Claude Debussy never sought fame. An intensely private person, he often kept his friends ignorant of each other’s existence. He made the obligatory public appearances only reluctantly. Until the production of his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902, Debussy’s name was scarcely known to the general public. But *Pelléas* changed all that. A group of young fanatics, known as Debussystes, turned the composer, quite unwillingly, into a cult figure. “Thanks to these ladies and gentlemen,” wrote a contemporary critic, “M. Claude Debussy has become the leader of a new religion, and at every performance of *Pelléas* the Opéra-Comique came more and more to look like a sanctuary.” [Jean Lorrain, quoted in Lockspeiser II, 73] In 1910, the music historian Louis Laloy proclaimed that Debussy’s significance in music history was comparable to that of Monteverdi, and that Debussyism was the equivalent in music of Impressionism in painting and Symbolism in poetry. [Lockspeiser II, 78]

Debussy’s private life during this period also carried the whiff of scandal. In 1903 he met Emma Bardac and in 1904 ran away with her to the island of Jersey, an episode captured in an exuberant piano piece, *L’Isle joyeuse*. His wife Lily subsequently attempted suicide. The necessary di-
After the divorces having been carried out, Debussy married Emma Bardac in 1908, three years after the birth of their daughter Claude-Emma (known affectionately as “Chouchou” [pet, or darling]).

The suite of piano pieces known as *Children’s Corner*, published in July 1908, represents a kind of turning inward, with objects from Chou-
chou’s nursery serving as inspiration for the six movements. The English-language titles may be a tip of the hat to the girl’s English nanny. The dedication reads (in French), “To my dear little Chouchou, with her father’s tender excuses for what follows.” I find that these short pieces offer clues to the sources of Debussy’s musical language. Beneath their apparent simplicity and innocence lie some truly revolutionary ideas.

***Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum***

Many authors, myself included, have described Debussy as an iconoclast, unwilling to accept the musical conventions of his time, always experimenting with new harmonies and new sounds. But we should never forget that Debussy enjoyed a very thorough conventional education at the Paris Conservatoire, where he won honours in piano performance and in composition. Young pianists, then as now, practice scales and etudes to perfect their technique.

One celebrated collection of piano studies by the Italian composer Muzio Clementi bears the title *Gradus ad Parnassum*, or “Steps to Parnassus,” named after the mountain that, according to Greek mythology, was the home of the muses.
The sixty-first etude in the collection begins this way.

Debussy borrows the left-hand octave and the opening figure in the right hand to begin his own gentle parody of an etude, “Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum,” the added title sounding a bit like the German honorific Herr Doktor Professor.
Later the composer demands some pianistic acrobatics, with the left hand crossing over the right.

The initial melody returns in a slower tempo, marked “expressive,” then occurs “animated” and “very animated.” The whole piece gives the impression of someone standing outside the Paris Conservatoire, listening to all the practicing pianists, each with his or her own style of performance. Some play staccato, or detached notes. (Example) Others play legato, or connected notes. (Example)

I had this very experience standing outside the Liszt Academy in Budapest, hearing dozens of pianists playing different pieces simultaneously.
You may be surprised when I describe this piece as “subversive.” But consider: what adjectives come to mind when I mention the name of Claude Debussy? Evocative? Ethereal? And even a word that the composer detested, “impressionistic”? Consider the opening of “Doctor Gradus” again: is there anything the slightest bit evocative, or ethereal, or even impressionistic about this music? No. It’s thoroughly grounded in C major, the ultimate vanilla flavour in music. (Play opening measures)

What makes C major sound so homey, so comfortable? It’s the way the notes of the major scale divide the octave: that familiar pattern of whole steps and half steps.

C Major

In particular, listen to the end of the scale—that half-step between B and C. There’s a really strong force driving the B to the C. In fact, we call that B the leading tone for that very reason: there’s a powerful impulse leading from B to C. And when you finally reach that C, there’s a sense that all’s well with the world. You feel grounded. (Play scale)

Now let’s consider a special scale often associated with Debussy’s music. It’s called the whole-tone scale because it contains only whole steps.

