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1 The definition of timbre in the process of composition of *Jeux*

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The music of *Jeux* made relatively little impact at the time of its first performance by the *Ballets Russes* on 15 May 1913. It was somewhat overshadowed two weeks later by *The Rite of Spring*, which provoked an unforgettable scandal in the history of music. Some forty years on, a number of young, avant-garde composers, in the forefront of whom were Jean Barraqué and Pierre Boulez, drew attention to the innovations apparent in Debussy's score, which they rightly saw as a determining influence on the development of twentieth-century music. Without re-examining their analyses and conclusions, the intention of this study is to bring a further historical perspective to bear on this work, to describe its genesis with a view to understanding the process of its composition, and to compare this process to that of the earlier works. The objective is not to contrast the composer's viewpoint with that of the historian, but rather to investigate to what extent historical research can further an analytical approach.

Present musicological research, in particular for the *Edition critique des Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy*,[1] has led to the discovery of musical and historical sources hitherto unknown. Progress in this field has brought a greater understanding of the composer's working methods and has highlighted the possibility of a thorough investigation of the process of composition in Debussy's works: indeed this must surely be one of the functions of a critical edition. Those responsible for such an edition must assess to what extent this 'autopsy' of the manuscript is instructive. The *Fantaisie* and the *Nocturnes* are among the most complicated pieces – but also the most fascinating – to be unveiled by such editorial methods. There,

[1] *Edition critique des Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy* (Paris, Durand et Costallat, in progress).

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the discovery of copious sources, and editions strewn with corrections, reveal the composer's constant quest for perfection. Each work has its own identity, each runs its own course, but the gestation of each is different. It is therefore hoped that an eventual comparison of all these findings will one day yield the key to a greater understanding of Debussy's creative processes.

To borrow a term from Pierre Boulez, for whom the phenomenon of composing is 'expressed by a series of gestures' (*gestes*), one of the aims of such collective research is to try to define the sequence (or the simultaneity) of the composer's 'gestures'.[2] To penetrate the mystery of the passage from the conception of an idea to its realisation, and to explain when and how the various parameters which constitute the material of the composition are used, should surely be a primary aim of a project combining the efforts of all those working on the critical edition of Debussy's orchestral works.

With regard to these, previously unsuspected chronologies are often revealed by reviewing existing musical sources in conjunction with historical documents which range from correspondence to contracts; press articles; programmes; reviews; printers' plate numbers; publishers' copyright listings; registers of deposits at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*; memoirs and testimonies. In this respect, the orchestral works yield particularly rich rewards concerning their gestation. Rough drafts; *particelles*; the fair copy of the manuscript; the piano reduction; corrected proofs of both the orchestration and the piano reduction; certain scores belonging to conductors who were Debussy's contemporaries – all these sources, when carefully analysed and cross-checked with historical documents, particularly correspondence, can prove extremely enlightening. Ultimately, an understanding of this entire body of material is a prerequisite for any real editorial work to begin.

Some ten years ago, Marie Rolf devoted an article to the early orchestral manuscripts of Debussy, basing her study on the *particelles* of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, the *Nocturnes* and *La mer*.[3] By way of introduction to a further projected study, the present article takes a similar line of approach to *Jeux*, Debussy's last orchestral work and a supreme example of

[2] Pierre Boulez, *Jalons (pour une décennie) dix ans d'enseignement au 'Collège de France' (1978–1988)*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez (Paris, 1989), p. 110.

[3] Marie Rolf, 'Orchestral Manuscripts of Claude Debussy: 1892–1905', *The Musical Quarterly*, 4 (1984), 538–66.

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the subject. I propose to focus this examination on timbre, an essential element in the composition of an orchestral work. Pertinent to such a study is the availability of a particularly impressive number of sources, enabling us to determine with a certain degree of precision the genesis of the composition of this score.[4]

It therefore seems of interest to take *Jeux* as a starting point for examining the process of composition; tracing the sequence of 'gestures'; estimating the rate of composition; and attempting to evaluate the ease or difficulty of creativity, without, however, raising the problem of regrets or second thoughts such as those found most extremely in 'Sirènes'.[5] To pose the central question: at what stage of composition did Debussy introduce timbre? An investigation of this point seems fundamental in determining whether or not, for Debussy, timbre is inherent in the germ of the musical idea. To use Boulez's terms once again, the question can be formulated as follows: in Debussy's case, does 'orchestral-invention' (*orchestration-invention*) replace 'orchestral-dressing' (*orchestration-vêtement*)?[6]

In the first place, it is essential to retrace in detail the genesis of the composition of *Jeux*. Due to the abundance of musical sources, combined with documents of an historic nature, a relatively precise chronology can be established.

