

Dreaming up a Main Character:  
Persona and Vocal Agency in Debussy's "De rêve"

by

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Diploma in Music, Camosun College, 2015

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We acknowledge with respect the Lewkungen peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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## Abstract

This thesis stems from a performance I gave of Claude Debussy's song cycle *Proses lyriques* in March 2020, and from the particular difficulties I encountered during the preparation process. In most art song, it is not problematic to assume that the text drives the musical narrative. However, "De rêve," the first song of the cycle, challenges this assumption. The musical setting undercuts the agency of the vocal part and creates a situation in which the narrative of the song is driven by the thematic development of the piano part, rather than by the text. This thesis suggests that Debussy deliberately plays with multiple "voices" within the music to heighten the ambiguity prized within the Symbolist movement to which he was attached at the time of composition.

I begin by introducing the piece and its context. In the second chapter, I build upon the work on voice and musical narrativity of Edward T. Cone and Matt BaileyShea to formulate definitions of the voices present within "De rêve" over which the singer has direct agency. I then discuss the appeal the Symbolist aesthetic held for Debussy at the time of composition. In chapter three, I develop a reading of the text that will assist singers preparing the entire cycle for performance to establish the figure of the narrator-protagonist. In the fourth chapter, I analyse in the way in which the musical setting resists the accession of the narrator, and therefore the singer, to the role of protagonist.

Through my analysis, I offer the close study of the voices and personae within a work as particularly useful tools to help singer-scholars who tackle *Proses lyriques* or other ambiguous repertoire tease out hidden voices within the music.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction Whose Voice Is It, Anyway?

As singers prepare music for performance, they are faced with two different types of “voice.” The first, more obvious one is their human, physical, sounding voice, which they bring to any repertoire they perform.<sup>1</sup> The second “voice” singers must deal with is more abstract. The term “voice” in musical analysis typically designates not the physical, sounding voice but rather the expressive elements within the musical work, which can be conveyed through the text or the music. It is easy for singers to slip between these concepts of voice when they prepare repertoire especially because their attention is divided between their own voice (i.e, the sound produced by the singer’s larynx) and the “voices” of the text, the vocal line, and the instrumental part, which work together to make up the “voice” of the composition as a whole. Quite often, both singers and, as we shall see, scholars, make the following assumption when dealing with texted music: since the vocal line delivers the text, which carries explicit semantic significance, it must therefore be the voice of the work itself. In some types of repertoire, this assumption is unproblematic, as the vocal and instrumental parts are all pushing in the same direction, and the textual narrative is evident. Certain other repertoire, however, is deliberately more ambiguous. This is particularly true in the case of Claude Debussy’s song cycle *Proses lyriques*. This cycle is unusual within the genre of art song for two main reasons: first, because Debussy wrote both the text and the music, rather than using a pre-existing text by another author, and second (and more interestingly), because of the complexity of the multiple voices present in the four songs which make up *Proses*. The issue of what constitutes a musical “voice” is vast, complex, and subject to much debate, so I will limit myself to the following “voices”: those present in the text or poetry

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the singular they throughout when referring to individuals or characters of unknown or unspecified gender.

itself, in the vocal melody and the instrumental part, and the voice of the performer themselves. In an effort to constrain the topic of study, I will not deal with audience experience, but will rather bend my attention to those factors that the singer can either control directly—themselves and their performance of the vocal line—or study during the process of preparing *Proses lyriques* for performance.

My thesis argues that Claude Debussy (1862-1918) deliberately plays with the “voices” of his song cycle *Proses lyriques* (*Lyrical Prose*, 1892-1893) to heighten the ambiguity so prized by the Symbolist movement he was involved with around the time of composition. In particular, I will focus on the way in which the music of “De rêve,” the first song of the cycle, undercuts the agency of the narrator—and, therefore, in a way, of the singer—with unexpected thematic developments and interruptions of the vocal line, which obfuscate the perspective from which the story is being told. The ambiguity surrounding the narrative point of view in “De rêve” was something that, as a performer, I found challenging.

This thesis stems from a lecture-recital I gave in the spring of 2020 while pursuing my M.A. in Musicology with Performance at the University of Victoria and contributes to a theory of voice I wish I had had access to while I was preparing that project.<sup>2</sup> To do so, I will use the concepts of narrative voice in texted music advanced by Edward T. Cone and Matt BaileyShea to study the trajectory of the assumed narrator of “De rêve” and this narrator’s persistence through the other songs of the cycle. A serious singer-centered study of *Proses lyriques* is, in my view, sorely lacking. Standard *mélodie* performance guides that address *Proses lyriques* are brief and

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<sup>2</sup> Alana Hayes, mezzo-soprano, Lecture Recital: OÙ commence le corps humain, featuring *Proses lyriques* by Claude Debussy (with Dr. Kinza Tyrrell, piano) and *A-Ronne*, by Luciano Berio (with Irina Kim and Ai Horton, sopranos, Char Hodgkins, alto, Cedric Spry and Kieran Foss, tenors, and Kyron Basu and Rowan McWilliams, basses), Phillip T. Young Recital Hall, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, March 11, 2020. The recital was prepared under the supervision of vocal instructor Anne Grimm.

dismissive of the cycle, while academic studies have focussed on elements within the music that are outside of the singer's control. Approaching the issue as both a performer and a scholar, I will build upon the existing theories of narrative voice in texted music to account for instances of deliberate elision of voice within art song through the case study of "De rêve."

I will first briefly survey the genre of art song as Debussy would have known it. Edward T. Cone defines art song simply as "a song in which a poem (in any language) is set to a precisely composed vocal line united with a fully developed instrumental accompaniment."<sup>3</sup> I will adhere to this definition, which I appreciate for its simplicity and generally flexible applicability. Both German *lied* and French *mélodie* fit under the umbrella of art song. In the case of *mélodie*, musicologists David Tunley and Katherine Bergeron both identify a dual ancestry. In part, *mélodie* grew out of the eighteenth-century French-language song form of the *romance*—simple, often strophic songs with relatively unadorned and unvirtuosic vocal lines with basic accompaniments, characterized by "charming simplicity."<sup>4</sup> This small-scale, intimate genre experienced a swell of popularity around the 1830s, as it was perfect for the Parisian salons, newly re-established after the turmoil of the French revolution era.<sup>5</sup> Also in the 1830s, the songs (*lieder*) of Franz Schubert (1797-1828) were published in French translation and became wildly popular in Paris. It was the intersection of these two trends that, according to Bergeron, created the distinction between *romance*—a pleasant but fundamentally frivolous form—and the new genre of *mélodie*, which was musically more complex and possessed of greater affective

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<sup>3</sup> Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 5. I will discuss Cone's work on music, voice, and narrativity in more detail in section 2.

<sup>4</sup> David Tunley, *Salons, Singers, and Songs* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 58; Frits Noske, *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc: The Origin and Development of the Mélodie*, 2nd ed (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970), 2-3.

<sup>5</sup> Elaborated upon in chapter 2 of Tunley, *Salons, Singers, and Songs*, especially 18-20.

emotional power.<sup>6</sup> Given the close cross-pollination between French *mélodie* and German *lied* in the nineteenth century, I find it appropriate to take something written about the latter and apply it to the former. In his preface to *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, Rufus Hallmark writes that, “far from serving as a mere accompanist, the pianist who delves into lieder will soon discover what balanced partners voice and instrument are, and how crucial to the total effect of the song the piano writing is. [...] By the same token, the singer should not think [themselves] the sole focus of the audience’s attention, but must learn the mutual attentiveness and pleasure of chamber music-making.”<sup>7</sup> In the same vein, *mélodie* is characterized by a close partnership between the vocal and piano parts. In much of the standard vocal repertoire of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these two parts function as two “voices” which generally (though not exclusively) move together as equal partners in the same overall narrative direction. This unity of purpose is not without exceptions. Notably, in a recent article, Janet Schmalfeldt explores Schumann’s use of an unreliable narrator and a notable *disunity* between voice and piano, and music and text.<sup>8</sup> This sort of disunity is, however, a more exceptional case, and not a characteristic of the majority of art song.

In contrast to the prototypical art song, *Proses lyriques* poses a challenge to any who might seek to pinpoint the musical voice or voices of the cycle. Unlike a more traditional cycle in which the singer is embodying a specific character—such as the Poet in Robert Schumann’s *Dichterliebe* (*A Poet’s Love*) or Bilitis in Debussy’s own *Chansons de Bilitis* (*Songs of Bilitis*)—there is no explicit human main character unifying all four of the songs in *Proses*. Nor do the

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<sup>6</sup> Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 6. Bergeron notes that the exact history and provenance of the term *mélodie* is unclear, and in 19<sup>th</sup> century France there was some slippage of use between *romance*, *mélodie* and even *lied*.

<sup>7</sup> Rufus Hallmark, editor, *German Lieder in the Nineteenth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Janet Schmalfeldt explores *Papillons*, Op. 2 and *Dichterliebe* in “From Literary Fiction to Music: Schumann and the Unreliable Narrative,” *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music*, 43, no. 3 (Spring 2020), 170-193.

moments portrayed in each song fit together to form any sort of clear story. The first song, “De rêve” (“Of Dreams”), retells a dream of a mythic past in the third person. The second song, “De grève” (“Of the Shore”) describes a storm over the ocean building and then calming without an explicit first-person narrator. In contrast, the third song, “De fleurs” (“Of Flowers”), is entirely in the first-person, as the speaker sits in a greenhouse and wallows in their own emotions, which they project onto the plants that surround them. The fourth and final song, “De soir” (“Of Evening”), describes a Sunday in Paris, and slips between third- and first-person narration. These frequent changes of point of view create ambiguity around who, exactly, is telling the story. The challenge for the singer is that they neither embody a specific character nor act as an outside observer recounting a story they have witnessed. Instead, the singer must slip in and out of points of view. This creates an ambiguity of voice that pervades the entire cycle.

Yet while the ambiguous and shifting points of view may make it seem as if *Proses lyriques* has no narrator, I will argue that there is, indeed, a narrator in this cycle. I will first briefly define the concept of the narrator. The most common definition is, per the Oxford English Dictionary (henceforth, OED), “a person who narrates or gives an account of something,”<sup>9</sup> thus providing the point of view from which a story is told. As it pertains to literature, OED defines narrator as, more specifically, “the voice or persona (whether explicitly identified or merely implicit) by which are related the events in a plot, esp. that of a novel or narrative poem.”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, a character is “a person portrayed in a work of fiction, a drama, a film, a comic strip, etc.; (also) a part played by an actor on the stage, in a film, etc., a role.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, a narrator may or may not be a character within the story they are telling. Literature on the role of the narrator in

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<sup>9</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. Narrator.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. Character, 14.

other media has resolved part of the quandary posed by the absence of a clear human narrator that I have signalled above. Jerrold Levinson, who deals specifically with film but whose definition is applicable to a wider range of media, assumes that “if there is a narration of events in a fiction film, if a comprehensible story comprising them is being conveyed to us, then there is an agency or intelligence we are entitled, and in fact, need, to imagine is responsible for doing this narrating—to wit, a narrator, though not necessarily an ordinary human being.”<sup>12</sup> This agency is, therefore, the narrator.

I, too, will begin by making the same assumption as Levinson: the cycle *Proses lyriques*, when performed in its entirety, has a narrator, and that figure is separate from Debussy as poet and composer. I will argue that the narrator of “De rêve” may be understood as a character who evolves through the song and grows more conscious of themselves. This is revealed by how they become more emotionally affected by the scene to which they are witness. The narrator of “De rêve” must therefore be created as the main character of the song and the assumed narrator of the entire *Proses lyriques* cycle. Through this process, this character becomes the protagonist of the entire cycle.

