

CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S TWELVE ETUDES, BOOK I: AN ARTISTIC REALIZATION OF
TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

by

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	i
List of Examples	iv
List of Tables	vii
Chapter 1 : Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2 : Background	2
Chapter 3 : The Etudes.....	6
Chapter 4 : Book I.....	9
Chapter 5 : Conclusion.....	53
Bibliography	55

List of Examples

Example 1. Czerny: “Art of Finger Dexterity” op.740 no.1. Five-finger patterns.....	9
Example 2. Etude “for five fingers.” C-major five-finger pattern	10
Example 3. Etude “for five fingers.” Five-finger stepwise patterns.....	11
Example 4. Etude “for five fingers.” Chromatic pattern.....	11
Example 5. Etude “for five fingers.” Gigue patterns	11
Example 6. Etude “for five fingers.” Pentatonic pattern.....	12
Example 7. Etude “for five fingers.” Pentatonic patterns	12
Example 8. Etude “for five fingers.” Right-hand pentatonic figuration.....	12
Example 9. Etude “for five fingers.” Rubato gestures	13
Example 10. Etude “for five fingers.” Scales.....	13
Example 11. Etude “for five fingers.” Pianistic difficulties.....	13
Example 12. Etude “for five fingers.” C vs A-flat	14
Example 13. Etude “for five fingers.” G vs F-sharp	14
Example 14. Etude for “five fingers.” G-flat vs G, D-flat vs D.....	15
Example 15. Etude for “five fingers.” D-flat vs C	15
Example 16. Chopin: Etude op.25 no.6. Rapid motoric patterns.....	16
Example 17. Etude “for thirds.” Principal thematic idea	17
Example 18. Etude “for thirds.” Rubato motive	18
Example 19. Etude “for thirds.” Tonicizations of D-flat major, B-flat minor, A-flat major.....	19
Example 20. Etude “for thirds.” 6/4, 7 th and extended chords	19
Example 21. Etude “for thirds.” Chromatic major and minor thirds	19
Example 22. Etude “for thirds.” Simultaneous major and minor thirds.....	20
Example 23. Etude “for thirds.” Black vs white thirds	20
Example 24. Etude “for thirds.” Oscillating thirds	21

Example 25. Etude “for thirds.” Rhythmic complexity	21
Example 26. Etude “for thirds.” Broken figuration	22
Example 27. “Pagodes.” Stream of fourths and fifths	23
Example 28. Etude “for fourths.” Motive (a).....	24
Example 29. Etude “for fourths.” Motive (b)	25
Example 30. Etude “for fourths.” Melody (c).....	25
Example 31. Etude “for fourths.” Motive (d)	26
Example 32. Etude “for fourths.” Climax.....	26
Example 33. Etude “for fourths.” Recollection of motives (a), (b) and melody (c)	27
Example 34. Etude “for fourths.” Musical disintegration.....	27
Example 35. Etude “for fourths.” Types of fourths	28
Example 36. Etude “for fourths.” 6/3, 7 th and quartal chords	28
Example 37. Etude “for fourths.” C pedal-point.....	29
Example 38. Etude “for fourths.” Conclusion	29
Example 39. Etude “for fourths.” Four-note figures.....	30
Example 40. Etude “for fourths.” Melodic range of a fourth.....	30
Example 41. Chopin: Etude op.25 no.8	32
Example 42. Etude “for sixths.” Thematic material of A	33
Example 43. Etude “for sixths.” Thematic material of B.....	33
Example 44. Etude “for sixths.” Thematic material of c	33
Example 45. Etude “for sixths.” 6ths, 7ths and extended harmony	34
Example 46. Etude “for sixths.” Stacking of sixths	35
Example 47. Etude “for sixths.” Black vs white	35
Example 48. Etude “for sixths.” Diatonic triadic harmony.....	36
Example 49. Etude “for sixths:” Conclusion	36
Example 50. Chopin: Etude op.25 no.10. Perpetual motion.....	38

Example 51. Etude “for octaves.” Thematic material.....	38
Example 52. Etude “for octaves.” Thematic material (a)	39
Example 53. Etude “for octaves.” Thematic material (b)	40
Example 54. Etude “for octaves.” Climax: parallel octaves	40
Example 55. Etude “for octaves.” Beginning of coda	41
Example 56. Etude “for octaves.” White vs black	42
Example 57. Etude “for octaves.” Chromatic octaves	42
Example 58. Etude “for octaves.” Rhythmic irregularity	43
Example 59. Etude “for octaves.” Triplets.....	43
Example 60. Etude “for octaves.” Polyrhythm	43
Example 61. Etude “for eight fingers.” Structural divisions a, b and c with coda.....	46
Example 62. Etude “for eight fingers.” Climactic point of A section.....	46
Example 63. Etude “for eight fingers.” Repetition of one and two-bar unit.....	47
Example 64. Etude “for eight fingers.” Diatonic eight-finger patterns.....	48
Example 65. Etude “for eight fingers.” Juxtaposition of scalar types.....	48
Example 66. Etude “for eight fingers.” Oscillating, inverted and pentatonic patterns	49
Example 67. Etude “for eight fingers.” Black vs white. Oscillating.....	50
Example 68. Etude “for eight fingers.” Black vs white. Climax	50
Example 69. Etude “for eight fingers.” Black vs white. Triplets.....	50
Example 70. Etude “for eight fingers.” Black vs white. Conclusion.....	51

List of Tables

Table 1. Etude “for five fingers”.....	10
Table 2. Etude “for thirds”	17
Table 3. Etude “for fourths”	24
Table 4a. Etude “for sixths”	32
Table 4b. Etude “for sixths”.....	34
Table 5. Etude “for octaves”	38
Table 6. Etude “for eight fingers”.....	45

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Debussy's Twelve Etudes mark a special place in the composer's oeuvre: they constitute his last major composition for the piano, and offer a spectacular and all-encompassing display of his achievement as a piano composer. In these works he pays his respects to etude composers of the past, most notably Chopin to whom Debussy dedicated his Etudes, but also Czerny, as well as the great clavecin-masters of the French Baroque, particularly Couperin. Onto this tradition he imparts his considerable contribution to the development of pianism accumulated through a lifetime of experimentation and discovery. Lastly, not least because they are a product of his Late Style, the Etudes are as much a compositional tour-de-force as they are a tribute to piano playing. Considering the constraints posed by the pedagogical function found in each etude, as well as their relatively short length, it is remarkable to see the ways in which Debussy transcends these potential limitations with such creativity and skill.

In this paper I chose to narrow my focus onto Book I of the Etudes, in part because it allowed me to increase the amount of detail I was able to highlight while still maintaining a sense of unity and closure, since the etudes are grouped together as a complete set of six. This sense of unity is further enhanced by the choice of technical problems tackled in the first book. Even more appealing, however, is the actual musical content of these etudes and the ways Debussy explores each of the technical problems they address. His approach to harmony, melody, rhythm and form is a source of sophisticated variety throughout the set, depending on the musical and technical nature of the study. With this essay I aim to showcase how Debussy acknowledges and builds onto the keyboard tradition inherited by his predecessors in Book I of his Etudes, furthering in his unique way the development of piano writing and etude composition, while challenging and overcoming the particular restrictions posed by the etude genre, resulting in works of the highest artistic quality.

Chapter 2: BACKGROUND

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Debussy composed his Twelve Etudes in a burst of inspiration during a remarkably productive summer spent in the coastal town of Pourville, Normandy in 1915.¹ That summer marked an impressive rebirth of his artistic powers following a pronouncedly unproductive and troubled 1914. World War I had erupted in August of that year and the German attack on France had a dramatic psychological impact on the hyper-sensitive composer. He complained to his French publisher Durand of being unable to work, his Paris studio having become “a factory of nothingness.”² This, coupled with a disturbing decline of his health due to cancer, led to an abrupt halting of his creative output for most of 1914; Debussy resorted to editing the piano works of Chopin for his French publisher, in return for Durand’s continued financial support during Debussy’s period of personal crisis. He eventually decided to leave Paris with his wife, in the hope that the peaceful and idyllic surroundings in Pourville would have a positive effect on his health and frame of mind, and that he would be inspired to compose once again.

The financial stability brought about by his editing project allowed him further time to reflect on the causes of his creative block, as well as on his artistic standing as a French musician in general. Despite Debussy’s intensely private and apolitical nature, he had become increasingly aware of his role as a banner-man of French music throughout his career, and for most of his creative life had sought to distance himself from the imposing Germanic musical tradition, aligning himself instead with his Gallic roots that went back to Couperin and Rameau of the French Baroque.³ The brutal reality of the Great War further provoked Debussy’s nationalist

¹ Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2001), 301.

