

MUSIC TEACHERS.CO.UK
...the internet service for practical musicians.

Edexcel A Level Syllabus – Analysis

Claude Debussy: Prelude to
‘L’Après-midi d’un faune’

Gavin Meredith

© 2002 MusicTeachers.co.uk

Background

Debussy's orchestral work *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was first published in 1894 and later revised in the early twentieth century. It stands as a milestone in music history for its originality on many levels, proof that Debussy had established a style that embodied both an acute sense of orchestral colour and a development of the established 'rules' of harmony and form.

The piece is based on a poem by the contemporary French poet Mallarmé entitled *L'après-midi d'un faune*. Despite using the flute to represent the faun, it is not intended as a literal translation of the text, more an 'impression' of the atmospheres and ideas it evokes; in this light we can compare Debussy's musical style to the idiom of the French painters of his time known as the Impressionists including Monet, Degas and Renoir). Indeed, in his book *Claude Debussy and the Poets*, Arthur Wenk describes Debussy's musical language as being one that 'suggests rather than states, and which casts doubt upon the separations between reality, memory and fantasy'. Debussy's affinity with poetry was a great driving force behind much of his music. His friendship with many important writers and poets (including Mallarmé) is evidence of his passion for literature that coexisted with that for music. Songs form an important part of his output through settings of poems by major French poets such as Baudelaire and Verlaine, and he even wrote his own texts for the four songs entitled *Proses Lyrique*, which were composed around the same time as the *Prélude*.

When it was first performed, there were criticisms from some that the work was formless. Certainly, on first appearance the work does not follow any pre-existing formal plan, but there are, nevertheless, various musical features that unify the work. Tonally, the piece begins and ends in E major, giving a sense of completion to the structure. Another important feature is the recurrence of the main flute theme throughout the work, which provides an ongoing point of reference as the piece progresses. However, each time the theme occurs it is seen through a different lens, with subtle changes to both the shape of the theme and the accompanying texture that display the composer's rich imagination. For example, the first four appearances of the theme are all harmonised differently (the first one kept deliberately simple and unaccompanied!); if one takes the first note of the theme (C-sharp) in these instances, the chords that accompany it are D major in bar 11, E major (with added 6th) in bar 21 and E major (with flattened 7th and added 9th) in bar 26. Debussy's harmonic language is flexible and ambiguous enough to allow the theme to be reinterpreted in this way. The theme itself contains tonal ambiguities; despite being written in E major, it begins curiously on the sixth note of the scale and then falls through a tritone down to a G-natural. In bar 4 it comes to rest on an A-sharp, thus perpetuating its reluctance to settle in one particular key. It can also be noted that when the theme returns towards the end of the piece, the falling tritone is softened to a perfect fourth, making the theme much more harmonically 'comfortable', and suggesting a resolution of some kind - a feature reiterated by the flute's final two notes which consist of a drop from C-sharp down to G-sharp.

Debussy's fondness for incorporating scales other than the usual major and minor into his melodic material can be seen through his use of the whole-tone scale in the clarinet and flute parts between bars 32 and 37.

The chromatic aspect of Debussy's harmonic progressions also adds to the tonal fluidity of the piece and provides magical moments such as the slip from a D major-based chord in bar 62 into D-flat major in the following bar. The use of parallel harmonies, another feature typical of Debussy's style, can also be found in the piece (for example, in the strings in bars 36-37 and 49). Even more interesting (and original at the time of composition) is the way that dominant 7th chords are stripped of their traditional function to lead onto a tonic or submediant chord. Instead, in the *Prélude*, they are often used purely for their particular harmonic colour and do not have a progressive function. This can be seen, for example, in bar 94, where the first chord in the strings is based around a dominant 7th harmony on E (with added 6th and 9th); in traditional harmonic progressions one would expect a tonic chord of A to follow, but Debussy slips onto a chord based on a C major dominant 7th (with added 9th).

The interval of a tritone, which is one of the main characteristics of the opening theme of the work, also permeates the harmony elsewhere. This is most noticeable in the second most prominent theme of the piece, played by the wind at bar 55 and then taken up by the strings at 63; underpinning this theme is a bass line that oscillates between D-flat and G (a tritone).

In terms of orchestration, Debussy achieves an amazing spectrum of colours from what is essentially a small orchestra by late nineteenth century standards. It is interesting to note that there are no brass instruments apart from horns, and no percussion other than antique cymbals (themselves an exotic addition to the usual orchestra). However, Debussy requires two harps, and gives them both relatively big parts to play. The variety of textures played by the string section shows the composer's remarkable awareness of the different shading requirements of specific passages. The players are asked to play with mutes (bar 5), on the fingerboard (bar 11), *pizzicato* (bar 32) and *tremolando* (bar 94).

