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New Insights into Debussy's Sketches for the String Quartet Op. 10

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ABSTRACT

This article provides new perspectives on Claude Debussy's compositional process in his String Quartet through a fresh examination of existing sources, particularly a sketchbook kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. First, the fragmentary nature of the material contained in the sketchbook implies the existence of another manuscript, now lost. By analyzing Debussy's notations for his String Quartet in greater detail, it is possible to question the different functions the latter took on in the compositional process: in addition to the musical ideas simply noted as an aide-memoire, there are more exploratory musical fragments. Furthermore, the description and analysis of the sources of the String Quartet's creative process enhance our knowledge of Debussy's compositional methods and techniques. These new insights into the sources also show how Debussy adapted to certain social and aesthetic constraints when writing the String Quartet. The compositional context, the very genre of the quartet, and the fact that Debussy was close to Chausson and the Société nationale, led him to seek compositional solutions to combine the techniques of the Franck school with the personal aesthetic he was developing at the time. In particular, the article reconstructs part of the composer's reflection on the cyclic design, which is at the heart of the questions raised in the sketches.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Claude Debussy's String Quartet has already been the subject of numerous musical analyses. The notoriety of this early work has led to its being subjected to the scrutiny of musical theory: David Code shows the Beethovenian legacy on which Debussy based his formal construction.[1] Marianne Wheeldon, after James Briscoe,[2] emphasizes the Franck legacy, particularly audible in the cyclic form that structures the whole of Debussy's quartet.[3] Several analyses of Debussy's quartet were also published in 2000, presenting a great diversity of formal interpretations.[4] Moreover, the recent book by François de Médicis presents an analysis of the String Quartet anchored in the historical context in which it was born, showing the circulation of certain compositional techniques, in particular concerning the cyclic design.[5] This approach, based on a deep understanding of the historical context, makes it possible to better understand the originality of Debussy's quartet in relation to other composers' works of this period, profoundly marked by a "Franck" turn in the mid-1880s, into which Debussy entered under the influence of his friend Ernest Chausson, but also by other tendencies embodied by Camille Saint-Saëns or even Edvard Grieg.[6] What questions remain to be answered about the Debussy quartet from an analytical and historical point of view? Several questions arise from the results of the above-mentioned literature. Firstly, although it has already been addressed, the question of the creative process of this work remains partly unanswered: how was the quartet composed? An article by Denis Herlin on the sketches of Debussy's quartet introduces one of the fundamental sources of the work, identifying fragmentary material recorded in a tiny sketchbook; this sketchbook encompasses sketches of the String Quartet and of the *Scènes au crépuscule*, an early draft of the *Nocturnes* for orchestra.[7] Nevertheless, as we shall see in this article, it is possible to make these sources "speak" to a greater extent. The fragmentary and very incomplete nature of these sketches has long been considered a major obstacle to their interpretation. Nevertheless, the transcription of these sketches, making them more accessible, but above all the results of previous work on Debussy's creative work, allow us to broaden our understanding of these traces of his compositional activity. In doing so, it is possible to ask the following question: what are the main stages of composition and, by narrowing the focus, what techniques and compositional practices can be deduced from the analysis of these sources? Secondly, the question of the link

[1]David CODE, "Debussy's String Quartet in the Brussels Salon of 'La Libre Esthétique'," *19th-Century Music* 30/3 (2007), 257–287.

[2]James BRISCOE, "Debussy, Franck, and the 'Idea of Sacrifice'," *Revue Belge de Musicologie/Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap* 45 (1991), 27–39.

[3]Marianne WHEELDON, "Debussy and *la sonate cyclique*," *The Journal of Musicology* 22/4 (2005), 644–679.

[4]Mark DEVOTO, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality: Essays on His Music* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2004), 1–23; Jean-Philippe GUYE, Philippe GOUTTENOIRE and Éric DEMANGE, "Le *Quatuor* de Debussy: recherches analytiques et esthétiques," *Analyse Musicale* 37 (2000), 32–60.

[5]François de MÉDICIS, *La Maturation artistique de Debussy dans son contexte historique, 1884–1902* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 436–541.

[6]Concerning Grieg's influence and the Société nationale, see also Michael STRASSER, "Grieg, the Société nationale, and the Origins of Debussy's String Quartet," in *Berlioz and Debussy: Sources, Contexts and Legacies. Essays in Honour of François Lesure*, ed. by Barbara KELLY and Kerry MURPHY (London: Routledge, 2007), 103–116.

[7]Denis HERLIN, "Les esquisses du *Quatuor*," *Cahiers Debussy* 14 (1990), 23–54.

between the social network of the Société nationale de Musique, the requirements of the quartet genre and those of cyclic form, which is crucial for the reflections of musicologists who have dealt with this work, find a significative extension through an in-depth study of the sketches contained in the notebook.[8] An analysis of the quartet sketches in relation to Debussy's social and historical context can therefore provide new insights into Debussy's thinking about cyclic form, his renunciation of certain solutions and his search for new ones based on a compositional technique shared by a group of composers of the same period. By re-examining these sources as traces of the compositional process, it is therefore possible to understand some principles of formal construction and musical invention, as well as compositional techniques. Moreover, the compositional issues that emerge can be related to the techniques that can be found in other works by the composer. In this paper, I first remind the reader about the context in which to figure out and explain specific compositional constraints. Second, I briefly describe the sketchbook and its content from a philological point of view. Finally, I present an analysis of the sketches for the second and fourth movements of the quartet, introducing some aspects of Debussy's compositional process and technique.

2. CONTEXT OF CREATION

The composition of a string quartet was not an obvious choice for Debussy. While composing his String Quartet, between the end of 1892 and August 1893, Debussy was immersed in the Wagnerian and Symbolist atmosphere that prevailed in Paris. In 1893, Debussy got close to the composer Ernest Chausson, who was working on his eminently Wagnerian opera *Le Roi Arthus*; Debussy also attended the premiere of his lyric poem *La Damoiselle élue*, based on a libretto by the pre-Raphaelite Rossetti and performed at the Société nationale. It was the year Debussy gave "Wagnerian performances" with the pianist Raoul Pugno and Catulle Mendès on the *Walkyrie* and *Rheingold*, when Wagner was finally triumphant in Paris after decades of controversy about him. Debussy had been working on the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* since 1892, and in the summer of 1893, he completed his song cycle *Proses lyriques*, for which he wrote the poems himself.[9]

Debussy also attended the performance of Maeterlinck's play *Pelléas et Mélisande* on May 17, 1893 and, at the end of the summer, was about to start composing the lyrical drama. Artistic and musical life in Paris was then dominated by the Wagnerian aesthetic and by Symbolism. In these circumstances, how to interpret the fact that Debussy composed a string quartet? The string quartet is indeed a genre of pure music, a "serious" genre, far-removed from Symbolist concerns. Chamber music actually played a key role in the circles of the Société nationale de Musique, which had been created to perform French music, principally chamber music. The Société nationale was partly dominated by the ideas of Vincent d'Indy, who ensured the continuity of

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[8]Particularly de MÉDICIS, *La Maturation artistique*; WHEELDON, "Debussy and *la sonate cyclique*"; GUYE, GOUTTENOIRE and DEMANGE, "Le *Quatuor* de Debussy".

