

Debussy – Life and Times

- Debussy was born in 1862 into a poor family in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. His pianistic talents were in evidence from an early age (he was taught by Verlaine's mother-in-law), and by the age of 10 or 11 he had entered the Paris Conservatory. Though his ability was recognized here, too, his teachers were far from convinced by his innovative musical style.
- In 1880 Debussy was hired by Nadezhda von Meck (Tchaikovsky's former patroness) to teach her children the piano. With her he also visited Russia and much of Europe and became familiar with the music of Russian composers that would influence his own compositions.
- In 1884, at the age of 22, he won the Prix de Rome, the conservatory's top composition prize, which allowed him to study for three years in Rome – though he returned after only two years. While there, he met Liszt and also became acquainted with the music of Wagner, and, though in later years he rebelled against the German's musical style, Wagner's influence on Debussy was profound and lasting.
- In 1889 Debussy attended the Paris World Exposition, where he heard a Javanese gamelan orchestra, with its variety of gongs, bells, metallophones and xylophones. These sounds, along with the music's pentatonicism, were soon incorporated into his own music.
- Debussy's association with painters and poets, however, were to influence him more than his friendship with musicians. His life was spent as a composer, performer and critic. He died in Paris in 1918 during the First World War.
- Debussy occupies an important position in musical history in the transition from Romanticism to Modernism at a time when Impressionism and Symbolism were emerging in *fin de siècle* France. (Though these were two distinct movements, they shared a number of artistic ideals). At first, commentators tended to consider Debussy as being influenced by Impressionism, a genre associated with art. Debussy intensely disliked this label, writing, in 1908: *I'm trying to write something else, what imbeciles call "impressionism"*. More recently, the importance of Symbolism on Debussy and his music was recognised. This was a poetic movement that reacted against naturalism and realism in favour of spirituality and imagination. The poems of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine, the leading poets of the movement, attempted to evoke rather than describe, so having much in common with Impressionism. The term itself was coined in 1873 (intended pejoratively) in a review of Monet's "Impression: Sunrise", though the negative criticism was aimed exactly at that which Monet intended to achieve – a vague and unfinished state. Similarly, Symbolism tried to "create a sensuous world of ambiguous and evocative psychological experiences and intense sounds in order to evoke rather than depict". Symbolist poets often used words for the sake of the music contained in them rather than for their meaning. [Verlaine's poem "Art poétique" begins "De la musique avant toute chose... " ("Music before everything else... ")] Debussy's use of non-functional sonorities like parallel dominant 7th/9th chords could be considered a musical counterpart to this.

Debussy's Musical Style

One of Debussy's most important contributions to Modernism is his treatment of harmony, specifically his role in the "emancipation of dissonance". His harmony tended not to restrict itself to the progressions typical of those in the common-practice period of the Western tonal tradition. In contrast with later 19th century harmony, Debussy eschewed traditional chord functions, and, instead, used sonorities that did not resolve or relate to each other in the usual way. As mentioned above in relation to the Symbolist aesthetic, the individual effect of a chord and the overall effect of a section became emphasised at the expense of the familiar tension-resolution pattern. Harmonic function is not entirely eliminated, of course, but cadences become increasingly rare and dissonances tend to "resolve" to other dissonances. In a Debussy cadence, the final chord frequently functions as a point of repose not because it is consonant, but because it is less dissonant than what came before.

- Chords are often chosen for their sonority, in which both scoring and registration can become important elements. Most chords are based on 3rds (tertian harmony), with 7th and 9th chords being common. (Chords are sometimes extended even further). Sometimes, the 3rd of a triad is omitted, leaving a bare 5th, an important departure from the norm that was to have an influence on his contemporaries and followers. Sometimes, these intervals were used in parallel, this organum-like style sometimes being used for archaic effect, as in "La cathédrale engloutie" ("The submerged cathedral"). These intervals were also frequently used as pedal points, with the harmony above creating dissonance with the sustained pedal notes. [Pedal points occur frequently in Debussy's music, not only as a source of dissonance, but also as a means of creating tonal stability in a passage in which there is harmonic ambiguity]. Debussy's parallelisms went against the prescribed rules of traditional harmony, which prohibited the use of parallel 5ths and 8ves.
- Debussy's use of modes had an effect on his harmony, too. Modality is often cited as an important feature of Debussy's music, and many passages can be found that contain notes that are reminiscent of dorian or phrygian rather than minor, or lydian or mixolydian rather than major. Debussy acquired these pentatonic and modal characteristics mostly from the Russian nationalist composers, though his initial interest in pentatonicism was inspired by the Javanese gamelan music he heard at the Paris Exposition. The use of these modes had the effect of breaking down the traditional tonal system and of forming a new one based on new scale formations. In the whole-tone scale (a favourite of Debussy's) there was no differentiation at all in its constituent intervals, while the pentatonic scale also restricted the notes available to the composer. The subdominant tends to have a more important role in Debussy's music than the dominant.
- It is only relatively recently that analysts have come to identify the use of the octatonic scale in the works of composers such as Debussy and Ravel. This is partly because, unlike Stravinsky, who employed the scale for large stretches of a composition, Debussy tended to use it for shorter passages and juxtaposed its use with other harmonic styles, taking advantage of notes shared between the different types of modes. "Nuages" from the "Three Nocturnes" provides a good example of this compositional method.
- From early on Debussy was aware that his harmonic concepts demanded new forms and that the traditional forms that relied on former tonal practices were not adequate in this respect. Debussy considered sonata form to be an outmoded formula, "a legacy of clumsy, falsely interposed traditions". The working out of themes and motifs he regarded as a species of dull "musical mathematics". Instead, Debussy tended to employ short lyric forms – preludes

