

## Proses Lyriques in Context

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La réception de Debussy au XXe siècle. Incidences, influences et autorité

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Résumé de l'article

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# *Proses Lyriques* in Context

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## Résumé

Dans ses *Proses lyriques*, Debussy a développé de nouvelles méthodes dans la relation entre musique et texte. Les critiques de musique à Paris et à Bruxelles qui ont examiné l'œuvre entre 1894 et 1914 exprimaient bien souvent des réserves. Plutôt que d'admettre qu'ils ne comprenaient pas les objectifs que Debussy s'était fixés dans cette composition, certains critiques ont parlé de lui en des termes péjoratifs parce qu'ils croyaient que le compositeur avait abandonné les principes traditionnels d'écriture de la poésie et de la façon de mettre un texte en musique. À cela s'ajoute le fait que c'est Debussy lui-même qui a écrit le texte pour les quatre chansons des *Proses lyriques*. Il a eu recours aux innovations d'écriture qu'a mis de l'avant Charles Baudelaire et qui ont trouvé à s'épanouir chez Stéphane Mallarmé. En particulier, Debussy a utilisé le genre littéraire de la prose lyrique, lequel a été cultivé par l'écrivain belge Arnold Goffin et certains de ses contemporains. La prose lyrique était une synthèse de la poésie lyrique et de l'évolution du vers libre qui était mis au premier plan dans les poèmes en prose. Mallarmé et Rémy de Gourmont, en particulier, ont encouragé des écrivains à prendre conscience des aspects harmoniques et rythmiques des mots qu'ils choisissaient dans leurs vers. Cette étude présente quelques-uns des commentaires qui ont été écrits au sujet des *Proses lyriques* durant les deux décennies qui ont suivi la composition de l'œuvre. Il aborde également la façon dont l'écriture versifiée a évolué au cours de la deuxième moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cette discussion pose le contexte pour comprendre à la fois l'environnement artistique dans lequel Debussy a composé ses chansons et les innovations qu'il a accomplies dans son œuvre. De la sorte, il est possible de comprendre les innovations qu'on retrouve dans sa conception du vers, du rythme et du texte, en plus des choix mélodiques et harmoniques.

Mots clés : critiques de concerts ; poésie en prose ; *Proses lyriques* ; rythme ; vers libre.

## Abstract

In *Proses lyriques*, Debussy developed new methods for setting text to music. The music critics in Paris and Brussels who reviewed this composition between 1894 and 1914 were in most cases highly critical of the work. Rather than admitting that they did not understand the goals that Debussy had set for this composition, some of the critics spoke of it in derogatory terms because they believed that it abandoned traditional principles for writing poetry and for setting the text to music. Debussy wrote the text for the four songs of *Proses lyriques*. He used the innovations in writing verse that were begun by Charles Baudelaire and culminated in works of Stéphane Mallarmé. In particular, Debussy used the literary genre of *prose lyrique* that was cultivated by the Belgian writer Arnold Goffin and some of his

contemporaries. *Prose lyrique* was a synthesis of *poésie lyrique* and developments in *vers libre* that were prominent in *poèmes en prose*. Mallarmé and Remy de Gourmont, in particular, encouraged writers to be aware of the harmonic and rhythmic aspects of the words that they selected in their verse. This article presents selected reviews of *Proses lyriques* written during the two decades after its composition. It also discusses the development of verse during the second half of the 19th century. This discussion provides a context for understanding both the artistic environment in which Debussy composed these songs and the innovations that he implemented in this composition, so that future scholarship can explore his innovations in the design of his verse, its rhythm and word selection, and its melodic and harmonic realization.

Keywords: concert reviews; *poésie en prose*; *Proses lyriques*; rhythm; *vers libre*.

Claude Debussy lived in Paris at an exciting time. Numerous painters, writers, and musicians were creating works of art, some using traditional techniques, and others exploring innovations in the design, philosophy, meaning, and communication of their art forms. Mallarmé's *mardis*, which Debussy attended for five years, attracted and encouraged interactions among writers, painters, and musicians, mostly French but some from other nations. Artists were able to create within a society that had a lively discussion of politics, the meaning of social constructs, and the nature of communication in the arts.

Not only were there many performances of new musical compositions, but there were also art exhibitions, opera, theater, poetry readings, and lectures in both Paris and Brussels. Equally important to the arts in the 1890s and early 1900s were the significant number of daily, weekly, and monthly publications that provided a forum for critics to discuss innovations and, fairly or not, to place them in the philosophical context held by the critic. These publications provide an exciting window into Debussy's world, and they enable us to see his music as it was perceived by his contemporaries.

Debussy composed *Proses lyriques* during 1892 and 1893. He first composed "De rêve" and "De grève" in 1892, and he completed "De soir" in late 1893 ([Centre de documentation Claude Debussy 2007](#)). During the past century, *Proses lyriques* is mentioned often in scholarly studies in French and English, but many times only in passing. The early critiques of the work ranged from complimentary to dismissive and hostile. Only in recent years are scholars studying the work in some detail and uncovering the innovations that Debussy achieved in these musical settings.

Meister (1998, p. 342-355) focused her concise discussion of each song on its poetic devices, imagery, and musical textures. Wenk (1976, p. 197-221) examined various aspects of the poetry and Debussy's musical settings. He described the "decadent" features of the settings, which he attributed to the sense of obscurity, ennui, and internal reflection that characterize the works. He also discussed Debussy's admiration for the paintings of Turner and the writings of Jules Laforgue.

Marion (2007) explored Debussy's treatment of time. In "De rêve," e.g., it appears that time flows into the past throughout the song. Peiser's dissertation (2009) is a comprehensive discussion of the motives used in the songs, how the motives populate the formal and harmonic structure of the songs, and how the harmonies and textures support the ideas expressed in each song.

Hertz (1987, p. 94-95) placed the four songs in the context of poetry of Baudelaire and Mallarmé, and he identified piano compositions of Debussy in which the composer asserted similar moods, textures, or sonic structures. He proposed an important insight: that the four songs are unified by “phonological modulation.” He demonstrated that the vowels in the titles of the songs form a progression: /ɛ/ in *rêve* and *grève*, to /œ/ in *fleurs*, to /a/ in *soir*. Such phonological modulations occur throughout the songs, inspired, Hertz believed, by the poetic techniques of Paul Verlaine.

