

PART THREE

**Musical techniques**



## 9 Debussy's tonality: a formal perspective

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### Debussy as a tonal composer: reception and stylistic evolution

There are many possible ways to approach the question of Debussy's tonality, which over the last fifty years has inspired an unusually diverse range of critical and analytical viewpoints. The focus here will be on tonality's relationship with other aspects of formal process (especially thematic): how the nature of this relationship serves both to connect Debussy's music with earlier traditions of tonal composition and to set it apart from such traditions. First, though, we must consider the more fundamental issue of the music's status as *tonal* music: how Debussy adapted his inheritance of late Romantic chromatic tonality to the service of a modernist musical outlook and how the music expresses tonal function in an idiomatically Debussyan way.

As a preliminary observation we could note a striking divergence of perception between musical scholars (especially analysts) on the one hand and the listening public on the other, regarding Debussy's harmonic language or tonal practice in a general sense. While analysts have usually considered this aspect of Debussy's art to be rather problematic in the sense of abstruse, elusive or otherwise difficult to grasp (and hence to explain through analysis),<sup>1</sup> it would be fair to say that this perception has not been shared by concert audiences; on the contrary, Debussy remains one of the most enduringly popular composers of the post-Romantic era. Although there are many reasons for his music's evident accessibility, not least among them is surely its instantly identifiable tonal idiom or 'accent'. Debussy's tonality, while perennially new and exotic-sounding, yet retains powerful and familiar resonances from the tonal language of his predecessors; it exhibits a strong sense of tonal centre, expressed through vividly projected attributes of tonal function both melodically and harmonically.

Secondly, we might observe that Debussy's musical language always remained rooted in triadic consonance and the principle of monotonicity.<sup>2</sup> In this respect the contrast with some other progressively oriented composers of the same period is indeed striking; one thinks, for instance, of the evolutionary paths pursued by Bartók and Scriabin (in their very different ways) from a late Romantic tonal language to their own, radically post-tonal brands of musical modernism.

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In Debussy's case stylistic evolution rather entailed an ever greater refinement of principles established at a relatively early stage. The songs and piano music of what we might think of as his 'first period' (c. 1880–92) saw the consolidation of the formative elements of his tonal language: a chromatic tonality derived from late-Romantic practice, both French and Wagnerian, alongside a marked penchant for harmonic and tonal adventurism (during these years it was more pronounced in the songs *Ariettes (oubliées)*, *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*, and *Fêtes galantes*, series 1). Here Debussy's progressive tonal outlook is clearly evident in his fondness for juxtaposing remotely related chromatic regions with exotic-sounding uses of chromatic modality, and perhaps most of all in a characteristic penchant for certain non-diatonic pitch collections, especially the whole-tone and octatonic scales.<sup>3</sup>

In the works of his early maturity and subsequent 'middle period' (c. 1893, String Quartet; *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* to 1909–12, *Préludes*, book 2; *Images* for orchestra), stylistic elements from the earlier period were distilled and refined towards a greater economy of means. With respect to tonal vocabulary, his middle-period music increasingly took on a certain quality of elliptical concision of tonal succession, involving both (diatonically based) tonal syntax and 'exotic', or colouristic harmonic elements. In particular, this period is characterised by a more seamless integration of symmetrical collections into the chromatic vocabulary generally.

Debussy's late music (c. 1913–17, *Jeux*, *Etudes*, chamber sonatas) shows simultaneous trends in what appear to be divergent directions: on the one hand a more refractory than ever approach to syntactical continuity of harmonic practice (as exemplified throughout *Jeux*, for instance, and movements such as 'Sérénade' from the Cello Sonata); on the other, the emergence of a new neoclassical simplicity (as in the first movement of the Violin Sonata and numerous passages throughout the *Etudes*).

## Debussy's tonal practice: idiosyncratic features

### Harmonic and melodic vocabulary

#### *The tonic–dominant relation*

One of the least traditional aspects of Debussy's tonal practice concerns his treatment of this fundamental harmonic relation, its radical transformation in some pieces and (real or apparent) conspicuous absence from others. For some analysts (most notably Richard S. Parks), this departure from earlier tonal norms effectively disqualifies Debussy's music from consideration as genuinely tonal.<sup>4</sup> While the point is well taken it is at least arguable that this represents less of a radical break with the tonal tradition than some have claimed. Historically, the I–V relation's centrality to compositional practice

had been steadily declining through much of the nineteenth century; the evolution, from Schubert to Liszt and beyond, of what eventually became a fully chromatic tonal system was distinguished (*inter alia*) precisely by its gradual shift away from fifth relations as the primary basis of composers' large-scale tonal structures in favour of an increasingly important role for third relations. Moreover, 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 foreground (chord-to-chord) harmonic process. This is especially true of Debussy's longest, most elaborately developed forms, a topic to be returned to below.

### ***Modality (diatonic)***

In Debussy's mature style, while the traditional major/minor system continues to inform tonal identity on a large scale in whole pieces, or substantial, self-contained sections thereof, at the level of surface detail that system is often undermined by a prevalence of degrees of modal scales such that melodies and chord successions often resist traditional tonal classification. Some well-known instances are the oboe d'amore theme from 'Gigues' (bars 21ff. are Aeolian/Dorian; the tune's lack of a mode-defining sixth degree is characteristic), the main themes of 'Fêtes' (bars 29ff. are Mixolydian) and 'Sirènes' (bars 26ff. are Lydian), and the opening idea (*quasi guitarra*) of 'La sérénade interrompue' (Phrygian).<sup>5</sup>

### ***Chromaticism***

As further explored below, Debussy's music is distinguished by a highly individual fusion of fundamentally different kinds of chromaticism: tonally functional (that is, governed by the *syntactical* resolution tendencies of common-practice tonality) and non-functional (originating outside those tonal-syntactical constraints, and often collectional, e.g. whole tone and octatonic). Concerning chromaticism of the latter kind, its centrality to Debussy's tonal practice points to an important distinction of emphasis when comparing his chromatic usage to those of such post-Romantic contemporaries as Delius, Elgar, Sibelius and Strauss. Whereas collectional chromaticism is by no means uncommon with these composers – in the Strauss of *Salome* and *Elektra*, for instance, and much of the later Sibelius – it nevertheless remains a secondary, rather than primary, resource of the chromatic arsenal.

