Debussy, Pentatonicism, and the Tonal Tradition

This article presents a historical and analytical assessment of one of the important components of Debussy's musical style: his pentatonic practice. This practice, while often radical, nevertheless also partakes of a tradition of nineteenth-century pentatonicism that itself can be understood in relation to the larger context of tonal history—a point well illustrated by a favored cadential device of Debussy's, the "plagal leading-tone." I explain this intersection of the pentatonic and tonal traditions, and through a Schenkerian analysis of *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, I reveal Debussy's innovative and far-reaching reformulation of structural norms in response to those traditions.

Keywords: Claude Debussy, pentatonic scale, diatonic scale, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, Schenkerian theory, Schenkerian analysis, plagal cadence, $\hat{6}$, historiography, tonality

Beginnings and endings are the customary concern of historians and the necessary concern of composers. But history, unlike works of art, often confounds the notion of "beginning," of "ending," and even the notion that the two are opposites. When in 1864, for instance, a new word—"pentatonic"—was used to characterize a very old music, it signaled both a beginning and an ending. Carl Engel's *The Music of the Most Ancient Nations* contained the first published use of that term in English and apparently predated the emergence of analogous terms in other European languages. As such, Engel's "pentatonic" represents the beginning of a particular path of discourse. It also, however, represents the end of a long process of discovery and conceptualization—a moment when an idea had become important enough and stable enough to justify linguistic reification. What Du Haldé in 1735 had presumably heard in the music of Chinese monks who "never raise or lower their voice a semitone" (265);[1] what Rameau in 1760 had described as a peculiar scale of "only five tones" (191),[2] Roussier in 1770 as a scale "whose gaps always seem to [illegible] tones" (83),[3] and Laborde in 1780 as a scale "in which there is neither fa nor ut" (1:146);[4] what Burney stumbled upon in his study of the "mutilated" scales of Greek music and elsewhere referred to simply as the "Scots scale" (425, 46); what Crotch identified as "the same kind of scale as

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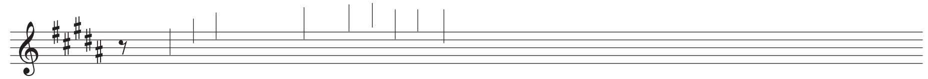

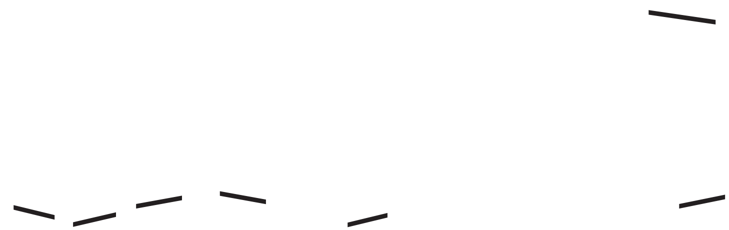

I. *Debussy,* Pagodes *(1903)*

Debussy's, one that avoids the sweetness and triadic-tonal associations of the major third but instead features the austere intervals of the second and fourth. The varied return of this material at measure 23 (given in Example 1[b]) at first appears to offer a pentatonically "complete" rendition of the melodic material, as all five tones are present in the upper voices. However, a closer look reveals a juxta- and superposition of two intervallically identical tetrachordal sets (the original $\hat{2}/\hat{3}/\hat{5}/\hat{6}$ along with $\hat{1}/\hat{2}/\hat{5}/\hat{6}$), a result of the canonic treatment of the theme. The tetrachord's stark intervallic content is made most explicit in the codetta to the first main section (measures 27–9), the tetratonic theme in Example 1[c], which is accompanied by familiar Debussian "organum": the resulting counterpoint in parallel "thirds" (i.e., $\hat{2}/\hat{5}$, $\hat{3}/\hat{6}$, $\hat{5}/\hat{2}$, and $\hat{6}/\hat{3}$) contains only perfect intervals. (A fully pentatonic organum of this sort would contain a single major third, $\hat{1}/\hat{3}$, beside its four perfect fourths—a perhaps overly differentiated interval structure for Debussy's purposes.[5]) Similar pentatonic fragmentation continues throughout the piece, which makes the dissonant (i.e., ostensibly unresolved) final sonority, provided in Example 1(d), all the more striking: the last measure simply freezes the ubiquitous pentatonic figuration, and it is this stillness (emphasized by the indication *laissez vibrer*) that quietly invites the listener at last to truly behold the pentatonic set as one complete entity.

