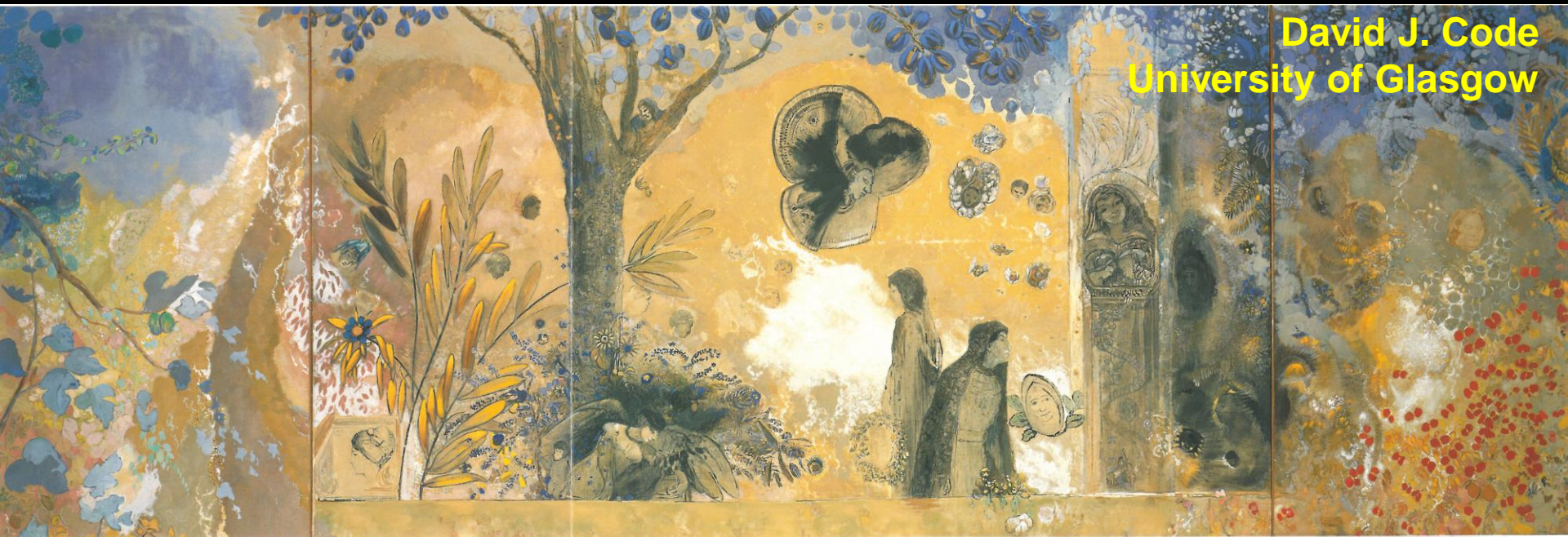




Debussy, the 'Song Triptych', and fin-de-siècle Visual Culture

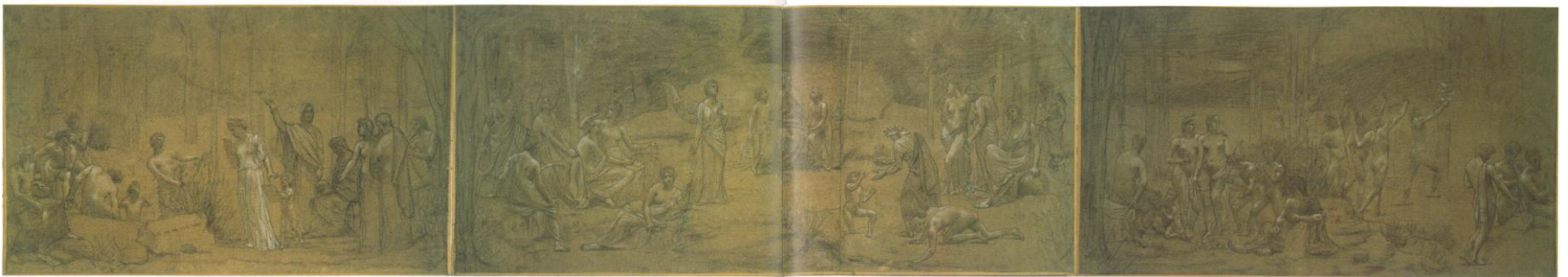


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The fin-de-siècle triptych: one monumental point of orientation



Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Décoration du grand amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne* (1888)
-an allegorical triptych showing Eloquence and Poetry (centre), flanked by Philosophy and History (left)
and the physical Sciences (right)

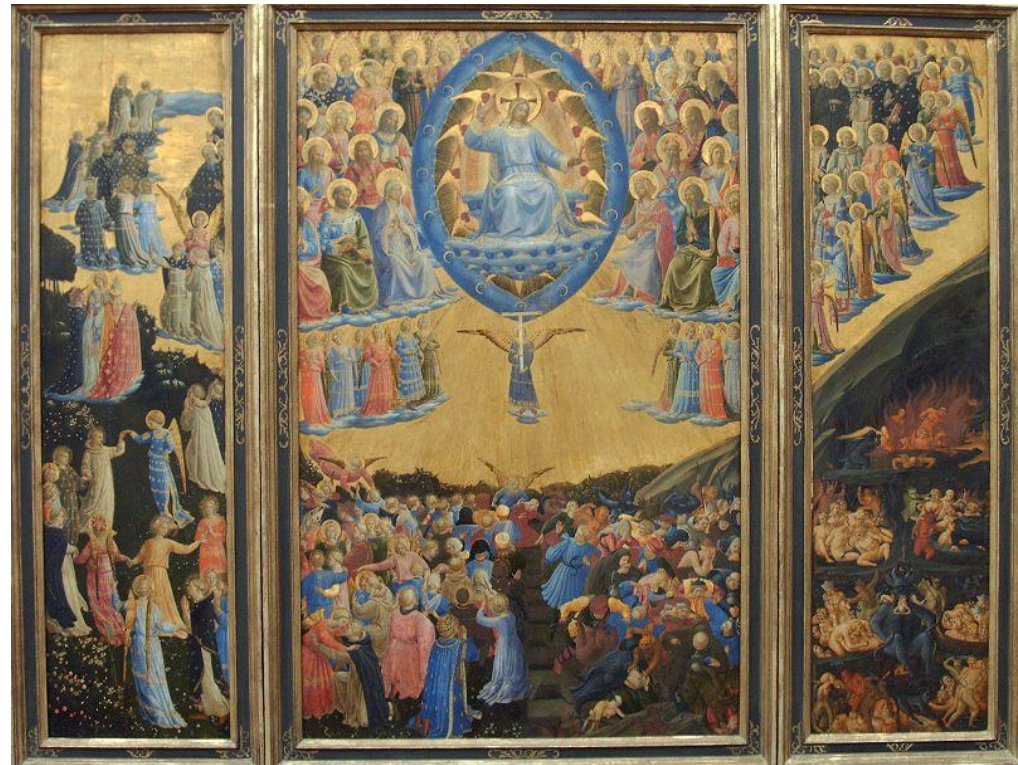


Puvis de Chavannes, *Carton pour 'La Sorbonne'* (ca. 1887)

For Puvis as pivotal figure in the Symbolist recovery of the 'decorative' art of the *Primitifs* see e.g. Maurice Denis, 'Définition du Néo-traditionnisme', *Art et critique*, 23 et 30 août, 1890

