# 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. 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,

<sup>1</sup>Examples 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 resem-

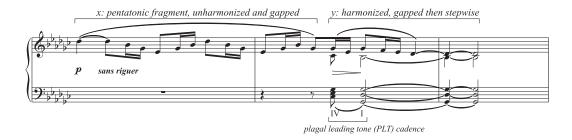
blance.

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.

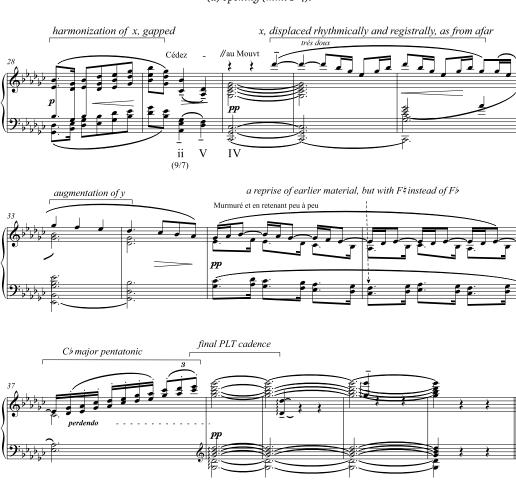
#### 1. An Overview of La fille

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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>See for instance Alegant and Sly (2004) and Day-O'Connell (2009).



(a) opening (mm. 1-4).



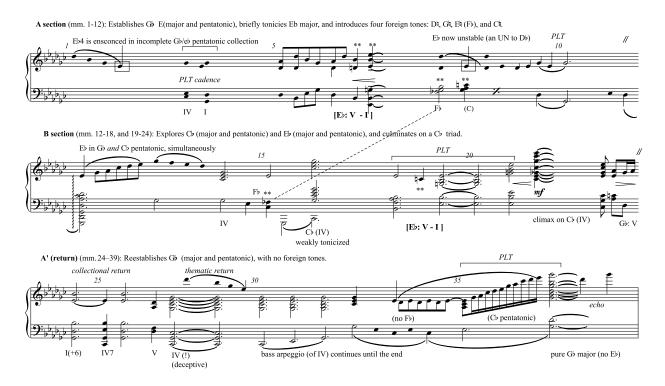
Example 1. La fille aux cheveux de lin.

(b) conclusion (mm. 28-41).

lude is in—or at least *on*—Gb 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 Gb, the tonic, Eb, and, to a slightly lesser extent, Cb. 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 Cb 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 Gb-major pentatonic collection, labeled x, and a chordal realization of x's tail, la-



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 Gb-major pentatonic collection that is completed by the Ab<sub>4</sub> that arrives on the downbeat of measure 4. At the same time, the Cb-major chord, which breaks the spell of the floating melody, realizes a complete Cb-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 Gb triad. Jeremy Day-O'Connell refers to this progression as a plagal leading tone cadence, abbreviated PLT.<sup>3</sup> In simplest terms, a PLT cadence harmonizes the progression from 6 to 8. PLTs 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 Gb major. It also introduces four foreign tones that destabilize Gb; these foreshadow the brief tonicization of Cb major and the more expansive outburst of Eb pentatonic in the central section. D\(\beta\) and G\(\beta\) emerge in the tonicization of Eb major; Db is particularly conspicuous in the innervoice chromatic segment Db-Db-Eb. The other two foreign notes, Fb and Cb, 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 Cb pentatonic collection and briefly tonicizes Cb major. The catalyst for this modulation is the Fb (heard earlier in m. 8), which destabilizes Gb and opens the door to Cb. Measures 19–24 bring an increase in tempo and energy, as well as a cascade of Eb-pentatonic flourishes that culminate in a **mf** dynamic. The stark Cb triad effectively overrides Gh and Ch with Gb and Cb; subsequent juxtapositions of Cb versus C\(\mathbf{1}\) and a c\(\hat{e}dez\) prepare the reprise in measure 25. The remainder of the work (mm. 25-39) stays entirely within the orbit of Gb, with no foreign notes. Indeed, perhaps the most intriguing detail is the absence of Fb in m. 34, which restates the material in mm. 14–15. F‡ makes perfect sense, as an Fb at this late stage might fatally undermine Gb 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: Ab.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Day-O'Connell (2009) traces the development of pentatonicism 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 6 in numerous ways, all of which lack a leading tone in the penultimate chord. Thus, 6 might be supported by a supertonic or subdominant triad or seventh cord, even with 5 in the bass.

