

CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S *TROIS CHANSONS DE BILITIS*:  
AN ANALYSIS

HONORS THESIS

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By

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## **ABSTRACT:**

Claude Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, as with many of his works, evade traditional tonal-harmony analysis. Unlike the composers of earlier years, Debussy's works utilize scales containing modal mixture, strings of parallel fifths, and several other previously unorthodox techniques. The three songs, "La flûte de Pan", "La chevelure", and "Le tombeau des naiades" all contain several musical ideas unique to the impressionist age of composition, and the following analyses aspire to display directly these ideas as they appear within these pieces.

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## ABOUT THE CHANSONS

The poems used for these three songs are from *Les Chansons de Bilitis* written by Pierre Louys. Monsieur Louys was born on December 10, 1870 in Ghent and was a noted French novelist and poet. He moved to Paris in 1891 where he created a review called 'Le conque' and published his first poems.<sup>1</sup> As a writer he was heavily influenced by Greek form and even claimed that these texts were translations of the writings of an ancient Greek poetess from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.<sup>2</sup>

There are a total of 155 poems within the *Chansons*, all of which discuss the life of the female character, Bilitis. These poems were divided into three sections pertaining to different aspects of her life. The 3 poems Debussy set are from Louys' first section titled: "Bucoliques en pamphylic"<sup>3</sup>

The three poems used in these works were set to music by Claude Debussy between 1897-1898. Claude Debussy was born in St. Germain-en-lay on August 22, 1862 to a peasant family. In 1872 he was admitted to the Paris conservatory to study piano and solfège. Later on in his life he would be influenced by such composers as Massenet, Gounod, Tchaikovsky, and Wagner as well as Javanese Gamelan.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'LOUYS, Pierre'. Biography from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* (1997). (c) Chambers Harrap Publishers Ltd. Available from Wilson Web. Database on-line. [http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/hww/shared/shared\\_main.jhtml?requestid=20531](http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/hww/shared/shared_main.jhtml?requestid=20531). Accessed 16 April, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Fulcher, Jane. *Debussy and His World*. (Princeton University Press, 2001), 118

<sup>4</sup> Lesure, François, Roy Howat. 'Debussy, (Achille-)Claude'. *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy. Database on-line. [http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/shared/views/article.html?from=search&session\\_search\\_id=213093559&hitnum=1&section=music.07353](http://www.grovemusic.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/shared/views/article.html?from=search&session_search_id=213093559&hitnum=1&section=music.07353). Accessed 16 April, 2007.

## LA FLÛTE DE PAN

Poem #30 of Pierre Louys *Les Chansons de Bilitis*  
 Song # 1 of Claude Debussy's  
*Trois Chansons de Bilitis*

### LA FLÛTE DE PAN

Pour le jour des Hyacinthies, il m'a donne  
 une syrinx faite de roseaux bien tailles,  
 unis avec de la blanche cire qui est douce a  
 mes levres comme du miel.

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

Nous n'avons rien a nous dire, tant nous  
 sommes pres l'un de l'autre; mais nos  
 chansons  
 veulent se repondre, et tour a tour nos  
 bouches s'unissent sur la flute.

Il est tard, voici le chant des grenouilles  
 vertes qui commence avec la nuit. Ma mere  
 ne  
 croira jamais que je suis restee si longtemps  
 a chercher ma ceinture perdue.<sup>5</sup>

### THE FLUTE OF PAN

For the day of Hyacinthies, He gave me  
 a panpipe made of carefully assembled  
 reeds, united with a white wax that is sweet  
 to my lips as honey.

He teaches me to play, I am seated on his  
 lap; but I am a little nervous. He plays after  
 me, so softly that I strain to hear him.

We have nothing to say, so close we are  
 to each other; but our songs answer each  
 other, and little but little our mouths unite  
 on the flute.

It is late. There is the song of the green  
 frogs that begins with the night. My mother  
 will never believe that I stayed so long  
 searching for my lost sash.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Project Gutenberg Etext of Les chansons de Bilitis, by Pierre Louys*  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/7blts11.txt> Accessed 16 April 2007

*La flûte de Pan* was written in 1897 and contains three attributes that will be discussed in further detail. The first is the use of the B-Lydian scale: its location, and its enhancement of the mood. Next will be an examination of the use of parallel fifths within the work. This will involve their intervallic relationship across the span of work, along with consideration to any patterns that arise. The last item discussed will be the text music relationships.

The Lydian scale is one of the traditional church modes, and B-Lydian appears within *La flûte de Pan* three times.



