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michael.oravitz@unco.edu**Form and structural narrative in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*****ABSTRACT****Background**

Debussy's early orchestral masterpiece *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, as is well known, comprises a work inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's eponymous poem. The poem invokes the ancient mythological figure Pan as a first-person protagonist who reminisces upon whether or not an erotic experience was dreamed or real. Given the work's use of similar but continuously evolving thematic material, and given certain scholars' desires to find correspondences between the poem and the musical work (Bruhn: 2000; Code: 2001), a number of variant formal readings exist. Debussy himself suggested a non-literal congruence between the poetry and the music, and this study does likewise, combining particular pitch-structural facets of the work with more general musical topics that are suggested in the work's gestures, topics that loosely complement the Attic and erotic themes of the poem.

Previous studies (Barraqué: 1962; Howat: 1983) generally agree on the locations of the larger sections, but do not attempt to read a broader structural narrative into the work, perhaps because of Debussy's own implicitly voiced distaste for such literal depictions in his 1903 critique of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. Debussy manages to create a less specific narrative that transcends the play-by-play attributes of the traditional tone poem, but one that implants in the listener an unmistakable sense of coherence.

Unique resolutions of the C-sharp to G tritone, a dissonant interval experienced at key junctures in the work (see Austin: 1970), correspond with a loose narrative that is formed by a strand of contrasting extramusical topics that complement the larger sections. The most prominent sounding of that interval is heard in the opening pan-flute gesture's boundary interval, an intervallic span that is traversed exclusively by the flute no less than 18 times in descent and ascent among this opening formal section (mm. 1–30), one essentially devoted to presentations of the pan-flute theme. In only one instance in m. 23, in the context of a singular dominant-harmony response to a tonic statement in m. 22, is anything but the C-sharp to G boundary heard in the flute melody. As the melody pans downward through its tritone range, its compacted intervals, placed at the bottom in descents and the top in ascents, loosely mimic the *pyknon* structure found in Ancient Greek tetrachords. Bellman (2014) offers the possible influence of composer, friend, and Ancient Greek music enthusiast Maurice Emmanuel upon Debussy. Although Emmanuel's writings came after the composition of *Faune*, it seems likely that he shared his interests in Ancient Greek music with Debussy prior to his 1895 dissertation on that subject, and that this may have lent Debussy the confidence to apply his own brand of Attic gestures in his Ancient Greek themed repertoire. In this context, the pan flute melody can be heard as a depiction of Pan attempting to seduce nymphs with this chromatic lure played on his reed flute. As is the case with ensuing larger formal areas in *Faune*, the opening span of music concludes with a clear V-I cadence in B major, a harmonic formula that Debussy, like his common-practice predecessors, reserves for significant formal closure.

Debussy maintains the structural importance of that interval in the brief, formally transitory section (at R3) heard in mm. 31–36. It begins with a clear bass-soprano emphasis (in cello and clarinet respectively) on C-sharp and G, drawing from the whole-tone scale in order to underscore the instability and suggested unrest of this passage, an instability that is further projected in its pair of triple-bar hypermeters. The chalumeau register of the clarinet, compiled with the now unmuted scampering staccato figures in the cello, framed in two successive sequential statements a minor third apart, may suggest a chase and the fleeing of nymphs from Pan's advances. Such an interpretation is colored by the suggestion of a pastorelle heard in the ensuing section.

The featured opening melody at the onset of the next formal section (m. 37; R4), is a transformation of the opening Pan theme. Its diatonicism and gentle, wave-like melodic contours seem to suggest the domicile of nymphs, a riverside. Given the sense of chase and flight in the previous section, it seems probable that Debussy, in this section, is depicting the nymphs in this less agitated and more bucolic state. The pastoral association is further suggested by the change in timbre to the oboe, predecessor to the shawm. The range is virtually identical to the opening pan flute theme, but now with its boundary interval expanded by half step as the lower range of the melody's opening (in m. 37) is now F-sharp instead of G. This half-step alteration will take on further importance in the climax of the work. The section builds in lyric intensity, yet never entirely loses its pastoral, riverside depictions, formally cadencing in A-flat major (V-I) at m. 51 (R6). A brief transition, whose function is to gently transform that A-flat tonic arrival into a dominant function of D-flat, follows in mm. 51–54.