A. Calm	<b>e.</b> Introduc	es and develops the first theme, outlines three	pentatonic collections, a	and establish	nes A♭ major.						
	mm.		Pentatonic collection	Cadence	Foreign notes						
	1	Eb pentatonic, unharmonized	Εb								
	3	Eb pentatonic, harmonized		I: PAC							
	5	Ab pentatonic, harmonized	Ab		G♭						
	7	Ab major			E						
	9	Plagal inflection	Dβ								
	11	Stepwise descending tonic affirmation	I: PLT								
Codetta											
	13	Pentatonic flourishes on I and IV	Db, Eb								
	16–18	Stepwise transition into the next section		I: HC	D						
<b>B.</b> Increases energy, though the dynamics remain $p$ and $pp$ throughout. Moves through Bb minor to Bb major.											
	Doux et léger										
	19	Scalar descent through Bb minor			G♭						
	21	Descent repeated, chromaticized	Ab (partial)		Bbb						
	Un peu animé										
	23	Bb major, <i>joyeux</i> theme	Εb								
	29	Interruption: C <sup>13</sup> <sub>9</sub>	C (partial)		E, A						
		$F_{9}^{13}$	F (partial)	II: HC	C, D, E, G, A						
	33	Bb major, <i>joyeux</i> theme returns, but with Gb	Eb		G♭						
	37	Retransition: $G\flat \to G$									
	Cédéz //										
<b>A'.</b> Reca	pitulation.										
	38	Literal recall of m. 8 and Ab			E						
	39	Ab re-confirmed	Db, Eb								
	41	Stepwise descent, confirmation of tonic		I: PLT							
Coda	En retena										
	44	Reharmonization of mm. 3-5	G♭ (!)	I: IAC	E, Gb (F#)						

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 Eb<sub>4</sub> in the upper voice. This particular pitch is a common thread. Measure 6 harmonizes the notes of the Ab-major pentatonic collection with (nonfunctional) triads, and introduces the first foreign tone, Gb, which appears in three octaves. A second foreign tone emerges soon after in an inner voice: Et4 is a chromatic passing tone. The remainder of the opening section stays within the orbit of Ab, and this collection is confirmed with wall-to-wall scales that fall from Eb<sub>6</sub> to Eb<sub>4</sub>. (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  $F_4$ , and the continued emphasis on  $E\flat$ , especially  $E\flat_4$ . The emergence of  $D\flat$  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"  $D\flat$  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 Gb and F. At first we might hear this five-flat collection as Ab Mixolydian (which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup>Salzer 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  $\hat{s}$ - $\hat{o}$ - $\hat{s}$ - $\hat{o}$ - $\hat{s}$ - $\hat{o}$ - $\hat{s}$ - $\hat{o}$ - $\hat{s}$ -motions. Remarkably, Salzer even represents this  $\hat{s}$ - $\hat{o}$ - $\hat{s}$ -motion at the deep middleground and background levels, in the guise of parallel 5ths between the tonic and supertonic scale degrees.



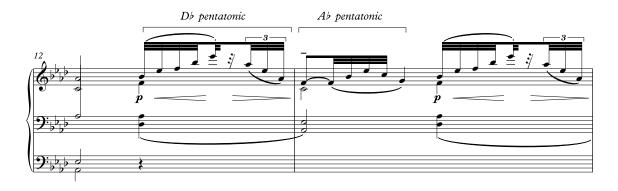
Example 3. Bruyères, mm. 1-14.

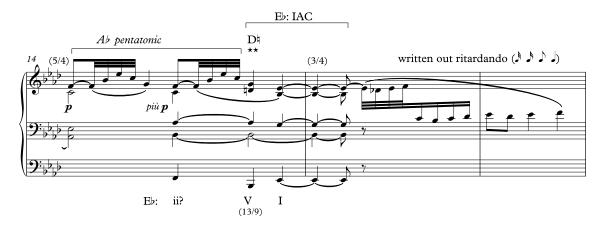
is cemented by the Ab in the bass on the downbeat of m. 21), Bb minor, or even C Locrian. This transition twice outlines a fifth descent from  $F_5$  through  $Bb_4$ . The repetition of this descent brings an increase in energy and chromaticism; the dynamic rises to p; the bass note  $Ab_3$  provides a semblance of harmonic clarity; and a new foreign note, Bbb, 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.<sup>5</sup> These sustained  $C_9^{13}$  and  $F_9^{13}$  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  $G\natural_3$ , which resolves upward to the tonic on the next downbeat (not shown).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>Somer (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.





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 Ab 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 6 in the melody of m. 43 is harmonized not with Db major, but with an open F–B♭–F sonority, which hearkens back to the Bb–F boundaries of the *joyeux* theme. Additionally, the bass line in m. 43 descends to  $Ab_2$ , as it did before, but then leaps down to the root of a Db 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 Eb4 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 Et, the first foreign note. After a brief slice of silence—a rare event in this prelude—Et moves upward by step to F; the resultant IV chord heralds the return of y. The F\psis on the ensuing downbeat (m. 47) recall the wealth of previous Gbs; 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 Eb on the second beat, with F# 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  $Ab_4$ ; the line instead collapses back to  $Eb_4$ .) The tenuto  $C_5$ on the downbeat of m. 48 initiates an augmentation of y; at the same time this dominant sonority recalls the <sup>13</sup><sub>9</sub> chords built previously upon Ab (m. 21), C (mm. 29–30), and F (mm. 31–32). Finally, the harmony on beat 2 of m. 48 combines \$ in the bass with a Db-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#s straddle the predominant and dominant functions of the ultimate cadence. I do not hear this pentatonic constellation as a *structural* har-



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  $E^{\flat}$  (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 (Gb and Eb in the former and Ab and Bb 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.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>Additionally, each prelude avoids the lowered third of its referential collection: *La fille* eschews Ah and *Bruyères* avoids Bh.