The singer has a great deal of agency as they prepare *Proses* for performance. To be sure, the task of finding the narrator—and thus the narrator-protagonist, as it were—in *Proses* is not simple for two main reasons. First, the cycle lacks both a single, easily identifiable human character present in each song and a clear story. Second, the text and music of “De rêve”, the first song of the cycle, avoid casting the singer as a human character or as the dreamer of the titular dream. Yet the singer can, and must, create the character of the narrator. This task is all the more crucial for a singer performing the cycle in its entirety. The first song has the role of

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<sup>12</sup> Jerrold Levinson, “Film music and narrative agency,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 251.

setting up a character for the cycle to guide the audience through the contrasting and changeable music of *Proses lyriques* (see Appendix A for a diagram of the voices in “De rêve”).

Because there is no clear human character to drive the action of the cycle, the singer must tease out a narrator-protagonist from the textual and musical elements of “De rêve.” The concept of “narrative voice” is useful while preparing tricky repertoire for performance, as it provides a framework for analysing how the various elements of a musical work fit together, convey agency, and create the impression of a narrative. While most texted musical works in the standard canon of Western Art Music have a clear narrative, the songs of *Proses lyriques* intentionally elide narrative meaning. *Proses lyriques* is saying something, though who is speaking and what they are saying is ambiguous. Debussy, in his deliberate avoidance of clear meaning—and even of a clear protagonist—invites the listener to revel in this ambiguity. This ambiguity is what makes it appropriate to use the concept of narrative voice as a framework for analysis.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1: Narrative Voice—We Don't Talk About Art Song, No, No, No<sup>13</sup>

For the most part, research on voice and narrative draws on instrumental genres and, to a lesser degree, opera. One genre mostly lacking in the field as a whole, particularly in works on musical narrativity, is that of smaller-scale vocal works such as art songs and cycles like Debussy's *Proses lyriques*. As discussed in the introduction, art song is characterized by an indissociable union between the text and music, in which meaning springs forth from the close collaboration between the text and the music. Voice and narrative are therefore both musical and textual. This double layer of significance presents a particular challenge, which has resulted in the relative absence of art song from the discourse on musical narrativity. Edward T. Cone, one of very few authors to have written extensively about the narrative voices in song, subsumes all voices within an overriding composer-derived persona. Carolyn Abbate writes about the intersection of the human singer's voice and the narrative voices within music, but deals specifically with opera, which already has a larger overarching narrative and clearly defined characters.<sup>14</sup> Other scholars on musical narrativity Fred Everett Maus, Kofi Agawu, Byron Almén, and Seth Monahan<sup>15</sup> all deliberately confine themselves to the study of non-programmatic, untexted instrumental music. Monahan even writes that “[his] suspicion is that

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<sup>13</sup> Carbon-dating the writing of this section to December 2021/January 2022, I refer here to Lin-Manuel Miranda's song “We don't talk about Bruno,” from the Disney film *Encanto* (2021). Of course, the family Madrigal does talk about Bruno, despite all protestations to the contrary, just as scholars of musical narrativity do talk about art song. In both cases, this talking (or writing) adds some complexity, complications, and a bit of entertaining chaos to the issue at hand.

<sup>14</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Fred Everett Maus, “Music As Drama,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 10 (Spring 1988): 56-73; “Music As Narrative,” *Indiana Theory Review* 12 (Spring and Fall 1991): 1-34; “Narrative, Drama, and Emotion in Instrumental Music,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 393-303. Byron Almén, *A theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

analysts of solo vocal music have had little use for the work-persona concept, since the vocal persona already occupies the position of a coextensive, focal subjectivity—one whose actions might well include the accompaniment.”<sup>16</sup> For these last four scholars, the presence of text is so overwhelmingly significant that the voices present in the accompaniments of texted solo works like art song are assumed to lack the agency accorded to the various voices of strictly instrumental music.

This position overestimates how easy it is to understand the human voice during the performance of art music, especially in repertoire with virtuosic sections such as *Proses lyriques*. Authors on musical narrativity who eschew texted music accord overwhelming narrative power to the human voice delivering text. However, they ignore the way text setting, extremes of register and the stretching of vowels—to say nothing of repertoire in languages foreign to the audience—loosens the semantic significance of text, and thus makes it hard for the audience to grasp. This tends to occur because scholars themselves are dealing mostly with notated music rather than performance and are prone to neglecting the unpredictability of live performance. Music analysis tends to deal with the work apart from its performance and seeks out everything which may be said to exist within the score. In this, analysis widens potential interpretations of a work.

Performers, in contrast, are concerned with the narrowing down of these potential interpretations, of clarifying through their musical decisions a specific reading of a work, thus excluding others. Despite this ideal of clarity, the performer is no more capable of imparting their exact intentions to the audience than is the composer. While the performer is “speaking” much more immediately than a composer, who is separated from their audience through time and

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<sup>16</sup> Seth Monahan, “Action and Agency Revisited,” *Journal of Music Theory* 57, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 361.

through mediation by the performer(s), they are still subject to imperfections of human communication.

It is because of these imperfections of communication between performer and audience that the concept of musical voice becomes so crucial to the understanding of *Proses Lyriques* as a whole, and of “De rêve” as our first introduction to the cycle. Cone’s pioneering work *The Composer’s Voice* (1974) identifies a central intelligence within a work and prioritizes the composer’s voice as the governing consciousness of the music. Subsequent writers, some of whose work I will also address, would bring their own major developments to the idea of a work’s voice and guiding consciousness, and Cone’s own thought would undergo a substantial evolution. I will nevertheless begin with *The Composer’s Voice*, as it is a foundational text within the field and, despite their efforts, later authors—and indeed, Cone himself in his later years—have not quite succeeded in getting away from the ideas it put forth.

A further definition is merited at this point, as it is central to Cone’s concept of voice. The OED defines persona as “an assumed character or role, esp. one adopted by an author in [their] writing, or by a performer.”<sup>17</sup> Cone uses the term in much this manner. His earlier work distinguished between the vocal, virtual/instrumental, and musical personae of the work as a whole. Later, he would revise his theory, finding that a work in fact has only one persona, which is a “unitary vocal instrumental protagonist that is co-existent with the persona of the actual composer of the song.”<sup>18</sup> I prefer his earlier formulation, at least when dealing with a work from the perspective of a singer preparing for performance. Allowing a work to include multiple

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<sup>17</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. Persona

<sup>18</sup> Edward T. Cone, “Poet’s Love or Composer’s Love?” in *Music and text: critical inquiries*, edited by Steven Paul Scher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 182.

personae accounts both for aspects of the music that seem to work against each other, and accords more agency to the performers in determining how to assume the character(s).

Cone acknowledges at the outset the separation of biographical writer from the author construct.<sup>19</sup> His initial concept of the voice within a work was of a composite of multiple personae. His view was that in all vocal music there is a vocal persona, “incarnate” as it expresses itself fully through the human voice.<sup>20</sup> The singer embodies a character who, by their use of language, emerges from the overall musical texture and “demands to be heard.”<sup>21</sup> Cone terms this the “vocal persona,” and refers to it as the protagonist of a work. The vocal persona is composed of three segments: the poetic aspect of the words themselves, the vocal aspect of the words and melody together, and the vocal-instrumental aspect which combines the poetic and vocal aspects into the total musical texture.

The vocal persona exists in contrast with what Cone terms the “virtual persona.” The virtual persona is embodied by the instrumental parts. These are constructs that may only speak symbolically and exist at a further remove from the performer(s); unlike the singer, instrumentalists do not also embody a clearly identifiable and personifiable character. Rather, the virtual persona acts as the environment which the vocal persona inhabits and with which it interacts. For Cone, a sung line is heard to be “composed” by the singer, while an instrumental part (i.e., the virtual persona) “should give the effect of composing itself *through* the player.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The most widely read and easily accessible discussions of this type of separation can be found in Roland Barthes’ 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” later published in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) and Michel Foucault’s 1969 lecture “What is an author?” later published in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 141-160. For a discussion on the mythologification of the figure of the composer in Western art music, see especially Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Edward T. Cone, *The Composer’s Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 105.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Cone, “Poet’s Love or Composer’s Love?,” 106.

The “musical persona” of a song thus springs forth at the intersection of vocal and virtual persona. It is a constructed “composer-persona,” created anew for each individual piece, and anything the audience hears is subservient to the central intelligence of the work. This “composer-persona” aligns with Levinson’s concept of narrator as an “intelligence” that is “responsible”<sup>23</sup> for the narration of a film (or a song cycle) which we can assume exists because the story exists. For both *Proses lyriques* as a whole and “De rêve” in particular, the slipperiness of point of view renders the singer’s work in unifying the disparate aspects of the personae all the more important.

Cone’s views changed by the time he published his 1992 article “Poet’s Love or Composer’s Love.” The complex system of multiple component aspects gave way to a system which “acknowledg[es] the protagonist as the conscious composer of words and music alike (often including [...] the accompaniment).”<sup>24</sup> Here Cone argues that this makes it “easy to think of the accompaniment we actually hear as a representation of what is going on in the inner ear of the composer-protagonist.”<sup>25</sup> He writes that his “three original figures [i.e., vocal persona, virtual persona, and composer-persona] have collapsed into one: a unitary vocal-instrumental protagonist that is coexistent with the persona of the actual composer of the song.”<sup>26</sup> The streamlining of the personae into one single protagonist figure, he argues, allows for “a more just appreciation of the dramatic portrayal inherent in a song.”<sup>27</sup> The concept of a unified composer-protagonist may hold true for much of the art song repertoire. However, the simplification of the concept of voice from a multivalent composite into a single figure denudes the idea of voice of

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<sup>23</sup> Levinson, “Film music and narrative agency,” 251.

<sup>24</sup> Cone, “Poet’s Love or Composer’s Love?,” 179.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 181. The slippage of terms from composer-persona to composer-protagonist here is Cone’s own, as his passage from a tri-partite concept of personae to the unified, singular governing intelligence of a work appears to have made him strengthen the terms he uses for the composer’s voice within the work.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

its ability to deal with multiple agents acting within a single work, and risks smoothing out antagonistic aspects within the music.

At this point, a clear definition of the term protagonist suggests itself as particularly useful. This singer's task is to establish the narrator of "De rêve" as the main character—and thus as the protagonist of the cycle. The OED defines the protagonist as "the chief character in a dramatic work. Hence, in extended use: the leading character, or one of the main characters, in any narrative work, as a poem, novel, film, etc."<sup>28</sup> Per the Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance, "in modern usage, 'protagonist' is used to refer to the central character in a play, the one at the centre of the conflicts, and frequently the hero."<sup>29</sup> The protagonist the character who drives the action. This is the definition to which Cone hews. Cone uses the term "protagonist" in his writings on art song to mean the main character of the work, assuming a conflation between the main character of the work—the point of view from which the story of the work is being told—and the driving consciousness of the work. For Cone, all these aspects are embodied by the singer.

I will make a distinction between these aspects of Cone's protagonist: the point of view of the story of a song is not necessarily the main character of the song. In the specific case of "De rêve," the narrator is initially witness to various characters—the trees, the women, the knights—engaged in action and demonstrating emotions. Over the course of the song, it becomes clear that the narrator is emotionally invested in the scene they are witnessing, and in the final

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<sup>28</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. Protagonist.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald W. Vince, "protagonist," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, Oxford University Press, 2003. <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780198601746.001.0001/acref-9780198601746-e-3191>.

instants of the song, the narrator is established as a distinct, feeling, main character. This main character will carry forward as the protagonist of the three subsequent songs of the cycle.

