Random Thoughts on the Preludes of Claude Debussy

Irwin Freundlich

". . . there is nothing blurred in Debussy's art. His music is finely wrought and highly chiseled. Not since Mozart . . . was every note of a score so interdependent and carefully weighed as in this music. . . . Despite its seeming elusiveness, the music has its own inexorable logic, often exasperating the musical analyst . . ."

Otto Deri[1]

But the "inexorable logic" of which Otto Deri wrote is the inexorable logic of the poet faced with the delineation of atmosphere, mood, or character. The choice of textural settings, the potent chemistry of his harmonies, the musical images, melodic configurations, fluid rhythms, and modifications of touch, articulation, and stress are all dictated by the poetic needs of each piece; and it is from these needs that the varying structures of each prelude evolve. The maintenance of interest, continuity, and unity in so free and elusive an approach to art is, of course, a tribute to one of the greatest musical craftsmen of our century, well-recognized in these years. (I say "in these years" because I clearly remember that when I first heard the music of Debussy in my student days we asked, "Is it really music?") One thinks of certain works of Schumann wherein that most touching of composers simply drops one musical idea to begin a new one without any apparent organic continuity or energy motivated by the music itself. I believe that one is rarely or never faced with this situation in the music of Debussy. The organic flow of the Preludes is generated by the musical materials which are motivated, in turn, by essentially poetic considerations, an amalgam of elements that, in Deri's words, proves exasperating to the musical analyst.

I believe Deri was right in asserting that Debussy was closer to the literary symbolists than to the Impressionist painters with whom time has indissolubly linked his name and art. The aesthetic prototype was a poetry wherein the timbre and rhythm of each word was at the service of projecting an aura, a characteristic *Stimmung*. The care with which the poet's choices were made is matched by the care in the music of Debussy. As Deri said, the blurred impressionism in Debussy is by no means a result of confused thinking; rather, as we well know, it is the product of the most precise calculation in the control of musical materials.

Both books of Preludes (1910, 1913) originate in a superbly rich epoch in the history of 20th-century music: the epoch of Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps* (1913), Ives's Piano Sonatas (1902, 1915), Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) and *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11 (1908), Bartók's *Bagatelles* (1908), Ravel's *Miroirs* (1905) and *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1908). The Preludes take their place firmly among these pathbreaking works. They provide for us a kaleido-

scopic microcosm of the workings of Debussy's mind and sensibilities, a microcosm in which his compositional techniques and the pianistic realization of those techniques may be observed in close relation to his aesthetic preoccupations.

Consider, for a moment, the range of cultural allusions touched upon by the Preludes as an immediate indication of the bent of Debussy's interests: Greek antiquity—the oracle at Delphi, the votive dancers around the famed prophetess (captured for Debussy's delectation on the fragment of a frieze in the Louvre); Egyptian antiquity—the canopic urn housing the ashes of the dead; French poetry and culture—the fireworks on Bastille Day, the *Harmonie du soir* from the *Fleurs du mal* of Baudelaire, or the maiden with the silken hair from the poem by Leconte de Lisle; English literature—Dickens of the *Pickwick Papers*, or Puck of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*; Spanish culture—the guitar evocations of the *Sérénade interrompue*, or the stamping habanera and "cante hondo" of *La Puerta del Vino*; Italian culture—the bells of Anacapri, the tarantella, and Neapolitan popular song; minstrelsy of the black musicians who were first heard in Europe at the turn of the century; medieval legend—the myth of the Cathedral at Ys, involving Gregorian chant and organum; painting—the frozen landscapes of *Des pas sur la neige* or *Feuilles mortes*, or the more agreeable vista of heather in *Bruyères*; the world of puppetry, caught so graphically in *General Lavine, eccentric*. One must add to this catalogue the natural phenomena of wind (over the plain, or the more stormy winds over the Atlantic), the billowing of veils or sails, the capriciousness and fantasy of the watery world of Ondine, the fluttering of exquisitely dancing sprites, and the lone work dedicated to the world of the piano etude, *Les tièrces alternées*, foreshadowing the much later Etudes.

Are not the allusions revealing? They are a far cry from the epic themes of the great German tradition, much more in the spirit of the 18th-century French clavecinistes. They constitute an extraordinary hothouse world of reflected images, in turn exquisite, delicious, and highly perfumed.