Debussy composed the text for the four songs himself, but they are not poetry. They are what he called them—*prose lyrique*, a form of expression that is neither prose nor verse. Instead, it is a construct of sound that integrates the harmony produced by vowels with the rhythm of verse and the symbolic meaning of its words. *Prose lyrique* as a form of writing is particularly suitable to the French language, with its rich set of vowels. It also serves the purpose of symbolist expression because of the way that it captures mental image-scapes in vowel harmonies that are then captured in words within a structure that is neither free verse nor prose, but which shares elements of both.

This article presents selected reviews of *Proses lyriques* written during the two decades after its composition. It also discusses the development of verse during the second half of the nineteenth century. This discussion provides a context for understanding both the artistic environment in which Debussy composed these songs and the innovations that he implemented in this composition, so that future scholarship can explore his innovations in the design of his verse, its rhythm and word selection, and its melodic and harmonic realization.

## THE EARLY PERFORMANCES AND THEIR REVIEWS

Debussy published two of the *Proses lyriques*, “De rêve” and “De grève,” in December 1892 in *Entretiens politique et littéraires*, at the urging of Henri de Régnier ([Debussy 1892](#), p. 269-270; Lockspeiser 1962, p. 127). Debussy knew de Régnier and many other writers and painters because of his regular attendance at Mallarmé’s *mardis*. Nadia Boulanger described the composer’s experience:

From about 1890 to 1895 Debussy was a frequent visitor at Mallarmé’s apartments in the rue de Rome where, on Tuesday evenings, the great leader of the symbolists received his ever widening circle of disciples and friends. To these gatherings came: Jules Laforgue (for whom Debussy had particular affection, though he never set any of his poems), Gustave Kahn, Stuart Merrill, Henri de Régnier, Pierre Louÿs [...], Degas, Whistler, Verlaine [...], and others; a choice but heterogeneous company of spirits, held together, for a time, at least, by their common admiration for Mallarmé, by the charm of his personality and the incomparable lucidity of his mind and conversation ([Boulanger 1926](#), p. 156).

The first performance of “De fleurs” and “De soir” was 27 February, 1894 in Paris at a concert of the Société nationale de musique, to which Debussy was elected 23 April, 1893 ([Duchesneau 1997](#)).

The review of J. Guy Ropartz was complimentary. Another review was vague and suggested that Debussy's text resembled the poems of the decadents:

*Deux Proses lyriques de M. Cl. A. Debussy ont été chantées, fort bien d'ailleurs, par M<sup>lle</sup> Th. Roger. M. Debussy est, parmi les « jeunes », un de ceux sur lesquels il est permis de compter le plus pour accroître la gloire de l'école française. Ces deux nouvelles compositions sont absolument exquis; le sentiment en est d'une rare distinction et d'une émotion intense, et l'enveloppement instrumental que le piano doit tisser à la voix est d'une absolue personnalité. M. Debussy accompagnait lui-même et de façon telle quels mieux serait impossible* ([Ropartz 1894](#), p. 199).

*[L]e critique anonyme du Progrès artistique mentionnait brièvement ces « œuvres curieuses mais trop cherchées, donnant musicalement l'impression que les poètes décadent offrent dans leurs vers »* (Lesure 1992, p. 126).

The second performance of these two songs occurred in Brussels in a concert presented at le Salon de la Libre Esthétique. This was an annual exposition of contemporary painting that provided opportunities for writers and composers to present their works:

*Fondé en 1884 par Octave Maus et ses amis à Bruxelles, le Salon des « XX », devenu en 1894 le Salon de la Libre Esthétique, présente en Belgique le travail de grands maîtres européens. Il s'agit d'un Salon annuel européen où l'élite artistique se retrouve dans la « fraternité » des arts. [...] [I]l s'agit d'un salon interdisciplinaire, [...] qui rassemble des peintres, sculpteurs, graveurs, architectes, artistes décorateurs, médailleurs, céramistes, verriers, éditeurs de livres, relieurs, etc., et ceci dans tous les courants esthétiques, sans sectarisme [...]* ([Le Salon des 'XX' et de la Libre Esthétique - Bruxelles \(1884-1914\) 2012](#)).

The first concert of le Salon des XX was presented in 1886. In the following years, two or three concerts were performed each year. Because one goal was to introduce audiences to music of Belgian composers, two concerts in 1887 were devoted to the works of these artists. Another goal was to present the works of contemporary composers who were regarded as masters. The first of three concerts presented in 1888 featured works of Franck, d'Indy, Fauré, and de Castillon. A third goal was to give audiences the opportunity to hear the works of the traditional masters, as well as music of other European countries. The second concert in 1888 included works of Schumann, Scarlatti, Bach, and several Spanish composers. The third concert that year was devoted to the works of Fauré. In 1891, the first concert was devoted to the works of Franck and the third to music of Russian composers.

The concerts in 1892 included works by two composers to whom critics would later compare Debussy—Magnard (*Invocation. Poème en musique*) and Lekeu (an excerpt from *Andromède*). The third concert in 1893 included two works by Lekeu—*Sonata pour piano et violon* and *Trois poèmes pour chant et piano* (Maus 1926, p. 51, 62-63, 82-83, 110-112, 128-130, 142-144). The latter work was sung by Angèle Delhaye:

*La jolie voix de M<sup>lle</sup> Angéline Delhaye et sa diction précise ont fait apprécier à leur valeur les trois poèmes dont M. Lekeu a écrit le texte et la musique. Ils ont tous trois un joli caractère, et, [...] bien que d'une nature plus légère, cette signature personnelle qui donne tant de saveur à la musique du jeune compositeur ([“Aux XX. Troisième concert” 1893](#)).<sup>1</sup>*

The year 1894 was the first for the Salon de la Libre Esthétique, which replaced the Salon des XX. The second concert was devoted to the works of Debussy:

