

Jeffrey LaDeur, May 17, 2016

Pinole, California

## As Above, So Below:

### Deciphering Debussy's *Images I*

In 1904, Claude Debussy found himself at the center of a triple collision, the impact of which would propel him, and the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century music, into the future. Debussy's personal life had literally exploded as his wife attempted suicide with a revolver, the socio-political climate challenged the very identity and value of French culture and its art, and the ascent of Debussy's star as international figure thrust him into the spotlight, not only as composer, but as self-appointed ambassador of French ideals through music. The overwhelming pressure of these events formed the diamond that is *Images I*.

*"Have you played the Images...? Without false pride, I feel that these three pieces hold together well, and that they will find their place in the literature of the piano... to the left of Schumann, or to the right of Chopin... as you like it."* Debussy writing to Durand, September, 1905<sub>2</sub>

Debussy's assessment of his *Images I* reveals an unreserved satisfaction with his composition, remarkable for a composer so meticulous in his judgment and one prone to multiple revisions. History's evaluation of the *Images*, and the degree to which this music has endeared itself to performers and audiences, has been more conditional. "Reflets dans l'eau" is unquestionably regarded as the jewel in the crown, followed by admiration, if not love, for the solemn "Hommage à Rameau", lastly (and least) "Mouvement", a piece left in the proverbial Lost and Found.

Over one hundred years later, Debussy's emphasis on the unity achieved in this set is perplexing. Why do these pieces belong together, and what do they add up to? What is the meaning of their titles? Why would Debussy place "Reflets dans l'eau" first, followed by two pieces that do not attempt to match its technicolor brilliance? Given his reverence for Rameau, why would he include the deeply felt "Hommage" in the midst of two seemingly unrelated pieces?

I believe that *Images I* is the musical equivalent of a Greek frieze, each piece a tableau inspired by Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* (1737). At the simultaneous peak of artistic fame and personal crisis, Debussy found in Rameau's opera an ideal amalgamation of artistic values, a crucial link between Ancient Greek

aesthetics, enlightened thought, and the vision of a purely French tradition. Debussy would forge a path forward through antiquity, and conjure with his music, an antidote to Wagner's poisonous influence.

### **Crafting Identity**

Debussy's aesthetic loyalties were polarized throughout his lifetime, drawn to the French clavencinistes Rameau and Couperin on one side, the mesmerism of Wagner ("...ce viel empoisonneur...") on the other.<sup>1</sup> As Debussy shouldered the burden, at least in his own mind, of protecting French music from further corruption, his compositional efforts were fueled by a sense of purpose recognized by some as a genuine search for musical truth, and others as cultural chauvinism.<sup>13</sup> "It is a pity that Mozart was not French; he really would have been worth imitating." (Cite)

In January of 1903, Debussy was in the audience when Vincent D'Indy led a performance of the first two acts of Rameau's *Castor et Pollux*. In his column for *Gil Blas*, Debussy writes,

"We have ... in Rameau's work a pure French tradition full of charming and tender delicacy, well balanced, strictly declamatory in recitative and without any affectation of German profundity or over-emphasis or impatient explanation... We may, however, regret that French music should for so long have followed a course treacherously leading it away from that clarity of expression, that terse and condensed form, which is the peculiar and significant quality of the French genius. I know quite well the theory of free trade in art and its valuable results; but this does not excuse us from having so completely forgotten the tradition that permeates Rameau's work, a tradition filled with far-reaching, almost un-paralleled discoveries."<sup>3</sup>

Debussy makes special mention the aria "Tristes Apprêts", "...Then Têlaire, Castor's love, enters and utters the sweetest, most touching lament that ever sprang from a loving heart."<sup>3</sup> This remark provides a significant clue as to the origin and architecture of *Images I*.

Several months later, Debussy reveals a key to understanding his concept of French identity in an open letter to Christoph Willibald Glück, in which he accuses the long deceased German composer of profiting from Rameau's genius only to drive France "...into the arms of Wagner" and protests, "...Rameau was infinitely more Greek than you."<sup>3</sup> Neither composer was Greek, but Debussy's allusion to their mutual focus on antiquity and the contrasting musical styles employed, fuels his accusation that Glück was a Germanic wolf in sheep's clothing, appropriating that which was the cultural inheritance of the French.

---

<sup>1</sup> Apparently as late as 1914, Debussy was seen coming out of a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* "...literally shaking with emotion".<sup>10</sup>

For Debussy, the psychological melding of Ancient Greece with France's collective past is the portal through which he is able to create the mystical world of *Images I*.

What distinguishes Rameau's *Castor et Pollux*? Boldly orchestrated and harmonically daring, the opera contains some of the most purely beautiful music of its time, including arias like "Tristes Apprêts", at once disarming, enchanting, and full of humanity. Another defining characteristic of this opera is the mythology itself: it is less a traditional romance than a story of brotherly devotion, Fraternité. In Rameau's version, Castor is dead before Act I has finished, and while the drama is enhanced by the love triangle between the twins and Princess Télétaire, the primary dramatic action revolves around Pollux' travels to the Underworld as he offers to take the place of his brother.