Whole-tone scale

Notice how you feel when I play this scale. In particular, notice the absence of a leading-tone. You don’t feel grounded at all because there’s no sense of a home base. When you try to describe this scale, you’re likely to use words like evocative, ethereal, even impressionistic. In “Doctor Gradus” Debussy insinuates this scale for just an instant.
It goes by so quickly you scarcely notice it. You may think of it as just a splash of unusual colour. But I’m going to suggest that there’s more to it than this. If we think back to the C major scale, we feel grounded because of that pattern of whole and half steps ending with the leading-tone. The whole-tone scale, by contrast, has no grittiness to it. All the intervals are the same. Another way of looking at the scale is to say that it divides the octave equally. The octave is divided into six equal whole-tones. And by being equally divided, it has no definite character. It’s like a house key without any ridges on it.

Are there any other intervals that equally divide the octave? Yes: the major third does that.

### Equal division by major third

When I play those notes, it sounds like an arpeggio, or broken chord, but not a familiar one. Compare that progression with the C major arpeggio.

### C major arpeggio

Ah, yes. That sounds like home. We know we’re in C major. Why? Because the differences between the intervals give us a way to orient ourselves. Those differences are like the ridges on our house key that make it distinctive. We recognize those pitches, whether we can name them or not,
as the most important tones in the C major scale. By contrast, when we divide the octave by major thirds (play example), we have no way of knowing where we are. Debussy gives us just this kind of peculiar arpeggio toward the end of “Doctor Gradus,” just after a fragment from the whole-tone scale.

How would you describe those sounds? Words like “ethereal,” “evocative,” and the dreaded “impressionistic” come to mind.

The subversion doesn’t end there. If we consider the way a movement by Mozart or Haydn is organized, we notice that the music generally centers on two pitches, what we call the tonic (the key of the piece), and the dominant (a fifth away). In the key of C major, the key that “Doctor Gradus” purports to be in, those centres would be C and G. (Play example)

But that’s not the way this piece is organized. We have an opening clearly organized around C. (Play opening bars) But the next section is not organized around the expected G, but rather around E.
That repeated E in the bass serves to organize the pitches in this section. Debussy then gives us a passage of transition followed by a section organized on A flat.
That pedal tone on A flat in the bass acts as the temporary organizing force for this section. Then we’re back to C for the final section. So Debussy has used the equal division of the octave by major 3rds both as an arpeggio and as a pattern for organizing the musical structure of the movement. (Play C – E – Ab - C again)

There is still another way of dividing the octave equally. It can be divided by minor 3rds.

**Equal division by minor 3rd**

You may recognize these pitches as belonging to a diminished 7\(^{th}\) chord, the harmony beloved of 19\(^{th}\)-century composers because from there you can go to any harmony you want. It’s the ultimate chameleon chord—it has no real identity of its own.

Debussy doesn’t pursue this all the way—there are limits to pedantry—but how otherwise explain the peculiar passage at the end of the piece where we hear arpeggios on C, E flat, and F#?
“Doctor Gradus” remains relatively tame. For the most part we can think of the piece in C major. But Debussy keeps throwing in suggestions of the various ways in which he can take us out of our comfort zone. Specifically, Debussy shows us how equal divisions of the octave remove our sense of a home base by taking away the leading tone.

[Play piece]

**Jimbo’s Lullaby**

The second movement of the suite, a lullaby inspired by Chouchou’s stuffed elephant, makes use of a folk melody surely familiar to the young girl. The melody has two forms, one with a text, the other with nonsense syllables.
Debussy uses a variation of the first version in his orchestral *Images*, and in the piano piece “Jardins sous la pluie,” (Gardens in the rain) a piece I performed here a few years ago.

In “Jimbo’s Lullaby” Debussy uses the second, simpler version. Here is that melody with its characteristic rhythm.
We hear an echo of the lullaby in the closing measures of the piece.

But when we consider that the lullaby, at least in this simpler version, consists of just a major second, it is easy to spot it in the accompaniment figure as well as in the melody.
The accompaniment figure of the major second keeps reappearing in one form or another throughout the piece.
So when we look again at the closing measures, we hear not only the echo of the lullaby but also the accompaniment figure produced by playing both of its pitches together.

“Jimbo’s Lullaby” offers us a chance to talk about sound as an essential element of music. We may break the overall idea of sound into four components: timbre (or the quality that makes an oboe sound different from a trumpet); dynamics (the loudness or softness of a particular pitch); tessitura (where the note is placed, high or low); and attack (the manner in which the piano key is struck).