Also dealing with the agency singers have as protagonists of their respective songs, Matt BaileyShea extends the idea of the singer as the conscious composer of the music and proposes a radical reading of Wagner in which certain characters exert agency over the instrumental part. BaileyShea posits that the operas exist in a world made of music, where the orchestra does not merely serve as “accompanying” the drama but is a constantly present and multi-voiced part of the drama “*even when silent*.”<sup>30</sup> He argues that throughout the *Ring* cycle, “the orchestra, despite possessing an independent voice, is *fundamentally passive and reactive* [...]. It instead reacts to the movements, emotions, desires, and energies of the very characters it envelops”<sup>31</sup> (all emphases original). The music does not simply convey the subtext of the text, or accompany it, but is a tangible “physical force”<sup>32</sup> within the world of the opera when taken as a whole. Certain characters have the agency to reshape the music and the orchestra reacts to their will.

It is particularly relevant to the repertoire at hand that BaileyShea’s approach uses Wagner’s operas. First, all four *Proses lyriques* were written concurrently with *Pelléas et Mélisande*, a work in which Debussy was unable to escape a constant dialogue with Wagner, still a figure towering over all of European opera.<sup>33</sup> Second, Debussy was thinking orchestrally for at

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<sup>30</sup> Matthew BaileyShea, “The Struggle for Orchestral Control: Power, Dialogue, and the Role of the Orchestra in Wagner’s *Ring*,” *19th-Century Music* 31 (2007): 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> More information about Debussy’s complicated views on Wagner can be found in: Barbara L. Kelly, “Debussy’s Parisian Affiliations,” *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Simon Trezise, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Déirdre Donnellon, “Debussy as Musician and Critic,” *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*; and François Lesure, *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography* (New York: University of Rochester Press, Boydell & Brewer, 2019), 85, 114. During Debussy’s student years—and beyond—Richard Wagner (1813-1883) towered over the European music scene. Donnellon characterises Debussy and other French composers of his generation as having “[grown] up in [the] shadow” of Wagner (Donnellon, 45), whose music remained popular, even revered in Paris long after his death. In the 1880s, the young Claude Debussy made two “pilgrimages” to Bayreuth (Kelly, 29; Donnellon, 46) and in an 1887 letter he described a performance of Act 1 of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* he attended in Paris as “definitely the most beautiful thing I know, with respect to

least part of the composition process of *Proses lyriques*, as revealed by Denis Herlin's 2014 analysis of an unpublished alternative manuscript of "De rêve," which finds orchestration notes in Debussy's hand.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, even the published version for piano and voice has several passages which are nigh-unplayable as written, as they would require a third hand (and at times require a third stave in the piano part).<sup>35</sup> It is perhaps partially this remnant of orchestral thinking which resulted in a rich piano part that contains a multitude of overlapping voices and themes. Indeed, themes within the piano part are far more traditionally melodic (using the ever-scientific "can this melody become an easily hummable earworm" test) than anything in the vocal line. This relative melodiousness is instructive as to the place of voice and agency in "De rêve." Cone and BaileyShea both demand that the singer be cast as the protagonist who actively manipulates the music. "De rêve" defies this approach to texted music. As we shall see, the singer is perpetually musically and textually reactive to the music of the piano.

The ideas put forth by Lawrence Kramer and Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen in the article collection *On Voice* can also help us understand the reactivity and apparent lack of agency of the vocal line in "De rêve." In his introduction, Kramer writes that "the voice of the subject, the subject as voiced, comes to know itself [...] in words, in the language it speaks, the vocabularies

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emotional depth..." (Lesure, 70). Kelly describes the late 1880s as "the beginning of Debussy's disillusionment with Wagner, though not the end of his absorption in his music (however much he revolted against his influence)" (Kelly, 32). Kelly writes that Debussy's "principled rejection of Wagner was on musical and cultural grounds: Wagner was unsuitable as a model for French composers because he was inimitable and not French" (Kelly, 32). By 1893, Debussy was, per Lesure, fed up with the current Parisian taste for Wagner, to the point that he announced, though never published, an article to be titled "*De l'inutilité du wagnérisme*" (On the Uselessness of Wagnerism) (Lesure, 114). Around this time, Debussy began to work on *Pelléas et Mélisande*, but "tore up" some of that early work as he was "conscious of still being under the influence of Wagner" (Lesure, 114). Despite his best efforts to distance his work from Wagner, contemporary critics would frequently compare *Pelléas* to Wagner's operas (Donnellon, 48.)

<sup>34</sup> Denis Herlin, "From Debussy's Studio: The Little-Known Autograph of 'De Rêve,' the First of the *Proses Lyriques*," translated by Peter Bloom. *Notes* 71, no. 1 (September 2014): 22-23. Debussy included notations of 1V (first violin) at certain points. Herlin also points to the use of red ink for certain chords as indicative of ambitions towards eventual orchestration.

<sup>35</sup> Debussy, "De rêve," mm. 90-91.

it calls on, the shapes it imparts to its utterances, the habits of its speech acts.”<sup>36</sup> In her chapter “Voice and Presence in Music and Literature: Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” Stougaard Pedersen writes, “whether it is spoken, sung or expressed in a text, the voice performs a movement. It seems to have the specific aim of sharing this movement, this action [...] The voice—in an intentional aesthetic relation—reaches out for its listener.”<sup>37</sup> For both authors, the voice is apprehended by the audience as plastic. The voice of a work creates itself through the expression of text. In the case of “De rêve,” the reactivity of the vocal part is, I will argue, a function of the narrator’s gradual realization of himself as the protagonist of the song. The narrator’s consciousness of himself in the scene set forth by the piano part of “De rêve” unfurls gradually. It is an action performed by the voice of the song and the voice of the performers simultaneously. As the narrator is initially not conscious of himself as a participant in their own dream—nor indeed, conscious of himself as the dreamer—they are subject to the agency of the instrumental part. The singer’s role is to reveal for the audience the narrator’s trajectory from dispassionate observer to passionate witness.

## 2.2: The Appeal of Symbolism for Debussy—Reveling in Ambiguity

Though it is risky to search for the meaning of a work of art in the creator’s biography, it is worth asking if the ambiguity of narrator and narrative in *Proses lyriques* may have been deliberate on Debussy’s part. Debussy wrote the text and music of *Proses lyriques* at a time when he was involved in the Symbolist movement, which had ambiguity as a stated artistic and aesthetic goal. Writing about Symbolist visual art, art historian Michelle Facos identifies a dual

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<sup>36</sup> Lawrence Kramer, “On Voice: an Introduction,” in *On Voice*, edited by Walter Bernhart and Lawrence Kramer (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2014), vii.

<sup>37</sup> Birgitte Stougaard Pedersen, “Voice and Presence in Music and Literature: Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” in *On Voice*, 119.

agenda. First, “an artist’s desire to represent ideas,” and second, “a manipulation of colour, form, and composition that signals the artist’s relative indifference to worldly appearances.”<sup>38</sup> It is from these two priorities that she derives her definition of Symbolist art as one whose “composition, technique and often title convey to contemporary audiences its maker’s intention to suggest ideas.”<sup>39</sup> The roots of this definition can be found in Jean Moréas’s 1886 Symbolist Manifesto, published in *Le Figaro*, in which he argued that the essential characteristic of Symbolist art consisted of never going so far as to allow the Idea itself to manifest concretely (“le caractère essentiel de l’art symbolique consiste à ne jamais aller jusqu’à la concentration de l’Idée en soi”).<sup>40</sup> While this does not map directly onto whatever Debussy’s priorities as a Symbolist poet and composer may have been, we can still translate the dual agenda Facos outlines to a different medium. I therefore suggest that the songs Debussy wrote while associated with the Symbolist movement have a dual purpose as well. First, to represent ideas abstractly, so that the thing being represented overtly is not the actual subject. Second, to eschew traditional forms and conventions and therefore increase a work’s suggestiveness while moving the suggested subject ever further from the audience’s grasp. In the case of “De rêve,” one of the elements being suggested rather than stated outright is the protagonist.

Symbolist poets preferred indirect and ambiguous references to direct imagery. The writer and literary scholar Wallace Fowlie argues for “*suggérer*” as a key word in the aesthetic of French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98). Fowlie writes that “it means first to awaken, to indicate without specifically naming or defining, to propose a meaning without

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<sup>38</sup> Michelle Facos, *Symbolist Art in Context* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 7. She continues: “These ideas reflected the wide spectrum of how citizens of the late nineteenth century, particularly Europeans, responded to the seismic economic, intellectual, and social changes shaping their world.”

<sup>40</sup> Jean Moréas, “Le Symbolisme” *Le Figaro*, literary supplement, Sept 18, 1886.

dogmatically imposing it.”<sup>41</sup> For French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) and his successors, which in this context includes Debussy, “all things have symbolic value.”<sup>42</sup> Mallarmé, by whose friendship Debussy was socially connected to the Symbolists, “sought an idiom that would suggest rather than describe, invoke speculative doubt rather than analytic certainty, and emphasize words at least as much as their referents.”<sup>43</sup> This quote is instructive as to the wider Symbolist agenda. Here, Mallarmé touches upon what Patrick McGuinness identifies as a certain contradiction inherent within the very term “symbolism” itself. In what McGuinness terms “ordinary usage,” a symbol is something concrete which replaces a more abstract idea or concept and is dependent upon a web of common associations through which the transition from symbol to idea is nearly instantaneous.<sup>44</sup> In contrast, literary Symbolism deliberately does the opposite and seeks to disrupt the instant translation of symbol to idea, and therefore impedes the “automatic transaction between writer and reader”<sup>45</sup>—or the automatic translation of idea between writer-composer, performer, and audience.

The Symbolist aesthetic may thus be said to prioritize the space between author/creator and audience and to enjoy the ambiguity which slips between words as they are written and their interpretation by an individual reader. The reliance upon suggestion rather than outright statement allows for narratives which avoid easy comprehension and deliberately invite as many interpretations as there are readers. It entices the reader to search for a through line within a work (or multiple juxtaposed works) which may not be readily apparent. In the case of *Proses*

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<sup>41</sup> Wallace Fowlie, *Poem and Symbol: A Brief History of French Symbolism* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1990), 13.

<sup>42</sup> Marshall C. Olds, “Literary Symbolism,” in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, David Bradshaw and Kevin J.H. Detmar, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 156.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>44</sup> Patrick McGuinness, “53. Symbolism.” *The Cambridge History of French Literature*, 482.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

*lyriques*, the through line is the persistence of the singer, and, through the person of the singer, the narrator-protagonist.

The Symbolist poetic aesthetic manifested itself in a repudiation of traditional French versification by using free verse, as well as what David Michael Hertz terms a “[thwarting of] the feeling of periodicity in both poetry and music.”<sup>46</sup> From a structural standpoint, the Symbolist poets were interested in a move away from strict versification and regular phrasing in their poetry. This followed the broader nineteenth-century move towards free verse, which Herlin describes as an attempt to “liberat[e] the poem from regular and traditional meter.”<sup>47</sup> With *Proses lyriques*, Debussy wrote his own text in the Symbolist style. His affinity for the Symbolist ideal is made clear in his writings. Peter Dayan quotes a 1901 letter in which Debussy wrote: “it is... unnecessary for music to make you *think!*... All we need is for music to force people to *listen*, in spite of themselves... for them to think they have dreamed, for an instant, of an imaginary country, nowhere to be found because [it is] imaginary.”<sup>48</sup> Debussy’s letters suggest some apathy towards formal, traditional French verse. In an 1885 letter, as an explanation for why he had abandoned his attempts to compose an opera to a libretto in tradition French verse, he wrote, “I want a kind of music so supple and so open to contrasts that it can mold itself to the lyrical movements of the soul, to the caprices of our daydreams.”<sup>49</sup> This echoes the Symbolist poets’ desire to free themselves from traditional versification.

