

5. Debussy

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (For Unit 6 : Further Musical Understanding)

Background information

Biography

Debussy was born in St Germain-en-Laye, France on 22nd August 1862.

His prodigious musical talent was recognised when, at the age of 10, he was awarded a place at the Paris Conservatoire.

He would study there for the next 11 years.

During that time Debussy became more and more exploratory and experimental in his composition, causing consternation amongst his professors at the ultra-traditional Conservatoire.

Much to the surprise of many, in 1884, Debussy won the Prix de Rome (a renowned competition at the Paris Conservatoire which required adherence to strict rules of composition, something of an anathema to Debussy).

The prize, awarded for his cantata *L'enfant prodigue*, was a further two years of funded study at the Villa Medici in Rome.

These years of study, along with many other influences as diverse as experiencing the operas of Wagner at Bayreuth and encountering Gamelan Music at the Paris Exhibition of 1889, combined to form a new compositional style, evident in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.

'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune'

- The *Prélude* was inspired by the Symbolist poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, and specifically his poem *L'après-midi d'un faune*, written in 1876.
- The poem describes a faun, alone in a forest, playing on his pan-pipes. Passing nymphs and naiads arouse him and he pursues them. He is unsuccessful in his pursuit, falls asleep and has vivid dreams.
- The *Prélude* was premiered in Paris on December 22nd, 1894.

Modern opinion is very different and the contemporary composer-conductor Pierre Boulez famously remarked that the work saw the beginning of twentieth century music.

(See Matthew Brown, *Music Theory Spectrum*, 1993)

Debussy – Symbolist or Impressionist?

It is very common to find Debussy labelled an Impressionist composer, yet he himself was quite adamant that he was not.

In late-19th Century France, “Impressionist” was a pejorative term denoting all that the establishment considered was wrong with the contemporary arts, particularly the lack of clear structure and a failure to conform to accepted rules and norms. Whilst one could easily accept that Debussy fits that description, he was very clear in his alliance to the Symbolist movement. Symbolists eschewed realism and believed that art should represent absolute truth, but the representation of that truth could only be achieved by way of metaphor, suggestions and, most appropriately when we consider Debussy’s *Prélude*, dreams.

Performing forces and their handling

The orchestra Debussy employs consists of a full complement of strings allied to ten woodwind (not least the solo flute representing the Faun’s pipe), four horns and two harps. One unusual addition is antique cymbals, otherwise known as crotales; it is worth noting that these are tuned percussion instruments and they appear near the end of the *Prélude* playing the interval of a perfect fifth (E to B).

Of course, a simple list of instruments could never do justice to Debussy’s score. To demonstrate the wealth of colour he achieves, here are some examples of his orchestration: -

- Strings use mutes for extended periods.
- All string parts apart from Double Bass are frequently divisi.
- This can lead to up to nine simultaneous string parts (e.g., Bar 60)
- Tremolo is used in strings.
- Two different types of tremolo are used: Bowed tremolo (where one note is rapidly reiterated by movement of the bow), e.g., Bar 11; Fingered tremolo (where there is rapid alternation between two notes), e.g., Bar 94.
- Sur la touche (bowing over the fingerboard) is specified to create a gentler string timbre (e.g., Bar 85).
- Pizzicato and Arco techniques are used, sometimes in rapid succession (e.g., Bars 25-26).
- Harp glissandi create shimmering effects.
- Harmonics are used on the harp (e.g., Bars 108-109).

- Woodwind are often given independent solo lines which focus on their individual timbres (flute, oboe and clarinet are often isolated in this way).
- Sometimes doubling is used to create powerful effects in the upper wind (e.g. the melody at Bar 55).
- At Bar 95 Clarinets use tremolo technique as well as strings.
- The clarinet part requires both Clarinet in A and Clarinet in Bb (although this is as much about practicality as timbre).
- In Bar 93 Horn 1 is instructed to play a note bouché (stopped) to create a particular tone colour.
- Horns are also muted (sourdines) in some passages (e.g. bars 84-92).
- In bar 93, the direction *cuivré* appears in the first horn part, indicating that a “brassy” tone is required.

Texture

Most of the music consists of various types of melody-dominated homophony.

