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In memoriam Robert Wayne Bailey

Chapter Fifteen

Debussy's Absolute Pitch

Motivic Harmony and Choice of Keys

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In tonal music, the formal importance of a particular key is often signaled by an indication in the title, e.g., Symphony no. 5 in C minor, op. 67. Beethoven's Fifth is designated "in C minor" even though its second movement is in A-flat major and its finale in an empyrean C major. Primacy of a particular key is of course a structural consideration; but within the individual movement, whether the composer has said so or not, the priority of a single key is usually announced by tonal closure, by ending in the same key as the movement began. But typically there is another announcer as well: the key signature. In the first movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony, the *Sinfonia eroica*, op. 55, nearly seven hundred measures long and lasting twenty minutes, the key signature never changes, though one may identify as many as twenty-seven actual modulations just between the first measure of the exposition and the beginning of the recapitulation; by contrast, merely as an exercise, one may compare Beethoven's Prelude, op. 39, no. 2, seventy-six measures long, in which there are twenty-four changes of key signature, including twelve just between measures 51 and 62, but this is obviously a special case.

In a work as large as an opera, tonal closure can be demonstrated in the abstract by the first and last tonalities heard in the opera, regardless of division into acts with intermissions in between. Mozart's *Magic Flute* is one example, with an E-flat-major overture and finale of act 2, and the *dreimalige Akkord* in the middle (which in any case is a dominant, as it is in the overture), and everyone knows about the Masonic symbolism of three flats in this work. Similarly,

Weber's *Freischütz* and Verdi's *Falstaff* are, so to speak, C-major operas, as was Beethoven's *Fidelio* in its first *Leonore* version. Wagner's *Meistersinger* certainly has C major as a symbolic unifying tonality with closure, but it also emblematizes the central role of the Master Singers, for C major is their key. Even the *Ring of the Nibelungs* can be said to have D-flat major as an overarching "Valhalla tonality," if the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, beginning in E-flat major and freely modulating, is regarded as a prologue to everything that follows. The sleeping gods wake up in the second scene in D-flat major and perish in D-flat major seventeen hours later. There is no doubt that Debussy was fully familiar with the *Anneau des Nibelungen*, but it would be impertinent to suggest that the overflowing Rhine at the end of *Le crépuscule des dieux* inspired the principal key of Debussy's *mer orageuse*.[1]

In the nineteenth century the inherited conventions of tonal closure and key signature began to be varied, at first in relatively uncomplicated ways, as in Schubert's *Impromptu*, op. 90, no. 2, in E-flat major, ending in E-flat minor with the minor-mode scale degrees written as accidentals in a signature of three flats. Chopin's *Ballade* no. 2, op. 38, nominally in F major, represents a more fundamental departure from the norm for closure, with middle section and conclusion in A minor. Chopin's *Scherzo* no. 2, op. 31, is known to everyone as his B-flat-minor Scherzo, but the B-flat minor really applies to the much-repeated opening motto, everything else being principally organized around D-flat major or C-sharp minor, and ending in D-flat major. (Heinrich Schenker actually referred to this work as Chopin's *Scherzo* in D-flat major.)

We know that Debussy, who was known to have included a key designation in the title of only one of his works (the First String Quartet in G Minor, op. 10), would never have considered himself bound by any such conventions as these. But we know just as well that he had a highly developed sense of tonal structure with its own rules and boundaries, and that this fact is central to his art. An important aspect of this sense was, I believe, innate: all the evidence from his music indicates that Debussy had an effortless and acute sense of absolute pitch. René Peter's memoir confirms that Debussy correctly identified pitches played on the piano, though Debussy may have been only half serious when correcting himself, saying that not A♭ but G♯ was being played.[2] This sense inevitably relates to Debussy's manifest preference for certain keys, which are structural determinants in his larger-scale works. Debussy is hardly unique among composers in this regard, whether we think of Beethoven in C minor, Chopin in A-flat major and D-flat major, Franck in B major, Tchaikovsky and the Russian Five in D-flat major, or even Schoenberg and Mahler both in D minor.

Various writers, but especially Richard Langham Smith, have pointed to the significance of particular keys, including "tonalities of darkness and light."[3] Although it is probably apocryphal, a long unofficial tradition holds that F-sharp major was the key scorned as "unplayable" by the Prix de Rome

committee when Debussy sent *Printemps* to them in 1887. The same key has a variety of roles in *Pelléas et Mélisande*—at the beginning of the love duet in act 4 and perhaps even more tellingly in act 2, scene 1, in G-flat major, where Pelléas wraps Mélisande's long hair around the willow branches. The amorous significance of this key had some precedents, for the love duet in act 1 of *Rodrigue et Chimène* is in F-sharp major, and this in turn was preceded by the final love duet in *Diane au bois*, in G-flat major. (When he wrote *Diane au bois*, Debussy had not yet been to Bayreuth to hear *Tristan und Isolde*, but he surely would have known, from studying the score, the G-flat-major love music in act 2, scene 2, following "Brangänes Ruf.")

Debussy's deployment of key signatures tends to coincide with areas of *relative* tonal stability, but of course this is not always the case. "Relative tonal stability" in Debussy's music may still include temporary modal inflections, chromatic departures, and whole-tone harmony, but the key signature always symbolizes a diatonic scale whose tonic is never in doubt. Debussy's modal inflections are always indicated by accidentals, precisely because they are inflections. "Fêtes," for example, begins with an obvious Dorian with the F-minor key signature of four flats, in which the sixth degree is indicated by D♮. *L'isle joyeuse* includes all twelve chromatic degrees, whole-tone harmony, and Lydian and Mixolydian inflections just on the first page of the score, but the A-major foundation of the tonality is firm and unmistakable. Even such a radical departure as "Nuages," with its pervasive artificial scale B–C♯–D–E–F–G–A, and a tonic triad that is diminished, is unmistakably diatonically centered on B, and this centricity is proclaimed by the signature.[4]

This is also true of his choice of keys remote from C major, and of their associated key signatures, and in some cases there is definitely a difference whether six sharps or six flats are used to designate the same major key. Moreover, Debussy used the seven-sharp signature at least ten times—more than any previous composer—and it is significant that parts of "Jeux de vagues," the second movement of *La mer*, are notated in C-sharp major whereas the first and third movements are decisively in D-flat.