"La musique doit humblement chercher à faire plaisir; il y a peut-être une grande beauté possible dans ses limites," he said. "Il faut que la beauté soit sensible, qu'elle nous procure une jouissance immédiate, qu'elle s'impose ou s'insinue en nous sans que nous ayons aucun effort pour la saisir. Voyez Leonardo da Vinci, voyez Mozart. Voilà les grands artistes."

It matters little whether or not the title preceded or followed the composition of a given prelude. There is common ground between title and musical content. The activity, relative inactivity, and elements of character hinted at by the titles are explicitly stated in the nature of the musical materials and the ways in which these materials are treated in purely musical terms. From this poetic base are generated the form and structure of each prelude. One recalls Mendelssohn's reminder that music is not less specific than words but more so. The nuances of fantasy and imagination inherent in each prelude can be suggested only in words, or talked "around." To *hear* is to understand.

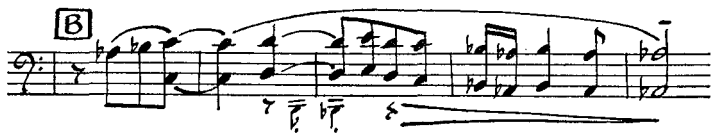
Let us begin with a consideration of *Voiles*, justly famous as one of the first

pieces to abjure tonality. The connotations of "veils" or "sails" (the very ambiguity is characteristic) focuses attention on the image of billowing, a gentle moving back and forth rooted to an immobile base. Debussy, therefore, sits the piece on a low B♭ whose only activity is to propound irregular rhythms at irregular intervals and, on occasion, to rest quietly. The harmonies, two in number (a whole-tone series and a pentatonic series, both starting on a B♭) are united by the bass tone. The entire piece oscillates, in the largest sense, between these two harmonies (51 mm. on the whole-tone series, 6 mm. at the climax on the pentatonic series, swinging back to 17 closing mm. on the whole-tone series). The oscillation also exists in the nature of the melodic ideas. If the melody descends, it is compensated for by a rise; if it ascends, it has a subsequent complementary descent. Even the subsidiary, accompanying figures share in the rocking motion (e.g., middle voice in mm. 22–28). Melodies A and B (Ex.1, which also illustrates oscillating melodies) are recapitulated in reverse order, so that the piece ends where it began. The wave of sound ascending at the climax and receding into the recapitulation serves only to further emphasize the fact that the whole structure and content share the rocking, billowing activity which is its poetic *raison d'être.*

EXAMPLE 1

a.

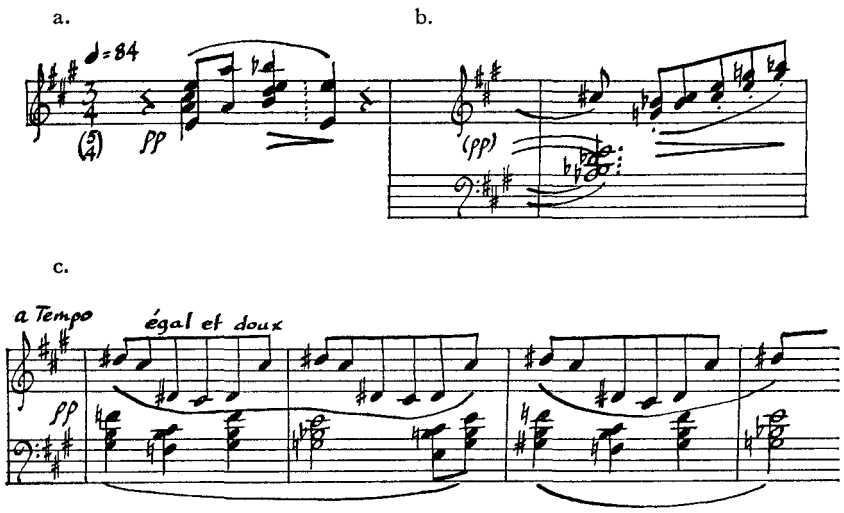
b.