[9]For further information on Debussy's surroundings during the Symbolist period, see François LESURE, *Claude Debussy. Biographie critique* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); id., *Claude Debussy avant Pelléas ou les années symbolistes* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992); and especially the introduction in the critical edition of the String Quartet by Durand: Claude DEBUSSY, *Complete Works* III/1: *Trio pour piano, violon et violoncelle, Pièce pour violoncelle et piano dite Nocturne et Scherzo*, ed. by Roy HOWAT, *Quatuor à cordes*, ed. by Peter BLOOM (Paris: Durand, 2015).

César Franck's aesthetic. In this respect, the aesthetic expectations regarding musical form were quite strict: the model promoted by d'Indy was rooted in cyclic form as it appears in Franck's Sonata, Quartet or Quintet. In this context, composing a string quartet was all the more "serious" and elitist. Debussy was trying to become more successfully integrated into these aristocratic circles, probably at the instigation of his friend Ernest Chausson. Debussy wrote to his friend in 1893: "Your intervention in my life is surely one of the feelings dear to my heart!"[10] The correspondence between the two musicians makes it easier to understand that exchanges about their own music were very frank. On the one hand, Chausson did not want to perform any more excerpts from his Wagnerian opera *Le Roi Arthus*, because Debussy already had in mind the idea of making operas "after Wagner, not inspired by Wagner."[11] On the other hand, Debussy wanted to dedicate his quartet to Chausson, but changed his mind after Chausson expressed disappointment with the musical form of Debussy's quartet:

> Must I say, too, that I have had a few days of real grief about what you told me about my quartet, for I felt that after all, it had only made you love more *certain things*, whereas I would have liked it to make you forget them! Anyway, I will make another one that will be for you, and seriously for you, and I will try to ennoble my forms![12]

It is clear from this letter that Chausson felt that the musical forms used by Debussy in the various movements of his quartet were not "noble" enough. This adjective seems particularly well chosen by Chausson, as it conveys a social meaning regarding the composition of a string quartet and following certain formal codes. It is quite fascinating to see that this preoccupation with "ennobling forms" can be tracked in the sketches for the String Quartet. In several instances, we can see Debussy hesitating between alternative solutions to formal problems appearing in the fourth movement of the work. These problems, as we will see, are frequently related to cyclic form, a formal principle valued by César Franck and taught by d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum. Debussy used cyclic design in many works of instrumental music and often encountered major difficulties in composing the last movement, recapitulating the different themes of the work. The sources for the last movements of the String Quartet, "Iberia," the Cello Sonata and the Violin Sonata are all marked by an abundance of alterations.[13] As for the String Quartet, this difficulty can be documented through correspondence. Concerning the String Quartet, Debussy wrote to his friend Ernest Chausson: "As for the finale of the Quartet, I cannot achieve what I would like it to be, and here I am three times starting again without success (it is suffocating!)"[14] Then, the following month: "I think I can definitely show you the finale of the Quartet, which really made me unhappy."[15]

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[10]Claude DEBUSSY, *Correspondance, 1872–1918*, ed. by Denis HERLIN and François LESURE (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 126–127. See the letter to Ernest Chausson, May 7, 1893.

[11]Claude DEBUSSY, "Pourquoi j'ai écrit Pelléas" (April 1902), in id., *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 62–44.

[12]DEBUSSY, *Correspondance*, 192. See the letter to Ernest Chausson, February 5, 1894.

[13]François DELÉCLUSE, *Dans l'atelier de Claude Debussy. Processus créateur et méthodes de composition* (Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, forthcoming).

[14]DEBUSSY, *Monsieur Croche*, 140. See the letter to Ernest Chausson, July 2, 1893.

[15]Ibid., 150. See the letter to Ernest Chausson, August 15, 1893.

3. SOURCES

There are few sources that can provide us with information on the genesis of the quartet. The steps leading to the composition and publication of the work are rather complex, as is demonstrated by the critical edition published by Durand in 2014 as part of Debussy's *Complete Works*. Most of these different sources listed in Table 1[16] provide information on the editorial and performance process. But only one source keeps track of the composer's melodic, harmonic, and formal invention: this is the sketchbook preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (ms. 20632 [2]).

Another source, unfortunately lost although documented in the musician's correspondence, could provide a considerable amount of information not only for the study of the creative process, but also for an examination of the performance practice. The parts used by the Ysaÿe Quartet during the creation of the work are probably covered with revealing annotations made

Table 1. Sources for the String Quartet

Primary sources	Location/Edition
Sketches in a notebook	Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2)
Autograph of the score	Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 1004
Handwritten parts 1 (first performance)	Lost
Handwritten parts 2	Lost (offered to Ysaÿe)
Proofs	New York: Pierpont Morgan Library (Lehman Deposit), D289.Q16
Copies of the separate parts	Paris: Durand, 1894
First edition	Paris: Durand, 1894
Early edition of the score with corrections 1	Royaumont: François Lang Library
Early edition of the score with corrections 2	Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Rés. Vmb.70
Study score	Paris: Durand, 1904 and 1907
Secondary sources	**Edition**
Correspondence	Claude Debussy, *Correspondance, 1872-1918*, éd. Denis HERLIN and François LESURE (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
Public writings	Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, éd. François LESURE (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

[16]This table is based on the critical edition: Claude DEBUSSY, *Complete Works*, ibid.

by the quartet and may testify to the interactions between the composer and the performers of his piece.

The sketches for the String Quartet are recorded in a tiny notebook measuring 12 cm in height and 15.5 cm in length. It is therefore truly a pocket-size format. The sketches of the quartet are written down at the end of the notebook, from page 46 to the end, using the notebook in an upside-down position. The sketches devoted to the String Quartet relate to the first movement, second movement (a scherzo), and last movement. There is no sketch for the third movement in the notebook. In addition to this remarkable absence, there are considerable differences in the number of pages devoted to other movements. Indeed, the sketches are mainly dedicated to the last movement of the work. Whereas only two pages are related to the first movement and three pages to the scherzo, no less than nine pages have to do with the fourth movement. How can we interpret these significant differences between the movements? First, the abundance of sketches devoted to the fourth movement confirms what Debussy explained in his correspondence with Chausson, namely that he encountered difficulties in composing the last movement and that he tried many solutions. Second, it can be assumed that the lack of sketches for the slow movement is due to its independence from the other movements of the quartet. The third movement contains no thematic reminder of the cyclic theme, so its composition may well have begun in another source. The sociology of texts teaches us that the relationship between a medium and its content is not insignificant.[17] It would seem that the sketches for the String Quartet confirm this idea: only the movements linked by the cyclic theme are sketched in the notebook, as if the medium itself participated in linking the different movements composed by Debussy. In other words, the material aspect of the source is crucial to the creative process. The notebook thus had a significant compositional function, which is characteristic of the composer throughout his career. Writing in a sketchbook implies relationships between the fragments sketched out, a transition from the piano to the sketchbook and from the sketchbook to the continuity draft.