Debussy's absolute pitch capability sheds light not only on his preference for certain keys but also on his regular use of untransposed harmonic entities for their emblematic or symbolic value. Certainly Debussy repeatedly professed skepticism, even derision, of symbolic values in music, particularly with respect to the Wagnerian leitmotive, but he decisively employed recurrent symbolic motives in his operas—motives that almost invariably are associated with specific characters, never with ideas or objects. His placement of these motives is strategic, as in Verdi's later operas, and they are never "symphonically" developed as in Wagner. But Debussy typically favors an untransposed version of a recurrent motive, especially when it is associated with a particular harmony; in this regard, Debussy is also like Wagner.

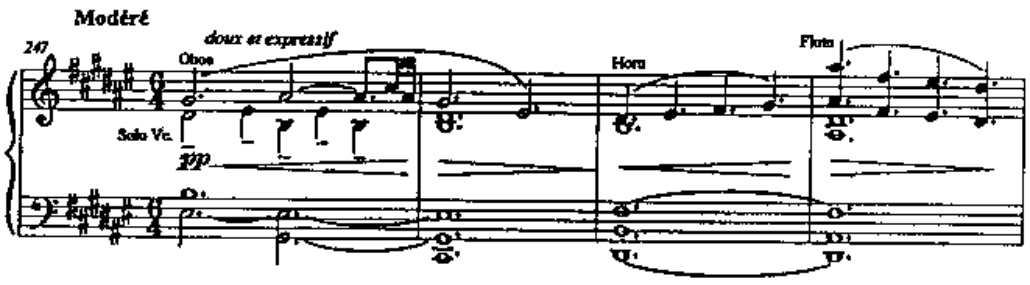
Debussy could not escape the Tristan sonority, which is widespread in his work, and in several works the Tristan chord unquestionably achieves emblematic value, directly suggesting Wagner, when it is considered as a collection of particular pitch classes.[5] One unabashed instance is in the first-act sketch of *Rodrigue et Chimène,* at measure 137, where, with the same pitch classes and spacing as first heard in Wagner's Prelude, it accompanies Chimène's first vocal appearance in the opera ("Est-ce vous, mon âme?").

In *Pelléas et Mélisande* the appearance of absolute-pitch Tristan harmony is at once more intense and more subtle. The first approximate appearance is at measure 61 of act 1 ("Pourquoi pleurez-vous, ici"), in which the Tristan chord has the same pitch classes and vertical dispositions, except that the two lower voices are displaced an octave downward; Golaud, at this point, does not yet know that he will love Mélisande. Just four measures later (at m. 65, "Oh! Vous êtes belle") the Tristan chord is cyclically transposed upward, exactly as at measure 6 of Wagner's Prelude; the two harmonies have two factors in common (compare *La damoiselle élue,* mm. 278–82). But the most compelling example of absolute-pitch Tristan in the opera is in the interlude between scenes 1 and 2 of act 3, at measure 247, a moment of hushed but intense emotional significance where, for the first time, Mélisande's and Pelléas's leitmotives are contrapuntally combined, in bifocal F-sharp major and D-sharp minor (see ex. 15.1). It appears again at the end of the next scene, measure 395, in a six-flat signature ("Elle est très délicate. . ."), and yet again, six measures later.

In measure 241 of act 2, scene 2, when Mélisande tells Golaud that her unhappiness is "quelque chose qui est plus fort que moi. . ." there is a chord of stacked fourths, a complex dominant in E-flat major, accompanying Pelléas's motive (see ex. 15.2). This same harmony reappears untransposed with telling effect at measures 605–6 of act 4 scene 4, when Pelléas says "Sais-tu pourquoi je t'ai demandé de venir ce soir?," and once more, in act 5, measure 181, when Mélisande tells Golaud that she did love Pelléas. (For those who want a more precise description of the harmony, it can be called a dominant thirteenth in second inversion, that is, with the fifth in the bass, and with the eleventh omitted; compare the beginning of Satie's Prelude to *Le fils des étoiles,* composed a few years earlier, in 1891, and probably known to Debussy.)

Still another example involving absolute-pitch values is in scene 2 of *Pelléas et Mélisande,* the letter scene that is so often pointed to for its spare texture, but which is also so striking for the simplicity and purity of its modal harmony in A minor. (A minor, using the Aeolian or natural minor scale, enjoys a primary structural significance in this scene, a significance that increases until the end of act 2 and even beyond.) From measures 239 to 258 there is only one distant dissonance, the whole-tone chord at measure 241, where Golaud describes Mélisande's sobbing. By measure 257 the tonal center has drifted to the nearby D minor/F major, and abruptly at measure 261 a remote stable harmony

Example 15.1. *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 2, mm. 247–50.