The elusive evocation of Baudelaire (*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*) is a nocturne dealing with the sensations aroused by a drowsy commingling of the senses, a theme close to the interests of the symbolist poets. The imagined fusion of sounds and scents is suggested by (or suggests) melodic fragments that attempt to rise (Ex. 2a, the main motive), trail off into nothingness (Ex. 2b), or are caught in nostalgic webs of sound (Ex. 2c). The perfumed ambience of Baudelaire's *Harmonie du soir* from *Les Fleurs du mal* (the source of the title) is further heightened by the distant horn calls at the final cadences. The static basses move from a low A to an A♭ and back to A with some momentary attention to C♯.

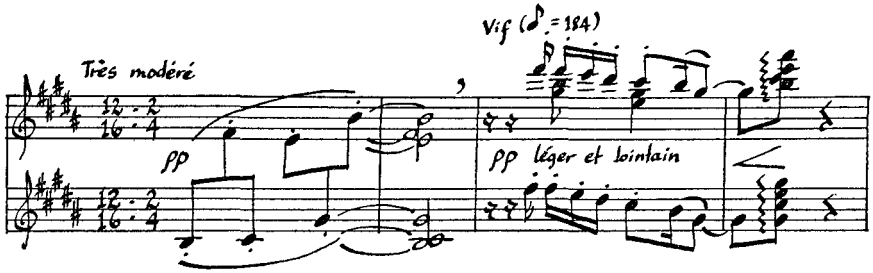
The reference to *Les collines d'Anacapri* is first suggested by bell sonorities that act as a kind of series, from which are extracted important accompanying

EXAMPLE 2



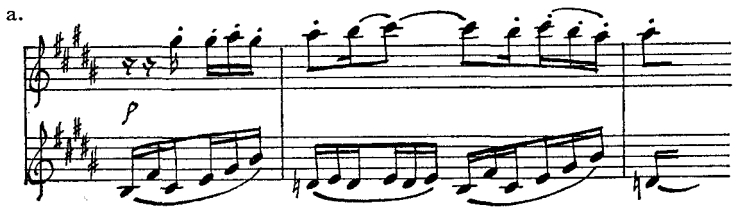
figures and a final sequence that ultimately dominates the piece. A tarantella, abruptly intruding (Ex. 3), makes way for two popular song types in Neapolitan style (mm. 68ff.).

EXAMPLE 3

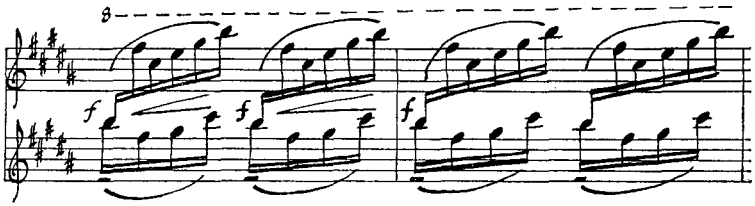


The bell tones, reintroduced in diminution, accompany the tarantella (Ex. 4a) and then overpower it in a clangorous ending at the final outburst (Ex. 4b).

EXAMPLE 4

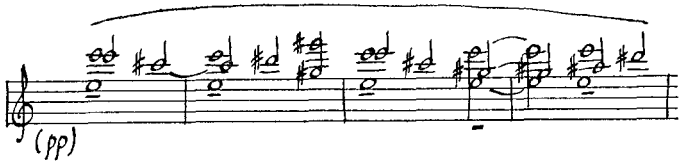


b.



The much admired and well-worn *La Cathédrale engloutie* deals with activity that strives to rise from the depths (m. 1) but is momentarily pulled back by dragging movements in the bass (m. 2). The ascending motive (m. 1) dominates the musical materials of the piece and shares interest with the Gregorian-type melos (Ex. 5) stemming from the medievalism of the legend.

EXAMPLE 5

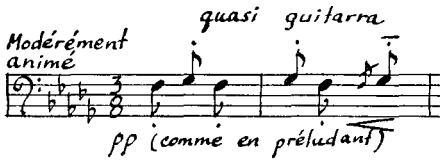


The emergence of the cathedral, the cathartic resolution of the musical impulses, takes place in a radiant C major, which, characteristically enough, appears for the first time in the piece near its conclusion. The final blurred statement of the melody graphically paraphrases the waters closing above the submerging cathedral, as the musical activity subsides into the final quiet conclusion.