### ***Non-functional diatonicism***

In Debussy's diatonic writing the quality of harmonic goal-directedness, so crucially defining for earlier tonal styles, is often undermined through the characteristic presence of a (strictly non-functional) pentatonic patina (quite apart from its undermining by other factors, rhythmic and

phrase-structural, on which more below). For a good example of this, see the very beginning of *La mer*.

### **Chordal vocabulary**

As often observed, Debussy's surface chord successions typically serve ends of colouristic effect rather than tonal-syntactical coherence. This is especially so with respect to the frequent presence of functionally 'superfluous' (non-resolving) chordal sevenths and ninths. In contrast to their explicitly syntactical role (that is, their stylistic and grammatical imperative to downward resolution, even if not directly realised in their immediate context) in common-practice tonal music, Debussy's chordal dissonances often (though by no means always) constitute static, colouristic embellishments of the basic triad. See, for example, bars 26ff. of 'Sirènes' (arrival of the tonic B major), where the chordal flat sevenths (A♭s), far from implying any kind of harmonic motion towards the subdominant, are strictly decorative.

### **Chordal syntax**

In many cases Debussy's chordal successions are better understood as textural thickenings of the melodic line than as harmonic progressions in the traditionally accepted sense. This penchant for non-functional (organal) melodic doubling typically takes the form of parallel triads or open fifths. The triads can be in any position: root position, as in the opening ideas of *Préludes* 'Canope' and 'Brouillards' (cf. Example 9.2 below); first inversion, as in the opening woodwind theme of the prelude to *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*; or second inversion, as in the C major theme (bars 28ff.) from 'La cathédrale engloutie'. For an example of 'organal' doubling in open fifths, see the woodwind idea at bars 33–4 etc. of 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer'.

### **Arabesque and chord progression**

Such a catalogue of unorthodox technical features can usefully point to *what* is different about Debussy's tonality, but does not go very far towards telling us *why*. To understand what makes such a tonality 'tick', the irregularities must be considered in the larger context of compositional aesthetics; specifically, Debussy's oft-expressed ideal of the kind of 'ornamental' melodic art he found in the music of Palestrina and Bach ('melodic arabesques, which create their effect through contour'<sup>6</sup>). In Debussy's own music, that ornamental conception finds its most characteristic form in harmonic inactivity, without the dimension of chord progression to distract from the 'curve' and 'contour' of the melodic arabesque. This harmonic inactivity typically extends to the level of the self-contained melodic phrase or thematic entity.

Several writers have observed a kinship between this aspect of Debussy's art and certain ornamental or decorative manifestations in the visual arts,

particularly Art Nouveau.<sup>7</sup> One of the fundamental attributes of Art Nouveau is its appearance of irresistible decorative impulse to fill available space.<sup>8</sup> Debussy's thematic arabesques seem to obey a comparable impulse to fill registral space, in a combination of stepwise and relatively undulating disjunct motion (typically avoiding intervals larger than a fifth).<sup>9</sup> The pentatonic subset of the diatonic scale is inherently conducive to such registral-space filling; crucially lacking those very scale degrees ( $\hat{4}$  and  $\hat{7}$ ) indispensable to tonal definition by means of genuine harmonic progression, its true nature resides in decorative embellishment of the tonic triad.<sup>10</sup> For a classic example of the Debussyan pentatonic arabesque, see the above-mentioned woodwind theme from 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer' (bars 33–4).

Debussy's arabesques take many other forms besides pentatonicism: diatonic modality (cf. the modal themes cited above), including the major mode itself (as in the *sevillana* main theme of 'Par les rues et par les chemins', bars 8ff.), and chromatic. Chromatic arabesques often feature an admixture of totally chromatic scalar segments with whole-tone or octatonic elements; here, the *locus classicus* is the opening flute solo of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (chromatic and whole tone). Pure whole-tone or octatonic arabesques are comparatively rare; for a pure octatonic example, see the long-breathed lyrical tune (oboe, solo viola) at bars 140ff. in 'Par les rues et par les chemins'. More typical is a seasoned blend of both collections, as in the horns' theme in octaves at bars 35ff. of 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer' (octatonic and whole-tone).

Debussy integrates such thematic ideas into larger formal sections via a characteristic technique whereby arabesque-like units, typically two bars in length, are combined through a chain-like process. This constructive technique is so prevalent as to constitute one of his most readily identifiable stylistic traits.<sup>11</sup> The units' identity as such is established by symmetrically balanced contrast and juxtaposition in factors such as motive, texture, and harmonic rhythm (also, of course, secondary parameters of instrumentation, dynamics and so forth); larger form is generated by the hierarchical chaining of units and their compounds. While such a pronounced emphasis on two-bar segments might seem unremarkable in itself, the technique's conjunction with the arabesque's characteristic quality of non-goal-directedness in the harmonic sphere adds up to a novel and distinctly twentieth-century approach to form generation.

This essentially additive approach to form building might be described as kaleidoscopic or block-like; it is possessed of a singular clarity of outline. (In this connection it is ironic that Debussy's forms have often been both criticised and praised for supposedly 'Impressionistic' or modernist tendencies to the very reverse of such clarity.) The technique enabled the construction of expansive thematic-presentational areas incorporating sufficient internal

## Example 9.1(a) 'Pagodes' (bars 3–4)

(2-bar block) arabesque  
*délicatement et presque sans nuances*

3

Rit.