Arthur B. Wenk quotes a 1911 interview that demonstrates Debussy’s ongoing efforts to circumvent the challenges of setting traditional, strictly metrical poetry. In the interview,

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<sup>46</sup> David Michael Hertz, *The Tuning of the World—The Musico-literary Poetics of the Symbolist Movement* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1987), xii.

<sup>47</sup> Denis Herlin, “From Debussy’s Studio: The Little-Known Autograph of ‘De Rêve,’ the First of the *Proses Lyriques*,” 12.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Dayan, “Nature, Music, and Meaning in Debussy’s Writings,” *19th-Century Music* 28, no. 3 (2005): 218.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

Debussy said that “true verses have an inherent rhythm which is rather difficult for [composers] to follow clearly.”<sup>50</sup> Debussy then proposed an alternative: “with rhythmic prose, one is more at ease and [has more flexibility]. If a musician were themselves to write their own rhythmic prose? Why not?”<sup>51</sup> Wenk points out that Debussy had, in fact, done exactly this with *Proses*: all four were written as rhythmic prose and then set by the author. In light of Debussy’s views on the suggestive, flexible, and natural music he wished to write, the allure of Symbolism is evident.

The four songs which form *Proses lyriques* are unusual as examples of art song. In general, an art song will use pre-existing poetry, which is written as a self-contained work. One of the component parts of a standard art song is therefore an entire other work of art, transformed into a musical work by the composer. Literary scholar and musicologist Lawrence Kramer argues that the relationship of text to music in song should be viewed as a potentially destructive one: a song constitutes a “reading” of the poem by the composer. Kramer writes, “the song is... permitted to make a reading only by violating other readings.”<sup>52</sup> Debussy wrote his own texts for *Proses lyriques*, which might at first blush seem to attenuate the tension between the text as written and as set. However, Debussy’s published two of the poems in 1892, before he began to compose the music.<sup>53</sup> This suggests that at some point he considered the poems able to stand as independent works. Though biographical composer and author are the same individual, Debussy’s setting of his own text precluded other possible interpretations just as surely as it would have had he set another writer’s words. I will therefore initially consider the text and song separately.

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<sup>50</sup> Arthur B. Wenk, *Claude Debussy and His Poets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 197.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley, CA: University of Berkeley Press, 1984), 127-128.

<sup>53</sup> Wenk, *Claude Debussy and His Poets*, 198.

### Chapter 3 The Text: Dreaming Time/Dreaming Self

We will begin from the assumption that part of Debussy's symbolist agenda was to deliberately court ambiguity. Numerous critics contemporary to Debussy reproached *Proses lyriques* for its meaningless symbols and general "bizarreries"<sup>54</sup> (oddities/eccentricities), as musicologist Paul Dworak notes in his article "*Proses lyriques* in context."<sup>55</sup> Other scholars, whose works I will discuss below, have also questioned the quality of Debussy's writing. Indeed, there is a certain fluidity of imagery and blurring of textual meaning. In the case of "De rêve," the first song of the cycle as well as the subject of this thesis, this fluidity reflects both Debussy's symbolist aesthetic and his subject matter. The text describes a dream scene. Thus, the absence of a tidy textual structure helps enhance the unbalanced, dreamlike atmosphere conveyed in Debussy's lines. The easy passage from one symbol to the next, of images presenting themselves and then passing away makes sense if the entire text of "De rêve" is to fit into a sort of dream logic, rather than a realistic and grounded logic.

In the following section, I will closely analyze Debussy's poem with an eye towards developing a reading of the text that will assist the singer as they prepare the entire cycle for performance. I base my analysis on the text of "De rêve" as it appeared when it was originally published as a literary work in *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* in December 1892, and which is transcribed below.<sup>56</sup> When he subsequently set the poem "De rêve," he made alterations, which I will discuss in my analysis of the music in section 4. Whereas previous scholarly analyses of "De rêve" have concentrated solely on the concept of time, a facet of the music that is more valuable

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<sup>54</sup> Paul Dworak, "Proses Lyriques in Context," *Revue Musical OICRM* 2, no. 1 (2014): 7, 9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

<sup>56</sup> *Entretiens politiques et littéraires* 5, no. 33 (December 1892): 269-270. The *Entretiens* version, Wenk (p. 199), Hertz (p. 86) and Bernac (p. 188) all have differences in punctuation and line breaks.

to researchers than to performers, performance guides are too brief be of real assistance in the preparation of this work for performance. Building on, and adding to, existing literature on “De rêve,” my analysis will lean heavily on the figure of the implied narrator and the trajectory of this implied narrator as they become the in-text narrator-protagonist. The translation of the poem is my own; texts and translations of the other three song texts in the cycle may be found in Appendix B.

<sup>1</sup> La nuit a des douceurs de femme	The night has the sweetness of woman,
<sup>2</sup> Et les vieux arbres, sous la lune d'or, sont	And the old trees beneath the golden moon dream Of she who has just passed by with her head crowned
<sup>3</sup> À celle qui vient de passer la tête emperlée,	with pearls,
<sup>4</sup> Maintenant navrée!	Now sorrowful!
<sup>5</sup> À jamais navrée!	Forever sorrowful!
<sup>6</sup> Ils n'ont pas su lui faire signe...	They did not know how to call out to her...
<sup>7</sup> Toutes! Elles ont passé	All! All have passed
<sup>8</sup> Les Frêles,	The frail,
<sup>9</sup> Les Folles,	The foolish,
<sup>10</sup> Semant leur rire au gazon grêle,	Sowing their laughter upon the fine grass,
<sup>11</sup> Aux brises frôleuses	To the brushing breeze
<sup>12</sup> La caresse charmeuse	The charming caress
<sup>13</sup> Des hanches fleurissantes!	Of flowering hips!
<sup>14</sup> Hélas! de tout ceci, plus rien qu'un blanc frisson	Alas! Of all this, nothing more than a pale shiver
<sup>15</sup> Les vieux arbres sous la lune d'or, pleurent	The old trees beneath the golden moon weep
<sup>16</sup> Leurs belles feuilles d'or	Their beautiful gold leaves
<sup>17</sup> Nul ne leur dédiera plus la fierté des casques d'or	No one shall ever again dedicate to them their proud golden helmets,
<sup>18</sup> Maintenant ternis!	Now tarnished!
<sup>19</sup> À jamais ternis!	Forever tarnished!
<sup>20</sup> Les chevaliers sont morts sur le chemin du Grâal!	The knights died on the quest for the Grail!
<sup>21</sup> La nuit a des douceurs de femme!	The night has the sweetness of woman!
<sup>22</sup> Des mains semblent frôler les âmes,	Hands seem to caress the souls,

<sup>23</sup> Mains si folles!	Hands so foolish,
<sup>24</sup> Mains si frêles!	Hands so frail,
<sup>25</sup> Au temps où les épées chantaient pour Elles!...	In the days when swords sang for them!
<sup>26</sup> D'étranges soupirs s'élèvent sous les arbres	Strange sighs arise from beneath the trees:
<sup>27</sup> Mon âme! c'est du rêve ancien qui t'étreint!	My soul! It is the ancient dream that has you in its grasp!

I have omitted the title “De rêve” here. This poem, and the poem that would become the text of “De grève,” were published together under the title *Proses lyriques in Entretiens politiques et littéraires*, and the titles by which they are now known were only added by Debussy when he published the complete song cycle in 1895.<sup>57</sup> However, for the sake of convenience, I will continue to refer to the original poem as “De rêve.”

Previous analyses of the song “De rêve” have concerned themselves with Debussy’s representation of time. Attention to Debussy’s poetry tends to be relatively brief and intertwined with much more thorough musical analysis. I will not deny any of the previous work on the interplay of temporalities, merely expand upon it, as the oscillation between past and present in the text is fundamental to the gradual revelation of the narrator-protagonist. I will examine the three following analyses, as they all consider the text of “De rêve” to be primarily concerned with the past. Arthur B. Wenk’s brief 1976 effort emphasizes the “spirit of overwhelming *languor*, futility, and nostalgia” of Debussy’s music of the 1890s.<sup>58</sup> He argues that “The poem has no future, only a past.”<sup>59</sup> He wholly conflates the in-text narrator with the biographical Debussy. David Hertz’s equally concise 1987 analysis of the text dwells most upon the Debussy’s use of “clichés of Symbolist imagery”<sup>60</sup> and lack of narrative and symbolic clarity.

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<sup>57</sup> I will discuss the effect the addition of titles had upon the cycle in chapter 4.

<sup>58</sup> Wenk, *Claude Debussy and His Poets*, 200.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>60</sup> Hertz, *The Tuning of the World*, 87.

Gregory J. Marion's 2007 analysis of Debussy's treatment of the past in the opening 18 bars, which covers the first five lines of text of "De rêve," also conflates the narrator with Debussy.<sup>61</sup> Marion interprets the chief tension within the song to be an interplay between Debussy/the narrator's present and the imagined, mythologized past as represented by the figures of ladies and knights. These three authors concentrate on Debussy's portrayal of time but provide no particularly useful guide to performers tackling this challenging work.

Likewise, guides to performance offer scant more assistance to those who might seek assistance to deal with the text. I will discuss the following two performance guides because they are both the most widely accessible to singers and are considered by vocal pedagogues<sup>62</sup> to be authoritative as to the performance of French *mélodie* and Debussy. Pierre Bernac's *The Interpretation of French Song* is the most widely accessible English-language guide to French song. His evaluation of Debussy's poetry is cutting: "the texts are by Debussy himself and unfortunately one must admit that they are not very good in their rather toilsome obscurity."<sup>63</sup> Jane Bathori's *Sur l'interprétation des mélodies de Claude Debussy (On the Interpretation of the mélodies of Claude Debussy)* tacks *Proses lyriques* on at the very end, though they were relatively early works. All she has to say about the text of "De rêve" specifically is that the "images evoking knights and swords" and general rich piano texture recall Wagner.<sup>64</sup> Although performance guides are not meant to provide a close poetic reading of a song text, for a song with such a dense and complex text, this is remarkably dismissive and brief. This brevity does a

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<sup>61</sup> Gregory J. Marion, "Debussy and Recollection: *trois aperçu*," *Music Theory Online* 13, no. 1 (March 2007): paragraphs 9-10.

<sup>62</sup> At least in English-speaking Canada.

<sup>63</sup> Pierre Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song*, translations by Winifred Radford (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 187.

<sup>64</sup> Jane Bathori, *On the Interpretation of the 'Mélodies' of Claude Debussy* (1953), edited by Linda Laurent, (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1998), 97.

disservice to the layered text of “De rêve,” whose ambiguity is a feature, rather than a fault. It is an invitation to readers, listeners, and performers to dwell with the ambiguity, rather than to seek absolutes.

The ambiguity of the poem reveals itself quite early on. “De rêve” begins in the implied narrator’s present. Initially, nothing suggests anything but an omniscient third person point of view. This is confirmed by the line “... les vieux arbres, sous la lune d’or, songent” (“the old trees, beneath the golden moon dream”), in which the first active verb in the poem (“dream”) is associated with the trees rather than the narrator. The narrator has, in the logic of dreams, dreamed themselves both as an outside observer of the scene and into the character of the trees. While this could be dismissed as a flight of fancy on the part of the narrator, the trees emerge throughout the first stanza as the most emotionally engaged characters. The fantastical scene which gradually unfurls is narrated from the perspective of the trees as they observe the passage of the pearl-crowned woman and are distressed at their inability to reach out to her. There is as of yet no overt suggestion that this is a dream of the past. The first time-related terms are “maintenant” and “à jamais” (“now” and “forever”), which suggests that the dream exists both in the instant and in a timeless, eternal space.