In no way can these sketches be considered as a continuity draft. They are essentially fragmentary sketches that are devoted to a few specific measures of the quartet. The presence or absence of some passages can reveal several aspects of the compositional process. Firstly, the sketchbook, given its tiny size, probably served as an aide-mémoire. When on his way, if an idea came to Debussy, he would scribble it in his notebook, to use it later in a continuity draft of the work. Debussy probably used this sketchbook in very different circumstances, as it contains quite different types of musical notation. In the notebook, the quartet parts are mostly written down as a two-stave piano reduction, without any indication of clef, key and time signature. This suggests that Debussy was working at least partly at the piano. In addition, there are other types of musical notation in the sketchbook. Some passages are directly written down as a score, with four staves: in this case, we can think that Debussy was composing "at his desk." In any case, this sketchbook is particularly fragmentary; clearly, it is used as a supplementary document in which Debussy wrote down ideas that he may copy out into another document. Therefore, it must be assumed that another document may have existed. This other document, written just before the autograph of the score, may have incorporated a continuity draft in which the composer mainly elaborated the form of the work.

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[17]See Donald F. MCKENZIE, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

4. THE SKETCHES FOR THE SCHERZO

In order to understand the function of the sketches in the compositional process of this scherzo, it seems important to recall briefly some of their characteristics. Short and rather simply conceived, the movement includes two trios (Table 2). Debussy has linked his scherzo with the first movement through a cyclic connection: the entire thematic material of the scherzo is based on the cyclic theme, as shown in Example 1.

    The main theme of the scherzo is the cyclic theme itself, appearing first at the beginning of the opening movement. This is not a direct quotation of the theme, but the chromatic version appearing at the beginning of the development of the first movement (mm. 61–62), remaining unexploited

Table 2. Organization of the scherzo

Sections	Scherzo 1	Trio 1	Scherzo 2	Trio 2	Scherzo 3	Coda
Measures	1–53	54–85	86–107	108–147	148–167	168–177
Tonalities	G	E♭	C → V of E♭	E♭	G	G

Example 1. Derivations from the cyclic theme in the scherzo

there and only finding its deployment in the scherzo. In this chromatic version of the theme, the melodic pattern keeps the general design of the first movement's main theme and the motif based on an auxiliary note in a sixteenth-note triplet. Rhythm is radically transformed as well as the time signature; in addition, there is a descending chromaticism (G–F♯–F♮). Last, this theme is heard as an ostinato and no more as a theme which will be developed. As for the trio's theme, it is based on a simple augmentation of the scherzo ostinato: the chromaticism and triplet motif are kept, but the rhythm comes from the main theme of the first movement in augmentation (Example 2).

To understand Debussy's work in his sketchbook, it is worth noting that in the return of the scherzo, at measures 87–107, the composer repeats the initial ostinato but brings out a new melody, noted in Example 3. One can argue that this secondary theme stems from the cyclic theme too. Nevertheless, it seems that Debussy chose not to emphasize this link: we can hear the connection only with the descending second and the chromatic pattern from B♮ to B♭.

The three pages for the scherzo written down in the sketchbook have to do with two very different passages, relating to measures 86–99. As it can be read on the diplomatic transcription (Examples 4a and 4b), the passage exactly relates to the return of the scherzo, at the end of the first trio. What can we learn from the sketch? Debussy wrote this passage down as a two-stave reduction. The secondary theme appears in the left hand, in the bass, then at the end of the second system, and continues in the last system. In this last system, the rest of the quartet is largely left implicit, since there is only the melody without any accompaniment. The secondary theme is not written down in the same way as in the final score. Indeed, as we can see in Example 3, in the last
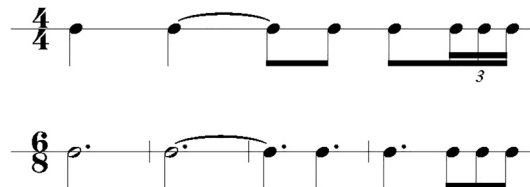
Example 2. Augmentation of the cyclic theme's rhythm

Example 3. Secondary theme of the first return of the scherzo
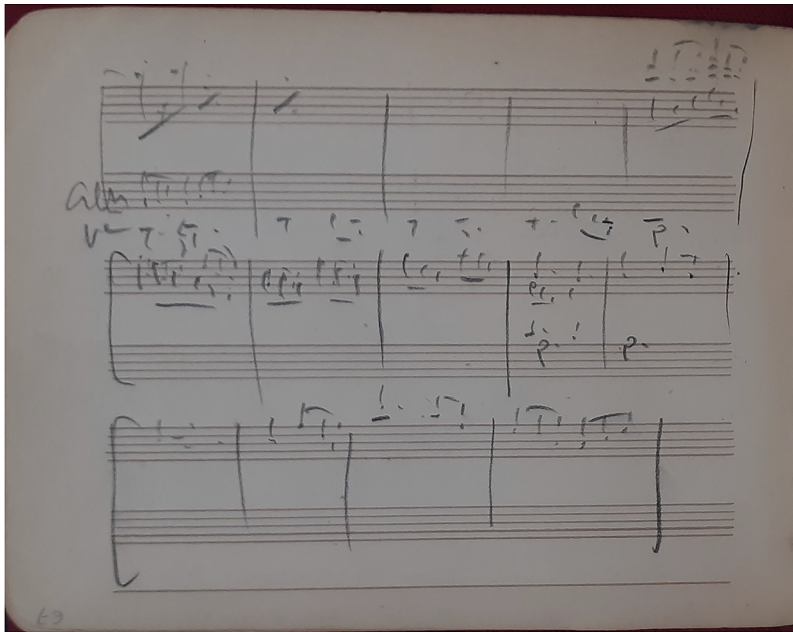
Example 4a. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 67[18]

