

Music through the Microscope



Claude Debussy

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

A musical analysis

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Introduction

This document is a detailed analysis of Debussy's revolutionary score *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. The purpose of this analysis is to aid the study of the work by isolating aspects of structure, melody and melodic development, harmony, orchestration techniques and texture.

This study is not a critique of the composer and does not seek to explore the cultural, contextual or historical aspects of the music.

If some of the illustrations appear too small then a free copy of the illustrations can be downloaded as a PDF file from:

http://nickredfern.co.uk/Music_through_the_Microscope.htm

Structure

Comprehending the structure as a vital component in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is essential and it is as intriguing, subtle and mellifluous as the melodic and harmonic content. Moreover, it is the very nature of the melodic and harmonic content that informs the structure and its elusive and beguiling nature. The subtlety of Debussy's syntax cannot be overstated and neither can his modernist sympathies. However, if one is to reach an understanding of the melodic and harmonic language of the work it is important to understand the underlying simplicity of the overall structure.

Tripartite structure

A basic overview of the work reveals a simple three-part structure, palindromic by nature, with a central section built upon largely new material. However, it is misleading to consider the work in terms of the Classical sonata principle. The Central Section, which is at the heart of the structure as it is the emotional climax of the work, is clearly not a development section. Debussy's language in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* in many respects lacks the goal orientation of the Classical sonata structure.

A bars 1 – 54

B bars 55 – 93

A (Recapitulation) bars 94 – 110

Classical form, i.e. sonata form, is a vehicle for thematic statement, transformation and return to the original theme. Classical form is also dependant on the relationships with keys and the cycle of fifths. But Debussy's music does not expose a theme or secure a clear tonality in a classical manner: here it is tentative and unsupported by an established key. His development technique relies on the restatement of bars 1 – 4 and the continual transformation of that melodic material. By the melody's third statement at bar 21 the process is already underway. However, the tonal centre of the work, E major, is not truly established until bar 21.

Themes and motifs

To achieve a deeper understanding of the formal concept of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* it is important to understand Debussy's developmental technique when applied to musical themes and motifs.



Figure 1 Theme A (Faune)



Figure 2 Motif A (Triplet)

Motif A (Triplet) is derived from Theme A and is an important feature of the central B Section. A more detailed exploration of Debussy's themes and motifs will be explored later.



Figure 3 Motif B horns

This is a highly languid and sonorous motif which is first used at bars 4 to 5 and 7 to 11 beat 1. The motif is associated with the horns but is forgotten soon after its brief introduction. I have included the motif in the analysis as it does have short term structural relevance.



Figure 4 Motif B bars 7 to 11 horns

Motif Z (cadencial motif)



Figure 5 Motif Z oboe bar 17

This motif first appears in the oboe at bar 15. It is formally significant and could be said to be derived from the opening statement of Theme A, bar 3.



Figure 6 Motif Z flute bar 3

Motif Y ('cellos)



Figure 7 Motif Y 'cellos bar 31

This is an unusual motif and is associated with the strings.