On 18 June 1912 a contract was drawn up between Claude Debussy and Serge de Diaghilev.[7] The subject of this contract was a commission for ballet music for the following season of the *Ballets Russes*, namely June 1913. According to the terms of this contract, Debussy undertook to deliver the piano score by the end of August 1912 and the full orchestral score by the end of March 1913. It is appropriate to note that in the case of ballet music the piano reduction was the first requirement, both for the choreographer to create the ballet and for the dancers to rehearse. In accepting the terms

[4] See Debussy, *Jeux*, ed. Myriam Chimènes and Pierre Boulez, *Edition critique des Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy*, series 5, vol. VIII (Paris, 1988).

[5] See Denis Herlin, 'Sirens in the Labyrinth: amendments in Debussy's *Nocturnes*, in this volume, pp. 51–77.

[6] Pierre Boulez, 'Debussy', in Paule Thévenin (ed.), *Relevés d'apprenti* (Paris, 1966), p. 344.

[7] A copy signed by Diaghilev and retained by Debussy is in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, (Musique). Rés. Vm dos 13 (7).

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of this contract the composer thereby implied that he felt capable of composing the piano reduction (the music) in less than three months and completing the orchestration some nine months later. The time scale was thus extremely brief.

From Debussy's correspondence we learn that by 2 July 1912, he had not yet received the scenario and so had not yet begun to compose the music.[8] However, on 9 August, a further letter to his publisher Jacques Durand confirms that the composition of *Jeux* was already underway. Debussy writes that he has received a visit from Diaghilev, enabling him to 'sort out one or two details that were still rather vague. They are in a hurry for the music of *Jeux* because Nijinsky wants to work on it during his stay in Venice!' Debussy adds, however, that he refused, despite Diaghilev's impatience, to play him what he had done because he did not want those 'Barbarians sticking their noses into [his] experiments in personal chemistry!'[9] Less than three weeks later, on 25 August 1912, Debussy wrote to André Caplet: 'I've finished the piece called *Jeux* I spoke to you about. How was I able to forget the troubles of this world and write music which is almost cheerful, and alive with quaint gestures?' And he continues: 'I'll have to invent for it an orchestra "without feet". Not that I'm thinking of a band composed exclusively of legless cripples! No! I'm thinking of that orchestral colour which seems to be lit from behind, of which there are such wonderful examples in *Parsifal*.'[10]

The date and contents of this letter are particularly significant. What exactly comprises the *music* of *Jeux*? The above text, when examined in

[8] See letter of Debussy to Jacques Durand, 2 July 1912, in Claude Debussy, *Correspondance 1884–1918*, ed. François Lesure (Paris, 1993), p. 307.†

[9] 'réglé utilement quelques détails restés dans l'ombre. Ils sont pressés d'avoir la musique de *Jeux*, sur laquelle Nijinsky voudrait travailler pendant son séjour à Venise!' Debussy continues, 'à lui jouer ce qu'il y a de fait, n'aimant pas que les Barbares mettent leur nez dans [ses] expériences de chimie personnelle!' Debussy, *Correspondance*, p. 309.†

[10] 'J'ai terminé la composition de *Jeux* dont je vous ai parlé. Où ai-je trouvé l'oubli des ennuis de ce monde pour écrire une musique à peu près joyeuse, rythme de gestes falots?' He continues, 'Il faudrait un orchestre "sans pieds" pour cette musique. Ne croyez pas que je pense à un orchestre exclusivement composé de culs-de-jatte! Non! Je pense à cette couleur orchestrale qui me semble éclairée par derrière et dont il y a de si merveilleux effets dans *Parsifal*!' Debussy, *Correspondance*, pp. 310–11.†

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conjunction with the musical sources, confirms that the first draft of the work (no preliminary drafts are known) is in fact the *particelle*, dated '23rd, 28th, 29th August 1912, 1st, 2nd September'.[11] Written on four staves, this *particelle* contains practically no indications of tempo, dynamics or articulation, and no more than a dozen indications of instrumentation. Therefore, in Debussy's terms ('I've finished *Jeux*'), the completed work would seem to be this embryo of his final score, in other words the original *particelle*, the earliest materialisation of the musical idea. The composer had no hesitation in declaring the work finished when in fact he had not yet begun the orchestration.