The dotted, jerky rhythms of *Danse de Puck* characterize the image evoked of Robin Goodfellow, the Puck of *Midsummer Night's Dream.* The capricious musical outbursts flow from the nature of the poetic subject at hand down to the haunting horn calls (mm. 69–70), at which point Puck seems to pause and listen as the musical activity holds back. The disappearing scale passage at the close is sheer vaudeville as Puck flees the stage.

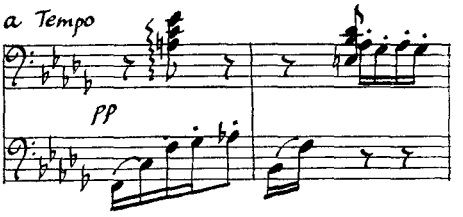
Equally vaudevillian in approach is *La sérénade interrompue,* comprising, along with *La Puerta del Vino* and *La Soirée dans Grenade* (from *Estampes*), Debussy's "Spanish" pieces for piano. It is, in effect, a tiny dramatic "scena" and can be understood only in that sense. The serenader "tunes up" his guitar (Ex. 6; note the sliding pitch represented by the grace note in m. 2).

EXAMPLE 6



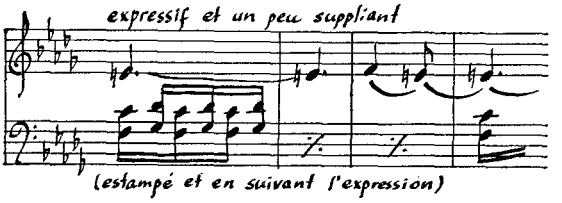
He begins his serenade first on the guitar, in "punteado" style (Ex. 7);

EXAMPLE 7



and continues vocally, with an accompaniment in "rasgueado" (strumming) style (Ex. 8).

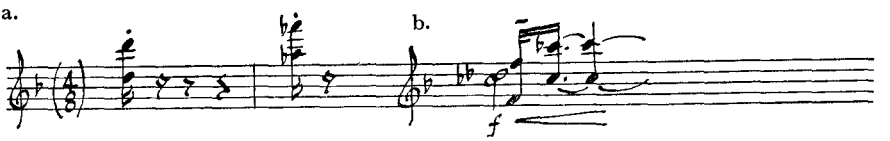
EXAMPLE 8

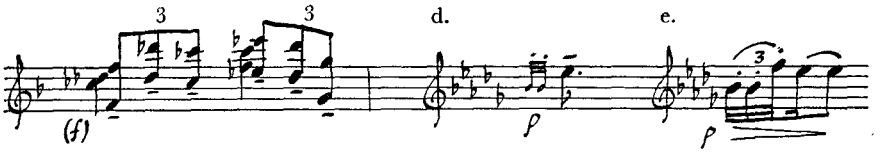


The vocal element is raw, primitive, "echt" Spanish. He resumes his guitar playing but is interrupted by the slamming of a shutter(?), suggested by strong chordal sonorities in broken rhythms (mm. 46–47). Nevertheless, he returns to the serenade, sings and plays for a while, until his somewhat free recitative is again interrupted, this time by a distant march. He rages (mm. 85–86), is again interrupted by the march, rages once more, and recaptures vocal command of the scene, concluding with an endearing, sensuous song (mm. 113ff.). There follows a little more guitar playing, and the serenader then vanishes into the night.

Instances can be multiplied ad infinitum to illustrate the relationship of Debussy's musical imagery to the extramusical content of each prelude, but a few words must be said about his skillful motivic elaborations. The life of the main motive in *Feux d'Artifice* is a case in point. The fireworks on Bastille Day (alluded to by the evanescent quote of *La Marseillaise* at the conclusion of the piece) suggest to Debussy material that splutters or soars. The initial motive forms a diminished fifth, becomes a perfect fifth, and then undergoes much motivic variation (Ex. 9). These motivic derivations do not exhaust its possibilities, as the reader can see for himself by examining the music further.