² Claude Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, trans. Roger Nichols (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 292 and 301.

³ Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Marie and Grace O’Brien (London: Oxford University Press, 1933; reprint, New York: Dover, 1973), 251.

fervor, as he attempted to find his personal way of contributing to the war effort of his countrymen. As he gradually awakened from his creative slumber, Debussy found himself redefining both his musical language as well as his role as a “*musicien français*.”⁴ Amidst the picturesque and inspiring surroundings of Pourville, he completed a staggering amount of music in the course of three months: the two-piano suite *En Blanc et Noir*, the Cello Sonata, the Sonata for Viola, Flute and Harp, and the Twelve Etudes. (His final work, the Sonata for Violin and Piano, followed shortly after.) For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to this string of masterpieces that directly followed his period of soul-searching in 1914 as his “Late Style.”

THE LATE STYLE

Defining Debussy’s Late Style is no easy task, primarily because it represents an amalgamation of external and internal influences, often contradictory and paradoxical. By 1915, the Great War had completely changed the musical scene in France, and particularly Paris. Grand projects for large-scale forces, such as oratorios, ballets and opera, which took up an increasing amount of Debussy’s energy leading up to 1914, became both impractical and seemingly indulgent considering the appalling state of the war-stricken nation. While Debussy came to the conclusion that “it was cowardly just to think about the atrocities that had been committed without doing anything in return,” he realized that contribution to French musical culture would be his personal response to war and aggression, by restoring “a little of the beauty these ‘men’ are destroying.”⁵

As Debussy began to rethink his musical style in the context of wartime France, it gradually underwent a radical and very personal transformation. Abandoning his grand large-scale projects in favor of chamber music, and ever-concerned with both expanding and rediscovering his musical language, Debussy increased his focus on the musical tradition of his homeland. His

⁴ Debussy insisted on having the title page of his projected Sonatas for Various Instruments read: “Claude Debussy, Musicien Français.” See Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, 260.

⁵ Letter to Robert Godet, 14 October 1915; Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, 1987, 305.

interest in maintaining his cultural lineage with the French classicism of Couperin and Rameau led him to consider, shockingly, composing in traditional forms, including – most surprisingly of all – a return to the baroque sonata-form. Thus, the composer who became famous across Europe for dismissing structural formulas, finally returned, in his twilight years, to one the most traditional forms of them all. His ambitious six-sonata project for various combinations of instruments, including harpsichord, was tragically cut short by the composer's death before it could be fully realized, but Debussy did complete a cello sonata, a violin sonata, and a sonata for viola, flute and harp, offering a fascinating demonstration of his ability to merge the old with the new.

Debussy's musical transformation did not occur in a vacuum, however. In May of 1913, modernism received, arguably, its official and scandalous inauguration in Paris, with the premiere of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring. Debussy's keen ear and mind was intrigued by the Russian composer's novelty, despite the diametrically opposed aesthetic it represented; the two great composers met in Paris during Stravinsky's collaboration with the *Ballets Russes*, and even played four-hand piano arrangements of The Rite of Spring. Though Stravinsky's interest in depicting the grotesque in music must have repelled Debussy, the Russian's exploration of jarring structural, tonal, and rhythmic juxtapositions left a fascinating impression on the Frenchman. Indeed, as early as 1911, Debussy was raving about Stravinsky's untamed fearlessness coupled with his "instinctive genius for color and rhythm,"⁶ and began incorporating these Stravinskian influences into his late works, including the Etudes. It is appropriate that Debussy, whose *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and *Pelléas et Mélisande* created a scandal in their own right at their respective premieres, would be eager to assimilate any cutting-edge influences that appealed to his musical aesthetic.

⁶ Letter to Robert Godet, 18 December 1911; Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, 1987, 250.

CHOPIN

While Debussy was on his journey of self-discovery throughout 1914 there was one other composer who was to exert a profound influence on his final major piano work, the Etudes. His study of Chopin's piano music necessitated by Durand's forthcoming Chopin edition rekindled Debussy's admiration for this adopted son of Paris, a composer who had a special meaning to Debussy ever since his childhood, when he was taught piano lessons by Madame Mauté de Fleurville, an alleged pupil of Chopin.⁷ During his conservatoire days much of his piano studies were devoted to the polish master, and as Debussy matured as a composer his revolutionary writing for the instrument was already drawing comparisons with that of Chopin. As musicologist Roy Howat points out, "details of Debussy's piano writing recall Chopin so often as to suggest how ingrained Chopin's music was in Debussy's ears (and fingers)."⁸ Debussy's aesthetic kinship with Chopin was evident in the creativity and grace with which the two men were able to utilize piano technique. It is not surprising, therefore, that Debussy's immersion in Chopin's piano music during his work as Durand's editor made him particularly conscious of his own contribution to the development of piano writing. By the summer of 1915 he was corresponding enthusiastically with his publisher informing him of developments regarding his exciting new project: a set of Twelve Etudes that were destined to become a tribute not only to Chopin but to Debussy's own distinctive treatment of the instrument.⁹

⁷ Marcel Dietschy, *A Portrait of Claude Debussy*, ed. and trans. William Ashbrook and Margaret G. Cobb, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 20.

⁸ Roy Howat, "Chopin's Influence on the *Fin de Siècle* and Beyond," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chopin*, ed. Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 256.

⁹ Marianne Wheelton, *Debussy's Late Style*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 55.

Chapter 3: THE ETUDES

THE PROJECT

When Debussy finally resumed his composition activities during the summer of 1915, he did so with ferocious speed and sense of purpose; this would prove to be his final extended period of fruitful artistic labor, with the Twelve Etudes being his last major-scale composition. The Etudes were transformed from fragmentary sketches to the finished autograph in roughly six weeks, demonstrating the zeal and inspiration with which he tackled this particular composition;¹⁰ indeed, it is particularly impressive if one considers the enormity of Debussy's artistic achievement. This achievement, as alluded to in letters to his publisher Durand, was most meaningful to Debussy: "I've invested a lot of passion and faith in the future of the Etudes. I hope you'll like them, both for the music they contain and for what they denote."¹¹ What the Etudes "denoted" was a culmination of a pianistic evolution that went back to Couperin, paving its way forward through the contribution of 19th century pianism, namely Chopin, and reaching Debussy at the dawn of a new, modern era of piano writing and musical thought in general. It is also worth noting that Couperin, Chopin and Debussy all shared a direct link with France, having spent the majority of their creative life there and become indelibly connected to the musical legacy of that country. It is therefore not far-fetched to give quasi-nationalistic dimensions to Debussy's Etudes project, especially considering the state of his war-stricken nation at this time.

THE DEDICATION

Conscious of his lineage back to the French Baroque and torn between his love for both Couperin and Chopin, Debussy agonized over which of the two great composers should receive the dedication of his Etudes. He repeatedly wrote to Durand asking his opinion: "You haven't

¹⁰ Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, Vol. 2 (London: Cassell and co., 1962), 212

¹¹ Letter to Jacques Durand, 28 August 1915; Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, 1987, 300.

given me an answer about the dedication: Couperin or Chopin?"¹² Debussy eventually yielded the dedication to Chopin, and it feels like the more appropriate decision: the presence of Chopin loomed over this project from the outset; he was widely recognized as the first great composer to elevate the etude genre from its origins as a pedagogical piece of limited musical merit to a work of unquestionable artistic quality. Debussy was keenly aware of comparisons that were to be drawn by his public between him and Chopin, yet fully acknowledged the debt he owed his great predecessor for his contributions to piano writing:

I'm sure you'll agree with me that there's no need to make the technical exercises over-somber just to appear more serious; a little charm never spoils anything. Chopin proved it and makes this desire of mine seem somewhat foolhardy, I know. Neither am I so dead to the world as not to be aware of the comparisons that my contemporaries, colleagues, and others... will studiously make to my disadvantage.¹³

Indeed, Debussy's treatment of the piano in the Etudes displays much of Chopin's keen ear for detail, color and charm. One would be hard pressed, however, to find specific similarities between the respective collections of etudes by the two great composers. On the contrary, it seems as if Debussy was often consciously *avoiding* following Chopin's example in his treatment of certain pianistic difficulties, as we shall see when we start exploring the Book I of the Etudes.