B

## (b) 'Bruyères' (bars 8–10)

(3-bar block) arabesque

8

*mf*

*p*

A6:I

IV

I

7

contrast without (necessarily) the component of harmonic progression. The point is well illustrated by the harmonically static  $D^b$  major expanse in bars 31–42 of 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer', already discussed with respect to its thematic component parts.

Harmonic progression often appears as a slower-moving underlay to motivic arabesque-activity on the surface. Synchronisation of this harmonic underlay with the motivic symmetry of the 'two-bar block' technique results in a metrical (and hypermetrical) regularity that again sits oddly with the notion of 'Impressionist' amorphousness. A classic example is the opening of 'Pagodes' (Example 9.1a). The size of Debussy's constructive 'blocks' is not invariably two bars; Example 9.1b shows its expansion to three in the main theme (bars 8ff.) of 'Bruyères', an expansive idea articulating a complete  $(I-ii^7-V^7-I)$ , bars 8–14) progression before moving to a half-cadential dominant (this characteristic thematic type is further discussed below).

When the block technique serves an extended area of harmonic inactivity, as in the above-cited passage (bars 31–42) from 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer', harmonic progression sometimes takes the form of a distant undercurrent far beneath the surface. This is well illustrated by the same passage's larger



context, a tonally open-ended formal section (bars 31–83) that eventually modulates from the movement's tonic (D $\flat$  major) to the subdominant (G $\flat$ ), the latter thematically articulated by the internal reprise (bar 68) of the section's opening material. Between the section's initial tonic and its long-range subdominant goal, an internal contrasting section (bars 47–67) articulates another static tonal area, the minor dominant (A $\flat$  minor).

Areas of harmonic inactivity often coexist with a highly chromatic musical surface, often of a whole-tone or octatonic orientation. Such collectional focus in the foreground attenuates harmonic-functional sense, which nevertheless still emerges at a higher level. A good illustration of this phenomenon is the extended octatonic area, over E in the bass, at bars 122ff. of 'Par les rues et par les chemins' (containing the oboe/viola theme mentioned above). On the surface harmonic function seems suspended for the duration, while the octatonic collection sustains an intricate motivic polyphony (the passage also shows how such harmonically inactive areas serve Debussy's penchant for motivic combination). But in its larger tonal context, the same passage plays a pivotal harmonic role: it relates both backwards, as a retroactively applied dominant to the preceding extended emphasis on A (= V/V, bars 90–121) and forwards in the role of supertonic relative to the following area of D (= V, bars 170ff.).

In contrast to the harmonically inert arabesque, another Debussyan thematic type is based on harmonic progression, most often of an open-ended (I–V or half-cadential) variety. Such themes invariably occupy the role of an opening or main theme, as in 'Bruyères' (bars 8–17); other examples include 'Danseuses de Delphes' (see below), 'Les collines d'Anacapri', 'Poissons d'or', 'Jeux de vagues' and 'Dialogue du vent et de la mer'. As in earlier tonal music, this thematic type is often associated with an actual or incipient antecedent-consequent period (cf. 'Les collines d'Anacapri' and 'Dialogue du vent et de la mer'). The complete I–V–I progression, as the harmonic basis of a thematic entity, is rare in Debussy; in the middle-period piano and orchestral works the nearest candidate is perhaps the dominant-key theme (bars 86ff.) in the sonata-like form of 'Fêtes'. Themes based on non-tonally-functional chromatic progressions are rarer still, a *sui generis* example being the march episode (Debussy's 'dazzling fantastic vision') that constitutes the middle section of the same piece.

### **Analytical approaches to Debussy's tonality: a selective survey**

From a tonal perspective, existing analytical studies can be viewed as falling into two broad camps: accommodationist (of established tonal theories to

Debussy's idiosyncratic brand of tonality) and rejectionist (of the viability of any such accommodation).

Prominent in the first camp have been several attempts at a Schenkerian approach, with its emphasis on linear voice leading rather than the moment-to-moment identity of harmonic constructs. But although Schenker's influential theory of tonal music remains unrivalled in its explanatory depth and subtlety, its application or adaptation to any music outside Schenker's own select band of composers (from Bach to Brahms, more or less) – and especially to twentieth-century music – has always been highly controversial.<sup>12</sup> The first analysts to apply Schenkerian concepts to Debussy's music were two of Schenker's own pupils, Felix Salzer and Adele Katz. Though both are insightful and provocative, their approaches are quite different. Salzer liberally reformulates many of his teacher's basic precepts, in the process tending to blur Schenker's absolute distinction between consonance and dissonance, which Salzer justifies as reflecting twentieth-century stylistic realities.<sup>13</sup> Katz is, generally speaking, more reluctant to modify the original theory; as a result, her emphasis is much more on the unconventionality of Debussy's tonal practice compared to earlier composers.<sup>14</sup> While Katz restricts her analyses to short passages (from *Pelléas* and selected piano pieces), Salzer is more ambitious in his attempt to show the large-scale tonal coherence of whole pieces ('Bruyères') or large sections thereof (*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, bars 1–30).<sup>15</sup> But Katz goes further in her pursuit of a broader historical agenda, casting Debussy in the role of natural heir to Wagner in a tonal evolutionary process extending from Bach to the early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

By way of contrast, Werner Danckert approached Debussy's tonality from the perspective of harmonic function after Hugo Riemann's influential ideas on the ultimate reducibility of all chords to some form of tonic-, dominant-, or subdominant-functioned expression.<sup>17</sup> Danckert's analyses are less illuminating than those of Salzer and Katz, not because of any shortage of functional sense in the music itself, but rather on account of his literalistic, inflexible employment of the Riemannian apparatus in inappropriate chromatic contexts. Altogether more successful is Rudolph Réti's wide-ranging motivic study of 'La cathédrale engloutie', an ingenious analytical tour de force in the Schoenbergian tradition of thematic/motivic 'musical logic'.<sup>18</sup> More recently there have been a few attempts at a systematic explanatory synthesis of the music's dualistic basis in triadic tonality on the one hand and symmetrical collections on the other. Arnold Whittall, for example, explores ways in which Debussy expanded his legacy of Wagnerian tonality through absorption of a structural role for the whole-tone scale.<sup>19</sup>