EXAMPLE 9

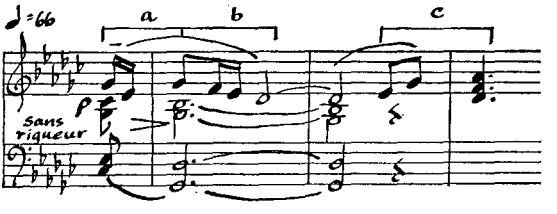




Very subtle attention to motivic derivations to supply musical energy is strikingly evident in the exquisite *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, the tiny essay dealing with a reposeful, tender affect associated with Leconte de Lisle's poem of the same name. I am reminded, at this point, of Alban Berg's analysis of Schumann's *Träumerei*. In it Berg delivered a withering attack on Hans Pfitzner's assertion that with the Schumann piece all one could do was to genuflect, "play the music and say, 'how beautiful.'" One could not talk about nor analyze it. Berg gnashed his teeth and set about to demolish Pfitzner in his own famous analysis of *Träumerei*, which revealed "the exceptional pregnancy of the individual motifs, their profuse relations with one another and the manifold application of the given motivic material." A close perusal of *La fille aux cheveux de lin* reveals a somewhat similar craft on the part of Debussy. The tonality of G♭ major frames the picture, a silken study in hushed sonorities. Harmonically, the piece is governed by the subdominant. It favors movements to the IV and VI chords instead of the sharper contrast of dominant harmony, which is touched upon only with the greatest discretion, notably at the return. This softening of harmonic contrasts is underlined by emphasis on stable root-position triads aided and abetted by parallel chord movements neutral in color. Rhythmic subtleties abound, with gentle stresses shifting from the downbeat to the third beat and complicated, on occasion, by syncopations that carry over from a previous bar. At times an offbeat replaces the main beats in stress. At the crucial harmonic climax, the third beat is tied over into an inactive first beat for the only time during the piece.

But the motivic manipulation adds to the exquisite balance and organic unity. The cadential formula to the neutral swaying opening melody (Ex. 10) reveals two motives (*a* and *b*) pregnant with implications for the further course of the musical continuity. The link (*c*) to the next phrase is equally important in subsequently generating longer melodic strands.

EXAMPLE 10



Motive *a* is useful cadentially (mm. 18–19); motive *b* (a descending fourth) is employed in augmentation (mm. 31–32); motive *c* appears most often not as

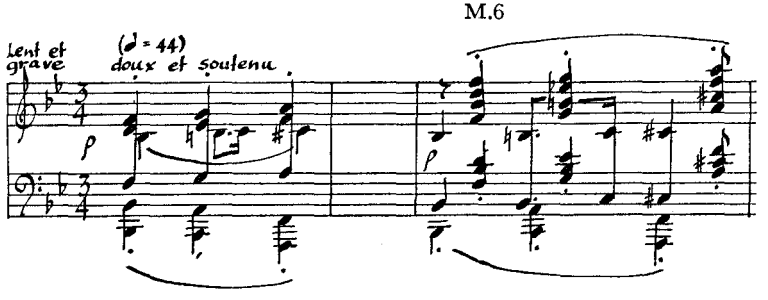
a third plus a second but in the opposite order. It generates the longer melodic strands mentioned above in several rhythmic variants (mm. 11–13; 15–16; 19). Only at the final cadence do we clearly hear V–I high in the upper reaches of the piano, but, true to the character of the piece's poetic content, it rests securely buried in the reposeful tonic.

Debussy's basses are inclined to move very slowly. Often three or four bass tones hold together an entire prelude. *La Puerta del Vino*, for instance, has only three essential bass tones: a D♭ on which the habanera rhythm sits; a digression to a B♭ (mm. 44ff.); and a move through a few ornamental harmonies to A♭ (mm. 62–65), which finally returns to the tonic D♭. Even the stormy West Wind prelude, which accentuates so much noisy activity in its Lisztian treatment of the entire range of piano sonorities, is, in essence, pivoted to a low F♯ for forty of its seventy-one measures. Only a B and a D♯ are used prominently as pivotal points in the harmonic motion. The frenzied activity is entirely figural, rhythmic, and textural, with these factors playing a more important role than the opposition of harmonies or the pull of linear forces.

