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Separating Debussy from Impressionism: How Non-Western Scale Patterns, Parallel Harmony,  
and Heterophonic Orchestration Truly Create the Unique Sound of Debussy

When I was told Claude Debussy's *Premiere Rhapsodie* was too complex for me to perform, I searched for a similar sounding piece in the clarinet repertoire. After many hours of research, I only discovered another short piece from Debussy. In this process, I realized that no composer wrote music quite like Debussy's, launching the question that haunts me to this day: Why did no one imitate the sound of Debussy? An answer to this question has to do with the way that Debussy has been misrepresented and misunderstood throughout the decades.

In my research, I discovered that the overarching use of the label Impressionism to describe Debussy's music created a lack of clarity around its musical meaning. By defining specific textural and compositional elements as impressionistic, and then referring to Debussy as one who used Impressionism in his compositions, a window is created to see that the unique sound of Debussy is separate from the broader concept of Impressionism, both as a musical style and as a movement in the visual arts associated with light and nature. I will argue that Debussy's unique sound is instead a result of the juxtaposition of non-Western scale patterns, parallel harmony and heterophonic orchestration. This important separation that distinguishes Debussy's characteristic sound from this aesthetic label deepens both the understanding of Impressionism as a style, and the connection between Impressionism and other composers beyond Ravel and

Respighi. It creates a path forward to discover and champion under-represented Impressionistic composers, because this separation alleviates the need for Impressionistic music to sound like Debussy, only to be constructed in a similar fashion. In my paper, I will clarify the compositional elements that point to the musical styles of Impressionism and Symbolism to discover what combination of compositional techniques created Debussy's unique sound.

### **The Varied Meanings of Impressionism in Music**

The musical style of Impressionism is widely discussed and written about by music theorists and musicologists, but the meaning of the term is not often explained or fully understood. Many people articulate that they are hearing impressionistic music when listening to Debussy, but there is often a debate around the other composers associated with this style. This persistent lack of understanding around the style was created by the varied evolution of Impressionism as a term in the cultural landscape of the early 1900s. Throughout the life of Debussy, Impressionism was always mentioned in reference to his music, but it had many different definitions, based on how Impressionism was viewed in the visual art world at the time.<sup>1</sup> When it was first applied to his music during a review of Debussy's Prix de Rome<sup>2</sup> composition *L'enfant prodigue*, Impressionism was used to describe Debussy's lack of adherence to the Western musical tradition, specifically rejecting his unconventional key center of F# major and lack of easily recognizable musical forms.<sup>3</sup> At this time, Impressionism had a

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<sup>1</sup> Stefan Jarocinski, "The Meaning of 'Impressionism' in Musicology," in *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism*, trans. Rollo Myers (London: Ernst Eulenburg, 1976), 11-22.

<sup>2</sup> If you are unfamiliar, the Prix de Rome is a prestigious art scholarship given by the French government until 1968, to the winner of a contest that they had in music composition, engraving, painting, sculpture, and architecture. The musical composition was required to be a cantata, with the prescribed voice part(s) changing occasionally throughout the years.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Jarocinski, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism*, trans. Rollo Myers (London: Ernst Eulenburg, 1976), 11.

negative connotation, as the visual art world was still rejecting Impressionism.<sup>4</sup> As Debussy began to publish more works, the meaning of the label Impressionistic became varied between musical scholars, with some using it to describe Debussy's use of striking musical colors, while the majority continued to use it as a negative connotation to describe Debussy's lack of form.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in the 1910s, music theorists as well as music critics began to explore the term Impressionism, as the negative connotations of the term dissipated. Most of the major voices in the music community seemed to settle on the idea that Impressionism had to do with the way the music creates distinctive sounding colors for the audience, called sound-pockets.<sup>6</sup> The wildly shifting perception of Impressionism in the art world, growing from a slander to a positive term in under fifty years, led to the ambiguity in the way the term is talked about and perceived in the musical community, especially in future scholarship.

