

RECONSIDERING DEBUSSY'S *BRUYÈRES*

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Abstract. This analysis compares and contrasts two of Claude Debussy's pentatonic preludes, *La fille aux cheveux de lin* and *Bruyères*. It argues that these works are remarkably similar in terms of form and harmonic language, but quite distinct in terms of their cadential structure and handling of foreign notes, which often serve as catalysts. Particular attention is paid to a nexus passage in *Bruyères* that sheds further light on Debussy's idiosyncratic and nuanced harmonic praxis.

KEYWORDS AND PHRASES: Debussy, *Bruyères*, pentatonicism, collections, foreign notes.

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

DEBUSSY WROTE QUITE A NUMBER of pentatonic essays for piano, including *Pagodes*, *Voiles*, *La cathédrale engloutie*, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, *Les collines d'Anacapri*, and *Bruyères*. These charming, accessible compositions have received considerable attention from analysts, and they appear regularly in anthologies and textbooks.¹ While much has been written on Debussy's idiosyncratic approach to pentatonicism, there is still much to discover, particularly in the case of *Bruyères*. This analysis highlights several aspects of *Bruyères* that have not been adequately addressed, and attempts to shed further light on Debussy's idiosyncratic and nuanced compositional praxis.

The initial point of departure is that *La fille* and *Bruyères* are remarkably similar on both the small scale and the large. These preludes share the same atmosphere, color,

tempo, dynamics, texture, and harmonic palette. They use like strategies to generate and interrelate their pentatonic and diatonic collections. They rely heavily on subdominant triads, "compose out" 5–6 motions on various levels of structure, and carefully introduce foreign tones as catalysts. And their structural blueprints are nearly identical—from the initial floating pentatonic gesture to the penultimate cadence. I say "nearly," because the preludes end very differently. Broadly speaking, *La fille* embraces a recessive dynamic: its final section is static harmonically, it remains entirely within the orbit of its original pitch-class collection, and it concludes with a particular kind of plagal cadence. In contrast, *Bruyères* embraces a more progressive dynamic: its final measures not only recall the foreign notes of its opening section, but celebrate them in a spectacularly rich nexus of melodic and harmonic associations. And, perhaps in answer to the last-minute exuberance, it concludes with an authentic rather than plagal cadence.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF *LA FILLE*

La fille has received a great deal of attention from scholars, so I will summarize briefly.² As is well known, the pre-

¹Examples of anthologies and textbooks include Antokoletz (1999), Burkhart (2004), Lester (1989), Morgan (1991), Roig-Francolí (2008), Straus (2005), and Williams (1997). Close readings of the preludes include Charru (1988), Goldman (1991), Kopp (1997), Day-O'Connell (2009), Parks (1989), Salzer (1962), and Whittall (1975). Kopp (1997) notes that *Bruyères* and *Les collines* each employ a trio of embedded pentatonic collections, and claims that the former more closely resembles *La fille* (285–286) than *Les collines*. But he illuminates neither the nature nor the extent of the resemblance.

²See for instance Alegant and Sly (2004) and Day-O'Connell (2009).

x: pentatonic fragment, unharmonized and gapped *y: harmonized, gapped then stepwise*

p sans riguer

IV I

plagal leading tone (PLT) cadence

(a) opening (mm. 1–4).

harmonization of x, gapped *x, displaced rhythmically and registrally, as from afar*

28 p Cédez *//au Mouvt* *très doux*

pp

ii V IV

(9/7)

augmentation of y *a reprise of earlier material, but with F# instead of Fb*

33 pp Murmuré et en retenant peu à peu

37 perdendo

3

final PLT cadence

Cb major pentatonic

(b) conclusion (mm. 28–41).

Example 1. La fille aux cheveux de lin.

lude is in—or at least *on*—G \flat major. It is “tonal” but not functional in terms of voice leading and harmonic progression, which is to say that neither the voice-leading transformations nor the resolution of dissonance is normative. The harmonic framework gravitates around G \flat , the tonic, E \flat , and, to a slightly lesser extent, C \flat . Over the course of the work, these three notes anchor diatonic and major pen-

tatonic collections (which are comprised of scale-degrees $\hat{1}$, $\hat{2}$, $\hat{3}$, $\hat{5}$, and $\hat{6}$ of the major mode). Together, these pitch-classes form a C \flat triad, a IV chord that exerts considerable influence throughout.