Katz, having demonstrated a cogent post-Wagnerian tonal practice at work in some pieces, then turns to others (principally the *Préludes* 'Voiles')

and 'Les tierces alternées') only to find a 'structural vagueness' resistant to her well-defined tonal criteria.<sup>20</sup> She concludes that Debussy, having first expanded the technical and expressive possibilities inherent in the old tonal system, ended up going beyond its natural limits. As for that perplexing 'structural vagueness', it will require nothing less than a (new) 'form of analysis to cope with the problems to which the new systems give rise'.<sup>21</sup>

One such 'new form of analysis' was eventually provided by pitch-class set theory, originally intended for music more obviously 'atonal' than Debussy's.<sup>22</sup> The most notable exponent of such an approach has been Richard S. Parks, who adapts the concept to Debussy's triadically based language by refracting it through four 'genera': diatonic, chromatic, whole-tone and octatonic.<sup>23</sup> The resultant analyses capture well one of Debussy's most salient compositional traits, namely his penchant for kaleidoscopic contrasts of certain kinds of diatonic and chromatic pitch resources in block-like juxtaposition. But while the set-theoretical approach can hardly be criticised for failing to address issues that lie beyond its scope, it must be said that its drastic negation of tonality results in a somewhat one-dimensional picture.

### **Large-scale form in Debussy's instrumental music**

Most of the copious literature on this subject has been more concerned with Debussy's supposed formal radicalism than with uncovering any underlying connections to earlier traditions. Indeed, to assert their existence to any significant degree implies a substantial revisionism of much prevailing critical wisdom. The view of Debussy as a proto-avant-gardist owes much to the Darmstadt serialists of the post-war period, who in retrospect seem to have been intent on reinventing Debussy after their own image, with such concepts as 'statistical form' (Stockhausen) and 'vegetative circulation of the form' (Herbert Eimert).<sup>24</sup> Another commonly encountered view is that Debussy's forms somehow exemplify the antithesis of a typically 'Germanic' aesthetic of 'developmental' form. This line of argument is well represented by Edward Lockspeiser:

Thematic or harmonic development, in the form of a musical argument ruthlessly pursued, demands a firmer, less ambiguous harmonic structure, and it was no doubt for this reason that Debussy particularly mistrusted musical development as a method of composition.<sup>25</sup>

(Boulez, on the other hand, speaks of Debussy's '[overthrowing of] not so much the art of development as the very concept of form itself'.<sup>26</sup>)

Debussy's most favoured formal design, which he employed with inexhaustible variety, was ternary (A–B–A') form, whose fundamental attribute

is the presence of a contrasting middle section followed by a thematic/tonal reprise of the first part. While the possibilities for varying such an elementary scheme are obviously practically limitless, the most basic distinction among sub-types is harmonic, concerning the tonal destination of the form's first part (A section): closed (first part ending in the tonic followed by a middle section in a tonally contrasting area) versus open (first part ending off-tonic, either by way of modulation to another key or simply on a non-tonic chord). Some examples of the first (closed) type are the *Préludes* 'La cathédrale engloutie', 'La puerta del vino', and 'Général Lavine – eccentric', and the *Nocturnes* 'Nuages' and 'Sirènes'. An example of the second (open) type is 'Danseuses de Delphes', further discussed below. On a larger scale some orchestral representatives of the open type feature the expansion of their (modulating) first part into a sonata-like exposition incorporating both the (I–V) tonal polarity and thematic duality characteristic of that form: see 'Fêtes', 'Jeux de vagues', and 'Par les rues et par les chemins'.

Another important Debussyan formal type is cyclic or rotational form, which involves the recurrence of an established sequence of material. An outstanding example is the *Prélude* 'Des pas sur la neige', with its obsessive duality of a three-note diatonic ostinato (D–E–F) juxtaposed with incursions into ever more distant chromatic regions. On other occasions the result is a rondo-like form, as in 'Brouillards' (see below) and 'Dialogue du vent et de la mer'.

A further category could be characterised as through-composed, broadly defined as a continuously developing form, lacking both ternary form's overriding symmetry of reprise process and cyclic form's regular alternation of material. A good example of this type is the fantasia-like form of 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir', analysed below; others include 'Jardins sous la pluie', 'Ondine', 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer', and 'Les parfums de la nuit'.

Debussy's forms correspond most significantly to traditional tonal models less in the realm of their overall design, or the lower-level details of such, than in the kinds of dynamic musical *process* that constitute the life-blood of our experience of musical form: that is to say, the various kinds of *formal function* expressed by the form's constituent parts.<sup>27</sup> As in earlier tonal music such function is articulated through thematic and motivic processes in the context of open and closed harmonic structures; similarly, the overall form arises from large-scale harmonic tensions and contrasts. Furthermore, the radical surface novelty of Debussy's music often conceals a more fundamental (harmonic or voice-leading) structural basis remarkably reminiscent of earlier tonal music. Lower-level formal processes are likewise articulated by form-functional phenomena of a traditional nature: for example, those of cadential closure or half-cadential caesura; thematic constructs such as

the antecedent–consequent period; motivic processes of development, fragmentation and so forth. They are always creatively transformed in an idiomatically Debussyan way.