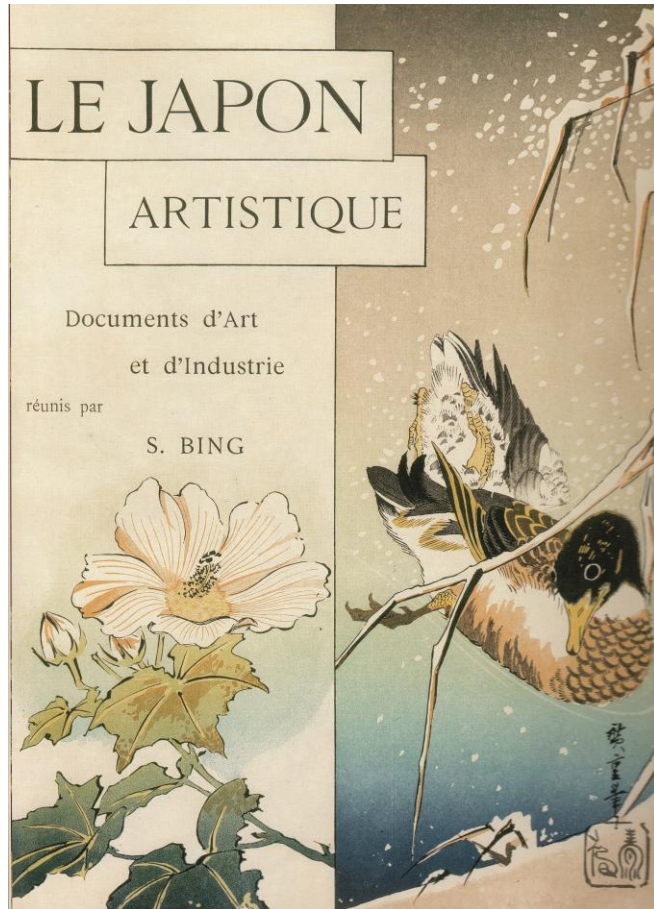


Giotto, *Trittico Stefneschi*, c. 1330
(Musei Vaticani, Vaticano)



Fra Angelico, triptych: *The Last Judgement*, c. 1440
(Gemäldegalerie, Berlin)

... but alongside Denis's 'traditionalist', deeply Catholic perspective consider also the 'apotheosis', c. 1890, of 19th-century *Japonisme*¹



Cover of *Le Japon Artistique*, vol. 1 of 6, published by S. Bing from 1888-91



Jules Chéret, Poster for Bing's grand 'Exhibition of Japanese Engraving', 1890

¹See e.g. Roger Marx, 'De l'influence de l'extrême-orient sur l'art français', *le Japon Artistique* 35 (April 1891)

Debussy's love of Japanese prints is well known from the famous Hokusai cover of *La Mer*. But perhaps that late explicit gesture gains new resonance in view of the 'triptych' form favored by *ukiyo-e* artists ...



From Utamaro (c. 1753-1806)



... through Hiroshige (1797-1858)



... and Kuniyoshi (1798-1861)



... to Kunichika (1835-1900)

... and the direct impact of this form on many post-Impressionist painters (including Denis's fellow 'Nabis') ...

Kunichika,
Triptych
(two panels)
c. 1870



Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947),
Ducks, Heron and Pheasants, 1889



Pierre Bonnard, *Marabout and Four Frogs*, 1889

... which often came into intriguing synthesis with a more 'traditionalist' impetus.



Paul Sérusier (1864-1927), *La cueillette des pommes*, c. 1891

Note the seasonal/biographical 'narrative': **spring (infancy)**; **summer (mature fertility)**; **autumn (old age)**

How might this rich artistic background guide a re-appreciation of Debussy?

- It is futile to try and isolate a single thread from this contextual tangle. See one of Gauguin's letters from Arles, where he was working alongside van Gogh (himself a collector of *ukiyo-e* prints):

'It's funny, here Vincent sees Daumier-type work to do, but I, on the contrary, see another type: **coloured Puvis mixed with Japan**. The women here have their elegant coiffures, their Greek beauty. **Their shawls forming folds like the primitives are, I find, Greek processions**'.

Letter to Emile Bernard, December 1888

- Debussy's (extremely sparse) letters from 1890-91 are lacking in specific reference ...

... But this visual background might still serve as a heuristic to open thought about the modes and degrees of 'unity' on offer in the song triptychs, beyond the constraints of received musicological approaches

Consider one last example:



Léon Frédéric, *One day the people will see the sun rise*, 1890-91

- A frankly allegorical triptych, characterized by a striking iconographic 'unity in disunity'

Trois mélodies de Paul Verlaine: two personified landscapes, one objective 'scene'

1. 'La mer est plus belle'

(The sea is more beautiful)

- Calls the sea a 'faithful nurse',
and quotes: 'you who are without hope,
die without suffering!'