Example 1a shows the opening of *La fille*, which projects an un-harmonized fragment of a G \flat -major pentatonic collection, labeled *x*, and a chordal realization of *x*’s tail, la-

A section (mm. 1-12): Establishes G \flat E(major and pentatonic), briefly tonicizes E \flat major, and introduces four foreign tones: D \sharp , G \sharp , E \sharp (F \flat), and C \sharp .

E \flat 4 is ensconced in incomplete G \flat /E \flat pentatonic collection

PLT cadence

IV I

E \flat now unstable (an UN to D \flat)

PLT 10 //

B section (mm. 12-18, and 19-24): Explores C \flat (major and pentatonic) and E \flat (major and pentatonic), and culminates on a C \flat triad.

E \flat in G \flat and C \flat pentatonic, simultaneously

15

IV

F \flat **

C \flat (IV) weakly tonicized

PLT 20

[E \flat : V - I]

climax on C \flat (IV)

G \flat : V

A' (return) (mm. 24-39): Reestablishes G \flat (major and pentatonic), with no foreign tones.

collectional return

25

IV(+6) IV7 V

thematic return

30

IV (I) (deceptive)

bass arpeggio (of IV) continues until the end

PLT 35

(no F \flat)

(C \flat pentatonic)

echo

pure G \flat major (no E \flat)

Example 2. Summary of foreign notes, cadences, and collections in *La fille*.

beled y. The incomplete pentatonic fragment is wonderfully ambiguous. I hear the opening, self-contained gesture as an incomplete G \flat -major pentatonic collection that is completed by the A \flat ₄ that arrives on the downbeat of measure 4. At the same time, the C \flat -major chord, which breaks the spell of the floating melody, realizes a complete C \flat -major pentatonic collection. Example 1b shows the conclusion of the prelude, beginning with a striking deceptive cadence in m. 28. Example 1b highlights several aspects of the reprise: a disguised harmonization of *x*, a rhetorically-charged presentation of *x* that is displaced registrally by an octave and delayed rhythmically by two quarter notes, an augmentation of *y*, and a scalar pentatonic ascent to the final G \flat triad. Jeremy Day-O'Connell refers to this progression as a *plagal leading tone cadence*, abbreviated *PLT*.³ In simplest terms, a *PLT* cadence harmonizes the progression from $\hat{6}$ to $\hat{8}$. *PLT*s saturate *La fille*.

Example 2 summarizes the handling of foreign tones and collections within the tripartite design. The first sec-

tion, mm. 1-12, establishes the pentatonic and diatonic elements of G \flat major. It also introduces four foreign tones that destabilize G \flat ; these foreshadow the brief tonicization of C \flat major and the more expansive outburst of E \flat pentatonic in the central section. D \sharp and G \sharp emerge in the tonicization of E \flat major; D \sharp is particularly conspicuous in the inner-voice chromatic segment D \flat -D \sharp -E \flat . The other two foreign notes, F \flat and C \flat , imbue the harmonization of the initial pentatonic fragment with whole-tone flavor. The B section contains two impulses. The first, in mm. 12-18, adumbrates the C \flat pentatonic collection and briefly tonicizes C \flat major. The catalyst for this modulation is the F \flat (heard earlier in m. 8), which destabilizes G \flat and opens the door to C \flat . Measures 19-24 bring an increase in tempo and energy, as well as a cascade of E \flat -pentatonic flourishes that culminate in a *mf* dynamic. The stark C \flat triad effectively overrides G \sharp and C \sharp with G \flat and C \flat ; subsequent juxtapositions of C \flat versus C \sharp and a *cédez* prepare the reprise in measure 25. The remainder of the work (mm. 25-39) stays entirely within the orbit of G \flat , with no foreign notes. Indeed, perhaps the most intriguing detail is the *absence* of F \flat in m. 34, which restates the material in mm. 14-15. F \sharp makes perfect sense, as an F \flat at this late stage might fatally undermine G \flat major—especially since the ultimate *PLT* cadence is relatively weak. One final thought: every note of the total chromatic appears in this prelude save for one: A \sharp .

