



Claude Debussy: 'Fêtes' from *Trois Nocturnes*

Background information

The following materials are essential for use with this resource:

- Complete score. London: Ernst Eulenburg & Co. GmbH, No.1320, 1983. Plate E.E. 6323. ISBN number 978-3-7957-7181-2
- A piano reduction can be helpful for harmonic analysis. The best is the two-piano version by Ravel but note this does have some notable differences in order to adapt it for this medium
- Recording (several good ones available on iTunes, YouTube and Spotify)

NOTE: This resource refers to bar numbers, which will need to be added

It will be useful to students to have done the following preparatory work:

- A general introduction to early twentieth century music
- French music at the turn of the century: Satie, Fauré, Ravel and Debussy
- Harmony and tonality in the Western Classical Tradition and its extension around the turn of the century
- Church modes, the whole-tone scale and the octatonic scale

These notes are intended to assist music teachers in their preparation and delivery of the set work. They are offered as outline guidance and contain suggestions as to the necessary musical content and background for study but are not meant to be an exhaustive resource. Note that the following sources are useful for analytical, contextual and stylistic background:

- Taruskin, R. (2010) *Music in the Early Twentieth Century* (The Oxford History of Western Music), Oxford: OUP.
- Trezise, S (2011) *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, Cambridge: CUP.
- Walsh, S. (2018) *Debussy: A Painter in Sound*, London: Faber

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Claude Debussy occupies an important position in musical history in the transition from Romanticism to Modernism. At first, commentators tended to consider Debussy as being influenced by **Impressionism**, a genre associated with art, but the composer himself considered the ideas of **Symbolism** to be more significant.

The term **Impressionism** itself was coined in 1873 in a review of Monet's 'Impression: Sunrise'. It was meant as a criticism of the apparently vague and unfinished style of the work, but that was exactly what Monet intended to achieve.

The leading **Symbolist** poets (Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine), attempted to evoke rather than describe, a similar aesthetic to Impressionism. Symbolist poets often used



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words for the sake of the sounds contained in them rather than for their meaning. Debussy's use of sonorities like parallel dominant 7th/9th chords could be considered a musical counterpart to this – the chords are chosen for their rich sonority rather than their function.

In terms of musical influences, some of the most important include:

- **Tchaikovsky, Borodin and Mussorgsky:** He encountered this music through his visits to Russia as teacher of the children of Tchaikovsky's former patron Nadezhda von Meck.
- **Wagner:** Debussy won the prestigious *Prix de Rome* in 1884, which involved an extended stay in Italy. While there he met Liszt, who introduced him to Wagner's music, an influence he would ultimately reject.
- **Eastern music:** Debussy visited the Paris World Exposition in 1889 and was much influenced by Javanese and Chinese music, among others.

Despite winning the *Prix de Rome*, Debussy's attitude was very anti-establishment.

This attitude was one he apparently followed in his personal life too, with a series of affairs and short-lived engagements that scandalized both the public and friends of the composer.

On another occasion, Debussy reportedly told fellow composer Ernest Guiraud that 'you have to drown the tonality'. Debussy's radical rejection of tradition is part of what made him so influential on later generations of composers in France and beyond. His more general attitude of rejecting tradition, a decidedly modernist one, is encapsulated in his famous quote that 'the century of airplanes has a right to its own music'.

At the same time, unlike many twentieth century composers, Debussy's music has generally been accepted and appreciated by the general concert-going public. This is perhaps because its dissonances are sensuous (as opposed to the harsh dissonances of serialism) with lush orchestrations and, although tonality is seriously under threat, there is a sense that resolution is not far away, even if it rarely arrives.

Pierre Boulez considered 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune', an earlier piece by Debussy written in 1894, as marking the beginning of modern music.

The second movement of the **Nocturnes** has a few moments of local clarity (there are several perfect cadences), but the overall tonal structure is highly elusive. *Fêtes* is the second of the **Trois Nocturnes**, which Debussy completed in 1899.

Similarly, the movement titles are generally evocative rather than specific. The first is *Nuages* (clouds) and *Fêtes* means festivals, evoking a generally festive atmosphere rather than a particular event.