Here are examples of different accompaniment styles:-

- **Bar 11** – held chords in clarinets and tremolo strings.
- **Bar 21** – sustained bass notes and harp arpeggios.
- **Bar 31** – Horn and string chords with harp octaves and Cello countermelody.
- **Bar 55** – Melody in doubled octaves with syncopated string chords.
- **Bar 94** – Flutes play the melody in unison over 9-part divisi string tremolos.

Some textural exceptions and points of interest are as follows:-

- Most famously, the opening Flute solo is monophonic.
- Doubling of instruments is common (including examples of octave doubling).
- Pedals occur (e.g., Bars 106-110).
- In Bar 107 Homorhythm is employed in Horn and Violin 1 parts.

Structure

When analysing the structure of this piece, the word *Prélude* can seem confusing. The simple explanation is that Debussy originally intended a three section composition with the *Prélude*, naturally, as the first of these. Sadly, this plan was never realised. Some analysts quite reasonably consider this work to be a Tone Poem as it is a depiction of the Faun's afternoon.

The *Prélude* is essentially a Ternary Form piece with a Coda. The breakdown of this structure can be seen in the table below.

Bars 1-54	A
Bars 55-78	B
Bars 79-93	A
Bars 94-110	Coda

It is noteworthy that the reprise of the A section is much shorter than its previous appearance. The explanation for this can be found when one analyses the piece at a deeper level. Bars 1-54 can be further subdivided into subsections and this gives a more balanced analysis in terms of bar lengths: -

Bars 1-30	A (Flute theme)
Bars 31-36	Transition (based on opening Flute theme)
Bars 37-54	A1 (Oboe theme)

Consequently, bars 79-93 could be considered a reprise of A1.

In spite of the seeming improvisational freedom of Debussy's work, there are a number of interesting structural features:

- Mallarmé's poem has 110 lines: Debussy's composition has 110 Bars! (It is well known that Debussy had a fascination with numbers. He would add extra bars to pieces so that they would conform to particular numerological patterns. In particular, the Fibonacci Series and the Golden Section fascinated him).

- There is some evidence to suggest that Debussy's bars correspond to Mallarmé's lines in a very specific way. (To give one example: the ascending music of Bars 48-51 corresponds precisely to the part in the poem describing "shapes...rising".)
- Notice the more traditional phrase structure of the central portion of the work (from bar 55).
- Apart from the overall ternary structure, the work also draws on variational procedures with regard to the returns of the principal theme (notice the changes of harmony [see below], rhythmic and melodic modifications, changes of tempo etc.)

Tonality

One of the striking features of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is that tonality is a rather hazy concept, as keys are clearly present but are not generally defined in a traditional manner. Sense of tonality is undermined by

- Chromaticism
- Whole-tone writing
- Unresolved dissonance

Moments of tonal clarity, when they occur, are vitally important to the structure.

Most obviously defined of all are the final bars. Here we settle comfortably on E Major, with a perfect cadence in bars 105-106 (notice the V-I Bass movement, V supporting a ninth chord).

Another moment where the listener feels unequivocally directed to a specific key is bar 55. Here, again, there is a V-I Bass outline (this time the dominant is present for four bars prior to the arrival of tonic). The key we reach is Db Major.

The opening of the piece, with a chromatic melody outlining the interval of a tritone, provides no sense of key. The persistent C#s in the melody give that note a feeling of importance, but clarity only emerges at Bar 21 when the melodic C#s sit comfortably above an E major chord (with added 6th both in the melody and the harmony). Debussy plays with these E and C# influences at will (C# anticipates the enharmonic D flat at bar 55), thereby conjuring up a feeling of tonal flux totally in sympathy with the Faun's dreamlike state.

Other keys are touched on in passing:

- B major (bar 30)
- C major (bar 83)
- B major (bar 90)

Harmony

Apart from the cadences mentioned above, Debussy uses chords in a non-functional way; his harmonies exist to create musical colour, a totally original concept at the time and one which would have a significant influence on future generations of composers.

- One example of the colouristic, non-functional harmonic language Debussy uses is the unusual shift in Bars 19-21 from a C#7 chord to an E6 chord. The piece abounds with similar examples.

