

Fleeting Fairy Footprints: Trails of Influence in a Debussy Prelude

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Abstract

The titles of Claude Debussy's twenty-four preludes for solo piano contain many references to places, scenes, and characters, reflecting the composer's extensive knowledge of music, art, and literature and their influence upon his work. This study explores the rich history of the fourth prelude from book two, "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses" ("The Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers"). The title "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses," set in quotation marks by Debussy himself, indicates the immediate inspiration for the piece: the caption to an illustration by English artist Arthur Rackham in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Garden* (Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music* (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1997), 150.)

My research asserts that Debussy's musical portrayal of this illustration draws heavily on characteristics of nineteenth century fairy style, popularized by Mendelssohn in his Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826). My study compares the musical content of Debussy's prelude to the characteristic features of fairy style pioneered by Mendelssohn. In addition, this essay includes an overview of Debussy's great admiration for the music of Carl Maria von Weber and contends that musical features that Debussy admired in Weber can be seen in Debussy's own composition through both a direct reference and broader musical principles at work in the middle section of the piece.

Keywords

Fairy, Music, Debussy, Mendelssohn, Weber, Rackham



Fleeting Fairy Footprints: Trails of Influence in a Debussy Prelude

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Claude Debussy's twenty-four preludes in two books, published in 1910 and 1913, are among his best-loved works for solo piano. Unique in Debussy's output, the preludes were printed without titles above the music. Instead, they included small, parenthetical epigraphs at the end of each prelude, allowing the music to make its own impression before Debussy revealed his intentions.¹ The "titles" of the preludes refer to a host of places, scenes, and literary characters, some perhaps too obscure for the listener to guess. Even when Debussy's musical descriptions evoke clear images, further investigation is necessary to fully uncover the many threads of influence Debussy has woven into his compositions. The fourth prelude from Book 2, "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses" ("The Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers"), possesses a particularly deep history under its shimmering surface. An exploration of the sources of inspiration for "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses" demonstrates the connection between the influences of visual art, Mendelssohn's fairy style, and

1. Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature: Music for the Piano and Its Forerunners* (Belmont: Schirmer, 1996), 370.

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Debussy's admiration for Weber to the prelude, revealing a rich composite that reframes Romantic tradition in Debussy's characteristic idiom.

The title “Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses,” set in quotation marks by Debussy himself, indicates the immediate inspiration for the piece. The line “the fairies are exquisite dancers” originates from J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Garden*, a Christmas present given to Debussy's daughter, Claude-Emma, by Debussy's friend Robert Godet.² The words also appear as the caption to an illustration by English artist Arthur Rackham in Barrie's novel (ex. 1).³ Debussy and his daughter greatly admired Rackham's captivating illustrations: Debussy owned a copy of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with illustrations by Rackham.⁴ Further, Claude-Emma was familiar enough with the illustrator and the stories he brought to life to refer to him affectionately as “that old Rackham.”⁵ Rackham's illustration depicts an insect-size fairy on a thread of a spider's web, dancing to music played by a grasshopper clarinetist and a spider bassist. Debussy, ever charmed by Rackham's work and his daughter's fancies, composed this three-minute prelude to vividly capture this microscopic world in music.

2. Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music* (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1997), 150.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 146.

5. Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996), 228.

Example 1: Arthur Rackham, “The Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers.”



“Les fées” evokes fairies from its very first gesture: a *pianissimo* flurry of quintuplets in the upper-middle register of the keyboard (ex. 2). Fleet trills follow and flit from low to high; quick ascending scales interject before the initial texture reemerges. These fluttering figurations (which also reappear near the end of the piece) easily inspire images of exquisite fairy dancing. This is no coincidence—this opening employs several traits of what has been identified as Romantic fairy style. Musicologist Janice Dickensheets describes characteristics of fairy style in her comprehensive study of nineteenth-century musical topics:

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The orchestration will almost always feature a high, shimmering instrumentation that includes violins, flutes, piccolos, or the celeste. Glittering parallel thirds are common, and many melodic patterns include stepwise movement or small leaps. Melodic figuration rarely encompasses a range of more than a fifth, and sequences occur frequently. Fleet, running eighth or sixteenth notes are most common.⁶

Example 2: Claude Debussy, “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses,” mm. 1–4.

