witnessed by the pornography industry. This does not imply that *orgasm* itself is a cognitive experience, though.

What, after all, is an orgasm? It is not enough to think of it as an 'explosive discharge of neuromuscular tensions', as suggested in the famous Kinsey reports.¹¹⁶ The question has been raised by philosophers Ned Block and Michael Tye as a case test for their dispute around 'representationalism', i.e. whether the phenomenal character of conscious experience is only that of representational contents, or whether there are also 'qualitative properties of conscious experience', or qualia.¹¹⁷ According to Block, on the one hand, 'there are features of the experience of orgasm that don't represent anything', since 'orgasm is phenomenally impressive and there is nothing very impressive about the representational content *that there is an orgasm*'.¹¹⁸ According

¹¹³ Georges Bataille, *Les larmes d'Eros* (Paris : Pauvert, 2001).

¹¹⁴ Richard Shusterman, 'Aesthetic Experience: from Analysis to Eros'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64/2 (Spring 2006), 217-229.

¹¹⁵ Schaeffer, *L'expérience esthétique*, chap. 2.

¹¹⁶ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, Clyde E. Martin and Paul H. Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders, 1953), 627.

¹¹⁷ Ned Block, 'Mental Paint and Mental Latex'. *Philosophical Issues* 7, *Perception* (1996), 19-49.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

to Nye, on the other hand, 'orgasms are, at heart, bodily sensations. Like other bodily sensations, under optimal conditions (conditions of well functioning), they "track" bodily states, just as perceptual sensations "track" environmental states.'¹¹⁹

Consequently, an orgasm is either a non-representational impression or a non-conceptual representation of one's own body. And this is so even if mental images, among many other things, play a key role in erotic excitement as part of 'a piece of theater whose story seems genuine because of the truth of the body's sensations', as Robert Stoller puts it.¹²⁰ Having an orgasm is not being aroused, or enchanted, or touched, by a partner, even if all that can definitely trigger it. 'I can have an experience whose representational content is that my *partner* is having a very pleasing experience down *there* that changes in intensity', says Block; 'and although that may be pleasurable for me, it is not pleasurable in the phenomenally impressive way that graces my own orgasms. I vastly prefer my own orgasms to those of others.'¹²¹ It follows that there is no such a thing as a shared orgasm even if partners reach climax at the same time, which can of course very much contribute to the intensity of their experience.

This brings to the fore an essential difference between Patty's graph of musical intensity curve and Reich's graph of orgasm, namely that the first depicts an object of perception, whereas the second depicts an inner experience. Musical climaxes and real orgasms are but two different examples of the many temporal shapes that can be represented through an intensity curve of tension and energy. This is why the orgasm metaphor can apply to very different things, from winning chess games to hearing washing machines,¹²² as long as they are sources of pleasure. And, of course, this is independent from the presence of the word *orgasm* itself. Annegret Fauser explains how Parisian musical critics, both excited and embarrassed by Massenet's erotic interlude in act II of *Esclarmonde* (1889), struggled to 'control the music's excessively direct impact by looking for verbal equivalents'.¹²³ Only in the 1920s the word 'orgasm' started to migrate from sexology and psychiatry to the current vocabulary of sexual

¹¹⁹ Michael Tye, 'Orgasms Again'. *Philosophical Issues* 7, *Perception* (1996), 51-54 at 54.

¹²⁰ Robert Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), viii. See also Steven Epstein, 'Sexuality and identity: The contribution of object relations theory to a constructionist sociology', *Theory and Society* 20 (1991), 825-873.

¹²¹ Block, 'Mental Paint and Mental Latex', 33.

¹²² Bernard Suits, 'Games and Paradox', *Philosophy of Science* Vol. 36, No. 3 (Sep., 1969), 316-321.

¹²³ Annegret Fauser, 'L'élément érotique dans l'œuvre de Massenet', *Massenet en son temps, Actes du colloque organisé en 1992 à l'occasion du deuxième Festival Massenet* (Saint-Etienne: Association du festival Massenet/L'Esplanade Saint-Etienne Opéra, 1999), 156-179 at 169.

pleasure;¹²⁴ in French legal sources, it does not appear before 1940.¹²⁵ Yet the plausibility of considering any phenomenon, including musical climaxes, as a representation of the sexual act strongly increases with the presence of *other* analogies than just similar intensity curves. Indeed, the lack of other analogical parameters might help explain why McClary's 'metaphorical ejaculations' often appear as idiosyncratic interpretations, rather than being accounted for in reception materials.

What other analogies, then, play a role in a musical climax that can be heard as an orgasm? One of the most basic features of the sexual act, in all historical contexts, is the strong rhythmic dimension of the interaction of the bodies. Accelerating and slowing down, introducing segmentations with or without transitions, keeping a steady pulsation while varying other intensities – all of these are facets of the complex game of pace, power and pleasure that couples play during sexual intercourse. According to psychologist Adam Safron, for evolutionary reasons 'human sexual performance depends on being capable of not only switching between multiple rhythms, but of inferring the best times for these changes.'¹²⁶ 'Slowly the pelvis begins to swing, like the free swinging of a dangling leg. As the pelvic movements in both partners take on this free-swinging quality, the tempo of the movement increases', says an *Encyclopaedia of Sexual Behavior*; the passage rings like a musical description of dance.¹²⁷ Such rhythmical and temporal patterns have a bodily basis that can be measured through scientific means: Williams Masters and Virginia Johnson found that during orgasm the initial contractions of the penis happen at the same average interval as those of the vagina, namely 0.8 seconds.¹²⁸ But they also have a strong subjective component, as when an 'experience of inevitability' marks for the man the instant when he ceases to control ejaculation; also, feminine orgasm reportedly begins with 'a feeling of suspension'.¹²⁹

All this is a consequence of human biology, which nevertheless does not prevent strong cultural modulations in time and space. The duration of foreplay and

¹²⁴ Anne-Claire Rebreyend, 'Sur les traces des pratiques sexuelles des individus 'ordinaires'. France 1920-1970', *Le Mouvement Social* 207 / 2 (2004), 57-74; Dominique Cardon, 'Droit au plaisir et devoir d'orgasme dans l'émission de Ménie Grégoire', *Le Temps des médias*, vol.1 n°1 (2003), 77-94.

¹²⁵ Anne-Marie Sohn, *Du premier baiser à l'alcôve. La sexualité des Français au quotidien (1850-1950)* (Paris: Aubier, 1996), chap. 1.

