Tonality and Form in Debussy’s Prélude à “L’Après-midi d’un faune”

Matthew Brown

Seventy-five years after his death, Debussy is often remembered as “the quiet revolutionary,” who breathed new life into musical art.¹ He is credited with challenging the authority of nineteenth-century tonal and formal practice, and with pushing music gently into the twentieth century. To quote Pierre Boulez:

Just as modern poetry surely took root in certain of Baudelaire’s poems, so one is justified in saying that modern music was awakened by L’Après-midi d’un faune.²

For his part, Debussy did much to promote this radical image of his music; throughout his letters and journal articles, he launched a bitter campaign against the musical establishment and conventional compositional practice. Most of these criticisms are general in nature, and ridicule what Debussy saw as a “silly obsession with overprecise ‘forms’ and ‘tonality.’”³ Sometimes, however, they address concrete musical issues. For example, Debussy denounced accepted notions of chord function; in a letter to Pierre Louÿs (22 January 1895), he announced that “tonic and dominant had become empty shadows of use only to stupid children.”⁴ Similarly, Debussy rejected the traditional distinctions between consonance and dissonance. With typical panache he insisted:

Nothing is more mysterious than a consonant chord! Despite all theories, both old and new, we are still not sure, first, why it is consonant, and second, why the other chords have to bear the stigma of being dissonant.⁵


He likewise scoffed at those who prohibited the use of parallel chords and proposed that tonality should be fully chromatic and “enriched by other scales.”

Just as Debussy debunked many basic tenets of common-practice tonality, so he also questioned conventional approaches to musical form, especially those found in symphonic repertories. In an essay for *La Revue blanche* (6 March 1901), he dismissed a recent orchestral work by Witkowski, claiming that it provided “only further proof of the uselessness of the symphony since Beethoven.” He added:

Must we conclude that despite so many attempts at transformation, the symphony—in all its elegance and formal order . . . —is a thing of the past? Has not its worn out gilt merely been replaced by a plating of shining copper, the shoddy finish of present-day orchestration?

Some ten years later, the barbs were no less pointed. Writing for *SIM* (1 November 1913), Debussy censured his colleagues for imitating the stale symphonic forms of Franz Liszt and Richard Strauss:

Is it not our duty . . . to try and find the symphonic formulae best suited to the audacious discoveries of our modern times, so committed as they are to progress? The century of aeroplanes has a right to a music of its own!

Besides disdaining textbook formal stereotypes, so Debussy also praised composers, such as Mussorgsky, whose works “are impossible to relate to (the) accepted forms—the ‘official’ ones.”

Intentions are one thing, but actualities are often quite another matter. While Debussy’s radical goals are hard to deny, we may still wonder whether he succeeded in freeing himself from common-practice tonality and nineteenth-century formal conventions. Did Debussy really create symphonic forms fit for “the century of aeroplanes”?

Obviously, any answer to this question depends on the way in which we decide to explain tonality and on the kinds of analytical priorities we make in assigning formal functions. Although there are many possible theories of tonality, this paper will use Schenkerian theory. This decision, however, requires some explanation. In particular, it contradicts the prevailing view that Debussy’s music cannot be analyzed by strict Schenkerian paradigms. Surely, Schenker would have disapproved; he made no secret of his dislike for Debussy’s music. In the preface to his edition of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101, he complained that the sequences of sounds found in impressionist pieces are valuable as “an acoustic phenomenon, but certainly not as art.”

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6In Debussy’s conversations with his teacher Guiraud, he questioned the rules prohibiting parallel sonorities, claiming that “there is no theory. You have merely to listen. Pleasure is the law.” In the same conversations Debussy also declared: “Music is neither major nor minor. Minor thirds and major thirds should be combined, modulation thus becoming more flexible. The mode is that which one happens to choose at the moment. It is not constant.” These conversations are translated in William Austin, ed., *Debussy: Prelude to “The Afternoon of a Faun,”* Norton Critical Scores (New York: Norton, 1970), 128–31. For a facsimile of Maurice Emanuel’s original transcription, see Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works,* trans. Maire and Grace O’Brien (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 84.


11”Von einer gewissen ‘Linie’ sprechen heute gern auch die Verfertiger sogenannter impressionistischer Stücke. Wo aber, wie in diesen, die Wirkung erst auf ein Tongeräusch hinausläuft (das wie jedes Geräusch nur als akustische Erscheinung, aber noch nicht als Kunst gilt). dort sagt die ‘Linie’ des Tongeräusches gewiss nicht mehr die Linien als die steigend, fallend ja auch in anderen Geräuschen (z.B. in Donner, Tischrücken, Wagenrollen usw.) sich
where, he also condemned Debussy for pandering to the “mediocrity of French taste.”

