

Summary of Three Dissertation Recitals

by
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mentor, Professor Skelton, who told me:

“I’d rather learn from one bird how to sing than teach 10,000 stars how not to dance.”

—E. E. Cummings

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ABSTRACT

Three dissertation recitals were given in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts.

The first dissertation recital was presented in Britton Recital Hall on December 15, 2019. The program consisted of music by Frédéric Chopin, including the Mazurkas, Op. 59; the Sonata no. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 35; the Nocturne in F major, Op. 15, no. 1; the Nocturne in B major, Op. 62, no. 1; and the Ballade no. 4 in F minor, Op. 52.

The second dissertation recital was presented in Britton Recital Hall on November 20, 2020. The program consisted of music by German composers: the Sonata in C Major, Op. 2, no. 3 by Ludwig van Beethoven, and the Toccata in C Major, Op. 7; and *Humoreske*, Op. 20 by Robert Schumann.

The third dissertation lecture recital, titled “The Collective Worlds of Debussy,” was presented in Britton Recital Hall on April 20, 2021. The lecture explored the influence of French Symbolist poetry, Gamelan music, American Vaudeville and the music of Richard Wagner on Debussy’s music. The following works by Debussy were discussed in the context of the cultural environment of turn-of-the-century Paris and then they were performed: “Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” from Preludes, Book 1; “Pagodes” from *Estampes*; “Minstrels” from Preludes Book 1; “Général Lavine-eccentric” from Preludes Book 2; *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, transcribed for solo piano by Vyacheslav Gryaznov.

RECITAL 1 PROGRAM



FIRST DISSERTATION RECITAL

XITING YANG, PIANO

*Sunday, December 15, 2019
Moore Building, Britton Recital Hall
7:30 PM*

Mazurkas, op. 59 (1845) No. 1 in A Minor No. 2 in A-flat Major No. 3 in F-sharp Minor	Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849)
Sonata no. 2 in B-flat Minor, op. 35 (1840) Grave—Doppio movimento Scherzo Marche funèbre: Lento Finale: Presto	Frédéric Chopin
<i>Intermission</i>	
Nocturne in F Major, op. 15, no. 1 (1832) Nocturne in B Major, op. 62, no. 1 (1846)	Frédéric Chopin
Ballade no. 4 in F Minor, op. 52 (1843)	Frédéric Chopin

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RECITAL 1 PROGRAM NOTES

Mazurkas Op. 59

The set of three mazurkas was composed in 1845, each of these miniature character pieces distinct from each other with its own poetic and colorful features. Chopin was passionate about folk music and he saw the mazurka as a means to express his musical inspiration as well as patriotism towards his motherland. The first one in A minor starts off in the tonic key, suggestive, wandering, searching, sounding like a melody floating from afar. After a series of chromatic explorations, the previously “lost” voice gradually grows into a section that is bolder and more certain with much vigor. The coda shows Chopin’s masterful manipulation of harmony and musical material - we hear the faintly echoed theme but without resolution - and the music evaporates into mist. The second of the set is seemingly simple and straightforward in form, a dance with a trio section, followed by a coda. However, the theme is transformed in the same way as in the ballades. The theme is presented at first in a gentle yet dignified manner. In the next entrance the theme is transformed into sixths and thirds, and is much grander in gesture. During the trio section, the theme is played by the left hand which is unusual in Chopin’s mazurkas as the left hand usually serves to accompany the melody. The sequential passage right before the epilogue is a signature of “late Chopin” as it is highly chromatic with mostly sliding and nonfunctional harmonies. The final piece of the set starts with a Mazurian dance and is full of exuberance

and grandeur. The contrasting section is particularly melodic and intricate with a rocking bass line as in a barcarolle. We also hear sections of bagpipe drones in the trio section. The ending leaves us with a lingering sensation of the colorful, evocative and highly chromatic palette Chopin created through these pieces.