[18]Diplomatic transcriptions of the sketches have been created for ease of reading and analysis: the musical notation in grey represents pencil; editorial additions are indicated in black square brackets. The shaded areas indicate crossed-out sections. The great difficulty with Debussy's sketches is the lack of accidentals: Debussy's music partly relies on subtle changes of mode, which are difficult to trace in the sketches.
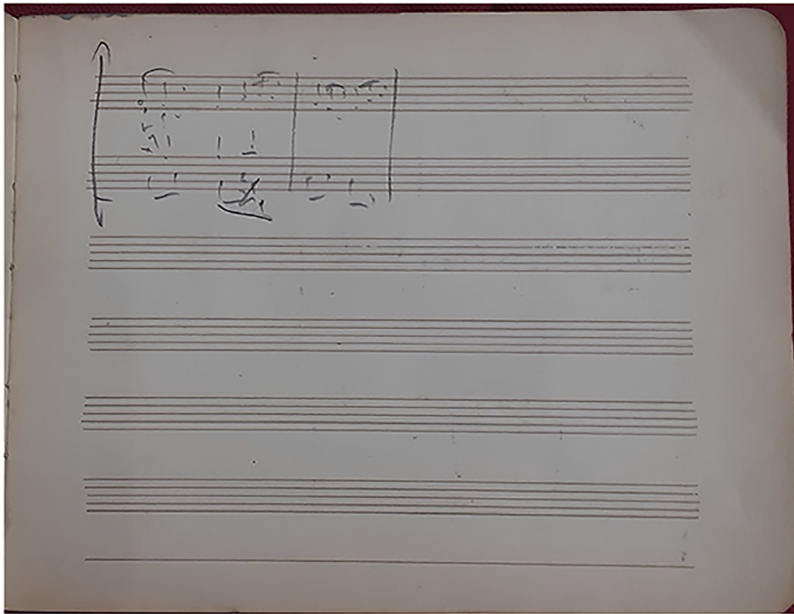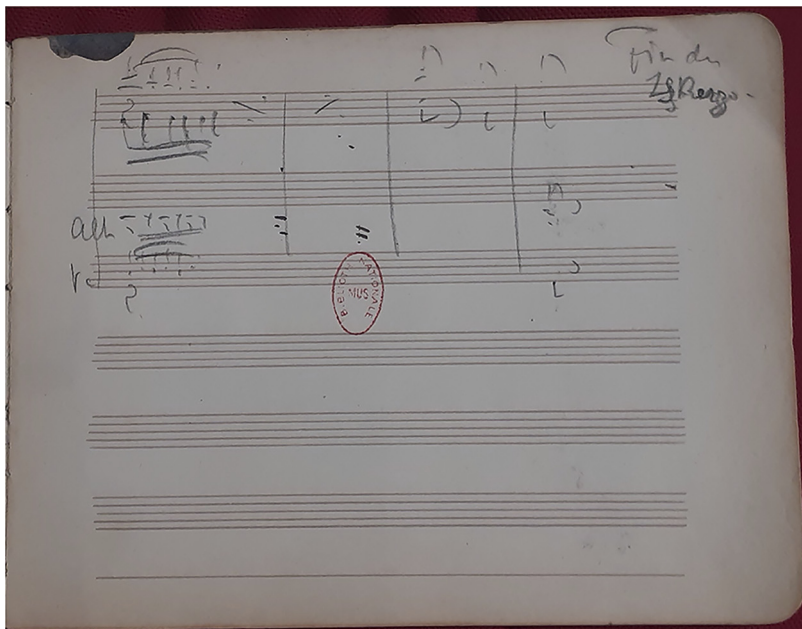
Example 4b. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 66

measure of the theme, the rhythm is not the same in the sketch as it is in the final score. These changes reveal Debussy's logic concerning thematic construction. Indeed, the last measure of the secondary theme of the trio is initially notated as a dotted quarter note and three eighth notes; in the final version, Debussy transformed the rhythm, using instead four eighth notes. In doing so, the composer chose to blur the relationship between the secondary theme and the cyclic theme, as the first rhythmic idea refers directly to the triplet rhythm of the cyclic theme. Moreover, by removing this rhythmic motif, Debussy avoided aligning the rhythm of the secondary motif with that of the ostinato: changing this simple rhythm thus makes it possible to distinguish the theme more clearly, to make it stand out, and to create a polyrhythm of three-against-two with the ostinato.

Moreover, this fragment provides some information on how Debussy thought about musical form. Why did he write this fragment in his sketchbook? What meaning might it have for the creative process? This passage can be understood as a trace of reflection on the form of the scherzo. The function of this passage corresponds to a precise need during the composition: a passage that brings the scherzo back while varying it, and one that separates the two trios. It can therefore be assumed that the material in question is absent from the hypothetical continuity

draft I have mentioned. Thus, the fragment written down in the sketchbook corresponds to an area added afterwards, once the general outline of the scherzo had been determined. In other words, either the idea of separating the trios may have arisen as a second thought, or the idea of a return of the scherzo between the two trios was present, but Debussy wished to transform the texture of this return, which he had originally planned to be more literal.

The other sketch for the scherzo found in the sketchbook seems to be consistent with this hypothesis: the sketch includes the coda of the scherzo (Example 5). In this sketch, Debussy is clearly searching for a special texture with which to conclude the movement. Indeed, the layout on three staves indicates that the composer is primarily experimenting with texture. In other cases and as mentioned already, the composer tends to write down his ideas in the form of a reduction of the four voices on two staves, like a piano reduction.

Example 5. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 68

As a result, Debussy clearly wrote fragments down in this sketchbook, which are intended to complete the areas of musical form that he was developing and which he added to the continuity draft manuscript which, unlike the sketchbook, has disappeared. In this sketch, three things are remarkable. Firstly, Debussy worked on the violin part 1 in three stages, changing the chordal arrangement (Example 6). Debussy first thought of a motif based on a repetition of D and B. However, the B does not match the chord: G–E–C–A–[B]. Consequently, he changed this motif to D–G to match the chord (G–E–C–A); finally, Debussy changed this motif again in the final version to G–D, creating a more complex harmony based on a stack of fifths (C–G–D–A–E).

Secondly, and in a simpler way, Debussy suppressed the harmonization of the last three measures to the advantage of the more conclusive unison (Example 7). Thirdly, Debussy

Example 6. Steps to transform the coda

Example 7. Last measures of the scherzo

changed the rhythmic pattern: although he kept the same overall rhythm from the sketch, he increased its overall duration.

The particularly fragmentary sketches for the scherzo of Debussy's String Quartet nevertheless tell us about several aspects of the genesis. In all likelihood, Debussy needed to rethink some passages during the creative process. These sketches show his reflection not only on musical form and motivic connections, but also on rhythmic and melodic invention, harmony and textures.

5. THE SKETCHES FOR THE FINALE

The sketches for the fourth movement of Debussy's String Quartet clearly show the difficulties experienced by the composer during the composition. They also confirm that these difficulties were linked to his choosing between competing ideas, or finding the right formulation of a particular idea. Almost all the sketches for the fourth movement show the composer struggling with the requirements of cyclic design, especially the connection of the various themes with the cyclic theme, but also thematic superimpositions, and more concrete issues. These compositional difficulties can be understood in the French musical context of the 1890s: in the Franckist tradition, the fourth movement is the moment in which the cyclic theme and the various other themes of the work are recapitulated and merged with each other through contrapuntal combinations, in a progression generally from minor to major.[19]

In the sketchbook, the traces of Debussy's compositional work on the fourth movement seem disordered: the order in which the fragments appear in the sketchbook prompts one to consider each sketch and its content, as well as the order in which they appear, the succession of ideas in the sketchbook (taking into account the fact that the sketches are noted from the middle of the sketchbook, used upside-down). As shown in Table 3, the disorganized appearance of the sketches is due to the fact that musical ideas are not linked chronologically, but correspond to different passages of the movement.

