

Memory and Tonality in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*

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Does the world need another analysis of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*? This is a fair question. The most familiar treatments available in English, including William Austin's Norton Critical Score, the hermeneutic analysis by David J. Code published 7 years ago in *JAMS*, and Matthew Brown's elaborately Schenkerian approach in *Spectrum*, not to mention my own brief outline that appears in the revised *Harmony* of Walter Piston, ought to be enough for anyone who would rather not go through several excellent analyses already published in other languages. *Faune* has, after all, received almost as much analytical attention as the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan*, and for much the same reasons: *Faune* is a historical turning point just as *Tristan* was, and is a piece of manageable size for a thorough explication within, one hopes, a relatively few pages. My examination here will take up where my Piston analysis left off, so I beg the reader's indulgence if I recapitulate some of that as I begin.

It is said that in the works of the Impressionist painters, *light* is the protagonist. In Impressionist music, it may be argued that *tone-centricity* is the protagonist. I think of *Faune* as an *art nouveau* work on the way to Impressionism, but tone-centricity is all-important, because in *Faune* there are *two* tonal foci, more or less balanced and defining a *bifocal tonality* of Csharp and E. Moreover, Debussy's tonal form in this work depends above all on *absolute-pitch values*, and these are realized in harmonic quanta that may be respelled enharmonically and respaced in different positions but that always display the same absolute pitch-classes. These harmonic quantities can be said to embody subconscious emotional and symbolic values that work their way to the surface of consciousness, indeed, the stuff of dreams; they mean something to the Faun even when he cannot precisely remember what they mean. There are classical progressions defining the form as well; one encounters, for instance, some well-placed ii-V-I cadences before actually realizing that they are Debussy's own.

From Mallarmé's poem, notwithstanding its daunting complexity and willful obscurity, we know that the Faun's essential problem is memory – his oneiric memory of “those nymphs.” We may think of this as how Debussy conceived the form of his Prelude: as a graph of attempted memory, even though considered as a “general impression”. The Faun, in center stage with his flute, is the pitch-class Csharp, and Fate, the summer Afternoon without nymphs, is the key of

E. The Faun's constant effort to recapture the memory proceeds with increasing imprecision as the Prelude develops, as we can tell from the different ways the Csharp is harmonized and the different ways in which it dissolves melodically.

As so often elsewhere in Debussy, the overall form is essentially in three parts, which we can define by the presence or absence of the main melody that first appears in the solo flute. By the middle of the Prelude, that is, the second part of this three-part form, the melody, but not the pitch-class C \sharp , has disappeared almost entirely; with the beginning of the third part the main melody reappears, but decisively changed, and by the last few bars of the Prelude it has gradually recovered its initial form with a new role for the Csharp, only to yield tonally, at the very end, to a final E major in which the Csharp is only an evanescence.

The opening flute solo already defines essential boundaries that will be clarified soon enough. Most important are: the initial Csharp; the chromatic scale segment; the lower G that is anti-dominant, dividing the Csharp octave exactly in half; the diatonic third measure that so clearly moves from a tentative Csharp tone center to a much clearer E major tonic defined as a triad. So far so good, and any number of analysts have pointed to these elements. What immediately follows in m. 4 is an entirely new complex: chordal accompaniment, new timbres, and an Asharp pitch-class that doesn't belong to either Csharp minor or E major. As the added major sixth above a Csharp minor triad it forms a half-diminished seventh chord which we won't call a *Tristan* chord, because Debussy was careful to make explicit use of the *Tristan* chord in the characteristic *Tristan* spacing in earlier works such as *La Damoiselle Éluë* and the unfinished *Rodrigue et Chimène*. The Asharp7 chord resolves chromatically via two common tones Asharp-Bflat and Gsharp-Aflat. This is very similar to the standard classical resolution of raised VI7 to V65.

Example 1

The musical notation for Example 1 is presented on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). It is divided into four sections:

- m. 4:** A chord with notes G2, B2, D3, F#3, A3, and C#4.
- 5:** A chord with notes G2, B2, D3, F#3, A3, and C#4.
- compare:** A chord with notes G2, B2, D3, F#3, A3, and C#4.
- enharmonically:** A chord with notes G2, B2, D3, F#3, A3, and C#4.

 Below the staff, the following labels are provided:

- Under m. 4: Eb: +VI7
- Under m. 5: V65

Tonally, this chord of resolution – Debussy notated it as Bflat7 of course – is the root-position dominant of Dsharp, and more of it will be heard very soon. The pitch-class D is the link to the next new harmony: a root-position D major seventh (m. 11). This now supports Csharp in the flute melody as a strong dissonance. The wonder is that the G7 harmony that supports the G of the flute melody is so much more consonant than the D major seventh.