nocturnes, arabesques. His forms, too, tend to be a series of waves, whose principal themes recede into the background and continue as ostinatos while other versions of themselves or new material is superimposed. Although the thematic content of even large-scale works is fairly limited, alterations in texture and rhythm disguise motivic shapes to the point that they often become mere suggestions of themselves. Juxtapositions are not prepared; bridge passages may be entirely absent or only briefly suggested. Many of the early pieces have a symmetrical shape with an emotional peak about two-thirds the way through, usually in a central section that is based on its own thematic material. This is followed by a return to opening material. Rarely, though, does the return function as a literal recapitulation. Instead, the material continues to transform itself. Some analysts (like Howat and Parks) have identified what they consider to be the use of the Fibonacci (and Lucas) series in several of Debussy's works; Boulez went even further, remarking that Debussy "overthrew not so much the art of development as the very concept of form itself".

- Another formal type sometimes employed by Debussy was "through-composed" form, a continuously developing form that lacks ternary form's symmetrical shape and rotational (cyclical) form's regular alternation of material. Debussy's "additive" approach to form building, in which typically 2-bar units are combined through an arch-like process has been both criticised and praised by commentators.
- The subtle harmonies of the Impressionists demanded complementary timbres. Debussy usually employed a large orchestra, but loud passages tend to occur infrequently. The strings are often divided and muted; harps are used subtly to add a distinctive colouring; in the woodwind, flutes, oboe and cor anglais are often used for solos, their lower ranges being exploited; horns and trumpets, also often muted, are heard in short pianissimo phrases; percussion instruments are another source of unusual timbre, such as the use of antique cymbals in the "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune". The expressive scope of the string section is augmented, with all manner of combinations of arco and pizzicato, divisi part writing, "sul tasto" and tremolo, resulting in a new variety, flexibility and beauty of string sound. In his solo piano music Debussy exploits the instrument's wide range to create timbral juxtapositions of deep, dramatic bass registers in contrast with the higher register's more "glittering" sonorities. The complex resonances of Debussy's piano writing require careful use of the pedals, the damper pedal in particular. Sometimes, in his orchestral works, timbre assumes an almost structural importance. Works such as "Jeux" or "Jeux de vagues" (from "La Mer") exhibit a pointillist orchestral technique, which was further developed by composers such as Webern and (later) Boulez.
- Like timbre, rhythm and tempo in Debussy function to characterise entire pieces or individual passages. Often, accompaniments consist of nervous, propulsive ostinatos, while the melodic material appears in languorous, rubato-like rhythms. While changes in time signature occur with nothing like the frequency they do in the music of other contemporary composers (Stravinsky in particular), even in passages with an unchanging time signature, rhythms are so subtle that it is often difficult to determine the first beat of the bar. Elsewhere, when textures do possess regular rhythms, they are often overlaid with ornamental melismata that seem to contradict them. On the other hand, changes of tempo can be frequent in Debussy's music, as is the directive "rubato". This preoccupation with creating a sense of rhythmic freedom is evident in the tempo direction for "Jeux de vagues" - "dans un rythme très souple". Debussy distrusted metronome markings, remarking in a letter to Durand: *You know what I think of metronome marks: they're right for a single bar ... There are "those" who don't hear music and who take these marks as authority to hear it still less!*

- Debussy's early compositions (such as the slow movement of the String Quartet) were characterized by a highly personal, intimate lyric style such as that found in the music of Gounod. Other works, such as "Nuages", can have minimal melodic content.

Nuages - Debussy

Introductory notes

"Nuages" ("Clouds") is the first of the "Trois Nocturnes", which Debussy completed in 1899. He remarked that: *The title "Nocturnes" is intended to have here a more general and above all a more decorative meaning. We, then, are not concerned with the form of the Nocturne, but with everything that this word includes in the way of impressions and special lights.* In the original program booklet from 1900-01 Debussy cited the entire piece's affinity with *the unchanging aspect of the sky with the slow and melancholy movement of the clouds, extinguishing in a grey softly-tinted white.* In conversation, he also mentioned that he associated "Nuages" with the experience of *the effect of clouds on the Seine at the Place de la Concorde.* Caroline Potter writes as follows on the programmatic nature of Debussy's musical language in "Nuages": *The limited range of cloud colours is often evoked in this movement by the use of a single, uniform orchestral timbre... The generally low dynamic level of the movement enhances this deliberately monotonous colouristic range. The use of explicitly tonal musical devices, such as cadence, was no doubt avoided because tonality is a goal-directed musical language, based on tension and resolution. As clouds do not move towards a specific goal, this choice would have been unsuitable.*

