

La cathédrale engloutie: Is musicology changing the way we perform?

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The recording of *La cathédrale engloutie* by Debussy himself revealed important differences between the score and the way he performed the music. This gave rise to a series of studies in musicology and to the posthumous correction of the score. The aim of the present work is to question the impact of musicological studies on performance practice. An overview of the most important documents concerning *La cathédrale engloutie* is presented, from the time when the work was published until the present. In addition to this, 38 recordings were examined to ascertain how performers played the work over this period. The results showed that Debussy's recording itself did not have a direct impact on the way performers play *La cathédrale engloutie* and that only after the score was rectified pianists gradually started changing the way they performed the work. The study confirmed the historical importance of Debussy's own recording, as well as the importance of the musicological studies for performance practice. However, the study also revealed that these findings take a long time to become known and accepted among professional pianists.

Keywords: Debussy; recordings; performance; interpretation; musicology

When Debussy wrote *La cathédrale engloutie* he omitted the changes of tempo (half-note=quarter-note) in two sections of the piece (bars 7-12 and 22-83). It is possible that he did not consider it necessary to give such indication, although this seems unlikely. He wrote a double indication of meter in the first bar, but this did not offer enough evidence for a performer to change tempo. The first edition of the first book of *Préludes* by Durand was published in 1911 with no indications as far as changes of tempo were

concerned, and the mistake would lead several generations of pianists into a big problem of interpretation. If one starts the prelude at a slow tempo, “profondément calme” as is indicated in the score and does not change tempo for double speed in those two sections, one would turn the prelude into a funeral procession. On the other hand, to play the prelude with no changes of tempo one has to play it considerably faster, thus contradicting the composer’s initial indication.

When Debussy recorded *La cathédrale engloutie* for Welte-Mignon in 1913, he played with the alterations of tempo that were absent in the score. However, this recording on a pianola was only accessible to very few listeners. Other pianists who recorded the work in the early days, such as Alfred Cortot (1931) or George Copeland (1933), also performed with the same tempo alterations, but their 78rpm recordings never raised controversy about this topic. Moreover, although there was an early orchestration of *La cathédrale engloutie* by Debussy’s colleague Henry Busser (1917) that indicated the changes of tempo, it seems that Debussy’s contemporaries who wrote about his music never mentioned the problem. One exception could appear to be in Schmitz’s book about Debussy’s piano works, where one can read: “all the voices must be closely integrated as to dynamics and timing” (Schmitz 1950). Nevertheless, as Cecilia Dunoyer describes, Schmitz was among those who “went to extraordinary pains to make the $6/4=3/2$ work literally” (Dunoyer 1999). Only in 1962 was the recording by the composer himself made available in LP format. As a result, Charles Burkhart (1968) discussed these changes of tempo. The topic caused controversy but does not seem to have convinced musicians in general. In 1983, Roy Howat revealed mathematical evidence in favor of Debussy’s recording. Howat compared a version of the original score with a version of the score according to Debussy’s own recording, and he concluded that, if the piece was written as Debussy himself played it, it would be structured according to the mathematical proportion of the golden section. Due to these studies, the score was rectified by Durand in 1985.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

This problem of tempo raises two interesting questions: (1) how was it possible to perform the work with such a big mistake in the score and (2) what were the consequences of these studies and of Debussy’s recording for performance practice? An historical survey of the pianists who performed according to Debussy’s intentions is useful to contextualize this question.

Table 1. List of recordings and correspondent versions: Debussy's recording or original score.

<i>Year of recording</i>	<i>Pianist</i>	<i>Changes of tempo according to:</i>
1913 (roll)	C. Debussy	Debussy
1925	M. Hess	Score
1931	A. Cortot	Debussy
1932	G. Copeland	Debussy
1953	R. Casadesus	Score
1953	W. Gieseking	Score
1954	M. Meyer	Score
1955	F. Gulda	Score
1961	S. Richter	Score
1970	D. Ciani	Score
1971	N. Lee	Score
1976	T. Paraskivesko	Debussy
1978	A. Michelangeli	Score
1979	C. Arrau	Score
1983	J. Rouvier	Score
1983	Y. Egorov	Score
1986	C. Ousset	Score
1990	J. B. Pommier	Debussy
1991	K. Zimerman	Score
1991	M. O'Rourke	Score
1992	P. Crossley	Debussy
1993	J. V. Immersel	Debussy
1994	J. Y. Thibaudet	Debussy (but at different places)
1995	M. Pletnev	Score
1996	P. Donohoe	Score
1996	F. J. Thiollier	Debussy
1996	Z. Kocsis	Debussy (but at different places)
1997	R. Howat	Debussy
1998	C. Yin	Score
1998	M. Pollini	Debussy
2002	N. Ogawa	Score (but differences in Section C)
2003	M. Tan	Score
2003	G. Pludermacher	Score
2003	R. Voltapek	Score
2004	E. Greenfield	Debussy

Table 1 (cont.)

<i>Year of recording</i>	<i>Pianist</i>	<i>Changes of tempo according to:</i>
2004	F. Braley	Score
2006	S. Osborne	Debussy
2007	J. Bavouzet	Debussy

Table 1 illustrates the pianists who follow the original score and those who play according to Debussy's own recording. Since the score was rectified in 1985 the number of recordings according to Debussy's version increased. Up to that point, besides the early examples of Copeland and Cortot, who knew the composer, only one pianist performed according to Debussy's intentions. Paraskivesko's recording was released in 1976, after the LP of Debussy (1962) and the paper of Burkhart (1968) were published. Indeed, because the recording of Paraskivesko was the first for many years to display the same choices of tempo as Debussy's recording, I have contacted him in order to ascertain the reason for his strategy. Paraskivesco stated that his decision was based purely on a question of musical logic and that he was not aware of either the studies by Burkhart or of Debussy's own recording. The double meter indication from the first bar of the Prelude led Paraskivesco to conclude that that was Debussy's intention.

The number of recordings between the publication of Howat's book and the new edition of the score (from 1983 to 1985) is not enough to conclude whether the book alone would have led to a change of attitude in performers, but it is unquestionable that after 1985, when Durand published Howat's edition, the number of performers who play according to Debussy's intentions increased. After 1985, this has been further discussed in a number of papers and book chapters (e.g. see Howat 1994, 1997; and Dunoyer 1999) and acknowledged in CD reviews by critics.

As far as the question of tempo is concerned, performers can be divided into three groups: (1) those who play like Debussy himself with the changes of tempo, (2) those who play in accordance with the original printed score, and (3) those who play with changes of tempo but not exactly in the places Debussy intended. Those pianists who play according to Debussy's recording respect the thematic correspondence among different sections within the work. Moreover, this is the only possible way of maintaining the same overall speed; starting at a slow tempo as indicated by the words "profondément calme." It seems that the particular case of tempo in Debussy's recording is one of the most significant cases of how a recording by a composer changed

the way the score was interpreted. However, it is also surprising that after so many papers and books on the topic there are performers who still ignore this important data. This is probably a result of the tradition among many performers of not listening to recordings and ignoring the studies of musicology. They believe that they must find their own interpretations and that listening to recordings or reading others' ideas about the music might influence them and thus make their interpretations less personal. This may also reflect that the means of disseminating musicological studies in general and performance studies in particular may not be reaching their target audience with the desired impact.

IMPLICATIONS

This study reinforces the importance of Debussy's recordings and of literature on the topic. Moreover, it alerts performers to the contribution of musicology for performance practice and acknowledges a mistake that is being perpetuated in many recordings. This study offers implications in the way professional pianists and music students perform *La cathédrale engloutie*.

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