Once this *particelle* was completed, Debussy very quickly produced what is usually considered to be a piano reduction, although in this case the term 'reduction' is somewhat inappropriate. Logically, a piano reduction is a piano score reduced from an original orchestral score, yet in Debussy's case, the reality often seems to be quite different. Debussy's piano reduction was no doubt almost completed when he received another visit from Diaghilev, as he related in a letter to Jacques Durand the following day: 'Diaghilev seemed satisfied, requesting only that I extend the ending a little, which I have been busy doing all day.'[12] What was Diaghilev satisfied with? What had Debussy played to him that day? Had he been reading from the *particelle*, as he had done with *Pelléas* whenever friends asked him to play fragments of his opera still in gestation?[13] Or had he already made some headway with the piano reduction? The *particelle* in fact shows no trace of either alteration or extension.

This manuscript of 678 bars (the final score would comprise 709 bars) is completely free of any such amendments. On the other hand, the changes requested by Diaghilev appear very clearly on the manuscript of the piano reduction,[14] as well as on a page written in Debussy's hand and attached to

[11] Manuscript on deposit in Winterthur, Stadtbibliothek, Rychenberg-Stiftung, Dep. RS 11/3.

[12] 'Diaghilev a semblé satisfait, il m'a demandé seulement d'allonger un peu la fin, ce à quoi je me suis employé tout ce jour.' See Jacques Durand (ed.), *Lettres de Claude Debussy à son éditeur* (Paris, 1927), p. 111. Letter incorrectly dated 1 November 1912 instead of 1 September 1912. Regarding this error, see the preface to the edition of *Jeux* in Debusssy, *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. xiii, note 21.

[13] See David Grayson, *The Genesis of Debussy's 'Pelléas et Mélisande'* (Ann Arbor, 1986).

[14] Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, (Musique). Ms. 1008.

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the copy[15] made at this time for Nijinsky by the publishers Durand from the manuscript of the piano reduction. This proves that the reduction was therefore already completed in its first version. The changes required also explain why Debussy was slightly late in meeting his deadline. On 5 September 1912 he wrote to his publisher: 'Diaghilev's request for a few more bars has meant a change – for the better – in the ending of *Jeux* . . . It feels more balanced now, and is brimful of passion.'[16] Finally, Debussy must have delivered the manuscript of the piano reduction to Durand on 12 September, as shown by a letter to his publisher dated that same day: 'You'll find considerable changes at the end of *Jeux*. I've been working on it up to the last moment.'[17]

Having honoured the first part of his contract, Debussy appears to have put aside *Jeux* for several months. He began work again on the orchestration of 'Gigues', completed the second book of *Préludes* and returned to some 'old projects' (*La chute de la maison Usher* and *Le diable dans le beffroi*). Once this preliminary stage of composition was over, all that remained was the routine side of the orchestration, according to the classical procedure of 'orchestral-dressing' (*orchestration-vêtement*). This surprising fact may also reveal that Debussy had by then a fairly good idea of his own capacities. The composition of the *particelle* and the piano reduction of *Jeux* had taken little more than a month. The composer then waited until the last moment before proceeding with the orchestration, which he also completed within a month. There is no documentary evidence of his having begun any earlier this final stage of the composition of *Jeux*.

The following stage in the creative process of *Jeux* consists of a draft orchestration, entitled by Debussy himself: *Préparation orchestrale* and dated very precisely at the end '28 March 13 Midday – 24 April 13 6.15'.[18] This manuscript is a source of major importance, particularly since there exists no equivalent for any of the other orchestral works. Indeed, for the

[15] In the Frederick R. Koch Foundation Collection on deposit at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

[16] 'Les quelques mesures demandées par Diaghilev m'ont obligé à modifier – assez heureusement – la fin de *Jeux* . . . C'est mieux en place et la volupté coule à pleins bords.' Letter to Jacques Durand, in Durand (ed.), *Lettres*, p. 110.

[17] 'Vous trouverez de grands changements dans la fin de *Jeux*. J'y ai travaillé jusqu'à la dernière minute.' In Debussy, *Correspondance*, p. 312.†

[18] Collection of the Robert O. Lehman Foundation, New York.

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earlier works, there are no known intermediate sketches between the *particelle* and the final, definitive manuscript. The *préparation orchestrale* of *Jeux* includes an as yet incomplete nomenclature of instruments: the string parts, for example, are written on four staves, already showing many indications of the division of the parts. This manuscript, however, contains no indications whatsoever of dynamics, nuances or tempi. The latter, it should be noted, were indicated with great precision – greater even than in the final orchestral manuscript – on the manuscript of the piano reduction dated September 1912.[19] To orchestrate *Jeux*, Debussy therefore wrote a *préparation orchestrale* which he developed straight into the fair copy of his final manuscript,[20] and which would be used in the first place by the copyist for the orchestral parts, and subsequently by the engraver for the edition.