### **The Plot, According to Rameau**

"*Dioscuri*, 'Sons of Zeus', in Greek and Roman mythology, twin deities who succoured shipwrecked sailors and received sacrifices for favourable winds."<sup>4</sup> The twins were credited with the meteorological phenomenon which sailors believed was the portent of relief from a raging storm. Known from the Christian era to present day as "St. Elmo's fire", the phenomenon consists of luminous bursts of light as a result of atmospheric discharge frequently at the mast of ships<sup>2,5</sup>

While there are many variations of the mythology surrounding the two brothers, several elements remain constant: Castor is mortal, and Pollux immortal. They were crewmembers of the Argo, thus Argonauts, and were associated with horsemanship and boxing, in addition to sailing. Finally, most legends refer to the brothers' ascent to the heavens as the constellation Gemini.

The performance heard in Paris, 1903, would have been the original 1737 *Castor et Pollux*, confirmed by Debussy's description.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the 1754 revision, Rameau's original production begins with a short overture which immediately gives way to a funereal procession: Castor has been killed in battle. Princess Télétaire mourns her beloved while deflecting the affections of Pollux, who is also in love with her. She pleads with Pollux to seek Jupiter's intercession in returning Castor to life. Sacrificing his own hopes to be with Télétaire, Pollux begs for Castor's life and is given the opportunity to save him by taking his place in the underworld, a fate to which Pollux resigns himself once he understands that his love is unrequited. After fighting the demons that guard the entrance to the underworld, Pollux finds Castor in peaceful awe of his beautiful surroundings. Castor is moved by his brother's selflessness and agrees to return to the

---

<sup>2</sup> This is not unlike *Feux Follets*, frequently referenced in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and music.

<sup>3</sup> "The scene is the burial-place of the Kings of Sparta. After an overture... the wailing voices of a chorus solemnizing the obsequies of Castor are heard... Then the chorus and a martial ballet superb in its forceful rhythm, slashed now and again with a blare of trumpets, end the first act."<sup>3</sup>

living realm in order to spend one last day with T elaire. Finally, Jupiter grants both brothers immortal life in the form of the constellation Gemini. 6

Given Debussy's admiration for *Castor et Pollux* and "Tristes Appr ets" in particular, I began looking at the aria more closely. It was one of few Rameau works whose popularity survived into the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Berlioz knew and admired it notwithstanding his immense enthusiasm for Gl uck. Of special significance, this aria is believed to have been performed at Rameau's own funeral. Below is an eloquent description by the late British scholar Cuthbert Girdlestone:

" 'Tristes Appr ets' has those qualities of intense pathos united with great dignity we have already admired in the fourth act of *Hippolyte*. The utterance is personal, not collective; it is the complement of the anonymous weeping of the Spartan throng at the prince's tomb. Yet the individuality is kept within bounds; it retains that general, universal value that French art and literature at their highest- sculpture of thirteenth century porches, tragedy of Racine- have in common with those of ancient Greece." 6

The most salient feature of its opening is the striking use of the subdominant, melodically and harmonically. According to Rameau,

"Do we not feel naturally struck with the same solemn sadness as the actress who is singing *Tristes Appr ets* ... when the lower fifth, that is, the subdominant, succeeds the tonic on the last syllable? And do we not feel relieved when the tonic returns almost at once on the last syllable of 'pales flambeaux?'" 6

This poignancy is delivered over a tonic pedal point in the bass, giving the music a grounded, static quality. Rameau writes again,

"The feeling of dull suffering and of gloom that prevails here arises from the chromaticism in the fundamental succession, whilst there is not a single chromatic interval in any of the parts." 6

This last description could apply equally well to the vast majority of Debussy's "Homage". The stark angularity of these intervals form the musical pillars from which Debussy begins to build his temple.

*Images I* is born out this essential subdominant relationship, what I have termed the "fall of the fifth". It pervades each piece and forms the structural bridge that binds the set together not only musically, but as allegory to the myth of Castor and Pollux. The descending fifth is combined with a major second, an interval representative of the twins and their relationship. As we shall see, these simple building blocks are embedded at every level of the music, beginning with the most basic elements of key and time signature.

## The Key Unlocks the Myth

Rameau writes “Tristes” in E-flat major, a key laden with meaning in the occult. Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* is perhaps the most famous example of its overt use in a Masonic context, but it is worth examining in Rameau’s aria, particularly with regard to Debussy’s concept of unifying French and Greek ideals. The number three being a prevalent symbol in various mystical traditions, the three flats in the key signature not only suggest the Trinity, the unity of male and female, the three realms of earth, underworld, and heavens, they also form the first three notes of Rameau’s melody.<sup>4</sup> Debussy takes this further and uses triangular shape of E-flat major on the staff to unify large scale musical structures in *Images*.