Fêtes has a sharply contrasted ternary form. The outer sections begin with something like a Tarantella (a 6/8 Italian dance purportedly used to dance out the effects of a tarantula bite) dominated by melodic figures in triplet rhythms clothed in light, colourful orchestration. The middle section, however, is static with fanfare figures beginning very hushed over an extended pedal that lasts for the entire section, depicting some sort of procession passing through the festival.



Debussy's musical style

Harmony and dissonance

Dissonances such as 7ths and 9ths are often strung together in long chains that move in parallel motion. Richard Taruskin has suggested that this obsessive use of strongly functional chords, such as dominant sevenths as unresolved colours, is part of Debussy's radical response to Wagner. Whereas Wagner's harmony is full of the unresolved yearning of sonorous functional chords, they do eventually resolve, creating yearning and tension. Debussy uses essentially the same technique to efface tonal resolution almost entirely and replace it with rich, ever-shifting harmonic colour.

Modes

In the major and minor scales of the Western Classical Tradition, the pattern of tones and semitones means that we usually identify the tonic of a melody pretty easily. The important factor is the semitone from the seventh note of the scale to the tonic, which helps to locate us within the scale. Debussy makes substantial use of both church modes, for example Aeolian, Dorian, as well as scales not much used in the Western tradition (see below). The use of modes has some important consequences:

1. it creates an alternative set of harmonic and melodic colours to that of the major and minor scales
2. it loosens the sense of key, because modes rely not on a leading note to establish the tonic but on emphasis through repetition and accompaniment.

A variety of patterns emerge in the church modes but the two other scales that Debussy uses are much more symmetrical and establishing a tonic is even more difficult:

- **Whole-tone scale:** As this scale consists of only major seconds, there are no semitones and therefore no establishing of a tonic note. (see discussion of bars 15–22 below for details).
- **Octatonic scale:** This mode, based on the diminished seventh chord, has an unusual symmetrical structure that negates any idea of a clear tonic (see discussion of bars 1–8 below for details).

Tonality

Debussy rarely confirms keys with clear, functional harmony in his music, but a sense of tonal centre is often present or at least hovering in the background. His use of more unusual scales (see above) works against tonal clarity as does his treatment of dissonance. Tonal relationships that do exist are often oblique or unusual. See for example the trajectory of the first part of *Fêtes*, which moves from F minor through D \flat , A and then F \sharp at the end of the first A section only to divert onto a sombre A \flat at the beginning of the B section.



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Timbre

Debussy explores new sounds in the orchestra to complement his colourful harmonies. The string section, for example, is often divided into more individual parts; wind instruments tend to be used in unusual registers; and the contribution of percussion and harp can be central.

Metre and rhythm

Metre and rhythm are often free and flexible, with changing metres and extensive use of cross rhythms. A good example of these tendencies is the passage from bar 27 where the music is simultaneously in 5/4 and 15/8. Despite this avoidance of regularity in metre and subdivision, Debussy's phrase structure is often very predictable. In *Fêtes*, melodic ideas are mostly two or four bars long, with lots of repetition of two-bar units.

Form

Debussy generally avoids traditional forms, preferring cyclical structures in which material appears and re-appears in varying harmonic and orchestral guises. The first movement of the *Trois Nocturnes* has this sort of cyclical form.

Fêtes, however, seems to hint at a more traditional structure, to the extent that Boyd Pomeroy in the Cambridge Companion suggests that it is in sonata form. The combination of distinct tonal centres and contrasting themes is somewhat suggestive of this schema, but in this resource we have avoided trying to fit the music to quite such a prescriptive scheme. The sections and themes have instead been labelled in such a way that a sonata-like reading is possible, while allowing for a looser interpretation based on cyclical repetitions across the A sections of the overall ternary form.

The A section (or exposition) consists of two main ideas labelled S1 and S2 below and this material is brought back mostly in the same order in the final A section (or recapitulation). At the B section, the sonata analogy breaks down, as this is not really a development of the A section, but rather an interruption of its flow.