Figure 1: B-Lydian scale as it appears within *La flûte de Pan*

B-Lydian is the central scale involved in this piece and is presented in an incomplete form. As indicated above, this scale begins on B and ascends in the traditional fashion via W-W-W-H-W-W-(H). The half step indicated in parentheses is the final step in the scale that is left unfulfilled within the aural presentation of the scale. During its ascent to the complete octave, its path is halted on the seventh note of the scale and never reaches the octave in any satisfying, conclusive form.

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<sup>6</sup> James R Briscoe. *Songs of Claude Debussy*. (Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 1993), 96.

This scale is presented a total of three different times and each time creates a slight variance in the mood as the text and story advance within the work. B-Lydian's first appearance is in measures 1-4. With minimal plot advancement, this scale creates an auditory sensation of mystery and youthful curiosity at the beginning of the work, connecting directly to the character at this point. As we approach the Lydian scale again at measure 12 it begins to take on a new feeling of exploration as Bilitis begins to interact with an individual she has met on her journey. The final presentation is at the end of the piece where the B-Lydian scale embodies an entirely new emotion. As she realizes that she has been out too late, the expression feels more like a wistful, slightly darkened reflection on her ill-advised but enjoyable behavior over the past evening.

The movement of parallel fifths throughout the piece is a predominant feature in *La flûte de Pan*.

The image shows a musical score for the 'Fifth Movement' of 'Flute de Pan'. It consists of two staves of music in bass clef, with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The music is composed of parallel fifths. Below the staff, there are arrows indicating the intervallic movement: up (↑) and down (↓) arrows, often followed by a number (e.g., ↑4, ↓4, ↑3, ↓3). The measures are numbered 1 through 30.

Figure 2: Flute de Pan – Fifth Movement

As seen in the chart above, the primary intervallic movement for the parallel fifths within this work is by third, fourth, and second in order by frequency of presentation. There are five instances of repeated fifth patterns, the first being a



collection of three fifth instances that accompany the presentation of the B-Lydian scale in measures 1-4 and measures 28-29.

↑4 ↓4 ↑4 ↓2      ↑4 ↓4 ↑4 ↓2      ↑4 ↓4 ↑4 ↓2

Figure 3: Flute de Pan – Parallel Fifth Pattern 1

The second instance is almost an exact repetition involving measures 8-9.

↓4 ↑3 ↓4 ↑2

Figure 4: Flute de Pan – Parallel Fifth Pattern 2.1

In the above visual, the collection of fifths has a set pattern of motion. In next measure, as seen in figure 5, the pattern is an exact repetition until the fourth fifth that is sustained instead of moving up by step.

↓4 ↑3 ↓4

Figure 5: Flute de Pan – Parallel Fifth Pattern 2.2

The third instance is an exact repetition in measures 13-14.



Figure 6: Flute de Pan – Parallel Fifth Pattern 3

The fourth example in measures 17-20 is much the same.

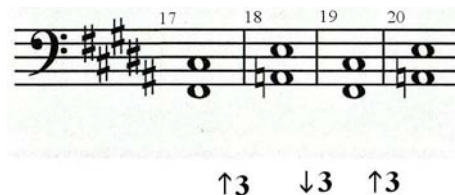


Figure 7: Flute de Pan – Parallel Fifth Pattern 4

The fifth instance is unique in that the pattern presented in measure 25 is presented again in measure 26 with the same pattern of intervallic movement, but up an octave and a third from the original position.

The presence of these fifths, particularly in such abundance, is a serious break from the composers of earlier years. Since the abandonment of this interval for thirds and other more holy intervals following the medieval period, the use of the fifth had grown rare.

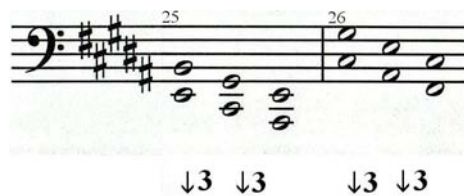


Figure 8: Flute de Pan – Parallel Fifth Pattern 5

The next item of discussion is the text painting within the piece. The first event is expressed vividly through the use of the B-Lydian scale as a representation of

the flute's melody. It is heard first in measures 1-4 as a presentation of the idea. At measure 12 the narrator discusses how she must strain to hear her acquaintance play his flute. In time with this we hear yet another presentation of the B-Lydian flute motive. Here it is a longer version of two consecutive scales that span an octave and a seventh. Also in this second rendition, the fifth presented beneath the scale is a third lower than in its first appearance, foreshadowing the darkening of the plot ahead.