Although the final manuscript is not dated, it seems permissible to put forward this hypothesis. We know that the publisher Durand extracted the manuscript from Debussy page by page, so that the orchestral parts could be produced in time for the rehearsals preceding the first performance by the *Ballets Russes* on 15 May 1913.[21] The *préparation orchestrale* therefore cannot have been written very long before the definitive manuscript and is more likely to have constituted a type of rough draft on which Debussy worked simultaneously with the definitive manuscript. The final date of 24 April is therefore probably the date on which the definitive manuscript was also completed.

This detailed chronology speaks volumes. Not only does it enlighten us as regards the process of composition, it also reveals Debussy's conception of the meaning of 'completion' in terms of an orchestral work. In August 1912 Debussy informed Caplet that he had completed *Jeux* when in fact only the *particelle* had been composed. In November 1912, while waiting for a new proof of the piano reduction of *Jeux*, Debussy wrote to Stravinsky: 'As soon as I have a reasonable proof of *Jeux* I'll send it to you . . .

[19] These indications have been taken into account in the edition of *Jeux* in Debussy, *Oeuvres Complètes*. Obviously pressed for time, Debussy did not take the trouble to record them in his final manuscript and they were omitted in the 1914 edition.

[20] Bibliothèque Nationale de France, (Musique). Ms 966.

[21] See autograph letter from Debussy to Emile Vuillermoz, 6 April 1913, in the collection of the Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

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I'd like to have your opinion on this 'trifle' . . . for three people!'[22] These two documents lead one to believe that for Debussy the essence of his work was contained in his initial draft or in his piano reduction. Consequently, it would seem that he viewed timbre as no more than a supplementary element, of decorative function, added at a later stage. This discovery is particularly surprising when one considers the final result: a work in which timbre is integrated in an unprecedented way into the musical fabric, of which it is a major component.

A similar examination of an earlier work, the *Nocturnes*, confirms that Debussy had this very particular conception of the notion of completion. On 25 June 1898, Debussy wrote to his publisher Georges Hartmann: 'the *Nocturnes* are finished'.[23] His subsequent letters, however, tell us that right up until the end of the following year he was still hard at work on their orchestration. Once again, Debussy is no doubt referring to the *particelle* on which appears, as in the case of *La mer*, the date of completion of the final manuscript. It is therefore advisable to treat only with the greatest caution the dates inscribed by Debussy on his manuscripts – as, moreover, is the case with his letters.[24] Further examples could be cited, notably concerning the composition of *Pelléas et Mélisande*.

One important question, however, remains: can one consider Debussy's indications of timbre in the *particelle* as inherent in the germ of the musical idea? By deduction, would the corollary then be that whatever does not appear in the *particelle* cannot be considered germinal? An answer may possibly be found by examining the sources of *Jeux*, and in particular comparing the *particelle*, the *préparation orchestrale* and the final manuscript. Examples drawn from the *particelle* and from the *préparation orchestrale* are given below. For comparison with the final stage of the work, readers should refer to the edition of *Jeux* in the *Oeuvres Complètes*.

At bars 74–5, where the scenario indicates 'Une balle de tennis tombe sur la scène' (a tennis ball falls on to the stage), Debussy very clearly notes in

[22] 'Aussitôt que j'aurai une épreuve convenable de *Jeux*, je vous l'enverrai... j'aimerais avoir votre opinion sur ce badinage... à trois.' See letter dated [5 November 1912] in Debussy, *Correspondance*, p. 35.†

[23] 'les *Nocturnes* sont finis'. See Debussy: *Correspondance* p. 133.

[24] Note, as an example, the title page of the *particelle* of *Jeux*, where the following incomprehensible dates appear in Debussy's hand: '1913–1915'.