	Bars	Thematic material	Tonal centres	Scales
A1	1-8	S1a / S1b (motifs x and y)	F	F Dorian
	9-14	S1a / S1b (motifs x and y)	D _b	D _b Acoustic
	15-22	S1a / S1b (motifs x and y)	A _b then b. 19 A	Whole tone
	23-26	Motif y	D _b	D _b major
A2	27-38	S1a	A	A Mixolydian
	39-53	Tr1 / Tr2 (and S1 at b. 44)	D _b (V-I in b. 48) then b. 50 F	D _b with some octatonic / Whole tone / F with some octatonic



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	Bars	Thematic material	Tonal centres	Scales
A3	54–69	S2a	F (V–I in b. 56 and 58) then b. 62 A (V–I in b. 64 and 66)	Octatonic
	70–81	S2b / S2c	F♯ then b. 78 E	F♯ Dorian (becomes E major)
	82–97	S2a / S2c	E (V–I in b. 82) then b. 90 D then b. 96 E	G♯ octatonic / F♯ Dorian
	98–115	S2a / S2c	E then b. 102 F♯	G♯ octatonic / F♯ Major
B	116	Fanfare idea over pedal		A♭ Dorian
	128			B♭ Mixolydian
	132			B Dorian
	144			D♭ Mixolydian
	148			F Dorian
	156	Fanfare combined with S1a		A♭ Dorian
	160			B♭ Mixolydian
	164			B Dorian
	170			Chromatic
A1`	174	S1a (motif x and y)	D♭ (V–I in b. 174)	D♭ various modes
	182	S1a (motifs x and y)	D	D various modes
	190	S1a / S2b (motif x)	E♭	E♭ Dorian
A2`	208	S1a	A	A Mixolydian
	220	Tr1	C♯(!)	C♯ with some octatonic
A3`	224	S2a	C♯	Octatonic
	232–240	S2a fragments plus fanfare motif	C♯	F♯ Dorian (becomes E major)
	252	Fragments slowly dissolve	A	Initially Dorian



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Section A1 (bars 1–26)

Bars 1-8

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S1a / S1b (motifs x and y)	F	F Dorian

Fêtes begins the festivities with a lively repeated triplet rhythm (x). The metre is 4/4 but the dominance of triplets makes it feel more like 12/8 with only the occasional duplet against them.

Accompaniment based on motif x (b. 1)

This initial figure, an open fifth (F and C) in the strings, turns out to be the accompaniment for the first main theme (**S1**), which is introduced on the woodwind, a scalic tarantella-like idea based on the F-Dorian scale. **S1a** consists of a rising scale and then a series of descending auxiliary note figures (**y**). **S1b** expands the auxiliary note using the opening rhythm (**x**).

Theme S1 (b, 3)

Musical score for S1a and S1b. The score consists of two measures. The first measure, labeled S1a, starts with a dynamic 'y' over a measure of eighth notes. The measure ends with a dynamic '4' over a measure of sixteenth notes. The second measure, labeled S1b, starts with a dynamic 'y' over a measure of eighth notes. The measure ends with a dynamic '3' over a measure of sixteenth notes. The music is in 2/4 time, key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the instruments are Clarinet/C.A. (Clarinet/C.A.).

F Dorian scale

A musical staff in G clef with seven notes. The notes are: a quarter note (T), an eighth note (S), a quarter note (T), a half note (T), a quarter note (T), an eighth note (S), and a quarter note (T). The notes are connected by a single horizontal line above them.

F Octatonic scale

A musical staff in G clef with seven notes. The notes are grouped into pairs by horizontal brackets: (T, S), (T, S), (T, S), and (T, S). The notes are: T (open circle), S (open circle with a vertical line), T (open circle with a vertical line), S (open circle with a vertical line), T (open circle with a vertical line), S (open circle with a vertical line), and T (open circle with a vertical line).



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The **Dorian** mode is the most prominent among several modal colours that Debussy uses in this movement. This choice is interesting as it is the mode most like the **octatonic** scale, which dominated in the previous movement. The first four notes (or tetrachord) and the last tetrachord is the same in both cases (tone-semitone-tone). The only difference is that while the Dorian scale has its second tetrachord starting a tone higher than the previous note (B_b – C), the fifth note of the octatonic scale is only a semitone higher (B_b – B), resulting in an 8-note rather than 7-note scale. The TST tetrachord (which we will refer to as the Dorian tetrachord for clarity) is symmetrical but the octatonic scale follows the same pattern of tones and semitones all the way up and therefore has many more points of symmetry. Because of this, it is a good scale for a composer trying to deal in ambiguous tonality. Whereas the Dorian (like the major) has only two semitones, which can help locate us within the scale, in the octatonic scale every other interval is a semitone so it is much less helpful as a reference point.