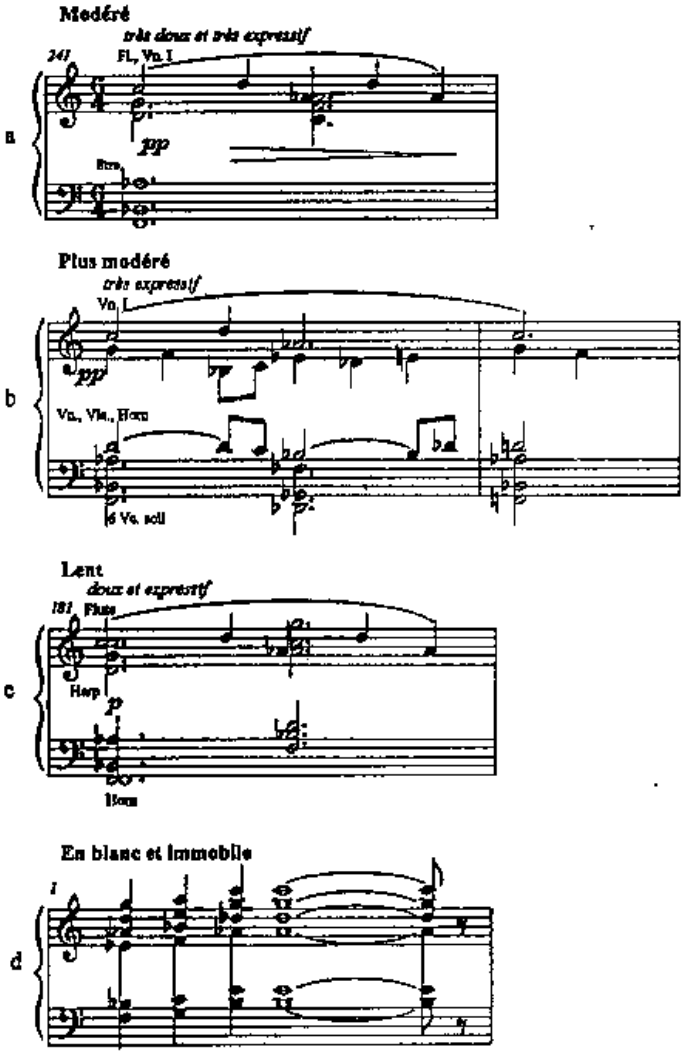
appears, an accented gesture on a G-sharp-minor triad, where, for the first time in the opera, the sea is mentioned: "la tour qui regarde la mer." The next time a well highlighted root-position G-sharp-minor harmony appears is in scene 3, at measure 420, with "cependant la mer est sombre."[6]

G-sharp minor is also A-flat minor, and these two enharmonic keys constitute the most significant secondary tonality in all of *La mer*, particularly in the first movement. Much of the A-flat minor in this movement is based on the half-diminished seventh on F, namely F–A♭–C♭–E♭, and this, with the A♭ in the top voice, is of course the Tristan chord. At the same time, this same half-diminished seventh, placed above a D♭, is a D♭^{9}, the dominant ninth of G-flat/F-sharp major. Whatever Debussy's fondness for the particular sound of the Tristan pitches, one may well doubt that he had in mind any symbolic connection between *La mer* and *Tristan und Isolde*.[7]

In my book on Debussy I wrote about his use of *bifocal tonality* and its ancestry in Russian music;[8] in works like *Faune*, bifocal tonality associates relative major and minor into a single super-key under one key signature.[9] Large sections of *Pelléas et Mélisande* can be analyzed in this way, where the tonality, although flexible as to tonal center, is nevertheless stable and untinged by strong chromaticism. We may refer once more to the letter scene, which is framed in A natural minor, sometimes with a cadence in C major, and in which, because of its spare texture, any addition of a chromatic tone is sufficient to indicate a psychological departure. The B♭ at measure 241 ("Elle pleure tout à coup . . .") is the first out-of-scale event in ten long measures, but it belongs to F major/D minor, keys that are closely related to C major/A minor. At measure 255 the first appearance of an F♯, as part of a dominant of G minor, points to the mention of Arkel, and his own entrance, "Je n'en dis rien," at measure 270 on a D♯-minor triad, is at the polar opposite from A minor, linked by the F♯-added sixth that becomes a consonant factor of D-sharp minor.

The subject of Debussy's keys is a large one, so only a few will be discussed here. C major is a logical place to start, as though in a theory textbook, but Debussy uses C major relatively infrequently as a principal key. There are obvious reasons why "Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum" and the etude "Pour les cinq

Example 15.2. (a) *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 2, m. 241; (b) *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 4, mm. 605–6; (c) *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 5, m. 181; (d) E. Satie, prelude to *Le fils des étoiles*, m. 1.



doigts" are in C major, and it represents the "white" key of celestial purity in *La damoiselle élue*, but there is nothing else to connect these works symbolically, nor with "Mouvement" or "Le jet d'eau."