Example 2

But in fact this is a familiar augmented-sixth chord, proceeding from an unfamiliar major seventh chord via unorthodox voice-leading; Schubert used this same progression in reverse in his Great C major Symphony.

Example 3: Schubert, *Symphony in C major*, D 944, IV

From this point, Debussy gives us full harmony for the mysterious flute melody; the D in the bass yields to Dsharp in m. 13, adumbrating the more complete root-position dominant seventh of E (with Gsharp13th) that in turn resolves to an E triad with added Csharp sixth.

Example 4

E: V13 I(vi)65

Is this, here at m. 13, the first real tonic sonority in the Prelude – E major – because its preceding dominant is so strong? Probably; but the Csharp neighbor note of B also vitiates the tonic strength of E. This is only a continuing hint that Csharp and E will be competing for centrality. Nor does it last, for the next stable sonority is an Asharp43 chord at m. 14.

Example 5

14

This harmony was already heard in root position at m. 5, and it will link up again at mm. 17-18, to alternate with a real *Tristan* chord, with Wagner's same original pitch-classes, stated four times at mm. 18-19 to support the Csharp as dominant of Fsharp – the only time Tristan makes his presence known in the work, but here he is only part of a dominant of Fsharp.

Example 6

18

Vn. div.

Tutti *f*

Debussy's third statement of the Csharp, at m. 21, is the most stable so far, as the added major sixth above the E major triad as at m. 13.

Example 7

Once again the Csharp focus is balanced with E centricity – the Csharp because we have already heard it twice before as the initial pitch-class of this flute melody, and the E because of its root-position triadic strength. The E major is redeemed by m. 23, however, with its strong dominant. The flute melody, already let loose in m. 22, is shown here in m. 23 to undergo chromatic development, initiating with A (the seventh of V7 in E). Thus freed, the flute leads off temporarily in a different tonal direction: m. 24 is clearly – or almost clearly – a dominant of G for a short while, and the flute reaches an upper C on a half-diminished 7th, settling back once more to Debussy’s fourth statement of Csharp at m. 26.

Example 8

Measure 26 is like m. 21 in that its root-position sonority is on E:

Example 9

but this time it is E9, that is, E Gsharp B D Fsharp, and the Csharp is the thirteenth, once again a stronger dissonance, analogous to the D with major seventh that we heard at m. 11. Here at 26 the E and Csharp harmonize in the same way that they will again later at m. 94 – and it is important to note that this flute melody does not appear again with the Csharp in the flute until that late bridging point. The main melody will definitely appear again in between, but with changed circumstances, and here at m. 26 it is poised to embark on further variations – the Faun is struggling to get it right as he goes up and down between the Csharp and the G, and up again above the Csharp to Gsharp at m. 28. And now we have an even more classical cadence, ii-V-I in B major, at mm. 29-30.

Example 10

B: V V V V11 (ii/V) I

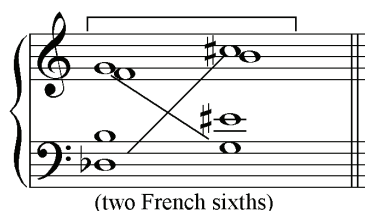
This is the moment where some analysts understandably sense the most important formal point of demarcation thus far in the Prelude. The new subsection, beginning with the upbeat to m. 31, offers a variant of the flute melody, indeed a considerable variant, but starting with the downbeat on G and in the clarinet. To be sure, we saw this same G7 at m. 11, where it was an unusual kind of augmented sixth chord; here, arising from the B major triad of m. 30, it is an augmented sixth chord of a more familiar kind, a plain German sixth. And in the bass at this point? Csharp – it would, one assumes, hardly have disappeared altogether. The chromatic scale segment has burrowed into the accompanying harmony as well. At mm. 32-33 the melody graduates to a whole-tone segment, for the first time in the Prelude, supported by the root-position G7 with major ninth. Together with the preceding Csharp, the G bass frames the same interval that framed the opening flute melody, so it might be said that the opening flute melody is written as a chord standing on its head, and that the shadow of the flute melody is retained in the bass even while its chromatic skeleton dances in the clarinet.