Not only the pitch material of *Pagodes*, but its counterpoint, shimmering figuration, and title all suggest, as Constanin Brailoiu wrote in his extensive (albeit error-ridden) essay on Debussy's pentatonicism, "a distinct category generated in the atmosphere of the World Exhibition"

Fl. I
Fl. II
Tri.
p
p

2. *Saint-Saëns,* Marche Orient et Occident *(1869), 3 measures before rehearsal 4*

A
p

3. *Gounod,* Mireille *(1864), Overture, beginning*

pp *p* *pp*

4. *Debussy,* Printemps *(1887), i, beginning*

The scope of the pentatonic tradition can be further appreciated by considering that F♯-pentatonic theme: neither Debussy, nor Chopin before him (recall Chopin's Etude in G♭, op. 10, no. 5), was the first to discover the peculiarly pleasing sound so unassumingly contained in the black keys of the piano. As early as 1798, Abbé Georg-Joseph Vogler (though surely not the first himself),[9] composed an all-black-key piece entitled simply, and enigmatically, *Pente chordium* (given here in Example 5), what I can only guess was an attempted allusion to ancient Greek music. (Debussy's first *Épigraphe Antique*, "Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été," makes a similar allusion, as well as a typical conflation of the pastoral with the primitive.)

Debussy would have no doubt noticed the scalar commonality of Asian and Scottish music, which Engel called "quite inexplicable" (1864/1909, 128). And though the Scottish influence on Debussy is seldom considered, he was indeed susceptible to this northerly exoticism (as it were). The musical borrowing in Debussy's *Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire* follows the practice of, for instance, J.C. Bach, whose opus 13 keyboard concertos featured variation movements on such popular songs as "The Yellow Hair'd Laddie"—as well as of Beethoven and Haydn, who gladly harmonized a large number of Scottish songs for an insatiable public. Newly composed Scottish-style pentatonicism appears in music throughout the nineteenth century, including in Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Loewe, and Brahms. The pentatonicism of Debussy's piano prelude *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (which I will discuss in depth later) calls to mind Debussy's earlier, unpublished *mélodie* of the same name, which set poetry from Leconte de Lisle's *Scottish Songs*.[10]

Another category of pentatonicism (unmentioned by the writers cited above, but alluded to by Riemann), the "religious pentatonic," figured prominently in Liszt's sacred (and sacred-inspired) music.[11] Pentatonic passages in Debussy's *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* suggest certain correspondences with Liszt's *St. Elisabeth* (compare Examples 6 and 7) as well as with Wagner's *Parsifal* (compare Examples 8 and 9). As I describe below, the *religioso* coda in Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* may have exerted a lasting influence on the melodic vocabulary of nineteenth-century composers, not least of all Debussy.

Finally, it might be supposed that a further, non-signifying brand of pentatonicism—as it were, "coloristic" pentatonicism—is more uniquely Debussian. But this isn't entirely right either: pentatonic and added-sixth flourishes enlivened the tonic triads of Chopin, Liszt, and Thalberg (whose

We have, for instance, a letter from Robert Burns who recounts a sort of pentatonic party trick: "Mr. James Miller . . . was in company with our friend [Stephen] Clarke; and talking of Scotch music, Mr. Miller expressed an ardent ambition to be able to compose a Scots air. Mr. Clarke, partly by way of joke, told him to keep to the black keys of the harpsichord,

Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia.

Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia.

Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia.

cresc. *cresc.*

Debussy, Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien, *V, 9 measures from end*

Having considered Debussy's place in the pentatonic tradition, I wish to return momentarily to Carl Engel, whose term "pentatonic" likewise participated in a tradition, albeit one more of scholarship than of sound. A newly coined word is a sort of gift to a scholarly community, but all the same, something is lost the moment thought is concretized and thus constricted. Indeed, I feel that the poverty of conventional accounts of nineteenth-century pentatonicism can be partly blamed on the very existence of that term, "pentatonic," and its ostensible transparency. After all—and as Engel's predecessors (quoted earlier) remind us—"pentatonic" connotes more than its etymological literalism ("five-toned").

