

24. Debussy

Pour le piano: Sarabande

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Introduction and Performance circumstances

In 1894 Claude Debussy (1862–1918) composed three *Images* for piano which were eventually published together in 1977 under the title *Images oubliées*. The second is referred to on the cover as 'Souvenir du Louvre' ('Memory of the Louvre'), and at the head of the score has the inscription 'Dans le mouvement d'une "Sarabande", c'est-à-dire avec une élégance grave et lente, même un peu vieux portrait, souvenir du Louvre, etc.' – 'In the rhythm of a Sarabande, that is to say with a solemn and slow elegance, a little like an old portrait, memory of the Louvre, etc.'. See http://imslp.eu/linkhandler.php?path=/imglnks/euimg/3/39/IMSLP276950-PMLP449630-Images_oubliees.pdf

The piece was published separately in 1896 in the periodical *Le Grand Journal du Lundi*, and then, slightly revised, as part of *Pour le piano* in 1901 under the title 'Sarabande'. A fine performance of *Images oubliées* by Artur Pizarro is available in the BBC Music Magazine Collection, Vol. 19 No. 1 (BBC MM 324).

Debussy's decision to compose a Sarabande probably resulted in part from knowledge of Erik Satie's three sarabandes of 1887, with their similarly sensuous harmony. Debussy's references to 'an old portrait' and to the Louvre are reminders of the importance of the visual arts to him. He remarked in 1911 that he loved pictures almost as much as music. Despite this, there are no grounds for applying the word 'impressionist' to Debussy's *Sarabande* – even though the piece is very similar in date to *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. The term 'neoclassical' may be more appropriate, although this is not the post-World War I type of 'wrong-note' neoclassicism which some students may have encountered in 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*.

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 (notably in bar 19).

Texture

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

- In some passages the expression *melody-dominated homophony* can be used – the top part stands apart from an underlying rhythmically-unified accompaniment – as in bars 9–12 and 42–45.
- Elsewhere all parts move together, a type of homophony often referred to *homorhythm* or *chordal writing*: see for example bars 1–2.
- Much of the chordal or homorhythmic writing involves *parallelism*, with all or some parts moving in the same direction by the same intervals. This happens in bar 1, but note how the third note in the bass is A not the G sharp that would result from strict parallelism.
- Debussy's parallelism is varied and resourceful. 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 in bars 35–41.
- Three short octave passages provide contrast. The first (bars 5–6) introduces a new melodic-rhythmic figure. The second (bars 20–22), based on the figure from bars 5–6, provides a quiet, almost forlorn ending to the first main section. The third (bars 66) is in the same pitch range as the second, but is otherwise a repeat of bar 5. (It is better to refer to *octave writing* in these passages rather than to *unison* or *monophonic writing*, both of which strictly involve one note at a time.)

Structure

François Lesure, writer of the article on Debussy in the *The New Grove* (2001), states that 'Debussy's inventions bear equally on harmony, rhythm, texture and form, and might be summarized as a lifelong quest to banish blatancy of musical expression'. Accordingly, the *Sarabande* cannot easily be made to fit any single traditional form such as binary, ternary or rondo, although reference to such forms can to some extent help us to understand a unique and intensely satisfying structure.

Because Baroque sarabandes were in binary form, it is natural to ask first if Debussy's *Sarabande* is binary also. A binary structure can be mapped out as follows:

- Section A = bars 1–22. This first section ends on C sharp, the main tonal centre, not in a complementary key as more often (but not always) happens in traditional binary form.
- Section B = bars 23–72. There is a modified repeat of bars 1–8 at bars 42–49 (melody in different octaves, harmony almost all different), which is characteristic of *rounded* binary form. Bars 60–61 likewise refer back to bars 9–10 (same melody, different harmony), and bar 66 is a transposition down two octaves of bar 5. The B section of binary form is frequently longer than the A, but the disparity here is unusually marked.

Our ears, however, may suggest a different interpretation – basically a *ternary* one – 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, in view of the repeat of bars 1–4 in bars 15–18. As expected with ternary form, Section A ends in the main key (C sharp Aeolian minor).
- Section B = bars 23–41.
- Section A^v = 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).