Note the symmetry of this German-sixth chord, with its Csharp pedal, and their tritone transposition, in the Boris-bell relationship; then remove the D and Gsharp from the two chords and you have two symmetrical and enharmonically equivalent French-sixth chords which share a whole-tone mapping:

Example 11

32

Boris (without 5th)



When this three-bar passage is repeated a minor third higher, mm. 34-36, the sustaining harmony is a Bflat7, which connects back to m.5 and its subsequent manifestations. The bass, forming that oblique pedal underneath the augmented sixth chord, is on E. From this point, for the next 42 measures, we have the Part 2 of the three-part overall form. It is marked by the *disappearance* of the flute theme, and indeed by the disappearance of any soloistic activity for the flute. (When the flutes play at all in this section they are always doubled.) What takes over the leading melodic role at this point is the oboe: the poem speaks of *two* pipes, after all. The tempo is increased; the harmony is a clear V-I progression in E major; the overall orchestral texture becomes more full, and the melodic progress more continuous. The entire subsection between mm. 37 and 51 is transitional and theme-suppressive: it develops short motives from mm. 37 and 38, but no further, and introduces a subtle hint of what will be a structural theme: the rhythm of the oboe in m. 39, followed by the violins in m. 40. The melodic high point on Dflat at m. 46 suffices to conceal the inner part (clarinets, English horn) marked *très en dehors*; this melody repeats in the violins in the next bar and never returns after that. The harmony – Dflat major with added major sixth – is pre-cadential; we learn that by hindsight, a big supertonic upbeat to the next three bars, mm. 48-50, in the key of Aflat major, with dominant upbeat in m. 50. At m. 51, four bars with Aflat key signature, *Ier mouvement*, expound the new syncopated theme, in the solo clarinet, *p, doux et expressif*. We might have known that this would be coming when we heard the horns *en dehors* at m. 47; we would not have known, however, as early as the oboe and violin in mm. 39-40. It is characteristic of Debussy, characteristically anti-Austro-Germanic, that he introduces his thematic material by causing it to emerge gradually from the textural background. The change of key signature to five flats marks the formal center of the Prelude, with a strong new melody occupying center stage. In terms of tonality, too, this passage is the structural centerpiece, but it is also emblematic of the main flute melody that is entirely absent here: only its dream remains, in the form of the Dflat-G tritone in the bass.

Example 12

The harmony of m. 56 is a substitute for a dominant, in the form of a special augmented sixth chord – inverted, so that the interval is the diminished third of G – Bdoubleflat – with appoggiatura F, the whole sonority mapping with the whole-tone scale. Debussy has used this harmony before, at the beginning of the Act III sketch of *Rodrigue et Chimène*:

Example 13: Debussy: *Rodrigue et Chimène*, beginning of Act III sketch

1 **Assez vif et bien rythmé**

But this sketch passage is so closely similar to the beginning of Franck's *Les Éolides* that it is a fair guess that Debussy might have remembered it from there. This chord, with its appoggiaturas, is in fact a double-function chord, an augmented sixth in two different keys.

Example 14

The Gflat minor triad that follows adumbrates the subdominant *major* harmony that will appear at m. 67. The A minor melody at m. 61 isn't entirely new; it is related to the melody at m. 28. Its cadencing harmony, last beat of m. 62, is another augmented sixth chord, interpreting the C seventh above the D bass as a Bsharp rising to Csharp (Dflat).

Example 15

enharmonically:

(German 6th as dominant of D \flat)

The big Dflat major melody now repeats in string octaves, with throbbing winds decorating the original harmony, and after four bars the melody continues with the syncopated *En dehors* melody of m. 47, plus a segment just heard in m. 62; this entire seven-bar melodic stretch is assembled out of remembered fragments. The passage includes the dynamic climax of the entire Prelude, a single *ff* marking, and that only in the strings and harps. The strongest classical cadence in the entire Prelude, ii-V-I (compare mm. 29-30), is stretched out over mm. 71-74, even down to the *sfz* dominant bass in the harp in the upbeat to 74 – good recordings never miss this.

Example 16

Part 3 begins at m. 79 with the return of the four-sharp key signature, *Mouvt du Début*, and with it the solo flute and the main melody, beginning on E, and descending not by a tritone but by a perfect fourth to B.

Example 17

The harmonization is wonderful: a first-inversion E major triad at m. 79, and the bass moves to Csharp at m. 81, like a dominant-to-tonic motion in Csharp. The Faun remembers the Csharp subconsciously even if he hears the flute melody starting on E. This is strongly structural, of course, but the motion of the bass after that to Fsharp is a stroke of genius. The idyll is interrupted by the strange *Un peu plus animé*, another deceptive cadence from E major to C major, strange because of the evanescent orchestration, oscillating *pp* muted horns, clarinets, and bassoons. The melody here is the jittery oboe, with chromatic-scale segments that are a variant of the clarinet figures at m. 31, and these come, of course, from the original flute melody. The C63 alternates with an A7, the oboe reinforcing the fifth of each of these chords. The repeat of mm. 79-82 is in Eflat major, not E, and neither Csharp nor E is present; because of this, there is no flute either, and the melody is played by the oboe – in other words, far removed psychologically from the original form. This is the Faun’s most remote and strained effort at recall. But remember – remember! – that there were Asharp7 dominants of Eflat at mm. 5, 8-9, 17-18, and 35-36, and we will have them once more still before the Afternoon is over. The main flute melody beginning on Csharp was last heard at m. 26, and it returns here at m. 94 very subtly altered but over that same harmony as before, with E in the bass. Note the difference between the last three notes of the melody of m. 94 and those of m. 26: the difference between a half-diminished seventh at 26 and a full dominant seventh at 94. In m. 95, the melody takes the form of the end of m. 27; simultaneously with this is the syncopated melody from m. 47, in two unmuted solo violins.¹