There is evidence to suggest that Debussy planned this piece to be one third of a larger work entitled *Prélude, Interludes, et Paraphrase Finale à l'après-midi d'un faune*, but the rest of the work never materialised; one can only wonder what further magical atmospheres the composer envisaged.

Analysis

Bar	What Happens	Comment
1-10	A solo flute presents the main theme (motif A) with no initial accompaniment. The melody slides up and down through a tritone twice before stretching upwards and falling through an octave. Harmony is introduced in bar 4 with a harp and woodwind chord of A-sharp, E, G-sharp and C-sharp which resolves onto a dominant seventh chord on B-flat to start the next bar. Here, muted strings provide the harmony whilst two horns engage in a dialogue, repeating a 1-bar figure. In bar 10 the 1 st horn part slides chromatically upwards to reintroduce the theme in the next bar.	The theme played by the flute is tonally ambiguous in that it does not sit comfortably in any one key (a feature exploited by Debussy in the opening section of the piece).
11-20	The theme is restated exactly in the flute. However, this time it is harmonised initially by an unexpected D major harmony (the key signature is four sharps!). This falls back towards E major in bar 13, with the horn pondering on an added 6 th (C-sharp) to the E major harmony, extending the similar idea from bar 5. At bar 14 the oboe takes over the last note of the flute and develops bars 3 and 4 of the theme. This grows into a thicker texture at bar 17, where a 3-note cell in violin 1, clarinet and oboes becomes the important, repeated motif. The textural cut-off in bar 20 leaves the 1 st clarinet to gently slide this motif back towards a C-sharp so that the flute can take up its theme again.	The introduction of the strings playing <i>tremolando</i> (they are already muted) in bar 11 creates a hushed, magical atmosphere.
21-25	The flute begins to vary the theme with this presentation, beginning with a much longer initial C-sharp and a freer development of the original shapes in bar 22. The theme is underpinned harmonically this time by a chord of E major (with added C-sharp (the 6 th), spelt out by the harp's arpeggios. The flute then plays the opening of the theme over a dominant ninth chord (on B) in bar 23 before	

	<p>rising to a C natural and dropping an octave (referring to the octave leap in bar 3). The accompanying harmonies pass from the strings (bar 24) into the woodwind, ending up on a chord of c minor on the last beat of 25.</p>	
26-30	<p>As the flute slides onto a C-sharp to restate the theme for a fourth time, so the harmonies slip subtly sideways onto a dominant 9th chord on E, spelt out on the harp and strings again, as in bar 23. The flute then flutters up and down the same tritone gap as in the previous bar, echoed by the 2nd flute before they join in unison to take up a semiquaver triplet idea and cascade down a scale in bar 28, accompanied by undulating (but harmonically fairly static) strings. The texture then sinks to rest on a B major chord at the beginning of bar 30 (note the 2nd violin part and compare to the 3rd horn in bar 5).</p>	<p>Each time the flute has presented the theme the harmony underneath has been varied (i.e. unaccompanied in bar 1, D major in bar 11, E major in bar 21 and a dominant 9th on E in bar 26). Note that in traditional harmonic progressions, this latest dominant seventh-based chord (bar 26) would naturally resolve to its tonic, but instead it slips chromatically upwards on the last beat of the bar.</p>
31-36	<p>A <i>sforzando</i> chord in the horns heralds a more animated texture, driven by the agitated, repeated notes in the cellos. Over this the clarinet plays a variation of the flute's original theme, which in bar 32 rises up a whole-tone scale to E-sharp before sinking down through an octave (an elaboration of the flute's original melodic shape) In bar 33 the flute imitates this elaboration whilst the bassoon imitates the cellos from two bars previously. The harp's grace notes in bar 32, together with the <i>pizzicato</i> strings add further energy to the music. Bars 34-36 are basically a transposed repeat of 31-33.</p>	
37-43	<p>A new theme appears on the oboe (motif B), accompanied by strings and bassoon. There follows imitation between the woodwind and the violins, based on this theme.</p>	<p>The first three notes of this new theme are a reversal of the 3-note cell that became prominent in bars 15-20.</p>
44-50	<p>Debussy drives the music forward with the marking '<i>toujours en animent</i>' a long crescendo between The falling 3rds from this new theme are taken up by the flute and oboes</p>	