A shift of both time and characters occurs at the end of the first stanza. Line 6, which reads “Ils n’ont pas su lui faire signe” (“[the trees] did not know how to call out to her”), marks the first use of *passé composé*, a verb tense that signals a completed past action which nevertheless has ongoing results in the present.<sup>65</sup> The second stanza continues to mesh past and present. Line 7, “Elles ont passé” (“they [fem. pl.] have passed,” again *passé composé*). Line 10 “semant leur rire” (“sowing their laughter”) is an instance of the present participle, indicating an

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<sup>65</sup> Grevisse, *Précis de grammaire française*, 185.

action that is happening concurrently<sup>66</sup> with the main action of the line 7: the passage of the women. Line 7 is also interesting for another reason: it marks a shift from one to several female figures. In another display of dream logic, this transition will go unremarked upon in Debussy's text and the use of the plural for references to women will persist throughout the poem. A more concrete, less ambiguous narrative might have tried to clarify this transition from one to several women; the dream narrative presented in "De rêve" does not.

There is a further ambiguity present in lines 11-13, which read "Aux brises frôleuses/La caresse charmeuse/Des hanches fleurissantes!" ("To the brushing breeze/The charming caress/Of flowering hips!"). At this point, the figures of the ladies are passing by the trees, and the image of flowers is introduced. What, precisely, is "flowering"? Do the hips refer to the hips of the women, seeming as if bedecked in flowers (or more suggestively, metaphorically flowering and nubile)? Or is the flowering "hips" or sides of trees, great flowering flanks which the charming breeze rustle as the women pass by? The imagery is ambiguous as the figures of women blur with the figures of the trees. Two adjectives are used for the undifferentiated multitude of ladies: "les Frêles" ("the frail") and "les Folles" ("the mad"). These qualifiers will recur in reference to the ladies later in the poem as well. The text initially paints an idyllic picture of frolicking laughter upon the grass. This quickly changes, as line 14 represents the first textual reference to the irretrievability of and distance from this past. The line reads, "Hélas! de tout ceci, plus rien qu'un blanc frisson..." ("Alas! Of all this, nothing more than a pale shiver...") recasts the frail, mad figures charmingly dancing and laughing upon the grass as pale ghosts.

The word "Hélas!" is also the first hint at a definite point of view for the narrator. Up until now, the text has been devoid of opinions on the part of the narrator, with the only

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<sup>66</sup> *Bescherelle 3: La grammaire pour tous* (Québec, QC: Éditions Hurtubise HMH Ltd., 1993), 261-262.

emotional verb, that of “songer” (“to dream”) being ascribed to the trees in line 2. The use of the exclamation “hélas!” suggests for the first time that the narrator is emotionally invested. This line is interesting for another reason: it lacks a verb. It should be noted that the verbless construction around “plus rien,” particularly in a poem, is less jarring and ambiguous in French than an equivalent line around the word “nothing” would be in English. In this case, one might reflexively assume that the missing verb is some variant of “to remain” or “to be.” This is precisely the translation suggested by Winifred Radford in Bernac’s book. Radford renders this line as “of all this, nothing is left but a pale tremor...” adding back into the English version the verb missing in the original French.<sup>67</sup> While English translations that reintroduce the verb clarify the meaning of the phrase for non-francophones, they do not do justice to the effect of the missing verb. The absence of a verb denudes the figures of agency as the construction of the phrase reinforces their intangibility in the present. They are visible but cannot act. This sets them up in contrast to the trees. Though the latter are likewise unable to act, they are imbued with emotion and presented in the text as feeling subjects, while the female figures are, as the knights will be later in the poem, distantly observed objects lacking agency.

The narrator’s own potential emotional investment recedes in the following stanza, as a variation on the opening line returns in line 15. Now, the old trees beneath the golden moon are crying. Debussy again omits some information here. The poem reads,

<sup>15</sup> Les vieux arbres sous la lune d’or, pleurent	The old trees beneath the golden moon weep,
<sup>16</sup> Leurs belles feuilles d’or	Shedding their beautiful gold leaves!
<sup>17</sup> Nul ne leur dédiera plus la fierté des casques d’or	No one shall ever again dedicate to them their proud golden helmets

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<sup>67</sup> Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song*, 188. The translation on Lieder.net is similar, rendering the line as “Alas! Only a white shiver remains of all this...” Faith G. Cormier  
[https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get\\_text.html?TextId=4344](https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=4344)

There is a missing clarification of subject between the second and third lines of this excerpt. In line 16, the determiner “leur” refers to the trees and their leaves. In line 17, the possessive pronoun “leur” must refer to the ladies as the likely recipients of the dedicated gold helmets. This has two effects. First, it re-asserts the trees as the emotional subjects of the text, rather than the narrator who almost emerged just one line prior. It is a reminder that the scene is framed, both in terms of point of view and physically, by the trees. This emphasizes the narrator’s separateness from the imagined past to which they are witness and literally serves to frame it like a scene from a play or a series of paintings. Second, the oscillation between ladies and trees demonstrates more ambiguity as to the scene being witnessed. There has already been a shift from one female figure to several female figures, and the uncertain ownership of the “flowering hips.” Now, the ladies and trees blur together even more, as both seem to be the objects of the dedication of golden helmets.

Adding further fluidity to the text at this point is Debussy’s use of verb tenses to reflect the ongoing temporal interplay. The first instance of future tense occurs in line 17: “nul ne leur dédiera plus” (“No one shall ever again dedicate to them”), in which the verb “dédier” is in *futur simple* tense. This tense does not only serve to indicate future events. According to Grevisse the future tense is also used, most often in historical accounts, to signify a past event that occurs after an imagined present that a narrator has situated in the past.<sup>68</sup> Just as Debussy’s prior uses of past tense were inextricably tied to the narrator’s present, here the use of the future tense is still tied to the past. It suggests an ever-unfolding time, both in the narrator’s present and the dreamscape time, and reinforces the separation of past from present.

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<sup>68</sup> Grevisse, 375. b) 5° 188: “Parfois (surtout dans les exposés historiques) un fait passé, mais postérieur à un présent que le narrateur a situé en imagination dans le passé”

The golden helmets of line 17 take on a temporally relevant identity of their own and serve as the in-text confirmation that this is a dream of the past. They become representative of a nineteenth-century idealized concept of chivalric knighthood.<sup>69</sup> The use of gold in lines 15-17 is remarkably insistent. The moon is gold, the leaves of the trees are gold, and the helmets of the knights are gold, linked by resplendent colour. The gold does not stay, however, as the helmets are, by line 18, now and forever tarnished. From the very moment of their introduction, the helmets are degraded by the passage of time. Debussy explicitly attaches to them concepts of time: *now* and *forever* tarnished. In case the reader has not grasped the symbolism of the helmets, Debussy continues baldly: “the knights died/On the quest for the Grail.” Until this point, the interplay of past and present is subtle. It is only with the explicit presence of knights on a quest that the dream-space is finally located in the distant, idealized Medieval past.

Wenk argues that the representation of futility and loss places the poem solidly within the decadent tradition, writing that, in relation to grandiose, overripe music of the late nineteenth century, “Debussy had little sympathy for rhetoric, bombast, or heroic grandeur.”<sup>70</sup> As noted, Wenk goes so far as to state that “the poem has no future, only a past.”<sup>71</sup> In this, I would argue that Wenk is only partially correct. He conflates the fate of the narrator of the poem with the fate of the figures who appear within it. The figures who populate the dream have no future, certainly. However, the narrator has, by their turn towards emotional investment as revealed through the use of the first person, presented themselves as a character within the unfolding narrative. They are both narrator and protagonist, both telling the story and ultimately driving the

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<sup>69</sup> For further information, refer to Dale Townshend, *Gothic Antiquity: History, Romance, and the Architectural Imagination, 1760-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). In his introduction, Townshend details the characteristics that made up the (ahistorical and idealized) nineteenth century romantic antiquarian ideal of chivalry.

<sup>70</sup> Wenk, *Claude Debussy and His Poets*, 200.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

final action. The narrator-protagonist's insurmountable separation from the dream of the past implicitly presents them as a character with a future, unwilling as they are to go towards it. Were the narrator-protagonist truly without a future, there would be no sorrow at their separation from the imaginary figures of the past, as they would be amongst those figures, rather than a watcher, removed through time and distance.

The narrator-protagonist's sorrow confirms that they are present in the poem not only as an omniscient author figure, but within the poem as an emotionally invested character. In contrast, it is also in lines 21 to 24 that the ladies are subjected to synecdoche and disembodiment. Earlier in the poem, the ladies were characterized as "les frêles/les folles." Now, it is only hands which are given the attributes of "les frêles/les folles" as they gently caress one's soul (presumably that of the narrator). The female figures can only act as dismembered objects or mere wisps of the imagination. The knights are subject to further objectification, now rendered as swords which sing for the ladies/hands, again able to act only by dislocation from whatever dream body they earlier possessed. As swords are held *in* hands, the figures in the dream have all collapsed out of personhood.

The text of the poem ultimately returns to the framing device of the trees, under whom strange sighs arise. Who is sighing? The text provides no answer. Perhaps the ghostly figures of knights and ladies, already blurred with the trees by ambiguity of text and recurrence of imagery, sighing together as they fade out of the dream. Other dream-figures from the narrator's present, perhaps, under the trees that witnessed and framed the dream of the past just as they witness and frame the dreaming narrator themselves. At last, at the very end of the poem, the narrator acknowledges that they are the dreamer. Line 27's "Mon âme!" is the first use of a first-person pronoun, as the narrator-protagonist exclaims that they are held fast by the dream of the past.

Held, but always separate, as the dream and the figures within are now blurred into inaccessible ambiguity. It is this separation of the dreaming narrator-protagonist's present from the imagined dream-past which allows the narrator-protagonist of "De rêve" to escape the bounds of the song and become the protagonist of the whole cycle.

## Chapter 4

### The Music: A Gradual Unfurling—Rude Interrupting Piano

Just as the narrator’s revelation of himself unfurls gradually in the text, so too does the musical setting resist their accession to the role of protagonist until the end of the song. The agency of the music resides in the instrumental part rather than the vocal line, as themes in the piano interrupt and pre-empt the text. In this section, I will provide an overview of the music in relation to the text and briefly describe the various themes present in the music (see Table 1 and Appendix C). I will then survey previous interpretations of Debussy’s setting of his own text. Finally, I will provide my own analysis of “De rêve,” which will concentrate on instances when Debussy’s setting obfuscates and undercuts the narrator.