The image shows a musical score for the first four measures of Claude Debussy's "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses". The score is written for piano and consists of two systems. The first system has a treble clef on the right hand and a bass clef on the left hand. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major), and the time signature is 3/8. The tempo/mood is "Rapide et léger" and the dynamic is "pp". The melody in the right hand is a sequence of eighth notes with parallel thirds, starting on G4 and moving up stepwise. The left hand provides a bass line with similar eighth-note patterns. The second system continues the same melodic and harmonic patterns.

The characteristics of fairy music identified by Dickensheets have entered the vocabulary of musical topics in large part because of the popularity and influence of Felix

6. Janice Dickensheets, “The Topical Vocabulary of the Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 31 (2012): 122.

Mendelssohn's Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826), which musicologist Francesca Britten calls "the [nineteenth] century's paradigmatic elfin evocation."⁷ Brittan reports that the Overture was received as "a striking innovation," with particular praise "linked to its elfin subjects and their 'fantastic' representation in sound."⁸ In 1837, British journal *The Musical World* reported that the Overture was "full of originality, of invention, and indication of the highest genius."⁹ According to late-nineteenth-century music critic Henry C. Lunn, the Overture's new and inventive fairy sound is created through "effects in orchestration surpassing anything of the kind yet written."¹⁰ This novel portrayal of the fantastic in music begins after the Overture's sustained opening chords. Marked pianissimo (m. 6) and *sempre staccato*, the violins scurry through intricate passagework featuring twists and turns, scales and repeated notes (ex. 3). The upper voices move mostly in parallel thirds in eighth notes, while the lower division of the second violins and violas contrast the filigree with *pizzicato* quarter notes beginning in measure 24, contributing to what musicologist Eero Tarasti calls the "light and airy orchestral figurations of the fairy music."¹¹

7. Francesca Brittan, "On Microscopic Hearing: Fairy Magic, Natural Science, and the *Scherzo fantastique*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 3 (2011): 543.

8. *Ibid.*, 527–28.

9. "Life of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy," *The Musical World: A Weekly Record of Musical Science, Literature, and Intelligence* 4 (1837): ix.

10. Henry C. Lunn, "Fairy Music," *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 23 (1882): 136.

11. Eero Tarasti, *Myth and Music: A Semiotic Approach to the Aesthetics of Myth in Music, especially that of Wagner, Sibelius, and Stravinsky* (Helsinki: Suomen Musiikkiteollinen Seura, 1978), 102.

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Example 3: Felix Mendelssohn, Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, mm. 8–11.

Allegro di molto

Violin I *divisi* *sempre stacc.*

Violin II *divisi* *sempre stacc.*

Critics regarded these musical effects as original and innovative, a new musical sound world. But what influenced Mendelssohn’s creation of these effects? The Overture was not Mendelssohn’s first experiment with this musical language; the third-movement scherzo of his Octet op. 20 (1825) features a similar musical style. According to Felix’s sister, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, the scherzo was inspired by the Walpurgis Night’s Dream in Goethe’s *Faust*.¹² This scene describes the Golden Wedding of Oberon and Titania, including music performed by a “miniscule orchestra of flies, mosquitoes, frogs, and crickets.”¹³ Of the piece, Fanny wrote that Felix “has been really successful.”¹⁴ It made her feel “so near the world of spirits, carried away in the air, half inclined

12. Sebastian Hensel, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, and Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family (1729–1847) from Letters and Journals* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 2nd rev. ed., trans. Karl Klingemann, vol. 1, 131.

13. R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 150.

14. Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, vol. 1, 131.

to snatch up a broomstick and follow the aerial procession.”¹⁵ Musicologist R. Larry Todd hears the musical effects in the scherzo as representations of Faust’s insect and animal orchestra, citing “leaping figures at the opening for the crickets and frogs, buzzing trills for the flies, and brisk *spiccati* for the stinging mosquitoes.”¹⁶ This statement causes Brittan to argue, “For Mendelssohn and his sister, the sound of fairies was synonymous with the sound of insects.”¹⁷ The scherzo was only the beginning of this insect-fairy sound; Fanny’s son, Sebastian Hensel, calls it a “precursor to...the most brilliant result of that strangely poetic frame of mind,” the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.¹⁸

As in the scherzo of the Octet, insects remained an inspiration for Mendelssohn in the Overture. His friend Julius Schubring recalls Mendelssohn’s quieting him as a fly passed by when they were conversing outdoors because “he wanted to hear the sound it produced gradually die away.”¹⁹ Mendelssohn later showed Schubring the score of the Overture and highlighted a descending cello line, explaining, “There, that’s the fly that buzzed past us at Schönhauser.”²⁰ Based on his observations of nature, Mendelssohn translated the sounds of insects to the orchestra with light, fleet passagework in the upper register of the strings. Brittan considers Mendelssohn’s use of “ingenious combinations of

15. Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, vol. 1, 131.