¹²⁶ Adam Safron, 'What is orgasm? A model of sexual trance and climax via rhythmic entrainment', *Socioaffective Neuroscience & Psychology* (2016), 1-17.

¹²⁷ Alexander Lowen, 'Movements and feeling in sex', *The Encyclopedia of Sexual Behavior*, Albert Ellis and Albert Abarbanel (eds.). (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961), 740.

¹²⁸ William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Toronto and New York, 1966; repr. Boston, 1980), 128, 185.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 134, 214.

intercourse depends on cultural sexual scripts that orient the individual's desires and practices, at the price of frequent misperceptions and discordances.¹³⁰ Nowadays, in Western countries, the coordination of movements and gestures is often supposed to maximize the pleasure of both partners, at least as a normative ideal whose ultimate expression is heterosexual simultaneous orgasm. Things were probably a little bit different in Debussy's time, especially since women's pleasure was generally less important for men. For sure, instructions on how to 'build her stage-by-stage towards the best orgasm of her life', now current in men's magazines, were not to be found in the press he read.¹³¹ Yet the temporal coordination of bodies and affects was, and is, a necessary aspect of any sexual encounter.

I suggest that a piece of music is more likely to represent and/or induce a sex experience when its pacing scenarios, and not only its intensity curve, have an analogic relation with those of sex. According to Safron, 'music and dance may be the only things that come close to sexual interaction in their power to entrain neural rhythms and produce sensory absorption and trance.'¹³² This might be a fundamental reason for dance's close association with seduction and sex. It happens through what cognitivists call 'cross-domain mapping', i.e. the capacity to establish analogies between separated areas of experience, a mechanism that according to Lawrence Zbikowski, is crucial for musical emotions and dance.¹³³ Musical works that explicitly evoke sexual content, like bacchanals in Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* (1877) or Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* (1912), characteristically display strong rhythmic activity. Also, Ravel's *Boléro* illustrates the idea as a metronome of desire: a musical climax is more likely to be heard as a musical orgasm when it articulates a climactic intensity curve and a rhythmic pattern that resemble the pacing scenarios of real sexual acts.

The perception by a listener of such a temporal sonic shape under certain contextual conditions allows her to recognize it as an orgasm, although there is a long way to *experiencing* it as such. Indeed, the chances of somebody actually having an orgasm just by listening to a musical orgasm are quite low. This doesn't mean that the listening experience never includes sexual arousal. The pleasure of perceiving a musical climax might have something in common with that of perceiving a partner's

¹³⁰ S. Andrea Miller and E. Sandra Byers, 'Actual and Desired Duration of Foreplay and Intercourse: Discordance and Misperceptions within Heterosexual Couples', *The Journal of Sex Research* 41/3 (Aug., 2004), 301-309.

¹³¹ *Men's Health*, quoted in Frith, *Orgasmic Bodies*, 94.

¹³² Safron, 'What is orgasm?', 5.

¹³³ Lawrence Zbikowski, 'Music, emotion, analysis', *Music Analysis*, 29/i-ii-iii (2011); *id.*, 'Ways of knowing. Social dance, music, and grounded cognition', *Music-Dance. Sound and Motion in Contemporary Discourse*, Patrizia Veroli and Gianfranco Vinay (eds.) (London: Routledge, 2018), 57-75.

orgasm, while differing from it at an ethical level, since the latter is part of an intersubjective encounter while the former is not. Psychologists John Sloboda and Jaak Panksepp mention sexual arousal as a quite frequent effect of music in their experimental studies of 'chills' and the listening experience¹³⁴. And even if no reception studies seem to exist, some level of arousal is a likely reaction to 'aural sex' pieces, like pop music songs that include female vocalizations like Donna Summer's 'pornosonic confession' in *Love to love you baby*,¹³⁵ to say nothing of unedited recordings of actual orgasms. Also, in an article on music and 'erotic agency', Tia DeNora has reported cases of heterosexual men proposing to her female partners to adapt the timing of the sexual act to classical music works, including Ravel's *Boléro*, eliciting negative reactions in the women.¹³⁶ This empirical result is similar to a fictional scene in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Summertime*, depicting a woman outraged by the protagonist's proposal to make love to the adagio of Schubert's C Major Quintet, a thirteen-minute piece with no apparent 'musical orgasm'.¹³⁷

All this suggests a historically strong masculine bias. It also confirms the pertinence, under certain contextual conditions, of describing *some* music climaxes as 'musical orgasms', even if masculine. But what about feminine orgasms? How can *they* be musically represented? The most famous orgasm in music history is probably that of a woman, Isolde, at the end of Richard Wagner's *Liebestod*. But this is a male composer's representation of female *jouissance*, one in which the *petite mort* is monumentalized into a *grande mort*. And in that respect things are not very different in avant-garde works such as Erwin Schulhoff's *Sonata erotica* (1919), even though this Dadaist piece, where a female singer performs a realistic orgasm fully written into score, actually represents a critique of Wagnerian pathos by its mere existence. In pornography and popular culture, 'the vocal ejaculations of climaxing women are a prominent, perhaps *the* prominent, feature of representations of female sexual pleasure'.¹³⁸ But it is harder to identify musical representations of the *inner* experience of women akin to the masculine intensity curve. The non-normative status of feminine

¹³⁴ John Sloboda, 'Music structure and emotional response: Some empirical findings', *Psychology of Music* 19 (1991), 110-120 at 112; Jaak Panksepp, 'The Emotional Sources of 'Chills' Induced by Music', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter, 1995), 171-207 at 178.

¹³⁵ Susana Loza, 'Sampling (Hetero)Sexuality: Diva-Ness and Discipline in Electronic Dance Music', *Popular Music*, Vol. 20, No. 3, *Gender and Sexuality* (Oct. 2001), 349-357 at 351; John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis, 'Aural Sex: The Female Orgasm in Popular Sound', *TDR* (1988-) Vol. 40, No. 3, *Experimental Sound & Radio* (Autumn, 1996), 102-111.

¹³⁶ Tia DeNora, 'Music and Erotic Agency. Sonic Resources and Socio-Sexual Action', *Music & Body* 3/2 (1997), 43-65 at 58.

¹³⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Summertime. Scenes from provincial life* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 68.