There are three main themes present in “De rêve.” Table 1 (immediately below) summarizes their characteristics and their placement relative to the text, while Appendix C includes the musical examples.<sup>72</sup>

<p><sup>1</sup>La nuit a des douceurs de femme  <sup>2</sup>Et les vieux arbres, sous la lune d’or, songent</p>	<p><b>Theme A:</b> mm. 1-5, see Appendix C, Fig. 1          Serves as a refrain and is always associated with a recurrence of variations on the first two lines of text.          Ascending arpeggiated figure in RH, undergirded by descending arpeggiated figure in LH          Harmonically and metrically ambiguous          F# pitch centrality, with F# augmented triad featuring prominently</p>
<p><sup>3</sup>À celle qui vient de passer la tête emperlée,  <sup>4</sup>Maintenant navrée!  <sup>5</sup>À jamais navrée!  <sup>6</sup>Ils n’ont pas su lui faire signe...  <sup>7</sup>Toutes! Elles ont passé  <sup>8</sup>Les Frêles,  <sup>9</sup>Les Folles,  <sup>10</sup>Semant leur rire au gazon grêle,</p>	<p><b>Theme B:</b> mm. 6-64, see Appendix C, Fig. 2 and Fig. 3)          Associated with the actions of the lady/ladies as observed by the narrator and as emotionally reacted to by the trees.          Tonal centre mostly is Bm—recasts the first section’s F# centrality as serving a dominant function.</p>

<sup>72</sup> Please refer to section 3 for text translation and correct paragraph breaks

<p><sup>11</sup>Aux brises frôleuses  <sup>12</sup>La caresse charmeuse  <sup>13</sup>Des hanches fleurissantes!  <sup>14</sup>Hélas! de tout ceci, plus rien qu'un blanc frisson</p>	<p>Less harmonically and metrically ambiguous than Theme A.  Fragments of material from the initial appearance of theme B melody (RH of Fig. 2) are developed throughout this section.  Quarter note pattern (see fig. 3) is always associated with transitions within B theme material</p>
<p><sup>15</sup>Les vieux arbres sous la lune d'or, pleurent  <sup>16</sup>Leurs belles feuilles d'or</p>	<p><b>Theme A:</b> mm. 47-52, see Appendix C, Fig. 4  Differs from the first appearance of theme A through the addition of an F# pedal and chords in the LH.  M. 49: while the theme A arpeggios continue in the RH, the chordal horn-like call that will become theme C1 appears in the LH (see Fig. 4; compare to Fig. 5)</p>
<p><sup>17</sup>Nul ne leur dédiera plus la fierté des casques d'or  <sup>18</sup>Maintenant ternis!  <sup>19</sup>À jamais ternis!  <sup>20</sup>Les chevaliers sont morts sur le chemin du Grâal!</p>	<p><b>Theme C:</b> mm. 53-61, see Appendix C, Fig. 5 &amp; Fig. 6  Associated with the knights and their death  Begins in B major, though unstable because of the F# pedal  Characterized by two different brass-like call figures  C1: chordal horn fanfare (see Fig. 5)  C2: solo horn call with dotted rhythm (see Fig. 6)  Begins with a robust <i>f</i>, but slowly fades in dynamic and descends in register</p>
<p><sup>21</sup>La nuit a des douceurs de femme!</p>	<p><b>Theme A</b> (mm. 65-66)  This final return of theme A is very brief, and immediately gives way to a return of theme B</p>
<p><sup>22</sup>Des mains semblent frôler les âmes  <sup>23</sup>Mains si folles!  <sup>24</sup>Mains si frêles!  <sup>25</sup>Au temps où les épées chantaient pour Elles!...</p>	<p><b>Theme B</b> (mm. 67-81)  Theme B RH melody (see Fig. 2) is fragmented and developed, driving towards the climax of the song in m. 81  <b>Theme C2</b> intrudes at m. 78, foreshadowing the transition into the final section</p>
<p><sup>26</sup>D'étranges soupirs s'élèvent sous les arbres</p>	<p><b>Theme B</b> and <b>Theme C2</b> (mm. 82-87)  Quarter note pattern associated with theme B space (see Fig. 3) returns, sounding simultaneously with theme C2</p>
<p><sup>27</sup>Mon âme! c'est du rêve ancien qui t'étreint!</p>	<p><b>Theme B</b> (mm. 88-94) and <b>Theme C2</b> (mm. 96-99/end)  Soft dynamic as the dream fades</p>

	Theme B with an F# centricity that will persist until the end Last word is given to theme C2 trumpet calls in C# against F# major pedal and chords
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Table 1: Three main themes present in “De rêve”: Characteristics and placement relative to the text

The traditional view of “De rêve” has been of a speaker who dreams of an inaccessible mythical past. Wenk, Hertz, and Marion all consider this song to be an exploration of the tension between present and past, and the shifts between more chromatic and ambiguous material (which I have labelled theme A) and the relatively less harmonically ambiguous passages (corresponding to those which I have labelled theme B or theme C, depending on which sections of music each author particularly focusses on) as representative of this tension. All three authors agree that the primary locus of tension is between past and present, a tension they ascribe to various aspects of Debussy’s own biographical artistic coming of age.

Wenk posits that “De rêve” primarily expresses musical decadence, and that the harmonic ambiguity conveys “a feeling of purposelessness.”<sup>73</sup> He argues that “occasional passages of harmonic stability [are used as] a nostalgic evocation of the past.”<sup>74</sup> For Wenk, the temporal tension of “De rêve” is an exploration of the decadent fin-de-siècle in which Debussy was living, placed in opposition to an evanescent, tonal past. Wenk asserts that “the poem has no future, only a past”<sup>75</sup> and finds that the music wallows in the nostalgic elements of the text while the harmonies refuse to settle. In Wenk’s analysis, the music is granted a great deal of agency, but the in-song narrator themselves is not discussed.

For Hertz, the tension of past and present in the song is representative of Debussy’s own experience of a musical coming of age as his youthful works and inspirations gave way to the

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<sup>73</sup> Wenk, *Claude Debussy and His Poets*, 202.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

mature composer he was becoming. Hertz emphasizes the degree to which “De rêve” is in dialogue with Wagner’s operas.<sup>76</sup> (Debussy had greatly admired Wagner’s music as a young man but had by 1889 moved away from him<sup>77</sup>). Hertz pays particular attention to the material I have labelled themes C1 and C2 and locates the musical representation of the rupture between past and present in the song in the contrast between this material and the recurring arpeggios I refer to as theme A. There is therefore tension between Wagner’s heroic, musically virile knights and brass and Debussy’s dead and failed questers for the grail, represented by “a whisper from the shadows of the past and from the secret personal world of the dream.”<sup>78</sup> Again, the in-text narrator is absent, subsumed in Hertz’s suppositions about the biographical Debussy’s agenda. For Hertz, the song is in fact in dialogue with Wagner’s musical legacy. The more chromatic and (comparatively) more diatonic material in “De rêve” correspond respectively to Debussy’s Wagner-influenced past and the contemporary music Debussy now sought to write.

Marion, who deals mostly with the first 18 measures of music, attributes the shifts between chromatic and diatonic harmony (notably between the section ending with m. 5 and the one beginning at m. 6, but recurrent throughout the song) to a tension between present and past. He argues that the present of the speaker, who he conflates with Debussy,<sup>79</sup> is represented by the tonally ambiguous opening piano figure (which I have termed theme A). Marion interprets these recurring tonally ambiguous arpeggios as devices which return the speaker to their present.<sup>80</sup> He considers the second, more diatonic, section of music which first appears beginning at m. 6 (which I have termed theme B) to be a firmer establishment of the dream of the past. He writes

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<sup>76</sup> Hertz, *The Tuning of the World*, 88. Hertz does not identify which specific operas he means and refers only to the abstract concept of “Wagnerian knights.”

<sup>77</sup> Lesure, *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography*, 83. Refer also to footnote 33 on p. 14 of this thesis.

<sup>78</sup> Wenk, *Claude Debussy and His Poets*, 91.

<sup>79</sup> Marion, “Debussy and Recollection,” 9 “... the present (Debussy’s present)...”

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17

that the suggestion of B minor as the tonal centre at this point is “equivocal, for the tonal language of the passage [...] stops short of assimilating fundamental traits of the common-practice period, such as [...] the gravitational pull of a single tonic,”<sup>81</sup> particularly as the left hand repeatedly gravitates towards D major and E minor. Marion argues that the modal shifts reveal the shifts in temporality. He ascribes the whole-tone mode to Debussy’s present.<sup>82</sup> Marion argues that these forays to various tonalities, none of which will emerge as the song’s tonal centre, are instances of the dream of the past encroaching upon the present.<sup>83</sup> It is not until the song arrives in F-sharp major on the very last page, after the speaker has fallen silent, that the two temporalities are reconciled, and the past merges into the present.<sup>84</sup> Marion argues that this reconciliation comes as the speaker acknowledges the impossibility of ever recapturing this imagined past.<sup>85</sup>

I do not mean to suggest that the interpretation of “De rêve” as revolving around a tension between past and present is spurious. There is certainly an interplay of temporalities, and it is indeed revealed by the switches between thematic material. But the way analysts have written about “De rêve” assumes that the fractured temporality is readily apparent from the outset. This assumption ignores the gradual unfurling of the narrative, as the realization that the speaker does not exist in the same time as the dream is initially only hinted at. The retroactive ascription of revelations from the end of the song is useful for analysts but fails to account for the experience for performers and listeners, for whom the work proceeds in chronological order, and for whom the revelation of temporal and narrator instability develops only gradually.

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<sup>81</sup> Marion, “Debussy and Recollection,” 11.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

I therefore propose that the contrasting themes of “*De rêve*” suggest a multiplicity not only of temporalities but also of speakers (or voices) whose textual existence I established in the previous section. Each of these speakers is a potential dreaming subject within those temporalities. Though the text ultimately reveals the unnamed narrator as the dreamer and the narrator-protagonist, the music, in particular the way the themes succeed each other, actively resists this casting. The music reinforces the degree to which the narrator is *not* driving the images presented in the text but is instead swept along by the succession of musical themes associated with the various characters within the dream. If BaileyShea’s opera characters shape the orchestral accompaniment to fit their emotions, the narrator of *De rêve* has their attention and emotions directed by the piano part.

The opening arpeggiated figure, which I refer to as theme A, recurs three times in the song, and serves as something of a refrain. It outlines an augmented triad, which is a particularly ambiguous chord. It is always accompanied by variations on the same text: first, “*La nuit a des douceurs de femmes/Et les vieux arbres sous la lune d’or songent*” (mm. 1-5; “The night has the sweetness of woman/And the old trees beneath the golden moon dream”); then “*Les vieux arbres sous la lune d’or/Pleurent leurs belles feuilles d’or*” (mm. 47-49; “The old trees beneath the golden moon weep/Their beautiful golden leaves”); and finally, a repetition of the line “*La nuit a des douceurs de femmes*” (mm. 65-66). All instances of the music are similar, and the theme is not substantially developed throughout the song. Theme A is the music we might most closely associate with the narrator, as no other human characters are present at this point in the music. However, as we established in the poetic analysis, every time the trees appear in the text, they are more emotionally invested than the narrator, who observes the action at a remove. It therefore

seems more correct to initially associate theme A with the trees, as they are the active and involved onlookers textually confirmed to be present within the scene.

In contrast to the relatively static theme A, theme B forms the bulk of the musical material of “De rêve.”<sup>86</sup> It covers a substantial proportion of the song’s duration, as it occupies 64 of the song’s 99 measures in comparison to the 13 total bars of theme A. Furthermore, material drawn from theme B is substantially developed, whereas theme A varies little from one appearance to the next. The B theme’s right-hand melody, first heard in mm. 6-8 (see Appendix C, Figure 2), is a more metrical, conventional, and easily memorable tune after the overall ambiguity of theme A. Theme B heralds the entrance of the mysterious crowned lady of whom the trees dream. The lead-in of the A theme into the B theme represents the clarification of the tonal role of the opening F# chord. In mm. 4-5, the left hand plays a bass F# octave chord which gains a dominant function in m. 6 as the B theme initially sounds to be in B minor. This revelation of a V-I relationship between the themes recasts the opening ambiguous material as one long lead-in to the “true” theme.