For the most part, Schenker’s followers have accepted the limitations of their methods for explaining Debussy’s music. Some, such as Felix Salzer, have seen these limitations as grounds for modifying Schenker’s original model and, in so doing, expanding the notion of tonality in music. For example, Salzer claims that, instead of being derived from a Schenkerian Ursatz, Debussy’s piano Prelude “Bruyères” is generated from a background progression built from a chain of parallel fifths $\frac{5}{4}$ at $\frac{5}{4}$ in A♭, Others, such as Adele Katz, acknowledge that only a few of Debussy’s pieces follow strict Schenkerian paradigms, and that many of them require some new type of explanation. Most recently, Richard Parks has claimed that, with some exceptions, only Debussy’s early scores (up to ca. 1889) conform in any consistent way. As he puts it:

After the early works especially, one rarely finds tonic-dominant closure in a structural sense. In Schenkerian terms, this means that bass arpeggiation is not an integral feature of underlying structure. Linear progressions are far less common than in the works of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century masters, as is the multilayered concatenation of contrapuntal-harmonic relationships which normally accompanies them. In Debussy, linear progressions tend to be of the simplest sort and only of local significance.

He adds that structural levels are “few and uncomplicated,” and that the richness of Debussy’s music lies mostly in the foreground.

Nevertheless, there are problems with both of these responses. In Salzer’s case, his revisions modify Schenkerian theory to such an extent that they erode the entire foundation of the model. For example, by classifying chords according to their degree of dissonance, Salzer contradicts Schenker’s claim that in tonal music there is an absolute distinction between the behavior of consonances and that of dissonances. This distinction is crucial to the way in which Schenkerian theory connects the rules of harmony and voice leading; once the distinction is abolished, Schenker’s notion of transformation becomes seriously weakened. To quote Edward Laufer:

By and by one asks what is left, as all the specific techniques Schenker described must all go by the board or be diluted into an indistinct blur. . . . [I]f there is no technically consistent, non-speculative basis, then anything goes and likewise nothing.

Similarly, while Katz and Parks are justified in restricting the scope of Schenkerian theory—to be explanatory, all theories must have boundaries—neither they, nor any other Schenkerians, have ever defined these limits in a systematic


12”Und gar ein Debussy, der wäre demnach nicht einmal noch ein Talent, ein Musiker überhaupt zu nennen, mag er auch dem Mittelmass in Frankreich genügen und dort aus Gründen kunstpolitischer Natur—Frankreich treibt Politik und Ränke auch in den Künsten—sogar als ein Überwinder Wagners, also schon aus diesem Grunde allein als ein Erneuter nationaler Musik gelten” (Schenker, Das Meisterwerk in der Musik, vol. 3 (1930), 108).


14Salzer, Structural Hearing, fig. 478.

15According to Katz: “Therefore, as both harmonic analysis and the Schenker method were evolved out of the tonal techniques, it is probable that a new system of analysis is needed to understand the new concepts” (Challenge, 293). For a convenient summary of Katz’s position see James Baker, “Schenkerian Analysis and Post-Tonal Music.” in David Beach, ed., Aspects of Schenkerian Theory (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 154–55.


17Ibid., 4.

18Ibid.

manner. In fact, both of them consistently underestimate not only the extent to which Debussy’s mature music contains orthodox tonal material, but also the degree to which Schenkerian theory can cope with extreme chromaticism, modal or exotic harmonies, free dissonances, parallel chords and many other anomalies in Debussy’s style. Of course, this does not mean that Schenkerian theory can explain every aspect of all works by Debussy; it simply means that the model can help us determine, case by case, how and why partially, or even marginally, tonal pieces sometimes sound tonal and sometimes do not.

To show how Schenkerian theory helps us understand the tonality of Debussy’s music, this paper will examine the Prélude à “L’Après-midi d’un faune” (1891–94). The work is an appropriate test case for several reasons. On the one hand, Debussy specifically drew attention to the novel tonal and formal properties of the Prélude. In a letter to Henri Gauthier-Villars (10 October 1896) he observed:

The Prélude à “L’Après-midi d’un faune,” cher Monsieur, is it perhaps the dream left over at the bottom of the faun’s flute? . . . It also demonstrates a disdain for the ‘constructional knowhow’ which is a burden upon our finest intellects. Then again, it has no respect for tonality! Rather, it’s in a mode which is intended to contain all the nuances—I can give you a perfectly logical demonstration of this.

On the other hand, by graphing the Prélude, we can answer some of the intriguing formal questions posed by Debussy’s orchestral music. In particular, we will see how he developed four techniques—incomplete progressions, parenthetical episodes, motivic compression, and tonal modeling—that feature prominently in the Nocturnes (1897–99), La Mer (1903–5), and the Images for orchestra (1905–13), and that allowed him to move away from nineteenth-century formal models.