¹³⁸ Corbett and Kapsalis, 'Aural Sex', 103.

orgasm precludes standardized sonic representations, other than real or faked vocalizations that are themselves often modeled on men's desire.¹³⁹ McClary makes a case for *Genesis II*, a piano trio by Janika Vandervelde, to contain an 'image of female erotic pleasure', but she does not describe the music, nor speaks of orgasms for that matter.¹⁴⁰ Hanna Bosma notes that 'the avoidance of definitive closure' is recurrent in works by female avant-garde composers, as well as in male-dominated avant-garde music at large;¹⁴¹ Danielle Sofer mentions Alice Shields' electronic opera *Apocalypse* (1994) as staging a woman's orgasms by leaning away from 'binaristic notions of gender'.¹⁴² We can leave open the question, as a topic for further research, of what musical feminine orgasms sound like, be they composed by men or by women, when they are truly independent of masculine models. For sure, such an inquiry should take good notice of 'the proposition that female orgasm is unnecessary', as feminist literary theorist Susan Winnett wrote in still another response to Scholes' 'archetype', not because she didn't like orgasming but because 'women's pleasure can take place outside, or independent of, the male sexual economy whose pulsations determine the dominant culture.'¹⁴³

Nevertheless, something more substantial can be said about the visual representation of female orgasm. In 1966, Masters and Johnson proposed an alternative to Reich's graph and its masculine biased crescendo-and-post-coital-calm curve.¹⁴⁴ Their graphs include an enhanced plateau, multi-orgasmic scenarios, and different curves of decreasing intensity (See Pl. 6).

¹³⁹ Erin B. Cooper, Allan Fenigstein and Robert L. Fauber, 'The Faking Orgasm Scale for Women: Psychometric Properties', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43, n° 3 (1 April 2014), 423-435.

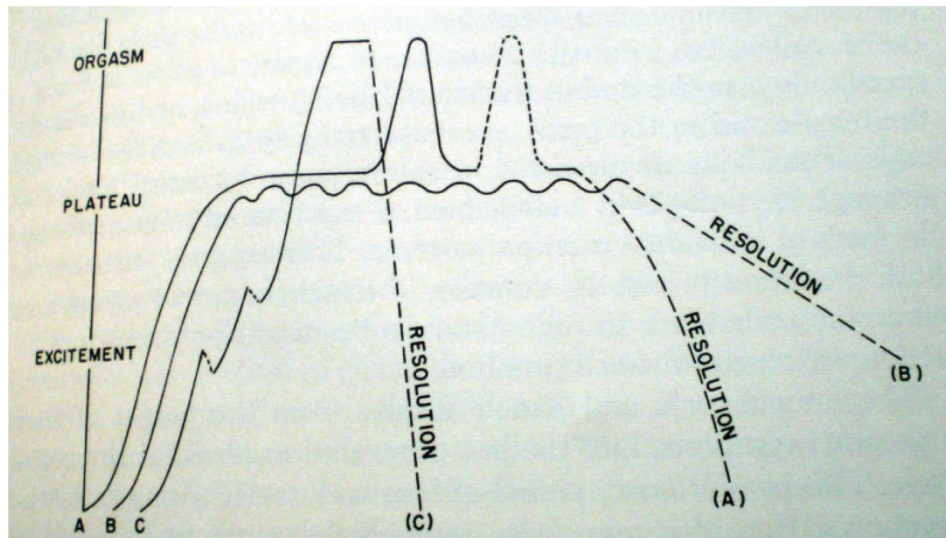
¹⁴⁰ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 124.

¹⁴¹ Hannah Bosma, 'Musical Washing Machines, Composer-Performers, and Other Blurring Boundaries: How Women Make a Difference in Electroacoustic Music', *Intersections* Vol. 26 n°2, *In and Out of the Sound Studio* (2006), 100. See also *id.*, *The electronic cry: Voice and gender in electroacoustic music*, Ph.D. diss., ASCA-University of Amsterdam (2013), <https://dare.uva.nl/search?identifier=fa216eb9-eab1-468c-98c8-0f76eb679b8a>, accessed 10 June 2018.

¹⁴² Danielle Sofer, 'Breaking Silence, Breaching Censorship: "Ongoing Interculturality" in Alice Shields's Electronic Opera *Apocalypse*', *American Music*, 36 (2018), 135-162 at 141; and Sofer, 'Eroticism and Time in Computer Music: Juliana Hodkinson and Niels Ronsholdt's *Fish & Fowl*', *Proceedings of the ICMC/SMC* (2014), 148-53.

¹⁴³ Susan Winnett, 'Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure', *PMLA* 105/3, *The Politics of Critical Language* (May 1990), 505-518 at 505.

¹⁴⁴ Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, 5.



Pl. 6. Graph for female orgasm from Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, 5

Drawn at a moment when the very nature of feminine orgasm – including Freud’s famous and now discredited distinction between vaginal and clitoral orgasms – was an object of scientific and general debate, these graphs showed striking differences between men and women. But Masters and Johnson also fired an endless controversy for contrary reasons, as witnessed by sociologist Ross Morrow’s later fierce attack on their ‘four stages model’ –excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution – because of its ‘ideological emphasis on sexual similarity’ through an alleged essentialization of heterosexual ‘coital imperative’.¹⁴⁵ With these debates in mind, it might be more adequate, rather than distinguishing sharply between masculine and feminine orgasms, to see orgasms as a variegated set of experiences that, within the boundaries of their biological apparatus, human beings may, or may not, have in different forms and situations.

In fact, research tends to show no essential difference between women and men, except – significantly – the ability of many women to experience more and longer orgasms, and also to continue making love afterwards. A few years after the publication of *Human Sexual Response*, a study by Ellen Belle Vance and Nathaniel N. Wagner detected no gender difference in a set of ‘written descriptions of orgasm’, like ‘A buildup of tension which starts to pulsate very fast, and then there is a sudden release from the tension and desire to sleep’; ‘Feels like tension building up until you think it can’t build up any more, then release’; and so on. The authors concluded that ‘the experience of orgasm for males and females is essentially the same’, something

¹⁴⁵ Ross Morrow, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 102-8.

that is true in many ways, including the involved neurological mechanisms. Yet what that 1976 study actually showed, because of its biased methodology, was only that a panel of mostly male ‘experts’ (gynaecologists, obstetricians and medical students) was unable to distinguish between male and female *narratives* of orgasms out of a sample from which multi-orgasmic reports had been suppressed from the start.¹⁴⁶

Transposed to music, this suggests that at a male composer was, and is, likely to conceive the intensity curve of a female orgasm as similar to that of his own orgasms. With all this in mind, we can resume our discussion of Debussy’s *L’isle joyeuse* at the point where we left it.