The next larger section, spanning mm. 55–74, comprises the climax of the work as well as a significantly cathartic "resolution" of the tritone between C-sharp/D-flat and G at m. 67. That point of resolution both sparks a crescendo into the work's climax (ca. mm. 69–70), and also launches the work's longest stretch of pure diatonicism in D-flat major that supports that climax.

This resolution and climax is structurally situated in a writ-large period structure, one whose "incomplete antecedent to complete consequent" thematic-statement conventions are drawn upon by Debussy to frame a musical reflection on the question at the heart of Mallarmé's poem: was the sexual experience dreamed or real? The "basic idea" (to use Caplin's term) in both the antecedent and consequent features a haunting D-flat to G bass motion, initiating this larger formal section with yet another display of that prominently characteristic tritone. Within that period, one witness a tonal divergence in the antecedent phrase's contrasting idea that leads the music through a borrowed subdominant at m. 57/R7 (G-flat minor enharmonically presented as F-sharp minor) en route to a tritone-substitution half-cadence on the lowered second scale degree (spelled as D major). This divergence can be heard as a representation of either Pan's unrequited longings and sexual frustrations, or as a commentary on his troubled state of ignorance of not knowing whether his sexual encounter was dreamed or real, or both. In the contrasting idea of the consequent, this divergence is "corrected" in a way that uniquely resolves the tritone bass motion in m. 67. Here,

Debussy sounds the diatonic (rather than “borrowed”) predominant, spelling it now with a G-flat as opposed to the F-sharp. This motion expands the tritone into a broader, linear perfect fifth descent foreshadowed in both the recent “borrowed” F-sharp minor divergence and the expansion that was foreshadowed at the onset of the pastorale section at m. 37/R4. This rather significantly cathartic structural resolution of the C-sharp (or, in this case, D-flat)–to–G tritone in its climactic “consequent” phrase, as mentioned above, is the spark that ignites an extensive outpouring of diatonic lyricism—the longest span of diatonicism in the entire work—that swells to the climax around mm. 69–70, and then reposes in a gentle authentic cadence (complete with ii-V-I root movement) in mm. 73–74. This pitch-based catharsis perhaps represents Pan’s reconciliation that he will never be able to know whether or not the sexual experience was dreamed or real, thus leading to his emotional celebration of it.

This larger period structure is outlined here:

Antecedent: 55–62;

- basic idea: 55–58, featuring the D-flat to G motions in the bass line.

- contrasting idea, inflecting to the “borrowed” subdominant of F-sharp minor (enharmonically G-flat minor), and leading to a tritone-substitute “half cadence” (on D): mm. 59–62.

Consequent: 63–74:

- basic idea: 63–66

- contrasting idea, expanded and comprising diatonic climax to PAC: mm. 67–74.

Of interest in the remainder of the work is the manner in which statements of the pan-flute theme that follow in the wake of this cathartic resolution are now, for the most part, absent of their characteristic tritone-boundary interval. Measures 74–78, by transforming the D-flat major arrival into a D-flat dominant sonority, recall the similar event in mm. 51–54 (R6), where the A-flat arrival was transformed into A-flat dominant in preparation for the lyrical climax in D-flat major. Measures 79–93’s two broader pan flute statements, in E and E-flat, now span a perfect fourth rather than the characteristic tritone. The two sequential statements are reminiscent of those that occurred in the whole-tone transition like passage heard in mm. 31–36. If we are to interpret the downward splash of staccato articulations in the winds in m. 85 and 90–93 as a kind of laughter of the nymphs after having escaped Pan’s advances (as is somewhat suggested in Nijinsky’s choreography), this section represents a recollection of the pursuit and an emphatic rejection of it. Finally, with the return of the opening theme at its original register (at m. 94, R10), is a brief return of the tritone boundary from C-sharp to G, but, compellingly, one that is immediately cancelled out in the ensuing measure, as the G natural is replaced in the flute with G-sharp. This “cancelling out” is confirmed with a number successive statements spanning C-sharp to G-sharp in the flute (at times doubled with cello), in mm. 99–102.

Aims and repertoire studied

Formal interpretation of Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* based on topical narratives and resolutions of a particularly central featured dissonance.

Methods

Musical topics. Formal analysis.

Implications

Debussy’s use of structure and extramusical topics are used to project a formal design.

Keywords

Debussy, *Faune*, form, narrative, topics

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