Sonata No. 2, Op. 35, in B-flat Minor

The sonata was one of the most notable compositions from Nohant in 1839. The sonata as a genre was slowly losing its position of importance during Chopin's time. Composers from the Romantic era more frequently wrote character pieces that are much smaller in scale than the sonata. It is possible that Chopin could have modeled his B-flat sonata after Beethoven's Grand Sonata Op. 26 as it is the only sonata by Beethoven that Chopin had played. The formal design of both sonatas is similar as well: both contain a scherzo, funeral march and have a *perpetuum mobile* last movement. In a letter from Chopin's partner George Sand to a friend, she wrote "Chopin is still up and down, never exactly good or bad. [...] He is gay as soon as he feels a little strength, and when he's melancholy, he falls back onto his piano and composes beautiful pages." From the letter we can see that the initial stages and ideas are spontaneous and inspired. Chopin as a composer always followed this first period of creation with much careful revision. The first movement has much angst and agitation in the first theme. This turbulent beginning is contrasted by a chorale-like and sonorous *cantabile* second theme. The clashing of the two themes suggests a dramatic process of sudden juxtapositions, fighting, searching, longing and prevailing.

The second movement starts like a demonic dance from hell with devious accents. The trio of the scherzo emerges from silence, almost as if the scherzo never happened. The piano sings as if it is daydreaming, and the music is as far removed from the anxiety as possible. The scherzo crawls back in, bringing back the initial stormy temperament. In a letter Chopin wrote to describe a performance of the sonata, he said, “When I was playing my sonata in B-flat minor amidst a circle of English friends, an unusual experience befell me. I executed the allegro and scherzo more or less correctly and was just about to start the funeral march, when suddenly I saw emerging from the half-opened case of the piano the cursed apparitions that had appeared to me one evening in the Chartreuse (on Majorca island). I had to go out for a moment to collect myself, after which, without a word, I played on.” From the letter we can see clearly Chopin’s vivid imagination as well as his state of being when he played this sonata. The funeral march paints a somber picture of the graveyard and in the middle section brings back a distant but beautiful memory. The mysterious, fleeting finale, in sweeping parallel *sotto voce* octaves throughout, is unprecedented in the history of piano music. It still has a most striking and highly unusual effect even in the present day. Such a remarkable piece is difficult to describe. Anton Rubinstein said it was the sound of “wind howling around the gravestones.” Perhaps, though, it is an enigmatic expression of the mystery that follows death, as if we are drawn into a kind of cosmic wormhole of the unknown. I personally feel the whole sonata is a meditation on existential matters.

Nocturne in F major, Op. 15 No. 1

This dream-like piece was written, like so many of Chopin's nocturnes, under the influence of operatic arias, the simple but beautiful melody colored with *sfogato*, a specialized kind of light, airy, delicate operatic singing in high register, and later contrasted by an orchestral and stormy section in the parallel minor. Chopin juxtaposed an illuminating, pure and poetic picture with a tempestuous outburst. The first section returns unaltered, bringing us back into an angelic world of sound.

Nocturne in B Major, Op. 62 No. 1

One of Chopin's last works, Op. 62 No. 1, is a very haunting, melancholic and evocative piece. It starts with a striking arpeggiated flourish, announcing the story that is beginning to unfold. The first section is *dolce* and calming, but the underlying harmonic language is full of chromatic complexity and richness. The second section is syncopated, full of uncertainty, and is more fragmented than the first section. The first part returns in an embellished manner, referencing the *bel canto* style, in which a singer was expected to embellish and decorate the melody upon its recurrence. Chopin scholar James Huneker has given this nocturne the name of "Tuberose" as "the chief tune has charm, a fruity charm," and its return in the reprise "is faint with a sick, rich odor."

Ballade No. 4 in f minor, Op. 52

The introduction of the piece, mostly in the dominant key of C major, begins with soft repeated distant bell-like tones, seeming to emerge out of nothing. This evocative

opening leads us to the waltz-like main theme in f minor. The theme contains only five essential notes, but it goes through many different transformations and is subsequently presented in numerous variations throughout the piece as contrapuntal, melismatic, and canonic. Chopin successfully incorporates elements of variation form with the ballade genre. Approaching the coda, Chopin incorporates a series of sudden, rapid-fire harmonic modulations juxtaposed with sweeping arpeggiated and passionate surges. After a brief respite, pianissimo chords appear that remind us of the pastoral introduction. The coda then erupts violently, suddenly, with intense power and drama, rushing toward a fated ending.

