

## 24. Debussy

### Pour le piano: Sarabande

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

#### Introduction and Performance circumstances

Debussy probably decided to compose a Sarabande partly because he knew Erik Satie's three sarabandes of 1887, with their similarly sensuous harmony. There are no grounds for referring to Debussy's *Sarabande* as 'impressionist', even though the piece is very similar in date to his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. The term 'neoclassical' may be more suitable, although we do not hear the post-World War I type of 'wrong-note' neoclassicism of, for example, Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*.

In public performance Debussy's *Sarabande* is most likely to be heard as part of a piano recital, along with the two other movements which flank it (*Prélude* and *Toccata*) from *Pour le piano*. Incidentally the suite was published in 1901, but the *Sarabande* (in a slightly different version to the one we know) dates back to 1894.

#### Performing Forces and their Handling

*Sarabande*, for solo piano, does not depend for its effect on any virtuosity or display. Marguerite Long, a pupil of Debussy, noted that the composer 'himself played [the piece] as no one [else] could ever have done, with those marvellous successions of chords sustained by his intense legato'.

A wide range is involved, from (several) very low C sharps to E just over five octaves higher; there are no extremely high notes. Some left-hand chords extend to well over an octave and have to be spread.

#### Texture

The texture is almost entirely homophonic, with much parallelism, and is often extremely sonorous on account of the many chords with six or more notes.

- Sometimes the top part stands apart from the unified accompaniment beneath it; this is *melody-dominated homophony*, as in bars 9–12.
- Elsewhere all parts move together; this is *homorhythm* or *chordal writing*, as at the beginning.
- *Parallelism* involves all or some parts moving in the same direction by the same intervals, and is used with variety and resourcefulness. There are, for example, six-note chords at the beginning, four-note chords underlying the melody in bars 11–12, and eight-note chord streams just before the opening tune returns (in bars 35–41)
- Three short octave passages provide contrast (e.g. near the beginning in bars 5–6).

## Structure

The *Sarabande* does not entirely fit any single traditional form such as binary, ternary and rondo, although reference to such forms can help us understand a unique and intensely satisfying structure.

Baroque sarabandes were in binary form, and it is possible to hear a binary structure in Debussy's piece, as follows:

- Section A = bars 1–22 (ending on C sharp with a quiet low passage in octaves).
- Section B = bars 23–72, which includes a modified repeat of the opening music part way through (bars 42–49). Such a repeat is characteristic of *rounded* binary form (rather than simple binary). The B section of binary form is frequently longer than the A, but not usually as long as it is here.

We may hear a *ternary* rather than binary structure, however – particularly as bars 23–41 are fairly self-contained and include some quite new material (especially at the start).

- Section A = bars 1–22. These bars are themselves broadly ternary, because the opening music comes back towards the end (bars 15–18).
- Section B = bars 23–41.
- Section A<sup>v</sup> = bars 42–72 (v signifies that the second A section is a (much) varied repeat of the first A section).

Yet another clue to the structure of the work may lie in the rondo, or rondeau, another Baroque structure frequently used by Couperin and Rameau. In this form the main theme recurs in the same key, separated by various episodes.

- Theme A appears, albeit with variations at bars 1–8, 15–22 and 42–49. Section B appears at bars 9–14, section C at 23–41 and section D at 50–55.
- The rondo interpretation breaks down at bar 56 where, instead of Theme A, B returns and leads on to a coda (from bar 63).

Characteristic of Debussy's approach to small-scale (rather than large-scale) structure is the immediate repetition, almost exactly, of one- and two-bar units, for example:

- At the start, where bars 1–2 are repeated in bars 3–4, with very slight embellishment.
- Further on in the opening section where bar 9 is repeated as bar 10, again with slight variation.

These short repetitions:

- Give the listener a second chance to hear important steps in the musical argument rather as a teacher or lecturer might repeat an important sentence or phrase.
- Emphasise the sensuousness of the harmony.

Generally there is *periodic phrasing*, with 2-bar units and multiples thereof.