*La deuxième audition du Quatuor Ysaye au Salon de la Libre Esthétique aura lieu jeudi prochain, 1<sup>er</sup> mars, à 2 h. 1/2, dans la grande salle de l'exposition. Elle sera consacrée exclusivement à M. Claude-A. Debussy, un jeune compositeur français dont aucune œuvre n'a été jusqu'ici interprétée à Bruxelles. L'audition comprendra un quatuor inédit pour instruments à cordes ; un poème pour soli, orchestre et chœurs : La Damoiselle élue, d'après Dante-Gabriel Rossetti ; deux pièces de Baudelaire : Recueillement et Le Jet d'eau, chantées par M. D. Demest, professeur au Conservatoire, et accompagnées par l'auteur ; enfin, L'Après-midi d'un Faune, de Stéphane Mallarmé, pour orchestre. Les soli de La Damoiselle élue ont été confiés à M<sup>lles</sup> Angèle Delhaye et Laure Callemien [...] ([“Petite Chronique” 1894](#), p. 63).*

In fact, *Recueillement*, *Le Jet d'eau*, and *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* were not performed, and “De fleurs” and “De soir” from *Proses lyriques* replaced them. Angèle Delhaye, who was programmed to sing in Debussy's *La Demoiselle élue* in 1894, was replaced by Thérèse Roger.

The fact that a concert at the Salon de la Libre Esthétique would be devoted to the works of a young composer like Debussy was a sign of respect for his skill and his innovations as an emerging composer, but this esteem was not reflected in the reviews of all of the critics. The critic of *L'Art Moderne* was mildly complimentary, but the review of Maurice Kufferath in *Le Guide musical* was harsh:

*Un nom nouveau, des œuvres inconnues, une exécution parfaite, – tels furent les attraits de la deuxième séance de musique donnée par M. Eugène Ysaye et ses partenaires au Salon de la Libre Esthétique. M. Debussy appartient, avec MM. Dukas, Savard, Bonheur, Magnard, à la dernière génération de la Jeune-France musicale. [...] [U]n intermède de chant a fait connaître deux des Proses lyriques dont M. Debussy est à la fois le poète et le musicien. M<sup>lle</sup> [T.] Roger, accompagnée au piano par l'auteur, a chanté d'une manière exquise ces deux mélodies au charme enveloppant, qui n'ont rien de la forme traditionnelle et se déroulent en dessins imprécis, en modulations d'une subtilité précieuse. La seconde, « De Soir », nous a particulièrement plu par la grâce enlaçante de la mélodie et le raffinement du vêtement harmonique qui la drape. On se sent en présence d'une personnalité nette de qui il est permis d'espérer beaucoup ([“À La Libre Esthétique. Œuvres musicales de M. Claude-A. Debussy” 1894](#)).*

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<sup>1</sup> Angèle Delhaye won, in 1894, first prize in singing at the Conservatoire royal de musique de Bruxelles in the studio of Ida Cornélis-Servais. She performed several times in concerts of the Salon des XX, but apparently never became a major artist ([Lekeu 1993](#), p. 27).

*La deuxième séance de musique [...] a été consacrée tout entière à l'audition d'œuvres de M. Claude-A. Debussy, une adepte de la nouvelle école du pointillisme musical et de l'amorphisme universel. En attendant, il faut bien avouer que cette musique nouvelle nous paraît plus cherchée qu'inspirée, plus voulue que sentie, qu'elle est terriblement fatigante par l'excessive accumulation des artifices les plus raffinés de l'harmonie, qu'elle est souvent plus littéraire que véritablement musicale et tournée tout entière, en somme, vers l'effet purement extérieur, encore qu'elle se prétende intime et symbolique. [...] Il y a un contraste singulier, d'ailleurs, dans l'extrême complication de la forme et la simplicité des paroles à laquelle la musique s'adapte. Plus les paroles sont naïves, puériles même pour ne pas dire niaises, plus s'accroît la recherche des harmonies et l'étrangeté des thèmes. [...] Il y a, certes, dans les œuvres de M. Debussy des qualités très peu communes, une belle distinction de sonorité, une grande richesse de combinaisons, çà et là un accent pathétique qui charme ; mais à première vue cela est terriblement noyé dans un fatras des bizarreries voulues, et il vous reste de ces œuvres une impression singulière de malaise, un trouble étrange qui rappelle le réveil après un cauchemar ([Kufferath 1894](#), p. 227-228).*

Kufferath's characterization of the songs as "musical pointillism" is a pejorative term in the context of this review. George Seurat utilized patterns of dots of paint to build forms. This technique, referred to as pointillism, was associated with Impressionism in painting, and it was regarded by some critics as creating paintings that lacked structure. Of course, Kufferath's assertions that Debussy's songs were cacophony and a nightmare simply express his own aversion to novel approaches to harmony and the setting of text in songs, and by extension his aversion to contemporary philosophies of poetry and art.

In their reviews respectively in 1895 and 1897, Georges Servières and Camille Bellaigue commented on all four songs in *Proses lyriques*:

*Le mérite de ces compositions, les tendances de l'auteur veulent qu'on prête l'oreille à sa chanson, bien que la facture puisse dérouter parfois les auditeurs peu préparés à l'entendre. En elles se révèle une nouvelle transformation du Lied qu'il est intéressant d'étudier par comparaison avec les œuvres similaires plus anciennes. [...] Venons au dernier recueil : Proses lyriques. Ici reparait le goût de l'étrangeté et des complications harmoniques, signalé dans les Poèmes de Baudelaire. Les sujets de ces pièces vocales [...] sont assez difficiles à définir, car ils sont d'une prose très inspirée de Mallarmé, chargée sans doute de sens symboliques qui ne se dévoilent pas aisément aux profanes. Que signifie, par exemple, la « serre de douleur » dont « les mains salvatrices » doivent briser « les vitres de maléfice » ? L'auteur seul pourrait nous le dire. [...] Ces Proses lyriques, à part quelques duretés, un abus des dissonances et des passages écrits au grave, nécessairement voulu, font preuve, comme les Ariettes, d'un très délicat sentiment harmonique chez ce musicien novateur. Enfin, sans être faciles, elles sont charitables pour tout artiste ou amateur à l'oreille exercée. [...] Et tous nos novateurs en sont là : Charpentier, Chapuis, Bruneau, Debussy. Ils rejettent avec affectation les règles d'harmonie que leur enseigna le Conservatoire, mais ils ne peuvent s'affranchir des formes mélodiques les plus rebattues et ne savent les rompre que par ces récits en notes répétées qui n'ont absolument rien de musical [...] ([Servières 1895](#), p. 682-684).*