Though written as early as 1894, the composer and conductor, Pierre Boulez, considered Debussy's "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" as marking the beginning of modern music: *modern music was awakened by L'après-midi d'un faune ... the art of music began to beat with a new pulse.* The work's opening flute solo was given a special mention: *the flute of the faun brought new breath to the art of music.* Five years later Debussy was to compose yet another iconic opening, that of "Nuages", whose tonality in the opening 10 bars or so in particular (though not exclusively) has perplexed analysts. Richard Taruskin describes the music as "tonally as unconventional as can be", while Mark DeVoto coined the term "reduced tonality" to describe Debussy's harmony in "Nuages", declaring: *It is no exaggeration to say that "Nuages" represents Debussy's greatest single leap into the tonal unknown.* Additionally, in terms of melody, DeVoto considered that, in "Nuages", *the melodic motion is confined to the recurring cor anglais melody and the leading line of the background texture, driven by steady and almost entirely uninterrupted crotchet motion.* He goes on to say:

"Nuages" is tonal, but, apart from one instance, there are no tonic triads, and dominant-tonic relationships are entirely absent. This was not true of the "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune", where important cadences contain functional dominants. In "Nuages", however, functional dominants are nowhere to be seen. There is no B major or B minor. Instead, the piece establishes the pitch B as a benchmark, constantly recurring even after the most unusual harmonic wanderings with the most intensive suppression of conventional progressions. In every instance but one, B is evaded as the root of a complete major or minor triad.

If harmony/tonality was a troublesome aspect of "Nuages", by contrast, form was not considered in the least problematic by commentators, most of whom considered it to be in a simple ABA' ternary structure. However, musicologists became increasingly dissatisfied with this categorisation, since it did not seem to explain sufficiently what actually happens in the music, including the fact that the concluding A' section is compressed or treated freely and at the end contains a brief allusion to B. A', then, is an altered, re-composed return of the musical material from the

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first A section. This is what the renowned musicologist Joseph Kerman had to say on the work's supposed ABA' form:

“Nuages “might be said to fall into an ABA' form – but only in a very general way. Debussy shrinks from clear formal outlines; the musical form here is much more fluid than that of ABA structures observed in earlier music. By design, avant-garde composers break down the sharp and (to them) over simple divisions of older musical styles. If they avail themselves of form types such as rondo, sonata form and so on, they do so in very free, imaginative ways. Thus A' is not a “real” return of A but only of selected elements standing in for A.

Throughout his letters and essays from the turn of the century onwards, Debussy constantly wrote of his desire to break away from both the standard harmonies and rigid formal types of earlier music to attain a more intuitive art with more freedom for the artist. In 1907, for instance, he spoke of his aversion towards the mere mechanisms of “rigorous, traditional forms”. According to Richard Parks: *The three “Nocturnes” represent a significant evolutionary step beyond the earlier “Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune” and anticipate refinements of Debussy's later style that we associate with works like “La Mer” and “Jeux”.... “Nuages” illustrates Debussy's technique of fabricating form from a limited number of themes that are presented by turns and for which new material is generated through transformation.*

The musicologist James Hepokoski views “Nuages” as a *rotational structure, unfolding in five cycles of differing lengths, with the D sharp modal/minor centre of Rotation 4 (bars 64-79 of the B section) understood as a subsection within the “rotation”. Each rotation is governed by the succession of two motifs and their variants.* Each of the five “rotations” begins with a variant of the movement's opening motif, and is answered by the relatively invariable and harmonically static cor anglais melody, which also completes each “rotation” and leads into the next. Hepokoski also states: *By no means do I wish to dismiss the ternary, ABA' effect of “Nuages”. The ABA' impression is there to be perceived, doubtlessly at some level intended by Debussy.... Rotational form coexists with the ABA' impression.* (Other analysts have come to similar conclusions, even if their “rotations” do not exactly match up in every instance.) There are, then, some similarities in this respect with the concept of form in the second movement of Poulenc's “Trio”, though the ABA' structure is more apparent in “Nuages” because the B section, with its different material, tonality and texture/timbre, seems more clearly to fulfil the function of a traditional contrasting middle section. On the other hand, the underlying tonal trajectory in the Poulenc perhaps points more to a “dual” sense of structure than that in “Nuages”.

Since Hepokoski's five-part rotational structure is methodical and logical, conveniently separating the movement into short sections, it will form the basis of this brief analysis. Naturally, other methods and formal divisions are possible; one or two variants on Hepokoski's structure will also be mentioned.

