Background

Debussy (1862-1918) was in many ways a radical composer; in other words, he made fundamental and far-reaching changes in his approach to composing music. He is often labelled 'impressionist' – a term derived from painting, in which outlines are blurred and delicate shades of colour are used. By analogy this is a fair description of much of Debussy’s music: outlines are blurred because he avoids clear-cut rhythms and melodies, and his harmonies are rich (using dense, complex chords) and vague, creating a 'wash' of sound. Thus his music sounded very different from his late romantic contemporaries', and laid the foundation for many developments in 20th century music.
‘Pagodes’ from *Estampes*

**Inspiration: melody and harmony based on pentatonic scale**

The first four bars of this atmospheric piece are based on a B pentatonic (five-note) scale, using only the notes B, C#, D#, F# and G#. The following two bars however, expand this, by keeping the pentatonic idea in the right hand but adding a minor seventh (A natural) to the chord in the left hand:

In the next phrase Debussy keeps the pentatonic material in the right hand again but expands the harmony again first by adding a fourth (E) against the double pedal in the left hand and by introducing a flowing melody in the middle of the texture. In these two bars we now have all the seven notes of a diatonic scale of B major present. In the following phrase (the last two bars below) Debussy returns again to purely pentatonic harmony.
‘The Sunken Cathedral’ from Preludes

The beginning of this evocative prelude also uses a pentatonic scale, this time building up chains of open fifths over a pedal. Whereas in Pagode we still have a clear sense of melody, the opening of this portrayal of a cathedral under the ocean is primarily to do with colour, piano texture and atmosphere.

ACTION: play around with pentatonic scales to create a gentle but colourful atmosphere. If you are basing an extended section on pentatonic scales, you will probably want to expand the collection as Debussy does in Pagodes or you risk the music becoming too static.

‘Sails’ from Preludes

Inspiration: whole tone scales

This extract is taken from Debussy’s prelude Voiles (sails). If you listen to the example or play it, you will hear how the whole tone scale creates an ambiguous wash of sound quite unlike traditional harmony.

ACTION: try using a whole tone scale to create an ambiguous wash of harmonies.
‘Sarabande’ from *Pour le piano* (anthology p. 260)

**Inspiration: colourful use of dissonance**

A very characteristic texture for Debussy is chains of parallel sevenths, which create colourful and ambiguous harmony as at the beginning of this Sarabande:

![Music notation image]

A very different colour is created by the use of quartal harmony at the beginning of the middle section. Quartal chords are build up in fourths (G#, C#, F# etc.) rather than the thirds of triadic harmony (C, E, G):

![Music notation image]

**ACTION:** try using parallel added note chords and/or chords built up in fourths or fifths
Preludes de l’apres midi d’un Faun (Anthology p. 86)

This dreamy orchestral piece starts with a famous flute solo which is harmonised in bar 11 as shown in the extract below. The slow-moving tremolo strings add a soft and lush bed on which the tune can lie. The first chord is a major seventh which is modified and added to as the tune develops:

In the extract over the page the harmony is even more colourful with a rich texture created by horns and lower woodwind punctuated by a sparking intervention from pizzicato strings, harp, piccolo and flute. The harmony in the first part of bar 90 is a B major added sixth chord and the final beat is a C half diminished seventh over a G# pedal.
ACTION: look through the rest of this prelude and see if you can find harmonic and instrumental colours that you can adapt for your piece.