### **Tonal-structural diversity in the *Préludes***

The two books of *Préludes* make excellent case studies on account of this hybrid genre's restricted dimensions and formal concision. They can serve to illustrate a diverse assortment of idiomatically Debussyan tonal and formal techniques, from those most reminiscent of traditional tonal practice to some of his furthest departures from that practice. This characteristic tonal-structural diversity could usefully be conceived in terms of a hypothetical continuum along which the relative position of individual *Préludes* would be indicative of the extent of traditional tonal practice operative in a given piece. Those least traditional would occupy the left end of such a continuum, those most traditional the right:

post-tonal *Préludes*

*Préludes* of non-functional triadic basis

*Préludes* with substantially developed tonal structures

Criteria for classification of *Préludes* along such lines could be defined as follows:<sup>28</sup>

*Préludes* of non-triadic structural basis

*Préludes* of triadic structural basis, exhibiting an (almost always) clearly defined tonic, but lacking in certain features traditionally associated with normative tonal forms (such as a structural dominant)<sup>29</sup>

*Préludes* exhibiting fully formed tonal structures (structural tonic–dominant relations; linear and harmonic elaborative techniques reminiscent of earlier tonal music)

In fact only one *Prélude* ('Voiles') meets the criterion for inclusion in the 'left' group as defined above. In its explicit negation of tonal reference, stemming from the outer sections' drastic restriction of pitch-class content to a single transposition of the whole-tone scale, this *Prélude* is paradigmatic for Debussy's furthest extreme of post-tonal practice.<sup>30</sup> As a compositional experiment in pitch-class restriction it occupies a unique place in Debussy's output. More representative are the three *Préludes* analysed below, from the 'left' end of the hypothetical continuum's middle group ('Brouillards') through the 'right' end of that group ('Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir') to the 'right' group itself ('Danseuses de Delphes').

## Example 9.2 'Brouillards' (bar 1)

Modéré  
extrêmement égal et léger  
*la m.g. un peu en valeur sur la m.d.*

chromatic mist

*pp*

C : I (diatonic) triadic organum

**Three *Préludes*****'Brouillards'**

In its triadic, albeit non-functional structural basis, 'Brouillards' is more representative of Debussy's 'modernist' practices than 'Voiles'. The identity of the *Prélude's* tonic is not in doubt, but that identity is defined to an unusual extent by non-tonally-functional means.

The piece is a study in texture; specifically of the sonorous and textural possibilities arising from a continuous opposition of independent 'white key' and 'black key' materials: an 'organal' procession of diatonic triads circling around the tonic, set against faster-moving chromatic figuration, doggedly shadowing the triads in the same register (Example 9.2). As a result, the *Prélude's* tonic of C major appears shrouded in a continuous chromatic haze or mist ('brouillard'). The chromatic mist obscures not only the clarity of individual diatonic triads, but also the outlines of larger-scale tonal relations, which consequently take on a somewhat unreal, disembodied quality. In addition to these more localised effects, the pervasive tonal mist has longer-range ramifications for the identity of the tonic triad itself, which motivates a process that hinges on its chromatic/common-tone transformation to other triads, thus: C major–C♯ minor (sharing E♯ as common third); C major–C minor (sharing C and G as common root and fifth).

The *Prélude's* form is rondo-like:

A (bars 1–9)–B (10–17)–A' (18–28)–C (29–37)–A'' (38–end)

Despite the music's largely non-functional surface, this formal process is nonetheless characterised by an alternation of tonic (A sections) and dominant (B and C sections) triadic emphasis. Furthermore, skeletal tonal processes operate internally within sections. The A section manifests an elementary skeletal harmonic basis in a I–V–I progression, the I–V motion

Example 9.3 'Brouillards' (bars 35–6)

filled in by the traditional tonal gesture of a fourth-descent in the bass from tonic to dominant (bars 3–4). The C section is underpinned by a large-scale applied-dominant progression: D (= V/V, bars 32–5) to G (= V, bars 36–7); see Example 9.3. While this applied-V relation is underscored by the section's formal design of parallel phrases, its harmonic identity is drastically attenuated by the music's relentlessly dissonant surface overlay (octatonic, on which more below), illustrating the earlier point concerning the chromatic mist's 'disembodying' effect on tonal relations.<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned above, the form's recurring 'A' sections emphasise the tonic. The two thematic reprises of this material are prefixed by a motive in octaves (bars 18 and 38; see Example 9.4) of a mysterious character; it is tonally ambiguous at its outset as on both occasions the motive follows directly on from an extended orientation to the dominant (G), so its opening pitches C $\sharp$ –D–G initially seem to relate to that context (Example 9.4). The motive expands chromatically to settle on a C $\sharp$  minor triad,<sup>32</sup> the effect of which is one of reorientation to a familiar object (the tonic triad) that had been lost sight of in the mist and now reappears in a strangely (chromatically) dislocated guise.

This effect of tonal dislocation is temporary, for on both occasions the 'C $\sharp$ ' motive gives way to the familiar, chromatically misted C major (see Example 9.2). The final C $\sharp$ –C juxtaposition (bars 41–3) motivically highlights the common-tone aspect of this chromatic triad-relation: E $\sharp$ , first as minor third of C $\sharp$ , then as major third of C, audibly plays the role of mediator between the two triads.<sup>33</sup>

Example 9.4 'Brouillards' (bars 38–40)

38 *Mouvement*

*pp*

G (V): ♯4-5 - | 8 ?  
C# (i): | ♯4 - ( ) 5 - 3̂ - 1̂

Example 9.5 'Brouillards' (bars 46–8)

46

D♭ - - - - D - G - E♭ - - - - A♭

8♭..... (1) → i(1)

The end invokes the other triad-transformation referred to at the outset: C major–C minor (see Example 9.5). Now the relation between tonic triad and its chromatic derivatives is quite literally spelled out: bars 47–8 are an ingenious enharmonic resetting of bars 38–9 whereby chromatic alteration of triadic context (C♯–C) transforms the scale-degree referentiality of the same succession of pitches thus:

		C♯	D	G	D♯	G♯
bars 38–9	C♯	1̂	b2̂	♯4̂	2̂	5̂
bars 47–8	C	b2̂	2̂	5̂	b3̂	b6̂
		D♭	D	G	E♭	A♭