THE FORMAT

The Twelve Etudes are divided into two books of six etudes each. It is interesting to note how the first book appears to be more traditional in its objectives than the second; where the second book deals with more abstract musical and technical themes such as "opposed sonorities" in no.10 and "composite arpeggios" in no.11, the first book seems to have a clearer pedagogical thread which helps bind the etudes together and give them a sense of musical integrity as a set: the first and sixth etude deal with step-wise finger-patterns (five-finger and eight-finger patterns

¹² Ibid., *Debussy Letters*, 300.

¹³ Ibid., 300-301.

respectively) while the rest of the etudes explore intervallic patterns (thirds, fourths, sixths and octaves). This organic material of Book I, therefore, is particularly well-suited for an examination into the creative workings of Debussy's mind as he navigates his way through the challenges and constraints of each etude, while exploring the sonorous possibilities of the piano and exploiting his own restless imagination. In the next chapter I will narrow my focus onto the first six etudes of the first book and attempt to shed some light onto Debussy's creative process, as I explore how he integrates the past and paves the way for the future in this music, managing simultaneously to challenge our notions of pianistic and compositional technique.

Chapter 4: BOOK I

Etude no.1 “for the five fingers”

It seems very fitting that Debussy’s first etude should bear the title “for the ‘five fingers’ – after Monsieur Czerny.” If Chopin crystalized the concept of the etude as work of art, then it was Carl Czerny who was responsible for epitomizing the idea of the piano etude as a piece with a primarily pedagogical function. Czerny, being arguably the father of modern piano pedagogy, composed hundreds of such etudes which never lost their popularity as teaching material for aspiring pianists, despite their questionable artistic quality. Debussy’s dedication of his Etude “for five fingers” to Czerny is yet another instance of Debussy being aware of and honoring the pianistic tradition he inherited from his predecessors. He does not hesitate to poke fun at Monsieur Czerny, however, exploiting very eccentrically Czerny’s signature five-finger patterns in this most humorous study.

The image shows a musical score for the first three measures of Czerny's Op. 740 No. 1. The score is in common time (C) and marked 'Molto allegro. (M. M. ♩ = 92.)'. The tempo is indicated by a quarter note. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The score is written for piano (p) and features a complex rhythmic pattern in the bass clef, with the right hand mostly silent. The first measure is marked 'mm. 1-3'. The second and third measures show a continuation of the bass line with some rests in the right hand. The score is attributed to 'C. Czerny, Op. 740 Cah. I'.

Example 1. Czerny: “Art of Finger Dexterity” op. 740 no. 1. Five-finger patterns

Like many of Debussy’s keyboard miniatures, the Etude “for five fingers” gives the impression of being through-composed in a fantastical manner, with frequent disruptions of tempo and key contributing to this effect. A closer examination of the score, however, reveals recurring motivic elements and structural divisions that help orient the listener and unify the piece. First off, at the broadest level of analysis, Debussy assigns distinct and contrasting key-areas to pivotal moments in the etude, thereby dividing the piece into multiple sections, roughly resembling the scheme shown in the table below:

Table 1. Etude “for five fingers”

Areas	A	b	a’	c	a’’
Measures	1	48	67	75	97

The first substantial section, “A,” is in C major and fragments of it, labeled “a,” recur both in the middle of the piece and at the end with varying degrees of subtlety. This C major material is framed by excursions into C-flat (b), and A-flat (c), which have a distinctly “developmental” feel, and are also punctuated by tempo adjustments, either preceded by a *ritardando* (m. 47) or marked to be played slower (m. 75). The a sections, on the other hand, confidently “return” the listener to the principal key and material; this occurs most spectacularly at the greatest climactic moment of the etude (m. 97), which acts as a triumphant recapitulation or apotheosis of various strands from the opening A section.

At closer inspection, one can see that structural unity is also achieved at the motivic level, through Debussy’s exploration and manipulation of five-finger patterns of various types. The opening C major section presents most of the motivic finger-patterns that will be explored throughout the etude. The piece begins with the simplest five-finger stepwise figure, played with the left hand starting on middle-C:



Example 2. Etude “for five fingers.” C-major five-finger pattern

This stepwise pattern generates much of the material that is to come, and it is transposed (m. 11), inverted (m. 15), decorated with neighbor-notes (m. 48) and even subjected to bi-tonal treatment with the G-flat/G major figures (m. 91):

m. 11

m. 15

m. 48

m. 91

Example 3. Etude “for five fingers.” Five-finger stepwise patterns

Chromaticism is introduced in m. 7 during a brief passage in 6/16 time, marked “in the tempo of a gigue,” featuring a chromatic descending sequence comprised of diminished triads:

mm. 7–10

Example 4. Etude “for five fingers.” Chromatic pattern

This gigue figure also makes an appearance later on in the etude, usually in the left hand alone, such as in m. 22 and 65:

mm. 22–23

m. 65

Example 5. Etude “for five fingers.” Gigue patterns

The chromatic pattern adds rhythmic variety by introducing the dance-like 16th-note triplets. Indeed, the triplet soon becomes the most commonly encountered rhythmic value in the piece.

The first satisfactory C-major cadence in the etude occurs in m. 28, thereby unleashing a rhapsodic outburst of pentatonic figuration, punctuated by bare fifths in the lower register of the keyboard:

Other motivic cells that appear sporadically throughout the etude include the tonally-questioning rubato gesture as well as the rapid scales ascending in parallel motion:

Rubato

m. 32

Rubato

m. 71

Example 9. Etude “for five fingers.” Rubato gestures

m. 43

m. 62

Example 10. Etude “for five fingers.” Scales

Pianistically, Debussy challenges the player’s motor skills by offering rapid finger patterns in many creative combinations. These patterns require, at the very least, both finger strength and independence, particularly in explosive sections such as in mm. 97–98 (ex. 7). They also frequently test the pianist’s suppleness and ability to coordinate the two hands; in mm. 35–40 left-hand figuration asks for an agile hand capable of extended stretches, while the right hand plays irregular patterns within the pentatonic mode (ex. 8). Indeed, some passages are as much a challenge to the player’s mental concentration as they are to one’s physical prowess. The C-flat major section, for instance, features unpredictable left-hand figuration in finger-twisting patterns, while the right hand intermittently crosses over the left hand to play its own distinctly independent line, thereby making the left-hand’s task even more difficult and uncomfortable:

mm. 52–53

Example 11. Etude “for five fingers.” Pianistic difficulties

Compositionally on the other hand, this etude is as much a study in evoking humor as it is in overcoming the pianistic challenge of executing five-finger patterns. Debussy’s use of parody was a particular specialty of his, as he demonstrated so brilliantly when poking fun of Wagner in “Golliwog’s Cakewalk” or imitating Clementi in “Gradus ad Parnassum,” both pieces featured in his piano suite Children’s Corner dating from 1908. In his Etude “for five fingers” Debussy achieves his comedic effect chiefly by eccentrically pitting white against black keys. Already in the very opening of the piece, insistent and obstinate A-flats in the right hand interrupt the conscientious five-note patterns of the left hand, which are sarcastically marked to be played *sagement* (“wisely”) by Debussy:

mm. 1–6

Example 12. Etude “for five fingers.” C vs A-flat

Similarly, in m. 12 and 14 the sober G major patterns are disrupted by sudden outbursts in F-sharp major:

mm. 11–14

Example 13. Etude “for five fingers.” G vs F-sharp

This bi-tonal interplay between the two hands is exploited spectacularly by Debussy in mm. 91–96 leading up to aforementioned climax of the etude:

mm. 94–97

Example 14. Etude “for five fingers.” G-flat vs G, D-flat vs D

The developmental sections in C-flat and A-flat are large-scale manifestations of this fantastical battle between the black and white keys. Debussy saves his punchline for the very end of the piece: after a surging build-up stretching over mm. 106–110 he abruptly cuts off; following a brief pause, a rapid ascending D-flat major scale resolves into three emphatic C-major chords, thereby ending this cat-and-mouse chase in the home key of C:

mm. 111–116

Example 15. Etude “for five fingers.” D-flat vs C

Debussy’s Etude “for five fingers” offers a fascinating synthesis of past and future, tradition and modernity. While the connection to Czerny’s five-finger patterns forms a direct link to the 18th century and the birth of the piano as virtuoso instrument, the references to the gigue take us back further still to the age of the baroque dance. In addition to this, Debussy’s jarring juxtapositions of abruptly disparate music and bi-tonal interplay are reminiscent of Stravinsky’s experimentations in the 1910s, and particularly *Petrushka*, which Debussy adored and studied

extensively.¹⁴ Debussy’s own originality lies in his manipulation of this diverse material, infusing it with his trademark sensitivity for color and a heavy dose of his infectious wit. It is this distillation of such contrasting and seemingly contradictory elements that are a hallmark of Debussy’s Late Style.