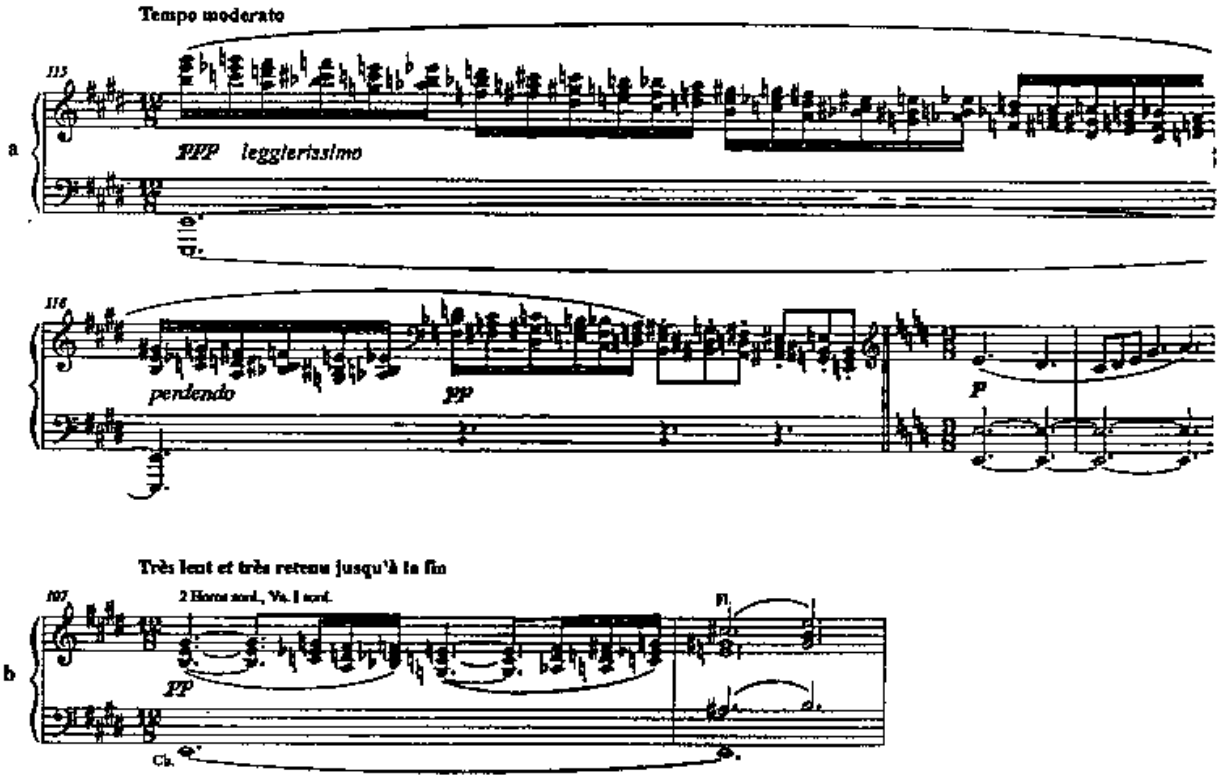
Another key that Debussy uses relatively rarely is E-flat major, and the three-flat signature is even less frequent. Only a few of his works demonstrate E-flat major as a principal key, notably his earliest known song, *Nuit d'étoiles*, and *La belle au bois dormant* soon after, plus "Golliwogg's Cake-walk" much later. Other than in passing moments, E-flat major occurs in Debussy in specialized situations, especially as a key deployed for an unexpected, sudden gesture. As early as the seventh measure of the *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra it appears as a

tonal disruption, a sudden departure from the solidly asserted G major that began the work; the reverse progression concludes the movement, so it can be considered structural. One of Debussy's most striking aural images is found in the sudden shift from F-sharp major to E-flat major at the boundary between the slow movement and the finale of this same *Fantaisie*, mm. 89–90, a progression that is exactly replicated with D-sharp major in measures 5–6 of part 2 of *Printemps*, and nearly twenty years later, the interrupting music at the end of "Les parfums de la nuit."[10] In each of these cases the progression highlights a textural disturbance in a gradual transition from slow movement to finale. These examples show E-flat major arriving by modulation through downward third. A comparable instance in the opposite direction is at measure 12 of "Le jet d'eau." Baudelaire's text has just concluded on a strong cadence in C major at the end of a ten-measure phrase: "Dans cette pose nonchalante / Où t'a surprise le plaisir," when E-flat major suddenly appears as a pleasant surprise with the words "Dans la cour le jet d'eau qui jase . . .." From E-flat major the departure to the dominant of C-sharp and then E major is no less sudden, arriving at a half cadence in C major once more to complete the eight-measure phrase (mm. 12–19); it offers a strong contrast of remote tonal relationships before gradually and deviously restoring C major in the rondo-like refrain that ends "Tombe comme une averse / De larges pleurs."

There are other examples of "sudden" E-flat major that one might point to for their value as psychological images. In the coda of *L'isle joyeuse*, following an ascent of whole-tone harmony, and just before the A major peroration that forms the climax, there is a sudden blaze of trumpet-like E-flat-major triads, like a herald. This is a tritone opposition to the A major that soon follows. But it is hard to find a good explanation for the particularly abrupt appearance of E-flat major in the Menuet of the *Suite bergamasque*, at measure 73, which follows a supertonic harmony in A major. After seventy-two measures with a neutral key signature of A minor, Debussy introduces a three-flat key signature at this very point, retaining it for just seven measures before changing to three sharps, another tritone opposition.

That the tonal structure of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* associates E major and C-sharp minor bifocally is well known.[11] Thus it is all the more significant that the remote association of E-flat major plays a brief but significant psychological role in this work. This is at the point that represents the faun's most strained effort at distant recollection: the only time in *Faune* where the main melody is stated without beginning on C♯ or E is at measure 86, and here it starts on E♭ and with the *oboe*, not the flute. The next statement of the main melody is with both the flute and the initial C♯ restored. The function of E major in *Faune* has been so well explored by others that I will mention here only an E-major aural image that originated in *Printemps*, beginning at measure 115 (see ex. 15.3). Note the specific connection of E major with the key of the minor sixth degree, C major.

Example 15.3. (a) *Printemps*, mm. 115–18; (b) *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, mm. 107–8.



It is apparent that E major was one of Debussy's favorite keys from his earliest days as a composer. For its history in his work, one might first consider the songs. Fourteen of Debussy's early songs have the four-sharp signature, and some, like *Beau soir*, "Chevaux de bois," five of the songs from the Vasnier period, and "C'est l'extase" begin and end with E-major harmony; *Les angélus* begins and ends with C-sharp-minor harmony; "Recueillement" and "L'échelonnement des haies" begin with C-sharp minor and end with C-sharp major, the latter in a *tierce de Picardie*. The four-sharp signature is the primary indication of formal closure, because all of these songs show the most varied plasticity of keys in between their beginnings and endings. These are all small forms, and we find the E–C-sharp polarity among the songs as late as "Colloque sentimental" as well. Debussy's early and middle piano music is comparable, as in the *Andante cantabile*, the "Cortège" of the *Petite suite*, and a large part of *Triomphe de Bacchus*. The first of the *Deux arabesques* shows a pellucid E major with a developing layout that would have done credit to Chopin, and so does the *Danse* that was once titled *Tarantelle styrienne*.