The disruptions of the narrator-protagonist’s agency occur at section transitions. The first major instance of an interruption of the speaker by the piano occurs when theme A is truncated as theme B makes its first appearance in m. 6. The transition between m. 5 and 6 is abrupt and arrives in the middle of the narrator’s sentence: “... les vieux arbres, sous la lune d’or, Songent!/À celle qui vient de passer...” (“the old trees, beneath the golden moon, Dream!/Of she who has just passed by...”), between the verb (“songer”/ “to dream”) and the indirect object (“celle qui vient de passer”/ “she who has just passed by”). Since the musical transition occurs

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<sup>86</sup> A point also made in Sacha Peiser, “Les Mains Désenlaceuses: unlocking the relationship of text and music in the *Proses Lyriques*,” Masters thesis, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 2009.

on an active verb ascribed to the trees, the transition itself is heard as being provoked by the trees. The narrator's agency is therefore attenuated and any incipient audience interest in them as a character is replaced by concern for the lady or ladies. Meanwhile, the trees are textually cast as the active and emotionally affected observers, and musically cast as a framing device of the dream scene. It is the trees who dream of and ponder upon the passing ladies and who, later, cry. The emotions the audience is told to feel towards the female figure are thus those ascribed to the trees, and the trees are set up as mediating between the audience and the dream scene just as surely as the narrator is. The slip from the ambiguous opening F# material through a V-I transition to the more rhythmically and harmonically cohesive quasi-B minor theme B is the musical consignment, for the time being, of the narrator to the role of outside observer.

Further reactivity is revealed in mm. 16-19 (see Fig. 1). Between the narrator singing, “À jamais navrée,” (“Forever sorrowful”) and “Ils n’ont pas su lui faire signe” (“They did not know how to call out to her”), the left-hand ascending triplet figure gives way to plodding quarter note chords in the bass line and high, tinkly 16<sup>th</sup> notes in the right hand. Though not interrupting a phrase of text this time, the musical transition draws attention to the sorrow of the trees, and away from any emotions the narrator may be feeling.

Figure 1: “De rêve” mm. 16-19

The next major disruption of the narrator by the musical setting occurs at the transition back to theme A. From a musical perspective, the return to the second instance of theme A at m.

47 is not an interruption. The narrator’s text trails off at “frisson” (“shiver”), and the descending bass line of B $\flat$ -A $\flat$ -G in m. 46 follows smoothly into the F $\sharp$  pedal at m. 47 (see Figure 2, below). From the point of view of narrative agency, however, the return of theme A music is shocking, as it interrupts the narrator’s first instance of first-person subjectivity. “Hélas!” (“Alas”) at mm. 43-44 was the first textual hint that the narrator was more than a dispassionate observer. But the narrator is not allowed to dwell on their textual sadness. At m. 47, theme A returns. The relatively abrupt transition (insofar as anything at a *pp* dynamic can be abrupt) and its occurrence in the piano part rather than the vocal line, give the impression that it is the return of theme A that provokes the repetition of text about “les vieux arbres sous la lune d’or” rather than the return of the text provoking the musical refrain.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "De rêve" from mm. 44-48. It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 44-48. The vocal line begins with "Hélas! de tout ceci, plus rien qu'un blanc frisson..." and ends with "son...". The piano accompaniment features a descending bass line in measure 46 that leads into a pedal point in measure 47. The dynamic is marked *p*. The second system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 49-52. The vocal line begins with "Les vieux arbres sous la lune". The piano accompaniment features a dynamic of *pp*. The score is marked "Plus retenu." and "1. Mouvement."

Figure 2: “De rêve” mm. 44-48

This second instance of theme A is not allowed to linger. The refrain of “les vieux arbres sous la lune d’or...” (“the old trees beneath the golden moon...”) is undergirded by both an F# pedal and by a newly introduced horn call motif, which I have called theme C1 (see Figure 3, below). Coming as it does while the narrator is still reiterating their description of the general setting of the dream, the chordal horn fanfare call precedes the textual arrival of the knights, metonymically represented by their golden helmets. The horn fanfare can be considered to interrupt theme A and presages the definitive arrival of theme C1 at m. 53 (see Appendix C, Figure 5). The gradual emergence of theme C1 in the piano’s left hand simultaneous with theme A, growing more insistent with each repetition, has the effect of calling the knights into the narrative as if conjured by the music.

The image displays a musical score for the piece "De rêve" (mm. 49-52). It consists of two systems of music. The first system features a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower staff. The vocal line includes the lyrics "d'or pleu - rent leurs bel - les feuil - les". The piano accompaniment has two green boxes highlighting specific motifs in the left hand. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with the lyrics "d'or! toujours en augmentant." and features a more complex, rhythmic motif in the left hand, also highlighted with a green box. The tempo/mood marking "peu à peu animé et en augmentant." is present at the beginning of the first system.

Figure 3: “De rêve” mm. 49-52, theme C marked with box.

Even at the very end of the song, the confirmation of the narrator as the protagonist of the dream comes not from the music, but from the text. The narrator finally uses first-person pronouns to refer to himself: “Mon âme! C’est du rêve ancien qui t’êtreint!” (“My soul! It is the ancient dream that has you in its grasp!”). All the other potential dreaming subjects have fallen by the wayside: the trees have become objects under which strange sighs arise rather than feeling, emotional subjects. The knights remain dead. The ladies have been disembodied and have vanished from the text. The last section of music, beginning at m. 88, is a return of theme B, this time roughly in F# major—the pitch centrality of theme A having ultimately persisted. However, it is now the turn of theme B to fade into the distance. By m. 95, the dynamic is *ppp* and the B tune (refer to Table 1, Figure 2 RH) has sounded its last, simultaneously with the last sung syllable. The last four bars are curious. They are marked *en se perdant* (*fading away*) and sound after the narrator, now finally established in the text as a feeling witness to their own dream and in possession of a realized first-person subjectivity, falls silent. The F# major pedal remains until the very end. As the dynamic fades to *pppp*, the trumpet-call theme C2 sounds again before dying away to nothing, a last failed attempt by the music to pre-empt the narrator’s agency and re-assert the dream of the past (see Figure 4, next page).

The image displays a musical score for the song "De rêve". It consists of two systems of staves. The top system shows the vocal line and the piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "rêve an-ci-en qui t'é-treint!". The piano part includes dynamic markings *pp*, *ppp*, and *m.d.*. The bottom system continues the piano part, with a vocal line that includes the lyrics "en se perdant". Two sections of the piano part in the bottom system are highlighted with green boxes. The piano part in the bottom system includes dynamic markings *m.g.*, *m.d.*, and *pppp*.

Figure 4: “De rêve” mm. 92-end; theme C2 marked with box.

Throughout “De rêve,” the vocal line, and thus the narrator, is subject to the vagaries of the changing thematic material in the piano part. Cone proposed a theory of musical narrative in which the music is heard to be composed through the protagonist. In the song “De rêve,” the narrator is only revealed to be the protagonist at the very end of the song. The experience of singing “De rêve” is less that of being the in-song composer of the music or the driving consciousness of the work than that of being subject to the musical environment created and dominated by the piano part.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### Sing ‘cause it’s obvious, sing<sup>87</sup>

This thesis grew out of my experience preparing *Proses lyriques* for performance. Specifically, as I began to work on “De rêve,” I found my usual methods of repertoire preparation somewhat insufficient—specifically, turning first to the text, as art song comes from already existing poetry, and then beginning the process of embodying the character, narrator, or storyteller present in that text. The “insufficiency” of my usual approach to new repertoire occurred in face of two major elements of “De rêve.” First, the ambiguity of the song’s narrator led me to become fixated on who, exactly, was dreaming. Was it “me,” the nebulous speaker, whose presence in the scene was implied only by the fact that the scene was being described? Was it the dreamlike and dreaming figures this “me” was watching? I had not (and have not since), to my recollection, ever gotten quite so stuck on the “who” aspect of a song. Second, the way I felt, while performing, that the musical setting tipped the balance of musical agency away from the vocal part, and even away from the equal partnership between voice and piano more typical of standard/prototypical art song in favour of the piano as the dominant voice, the overriding organizer of narrative, of the song.

At the same time as I was working on “De rêve,” I was introduced to the theory of musical narrativity, which struck me as a method of musical analysis perfectly suited to the detailed (and admittedly navel-gazey) problem of voice and agency I was dealing with. I started with Edward T. Cone, one of the originators of the entire field. Although Cone deals with the voices within art song in a sensitive and complex way, for my purposes, he hews too much to the idea of a single guiding consciousness within the work in both his earlier, trinitarian formulation

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<sup>87</sup> The Dresden Dolls, “Sing,” by Amanda Palmer, from *Yes, Virginia*, 2006, Roadrunner Records. In this case, of course, one must sing even if “it” is not obvious at all

and his later revisions to re-unify the voices into one overall persona. Subsequent scholars have built upon Cone's work, delving into musical narrativity in more detail and allowing for more ambiguity. Significantly, almost all of them have chosen to limit their work to non-programmatic instrumental work, as if the text, the potential for characters, for extra-musical meaning, might interfere with the analysis of the music. Carolyn Abbate and Matt BaileyShea both write explicitly and beautifully about texted vocal music, but concentrate on opera.<sup>88</sup> Aside from the obvious differences between art song and opera, the latter has clearly defined characters, and therefore Abbate and BaileyShea's work did not quite provide the answer I was looking for to my own issues of character and agency. Janet Schmalfeldt deals extensively with art song and with the potential for deception in the music. But again, though she deals with unreliable narrators who like to tell lies, she does not deal with cases in which the narrator themselves is hidden.

As I sought to fill what I perceived as a gap in the scholarship, I came to a couple conclusions. First, though I believe I have shown the ways in which the voices within the music can outweigh the text, the process was an arduous one. I now understand why authors have chosen to avoid art song, as the text complicates efforts to analyse the interplay of voices within the music. Text (usually) does say something definite, and the implicit voices of instrumental music may indeed fall under the sway of the semantic specificity of the text. However, the second conclusion I came to was that applying a framework of voices, of personas, working together and against each other in song is still useful in some cases. While most art song, indeed, does not need the personas of the narrator to be unpicked, uncovered from the haze of ambiguity in which they are hidden, "De rêve" is a bit of an outlier case in which the instrumental music

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<sup>88</sup> Abbate, *Unsung Voices* and BaileyShea, "The Struggle for Orchestral Control."

repeatedly interrupts and undercuts the protagonist, and in which other characters make solid, though ultimately fruitless, arguments for themselves as the true protagonists.

While this exact situation of a hidden narrator is not especially common, the process of using the music, rather than the text, as a starting point when determining which character to embody may be of some use to singers. Contemporary repertoire built upon extended vocal techniques and phonemes denuded of easily understandable semantic significance suggests itself as a good candidate for an approach which teases out a central protagonist from hints in the music, rather than a text which provides no clear answers. The recital for which I prepared *Proses lyriques* had as its second half Luciano Berio's *A-Ronne* (1975), written for eight unaccompanied voices.<sup>89</sup> In it, multiple languages are stretched to their phonetic breaking points and then reconstituted. At the time my very gracious/indulgent singer-colleagues and I were learning it, my thoughts on character were still inchoate; looking back, I cannot help but wonder if a clearer framework for discussing how characters emerged from and then receded back into Berio's complex layering of vocal effects might have helped us establish a cohesive vision for *A-Ronne* earlier on in the learning/rehearsal process.

I do not believe this sort of in-depth, minutious analysis necessarily contributes to a performance that is more enjoyable for the audience. I do not know how many singers will find that this sort of deep dive makes them a better performer. I do know that I made "De rêve" more concrete for myself. I feel I have succeeded, through the long process of pulling at the threads of characters hidden and interrupted by the music, in teasing out Debussy's deliberate ambiguity and slipperiness until, almost despite itself, a narrative I find acceptable has emerged. That process *did* improve the way I felt about my performance. It is my hope that other serial

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<sup>89</sup> Refer to footnote 2 for details.

overthinking, navel-gazing scholar-performers will find use both in revelling in the ambiguity of this sort of oddball repertoire and will, perhaps, find some satisfaction in poking at it with the idea of finding a narrator-protagonist to embody despite the best efforts of the music itself.