The following measures we see broken and or altered presentations of the flute motive as the Bilitis and her acquaintance begin to play in unison on the flute. The terminal presentation at the end of the piece is also introduced with this darkening fifth but then rises again to its initial position shortly after. This could be a representation of hope or interest in future events, or of youthful disregard for her mothers wishes for her.

The second vivid instance of text painting is the 'chant des grenouilles vertes' or the song of the green frogs.



Image 1: Art inspired by *Les Chansons de Bilitis*

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<sup>7</sup> Bessie, Alvah C., Willy Pogany 'The Songs of Bilitis by Pierre Louys' *Bulfinch's Mythology*. <http://bulfinch.englishatheist.org/bilitis/SongsofBilitis.html>. Accessed 16 April, 2007.

At the down beat of measure 19 a large leap in the left hand transcends two octaves and passes back down. This motive only occurs for two measures, but vividly paints the image the unique timbre of the croaking of frogs at the commencement of nightfall.

*La flûte de Pan* is full of stunning imagery that is projected by the B-Lydian Scale, patterns of motion using parallel fifths, and vibrant text painting.

## LA CHEVELURE

Poem #31 of Pierre Louys *Les Chansons de Bilitis*  
 Song # 2 of Claude Debussy's  
*Trois Chansons de Bilitis*

### LA CHEVELURE

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

<< Je les caressais, et c'etaient les miens; et nous etions lies pour toujours ainsi, par la meme chevelure la bouche sur la bouche, ainsi que deux lauriers n'ont souvent qu'une racine.

<< Et peu a peu, il m'a semble, tant nos membres etaient confondus, que je devenais toi-meme ou que tu entrais en moi comme mon songe. >>

Quand il eut acheve, il mit doucement ses mains sur mes epaules, et il me regarda d'un regard si tendre, que je baissai les yeux avec un frisson.<sup>8</sup>

### THE HAIR

He said to me: << Last night, I dreamed. I had your hair around of my neck. I had your hair like a black yoke around my neck, and across my chest.

<< I caressed it, and it was my own; and we were bound together forever, by that hair, mouth on mouth, as two laurels will have only one root.

<< And little by little, it seemed to me, that our limbs were so entwined, that I became you, that you entered into me as my thoughts.

When he had finished, he softly placed his hands on my shoulders, and he looked at me with a look so tender, that I lowered my eyes with a shiver.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Project Gutenberg Etext of Les chansons de Bilitis, by Pierre Louys*  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/7blts11.txt> Accessed 16 April 2007

*La chevelure* was written in 1897 and makes frequent use of the chromatic scale and parallel octaves to enhance musical color. There is also a brief presentation of the parallel fifths that are so frequently used in the surrounding songs, along with an active dialogue between vocalist and accompanist, and the use of a more metaphorical version of text painting compared to its sister chansons.

The chromatic scale permeates the texture in *La chevelure* and is most apparent within the descending motive shown in measures 1, 20, and 25-26.



Figure 9: Chevelure Chromatic Scale

The line built by the descending echo of eighth notes from C flat to G flat creates a sense of arrival as one settles into the mood of the piece. Further discussion as to the color enhancement created by this scale will be addressed in the section regarding text painting.

A consistent pattern in the accompaniment is the use of a block chord followed by (for the most part) a single line unison a half beat later. This unison within the first texture of the piece is presented an octave apart and divides between the right and left hand.

<sup>9</sup> James R Briscoe. *Songs of Claude Debussy*. (Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 1993), 100.

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Chevelure' by Claude Debussy. It features a vocal line at the top and a piano accompaniment below. The tempo is marked 'Moins lent' and the dynamics are 'p très expressif et passionnément concentré'. The lyrics are 'Cet - te nuit, j'ai rê - vé.' The piano part consists of parallel octaves in both hands, with some notes circled in blue. A box containing the number '13' is placed above the piano part. The page number '10' is visible in the bottom right corner of the score.

Figure 10: Chevelure Octave Doublings 1

Besides creating a thick texture, these parallel octaves echo the vocal line and in some instances give hint to its further progression.

Beginning at measure 13 a substantial change in texture settles into place, joined by a new arrangement of the parallel octaves previously seen. Here a set of parallel octaves is placed in each hand and in some instances only a step apart from each other. The strengthening of these close intervals by placing them in multiple octaves helps build the tension as the piece approaches its secondary arrival point in measures 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> James R Briscoe. *Songs of Claude Debussy*. (Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 1993), 100.