³Day-O'Connell (2009) traces the development of pentatonism and provides close readings of several works, including *La fille*. He defines and illustrates plagal leading tone cadences beginning on p. 235. In essence, a *PLT* can harmonize $\hat{6}$ in numerous ways, all of which lack a leading tone in the penultimate chord. Thus, $\hat{6}$ might be supported by a supertonic or subdominant triad or seventh cord, even with $\hat{5}$ in the bass.

| | | | | |
|---|---|----------------------------|---------|----------------------------|
| A. Calme. Introduces and develops the first theme, outlines three pentatonic collections, and establishes A \flat major. | | | | |
| | mm. | Pentatonic collection | Cadence | Foreign notes |
| | 1 E \flat pentatonic, unharmonized | E \flat | | |
| | 3 E \flat pentatonic, harmonized | | I: PAC | |
| | 5 A \flat pentatonic, harmonized | A \flat | | G \flat |
| | 7 A \flat major | | | E |
| | 9 Plagal inflection | D \flat | | |
| | 11 Stepwise descending tonic affirmation | | I: PLT | |
| Codetta | 13 Pentatonic flourishes on I and IV | D \flat , E \flat | | |
| | 16–18 Stepwise transition into the next section | | I: HC | D |
| B. Increases energy, though the dynamics remain <i>p</i> and <i>pp</i> throughout. Moves through B \flat minor to B \flat major. | | | | |
| Doux et léger | | | | |
| | 19 Scalar descent through B \flat minor | | | G \flat |
| | 21 Descent repeated, chromaticized | A \flat (partial) | | B $\flat\flat$ |
| Un peu animé | | | | |
| | 23 B \flat major, <i>joyeux</i> theme | E \flat | | |
| | 29 Interruption: C \flat ¹³ F \flat ¹³ | C (partial) F (partial) | II: HC | E, A C, D, E, G, A |
| | 33 B \flat major, <i>joyeux</i> theme returns, but with G \flat | E \flat | | G \flat |
| | 37 Retransition: G \flat → G | | | |
| Cédéz // | | | | |
| A'. Recapitulation. | | | | |
| | 38 Literal recall of m. 8 and A \flat | | | E |
| | 39 A \flat re-confirmed | D \flat , E \flat | | |
| | 41 Stepwise descent, confirmation of tonic | | I: PLT | |
| Coda | En retenant | | | |
| | 44 Reharmonization of mm. 3–5 | G \flat (!) | I: IAC | E, G \flat (F \sharp) |

Figure 1. Overview of *Bruyères*.

2. A CLOSE LOOK AT BRUYÈRES

Bruyères shares many of the formal, rhetorical, and harmonic characteristics as *La fille*. Example 3 annotates its first section, mm. 1–12, paying particular attention to the arrangement of pentatonic and diatonic formations, and the introduction and development of foreign tones. Like *La fille*, *Bruyères* opens with a leisurely, floating presentation of an unharmonized pentatonic collection, labeled *x*, and immediately harmonizes a fragment of this collection, labeled *y*. The pair of gestures are marked by an imperfect authentic cadence that settles on E \flat ₄ in the upper voice. This particular pitch is a common thread. Measure 6 harmonizes the notes of the A \flat -major pentatonic collection with (non-functional) triads, and introduces the first foreign tone, G \flat , which appears in three octaves. A second foreign tone emerges soon after in an inner voice: E \flat ₄ is a chromatic passing tone. The remainder of the opening section stays within the orbit of A \flat , and this collection is confirmed with wall-to-wall scales that fall from E \flat ₆ to E \flat ₄. (This same procedure closes the first section of *La fille*.) A *PLT* cadence brings the first section to a (somewhat tentative) close.

