



Debussy 'Nuages' from *Nocturnes*

Summary Notes

These notes supplement the annotated scores on Moodle and are designed to be used in conjunction with them.

What should I revise?

- Spend lots of time making sure you understand the overall structure and the details of the analysis, using the scores on Moodle and these notes. Make sure your score is heavily annotated - listening to the music with the score will help you to remember, especially as in this question you hear the extract that you have to discuss.
- Practice comparing different sections of the work with each other (X and Y in different rotations)
- Practice listing aspects of harmony, orchestration for short sections for the 5-mark question

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Claude Debussy had a huge influence both in his native France and on European composers more generally. Debussy's anti-establishment attitude can be seen in a conversation that he was reported as having with a professor from the conservatory: 'There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law'. This attitude was one he apparently followed in his personal life too, with a series of affairs and short-lived engagements that scandalized both the public and friends of the composer.

Debussy occupies an important position in musical history in the transition from Romanticism to Modernism at a time when **Impressionism** and **Symbolism** were emerging in France. At first, commentators tended to consider Debussy as being influenced by Impressionism, a genre associated with art, but more recently, the importance of Symbolism on Debussy and his music has been recognised.

The term **Impressionism** itself was coined in 1873 in a review of Monet's "Impression: Sunrise". It was meant as a criticism as the reviewer considered that the paintings were in a vague and unfinished state, but that was exactly what Monet intended to achieve.

The leading **Symbolist** poets (Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine), attempted to evoke rather than describe, a similar aesthetic to Impressionism. Symbolists tried to “create a sensuous world of ambiguous and evocative psychological experiences and intense sounds”. Symbolist poets often used words for the sake of the sounds contained in them rather than for their meaning. Debussy’s use of sonorities like parallel dominant 7th/9th chords could be considered a musical counterpart to this – the chords are chosen for their sound rather than their function.

“Nuages” (Clouds) is the first of the *Trois Nocturnes*, which Debussy completed in 1899. He remarked that:

The title “Nocturnes” is intended to have here a more general and above all a more decorative meaning. We, then, are not concerned with the form of the Nocturne, but with everything that this word includes in the way of impressions and special lights.

In the original program booklet from 1900-01 Debussy cited the entire piece’s affinity with ‘the unchanging aspect of the sky with the slow and melancholy movement of the clouds, extinguishing in a grey softly-tinted white’. In conversation, he also mentioned that he associated “Nuages” with the experience of the effect of clouds on the River Seine. Caroline Potter writes as follows on the programmatic nature of Debussy’s musical language in “Nuages”:

The limited range of cloud colours is often evoked in this movement by the use of a single, uniform orchestral timbre... The generally low dynamic level of the movement enhances this deliberately monotonous colouristic range. The use of explicitly tonal musical devices, such as cadence, was no doubt avoided because tonality is a goal-directed musical language, based on tension and resolution. As clouds do not move towards a specific goal, this choice would have been unsuitable.

Pierre Boulez considers “Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune”, an earlier piece by Debussy written in 1894, as marking the **beginning of modern music**: ‘modern music was awakened by L’après-midi d’un faune ... the art of music began to beat with a new pulse.’

The vague and sensuous opening flute solo of Faune’ Five years later Debussy composed yet another iconic opening, that of “Nuages”, whose tonality in the opening 10 bars or so in particular (though not exclusively) has perplexed analysts. Mark DeVoto has stated that ‘It is no exaggeration to say that “Nuages” represents Debussy’s greatest single leap into the tonal unknown.’ He goes on to say:

“Nuages” is tonal, but, apart from one instance, there are no tonic triads, and dominant-tonic relationships are entirely absent. This was not true of the “Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune”, where important cadences contain functional dominants. In “Nuages”, however, functional dominants are nowhere to be seen. There is no B major or B minor. Instead, the piece establishes the pitch B as a benchmark, constantly recurring even after the most unusual harmonic wanderings with the most intensive suppression of conventional progressions. In every instance but one, B is evaded as the root of a complete major or minor triad.

Debussy's Musical Style

- **Dissonance.** Dissonances such as 7ths and 9ths are not used functionally (i.e. they do not resolve to consonances) but instead are used to create colourful sounds and sonorities. These dissonances are often strung together in long chains that move in parallel motion.
- **Modes.** Debussy does not only use traditional church modes (e.g. Aeolian, Dorian etc.) but also makes use of the pentatonic and whole-tone scales
- **Octatonic scale.** This is a special type of mode that is frequently found in early twentieth century music.
- **Form.** Debussy avoided the formal recapitulations and developments of the Western Classical Tradition, preferring structures that loosely repeat and transform the material in a continuous way.
- **Timbre.** Debussy explores new sounds in the orchestra to complement his colourful harmonies. The string section, for example, is often divided into more individual parts, wind instruments tend to be used in unusual registers and he makes extensive use of percussion and harp.
- **Rhythm.** Rhythm, metre and tempo are usually very free and flexible.