16. Todd, *Mendelssohn*, 151.

17. Brittan, “On Microscopic Hearing,” 538–39.

18. Hensel, *The Mendelssohn Family*, vol. 1, 131.

19. Schubring, Julius, “Mendelssohn,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 26, no. 7 (June 1866): 260; Reprint of Julius Schubring, “Reminiscences of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy,” *Musical World* 31 (May 1866).

20. Schubring, “Mendelssohn,” 260.

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bowed and plucked strings [and] divided violins paired in extended (often chromatic) passages of thirds and fourths” as components of this “catalogue of natural effects” which creates the fairy sound.²¹

This insect-based fairy sound, inaugurated in the music of Mendelssohn, was the primary influence on nineteenth-century composers’ evocations of the fantastic. Brittan maintains that these effects inspired in music a “strand of nineteenth-century fairy language pioneered by Mendelssohn,”²² including works by Berlioz, Liszt, Grieg, and Tchaikovsky. Due to the popularity of these compositions, their characteristic sound entered the musical lexicon as “fairy music,” their influence extending even to Debussy. Being undoubtedly familiar with this nineteenth-century tradition, Debussy employed aural effects similar to Mendelssohn’s in order to capture the microscopic world of the fairy, insect, and arachnid of Rackham’s illustration—an application that is especially appropriate here, considering the fairy sound had its roots in the natural sounds of insects.

Musical features related to the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* appear from the opening bar, reconceived from Mendelssohn’s early Romantic style to suit Debussy’s twentieth-century idiom. Where Mendelssohn had sixteenth notes, Debussy writes thirty-second-note quintuplets (mm. 1–4), creating a complex blur in which individual notes are lost to the larger gesture. While Mendelssohn’s passagework was basically diatonic with frequent chromatic inflections, Debussy operates outside of tonal function. The quintuplet pattern is divided between the

21. Brittan, “On Microscopic Hearing,” 543, 542.

22. *Ibid.*, 594.

hands: the left hand on the white keys, the right hand on the black keys. The quintuplet groups are shifted up and down a pentatonic scale, in keeping with fairy music's proclivity for scalar motion, as identified by Dickensheets.²³ In these opening flourishes, Debussy portrays the fairies from a distance; the whizzing of their microscopic wings is too fast and miniature for the listener to distinguish specific motions. As Brittan notes, to humans the sounds of fairies and insects "appears merely as confused babbling."²⁴ Likewise, the rapid thirty-second note quintuplet figurations present the listener with too many notes to individually discern.

By measure 6, Debussy brings some order to the frenzied fairies, dividing the texture into three layers: the left-hand melody, the thirty-second note trill, and the pulsing inner voice, marked *staccato*, between them (ex. 4). Mendelssohn uses a similar texture in measure 8 of the Overture; the second violins play *staccato* repeated notes underneath the moving line of the first violins (ex. 3). Mendelssohn divides the first violins and moves them in thirds, whereas Debussy, unbound by traditional counterpoint rules, planes the two right-hand voices in parallel fifths (mm. 11–12).

23. Dickensheets, "Topical Vocabulary," 122.

24. Brittan, "On Microscopic Hearing," 572.

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Example 4: Claude Debussy, “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses,” mm. 6–12.

The image shows a musical score for Example 4, Claude Debussy's "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses," measures 6–12. The score is in 3/8 time and features a piano accompaniment. The right hand plays a delicate, upward-moving line, while the left hand plays a more active bass line. The piece is marked "sempre leggerissimo" and "p marqué".