A characteristically Debussyan aspect of local structure is the immediate repetition – almost exactly – of one- and two-bar units, especially:

- Bars 1–2 are repeated in bars 3–4 with the addition of G sharp passing notes in octaves in the melody (compare the repetition of bars 42–43 in bars 44–45).
- Bar 9 is repeated as bar 10 but with a concluding D sharp quaver in place of F sharp.
- Bar 11 is repeated without any change as bar 12.
- Bars 23–24 undergo slight melodic embellishment when repeated as bars 25–26.
- Bars 23–26 are followed in bars 27–28 by two statements transposed up a minor 3rd of bar 23 (the second of these has the melodic embellishment). As with bars 9–10, the shorter repetition in bars 27–28 serves to give added momentum as a section proceeds.

These single- or two-bar 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.

- However this does not extend to a monotonous succession of eight-bar units (note, for example, the six-bar unit reaching from bar 9 to bar 14).
- An exception to 'evenness' is the seven-bar span from bar 35 to bar 41 (as the modified repeat of the opening bars in bars 42ff is approached).
- Here the normal regularity is further blurred by *cross-phrasing* involving (a) the six-quaver phrase beamed across the barline that separates bars 39 and 40, and (b) the following three quavers plus two crotchets.

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 (the principal tonality is Aeolian-mode C sharp minor). The Aeolian mode on C sharp has the same notes as the descending melodic minor on that note. It lacks the A sharp of the ascending melodic minor and above all the raised leading note B sharp that is so characteristic of the 'ordinary' C sharp minor used for example by Beethoven in the first movement of his celebrated 'Moonlight' Sonata. It is important to realise that the Aeolian mode as used by Debussy, although in some senses deliberately archaic, is not handled in accordance with Renaissance or medieval practice.
- Tonal ambiguity. Earlier composers had sometimes enjoyed harmonising the same tune in more than one key (this type of ambiguity can be seen even in some of Bach's chorale harmonisations). In Debussy's *Sarabande*, the melody of bars 1–2 could represent E major, whereas the harmonisation is closer to (modal) C sharp minor. When the same melody recurs in bar 42 the D major chord gives an initial and short-lived impression of D major.

Note: It is difficult not to include some references to harmony (especially to cadences) in a discussion of tonality. However, comment on the types of chords used and the attitude to dissonance are reserved for the following section.

Bars 1–22

- Bars 1–8 and 15–22 (the modified repeat) are entirely diatonic (C sharp Aeolian minor).
- The only cadence on the tonic is in bars 21–22.
- The cadence onto a G sharp minor chord in bar 2 (see also bars 4, 16 and 18) is presumably imperfect in C sharp minor without the raised leading note.
- The cadence onto a B chord in bar 8 (with preceding A naturals) suggests imperfect in E.
- Bars 9–14 provide clear tonal contrast. An A sharp replaces A natural except:
 - At the beginnings of bars 9 and 10 (the shifts from natural to sharp are very striking here).
 - Where strict parallelism in the accompaniment necessitates A natural.
- The tonality in these bars is often still ambiguous. At the end, for example, the key may be G sharp Aeolian minor, ending on V with sharpened 3rd, or D sharp Aeolian minor (with tierce de Picardie to conclude the third and final V–I). The D sharp major chord leads on smoothly to the D sharp half-diminished 7th chord at the start of the recapitulatory bars 15–22.

Bars 23–41

- The melody of bars 23–24 suggests a C sharp Aeolian minor still, together with the very low I–V–I outline in bars 24–25. Strict parallelism accounts for the D natural in bar 23 (the G natural is a chromatic passing note).

- Bars 27–28 shift in sequence up a minor 3rd to E Aeolian minor – the move being particularly convincing because the first chord of bar 27 has already been sounded as the third chord in bars 23 and 25. Every note is a white note on the piano.
- Bars 29–30 (emphasised because the music rises to *mf* here only for the third time in the piece) provide a very strong tonal contrast with their intensive use of all the *black* notes (plus the white-note sharps, E sharp and B sharp). The key appears to be A sharp Aeolian minor, but the following cadence (bar 32) ends with an E major chord.
- Bars 33–34 = bars 29–30 but transposed down a major 3rd. F sharp Aeolian minor is the subdominant of the original key and may be intended to balance previous dominant-side moves?
- Bars 35–38 twice have the very low outline C sharp – F sharp – F sharp, perhaps representing V and I in modal F sharp minor. Melodic patterns emphasising F sharp may support this, notably in bars 38–40. If so, the D sharps in these bars must mean that ‘modal F sharp minor’ is not Aeolian but Dorian.