It is also worth noting that, unlike the major scale, which can be transposed 11 times before we get back to the original collection of notes, the octatonic scale only has three possible transpositions that yield a different set of notes. Any sense of a 'tonic' can only be created in this symmetrical scale by context and emphasis.

The repeated fifths and F-Dorian scale establish F as an initial centre, but the chords in bar 5 in the horns and bassoons do not help establish this as a key. As so often in Debussy, these chords are more about adding colour. This employment of extended chords as an effect rather than a function is a Debussy hallmark. Typically, extended chords, in this case a seventh followed by a ninth are played in stepwise parallel motion, in this case moving a semitone lower. Crucially, although these are potentially functional (the second chord is clearly dominant) they do not resolve in a traditional functional way.

Chord sequence at b. 5–6

Vln & Hn

D⁷ D_b⁹
Min. 7th Dom. 9th

Note: These chords are not diatonic in F Dorian (or F anything else) but the progression does have some octatonic inflections: the D naturals, D_bs and C_bs (Bs) are part of the F octatonic scale above but the C naturals and E_bs are not.

In bar 6 the trumpets echo the auxiliary notes of **S1b** in a duplet figure that increases in importance later in this section.

S1b fragment in trumpets (b. 6)

f



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Bars 9-14

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S1a / S1b (motifs x and y)	D _b	D _b Acoustic

The next phrase starts with a new and more elaborate accompanying figure in the lower strings. Melodically it is another expansion of the auxiliary note **y motif** utilising **x rhythms**:

Motif y (bar 10)

10

Vla.

Harmonically, the new accompanying figure consists of parallel dominant ninths. The figure centres on D_b as a centre, but there is no functional progression establishing this as a key.

Chord progression at bars 9-10

Vla & Vc

D_b E_b D_b A B_b

(all dominant ninths)

Over the top of this figure in bar 11, Debussy repeats **S1** but this time the melody is based on a D_b acoustic scale. One of his interests in this movement seems to be cycling through various different modal flavours – we will see many more scale variants as the piece unfolds.

Theme S1 (b. 11)

S1a S1b

12

Fl./Ob.



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D♭ Acoustic scale

A musical staff in G clef with five notes. The first note is a whole note with a vertical line below it, labeled 'T'. The second note is a half note with a vertical line below it, labeled 'T'. The third note is a quarter note with a vertical line below it, labeled 'T'. The fourth note is an eighth note with a vertical line below it, labeled 'T'. The fifth note is a sixteenth note with a vertical line below it, labeled 'S'. The sixth note is a sixteenth note with a vertical line below it, labeled 'T'. The seventh note is a sixteenth note with a vertical line below it, labeled 'T'. The eighth note is a sixteenth note with a vertical line below it, labeled 'T'.

The acoustic scale, which is found in some traditional Eastern European music, Brazilian folk music and jazz, is loosely based on the harmonic series. Debussy is one of a number of composers who employ it in their music (others include Liszt, Stravinsky and Bartok). The second tetrachord is the same as in the Dorian mode, but the first tetrachord is like the first four notes of the Lydian mode with its distinctive sharpened fourth, creating a whole-tone flavour.

Bars 15–22		
<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S1a / S1b (motifs x and y)	A\flat then b. 19 A	Whole tone

The last iteration of **S1** in the first part of section A involves a switch to a much more obviously exotic scale. Debussy layers up **S1a** and **S1b** simultaneously with everything based on the whole tone scale. The soft major-second-only dissonances of this scale mean that almost anything based on it will fit together into a whole-tone cloud. We have **S1a** in the cellos and bassoons counterpointed against **S1b** in the violins plus accompanying figures. All the material at bar 15 is based on the same whole tone scale. After four bars of this, at bar 19 all the material shifts up a semitone for a whole tone passage grounded on A.

Whole tone scales on A_b and A

A musical staff in G clef with ten notes. The notes are: B-flat, B-flat, A, A, G, G, F-sharp, F-sharp, E, E, D. Below the staff, the notes are labeled: T, T, T, T, T, T, T, T, T, T.