It is hard to imagine a single work that captures the spirit of Debussy’s style more obviously than the Prélude à “L’Après-midi d’un faune”; ever since its premiere at the Société nationale on 22 December 1894, musicians have tried to explain the elusive logic alluded to by Debussy. These spotting,” as he made clear in an essay for Gil blas, 23 February 1903 (see Lesure, ed., Monsieur Croche, 102–4; Lesure and Smith, Debussy on Music, 126–27). Debussy occasionally rebuked specific theorists: Riemann (Lesure, ed., Lettres, 165; Lesure and Nichols, eds., Letters, 183); Louis (Lesure, ed., Lettres, 118; Lesure and Nichols, eds., Letters, 128–30); Lenormand (Lesure, ed., Lettres, 227; Lesure and Nichols, ed., Letters, 259–60); Dubois (Lesure, ed., Monsieur Croche, 212; Lesure and Smith, Debussy on Music, 268–69); and Emile Durand (Lesure, ed., Monsieur Croche, 29–30; Lesure and Smith, Debussy on Music, 21).

20For further details, see Matthew Brown, “A Rational Reconstruction of Schenkerian Theory,” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1989).

analyses generally agree about the location of the work's main formal divisions. As shown in Example 1, the piece is clearly articulated at mm. 30, 37, 55, 79, 94, and 106. The famous flute theme is presented in mm. 1–30 and 94–106 on C♯ in E major (mm. 1–30 end in V of E). Measures 30–37 contain whole-tone diminutions of the flute theme, and mm. 79–93 present sequential statements on E (mm. 79–85) and Eb (mm. 86–93). The coda presents a simplified version of the flute theme, again in E. A contrasting theme in the new key of Db is developed in mm. 55–78, while mm. 37–54 serve both as a transition to the Db theme and as a development of the flute theme.

Debates arise, however, when we try to explain the motivic significance and tonal properties of each section. Four problems stand out: (1) Although mm. 1–30 center on E, the opening phrases are extremely abstruse tonally; the tonic E does not appear until m. 13, and is not confirmed by a closed progression until mm. 21–26. (2) It is not obvious how mm. 30–54 relate to their surroundings; the whole-tone chords (mm. 30–37) are particularly hard to fathom from a tonal perspective. (3) While the B section (mm. 55–78) establishes a new theme and key area, the precise layout of this passage is far from obvious. (4) It is hard to decide whether mm. 79–106 are better regarded as two segments (mm. 79–93 and 94–106) or as a single span. To resolve these dilemmas, let us examine the four sections in depth.

Few passages in the standard repertory are more obscure than the opening of the Prélude. At first sight, the sinuous flute theme and its shimmering accompaniment seem quite removed from the familiar world of common-practice tonality. Eventually E emerges as tonic in m. 13, but it is unclear how the seventh chords on A♯, B♭, and D (mm. 4–12) prepare the tonic. Opinions differ widely about the tonal function of these harmonies. Some, such as Felix Salzer and James Hepokoski, propose that the tonic chord is implied from m. 1. Salzer's graph of mm. 1–30 adds a virtual tonic chord in parentheses and treats the opening C♯ of the melody as a neighbor tone to the following B (m. 1). Although Salzer marks very few roman numerals (the V–I progression at m. 13 is a notable exception), he adds two small arrows in mm. 4 and 5. These suggest that the A♯ and B♭ sevenths arise contrapuntally and link the virtual tonic of m. 1 to the D seventh in m. 11. Hepokoski likewise marks a tonic at the opening, and suggests that the opening flute arabesque expands the apparent "contradiction" between A♯7 (VII of V in E) and B♭7 (V⁷ of D♯ or V⁷ of V in G♯). The latter apparently acts as a German sixth to the D⁷ in m. 11, presumably with an elision to its normal resolution (V⁷ of D). Hepokoski then proposes that the bass tones D (m. 11) and D♯ (m. 13) are neighbors to the root E (m. 13).

Other writers, however, have been reluctant to make functional ascriptions of any sort. John Crotty regards mm. 1–13...
Example 1. Debussy, *Prélude à “L’Après-midi d’un faune”*: main formal divisions

A

(mm. 1–30)

Whole-tone episode

(mm. 31–36)

Transition

(mm. 37–54)

B

(mm. 55–78)

A’

(mm. 79–106)

Coda

(mm. 106–10)
as part of a double-tonic complex E–C♯ that Debussy worked out during the rest of the Prélude. William Austin simply shows the bass motion A♯–B♭–D–B–E, and notes that although roman numerals could be added to some progressions, “the effort to label every chord seems out of proportion with any resulting insight.” Arthur Wenk takes a similar tack, claiming that the passage reflects Debussy’s shift away from functional harmony to “static” or “circular” successions. Richard Parks, meanwhile, dispenses with tonal concepts altogether and asserts that the Prélude “opens with a complement relation: the flute melody’s pcs form set 7-1, while 5-1 is embedded prominently within the sixteenths that descend to pc 7.”

