

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Register as Memory in Debussy's Preludes, Book I

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Abstract

Musical return is often identified through recurring motive or harmony, but Debussy's piano writing can recall an earlier state through the location and decay of sound. This article examines *Voiles*, *La cathédrale engloutie*, *La danse de Puck*, and *Minstrels* from *Préludes*, Book I. It tracks registral bands, spacing, pitch-class content, attack, resonance, and formal placement to distinguish literal reprise from registral recollection. In *Voiles*, stable acoustic zones clarify the opposition between whole-tone suspension and the pentatonic interruption; *La cathédrale engloutie* makes vertical register the medium of emergence and submergence; *La danse de Puck* turns rapid registral displacement into a memory of interrupted gestures; and *Minstrels* recalls stage-like personae through sharply separated bands and changes of articulation. A register becomes memorable not because it is intrinsically high or low but because surrounding spacing has made it distinctive. Pedal and written resonance extend that identity after attack, allowing a later sonority to evoke an earlier acoustic condition without reproducing its melody. The four preludes show formal memory operating through spatial relation and decay.

Keywords: Debussy; register; musical memory; piano; resonance; *Préludes*

1 Introduction

Recognition in tonal analysis is frequently attached to what returns: a theme, motive, key, or harmonic progression. Debussy's piano music invites an additional question—where does the returning sound occur? A sonority placed in an extreme register, isolated from surrounding material, or sustained through resonance can become identifiable even when its pitch content later changes. The listener may remember an acoustic location and the quality of its decay before recognizing a conventional theme.

Register is not a fixed expressive code. High does not always mean distant, and low does not always mean foundation. Its function depends on spacing, density, dynamics, articulation, and the history of neighbouring events. A middle-register chord can sound newly remote if surrounding material has occupied extremes; a low note can act as colour rather than bass when it is detached from harmonic progression. Registral analysis must therefore describe relations rather than attach meanings to absolute pitch zones.

The four selected preludes make those relations unusually explicit. Their titles, placed at the end of each piece in Debussy's original presentation, also dis-

courage a simple programmatic decoding of every gesture. Instead of beginning with the title as explanation, the analysis follows how sound is distributed across the keyboard and asks when that distribution becomes memorable. Howat's study of proportion supplies a precedent for relating local detail to formal scale [1]. Roberts's account of Debussy's piano music informs attention to sonority and pianistic realization [2]. Pasler provides a broader critical context for relating musical organization to cultural interpretation [3], while Trezise's edited collection situates the readings within Debussy scholarship [4].

The article asks how registral placement and decay can create formal recollection without literal melodic reprise. It compares four preludes through registral bands, spacing, displacement, attack, resonance, and return, arguing that a location becomes memorable through changing relations rather than absolute height. After defining the corpus and method, the analysis proceeds piece by piece, then draws out the implications for return, resonance, performance, and future testing. The contribution is a vocabulary for describing spatial memory in score-based analysis without treating metaphor as evidence.

Registral return in Debussy is assessed against studies of harmonic space and or-

namental detail. Parks provides a systematic account of pitch organization across Debussy's music [5]. Bhogal shows how small-scale ornamental features can carry structural and cultural consequence in fin-de-siècle French art and music [6].

2 Registral Bands, Displacement, and Return

The score used is the first book of *Préludes*, published by Durand in 1910 [7]. Lesure's biographical study supplies historical context for Debussy and the collection without being used to infer undocumented compositional intentions [8]. Four terms guide the reading. A registral band is a span of the keyboard occupied with relative consistency by a texture or gesture. Separation is the acoustically perceptible gap between bands. Displacement occurs when material moves to another band without retaining every other feature. Registral return is the reoccupation of a previously marked band after intervening contrast.

For each prelude, the analysis first maps broad zones of activity, then identifies sonorities made distinctive by spacing, dynamics, or articulation. A later event qualifies as recollection when it restores the earlier zone and at least one contextual relation—for example, isolation from the middle register or resonance over

a gap—even if harmony and rhythm differ. This criterion avoids calling every repeated pitch a formal memory.

Pedal indications and notated ties are treated as evidence of potential resonance, not as acoustic measurements. Piano, room, tempo, touch, and pedalling practice alter decay. The score nevertheless composes expectations about persistence: some attacks are meant to remain conceptually active while later sounds arrive. Register becomes memory partly because resonance makes absence gradual.

