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The Techniques of Impressionism in the Preludes of Claude Debussy

Janet Duffel

Ouachita Baptist University

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THE TECHNIQUES OF IMPRESSIONISM

IN THE PRELUDES

OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY

by

Janet Duffel

Honors Project

Spring 1974

Claude Debussy, called by Bartok "the greatest composer of our period"¹, was one of the most important composers in the history of piano music. He introduced a new approach to musical composition which is best summed up in an excerpt from a letter written by Debussy in 1885:

I don't think I shall ever be able to put music into a strict mould. I'm not speaking of musical form; it's a literary question. I shall always prefer a subject where, somehow, action is sacrificed to feeling. It seems to me that music thus becomes more human and one can then discover² and refine upon a means of expression.

As a student at the Paris Conservatory, Debussy showed little promise. His violations of the laws of composition annoyed and bewildered his professors. A description by a fellow student of one of his improvisations at the keyboard reveals many of the features which are now accepted as general characteristics of Debussy's piano music.

At the piano we heard groups of consecutive fifths and octaves; sevenths which instead of being resolved in the proper way actually led to the note above or weren't resolved at all; shameful "false relations"; chords

¹Otto Deri, Exploring Twentieth-Century Music (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 152.

²Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy (London, England: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., Aldine House, 1951), p. 25.

of the ninth on all degrees of the scale; chords of the eleventh and thirteenth; all the notes of the diatonic scale heard at once in fantastic arrangements. . . . And all this Claude called 'le regal de l'ouïe' (a feast for the ear).³

Because of his departure from the basic harmonic principles which had been in use for hundreds of years, Debussy was one of the principal originators of the new piano style in the twentieth century.⁴ Although Debussy was not always the first composer to use all the devices considered part of his style, he exploited them to such an extent that they became "part of the vocabulary of music."⁵ As the music of Beethoven bridged the gap between the Classical and Romantic periods in music, the music of Debussy served as one of the most significant bridges between the music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶

Although the music of Wagner, of Russian nationalists, of the Far East, and of Mussourgsky all had a powerful effect on the formation of Debussy's style, his creative inspiration came from Impressionist painters and Symbolist literature. "Symbolist poets and Impressionist

³Ibid, p. 18.

⁴Joseph Machlis, Introduction to Contemporary Music (New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1961), p. 127.

⁵Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth Century Music (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1967), p. 28.

⁶Ibid, p. 13.

painters helped to sharpen the senses of their contemporaries."⁷ To the Impressionists the subject matter itself was of less importance than the impression the subject aroused. They turned away from realism and were more concerned with color and light than form and substance. The poets often sacrificed clarity of statement to emphasize the sounds of the words. Their primary aim was to establish a mood through the sound and rhythm of their verses.

In the Preludes, Debussy creates a mood by exploiting the resources of the piano. These twenty-four pieces contain all the compositional techniques which Debussy had formulated through experimentation with various harmonic, melodic and rhythmic devices.

In the area of harmony, Debussy's most important contribution is his treatment of dissonance. Previously, the use of dissonance had been governed by the principle that a dissonant chord must be followed by moments of relaxation through resolution. But Debussy uses dissonance to add color rather than create tension.

...Debussy's harmonic world has a different flow from the music of the preceding era; because there is no urgent need to reach 'destinations', the flow of the chords assumes a gentleness, an unforced quality. Instead of sharply drawn harmonic progressions, chords are presented, often merely for their

⁷Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1967), p. 12.

sound values, with one unresolved chord gently flowing to the next, without eliciting any need for resolution of these chords.⁸

The following example, from "La vent dans la plaine", illustrates this technique of leading a dissonant chord to another one on a different level rather than resolving it.

⁸Otto Deri, Exploring Twentieth-Century Music (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 157.

One of Debussy's favorite harmonic devices is the use of parallel perfect intervals--fourths, fifths, and octaves--and parallel chords. Some type of parallelism is found in each of the preludes. In "Danseuses de Delphes", Debussy uses parallel chords between sections of the piece to add color.

I
Lent et grave ($\text{♩} = 44$)
doux et soutenu

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

A handwritten musical score for a piano piece. It features two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The music consists of several measures of parallel chords, where each chord is made up of notes separated by perfect fourths and perfect fifths, with no thirds. The chords are written in a way that suggests they are to be played in parallel motion across the two staves.