This is no doubt true of most terms (certainly "diatonic"), but especially so in the case of a "marginal" musical material that is inevitably interpreted with respect to prevailing norms. As David Kopp (1997) writes,

> The standard model for pentatonic music operating within a diatonic framework entails a single anhemitonic pentatonic scale overlaying diatonic scale degrees $\hat{1}$, $\hat{2}$, $\hat{3}$, $\hat{5}$, $\hat{6}$. This collection is used as the basis for melody, while the remaining diatonic pitches are supplied by subsidiary lines or chords, facilitating full-fledged presence of the common tonal functions. Familiar instances of this technique underlying entire pieces are Chopin's black key etude (op. 10, no. 5) and Debussy's prelude, *La fille aux cheveux de lin*. These so-called 'pentatonic' works take place within a relatively conventional tonal context (263).[14]

Kopp's point accurately describes pentatonic music throughout the nineteenth century, including those passages I've cited above, in which pentatonicism is expressed monophonically or decoratively, or else is accompanied by fully diatonic chords.[15]

Yet as F. A. Gevaert wrote in his widely read *Traité d'harmonie théorique et pratique* (among the first significant descriptions of pentatonicism in France), "pentaphonic melodies [can be] associated with a completely heptaphonic harmonization without losing their scent of suave tranquility" (1905, 61).[16] Indeed, as we will see later, the musical language of *La fille* is too hastily dismissed as "so-called

diatonic tonality, comprising as it does two notes of the (stable) tonic triad. The pentatonic scale's other minor third, however, does present a melodic anomaly: in the absence of the leading tone, scale degree $\hat{6}$ assumes special prominence and stands in a "stepwise" relationship to the tonic in addition to its straightforward classical role as the upper adjacency to $\hat{5}$. This strangely "subtonic" $\hat{6}$—what one Dvořák

such as Debussy, who was demonstrably conversant with both, those structural similarities would inevitably interact in the musical imagination (albeit at some subconscious level). (The analyst who is likewise conversant with both techniques will appreciate the key-defining nature of the unaccompanied pentatonic theme of Debussy's *Les collines d'Anacapri*, which Kopp [1997], inattentive to its plagal leading tone, declares tonally ambiguous [266].[17])

To put it another way: while analysts naturally gravitate toward the clearest examples of a phenomenon, I believe it would be wrong to take such examples as most representative of the act of musical composition. In assessing Debussy's pentatonic sensibility, we must consider the broader tradition of tonal harmony and melody, in addition to the pentatonic tradition *per se* (broad though it is in its own right, as we've seen). After all, when faced with a blank sheet of staff paper, composers do not normally reach for the textbook, whether

leading tone no less than it did the more celebrated pentatonic scale.

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Finally, I should make it clear that I follow Daniel Harrison in identifying $\hat{6}$ as the epitome of "plagal" harmony, $\hat{7}$ the epitome of "authentic" harmony (Harrison 1994, 26–27).[18] Notably, every non-tonic triad in a major key contains exactly one of those defining scale degrees (while the tonic triad contains neither). Nevertheless, these two brands of harmony are not equal. As even those scholars who have exposed a plagal undercurrent in nineteenth-century music admit, plagal harmony remains comparatively peripheral. Harrison himself, who is intent on theorizing a "Plagal system," acknowledges that the authentic "is by far the more privileged and common structure in tonal music by virtue of the comparative strength of its functional connections" (1994, 97).[19] For one thing, common-practice tonality, in its essence, involves the dramatic opposition between tonic and non-tonic, and this opposition is aptly expressed through the tonic and dominant triads: the dominant triad contains the two notes that neighbor the tonic note on either side, $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{2}$. In contrast, the subdominant triad contains the tonic note itself and hence necessarily bears an affinity with the tonic triad, which is why the standard plagal cadence is "softer" and "weaker" than the authentic cadence (requiring "compensation," as Deborah Stein puts it [1983, 166][20]) and is, according to the conventional view, of no structural significance.

The plagal leading tone, then, in its most typical harmonization, IV–I (or ii^{6}_{5}–I), represents a complete departure from tonal norms: to imbue $\hat{6}$ with leading-tone character, if only by association, is to confer some hint of dominant function upon a chord that has no right to it. In this way the plagal leading tone effects a subtle but profound deformation of the tonal hierarchy.[21] It is precisely these functional complications that we will later see explored in *La fille*.