Theme S1a (b. 15)

S1a



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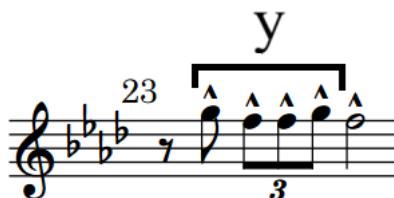
Because the whole tone scale is maximally symmetrical, it avoids having any real sense of tonal centre. However, depending on the bass and the voicing, aggregates of whole tone scales can have a dominant flavour (containing at least the major third, minor seventh and major ninth against any given root). The Ab-centred material at bar 15, coming off the back of Db in the previous bars, certainly has this implication, but the shift up a semitone at bar 15 somewhat undermines its eventual resolution back to Db.

Bars 23–26

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
Motif Y	Db	Db major

The first subsection ends with an emphatic landing on Db major at bar 23, representing the highest level of harmonic clarity so far, even if there aren't any real functional progressions in this key. The fanfare figure (perhaps presaging the very different fanfares in the B section) is a more emphatic version of the trumpet figure in bar 6, this time employing the entire brass section. There is a pause filled only by a Db drumroll before the harps play a glissando, winding us back up into the festive dance atmosphere.

Motif y (b. 23)



Section A2 (bars 27–53)

Bars 27–38

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S1a	A	A Mixolydian

The second part of the A section kicks off with a shift in metre and rhythm. Debussy injects new life into the material, switching to five beats in a bar but expressed in two time signatures that create cross rhythms: we have 15/8 in the woodwind producing five beats of triplets and 5/4 in the strings creating the same in duplets. It brings a freshness to this second round of festive dancing.

When **S1a** enters, the metre regularises to 9/8 (three in a bar rather than the four in section A1), which produces a slightly truncated version of this theme. This leads not to **S1b**, but to a new skipping arpeggiating figure shown in the last bar of the example below.



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Theme S1a (b. 29)

S1a

We have yet a new modal variation of the melody as well, with **S1a** now based on A Mixolydian (basically major but with the Dorian tetrachord in the top half of the scale). This mode is also mostly reflected in the accompaniment, which consists of pure parallel triads, providing a refreshing contrast after all the sevenths and ninths.

A Mixolydian scale

T T S T S T

Bars 27–32 is then repeated with some small changes at bar 33, with the more irregular accompanying idea leading into the Mixolydian version of **S1a**.

Bars 39–53		
<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
Tr1 / Tr2 (and S1 at b. 44)	D♭ then from b. 50 F	D♭ with some octatonic / WT / F with some octatonic

At bar 39 there is a sudden change as a new idea interrupts proceedings. The light and dance-like string and woodwind material gives way to a more strident horn and bassoon idea.

Transitional idea 1 (Tr1)

Most of the melodic material up to this point has been easy to understand in terms of traditional modes, but **Tr1** is more elusive. As in the opening of the first movement, which mixes B minor and B octatonic to create a high level of ambiguity, this melody can be understood as a mixture of D♭ major and D♭ octatonic.



D_b octatonic scale

A musical staff in G clef with seven notes. The notes are grouped into three pairs by brackets and labeled below as S, T, S, T, S, T, S. The notes are: S (two notes), T (one note), S (one note), T (one note), S (two notes), T (one note), S (one note). The notes are on the 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 7th lines of the staff.

Note: Remember that as the octatonic scale is symmetrical, any sense of a centre can only be created by context and emphasis.

The horn interruption at bar 39 leads to a new transitional idea that is clearly in D \flat major (the key we landed on at the end of Section A1). Note that the clarinets are in A at this point even though at the start of the system it still says B \flat (they changed in bar 26 and change back to B \flat in bar 115).

Transition theme two (Tr2) at b. 41

A musical score page showing measures 11 and 12 for an orchestra. The score includes parts for Flute, Clarinet (labeled 'Cl.'), Bassoon, and Trombone. The key signature is A major (three sharps). The music consists of two measures of sixteenth-note patterns.

The next four bars consist of a whole-tone version of **S1a** that is similar to that in bar 15 but with an added dotted rhythm:

Theme S1a in a whole tone version (b. 44)

In bar 47 the whole tone harmonies melt away and an A \flat dominant seventh chord emerges. This leads onto a repeat of **Tr2** again in D \flat , creating the first perfect cadence in this movement. Tonal resolution is very rare in *Fêtes* and it is interesting that the secondary key of D \flat (rather than the opening F) is the tonality that Debussy chooses fleetingly to confirm.