The main characteristic of "La cathédrale engloutie" is the use of parallel chords. The harmonies of the entire piece are based on parallel chords. In the first section, the harmonies are unusual because they are composed of fourths and fifths--the third of the chord is not present. This type of harmonic structure, called organum, helps to create the atmosphere of a cathedral because in medieval times chants were often sung at intervals of perfect fourths, perfect fifths and octaves.

Profondément calme (Dans une brume doucement sonore)

A handwritten musical score for a piano piece, similar to the one above. It features two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 6/4, with a 3/2 equivalent indicated below it. The music consists of several measures of parallel chords, where each chord is made up of notes separated by perfect fourths and perfect fifths, with no thirds. The chords are written in a way that suggests they are to be played in parallel motion across the two staves. The dynamic marking is *pp* (pianissimo). The tempo/mood instruction is "Profondément calme (Dans une brume doucement sonore)".

Debussy also uses parallel chords to accompany the melody. In "Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. D.P.M.P.C.", the melody of "God Save the Queen" is in the bass in octaves, accompanied by parallel chords in the right hand.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece by Debussy. It consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, marked 'Grave', and contains parallel chords. The middle staff is in bass clef and contains a melody in octaves. The bottom staff is also in bass clef and contains a melody in octaves, marked 'f sonore'. The time signature is 3/4. The score is written in a simple, hand-drawn style.

As in the example above, Debussy often writes his melodies in octaves, accompanied by different figures according to the mood he wishes to evoke. In "Feux d'artifice", Debussy accompanies his melody by whole-tone passages.

Handwritten musical score for the first system. It consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a 4/8 time signature and a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb). It contains a few notes and rests, with a large 'f' dynamic marking below it. The middle staff is also in treble clef with a 4/8 time signature and two flats. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a 4/8 time signature and two flats. It contains a series of notes, some with accidentals, and a large 'f' dynamic marking. There are some handwritten annotations and a large 'V' shape drawn across the staves.

Handwritten musical score for the second system. It consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats. It contains two triplet markings over groups of notes. The middle staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats. It contains a series of notes, some with accidentals, and a large slur over the right-hand portion. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats. It contains a series of notes, some with accidentals, and a large slur over the right-hand portion. There are some handwritten annotations and a large 'V' shape drawn across the staves.

In "Les collines d'Anacapri", broken octaves are used to accompany the melody.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece in D major (two sharps) and 12/16 time. The top staff is the melody, and the bottom staff is the accompaniment. The accompaniment features broken octaves, which are pairs of notes an octave apart, often with a grace note. The piece is marked with piano (pp) dynamics. The score is divided into two measures, with the second measure showing a continuation of the broken octave pattern.

The other perfect intervals--perfect fourths and perfect fifths--also are used as accompaniment figures. One section of "La fille aux cheveux de lin" has parallel fourths accompanying the melody, followed by a run of parallel fourths at the final cadence.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piece in D minor (two flats) and 3/4 time. The top staff is the melody, and the bottom staff is the accompaniment. The accompaniment features parallel fourths, which are pairs of notes a fourth apart, moving in the same direction. The piece is marked with piano (pp) dynamics. The score is divided into three measures, with the third measure showing a final cadence. The piece is marked with the instruction "Murmuré et en retenant peu à peu" and "perdendo...".

The parallel fifths in "La sérénade interrompue" not only serve as the accompanying figure when the melody enters, but they also suggest the sound of a guitar.

Handwritten musical score for "La sérénade interrompue". The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and a 3/8 time signature. The upper staff is labeled "sopra" and contains a vocal line. The lower staff is labeled "les deux pédales" and contains a piano accompaniment consisting of parallel fifths. The dynamic marking "pp" is written above the first measure.

Handwritten musical score for "La sérénade interrompue". The score is written in bass clef with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and a 3/8 time signature. The upper staff is labeled "più pp" and contains a melodic line. The lower staff is labeled "expressif et un peu suppliant" and contains a piano accompaniment consisting of parallel fifths. The dynamic marking "più pp" is written above the first measure. The melodic line is marked "expressif et un peu suppliant". The score ends with the instruction "C'estompé et en suivant l'expression".

Debussy often uses the intervals of seconds and sevenths/as accompanying figures and to form clusters. The accompaniment figure in "La vent dans la plaine" is based entirely on the intervals of seconds and sevenths. At the beginning of the piece the intervals are major sevenths and minor seconds, but in the middle section they change to minor sevenths and major seconds. At the end of the piece, major sevenths and minor seconds return in the accompaniment.