Although traditional tonal techniques are largely (though not completely) absent from 'Brouillards', the tonic triad itself – its identity and transformations – nevertheless remains central to the piece's idiosyncratic tonal and formal process.<sup>34</sup>



Much of the chromaticism in 'Brouillards' invokes symmetrical collections, in this case octatonic rather than whole-tone. In the recurring A sections, octatonicism arises as a by-product of some white-key/black-key combinations (as at the very opening) but not others (bar 4, for example). The B section is not octatonic at all; the C section, on the other hand (including the spectacular *Petrushka* burst of bars 29–30), is conspicuously octatonic for its entire duration, prominently emphasising all three collections (Example 9.3 shows two of these).<sup>35</sup> Although octatonicism contributes much to this *Prélude*'s distinctive soundworld, its role is less tonally focused than in some other *Préludes*, where one octatonic transposition (collection) is closely identified with a specific tonal function (particularly that of tonic). We will encounter a good example of this in 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir', analysed below.

### 'Danseuses de Delphes'

This counterpart to 'Brouillards' (as the opening *Prélude*) in Book 1 represents the 'right' end of our tonal continuum: a beautifully clear ternary form, tonally organised along traditional lines in its large-scale basis in tonic–dominant polarity:

sections	A	B	A'		
	I–	V	(V–)	I	(V–I)

The A section (bars 1–5, which are repeated with some textural variation), based on a I–II–V progression, presents one of Debussy's half-cadential themes, as discussed earlier.<sup>36</sup> In stark contrast to 'Brouillards', the music exhibits a remarkable, almost Classical translucence of tonal syntax, both harmonic and linear (Example 9.6). Note the beautifully protracted elaboration of the tonic chord through slow chromatic lines that fill in its constituent thirds: B $\flat$ –D, inner voice (bars 1–3), which is then transferred to the bass (bars 3–4) while the inner voice doubles at the upper tenth.

Example 9.6 'Danseuses de Delphes': foreground graph (bars 1–5)

Example 9.7 'Danseuses de Delphes': B section, middleground graph (bars 5–10)

(bars) (5/10) 11 13 15 16 18

9/7 = 8/6 = 7/5 = 6/4 = 2

(C: I) IV I

V (F): I V III I

Observe, in particular, Debussy's treatment of the bass version of this motive, whose rhythmic expansion to crotchets leads to the music's temporary overspilling of its metrical confines (bar 4, where the bass D's displacement from the first to the second crotchet necessitates a temporary stretching of the metre from triple to quadruple).<sup>37</sup>

The B section (bars 11–20) then extends the half-cadential dominant from the end of the first part. Compared to the first part, the music here is less susceptible to a detailed tonal explanation; note, in particular, how the new pentatonic descant introduced in bar 11 serves to cast a diatonic haze over proceedings: another good example of Debussy's non-functional diatonism as discussed above. Even so, the section coheres as a tonal whole through its middleground 'backbone' (see Example 9.7), a descending arpeggiation of the dominant chord coloured by chromatic alteration of its chordal third (Ab, bar 18) and incorporating, en route, a leisurely detour by way of its own dominant, C (= V/V, bars 15–17).

Bars 21–4 present a curious situation, a formal 'no man's land' between the end of the dominant-based middle section (bar 20) and the onset of the A' section (bar 25). While the tonic appears to return in bar 21, it is not accompanied by a thematic reprise of the first part (rather, its motivic content continues that of the preceding dominant; cf. Example 9.8, motive 'x'); when this occurs later in bar 25, it effectively upstages the earlier tonic (in addition to the thematic return, note the imposing effect of the bass's entrance on bottom Bb). Meanwhile, a rising idea (bars 23–4) effects a form-functional gesture of 'lead-in' to the 'official' reprise – but a lead-in from what? Not the earlier tonic, whose very presence would render the gesture quite redundant; by the same token, not the preceding dominant, which the first tonic has already effectively superseded. All in all, the passage might well appear to be a prime candidate for the 'structural vagueness' that Katz found in certain other *Préludes*.

Example 9.8 'Danseuses de Delphes' (bars 21–27, beat 1)

? ('no man's land')  
 21 X (from bars 18–20)  
 p  
 lead-in to ...  
 più p' dim  
 p  
 ..V (I)  
 A' section  
 #2 3 #2 (-3)  
 25 p p p p pp  
 pp  
 pp  
 I! V I V I

The thematic reprise itself is radically foreshortened to a mere two bars, followed by a codetta-like cadential reiteration. While such abbreviation of the ternary reprise section is quite characteristic of Debussy, this *Prélude* takes the technique to an extreme, in the process running the risk of unbalancing the formal edifice. That no such impression (of formal imbalance) arises is perhaps in large part due to the abbreviated reprise's tonal pre-empting in the preceding 'no man's land', the role of whose seemingly premature or redundant tonic is thus retrospectively clarified. (If the idea seems dubious, try playing or imagining the piece without bars 21–4.)

Structural closure, while implicit in the V–I progressions of bars 25–6ff., is attenuated through their non-diatonic format; instead of providing structural melodic resolution ( $\hat{2}$ – $\hat{1}$ ; C–B $\flat$ ), Debussy's retention of the chromatic second degree (C $\sharp$ ) produces V chords of augmented quality, whose tonic resolution (C $\sharp$ –D) rather emphasises scale-degree  $\hat{3}$  (see example 9.8). This melodic focus on the chordal third sustains to the end the floating or hovering quality that seems to permeate the entire *Prélude*, invoking a certain quality of detached remoteness about the Delphic dancers' ritualised steps, as if too strong a melodic resolution would puncture that elaborately maintained distance.