Obviously, the differences between these interpretations are partly matters of emphasis or context, and partly results of the anomalies inherent to Debussy’s score. It is perhaps testimony to the work’s ambiguity that so many readings have been advanced. Example 2, however, presents an alternative Schenkerian analysis of mm. 1–13. Here, the passage is interpreted as a transformation of the progression VII7 of V–V9–I in E. This progression is given in Example 2a. Example 2b shows how the dominant is arpeggiated in the bass through its mixed third, D, and how the C♯ in the upper voice in m. 4 is suspended over the D and B to form seventh and ninth chords in mm. 11–13. The resulting progression VⅤ7–V9 is very similar to those described by Schenker in

24Austin, “Toward an Analytical Appreciation,” 84–85.
26Parks, Music of Debussy, 156–57.
27It might seem that this sonority might be more conveniently labeled #IV. However, as Dave Headlam and I showed in our paper “Schenkerian Theory and the Limits of Tonality: The Problem of #IV” (Annual Meeting of the Society for Music Theory, Oakland, 1990), Schenkerian theory assumes that #IV Stufen cannot be generated directly from I in tonal contexts; instead, they can only be derived indirectly either from transformations of other Stufen (for example, Ⅴ of Ⅲ, IV of Ⅰ, VII of V, etc.), or from interpolations.
Der freie Satz. Example 2c then shows how the initial VII° of V in m. 4 is joined to the b-VII chord in m. 11 by a passing B♭. The latter chord arises contrapuntally; the alto and tenor parts E♭ complete a chain of parallel thirds extending from E♭ in m. 4 to G♭ (m. 13). This chain is perhaps more obvious in Debussy’s draft and two-piano reduction than in the finished score. Finally, Example 2d adds the overall motion—C♯–B–A♯—of the opening tune, along with the expansion of the dominant D♯–B in m. 13.

Example 2 clarifies several important issues. First, the graphs suggest that the tonal function of the opening four bars is indeterminant; although the pitch C♯ is clearly emphasized, its role is obscure. In fact, the G (mm. 1–2) implies that the harmonies probably change in these bars; such a change always occurs when the theme is harmonized, even when it raised to G♯ (mm. 100–101). To complicate matters further, the goal of the opening phrase seems to be A♯ rather than B. In m. 3, B seems to pass between C♯ and A♯, and only in later statements do C♯ and A♯ serve as neighbors to B. Second, whereas mm. 1–3 are ambiguous, mm. 4–13 can be derived by orthodox tonal transformations. Indeed, the rather striking progression b-VII–V is actually quite common in Debussy’s early compositions, and even controls the middleground of entire works such as the song “C’est l’extase” (Ariettes oubliees, 1887). Third, the chromatic inner lines found in Example 2c recur later in the Prélude. As we will see, both mm. 20–30 and 79–106 are bound together by analogous chains of parallel thirds. Fourth, Debussy veils our sense of tonality by manipulating the way in which melodic phrases intersect with their harmonic foundation. The progression VII° of V–V♭–I (mm. 1–13) actually cuts across two distinct statements of the flute theme in mm. 1–10 and 11–20.

Having discussed the opening of the Prélude, let us now turn to mm. 30–54. Jean Barraqué has rightly observed that this segment functions as some sort of development. He suggests that it can be divided into three discrete phases: mm. 30–37 offer a “double presentation of the principal theme harmonized by chords from the whole-tone scale”; mm. 37–50 introduce “the second theme... in the oboe” and modulate towards the key of the middle section; and mm. 50–54 sustain “a pedal on the dominant of D♭.” When we look more closely at the wider tonal and motivic context of the passage, several other details seem significant. For example, although the oboe theme does not appear before m. 37, this gesture is derived from the pentatonic motive in m. 28 (see Exx. 3a and 3b). Indeed, the links between this section and its predecessor are reinforced by the fact that the oboe theme appears with fragments of the main flute theme in mm. 46–47 (see Ex. 5b). More remarkably, as Charles Burkhart has demonstrated, mm. 37–55 form a single span, with a stepwise descent in the bass, from B (V of E) via B♭ and A to A♭ (V of D♭), and with a series of nested repetitions of the chromatic figure B(C♭)–C–C♯(D♭) in the upper parts (see Ex. 3c). Significantly, this chromatic figure is embedded within the main flute theme (see Ex. 3d). Burkhart's


31For elaborate accounts of the complex motivic connections see Austin. “Toward an Analytical Appreciation.” especially pp. 76–78. Peter Gülke has stressed the significance of pentatonic figures both to the opening flute theme (Gülke, Exx. 1, 3, and 5), the oboe theme at m. 37 (Gülke, Ex. 4), and the D♭ theme (Gülke, Ex. 2); see “Musik aus dem Banndkreis.” 114ff. and 120ff.

