

Edexcel A Level Syllabus – Analysis

Claude Debussy (1862-1918): Sarabande from Pour Le Piano

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Background

The French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918), who was one of the most important composers of his generation, helped to consolidate the break from the Germanic traditions prevalent in previous French music. He was innovative both in his musical language and his formal models which often reflected the influence of the Impressionist painters and poets ranging from Verlaine to the 'symbolists'. Musical influences were extremely diverse and include the music of Erik Satie, Wagner, Mussorgsky (especially *Boris Godunov*), Indian rāga and Javanese gamelan. This latter of these is especially evident in his mature piano works written after 1900, with their exploration of the instrument's percussive bell- and gong-like sonorities.

Harmonically, Debussy's music incorporates both modality and tonality (earlier French composers such as Fauré had used modal aspects in their works) and he is reported by Maurice Emmanuel to have said around 1889-90 that 'music is neither major nor minor', something evident in the 'Sarabande' from *Pour le piano*. Here, despite having a key signature of four sharps, the music never settles comfortably in E major or c-sharp minor, with many more keys suggested than actually reached; this is heightened by his general avoidance of 'traditional' diatonic cadences. Linked to this is the use of parallel block-chord harmonies, where a chord is used not within the context of a harmonic progression, but specifically for its colour and timbre. One of the most common examples of this is the use of parallel dominant seventh chords, where sonority replaces the traditional harmonic desire to resolve to the tonic.

On both an harmonic and melodic level, Debussy made use of a variety of scales such as the whole-tone, octatonic and pentatonic (see, for example, the use of whole-tone scales in 'Voiles' from the first book of *Préludes*).

It is characteristic of his music to present melodic material in varying harmonic contexts such as the opening of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, where the same flute figure occurs three times, first unaccompanied, then harmonised in two different ways. In the 'Sarabande' this technique can be seen in the recurrence of the opening melodic idea at bar 42 with substantial change to the underlying texture.

Formally, there is an avoidance of traditional structures in his works such as the symphony or concerto (although he did write several sonatas). This is not to disregard the importance of form; on the contrary, clarity of structure is a vital element to his music, something that needs careful attention in performance, since the use of too much *rubato* and rhythmic flexibility can obscure aspects of form that are inherent in the score (such as the *hemiola* at the end of the 'Sarabande'). In this respect, Debussy shows Classical characteristics.

Although tonal patterns are found in his works, they are not the only foundations on which he built pieces. Studies have also demonstrated the occurrence of formal structures

based on numeric sequences such as the golden section and the *Fibonacci* series, although the extent to which Debussy intentionally incorporated these is debatable. In his early years, the medium of song allowed him to develop a more fluid approach to form, since, to an extent, the form of the poem dictates the work's structure, thus leaving the actual music to concentrate more on sub-textural matters.

Through the striking individuality and imagination of his approach to composition he opened up new musical pathways for others to explore, and many of the most important twentieth-century composers (including notably Messiaen, Bartók and Stravinsky) are indebted to him in this respect.

Analysis

Key: E major/ C-sharp minor

Number of bars: 72

Bar	What Happens	Comment
1-2	Opening motif (motif A) is presented with each note in the first bar being harmonised by an added seventh chord, with parallel movement in the RH. The bass notes move in thirds apart from at 2.1, where the leap is inverted to a sixth. Three out of a possible six of the intervals between the notes of the motif are a third.	Debussy is presenting in a concentrated form all the main characteristic features that will appear on both a local and structural scale.
5	The second motif (motif B), consisting of a rising fourth and falling third. Tonally there is a shift to a modal c-sharp minor, suggested by the pause on g-sharp minor in bar 4, confirmed by the g-sharp to c-sharp leap at 5.1, but dissipated by the move to a B major chord (the dominant of E major) in bar 8.	Note the way the phrase unfolds from unison octaves in bar 5 to the pause in bar 8 through the use of contrary motion between the hands, helping to emphasise the final chord of B major.
9	The third main motif (motif C), which reverses the sequence of intervals of motif B with a falling third followed by a rising fourth. The underlying chord progression is A major - F-sharp major - D-sharp minor seventh.	The harmony descends by the interval of a third each time.
11	Imitation of motif C in the top of the RH, accompanied by parallel dominant seventh chords, starting on F-sharp, falling a major third then rising an augmented fourth.	Typical of French impressionism in music (and especially Debussy), the dominant seventh chord is stripped of its traditional harmonic function as a tonic preparation and used specifically for its own musical colour.
13-14	The a-sharp minor seventh chord on beat 3.1 seems initially to act like a chord VII in B major, reinforced by the fluctuation with an F-sharp major chord (the dominant of B). However, bar 14 shows it to be II7 in g-sharp	Further evidence that the piece is often tonally ambiguous, suggesting more keys than it actually reaches. We can now view that the three main harmonic resting points so far, g-sharp minor

