

## 5. Debussy

### Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

(for Unit 3 : Developing 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*.
- *Debussy died on the 25<sup>th</sup> March 1918.*

##### *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.

## Performing forces and their handling

### *Orchestra*

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; 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 divided.
- Tremolo is used in strings.
- Sur la touche (bowing over the fingerboard) is specified to create a gentler string timbre (eg. Bar 85).
- Pizzicato and Arco techniques are used, sometimes in rapid succession (eg. Bars 25-26).
- Harp glissandi create shimmering effects.
- Harmonics are used on the harp (eg. 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 (eg. 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.

## Texture

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

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

- The opening flute solo is monophonic
- Doubling of instruments is common (including examples of octave doubling)
- Pedals occur (eg. Bars 106-110)
- In Bar107 Homorhythm is employed in Horn and Violin 1 parts.

## Structure

When analysing the structure of this piece the word Prélude can cause confusion. The simple explanation is that Debussy originally had a plan for the composition to consist of three pieces of music – Prélude was, naturally, the first of these. Sadly, the plan for a three movement work 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 first 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.

## 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. 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).

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 6<sup>th</sup> 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.

## 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 7<sup>th</sup> chords
- Use of chord extensions; 9<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> notes
- Non-resolving Dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chords (eg. Bar 5)
- Pedals (eg. Bars 94-99)
- Chromatic harmony
- Half-diminished chords, eg. Bar 4.

## 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#.

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.

Whilst we could describe the opening bars as a theme or motive, the way Debussy treats this melody in the rest of the piece is 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 3<sup>rd</sup> lower) which now spans a Perfect 4<sup>th</sup> interval instead of a tritone.

## 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 (eg. Bar 1 – semiquaver triplets)
- Other tuplets appear (eg. Bar 21 – quintuplets in harp / Bar 105 – duplets / Bar 106 – quadruplets)
- Cross rhythms (eg. Bar 67).
- Syncopation (eg. Bar 55 in accompanying strings).