Several songs of the early 1890s demonstrate a more flexible bifocal tonality of E major and C-sharp minor. *Les cloches* of 1891, with its carillon ostinato

of C♯–D♯–E melodically emphasizes C♯ throughout, but gives equal weight to the E-major triad in the latter half of the song, where C♯ appears as added sixth. On the other hand, *Les angélus*, with a similar ostinato and a C♯ downbeat, mostly avoids the E-major triad until quite near the end, though it cleverly dodges back to C-sharp minor in the last measures. A third song from 1891 with the four-sharp signature, *Dans le jardin*, blends the C-sharp-minor/E-major ambiguity throughout, even to the final chord, an E-major triad surmounted by C♯ in the upper voice as added sixth.

Pour le piano is reckoned as middle-period Debussy, from about 1901, but the Sarabande comes as early as 1894 in its first version. Like *Dans le jardin*, just mentioned, the Sarabande blends E major and C-sharp minor with studied ambiguity; the first four measures are classically E major but end with a half cadence on G-sharp minor, the dominant degree of C-sharp, while the next four measures are melodically more directed toward C-sharp but find their half cadence in E. This is in part the consequence of the natural minor scale, but it also signals the tendency of the entire piece to prioritize half cadences at the expense of authentic cadences on different tonics.

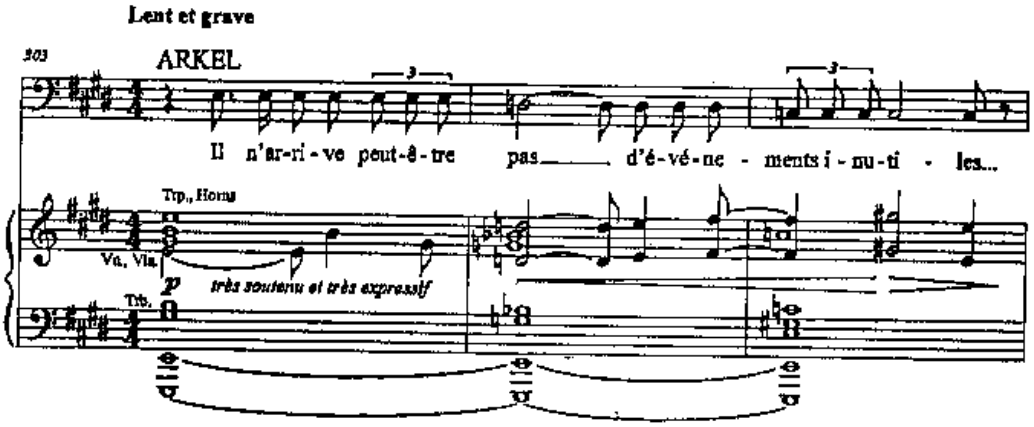
The Toccata, tonally a logical follower to the Sarabande, is clearly C-sharp minor at the beginning but without a classical dominant containing B♯ until the second page of the score. If the first eight measures are melodically C♯-centered, the next twelve are even more strongly E major. It is noteworthy in this piece that Debussy's C-sharp minor is projected with the natural minor scale, and the major form of dominant harmony in C-sharp minor is de-emphasized, just as the classical dominant of E major is *not* de-emphasized. This is just one example of intermodal flexibility in the context of a large rondo form that is unquestionably structured around C-sharp minor/C-sharp major with the widest variety of developing tonality in between the formal mileposts, including some harmonies that even Debussy might have identified as experimental within his own style.

The remainder of this essay chiefly focuses on the bifocal relationship of E major and C-sharp minor in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which is probably the most important marker in the very broad and varied tonal structure of the opera as a whole. A good place to begin is with the centering pitch class E. In the first scene of act 1 there are observable E^7 and E^9 chords: at "vous êtes belle" at m. 66, "elle est tombée en pleurant" at measure 103, at "vous avez l'air très jeune" at measures 151–52, but these are classically out of context; they are momentary events, not crossroads. No strong tonal context of E major is established until the interlude after scene 1. E begins to appear as a tonal centre at measure 215, *Un peu moins lent*, then at measure 223, the dynamic climax on a root position triad in F-flat minor, which is strong for only an instant; the letter scene begins just a few measures later, first with E half-diminished at measure 228 and then with a sustained E, the single note at measure 229. This is the