Servières viewed his duty as a critic not only to place compositions in the historical context and artistic environment of the time, but also to judge the success and effectiveness of a work within this context and environment. He wrote at a time when anarchism influenced politics, decadence was seen in literature, and what he perceived to be irrational experimentation occurred in music ([Shryrock 2000](#), p. 291-307)

Servières ([1897](#), p. 285-396) admired Saint-Saëns, whose music he believed followed the tradition of the great tonal masters and their techniques, as taught at the Conservatoire. He believed that the imagery used in a poem should be comprehensible and that the rhythm of the verse should be regular and flowing. The melody should set the rhythm of the poem in a pleasing manner. The form should be clear. Servières believed that Debussy had abandoned these principles. Saint-Saëns himself bemoaned “the man who abandons all keys and piles up dissonances which he neither introduces nor concludes and who, as a result, grunts his way through music as a pig through a flower garden” ([Saint-Saëns 1919](#), p. 97).

Yet, in his criticism of Debussy’s works, Servières uncovered one of their innovations, the phonological modulations discussed by Hertz. Although he did not understand the meaning of “serre de douleur,” “les mains salvatrices,” and “les vitres de maléfice,” he happened to identify the very phrases that explore modulations and mutations of the vowels /ε/, /a/, and /i/.

Bellaigue lamented the abandonment of the “laws” that unify words, notes, harmony, and form. Critics of the period obviously struggled with the rapid innovations that emerged in painting, poetry, and music. They rejected poetry that they perceived merely as prose. They repudiated the use of words that inspired the experience of the inner meanings in one’s soul, but that had no clear referents, and they dismissed music that appeared to abandon comprehensible form:

*Mais des Proses lyriques, encore une fois, je ne veux point parler parce que je n’y comprends rien, parce que, paroles et musique, cela représente aujourd’hui pour ma faible raison le commencement, peut-être plus que le commencement de la folie, aussi bien dans l’ordre des mots que dans l’ordre des sons. [...] [O]n pourrait essayer une définition, voire une étude de l’inintelligible musical. Non seulement cette forme ou cette catégorie de l’inintelligible existe, [...] mais elle a quelque chose de plus pénible que la forme poétique ou verbale : c’est que l’ennui de ne pas comprendre, la gêne purement intellectuelle, s’y complique et s’y aggrave de la souffrance d’entendre, du malaise physique, de la sensation enfin, elle aussi pénible ou intolérable. Donc, ne lisez pas cela : cela est vilain et cela est dangereux. [...] [L]es lois, on l’a dit, sont les rapports entre les choses et, de tous les rapports qui constituent la musique : rapports entre les mots et les notes, rapports de succession ou de combinaison des notes entre elles, je n’en vois pas un ici qui ne soit altéré ou même aboli. Je sais bien que les lois esthétiques souffrent violence. [...] En lisant la musique de M. Debussy, j’ai maudit la liberté* ([Bellaigue 1897](#), p. 932-933).



*Gil blas* provides information on later performances of *Proses lyriques*, the first on June 5, 1912 in the Salle Gaveau<sup>2</sup>) and the next in 1914. The first of these concerts was dedicated exclusively to the compositions of Debussy, and it included both *Proses lyriques* and *La Demoiselle élue*, which had been performed together in Paris and Brussels in the 1894 premieres. Following are the announcement and review of the 1912 concert:

*Ce soir, à 9 heures, Salle Gaveau, concert consacré aux œuvres de Claude Debussy, avec le concours de l'auteur, de M<sup>mes</sup> Chadeigne, Vallin, M. A. Caplet. Rondes de printemps (l'orchestre) ; Proses lyriques, M<sup>lle</sup> Vallin, accompagnée par l'auteur ; La Damoiselle élue, M<sup>mes</sup> Vallin, Chadeigne et les chœurs et l'orchestre, sous la direction de M. Caplet ; Trois nocturnes : Nuages, Fêtes et Sirènes (avec chœurs) (“Cercle musical” 1912a, p. 5).*

*Le Cercle Musical consacrait sa séance d'hier aux œuvres de M. Claude Debussy. C'est bien servir la musique. M. Claude Debussy, qui accompagna au piano ses émouvantes Proses lyriques que M<sup>me</sup> Vallier [sic, Vallin is preferred] chanta d'une belle voix et dans un style excellents, fut acclamé (“Cercle musical” 1912b, p. 5).*

René Simon wrote this summary in *Gil blas* for the 1914 concert on 28 May, 1914:

*La dernière réunion mémorable de la semaine fut sans conteste la séance supplémentaire de la Société Nationale de musique, qui présentait à ses fidèles la réunion des meilleures œuvres de son répertoire. On y acclama tour à tour le Quintette de Florent Schmitt, la Péri de M. Dukas, l'España de Chabrier, les Poèmes et les Proses lyriques de M. Claude Debussy. L'enthousiasme y parut d'autant plus légitime que les interprètes étaient de choix : le quatuor Touche, MM. Cortot et Ricardo Vinèg, et – vedette – anglaise la parfaite chanteuse, M<sup>me</sup> Vallin-Pardo (Simon 1914, p. 4).*

Other critics discussed how *Proses lyriques* met their expectations for advancing the art of song. Robert Brussels wrote the following review in *L'Art dramatique et musical au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*:

*[L]es sujets traités par Debussy montrent un souci constant de fuir le lyrisme grandiloquent et verbeux. – Son émotion est contenue, ramassée, exprimée en un langage simple et toujours poétique : car c'est à la poésie du sentiment qu'il accorde toute son attention, non pas à tel détail de composition ou à la perfection suivant les modes connus de sa ligne mélodique. On pourrait croire [...] que les Proses lyriques [...] sont écrits sans souci d'une architecture ; les anti-formistes pensent déjà triompher ; pour eux, les formes et le rythme sont des conceptions abstraites, qui existent en soi ; ils oublient qu'elles sont dépendantes de l'œuvre et que si les primitifs dont ils pensent renouveler les procédés, n'ont pas employé certains de nos moyens d'écriture, ils n'en ont pas moins senti la nécessité de transformer leurs divisions du temps musical ; ils oublient que le progrès*

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2 La Salle Gaveau was completed in 1907. It was designed by the architect Jacques Hermant and rapidly became one of the most prestigious concert halls in Paris. Seating 1 000, it was designed primarily for chamber music, but large ensemble concerts are presented as well (*L'histoire de la salle Gaveau* 2013).