32I have adapted Burkhart’s Ex. 9 very slightly; see Burkhart. “Schenker’s Motivic Parallelisms.” “ 156.
reading not only connects mm. 37–54 to mm. 1–30, but it also shows how the transition functions as one, rather than two, separate spans.

While mm. 37–54 are certainly unusual, they are a good deal more orthodox than mm. 30–37; Burkhart is surely correct to state that the latter contains “the work’s most radical departure from traditional procedure.” His analysis shows how the passage is built from the two whole-tone sets—C–D–E–F♯–G♯–A♯ and C♯–D♯–F–G–A–B. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that this passage cannot be derived from tonal transformations. On the contrary, Example 4 shows that mm. 30–37 arise contrapuntally, from complex passing motions in the inner voices. The upper line is created by a motion from the inner voice: the F♯ in the alto part (m. 30) ascends by step through G, A, B♭, and C to C♯ (m. 37). The inner parts mostly ascend by step: the viola part moves up from B through C♯ (m. 31–33) to D and E (mm. 34–36); the second violin part moves up from F through G (mm. 31–33) G♯ and A♯ (mm. 34–36); the cello, bass, and bassoon parts move up from C♯ through D and D♯ (mm. 31–33) to E, F, and F♯ (mm. 34–36). The bass part simply shifts from G (mm. 32–33) via B♭ (mm. 34–36) back to B (m. 37). The final sonority at the end of m. 36 (F♯–A♯–E♯–C♯) functions as an altered secondary dominant (V♭9 of V), that resolves to V7 of E.

The notion that whole-tone harmonies stem from altered dominants is, of course, one that has been advanced by many writers, from Schoenberg to Tovey. It is also consistent with the basic tenets of Schenkerian theory. As becomes clear near the beginning of volume 1 of Kontrapunkt, Schenker believed that when composers use exotic scales in tonal contexts, they do so “not to loosen [the] system in order to incorporate a foreign one, but, on the contrary, to use [the] major-minor system to express the foreign element.” Besides providing a tonal derivation for mm. 30–37, Example 4 also implies that this passage does not advance the tonal flow of the Prélude; rather, it acts as an aside or parenthesis that delays the modulation to D♭. Schenker described such “delays” very beautifully in Der freie Satz:

In the art of music, as in life, motion toward the goal encounters obstacles, reverses, disappointments, and involves great distances, detours, expansions, interpolations, and, in short, retardations of all kinds. Therein lies the source of all artistic delaying, from which the creative mind can derive content that is ever new.

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33Ibid., 157.


36Schenker, Der freie Satz, chap. 1, section 3, p. 18; Oster ed. and trans., 5.
In the case of the *Prélude*, this brief delay helps to evoke the mysterious, dreamlike atmosphere that permeates Mallarmé’s eclogue.

So far, we have seen that the *Prélude* is built from two main motives—the opening flute arabesque plus its derivatives, and the $D_b$ theme. Austin, however, identifies two other gestures, to which he refers as the syncopated and flowing motives. Since these ideas play a vital role in the subsequent unfolding of the piece and help to clarify the formal function of the B section, it is worth examining them closely.

Example 5 traces the life history of both ideas. Although the origins of the syncopated motive can be traced back to the horn parts in mm. 5 and 13, this gesture first becomes prominent in m. 39 (Ex. 5a). Almost immediately, it is combined with the opening flute motive (Ex. 5b). The flowing motive, meanwhile, is first heard in m. 28 (Ex. 5c) and becomes the progenitor of the oboe theme at m. 37. In the $D_b$ section, the flowing and syncopated motives are both absorbed into the B theme: the former appears as a continuation of the B theme in mm. 61–62 (Ex. 5d); the latter appears with the flowing motive beginning in m. 67 (Ex. 5e). The short codetta (mm. 74–78) then combines the syncopated motive in counterpoint with the B theme and flowing motive (Ex. 5f). This example of presenting themes simultaneously or in close succession—what we might term “motivic compression”—sets up the climax of the *Prélude* in mm. 94–99, where the syncopated and flowing motives both return in counterpoint with the main flute theme (Ex. 5g).