After Debussy's death, the scholarship on Impressionism took on a life of its own. In the 1920s, Impressionism described music that created a single emotional impression on the listener throughout the whole composition, and this idea prevails as the abstract definition of Impressionism.<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, a slight debate began around the concept of Impressionism. Some scholars, like Christopher Palmer, delved into the style, mapped its starting point in Debussy's music and then applied it to as many composers as possible.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, scholar Stefan Jarocinski argued that Impressionism needed to be separated from

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<sup>4</sup> Jarociński, *Debussy: Impressionism and Symbolism*, 5-10.

<sup>5</sup> Jarocinski, 11-12.

<sup>6</sup> Jarocinski, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Hexin Qiao, "A Comparative Analysis of Debussy's Ondine and Ravel's Ondine" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2021), 8.

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2566504529/abstract/A546989063EB4AE2PQ/1>.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Palmer, *Impressionism in Music* (London: Hutchinson, 1973).

Symbolism, and then argued that the style Symbolism better described the music of Debussy, aligning with the many friends of Debussy who also participated in Symbolist art forms.<sup>9</sup> The one thing that both authors agreed upon was that Impressionism was difficult to define, and that there were not specific characteristics or compositional devices that could categorize a piece as Impressionistic.

### **The Lost Concept of Symbolism**

As argued by Stefan Jarocinski, a better way to describe the aims of Debussy's compositions might be to use the term Symbolism, as Debussy spent a lot of time with Symbolist poets and used their poems as inspiration for most of his works. One of Debussy's most famous pieces, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, draws its title and inspiration from a poem by his friend, Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. Since Debussy was active in this movement, attending gatherings of Symbolist artists and writers, it would make a lot more sense to associate him with this style.<sup>10</sup> Like the style of Impressionism, Symbolism also has a vital connection to nature.<sup>11</sup> Instead of focusing on the interaction of light with nature as Impressionism did, Symbolists use nature to represent the indescribable internal dreams and feelings of the soul.<sup>12</sup>

When applied to music, Symbolism is the idea of the sound, timbre, and instrumentation being the structure or compositional underpinning of a piece of music rather than any sort of harmonic or formal structure.<sup>13</sup> In his own writings, Debussy seems to favor the

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<sup>9</sup> Qiao, "Comparative Analysis," 14.

<sup>10</sup> Qiao, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Jarocinski, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Qiao, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Jarocinski, 59.

idea of creating an image with his music to represent the feeling he was trying to express. Symbolism, although quite like Impressionism when applied to music, is a more specific way to describe the music of Debussy. One of the most important factors to creating Debussy's sound was his use of instrumentation and timbre to create unique worlds for his compositions. Impressionism describes pockets of sound that can take place within any musical context, while Symbolism brings the idea of these unique sounds to the fore, as an element that occurs throughout the entire composition.

An example of this is *Nuages*, the second movement in Debussy's *Nocturnes* for Orchestra. In this movement, the atmosphere is created by the use of divisi strings as the background texture, and the changes in this constant string texture, such as from the violins down to the lower strings and from legato to pizzicato, create the forward motion and energy that drive the movement<sup>14</sup>, as a traditional harmonic progression would. This specific timbre, created by a set instrumentation, is therefore a structural function of this piece, making the composition an example of musical Symbolism.

Despite Stefan Jarocinski's argument for Symbolism in the 1970s, scholars have continued down the path of Impressionism, ignoring not only this suggestion from Jarocinski, but also the debate created by Palmer and Jarocinski, which exposed the issue that scholars do not agree on the concept of the style of Impressionism. In recent years, the concept of musical Symbolism has been slightly reawakened. Many doctoral students have reintroduced the arguments of Jarocinski, using his work as a foremost source in their dissertations, despite the

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<sup>14</sup> Mark DeVoto, "The Debussy sound: "colour, texture, and gesture", in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed, Simon Trezise, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 182-184.

fact that the larger musical community has not latched on to the idea of Symbolism.<sup>15</sup> The application of both terms towards Debussy is an important step in creating a better understanding of Impressionism as a style.