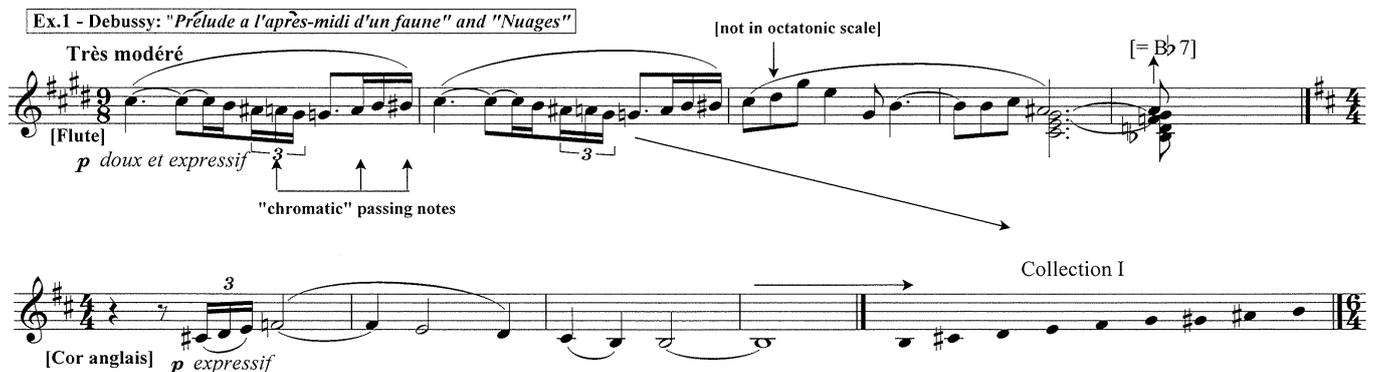
Analysis

[For study purposes, students are advised to use Ravel's two-piano transcription of "Nuages" (with the piano parts conveniently printed on the same page) along with the orchestral score. It may be downloaded from the Petrucci Music Library/www.imslp.org).] There is also a short score version on the website which may help students in understanding harmony.

Bars 1-10 [Rotation 1]

As well as harmonically interesting, the opening bars of "Nuages" (which depict a chilly night by the river Seine) have their own distinctive (and appropriate) timbre. Like the opening to the "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" (which depicts a hot afternoon in the countryside), the musical content is quite minimal. The earlier music's breathy, sensuous, unaccompanied solo flute in its lower register in "Nuages" becomes a two-part motif doubled at the lower octave in the slightly cooler, less "emotional", reedy tones of clarinets and bassoons (joined by the oboe in bar 3), all well above their lower register. The oboe picks out and sustains the 1st clarinet's notes on beats 1, 3 and 5, its falling line anticipating melodically, "rhythmically" and even, to some extent, timbrally, the downward, stepwise motion of the following cor anglais melody. In some respects, too, the cor anglais solo in bars 5-8 is reminiscent of the "Prélude's" solo flute. Its content is purely octatonic, spanning a tritone from B-F, while the "Prélude's" flute solo, which also moves entirely by step and initially spans the same interval (from G to C sharp), disguises its octatonic basis by introducing two ("chromatic") passing notes (A and B sharp)– see **Ex.1**. (As in diatonic music, the octatonic scale can be decorated by notes from without the scale. Look back at Ex.8 from the notes on Poulenc's "Trio" for instances of this). Notice, too, the immediate repetition of bars 1 and 3 in "Nuages", in the same way as the "Prélude's" flute solo directly repeats its opening bar.

Ex.1 - Debussy: "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" and "Nuages"



Très modéré

[Flute] *p* doux et expressif

"chromatic" passing notes

[not in octatonic scale]

[= B \flat 7]

Collection I

[Cor anglais] *p* expressif

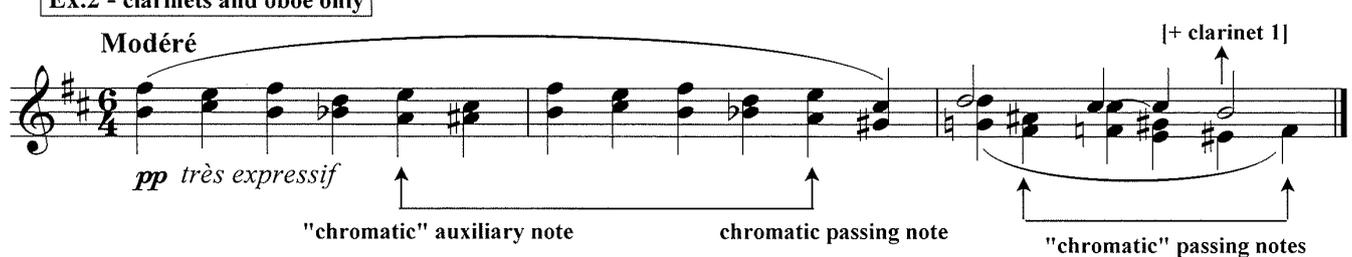
This chromatic decoration of the octatonic scale also occurs in "Nuages", but in a rather more complex manner. Bars 5-10 are entirely octatonic. Despite this, some fanciful, sometimes quite convoluted, theories have been proposed to explain the tonality of the opening 10 bars. However, the simplest (and perhaps most convincing) is that by the eminent American musicologist Allen Forte, who considers the upper line of bars 1-4 to be in a diatonic B minor (descending melodic minor scale) while the lower line is octatonic (again with a couple of passing notes) – see **Ex.2**. (In fact, the F sharp is the only note in the upper line not to belong to the lower line's octatonic scale; the new portion of the upper line in bars 3-4 is typically octatonic, again spanning a tritone. Similarly, the D sharp in bar 3 of the "Prélude" is the only non-octatonic note in the opening bars, and even this could be explained as an embellishment of the octatonic scale. (Rimsky-Korsakov, the composer most associated with the early use of the octatonic scale who included it in his composition course at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, sometimes used the semitone-tone and tone-semitone versions of an octatonic scale with the same "tonic" simultaneously, one for