RECITAL 2 PROGRAM



FIRST DISSERTATION RECITAL

XITING YANG, PIANO

*Friday, November 20, 2020
Moore Building, Britton Recital Hall
8:00 PM*

Sonata in C Major, op. 2, no. 3 (1795)

Allegro
Adagio
Scherzo
Allegro assai

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1779–1827)

Toccata, op. 7 (1833)

Robert Schumann
(1810–1856)

Intermission

Humoreske, op. 20 (1839)

Robert Schumann

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RECITAL 2 PROGRAM NOTES

Humoreske, Op. 20

Humoreske, Op. 20, was described by Schumann as perhaps his “most melancholy composition.” Upon finishing the piece, Schumann wrote to Clara Wieck from Vienna on 11 March 1839, “The whole week I have been sitting at the piano, composing and writing, laughing and crying all at once...” To understand the work and the implication of its title “*humor*,” we must turn to his literary inspiration Jean Paul. Schumann proclaimed that he “learned more counterpoint from Jean Paul than any music teacher.” *Humor*, from Jean Paul’s perspective, is far from being funny; it is a structural juxtaposition of the “small world” with the “infinite world” that provokes “laughter which contains pain and greatness.” Schumann’s incorporation of Jean Paul’s work is in the realm of form rather than content.

Instead of giving the seven pieces distinctive and evocative titles, Schumann gives only tempi suggestions which allow the listeners to have more freedom in the interpretation of the music. Different from earlier individual small and self-contained character pieces in *Fantasiestücke* or *Carnaval*, the thin-thin double bar line at the end of every piece in *Humoreske* implies *attacca* from piece to piece, suggesting that this is a continuous cycle of shorter pieces unified into a larger whole.

The first three pieces are mostly in a cyclical ABA form. Starting the fourth one “*Innig*,” the form becomes a little harder to define as it is written in a more stream of consciousness style, especially in the last piece “*Zum Beschluss*” (To the resolution), the long, soulful and winding lines seem to represent the infinite world of melodies that keep coming back over and over again; as Schumann himself put it, “Sometimes it even seem to me that I could play forever and never come to an end.”

An oft-misunderstood piece, the *Humoreske* definitely requires a different mode of listening than other compositions of Schumann. As author Koßmaly puts it, “[*Humoreske*] gradually communicates itself to the listener and fills him with a feeling of satisfaction that is as perfect, blissful, and profound as can be elicited only by those melodies that spring from the deepest, most secret source of the heart and from that genuine enthusiasm which transcends earthly bounds—then we believe that we shall not have missed the truth but instead come rather close to it, even if in our own way.”

Toccata, Op. 7

Composed in 1830 and revised in 1833, Toccata Op. 7 was originally titled *Etude fantastique en double-sons* (Fantastic Study in Double Notes). Schumann believed that it is “the hardest piece ever written.” In the 1830s, with the rise of a new kind of piano virtuosity

epitomized by Chopin and Liszt, Schumann was also eager to contribute to the repertoire.

Toccata, a Baroque musical form that exemplifies the dexterity and technique of the performer.

The form of the piece follows the conventional Sonata-Allegro model, Schumann incorporates multiple aspects of technical difficulties such as double notes, repeated octaves, fugal textures and big leaps. As scholar Daverio describes, “[Toccata is] the spirit of Bach, Beethoven and Paganini emerges through the interdependence of baroque rhythmic consistency, classicizing forms, and up-to-the minute virtuoso idiom.”

Sonata in C major, Op. 2 No. 3

The three piano sonatas Op. 2 are all large-scaled sonata form works, all are in four movements which is a more common practice for string quartets or symphonies as seen in Haydn’s work. During Haydn and Mozart’s time, solo piano sonatas were written for amateurs to play and enjoy at home, Therefore, the level of the technique is never overly challenging.