Consequently, it is possible that the function of the sketches for the fourth movement is somewhat different from the role of the sketches of the scherzo: concerning the latter, Debussy clearly wrote fragments down in the sketchbook, which are intended to complete material in another manuscript: in this case, sketches for the scherzo include secondary but very precise areas of the musical form; these areas should probably be added to the now missing continuity draft. In contrast, sketches for the last movement have a more exploratory dimension that those for the scherzo do not. Debussy seems to be searching for ideas rather than writing down specific areas of the form, as in the scherzo sketches. From this point of view, it is possible to assume, given the disordered nature of the ideas, that these are the first ideas for the last movement hastily committed to paper and not a first organization of the form or, as in the scherzo, a temporary format for clarifying certain missing sections. In this respect, the function of the sketchbook could change utterly during the course of the composition: the sketchbook could be used not only to search for ideas, but also as an intermediary writing medium, when the work was already at a more advanced stage of development. Thus, the different uses of the

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[19]On the Franckist context and compositional techniques in Debussy's music at this time, see de MÉDICIS, *La Maturation artistique*, 435–541.

Table 3. Organization of the sketches for the finale[20]

Pages	Measures/Content
65	145–148
64	not retained (continuation of the previous section)
63	same motif as 49ff.
62	≈268–288
61	≈149–151
60	not retained (illegible)
59	≈1ff. (first version of the slow introduction)
58	continuation of the slow introduction
57	blank
56	≈35–36 (first version of the refrain's harmonization)
55	not retained (a variation of the refrain)

sketchbook depended on the type of movement and the type of idea needed, but also on the complexity of the ideas to be developed.

6. THE IDEA OF THE REFRAIN

The main theme of the fourth movement is an easy-to-remember rondo theme. Debussy gave it a rough and popular character using a harmonization based on open fifths, alternating chromatically between G–D and F♯–C♯, and blurring the tonality of G minor (Example 8). The theme is derived from the generative cell of the cyclic theme in its chromaticized version, retaining the same characteristic intervals: the descending minor second (G–F♯ in the chromaticized cyclic theme) is transformed into an ascending minor second (A–B♭), while the descending major third skip (F♯–D in the chromaticized cyclic theme) remains the same by enharmony (B♭–F♯).

Several fragments of the sketchbook (pp. 58, 56, and 55) relating to the fourth movement are devoted to the conception of the theme and different versions of this harmonization. There is a first version of the refrain which was not used in the final version, as shown in Example 9. This version indicates only the violin parts, without the viola and cello. The refrain appears slightly modified and ends with the dissolution of the motif. This sketch is a continuation of the sketches for the slow introduction (p. 59), which seems to attempt a fragmentary presentation of the refrain, perhaps implying an acceleration. This would be the first idea of a gradual acceleration of the tempo, an idea which in the final version took the form of the chromatic fugato in measures 15–30.

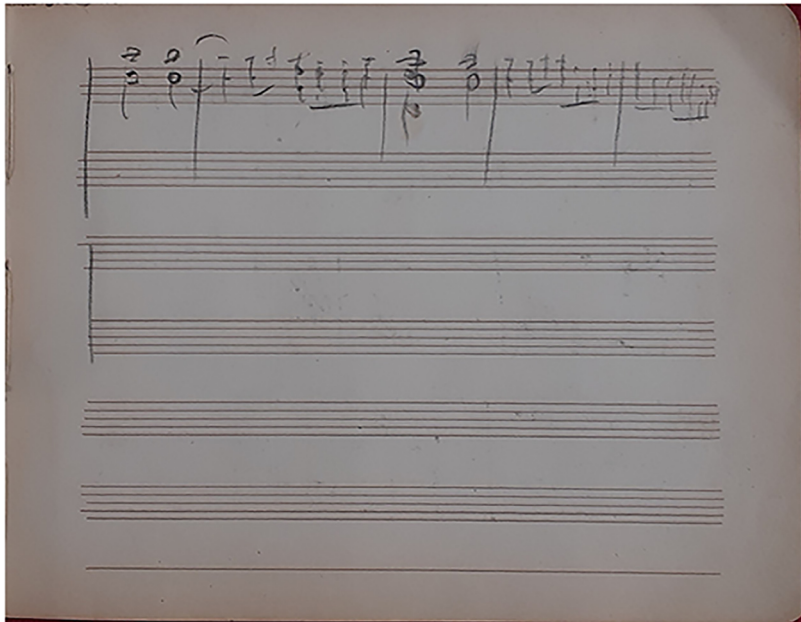[20]Information of this table principally stems from HERLIN, "Les esquisses du quatuor," ibid.