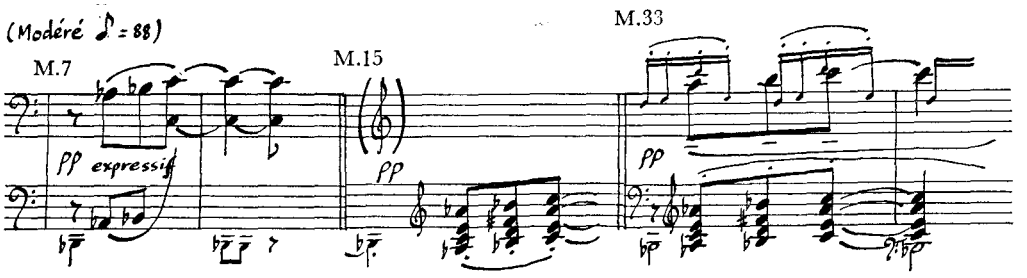
The problems involving textural inventions and combinations of unprecedented ingenuity display Debussy in one of his greatest roles as an innovator. Beveridge Webster has pointed out that, for some reason, it was not until Book II that Debussy resorted to three staves to clarify and beautify his notation, even though some of the problems in Book I would have benefited from such a device. The use of doublings and the addition of new dimensions in tonal space to create variation without the alteration of harmonic or melodic details is well illustrated by a comparison of the beginnings of the first two phrases of *Danseuses de Delphes* (Ex. 11) and the more complicated *Voiles* (Ex. 12).

The infinite variety of textures is also startlingly evident in the manifold ways in which Debussy begins his preludes: (1) block chordal texture with melody in the inner part; (2) unaccompanied melodic duet, flute style; (3) trill figuration spread over an octave, no melody, no harmony; (4) melodic motive, tones tripled, harmonized and opposed to bare bass tones; (5) bell sonorities ("quittez en laissant vibrer") interrupted by a distant fragment of a tarantella high in the upper register; (6) rumbling bass figuration outlining a

EXAMPLE 11



EXAMPLE 12



harmony; (7) unaccompanied melody harmonized only at the cadence; (8) rhythmic motive ("Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé") on which a bare melody is imposed; (9) block-chordal sonorities over the entire range of the piano, rhythm deemphasized, bell-like in sonority; and so forth.

Allied to this hypersensitive preoccupation with musical "settings" is an ingenious catalogue of musical images. One thinks of the musical symbolism in Bach: the sighing seconds, the jumping basses, the critical harmonies at the "Et sepultus est" in the Crucifixus of the B Minor Mass, the string accompaniment which provides a musical halo to the recitatives of Jesus in the St. Matthew Passion. Turning to Debussy, one sees how graphically the moonlight streams downward over the disguised quote from "Au claire de la lune . . ." in *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune.* One senses easily the capriciousness of *Ondine*; the stark quiet of the funereal evocation of *Canope*; the jigging of the dancing puppet *General Lavine, eccentric*; the outburst of wind in *Le Vent dans la plaine*; and the stumbling footsteps in *Des pas sur la neige.*

A study of this last-mentioned prelude indicates the fastidious sensibility to details in textual differences that enabled Debussy to cast endless light on simple materials. The rhythmic motive, symbolizing the dragging footsteps (one involuntarily thinks of Brueghel's *Hunters*) is stated alone. A melody is superimposed; widespread parallel chords harmonize the motive (mm. 5–7); the motive is used on top of two new simple lines (mm. 8–9) or in an inner voice surrounded by two lines (mm. 17–19).

One could speculate on Debussy's subtle rhythmic apparatus and explore the kaleidoscopic rhythmic shifts that necessitate such acute sensibilities in timing on the part of the performer. Add to this a study of the infinite variety of articulative demands and the problems of sonority related to the use of the pedals of the piano. Debussy complained repeatedly to Marguerite Long (who first studied many of his works with him) that she was never attentive enough to the "insides" of the harmonies. But no matter in what direction we turn, we can only hint at the "rightness" of Debussy's choices and decisions, his razor-sharp delineation of poetic ideas, the striking sense of balance and cohesion among all the above-mentioned elements.

I recall a story that Edward Steuermann told me. While he was still

studying composition with Schoenberg, the master announced they would examine how Mahler modulated in one of his symphonies. Confidently they sat down to peruse the score. After a few preliminary grapplings, however, Schoenberg turned to Steuermann in exasperation, said, "Well, he modulates!", and slammed the score shut. And so, too, the essence of the Preludes remains basically beyond rational explanation. Only the ear can perceive and judge. As our exasperation gives way to wonder, it seems appropriate to recall and slightly paraphrase the dictum of Blaise Pascal, 'L'oreille a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point'.

NOTE

[1] *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music* (New York, 1968), p. 155.