Aspects of Sound

- Timbre (tone quality)
- Dynamics (loud or soft)
- Tessitura (placement high or low)
- Attack (legato, staccato, sforzando, etc.)
If you’d tried to start a conversation with Mozart or Haydn about sound, in the way we’re using the word, you would have gotten blank looks. If you’d persisted, reminding Mozart, for example, of the way he used trombones to symbolize the underworld in *Don Giovanni*, he might have said, “That’s a well-established convention: everybody does that.” If you’d tried to tell him that the sound of an individual note was just as important as its pitch or its duration, he would probably have been interested, but mystified.

In the nineteenth century Hector Berlioz might have understood you, but few others. Yet any twentieth-century composer would have gotten it right away. They might not have pursued sound as systematically as Anton von Webern, who often changed timbre, dynamics, tessitura and attack from one note to the next, but they would have understood the idea of sound as a fundamental component of music.

Claude Debussy, considered by many, including myself, to be the father of twentieth-century music, helped to bring about this revolution in musical thought, which transformed sound from the merely decorative to the essential. Let’s look again at “Jimbo’s Lullaby.” Consider the placement of the opening melody in the bass.

It’s an elephant’s lullaby, you may exclaim impatiently: naturally it sounds low. But I remind you that both Schumann and Tchaikovsky wrote “albums for the young” without ever using such an extreme of tessitura. The fact that we now take such an idea for granted is due in large measure to Debussy’s influence. And look at the words Debussy uses to instruct the pianist: “soft and a bit awkward.” Again, this fits an elephant’s lullaby, but composers prior to Debussy didn’t use language like this.

Take a look at the measures that follow.
The pianist is instructed to use both the sustaining pedal and the *una corda* (the so-called “soft pedal”) which shifts the keyboard so that the hammers strike only two strings instead of three. Look at the horizontal marcato marks under the “Do do” melody, the staccato marks over the repeated major seconds, and the strange combination of marcato and staccato over the sustained notes. The composer has thought long and hard about exactly the quality of sound he wants for this passage.

Following the composer’s instructions completely requires developing a different kind of piano technique. Consider the end of the piece.

In order to achieve the staccatos on those high notes, you have to sustain the low notes, strike the high notes, recapture the low notes, and then release the sustaining pedal. (Play example)

Now that we’ve become attuned to the subtlety of sound, we hear the playful opening of “Doctor Gradus” differently, as we listen for the variety of attacks: first staccato, then legato. We may look more closely at the composer’s instructions to play the notes “equally and without dryness.”
It would be tedious to catalogue all of the composer’s directions for sound in *Children’s Corner*, but allow me to cite just a few.

- In the “Serenade of the Doll” Debussy says “you must sustain the soft pedal through the entire piece, even in passages marked *forte*.”
- “The snow is dancing” contains six different ways of playing softly: mezzo-piano, piano, more piano, pianissimo, more pianissimo, and triple piano.
- “The little shepherd” contains, in its two pages, more indications of crescendo and decrescendo and modes of attack than an entire sonata of Beethoven, who in his day was considered fastidious about such questions.
In “Golliwogg’s cakewalk” not a measure goes by without some indication of attack or dynamics, with as many as half a dozen instructions in a single measure.

“Children’s Corner,” for all its apparent innocence, lays the groundwork for a new conception of musical sound that was to revolutionize musical thought in the 20th century. Consider that melody, rhythm and harmony—the traditional defining elements of music—all depend on connecting one musical moment to another:

- melody consists of a relationship between different pitches;
- rhythm consists of a relationship between different durations;
- harmony consists of a relationship between different chords.

None of them—melody, rhythm or harmony—focuses on the individual moment. Sound, by contrast, directs our attention to a particular instant in time. Whether a sound is loud or soft, high or low, the timbre of the sound, the attack of the sound—these are all aspects of a musical moment, not a relationship among moments. This, as we shall see, is Debussy’s great contribution to 20th-century music.

[Play piece]

**Serenade of the Doll**

[The title page calls it “Serenade of the Doll,” with a capital D. The overall contents lists it as “Sérénade for the doll,” with the French word for serenade and a small letter d.]