3 *Voiles*: zones within harmonic suspension

Voiles establishes a restrained field in which whole-tone resources weaken ordinary tonal direction. Under those conditions, register becomes a primary means of differentiation. Recurrent figures occupy recognizable zones, and the spaces between them help listeners distinguish layers that harmonic function alone does not hierarchize.

The opening creates an acoustic environment rather than announcing a theme in the Classical sense. Pitch collections, repeated contours, and sustained spacing give the impression of motion whose destination remains uncertain. A low support can remain present as colour and boundary without acting like a conventional progressing bass. Higher figures acquire identity through their distance from that support and through their limited registral circulation.

The central pentatonic contrast is memorable not only because its collection changes. Its placement and articulation reconfigure the keyboard space. A more grounded or rhythmically defined sonority alters the relation between bands, temporarily giving the listener a different measure of distance. When the earlier whole-tone environment returns, it is heard through memory of the interruption. The reprise does not reset the piece; it restores an acoustic zone whose former ambiguity has now become identifiable.

Accounts of musical pitch space help distinguish a collection's intervallic organization from its registral disposition [9]. Here the formal claim depends on their interaction rather than on treating keyboard height as a substitute for harmonic analysis.

This design illustrates the distinction between repetition and recollection. Literal material may recur, but its formal effect depends on a changed registral history. The return sounds more remote because the middle has taught the ear

another way the keyboard can be occupied.

4 *La cathédrale engloutie*: vertical space as process

In *La cathédrale engloutie*, register participates directly in the image of emergence. Chordal sonorities rise, thicken, and gain dynamic presence; later they recede into quieter and lower or more veiled spaces. Yet the piece's formal interest exceeds pictorial ascent and descent. Vertical placement regulates what kinds of continuity can be remembered across changes of texture.

The opening's widely spaced sonorities establish distance as a compositional fact. Gaps allow attacks to resonate without being immediately absorbed into continuous middle-register figuration. As the texture grows, previously separated zones become connected by fuller chordal occupation. The keyboard seems to acquire architectural volume. This expansion is a memory process: later mass is understood in relation to earlier sparseness.

When the more imposing chordal state withdraws, the earlier acoustic world does not simply return unchanged. Resonance and registral trace preserve the memory of fullness. Quiet sonorities can therefore imply the absent mass that preceded them. The formal return is negative as well as positive: what is no longer sounding remains structurally present because the listener has learned the scale of the space.

Pedal is indispensable to this effect but should not be described as indiscriminate blur. It mediates between discrete attacks and imagined continuity. Different performances will control resonance differently, yet the composed relation remains: decay transforms vertical placement into duration. The cathedral's "submergence" is heard through the persistence of a space after its strongest sounds have disappeared.

5 *La danse de Puck*: displacement and interrupted identity

La danse de Puck organizes memory through agility and discontinuity. Brief figures enter, change register, alter articulation, and yield to contrasting gestures before they can settle into a single stable character. Register acts less as architectural depth than as theatrical repositioning. A gesture seems to appear from another part of the stage.

Rapid displacement complicates motivic identity. When a contour returns in a new band, the intervallic or rhythmic resemblance may be clear, but its

weight and proximity change. High placement can make an attack fleeting; lower placement can give the same profile unexpected substance. The listener remembers both the figure and its former location, so displacement becomes an expressive difference rather than mere transposition.

Gesture theory supports this attention to how changing placement alters the marked quality of a recurrent figure [10]. The claim remains score-based: register, articulation, and interruption make the contrast available to hearing.

Interrupted gestures also leave incomplete acoustic expectations. A phrase may vanish from one band and re-enter elsewhere without the connective motion customary in tonal sequence. Silence and thin texture preserve the gap as part of the event. The next appearance recalls a missing continuation as much as a previous sound.

This process suits the prelude's elusive dramatic character without requiring every registral move to correspond to a programmatic action. The analytical claim is narrower: the piece composes caprice by making continuity depend on remembered locations that are repeatedly vacated.

6 *Minstrels*: registral staging and changing persona

Minstrels uses abrupt contrasts of articulation, rhythm, and register to suggest a sequence of stylized performances. The keyboard behaves like a stage divided into zones from which gestures enter. Low punctuation, middle-register figures, and higher ornamental responses do not merely occupy separate pitches; they acquire different rhetorical roles through their spacing and timing.

Return in this prelude is often a return of manner. A registral band recalls the articulation and posture previously associated with it, even when the exact notes change. The effect resembles a character re-entering in altered costume. Identity is distributed among contour, attack, register, and the pause that frames the gesture.