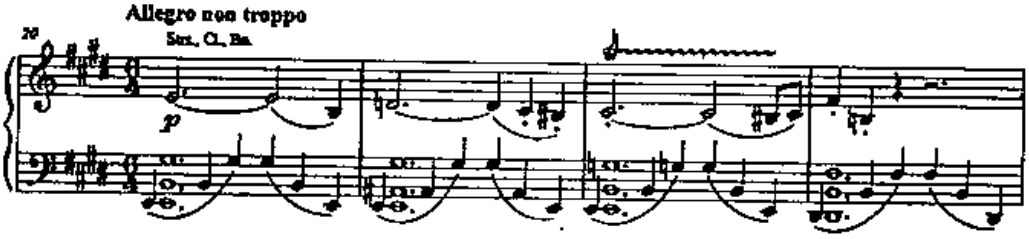
pitch, E above middle C, that Geneviève clings to as she reads Golaud's letter. The "first letter" part of the scene is strongly in bifocal A minor – C major, and this bifocal key, with particular emphasis on the pitch class E, continues to predominate through Arkel's first speech, until measure 296, at which point the signature changes to four sharps, with a strong dominant of E major alternating bifocally with C-sharp minor. Only at measure 303 does an unquestionably strong *tonic* sonority in E major assert itself, *Lent et grave*, at Arkel's shrug of resignation: "Il n'arrive peut-être pas d'événements inutiles." This is Debussy's *Scheherazade* moment (compare the strong E major of the examples below), and the first time Arkel's emblematic theme appears as an upper melody. (See example 15.4; it first appeared as a bass melody in m. 131; then as an interior melody in mm. 221–24.) Pelléas enters at measure 318, and the key signature changes from four sharps to three; the bass line descends stepwise from E to D to C♮ as Arkel asks "Qui est-ce qui entre là?" The descent in the bass is repeated, E–D–C♮, when Arkel continues "Est-ce-toi, Pelléas?," but Arkel's melody centers on E. As Pelléas speaks for the first time, we are back in A minor, the emblematic key, for the second letter, from Pelléas's friend Marcellus. This begins at measure 338 with the stable A-minor triad, and a stable E in the vocal line, exactly as when Geneviève had begun her reading of Golaud's letter at measure 232. If this prioritizes the pitch class E as a "letter" emblem, it also hints at the symbolism of E for Pelléas in the first scene of act 2.

More "événements" of E follow quickly just before the end of the letter scene. The first is the prominent E above middle C at measures 354–55, which had first been heard as F♭ at measure 226 as the curtain rises on the scene, and was emphasized three times as an appoggiatura seventh above F: at measures 239–40, 249–50, and finally at the very end of the scene, measures 356–57 (see ex. 15.5). The next marker is another curtain-raiser, at measure 386, and once more the four-sharp signature appears, for just five measures, with palpable bifocal E major and C-sharp minor before C major suddenly appears at measure 391 with the change of tempo. At the next change of tempo, *Animez un peu*, measure 403, Debussy has four sharps again, but it is really F-sharp Dorian, for six measures. There is more E major at measure 416, again with four sharps, but it yields quickly to G-sharp minor (m. 420, "la mer est sombre"). All of the four-sharp markers in this third scene serve to highlight either Mélisande or the arrival of Pelléas; even though it is the six-sharp signature, F-sharp major, the eventual key of love, that brings the two of them together as he takes her by the arm at measure 471, concluding act 1. The bifocal partnership of C-sharp minor–E major in the first scene of act 2 of *Pelléas et Mélisande* thus comes as no surprise. It is not a struggle for predominance but more a tonal–modal sharing of resources. It is significant that act 2 was the last to be composed, in 1895, after the successful première of *Faune*, and we know that Debussy had spent at least a full year refining *Faune* before it was performed in December 1894.

Example 15.4a. *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 1, mm. 303–5.

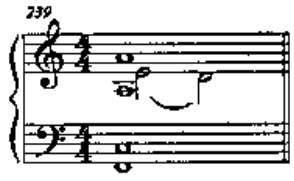


Example 15.4b. Rimsky-Korsakov, *Scheherazade*, part 1, mm. 20–23.



One suspects that *Faune* was still well in his mind when he sketched out the first scene of act 2, beginning in four sharps. The E-major–C-sharp-minor dichotomy is constantly present in this scene, and the emphasis on one tonic or the other is constantly blurred by modal progressions, avoided dominants, and displacements from root position. This is plain enough when the sixteenth notes begin to flow, at measure 13, with the upper melody over C♯ or its dominant note G♯, while the bass remains on E for 8 measures, only to move to a C^9 when Mélisande comments on the clarity of the water. A stronger root-position E major, on E^9, does not come until measure 27 ("On l'appelle encore 'la fontaine des aveugles'"). Measures 40–43 are closely similar to measures 17–20, and this time they are followed by a stronger E major, with more root-position harmony, when Mélisande leans over the well. From there the harmony becomes much more varied, touching on the dominant of E♭ and more strongly on modal harmony in C; with the arrival of the dominant of C at measure 54, Pelléas discovers Mélisande's hair ("Oh! votre chevelure . . ."), and at a critical moment (m. 58, "Vos cheveux ont plongé dans l'eau") the four-sharp key signature disappears.

Example 15.5. *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 1, m. 239.



The absence of key signature suggests a destabilization of key—many temporary shifts of tonal center follow as clouds begin to appear on the emotional horizon—but it also suggests the tentative psychological emergence of A minor/C major as a shared tonal–modal basis. The root-position C-major harmony of "Vos cheveux ont plongé dans l'eau" relates back to measure 21, "l'eau est claire," but even more to act 1, measure 98, "Qu'est-ce qui brille ainsi au fond de l'eau?" But this is less important, I think, than the psychologically disturbing disappearance of the four sharps in the signature. This is where the trouble starts: Pelléas asks Mélisande about when she met Golaud, she fibs about it and changes the subject, and then she takes off her wedding ring and loses it. At "Il est tombé!" the twelve strokes of noon in the harp are on E (mm. 83–87), and most of the harmony that follows within the next twenty or so measures is easily heard in C major or close to it, with a neutral key signature. The scene closes with the sixteenth-note melody that opened it, but in C major, at measure 116. As Pelléas says "La vérité, la vérité . . ." the four-sharp key signature returns at measure 119 and remains for just three measures. It is surprising enough that no key signature is indicated again until measure 428, when Pelléas and Mélisande enter the grotto by the sea; it is just as surprising that the signature here is four sharps, lasting just seven measures, and thus, other than the neutral key signature, without sharps or flats, the *only* key signature found in all of act 2 is four sharps.