### **Redefining Debussy**

Now that I have established that Impressionism no longer fully encompasses the music of Debussy, the question remains, What makes Debussy's music sound unique? His use of the Impressionistic sound-pockets was more often to create harmonic ambiguity to the structures that he was creating with his initial musical ideas, rather than using these sound-pockets to create the motivating harmony of the piece, like Ravel.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it must be his compositional techniques which lay the groundwork for his unique sound. The techniques that I discuss all lead back to the idea of repetition, and use repetition to create the structure of the piece, whether the repetition of a cycle creates the harmony, or the repetition of the same line creates its accompaniment or character. In this paper, a close examination of examples from Debussy's *Nocturnes* for orchestra demonstrates how the intersection of each compositional technique I will highlight results in the intermingling repetitions that create the unique sound palette used on Debussy's works.

Although it is not a focus of this paper, it is important to mention the East Asian influences in Debussy's music. Many are quick to blame Debussy for the exoticism created by his inclusion of scalar patterns from East Asian music, but this type of exoticism was encouraged by the musical community around him, and a requirement to win the Prix de

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<sup>15</sup> As a young musical scholar, this observation interests me, and I am curious to see the developments in the future. It is impossible to tell if these doctoral candidates will be going on to join the music theory community or not, as all doctoral theses state only a doctoral of music on the title page, not the future path of the candidate. If they do, I will be interested to see if they reintroduce the Symbolist argument in later work.

<sup>16</sup> Qiao, 68.

Rome.<sup>17</sup> Exoticism was a phenomenon in this moment of French culture, and Debussy' association with Erik Satie and the symbolist poets in Bailly's bookshop "Art Indépendant" encouraged his exploration of Asian musical scales, as well as the gamelan performances at the World Fair in Paris.<sup>18</sup> Debussy's goal was not to display this influence, but use it as a tool in his colors and textures.<sup>19</sup> He viewed it not as exoticism, but as an expansion of the world that he lived in, so the moral discussion surrounding these influences will not be engaged with, since Debussy did not view them this way.<sup>20</sup>

These non-Western scales were the most important technique Debussy used to create his own sound world, as they are cyclical. There is significant evidence of Debussy using whole tone, pentatonic, hexachordal, and octatonic scales, but in this paper the focus will be on his use of the octatonic and whole tone scales, since they are a larger set of notes, and are more unique to Western music than the pentatonic and hexachordal ideas that come from Renaissance music. Debussy used the octatonic scale not only in its full set or fragments as a scalar motion in horizontal or melodic ideas, but he also used it as a pitch set from which to derive his harmony.<sup>21</sup> When used as a pitch set, the octatonic scale still affected the melody, as in Debussy's music the harmony is often acting as a doubling to the melody, by using what theorist Roland Nadeau calls

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<sup>17</sup> Jann Pasler, "Revisiting Debussy's Relationships with Otherness: Difference, Vibrations, and the Occult," *Music & Letters* 101, no. 2 (May 2020): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcz079>.

<sup>18</sup> Pasler, "Revisiting Debussy," 332.

<sup>19</sup> Pasler, 321.

<sup>20</sup> If you have an interest in reading more about Debussy's exoticism and the problems it creates, please look to Kiyoshi Tawagama and Richard Mueller for full texts, as well as the many other journal articles that cover this topic.