Such staging can support caricature, but analysis should avoid treating the title as a complete explanation of musical difference. The cultural associations of minstrelsy require historical care, and the score's stylization does not remove that context. Formally, the significant point is that registral separation allows gestures to be juxtaposed without being reconciled into continuous development. Memory binds them after the fact.

Dayan's study of writing about music and literature is pertinent to this caution about converting a title directly into musical meaning [11]. The present reading therefore begins with notated relations and treats programmatic association as a further interpretive question.

The close of the piece is especially dependent on aftermath. Brief, sharply characterized events leave traces disproportionate to their duration. A later recurrence can activate those traces immediately because the registral stage has already been mapped. The piece turns economy of material into density of association.

7 Discussion

The comparison confirms that a register becomes distinctive through contrast. In *Voiles*, harmonic suspension makes stable acoustic zones easy to retain. In *La cathédrale engloutie*, widening and filling space turns register into large-scale process. In *La danse de Puck*, displaced bands make gesture elusive. In *Minstrels*, separated zones support theatrical juxtaposition. No absolute division of the keyboard explains all four.

Spacing is often more important than height. Two gestures in the upper register may have different functions if one is isolated above an empty middle and the other belongs to a dense continuum. Likewise, a low pitch may operate as harmonic foundation, resonant shadow, punctuation, or persona. Interpretation must identify what surrounds the pitch and how that relation has been prepared.

This relational account also prevents descriptive inflation. Terms such as luminous, dark, near, or distant may be apt, but they should follow observations about register, dynamics, density, and articulation. Otherwise, metaphor can replace musical explanation. Kramer's account of musical meaning supports keeping interpretation in view while making its analytical grounds explicit [12]. Debussy's notation supports vivid language when the pathway from score to hearing remains visible.

8 Return without literal reprise

Registral recollection permits continuity with altered material. A later sonority can restore a band and spacing relation while changing pitch collection, rhythm, and articulation. The listener recognizes a condition of sound rather than a melodic object. This kind of memory is particularly valuable in music that weakens conventional thematic hierarchy.

The four preludes use three versions

of the process. Reoccupation restores a previously marked zone. Echo preserves an attack through resonance or quiet repetition. Negative return recreates the spatial conditions of an earlier passage while leaving its most forceful sonority absent. Each process depends on temporal separation: without intervening contrast, location remains a present texture rather than memory.

Register therefore joins motive and harmony as a bearer of form. It does not replace them. In *Voiles*, collection and register reinforce one another; in *La cathédrale engloutie*, harmonic sonority and vertical mass interact; in the two character pieces, rhythmic gesture and location jointly create identity. The analytical gain lies in explaining continuity that would appear loose if only thematic repetition were counted.

9 Decay as composed evidence

Piano sound begins to disappear as soon as it is produced. Debussy composes with this fact by placing new attacks inside the decay of earlier ones. Pedal, ties, repeated notes, and spacing control whether resonance is heard as background atmosphere or as an active remnant. Formal memory can therefore begin before a sonority has fully ended.

This condition complicates the boundary between presence and return. A low pitch may no longer be attacked yet remain acoustically or imaginatively available; a later high sonority may seem to arise within its residual field. Analysis should distinguish notated sustain, likely resonance, and inferred memory, but all three contribute to the experience of layered time.

The role of the performer is substantial. Pedal depth, release timing, voicing, and tempo determine whether bands remain distinct or merge. The score sets relations and constraints, while performance realizes one acoustic version of them. Register as memory is therefore both compositional and performative.

10 Conclusion

The selected preludes remember sound spatially. *Voiles* makes stable bands legible within whole-tone suspension; *La cathédrale engloutie* composes emergence and withdrawal through changing vertical occupation; *La danse de Puck* uses displacement to leave gestures incomplete; and *Minstrels* turns the keyboard into a set of registral stages. In each case, return can be recognized even when melody and harmony are altered.

Register gains that power through re-

lation. Spacing, density, dynamics, articulation, and intervening contrast make a zone memorable. Resonance then extends location into time, allowing decay to carry formal information. Debussy's piano writing shows that musical memory need not recover the same object. It can recover the place from which an earlier sound seemed to speak. The four-prelude sample and score-based account cannot settle acoustic or perceptual salience; comparative recordings, performer testimony, and listener testing offer the next step.

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