Example 4 shows the subsequent codetta, which brings a slight acceleration of harmonic rhythm. Observe in particular the pentatonic shimmers on D \flat and A \flat , the tenuto reiterations on F₄, and the continued emphasis on E \flat , especially E \flat ₄.⁴ The emergence of D \sharp in m. 14 is striking given the previous emphasis on D \flat ; this foreign tone is folded into the imperfect authentic cadence in E \flat . I hear this E \flat triad as a back-relating dominant. A stepwise flourish, endowed with a written-out *ritardando*, serves to “correct” D \sharp to D \flat , thereby paving the way for the central section.

Measures 19–22, shown in Example 5, bring a different character and a sense of collectional ambiguity that is enhanced through a “rub” between G \flat and F. At first we might hear this five-flat collection as A \flat Mixolydian (which

⁴Salzer discusses *Bruyères* on pp. 122–134 of Volume 1 of *Structural Hearing* and offers a sketch in Example 478 of Volume 2. The sketch fastidiously traces the motivic parallelisms involving $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$, $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$, and $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{7}$ motions. Remarkably, Salzer even represents this $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$ motion at the deep middleground and background levels, in the guise of parallel 5ths between the tonic and supertonic scale degrees.

Calme—Doucement expressif ♩ = 66

I: IAC

x, E \flat pentatonic (within A \flat) *y, from x, harmonized*

A \flat pentatonic melody, with foreign G \flat *A \flat , gapped and scalar* *E \flat , a chromatic passing note* *D \flat penta*

V? - I *PLT* *IV V I*

Example 3. *Bruyères*, mm. 1–14.

is cemented by the A \flat in the bass on the downbeat of m. 21), B \flat minor, or even C Locrian. This transition twice outlines a fifth descent from F $_5$ through B \flat_4 . The repetition of this descent brings an increase in energy and chromaticism; the dynamic rises to *p*; the bass note A \flat_3 provides a semblance of harmonic clarity; and a new foreign note, B $\flat\flat$, creates a slight ripple in the smooth surface.

The second theme is based on a joyous presentation of B \flat major, the supertonic. B \flat major provides unambiguous support for F (and especially F $_5$), and allows us to hear retrospectively the foreign note B $\flat\flat$ as a leading tone. The first statement of the *joyeux* theme marks F and its surrounding neighbors, E \flat and G. The continuation phase of the sentential design is rudely interrupted in m. 29 by dramatic shifts in texture, surface figuration, dynamics, and

harmonic rhythm.⁵ These sustained C $_3^3$ and F $_3^3$ sonorities, embellished with pentatonic riffs in the upper register, outline a ii–V–I progression that ushers back the *joyeux* theme in m. 33. (I view m. 32 as a harmonic interruption, and m. 33 as a re-beginning.) The reintroduction of G \flat in m. 34 is pivotal, as this note once again undermines F and destabilizes the key of B \flat . The retransition in m. 37 is achieved with a single stroke: a shift from G \flat_3 to G \sharp_3 , which resolves upward to the tonic on the next downbeat (not shown).

⁵Somer (2005) explores (Classical) sentential presentations in Debussy's late music. Many of the observations in his study—including “dissonant elements” that alter the underlying prolongation of basic ideas and introduce “palpable restlessness”—apply to this prelude as well.

12

Db pentatonic

Ab pentatonic

Db: IAC

14 (5/4)

Ab pentatonic

Db: ii?

piu p

Db: V (13/9)

I

(3/4)

written out ritardando (♩ ♪ ♩)

Example 4. Bruyères, mm. 12–16.