Example 9.9 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir' (bars 1–6)

The musical score for Example 9.9 consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (bars 1-2) shows a rising melodic line in the right hand starting on E4, moving to A4, and then chromatically embellished with a flat second degree (Bb4). The left hand provides a supporting bass line with a heavy V7 chord (E4-G4-Bb4-D4). The second system (bars 3-6) continues the melodic line with a falling-fourth motive (F#4-C#4) and includes a trill in the right hand. The score is marked 'Modéré (harmonieux et souple)' and includes dynamic markings 'pp' and 'm.d.', as well as performance instructions like 'b2', 'A: 6-3', '(V7)', and '(oct. 3)'.

In 'Danseuses de Delphes' chromaticism is in large part, though by no means entirely, accountable to tonal function; it is characterised by its resolution-dependence on diatonic scale degrees. Although chords of whole-tone quality appear frequently, their chromatic elements nonetheless tend to resolve to consonant triad members (as in the 'augmented' V–I cadences just discussed).

In both *Préludes* analysed so far, the distinction between functional and non-functional kinds of chromaticism appears relatively clear-cut. The next analysis will focus on a more elusive and characteristically Debussyan use of chromaticism that seems to transcend such a hard-and-fast distinction by partaking of significant qualities from both categories.

#### 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir'

The *Prélude's* main thematic idea (bars 1–2) introduces three principal motivic components in turn (see Example 9.9, which shows part of the opening section): (1) the rising melodic fourth E–A; (2) chromatic embellishment of the tonic (A major) triad by 'Phrygian' scale degree  $b2$  (along with its supporting bass, E, suggestive of a heavily altered  $V^7$ ); (3) the falling-fourth motive  $F\sharp-C\sharp$  (bar 2), outlining the scale-degree succession  $\hat{6}-\hat{3}$ .

The next formal segment (bars 3–8) is highly chromatic; it is unified by its gravitation around a prevailing harmony, the seventh chord A– $C\sharp$ –E–G, which in structural terms represents the addition of a dissonant seventh to the initial stable tonic triad (see Example 9.10, a reduction showing the opening section's underlying voice-leading basis). On the surface, chromaticism

Example 9.10 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir': opening section, middleground graph

The image shows a musical score for the opening section of 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir'. Above the staff, a middleground graph is plotted. The x-axis represents bars, with specific bars 3, 5, 9, 13, 14, 15, and 24 marked. The y-axis represents pitch classes. Chord symbols are placed above the staff: '8' at bar 3, '47' at bar 5, '6' at bar 9, '45' at bar 13, and '45' at bar 15. The bass line features a sustained pedal point 'A' and Roman numerals '(V)' and '(V7/vi)' indicating harmonic structure. The score includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and various musical notations such as 'etc.' and 'ff.'.

now takes on a strongly octatonic flavour using collection 3,<sup>38</sup> which predominates in bar 5, beat 2 to bar 8; this new chromatic perspective finds motivic expression in a new transposition (C–G) of the falling-fourth motive (see Example 9.9). Notice, though, that the octatonic collection in question – represented by the diminished seventh chord on C $\sharp$  together with C $\sharp$  and the bass pedal A – is slightly, but crucially, diluted through the presence of a ‘foreign’ pitch, A $\flat$ , which Debussy retains from the preceding B $\flat$ <sup>7</sup> chord (bar 5, beat 1).<sup>39</sup>

In bars 9–12 the underlying harmony changes again, to an F $\sharp$  minor 6/3 chord (which thus provides downward resolution of the preceding section’s sustained emphasis on the dissonant seventh, G; see Example 9.10). While F $\sharp$  is itself embellished by its chromatic neighbours E $\sharp$  and G, the melody insists upon D $\sharp$  (see bars 9ff.), which results in another new chromatic perspective, now whole-tone. Tonal focus is tantalisingly elusive in these four bars: while the ‘whole-tone’ chords of bars 9, 11, etc. are clearly of embellishing status vis-à-vis the passage’s triadic basis in F $\sharp$  minor, the melodic D $\sharp$ s serve to undermine both that local context and the larger (A major) one.

In reaction to this passage of tonal ambiguity, the next segment (bars 13–23) effects a decisive change of tonal reference away from A to the dominant of F $\sharp$  (major, by implication). This transformation serves to assimilate those hitherto anomalous-sounding D $\sharp$ s, now contextualised as the upper note of a ‘9–8’ appoggiatura motive (bars 16ff.). As in bars 3–8, the passage’s prevailing harmony (the C $\sharp$ <sup>7</sup> chord) is octatonically enhanced, through a return of the same collection as before (i.e. collection 3; see bars 19, 21–3). This octatonic collection thus plays a mediating role between the tonal regions of A (bars 1–8) and F $\sharp$  (bars 15–23; unstated as a local tonic, but powerfully suggested by virtue of the sustained emphasis on its dominant).

Bars 24–6 return to the tonic in an internal reprise of the opening material. The return is accomplished via a sudden reorientation of the octatonic

collection to its original tonal context of A major, thus graphically ‘foregrounding’ the collection’s mediating role (bars 24, bcats 1–2).

To summarise, the *Prélude*’s opening section chromatically elaborates a well-defined tonic (A), incorporating a modulatory excursion to a contrasting tonal region (F♯). On the surface the kaleidoscopically changing chromatic contexts cohere through their common grounding in the tonic pedal together with Debussy’s exploitation of the octatonic collection’s potential for double tonal meaning. At a deeper level the successive formal segments are bound together through a slowly descending line in the upper voice: A–G–F♯–E♯(F)–E (see Example 9.10; note how this chromatically filled fourth parallels on a large scale the (E–A) fourth-motive announced at the outset). Most remarkably this rather elaborate tonal edifice is built entirely without recourse to harmonic progression of any kind.

The remainder of the *Prélude* presents a highly unusual design, whose improvisatory tonal freedom is curiously reminiscent of an earlier keyboard genre, the eighteenth-century fantasia. Like many of those pieces (C. P. E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart), the form is articulated by various new settings of the opening thematic material separated by modulatory linking passages.