In the crucial measures that follow, the harmony is supported by E in the bass: a Russian sixth in mm. 96-97 and an ordinary raised ii7 in mm. 98-99 (read Fdoublesharp for Gnatural). Tonally and harmonically mm. 100-101 mark the emotional climax of the entire Prelude: the moment of the Faun’s most complete recall. The main melody is again in the solo flute, but doubled an octave below by solo cello. It descends not to G but to Gsharp, a perfect fourth as at mm. 79-81. And here, for the first time in the entire work, the Csharp is the root of the harmony, in a Csharp7 chord in the 43 position.

1. This is one of Debussy’s characteristic formal devices: the contrapuntal combination of themes drawn from different sections of the piece. He does it in the *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra, in each of the four movements of the *Petite suite*, and, later, *Nuages* and *Fêtes*, not to mention at a moment of superb poignancy in Act III of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and with concealment in *La Mer*, to mention only a few instances.

Example 18

The auxiliary chord that follows it is $A\sharp 7$ (compare mm. 5, 14, 17, 35). The oboe takes over the melodic line at m. 103, with a conspicuous restatement of the melody of m. 3 starting on C, not E – the E is in the bass, a first-inversion C major triad supporting.

Example 19

It moves gradually toward one more classical cadential progression: ii-V-I of E major, which is the ultimately concluding harmony of the Prelude, at m. 106. No Csharp here – but what is left? The Faun's flute melody, but not in the flute and not on Csharp, at m. 107, a ghostly sonority of two muted horns above and muted first violins below. The harmony of these bars is particularly extraordinary – note the sequential triadic succession of E major – C minor – D major – Bflat minor – to the low point on a C major triad while E still sounds in the bass part.

Example 20

As the succession rises once more, Csharp mysteriously reappears – in the flute, of course, reinforced by the harp harmonic. This harmony, too, has been heard before, at m. 4, a different spacing of Debussy’s non-*Tristan* chord. The flute Csharp doesn’t resolve so much as it dissolves, first upward to E and then downward to Gsharp. This is the antithesis of a perfect cadence; the Csharp that centered so much of the Prelude is here allowed to hang in the air. Even the final E major triad is not so spaced as to have its root duplicated in the upper voice, when the crotales give the uppermost part to the high B, and the flute Gsharp in the next-to-uppermost part.

As an *envoi* in this paper I show how Debussy has bequeathed part of this last page to us before, in his 1887 suite *Printemps*, first movement, mm. 115-119. It is another vivid demonstration of Debussy’s absolute-pitch values in aural images, with the E major root position yielding to C major first inversion, and the E tied over in the bass.

Example 21: Debussy: *Printemps*, I, mm. 115-121 (ci-contre, p. 17)

Perhaps it is fair to note that the very first harmony heard at the beginning of *Printemps* is identical in pitch-classes to the chord in m. 4 of *Faune*. The lesson is plain: if springtime comes, can the summer afternoon be far behind?

Example 22: Debussy: *Printemps*, I, beginning

114
I *ppp leggerissimo*

115
II *ppp leggerissimo*

115
I *perdendo pp* 1° Tempo

116
II *perdendo pp* 1° Tempo *p*
ppp

117
I *Moderato pp*

118
II *Moderato p* *Poco rit.*

D. & F. 15455

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Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune
(schematic reduction)

1 4 5 11 (V⁷ of C)

13 14 17 19 20
E: I (VI)₅ (aug. 6th) Tristan

21 23 (cf. 25) 24
E: I → to 26 V → to 26

25 26 (cf. 94) 28 (cf. 4)
(from 21 and 23)

30 31 34
Clarinet (V⁷ of C over C#) (cf. 5 etc.)
(cf. 11) (V⁹ of C) (V⁹ of E_b)

PART II

37 Oboe

39 Syncopated motive

41 *8va*

42

44 45 46 48 50

51 53 55 59 *to 61*

(cf. 39)

aug. 6th (inv.)

app.

60 61 63 67 73

quasi aug. 6th

PART III

75 Solo Vn.

79 81 82

II V

83

86 Oboe

90

(cf. 61-63)

C#: V⁹

94

Crotales

(cf. 25)

96

Solo Vn.

100

Solo Vn.

(cf. 5)

103

104

[cf. 59??]

E: ii V

to 106

106

107

108

110

(cf. 4)

I