Early Impressionism

In Debussy's Nuit D'etoiles

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Research Question

What musical markers does Debussy use to show early impressionism in *Nuit D'etoiles* (1880)?

Literature Review

- *Nuit D'etoiles* was Debussy's first vocal solo piece (1880).

- Richard Taruskin and James Hepokoski have investigated Debussy's ***mature Impressionism***. Style elements are alternative scales; parallel chords; avoiding fifth-relations (tonic-dominant etc.) and cadences; chordal ambiguity; sensuality and a focus on color and timbre; rhythmic ambiguity (de-emphasizing meter) etc.

- Few scholars have discussed early works (1880 and before) of Debussy as path-defining for his famous Impressionist style

What is Impressionism?

- Impressionism in music compliments Impressionism in Art. Much like Monet in his paintings, composers were conveying mood and emotion through their music.

- Oxford Music Online:

  “Impressionism: A philosophical, aesthetic and polemical term borrowed from late 19th-century French painting. [...]. The word ‘Impressionism’ did not appear in conjunction with a specific musical aesthetic until the 1880s.”

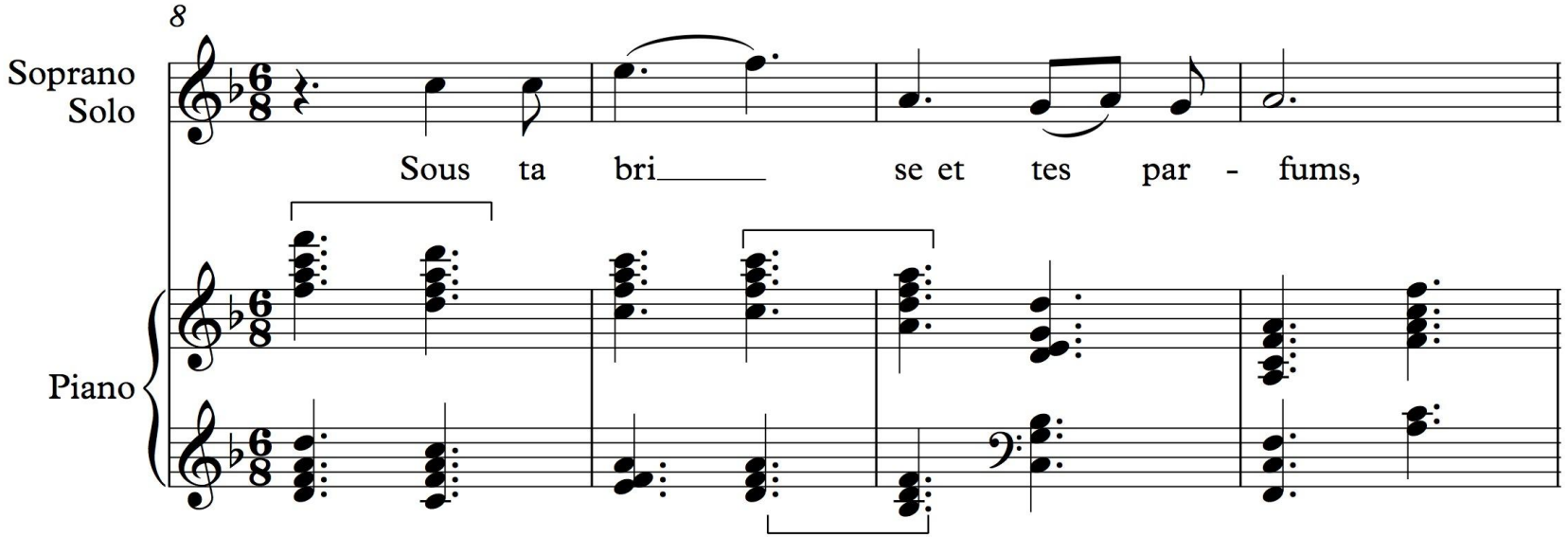
Methods

Investigating *Nuit D'etoiles* for standard markers of impressionism:

- Parallel chords
- Enharmonic shifts as signs of chordal ambiguity (functional ambiguity)
- Avoiding tonic-dominant relationships in favor of other, less used harmonic progressions
- Symbolism in the text; appeal to direct, immediate, physical "sensation": scents, experience through the senses.