What makes Debussy sound like Debussy? We can recognize a passage as sounding characteristic of the composer’s style, but explaining what we hear can be quite difficult, especially without recourse to technical language. Yet I think we can identify two elements of Debussy’s musical language without resorting to abstruse terms. Most of the music we listen to is written in either the major or minor mode. The opening of “Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum,” for example, is in C major.
That is to say, all the notes in the passage come from that scale:

The other scale commonly used in classical music is the minor mode.
Much of “The snow is dancing” is written in the minor mode, that is, the notes come from that scale.

All of the symphonies of Mozart, Haydn or Beethoven, for example, are in either a major key or a minor key. Even though these so-called Classical composers might occasionally have played with the contrast between major and minor, those were the only two available choices.

Debussy sought to expand this vocabulary. In 1889, a year in which Debussy heard both Wagner’s music dramas at Bayreuth and Javanese gamelan music at the Paris World Exhibition, he had a conversation with Ernest Guiraud, his old harmony teacher from the Conservatoire. Fortunately for us, a friend took notes, according to which Debussy said that he had no faith in the supremacy of the C major scale. “Classical signifies major and minor. ... The tonal scale must be enriched by other scales. ... Music is neither major nor minor. ... The mode is that which one happens to choose at the moment. It is inconstant.” [Lockspeiser I, 204-206]

*Children’s Corner* offers several illustrations of what Debussy had in mind. Early music, for example, is often written in modes other than major or minor. The use of these other modes is one reason that Gregorian chant sounds so otherworldly to our ears. Consider the Dorian mode.

The opening of “The little Shepherd” draws its notes from this mode, which is neither major nor minor.
The most unusual special scale, and the one most often associated with Debussy’s music, is the whole tone scale, so-named because it is made up entirely of whole notes.

You have already heard a passage written in this scale in “Jimbo’s Lullaby.”
Now that you have the sound of this scale in your ears, you may recognize it in this passage from “The snow is dancing”:

Debussy frequently made use of another special scale called the pentatonic scale. As the name suggests, it has only five tones. If you play just the black notes on a piano keyboard, you’ll be playing the pentatonic scale.
Now the accompaniment at the opening of “Serenade of the Doll” suggests a guitar. Yet this is not a skilled performer, but someone just strumming the open strings. (Play example) Against this, we hear a melody drawn from the black-note, or pentatonic scale.
In addition to using special scales and modes to expand his musical vocabulary, Debussy often weakens the forward impulse of the music through the use of static harmony. Now “static” doesn’t necessarily mean that the notes are moving slowly, rather that the chords of the underlying harmony don’t seem to be going anywhere.

Frequently Debussy uses a sustained pitch, called a pedal point, to provide a tonal centre for the music. For example, even though the individual notes at the opening of “Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum” move rapidly,
the harmony doesn’t go anywhere at all: the sustained pedal point on C provides an anchor for this static harmony.

Consider the opening of “Serenade of the Doll.” The repeated E in the strumming serves to define the tonal centre, but there’s no forward impulse to the harmony: the music just sits on E, supporting a melody drawn from the pentatonic scale.
The end of the piece displays this same static quality: the individual notes move rapidly, but the harmony just sits there. And even the individual notes don’t progress in the usual sense, but just oscillate back and forth in repeated patterns. Debussy has interfered with musical time by bending a straight line into a circle.
As you listen to the entire “Serenade,” notice how often Debussy dispenses with forward movement in favour of just staying in one place.

[Place piece]

The snow is dancing

We are so accustomed to having music in any style from any country from virtually any period in history available at our fingertips—through CDs, iTunes, YouTube, or other sources—that it may require considerable imagination to situate ourselves in a period where the only music was live music and the only way for a French composer to hear what we now call
“world music” came with the World Exhibitions, held every eleven years in Paris. (The Eiffel Tower, originally intended to be a temporary structure, was built for the 1889 version of this fair.) We notice a contribution from Canada in the photo on the lower right.

