

Debussy – Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune – Specimen Questions

1. Why do you think Boulez regarded the Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune as the beginning of modern music?

Pierre Boulez wrote music using the twelve-tone serial technique. One could imagine that such organised, mathematical music is worlds apart from Debussy's flexible, shimmering washes, yet there are many reasons why the Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune could be considered the start of 'modern' music – that including the avant garde, along with more tonal compositions of the Twentieth Century and beyond.

Orchestral colour is a major feature of this work. Debussy raised the importance of timbre to equal harmony and melody. It is the sounds we hear that are most interesting when listening to the Prélude. An immediate parallel could be drawn with John Cage who emphasised timbre and rhythm over harmony and melody in his Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano. One is also reminded of the work of John Adams and his exploration of the sounds that a body of instruments can make.

Debussy's most distinctive innovations were harmonic. His use of the whole tone and pentatonic scales foreshadowed future composers who built their music on these and other arrangements of notes. The tonality of the Prélude is ambiguous – while occasionally there is a cadence for structural reasons, rarely does the music remain around a tonal centre, and chords are used for colouristic purposes rather than as part of a harmonic progression. When we think we know what key the composer is thinking in, another note appears, contradicting this assumption. In this sense, then, the music is atonal – there is no tonal centre. Many avant garde composers took this idea further by avoiding any suggestion of key in their music.

2. Why could NAM 5 be described as a tone poem

Tone Poems, or Symphonic Poems as they can also be known, are generally one-movement works for orchestra and are concerned with presenting non-musical ideas through music. There are two particular types – the descriptive, in the manner of Berlioz's 'Symphonie Fantastique' or Dukas' 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice', which aim to portray specific events, and secondly those which try to illustrate ideas or feelings and atmosphere. The Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune by Debussy could be considered a tone-poem of the second variety.

Debussy described this work as a series of "tableaux through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon." Debussy's music not only adopts the atmosphere of the poem, but its form as well – with lazy outer sections contrasting with a more active middle. The Mallarmé poem upon which the Prélude is based is clearly evocative, and the warm, dreamlike atmosphere is painted in music using many compositional devices – chromatic melody, rich harmony, ambiguous tonality, a lack of any sense of pulse, and characteristic orchestral colour.

It is this approach to composition which led to Debussy being labelled 'impressionist'; his aim to evoke moods and impressions through harmony and tone colour, much unlike previous composers who had emphasised melody and form. The music is not romantic since it does not try to express deeply-felt emotions or tell a story, in the way that some of Richard Strauss's symphonic poems do.

The Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune is programme music of the highest degree. Its structure is governed, though loosely, by the words of the poem and while there are unifying motifs, these are rarely developed into new thematic material. Each twist and turn of the music relates to the poem; the music already played is a distant memory, occasionally rejuvenated like an image of the past; Debussy avoids the practice of absolute music of constant self-referencing and making new material flow from what has gone before.

3. Explain the difference between functional and non-functional (or colouristic) harmony.

Functional harmony is that which leads the music in a particular direction tonally – it forms a purposeful progression from one key to another in a journey which helps to define not only the structure of a piece, but also its unity and cohesion. Cadences are the hallmarks of functional harmony; clearly defining the end of one section of music and the start of another, be it individual phrase or complete section. Traditional composers have sought to make the cadence inevitable, through careful construction of the preceding harmonic progression.

Functional harmony is not absent from Debussy's *Prélude*, and a good example can be found in bars 105-6 which feature a perfect cadence in E, marking out the final section of the piece – almost symbolic of a resolution as all the ideas and suggestions come to rest.

Colouristic harmony has no structural purpose. It does not lead the music from one goal to another. It is used purely for effect – to enhance the atmosphere, emotional drive or merely to add interest to the music. Non-functional harmony consists of successions, rather than progressions, of unrelated chords. The music can sound unresolved and meandering, highly suited then to Debussy's realisation of Mallarmé's poem.

Colouristic harmony is evident in bars 103-104. Beneath the rather chromatic oboe solo are the chords C, Am, C7, C, F#m, F#m7. These do not suggest any particular tonal centre or harmonic progression – indeed the chords of C and F# are as distant from each other as possible in the circle of 5ths, being a tritone apart. The chords are chosen because of their sound. In this piece colour is provided not only by instrumental timbres but harmony as well.

4. Why is the tonality ambiguous in the first 20 bars of NAM 5?

A number of factors in Debussy's music contribute to the ambiguity of tonality, which heightens the sense of shimmering images on a drowsy, hot afternoon.