Emma’s desire, Claude’s music

Let’s start by the final climax. Composing the end of *L’isle joyeuse* was for Debussy a singular thing, both for musical and biographical reasons. As we have seen, climaxes were not his topical way of concluding, like they were for Mahler or d’Indy. Leaving aside his early production, where idiosyncratic aspects are less pronounced, his style is better represented by ‘dissolving endings’ like that of *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1894).¹⁴⁷ Here, the most salient climax intervenes less than half the way through the piece (bars 44-46) whereas a calmer, syntactic climax due to ‘motivic compression’ can be identified at bars 93-95, still more than a minute before the end.¹⁴⁸ Needless to say, this doesn’t make of *Prélude* an asexual piece; indeed, partly thanks to Nijinsky’s 1912 performance, it is one of the most eroticized pieces of all music history.¹⁴⁹ The three *Nocturnes* (1897-9) do not end with climactic closures either. And such endings are virtually absent in emblematic piano works such as *Images* (1901-5), the *Préludes* (1909-12)¹⁵⁰ and *En blanc et noir* (1915). As Marianne Wheeldon points out, in Debussy’s later works, musical ideas that ‘do not aim toward a climax or resolution, but proceed with no one statement hierarchically more significant than another.’¹⁵¹ An

¹⁴⁶ Ellen Belle Vance and Nathaniel N. Wagner, ‘Written descriptions of orgasm: a study of sex differences’, *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 5/1 (January 1976), 87-98.

¹⁴⁷ Arnold Whittall, ‘Tonality and the Whole-tone Scale in the Music of Debussy’, *Music Review* 36 (1975), 261-71 at 265.

¹⁴⁸ Matthew Brown, ‘Tonality and Form in Debussy’s “Prélude à l’Après-midi d’un faune”’, *Music Theory Spectrum* 15/2 (Autumn, 1993), 137.

¹⁴⁹ Farfan, ‘Man as Beast: Nijinsky’s Faun’.

¹⁵⁰ Of the twenty-four *Préludes*, only *Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest* and *Général Lavine: eccentric* end with full climactic closure. For an analysis of the climax at two-thirds of *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, see Jeremy Day-O’Connell, ‘Debussy, Pentatonicism, and the Tonal Tradition’, *Music Theory Spectrum*, 31/2 (Fall 2009), 225-261.

¹⁵¹ Marianne Wheeldon, ‘Interpreting ‘Strong Moments’ in Debussy’s “La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune”’, *Intégral* 14/15 (2000/2001), 181-208, 182.

earlier piece like *Masques* (1903-4) dissolves in a kind of transition that, according to Roy Howat, makes of it a prequel to *L'isle joyeuse*.¹⁵²

On the other hand, Debussy's pieces do seem to end more often with climaxes in the years following the premiere of *Pelléas*: witness *Estampes* (1903), *Rapsodie pour saxophone* (1903),¹⁵³ *Deux danses* (1904), *Ibéria* (1905-8) and *La Mer* (1903-5). Indeed, the final section of *Dialogues du vent et de la mer*, the third and last *esquisse symphonique*, is one of the composer's most grandiose orchestral moments. In later years, *Jeux* (1912) displays an impressive climactic form, whose intensity curve was personally scrutinized by Diaghilev to suit Nijinsky's eroticized choreography.¹⁵⁴ It is perhaps fair to say that climactic closure, contrary to being the default norm it was for many composers, was for Debussy but one formal strategy among others, in an astonishingly rich palette of ways to connect his music with silence.

Now, according to François de Médicis, *La Mer* is full of traces of Debussy's encounter with Emma, starting with a series of musical allusions to Wagner's *Tristan* that he hears as cryptic love messages, and including the dedication to Emma of a reduced manuscript score, later deleted for unknown reasons. For this author, there is an 'intrigue amoureuse' in *La Mer*, and this work, *L'isle joyeuse* and *Fêtes galantes*, are all 'hommages amoureux'.¹⁵⁵ Should we think that all the terminal climaxes Debussy wrote in Emma's company were born out of the same 'libidinal economy' as *L'isle joyeuse*? In fact, De Médicis speaks of love but does not say anything about sex, leaving us free to speculate on whether the final climax of *La Mer* is to be heard as a musical orgasm. We have seen how deep Debussy's joy of working on *La Mer* was during the blissful days spent with his lover on the isle of Jersey. Simon Trezise notes, in connection with this work, that 'the sea has often been associated with sexuality'.¹⁵⁶ In Ken Russell's film, the composer's swimming in the Channel with his own music as soundtrack is depicted as an almost erotic experience.

Yet, the ending of *La Mer* is much less likely to be heard as an orgasm than that of *L'isle joyeuse*, for reasons that are not only biographical (the third sketch definitely makes a difference at that level) but musical as well. According to Brian Hart, *Dialogues du vent et de la mer* 'alludes to the rhetorical features of a nineteenth-century symphonic

¹⁵² Howat, 'En route for *L'isle joyeuse*. The Restoration of a triptych'.

¹⁵³ James R. Noyes, 'Debussy's "Rapsodie pour orchestre et saxophone" Revisited', *The Musical Quarterly*, 90 3/4 (Fall-Winter, 2007), 416-445.

¹⁵⁴ Robert Orledge, 'The Genesis of Debussy's "Jeux"', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 128, No. 1728 (Feb., 1987), 68-73.

¹⁵⁵ François de Médicis, 'Tristan dans *La Mer* : le crépuscule wagnérien noyé dans le zénith debussyste?', *Acta Musicologica*, 79/1 (2007), 195-251 at 224-225.

¹⁵⁶ Trezise, *Debussy: La Mer*, 42.

finale: the reprise of its principal theme leads to the dynamic and textural climax of the composition, followed by a chorale peroration; and, unlike the preceding movements, it ends with a firm tonic cadence'. This puts *La Mer* in the surprising company of the *d'indyste* 'message-symphony', while at the same time rejecting its very 'purpose', namely the existence of a message.¹⁵⁷ Whatever Debussy's reasons for this strategic move, in this apotheosis the salience of the chorale-like melody, traditionally associated with political power and religious experience, is provided by dynamic and registral factors, like loud high brass sonorities on long-sustained pitches, and also by the slowing down, through the very salience of this melody, of the music's rhythmic momentum.