Animé ($\text{♩} = 126$)
 aussi légèrement que possible

pp

sopra

In "Feux d'artifice" both major and minor seconds join the sections of the piece. The right hand figure is composed of seconds and is a second above the note played by the left hand.

Handwritten musical score for piano in 4/8 time. The score consists of three staves: two treble clefs and one bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The music features clusters of notes, with a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) at the beginning. The clusters are formed by major seconds. The first staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 4/8. The second staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 4/8. The third staff has a bass clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 4/8. The music is written in a style that suggests a cluster of notes, with many notes beamed together.

Later in the same piece, Debussy also uses clusters formed by major seconds.

Handwritten musical score for piano in 4/8 time, labeled "Retenu". The score consists of three staves: two treble clefs and one bass clef. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The music features clusters of notes, with a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) at the beginning. The clusters are formed by major seconds. The first staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 4/8. The second staff has a treble clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 4/8. The third staff has a bass clef, a key signature of one flat, and a time signature of 4/8. The music is written in a style that suggests a cluster of notes, with many notes beamed together. The word "Retenu" is written above the first staff, and a double bar line with repeat dots is at the end of the piece.

One of the traditional devices that Debussy uses extensively is the pedal point. When the pedal point is in the bass, it often helps to establish a tonal center, as in "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir."

A handwritten musical score for a piano piece. The score is written on two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 3/4. The music features a prominent pedal point in the bass, with the note B# (the second sharp) sustained throughout. The upper staff contains melodic lines with various ornaments and phrasing. Performance markings include 'p n.d.' (piano non deturbo), 'expressif', and 'p n.d.' again. The piece concludes with a fermata over the final notes.

"Voiles" is based on the whole-tone scale. Because all the intervals in the whole-tone scale are an equal distance apart, the piece does not have a tonal center. But the B^b pedal point which occurs throughout the piece in the bass almost becomes a tonal center and also relates the contrasting sections of the piece.

A handwritten musical score for a piano piece. The score is written on two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb), and the time signature is 2/4. The music features a whole-tone scale in the upper staff, with notes Bb, C, D, Eb, F, G, Ab, and Bb. The lower staff contains a pedal point in the bass, with the note Bb sustained throughout. Performance markings include 'pp expressif' and 'très doux'. The piece concludes with a fermata over the final notes.

Debussy's pedal points are not always in the bass. "La Danse de Puck" has a trill in an inner voice which is used as a pedal point.

Dans le moult -- // Retenu

pp

tr

7R

expressif

The feature most commonly associated with Debussy's music is his use of scales other than the major and minor forms.

The scale is the structural organization behind both melody and harmony, and when this is substantially changed from former musical practices, herein lies the clue toward the recognition and understanding of this new sound.⁹

Among these forms are the whole-tone scale, the pentatonic scales and the modal scales.

To understand Debussy's preference for scales other than major-minor, one should think of the inherent psychological effects. One should keep in mind that the major-minor key system with the tonic-dominant axis sets up a certain

⁹Ludmila Ulehla, Contemporary Harmony: Romanticism through the Twelve-Tone Row (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1966), p. 161.

tension system with very well-defined destinations and harmonic purpose. This is exactly what Debussy wanted to avoid.¹⁰

The modal scales occur most frequently in the preludes. In "La fille aux cheveux de lin" the melodic material is in the dorian mode, but it is harmonized in the key of G^b major.

VII
Très calme et doucement expressif (♩=66)

p sans rigueur

V

p

The identifying characteristic of "Voiles" is the whole-tone passage which occurs at the beginning of the piece.

¹⁰ Otto Deri, Exploring Twentieth-Century Music (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 157.

II
Moderé (♩ = 88) (Dans un rythme sans rigueur et caressant)

When the piece changes keys, the type of scale passage changes to pentatonic. At the end of the piece, the whole-tone pattern used at the beginning returns.

EN ANIMANT

The melodic figure in "Les Collines d'Anacapri" suggests the pentatonic scale. A half-step occurs between the A[#] and the B, but the effect is that of the pentatonic scale.

Handwritten musical score for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 12/16 time signature. It features a melodic line with eighth notes and slurs. The bottom staff is also in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, featuring a chromatic accompaniment of eighth notes. The tempo/mood marking "p Joyeux et léger" is written between the staves. A "pp" marking is at the beginning of the bottom staff.

