French composer Claude Debussy has been recognized and admired for his extraordinary innovations in music. His explorations of the tonal and temporal aspects were ground-breaking, and they have not only resonated throughout the 20th-century music, but have also continued to inspire contemporary composers. Intrigued by the unique soundscape of Debussy’s compositions, music theorists have focused their analyses almost exclusively on his melodic and harmonic vocabulary. It is only in the past thirty years that scholars have started to explore the instances of metrical idiosyncrasy in Debussy’s music, and investigate their role. While focusing solely on his songs, this study delves into a thorough investigation of Debussy’s treatment of rhythm and meter, in order to show that his rhythmic and metrical designs arise out of his effort to emulate and project the rhythmic and metrical designs of the selected poems. As the vast majority of his songs is set to symbolist poems, it is conceivable that Debussy’s compositional approach was guided by the principles of vers libéré, the primary goal of which is to liberate the rhythm from the strictures of the predetermined metrical framework. Through a detailed analysis of one-hundred-and-one songs, and copious music examples that isolate the features of Debussy’s technique and document its development, the study will show that the rhythmic and metrical design in Debussy’s songs arises out of his efforts to emulate and project the principles of vers libéré in his music. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that this very aspiration, the desire to ‘unfasten’—or libérer—the rhythm from the ongoing regular pulse urged innovations in the development of his compositional devices. Finally, it will aim to prove that the principles of vers libéré penetrated the crafting of Debussy’s compositional technique so deeply that the stages of its evolution echo the course of nineteenth-century French verse.
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Introduction and Background

Instances of metrical conflict and ambiguity occur in the music of all major composers. However, in the oeuvre of Claude Debussy, a composer who expressed his idea of music as “rhythmicised colours and time” (Lesure, 1987), their occurrence is consistent and extraordinary. Following standard musical practice, Debussy specifies a time signature in his compositions, thus implying an alignment between the meter and the flow of musical content. Quite frequently, however, the implied synchronization is modified or altogether abandoned, producing audible effects of metrical irregularity, ambiguity, and disruption.

Perhaps the most striking displays of metrical disruption in Debussy’s music, involving masses of sound, can be heard in his orchestral compositions, L’après midi d’un faune, Nocturnes, La mer, and Images. Their musical content appears to move about in the elusive manner of daydreams, fragrances, or ocean waves, creating passages in which meter seems to be absent. The “Jeux des vagues” movement from La mer, for example, brims with musical notions that seem to unfold despite the notated meter, and still somehow progress along with it. Such effects of unfastening from the regular pulse create moments in which the listener loses a sense of time and is carried away from the notated meter.

On a smaller scale, manifestations of metrical ambiguity or “non-commitment” (Oravitz, 2005) can be found also in Debussy’s piano works (Parks, 1989; Durakoglu, 1997; Trezise, 2003; Oravitz, 2005). For example, the interesting features of his Prélude no. 4 (Book I), “Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir,” are that the indicated 3/4 time signature does not start to materialize audibly until measure 9, and that the lack of alignment between the layers in the first eight measures produces such an internal conflict that any perception of the 3/4 waltz is unattainable, even in retrospect. Similar instances of metrical ambiguity have been pointed out in analyses of his other Preludes (Parks, 1989; Trezise, 2003; Oravitz, 2005), Etudes (Durakoglu, 1997), selections from Images and chamber music (Parks, 1989).

Debussy’s songs brim with rhythmic, metrical and supra-metrical effects, too. The unusual placement of words within a measure, the intricate use of metrical dissonance, as well as the sophisticated arrangement of lyrical and declamatory passages, infuse his settings with an abundance of metrical idiosyncrasies that destabilise the ongoing metrical flow. Although noted by Debussy scholars, and discussed as isolated occurrences (Wenk, 1976; Youens, 1983; Rolf, 1985), the specific compositional techniques involved in the making of these effects have not been fully explored. Moreover, with the exception of Parks’s 1989 study of metric groups in “Les ingénus” and Krebs’s 1994 analysis of metrical dissonance in “Les Angelus,” there have been no attempts to examine the use, the impact and the role of Debussy’s metrical devices within the context of the songs’ overall rhythmic and metrical design, and relate them to the
respective poems. By exploring the development of Debussy’s metrical devices in relation to poems’ prosody, as well as placing them into a context of the poem’s narrative, alluded imagery and emotional content, this project will be addressing a research gap in this area and making an original contribution to the studies of Debussy’s songs. Furthermore, the study will inform performances of his compositions and influence future study of meter in his music.
Methodology

I have located the first editions of the published songs and acquired their photocopies. The unpublished songs, transcribed from Debussy’s manuscripts by editors working on the Complete Edition of his mélodies, have been obtained as well. The methodologies used in the analyses of rhythm, meter and hypermeter in music are based primarily on the analytical models of Harald Krebs (1999), William Rothstein (1989), and Christopher Hasty (1997) and, in my analyses of one-hundred-and-one songs by Debussy, they reveal the presence of five metrical states in his songs: metrical regularity, conflict, irregularity, disruption, and ambiguity. Their juxtaposition and superimposition is best demonstrated in music examples, the creating and the writing of which represents the final stage of this project.