Given Debussy’s interest in the art of suggesting musical “realities” through the veil of symbolism and its resonance with the subconscious, the pyramid shape of E flat major is the perfect device with which he is able to encode this music with the familial structure of the brothers Castor and Pollux, and their father and creator, Zeus, in this case represented by his Roman counterpart, Jupiter.

The key signature accurately contains the Greek terminology used to classify each star named for the twins: Castor, though the less brilliant of the two, is called *Alpha Geminorum* while Pollux, *Beta Geminorum*, is the brightest in the constellation. Debussy can therefore represent Castor with A-flat and Pollux with B-flat, the two pitches that become the obsession of “Reflets”, and the axis upon which the cycle turns. Jupiter, the source of the two brothers, is represented by E-flat, the high point of the triangle and fifth letter of the alphabet, just as Jupiter is the fifth planet from the sun. E-flat is also the only way that A-flat and B-flat can be present simultaneously in traditional western music as represented by a key signature, save for a whole tone scale that will prove to be of fundamental relevance to this symbolism. Therefore, E-flat makes the other two possible but also binds them together, restricting their movement to ‘earthly’ tonality.

Take the key signatures of the three pieces in *Images I*- “Reflets” in D-flat major, “Hommage” in g-sharp minor, and “Mouvement” in C major. The relationship between these can be represented by the following chart:

---

<sup>4</sup> Debussy may have been constructing a musical analogy to France’s Tri-part motto: “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.”

	<i>Reflets dans l'eau</i>	<i>Hommage à Rameau</i>	<i>Mouvement</i>
Key Signature	D-flat major	g-sharp minor	C major
Accidentals	5 flats (-5)	5 sharps (+5)	0 accidentals
Atmosphere	Sensual, Aquatic, Rich	Solemn, Modal, Stark	Free, Open, Joyous
Climax	E-flat Major	G <sup>9</sup>	C augmented
Final Bell Tone	A-flat	D-sharp/E-flat	B-flat
Mythological Realm	Earth	Underworld	Heavens

The notes that constantly reappear in structurally significant moments, including the final “bell tones” pitches of each piece, are the three flats in the key of E-flat major.

Note that A-flat/g-sharp is the center of both the five flats and five sharps, another visual cue to the centrality of Castor’s role in the cycle.

### **On Time Signatures, Rhythm, and Pythagoras**

Having established the fundamental intervallic cell as the combination of a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> and major 2<sup>nd</sup>, a look at the time signatures reveals more congruencies. “Reflets” is written in 4/8, “Hommage” in 3/2, and “Mouvement” in 2/4, the opening and closing pieces in duple meter and the central one in triple meter. By reducing the outer movements’ time signatures, one can read the ratio as  $\frac{1}{2} : \frac{3}{2} : \frac{1}{2}$  a striking symmetry, especially if represented spatially according to their values.

$$\frac{3}{2}$$

$$\frac{1}{2} : \frac{1}{2}$$

This looks remarkably similar to the E-flat major pyramid. 3:2 is the Pythagorean ratio of a perfect fifth, the essential interval of tonic falling to the subdominant. All the numerators equal 5, which is also the number of flats and sharps in the key signatures of the first two pieces.

It is also possible to see the three pieces as a suite of ancient dances: “Reflets” a pavane, “Hommage” a sarabande, and “Mouvement” a saltarello.

## **Shelley, Trauma, and the Memory Palace**

### ***Homer's Hymn to Castor and Pollux***

*Ye wild-eyed Muses, sing the Twins of Jove,  
Whom the fair-ankled Leda, mixed in love  
With mighty Saturn's Heaven-obscuring Child,  
On Taygetus, that lofty mountain wild,  
Brought forth in joy: mild Pollux, void of blame,  
And steed-subduing Castor, heirs of fame.  
These are the Powers who earth-born mortals save  
And ships, whose flight is swift along the wave.  
When wintry tempests o'er the savage sea  
Are raging, and the sailors tremblingly  
Call on the Twins of Jove with prayer and vow,  
Gathered in fear upon the lofty prow,  
And sacrifice with snow-white lambs,--the wind  
And the huge billow bursting close behind,  
Even then beneath the weltering waters bear  
The staggering ship--they suddenly appear,  
On yellow wings rushing athwart the sky,  
And lull the blasts in mute tranquillity,  
And strew the waves on the white Ocean's bed,  
Fair omen of the voyage; from toil and dread  
The sailors rest, rejoicing in the sight,  
And plough the quiet sea in safe delight.*

### **-Percy Bysshe Shelley**

Debussy knew and admired Shelley's work, and Edward Lockspieler connects Debussy's (...ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest...) to Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* 9 -the hymn to Castor and Pollux may have been in his mind as well. In historian Abby Smith Rumsey's *When We Are No More*, the author recounts the tale of Simonides' escape from a collapsing building after being called outside by two young men. Rumsey places this episode in the context of a landmark development in memory technique; Simonides was able to identify each of the victims in attendance by their position in the spatial landscape of the room.