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harmonic, the other for melodic, material, so making its use more difficult to identify). In 1896, Debussy wrote of the "Prélude" that *It has no respect for tonality! Rather, it's in a mode which is intended to contain all the nuances – I can give you a perfectly logical demonstration of all this.* Six years earlier, he had proclaimed that *the tonal scale must be enriched by other scales.*

Ex.2 - clarinets and oboe only

Modéré



pp très expressif

"chromatic" auxiliary note

chromatic passing note

"chromatic" passing notes

[+ clarinet 1]

In this analysis the material in bars 1-4 will be termed **X**, that in bars 5-10 **Y**. **X** consists of steady crotchets, though the time signature is ambiguous, fluctuating between 6/4 and 3/2, with a predominance of open 5ths. As mentioned above, the timbre is quite "expressionless". The music settles inconclusively (bar 5) on a doubled G/B dyad. According to Léon Vallas, Debussy stated that the cor anglais motif (bars 5-8) is meant to evoke the foghorn of a passing boat on the Seine. *Unlike the opening of X, this motif retains its original thematic shape, register and timbre for the rest of the movement. Its repetitive, refrain-like quality is a crucial feature that differentiates it from the varied version of the bar 1-5 material.* (DeVoto) (In this, it is reminiscent in some respects of Charles Ives' persistent trumpet in his short "The Unanswered Question", whose questioning takes no notice of the ever more frantic answers given by the flutes). The melodic fragment itself is repeated and expanded in later "rotations", and both the accompanying harmony and timbre are changed, but it continues to function as the concluding phase of each of the "rotations". In spite of this, it never achieves a clear sense of tonality, remaining open-ended.

- Other than tonality, identify the differences in the music of **X** (bars 1-4) and **Y** (bars 5-10). You should comment on orchestration, texture, rhythm/metre, harmony and any other features you consider to be relevant. Include a comment on the timpani part.

Bars 11-28 [Rotation 2]

Bars 11-28 are an expanded version of bars 1-10. Bars 1-2 of **X** return in bars 11-12 but in a fuller texture (Debussy's favourite *divisi* strings). In bar 13 the harmony moves into three real parts with a new variant of the diatonic line from bars 1-2 accompanied by a chromatically ascending line in minor 3rds (continuing the original lower chromatic motif in bars 1-2). This acts as a link to the next bar, which introduces a new harmonic world into the movement – one familiar to anyone acquainted with Debussy's music – with bar 14 consisting of a series of parallel dominant 9th chords. (These chords have no real dominant function, of course). Note the increasingly rich texture and that the outermost interval of the chords is a perfect 5th – i.e., the predominant interval of **X**; this interval is further highlighted in the double bass motif in bars 15-16, which introduces a sonority new to the movement – that of pizzicato. Note, too, the inclusion of a more persistent pentatonic element in the melodic outline of the 9th chords. Bars 15-19 consist of dominant 9th-type chords on B flat, G and E flat.

- These three chords are actually all slightly different from one another. Explain these differences.

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[Parallel dominant 9th chords were not a harmonic innovation by Debussy. DeVoto gives an example from Chabrier, a composer who influenced both Debussy and Ravel (see **Ex.3**), commenting: *Such instances of parallel chords are certainly colouristic, but it is important to recognize that they nevertheless are essentially melodic events, whose specifically harmonic function is suspended; moreover, they are guided by the chromatic scale, almost never the diatonic.* Here, then, an important element is the pentatonic “melody” that the chords support, but it is a pentatonicism that crosses an overlapping boundary between two different pentatonic scales – see **Ex.4**.]

Ex.3 - Chabrier: Fête polonaise

All three chords support continued pentatonic melodic lines, those in bars 17-18 and 19-20 being nearly sequential. This melodic line also anticipates the melody of the pentatonic “B” section. A modal element (B flat dorian) is briefly introduced in bars 19-20, before the music suddenly reverts to a G9 chord in bar 21. The crotchet oscillations in the strings (recalling the opening woodwind figures) return over the diatonically decorated G9 chord and persist as **Y**'s cor anglais melody reappears (in its same “metrically dissonant” 4/4), though this time the whole passage is repeated in bars 25-28. To further underline the link between the oscillating crotchets here and in bars 1-4, they, too, come in 1-bar repeated units. But there is a further link forged between the **X** and **Y** sections here. **Ex.5 (a)** shows the uppermost line in bars 13 and 22. The two figures are related by the bracketed notes, with those at the end of bar 22 inverting those at the start of bar 13; and both, like the movement's opening “diatonic” two bars, span the interval of a 4th. Additionally, **Y** is no longer fully octatonic, so integrating **X** and **Y** even more. (Note the disappearance of the previous timpani “pedal” note). Though some might regard this as a combination of octatonic and whole-tone elements, it is possible to consider this section as being based on the “acoustic scale” on G – see **Ex.5 (b)**. [To work out the notes of an acoustic scale, think of a major scale with sharpened 4th and flattened 7th]. It is a scale that Debussy used elsewhere, for instance in bars 35-40 of the first movement of “La Mer”.