Key to this is the composer's use of the whole-tone scale and the tritone interval. Traditional major/minor harmony is based on scales that are hierarchical: the uneven distribution of intervals means that some notes have a greater importance with regard to the tonality of the music. In contrast, the whole tone scale consists of equally spaced notes and its use can therefore disguise any tonal centre. This ambiguity is epitomised by Debussy's use of the tritone in the *Prélude*. Not only does the initial flute solo have a range of a tritone (C#-G), but it appears in the half-diminished chord of which the composer is so fond (look at the oboes in bar 4; the violins in bar 7). It should be noted that this particular interval represents the furthestmost points in the circle of 5ths – the reason for its instability.

In the first few bars of the piece, Debussy seems to be using the Dorian mode on C# (the flute melody containing all notes except the F#, in bars 3-4). One would imagine that this would at least provide some kind of aural 'anchor' of tonality, yet the composer ends the melody inconclusively on an A#, the 6th degree of the mode. Further, although the A- is part of the C#m^{add6} chord, the dissonance fails to resolve; the music instead pivots to Bb7. Throughout the piece, almost as soon as we are quite certain of the tonal centre, Debussy unsettles us by pivoting in a completely different direction.

The tonal ambiguity of the music is enhanced by the chromatic movement of the melody lines – it is not until the third bar that we have any clue as to tonal centre. Other melodies are similar, such as the rising pattern in the horns at bar 13, and the oboe melody at bar 14-16 leaps in a similarly undefined way.

Most important to the tonal ambiguity of this music is the lack of clear cadences. Chords are left 'hanging', perhaps followed by silence, as in bar 6, or by unrelated chords. It is Debussy's use of harmony for colouristic purposes that makes our journey through the music uncertain, with rarely a foothold to attach ourselves to.

1. Compare Bars 1-10 with 11-20 in terms of texture, harmony and instrumentation.

The *Prélude* opens with a solo flute melody, unaccompanied until bar four. Tonality is ambiguous – the solo spans the range of a tritone initially, and no particular key is implied until halfway through bar three. This is almost immediately negated by a half-diminished chord in the woodwind. The noble French horns enter with short repeated motifs as an answering call, above further ambiguous half-diminished chords in the strings that never resolve. The dreamy and languid atmosphere is enhanced by Debussy's orchestration, which features gentle harp glissandos, muted strings and a soloistic treatment of the wind instruments.

In the following section, the same opening phrase is this time harmonised by strings and clarinets. Again the horns answer, but with a rising scale, and the oboe extends the melody from the flute. The harmony gently shifts without any clear cadences, and the movement is mainly chromatic – the individual parts tend to move by step, giving an impression of stillness. The strings are playing quite low in their register, providing 'space' for the soloists, and the violins are divided. Not only this, but the strings are using tremolo and playing 'sur la touche', adding to the shimmering effect. Towards the end of this section, the texture begins to build towards one of homophony with all instruments (except harp) repeating a short motif. With a crescendo, the build-up is significant, but in bar 20 everything tops to let a solo clarinet lead us into a new section.

2. Identify one short passage of 10-20 bars that you consider demonstrated Debussy's effective handling of instrumental forces and explain why.

One section that I think demonstrates well Debussy's command of the orchestra is that between bars 63 and 43. The music here is surprisingly bold, almost romantic, in a welcome contrast from the shimmering, soloistic textures we have experienced so far.

This is one of the few passages in which strings take the melody – and they do so with gusto. The expansive tune is played in octaves by violins, violas and cellos while the double bass keeps a sustained bass. Notably, the cellos are high in their register creating a very rich timbre.

The woodwind accompaniment is based on triplet patterns, though the notes are grouped in pairs – adding to the ambiguity of pulse. Woodwind too are quite high in their registers. Two harps enhance the dream-like effect with rippling arpeggios, though these tend to be lost in the overall texture.

At bar 67, the accompaniment becomes more scalic, rather than repeated pairs of notes. Flutes are doubling clarinets an octave higher with a slightly different pattern than the rest of the woodwind. The harps are in higher registers and now have independent parts. Flutes are very high in their range, while strings bring out the tune below the accompaniment. A crescendo builds until a peak at bar 70 before fading away as the accompaniment trails off, leaving the strings playing the melody. A horn phrase follows.

This section is dynamically the peak of the composition. Innovative texture and beautiful timbres combine to produce the richest and boldest music of the piece. The soaring melody and lusciously heavy scoring makes this one of the most satisfying passages in the Prélude.