Debussy’s encounter with the music of the Javanese gamelan at the World Exhibition of 1889 had a marked impression on the composer. He wrote, some years later,

“There used to be—indeed, despite the troubles that civilization has brought, there still are—some wonderful peoples who learn music as easily as one learns to breathe. Their school consists of the eternal rhythm of the
sea, the wind in the leaves, and a thousand other tiny noises, which they listen to with great care, without ever having consulted any of those dubious treatises. Their traditions are preserved only in ancient songs, sometimes involving dance, to which each individual adds his own contribution century by century. Thus Javanese music obeys laws of counterpoint that make Palestrina seem like child’s play. And if one listens to it without being prejudiced by one’s European ears, one will find a percussive charm that forces one to admit that our own music is not much more than a barbarous kind of noise more fit for a traveling circus.” [Langham Smith, p.278]

Debussy was fascinated by the sound of the gamelan orchestra, the people of the model village, or kampung, and the Indonesian singers and dancers. His friend Robert Godet reported, “Many fruitful hours for Debussy were spent in the Javanese kampung . . . listening to the percussive rhythmic complexities of the gamelan with its inexhaustible combinations of ethereal, flashing timbres.”
Before going any further, I need to share the experience of this music with you, making use of technology not available in Debussy’s time. I should like you to notice a few particular details of this music:

- All the instruments are percussion instruments—metallophones, xylophones, drums, and gongs
- The higher instruments tend to play more rapidly, the lower instruments more slowly, with the lowest gong marking the end of each period
- In contrast to western music, which proceeds in a linear fashion, this music may be thought of as circular, and therefore static, tracing a succession of cycles

When you listen to gamelan music, you may think of the pentatonic scale (like the five black keys on the piano), but to our ears the music of the gamelan will sound “out of tune.” In fact, the gamelan is precisely tuned, and
it is, to be sure, a pentatonic scale, but not tuned according to the principles
governing the piano keyboard.

[Example: Tjatrik]

With the sound of the gamelan still in your ears, I invite you now to
listen to “The snow is dancing,” with particular attention to these details:

- The piece emphasizes the percussive quality of the piano, like a suc-
  cession of bell-like sounds
- Like the gamelan, the higher notes tend to move more rapidly, while
  the lower notes, resembling the gamelan gongs, move more slowly
- The repetition of measures or phrases and the use of pedal points
  produce a curiously static effect—there is not much forward motion in
  this piece

[play piece]

If we stopped here, you might conclude that an impressionable com-
poser with a good ear, hearing an unfamiliar musical idiom for the first
time, had done a pretty good job of mimicking certain aspects of Javanese
gamelan music. But I would like to argue that Debussy’s experience at the
Paris Exhibition of 1889 had a much more profound effect. I believe this
experience to have been an essential step in the creation of an original mu-
sical language.

Now music, unlike the other arts, exists in time. Some have even de-

dined music as the organization of sound in time. Western philosophy de-

finestime in terms of an arrow. Western thought is founded on cause and
effect, on linear progression. The western conception of history—
particularly before the cataclysms of two world wars—was based on
progress. How else can you define time, except in terms of forward move-

ment?

In the music of the Javanese gamelan, Debussy discovered an alterna-
tive. Eastern philosophy defines time in terms of a cycle. Eastern thought
is founded on cyclical repetition. The eastern conception of history is based
on death and rebirth, the rise and fall of empires like the endless cycle of
the seasons. This is a static, rather than a developmental, conception of
time.
Instead of the linear progression of European music, gamelan music traces cycles, with long periods--marked by the low gong--subdivided into smaller cycles by the higher instruments. Debussy’s hours listening to this music supplied him not just with charming, gently percussive sounds, but with an alternate conception of musical time.

Debussy uses three procedures that contribute to a static conception of musical time:

- pedal points
- repetition,
- special scales.

We have already heard some of these procedures in “Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum.” Listen for the low pedal point.

Notice how the sustained pedal point on Ab, and the repetition of measures, tend to suspend forward movement. We notice this cyclical effect throughout “The snow is dancing.”
Each repetition inhibits forward movement so that we begin to experience the musical moment in itself, and not just as part of a progression toward a goal. If you remember only one thing from this presentation, I hope you will remember Debussy’s contribution to 20th century music: the liberation of the musical moment from linear progression.
We have already talked a bit about Debussy’s use of special scales. At this point I should just like to call attention to what these scales have in common—and what separates them from the usual major or minor scales—the absence of a leading tone. The leading tone, you will recall, has a powerful drive toward the tonic, or central note of the scale.

Making use of scales that lack a leading tone represents another way of weakening the forward impulse and contributing to an appreciation of the individual musical moment.