Debussy's use of the chromatic scale is primarily as an accompanying figure and to provide color between sections of a piece. "La Terrasse des audiences du Clair de lune" has chromatic passages used in both of these ways.

Handwritten musical score for three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 6/8 time signature. It features a melodic line with eighth notes and slurs. The middle staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, featuring a chromatic accompaniment of eighth notes. The bottom staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, featuring a chromatic accompaniment of eighth notes. The tempo/mood marking "pp" is written between the middle and bottom staves. A "L. 9. 18" marking is at the bottom of the page.

Handwritten musical score for three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. All three staves have a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The top staff contains a melodic line with a slur over a sequence of notes. The middle and bottom staves contain accompaniment. At the end of the piece, there is a single note on the bottom staff with the handwritten text "8.a.b.a." below it.

As a result of the use of modal, whole-tone, chromatic and pentatonic scales, Debussy's cadences depend more on the completion of a certain theme or section of a composition than on the harmonic progression. The final chord of the cadence functions as a rest chord, because it is usually less dissonant than what precedes it. An example of this type of cadence is the chord which serves as the final cadence in "Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest".

The image shows a handwritten musical score on two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature consists of two sharps (F# and C#). The time signature is 3/4. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. Handwritten annotations include "Ketenul" at the top left, "au mouvement" above the right-hand staff, and "ff" and "sf sf sf" below the right-hand staff. There are also some scribbles and additional markings on the bottom staff.

The use of these scales and cadences helps to obscure the tonal center. Debussy often uses a particular key signature and then a chord or series of chords which cannot be analyzed as having any relationship to that key. This kind of harmonic progression appears in "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir". The key signature is that of A major, but in measures 34-36 there is a series of parallel chords which cannot be analyzed in the key of A major. This harmonic structure results in an indefinite tonal center.

la basse un peu appuyée et soutenu

Many of the Preludes change key signatures at least once. "Feux d'artifice" begins with the key signature of F major. Then the key signature changes to D^b major, to C major, to A major, back to C major, to F[#] major, to C major, to F[#] major, to C major, to F major and ends with the key signature of C major.

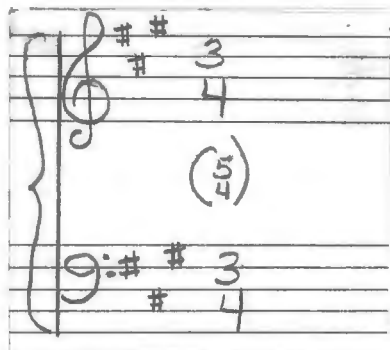
Another technique which obscures the tonal center is the use of many accidentals. At the beginning of "Feux d'artifice" the key signature is that of F major, but the accidentals in the first measure obscure the tonal center. The pattern for the first half of each beat is F-G-A. But on the second half of each beat the pattern is B^b-A^b-G^b. By using some of the same tones in each pattern with different accidentals, Debussy obscures the tonal center.

Modérément animé
léger, égal et voltain

The image shows a handwritten musical score for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both are in 4/8 time. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The music consists of a series of eighth-note triplets. The first triplet in the top staff is marked with a dynamic of *pp*. The bottom staff also contains triplets. A large slur covers the first two measures of the top staff.

Debussy's melodies frequently consist of short phrases which are often repeated. The melody in "Danseuses de Delphes" is composed of one short phrase, its repetition, and a longer phrase. This melody is presented in different registers of the keyboard and with various accompanying figures.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for piano, consisting of three systems. The top system is in treble clef and the bottom system is in bass clef. Both are in 3/4 time. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The music features complex harmonic structures, including chords and arpeggios. The first system has a dynamic marking of *p*. The second system has a dynamic marking of *p*. The third system has a dynamic marking of *p*. The score is divided into three measures, each with a large slur over the top staff.



Throughout the piece, the meter change is indicated by a broken bar line where the normal bar line in $\frac{3}{4}$ should come.

The time signatures at the beginning of "La cathédrale engloutie" and "Les Collines d'Anacapri" are $\frac{6}{4} = \frac{3}{2}$ and $\frac{12}{16} = \frac{3}{4}$.

La Cathédrale
Engloutie

"Les Collines d'Anacapri"

The rhythmic pattern of the accompaniment which appears throughout "Des pas sur la neige" obscures the meter through the use of an uneven triplet and tied notes.

Trist et Lent ($\text{♩} = 44$)

In "Canope" different subdivisions of the beat are used in the same phrase to obscure the meter of the piece.