Another connection to the fairy music tradition comes in the form of what Brittan identifies as the “*pianissimo* ascent,” a delicate upward run which often concludes a piece in this style.²⁵ Brittan cites the final lines of the scherzo from Mendelssohn’s Octet (ex. 5), Berlioz’s “Scherzo: Le Reine Mab” from *Roméo et Juliette* op. 17 (1839), and Liszt’s concert etude “Gnomonreigen” (1862–63) as examples of this feature.²⁶ Debussy adapts this concept, using it multiple times throughout the prelude. It first appears in measures 5–6: an open fifth, the upper note decorated with a trill, is shifted three octaves up the keyboard (ex. 6). This gesture is repeated in measures 17, 19, 105, and 107. Debussy modifies this

25. Brittan, “On Microscopic Hearing,” 579.

26. *Ibid.*

motive in measure 88, pairing the trill with a cluster chord and marking each iteration *sforzando*. At the conclusion of the piece, where a *pianissimo* ascent is usually found, Debussy prepares it on a larger scale, transposing the figurations of measures 108–112 one octave higher in measures 113–116. He then interrupts the ascent with the abrupt entrance of a high-register single-line melody (mm. 117–120). Debussy returns to the fluttering figure briefly in measure 121, cutting it short after two iterations with a broken octave from D-flat-5 to D-flat-6 (ex. 7), the highest pitch reached in the piece, before returning to the middle of the keyboard for the final three notes. In this manner, Debussy exploits the effects pioneered by Mendelssohn, capturing his fairy sound, but redesigns these effects using his unique musical vocabulary and compositional style.

Example 5: Felix Mendelssohn, Octet in E-flat Major op. 20, mm. 237–241.

Violin I

Violin II

Violin III

Violin IV

Viola I

Viola II

Violoncello I

Violoncello II

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Example 6: Claude Debussy, “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses,” mm. 5–6.

The musical score for Example 6 consists of two systems of piano music. The first system shows the beginning of measures 5 and 6. The left hand plays a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the bass clef, while the right hand plays a similar eighth-note pattern in the treble clef. A slur covers the right hand's eighth notes across both measures. The second system continues measure 6, where the right hand's eighth-note pattern becomes more complex, with some notes beamed together. The left hand continues its accompaniment. The piece concludes with a final chord in the right hand, marked *p marqué*. The instruction *sempre leggierissimo* is written above the right hand's eighth notes in the second system.

Example 7: Claude Debussy, “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses,” m. 121.

The musical score for Example 7 shows measure 121. It features three staves: a vocal line in the top staff and piano accompaniment in the bottom two staves. The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by a single note marked *8va* with a dashed line indicating an octave. The piano accompaniment in the right hand starts with a *pp* dynamic and features a melodic line with a slur. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with a steady eighth-note pattern. The piece ends with a final chord in the right hand, marked *p*.

In addition to the general impact of Mendelssohn's fairy style on the musical effects Debussy employs, the influence of Carl Maria von Weber is shown through a direct reference. The final three notes of the piece, a *pianissimo* $\hat{1} - \hat{2} - \hat{3}$ (ex. 8), quote the opening horn call of the overture to Weber's *Oberon* (1826, ex. 9).²⁷ Oberon is most recognized as the Fairy King of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Weber's opera is based on Christoph Martin Wieland's epic poem "Oberon" rather than Shakespeare's play, but Wieland himself drew in part from Shakespeare in the creation of his poem, and consequently the character of Oberon remains consistent.²⁸ Debussy's admiration of Weber is difficult to overstate. Debussy's friend Robert Godet (the same friend who gave *Peter Pan* to Claude-Emma) recalls an extended effusion of Weber's excellence from Debussy late one evening after a dress rehearsal of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Godet quotes Debussy as he discusses Oberon's horn and its portrayal by Weber, saying he was "fascinated at all times by its melancholy call" and that "it revived in [him] the emotion of that magic world with which Weber was pleased to enrich our art."²⁹ Debussy also praises Weber's mastery of creating musical characters:

27. Maurice Hinson, "Notes on the Individual Preludes," in *Claude Debussy: Préludes, Book II for the Piano* (Van Nuys: Alfred Music Publishing, 1988), 4.

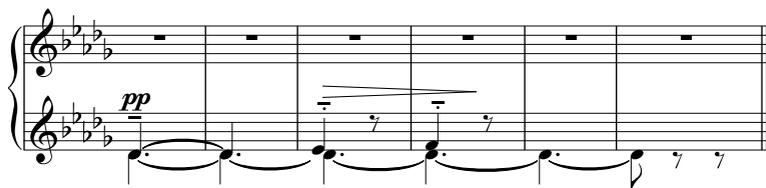
28. Birch, Dinah, "Weber, Carl Maria von," *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 7th ed., Oxford University Press, 2009, *Oxford Reference Online*, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/> (accessed 8 March 2013).