**The little shepherd**

The term ‘arabesque’ comes from the visual arts and refers to a scrolling, vegetal decoration, as we see in this 17th-century tapestry.

The sinuous flute solo evoked by “The little shepherd” offers us an opportunity to explore the concept of the arabesque in Debussy. His biographer Edward Lockspeiser asserts that Debussy’s musical and artistic sensibility toward the end of the 19th century was “a reflection of theories of the *Art Nouveau* movement. His conception of melody as an ‘arabesque’ was the direct musical counterpart of these theories.” In 1901 Debussy
wrote, “The musical *arabesque* or rather the principle of the ornament is at the basis of all forms of art.”

Lockspeiser goes on to write: “[Debussy’s] finely shaped handwriting, his monogram consisting of mysteriously entwined initials, his preoccupation with the decorative features of his publications, particularly the colors and spacing of the title pages, the furnishings of his humble home in the rue Cardinet (“your *Art Nouveau* den, as his friend Pierre Louÿs described it)—all this indicates that Debussy was deeply affected by specific trends in the visual arts.” [Lockspeiser I, 118-119]

The flowing lines and vegetal imagery of the *arabesque* can be seen in this painting called “The Blessed Damozel,” by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, whose poem of the same title Debussy set to music in 1889.

Edward Lockspeiser writes, “*The Blessed Damozel* ... greatly attracted the Art Nouveau artists, characteristically drawn to English poetry. What they admired in Rossetti’s painting of the Blessed Damozel was again the symbolism of line or arabesque. They cherished--apart from the melancholy of her greenish-blue eyes--the peculiar curve of her sensual protruding upper lip, her copper-coloured locks and the curvature of her swan-like neck repeated in the draperies of her celestial gown.” [Lockspeiser I, 120]
The sense of repeated curves can be observed in modern artistic designs bearing the title “arabesque.” We notice not only the presence of continual curves but also the way these curves keep turning our attention back toward the center, inhibiting our customary progression from left to right.
Debussy used this word “arabesque” to describe a particular kind of melodic writing that he especially admired. In a review from 1901 he wrote: “Once again one finds that almost the entire piece is a pure musical arabesque, or rather it is based on the principle of the ornament, which is at the root of all kinds of art. ... The primitives—Palestrina, Victoria, Orlando di Lasso, etc.—had this divine sense of the arabesque. They found the basis of it in Gregorian chant, whose delicate tracery they supported with twining counterpoints. In reworking the arabesque, Bach made it more flexible, more fluid, and despite the fact that the Great Master always imposed a rigorous discipline on beauty, he imbued it with a wealth of free fantasy so limitless that it still astonishes us today. In Bach’s music it is not the character of the melody that affects us but rather the curve.” [Langham Smith, pp.26-27]

Both our eyes and our ears can appreciate the curved musical shape, bending back on itself, in the opening measures of Bach’s first suite for solo cello.

Prélude.

Compare this with the visual appearance of the first of Debussy’s two Arabesques for piano.

If we think of lines bending back on themselves, ornamented in the sense of being curved rather than linear, we may get some notion of what the arabesque meant for Debussy in musical terms. Since we are talking of a flute solo in “The little shepherd,” why not begin with the most famous
flute melody in Debussy’s works, the opening of the “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun.”

We notice that the melody is mostly stepwise—there are very few skips. We also notice the way it oscillates back and forth, bending back on itself before finally coming to a resolution. There is a languorous quality to this kind of melody—sinuous, winding, evocative—just the opposite of direct, declarative, forthright.

We find these same qualities in a short piece called *Syrinx*, that Debussy composed for solo flute.

Notice the way the musical line hesitates and doubles back on itself.

If we turn our attention to the so-called “flute” solo at the beginning of “The little shepherd” we observe these same qualities.
The descending line is interrupted: it moves downward, then doubles back, continues its descent, then leaps an octave and repeats the descent. The same sinuous, “doubling back” characteristic appears in the continuation of the melody, now with a simple accompaniment.

It is difficult to talk about harmony without using technical language, but we cannot completely ignore this aspect of Debussy’s musical thought. The three flute-like examples we have considered—the opening of the Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, the beginning of Syrinx, and the initial measures of “The little shepherd”—have this in common: it’s very difficult to know just what key you’re in.