As suggested above, rhythmic patterns that cross the domains of music and sex enhance the plausibility of hearing a musical climax like an orgasm. The contrast with *La Mer* in that aspect contributes to *L'isle joyeuse*'s singular position in Debussy's oeuvre, often acknowledged by analysts. According to Arnold Whittall, 'first and foremost, it is a symphonic poem which subjects one of his finest melodies to the increasingly orgiastic demands of the "programme"'. Whittall does not say to what 'programme' he is alluding, but the connection with Emma was surely in his mind, the keyword here being 'orgiastic'. 'That he was capable of driving a structure forwards to end at the moment of maximum tension –he continues- is clear from for example, Act IV of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, but *L'isle joyeuse* is a strikingly single-minded example of such a cumulative design and the musical language is powerfully consistent'.¹⁵⁸ Roy Howat stresses the singularity of what he calls an 'exuberant dynamic shape': 'beginning *pianissimo* on two notes a tone apart, and in an undefined rhythm and tonality, it finishes in A major splendour, triple-*forte*, the last two bars spanning virtually the entire keyboard and completing a coda of rhythmic vigour unsurpassed in Debussy's output'.¹⁵⁹

This invites one to explore the affordances of the music for sexual metaphors. But let's stress first that this is very different from claiming that of whether any passage of Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse* 'is' a musical orgasm, and also from saying that Debussy wanted it to be heard in that way. Rather, the articulation of biographical context and musical form makes it *plausible* to hear orgasms in the third sketch as well as in the

¹⁵⁷ Brian Hart, 'The Symphony in Debussy's World: A Context for His Views on the Genre and Early Interpretations of *La Mer*', *Debussy and His World*, Jane Fulcher (ed.). (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 181-202, 193-194.

¹⁵⁸ Whittall, 'Tonality and the Whole-tone Scale', 265-266.

¹⁵⁹ Howat, *Debussy in proportion*, 46.

final section of *L'isle joyeuse* – at least as plausible as other interpretations such as the *Voyage to Cythère* (which is far from contradicting it), a Pantheist celebration of Nature, or a Deleuzian ‘territorial assemblage’. In other words, both the C major climax and the final A major climax can be verbally represented as musical representations of orgasms on a stronger basis than an occasional poetic metaphor. Indeed, these affordances, and those of *L'isle joyeuse* as a whole, invite us to hear the entire piece as a sexual narrative. And even if the music does not resemble a dialogue between a feminine and a masculine ‘voice’, its most likely reference, given the dominant view of art as expression of the artist, and provided that the biographical information is available to the listener, is no other than the relationship of Emma Bardac and Claude Debussy.

Evidence of the plausibility of sexual associations is to be found in the eroticized descriptions that regularly appear in its reception history. An early one, saturated with disclaimers about ‘innocence’, is Louis Laloy’s picturing in 1906 a ‘Garden of Eden’ full of nude dancing fauns and nymphs.¹⁶⁰ In 1914, Debussy associates it with Watteau’s *L'embarquement pour Cythère* (1717), and its couples paying tribute to Aphrodite on an island of pleasures.¹⁶¹ In 1929, music critic Pierre Lagarde speaks of its ‘oriental *langueur*’.¹⁶² In 1932, the reference to Watteau appears in a book by Alfred Cortot: ‘*L'isle joyeuse* sets the trap of its laughter and easy pleasures to the reckless lovers, whose light boats approach its happy coasts under the approving gaze of Watteau, Verlaine, and Chabrier, all necessarily evoked by the sensuous curve of this music.’¹⁶³ In 1980, Harry Halbreich explains that this piece ‘is the solar euphoria close to the shining sea, the expanding pride of virile affirmation, the joy of the lovers who at last have left aside their masks.’¹⁶⁴ Paul Roberts says that ‘*L'isle joyeuse* is unique in the open-air quality of its extroversion, the sustained intensity of its final climax, and its offer of a fulfilment that is supremely achieved’, while speaking of ‘Bacchic ecstasy, or the love-rites of an intoxicated Dionysus’.¹⁶⁵ François-René Tranchefort writes that the piece ‘joyfully mirrors the solar triumph of the love of Claude and Emma

¹⁶⁰ Louis Laloy, ‘Paroles sur Claude Debussy’, *Le Mercure musical*, 1 January 1906, 197.

¹⁶¹ Klein, ‘Debussy’s *L'isle Joyeuse*’, 29-31.

¹⁶² Pierre Lagarde, ‘Claude Debussy par M. Pierre Lortat’, *Comoedia*, 10 March 1929.

¹⁶³ Alfred Cortot, *La musique française de piano* (Paris: PUF, 1932), 26. ‘*L'isle joyeuse* tend le piège de ses rires et de ses plaisirs faciles à l’insouciance des amants dans les barques légères vont accoster ses rives fortunes, sous les regards bienveillants de Watteau, de Verlaine et de Chabrier auxquels force à penser la courbe sensuelle de cette musique.’

¹⁶⁴ Harry Halbreich, ‘Analyse de l’œuvre’, in Lockspeiser, *Claude Debussy*, 568-569. ‘...c’est l’euphorie solaire face à la mer resplendissante, c’est la fierté épanouie de l’affirmation virile, c’est la joie des amants enfin débarrassés de leurs masques.’

¹⁶⁵ Roberts, *Images*, 111-112.

Bardac.¹⁶⁶ Whittall's 'orgy' and Howat's 'vigour' also belong to that bouquet of sexual metaphors, together with Klein's 'sexual energy'. Other reception materials could be added. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find a comment by a woman.