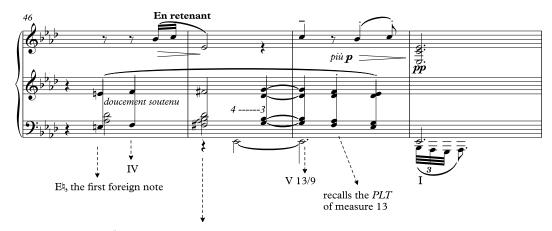
au Mouvt PLT cadence? 9 x, an octave higher, and delayed by y harmonized douxEn retenant doucement soutenu IV! Ab: IAC y, augmented più **p** sans lourdeur pр Ė♭ (V13)

A': a literal reprise of measures 8-12, with Ab major, Ab and Db pentatonic flourishes, and the foreign note E

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-



F# recalls Gb, the second foreign note. It completes a black-note pentatonic collection, and recalls the Gb  $\rightarrow$  Gh of the retransition (m. 37)

Example 7. Bruyères, nexus, mm. 45-49.

1	3	7	1	1	12	16		19		24		35	
Part I					Part II					Part	III (return)	Coda	ı
I		VI(E	Eb) ?	· I	I	(I	V)	VI	I	I			
		Dϸ, (	G <b></b> β F	Fb, Cþ	Fb	G	կ, Cկ		(none)				
	PLT	P.	LT F	PLT		P	LT				DC (!)	PLT	
1	5	8	11	12	14	19	23	29	35		38 44		46
Part I				Part II						Rt	Part III (ret	urn)	Coda
I				$\text{I} \rightarrow$	V,	ii	II	(ii, V	, I in Bb)		I		
	G♭	Еϸ			Dϸ	G♭,	Aμ	Dϸ, A	Αţ, Gb	G♭	Еϸ		Eϸ, G♭
IAC			PLT		IAC			HC,			DC (!)		IAC
	Part I  1 Part I I	Part I         I       PLT         1       5         Part I       I         I       G♭	Part I       VI(E         I       PLT       PLT         PLT       P         1       5       8         Part I       F         I       Gb       Eq	Part I	Part I       VI(Eb)       ? I         I       Dh, Gh       Fb, Ch         PLT       PLT       PLT         PLT       PLT       PLT         I       5       8       11       12         Part I       Part II       I $\rightarrow$ I       Gb       Eb       I $\rightarrow$	Part I       VI(Eb)       ? I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I I	Part I       Part II         I       VI(Eb)       ? I       I       (I         Db, Gb       Fb, Cb       Fb       G         PLT       PLT       PLT       PD         1       5       8       11       12       14       19         Part I       Part II         I       Gb       Eb       I →       V, ii       Gb, Gb,	Part I	Part II         I       VI(Eb)       ? I I I (IV)       VI DI         Db, Gb       Fb, Cb       Fb       Gb, Cb       PLT         PLT       PLT       PLT       PLT       PLT         1       5       8       11       12       14       19       23       29         Part I       Part II         I       I →       V, ii II (ii, V)         Gb       Eb       Db       Cb, Ab       Db, Ab	Part I         Part II           I         VI(Εb)         ? I         I         (IV)         VI         I           Db, Gb         Fb, Cb         Fb         Gb, Cb         (none)           PLT         PLT         PLT         PLT             I         5         8         11         12         14         19         23         29         35           Part I         I         Part II         (ii, V, I in Bb)           Gb         Eb         Db         Cb, Ab         Db, Ab, Gb	Part I         VI (Εb)         ? I         I         (IV)         VI I         I         I           I         Db, Gb, Cb         Fb, Cb         Fb         Gb, Cb         (none)         I           PLT         PLT         PLT         PLT         PLT         PLT         PLT           1         5         8         11         12         14         19         23         29         35         Rt           Part I         Part II         I         V, ii         II         (ii, V, I in Bb)         Rt           I         Gb         Eb         Db         Gb, Ab         Db, Ab, Gb         Gb	Part I         Part II         Part III (return)           I         VI (Ε♭)         ? I         I         (IV)         VI I         I	Part I         Part II         Part II (return)         Coda           I         VI(Εb)         ? I         I         (IV)         VI I         I         I         Db, Gb, Fb, Cb         Fb         Gb, Cb         (none)         DC (!)         PLT           I         PLT         PLT         PLT         PLT         PLT         DC (!)         PLT           I         S         8         11         12         14         19         23         29         35         38         44         Part III (return)         PLT           I         Part II         Part III         V, ii         II         Rt         Part III (return)         DC (!)         PLT

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,  $Bruy\`eres$  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,  $Bruy\`eres$  features a richer and more variegated landscape owing to the palindromic frame involving  $G\flat$  and  $E\natural$  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. 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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup>See Alegant (2014).

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