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•What new material appears in bars 21-28? Comment on the material itself and its motivic significance.

As X has expanded in “rotation 2”, so has its answering Y phrase. The original 10 bars of “rotation 1” have now expanded to 18 bars in “rotation 2”. This ordered recycling of X and Y material persists as the movement evolves.

Bars 29-56 [Rotation 3]

“Rotation 3” begins with a recomposed version of the parallel-chord variant of X, the parallel chords this time being reduced from dominant 9ths to simple triads (bars 29-30), while the “melody” again emphasizes both the intervals of a major 2nd and perfect 4th. These chords lead to an unexpected, sustained radiant C major triad in bars 31-32 in strings, but with the 3rd of the chord (E) highlighted both timbrally and metrically by the horns. The E proves to be a “link” between this simple and (relatively) tonally clear triadic passage and the following tonally more equivocal music. [DeVoto proposes that the C major chord in bars 31-32 is the “tonic resolution” of the previous G9 chords. More on this later].

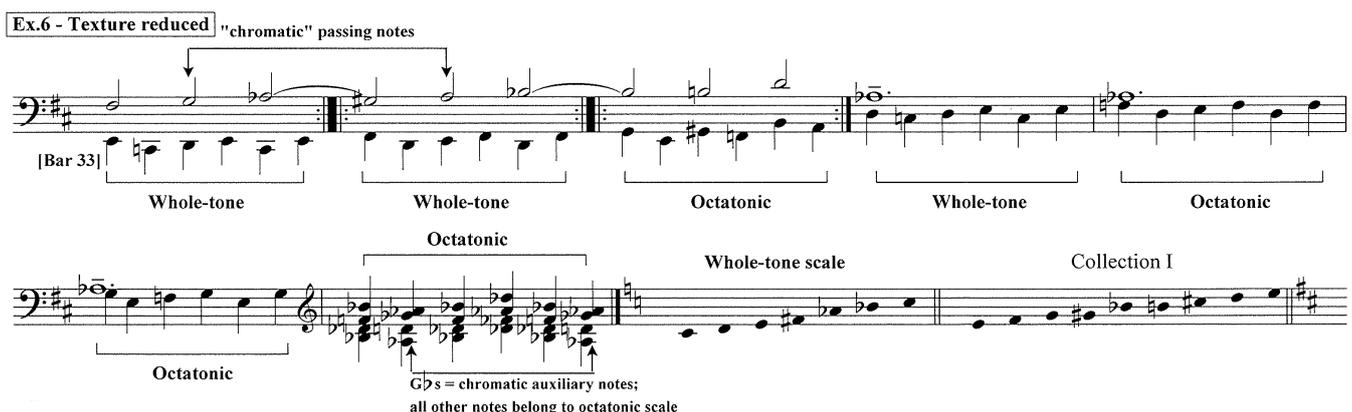
Bars 33-42 introduce a texture similar to that of the movement’s opening bars, i.e., a basically 2-part texture but with orchestral doublings. After the previous four bars of triadic harmony, bars 33-41 introduce an element of tonal and harmonic ambiguity. The melody – another motivic variation on the movement’s opening diatonic crotchet figure - moves to the bass. Both melody and harmony are sequential in bars 33-36, while the melody (but for one note) becomes sequential again in bars 39-41.

•Look at the constant crotchet “melody” in violas and cellos in bars 33-38 and woodwind in bars 39-42. What exactly are the similarities between this melodic line and the opening bars of “Nuages”?

Ex.6 (in a texturally simplified form) attempts to provide an explanation of the basis of bars 33-42. After the tonal clarity of the sustained G9 chord, the parallel triads and the sustained C major chord in bars 21-32, bars 33-42 juxtapose whole tone and octatonic material. In the same way as E was a linking “pivot note” between C major and the whole tone harmonies in bars 33-36, the woodwind’s B flat in bars 36⁵-37² and the violins’ A flat in bars 39⁴-41 provide a tonal connection between the different whole tone and octatonic modes used in this passage.

Y material returns at bar 43 – another double statement, but this time expanded in bars 51-56. Despite the sense of movement created by the syncopated pizzicato quavers, DeVoto considers these bars to be “the point of maximum immobility in “Nuages”.

Ex.6 - Texture reduced



“chromatic” passing notes

Whole-tone Whole-tone Octatonic Whole-tone Octatonic

Octatonic Whole-tone scale Collection I

Gbs = chromatic auxiliary notes;
all other notes belong to octatonic scale

• Compare and contrast the statement of **Y** material in bars 43-50 with those in rotations 1 and 2. Comment on the following musical aspects: (i) harmony/tonality; (ii) melodic content; (iii) orchestral accompaniment (including any features related to earlier music); (iv) rhythm.