Example 8. Refrain of the finale and motivic connection

Example 9. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 58

As shown in Example 10, a sketch (p. 56) shows another idea for the arrangement and harmonization of the refrain. Here the refrain is based on stacked fifths, in an acoustic or "Bartók" scale (C–D–E–F♯–G–A–B♭). It is possible that this is the first idea to announce the refrain. The open-chord voicing with double stopping and half note rhythm lies close to the final version but remains nevertheless very different. These different steps to the final accompanimental pattern show that Debussy thought very carefully of the different possibilities and that formulating the pattern could take a long while. In this case, we can see Debussy's process of elimination for the arrangement: the idea is first duplicated, as the numbers "one" and "two" indicate in the sketch (Example 10, central stave of the system). Then, in the final version of this passage, Debussy suppressed the first violin part to avoid the octave-doubled melody when the refrain is first announced; he finally assigned the melody to the viola to have a rougher sound; the octave-doubled version of the melody appears only at the second time (to be compared with Example 8).
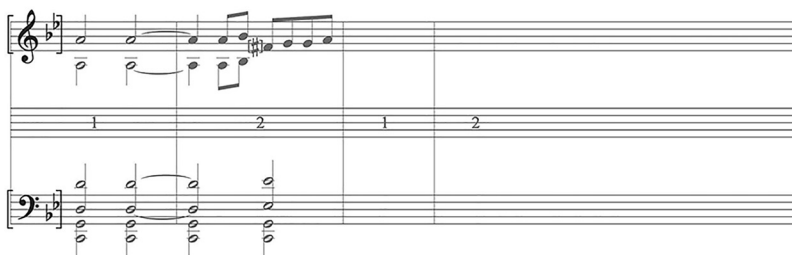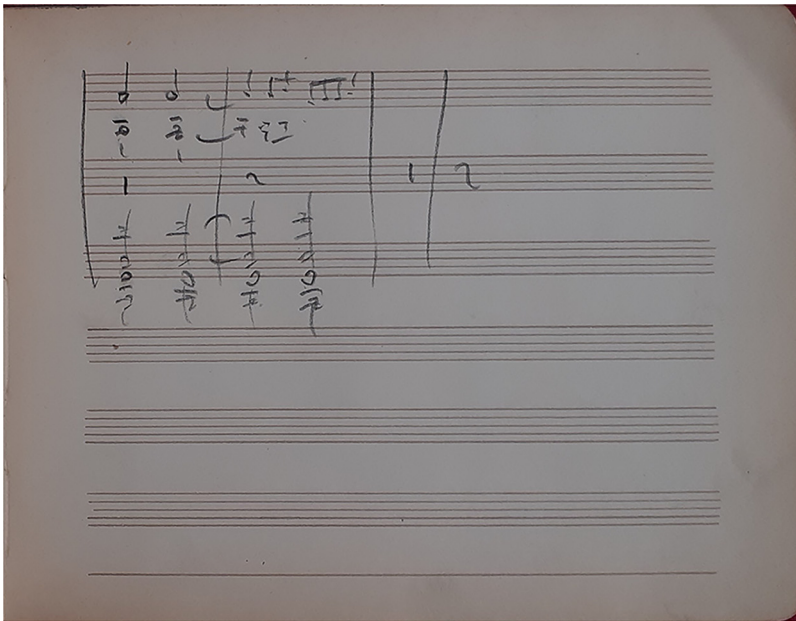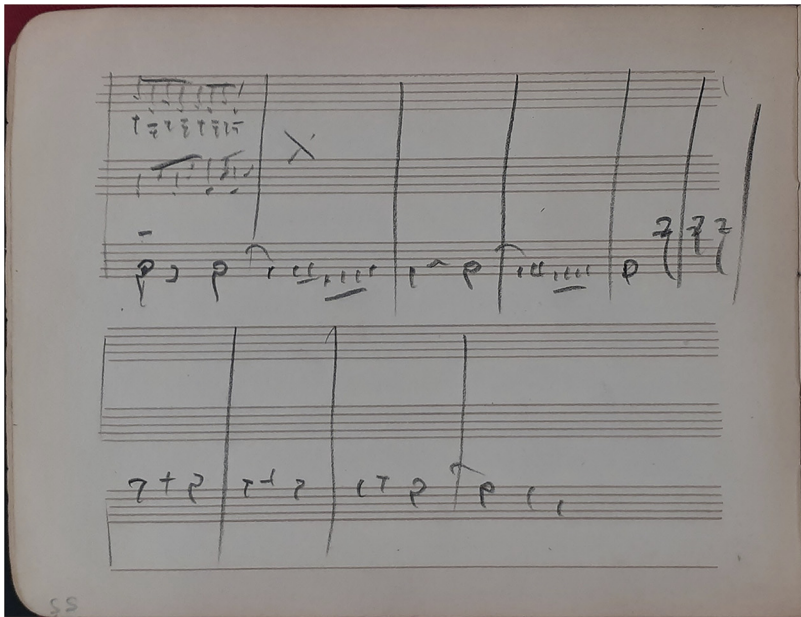

Example 10. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 56

As can be seen in Example 11, a final version of the theme appears on page 55. During this first stage of the composition, the refrain appears in B♭ and is written in a low register in the cello, not in the viola. Moreover, the rest of the quartet plays an F dominant ninth chord (F–A–C–E♭–G) on a tonic pedal (B♭). As shown by the layout, particular attention is paid to the texture and arpeggiation of the chord. This is a harmonization and arrangement of the main theme that were

Example 11. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 55

eventually not used by the composer. This type of experimentation found in the sketches shows the composer searching for different variants of a theme he had established before. These attempts at harmonization and arrangement are intended to find a place in the formal construction of the work at a later stage. This version in B♭ major is followed, in the cello part (second system in Example 10), by an embryonic development of the refrain motif (ascending second and descending third) in augmentation: this is a discarded idea. Given the fact that the two sketches follow each other, it is possible that this version was conceived as a first variation of the refrain, just after its first exposition where it is built on stacked fifths harmonization.

In all three cases it is remarkable that the beginning of the theme is based on two half notes followed by the eighth-note motif. However, one of the most significant aspects of this theme is the imbalance created by its off-beat beginning, directly on the eighth-note rhythmic motif. As can be seen in Example 12, Debussy suppressed both half notes and added a new continuation. In other words, Debussy probably first composed an initial version of the fourth movement, as we know from his correspondence; and, as the sketches demonstrate, this first version of the movement should have involved a remarkably different main theme, one that did not have a second part based on a dotted quarter note and eighth-note pattern. As a result, the head of the theme has been completely changed. It is meaningful, because the head of the theme with both eighth notes refers to the cyclic theme of the first movement, which begins with two long notes (two quarter notes). Debussy therefore eliminates this reference in order to give greater independence to the theme of the fourth movement. In doing so, he gives the refrain theme a more spirited, abrupt and unstable character, beginning on an offbeat with short rather than long notes. This motivic work shows how crucial the search for thematic ideas was in the conception of Debussy's quartet, especially in view of the construction of a tight and complex network of motivic relationships between the movements, in line with the school of Franck and his emulators in the Société nationale.

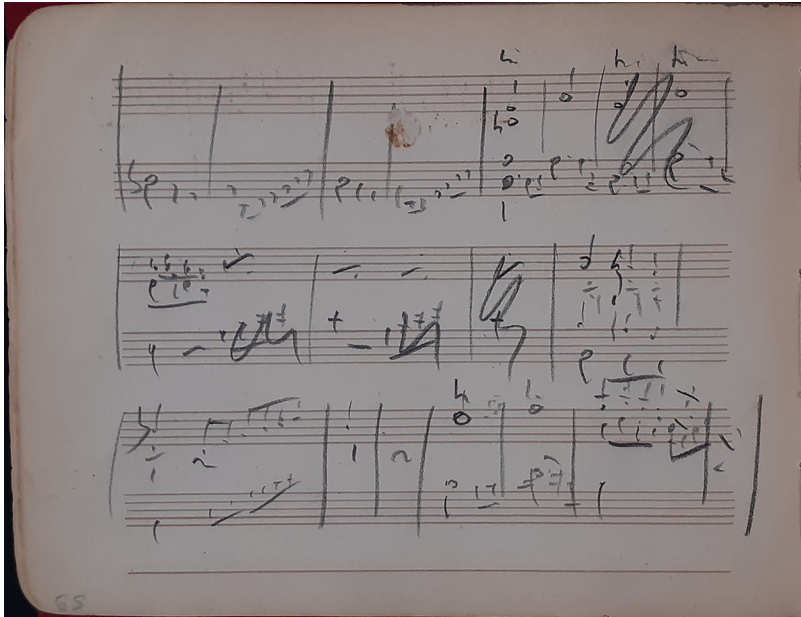## 7. FIRST VERSION OF THE SLOW INTRODUCTION

The fourth movement contains a slow introduction in two parts, designed to recall the mood of the third movement, a highly expressive slow movement. As shown in Example 13, the first part

Example 12. Rhythmic print of the cyclic theme

Example 13. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 59

of this slow introduction is recorded in the sketchbook (p. 59). The version of the slow introduction first imagined by the composer and noted in the sketch differs in several aspects from the final version.