The third in the set, Sonata in C Major, is definitely the most brilliant and ambitious of all. In this sonata, Beethoven gets quite experimental with the sonata-allegro form, as well as virtuoso writing of the sonatas. Beethoven is always interested in testing limits, constantly pushing the limits of the instrument he was writing for. In the first movement, Beethoven broadens the form by introducing sections like a keyboard fantasy and a cadenza; orchestral sounding transitional passages also make the timbre and sound of the movement much grander.

The Adagio movement comes as a surprise in terms of key choice. After the opening movement's C major tonality, E major (the chromatically altered mediant) has a special serene and hopeful sound in Beethoven's work, somewhat like the surprising opening of the slow movement of the third piano concerto. In this movement, the string quartet-like opening texture is followed by an E minor section which has the style and texture of an organ prelude. Darkness, yearning, content and serenity are the ongoing themes of this movement.

The scherzo opens with rapid contrapuntal imitation, rhythmic and energetic. The stormy and turbulent trio section full of constant arpeggios is again, quite unexpected. The most shocking section of this movement is the coda. The obsessive fade-out effect of the coda is perhaps Beethoven paying homage to his teacher Haydn, who is the master of humor.

The final movement is a brilliant and sparkling rondo. As the main theme appears for the last time, the figurations and texture become increasingly dazzling. Near the end, Beethoven plays with our expectations once again by moving to the submediant A Major and A minor, before the triumphant end in C major.

RECITAL 3 PROGRAM



DISSERTATION LECTURE RECITAL

XITING YANG, PIANO

*Tuesday, April 20, 2021
Moore Building, Britton Recital Hall
7:30 PM*

LECTURE RECITAL: THE COLLECTIVE WORLDS OF DEBUSSY

Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir (1910)	Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
Pagodes (1903)	Claude Debussy
Minstrels (1910)	Claude Debussy
Général Lavine – eccentric (1913)	Claude Debussy
Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1894)	Claude Debussy <i>arr. Vyacheslav Gryaznov</i>

RECITAL 3 PROGRAM NOTES

The Collective Worlds of Debussy

Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir from **Préludes Book 1**

Debussy is such an iconic figure in the history of western music. His approach was always seen as radical by his peers but they couldn't deny his genius and talent. Like every great composer or artist, Debussy's ideas and perceptions were not understood by the majority of people at first. Critics in the late 19th century once lumped him together with French painters at the time who achieved a kind of a vagueness in their artworks—Debussy then mocked them by saying that he's trying to create something different than “what those imbeciles call Impressionism.”

In order to go beyond “Impressionism” and achieve a deeper level of thought, understanding, and state of being, Debussy created a musical language of his own, escaping from traditional formal structures as well as conventional harmonic progressions. He created a kind of music that was unprecedented in many ways.

Paris has always been the cultural capital of the world where much is happening artistically, intellectually all the time. A lot was happening in Paris in the late 1800s: the French celebrated the centennial of the Revolution; the Eiffel tower was completed; the Paris Universal Exposition was held; American vaudeville music was brought to the Paris stage. Debussy's exposure to different forms of art was vast.

In Paris of Debussy's time was a circle of poets, predominantly symbolists: Paul Valéry, Paul Verlain, Charles Baudelaire and Stephen Mallarmé. There was also a circle of painters: Odilon Redon, James Whistler and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

All of which are byproducts of the *fin-de-siecle*. This term refers to the phrase "turn of the century" as well as an end of an era, marking the onset of the next. The *fin-de-siecle* soon became a syndrome, which writer Heffernan describes:

Changes which are actually taking place at these junctures tend to acquire extra (sometimes mystical) layers of meaning. This was certainly the case in the 1890s, a decade of "semiotic arousal" when everything, it seemed, was a sign, a harbinger of some future radical disjuncture or upheaval... The original French expression, meaning simply "end of century," became a catch phrase to describe everything from the architectural and artistic styles... to the wider, often impassioned debates about the past, the present and the future on the eve of a new century.¹

Debussy's urge to carve out a new path for the music of the late romantics could be reasonably traced back to this new turn of the century ideology. As a connoisseur of poetry and paintings, Debussy often sought inspiration from his poet friends. One of the most prominent being Baudelaire, as Debussy composed "five poems of Charles Baudelaire" on poems taken from Baudelaire's collection of poems, *Les Fleurs de mal*, the *Flowers of Evil*. The first piece I will be discussing today derives from one of the poems in the *Flowers of Evil*.