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## Appendix A: Narrative Voices in Song

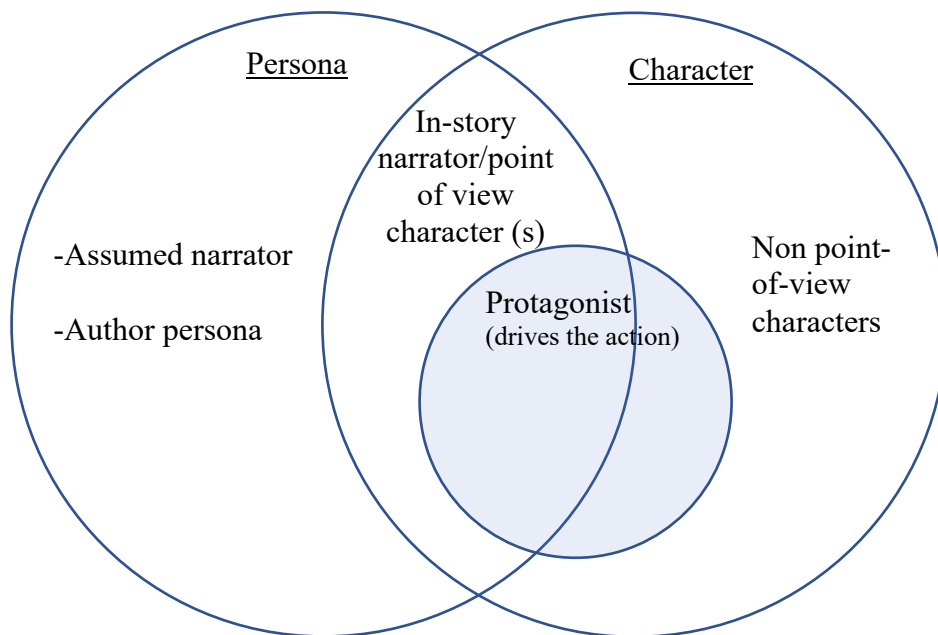


Figure 1: Potential narrative voices within song

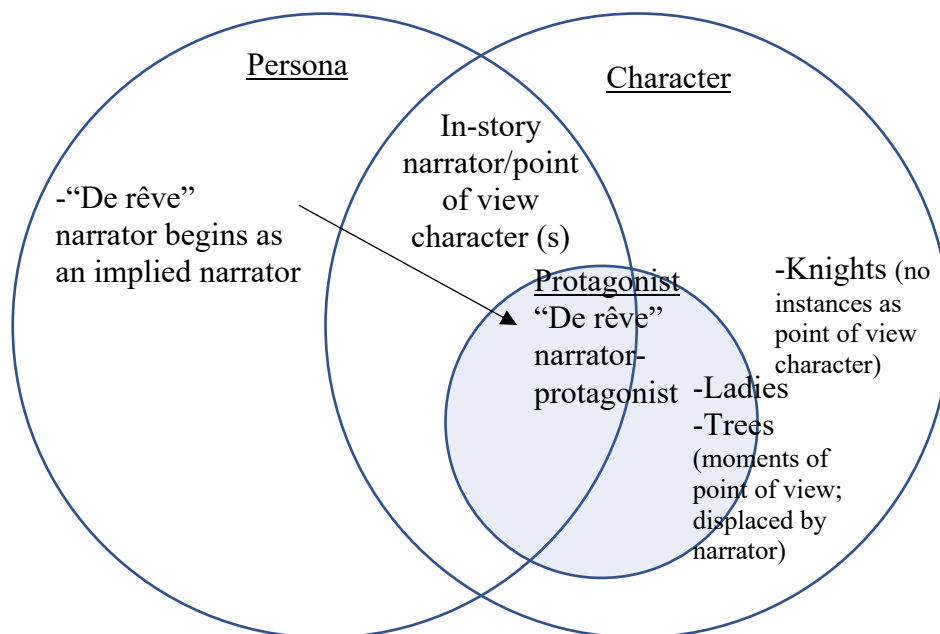


Figure 2: Voices in "De rêve"

Arrows indicate passage of voices in "De rêve" from one type of persona/character to another over the course of the song. The narrator passes from being an implied narrator (whose existence is revealed only by the fact that a narrative is being recounted) to being a driver of the action and thus the protagonist. This displaces the trees and the ladies, who are initial candidates for protagonists of the narrative, but are replaced as the narrator-protagonist asserts himself.

## Appendix B: Poem Translations

Translated by Alana Hayes

### II. "De grève"

Sur la mer les crépuscules tombent,  
Soie blanche effilée.  
Les vagues comme de petites folles  
Jasent, petites filles sortant de l'école,  
Parmi les froufrous de leur robe,  
Soie verte irisée!

Les nuages, graves voyageurs,  
Se concertent sur le prochain orage,  
Et c'est un fond vraiment trop grave  
A cette anglaise aquarelle.  
Les vagues, les petites vagues,  
Ne savent plus où se mettre,  
Car voici la méchante averse,  
Froufrous de jupes envolées,  
Soie verte affolée.

Mais la lune, compatissante à tous,  
Vient apaiser ce gris conflit,  
Et caresse lentement ses petites amies,  
Qui s'offrent, comme lèvres aimantes,  
A ce tiède et blanc baiser.  
Puis, plus rien...  
Plus que les cloches attardées  
Des flottantes églises,  
Angelus des vagues,  
Soie blanche apaisée!

### III. "De fleurs"

Dans l'ennui si désolément vert  
De la serre de douleur,  
Les fleurs enlacent mon cœur  
De leurs tiges méchantes.  
Ah! quand reviendront autour de ma tête  
Les chères mains si tendrement  
désenlaceuses?  
Les grands Iris violets  
Violèrent méchamment tes yeux,  
En semblant les refléter, -  
Eux, qui furent l'eau du songe

### II. "Of the shore"

Twilight falls on the sea,  
Frayed white silk.  
The waves like little wild ones<sup>90</sup>  
Chatter, little girls leaving school,  
Amidst their frilly skirts  
Iridescent green silk!

The clouds, those somber travellers,  
Conspire to create the oncoming storm,  
And it is far too grim a backdrop  
For this English watercolour.  
The waves, the little waves,  
Do not know where to turn,  
For the wicked downpour has arrived,  
Rustling frilly skirts,  
Green silk in a tizzy.

But the moon, compassionate to all,  
Comes to pacify this tiresome conflict,  
And gently caresses her little friends,  
Who offer themselves up like loving lips,  
To this warm, white kiss.  
Then, nothing more...  
Nothing but the belated bells  
Of floating churches,  
Angelus of the waves,  
Pacified white silk!

### III. "Of flowers"

In the desolate green boredom  
Of the greenhouse of pain,  
The flowers entwine my heart  
With their cruel stems.  
Ah! When will the dear hands return  
To tenderly disentangle them from my head?  
  
The large purple irises  
Cruelly violated your eyes,  
And seemed to reflect them, -  
They, who were the waters of dreams

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<sup>90</sup> Feminine

Où plongèrent mes rêves si doucement,  
 Enclos en leur couleur;  
 Et les lys, blancs jets d'eau de pistils  
     embaumés,  
 Ont perdu leur grâce blanche,  
 Et ne sont plus que pauvres malades sans  
     soleil! -  
 Soleil! ami des fleurs mauvaises,  
 Tueur de rêves: Tueur d'illusions,  
 Ce pain béni des âmes misérables!  
 Venez! Venez! Les mains salvatrices!  
 Brisez les vitres de mensonge,  
 Brisez les vitres de maléfice,  
 Mon âme meurt de trop de soleil!  
 Mirages! Plus ne reflleurira la joie de mes  
     yeux,  
 Et mes mains sont lasses de prier,  
 Mes yeux sont las de pleurer!  
 Éternellement ce bruit fou  
 Des pétales noirs de l'ennui,  
 Tombant goutte à goutte sur ma tête,  
 Dans le vert de la serre de douleur!

## IV. "De soir"

Dimanche sur les villes,  
 Dimanche dans les cœurs!  
 Dimanche chez les petites filles,  
 Chantant d'une voix informée,  
 Des rondes obstinées,  
 Ou de bonnes tours  
 N'en ont plus que pour quelques jours!

Dimanche, les gares sont folles!  
 Tout le monde appareille  
 Pour des banlieues d'aventure,  
 En se disant adieu  
 Avec des gestes éperdus!

Dimanche les trains vont vite,  
 Dévorés par d'insatiables tunnels;  
 Et les bons signaux des routes  
 Échangent d'un oeil unique,  
 Des impressions toutes mécaniques.

Dimanche, dans le bleu de mes rêves,  
 Où mes pensées tristes  
 De feux d'artifices manqués  
 Ne veulent plus quitter  
 Le deuil de vieux Dimanches trépassés.

Into which my dreams dove so gently,  
 Enclosed in their colour;  
 And the lilies, white fountains of fragrant  
     pistils,  
 Have lost their white grace,  
 And are now nothing more than poor sick  
     sunless things! -  
 Sun! Friend of evil flowers,  
 Murderer of dreams: murderer of illusions,  
 This holy bread of miserable souls!  
 Come! Come! Saving hands!  
 Shatter the panes of lies,  
 Shatter the panes of maleficence,  
 My soul is dying from too much sunlight!  
 Mirages! Never more shall the joy of my eyes  
     flower,  
 And my hands are weary of praying,  
 My eyes are weary of crying!  
 Eternally, this mad noise  
 Of the black petals of tedium,  
 Fall drop by drop on my head,  
 In the green of the greenhouse of pain!

## IV. "Of evening"

Sunday over the cities,  
 Sunday in our hearts!  
 Sunday among the little girls,  
 Singing with unformed voices  
 Their obstinate rounds,  
 In which the turns of the good towers  
 Only last for a few days!

Sunday, the train stations are mad!  
 Everyone prepares to leave  
 For suburban adventures,  
 And bid each other farewell  
 With frantic gestures!

Sunday, the trains go fast,  
 Devoured by insatiable tunnels;  
 And the good train signals  
 Exchange with their single eyes,  
 Their wholly mechanical impressions.

Sunday, in the blue of my dreams,  
 Where my sad thoughts  
 Of failed fireworks  
 Do not wish to cease  
 Their mourning for old, deceased Sundays.

Et la nuit, à pas de velours,  
Vient endormir le beau ciel fatigué,  
Et c'est Dimanche dans les avenues d'étoiles;  
La Vierge or sur argent  
Laisse tomber les fleurs de sommeil!

Vite, les petits anges,  
Dépassez les hirondelles  
Afin de vous coucher  
Forts d'absolution!  
Prenez pitié des villes,  
Prenez pitié des cœurs,  
Vous, la Vierge or sur argent!

And the night, with velvet steps,  
Lulls the lovely, tired sky to sleep,  
And it is Sunday in the avenues of stars;  
The gold-on-silver Virgin  
Lets slip the flowers of sleep!

Quickly, little angels,  
Race the swallows,  
That you may sleep  
Secure in your absolution!  
Have pity on the cities,  
Have pity on the hearts,  
You, the gold-on silver Virgin!

### Appendix C: Musical Examples for Table 1

CHANT.

PIANO.

Modéré.

*p*

La

Figure 1: "De rêve," m. 1

Audantino.

*p* *doux et expressif.*

A

Figure 2: "De rêve," mm. 6-8

*m.d.*

8

Ils n

Figure 3: "De rêve," mm. 18-19

d'or pleu - rent

Figure 4: “De rêve,” m. 49; theme C2 indicated with square

**1<sup>er</sup> Mouvt** dans un rythme plus accusé.

Nul ne leur dé - diera plus la fier -

Figure 5: “De rêve,” mm. 53-54

té des casques

Figure 6: “De rêve,” m. 55