<sup>21</sup> Allen Forte, "Debussy and the Octatonic," *Music Analysis* 10, no. 1/2 (March 1, 1991): 127, <https://doi.org/10.2307/854001>.

parallel chord bands.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the harmony and melody are intrinsically linked, and “the chord band as a whole functions solely as [a] thickened melody” according to Nadeau.<sup>23</sup> Debussy could then use this pitch set to create a whole composition in some cases. A blatant example of the octatonic scale is in *Nuages*, the first movement of Debussy’s *Nocturnes* for Orchestra. The opening entrance of the English horn, follows the octatonic pattern of B, C#, D, E, F in order: starting on the C#, ascending to the F, and then descending to the B, as seen in the example below from Allan Forte’s “Debussy and the Octatonic”.<sup>24</sup> In this way, the main melodic motif of the piece is simply a portion of the octatonic scale, showing its importance to Debussy’s music.

Ex. 14 *Nuages*, bs 5-11

5-10 | B, C#, D, E, F |  
 6-22 | B, C#, D, E, F, G |  
 7-31 | B, C#, D, E, F, G, G# | C1

<sup>22</sup> Roland Nadeau, “Debussy and Crisis of Tonality,” *Music Educators Journal* 66, no. 1 (September 1979): 72, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3395721>.

<sup>23</sup> Nadeau, “Debussy and the Crisis of Tonality,” 72.

<sup>24</sup> Forte, “Debussy and the Octatonic,” 145.



The harmony acting as a doubled melody is also related to Debussy's use of parallel harmony. The structural harmony of Debussy's pieces does not follow a traditional tonal practice, because the chords do not follow each other in a linear fashion, but instead are chosen based on the note in the melody, meaning that all of the different voices of the chord move together in parallel, rather than in a traditional voice-leading practice.<sup>25</sup> I place parallel harmony and interval mapping together, because both concepts require repeating the same set of intervals starting on a different note. For a musician playing Debussy, the repeating figures in different pitch-classes that seem unrelated but sound related is one of the important hallmarks. It is interesting to note that both the whole tone scale and the octatonic scale, which Debussy was fond of using, are interval cycles, meaning that they repeat the same interval set over and over again. In this way, Debussy's harmony is a function of repeating intervals.

The first example of parallel harmony is the idea of doubling at the fifth or the octave. Debussy often doubled his melodic lines in two or three different octaves. The idea of a doubling is not something new between a bass or soprano, but it is interesting to note his use of doubling throughout an entire melodic line within multiple octaves, because it then also becomes a textural element.<sup>26</sup> The real unique part of Debussy's use of parallelism was his use of parallel chords and parallel dissonant intervals such as 9ths. Debussy sometimes combined these ideas to create 'perfect triads,' where the bass and soprano double the root of the triad

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<sup>25</sup> Boyd Pomeroy, "Debussy's tonality: a formal perspective," in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, ed. Simon Trezise, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 158.

<sup>26</sup> Mark DeVoto, "Some Aspects of Parallel Harmony in Claude Debussy," in *Liber Amicorum Isabelle Cazeaux: Symbols, Parallels and Discoveries in Her Honor*, ed. Paul-Andre Bempechat, Festschrift series, (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2005), 472.

through the harmony, creating a string of root position triads with parallel octaves.<sup>27</sup> In the example on page ten, parallel harmony is showcased in the violins between measures eight and nine. In all three movements of the *Nocturnes*, there is at least one moment where Debussy uses parallel harmony to showcase a climatic or important moment in the movement.<sup>28</sup>

Not only did Debussy use a large amount of parallel harmony, but he also used a significant amount of parallelism in his orchestration. Debussy spent a large amount of time on his orchestrations, and especially in the third movements of his compositions, he often went back and made significant edits to the orchestration as he searched for the sound he was looking for.<sup>29</sup> In the third movement of *Nocturnes*, called “Sirenes” there are three different versions of edited scores created between 1901 and 1918 after the premiere of the work.<sup>30</sup> The number of versions is due to a falling out with the original publisher of the work, but I’m more interested in how this shows that Debussy kept making different and sometimes contradictory edits as he searched for the textures he wanted.<sup>31</sup> One of the things that he was constantly changing in his edits to “Sirenes” were his doublings at the octave and fifth, which helped to create his heterophonic orchestration.<sup>32</sup>

The definition of heterophonic orchestration is one or more instruments playing the same

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<sup>27</sup> Mark DeVoto “*The Danses sacree et profane: Whole Tone and Modal Mapping*,” in *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality : Essays on His Music*, Dimension and Diversity Series: No. 4, (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2004), 170.