Etude no.2 “for thirds”

With the Etude “for thirds” Debussy embarks on a journey of intervallic exploration; this etude, as well as the subsequent Etude “for fourths,” “for sixths” and “for octaves,” will become his laboratory for an intense examination of the vertical and horizontal possibilities of each of these intervals. One look at the score reveals a striking visual feature of this piece: streams of uninterrupted thirds flow in 16th-note groupings virtually from the beginning to the end of the etude. This lack of rhythmic variety is hardly unusual within the etude canon, since etudes by his predecessors, including Chopin, were used primarily as vehicles for developing finger dexterity through the rapid repetition of motoric patterns:

The image shows the beginning of Chopin's Etude op. 25 no. 6. The tempo is marked 'Allegro' with a quarter note equal to 69 beats per minute. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The right hand (treble clef) plays a continuous stream of sixteenth-note chords, primarily triads and dyads, in a pattern of thirds. The left hand (bass clef) plays a more melodic line with some chords. The score is labeled '6.' and includes the instruction 'sotto voce'. The first four measures are indicated as 'mm. 1-4'.

Example 16. Chopin: Etude op. 25 no. 6. Rapid motoric patterns

What makes Debussy’s etude so fascinating, however, is that despite its rhythmic regularity it is *not* a study in extreme speed or endurance. Indeed, with markings such as “moderato,” “sostenuto” and “legato” Debussy ensures that the player is always aware of the singing quality

¹⁴ Lockspeiser, 180.

This conclusion proves to be emotionally and structurally satisfying, however; a closer look at the score shows how the *Con fuoco* material of m. 67 is directly linked to the yearning rubato motive in m. 13:



Example 18. Etude “for thirds.” Rubato motive

The climactic resurfacing of this material helps unify another important motivic strand of the etude.

If the piece is somewhat lacking in diverse thematic and rhythmic interest, Debussy overcomes this self-imposed constraint by offering a dazzling compensation through the display of the coloristic possibilities of the third in the hands (and feet!) of a skillful pianist. Exploiting the interval’s unique ability to determine the modal quality of chords, Debussy deftly maneuvers between major and minor tonalities, creating an intoxicating atmosphere of modal ambiguity aided by the pedal’s ability to sustain sonority. In the first three measures alone, he alludes to D-flat major, B-flat minor and A-flat major through the subtlest of harmonic alterations of the right hand against those of the countermelody in the left hand:

In addition, different types of thirds are often combined simultaneously, contributing further complexity to Debussy's harmonic vocabulary; in m. 5 minor thirds in the left hand occur against oscillating major thirds in the right, while in m. 63 major and minor thirds are played in rapid succession in the right hand while the figuration in the left (a third below) creates an alternation of augmented and diminished chords:

m. 5

m. 63

Example 22. Etude “for thirds.” Simultaneous major and minor thirds

Finally, Debussy exploits the coloristic quality of thirds played on black versus white keys of the piano, as can be seen in ex. 23; if the antithesis between black and white was used as a source of humor in the first etude, it is now used in order to create distinct soundscapes that function as yet another sensual brushstroke on Debussy's multicolored canvas:

mm. 6-9

Example 23. Etude “for thirds.” Black vs white thirds

A closer look at the 16th-note figuration reveals the subtle and creative variety of Debussy's groupings: some feature irregular, circular contours as in the opening of the etude (ex. 19); others create a hypnotizing atmosphere by using oscillation – stepwise, or in two-note pairs:¹⁵

mm. 21–22

mm. 34–35

Example 24. Etude “for thirds.” Oscillating thirds

Rhythmic complexity is added by grouping the 16^{ths} in patterns of threes (ex. 25), while broken figuration divides the thirds between the hands spanning a large range of the keyboard (ex. 26):

m. 30

m. 32

Example 25. Etude “for thirds.” Rhythmic complexity

¹⁵ Qing Jiang, “Rethinking Virtuosity in the Piano Etudes of the Early Twentieth Century: Case Studies in Claude Debussy’s Douze Études for Piano,” (DMA diss. New England Conservatory, 2012), 35.
<http://ir.flo.org/nec/fileDownloadForInstitutionalItem.action;jsessionid=FE2A453D1B05819B47F9D7A87027A04C?itemId=26&itemFileId=71>

Example 26. Etude “for thirds.” Broken figuration

This deft manipulation of inflection and texture in the stream of 16th-notes is at the heart of the music’s mesmerizing effect on the listener; Debussy seems to simultaneously create a feeling of rhythmic uniformity and flexibility. Bringing to life the tension between the streamlined flow of unchanging note-values and the malleable flexibility of their organization adds a sophisticated challenge to the difficulties that need to be tackled by the pianist.

Even though the virtuoso element in the Etude “for thirds” is not as blatantly obvious as that of its predecessor, it nevertheless still places considerable – if subtle – demands on the pianist. It goes without saying that in order to do this etude justice the player must be able to conjure colors out of the keyboard with outmost skill and refinement. Extreme sensitivity to the beauty of Debussy’s sonorities must be reflected in the pianist’s touch, and in the way in which he negotiates the multi-layered textures that yield these sonorities; constant attention to voicing and pedaling is crucial in being able to manage this daunting task. In addition, much painstaking work is required in order to settle on the most appropriate fingering that renders the required legato possible despite the awkwardness of the various hand positions. The result of this endeavor, however, is most gratifying for both the pianist and the listener: a masterful rendition of this etude reveals Debussy’s refreshing insight into one of the most commonly encountered pianistic difficulties, showcasing the coloristic possibilities of the piano in its full glory.

Etude no.3 “for fourths”

Debussy was well aware of the novelty of his experimentation with sonority; in a letter to Durand from the summer of 1915 he singled out the Etude “for fourths,” claiming it contained

“unheard of things,” even by an ear as accustomed to his originality as Durand’s.¹⁶ Indeed, one can still be mesmerized by Debussy’s treatment of this austere interval a hundred years after the piece was written. His affinity for this interval, with its evocation of a sound-world from antiquity as well as its association with music from the Far East was already proven by the time of his “Pagodes,” the introductory piece from *Estampes* of 1903;¹⁷ in the following excerpt, streams of perfect fourths alternate with perfect fifths (their inversion) in the right hand, creating a most evocative wash of pentatonic sonority:

mm. 27–28 2 Ad.

Example 27. “Pagodes.” Stream of fourths and fifths

If the Etude “for fourths” retains some of this Eastern flair, it is heavily disguised under Debussy’s meticulous and thoroughly modern exploration of the horizontal and vertical possibilities of the interval, which itself points to Stravinsky’s novel experimentations with chromatic voice-leading of bare fourths in the *Rite of Spring*. The result of Debussy’s creative effort is perhaps the most extraordinary of all the Etudes, revealing his restless imagination at its uninhibited best.

The spirit of fantasy and otherworldliness that permeates this etude is reflected in Debussy’s approach to its structure. While subtle recollections of motives and thematic fragments serve as a guide to the listener, the music’s trajectory seems not to be bound by temporal conventions; it is as if the composer was recounting a dream through sound, or revealing the musical thoughts of his subconscious mind. One would be hard pressed to find a traditional structural interpretation

¹⁶ Letter to Durand, 28 August 1915; Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, 1987, 300.