In addition the following harmonic features are worthy of note:

- Much use of 7th Chords.
- Use of chord extensions; 9th, 11th and 13th notes.
- Non-resolving Dominant 7th Chords.
- Pedals.
- Chromatic harmony.
- half-diminished 7th chord (e.g. bar 4)

The opening theme reappears seven times in the composition (interestingly, this corresponds to the division of Mallarmé's poem into seven sections), and each entry is harmonised in a different way. An analysis of these appearances gives a good demonstration of the subtlety and complexity of Debussy's harmonic style.

	<u>Bar No.</u>	<u>Harmonisation</u>
1	Bar 1	Monophonic
2	Bar 11	Only the notes D and F# are present in the accompaniment at first, the addition of the Flute C# creating a D maj7 chord. At the end of the bar, the F# is changed to F natural. The chords in bars 13-14 include B13, E with added 6th, C#7b.
3	Bar 21	E major chord with added 6 th (the 6 th , C#, appears in both

		accompaniment and melody). The last chord in the bar is C major.
4	Bar 26	E major with added 7 th and 9 th .
5	Bar 79	E major, 1 st inversion.
6	Bar 94	E major with added 6 th , 7 th and 9 th ; string tremolos create a shimmering harmonic effect by alternating between notes of the triad and the chord extensions.
7	Bar 100	C#7 (first inversion), alternating with A# 7.

Melody

Debussy is famous for his use of the whole-tone scale and this piece has an example (Bar 32 – clarinet) but central to consideration of melody in this piece has to be the revolutionary nature of the opening flute theme:



The opening two bars are a chromatic combination of tones and semitones. Radically, they cover the range of a tritone.

In Bar 3 the melody expands to cover the range of an octave and it could be viewed as either diatonic or as a minor pentatonic on C#. The arrival of A# in Bar 4 then gives a suggestion of modal influences in that these two bars could be regarded as being in Dorian mode on C#.

In his compositions Debussy reacted against the well-established motivic tradition of composition (one of the reasons why he upset his professors at the Conservatoire!), and he was determined to create a new kind of melodic composition. He himself described it as: -

"... music [that is] truly freed from motifs, or constructed on only one continuing motif which nothing interrupts, and which never goes back on itself."

Whilst we could describe the opening bars as a theme or motive, the way Debussy treats this melody in the rest of the piece provides an excellent demonstration of his concept of

melodic evolution. Here is an example of how this opening material returns in varied form: -

Bars 21-23

Comparison with opening bars

- First note is elongated.
- Opening bar is not repeated.
- The second bar becomes a varied and rhythmically diminished version of Bar 3 which then leads into.....
- a transposed version of the opening theme (a major 3rd lower), now spanning a Perfect 4th interval instead of a tritone.

Bar 27

Comparison with opening bars

- Material shared between Flutes 1 & 2.
- Opening eight notes repeat three times in diminution (demi-semi-quavers), leading to.....
- repetition of the second half (final four notes) of the unit, leading to.....
- a rising melodic unit based on the Minor Pentatonic scale on C#.



Comparison with opening bars

- Transposed up a minor 3rd.
- Interval spans a Perfect 4th instead of a tritone.
- Rhythmic augmentation

Notice also the use of ornamentation in bars 83-84 where a further variation of the melodic outline is introduced.

The melody in the central section is notable for its more obvious phrase structure and generally more diatonic style.

Rhythm and Metre

Aurally it is very difficult, in many sections of the piece, to discern either pulse or metre. This is a carefully considered part of Debussy's structural plan for the piece. Even the opening theme, with its long notes, semiquavers and triplet semiquavers, is designed to create a sense of freedom and rhythmic flexibility.

If one analyses the score there is much specific information one can glean: -

Metre

- The opening metre is Compound Triple.
- Frequent changes of metre are present.
- The B Section has a more stable metrical framework, remaining in Simple Triple throughout.

Rhythm

- Triplets (e.g., Bar 1 – semiquaver triplets)
- Other types of triplets are also utilised (e.g. quaver triplets in Bar 96)
- Other tuplets appear (e.g., Bar 21 – quintuplets in harp / Bar 105 – duplets / Bar 106 – quadruplets)
- Cross rhythms (e.g., Bar 67).
- Syncopation (e.g., Bar 57).