*a simplifié uniquement ce qui existait, mais n'a point créé rythme ou architecture qui existaient du moment qu'une œuvre musicale était née* ([Brussels 1903](#), p. 452).

*Revue française de musique* carried the following two critical commentaries in 1906 and 1910 respectively:

*Conscient de sa manière, Debussy la porte à l'extrême dans ses Proses lyriques, qui sont beaucoup plus torturées et artificielles. Ici, c'est de l'impressionnisme pur. Ces pièces, où n'apparaît nettement aucun essai de construction, mais seulement le souci d'illustrer d'une idée musicale chaque phrase, chaque mot, font penser à tel peintre impressionniste. Ce sont, transposées dans le monde des sons, les mêmes outrances, avec çà et là de petits coins exquis, des idées charmantes. D'ailleurs, ici, les bizarreries du musicien s'expliquent par les bizarreries du poète (musicien et poète, en l'occurrence, ne font qu'un). Dans les Proses lyriques, il y a peut-être trop de prose et pas assez de lyrisme [...]* ([de Lestang 1906](#), p. 236).

*[L]es Proses Lyriques sont un peu troublantes, comme prose et comme musique : il faudrait sans doute plusieurs auditions pour les bien apprécier. Notre public pourtant a tout écouté avec la plus grande attention, et, semble-t-il, avec un vif plaisir* ("[Concert de la Revue Musicale](#)" 1910, p. 668).

Critics appeared to agree that Debussy set words to music based on the sentiment expressed or inspired by the words. Some believed that he composed phrase-by-phrase, ignoring form but creating sounds that pleased some audiences. Brussels suggested that, for Debussy, form was not created by the accumulation of independent phrases that might appear to be the result of improvisation, but instead is defined by the harmonious proportions of the work, "le cercle indispensable décrit par la pensée musicale, son départ, son développement, son retour."

In summary, the negative reviews by critics fall into two categories. The authors of reviews written before 1900 failed to understand Debussy's harmonic language, unfolding of form, and treatment of rhythm. Because they did not understand his innovations, they considered him to have abandoned what he learned at the Conservatoire, and they identified him with groups that they held in low esteem—impressionists, decadents, and symbolists. The authors of reviews after 1900 had time to assimilate Debussy's harmonic language and to witness his successes. Although they complimented Debussy's compositional goals and achievements in general, they did not understand *Proses lyriques* to be the bold experiment in innovation that it was. To understand *Proses lyriques*, the listener and scholar must explore how this work fits into the history of poetry that evolved during the nineteenth century in France.

## THE EVOLUTION OF *PROSE LYRIQUE* AS A LITERARY GENRE

The technique of writing generally referred to as *prose lyrique* can best be understood by exploring the relationships among *poésie lyrique*, *vers libre*, *prose rythmée*, and *prose lyrique*. A. J. H. Vincent, in his *Seconde lettre à M. Rossignol*, discussed the rhythm of Greek lyrical poetry. He remarked that "à un certain point de vue, tout mètre est rythme, mais que tout rythme n'est pas mètre [...] l'autorité que je devais invoquer là est celle de Suidas lorsqu'il

*dit que le rythme façonne le mètre comme un moule appliqué sur une matière plastique*” ([Vincent 1847](#), p. 149). In his *Lexicon*, Suda defined *Ρυθμός* (*rhyμος*) as follows:

Rhythm [is] the father of measure [...]. Measure is a species of rhythm, for rhythm is observed even in those stomping their hands and feet. [...] [R]hythm is said to be the pattern of time during which movement takes place [...]. Rhythm in verbal expression acts according to long and short which alone is said to be meter ([Spyros 1999](#)).

Vincent distinguished three “species” of rhythm: (1) the musical rhythm as a succession of sounds, regardless of the length and stress of each sound in the succession; (2) the regular division of time into arsis and thesis, with various ratios of length being possible between arsis and thesis; and (3) poetic rhythm, which is “le rythme qui accompagne la simple lecture des vers.”

He discussed various rhythmic transformations and mutations, including changing the length of the arsis and thesis (e. g., duple division to triple division), and changing the ratios of the elements (e.g., 2:1 to 3:1 or to 3:2). He pointed out that Greek lyric poetry was sung, and neither the poetry was sacrificed to the music nor vice versa.

He expressed concern that the melody of a lyric poem might supplant the importance of the lengths and accentuations of its syllables. He drew no conclusions on this point, but it is particularly relevant to French verse, which has no implied lengths and stresses for any syllables internal to a phrase. Instead, the verse is organized into sets of syllables originally based on even numbers (8, 10, or 12—the Alexandrine), with caesuras used to articulate the groupings of words required to reveal their meaning. Of course, a caesura does add stops that create a rhythm when the words are spoken. Debussy and his contemporaries needed to find a solution for articulating these word elements within song ([Vincent 1847](#), p. 149-153).

In his discussion of *vers libre*, Remy de Gourmont began by stating that verse and music, and sometimes dance, have always been associated with each other. Poetry was often sung or chanted, but even when recited it had characteristics of music. He indicated that free verse can be implied in several ways: (1) Typography: splitting an Alexandrine of twelve syllables into several lines with fewer syllables; (2) Caesuras: pauses that highlight groups of words based on their meaning. The caesura creates a virtual accent. Elements separated by caesuras may have equal or unequal numbers of syllables, whatever best serves the desired effect; (3) Mute-*e*: in ancient verse, the mute-*e* could influence the syllable count if it was followed by a word beginning with a consonant. A mute-*e* at the end of a line of verse was not included in the syllable count.