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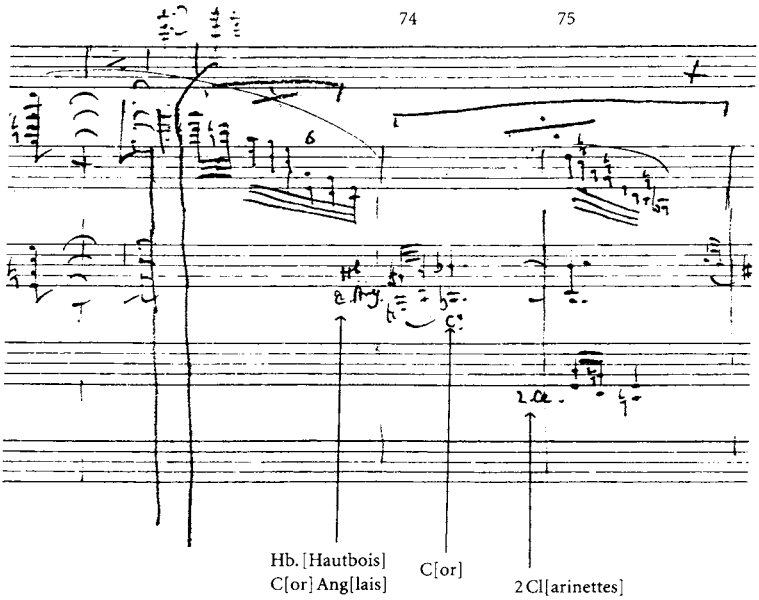
Example 1.1a. *Jeux*: *Particelle* bars 74–5



the *particelle* oboes, cor anglais and horns (bar 74) as well as two clarinets (bar 75). The descending passage in bar 75, however, appears without reference to timbre (ex. 1.1a). The piano reduction remains faithful to the *particelle*, with similar motives and in particular the descending passage of bar 75. In the *préparation orchestrale* (bar 74), Debussy retains the motif destined for oboe but assigns to the bassoon the part initially intended for the cor anglais. He maintains the horns, however, without indicating this in full in the nomenclature. At bar 75 he gives the strings the motif intended for the clarinets and, in return, assigns to the latter the descending passage. He adds, on the same beat, an ascending passage in the harps (ex. 1.1b). In his final manuscript, Debussy retains the oboes, bassoons and horns at bar 74 but does away with the descending passage in bar 75 which had appeared in all previous sources. He keeps the ascending passage in the harps, added at the time of the *préparation orchestrale*; as well as the motif in the second violins and the *pizzicato* in the violas. Debussy therefore retains in his definitive version only part of what he had conceived in his initial draft, developing his score at each new stage of the process of composition (ex. 1.1c).

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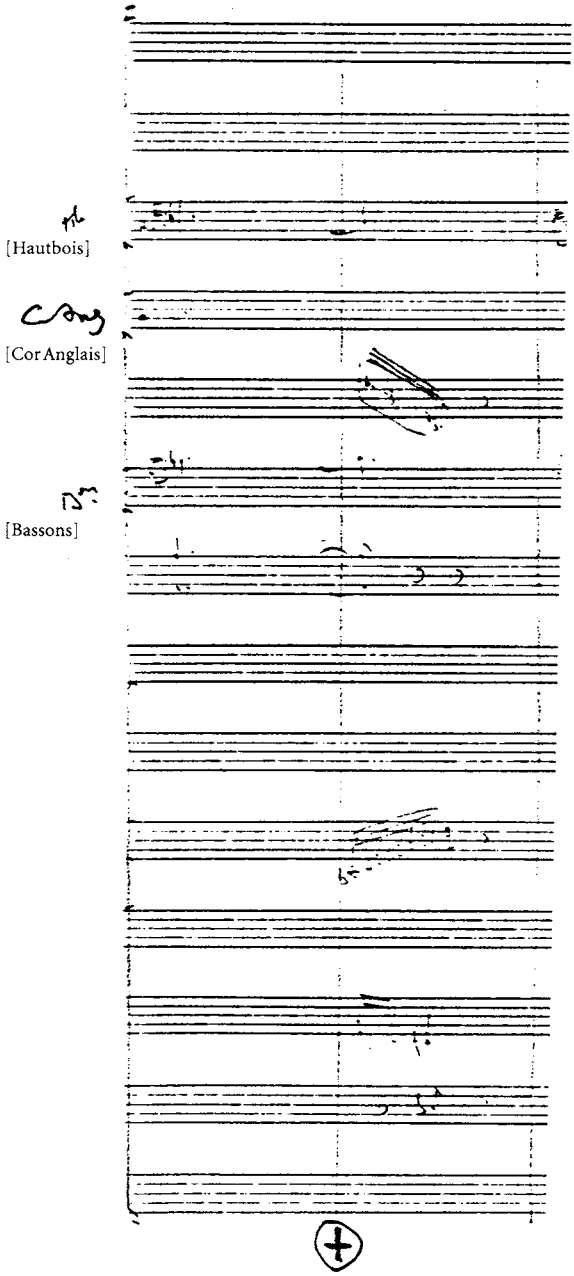
Example 1.1b. *Jeux:*
Préparation orchestrale bars 74–5



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