Form in 'Nuages'

The very loose form of 'Nuages' can be understood in various ways, but in the Eduqas notes the main analysis presents it as a series of 'rotations' of two main melodic ideas X and Y. Another, more traditional, way of analysing it is as ABA' (ternary form). The table below summarises the form in relation to both these analyses. In addition there are interpolated passages between X and Y in every rotation except the first – the B section is best understood as one of these interpolations:

1	5	11 (17)	21	29 (33)	43	57	(64)	80	94 (98)	99
Rotation 1		Rotation 2		Rotation 3		Rotation 4			Rotation 5	
X	Y	X	I	Y	X	I	Y	X	I	Y
A							B		A'	

Orchestration and texture in 'Nuages'

The subtle harmonies of the Impressionists demanded complementary timbres. Debussy usually employed a large orchestra, but loud passages tend to occur infrequently. The strings are often divided and muted; harps are used subtly to add a distinctive colouring; in the woodwind, flutes, oboe and cor anglais are often used for solos, their lower ranges being exploited; horns and trumpets, also often muted, are heard in short pianissimo phrases; percussion instruments are another source of unusual timbre, such as the use of antique cymbals in the "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune". The expressive scope of the string section is augmented, with all manner of combinations of arco and pizzicato, divisi part writing, "sul tasto" and tremolo, resulting in a new variety, flexibility and beauty of string sound. In his solo piano music Debussy exploits the instrument's wide range to create timbral juxtapositions of deep, dramatic bass registers in contrast with the higher register's more "glittering" sonorities. The complex resonances of Debussy's piano writing require careful use of the pedals, the damper pedal in particular.

Some notable textures and sonorities:

- Although the scoring at the beginning is sparse the choice of instruments (Clarinets, bassoons and oboe) make the sonority quite rich
- The timbre is much clearer and lighter when the same material returns on divided violins in b. 11. It is very characteristic for Debussy to divide the string parts – at some points in this piece there are up to 16 different string lines!
- High, divided violins also provide the main accompaniment in b. 7 after the rich sound of the Cor Anglais accompanied by bassoons and clarinets for the main Y material at b. 5.
- The homophonic (homorhythmic) parallel motion in the strings at b. 14 is a characteristic Debussyian texture.
- The strings are muted (*con sordines*) at the opening and at bar 23 Debussy also asks for cellos as basses to play over the fingerboard (*sur la touche*) which makes for an even more light and delicate sound.
- At bar 33 the texture is pared back to two lines but with extensive octave doubling in both lower strings for one line and woodwind for the other
- When Y returns in b. 43 the texture is given a new colour by on-beat bowed strings being joined by off-beat plucking (*pizz.*)
- At bar 57 the relatively bare texture from the beginning is given a bit more warmth by means of an added viola line.
- At bar 64 the gentle sustained string chord, scored across a wide register accompanies some interesting doublings in the melody, starting with harp and flute
- The strings take the melody, again in doubled octaves in bar 71
- The rich chord with horns and tremolo lower strings in b. 82 is a very characteristic and lush Debussy timbre
- The piece ends with a very dark and quiet texture, with basses and cellos very low and close together at 92 and many other low sonorities, including the tremolo between B and D on the timpani

Use of different modes and scales in 'Nuages'

Whole-tone scale (particularly prominent from b. 33)

The whole-tone scale is discussed in the notes on Impressionism in relation to 'Voiles' above. The scale is only used a few times in 'Nuages' and its main properties are as follows: 1) because it has only one interval (the tone) there is no clear sense of tonic 2) the only possible triad is the tonally ambiguous and unusual-sounding augmented triad.

Pentatonic scale (found particularly in the section from b. 64)

The pentatonic scale is often associated with 'exotic' music – Debussy would have been familiar with it through his experience of Gamelan music in the Paris exhibition. The five notes in two groups of tones tends to create soft and gentle harmonies without any harsh (semitone) dissonances.