The plagal leading tone was one of Debussy's favorite cadential devices, though again it was by no means uniqrwas osjpr 1-0.
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517

I have isolated the plagal leading tone so as to further pluralize the precedents of Debussy

3

3

and A♭ (=G♯) are $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{5}$ of D♭. More significantly, the melting together of E-pentatonic and B-pentatonic recalls the opposition, and then melting together, of I and vi at the end of the first movement. The third movement ("Dialogue du vent et de la mer"), on the other hand, does finally achieve a forceful resolution in its structural cadence, shown in Example 22: its majestic vi–I not only serves as a triumphant Picardy sixth in response to the equivocating motif that pervades the movement, ♭$\hat{6}$–$\hat{5}$–♮$\hat{6}$–$\hat{5}$ (Example 23), but also recalls, and decisively settles, the elusive close of the first

note as "extraneous," "the representative of another, more remote, system, rather than . . . an organic component of the [major scale], which, according to Nature's intention, originated from a series of rising fifths alone" (1954, 40).[27] Such theoretical niceties aside, the more musically concrete question of chord succession likewise drew an adamant opinion (now from his later *Free Composition*): that the plagal progression I–IV–I "express[es] no motion whatsoever" (1979, 14).

Schenker's insistence on melodic descent, on stepwise melodic motion, and on authentic, as opposed to plagal, progressions, would seem to distance him from the question of the plagal leading tone. His assessment of Debussy as a "brainless French nonentity" (2004, 45) would seem to further distance him from the subject of this article. Nevertheless, Schenker has provided a uniquely elegant and lucid account of musical logic, unity, and drama. Even if that account is dogmatic and limited in the particulars, the ultimate musical qualities that he describes (though by no means universal) do transcend compositional style—and transcend as well Schenker's own rather narrow musical tastes. I will focus on only one of those qualities, namely contrapuntal coherence, formalized by Schenker in the concept of the *Ursatz*.

For Schenker, any well-composed tonal piece possesses a single, global melody, which is however perceived only subliminally, and the outline of which is evident only through analysis. This global melody, termed the "structural line," relates to the actual melodic content of the piece through levels of abstraction corresponding to the compositional technique of "prolongation." The structural line of a given piece assumes one of the three logically possible forms given in Example 24: a stepwise descent to the tonic starting from either $\hat{3}$, $\hat{5}$, or $\hat{8}$. In each case the structural line is bound up with the underlying harmonic progression or "bass arpeggiation," I–V–I; the coordination of structural line with bass arpeggiation produces counterpoint known as the *Ursatz*, the "fundamental structure." As the deepest foundation of the actual ("surface") events of a piece, the structural line acquires an organic quality of the utmost psychic importance. It "signifies motion, striving toward a goal, and ultimately the completion of this course. In this sense we per-

analogous voice-leading connections, organized hierarchically in longer and longer spans extending far beyond the confines of the phrase and the affairs of the musical surface.

Matthew Brown’

Prélude similarly focuses on stepwise relations; now the plagal leading tone of measure 30 isn't just subsumed but is altogether omitted—perhaps not surprisingly, as Salzer uses this piece to illustrate the deeper-level neighbor-note motion ($\hat{5}$–$\hat{6}$–$\hat{5}$) that he claims is "typical . . . of Debussy's

(a) Excerpt (mm. 10–14) of Salzer's analysis, with corresponding music for comparison

(b) *Ursatz* for entire piece

2. *Felix Salzer, analysis of Debussy,* Bruyéres *(from* Structural Hearing*)*

As the opening phrase continues, an important harmonic element is introduced as well, in the cadence of measures 2–3. Not only is this plagal cadence the first cadence in the piece, but its subdominant triad is the first bona fide chord of the piece; indeed, the cadential progression IV–I com-