Example 5 highlights three essential features of thematic working in Debussy’s music. First, it often includes very intricate motivic relationships. This fact apparently contradicts Debussy’s frequent claims to simplifying symphonic composition. For example, in an essay for *SIM* (1 November 1913) he declared:

Let us purify music! Let us try to relieve it of its congestion, to find a less cluttered kind of music. And let us be careful that we do not stifle all feeling underneath a mass of superimposed designs and motives: how can we hope to preserve our finesse, our spirit, if we insist on being preoccupied with so many details of composition? We are attempting the impossible when we try to organize a braying pack of tiny themes, all pushing and jostling each other for a bite out of poor old sentiment.

Second, in Debussy’s music, motives that initially seem innocuous may end up playing a vital role later. Since this process cuts across the main formal divisions of the *Prélude*, it helps to erode the boundaries and autonomy of each section. Third, Debussy’s music is often extremely complex polyphonically, especially at critical moments in the form. In the *Prélude*, the densest textures occur at the climax (beginning in m. 94). This point is doubly ironic because Debussy is often portrayed as the archenemy of polyphony, and because Schenker traced the downfall of music in the twentieth century to a “decline of counterpoint.”

Before leaving the B section, we must briefly consider its harmonic structure. We have already seen how the thematic

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39For published discussions of Debussy’s contrapuntal practices, ➔ Peter DeLone, “Claude Debussy: Contrapuntiste Malgré Lui,” *College Music Symposium* 17 (1977): 48–63; and William Austin, *Music in the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Norton, 1966), especially p. 20. Debussy himself discussed the significance of counterpoint in his music; see Lesure and Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 84, 94, and 278. Schenker, of course, made frequent attacks on twentieth-century music, such as the following in *Der freie Satz*: “The present decline of counterpoint has brought about the decline of diatony. This is the fault of the musicians, who still have not grasped the fact that as long as the fifth determines the natural sonority—and that will always be so—a voice-leading technique based on the fifth, as nature requires, cannot lead to any diatony other than the diatony which our art has exhibited up to the present day. All attempts to deprive nature of her rights will shatter against the wall of her resistance” (Oster, ed. and trans., par. 4, p. 11).
Example 5. Motivic compression in the *Prélude*

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<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Syncopated motive</td>
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<td>b</td>
<td>Flute theme</td>
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<td>c</td>
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Example 6. Prélude à “L’Après-midi d’un faune,” mm. 55–78

content changes between the first and the second statements of the Db theme. Example 6 shows that this change coincides with a remarkable shift in the theme’s harmonic support. To understand this transformation it is best to begin with the first statement, however, is more complex (see Ex. 6b). Here, is supported by the simple progression I-IV-II-V-I. The diatonic descent through the D octave in the upper part that second statement (see Ex. 6a). These measures present a diatonic descent through the Db octave in the upper part that is supported by the simple progression I–IV–II–V–I. The first statement, however, is more complex (see Ex. 6b). Here,
the octave descent is transformed chromatically: \( D_b - C_b - B_b - A_b - G_b - F_b - E_b - C - D_b \). Notice how the augmented-sixth chord resolves traditionally: D moves down by step in the bass, while the tritone \( F^\# - C \) in the upper voice resolves inwards to F and \( D_b \) (horns 2 and 4, violin 2). As shown in Example 6c, the supporting progression, with its mixed sub-dominant, flat submediant, and augmented-sixth sonorities, foreshadows the chromatic excursions found in Debussy’s later works, such as the piece “Reflets dans l’eau” (Images, Book I, 1904–5). Here the upper line moves from \( \frac{4}{5} \) via \( \frac{\bar{5}}{7} \) and \( \frac{\bar{2}}{3} \) to \( \frac{\bar{6}}{7} \) and \( \frac{\bar{4}}{5} \).

We now come to the final sections of the Prélude. As mentioned earlier, experts disagree about the formal function of mm. 79–106. Some, such as Barraqué and Howat, argue that these measures are built from two distinct spans: mm. 79–93 develop the flute theme sequentially on E and \( E_b \); mm. 94–106 restore the main theme to \( C# \) for the start of the final section proper.\(^{40}\) Conversely, Denis Dille, Laurence Berman, and others suggest that these bars constitute a single span analogous to that of the opening A section.\(^{41}\)

Which reading should we prefer? Certainly, there are good reasons for dividing mm. 79–106 into two spans. Although the flute theme is transposed to \( E \) in m. 79, it is not restored to the original starting pitch \( C# \) until m. 94. Furthermore, the scherzando character of the flute theme (mm. 79–93) recalls the whole-tone variations (mm. 30–37). Tonally, however, this reading is less convincing. No one would deny that the tonic \( \frac{6}{5} \) returns in m. 79, but when the bass tone \( E \) returns at m. 94, it no longer supports a simple tonic triad. Instead, we find an \( E^{13} \) identical to the one in m. 26. Dissonances of this sort do not normally appear at the start of a span; still less do they initiate the final section of a piece. How, then, can we explain their presence in m. 94?