2. 'Le son du cor'

(The sound of the horn)

- The horn is heard 'grieving' in the
woods; 'the soul of the wolf weeps in
that voice ...'

3. 'L'échelonnement des haies'

(The serried rows of hedges)

- Beside a 'clear sea in the light mist'
young colts 'gambol', ewes also play ...

1 (a): examples of 'chromatic' 'Mélisande' motif

(repeat m3 higher next two bars)

(Rekurs 8vb two bars later)

1 (b): 'diatonic' version emerges last bars

(Rekurs 8vb two bars later)

3 (a) opening, with diatonic version in diatonic context

(Rekurs 8vb two bars later)

(Rekurs 8vb two bars later)

3 (b): ending, last diatonic version

(Rekurs 8vb two bars later)

Fêtes galantes série I:

from passionate intimacy, through *commedia dell'arte* antics, to a synthesis of both

1. 'En sourdine' (Muted)

- intimate address ('tu', 'tes yeux')
- 'let us melt together our souls, our hearts and our ecstatic senses' ...
- '... the nightingale will sing'

2. 'Fantoches' (Marionnettes)

- 'Scaramouche and Pulcinella gesticulate beneath the moon'
- '... daughter seeks her Spanish pirate'
- '... nightingale' singing shrilly

3. 'Clair de lune' (Moonlight)

- formal address ('Votre âme') 'your soul is a charming landscape where maskers and bergamaskers go about'
- '... the fountains sob in ecstasy ...'

1 (a): opening, with 'Tristan chord' as vestigial 'yearning'

T chord, original spacing
(E# as 'appoggiatura')

[T chord then recurs 8vb, i.e. at original register]

1 (b): ending, with ambiguous (B/g#) close

B 'added 6th' / g# m7

3: opens with clear modal cadence to g# (not shown)

3: ending, in g# dorian, with re-voiced 'Tristan chord'

g# minor - - plus E# (= T chord)

(E# recurs as pure modal colouration)

Example 1 (bars 1-6)

I. La flûte de Pan

= root-pn. triad

Lent et sans rigueur de rythme

'antique scale': Lydian mode

pp

(g#/B ambiguity)

p *doux et soutenu*

Pour le jour des Hy-a - cin - thi - es, il m'a don-né u - ne sy -

pp

retenu

rinx fai - te de ro - seaux bien tail - lés, u - nis a -

retenu

retenu

vec la blan - che ci - re qui est douce à mes lé - vres com-me le miel.

pp

For Hyacinthus's day, he gave me a pan-pipe made of finely cut reeds, joined with white wax that is sweet to my lips like honey.

Example 2 (bars 17-25)

17 [a tempo]

'black-note' music for intimate contact ...

pp

sempre pp

19

tard: voi-ci le chant des gre-nou-illes ver-tes qui com-

21

Plus lent ... becomes 'white-note' music for distant hearing

rence a - vec la nuit.

ppp

pp léger mais sans sécheresse

24

Pressez un peu *pp* Presque sans voix

Ma mè - re ne croi - ra ja -

pp

[our mouths join on the] flute. It is late; here is the song of the green frogs that starts with the night. My mother will never believe [that I stayed so long to search for my lost sash.]



(continuous Excerpt: bars 9-20)

II. La chevelure

■ = M2, m7, M9

'Modern scale': whole-tone . . .

9

11

... becomes Lydian/ Aeolian mode

12

circle of fifths from here:

'V'

[I had your hair like a black collar
around my neck and on my] chest.
I caressed it, and it was mine;
and we were bound together forever like that,
By the same hair mouth on mouth,



13 *Tempo I* *p subito*

15 *en pressant peu à peu et en augmentant*

17

19 *Tempo I, plus lent*

ø7 ('Tristan' chord, at pitch)

in the way that two laurels often have only one root.
And little by little, it seemed to me, so mingled
were our limbs, that I became you or that you entered into me like my
dream

(continuous Excerpt: bar 17 to end)

107

III. Le tombeau des Naiades

■ = m2, some M7, m9)



17

ans il n'a pas fait un hi-ver aus-si ter-ri-ble. La tra-ce que tu vois est cel-le d'un

19

bouc. Mais res-tons i-çi, où est leur tom-

Octatonic scale . . .

très dim.