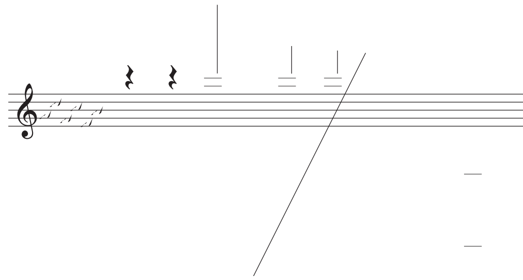
cadence, in fact—a rather sudden, unmotivated (and, as it turns out, short-lived) tonicization of E♭ major—is the one straightforwardly authentic cadence in the entire prelude. That key (VI♯) will become important later in the piece; for now, the high E♭ thus attained ($\hat{6}$), forges a middleground connection with the D♭ of the opening theme, which in turn is restated in the third strain as well (measures 8–11). In other words, the classical neighbor figure ($\hat{5}$–$\hat{6}$–$\hat{5}$) that was somewhat tenuously implied in the first strain is emphatically expressed in the middleground over the course of these first eleven measures, as illustrated in Example 28.

But it is precisely at the middle- and background levels that *non*-classical $\hat{6}$ will eventually dominate. Indeed, Example 30 shows how subsequent plagal leading tones (at measures 12–13 and 15–16) drive a middleground melody that ascends in consistently pentatonic motifs. This ascent accomplishes the chief modulation of the piece: to the key of IV, the pentatonic scale of which is in fact outlined by that middleground melody itself. (And now it must be considered that Debussy's use of register is, *pace* Parks, rather *un*-"complicated": a simple audit of melodic peaks throughout the prelude brings the middleground and, ultimately, the background progressions into considerable relief.)

This ascent reaches a point of crisis at the piece's climax in measure 21 (at *mf*, the dynamic pinnacle of this serene prelude), following a modulation to E♭ major. In Example 31, a jarring C♭ major triad grows out of a $\hat{6}$–$\hat{8}$ cadence in E♭ and its three subsequent repetitions—first in the original tenor register, then an octave higher, and finally, though abortively, an octave higher still, in the established register of the structural ascent. That last, feigned repetition breaks with its model precisely at the moment of cadence, skipping $\hat{6}$ altogether and leaping instead from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{8}$; in so doing, it avoids what would have been the first chromatic intrusion into the structural ascent (C♮) and hence reverses the tonal trajectory of the piece in preparation for the recapitulation soon to come.[30] Moreover,

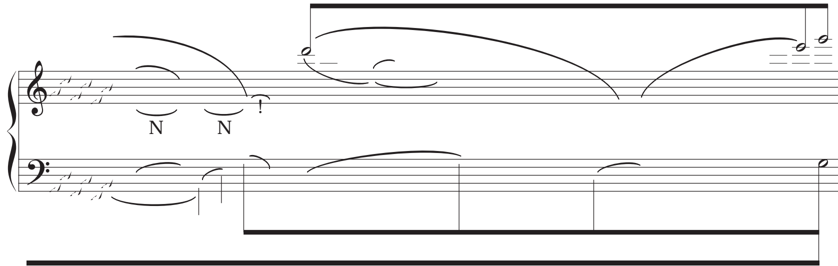
pentatonicism not considered in my discussion above. The Asian offerings at the 1889 Exhibition too easily overshadow in historians' minds a pair of concerts of Russian music conducted there by Rimsky-Korsakov. (Though again, Debussy's contact with Russian music had preceded that Exhibition.)

Pivotally, the sudden insertion of a C♭ major triad at this moment turns $\hat{1}$ in the key of VI♯ into $\hat{6}$ in the key of I. More to the point, the reassertion of IV (the chord), conjures up the key that had preceded this climactic passage: VI♯ thereby reveals itself to have been something of a parenthetical digression with respect to IV, just as it had been in measures 1–11, with respect to I.[31] This sonority, IV/$\hat{6}$, will be as important at the structural level as it has been at the foreground level



the first 28 measures represent the first half of a background interruption structure (albeit a *rising, pentatonic* one, $\hat{5}$–$\hat{6}$ || $\hat{5}$–$\hat{6}$–$\hat{8}$), elaborated by a large-scale transfer of register—the very interruption that was vaguely foreshadowed by the main theme itself (Example 28, measures 1–3).[32] The final cadence of the piece, then (Example 36), consummates this pentatonic interruption, extending the structural line to its highest point with one last plagal leading tone.[33]

Of all the $\hat{6}$–$\hat{8}$ cadences in this piece, only the first and this last cadence employ triads as cadential chords: IV–I previously, ii–I here. (In all the other cases, some chordal additive—seventh, ninth, etc.—appears in the long-note chords of the



calculatedly polemical (two pervasive modes of Debussy's criticism), it certainly suggests a concern with the nature and history of musical closure, a concern shared by Debussy's contemporaries.