¹⁷ Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, 156.

for the piece; however, as in the preceding etudes, tempo and key modifications seem to indicate broad formal divisions of a ternary nature:

Table 3. Etude “for fourths”

Areas	A	B	A'
Measures	1	29	65

Much like the Etude “for five fingers,” most of the thematic material in this etude derives from the first section of the piece, before an abrupt modulation to a distant key a half-step away from the tonic in m. 29 signals a sectional division of a developmental nature, and which is also marked by the performance indication *Balabile e grazioso (poco animando)*. Thematic fragments such as the stretto motive of m. 7 (a) and the risoluto motive of m. 18 (b) make their appearance in m. 29 and 37 of the developmental section:

m. 7

m. 37

Example 28. Etude “for fourths.” Motive (a)

in Tempo I

m. 49 *pp scherzando*

m. 53 *pp sempre*

Example 31. Etude “for fourths.” Motive (d)

mm. 58–61

Example 32. Etude “for fourths.” Climax¹⁸

Finally, the return to the original key of F creates a magical effect, as recollections of motives (a), (b) and melody (c) are stated in an increasingly fragmentary manner:

Tempo I

mm. 65–66

¹⁸ It is interesting to note the similarity of the right hand 32nd-note figuration in ex.32 with that of the triplets in “Pagodes” in ex.28.

m. 74

m. 75

Example 33. Etude “for fourths.” Recollection of motives (a), (b) and melody (c)

The restatement of the (c) melody is particularly poignant, as it is now presented in the right hand while the left hand accompanies in fourths, creating exquisite quartal harmonies. The gradual feeling of musical disintegration is enhanced by Debussy’s indication to decrease the tempo and dynamic until it reaches the point of “extinction,” marked *estinto* in the penultimate bar:

mm. 82–85

Example 34. Etude “for fourths.” Musical disintegration

The Etude “for fourths” presents the featured interval in a seemingly inexhaustible number of contexts. Perfect, diminished and augmented fourths are used horizontally and vertically creating a wealth of melodic, harmonic and even rhythmic possibilities. Let us take the first six measures as a case in point, shown in ex. 35: the first measure introduces a stream of perfect fourths in the right hand which outline a pentatonic sonority of C, D, E, G, A centered around a minor. The left hand joins from m. 2 onwards with its own string of fourths; the interplay between the two hands yields sonorities based on both tertian and quartal harmony. Additionally, the introduction of chromaticism in m. 3 allows the possibility for stacking perfect and augmented fourths in combinations resulting in mm7, Mm7, aug7 as well as 6/3 chords (if we do not consider the E-flat as integral to the harmony). In terms of melody, it is interesting to note the horizontal presence of the fourth in the linear shapes of the first six measures. Rhythmically, too, there is an allusion to the fourth by the temporal groupings of four 16th-notes in mm. 3–6.

Andantino con moto

III

p dolce

rit. *più p*

pp

pp

mm. 1-6

(sopra)

Example 35. Etude “for fourths.” Types of fourths

Similar manifestations of the fourth are explored in rigorous detail throughout the etude, and that is particular true with regards to harmony. Some examples include the single-line strings of fourths, both within a pentatonic context (ex. 28) and a diatonic one (ex. 29); the abundance of 6/3 sonorities in m. 46 and the rich, four-voice texture created by the vertical stacking of fourths in mm. 69–70, featuring both quartal harmonies and seventh chords (ex. 36).

m. 46

mm. 69-70

più p

Example 36. Etude “for fourths.” 6/3, 7th and quartal chords

Debussy goes to great length to avoid giving the music clear tonal resolution, and this accounts for much of its austere character. The tonal areas are generally indicated not by the presence of the tonic but that of pedal-points, particularly on the dominant; in so doing Debussy draws attention to the fourth below the tonic, which in a sense becomes a replacement for the tonic and is reminiscent of the tenor in modal music. One can notice for instance the insistent presence of C throughout the A section (ex. 37), or of D-flat in the developmental section (see motive (b) in ex. 29):

mm. 5-6

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major) and a 4/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with a fermata over the final measure, marked with a hairpin crescendo and the dynamic *pp*. The bottom staff is in bass clef, providing harmonic support with a similar dynamic marking. A *rit.* (ritardando) marking is placed above the second measure.

mm. 8-9

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is in soprano clef (sopra) with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with a fermata over the final measure, marked with a hairpin crescendo and the dynamic *pp*. The bottom staff is in bass clef, providing harmonic support with a similar dynamic marking. The marking *pp mormorando* is written below the bottom staff.

mm. 14-15

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with a fermata over the final measure, marked with a hairpin crescendo and the dynamic *pp*. The bottom staff is in bass clef, providing harmonic support with a similar dynamic marking. The marking *in Tempo* is written above the top staff, and *sempre pp* is written below the bottom staff.

Example 37. Etude “for fourths.” C pedal-point

The most striking example of this occurs in the final measures of the piece, where Debussy, having “resolved” – albeit ambiguously – into a decorated sonority based on the F-major triad (the tonic key), he builds the final chord on middle-C in m. 84, only to “weaken” this resolution further by adding the low C in the bass in m. 85. This demonstrates the degree to which the interval of the fourth, built from C to F, has become integrated into his harmonic thinking as its primary foundation:

mm. 83-85

The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with a fermata over the final measure, marked with a hairpin crescendo and the dynamic *pp*. The bottom staff is in bass clef, providing harmonic support with a similar dynamic marking. The marking *estinto* is written above the bottom staff.

Example 38. Etude “for fourths.” Conclusion

The juxtaposition of the lyrical and rhythmic element in Debussy’s treatment of the fourth is another striking characteristic of this etude. Melodic fragments frequently appear in four-note

short-short-short-long figures (ex. 39) or in groupings spanning the range of a fourth, such as the diatonic 32nd-notes in m. 18 and diminished triplets in m. 21 (ex. 40):



Example 39. Etude “for fourths.” Four-note figures



Example 40. Etude “for fourths.” Melodic range of a fourth

In addition, certain rhythmic outbursts of successive fourths acquire a percussive dimension; this is particularly true of the recurring stretto passage shown in ex. 28, indicated to be performed *sonore* (“sonorously”) and *martelé* (“percussively accented”). This effect seems to pay homage to Javanese Gamelan music, a rhythmically intricate musical language from Indonesia featuring exotic percussion instruments and pentatonic sonorities. This music famously made a huge impression on Debussy when he heard it in person at the Paris Exposition of 1889, and led him to begin incorporating many of its elements in his own compositions.¹⁹

The Etude “for fourths” poses unique challenges for both composer and pianist, largely because the existing canon of works that exploit this interval in a technical manner is virtually non-existent, not least within the genre of piano etude. For this reason the pianist needs to come to terms with a novel set of difficulties that requires ingenuity of fingering as well as considerable

¹⁹ Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, 59.

finger independence. Sections such as the climactic cascade of fourths (ex. 32) are virtually unplayable at a rapid tempo, calling for utmost agility and dexterity. Similarly, the stretto passages (ex. 28) are very uncomfortable to play, forcing most pianists to redistribute the fourths among their two hands in order to achieve the desired effect. Issues of maintaining legato, voicing the double notes and negotiating the complex textures abound, as does the skillful usage of the pedal in order to retain clarity. Much like its predecessor “for thirds,” the Etude “for fourths” requires a pianist of uncanny sophistication, able to produce an array of colors at the keyboard using a varied palette of touch. What is even more remarkable, however, is the manner in which Debussy showcases his compositional virtuosity on equal footing with the virtuosity of the pianist. More than perhaps any of the Etudes, the Etude “for fourths” represents a tour-de-force display of Debussy’s ability to push the boundaries of the etude genre, tackling uncharted musical territory and overcoming this creative challenge while testing the possibilities of piano writing to its limits.

Etude no.4 “for sixths”

With the Etude “for sixths” Debussy continues his foray into intervallic exploration, this time indulging in the harmonic possibilities of the often ambiguous sixth. In a letter to Durand he makes his proud compositional intentions very clear: “... I wrote this study in which my concern for sixths goes to the lengths of using no other intervals to build up the harmonies; not bad!”²⁰ Similarly to the Etude “for fourths”, the Etude “for sixths” reveals an uncompromising attempt to eschew or disguise tonality by avoiding extensive use of cadences and diatonic triads; in so doing Debussy creates a sound-world of harmonic allusion and implication. The sensuous capriciousness of these harmonies did not go unnoticed by Debussy: “For a long time the continuous use of sixths reminded me of pretentious young ladies sitting in a salon, sulkily doing

²⁰ Debussy, *Debussy Letters*, 300

their tapestry and envying the scandalous laughter of the naughty ninths.”²¹ In order to aid capturing this intoxicating atmosphere, Debussy assigns this piece the slowest tempo marking out of all the etudes in the first book; in contrast with most studies in sixths, including Chopin’s virtuoso etude for the same interval, Debussy once again favors an introspective look into a common pianistic problem, turning a technical convention of etude-writing on its head.