Example 6 shows the last section of the prelude. Here, as in *La fille*, Debussy does not mark the return to $A\flat$ major with x , the unharmonized pentatonic fragment; instead he jumps straight to y , in a literal recollection of mm. 8–12. This omission allows him to save the return of the opening gesture until the penultimate cadence, which occurs in m. 44. A comparison between this cadence and the *PLT* in mm. 12–13 is revealing. Perhaps the first thing to notice is that $\hat{6}$ in the melody of m. 43 is harmonized not with $D\flat$ major, but with an open $F-B\flat-F$ sonority, which hearkens back to the $B\flat-F$ boundaries of the *joyeux* theme. Additionally, the bass line in m. 43 descends to $A\flat_2$, as it did before, but then leaps down to the root of a $D\flat$ major chord (IV). This moment bears an unmistakable resemblance to m. 30 of *La fille* (shown earlier in Example 1b): the theme returns, displaced, and over a sustained subdominant harmony; time freezes once more. The prelude ends with an augmentation of y , in its original register, followed by an imperfect authentic cadence with $E\flat_4$ on top.

I find the most astonishing moment in *Bruyères* to be the harmonization of y in the passage marked *doucement soutenu* and *en retenant* (mm. 46–48). Example 7 displays this turn of phrase. There are no fewer than five deep-rooted associations in this nexus, which is driven by an ascend-

ing chromatic segment from E to G , in octaves. The nexus begins with $E\flat_4$, the first foreign note. After a brief slice of silence—a rare event in this prelude— $E\flat_4$ moves upward by step to F ; the resultant IV chord heralds the return of y . The $F\sharp$ s on the ensuing downbeat (m. 47) recall the wealth of previous $G\flat$ s; more intriguingly this note completes the black-note pentatonic collection. For one brief moment, functional harmony is suspended. The spell is broken by the bass note $E\flat$ on the second beat, with $F\sharp$ moving upward to G . This semitone shift recalls the retransition, and completes the chromatic ascent from E to G , the leading tone. (It seems fitting that this leading tone never finds its way to $A\flat_4$; the line instead collapses back to $E\flat_4$.) The *tenuto* C_5 on the downbeat of m. 48 initiates an augmentation of y ; at the same time this dominant sonority recalls the $^{13}_9$ chords built previously upon $A\flat$ (m. 21), C (mm. 29–30), and F (mm. 31–32). Finally, the harmony on beat 2 of m. 48 combines $\hat{5}$ in the bass with a $D\flat$ -major chord, and thus references the *PLT* cadence of m. 13.

What I find most striking about this nexus is the way in which the black-note pentatonic collection coexists with functional harmony. Specifically, the $F\sharp$ s straddle the predominant and dominant functions of the ultimate cadence. I do not hear this pentatonic constellation as a *structural* har-

G♭ pedal

19 *pp* *doux et léger*

21 *p* *B♭* *inc. A♭ or D♭ penta.*

23 *Un peu animé* *E♭ pentatonic* *p* *joyeux* *m.g.*

B♭ major

26 *E♭ pentatonic and major* *espressif*

Example 5. *Bruyères*, mm. 19–37.

mony; rather, I hear it variously as a color, as a mirage, or a “vagrant” harmony (to borrow Schoenberg’s label from *Theory of Harmony*). This fleeting pentatonic is the fullest, most

exotic manifestation of $G\flat$, the primary foreign tone in the work. Additionally, the conspicuous re-introduction of this foreign tone in the late stages of the prelude creates a kind

Example 5. (continued).

of palindromic frame: the opening features $G\flat$ (m. 6) and $E\sharp$ (m. 8) whereas the coda presents these tones in reverse order. In a sense, these foreign notes serve as bookends.

3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In summary, both *La fille* and *Bruyères* are organized in an A–B–A′–coda form. Both open with floating, unharmonized pentatonic fragments, and conclude with sublime realizations of this opening fragment. Each prelude is based

primarily on two pentatonic and diatonic collections ($G\flat$ and $E\flat$ in the former and $A\flat$ and $B\flat$ in the latter), and relies heavily on plagal progressions and *PLT* cadences. Their surfaces are saturated with diatonic elements, with precious few clashes of vertical semitones; and the diatonicism is colored with a quartet of foreign tones, which frequently serve as agents or catalysts for modulation.⁶

⁶ Additionally, each prelude avoids the lowered third of its referential collection: *La fille* eschews $A\sharp$ and *Bruyères* avoids $B\sharp$.