Bars 51-56 are an extension of **Y** material - Hepokoski calls it an “expanded fade-out” - which introduces “new” material on the cor anglais. This actually consists of a variant of its own melody’s closing motif, more specifically its version in bars 47-50, which had eliminated both the “cadential” C sharp, replacing it with an acciaccatura D, and the repeated B. For the first time, too, the melody conforms with the 6/4 metre of the accompanying string oscillations, which continue to allude to the movement’s opening “diatonic” motif, with its intervals of a 3rd and 2nd. The pedal B persists for the first two bars (51-52), the previous harmony being reduced to a diminished triad. But the bass moves down by step through the interval of a tritone to F natural – i.e., it covers the space defined by the cor anglais melody, but at the other end of the mode’s spectrum. It also introduces two notes outside that mode, A natural and C natural. [These could be explained as more examples of “chromatic” passing notes, with the C natural in bars 55-56 “resolving” (in the “wrong” octave) onto the B in bar 57]. However we are meant to hear this, “rotation 3” has ended inconclusively on the most ambiguous of harmonies, its F major basis a tritone away from the movement’s opening tonal focus of B. “Rotation 3” has been “an enhanced and lengthened intensification, now extended to 28 bars”. Its total length is the exact sum of the previous two “rotations”: 1 = 10 bars, 2 = 18 bars, 3 = 28 bars.

Bars 57-93 [Rotation 4]

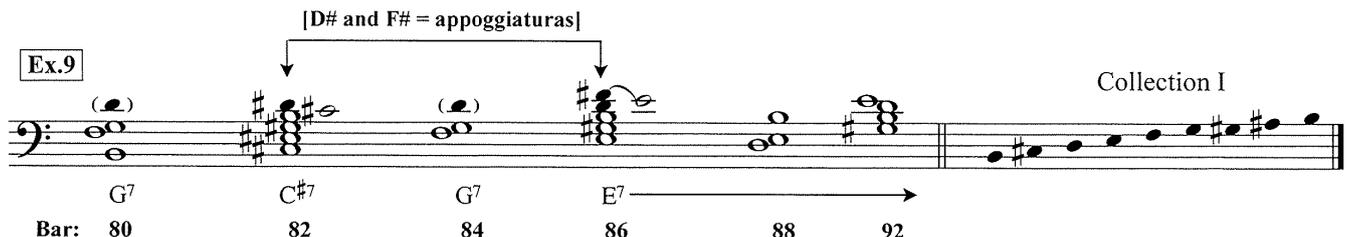
“Rotations 2-3” have consisted of (ordered) expansions of the material of **X**. At 37 bars, “rotation” 4 is the longest and, in some ways, most remarkable of the rotational sections. It is at this point that the ABA’ form and the “rotation” schema “overlap” and move out of sync, since commentators who hear a ternary design in the movement regard bar 64 as the start of the B section – i.e., 8 bars after the notional start of “rotation 4”. On the one hand, the music starting in bar 64 is quite strikingly different from the previous material, yet, on the other hand, there are undeniable similarities between this B section and previous music, to the extent that it could well be considered as a logical continuation of the processes set in motion in “rotations 1-3”.

While the opening of “rotation 3” referred to the original **X** material only obliquely, in bar 57, continuing the trend of the preceding bars, the texture thins out even further, leaving just a pair of oboes playing the original **X** passage, against which a solo viola adds additional material, seemingly half way between a new (counter)melody (bars 57-58/59) and enriched accompaniment (bars 59/60 – where it joins in with the constant crotchet motion of the oboes, playing almost entirely in parallel 3rds with the 2nd oboe). The harmony here is similar to that at the opening of the movement, but the addition of a third (viola) part obscures matters. In view of what is to occur in bar 62, it is worth noting the presence of augmented triads as “by-products” of the linear writing of these four bars – see **Ex.7**. The new variant of **X** ends on a half-diminished 7th chord (the so-called “Tristan” chord, famous from its much discussed use in the opening bars of Wagner’s “Tristan and Isolde”; though used only occasionally in “Nuages”, it was one of Debussy’s favourite sonorities – see the first chord in **Ex.1** from the “Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune” for an example of its use). The parallel chords in bars 61 and 63 (excepting the first beat) are dominant 7th chords in last inversion (V4/2). (It would be more correct to refer to these chords as major-minor-7th chords since they have no actual dominant function). In their melodic outline (i.e., uppermost line) they recall those in bar 14, but instead of pausing on the final chord, bar 62 interjects (for the only time in the movement apart from the veiled whole-tone references in the “hybrid” whole-tone/octatonic passage in bars 33-42) two pure whole-tone chords (or one plus its upper auxiliary chord). It also introduces a rhythmic motif not encountered before – see **Ex.8**. [Were it not for the sustained E/A

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Ex.9

[D# and F# = appoggiaturas]



Collection I

Bar: 80 82 84 86 88 92

[Note the partitioning of Collection I into minor 3rds (C#-E-G) - typical of octatonicism]

- Analyse the harmony in bar 69. Are these chords diatonic, octatonic or modal?
- Comment on the flute/harp melody in bar 79. From what is it derived?
- Discuss its effectiveness as a link between the end of this section and the return of **Y** material in bar 79⁴(80).
- Describe Debussy's use of the orchestra in bars 64-79.