Vivace. (♩ = 69.)

mm. 1–2

Example 41. Chopin: Etude op. 25 no. 8

The piece is organized into distinct sections that form another loose ternary structure with an extended middle section:

Table 4a. Etude “for sixths”

Areas	A	B	A’
Measures	1	21	46

The meandering eighth-note that opens the etude is developed in the A section, gradually picking up steam and reaching a climactic point before winding down and transitioning into the B section (m. 21), marked *un poco agitato*. The opening material returns once again in abbreviated form in m. 46 (A’), before slowing down and dying away in a manner similar to the closing measures of the preceding Etude “for fourths:”

²¹ Ibid., 300.

m. 1

m. 46

Example 42. Etude “for sixths.” Thematic material of A

The middle section (B) features sixteenth-note triplets against dance-like eighth-notes; this material returns in m. 38 and frames an extensive subsection (c). The c subsection begins in m. 27 with a short passage in G-flat major highlighting oscillating sixths, which once more returns in m. 34.

m.

m. 38

Example 43. Etude “for sixths.” Thematic material of B

mm. 27–29

Example 44. Etude “for sixths.” Thematic material of c

The ternary design of the smaller sections mirror the overall structure of the piece; one can therefore interpret the form of this etude as a superimposition of various ternary structures of different scales. The large-scale ABA’ form contains a ternary bcb’ within the B section; similarly, the c section contains a miniature ternary *cde*’ structure within itself:

Table 4b. Etude “for sixths”

A	B			A'
	b	c	b'	
		c	d	c'

If these divisions are put forth in order of appearance this will result in the complex palindromic design *AbcdbcA* (which could be re-interpreted in its larger scale as *AbcbA* and *ABA*); even though this structural interpretation might attempt to offer too “academic” an explanation of Debussy’s formal experimentation, it is highly unlikely that Debussy was not aware of the elegantly symmetrical and mathematical proportions of his design.

Much like Debussy’s treatment of the fourth and particularly that of the third, Debussy manipulates the rich harmonic possibilities of the sixth both as a single interval and in relation to other musical lines. Already in the first six bars Debussy progresses from bare diatonic sixths in m.1 to diminished and dominant 7th sonorities in mm. 2–4 before dissolving into extended triadic harmony built on the low C in mm. 5–6 in the left hand:

mm.1-6

Example 45. Etude “for sixths.” 6ths, 7ths and extended harmony

Debussy often juxtaposes chromatic with diatonic sonorities in order to create harmonic variety and color without yielding to the tonal certainty of traditional triads. Consider for instance the effective contrast created by the stacking of sixths in m. 7 and 13; the chromaticism of m. 7 is exotic and tonally ambiguous, while m. 13 bathes the music in diatonic V sonorities without explicitly resolving into the tonic D-flat:

m. 7

m. 13

Example 46. Etude “for sixths.” Stacking of sixths

Similarly, in mm.10–11 the alternation of black-key and white-key harmonies creates more delicious, fleeting ambiguity.

mm. 10–11

Example 47. Etude “for sixths.” Black vs white

On the rare occasion that Debussy does indeed venture into simple diatonic triadic harmony, as in m. 27 of the c subsection, the effect is most refreshing and expressive; it is no coincidence that he repeats this bar four times within the short section:

Mouvt

m. 27

Example 48. Etude “for sixths.” Diatonic triadic harmony

In the ensuing return of A’, Debussy continues to indulge in tonal uncertainty all the way up to the magical very last chord: two stacked sixths make up a D-flat sonority with an added sixth; this “addition” incorporates just enough spice to tantalize the listener’s ear; it is difficult to think of a more appropriate and exquisite ending to this beautiful piece:

mm. 58–59

Example 49. Etude “for sixths.” Conclusion

Aside from harmony, Debussy uses rhythm as another means of creating variety and infusing the piece with character. Each section of the piece has its own rhythmic profile which changes according to the structural development of the etude; the A section features mostly tentative eighths and sixteenths, while the B section explores triplet rhythmic values. In addition, Debussy differentiates between the dance-like triplets which highlight repeated notes in subsection b with the oscillating and wavy contours of subsection c. The return of A’ sees the return of the meandering eighths which gradually dissolve as the piece dies down and is brought to a close. It is interesting to note how the progression of rhythmic values – from less to more active and back again – roughly mirrors the palindromic design of the etude, thereby strengthening its unity of form and content.

The Etude “for sixths,” like its two predecessors, continues to challenge the pianist’s mastery of touch, as the player navigates through Debussy’s textures aided by the ever-faithful pedal. The outer sections call for a legato sustain of the musical line, while the agitated B section requires a suppleness of the wrist in the right hand which is particularly taxing considering the awkwardness of the hand positions. Broadly speaking, the Etude “for thirds,” for fourths” and “for sixths” are bound together by similar musical objectives and a sound world that is generally subdued, exploring softer dynamics and veiled sonorities. The piano writing, though at times extremely difficult, is nonetheless not intended to enthrall an audience by its speed or power. Moreover, Debussy’s general preference for a singing tone and a legato touch aligns this music with the romantic pianistic sensibilities of the 19th century, despite these etudes containing some of his most cutting-edge harmonies. If it is in one sense un-virtuosic, however, in another it represents the epitome of pianistic sophistication and resourcefulness; using these intervals as a springboard, Debussy launches into an exhaustive exploration of the coloristic possibilities of the piano and its wondrous capacity to create and sustain layers of sonority.

Etude no.5 “for octaves”

The Etude “for octaves” marks a return to the angular and extravagant virtuoso-world of Debussy’s Etude “for five fingers.” Indeed, this etude is the most extroverted and dynamic of the set, with frequent fortissimo outbursts and jarring rhythms giving it a joyously wild and untamed character. Unlike Etudes nos. 2-4, the Etude “for octaves” exploits its interval in a largely un-melodic manner, favoring a rhythmic and percussive treatment of the octave. These bold characteristics point, once again, to the influence of the young Stravinsky and his novel experimentation with disjointed musical fragmentation and rhythmic irregularity which bowled over the musical elite in the 1910s. Furthermore, the multitude of leaps in all directions featured in both hands of this etude come in stark contrast with Chopin’s use of stepwise perpetual motion in his own octave study op.25 no.10 (ex.50). Debussy’s acrobatic treatment of the octave, in

conjunction with its relentless rhythmic propulsion and wide dynamic range make this etude a contender for being the most brilliant and effective of the twelve.

Allegro con fuoco. ($\text{♩} = 72.$)

mm.1-2

Example 50. Chopin: Etude op.25 no.10. Perpetual motion

The Etude “for octaves” is divided into clearly defined sections that are once again punctuated by tempo and key modifications, as well as recurring thematic material that fits the general mold of a ternary structure:

Table 5. Etude “for octaves”

Areas	A	B	A’
Measures	1	49	83

Most of the material that Debussy develops is generated from the opening four measures: the rising left-hand figure with the accented second beat and the right-hand descending sixteenth-note figure in m. 1 followed by the syncopated figure in m. 2 (a), and the alternating octave pattern featuring intervals of a perfect fifth in mm. 3-4 (b).

mm. 1-2

Thematic material (a)

mm. 3-4

Thematic material (b)

Example 51. Etude “for octaves.” Thematic material

These four bars, with their metric ambiguity resulting from the unpredictable accents and syncopations, as well as their extreme and sudden dynamic shifts, set the tone for the reset of this eccentrically joyous etude. The first section of the piece is saturated with the motives introduced in the first four bars, and the extensive use of repetition gives the music an added layer of intensity. It is interesting to note that the (a) thematic material are basically a V-I cadential figure, one that we would expect at the end of a section or phrase instead of the beginning.²² Debussy exploits this element, stating the figure at structurally important points such as the modulation to E-flat in m. 23, the recapitulation in m. 83 as well as the conclusion of the piece in m. 119:

52
21 Mouvt
mm. 21–23

This musical score shows measures 21-23. It features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The tempo is marked 'Mouvt'. The music is characterized by syncopated rhythms and dynamic shifts, including a fortissimo (ff) dynamic. A first ending bracket is present over measures 21 and 22.

1^{er} Mouvt
mm. 82–85

This musical score shows measures 82-85. It features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of two sharps. The tempo is marked '1^{er} Mouvt'. The music includes a first ending bracket and a dynamic shift to fortissimo (ff). A small asterisk (*) is placed below measure 82.

Mouvt
mm. 119–121

This musical score shows measures 119-121. It features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of two sharps. The tempo is marked 'Mouvt'. The music includes dynamic shifts to fortissimo (ff) and fortissimo (ff).

Example 52. Etude “for octaves.” Thematic material (a)

On the other hand, the (b) motive dominates the second half of the A section, and plants the seed for the middle section beginning in m. 49. The B section is further defined by being preceded by a

²² Jiang, “Rethinking Virtuosity in the Piano Etudes of the Early Twentieth Century: Case Studies in Claude Debussy’s Douze Études for Piano,” 101.

lengthy ritardando in m. 47, which develops the concept of alternating hands in single notes and octaves introduced by the (b) material.