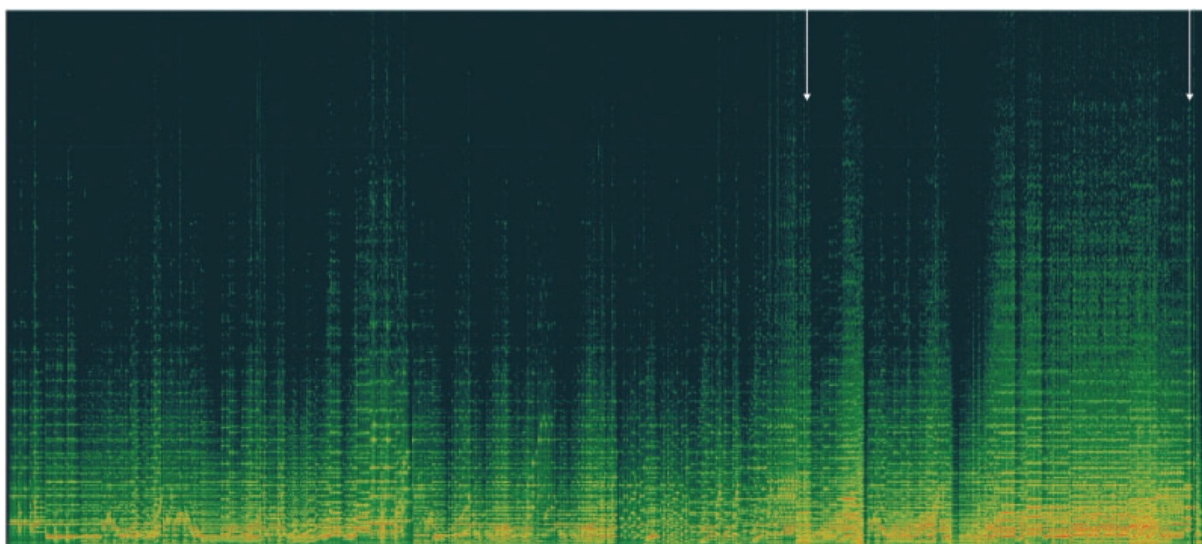
How does the music afford this proliferation of sexual images? Even if analysts have tried to describe its form with classical schemes, they all point out how far the piece is from following them, so we can leave them aside altogether, and favor rather a 'processual approach'.¹⁶⁷ To understand *L'isle joyeuse's* potential for sexual associations, Howat's suggestion to hear a 'sequence of dynamic waves' that 'lead cumulatively to the coda' seems promising, in the light of what we have seen above of human sexual performance as 'switching between multiple rhythms' and 'inferring the best times for these changes'. Throughout the piece, adds Howat, the sequence of waves, where he identifies five 'peaks', is achieved 'by preventing too firm a sense of arrival at any stage before'.¹⁶⁸ Emma's C major cadence, a moment of twice pulsating ecstasy in a relatively distant tonality, is still, nearly halfway through the piece, the firmest moment of arrival before the final A major cadence.

Thus, both climaxes are structurally related as complementary poles: one is open-ended, the other is the end itself; one evokes the intensity curve of a feminine orgasm, the other, that of a masculine orgasm; one was 'dictated' by Emma, the other was probably part of the first manuscript, written by Claude before encountering her. This pattern can fit several pieces of sonic theater: one in which a woman's orgasm is followed by a man's orgasm, one in which a woman climaxes first and both partners climax together at the end, one in which the music reaches an orgasm that has no gender specifications, and still others perhaps. But even for listeners unaware of, or indifferent to, anthropomorphic scripts, the C major climax and the A major climax organize the temporality of *L'isle joyeuse* – a piece of music of circa 6 minutes' length in performance – as a long-range quest for culminating pleasure. The global intensity curve can be visualized in a spectrogram (see Pl. 7).

¹⁶⁶ François-René Tranchefort, *Guide de la musique de piano et de clavecin* (Paris: Fayard, 1987). '...reflète la joie du triomphe solaire de l'amour de Claude et d'Emma Bardac.'

¹⁶⁷ Charles M. H. Keil, 'Motion and Feeling through Music', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1966), 337-349.

¹⁶⁸ Howat, *Debussy in Proportion*, 55 and 47-48.



Pl. 7. Spectrogram of *L'isle joyeuse*, after the 1961 recording by Magda Tagliaferro (the arrows indicate the C major and A major climaxes). Courtesy of Simon Garrette

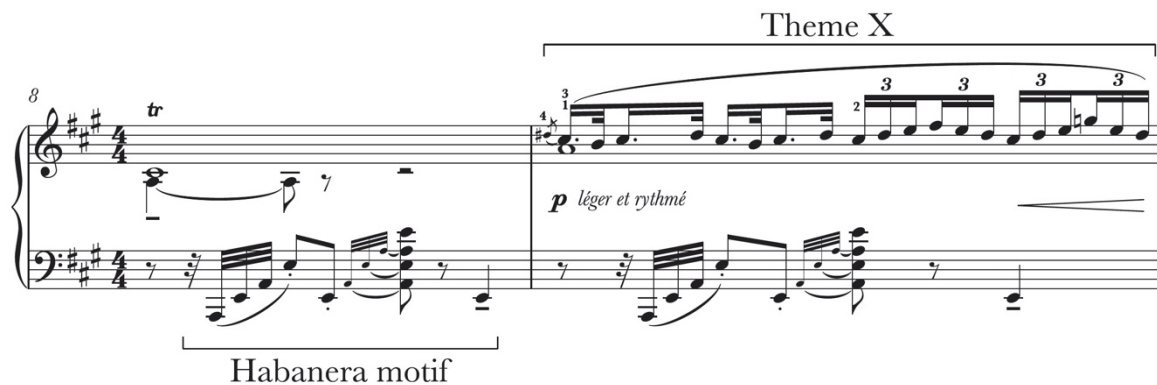
The quest starts at the beginning, with the first C# trill motif played without accompaniment, *quasi una cadenza*. It is a singular sound object, a long blurred sound in *temps lisse* with a fast suffix on a whole-tone collection, a pulsating explosion of frequencies, successively heard on the same notes at different octaves (see Ex. 1).

Ex. 1. Debussy, *L'isle joyeuse*, bb. 1-2



At bar 1 with no beat, at bar 52 with strong ternary accents, at bar 244 as pleasure unchained, the C# trill motif is throughout the piece a perceptual anchor in the midst of fast-flowing events, whose rhythmical patterns and thematic elaborations frame the complex interaction of diatonic, acoustic and whole-tone materials, well described in the literature. The thematic thread is dominated by the C# trill motif and by two main themes, plus several other ideas. The first main theme, theme X, is in fast binary rhythm, and associates a dotted motif and a triplet motif (see Ex. 2).

Ex. 2. Theme X and habanera motif, Debussy, *L'isle joyeuse*, bb. 8-9



Early in the piece, as a bridge between the C# trill and theme X, the bass plays five times, in guitar-like arpeggios, a motif of habanera. It is as though the music were setting a social scene of desire through a dance of Hispanic resonances. In Debussy's music, the habanera also sounds that same year in *La soirée dans Grenade*, a piano piece from *Estampes* (1903), and later in the prelude *La puerta del vino* (1911-12). In *L'isle joyeuse*, it is a sensual and tactful invitation to dance, an ephemeral dramaturgy of bodily sensations that returns with the C# trill at bars 64-66 – almost like a tango, soon to become new *danse à la mode* in Paris.