De Gourmont cautioned that declamation cannot determine versification, because the rhythm of a line of French syllables is subjective, and is determined by individual speakers and listeners. He discussed many examples of verse in which poets wished any mute-*e* in the middle of a line of verse to be pronounced, and he asserted that odd numbers of syllables in a line, as well as unequal line lengths, do not themselves create free verse ([de Gourmont 1899](#), p. 222-240).

He suggested that numerous pauses that are created by caesuras or typography can disrupt the musical flow of the verse, which he considered paramount:

*En tous il y a une grande richesse d'images, la preuve d'une réelle force de création, des variations heureuses sur des thèmes variés, et le souci de rendre sa pensée poétique à la fois comme spectacle et comme musique ; les images chantent et les musiques se dessinent. Cela est assez particulier dans la poésie contemporaine. [...] Je crois que l'art suprême est de donner des illusions d'harmonie. Au lieu d'attirer l'attention sur des discontinuités même voulues et nécessaires, il faut les voiler et les rendre invisibles au premier coup d'œil ; que la note en discord aille par des harmoniques imperceptibles s'absorber dans l'accord des notes fondamentales (de Gourmont 1899, p. 243-244).*

The concept that poetry gives the illusion of harmony is important for Debussy's *Proses lyriques*, in which he developed "harmonic progressions" of vowels that complement the melodic setting of the words and the harmonic texture of the piano. De Gourmont continued:

*La prose rythmique et la poésie syllabique ont la même origine et sans doute le même âge. La prose rythmique tient à la fois de la prose et du vers ; [...] [E]lle ne se compose pas absolument de vers, puisque ses vers ou versets n'ont pas un nombre fixe d'accents ; elle n'est point de la prose pure, puisque l'accent y joue un rôle sans doute prépondérant, quoique obscur. La rime ou l'assonance achèvent de la différencier d'avec la prose ordinaire. Ses éléments sont donc, je ne dis pas, le vers libre, mais un vers libre (ibid., p. 247-248).*

In an interview with Jules Huret, Stéphane Mallarmé commented on the merging of prose and poetry employed by Charles Baudelaire in *Le Spleen de Paris*, and later by many other writers. Mallarmé believed that, if prose is a type of verse, then prose can be verse; thus *prose rythmée*, *poésie en prose*, and *prose lyrique* become possible for writers of verse:

*Le vers est partout dans la langue où il y a rythme. [...] Dans le genre appelé prose, il y a des vers, quelquefois admirables, de tous rythmes. Mais, en vérité, il n'y a pas de prose : il y a l'alphabet, et puis des vers plus ou moins serrés, plus ou moins diffus. Toutes les fois qu'il y a effort au style, il y a versification [...] (Huret 1891, p. 2).*

What then is the rhythm of prose in French? Albert di Cristo proposed that rhythmic structures occur on multiple levels of the language, from the deep structure of templates of syntax and of schemas of meaning, to the surface rhythm of syllables, words, and phrases:

*Pour les musiciens, en effet, le mètre est une norme conceptuelle, fixe et abstraite, sur laquelle se superposent les variations effectives du rythme, ce dernier étant alors caractérisé par des effets d'accélération, de ralentissement, de syncope, d'anticipation, de déplacements d'accent, etc. [...] [M]ètre et rythme renvoient à deux niveaux cognitifs de représentation complémentaires : un niveau profond, où sont spécifiés les gabarits (ou les schèmes) métriques de la langue, et un niveau de surface, où s'actualisent les motifs rythmiques versatiles que motivent à la fois ces contraintes métriques profondes et les contingences inhérentes à la construction des messages (choix du lexique, de la syntaxe et mise en œuvre de contraintes sémantico-pragmatiques) (Di Cristo 2003).*

Benoît de Cornulier (2003) came to a simpler conclusion. He believed that, in French, a sentence has no inherent rhythm. The rhythm depends on how the words are read, and how they are heard.

Jean-Paul Goux proposed the intriguing idea that artistic writing is characterized by *allure*, which makes the writing alive and suggests its own movement in the rhythmic structures:

*La phrase a un corps, un corps syntaxique, et ce corps n'est vivant, comme il se doit, que par l'amour qu'on lui porte. [...] Et parce qu'elle a un corps, la phrase a une allure : elle a un mouvement propre, sa manière d'aller, comme elle a une apparence extérieure, son aspect ou son maintien ; elle va et elle se tient ; on dirait aussi bien qu'elle a une tournure, parce que les particularités de sa construction lui donnent un port caractéristique (Goux 2003).*

The poets of the late nineteenth century not only experimented with the rhythm of their verse, but also explored the use of vowel timbres in the structure of their verses. To elucidate their structured use of vowels, I expand Hertz's concept of phonological modulation to include several categories of transformation within the formant space of the vowels.

Figure 1(a) shows the French vowel trapezoid designed by Delattre (1965), which plots the frequencies of the first and second formants of the vowels in two-dimensional space (F1 x F2). His figure is one example of the placement of the vowels in this space and is not a definitive representation of all possible pronunciations. It is bounded by three axes defined by the vowels on the endpoints of each, namely /a-u/, /a-i/, and /i-u/.

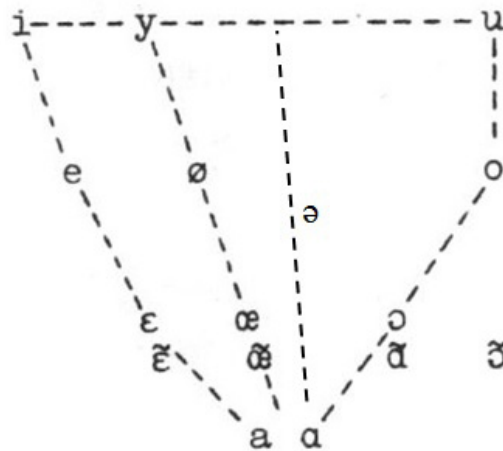


Figure 1: Delattre's formant space of French vowels.