According to Rumsey, “The first thing to notice is that his memory was *formed under extreme duress*, the trauma of having escaped a certain death. Emotion in memory formation and retention is primary.”<sup>11</sup> Who were those two young men that called out to Simonides? None other than Castor and Pollux, of course. Simonides had earned their favor through an ode he was commissioned to write in praise of a boxer, but spent as much or more time praising the twin brothers, guardians of boxers, among other things. The original commission fee was halved upon receipt of the work, the patron insisting that since Simonides had devoted so much space to Castor and Pollux, he would have to collect the remaining half of the fee from them!

The episode with Simonides and the Brothers Gemini is intriguing as it relates to Debussy’s state of mind while composing *Images I*. His life had collapsed, unprecedented personal trauma painfully seared into his memory. Perhaps his offering to the mythical twins was a karmic debt of gratitude, paid retroactively, for having been allowed to emerge from the rubble of his own disaster.

### **Order and Unity- Reflets dans l’eau**

Debussy was extremely attentive to the ordering of his pieces prior to publication. Let us examine each consecutively, as it relates to the larger drama of Castor and Pollux.

“Reflets” begins, as its companion pieces, with the sound of a perfect fifth<sup>5</sup> dyad. The right hand sixteenth notes immediately take up the same D-flat A-flat fifth from the bass with the addition of E-flat, forming a three note gesture that mirrors the shape of E-flat major key signature (see above description of intervallic content)<sup>6</sup>.

The left hand rings a three note melody that sounds like an augmentation of the right hand group. By singing the solfege syllables ‘La Fa Mi’ or in French, “La Famille” the essence of the piece is encapsulated in the first two measures. To recap, the first measure begins with A-flat prominently as upper voice of the bass dyad, the peak of the right hand groups, and the peak of the left hand quarter note melody before falling back to the bass D-flat which is anticipated by yet another A-flat. Clearly A-flat is the central pitch in this opening, and yet in conventional harmonic analysis tells us the primary tonal

---

<sup>5</sup>The ascending perfect fourth that opens *Hommage* is equivalent to the perfect fifth according to Rameau’s system.

<sup>6</sup> Debussy may also be referencing Chausson's Concert op.21, itself an allusion to Rameau's chamber music, as it begins with a declamatory three note motif of the same intervals and order, merely a half step up in D major.

function of this passage as a tonic pedal in D-flat. I believe that these ‘signal pitches’ are superimposed on functional harmony, highlighting another layer of meaning rather than shifting the tonal foundation.

If we take A-flat to be the *raison d’être* of the opening, its omission in measures 3 and 4 is worthy of attention, where B-flat comes to the fore as the prominent pitch. These two-bar groups (mm. 1-2 and mm. 3-4) offer the microcosm of Castor and Pollux relationship. Castor, as Alpha, is always first as his name implies. Pollux, the immortal and brighter Beta, is second but always higher, the earthy tenuto melody conspicuously absent from ‘his’ two measure group.

Debussy begins to explore this dialogue in mm.9-11 where the starry sonority of A-flat initiates and the sequential step up to B-flat spins out a longer phrase with increased harmonic motion. Measure 16 shows constant alternation between the two pitches in the right hand both in the inner voice and upper voice, forming a composite B-flat A-flat alternation for a measure and a half at which point they unite on a neutral second C+D and then C-flat and D-flat in measure 18.

The ‘quasi cadenza’ beginning in measure 20 arrives over an extended A-flat pedal point, while the melody “*Doux et expressif*” is in the tenor, embedded between the bass pedal and sparkling arpeggios of the right hand. The tune here is nearly a perfect whole tone scale (see ex. Whole Tone I) save for C-flat, which prevents it from total symmetry and freedom. Let us assume that this is Castor’s material, bound to earthly laws as represented by the bass and frustrated harmony which attempts to break free into whole tone. As we will see, this obstruction is of symbolic importance to the development of the piece. The right hand mirrors this anomaly, only switching to C natural when the left hand has given up its whole tone ambitions.

The return of the opening material (A’) revisits the same relationship between A-flat and B-flat, now with the three note groups of right hand chords subdivided into yet another three, 32<sup>nd</sup> note triplets. In measure 43, a storm brews over the whole tone bass line, syncopated against the swirling arpeggios of the right hand. This time, it is the complementary Whole Tone II (ex.) scale which dominates the musical territory, breaking free of key signature entirely at measure 48. The combination of unrestricted tonal freedom, lack of key signature, the starry high register, and return of Castor’s melody from m.24 in pure whole tone over a B pedal, signals that this is Pollux soaring over the waves. When the two brothers combine their powers in measure 56 in the centrally important E-flat major, both hands tear up and down the keyboard where previously one or the other held down the melodic content.