Firstly, the initial theme for the cello solo is slightly modified: as can be seen in Example 14, in the final version, the rhythm is written in diminution; moreover, there is a significant switch

Cyclic theme in the 2nd movement

First theme of the 4th movement (Sketch)

First theme of the 4th movement (Printed score)

Example 14. Changes in the first motif of the slow introduction

at the beginning between C♭ and A♭. In so doing, Debussy blurs the link with the cyclic theme of the work in the version set out in the second movement.

Such relatively minor changes may look rather surprising. Debussy seems to be trying to weaken the link between the beginning of the movement and the cyclic theme. But it seems important to note that the weakening of this connection with the cyclic theme is also linked to changes in the development of the slow introduction. Indeed, in the final version, the thematic connection with the cyclic design is ensured by the answer of the full quartet at measure 3 (Example 15), quoting the chromatic version of the scherzo in a triplet rhythm.

As can be seen in Example 15, the theme is played in the first violin part: in this final version, the thematic connection can be heard not at the beginning of the cello phrase, but from measure 3. In the early version (see Example 13) Debussy first repeats the musical idea of the

Example 15. Debussy, String Quartet, mov. IV, mm. 1–3

solo cello strictly, twice in a row; in the final version the phrase is also repeated, but only in the violin (mm. 9–10 of the final score) and is fragmented by the responses of the whole quartet, referring to the cyclic motif (mm. 3–8, and 10–14). Other elements of rewriting are remarkable in this sketch, compared to the first version. In addition to the first phrase, greatly enriched by the play of texture (solo/tutti) and the motivic transformation of the beginning, Debussy completely rethinks the development following the recall of the cyclic theme. This first developmental idea in the introduction initially extended to page 58 of the sketchbook, where we find the refrain of the last movement (Example 9).

The first version of the development, partly crossed out in the sketch, was thus intended to lead directly into the refrain of the fourth movement. In the final version, this development is much more extensive: it is replaced by a chromatic fugato that increases the musical tension and gradually raises the tempo (mm. 15–24), before musical tension decreases through a chromatic fall accompanied by a progressive attenuation of the texture (mm. 25–30), until a new interruption (m. 30), just before the beginning of the refrain.

In the original version, the development is not based on the same progression. The idea is rather to build up the musical tension to the theme of the refrain, rather than to interrupt the musical flow again before playing the refrain. The development therefore does not have quite the same function in the early version as in the late version. In the early version, the texture of the quartet is characterized by the unfolding of a ninth chord on Db, while the cello fragments the previous theme by playing only the end of it (Ab–Cb–Eb–Db), the texture also being enriched by trills (Example 12). In the final version, there is a similar texture at the end of the chromatic fugato progression (mm. 21–24), but in a much tenser harmonic context.

Moreover, at the end of the second system of the sketch (Example 12), another idea appears: in the sketch version, the unfolding of the texture described above is interrupted by a measure in which the quartet plays the initial motif of the cyclic theme homorhythmically (a half note and two quarter notes), again in tenser harmonies (Example 16).

This idea of a fragmentation in texture and harmony will be abandoned in the introduction, but will be taken up again, as an essential idea, later in the quartet: indeed, the dancing refrain of the fourth movement is often interrupted by fortissimo chords played by the whole quartet in homorhythm, evoking the very first harmonization of the cyclic theme in the first movement (mm. 35–37, 43–44 etc.).

This analysis of the first version of the introduction to the fourth movement should also be understood in relation to the models of thematic exposition that Debussy had in mind when he

Example 16. Idea of homorhythmic interruption

composed and then revised the beginning. Indeed, as de Médicis has shown, Franck's music generally sought to create an effect of emergence of the theme at the end of a progression,[21] a technique that Debussy appropriated and which would be a constant object of reflection in his career.[22] Finding original ideas with which to bring about the presentation of the theme was an important compositional challenge for Debussy, as history and analysis prove, and as the traces of work in the sketches confirm.

8. THEMATIC SUPERIMPOSITIONS

The composer's questions in the introduction to the fourth movement concern cyclic design and thematic recalls, but also how to bring about the exposition of a theme to generate musical tension through harmonies and textures. In the final version, the addition of a fugato is a clear reference to the Société nationale tradition of fugal writing and contrapuntal textures with superimposed motifs and themes. The superimposition of several themes seems to have been a major concern of Debussy during the writing of the fourth movement, as shown by several sketches, particularly on two facing pages of the sketchbook (p. 65, Example 17 and p. 64, Example 18).

In the second of both these sheets (Example 18, p. 64), we find a sketch which was not used by the composer. This sketch includes a development mixing several motifs (Example 19). Here we find the material of the second movement (E–D–C♭–A–C♮–E–F♯–E), but obviously in a duple time signature: the ostinato based on the cyclic theme in the cello part takes up the chromaticism and auxiliary note typical of the cyclic theme as introduced in the second movement. To this, the composer added the head of the refrain in the viola (A–B–F♯–G). Debussy alternates this thematic superimposition with trills. With these developmental fragments, the composer seeks solutions for superimposing fragments of material. It is rare to find completely abandoned fragments in Debussy's sketches, for, according to the testimony of Debussy's friend Robert Godet, "Debussy only took up the pen when he had the musical idea firmly in mind":[23] however, there was still a great deal to be done at this point until the version of the fourth movement finally satisfied him. Not only did Debussy find a number of solutions for combining ideas in his fourth movement, but he also sought thematic combinations that would match and fit into the form of his work.