In 1919, the year after Debussy's death, the Italian pianist, conductor, composer, and critic (as well as, it so happens, champion of Debussy) Alfredo Casella completed a prodigious history of Western music, in which he sought "to trace the gradual formation and development, during the slow course of centuries, of the principal elements of our magnificent edifice of modern music." As a lens through which to view this development, from 13th-century polyphony to the music of Stravinsky and Schoenberg, Casella employed a novel course of action, presenting one hundred musical examples chosen to illustrate variations on a

> technical formula to which composers have had recourse during the last few centuries, and which summarizes the principal characteristic features of the wonderful modern tonal system.

1 5 9 13 17 21

$\hat{3}$ $\hat{2}$ $\hat{1}$

tr

57

This formula could be no other than the *perfect cadence*, i.e., the traditional 'full close' obtained by the progression from the *dominant* to the *tonic*.[36]

Casella's *The Evolution of Music Throughout the History of the Perfect Cadence* is an ambitious piece of musical scholarship, unprecedented in its approach.[37] In my own small amendment to Casella's study (as it were), I hope to have demonstrated a pair of peculiar, perhaps unforeseen results: that Debussy's pentatonic vocabulary looks backward more than has been supposed (certainly in its stylistic and semantic debts, as was shown earlier, but also, as in the case of *Pagodes* at least, in its large-scale melodic syntax); and that meanwhile, Debussy's ostensibly straightforward, common-practice vocabulary—what could be more accessible, more tonal, than *La fille aux cheveux de lin*?—might be seen to break with the past in profound ways having to do with the logic of musical closure within a pentatonically inflected diatonicism.

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In the very year that *La fille* was published, Schenker himself published the first volume of *Counterpoint*, which opened with the following apocalyptic assessment of the state of music.

> We stand before a Herculaneum and Pompeii of music! All musical culture is buried; the very tonal material—that foundation of music which artists, transcending the spare clue provided by the overtone series, created anew in all respects from within themselves—is demolished (1987, xvii).

One cause of this decline, Schenker later explains, is modern composers' flirtations with the church modes and with "exotic" scales such as the pentatonic (1987, 20*ff.*). Schenker's impatience with these imported systems (or as he calls them, "so-called systems") relates ultimately to his concern with contrapuntal structure. "Those exotic people still lack diatony [i.e., the *Ursatz*], and that is the reason for the irrational character of their music" (1987, 22).

And conscious that musical exoticism was practiced by his own heroes, Haydn, Beethoven, and Brahms, Schenker took care to add,

> Skillful artists, still, have always successfully limited the problem of musical exoticism in practice. They solved it by attempting to make the original melodies of foreign peoples (often original only because of their imperfections and awkwardness) accessible to us through the refinements of our two tonal systems. They expressed the foreign character *in our major and minor*—such superiority in our art, such flexibility in our systems! (1987, 28)

By demonstrating the structural richness and integrity of *La fille*, I do not aim to "validate" Debussy's style with respect to (even loosely interpreted) Schenkerian principles. (Debussy's music has no need for such pleading on its behalf; and Schenker's xenophobic chauvinism does not warrant a

36 The author's preface (dated 1919) to Casella (1924/1964, iii). In this work, Casella does not mention anything resembling the plagal leading tone. Interestingly, however, Casella's 1911 piano piece *A la manière de C. Debussy* ends with a plagal leading tone in the bass (ii^6_4–I, just as in *La fille*)—thus vindicating a contemporary's judgment that "there is in the world of music, no innovation that could escape the infallible eyes and ears of Casella" (Jean-Aubry 1920, 40).

37 Nevertheless, this interest in the cadence was widespread at0.018pc06ahsellaI, just a5 Tw[(s90 129124 0 TD0 Tc1.65j/F55 1 Tf0.76064 Tm(ETj/F50he 81291 Tw

response in any case.) But I do hope to have celebrated Debussy's discovery of a remarkable and previously unexplored "flexibility" in the diatonic system, a discovery ultimately motivated by the composer's wholesale—and yet wholly uncompartmentalized—investment in both pentatonicism and the tonal tradition.

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