This climax, noted for its Lisztian virtuosity and Wagnerian passion, may represent something else in addition. Castor and Pollux were known as guardians of sailors and were thought to have been the force behind the phenomenon known as St. Elmo’s Fire. We will examine the multiple layers of meaning in

each of the titles of Debussy's pieces, but one of them may very well support this conclusion. 'Reflét' is a word used to describe iridescence or brilliance, particularly in pottery. If one imagines iridescent bursts in the water, the accounts of St. Elmo's Fire match with surprising accuracy.

The retransition makes use of Whole Tone II before taking a somewhat surprising turn to three sharps, a passage that implies rather than settles in A major. Here again, the visual nature of the music offers some information: the three sharps are immediately voided by a *ppp* c minor chord, referring back to the ubiquitous three-flat triangle. The return of the opening material occurs an octave higher and over a B-flat pedal point (mm. 71-74) and A-flat over D-flat (mm. 75-78) before two bars of uncertainty lead to the coda over B double flat, a key prepared by the A major episode mentioned above.

We are not sure what has transpired, but there is a psychological unrest that sets in where Debussy marks "dans une sonorité et lointaine", a subtle turbulence not allayed by the seemingly placid ending.

The foreboding quality of this harmony juxtaposed against the original tenuto melody in the right hand creates a dichotomy of light and dark, with A-flat gradually losing strength. Between measures 87-92, A-flat is entirely absent from the melody, B-flat calling out for its familiar response. Only in the last two bars, the final resolution of the piece, does Castor's voice sound through the peculiar rolled chord in the tenor, echoed highest octave range over the lowest D-flat bell, an extreme distance perhaps representing the brothers separated by spiritual realms.

### ***Rameau's Aria, Debussy's Hommage***

*Tristes Apprets* gravitates to A-flat, the subdominant, evoking the "Jour plus affreux que les ténèbres" ("day more terrible than darkness"). Debussy writes his *Hommage* in g-sharp minor, an enharmonic transformation and shift to minor mode, but ultimately the very same pitch that Rameau gravitates toward in his aria. In this way, Debussy offers the macro 'reflection' of Rameau's lament.

In Rameau's aria, there are distinctive melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic features that became raw material with which Debussy would construct *Images I*.

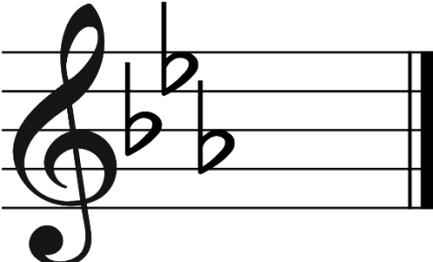
Melodically, Rameau begins on the 5th scale degree followed by the upper 1st degree (tonic), the pivotal descending interval of a fifth to A-flat, and finally the return home to the tonic below. B-flat-E-flat-A-flat-E-flat (musical example). It is not difficult to see why the resulting collection of pitches was attractive to Debussy- it consists of two symmetrical fourths, or two overlapping fifths, depending on one's view, and is therefore a reflection of itself. In Rameau's treatise on harmony, he makes it clear that inversion of intervals do not affect their essential value and are thus interchangeable, lending even more malleability

to the pitch set. When played in ascending order, these pitches outline the opening phrase of "La Marseillaise" which Debussy quotes more explicitly in his final prelude ...*feux d'artifice*.... In addition to its purely musical qualities, this cell also has a specific tactile feeling at the piano, and it is not difficult to imagine Debussy playing through the score, enjoying the elevated plane of black keys that form this melody.

Harmonically, the melody is accompanied by a drone bass on the tonic and arpeggiated chords played by the bassoon. In the second measure, the A-flat pitch in the melody is harmonized over the tonic as a ii4-2, a particularly close-knit chord- E-flat-F-A-flat. These notes and their intervallic spacing are of central importance.

Rhythmically, the Rameau aria evokes its stately atmosphere through a steady pulse of quarter notes on beats 2-3-4 over the aforementioned drone bass, which gives extra weight to the downbeat, and a feeling of floating gradually up on the remaining beats in the measure.<sup>6</sup>

Further confirmation is found when one discovers the essential intervallic material encoded in the musical cryptogram RAMEAU. Whether this was the original inspiration for the piece, then combined with the features of this aria, or simply the icing on the compositional cake, we do not know.

<p>Cryptogram R A M E A U</p>	<p>Pitches represented D A F E A G</p>	<p>As presented in <i>Hommage</i> D# A# F# E(##) A# G#</p>
<p>Solfège Syllables Re/Mi La (U)</p>	<p>Condensed 3-note Cell P4/P5 + M2 (Re/Mi) E A U</p>	<p>E A U D-sharp G-sharp F-sharp</p>
<p>Intervallic Structure P4/P5 P4/P5 B-flat-----E-flat-----A-flat  M2</p>	<p>E-flat Pyramid B-flat E-flat A-flat </p>	<p>Mirror Image Center D-sharp ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ 2 1 5 1 7 A# G# D# G# F# -2<sup>nd</sup>- -P5 = P4- -2<sup>nd</sup>-</p>

<sup>6</sup> In "Reflets", the series of three notes chords in the right hand are also heard as resultant impulses of the main beats, just as the bassoon part is born out of the strong downbeats in "Tristes Apprêts".