25
Cédez
Mouvt
ff < *p*
molto

mm.

ff > *dim.* - - - *f* 3 3 3

mm. 37–38

dim. molto e rit. //
au Mouvt très également rythmé, sans presser
(con sord.)

mm. 47–50

Example 53. Etude “for octaves.” Thematic material (b)

The development finally builds up to a blistering climax featuring parallel octaves at accelerated speed in m. 76:

Strepitoso
ff

mm. 76–77

Example 54. Etude “for octaves.” Climax: parallel octaves

The recapitulation begins identically to the exposition but soon gives way to a *Poco meno mosso* section that functions as a reflective coda (ex. 55), before it gradually picks up steam and leads to the final statement of the (a) fragment in m. 119, bringing the piece to a triumphant close (see ex. 52):

mm. 93–94

Example 55. Etude “for octaves.” Beginning of coda

Considering that the vertical interval of the octave does not offer much harmonic interest, Debussy achieves a refreshing variety of texture, color and effect by favoring a linear and pianistic exploration of the possibilities of this interval. Octaves are used in quick succession within a single line such as in the (a) motives, divided up between the hands in the (b) motive, broken up and rhythmically fragmented in the development (ex. 53) or in parallel motion in the climax of the piece (ex. 54). In addition, he exploits the timbral differences between white and black keys – a favorite coloristic device of Debussy – by juxtaposing the two side by side, like in mm. 11–15, or by alternating black with white notes in rapid succession, as in the “development,” further enhanced by the pedal’s ability to combine and sustain these tones together:

mm. 11–15

mm. 59–60

*garder la sourdine,
la pédale forte sur chaque temps*

Example 56. Etude “for octaves.” White vs black

Beyond major and minor tonalities, Debussy also creates variety by using his octaves to explore the pentatonic and chromatic scale. The pentatonic scale features through much of the B section, most spectacularly in the aforementioned climactic outburst in ex. 54, while the chromatic scale is used with more subtlety in the A sections:

mm. 31–32

mm. 117–118

Example 57. Etude “for octaves.” Chromatic octaves

One of the striking features of this etude is its use of rhythm. From the outset in mm. 1–2 Debussy creates a feeling of instability by accenting weak beats of the measure (particularly the second) and concealing the downbeat (ex. 51). This disjointed material is then transformed into lilting, waltz-like music, which nevertheless never quite loses its eccentric, rhythmic edge introduced in the opening two bars. In the following example, tenuti and accents highlight the second and third beats of mm. 7–8, while in mm. 9–10 the absence of a downbeat creates rhythmic uncertainty:

mm. 7–10

Example 58. Etude “for octaves.” Rhythmic irregularity

In addition, the surging, hand-alternating figure of mm. 3–4 shown in ex. 51 gives birth to more rhythmically complex outbursts, particularly after the introduction of the triplet sixteenths in m. 29:

mm. 29–30

Example 59. Etude “for octaves.” Triplets

These triplets are treated with rhythmic ingenuity as the etude unfolds, Debussy exploiting both the duple and triple divisions of the triplet figure, as in mm. 31–32 shown in ex. 57. This exploration culminates in the ensuing B section, where irregular sixteenth-note groupings of the triplets gradually grow in volume and density to include double octaves in polyrhythm (ex. 60) before the climax in parallel octaves:

mm. 72–73

Example 60. Etude “for octaves.” Polyrhythm

The etude's reliance on the repetition of foot-tapping rhythmic patterns gives the music a popular feel unique to the studies of the first book; this extravagant display of the possibility of rhythm adds an irresistibly joyous quality to the etude which wholly justifies Debussy's performance indication at the top of the title page: *joyeux et emporté* ("joyous and fiery").

The Etude "for octaves" contains some of the most acrobatic writing in the entire collection. The abundance of leaps calls for accuracy under risky conditions, requiring a component of bravery that has always been associated with the greatest virtuosos. Additionally, the athletic element extends to the amount of endurance required to pull off certain passages; this is most clearly evident in the climactic peak of the etude (ex. 54), where octaves leaping in both directions are piled on to each other in an extravagant feat of brash virtuosity. To complicate matters even further, the interpretative challenges inherent in the eccentric juxtaposition of contrasting musical fragments acquire a pianistic dimension; the player must be able manage these Stravinskian interjections with a masterful control of dynamics, rhythm and touch. As is so often the case with Debussy's Etudes, however, the technical requirements are subservient to the music, and when all is said and done the Etude "for octaves" must be tossed off with a confident aplomb that reflects the joyously entertaining quality of this piece; herein lies the pianist's greatest challenge.

Etude no.6 "for eight fingers"

It has already been noted how Czerny, Chopin and Stravinsky made their influence felt in Debussy's Etudes. The French-Baroque master Couperin, on the other hand, found his way in the work with a little more subtlety. Having explored intervallic relationships in the last four etudes, the final etude of the first book marks a return to the examination of stepwise scalar figuration of four or eight adjacent notes distributed among the eight fingers of the two hands. It is therefore a thematically appropriate conclusion to the first book, even though the muted and fleeting sound world it inhabits does not intend to offer a grandiose culmination to the set. In the Etude "for eight fingers" Debussy calls for certain idiomatic fingering and hand positions that are

reminiscent of what one would use on the clavecin; the etude employs the use of the four long fingers of each hand in alteration, and the hand crossing makes for a most startling visual and musical effect. The pianist is further encouraged in a footnote by Debussy on the actual score not to make use of the thumbs, in order to avoid unnecessary discomfort.²³ Many performers chose not to follow Debussy’s suggestion, however, since the use of the thumb is conveniently applicable when the two hands do not overlap; it is interesting, in this case, to notice the similarity with 18th-century harpsicord performance-practice, where the thumb was used but never passed under the hand.²⁴ Furthermore, the manner with which Debussy overlaps or superimposes the hands is similar to the use of a multi-manual harpsichord and point to a genre which Couperin himself created, indulging in this precise technique and called *Pièces croisées*.²⁵

Structurally, the Etude “for eight fingers” is the most straight-forward out of any in the first book: it is in binary form, with the first section developing into an explosive climax (mm. 1–41), and the second returning to a shortened statement of the principal material, ending with an accelerated coda (mm. 42–68):

Table 6. Etude “for eight fingers”

Areas	A		A’	
	a	b	a	c
Measures	1	13	42	54

The two halves of the form could be further divided into ab and ac, since the a material is identical in both parts. The b material is announced by a key change to E-flat in m. 13 (which does not occur in the equivalent spot of m. 54 in c) and arrives to the climax of the first half of the

²³ Claude Debussy, *Douze Études*, Klavierwerke, Band V, ed. Eberhardt Klemm (Leipzig: C.F. Peters, 1970), 37.

²⁴ Wheeldon, *Debussy’s Late Style*, 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

piece. The returning a section is followed by c without a change of key signature, leading instead to an exciting coda:

The image shows four systems of musical notation for Example 61, Etude "for eight fingers." by Debussy. Each system consists of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with piano accompaniment. The first system (mm. 1-2) is marked "Vivamente, molto leggero e legato" and "pp". The second system (mm. 13-14) is marked "pp" and "sub.". The third system (m. 54) is marked "p" and "les basses légèrement expressives". The fourth system (mm. 60-61) is marked "Accel. poco a poco" and "sempre f ma sempre leggerius." and ends with a coda. The piece is in 3/4 time and has a key signature of three flats.

Example 61. Etude “for eight fingers.” Structural divisions a, b and c with coda

Debussy follows his usual custom of having the climactic point in the etude coincide with the moment of most pianistic brilliance; this climax spills over multiple bars, which act as a bridge into the recapitulation, thereby unifying the piece in a seamless manner:

The image shows a single system of musical notation for Example 62, Etude "for eight fingers." by Debussy. It consists of a grand staff with piano accompaniment. The system starts at measure 34, marked "gliss." and "f". It features a long, sweeping melodic line in the right hand and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The piece ends with the marking "molto dim.".