Figure 11: Chevelure Octave Doublings 2

Double parallel octaves are indicated by the arrow.  
Parallel 2nds are encased in hexagons.

A connection among all three songs is their use of parallel fifths. The motion is varied to some extent between the three, but all include consecutive use of this interval. Within *Le chevelure* the parallel 5<sup>ths</sup> descend by step and only appear within measures 24-25.

Figure 12: Chevelure Parallel Fifths

Poetry is consistently open to interpretation, but no matter how one seems to view it Louy's *Les Chansons de Bilitis* are at least moderately erotic poems. *La chevelure* in particular appears to have a heightened sense of sexuality. The dream described within the poem sounds remarkably like a metaphor for sexual intercourse. Were one to interpret it as such, one would find a surprising parallel in the flow of the music to such an idea.

<sup>11</sup> James R Briscoe. *Songs of Claude Debussy*. (Hal Leonard Publishing Corporation, 1993), 103.



As mentioned previously, the chromaticism introduced at the beginning of the song creates a settled, languid feel. The soft, luxuriant flow of the parallel octaves appears almost as a gentle, intimate caress between lovers. In music literature there are several instances of associating chromaticism with sensuality or seduction, an example being the chorus of the aria 'Mon coeur s'ourve a ta voix' from *Samson and Dalila*. There is frequent use of descending chromaticism in the vocal line as Dalila begs Samson to respond to her 'kindness' in this aria of seduction.

A primary climax arrives in measure 12, an apex that is preceded by a gently accelerating tempo. This corresponds in the text to the moment where the two lovers united 'mouth on mouth'. After this initial peak, the tempo relaxes briefly but arrives again at a secondary, more aggressive zenith in the music. This second arrival happens within 6 measures during which the tempo is heightened dramatically along with an increase of chord density and the use of closely related intervals.

Following these two climactic moments the tempo slows substantially, arriving back at the descending chromaticism as though to imitate the snuggle of two lovers after such an intimate encounter. This pattern is altered slightly within the last three measures. Only the first three full beats of this pattern are presented. They are not only divided by a rest, but given a fermata at the half beat resolution as well. This motive immediately follows the narrator's statement 'that I closed my eyes with a shiver', and staying true to the vibrant text painting previously displayed in this chanson, the piano gives just a little shiver.



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Image 2: Art inspired by *Les Chansons de Bilitis*

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<sup>12</sup> Bessie, Alvah C., Willy Pogany 'The Songs of Bilitis by Pierre Louys' *Bulfinch's Mythology*. <http://bulfinch.englishatheist.org/bilitis/SongsofBilitis.html>. Accessed 16 April, 2007.

## LE TOMBEAU DE NAIĀDES

Poem #46 of Pierre Louys *Les Chansons de Bilitis*  
 Song # 3 of Claude Debussy's  
*Trois Chansons de Bilitis*

### LE TOMBEAU DES NAIADES

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

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

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

Et avec le fer de sa houe il cassa la glace  
 de la source où jadis riaient les naiades.  
 Il prenait de grands morceaux froids, et, les  
 soulevant vers le ciel pâle, il regardait au  
 travers.<sup>1314</sup>

### THE TOMB OF THE NAIADES

Along the forest covered with frost, I  
 walked; my hair in front of my mouth was  
 covered in tiny icicles, and my sandals were  
 heavy with snow, miry and compact

He said to me: << What are you searching  
 for? -- I am the tracker of the satyr. It's little  
 cloven hooves alternate like the wholes in a  
 white coat. >> He said to me: << The  
 satyrs are dead.

<< The satyrs and the nymphs also. For  
 thirty years there has not been a winter so  
 terrible. The tracks that you see are those of  
 a goat. But remain here, where is there  
 tomb.>>

And with the iron of his hoe he shattered  
 the ice of the spring where once laughed the  
 naiads. He took one of the large, cold pieces  
 and raised it to the pale sky, he examined it  
 to the breadth.

<sup>13</sup> *The Project Gutenberg Etext of Les chansons de Bilitis, by Pierre Louys*  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext03/7blts11.txt> Accessed 16 April 2007

<sup>14</sup> Bessie, Alvah C., Willy Pogany 'The Songs of Bilitis by Pierre Louys' *Bulfinch's Mythology*.  
<http://bulfinch.englishatheist.org/bilitis/SongsofBilitis.html>. Accessed 16 April, 2007.

*Le tombeau des Naiades*, was written in 1898 and features three different scales, parallel fifths, and a varying tonal center that that makes full circle within the piece.