"Canope" also has an example of syncopation. The emphasis comes on the second beat of the measure rather than on the first or third beat. The first beat is a quarter rest, and the third beat is a tied note.

A handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Canope". It consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. It features a syncopated melody with a quarter rest on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, and a tied note on the third beat. The middle staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature, containing a bass line with a quarter rest on the first beat and notes on the second and third beats. The bottom staff is also in bass clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature, showing a bass line with a quarter rest on the first beat and notes on the second and third beats. Dynamics markings include "p" and "pp" in the middle staff, and "f" and "p" in the bottom staff. There are also some handwritten annotations like "7" and "EP" in the bottom staff.

The influence of Spanish rhythms on Debussy's music is obvious in "La puerta del Vino". The tempo marking at the beginning, the great number of accents, and the dotted rhythms indicate a Spanish influence.

Mouvt. de Habanera
avec de brusques oppositions d'extrême violence et de passionnée douceur

A handwritten musical score for a piece titled "Mouvt. de Habanera". It consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 2/4 time signature. It features a syncopated melody with a quarter rest on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, and a tied note on the third beat. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a key signature of two flats and a 2/4 time signature, containing a bass line with a quarter rest on the first beat and notes on the second and third beats. Dynamics markings include "f" and "p" in the top staff, and "f" and "p" in the bottom staff. There are also some handwritten annotations like "7" and "EP" in the bottom staff.

Another prelude which shows the Spanish influence in melody and rhythm is "La serenade interrompue".

sempre sopra

Debussy is precise in his tempo and dynamic markings. In each prelude there are many markings which tell the pianist exactly what to do. The remarks at the beginning of each piece often set the mood for the entire piece. "Dans le style et le Mouvement d'un Cake-Walk" characterizes the atmosphere of "General Lavine 6 eccentric _". "La puerta del Vino" begins with the following instructions: "avec de brusques oppositions d'extreme violence et de passionnée douceur".

The comment at the beginning of "Voiles" reads: "Dans un rythme sans rigueur et caressant." One of the specific remarks in "Les collines d'Anacapri" directs the pianist to play that section of the piece "avec la liberta d'une chanson populaire". Some of the most frequent tempo markings in the Preludes are "Cédez" (ritard), "Retenu" (ritard to the next tempo marking), and "Mouvement" (a tempo).

The majority of Debussy's dynamic markings are pianos and pianissimos.

Seven of the Preludes of the first volume start pp and the other five are marked p. Stunning dramatic climaxes occur, but they are momentary flashes soon to be replaced by quiet.¹¹

Debussy not only uses precise dynamic and tempo markings but also gives specific directions for playing the piece. For instance, in measure 48 of "Voiles" the directions read: "comme un très léger glissando". One section of "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir" says that "la basse un peu appuyée et soutenu". In the next to the last measure of "La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune", the words "timbrez légèrement la petite note" appear.

¹¹Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music (Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1967), p. 33.

Debussy makes use of the entire range of the keyboard. Some of the preludes in the first volume, such as "Les collines d'Anacapri", make use of extreme registers of the keyboard, but not until the second volume are the high and low registers used simultaneously with the middle area empty. This technique appears in "Brouillards".

The image shows a musical score for the prelude "Brouillards" by Debussy. The score is written for piano and consists of three staves: a treble clef staff at the top, a grand staff in the middle, and a bass clef staff at the bottom. The tempo is marked "Mouv." and the time signature is 4/8. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is divided into two measures by a vertical line. In the first measure, the treble staff has a melodic line of eighth notes, and the bass staff has a corresponding melodic line. The grand staff is empty. In the second measure, the treble staff has a melodic line of eighth notes, and the bass staff has a corresponding melodic line. The grand staff is empty. The score is marked with "pp" (pianissimo) and "un peu en dehors" (a little out of tune). The word "Brouillards" is written at the bottom of the bass staff.

By using the compositional techniques discussed in the preceding pages, Debussy arrived at one of the most original and influential styles developed in the early twentieth century. His new approach to dissonance, his weaving together of brief, fragmentary melodies, his use of scales other than major and minor, and his new conception of sound and form influenced the leading

composers of the twentieth century.

One can state without exaggeration that Debussy exerted the most important single influence on a host of composers, including Stravinsky, Bartok, Berg and even Webern and Boulez.¹²

¹²Otto Deri, Exploring Twentieth-Century Music (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 168.

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