Lest you imagine that harmonic vagueness is a general feature of flute music, consider the opening of Mozart’s Andante in C for flute and orchestra:

No question: from the very first notes we know that we’re clearly in C major. By contrast, the vagueness of the harmony in the three Debussy examples represents an essential aspect of the composer’s style. In effect, De-
bussy has given musical expression to the philosophy proposed by his poe-
tic mentor, Stéphane Mallarmé: “To name an object is to take away three
quarters of the poem’s joy, which consists in figuring it out little by little; to
suggest, there’s the dream.” (Mallarmé, Oeuvres complètes, Paris: Bibl-
othèque de la Pléiade, 1965), p.869.)

How does Debussy achieve this harmonic vagueness? Let’s return to
the idea of special scales, scales other than the usual major or minor. De-
ussy’s use of special scales helps to liberate the melody from any clear ton-
al centre. We have already mentioned the whole-tone scale, which operates
in a kind of harmonic fog. And we have noticed Debussy’s use of the an-
cient modes, such as the Dorian mode at the beginning of “The little
Shepherd.” You would be hard-pressed to decide exactly what key this
piece was in, based on the opening measures.

Debussy also makes use of an unusual scale called the alternating
scale because it alternates half steps and whole steps. Both forms of the
scale appear in “The Little Shepherd.”
The notion of the arabesque well describes the musical language of “The little shepherd”: melodic lines that double back on themselves instead of proceeding directly to their goal, within a harmonic context that, in Mallarmé’s words, allows us to “figure it out, little by little.” By the time we get to the end of the piece, we know that we’re clearly in A major.

The final harmonic progression—ii7 to V7 to I—is one of the most common in all of classical music. But Debussy has taken Mallarmé to heart: suggest rather than name. We figure out the harmony little by little.

[Play the piece]

Golliwogg’s Cake-walk
The final movement in the suite requires a fair amount of explanation. To begin with, what on earth is a golliwogg? Various etymologies trace the word to black stuffed dolls played with by the children of Egyptian labourers, as observed by British soldiers in the 19th century, or to characters from the blackface minstrel tradition. The term has since been classified as derogatory and racist. Be that as it may, Chouchou had a golliwogg doll in her nursery, and Debussy exploited the minstrel side of the tradition in his piano piece.

Interviews with ex-slaves in the 1930s elicited this first-person account of the cakewalk: “Cakewalkin' was a lot of fun durin' slavery time. Dey swep yards real clearn and set benches for de party. Banjos wuz used for music makin'. De women's wor long, ruffled dresses wid hoops in 'em and de mens had on high hats, long split-tailed coats, and some of em used walkin' sticks. De couple dat danced best got a prize. Sometimes de slave owners come to dese parties 'cause dey enjoyed watchin' de dance, and dey 'cided who danced de best. Most parties durin' slavery time, wuz give on Saturday night durin' work sessions, but durin' winter dey wuz give on most any night."

The cakewalk may be thought of as a parody, a dance in which plantation slaves made fun of the fine manners of the white folks living in the “big house” by grotesquely exaggerated movements in a syncopated rhythm.
Debussy came to know this dance, and its ragtime rhythm, through performances by John Phillip Sousa. For those of us accustomed to thinking of Sousa exclusively in terms of marches, it may be surprising to associate his name with the classic rhythms of ragtime. But in 1903 Debussy wrote: “If American music is unique for its invention of the famous ‘cake-walk,’ and I must admit that for the moment that seems to be its single advantage over all other kinds of music, then of that M. Sousa is unquestionably its king.” [Langham Smith, p.181]
The real parody comes midway through the piece, but to understand it we need to go back a few years. Modern audiences may find it difficult to accept the notion of a composer becoming a cult figure—a rock star, sure, but not a longhair musician. Nonetheless, we've already seen that the partisans of Pelléas et Mélisande turned passion into a religion. One contemporary journalist described them mockingly:

“Their long hair is effectively parted down the middle, they are plump in face, of mat [dull] complexion and they have deep-set eyes. They wear velvet-collared coats with puffed sleeves, or frock-coats rather too tight at the waist, large silk ties hunched up round the neck or a flowing lavaliere tie. On the little fingers of their beautiful hands they wear an Egyptian or a Byzantine ring, a turquoise scarab or a jewel in green gold. [Lorrain, quoted in Lockspeiser II, 73-74]

Debussy was not the first composer to receive this kind of cult worship. A generation earlier Wagner was all the rage, with Debussy himself among his followers. Debussy described his youthful self as “a Wagnerian to the point of forgetting the simplest rules of courtesy.” Around this time Debussy took on a wager that he could play the entire score of Tristan und Isolde from memory. Though he lost the bet, the incident suggests how
thoroughly he had absorbed Wagner’s music and the extent to which he was conscious of this mastery.