One must not put too fine a point on this restrained and even structural use of key signatures at a critical point in the development of the opera. The spectrum of keys is constantly shifting throughout the opera as a whole as well as in those places where one cannot define a key signature. As Richard Langham Smith points out, there is also a tritone opposition between E-flat minor and A minor: this is especially prominent in act 2, scene 3, the cave scene, beginning with E-flat minor at measure 435 when the four-sharp signature disappears, and ending with the A Dorian in the last seven measures of the act (mm. 473–79). But in between we find G-flat major at the moment when moonlight illuminates the cave, and Debussy has shown us G-flat major or F-sharp major any number of times before in the opera, as well as in all five acts and often with special psychological prominence.

Act 3 begins with a mysterious modal B major, with a key signature of one sharp. One would hardly suppose this to be a dominant preparation for E; it functions that way, but hardly sounds like it. Mélisande's famous unaccompanied song follows, in E Dorian, which prioritizes E and C♯. From measures 51 to 117 the key signature is neutral, and the harmony free-ranging through unstable tonalities. At measure 118 (compare m. 109) the signature changes to four sharps for just twelve measures and then disappears; the increase in emotional tension of this passage is slight but palpable, and reaches a plateau when the G-flat-major signature appears at measure 163, *Modéré, puis progressivement animé et passionné*.[12] The climax (m. 182, *Toujours animé*), when the doves fly out of the tower, is heralded by a sudden change of key signature from G-flat major to E major, which yields to C-sharp minor mixed with whole-tone harmony. The four-sharp signature disappears at measure 201, and there is a sudden and scary downward shift from D-flat major to C major, just before Golaud arrives. All the rest of act 3 is directed away from the E-major/C-sharp-minor dichotomy. There is a well prepared C-sharp *major* at measure 385 (six sharps), "Elles se sont refugiées du côté de l'ombre," but this is preparatory to the G-flat major that concludes the scene, with its Tristan-chord moment (m. 401), as mentioned earlier.

In the next scene, with Yniold, there are five measures of four sharps at the very beginning (m. 422). At measure 510 ("De quoi parlent-ils quand ils sont ensemble?") the four-sharp signature returns for seven measures, but the harmony is more in the form of the dominant of F-sharp. Then at measure 531 E major is in root-position and becomes stronger: "Pelléas et petite mère parlent-ils jamais de moi quand je ne suis pas là?" After only eight meaures, the four-sharp key signature disappears and there is no key signature for the remainder of the act, 214 more measures. E and C♯ do not disappear, however. At measure 646, when Golaud lifts up Yniold above his shoulders, the subdued but terrifying headlong rush to the emotional climax begins, with C♯ and E together (the E is in repeated triplets in the divided viola). In a masterstroke of orchestral creepiness, the strings are muted. The final notes of act 3 are an octave E.

Pitch class E is still in the ear at the beginning of act 4, but concealed as the dominant degree of A minor, and it is also Pelléas's centering pitch when he describes how his father, recovered from illness, has told him to travel far away. This repeated E—"il faut voyager"—recalls Geneviève's reading of Golaud's letter in act 1, scene 2. This same pitch class persists, again concealed by different harmony, in the remainder of this short scene, as Pelléas and Mélisande plan to meet once more at the fountain. Then a full E-major harmony absorbs the solitary E in the next scene, in Arkel's fatherly address to Mélisande, recalling the *Scheherazade* harmony of act 1 scene 2. Golaud's rage against Mélisande later in this scene climaxes with E: "vous voyez—je ris déjà comme un enfant."

After Golaud's rage subsides a moment later, E disappears entirely; the long B-flat-minor interlude that follows is its polar opposite. E as a distinctive pitch resurfaces in Yniold's scene when he tries to move the heavy stone and when he hears the flock of sheep passing by. In this short episode, the regularly repeated E is part of modal harmony in C major/E minor, but it is a main component of Yniold's vocal line—a centering pitch. Thus it is not really surprising, considering how frequently this particular E has been emphasized in the different sung parts, that it appears in the next scene at an emotional climax: "Pelléas!"—"Mélisande! Est-ce toi, Mélisande?" The dominant of E sounds just twice more in act 4, at measure 643, "Est-ce vrai ca que tu dis?," and at measure 810, "Toutes les étoiles tombent."

In act 5 there is essentially no E major at all. Indeed, any appearance of stable tonality with strong root-position triads or seventh chords is rare in this final act of the opera. There is little or no arioso, and even a slightly stable key seldom lasts beyond a single phrase. Unadorned triads in a pristine harmonic environment occur mostly when Mélisande sings, or when Arkel sings to her. The vague F minor that begins act 5 is a *pianissimo* echo of the *fortissimo* last measures of act 4, but this F minor moves to greater stability and rising intensity in F-sharp minor, the most assertive tonality in the entire act, when Golaud confronts Mélisande, and this is wrought in dissonant harmony. There is an absolute-pitch irony here: the F-sharp minor with appoggiatura major ninth at "il faut qu'il sache la vérité!" (mm. 170, 183), reflecting the lack of resolution in Golaud's mind about Mélisande's claim to guiltnessness, is the same harmony, and with the same pitch classes, as at Pelléas's "C'est que je te regarde" in act 4, measures 670–71. There is a fine irony, too, in the gradual reappearance of stable tonality only after Mélisande dies. C-sharp minor appears, beginning at measure 370, recapitulating music first heard just before act 1, scene 3, and it soon yields to C-sharp major via a minor plagal cadence. We recall that F-sharp major was the tonality of light and love, but F-sharp minor is its decay before rebirth, marking the change of key signature to seven sharps for the C-sharp-major orchestral postlude. This becomes what is tonally the strongest harmony in the entire act 5. Further study is needed fully to uncover the structural importance of A minor, which has only been hinted at here and which is often associated with the equally structural A/C-sharp. The motivic flowing sixteenths in bifocal C-sharp minor/E major at the beginning of act 2, for instance, reappear in A minor/C major over a C bass at measure 116, over an E bass at measure 304, and once more, over an A bass, at measures 376–77 before shifting to the dominant of E major.