It is clear from the above groupings that Debussy found the seminal intervals generated and 'reflected' in Rameau's name. The red group represents the triadic nature of harmony, the stacking of thirds. The yellow group represents the close knit ii<sup>6</sup> from the second measure of "Tristes". The doubling of the letter 'A' forms an octave within which one finds 'D' and 'E' which forms the symmetrical fourth/fifth set mentioned above. Finally, all the notes combined create a full d minor pentachord. The purple group shows how Debussy was able to reduce this formula to three notes, relying on enharmonic duality, which becomes the essential motto of each of the *Images*. This combined with the superimposition of Bb-Eb-Ab over the entire set shows the micro-macro relationships of its structure. Both consist of a perfect fourth/perfect fifth and a major second; when one realizes that both the three note groups of the E-flat major key signature and that of Rameau's name condensed to EAU differ only in the placement of the major second above or below the fifth, it becomes clear that this structure is omnipresent. (example needed)

In Roy Howat's landmark book *Debussy in Proportion*, the author illuminates Debussy's use of mathematical proportion in structuring his music, giving the lengths of sections, cadences, and climaxes a feeling of naturalness and intuitive logic. Howat suggests counting the half note rather than the bar in order to calculate the golden mean of the piece.<sup>8</sup> I would like to offer an alternative analysis of "Hommage" however, because I believe that the few metrical changes are not enough to justify counting beats instead of measures when calculating the Golden Mean of this piece. When one takes the bar as the unit, the piece having 76 bars, it becomes clear that the golden section number is 47, a measure inconspicuous enough at first glance, falling in between the two central climaxes of the piece. Given this piece's roots in Rameau's aria and his name in musical form, it is a quietly significant and conscious nod to its dedicatee. Here we have "Tristes Apprêts" cell for the first time on its original pitches. It is marked with unique articulation, even though this figure has been formally introduced in bar 38. The combination of its original pitches, "en dehors" marking, plus dot and dash on each note, and finally the Golden Section proportion, convinces me that this is no coincidence. Robert Schmitz found that the music attains "...an almost religious peace in the coda in which a series of chords descend the degrees of the Dorian scale- as if to Rameau's tomb!"<sup>12</sup> The last sound we hear is the fifth scale degree over the tonic in the bass, ringing from another dimension, a final reminder of the connection between these two immortal pieces and their composers.

### ***Beauty of the Underworld***

Castor, transformed enharmonically from A-flat to G-sharp, is the focus of this piece, its low pedal points suggesting the sustain of an organ accompanying plainchant. As in Rameau's opera, there is an alternation between 'chorus' (mm. 1-4) and 'solo' (5-9) and so on.

The music evokes a somber, processional mood until measure 14, the introduction of the tritone, D natural. The Lydian mode and plaintive, parallel thirds create an atmosphere of tenderness and illumination, perhaps the twins on both sides of a great chasm. The 'A' section's bell curve shape is reproduced in larger scale in the B section, built on contrasting material drawn from the same intervallic structure.

Measure 31 emerges as a contrasting second theme area which is constructed by a similar pair of fourths, this time imperfect because of a tritone, a macro relationship crucial to the harmony of this piece.<sup>9</sup> A# (B-flat) begins to take prominence, introducing the 9<sup>th</sup> to the tonic chord, something Rameau systematically pioneered in his treatise on harmony. 8 bars later, the music rises a half tone to a pedal point on B (mm.38-41) and begins accumulating the momentum needed to reach the climax in mm.51-54. From 'en animant' in m.43 the D pedal returns, a reminder of the initial hope brought by this harmony which is transformed in m.47 as previously discussed (GS and Rameau figure) before one last tritone substitution which leads to the climactic G9.

Continuing the allegory of Castor and Pollux, "Hommage" is the exploration of the underworld, Pollux's offer to take his brother's place, and the possibility of Castor's resurrection. Given the tonal correspondences Debussy has constructed (A-flat for Castor, B-flat for Pollux) a question worthy of Sherlock Holmes presents itself: Under what circumstances can A be higher than B in harmony? Elementary, my dear Watson: in a 9<sup>th</sup> chord. Sure enough, the climactic peak of this piece is on all white notes, with A not only atop the anchoring chords of the melody but also at the peak of a rocket like arpeggio reminiscent of the E-flat climax in "Reflets". Here is the musical representation of Castor's rising and Pollux descent.