	<p>and then imitated again by the violins. A countermelody, played on the bassoons and clarinets in bar 44 is then imitated in the violas and cellos. A further bit of development can be seen in the clarinet and cor anglais in bar 46, where they play a figure similar in shape to the flute in bar 3. In the following bar the violins take over this motif as the horns play a line derived rhythmically from the third bar of motif B (but possibly also related to the 1st horn part in bar 5). In bars 48-50 a thinning texture is accompanied by a <i>diminuendo</i> as the strings slide upwards. The harmony in bar 50 is based on a dominant seventh chord on E-flat.</p>	
51-54	<p>The clarinet has the melodic material here (motif C), which continues to develop the horn part from bar 47. However, the opening minor 3rd leap is changed by the clarinet to a major 3rd. As the clarinet line rises, the violins sink downwards before sliding chromatically up and down a minor 3rd (possibly a reference to motif A). The double basses keep the underlying harmony static with a four-bar <i>pedal note</i> on A-flat.</p>	<p>The resolution onto a chord of A-flat major in bar 51 (with added major seventh) is the first strong perfect cadence in the piece so far.</p>
55-73	<p>As the music slips into D-flat major there is new melodic material in the woodwind (motif D). The gently throbbing string chords keep the texture flowing, while the woodwind play limp, falling phrases. In 59-60 the strings rise and crescendo to herald another falling figure in the wind, this time reminiscent of bar 28. At bar 63 the harmony magically drops a semitone and a sense of propulsion is added by the repeated <i>arpeggiation</i> of the two harps together with the cross-accented triplets in the upper woodwind and horns. Against this the strings begin to reiterate motif D in unison. Bars 67-70 are a repeated two-bar phrase. Here, the strings carry the thematic material; bar 67 relates to motif C and bar 68 harks back to the</p>	<p>Note the bass line in 55-58 oscillating across a tritone; this interval and the associated harmonic progression are important as they are embodied in the main theme of the piece, motif A, which initially falls from C-sharp to G-natural (an augmented 4th).</p>

	<p>woodwind's material in bar 62. Accompanying this, the wind and brass develop the same texture, only thicker, and the harps diverge to play thicker, more intricate patterns. As the wind and brass die out the strings diminuendo whilst repeating their triplet-semiquaver figures.</p>	
74-79	<p>The 1st horn makes reference to motif C before the clarinet and flute recall bar 62. This provides accompaniment to a solo violin which repeats motif D.</p>	<p>Like bars 51-54, these bars are constructed over a <i>pedal note</i> in the bass.</p>
79-82	<p>The music suddenly arrives back in its original key, E major, and the flute gives the listener a brief glimpse of motif A. It is played here in a 4/4 measure instead of 9/8, and the melody falls through a perfect fourth instead of the original tritone. The harp provides a harmonic stasis with flowing E major arpeggios. However, the strings use this as the basis for more elaborate simultaneous chords (note the C-sharp added in the cellos in bar 81 and the F-sharp based chord in bar 82).</p>	
83-85	<p>A change to C major prompts a sudden agitation with the oscillating horn pattern, over which the oboe plays an energised version of motif A, decorated with a trill and staccato notes (and only falling through a major 3rd this time). This releases a chattering cascade through the woodwind and horns, accompanied by cross-rhythm staccato chords in the strings.</p>	<p>Debussy increases the sense of agitation by also increasing the tempo – '<i>Un peu plus animé</i>'.</p>
86-89	<p>The harmony drops into E-flat major and repeats bars 79-82 down a semitone, this time with the oboe playing the flute's theme.</p>	
90-93	<p>This is based closely on bars 83-85. Motif A is given to the cor anglais and the chattering flute figure enters after only three beats. Harp <i>glissandi</i> add more colour to the texture. Tritone steps the the bass in bars 92-93 (see bars 55-58) end on a G#7-based harmony.</p>	
94-99	<p>A return to the original key (E major)</p>	<p>The juxtaposition of motifs</p>

	<p>sees motif A played in unison by two flutes, which digress after two bars to ponder on the falling triplet figure from bar 28 (strengthened by the oboe). Against the flutes' melody two violins refer to motif C, and after one bar they are joined by a solo cello and two clarinets.</p>	<p>A and C is startling because there is a semitonal clash (C-sharp/D) between their starting notes. The introduction of antique cymbals adds a magical touch to the texture..</p>
100-106	<p>The 1st flute restates motif A, although as in bars 79-81 the characteristic fall through a tritone is reduced to a perfect 4th. The first note of the theme is this time harmonised by a C#7 harmony. At bar 103 the oboe takes up the melodic material with a restatement of the second half of motif A (bars 3-4) which is extended and continues to fall while the strings climb upwards. Bar 105 is based on a B7 harmony, preparing for a final, strong perfect cadence into bar 106.</p>	
106-110	<p>The thick, muted string and horn chords in bar 106 create a luscious tonic chord over which the harps play quavers. The texture then fills out and the horns and violins play a reference to motif A (only falling and rising through a major 3rd). The flute then takes over to bring the piece to a close with two two-note figures (bars 108 and 109), both beginning on C-sharp, the first note of motif A (and the whole piece!). The second of these figures drops from C-sharp to G-sharp, a final, ghostly reminder of the opening shape of motif A (with the original G-natural resolved here to G-sharp to create a harmonic resolution).</p>	<p>The harps' quavers threaten to destabilise the tonic chord through their introduction of a D-natural (the flattened seventh). However, the tonic harmony is strong enough to withstand this and retains the feeling of impending closure.</p>