A little definition on musical symbolism. The core belief of musical symbolism is the evocative quality that is possessed by extra-musical phenomena, elements such as

¹ Michael Heffernan, "Fin de Siècle, Fin du Monde? On the Origins of European Geopolitics; 1890–1920." *Geopolitical Traditions: A Century of Geopolitical Thought*, (eds. Klaus Dodds, & David A. Atkinson, London & New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 28, 31.

objects, a person or kind of an emotional state serve as a symbol that could ultimately transcend the ordinary world, and therefore achieve enlightenment.

The prelude “*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*” belongs to the first book of preludes written between 1909-10. This is the only piece in both books of preludes that used a direct quote from a line of poetry. It is inspired by the poem “*Harmonie du soir*” (Evening Harmony) in *Flowers of Evil* by Charles Baudelaire.

Some obvious questions for pianists:

1. How closely is the piece related to the poem contextually and structurally?
2. How is the meaning of the words reflected in the music?
3. To what extent does the meaning of the poem affect our understanding of the music?

Upon first reading of the poem, it is striking to see lines of poetry repeated exactly the same, over and over without variation or development. You will be able to see the full translation in the next slide. There are also different objects presented throughout the poem, as if Baudelaire is using these objects, things, sounds and smells to conjure up a certain feeling and state of being, conveying a vivid sense of time and place, without elaborate explanations.

The poem is written in the rhyme scheme of *Pantun*, a style of poem that consists of four-line stanzas, the second and fourth lines of each stanza becoming the first and third lines of the next stanza. The repetition of the lines creates an interweaving and interlocking pattern.

It also slows the rhythm of the poem down, giving readers time to experience and feel. As scholars mentioned in the making of a poem, “the reader takes four steps forward, then two back,” making the pantun a perfect form for the evocation of a past time.”² This also echoes the last line of the Baudelaire poem, “your memory in me glitters like a monsterness.” In the English translation I have also highlighted the symbols that are used. It seems like they could be grouped into two categories, slow and fast, or relaxed and agitated. It is interesting to see how Debussy conveys this sense of movement in the music.

Let’s look at how Debussy expresses all these nuances with music? The first thing is the presentation of the opening motive. Just like the poem, in the prelude, when the opening theme is presented. Every time, it is hardly altered, varied or developed. It is the same representation as we heard the first time. The only thing changing is the key and the tempo indications, as you can see on the second page of the score. We can see that Debussy marks the score with *serrez* and *retenu* frequently, creating a push and pull feeling that closely echoes the contrasting groups of symbols in the poem.

The evocative and limited development of the material freed Debussy from the highly developmental music of the late Germanic tradition. It also allowed him to experiment with new possibilities of harmonies with minimal motives.

² Eavan Boland, Mark Strand, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, 2001, United Kingdom: Norton.

Pagodas from *Estampes*

Let's now move to the world of Asian music.

The 1889 Paris Universal Exposition attracted nearly 25 million visitors featuring displays of concert halls, galleries, cafes, villages and architecture. One of the most successful displays of the exhibition was the Javanese Village, it was a spectacle of sacred dances, accompanied by music that is full of exoticism, taking visitors directly from Paris to Bali. The Javanese exposition entrance featured two tall towers with tiered pagoda-like roofs. And real inhabitants from Java were living in the tents for 6 months while the show was on display. In order to give a better sense of what their lives back home would look like, they were carrying on everyday chores and activities such as cooking, making wooden or bamboo utensils, weaving fabrics, playing on their hand instruments to escort the visitors in and out of their village. One of the many visitors was Debussy, who returned again and again to the exhibit.

Debussy was struck by Gamelan music, particularly its freeness of form and structure. In letters and writings, he expressed a strong desire to move away from the doctrines and constraints of pre-existing traditions. Contrary to Germanic music's core belief, Debussy was not keen on developing melodies and motives through variation, motivic fragmentation, modulation, sequence, etc. Debussy was on the one hand attracted to the exotic sounds and texture of the indigenous music of Southeast Asia, but he also found the equality of tone and pitch in gamelan music liberating. The tonal hierarchy is destroyed in the pentatonic scale; the structural climax is destroyed in the equilibrium of the parts.