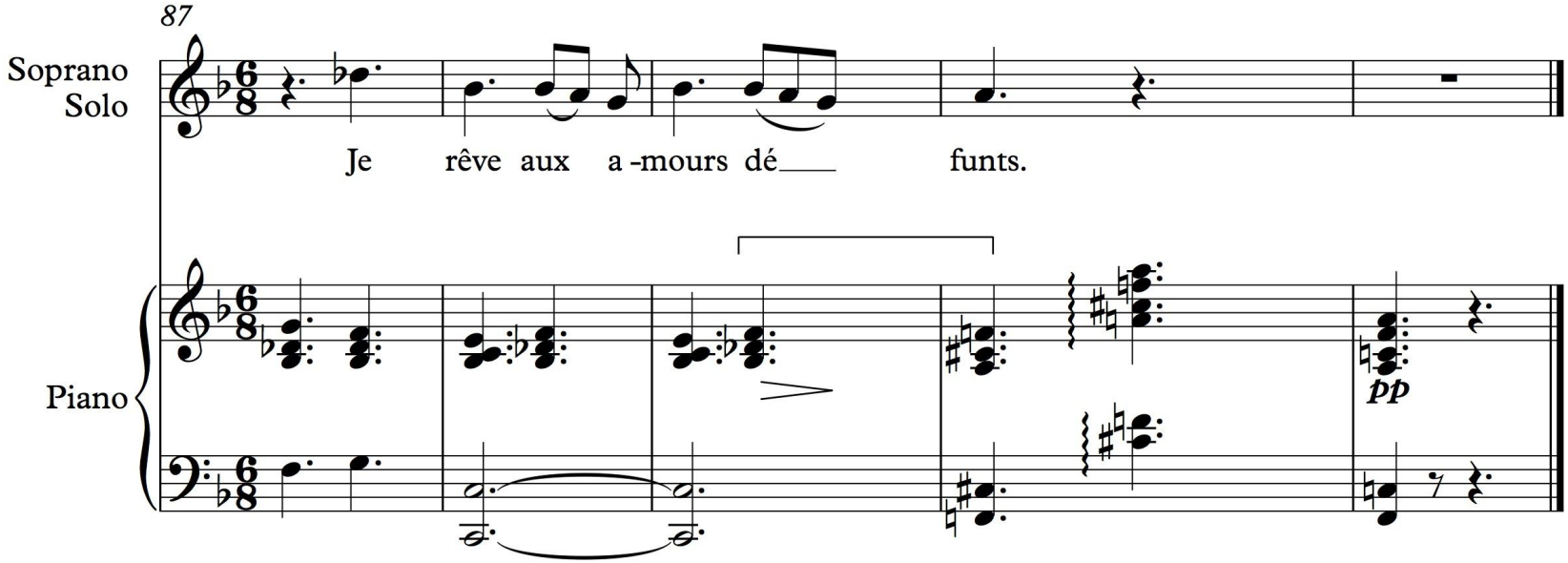
Music Analysis 1: Parallel Chords:

- m. 8



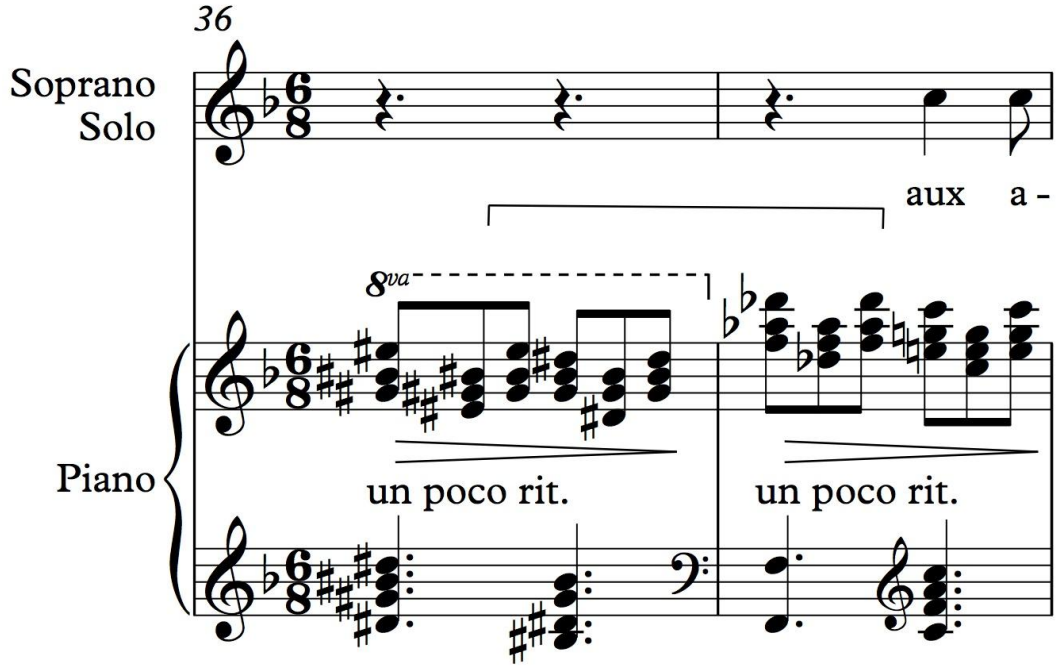
Music Analysis 2: Enharmonicism

- m. 87



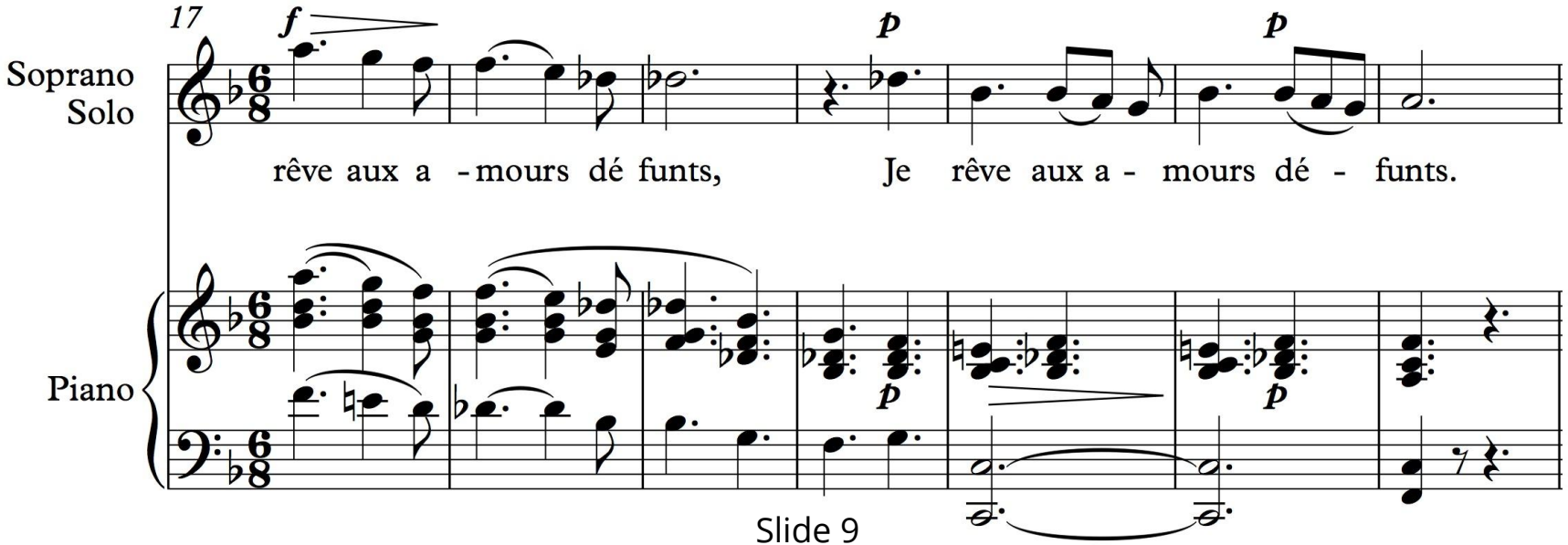
Music Analysis 2a: Enharmonicism

- m. 36



Music Analysis 3: Avoiding tonic-dominant relationships in favor of other, less used harmonic progressions

- m. 17



Music Analysis 4: Symbolism Reference in the Text

- m. 4: Nuit
  (night)

- m. 10-11:

  parfums
  (perfumes)

- M. 17: rêve
  (dream)

Conclusion: How does *Nuit D'etoiles* expand our view of Impressionism?

- I have analyzed Debussy's *Nuit D'etoiles* for its use of standard musical markers of impressionism, specifically, the use of parallel chords, the use of enharmonicsm, and the avoidance of direct dominant to tonic harmonic progressions.