This brief moment of stability is interrupted by the return of **Tr1**, which is now based on an F major/octatonic scale rather than the previous Db. It is on this new tonal centre of F that the next section begins, introducing the second main group of melodic ideas (**S2**).

Transitional idea 1 in F



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Section A3 (bars 54–115)

Bars 54–69

Thematic material	Tonal centres	Scales
S2a	F then from b. 62 A	Octatonic

The F major transitional idea gives way almost imperceptibly to a new and very quiet accompanying figure that establishes the opening key of F properly for the first time (after 55 bars of the piece have already elapsed!). The harmonic world of this section is bathed in lush dominant sevenths and ninths and multiple chromaticisms, but the twice repeated cadence that occurs for the first time from bar 55 into bar 56 is nevertheless clear.

Accompaniment to theme S2a (b. 54)

55

F: I **bVII** VI V I

2nd inv.
dominant
seventh chord
but 7th (Db)
spelt as C#

2nd inv.
dominant
ninth chord

Root pos.
dominant
ninth

Over the top of this *pianissimo très léger* accompaniment, Debussy unfolds a new arpeggiated oboe melody. It is written in 3/4 against the 9/8 of the accompaniment, which hardwires triplet/duplet cross rhythms into the second main theme of the movement.

Theme S2a (b. 54)

S2a

55

Ob.



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Although the F major perfect cadence in the accompaniment is clear, the oboe melody floats over the top with an octatonic melody that starts on A (the third of the tonic chord) but otherwise does not strongly reinforce the F major tonality.

A-octatonic scale

S T S T S T S

Both tonal harmony and octatonic theme are transposed up a major third at bar 62 for a modified repeat in A major. The harmonies and orchestration details are slightly changed (see below) and the overall effect of this section is a beautiful combination of the fragile tonal resolution and the lush added note chords played with the warmth of divided strings and bassoon.

Accompanying figure in bar 63

A: I $\#IV^7$ V^7 V^9_7 I

2nd inv. dominant seventh 2nd inv. dominant seventh Root pos. dominant ninth

Bars 70–81		
Thematic material	Tonal centres	Scales
S2b / S2c	F♯ then b. 78 E	F♯ Dorian (becomes E major)

The festivities appear to hot up through this section after the more languid feel of **S2a** by way of a crescendo and the simultaneous layering up of two new themes (**S2b** and **S2c**). Melodically, both themes are based on the F♯ Dorian mode accompanied by largely Dorian harmonic progressions. The main chords are an alternation of F♯ minor (**i**) and B major (**IV**). This progression with its major subdominant in a largely minor context is perhaps the most characteristic of the Dorian mode (there are also some D naturals thrown into the harmonic mix in the bass as well). **S2b** is two bars and needs two repetitions for each one of **S2c**.



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Themes S2b and S2c (played simultaneously at bar 70)

S2b

S2c

After two full repetitions of **S2c**, Debussy intensifies further by compressing both ideas into half the time at bar 78. At the same time, the harmonic support shifts so that it is centred around E. As modes are largely a matter of emphasis (that is, the Dorian is the same notes as the major or Aeolian mode) this move to E major from F♯ Dorian is a straightforward one. The music builds up to a climax, moving to a clear dominant in E major at the end of bar 81.

Compressed versions of S2b and S2c at bar 78

S2b

S2c

Bars 82–97

Thematic material	Tonal centres	Scales
S2a / S2c	E then b. 90 D then b. 96 E	G♯ octatonic / F♯ Dorian

The resolution onto a perfect cadence in E represents the third key to be established in this way in the movement so far. It is marked by a sudden *pianissimo* and the return of a slightly truncated **S2a** on G♯ octatonic over a continuing E major context (the same scale/key relationship as before for this thematic idea).



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Theme S2a at bar 82

S2a

83

Cl.

This is followed at 86 by a modified **S2c** that continues descending in the second two bars rather than going back up as before.

Theme S2c at bar 86

S2c

86

Ob.

This sequence of S2a followed by S2c is then repeated at bar 90 with small changes but this time centred on D.