By 1902 the spell had worn off, and Debussy wrote “After some years of passionate pilgrimages to Bayreuth, I began to have doubts about the Wagnerian formula, or, rather, it seemed to me that it was of use only in the particular case of Wagner’s own genius.” Later that same year he wrote “Certainly my method of composing—which consists above all of dispensing with ‘methods of composing’—owes nothing to Wagner.” We need to take this last statement with a grain of salt. In fact, Pelléas et Mélisande, the opera that initiated the Debussy cult, owes a great deal to Wagner. To offer but a single example, Debussy frequently used the so-called “Tristan” chord in his opera to set the word “triste” (sad).

“Golliwogg’s Cakewalk” gave Debussy an opportunity to thumb his nose at Wagner. Perhaps the most famous music the German composer created may be found in the opening measures of Tristan und Isolde.

Consider Debussy’s somewhat mocking version in “Golliwogg’s Cakewalk,” to be performed “with great emotion.”

Given what we know about the cakewalk itself, Debussy is in effect poking fun at Wagner as the “big daddy” of the plantation of 19th-century European music. Whether that puts Debussy himself in the position of slave merely testifies to the complexity of the relationship between the two composers, a relationship that may perhaps be best characterized as “conflicted.” [I re-
recently gave an entire lecture on this relationship. You can find the text on my website.]

Debussy found much to admire in Wagner. After all, Wagner’s immense expansion of musical time, and his avoidance of harmonic cadences to produce what he called “endless melody,” tended to weaken the measure-to-measure binding force of music, an idea that found favour with Debussy. Wagner’s goal of a “union of the arts” had a tremendous influence on the poets with whom Debussy associated. And Debussy clearly took to heart the idea of harmonic progressions defined by voice-leading instead of allegiance to a central tonality. We heard an example in “Serenade of the doll,” where the chords essentially slide from one to the next.

A few years later, in his first book of Preludes, Debussy would carry this procedure still furthur in “The Sunken Cathedral.”
In this passage what we would ordinarily have called a dominant-7th chord has lost all of its logical meaning. We hear the chord only as a way of colouring the melody.

But even as he extended musical time to unheard-of lengths, Wagner still thought in terms of logical progressions and harmonic destinations. Debussy sought a new conception of musical time: cyclical, static, focused on the individual moment. Finally disappointed with the Wagnerian model, Debussy wrote in 1903, “Wagner, if one may be permitted a little of the grandiloquence that suits the man, was a beautiful sunset that has been mistaken for a dawn.”

Robin Holloway, in his book Debussy and Wagner, summarizes the relationship this way: “Though his attitude toward Wagner, ranging as it did from early devotion to later hostility, was unbalanced in both directions, in his music [Debussy] is the one composer who, neither resisting Wagner’s sway nor succumbing slavishly to it, eventually produces music which while it is extraordinarily original and masterly in its own terms, could none the less not have existed were it not for Wagner’s example.”

We may listen to “Golliwogg’s Cakewalk” as Debussy’s way of casting off the old, in the parody of Wagner, and embracing the new, in this case the ragtime rhythms of the early twentieth century.

[Play piece]

A new conception of musical time: liberation of the moment

- Melody: winding arabesques weaken sense of linear progression
- Rhythm: repetition of measures or phrases contributes to stasis
- Harmony: special scales, lacking a leading tone, weaken logical progression; pedal points inhibit a sense of direction
- Sound: unprecedented attention to timbre, dynamics, attack, tessitura
A decade after composing “Children’s Corner” Claude Debussy would be dead of cancer at age 56, and a year after that his daughter would die of diphtheria. But in 1908, Chouchou and her nursery provided Debussy a quiet haven from the unwelcome intrusion of fame and the inspiration for a charming suite of piano pieces that offer a window into the composer’s musical language, a language that transformed our conception of musical time and prepared the way for the liberation of the musical moment.