The return to gloominess is augmented by the dominant pedal point from mm.57-60 where even basic tonic resolution is denied by the insistence of the bass. The raised 6<sup>th</sup> degree from measure 66 to the conclusion (Coda) emphasizes the subdominant relationship to C#, minimizing the power of a traditional dominant-tonic structure. As the 'Rameau' cell echoes in the starry treble ("Astres lugubres de tombeaux"?), Debussy's "Hommage" concludes with the subdominant relationship, the music fading away and leaving us with the darkness of a grave against the cold light of the stars.

### ***Gemini Rising***

*Mouvement* is undoubtedly the black sheep among its siblings. However, in the context of the mythical scene, it produces as satisfying a conclusion as any Deus-ex-Machina. Many writers have commented on the *moto perpetuo* aspect of the piece, citing its machine like qualities as precursors to Stravinsky and Prokofiev. Is it not also a toccata to be played on a two manual harpsichord? The hand crossing and

uncomfortable position that one endures on the piano feels remarkably similar to some pieces of the clavecinistes like Couperin's *Le tic-toc-choc*, though mercifully not as difficult.

“Mouvement” opens with the very same intervals found in “Reflets”: C-D-G are only a half-step down from “Reflets” in its D-flat tonality, and they reappear in the same order, provided that one hears the harmonic fifth C-G from bottom to top. When the triplets begin in measure 5, it is D that begins the pattern and is in fact the only pitch from the right hand to sound simultaneously with the left. The sound of the buzzing resonance that results sounds vaguely familiar; C-D-F-G creates once again a pair of fourths in symmetry as well as the pentachord created by Rameau’s name. E-flat and F-sharp emerge from the shadows on the last half beat of these measures as a reminder that all is not won just yet.

The 'Dies Irae' centers on B-flat, a fitting tune for Pollux given his sacrifice. With the constant repetition of fifths, seconds, and whirring triplets, the music conjures up an image of Leonardo DaVinci’s flying machines. Appropriately so, for that is exactly what this music aims to do. The joyous, athletic climax in m. 53 gives way to a troubling F-sharp pedal point combined with a dissonant outburst on B-flat diminished.

At this point, it is important to return to the subject of key signatures for a moment. Given that the E-flat major triangle was used to great effect in the first two pieces of the set, one might wonder what happened to the remaining accidentals. Beginning in measure 67 of “Mouvement”, they own the harmonic territory for nearly 50 bars, the turbulence of the music accurately represented in the key of b minor, key of the underworld.<sup>7</sup>

The dizzying triplets of diatonic and diminished chords create a haze from which a melody emerges as a secondary theme. This material consists of three note sub groups- G-A-C and D-F-G which reflect the three note E-A-U motto, now transformed into a futuristic flight of fancy. Sure enough, the magic of measure 79 hinges upon subconscious recognition of the very pitches that open “Homage”, first descending before ascending, marking out the symmetrical pair of fourths on black keys, centered on g-sharp/A-flat.

In this instance, Debussy's slight modification of the rhythm calls to mind yet another lament, John Dowland's *Flow my Tears* of 1596. Once might not be enough to draw the comparison, but Debussy repeats the opening Dowland phrase four more times in quick succession, all descending. This reframes the tune that was introduced in measure 30- was that a subtle foreshadowing of *Flow my tears*? Debussy quotes Dowland’s Lament on the *Homage* pitches which are taken from Rameau’s Aria! (Example)

---

<sup>7</sup> Chopin 1<sup>st</sup> Scherzo, Liszt Sonata, Tchaikovsky 6<sup>th</sup> symphony to name a few.

The three note cell continues amidst great turbulence over the tritone pedal point f-sharp, continuing until the recap, unrelenting in its pulse. It is not difficult to imagine Pollux battling the demons in order to rescue Castor from the underworld, particularly given the key as mentioned above.

The climax of this piece consists of repeated augmented chords (whole tone I) sounding apocalyptic fanfare with G-sharp in the soprano. Might this signal Castor's liberation? An exact repeat of the opening material is interrupted by a descending scale beginning on the fateful F-sharp, making its way down the whole tone scale but pausing on C-sharp before its final rest on C natural.

As the second theme is heard for the last time in whole tone, the right hand spirals ever higher in major 2nds. Here Castor and Pollux ascend together into the heavens as the constellation Gemini. E-flat has given way to a pure whole tone (I) that was introduced early on in "Reflets" but remained unfulfilled. The ambiguity of this mode could represent the unknown, the larger universe, as well as Rameau the explorer reaching up to the stars. Debussy alludes to the harmonic series with the low C and B-flat being 'filled' in by the other pitches. It is also worth noting that his "Tombeau sans nom" from the *Epigraphes Antiques* begins with the same rhythmic figure and contour in whole tone as 'flow my tears' and suggests a link between uncertainty and whole tone.<sup>8</sup>

### ***What's in a Name?***

*"Moreover, I think is dangerous to initiate the layman into the secrets of musical chemistry"*<sup>8</sup> -Debussy