Bars 98–115

Thematic material	Tonal centres	Scales
S2a / S2c	E then b. 102 F#	G# octatonic / F# Major

The final part of the A section at bar 98 is a more strident version of **S2a** as heard at 82, also back in E major. This time **S2a** then continues more quietly in bar 102 with a variant of S2c that is rather more like the original with its descending and ascending shape.

Theme S2c at bar 102

S2c

102

Vi.

A *molto* crescendo from 106 leads to a series of rising parallel seventh chords at bar 110. The tonal implication is clear as the melody ascends a scale of F# major to its leading note at the end of bar 111, the last two notes (D# and E#) repeated with increasing urgency in the following two bars.

Extended motif x rhythm at bar 110

110

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Section B (bars 116–173)

The expected F# major climax, however, never arrives. Instead, there is a sudden change of perspective. We turn away from the frenzied festivities and instead focus our attention on the procession mentioned by Debussy in his programme note.

The dynamic is *ppp* and the sonority of pizzicato double basses, two timpani and harp makes for a muffled and unclear sound that the listener must strain to hear after the previous *ff* tutti. The tonality, as it slowly becomes apparent, is also unexpected. The entirety of this section is underpinned by an Ab pedal (occasionally expressed enharmonically as a G#), from which a succession of modal colours emerges.

After nine bars of open fifths, the first of a series of muted trumpet fanfares appears at bar 124. The combination of the steady tread of the pedal with this eight-bar fanfare idea is clearly evocative of an approaching procession.

The first trumpet fanfare contextualises the Ab pedal as the tonic of Ab-Dorian. Over the next twenty seven bars, and as the procession gets nearer, Debussy tries out a range of different modes that include Ab (or sometimes G#) as one of its notes.

Modal content of fanfares over Ab pedal in bars 116–155 of the B section

At bar 156, the procession has got close enough for Debussy to write a *forte* tutti. He cycles through the first three modes again, but the fanfares are now mingled with material from the A section.

The fanfares are pretty much the same as before but combined with **S1a**. Notice that the fanfare rhythm is now part of the accompaniment, forming a slightly modified version of the rhythmic **x motif** from the beginning.



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Fanfare and S1a at bar 156

The first three modes from the beginning of the B section are reprised as follows:

Modes in the second half of the B section

156	Ab Dorian
160	Bb Mixolydian
164	B Dorian

As the texture intensifies, the repetitions of material get shorter (see the half-bar repetitions of Dorian fragments in bar 168) and then finally Debussy opens the throttle fully with the whole orchestra playing *fortissimo* at 170. The music is highly chromatic with a series of seventh chords descending by semitone. The pedal that has persisted for the whole section is still present in the timpani and the overall effect by the end of bar 173 is of a highly inflected Ab dominant seventh, which leads back to the A section in Db, the fifth perfect cadence of the piece so far, and the second in Db major.



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Lead back into A section from bar 172

Brass & ww

Strings

timp.

Section A1` (bars 174–207)

Bars 174–182

Thematic material	Tonal centres	Scales
S1a (motifs x and y)	D _b	D _b various modes

The A section material is reprised in broadly the same order but there are some significant changes along the way, not least that the tonality is D_b rather than F. It is notable that D_b is in fact the first key to be **established** in the first A section and the second tonal centre for this S1 material.

The return of S1 is more intense as there is no introductory accompaniment and S1b is not used. As can be seen in the example below, the mode played by the melody is not consistent, moving between D_b acoustic and D_b minor.

S1a at bar 174



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Although marked at a quieter dynamic, the accompaniment in bar 174 is immediately more harmonically rich than the very opening, with parallel ninth chords replacing the open fifths. In addition, in bar 180 Debussy doubles the speed of the harmonic rhythm, increasing the intensity.

Bars 182–189

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S1a (motifs x and y)	D	D various modes

Debussy ratchets up the tension further in bar 182 by moving this material more or less in its entirety up a semitone. The addition of further strings and woodwind in bar 186 followed by a crescendo raises the temperature further. Unlike at the opening, S1a is not broken up either by rests or other material, but relentlessly continues in unbroken quavers.

Bars 190–207

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S1a / S2b (motif x)	E _b	E _b Dorian

In the last subsection of A1 Debussy moves up yet another semitone and the intensity is ramped up still further by the appearance of a variant of S2b in combination with S1a as shown below.