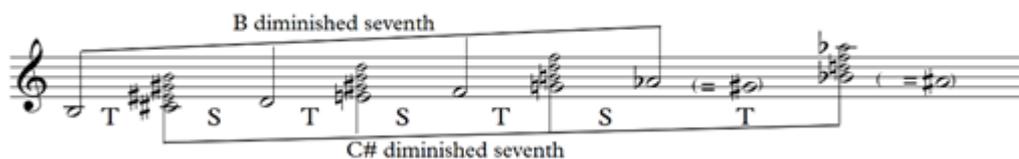
D# pentatonic minor



Octatonic scales (the Y material is mostly octatonic)

The octatonic (eight-note) scale alternates tones and semitones. It can also be understood as two overlapping diminished seventh chords. As shown in the example below, the notes of one of these diminished sevenths can be used as roots to construct a variety of familiar chords using only chords from the octatonic scale. In this example, there are dominant sevenths on each of the four notes of the C# diminished chord. These familiar chords organized in a symmetrical scale way create exotic combinations (e.g. a tritone apart) whilst completely avoiding chords that are fifth-related. There are three different octatonic scales starting with a tone on C, C[sharp] and D before you start repeating scales you have already encountered (see www.alevelmusic.com for more details).

B Octatonic



Acoustic Scale (in the section from b. 21)

The G acoustic scale is commonly found in folk music and in 'Nuages' it seems to be used partly because it is a bit like a compromise between the octatonic and whole-tone scales. The distinctive features of this scale are the raised fourth and lowered seventh on what is basically a G major scale. It is called the acoustic scale because it is loosely based on some of the notes from the harmonic series.

G acoustic



X (bar 1)
B minor
B Octatonic

Dominant 9ths (bar 14)
B9 A9 Gb9 Eb9 C9 Bb9

Pentatonic melody (bar 64)

	Rotation 1 (R1)	Rotation 2 (R2)	Rotation 3 (R3)	Rotation 4 (R4)	Rotation 5 (R5)
X material	<i>bb. 1-4</i> B octatonic with hints of minor in top part (F#s). A nat. in lower part is also “chromatic” to B-octatonic. Establishes B as a centre but only weakly.	<i>bb. 11-16</i> Starts same as R1 but strings rather than ww. Parallel dom. 9ths in b. 14 with a melody based on overlapping Eb and G minor pentatonic scales. Note falling fifth idea in bass in b. 15, which becomes increasingly important.	<i>bb. 29—32</i> This is the most contrasting presentation of X with a slightly different melodic profile and pure triads ending unexpectedly on a C major chord at 31.	<i>bb. 57-63</i> More like R1 but with new melody against main X idea in viola. Parallel dominant sevenths in 61 and 63 with a whole tone idea in between in b. 62 (echoed at b. 66 in the next section).	<i>bb. 94-97</i> Much more fragmented and darker orchestration of X trails over a G pedal initially but moves up to B in b. 96, where the idea fades out in a vague rumbling.
Interpolations		<i>bb. 17-20</i> idea based on D minor pentatonic melody (except a single E and Bb) anticipates B section. Dominant G9 harmony followed by Eb9	<i>bb. 33-42</i> Crotchet motion reminiscent of X in strings in sparse two-part counterpoint with octave unison in wind. Together create a C whole-tone feel but chromatic passing notes in ww. More octatonic at 40 to link into Y (b. 37 also octatonic)	<i>bb. 64-79</i> [B section]. Melody is D# pentatonic, expanding the idea from the middle of R1 and also includes the falling fifth idea from b. 15 (B). D# done but moves to G# (IV?) in middle of section. In b. 77 repeats a pentatonic fragment (B2 from R3).	<i>b. 98</i> All the ideas in R5 are fragmented and shortened suggesting a coda function , particularly here, where there is just a one bar fragment of B from R4 over continued oscillation of B and D in timpani.
Y material	<i>bb. 5-10</i> Cor Anglais melody and harmony is pure B octatonic. G7 in first inversion (B drone in bass) is main sonority. C.A. melody is in 4/4 (against the prevailing 6/4).	<i>bb. 21-28</i> Dominant G9 harmony continues now as an accompaniment to C.A. melody from R1 . Octatonic except for the 9 th (A) itself, which makes it a G acoustic scale. Falling tritone idea in b. 23 represents the span of the melody from F to B and becomes an increasingly important idea. No drone.	<i>bb. 43-56</i> Cor Anglais melody now accompanied by G7 chords alternating with dissonant chord suggesting B13. B drone is back. At b. 51 the C.A. goes back into 6/4 and expands two-note horn idea from 50 (B2). Bass descends by step from B to F (same span as melody) ending very ambiguously.	<i>bb. 80-93</i> Cor Anglais melody exactly the same as R3 but with darker orchestration of accompanying G7 sonority. Also, different chords from B octatonic change colour (C#7 at b. 82 and E7 at b. 86 – both have ‘chromatic’ appoggiaturas of D# and F# respectively). Falling tritone at b. 82 and B2 at 88 as before.	<i>bb. 99-end</i> Skeleton version of Y with just G7 sonority and falling tritone remaining (main melody has disappeared). Ends on B (same centre as opening) but G7 sonority just before helps to make this ending very tonally unstable.

Y (bar 5)