Alban Berg, twenty-three years younger than Debussy, was a profound admirer of the older composer's music. They probably did not know each other personally, though that suggestion has been made.[13] Berg certainly modeled the structure of alternating scenes and interludes in his opera *Wozzeck* on that

of *Pelléas et Mélisande* and took pride in the fact. He was also proud of saying that his *Wozzeck* was circular in conception, and that the last chord of *Wozzeck* could easily join up again with the first. Dramatically, there is a comparable suggestion in *Pelléas et Mélisande,* to the effect that "it is now the turn of the poor little girl" who could grow up in another opera to be another Mélisande. In that case, Berg, looking at Debussy's score, would naturally say that C♯ is the leading-tone to D.

Notes

1. D-flat major was a favored key from the early *Nocturne* for piano (1892) and the quite similar "Clair de lune" (from *Suite bergamasque*), probably written at about the same time, all the way to *La puerta del Vino* composed twenty years later, with the slow movement of the String Quartet in between (1893).
2. René Peter, *Claude Debussy* (Paris: Gallimard, 1931).
3. Richard Langham Smith, "Tonalities of Darkness and Light," in *Claude Debussy: "Pelléas et Mélisande,"* ed. Roger Nichols and Richard Langham Smith, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 107–39.
4. The presence of a key signature is a proclamation of tonal allegiance to a scalar system that is either classically a major mode or a minor mode, depending on whether the tonic triad is major or minor. Debussy's music, particularly in the works up to and including *La mer,* relies on this classical supposition even when the tonal center is momentarily suspended. As I discuss in my own book, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality: Essays on His Music* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2004), Debussy's uses of inflected scale degrees associated with the church modes may be frequent and even pervasive, but they are almost always local to the immediate context and are part of the melody, not the supporting harmony.
5. See Mark DeVoto, "The Strategic Half-diminished Seventh Chord and the Emblematic Tristan Chord: A Survey from Beethoven to Berg," *International Journal of Musicology* 4 (1995): 139–53. There is a considerable literature on Debussy's use of the Tristan chord. In addition to my own article, the following are of particular interest and relevance: Carolyn Abbate, "*Tristan* in the Composition of *Pelléas*," *19th-Century Music* 5, no. 2 (1981): 117–41, which especially examines Debussy's different stages of sketches; David Code, "Hearing Debussy Reading Mallarmé: Music *après Wagner* in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54, no. 3 (2001): 493–554, a close correlation of the poem with the score; also by Code, "Debussy's String Quartet in the Brussels Salon of 'La Libre Esthétique,'" *19th-Century Music* 30, no. 3 (2007): 257–87; Gregory Marion, "Crossing the Rubicon: Debussy and the Eternal Present of the Past," *Intersections* 27, no. 2 (2007): 36–59; and François de Médicis, "*Tristan* dans *La mer*: Le crépuscule wagnérien noyé dans

le zénith debussyste?," *Acta musicologica* 79, no. 1 (2007): 195–251, a detailed and penetrating harmonic survey. I am obliged to add here that in my book (*Veil of Tonality*) I suggest that Debussy's quotation of the opening gesture of *Tristan und Isolde* in the middle section of "Golliwogg's Cake-walk" might have been unintentional. This suggestion is now directly refuted by the recollection of the English pianist Harold Bauer (1873–1951), who gave the première performance of *Children's Corner* in 1908: "After I played the last piece, 'Golliwog's Cake-walk,' he remarked: 'You [Debussy] don't seem to object today to the manner in which I treat Wagner.' I had not the slightest idea what he meant and asked him to explain. He then pointed out the pitiless caricature of the first measures of *Tristan and Isolde* that he had introduced in the middle of the 'Cake-walk.' It had completely escaped me." Harold Bauer, *Harold Bauer: His Book* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1948), 141.

6. The sea is mentioned between these markers, but at measure 405, where the harmony is an F-sharp major-triad, it is not the sea itself but "la clarté de la mer" that is emphasized—another illustration of F-sharp major as a "tonality of light." Nevertheless, all these marine harmonies are related, especially in this scene and in act 3, scene 3.
7. François de Médicis offers a compelling suggestion to the contrary: see his "*Tristan* dans *La mer*: Le crépuscule wagnérien noyé dans le zénith debussyste?," *Acta musicologica* 79/1 (2007): 195–251.
8. Mark DeVoto, "'The Keel Row,' *Gigues*, and Bifocal Tonality," in *Veil of Tonality*, 126–43.
9. See Mark DeVoto, "Memory and Tonality in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*," *Cahiers Debussy* 37–38 (2013–14): 5–21.
10. "Aural Images: Debussy's Recycling," in DeVoto, *Veil of Tonality*, chapter 2.
11. See Matthew Brown, "Tonality and Form in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*," *Music Theory Spectrum* 15, no. 2 (1993): 127–43; John Crotty, "Symbolist Influences in Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*," *In Theory Only* 11 (1982): 17–30; and DeVoto, "Memory and Tonality."
12. In the full score this entire passage, measures 163–81 (beginning with rehearsal number 15), is written with a signature of five flats, the C♭ written in as an accidental. The piano-vocal score, second engraving (1907) with interludes incorporated, has the signature of six flats.
13. Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, "Debussy or Berg? The Mystery of a Chord Progression," *Musical Quarterly* 51 (1965): 453–59.