There are generally three layers in the music played by a gamelan ensemble—three groups of instruments. The big gongs mark the division of phrases serving as a pedal tone and resonating with other parts. The smaller metallophone and xylophones play the core melody. All other parts of melodies are derived from the main melody. All parts are equal and complementary to each other. The texture of the music is usually busy and multilayered. Also, the balanced, blended and level texture of the gamelan music reflects the value and virtue of Javanese society, in which restrained behavior and smooth interactions between people are valued.

One of the elements that give the gamelan its exotic and curious timbre is its tuning system. Gamelan music uses the slendro scale, a five-note scale with equal space between each note. Debussy showcased the slendro scale by using predominantly pentatonic scale. The five-note scale closely resembled the slendro scale. Right from the first measure, Debussy creates a stratified layer, the piece starting with an open fifth that imitates the sound of a gong, low in pitch, and with a long resonance. Two measures later, the main motif is stated in a pentatonic scale, the melody here could be played on a metallophone instrument that is of higher register, also light and delicate sounding. To an unusual degree, virtually all of the motives in this piece create an up and down motion that is like the repetitive arch structure of the tiered pagoda roof.

Everything throughout the whole piece is closely related to this up and down motion, sometimes put together one on top of the other to create a cross-rhythm pattern. Debussy marks the opening, very delicate and almost without any nuances, which calls up eastern restraint rather than the western expressiveness in music. Rather than making the instrument sing like his

predecessors tried to do for many years, Debussy in the *Pagodes* fully embraced the percussive characteristic of the piano and manipulated different sound and textural possibilities, essentially creating a gamelan ensemble with one instrument.

Minstrels and Général Lavine—eccentric

What was happening in the city of Paris is also fascinating.

Thanks to Toulouse-Lautrec, who was keen to portray the nightlife of the working class, we can get a glimpse into the rich and vibrant nightlife in Paris at the turn of the century. Musicians sought out amusement at places like the *Cafe le chat noir* in Montmartre, music halls such as *Le Moulin Rouge*, as well as the circus. American minstrelsy was introduced at this time as a novel segment of the entertainment scene. The circus is where Debussy would have heard and seen the minstrel show. The minstrel show was brought to France from the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 by an impresario. Two actors were famous for their roles of clown and partner in the circus. The English clown was named Footit, and his partner was a black man from Spain, called Chocolat. Both of them appeared in the drawings of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Pianist Alfred Cortot describes the piece *Minstrels*: “This is a witty and jocular picture of the atmosphere of the music-hall. English clowns appear in the piece. *Minstrels*, elements of a circus act are easily identifiable. The nervous, awkward and stumbling clown in the beginning, the juggling action, the mocking of the moody character, the sound of the tambourines

as well as the witty and ironic presentation of the big romantic theme. All of these scenes are changing quite fast and frequently, like all of the circus acts. They are quick, smart and funny, a collage of different things they are poking fun at.” If we look at the other American-influenced piece by Debussy, “Golliwog’s Cakewalk,” he quotes the opening of *Tristan and Isolde* in a mocking and belittling way. It is merely to make people laugh and react. English clowns appear and tumble on the stage in clumsy attitudes, and gusts of sensuous music suggest the idle pleasure of an evening’s amusement.

General Lavine, however, is a real person, a clown featured in the cabaret hall *Folies Bergere*. General Lavine has a much more refined sense of humor. It is more subtle, more satire and less direct. There is an account of Lavine’s routine by music critic Alfred Frankenstein: “Lavine is a tall man, and his uniform was calculated to make him look taller. The backdrop for his act, as he presented it in Paris, represented an army camp with little pyramidal tents drawn to an absurdly small scale. There were cannon and cannon balls, and a kind of free-standing scarecrow wearing a tuxedo coat and a top hat. The general made his towering entrance in an incredibly elaborate costume. On his head he wore a three-cornered hat many times too small for him and apparently held on with a hairpin consisting of a huge nut-and-bolt arrangement, which he unscrewed with a squeak during the act.”