Motifs S1a and S2b at bar 190

S1a

S2b

S2 therefore appears much earlier in the structure than during the first A section (where it took 70 bars to arrive), which contributes to the urgency of this reprise compared to the original. At bar 198 this material is compressed further into a two-bar repetition.

At the end of the first A1 section (bar 23), the music came to a halt as it resolved onto D_b, heralded by a *fortissimo* brass fanfare based on motif y. Having compressed and added to A1 in the reprise, Debussy returns to this idea at bar 202, but this time the tonal resting point is E_b and the brass replace the motif y material with the fanfare idea from the B section.



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Section A2` (bars 208–223)

Bars 208–219

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S1a	A	A Mixolydian

Having had this compressed reprise of A1, Debussy initially settles down into a more exact repetition of the original material for A2, including settling on the same A Mixolydian centre.

Bars 220–223

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
Tr1	C♯	C♯ octatonic

However, the transitional passage is significantly truncated, with the original 14 bars (39–53) compressed into just 4. It begins in a very similar vein (albeit written in C♯ rather than the D♭ original) but it is quite muted and both Tr2 and the whole-tone version of S1 are omitted.

Although the festivities in the first section were loud and often energetic, the music moved quite languidly from one idea to the next. There was a sense that there was plenty of time and space for the revellers to enjoy themselves. However, after the interjection of the procession (or revolutionary guard) in the B section, everything is both more muted and more urgent. The way the truncated transition leads into the second subject is a good example of this.

The rhythm is more relentless and Debussy deliberately highlights continuities such as the bass part in the strings (doubled in octaves) and the G♯s in the horns. In addition, the deliberate two-note semiquaver figure from S2a (bar 55) is compressed into an ornament in bar 225.

A2' into A3' starting at bar 222



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Section A3` (bars 224–end)

Bars 224–231

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S2a	C♯	Octatonic

The beginning of the second subject material in the first iteration of A3 was a moment of luxuriant repose before the slow build to the energetic climax at the end of the section. For this repeat of S2a, however, the music is loud and the texture full. Gone is the tension between the octatonic melody and the functional cadence in the accompaniment – instead everything remains more ambiguous. At the same time, like much of the rest of the material, the space that previously allowed S2a to breathe is removed. After a few urgent repetitions, the music immediately begins to fragment and dissolve.

Bars 232–251

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
S2a fragments plus fanfare	C♯	F♯ Dorian then E major

At bar 232, S2a is reduced just to the repeating minor third ornamentation from bar 225. Meanwhile the bass plays a descending chromatic scale that we first heard at the end of the B section. As the music fades out we get little fragments both of other A section material (echoes of triplet quavers) and also of the fanfare from section B starting in bar 237. Having had a magical meeting of the festival and the procession, suddenly everything becomes quieter and loses its focus.

Bars 252–end

<i>Thematic material</i>	<i>Tonal centres</i>	<i>Scales</i>
Fragments	A	A ambiguous – partially Mixolydian

All three Nocturnes in this set end in a similar way. It is almost as if each movement is a magical vision that, as soon as it has crystallised, starts to dissolve before our eyes. It adds to the sense of an impressionistic dream or vision.

This is compounded by the tonality. Neither the original opening tonal centre of F, nor the more established D♭/C♯ turn out to be the final key. Instead, the music fizzles out in A, a tonal visited only briefly but gloriously for S2a (at bar 62). At the end, however, this tonality is reduced to stuttering staccato chords that are eventually stripped down to a single *ppp* pizzicato A in the cellos and basses (compare with the very similar end to the previous movement).



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274

Timb. *pp* *ppp* *ppp*

Cymb. *ppp*

Ycelles *div. s* *s* *pizz.* *ppp*

Cb. *ppp* *div. s* *s* *pizz.* *ppp*

This musical score excerpt shows a section for orchestra and cello section. The score is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp. Measure 274 begins with the Timbales and Cymbals playing eighth-note patterns at dynamic *pp*. The Double Bass (Cb) and Double Bass (Ycelles) enter with eighth-note patterns at dynamic *ppp*. The Ycelles part includes a dynamic instruction *div. s* (divisi, eighth-note) and a pizzicato instruction *pizz.*. The section continues with eighth-note patterns for all instruments at dynamic *ppp*.