	minor, where a II-V cadence takes the music to pause on a D-sharp major chord.	in bar 4, B major in bar 8 and D sharp major in bar 14 are all a third apart.
15-18	Exact repeat of bars 1-4	
19	Motif B appears in the RH with the original leap of a fourth reduced to a third. The original bare-octaves presentation is replaced by a descending progression c-sharp minor - B major - A major.	The chord progression drops through a third.
20-22	The first section of the piece closes with a repeat of the modified motif B from the previous bar in low octaves.	The feeling of E major as the tonal centre in bars 20-21 is lost with the move onto C sharp in bar 22, shifting the music again towards a modal c-sharp minor.
23-26	Introduction of non-progressive harmonies based around a tonal centre of C sharp. There is parallel movement up a minor third on 23.3 and 25.3.	
27-28	Repeat of 23-24 transposed up a minor third.	Debussy is developing harmonically the interval of a third. Also bars 25-26 exactly copy bars 23-24 apart from an added quaver in the RH. This idea mirrors the opening bars of the piece where bars 3-4 repeat the previous two bars with a quaver added at beat 3.1.
29-30	Motif C is suggested in a rhythmically displaced version in the RH from 29.1-30.1.	There is harmonic movement in thirds in bar 30.
31	RH plays a modified motif B.	
32	The music pauses on an E major chord.	The previous harmonic pause was centred around C sharp in bar 26; therefore the interval of a third is again highlighted.
33	(see bar 29).	
35-41	Motif C is rhythmically displaced, transposed and harmonised by parallel sevenths in bars 36 and 38 (the second of these is a third higher than the first). The whole passage is	The rising texture, together with the marking <i>animez un peu</i> creates a climactic feeling which subsides as an anti-climax. This building up of intensity happens half way through

	underpinned by an F sharp in bars 36 and 38. Parallel seventh chords are used throughout.	the piece (there are 72 bars in total), thus acting as a fulcrum on which the structure rests. As mentioned previously, extensive use of parallel seventh chords are typically of Debussy's music.
42	Return of the first section material with substantial modification. Motif A is reharmonised more sparsely, with just a D major chord in the first bar	The drop of the bass note to a D at bar 42 shows another mediant (third) relationship as the previous important bass note was the F sharp in bar 38.
46-49	Motif B returns, transposed up an octave and reharmonised. The contrary motion feature is kept in bars 47-48 although the actual harmonies are slightly different.	
50-55	New material, the only apparent link with previous material being the device of repeating a bar or pair of bars which occurred most memorably at bars 1-4 and 9-10 and appears here in bars 50-53, although the repeat deviates at 53.2 .	These bars basically consist of a cadence which initially suggests the key of C-sharp major through the E-sharp at 50.3 but turns to c-sharp minor at 51.1. The repeat of this progression is followed by a movement to E major (although the use of a b minor chord still evokes a modal sound) before veering on to a D-sharp major chord.
56-57	Motif C presented majestically and <i>ff</i> ,transposed up a perfect fifth and reharmonised with the progression c - sharp minor - B major - A major.	This accompanying progression had first been used in bar 19 to accompany a modified motif B.
60-61	Bars 56-57 are here transposed back down to the original pitch of motif C	
63-65	Using the rhythm first found in bar 54 the music seems to settle around the tonality of g-sharp minor	The tonality of g-sharp minor is being used as a dominant preparation for the music to return to a modal c-sharp minor in bar 66.
66	Motif B played in its original unharmonised form in a low register of the piano.	
67-70	A <i>hemiola</i> turns four bars of 3/4 into two bars of 3/2. Both hands consist of rising thirds from bars 67-69.1.	This <i>hemiola</i> slows down the harmonic pace to create the feeling of conclusion (it is a feature common in much early music). The

		<p>harmony in bars 69-70 outlines a dominant seventh chord of B major, leaving the possibility of a perfect cadence in E major to finish the piece. However the music slips back on to a chord of c-sharp minor in bar 71 to bring the work to a more sombre close.</p>
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Summary

A Sarabande is a dance in triple time of Latin American origin. It was adopted by the Spanish during the sixteenth century, although its controversial characteristics limited its use to the extent that Philip II banned it in 1583 due to its effect of 'exciting bad emotions'. The English and French developed a more slow and stately version when the dance was introduced in the early seventeenth century and in the following century it became a standard movement in suites of dances. Debussy's adherence to this version can be immediately seen in his marking *Avec une élégance grave et lente* (with a serious and slow elegance). The characteristic rhythm of the Sarabande is a leaning on the second beat of the bar, which can be seen here on many occasions such as bars 2, 8, and 24 to name but a few.

Structurally it can be observed from the analysis table that the number three permeates the music on many different levels. Most obviously there is the time signature (3/2) and the way the piece divides into three main sections; bars 1-22, bars 23-41 and 42-72. The interval of a third is exploited melodically in each of the main three motifs on which the work is based, and parallel chord movement often rises or falls through this same interval (eg LH bars 9, 19 and 56). On a structural level, it was pointed out that consecutive harmonic pauses, such as those at bars 4,8 and 14 display similar relationships. The key signature shows four sharps, suggesting either E major or c-sharp minor as the tonic and the music is often ambiguous as to which of these is the true home key. It could be pointed out that there is a *mediant* (third) relationship between these keys.