<sup>28</sup> DeVoto, “Some Aspects of Parallel Harmony in Debussy,” 472-474.

<sup>29</sup> Denis Herlin, “Sirens in the labyrinth: amendments in Debussy’s *Nocturnes*,” in *Debussy Studies*, trans. Sidney Buckland, ed. Richard Langham Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 51, 61.

<sup>30</sup> Herlin, “Sirens,” 51-60.

<sup>31</sup> Herlin, 60-62.

<sup>32</sup> Herlin, 62.

melody, or an embellished version of the melody, often at the octave or unison. Debussy scholar Mark DeVoto also uses the term to describe the use of orchestral doublings, whether in harmony, melody, or special timbre (two or more instruments playing with modifications such as mutes to sound similar).<sup>33</sup> The use of parts doubled at the fifth was not a traditional harmonic technique in the Baroque or Classical period, so Debussy's use of the doubling at the fifth is particularly interesting. One of Debussy's favorite combinations was groups of muted strings in divisi, an example of which appears at the beginning of *Nuages*, as a background texture to the clarinet and bassoon.<sup>34</sup> They join the texture in measure seven of the piece, as shown in this reduced score created by Mark DeVoto for his essay "*Nuages* and Reduced Tonality."

Example 4.1 Complete short score (11 pages)

Modéré

pp très expressif

2 Cl.

2 Bn.

2 Fl.

Eng. horn

2 Hr. sord.

Cl., Bn.

Va. I sord. div. in 6/8

2 Cl., 2 Bn.

Cl., Bn.

Timp.

pp

pp

pp

ppp

pppp

pp

<sup>33</sup> DeVoto, "The Debussy Sound: colour, texture, and gesture," 181.

<sup>34</sup> DeVoto, "The Debussy Sound," 184.

These string textures would often be playing the octatonic scale or other intervallic patterns stacked in intervals and then connected by parallel harmony,<sup>35</sup> the two concepts mentioned before, showing how interconnected the unique elements of Debussy's sound are. In addition, the doubling of a motif and its harmonization in octaves by the pair of clarinets and the pair of bassoons in the example above showcases not only Debussy's use of heterophonic orchestration, but the way that he often kept that orchestration within the same instrument family when producing heterophony. It is also characteristic that the melodic lines are placed in the woodwinds, as the woodwind family was often the bearer of Debussy's melodies in orchestral works.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Key: Why No One Copied Debussy**

Since it requires all of these elements to create music that sounds exactly like or even similar to Debussy, it becomes clear that if a composer imitated only Debussy's impressionistic elements, it would not create a piece that sounds the same, as the other compositional elements are also required. Despite this conclusion, it seems that the larger reason that no contemporary wrote music that sounds like Debussy is the reception of Debussy's music after his death, which was due to the changing climate around tonality in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s.<sup>37</sup> The first major factor was the way that music theorists and composers viewed him at that time. Debussy's music was often chastised for its lack of form by more conservative voices, and most music theorists at the time discounted his works because of this.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the spreading use of the term Impressionism was distilling Debussy's music into one concept, so there was not much

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<sup>35</sup> DeVoto, "The Debussy Sound," 181.

<sup>36</sup> DeVoto, "The Debussy Sound," 181.

<sup>37</sup> Nadeau, 69–72.