29. Robert Godet, "Weber and Debussy," *The Chesterian* (1926): 223.

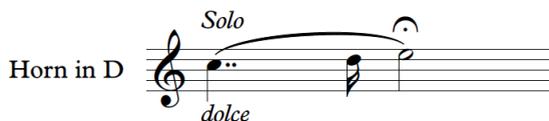
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He turns his landscapes into living beings, one might even say individualized in their characters, and if he transforms his characters, even those that are supernatural, into elementary types of innocence and malice akin to the tree and the flower, it is the genius of him, in spite of himself, that transfigures them until they are knit one within the other.³⁰

Example 8: Claude Debussy, “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses,” mm. 122–127.



Example 9: Carl Maria von Weber, Overture to *Oberon*, m. 1.



Weber’s influence on Debussy’s composition likely extends beyond the quotation of the horn call from *Oberon*. As musicologist Robert Orledge notes, “True admiration from Debussy always took the form of descriptions which

30. Godet, “Weber and Debussy,” 224.

could equally well apply to his own music.”³¹ Consequently, aspects of what Debussy revered in Weber are present in “*Les fées*,” and this connection sheds light on the mysterious middle section of the prelude. Ten short sections with contrasts in tempo, texture, and affect unfold in what musicologist Siglind Bruhn describes as “the spectator watching the fairies’ dance...as ten separate, short solos.”³² If in the outer sections Debussy views fairies from a distance, their motions represented in a flurry of quintuplets, here Debussy gives each its close-up. At close range, the fairies’ motions are individualized—two are dancing a waltz (mm. 76–83 quote a theme from Johannes Brahms’ popular Waltz in A Major op. 39 no. 15 [1865], ex. 10)³³ as others twirl around them in the trills (ex. 11). Like Weber, Debussy creates a kaleidoscope of characters that interact and contrast with one another. The first two phrases of this section exemplify these contrasts: the first is extroverted and exuberant, the second much sparser, more muted, showcasing two different dancing fairies (ex. 12). Debussy described Weber’s characters as “knit one within the other,” and Debussy achieves this also. The inverted arc-shaped melody of measures 58–61 and measures 67–70 reappears at the end of the piece in the extreme upper register of the keyboard (mm. 117–120). Here, Debussy juxtaposes the song of one fairy with the dizzying dance of the entire colony, tying together what is seen both with the microscope and the naked eye. In this way, Weber, Debussy’s favored forerunner in the

31. Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 280.

32. Bruhn, *Images and Ideas*, 154.

33. Roy Howat, *The Art of French Piano Music: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Chabrier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 252.

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pursuit of creating a “magic world” in music, can be seen as an influence of principles, inspiring Debussy’s individualization of his characters.³⁴

Example 10: Johannes Brahms, Waltz in A Major op. 39 no. 15, mm. 1–4.

The image shows the first four measures of a waltz by Johannes Brahms. The score is written for piano in A major, 3/4 time. The right hand features a melody with a *p dolce* marking. The left hand provides a simple harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes.

Example 11: Claude Debussy, “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses,” mm. 76–83.

The image shows a passage from Claude Debussy's piano piece. The score is in A major, 3/4 time. The right hand has a melodic line with trills and a *marqué pp* marking. The left hand features a complex, arpeggiated accompaniment with a *pp* marking and the instruction *un peu en dehors*.

34. Godet, “Weber and Debussy,” 223.

Example 12: Claude Debussy, “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses,” mm. 24–31.

“Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses” is a miniature masterpiece of descriptive music that has its roots in the illustrations of Arthur Rackham and the music of Mendelssohn and Weber. These strong ties to former styles suggest that Debussy, a composer credited with breaking new ground, is in many ways continuing and expanding upon Romantic tradition in his music. Debussy’s genius is found in the way he combines his extensive knowledge of music and art with his compositional inventiveness and ingenuity. Such a collage of influences concentrated in one three-minute piece exhibits Debussy’s great thoughtfulness about his music and invites consideration of the many other influences present in his twenty-four preludes.

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