*"The title that occasionally identifies my drawings can be superfluous. It is justified only when it is vague, indeterminate, and even equivocal."*<sup>7</sup> -Odilon Redon

Why does Debussy go to such lengths to conceal his inner meaning, much less the means by which he achieves it? Symbolism rarified the dream consciousness, and valued association over definition. Debussy was known to be intensely guarded and secretive when it came to his art. I believe that many of the so-called 'descriptive' titles of his pieces are sphinx-like deflections, distracting the conscious mind while the deeper meaning flows directly into the subconscious. The concept of 'initiation' certainly calls to mind freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and other occult interests of Debussy's that may have convinced him of the intrinsic value of mirroring universal structure and ancient mysteries in his works "as above, so below"<sup>7</sup>. It is worth noting that in Copernicus' catalogue of the stars and their position, the number of measures of Debussy's pieces each corresponds to a relevant constellation. "On the Head of Castor of the Western Twin, Castor" is listed at 76° Longitude, the exact number of measures in "Hommage". "Reflets" has either 94 or 95 bars depending on how one counts the quasi cadenza, aligning it with stars of the ship

---

<sup>8</sup> The *Epigraphes* also feature Greek themes such as in *Pour Invoquer Pan* and *Pour la danseuse aux Crotales*.

Argo, longitude 93° and 95°. Finally, “Mouvement” has 177 bars, a number that is not represented exactly. However, it is interesting to note that 154° corresponds to the apogee of Jupiter, the farthest point from the earth. The whole tone seconds begin their ascent in measure 156, perhaps following Jupiter into space. Whatever the motivation, the titles of each of the pieces in *Images I* certainly fit Redon’s description of indeterminacy.

“Reflections in the Water”, as the piece is often translated, has at least two meanings, both of which play on expectations. ‘Reflét’ as mentioned above, is a brilliance or iridescence associated with pottery, and one can imagine ‘reflets’ in the water would be a spectacular phenomenon of visual beauty. Reversing the literal and symbolic in our view of the title, gives new meaning to “Reflets dans l'eau” as reflections in **E-A-U**, literally. Sure enough, the three note motif of “Reflets” is the very same EAU from “Hommage” upside down. If one takes the score, turns it on its head, keeps all the conventions of clefs and key signatures, one finds the same three notes **EAU**. A brilliant sleight of hand, perhaps a "latest discovery of harmonic chemistry."<sup>2</sup>

“Hommage” can now be understood at the centerpiece of the entire cycle, the genesis of *Images I*. Far from being a single character piece which vaguely acknowledges the older composer, Debussy has crafted a miraculous web of correspondences from Rameau’s music and his very name. Finally, “Mouvement”, the most innocuous of titles, becomes a journey to the stars. Castor and Pollux are reunited and are taken into the heavens to shine for eternity as Gemini, twins bound by an unshakeable Fraternité. Debussy has also lifted Rameau up to stars with his touching tribute, a testament to the continuity and spirit of La Musique Française.

*Images I* is far more integrated, interdependent work than previously understood. Debussy's request that the unity of the set be preserved upon publication is evidence of their intrinsic integrity. Without a hint of the didactic, Debussy impels the listener to join him in his erudition, or perhaps he is teasing us with clues that he expects us to miss. Either way, the door is open for us to see further into the dream, to recognize ourselves in his pursuit of meaning and relevance, and to look back not only to our spiritual guides, but to focus our gaze directly on the source of their inspired vision.

## Bibliography

1. Copernicus, Nicolaus. *On the Revolution of Heavenly Spheres, book II*. Nuremberg, 1543.
2. Debussy, Claude. *Lettres à son Editeur*. Durand, Paris 1927.
3. Debussy, Claude. Articles from *Gil Blas*, Paris, 1903
4. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Dioscuri", accessed May 17, 2016,
5. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Saint Elmo's fire", accessed May 17, 2016,
6. Girdlestone, Cuthbert. *Jean-Phillipe Rameau: His Life and Work*. Cassell, London, 1957
7. Hauptman, Jodi. *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon*. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2005.
8. Howat, Roy. *Debussy in Proportion*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.
9. Howat, Roy. "Russian Imprints in Debussy's Piano Music." *Rethinking Debussy*. Edited by Elliot Antokoletz and Marianne Wheeldoon. Oxford university Press, 2011, pp.31-51.
10. Lockspieler, Edward. 1962. *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, volume 1. Cassell, London
11. Roberts, Paul. *Images*. Amadeus Press. Portland, OR, 1996
12. Rumsey, Abby. *When We Are No More*. Bloomsbury Press: New York, 2016.
13. Schmitz, Robert. *The Piano Works of Claude Debussy*. Dull, Sloan, and Pierce inc. New York 1950
14. Suschitzky, Anya. 2002. "Debussy's Rameau: French Music and its Others". *The Musical Quarterly* 86 (3). Oxford University Press:398-448