A': a literal reprise of measures 8-12, with A \flat major, A \flat and D \flat pentatonic flourishes, and the foreign note E \sharp

au Mouvt

38

mf

p

3

41

mf

3

3

PLT cadence?

V?

doux

p

x, an octave higher, and delayed by $\frac{1}{2}$

y harmonized

En retenant

p

doucement soutenu

IV!

V -7

y, augmented

A \flat : IAC

48

più p

pp

sans lourdeur

pp

E \flat (V13)

I

3

3

Example 6. *Bruyères*, final section, mm. 38–51.

The greatest differences between these preludes arise in their presentation and exploitation of foreign tones. To illustrate, Example 8 compares the handling of cadences and foreign tones; I have distributed the content in an attempt to show the similarities in proportion. Compar-

atively speaking, we can say that the design of *La fille* is more “front loaded”: all four foreign tones are introduced in the first part, in a kind of rapid-fire presentation of material. Three of these foreign tones return in the middle section, but none reappears in the final section. More im-

46

En retenant

doux

piu p

pp

4 — 3

3

E \flat , the first foreign note

IV

V 13/9

recalls the PLT of measure 13

I

F \sharp recalls G \flat , the second foreign note.
It completes a black-note pentatonic collection,
and recalls the G \flat → G \sharp of the retransition (m. 37)

Example 7. *Bruyères*, nexus, mm. 45–49.

La fille

| | 1 | 3 | 7 | 11 | 12 | 16 | 19 | 24 | 35 | |
|---------|--------|-----|-------------------------|------------------------|-----------|-------------------------|----|--------|-------------------|------|
| | Part I | | | | Part II | | | | Part III (return) | Coda |
| center | I | | VI(E \flat) | ? I | I | (IV) | VI | I | I | |
| foreign | | | D \sharp , G \sharp | F \flat , C \sharp | F \flat | G \sharp , C \sharp | | (none) | | |
| cadence | | PLT | PLT | PLT | | PLT | | | DC (!) | PLT |

Bruyères

| | 1 | 5 | 8 | 11 | 12 | 14 | 19 | 23 | 29 | 35 | 38 | 44 | 46 |
|---------|---------------|-----------|------------|-----|----------------|------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| | Part I | | | | Part II | | | | | | Rt | Part III (return) | Coda |
| center | I | | | | I → | V, | ii | II | (ii, V, I in B \flat) | | I | | |
| foreign | | G \flat | E \sharp | | | D \sharp | G \flat , A \sharp | D \sharp , A \sharp , G \flat | | G \flat | E \sharp | | E \sharp , G \flat |
| cadence | IAC | | | PLT | | IAC | | HC, | | | DC (!) | | IAC |

Example 8. Comparison of *La fille* and *Bruyères*.

portantly, these foreign tones are not truly developed or subsequently exploited; there is, in other words, very little history for us to trace among these notes. The final observation to make about *La fille* is that all of its definitive cadences are PLTs.

In contrast, *Bruyères* introduces its foreign tones much more conservatively, and exploits them more rigorously and more inventively, as every foreign tone appears in *multiple* harmonic contexts. As a result, *Bruyères* features a richer and more variegated landscape owing to the palindromic frame involving G \flat and E \sharp in the outer sections, the development of G \flat in the central section, and of course the nexus, which integrates both foreign tones in what becomes, for me, the “heart” of the prelude.

Years ago, I would teach just one or two pentatonic compositions in my post-tonal music theory class, invari-

ably a Debussy prelude or Ives’s song *The Cage*. In those days, I was always pressed for time, and I worried extensively about covering the twentieth *and* twenty-first centuries. Thus, I would hastily move on to octatonic, whole-tone, and more variegated works before embracing atonality, serialism, and other musics. Lately, however, I am enamored with the notion of “scuba diving,” by which I mean that I take pains to study (much) less material but to examine this material in (much) greater depth.⁷ Nowadays, I allow myself the luxury of closely reading both of these preludes. For I have found these particular preludes to be well suited to helping students develop their analytical skills and engage deeply with the nuances of Debussy’s compositional praxis.

⁷See Alegant (2014).

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