I consider phonological modulation to occur when the vowel that ends a group of syllables is on a different axis of the vowel trapezoid from the vowel that begins the group. The group itself can be a line of verse, a hemistich, or some other set of syllables bounded by a caesura. Placing two vowels in braces, e. g., {/a/ /u/}, signifies a modulation. A phonological mutation is a transition from a vowel to another one that is on the same axis, or to one that is a near neighbor. Parentheses indicate a

mutation, e. g. (/a/ /ε/). A vowel can be prolonged by being embellished by one or more other vowels. Square brackets signify a prolongation, e.g., [/e/ /i/ /ø/ /e/]. Angle brackets < > highlight sets of recurring vowels that act as motives within a line of verse. They are heard as recurring by the listener, but they may not be related directly to any of the phonological transformations.

An example of a set of phonological transformations is {(u[ɔ ə ɔ])(ε e ə ê)}. This expression represents a prolongation of /ɔ/ embedded in a mutation from /u/ to /ɔ/, modulating to a mutation from /ε/ to /ê/, which in turn is embellished by the vowels /e/ and /ə/.

The following excerpt is from “L’Étranger” from *Le Speen de Paris* by Baudelaire (1926, p. 3), published in 1869. Depending on the pronunciation of the mute-*e*, the syllables might be grouped in verse 1 as 5 + 5 + 5 + 5, or 10 + 10, and in verse 2 as 10.

Qui aimes-tu le mieux, homme énigmatique,											
i	ε		y	ə	ø	ɔ		e	i	a	i
5						5	(6)				
[10											]
dis? ton père, ta mère, ta sœur ou ton frère?											
i	<ɔ̃	ε>	a	ε	a	œ	u	<ɔ̃	ε>		
1	2	(3)		2	(3)		5	(6)			
[5								[5	(6)		]
[10											]
Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni sœur, ni frère.											
ə	e	<i	ε>	<i	ε>	i	œ	<i	ε>		
4	(5)			2	(3)	2		2	(3)		
[10											]

Figure 2: Baudelaire “L’Étranger” excerpt.

The flow of vowels does not suggest any phonological transformations, but he does use the double rhyme motives </ɔ̃/ /ε/> in verse 2 and </i/ /ε/> in verse 3. Baudelaire chose words based on their meaning and how they contributed to the rhythm of the verse, rather than on their musical sound. The excerpt demonstrates that, in *poèmes en prose*, freedom and lack of symmetry on the surface level of rhythm can coexist with symmetry on a lower level of rhythmic structure.

The following example is an excerpt from Jules Renard’s “Nouvelle Lune” from *Histoire Naturelles*, published in 1896. The excerpt demonstrates the fracturing of the line that is one characteristic of *prose rythmée*. Note that, depending on whether or not a mute-*e* is counted as a syllable, the number of syllables in a group can be perceived as 7 (line 1), 7 + 8 (line 2), and 7 + 9 (line 3). These groupings create similarities in pacing on a deeper level of the structure.

L'ongle de la lune repousse. ( $\tilde{\text{o}}$ ə ə a (y ə u)) (ə)	[7 (8)]
Le soleil a disparu. On se retourne : la lune est là. $\text{ə}\{(\text{ɔ} \varepsilon [\text{a} \text{ i} <\text{a} \text{ y}>]) (\tilde{\text{o}} \text{ ə} \text{ ə} \text{ u})) \text{ə} [\text{<a y> } \varepsilon \text{ a}]\}$	[7 + 4 (5) + 4]
Elle suivait, sans rien dire, ([<ε u i>ε] ã <(ě i)>)	[3 + 3 (4) +
modeste et patiente imitatrice. {(ɔ(ε e)(a ã)) [i i a i]}(ə)	9 (10)]

Figure 3: Renard “Nouvelle lune” excerpt.

Renard’s vowel transformations are nested, and in verses 2 and 4, he modulates among three sets of vowels. Nevertheless, these transformations do not establish vowel relationships among the verses of the excerpt, but only within each verse.

The next development in the history of verse was *prose lyrique*:

The *conteurs* of Belgium are a small but really noteworthy body. [...] Among the several writers of that species of *conte*, or allegory, or fantasy, now generally called *Proses lyriques*—a *genre* cultivated among the young Belgian poets and romancists with singular success—I must mention especially M. Arnold Goffin. [...] [T]his most able writer is seen at his highest artistic attainment in the charming contes of his recently published *Le Fou Raisonnable* ([Sharp 1893](#), p. 428).

Following is an excerpt from Arnold Goffin’s “Au-delà,” which was published in *La Basoche* in 1886. Goffin’s verses frequently contained groups of odd numbers of syllables. He also prolonged certain vowels (e.g., *éthéréen*) to slow the rhythmic movement of the “vowel harmonies” with respect to the surface rhythm of the syllable groupings. His word choice, which is based on the color of the word’s sound and the rhythmic pacing of the word, established the “rêve” and the “allure” of the verses. The meaning of the line then flows from these artistic choices.

Je respire l’air balsamique / de l’Empire éthéréen $\text{ə}[\text{<}(\varepsilon \text{ i})\text{>}\text{<}(\varepsilon [\text{a} \text{ a}] \text{ i})\text{>}] \text{ə} (\tilde{\text{a}} \text{ i} [\text{e} \text{ e} \text{ e} \text{ e}])\}$ <sub>1 2 3 2 3 1</sub>	[7 (9) + 7]
où tout est clarté, parfum, musique... [u u] (ε a e) (a œ) (y i)	[5 + 2 + 2]
Une lumière tamisée, fluide, — vibrante ; [y y] (ε a i e) [y i i] ã	[6(9) + 3(4) + 2(3)]
des aromates innommés, caressants — [e [a ɔ a] (i ɔ e)] (a ε ã)	[7 (8) + 3]

Figure 4: Goffin “Au-delà” excerpt.

Goffin’s vowel transformations do not exhibit the same degree of nesting as those used by Renard (Figure 3). Verses 2 and 3 share vowels, as do verses 1 and 4.

Relationships among /a/, /e/ or /ε/, and /i/ appear in each line. Verse 1 employs a rotation of the mutation of /ε//a//i/ to form /ã//i//e/.