The grotesque-looking General Lavine was fighting his tiny painted soldiers. As his victory was won, he proceeded to juggling and smoking his cigarette. In the prelude, the repetitive trumpet fanfare, the use of pentatonic scale associated with American folk music; as

well the tune from Camptown Race, creating a tug-of-war between each odd, goofy and eccentric collage-like scene, all associated with vaudeville novelty acts.

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

Debussy spent two years of music studies in Italy where he studied rigorously all sorts of western music repertoire, one of which was the music of Richard Wagner. Debussy was fascinated with Wagnerian chromatic and complex harmonies, but at that time he was yet to discover his own style.

Around the time of the *Afternoon of a Faun*, Debussy had a second job as a music critic. He was attacking the pseudo-educated musicians for worshiping old masters like Beethoven and Wagner because they are told to do so. He was seen as moody, cranky and isolated. He wanted to be different; in fact, he wanted to be seen as different. In an essay for *La revue blanche* in 1901, he wrote: “Must we conclude that despite so many attempts at transformation, the symphony—in all its elegance and formal order... is a thing of the past? Has not its worn out gilt merely been replaced by a plating of shining copper, the shoddy finish of present day orchestration?” He sets himself to be a kind of radical iconoclast. But maybe his genius was not in creating entirely new ways of writing and producing music, but rather exploiting existing principles in a bold and new way.

Today, I want to discuss the Faun by examining its formal structure and harmonic implications, and compare it to existing principles of harmony and form. I will try to understand this seemingly complex piece through a familiar lens.

A little background on the piece: The symphonic poem *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* was inspired by Stephen Mallarmé's poem *Afternoon of a Faun*. A faun is a half human - half goat mythical creature. In the poem, the faun is taking a nap in the afternoon on a summer day. Later he encounters several nymphs and tries to court one of them and after a short while she runs away. Frustrated at his unsuccessful attempt, he falls asleep again. Dreaming of the interaction. When he woke, he wasn't sure if it was a dream or if it actually happened.

The opening of the piece is undoubtedly striking in all kinds of ways. Looking at the opening introduction can give us many clues about the construction and the make-up of the entire piece. The piece was later made into a short ballet, choreographed by dancer Nijinsky, the production was highly controversial for its explicit sexual implications and Nijinsky's non-traditional movements that go against the smooth and sensuous nature of the music and poem.

There are a couple of distinctive elements in the beginning, one being the opening arabesque-like weaving flute melody. As you can hear, the outline of the melody spans a tritone from C# to G. The melody sounds ambiguous tonally, far away from E major, except for the momentary stop on E in m. 3. The second striking thing that appears after the opening is the half-diminished chord in m. 4. It is essentially the Tristan chord in a different inversion. Debussy here resolves it in a different way from Wagner. Throughout the piece, Debussy exploits the ambiguous quality of the flute theme by coming up with various ways of harmonizing the theme.

Debussy's resolution of the half-diminished Tristan chord is however very innovative. Instead of resolving to E major like the Tristan chord, he resolves to V7 of Eb Major, showing us a different resolution to a familiar chord.

Perhaps this is one of the ways Debussy undermines tonality and traditional theories of harmonic function. The half-diminished chord and its resolution is actually more substantial than just creative. If we combine all the notes in these two chords, it ultimately outlines most of the keys present in the entire piece: Bb C Db D E F Ab. Chopin did this sort of foreshadowing in his music, such as in the opening of his Scherzo in Bb Minor.

The form of the piece, based on the thematic materials is something like a symmetrical arch form, measure 55 being the middle point. This is called bridge form or palindromic form. An interesting fact to consider is that the original poem by Mallarmé consists of 110 lines. Debussy's entire piece has 110 measures. Both the piece and poem mark the second half at m. 55 and line 55. I don't know whether this is conscious or intuitive, intentional or simply a coincidence. However it occurred, Debussy in some way must have found the proportion of the poem balanced and logical.

Debussy in this piece opened the door to expanded tonalities, new ways of resolving dissonances, new ways of seeing harmony, tonality, a different and highly personal musical language.

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