Example 62. Etude “for eight fingers.” Climactic point of A section

Debussy’s relatively simple and traditional approach to structure could in part be related to the baroque aesthetic Debussy is emulating in this clavecin-inspired etude, and particularly to the

binary Ordres of Couperin and the Suite movements of Rameau²⁶. The binary element is also mirrored at the micro-level in Debussy's uncharacteristic obsession with repetition and sequence throughout the etude, which always occurs in two-bar (1+1) or four-bar (2+2) groups; take for example the two-bar units 7 and 8 (repetition of one measure), and the four-bar units of mm. 9–12 (repetition of two measures):

mm. 7–8 1x1

mm. 9–12 2x2

Example 63. Etude “for eight fingers.” Repetition of one and two-bar unit

The eight-finger patterns that are explored in this study are generally divided into two, four-finger groups alternating rapidly between the left and right hand. The creative ways with which Debussy pairs the four-note units provides the etude with both musical interest and pianistic variety. The piece begins with diatonic eight-note patterns in the G-flat Lydian mode, rising and falling in stepwise motion and spanning the interval of a fifth. Indeed, diatonic groups of eight notes feature throughout the etude in different contours: in m. 5 the G-flat pattern becomes an ascending scale which descends back down in F-flat major in the following measure; on the other

²⁶ Wheeldon, *Debussy's Late Style*, 70.

hand, the E-flat major section in m. 13 marks a return to ascending-descending diatonic figures, but this time spanning an interval of a sixth:

m. 1

m. 13

Example 64. Etude “for eight fingers.” Diatonic 8-finger patterns

Contrastingly, mm. 2–3 present diatonic figures in a chromatic context, with each eighth-note pattern introducing a different type of scale based on the common-tone C-flat/B-natural. Indeed, this juxtaposition of scalar or modal types occurs throughout the etude: in m. 5 the G-flat pattern becomes an ascending scale which descends back down in F-flat major in the following measure; in mm. 9–10 this juxtaposition occurs at the level of the four-finger pattern, with the left hand playing a D-flat tetrachord against the right hand’s d-natural:

m. 3

mm. 5–6

mm. 9–10

Example 65. Etude “for eight fingers.” Juxtaposition of scalar types

Other types of eight-finger groupings employed by Debussy are shown in the following example, including oscillating two-note figures (m. 15 and 17), inverted patterns that mirror each other between the two hands (m. 57), and pentatonic patterns (m.67):

The image displays four musical excerpts from Debussy's Etude "for eight fingers." in G-flat major. Measure 15 shows two staves with oscillating eighth-note pairs. Measure 17 shows a similar pattern with a slur over the right hand. Measure 57 shows two staves with mirrored eighth-note patterns. Measure 67 shows a single staff with a pentatonic eighth-note pattern, marked *ff* and *m.d.*

Example 66. Etude “for eight fingers.” Oscillating, inverted and pentatonic patterns

Considering that most of this etude explores a monophonic texture that does not include concurrent vertical sonorities, Debussy is faced with a considerable compositional challenge: how does one create an allusion of harmonic tension and release within a single musical line without the aid of counterpoint? The answer to this question lies in the sense of conflict that Debussy creates between black and white-key figurations, which battle it out, so-to-speak, in the course of the etude, aided by the intensifying tools of repetition and sequence. Already in the first two bars Debussy establishes a dominance of the black-key G-flat Lydian patterns in m. 1 which is “challenged” by the interjections of the white-key scalar figuration on B-natural in m. 2, creating a quasi-harmonic allusion of a tonic-dominant relationship (see ex. 61a). The first half of the A section is constructed entirely based on this tension between the black-versus-white diatonic step-wise patterns, while the second half introduces an additional intervallic element into the mix. In

mm. 17–20, oscillating thirds and fourths alternate between black and white keys creating a sense of tension (black) and release (white):



mm. 17–20

Example 67. Etude “for eight fingers.” Black vs white. Oscillating

This conflict escalates spectacularly in the climax of the etude, where the patterns alternate chromatically in groups of two (mm. 31–32), before a cascade of downward glissandos erupts on both black and white keys in mm. 33–34:



mm. 31–34

Example 68. Etude “for eight fingers.” Black vs white. Climax

The ensuing triplet figures perpetuate the juxtaposition of black and white (m. 39) and even occur simultaneously (m. 40):



mm. 39–40

Example 69. Etude “for eight fingers.” Black vs white. Triplets

Following the return of a, Debussy sets the scene for the resolution of this conflict in the coda in the last few measures. This final build-up sees black keys in the right hand clash concurrently with white in the left (mm. 60–61) and vice versa (mm. 64–65). As the music seems to reach boiling point, a glorious G-flat pentatonic wave of cascading sonority in m. 67 declares the black keys the winner of this dramatic battle. A final staccato G-flat in the last bar, played quietly and humorously by the two hands six octaves apart, confirms the result in the cheekiest way possible.

mm. 60–61

mm. 64–68

The image shows two excerpts of a piano score. The first excerpt, labeled 'mm. 60–61', features a treble and bass clef with a key signature of three flats. It includes the instruction 'Accel. poco a poco' and 'sempre f ma sempre leggeriss.'. The second excerpt, labeled 'mm. 64–68', continues the piece with dynamic markings 'p' and 'mf', and concludes with a 'ff' marking and a 'mi. d.' (middle D) note in the final measure.

Example 70. Etude “for eight fingers.” Black vs white. Conclusion

The pianistic difficulties of this etude result primarily from the necessity to maintain rapid speed within a very soft dynamic. To make matters worse, the constant alternation of hands in awkward positions challenges the pianist’s command of an even and articulated touch, let alone create mercurial, other-worldly effect the Debussy is evoking. If Chopin’s influence looms large above the preceding etudes, it is to Couperin’s capricious and whimsical spirit that this etude seems to be alluding. For Debussy, Couperin’s music represented a world of charm, grace and wit

that often escaped Debussy's contemporary composers;²⁷ this study allows the listener a veiled sneak-peek into that 18th-century world, albeit through its own, idiosyncratic and thoroughly modern lens. The Etude "for eight fingers" brings Book I of the Etudes to an ethereal and elusive conclusion; in a characteristically irreverent fashion, Debussy chooses not to end the set with an air of triumphant finality, favoring instead a frivolous, tongue-in-cheek conclusion to an etude that belies its pianistic and compositional sophistication.

²⁷ Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, collected by François Lesure, ed. and trans. Richard Langham Smith (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 230 and 296.

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

A “SPECIAL PLACE”

Debussy’s ebullient letters to Durand during the composition of the Etudes project are full of uncharacteristic enthusiasm and satisfaction over the quality of his work: “I must confess that I am glad to have successfully completed a work which, I may say without vanity will occupy a special place of its own.”²⁸ The “special place” the Etudes were to occupy in Debussy’s oeuvre can be justified on several different levels. At the very least, the Etudes are a monument to piano technique and piano writing in general. If the etudes of Chopin redefined piano writing in the 19th century and became the foundation on which future composers would build, the etudes of Debussy heralded the dawn of a new, modern understanding of the piano in the 20th century. Soaking up the influence of the past, Debussy traces back the development of keyboard writing to Couperin and Czerny, representatives of the Baroque and Classical eras respectively; these composers are paid homage in Debussy’s etudes alongside the dedicatee Chopin, on whose shoulders Debussy constructed his own tribute to the mastery of the piano.

It would be a disservice to Debussy, however, to downplay the extraordinary originality of his etudes, despite the far-reaching influences that seeped into this composition. Indeed, one of the most admirable qualities of Debussy the mature composer was his eagerness to constantly rediscover himself: “I believe that it ought to be the duty of every artist to depart as completely as possible from the place and subject of his previous success.”²⁹ It is this spirit of re-discovery that fueled his return to composing in his Late Style, and it is very evident in the forward-looking music contained in the Etudes, which reaches well beyond the influence of the young modernist Stravinsky. In contrast to most of his predecessors who composed etudes primarily as vehicles for

²⁸ Letter to Durand, 27 September 1915; Debussy, quoted in Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, 251.

²⁹ Debussy, *Debussy on Music*, 242.

display of the performer's virtuosity, Debussy heralded a new approach to etude composition, one where the composers were increasingly interested in displaying their compositional craftsmanship in addition to showcasing the instrument and performer. In pianistic terms, the most striking example of Debussy's own highly personal language is his exploration of sonority as an end in itself; sonorities are given unprecedented freedom to exist and be manipulated as independent entities in a myriad of different textural combinations. This imaginative exploration of texture and sonority pushed the boundaries for pianists and composers alike, and in so doing expanded both of their musical vocabularies. Despite the fact that each etude addresses – to a lesser or greater extent – a specific aspect of piano technique, Debussy however uses this constraint as much as a compositional challenge as a pianistic one. This accounts for the enormous variety of compositional approaches evident in the Etudes, which far transcend the mere concern with the pedagogical function of each piece.

It is this wealth of creativity that I sought to explore in my examination of Book I of the Etudes; whether concerned with age-old technical problems such as five-finger patterns, thirds, sixths and octaves, or novel experimentations in figurations and sonorities such as eight-fingers patterns and fourths, Debussy merges past and future in order to create music that is both steeped in tradition and eternally fresh. Herein lies the remarkable accomplishment of his Etudes – they mark a towering contribution to the advancement of pianism and etude composition while retaining the highest musical standards as multi-dimensional works of art.

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