<sup>38</sup> Jarocinski, 15-16.

attention paid to it other than to fit it into this category.<sup>39</sup> The second major issue was the underappreciation of Debussy's later works. In wartime France, the nationalist spirit was becoming stronger and stronger, and Debussy, wanting to leave himself a place in this legacy, began to attempt to associate his work with earlier respected French composers.<sup>40</sup> He knew that he was dying from cancer, so he had a chance to consider his reputation.<sup>41</sup> He began to fit his works into traditional forms like the sonata, etude, and cantata. Despite his return to form, this did not change the opinion of music theorists surrounding his music, and these works were largely ignored, as they were not fully understood, and became associated with Debussy's illness rather than the nationalistic cannon, as he had hoped for.<sup>42</sup>

The final nail in Debussy's unpopularity coffin came in the form of a magazine edition known as the *Tombeau de Claude Debussy*, published in 1920. In this project, Henry Prunières of the magazine "Revue Musicale" commissioned many articles in commemoration of Debussy's death, as well as 10 compositions from different famous composers such as Manuel de Falla and Stravinsky.<sup>43</sup> Most of the contents of the *Tombeau* ignored Debussy's later works and many continued to harp on the "problems" of his earlier works, despite most of the people involved being friends of Debussy. They did not associate his pieces with French Nationalism in the postwar climate, which led to the *Tombeau* creating a lot of negativity around the works of Debussy.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jarocinski, 16-17.

<sup>40</sup> Marianne Wheeldon, "Tombeau de Claude Debussy: The Early Reception of Late Works," in

<sup>41</sup> François Lesure, "The last years" in "Debussy, (Achille-) Claude," *Oxford Music Online*, January 20, 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.07353>.

<sup>42</sup> Marianne Wheeldon, "Tombeau de Claude Debussy" in *Debussy's Late Style*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 121-124.

<sup>43</sup> Wheeldon, "Tombeau de Claude Debussy, Early Reception" 259-260.

<sup>44</sup> Wheeldon, "Tombeau de Claude Debussy, Early Reception" 266.

If no one appreciates your work, it is clear why no one would copy the style. As we know today, Debussy rose back to popularity after this initial slander to his reputation. In the 1950s, there emerged a few composers who sound quite like Debussy, one of them being Julian Work. Yet, there are other Impressionistic composers who produce a less obvious replacement of his style. With this newfound understanding that Impressionism is not an overarching description of Debussy's sound, but specifically the use of unique colors or harmony to create isolated sound-pockets in a composition, it is easier to categorize composers into the style of Impressionism. Now, an analysis of the harmonic structure, or lack of traditional harmonic structure in a piece of music can be used to determine if the piece is Impressionistic.

Using this new categorization, it becomes clearer how Debussy and Ravel's music are both Impressionistic in nature, even though they sound quite different. Therefore, Debussy and those whose music sounds similar to his would fit into the term Symbolism, placing Symbolism as a more specific category under the umbrella of Impressionism. The use of parallelism more widely applies to Impressionism, but the use of heterophonic orchestration or embellished melodies takes a piece into the category of Symbolism. The only complication with the strategy is the connection to the original literary concept of Symbolism, because it required a connection to nature. I think that connection can be foregone if the piece represents all of the other compositional devices that composers used as hallmarks of that style since they were originally connected to the natural element of the movement.

### **The Slow Death of Impressionism**

One final matter to consider with the lack of clarity around Impressionistic composers after Debussy is the way that Debussy opened the door to the expansion of harmonic ambiguity

inside of the tonal system.<sup>45</sup> Part of what created the uniqueness in Debussy's music was his lack of traditional Western harmony and form. As these elements began to be used by so many composers, they created their own place in the musical cannon, it became more difficult to copy Debussy as it was no longer a novel sound. The pillars of Impressionism became increasingly difficult to find in newer compositions as all composers began to use non-standard elements in their compositions, mixing between different styles and genres. The lack of musical form is no longer a hallmark of Impressionism as most modern orchestral compositions do not follow a standard musical form as composers push the boundaries of what is possible. Since Impressionism no longer breaks conventions, it becomes more difficult to categorize composers as Impressionistic because the elements that made up the style are no longer unique and special that style.

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<sup>45</sup> Nadeau, 70.

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