Example 7a suggests that these dissonances arise from contrapuntal lines that start in m. 79. The inner parts \( F^\#_1 \) in m. 94 are part of a long chain of chromatic parallel thirds that passes from \( G^\#_1 \) (m. 79) via \( G^\#_E \) (m. 83), \( G^\#_E \) (m. 86), and \( F^\#_1 \) (m. 90) to \( F^\#_D \) (m. 94). This line then descends to \( E_G \) (m. 96) before shifting direction to join the upper line in m. 104. The soprano \( C# \) in m. 94, meanwhile, arises as an expansion of the chromatic motive \( B - B^\# - C# \) that is projected from m. 79. The \( C# \), which is even locally tonicized beginning in m. 96, eventually slides down through \( C\# \) and \( B^\# \) to meet the inner thirds at m. 104.

Besides demonstrating the overall integrity of mm. 79–106, Example 7b also indicates that the final section is built from the same tonal transformations as mm. 20–30. In mm. 20–30, the upper line also expands the motive \( B - B^\# - C# \) while the inner parts contain a chain of chromatic thirds extending from \( B_G \) (m. 20) via \( B_G \) (m. 22), \( A_F \) (m. 23), \( G^\#_E \) (m. 25), \( E_G \) (m. 25) to \( F^\#_D \) (m. 26). As with mm. 79–106, these thirds finally shift up to meet the upper line for the cadence. As Leonard B. Meyer has noted, the cadences in mm. 29–30 and 103–6 are connected motivically; both contain the same motives, marked \( x \) and \( y \) in Example 7c.\(^{42}\) The significance of this reading is twofold. It suggests that the final \( A' \) section is not a simple repetition of the opening section, but is an ingenious composing-out of a small segment, mm. 20–30. Furthermore, since this passage conflates the main flute theme with the syncopated and flowing motives and inflects \( C# \) as a local tonic, it provides a subtle reminiscence of the B section. This allusion to the B section unifies the Prelude and demonstrates the complex, long-range connections that invariably bind Debussy’s music together. Tonally, then, mm.

\(^{40}\)Barraqué, Debussy, 88; translated in Austin, ed., Prelude, 164; Howat, Debussy in Proportion, 149.

\(^{41}\)Dille’s view is summarized by Austin in “Toward an Analytical Appreciation,” 74; Berman, “Debussy’s Summer Rites,” 231.

\(^{42}\)Meyer, Style and Music, 223–25.
Example 7. Tonal models in the *Prelude*

79–106 constitute a single unit, bound together by an elaborate contrapuntal framework; they do not subdivide conveniently into two separate tonal spans.

To sum up: When analyzed from a Schenkerian perspective, Debussy’s *Prelude à “L’Après-midi d’un faune”* is best regarded as a continuous ternary form—A (mm. 1–30), transition (mm. 37–54), B (mm. 55–78), A’ (mm. 79–106), and coda (mm. 106–10). However, this scheme is obscured in four ways: by starting with an incomplete progression VII7 of V–V7—I; by adding a parenthetical whole-tone episode (mm. 30–36); by developing the syncopated and triplet figures across the formal boundaries; and by modeling the final A’ section (mm. 79–106) on part of the opening section (mm. 20–30). Although these features are unusual in themselves, especially when judged against the standards of nineteenth-century tonal theory, they do not represent a complete repudiation of tonal paradigms. What is so remarkable about the *Prelude* is that Debussy managed to combine these techniques so boldly over such a large span. Perhaps we should view the rather elaborate explanations presented above as signs of Debussy’s cultural elitism and his love of the esoteric—concerns that he described in a famous letter to Ernest Chausson (3 September 1893):

Music really ought to have been a hermetical science, enshrined in texts so hard and laborious to decipher as to discourage the herd of people who treat it as casually as they do a handkerchief! I’d go further and, instead of spreading music among the populace, I propose the foundation of a “Society of Musical Esotericism.”

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43“Vraiment la musique aurait dû être une science hermétique, gardée par des textes d’une interprétation tellement longue et difficile qu’elle aurait certainement découragé la troo peau de gens qui s’en servent avec la désinvolture que l’on met à se servir d’un mouchoir de poche! Or, et en outre, au lieu de chercher à répandre l’art dans le public, je propose la fondation d’une “Société d’Esotéricisme Musical” et vous verrez que M. Helman n’en sera
As it happens, this letter dates from the time when Debussy was finishing work on the *Prélude*.