On the previous page (p. 64), there are several themes which, in the final version, are not superimposed. The second and third measures of the sketch are equivalent to measures 145 to 148 of the final score (Example 20), but in diminution: the final version doubles the rhythmic values. In any case, eighth-note triplets in pizzicato are too difficult to execute at this speed. In addition to the rhythm, Debussy does not distribute the register in the same way: the first violin part is written an octave higher in the sketch than in the final version. Finally, and most
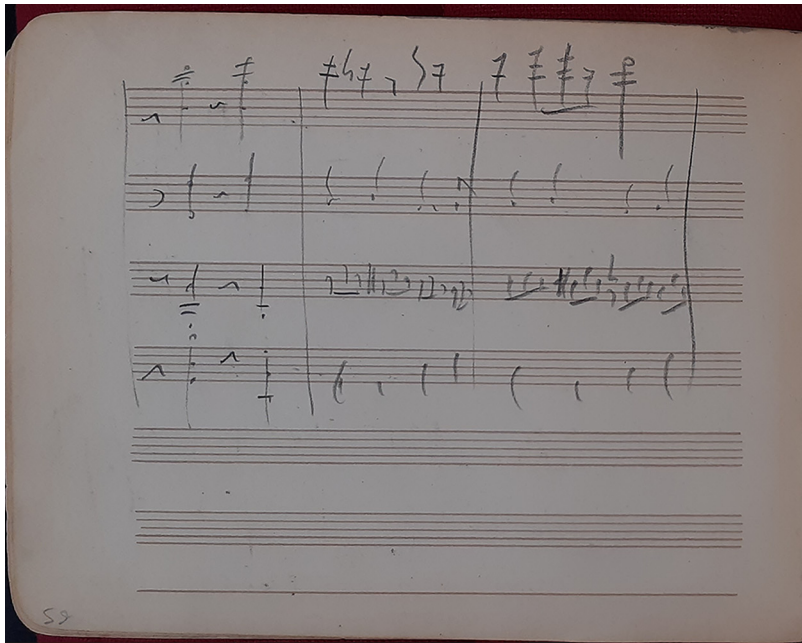
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[21]François de MÉDICIS, *La Maturation artistique*, 476–477.

[22]On this issue, see François DELÉCLUSE, *Debussy's Violin Sonata*.

[23]Quoted in Denis HERLIN, "Les esquisses du quatuor".

Example 17. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 65

importantly, in the final version Debussy does not give the second violin part a recognizable and identifiable theme, but a much more neutral accompanimental pattern. In the sketch, the motif assigned to the second violin stems from the head of the fourth movement's refrain. Thus, Debussy gave up on superimposing the cyclic theme with the refrain motif in this passage, simplifying the musical texture.

These examples of the superimposition of different motifs are characteristic of Debussy's compositional technique, but also employ a technique from the tradition of Franck and the musicians of the Société nationale. The composer's hesitations about the density of these motifs in the complex textures of his quartet, as shown in these two examples, demonstrate
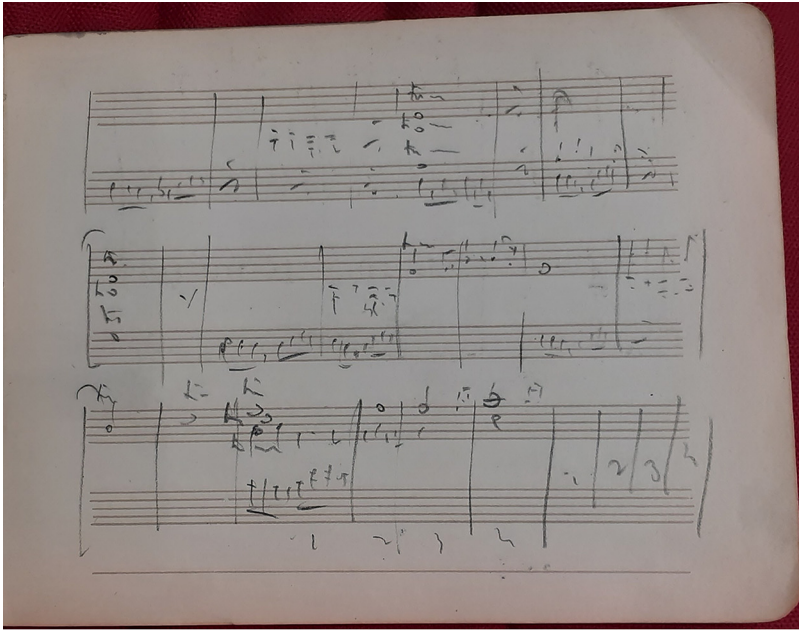
Example 18. Facsimile and transcription of Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, mus., Ms. 20632 (2), p. 64

Cyclic theme in the second movement

In the sketch (p. 65)

Refrain of the fourth movement

In the sketch (p. 65)

Example 19. Origin of the superimposed motifs

that, during the composition of the fourth movement, the composer was questioning the place of these motifs, their capacity to be perceived or to merge into the texture. Connecting and superimposing motifs will never cease to be part of Debussy's compositional technique,

A tempo
145

Example 20. Debussy, String Quartet, mov. IV, mm. 145–148

and in the sketches of an almost contemporary work, the *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*, there are traces of similar preoccupations, Debussy adding or removing certain superimposed motifs.[24]

9. CONCLUSION

A fresh exploration of Debussy's String Quartet sketches has proved particularly fruitful not only for understanding a number of elements of the creative process, but also for entering more deeply into his compositional technique. Firstly, the use of the sketchbook does not seem to be constant, depending on the movement of the quartet to which the pages of the sketchbook are devoted. The particularly fragmentary nature of the sketches contained in this notebook implies the existence of another manuscript now lost, a hypothetical continuity draft. For the second movement of the quartet (the scherzo), most of the elements must have been worked out in this lost manuscript, the sketchbook having another function: to search for ideas or to elaborate secondary sections of the piece. The case of the fourth movement is different, as the sketches are more abundant: they are more exploratory in nature. It is a sketchbook dedicated to researching ideas, allowing them to be noted in the order in which they appear, without a rigorous organizational principle. The definitive form of the fourth movement, however, was most probably developed in the lost continuity draft. In addition, the description and analysis of the sources of the creative process of the quartet allow us to deepen our knowledge of Debussy's compositional methods and to understand in a new light the use of certain techniques, but also to see how he adapted to certain constraints while writing the String Quartet. The compositional context, the genre of the quartet and the fact that Debussy was becoming closer to Chausson and the Société nationale, led him to seek compositional solutions to combine the techniques of the Franck school with the personal aesthetic he was developing. As the study of the sketches for the last movement has shown, these constraints involved especially the question of cyclic design. The fourth movement of a work in cyclic form generally recalls all the previous themes, but also employs thematic superimpositions and different ways of thematic presentation. Most of the compositional issues that can be identified in the sketches relate to cyclic form, and in particular to the presence or absence of cyclic motifs. It is particularly interesting to link the latter issue with the production of melodic material, which may by turns incorporate or lose a characteristic element of the cyclic theme. In addition to these thematic connections, the question of the contrapuntal superposition of different motifs is a crucial compositional issue, a typical marker of the Franck school supported in particular by Vincent d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum and the Société nationale. Debussy's progressive renunciation of the systematic aspect of this technique of contrapuntal superposition is already apparent in the sketches of the quartet, while the fragmentation of different motifs and the multiple ways in which they are linked together remained a major issue in Debussy's work.

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[24]François DELÉCLUSE and Thomas LACÔTE, "Une esquisse oubliée du *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune*," in *Esquisses musicales. Enjeux et approches du XIXe au XXe siècle*, ed. by François DELÉCLUSE (Turnhout: Brepols, series "Royaumont-IReMus", 2022), 121–166.

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