Bars 42–72

- Bars 42–45, the repeat of the opening: the tonality is elusive – if C sharp Aeolian minor, as one might expect, the opening D major chord might be flat-II (Neapolitan chord in root position).
- Bars 46–49: compare bars 5–8 – clearly beginning in C sharp Aeolian minor.
- Bars 50–55: new material, which is complex and ambiguous tonally. It perhaps passes briefly through E mixolydian at bars 53–54, but ends on a D sharp major chord that may be meant to recall bar 14 and/or to anticipate bar 59.
- Bars 56–59 are related to bars 9–11, with the melody initially a 5th higher.
- Bars 60–62 are very similar to bars 56–58 but down a 5th (textural differences and the lower pitch and the much quieter dynamic are inter-related) – the tonality, still ambiguous at times, is fundamentally C sharp Aeolian minor.
- Bars 63–end: at first probably G sharp Aeolian minor (note the A sharps), the frequent bass G sharps preparing for the final C sharp minor tonic chord in bars 71–72. The brief reminiscence from bar 67 of the passage that began in bar 23 helps to account for the D natural within 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 many previous styles.

- 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 use of *parallelism*. See especially the accompaniment to the melody in bars 11–12 and the ‘chord streams’ in bars 35–41. The cadences in bars 2 and 31–32 are novel in that chords a 3rd apart are involved – respectively E major to G sharp minor and G sharp minor to E major.

- Debussy's parallelism includes plenty of parallel 5ths. These were forbidden in previous musical styles, but now are positively 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), but are usually 'infilled' (e.g. with a perfect 5th as in bar 1). Parallel octaves between outside parts are confined to bars 63–65 – where they are part of multiple doublings of the melody line.
- Many chords (considered individually) are just 'ordinary' triads in root position. (Inversions of triads are avoided).
- Many others are seventh chords (chiefly in root position) – in bar 1 all five chords are sevenths, the third alone being in (third) inversion. Parallel movement means that sevenths above the root – previously considered dissonant and in need of preparation and resolution – are now 'emancipated' and can be treated freely.
- There are a few ninth chords (e.g. in bar 11, 3rd quaver beat). Some chords that appear to be ninth chords actually include dissonances that resolve – notably the first chord in bar 11 where the (unprepared) G sharp a 9th above the bass almost immediately resolves to the octave F sharp (part of a simple F sharp major chord).
- Bars 23–28 and 67–70 involve one of the earliest uses of *quartal harmony* – that is, harmony based on superimposed 4ths rather than the superimposed 3rds that make up 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 in bars 42–45. Compare also bars 60–61 with bars 9–10. The melody first heard unaccompanied in bar 5 is fully harmonised at bar 46.
- Such re-harmonisation might be considered to be Debussy's 'most literal approach to true Impressionist technique, the equivalent of Monet's fixed object...illuminated from different angles' (*The New Grove*, 2001).

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 of the opening two-bar phrase is just a 5th, and this is not exceptional.
- The compass is slightly more extended when an important cadence or sectional break is approached – notably in bars 7–8, 38–41 and 67–71 – presumably to emphasise that important cadence.

Rhythm and Metre

- As is customary for a sarabande, Debussy's piece is in simple triple time.
- Again as customary, the second beat is emphasised in many bars.
- Such emphasis is particularly common in the second bar of a two-bar phrase, for example in bars 2 and 24 where great weight is laid on beat 2 because there is a minim chord at this point and no movement at all on beat 3.

- Each of bars 9–12 has less weighty emphasis, with dotted crotchet and quaver at beats 2–3 supported by crotchet or quaver chords.
- The piece as a whole has considerable rhythmic variety, with:
 - Continuous quaver chords (most notably in bars 39–41).
 - A two semiquaver-quaver figure (e.g. bar 5) or the reverse (for the first time in bar 23).
 - Triplet quavers – though important they only appear in bars 1 and 3 and their modified repeats at bars 42 and 44.

Further reading

The items on the following list, though of considerable interest, are not to be regarded as essential reading.

F. Dawes, *Debussy Piano Music* (BBC Music Guides, 1969).

M. Long, *At the Piano with Debussy* (Dent, 1972).

P. Roberts, *Images: the Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Amadeus Press, 1996).