The first of the three scales is the G-Phrygian presented in measure 7. It coincides with the narrator describing how heavy her sandals are with snow. The scale descends slowly, nested within the bottom half of the 16<sup>th</sup> note ascending pattern in the right hand. The falling G-Phrygian scale beneath the rising pattern gives the feeling of a windblown trek with the weight of the light snow gently building and dragging on the performer, gaining intensity due to the rubato in this measure.



Figure 13: G-Phrygian Scale

The second scalar presentation is the octatonic scale at measure 20. Also a descending pattern, this scale is nestled in the center of a dense chordal texture, adding dramatic weight to the arrival of this falling motive. This devastating fall into octatonic despair appears in the music just as the narrator learns that the creature that she seeks is dead, her previous searching all in vain. It seems an ideal musical echo of her disheartenment.



Figure 14: Octatonic Scale

The final scale used is the whole-tone scale utilized in measure 21. This pattern rises in time with the narrator's hope as she is told to remain where the satyrs and naiads once were.

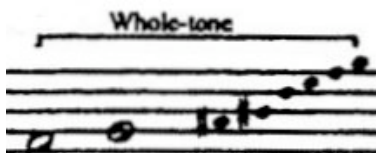


Figure 15: Whole-tone Scale

*Le tombeau des Nàiades* joins *La flute* and *Chevelure* in containing instances of parallel fifths. Within this work, parallel fifths predominantly move by third, much like several instances within *La flute de pan*. In measures 7-8, we first encounter the pattern of four consecutive descending parallel fifths by third. In measure 9 the inverse pattern begin to form, yet end prematurely at the three fifths, falling down by step. Only in measure 10 is the inverse pattern truly fulfilled.



Figure 16: Tombeau Parallel Fifths 1

The next pattern begins in measure 21: an ascending pattern is directionally inverted in measure 27.

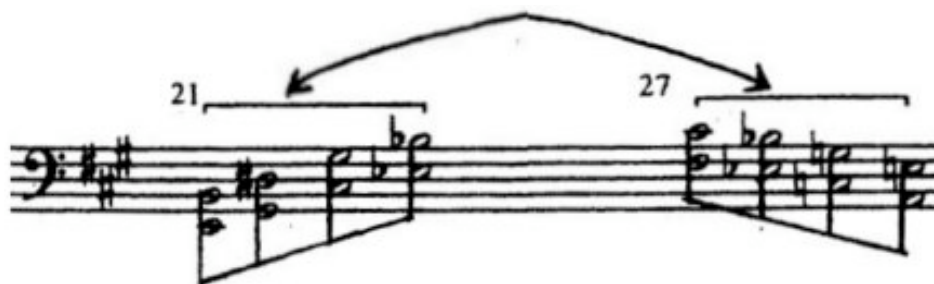


Figure 17: Tombeau Parallel Fifths 2

Finally, we see the most unique pattern presented within these three works.



Figure 18: Tombeau Parallel Fifths 3

Within measure 11 a pattern of 5ths descending by third is present but the usual pattern of four is absent. The pattern stops after the third fifth, but omits the fourth, which, on the diagram, is shown in parentheses. A nearly identical event occurs in measure 25. The solution for both of these unfulfilled patterns lies in measure 23, which contains the fifths that complete both patterns.

The final note of interest for this piece is that of the tonal center. Despite being written in A major, the key signature seems to have remarkably little with the sound of the composition. Instead, a tonal center or a pair of pitches serves as an auditory tonic.

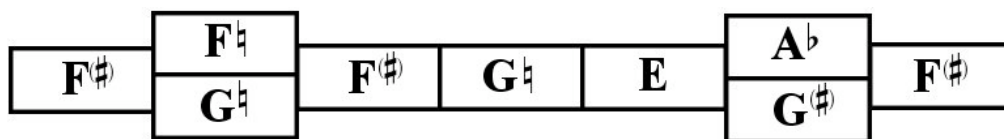


Figure 19: Tombeau Tonal Center

As the chart indicates, the piece begins with F# as the tonal center. At measure 7-8, it transitions to F natural and to G natural, which are symmetrical about F#. At measure 9 the work returns to the F#, only to switch back to G natural at 11. It remains “in” G until measure 21, where it descends to E natural. The establishment in measure 23 of A-flat/G# as a zenith of tonal center prepares the return to auditory tonic of F# at measure 26.



Image 3: Art inspired by *Les Chansons de Bilitis*

## CONCLUSION

Although Claude Debussy's *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* defy analysis through tonal harmony based Roman numeral analysis, they show significant musical structure in its use of scales, parallel fifths, and text painting.

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