...becomes whole-tone

22

beau." Et a-vec le fer de sa houe il cas-sa la gla-ce de la source où ja-

mf cresc.

mf cresc.

'[The satyrs are dead. The satyrs and the nymphs as well. For thirty] years there has not been so terrible a winter. The trail that you see is that of a billy-goat. But let us stay here, where their tomb is.' And, with the iron point of his hoe, he broke the ice on the spring where long

24

dis ri-aient les Na-ïa-des.

26

Il pre-nait de grands mor-ceaux froids, et les sou-le-vant vers le ciel

28

pâle, il re-gar-dait au tra-vers.

'schematic' harmony (m3 chain)

30

retenu

ago the naiads laughed.
He took up large, cold shards, and, lifting them towards the pale
sky, he looked through.

'V' of song I

Fêtes galantes série II

from two 'ultra-modern' songs to a Wagnerian memory that clears to modality

1. 'Les ingénus' (The innocents)

- a retrospection on youthful flirting, in all its remembered insincerity

2. 'Le faune' (The faun)

- A terracotta faun cynically regards lovers in the present

3. 'Colloque sentimentale' (Sentimental colloquy)

- two lovers recall lost love in a frozen park

1 (a): opening, 'artificial mode' oriented around **F augmented triad**

Modéré

Bergeron: an 'artificial mode'

pp doucement soutenu

F aug. triad

Les hauts ta -

pp

1 (b): ending, on **F augmented triad**

50

temps tremble et s'é - ton - ne.

pp

più pp

ppp *sf* *pp* *m.g.*

F aug.

2 (a): early settling onto 'bitonal' orientation (G/ **F aug**)

[preceded by oct./chrom. arabesque]

4

pp très lointain, sans nuances, mais pourtant bien rythmé

F aug.

pp **F aug.**

avec une expression sourde [2]

Koechlin: 'borders on bitonality' (**F aug.** triad from song 1, over G-D pedal)

2 (b): 'bitonal' ending

36

pp e perdendo

F aug. fifth over G

pp plus rien

Fêtes galantes série II (continued)

3 (a): opening, with strong cadence to F major

Triste et lent

(whole-tone at first)

'V7b5 -----

4

Dans le vieux parc so - li - taire et gla - cé, Deux

(melody implies a minor)

più pp

p

-- I' (F major) ... clears to triad

3 (b): ending, with traces of nostalgia, clearing to a minor

54 en allant se perdant jusqu'à la fin

seule en - ten - dit leurs pa - ro - les.

pp

dim. 7th colour from nostalgic middle section ...

56

più pp

plus rien.

... clears to a minor

Fêtes galantes II: harmonic summary

F Aug

F Aug + G maj.

F maj + a minor ...

... to a minor

1. 'Les ingénus'

2. 'Le faune'

3. 'Colloque sentimentale'

Beyond the 'awakening of modern music'?

'Au résumé, ce qui reste dans le souvenir, après une visite prolongée au *Salon indépendant*, c'est, parmi les nouveaux venus et les chercheurs d'inédits, une multiple curiosité vers des champs d'art fort différents. Il n'y a plus d'école, à peine y a-t-il des groupes, qui se fractionnent constamment. Toutes ces tendances me font songer à des mouvants et kaléidoscopiques dessins géométriques, qui se contrarient à tel instant, s'unissent à tel autre, rentrent tantôt les uns dans les autres, pour se séparer et se fuir peu après, mais tournent tous néanmoins dans un même cercle, celui de l'art neuf'.

'In sum, that which stays in the memory after a lengthy visit to the *Salon indépendant* is, amidst the recent arrivals and the seekers of surprises, a multivalent curiosity about widely disparate fields of art. There is no longer a school, at most there are a few groups, which are constantly breaking up. All these tendencies make me think of those dynamic and kaleidoscopic geometric designs, which mirror each other at one instant, come together at another, first conjoin only to separate and fly apart soon after, but nonetheless all keep turning within the same circle, that of new art'.

- Emile Verhaeren, 'Le Salon des Artistes Indépendants', *La Nation* 22 mars 1891