## Tonality

Debussy has abandoned the kind of tonality based on major and minor scales and functional harmony (focussed above all on tonic and dominant chords) that had dominated late Baroque, Classical, and much Romantic music. Two important elements are:

- Modality. Much of the music is in an Aeolian-mode version of C sharp minor. The Aeolian mode has the same notes as the descending melodic minor. So in C sharp minor we lack the A sharp of the ascending melodic minor and above all the raised leading note B sharp. (Incidentally, Debussy's handling of the Aeolian mode, although in some senses deliberately archaic, is not closely similar to that of Renaissance or medieval composers.)
- Tonal ambiguity. For example, the melody of bars 1–2 could represent E major, whereas the harmonisation is closer to (modal) C sharp minor.

### Bars 1–22

- This section is chiefly in C sharp Aeolian minor, but...
- ...in the middle there is clear tonal contrast, with A sharp often replacing A natural
- The tonality in the middle is often ambiguous, suggesting G sharp Aeolian minor or D sharp Aeolian minor.

### Bars 23–41

- To begin with, the melody suggests C sharp Aeolian minor still, together with the very low I–V–I outline in bars 24–25.
- There is a shift up a minor 3rd (in sequence: see bars 27–28), to suggest E Aeolian minor.
- After this (bars 29–30) there is a very strong tonal contrast (A sharp Aeolian minor?)
- Modal F sharp minor is featured later – listen for the very low outline C sharp – F sharp – F sharp in bars 35–38.

### Bars 42–72

- For the repeat of the opening (bars 42–45) we might expect the key to be C sharp minor Aeolian again, but the first chord (D major) does not help to make it clear.
- C sharp Aeolian minor is much clearer subsequently (bars 46–49).
- The new material that follows (bars 50–55) is tonally complex and ambiguous.
- Most of the music after that is in or close to C sharp Aeolian minor.

## Harmony

The harmony is generally 'non-functional' – that is, tonic, dominant and subdominant classes of chords do not establish and maintain traditional major and minor keys in the manner of so much previous music.

- Instead of chords 'progressing' as in the past, Debussy followed his own ear with successions of sensuous chords that 'float free', often being related to each other by systematic *parallelism*. See especially the accompaniment to the melody in bars 11–12 and the 'chord streams' in bars 35–41.

- Some cadences are novel in that chords a 3rd apart are involved – respectively E major to G sharp minor in the opening phrase.
- Debussy's parallelism includes plenty of parallel 5ths. Previously forbidden, these are now relished, partly no doubt for their supposedly archaic organum-like sound.
- Parallel octaves are mostly doublings of the principal melodic line (as in bar 1).
- Many individual chords are just 'ordinary' triads in root position. (Inversions of triads are avoided).
- Many others are seventh chords (chiefly in root position), including the very first chord of the piece. Parallel movement means that sevenths above the root – previously considered dissonant and in need of preparation and resolution – are now treated freely.
- There are a few ninth chords (e.g. in bar 11, 3rd quaver beat).
- The piece includes one of the earliest uses of *quartal harmony* – that is, harmony based on superimposed 4ths rather than the superimposed 3rds of ordinary triads and seventh chords. Bar 23, for example, begins with the notes G sharp, C sharp, F sharp, B under the melody's C sharp.
- Debussy sometimes re-harmonises a melody when it re-appears. Note particularly the strikingly different harmonisation of the opening melody when it recurs in bars 42–45.

## Melody

- The melody moves narrowly in most phrases with a mixture of conjunct (stepwise) movement and small leaps of a 3rd or 4th.
- The compass is slightly more extended when an important cadence or sectional break is approached – notably in bars 7–8, 38–41 (just before the return of the opening music) and at the end (bars 67–71) – presumably to emphasise that important cadence.

## Rhythm and Metre

- As customary for a sarabande, Debussy's piece is in simple triple time.
- Again as customary, the second beat is emphasised in many bars.
- The piece as a whole has considerable rhythmic variety, with:
  - Continuous quaver chords (most notably in the 'chord streams' of bars 39–41 just before the reprise).
  - A two semiquaver-quaver figure (e.g. bar 5) or the reverse (for the first time in bar 23).
  - Triplet quavers: these are important, but only occur in the melody first heard at the start.

### Some additional resources

For those who wish to pursue their studies beyond the demands of AS level, see the notes on Debussy's *Sarabande* for A2 Music. These have some additional points, more detail and examples, and provide some titles for further reading (beyond A2 level) for those who are interested.