[It was mentioned earlier that the C major chord in bars 31-32 could be regarded as the "resolution" of the earlier G9 chords. Bars 64-79 also contain two triads that are important focal points in the music – D sharp minor and G sharp major. It is intriguing to note that the three sustained (and so emphasised) dominant 9th chords heard in bars 14⁶-19 are B flat9, G9 and E flat9. B flat9 is the dominant of E flat (D sharp) major/minor, while E flat9 is the dominant of A flat (G sharp) major/minor. That is to say, if we accept the C major triad as the "resolution" of the G9 chord, can we now hear the B flat9 and E flat9 chords as having been resolved at this even later stage? This is not an isolated incident in the composer's oeuvre. His song "Colloque sentimental" (1904) begins with a whole-tone "complex" consisting of two (incomplete) dominant 7th chords played simultaneously, one (C7) in the right hand of the piano, the other (A flat7) in the left hand. The C7 chord is resolved almost immediately in a perfect cadence in F major (absorbing the A flat7's G flat as a flattened 5th), while D flat major (A flat7's tonic) turns out to be the focal point of the central section of the song, being, in fact, the only other triad in the whole of the song except for the final (unexpected) A minor chord. According to Boyd Pomeroy: *The principle of tonic-dominant polarity is arguably still operative in much of Debussy's music, albeit typically under the surface rather than as a salient feature of chord-to-chord harmonic process.*]

The descending pentatonic fragment in bar 79 ends abruptly and unexpectedly on a (non-pentatonic) E sharp, which doubles the F natural (this time sfz) in the cor anglais' statement of **Y**'s "foghorn" melody, which has crept in at the end of bar 79. (This sfz indication, duplicated in the clarinet and bassoon parts, the tremolando "sur la touche" direction in violas, cellos and basses (also violins later), and the harmonics on violins add an air of mystery and menace to the music's final bars). The two statements of this melody, with the same echoing horns (now augmented to three horns) as in "rotation 2", correspond almost exactly to those in bars 43-50, though the harmony reverts to something more like the static chords of "rotation 1". The chords themselves are different, however. The harmony is entirely octatonic, save for the chromatic appoggiatura (D sharp) in the "extra" horn, but the "G7" chord in bars 80-82³ changes to a "C sharp7" chord in bars 82⁴-85. A similar process occurs in bars 84-87, but the chords are different here, with the "G7" chords being reduced to a sustained F/G dyad, and the C sharp7 altered to an E7 chord (the 9th, F sharp, being another chromatic appoggiatura). (In bars 86-87 both the harmony and texture are enriched by the addition of an oboe). In bars 88-93, the cor anglais repeats its "expanded fade-out" music from bars 51-57¹, though again with a different harmonic backdrop, which continues the E7 chord from the previous bars. It appears first in 4/2 position (88-91), then in first

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inversion (92-93) – all the notes of which are subsumed under the prevailing octatonic Collection I. **Ex.9** illustrates the harmony in bars 80-93.

Bars 94-102 [Rotation 5]

“Rotation 5” functions as a short coda and uses only fragments of previous material, acting almost as a drastically pared down version of “Rotation 4”:

- **94** – a complete 2-part version of the first bar of **X** transferred to the bass;
- **95-97** – the second half of the uppermost line from bar 2 is followed by a complete 2-part version of bars 3-4 (still in the bass) but with the lower part subjected to tremolando in the cellos and, in bar 97, slight melodic variation in that the chromatic movement continues to fall through D sharp and D natural rather than circle back up as in the previous bar. Note the change to triplets in the cellos’ tremolando figures in bar 97³⁻⁶ and the pizz in the double basses in bar 98¹, both of which have the effect of marking the return of the pentatonic fragment from “rotation 4” seem something of an event.
- **98** – a fleeting, syncopated 1-bar allusion on flute to the “B section’s” opening pentatonic melody;
- **99-100** – two statements of the echo-like horn motif first heard in “rotation 2”, while the cellos and double basses play the final two-note “cadential” motif (D-B) of the second statements of the cor anglais melody in “rotations 2, 3 and 4”.
- **101-02** – this motif is fragmented further, leaving just a repeated “tonic” B as the music fades to nothing (ppp).

The harmonic colour at the start of this final section, though octatonic, is new to the movement. The opening bars of **X** have not, up to this point, appeared with a sustained G and B in the bass as they are in bar 94. This creates increased dissonance between the cellos’, double basses’ and timpani’s sustained G and B and **X**’s F sharps and B flats/A sharps on bassoons, all of which is further intensified by the proximity of the notes in question. The dissonance dissipates somewhat in bars 96-97 as the bass moves up to B, then disappears completely in bar 98, the music consisting only of the “pedal” B and the (G) pentatonic motif in the flute. The ambiguous major-minor-7th chord on G (bass B) is the last (inconclusive) chord we hear in the movement, with even the timpani managing to participate with their own version of the D-B motif in bars 98-100. There is no real harmonic resolution in the final bars. Both harmonically and tonally the movement ends perhaps the only way it could – on a repeated single pitch, B.

Below is the formal outline of “Nuages” as given by Richard Parks in his book on the music of Debussy. Compare this with the version by Hepokoski that formed the basis of the analysis above. Do you find one more convincing than the other? Do you hear the form of the movement in a different way?

Section 1 – bars 1-20

Section 2 – bars 21-42

Section 3 – bars 43-63

Section 4 – bars 64 – 79

Section 5- bars 80- 93

Section 5 – bars 94-102