Through music notation—a system used to visually represent pitches, durations, volume and timbre of music events—music examples reveal the intricacies of the tonal and temporal content of a composition. To musically trained reader, they communicate far more than words. For the purposes of this study, certain music examples will replicate measures from the original music scores:

Others, however, will be custom created to isolate a particular compositional technique, or illustrate its interaction with other techniques or music components.

Some music examples will be simple:
Others will be more complex, and without bar-lines:
Musical notation is now commonly done by software, but many existing programs are too automated to be able to efficiently account for irregularities and unusual patterns, such as those without bar-lines and metrically irregular groupings. With that in mind, it is necessary to hire a music-notation software expert to write the majority of these examples and help me complete this project.

Project Timeline and Milestones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submit Summer Work Opportunity Application</td>
<td>SK</td>
<td>April 2019</td>
<td>Application submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hire Work Opportunity Student</td>
<td>SK</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>Student hired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hire Composer Consultant</td>
<td>SK</td>
<td>May 2019</td>
<td>Consultant hired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of Musical examples</td>
<td>CC</td>
<td>June- October 2019</td>
<td>Musical examples completed</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assist with musical examples and literature</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>May-August 2019</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of team work</td>
<td>SK</td>
<td>November 2019</td>
<td>Dissertation ready for editor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Outputs and impacts

The funding of this grant will enable the completion of my research for the PhD in Musicology degree, which I have undertaken in order to advance my career as a researcher and professor. At this point, the help from a music-notation expert is necessary, as I cannot afford the time to neither learn a music-notation software, nor bring it to the required advanced level in order to create the compulsory music examples. My plan is to have an undergraduate student prepare the standard music examples, bibliography and index, while our department alumnus, composer Liam Gibson, would be hired to create the complex and more advanced music examples.

The musical examples to be written as part of this grant are also important for the translation of this work into a book chapter: my analysis of a song from this research project—the analysis initially presented at the 2017 Arts and Humanities conference in Honolulu, Hawaii and, more recently (and with some updates), at the “Claude Debussy in 2018: a Centenary Celebration” conference at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, UK, has been selected for a publication. Six weeks ago, I was approached by the organizers of the Manchester conference and invited to submit my presentation as a chapter in a Debussy Studies book, to be published by the Cambridge University Press. With both projects in mind, this grant will be a transformative “enabler” for the completion of my dissertation as well as the publication of the chapter.

The research completed in my dissertation will be disseminated through other academic presentations, traditional peer reviewed scholarly articles, and, as I have already been approached by a publisher, possibly through a publication of a book about Meter and Rhythm in Debussy’s Songs. The Colloquium series, presented by the VIU Faculty of Arts and Humanities has proven to be an excellent vehicle for dissemination of scholarly work, and I plan to offer a lecture there, as well. A number of Canadian and international composers, conductors, performers, as well as orchestras and conservatories have already expressed their interest in my work, and upon completion, I plan to share the results of my research with them as well (I worked as a CBC music producer for some 15 years, and my music networks are still in existence). Furthermore, this completion of this project will benefit the reputation of the VIU Music Department, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, as well as the university.
Project Team

1. Principal Investigator: Sasha Koerbler, Professor, Department of Music (Professor of Music Theory, University of Zagreb, Croatia; M. A. in Music Theory, University of Regina, SK; PhD in Musicology candidate, University of Victoria, BC)
   Sasha has been a Professor of Music at VIU since 2007. She is also a candidate for a PhD in Musicology degree at the University of Victoria, where her research focuses on the rhythmic and metrical design of Claude Debussy’s songs. Her role in the project is to complete the writing of the dissertation, oversee and mentor the writing and creation of music examples for the dissertation and the book chapter, as well as oversee and mentor the writing of the bibliography and index.

2. Music-Notation Consultant: Liam Gibson (Music Diploma, VIU; B. Mus. University of Victoria, BC; M. Mus. in Composition, University of Manitoba). Liam will be the principal writer of the music examples, whose work I will guide and oversee. With his expertise in composing new (contemporary “classical”) music and the necessary over-riding of the automated features programmed in music-notation software, he will create original music examples that are not part of the regular music notation.

3. Research Assistant: I will hire a senior undergraduate student to be my Research Assistant, to write (replicate) the traditional music examples, extract a bibliography from my literature review and the rest of the dissertation, as well as assemble and index.
References


Budget

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<th>Item</th>
<th>VIU Innovate Grant</th>
<th>VIU cash</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Composer Consultant</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>$1087</td>
<td>$5072</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Budget Justification

1. Research Assistant: I will hire a senior undergraduate student to provide assistance to the Composer Consultant with the musical examples and to assist me with various tasks associated with the research including preparing the more traditionally-notated music examples, extracting bibliography from my literature review, assembling the index, etc. This will provide valuable disciplinary experience for the student. The student will be primarily funded through a work opportunity position, with the Innovate funds being used to top up the salary. The salary is $16.85 per hour x 70 hours = $1180 + $142 = $1322. The Work Opportunity program will contribute $1087.

2. Composer Consultant: I will hire Liam Gibson, a composer and a music-notation software expert. His salary will be $25 per hour and it is estimated that 150 hours of Liam’s time will be needed, which adds up to $3750.