The thread of desire in *L'isle joyeuse* includes several other dance-like motifs, some of them binary, like the habanera, some ternary, like the ghost of a waltz entering the stage, again in the left hand, at the first change to 3/8 meter at bar 28 (see Ex. 3).

Ex. 3. Debussy, *L'isle joyeuse*, bb. 28-31



The dance motifs never persist more than a few bars, for *L'isle joyeuse* is not dance music. And yet they bring muscular memories of bodily movements that ignite social memories of seduction and desire, infusing with them the very texture of the music, even when they are not directly heard. Their desiring thread enriches the concatenation of local intensity curves in the overall temporal process. Let us move

together. And that movement includes the pianist's, the performer whose historical role has had to be left aside in this article, but whose own mind, body and desire are definitely part of this story.

Now the music refuses too simple an opposition between binary and ternary rhythms, between habanera and waltz, these fleeting shadows of desiring bodies. Rather, in Boulez's vocabulary, the piece is an exploration of evolving *temps strié*, whose Other is the *temps lisse* of the C# trill. Ternary rhythm insists in the second main theme of the piece, theme Y, first heard as an ascending chord melody on the A major acoustic scale, *ondoyant et expressif*. But the accompaniment plays now quintuplets, as if escaping metrical constraints (see Ex. 4).

Ex. 4. Theme Y, Debussy, *L'isle joyeuse*, bb. 67-72

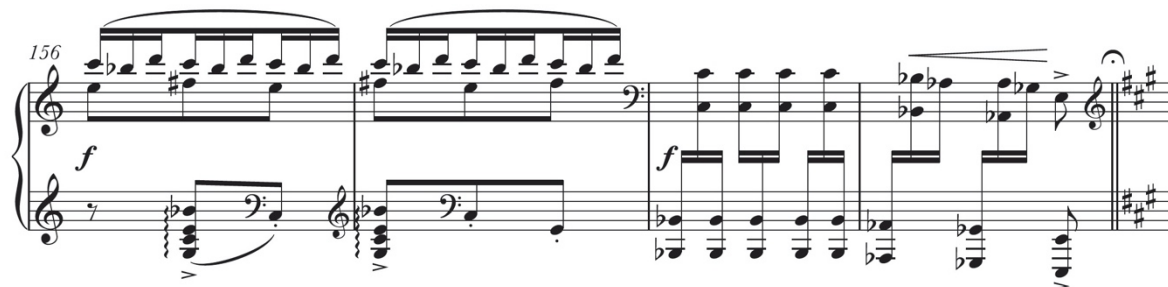


Another waltz-like motif does appear in the left-hand accompaniment of the bars 109-114, an E major - C major sequence of fast ascending and descending arpeggios that prepares the introduction of Emma's theme and the whole third sketch passage, already analysed as a separate entity. The dramaturgical strength of Emma's theme, in the bass and *en dehors*, builds on the fact that, for all its novelty, it is actually a variant of theme Y transposed to the whole-tone scale and rhythmically transformed by its rubato-like quality. Emma's climax is both self-contained and fully integrated into the flow of the music. Let us take its euphoric open-ended arrival in C major as a milestone for the joys still to come.

The climax emerges from theme X now in C major, whose triplet suffix gains autonomy through a motoric quality, *sempre crescendo* in an obstinate search for a high pitch. Upward ho! In this piece, the ascending movement keeps starting over and over, and the resolution of each wave is never the same twice. We can compare the C major climax to the following peak of tension at bars 158-9: again, two bars of suspended melody and fast rhythmic activity; but this time it's a blurred low-pitch sonority and

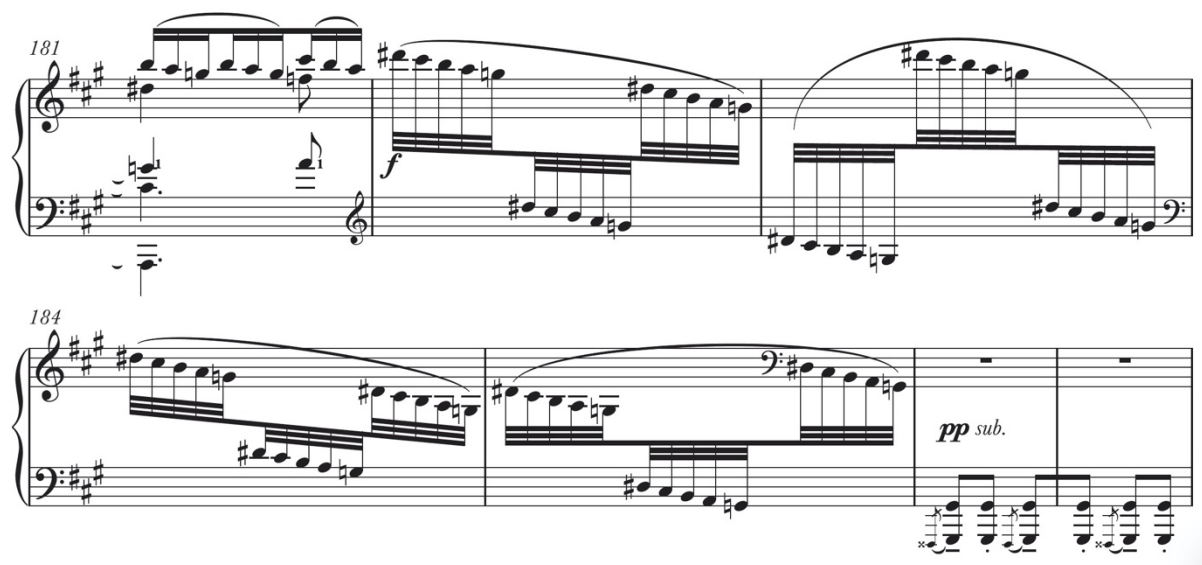
a collapsing motif that, by disrupting the texture, prepares an *anti*-climactic arrival in A major. Indeed, it is no peak at all, since the music suddenly tumbles down (see Ex. 5).