In bar 27 the music is suddenly plunged into flat tonal regions brought about by the falling-fourth motive’s enharmonic transformation from F♯–C♯ (bar 26, in its familiar setting as  $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{3}$  in A major) to G♭–D♭ (see Example 9.11).<sup>40</sup> Initially contextualised as  $\hat{4}$ – $\hat{1}$  in D♭ major (bass, bar 27), the motive then migrates back to its customary upper-voice setting, where it appears transposed to scale degrees  $\hat{3}$ – $\hat{7}$  (F–C) in that key. D♭, however, turns out to be the subdominant of A♭ major in which key the fourth-motive’s new transposition (F–C) can now revert to its more familiar diatonic-referential setting of  $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{3}$  (bars 28–9). A♭’s status as a temporarily stable tonic is then confirmed by means of a new cadential idea, elaborating a ii<sup>6</sup>–V–I progression which in turn forms the culmination of an improvisational sequence on the fourth-motive, now set against a chromatic bass (bars 29–31, Example 9.11).<sup>41</sup> Thus in the space of an eventful few bars we have journeyed to the region of ♭I (!); moreover, this extravagantly flat tonal realm is afforded the luxury of an elaborately prepared cadential progression, something conspicuously denied the tonic itself in the course of the long opening section.

However, no sooner is A♭ major convincingly established as a local tonic than it is unceremoniously ‘corrected’ back to A major in a sequential repetition that hinges on the abrupt chromatic transposition of triads on the raised seventh degrees of the respective keys (bars 35–7): G(=A♭:  $\hat{7}$ )–G♯(=A:  $\hat{7}$ ).<sup>42</sup> But A major proves transient in turn when arrival on its mediant, C♯ (bar 42), turns downward to arpeggiate the triad of F♯ major, in which key the main

Example 9.11 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir' (bars 26–31)

thematic idea now reappears (bar 45; see Example 9.12), thus providing long-delayed fulfilment of that key's strong suggestion in the *Prélude's* first part (bars 15ff.; cf. Example 9.13 below).

The appearance of  $F\sharp$  major provides the cue for a return of octatonicism, conspicuously absent from these intervening developments. Once again it takes the form of collection 3, the *Prélude's* 'home' octatonic collection, now producing a new 'diminished' harmonisation of the Phrygian motive (bar 46, Example 9.12). As in the opening section, octatonicism provides the link between the tonal areas  $F\sharp$  and A, this time in a modulatory sequence via a different octatonic collection (collection 1), see bars 46–7, Example 9.12. With the return of A major (this time rendered definitive by renewed conjunction with the 'home' octatonic collection), the stage is at last set for tonal resolution in the form of a reprise, in the tonic, of the (A $\flat$  major) cadential idea from bar 31. Arrived at by way of so many delays and detours, this cadential reprise (bar 50) thus both provides long-distance tonal resolution of that earlier chromatic episode and parallels on a large formal scale the local  $\flat I-I$  resolution of bars 33–8 (Example 9.13). At the same time it finally supplies the tonal ingredient missing from the opening section, a structural harmonic progression in the tonic.





Example 9.13 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir': whole piece, bass-line sketch

(bars) 15 24 27 31 32 38 42 (45) 47 (50) 51

(VI:V) (IV V) I ii<sup>6</sup> V I

### Formal expansion: piano triptychs, orchestral music

The above analyses have highlighted a few facets of the rich tonal-structural diversity found in these two books of *Préludes*, from tonal forms of a decidedly traditional cast ('Danseuses de Delphes') to radically modernist departures from that tradition ('Brouillards') in which the tonic triad nevertheless remains the central focus of tonal/formal process.

To conclude, a few remarks on Debussy's longer tonal forms are in order. The pieces comprising the middle-period piano triptychs, the *Estampes*, and *Images*, series 1 and 2, are typically more expansive in scale than the *Préludes*. The tonal forms encountered here constitute more elaborately developed counterparts to *Préludes* from both ends of our hypothetical continuum, from conspicuously modernistic essays, 'Mouvement', 'Cloches à travers les feuilles', 'Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut', to pieces that feature a degree of tonal-structural elaboration far beyond that found in any of the *Préludes*: 'La soirée dans Grenade', 'Jardins sous la pluie', 'Reflets dans l'eau', 'Hommage à Rameau', 'Poissons d'or'.

In the middle-period orchestral pieces, from *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* to the *Images*, we find Debussy's most elaborately developed tonal forms. To cite but one telling symptom of this greatly increased tonal-formal scope, compared to both the *Préludes* and the piano triptychs all the individual movements here (with the exceptions of 'Nuages' and 'Par les rues et par les chemins') begin off-tonic with an extended introductory section that elaborates a non-tonic chord or tonal region, from which the piece's tonic is approached circuitously – through the back door, so to speak. In 'De l'aube à midi sur la mer', for instance, the tonic eventually arrives via a large-scale progression from the flat side, formally occupying an opening section of slow-introduction function: *Très lent*: iv/IV(B)–iv(f♯) to the first main section, *Modéré, sans lenteur*, bar 31: I(D♭). For the orchestral music, the tonal-continuum concept is no longer applicable, as every movement would take a place on the extreme right.

In keeping with the progressive artistic spirit of the new century, Debussy succeeded in forging elements from the tonal practice of his predecessors

into something radically new. At the same time, his tonal language, even at its least orthodox, never loses sight of the traditional principles that ultimately give it meaning. In Debussy's music, tonal and formal processes continue to interrelate in ways not so fundamentally different from the tonal masterpieces of the preceding two centuries. To the extent that so vital an engagement with the tonal tradition went hand in hand with the creation of such strange and wonderful new sound-worlds, whose vivid modernity remains undimmed at the turn of another century, his achievement was perhaps unique.