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to trace Debussy’s use of the four techniques enumerated above in all his subsequent orchestral works, a few examples are in order. To begin with, of Debussy’s remaining eleven orchestral movements, all but one—“Par les rues et les chemins” (*Ibéria*, first movement)—begin with some sort of incomplete progression. For the most part, these works open with introductions that move to the tonic for the start of the main movement proper. However, “Les parfums de la nuit” and “Le matin d’un jour de fête” (*Ibéria*, second and third movements) are more complex. The former is a classic example of an auxiliary-cadence piece: the bulk of the movement prolongs the dominant of F♯ with the tonic finally occurring near the end (m. 92). The latter, meanwhile, not only begins away from the tonic, but it actually ends somewhere else: the movement starts in E♭, moves to C, and closes in G with material from the middle section of “Par les rues et les chemins.”

We can also find parenthetical episodes and interpolations in Debussy’s later orchestral scores. Perhaps the most obvious examples occur in the transition between the final movements of *Ibéria*. Here Debussy added a subordinate theme from “Le matin d’un jour de fête” near the end of “Les parfums de la nuit” (mm. 127–28), and he inserted a flashback to one of the main themes in the second movement near the beginning of the third (mm. 5–6). Significantly, the latter “interruption” has connections with Debussy’s piano *Prélude* “La sérénade interrompue”: in mm. 80–84 and 87–89 of the *Prélude* Debussy actually inserted the main theme from “Le matin d’un jour de fête”! On a larger scale, the entire fanfare section from the middle of “Fêtes” (*Nocturnes*, second movement) is a giant interpolation: mm. 116–73 are actually inserted within an ascending line that spans from m. 27 to m. 208. As in *Ibéria*, the insert recalls material from another work by Debussy: at the climax of the fanfare section, we hear Rodrigue’s leitmotiv from Debussy’s aborted “Wagnarian” opera *Rodrigo et Chimène* (1890–92).

Several interesting instances of motivic compression also occur in *La Mer* and the orchestral *Images*. A particularly fine example appears at the climax of “Jeux de vagues” (*La Mer*, second movement). In mm. 163–218, the main theme returns and is combined contrapuntally with other subordinate themes as well as with its own diminutions and augmentations. The same phenomenon can be seen in “Rondes de printemps” (*Images*). In two long sections (mm. 87–118 and 138–205), Debussy develops the folk tune “Nous n’irons plus au bois” contrapuntally with itself, and with other themes, including another folk tune “Do, do l’enfant do.”

Lastly, Debussy relied on tonal modeling in several later symphonic scores. In “Nuages” (*Nocturnes*, first movement), he modeled the final section (mm. 80–93) on the last segment of the opening A section (mm. 43–56). In recomposing the earlier material, he inserted two repetitions of a horn motive from mm. 23–24 and 27–28. More remarkably, the second half of “De l’aube à midi sur la mer” (*La Mer*, first movement), is an elaborate composing out of the contrapuntal framework of mm. 31–84: both move from D♭ via B♭ to A♭ and back, via G♭ to A♭. Similar experiments in tonal mod-

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pas, ni M. de Monnières non plus!” See Lesure, ed., *Lettres*, 51; Lesure and Nichols, eds., *Letters*, 52. This letter is normally connected with Debussy’s interest in the occult.

44For more details of this and the following analytical observations, see my forthcoming book *Debussy: ‘Ibéria’* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Debussy’s harmony functions precisely in the sense that it skilfully balanced relationship between chromaticism and diatonicism, both of which may show modal characteristics but which never lose sight of the triadic constructions and progressions of earlier tonal music. Debussy’s harmony functions precisely in the sense that it gives meaning, and movement, to this relationship. As a language it can best be described as “expanded tonality”, a language in which tonality still acts as a basic term, giving perspective to all other harmonic activity.47

Even if Debussy was unable to ignore common-practice tonality altogether, he did create a remarkable body of symphonic music that was indeed fit for “the century of aeroplanes.”

ABSTRACT

Debussy is often credited with revolutionizing musical form by rejecting nineteenth-century tonal and formal practice. This essay considers this claim by examining the tonal and thematic framework of the Prélude à “L’Après-midi d’un faune.” Although this analysis shows that the Prélude can be explained by traditional tonal procedures, it identifies four techniques—incomplete progressions, parenthetical episodes, motivic compression, and tonal models—that allowed Debussy to move away from conventional symphonic models. The paper ends by showing how he developed these techniques in later orchestral works such as the Nocturnes, La Mer, and Ibéria.