Ex. 5. Debussy, *L'isle joyeuse*, bb.156-9



Theme X resumes its motoric course, this time in its A major original tonality and register. The arrival on the tonic at bar 160 provides no release of tension; on the contrary, it triggers a speeding up of tempo, *plus animé*, and a reinforcement of the pulsation. By now, the original dancing flavour of the theme has mutated into a vertiginous binary rhythm: urgency is enthusiasm. Tension grows by whole-tone steps every two bars, as if following in augmentation the path of Emma's theme, a hypermetrical beat that suddenly accelerates to reach a new peak on D# at bar 182 (see Ex. 6). It is, once again, different from the previous ones, for the disruption of the texture occurs through a new descending motif, repeated no fewer than twelve times in various registers: a high-pitched ultrafast quintuplet on the acoustic scale, actually less a melodic gesture than a sound object on its own rights. Down, down we go, and still this time, there is no rest.

Ex. 6. Debussy, L'isle joyeuse, bb.181-7



This is where the final section begins, with a sudden change of bodily position at bar 186 *pianissimo subito*: from nothing, as it were - a pulsating nothing, though, with its low ostinato G#. This binary rhythm in quavers, marked by a grace note, frames the return of the dotted motif of theme X; it evolves on a steady pulse towards higher registers and louder dynamics, by steps of fourths and thirds in phrases spanning three crotchets. At bar 200, the dotted motif reaches G and becomes a fanfare in E flat major, always on the same steady, strenuous pace. Its percussive joy alternates with the triplet motif of theme X, and at bar 208 reaches A in F major. The pulse in crotchets reigns throughout the passage. It does so in spite of the ternary hemiola in the medium register at bars 212-15, turning into a trumpeting high A at bar 216-17. It does so through the triplets becoming semiquavers at bar 218. This high A announces the grandiose A major return of theme Y at bar 220, *ff, très en dehors* – and at the same time *un peu cédé*, since here deceleration, rather than acceleration, contributes to building climactic tension.¹⁶⁹

From this point on, with the restatement of theme Y, some analysts speak of a coda, but there is no strong reason for that, since all classical schemes have been abandoned. Still, we are close to the end of a temporal process, one that started at the beginning of the piece in *temps lisse* with the C# trill, danced a dreamed habanera in A major, grew through waltzing territories of *temps strié* up to the return of the trill, reached Emma's C major climax, sank with the pianissimo ostinato in G# at bar 186,

¹⁶⁹ Patty, 'Pacing Scenarios', 229-230.

and grew again steadily to rhythmical and melodic apotheosis in A major. The journey on the island has been joyful, and now we're heading towards a destination. The 3/8 downbeat is the very pulsation of pleasure, still enhanced by its contradiction with the accentuated second upbeat. Pleasure of repetition, pleasure of acceleration through diminution: the wide and euphoric theme Y in A major persists twice in its eight-bars form, and then twice in its four-bars form, still building tension by reaching a high C at bar 242.

The final ladder of Debussy's ode to joy starts at bar 244, when the C# trill motif espouses the ternary rhythm of theme Y (see Ex. 7).

Ex. 7. Debussy, *L'isle joyeuse*, bb. 241-55

The musical score for Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse*, measures 241-255, is presented in four systems. The key signature is A major (three sharps) and the time signature is 3/8. The tempo marking is **Tempo: Très animé**. The score includes a C# trill motif and a ternary rhythm. The first system (measures 241-244) features a **ff** dynamic and a **tr#** marking. The second system (measures 245-247) includes the instruction **jusqu'à la fin** and a **tr#** marking. The third system (measures 248-250) features a **ff** dynamic. The fourth system (measures 251-255) includes a **ff** dynamic and a **8va** marking. The final measure (255) is marked **8vb (m.d.)**.

Its suffix is prolonged through still increased tempo (*très animé jusqu'à la fin*) and dynamics (*ff*, then *fff*). Against this ternary rhythm, enhanced by intensity, at bar 248 the polyrhythmic doubling of C# in medium-register hemiolas keeps the fast pace going, and still changing. The pulse holds over the boundless prolongation of the whole-tone collection, with its subversive harmony in full blossom. What a feeling of suspension, what a feeling of inevitability. And then time gets definitely out of joint. Klein was right, after all. The music can come; it does come. The threshold of orgasm unleashes a gigantic trill in triple *fortissimo* on the vertical traces of the acoustic scale (A/E/D#), that resolves in a fast and high-pitched diatonic cadence on A major, then tumbles down across the keyboard to final exhaustion in the bass. In the score, the rest of the last bar is silence.

It is worth nothing, as a conclusion, that traces of Emma's theme, defined as a complete ascending whole-tone scale followed by a major third (F/G/A/B/C#/D#/G), are present in the final sections of the piece, and not only in the 'dictated' part. The same notes, transposed two octaves higher, are like milestones in the broad ascending curves that lead to the final climax. This happens first at bars 176-81, when the motoric triplet ascends steadily by one whole-tone step every two bars, then accelerates before reaching the peak that launches the collapse of the descending quintuplets. It happens again from bar 198 onwards, where F is melodically salient, as a diminished fifth of B major; then we have G, at bar 200; A, at bar 208; B, at bar 220, with the return of theme Y; C#, with the trill motif at bar 244, which brings along D#; and finally G at bar 245, the highest pitch before the final A.

Sources do not tell whether this construction of the finale was part of the revision that followed the sojourn on the isle of Jersey, or if the last sections already had this shape in the first draft. In the other two sketches, both dating from earlier stages of the creative process, most of the thematic materials of the piece are outlined with different levels of precision and development; yet, there is no trace of Emma's theme. But from a different perspective, its pitch collection was already part of the very first idea for the piece, namely the C# trill, written down at the beginning of the first sketch. In bar 1 of the score, the suffix of the trill on C#/D# completes the whole-tone collection by going downwards B, A, and G, with C, Bb and Ab as chromatic passing steps, and upwards G, F, and G again. The 'dictation' by Emma gave a distinctive shape to pitches that, differently ordered, were there from the very start of *L'isle joyeuse*. This leaves room for two possibilities: either the invention of 'Emma's theme' in June 1904 led the composer to revise the whole finale in order to make of it

the very drive of the last climactic sections; or, the other way around, the theme and its elaboration as a local climax in bars 117-44 is a condensation of the melodic edge of the final sections, which is in turn a reordering of the pitch collection of the initial motif of the piece. In both cases, Emma's desire, of which the theme is a symbol, plays a key role in the structuring of *L'isle joyeuse*.

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