The following stanza is from “Nocturne” from *Trois poèmes* by Lekeu (1892, p. 15-16). Although he wrote the poetry a year or two before Debussy’s *Proses lyriques*, Lekeu followed the classical practices of *poésie lyrique*. Sometimes he set the mute-*e* to a note to achieve even numbers of syllables in each line. As in most classical poetry, the poet’s idea determined the words that produce rhyme, alliteration, and the desired rhythm.

Aux branches des bouleaux, des sorbiers et des pins,	[6 + 6]
{[o ã ə e (u o)] ([e ɔ e e e] ĩ)}	
la tenture suspend ses longs plis de mystère	[12]
{(a [ã [y ə y] ã]) (e ɔ̃ [i ə i] ε)}	
où dort le sommeil des chemins	[8]
{(u [ɔ ə ɔ]) (ε e ə ĩ)}	
et l'oublieuse paix du rêve et de la terre.	[12 (+1)]
(e u i ø ə [[ε y ε] e ə a ε])	

Figure 5: Lekeu “Nocturne” excerpt.

Each verse except the last contains two vowel transformations. They are either embellished prolongations or embellished mutations. The first three verses consist of modulations between the transformations in each of those verses.

The final example is an excerpt from Debussy’s “De rêve” from *Proses lyriques* (1895, p. 1). Verses 2 through 5 of the opening six-verse stanza are shown. The syllable count is based on Debussy’s melodic setting of the syllables in his score, and the verse lengths are based on the layout of the poem in *Entretiens politique et littéraires*. Like Goffin, Debussy used groups with odd numbers of syllables, and like the Baudelaire excerpt, 5 + 5 = 2 + 8 = 10. Because his grouping is 5 + 5 + 2, then 8 + 5, the symmetry is not immediately obvious.

Et les vieux arbres, sous la lune d'or, songent	[5 + 5 + 2 +
{([e e] ø a) ə (u a y ə ɔ)} ɔ̃ ə	
A Celle qui vient de passer la tête emperlée,	8 + 5]
(ā ε ə i ĩ ə a e) [(a [ε ã ε] e)	
Maintenant navrée !	[5]
(ĩ ə ã a e)	
À jamais navrée !	[5]
([ā a] ε a e)]	

Figure 6: Debussy “De rêve” excerpt.

In this excerpt, relationships among vowel groups and their transformations shape the structure of the verses. The opening (/e/ /a/) mutation is reversed and expanded



with embellishment in the eight-syllable unit of verse 2. The remaining five syllables in verse 2 are an abbreviated form of the inverted mutation that begins the verse. The words “*la tête emperlée*” form, as a unit, a prolongation with “*À jamais navrée,*” embellished by “*Maintenant navrée,*” which in turn is an expansion of the embellishment within “*la tête emperlée.*”

The “story” of this *prose lyrique* is adapted to the sonorities, which demonstrate a very tight structure of phonological transformations, their groupings and nestings, and their expansions, contractions, and reversal of order. Debussy clearly adopted principles of rhythmic organization and phonological transformations of vowels developed by contemporary poets. His treatment of phonological transformations is innovative, because it establishes musical relationships among the vowels that contributes to the formal structure and unity of the stanza.

The resulting vowel “harmonies” create an additional “instrument” in the song, which acts as a counterpoint to the vocal line and the piano accompaniment.

## CONCLUSION

A more comprehensive study of the text of the songs in *Proses lyriques* demonstrates that Debussy treated the vowels as “harmonies” characterized by their formant structures (Dworak 2012).<sup>3</sup> They “progress” through vowel space. They have points of repose, similar to structural harmonic principles. Sometimes the piano harmony emerges from the vowel spectrum, which suggests that Debussy conceptualized song in a much more profound fashion than studies of melody, harmony, rhythm, meter, and the techniques of poetry can reveal. Debussy applied his unique ability to “hear the vowel in the chord, and the chord in the vowel.”

*Proses lyriques* exhibits Debussy’s innovations in many compositional parameters of these art songs. His pianistic writing demonstrates mastery of harmonic textures and progressions, encompassed within the linear structure of carefully crafted contrapuntal layers. Even critics of Debussy considered his piano writing to be highly evocative and attractive to the audience. Debussy’s melodic setting of the text is sometimes florid and passionate, and at other times very simple and restrained, so that the sounds of the words and their meanings dominate the sonic texture. The piano accompaniment not only supports the vocal line harmonically and contrapuntally, but it also enhances the essence of the sonic experience evoked in the listener by the words.

By using the literary technique of *prose lyrique*, Debussy utilized ideas of contemporary francophone poets that freed the rhythmic structure of the poetry from the severe constraints imposed by traditional groupings of syllables. His organization of syllables in his poems, however, also retained some aspects of classical French poetic rhythm. Because Debussy composed the poetry himself, he utilized symbolist techniques for capturing the emotional impact of the scenes and images that he created.

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3 See Paul Dworak, “Debussy’s Vowel Spaces in *Proses lyriques*,” presented at “L’héritage de Claude Debussy. Du rêve pour les générations futures,” Université de Montréal, 29 February-3 March, 2012, [www.pauldworak.net/publications/music/DebussyVowelSpaces.zip](http://www.pauldworak.net/publications/music/DebussyVowelSpaces.zip).

In these songs, Debussy explored even further. He selected words with vowels that had the particular spectra that he wished to use at every point within the phrases of text and music. The vowel successions in the poems form motivic structures that, like pitch motives, exhibit various transformations and hierarchical embeddings. Successions of vowels also suggest progressions of vowel spectra that are analogous to harmonic progressions. The formants that are prominent in these successions of vowels imply their own contrapuntal lines that interact with the vocal line. The implied chordal structures of the vowel spectra and their formants sometimes evolve from or flow into piano chords with similar spectral structures.

Debussy's ability to use groups of vowels as melodic, harmonic, contrapuntal, and motivic entities sets *Proses lyriques* apart from the vocal literature of his contemporaries. His integration of these innovations, set within the sonic texture of the voice and piano, creates the sound that captures the sense of the scenes and images that he seeks to evoke. All of these innovations make *Proses lyriques* a masterpiece that is only beginning to be rediscovered and appreciated.

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