

That Page!

Solutions to the Pedal Nightmare in Debussy's *Danses*

by Carl Swanson

Anyone who has ever studied Debussy's *Danses sacrée et profane* knows which page I'm talking about. It's page seven, or the third page of the second *Danse*. The problem is the combination of chromaticism and speed that collide there to produce one of the most awful pedal sequences in the harp literature. In preparing this article, everyone that I talked to, absolutely everyone, had something else taped over these six measures. To my knowledge, no one plays them exactly as they were published.

We tend to forget that the *Danses* were originally written for the Pleyel chromatic harp, a beast of another color entirely, having no mechanism and no pedals. Despite Debussy's preference for the Érard pedal harp, the Pleyel Company had commissioned this work, and he had accepted the commission. Almost as soon as the piece was written, Henriette Renié, perhaps at Debussy's or Durand's request, set out to make a version that would be playable on pedal harp.

In examining the piece, it would seem that Debussy had chosen to write in a way that would show off what the Pleyel harp could do, because the composition is much more chromatic than anything that Debussy had ever written for harp, or ever would again, and that made transcribing it for pedal harp a daunting task indeed! There are several other tricky pedal passages in the *Danses*, mainly in the first movement. But they are slower, and that makes them manageable. It's not hard to imagine Renié's reaction the first time she saw page seven. "*Mon Dieu!*" she must have said, slumping in her chair.

Renié was a skilled composer herself and not averse to changing notes when needed in transcribing for harp, not only to make the piece more playable, but also to sound better. Her magnificent transcription of Liszt's *La Rossignol* attests to that. But here she would be working with the composer himself. And so, with the greatest living composer in France looking over her shoulder, she must have felt

compelled to stay as close as possible to Debussy's original score. Her first version of page seven, the one that got printed, and the first of many she would do, sticks precisely to the notes that Debussy wrote.

Geraldine Ruegg, who studied with Renié before and after World War II, and who translated Renié's monumental *Méthode* into English, told me that at the time that Renié was transcribing the *Danses* for pedal harp, there was a woman's shoe in fashion which had a rather high thick heel and a blunt toe. Renié, wearing those shoes, found that by turning her right foot sideways, she could move both the E and G pedals together from flat to natural with no danger of touching the F pedal. So her original intent in this version was for the player to move two pedals with one foot, using one motion, not two. She even bracketed the two pedals to indicate this but didn't explain it anywhere. If ever a notation required a footnote!

But I think that almost as soon as the pedal harp version of the *Danses* was published, there were problems. Renié must have heard complaints from other harpists, as well as from her students. Also, she may have discovered in her own performances that the first solution was not that dependable. And what was a man or someone with a larger foot supposed to do in that passage? So the hunt was on for a version that everyone could play.

Renié's second solution, like the first, keeps all of the notes, while eliminating that awful two-pedals-with-one-foot-on-one-beat dance. Here she substitutes F-flat for the dreaded E-natural and does in fact achieve her goal of having no more than one pedal at a time in each foot. But at full tempo, there are just too many pedals, particularly in the right foot, for this to be practical. In addition, the right foot is all over the place at lightning speed, and if one pedal is missed, the whole thing collapses. So Renié searched again for a way to make this passage more playable.

Renié's first solution (the printed version)

Musical score for Renié's first solution. The score consists of two systems. The first system features a piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *f* and a melodic line. The piano accompaniment includes harmonic analysis: $F\sharp$ $C\sharp$ (chord), $A\flat$ $D\sharp$ (chord), $E\flat$ $G\flat$ (chord), $A\sharp$ $C\sharp$ (chord), $G\sharp$ $E\sharp$ $D\flat$ (chord), $A\flat$ $C\flat$ (chord), and $A\flat$ $D\sharp$ (chord). The melodic line is marked with *dim.* in the final measure. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *p* and includes harmonic analysis: $E\flat$ $G\flat$ $A\sharp$ (chord), $G\sharp$ $E\sharp$ $B\sharp$ (chord), and $A\flat$ $B\sharp$ (chord). The melodic line continues with a *p* dynamic marking.

Renié's second solution

Musical score for Renié's second solution. The score consists of two systems. The first system features a piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *f* and a melodic line. The piano accompaniment includes harmonic analysis: $F\sharp$ $C\sharp$ (chord), $A\flat$ $D\sharp$ (chord), $E\flat$ $G\flat$ (chord), $A\sharp$ $C\sharp$ (chord), $F\flat$ $G\sharp$ $D\flat$ (chord), $A\flat$ $C\flat$ (chord), and $F\sharp$ $D\sharp$ (chord). The melodic line is marked with *dim.* in the final measure. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with a dynamic marking of *p* and includes harmonic analysis: $G\flat$ $A\sharp$ $C\sharp$ $F\flat$ (chord), $G\sharp$ $A\flat$ $F\sharp$ $B\sharp$ (chord), and $E\sharp$ (chord). The melodic line continues with a *p* dynamic marking.

In her third solution, Renié leaves out two notes in the six bar passage, and both times it is the same note, a G-flat. The pedals have been simplified, but not by much. However, the alteration to the rhythm by twice changing a four-note group to a triplet really damages the passage musically, and I find this solution to be weak. Maybe Renié, thinking now of all of the harpists who would be playing the piece, figured that fewer notes played correctly was better than the risk of a major crash-and-burn.

There are almost as many versions of this passage as harpists who have played it. Renié made several more versions, frequently making a new one for each student. Salzedo made a version as well, and it is the most distant from the original. In it, he leaves out the left hand entirely and simplifies the right hand so much that the harmony is altered. Many harp teachers have their own versions, which they either made themselves or got from their teachers.

When I studied the *Danses* with Pierre Jamet, he had his own solution for this passage. His advice to me was simple, straightforward, and makes me laugh even now. "Look," he said, "you can play it the way it's printed, or you can use my 'cheat.' If you play the original version, you'll get it maybe five out of ten times. If you use my 'cheat,' you'll get it maybe eight out of ten times." So here it is, and I believe it is the best solution to the problem. I have used it in performance many times, and have always nailed it. One of Renié's later solutions is almost identical to this one, and I honestly don't know if she got it from Pierre Jamet or if he got it from her.

This solution substitutes a C-natural for the first E-flat, and leaves out the second E-flat altogether. But at full tempo, you simply cannot hear these changes. There is never more than one pedal per beat in either foot, but more importantly, the two pedals used by each foot are right next to each other. Neither foot has to do a lightning fast swing across other pedals. The simplicity of the pedaling minimizes the chance of a wrong pedal and virtually assures a successful performance every time, allowing the harpist to focus on playing the passage cleanly and creating the energy Debussy wanted. This, to me, is the one that works the best in performance while staying as close as possible to Debussy's original intent.

Author's note: My thanks to Sam Milligan and Gordon Johnston for setting the four musical examples, and to Geraldine Ruegg for bringing these other versions to my attention. ♪

About the author:

Carl Swanson's life and career have encompassed many aspects of the harp. He is a respected builder and repairer of harps, as well as a performer and teacher. He has lectured many times at AHS national conferences and is a frequent contributor to The American Harp Journal.

