

# A Comparative Analytical Commentary of Debussy's "Syrinx" and "Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune"

Composed at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the works "Syrinx" and "Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune" by Claude Debussy are examples of French Romantic music where the flute is featured prominently. The works were revolutionary at the time they were written, both displaying the Romanticism of their era and also the innovatively modern harmony which would become widespread in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This Commentary will attempt to analyse the key features of "Syrinx", the shorter of the two pieces, and comment on how it creates an effective impact on the audience. The Commentary will then compare it with the longer, orchestral, "Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune" and identify the similarities and contrasts present. The way which Debussy used a common subject and program to create two very distinct and different works of music will also be examined.

"Syrinx", intended originally to be titled "La Flûte de Pan", was written in 1913 as a piece of incidental music during a play for solo flute. The aim of the piece was to accompany a scene comprising the Greek God Pan, often depicted in the image of a faun or satyr in mythology. The piece begins by stating the main theme:

Très modéré

*mf*

*p*

*p*

Although the piece is in B-flat minor, it is evident that chromatic notes and semitone intervals are liberally used. This creates an effect which is very distinct from traditional tonal harmony, reinforcing the "exotic" and "mysterious" image of Pan. The use of a solo flute is an effective choice for this piece of music. The instrument perhaps most closely imitates the panflute and the desolate sound conveys the

loneliness of the Greek God. Indeed, many performers of this piece choose to play in a large open space, where the acoustics would create natural reverb from the solo flute voice and add to the effect of being alone. This is also the reason why some audiences comment that because of the “airy” sound of such a setting the descending phrases at the start of “Syrinx” also give the impression of a fall, as if Pan is flying down from above. From a technical perspective, the lack of accompaniment gives the player much more freedom in the expression of the phrases and so rubato, which came into prominence in the Romantic era contemporary to this piece, is often employed. Another feature of this piece, and in fact any other solo instrumental piece, is that there is of course no harmony or cadential points per se. However the clever use of melodic intervals helps the audience to imagine what chords the composer would have chosen if an accompaniment was added. After the initial descent of the melody it makes a quick overall ascend from the middle of bar 4. The usage of the triplets here creates an “artificial increase” in the tempo, perhaps to suggest that Pan is hurrying away. Then suddenly at bar 6, the end of the first section, the notes are lengthened to crotchets and minims, creating the opposite effect to the triplets and giving us the notion that Pan stops for thought. Although the dynamics for this phrase is specified by the composer, the performer has great expressional allowance on how it is executed.

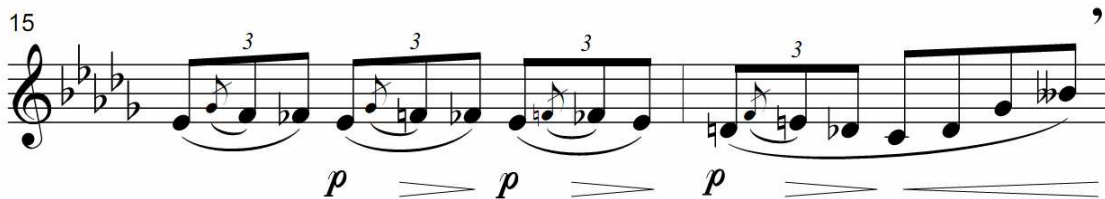
In the next section of the piece the pace quickens:

Un peu mouvementé (mais très peu)

Here the opening theme is repeated one octave lower. However instead of pausing, the melody continues to develop and turns into a run of whole tones at the middle of bar 10. This departure from diatonic harmony is a feature of Romanticism and further conveys the exotic nature of the setting. Quickly there is a diminution of this whole tone theme to give a deceptively more complicated sound:

Following this Debussy again uses shorter rhythms to squeeze more notes into the same amount of time taken as the last section. The effect created is a pattern of “fast” sections

alternating with “slow” sections although of course the actual tempo of the music remains constant. The brief sequence present in bar 13 imitates the dotted-quaver demi-semi-quavers rhythm of the previous section except that an extra demi-semi-quaver is inserted, just to make the music feel slightly more rushed than before. Each individual sequence is chromatic in nature, which creates a contrast with the whole tone runs already stated. This alternation between whole tone and chromatics would sound quite alien to an audience who is accustomed to the strictly diatonic major or minor sounds of the Classical or earlier eras. Nevertheless we can still detect a vein of traditional “harmony” running through amongst these semitones. The notes A-G $\flat$ -E $\flat$ -C-A-G $\flat$  (highlighted by white dots) which accentuate the start and end of each chromatic sequence form a cycle of minor thirds. This cycle begins on A which causes us to conclude that this is a diminished 7<sup>th</sup> broken chord of A. Perhaps Debussy really intended us to hear this subtle diminished chord rather than just a series of well-placed semitones. Musically this overlapping of a broken chord over semitone makes sense as an audience would be able to mentally connect the important notes and would not think the placement of the semitones were at all random. However, if this sequence is just a diminished 7<sup>th</sup> broken chord in disguise, why would it finish on G $\flat$ ? The answer is in the continuation of this section:



The next note of the diminished broken chord E $\flat$  is repeated over and over in a chromatic “loop” which creates the effect of unsettledness and anticipation. It could also suggest to the audience that at this point Pan is indecisive, further supported by the fact that the dynamics is also looping, never settled on one level. The acciaccaturas in the triplet rhythm give a lopsided feel to the melody, perhaps imitating stuttering or limping. The notes are low on the register of the flute but yet quiet, reflecting Pan’s decadent and conspiring thoughts. These loops of notes continue until bar 16, where the sequence proceeds slightly and suddenly there is a change of the direction of movement and rhythm. The notes E $\flat$ , G $\flat$  and A (B $\flat$ ) which ends this phrase completes the diminished broken chord from before, albeit with much delay and notes filling in between. The fact that A is spelt as the enharmonically equivalent B $\flat$  suggests that the music will modulate, which is exactly what Debussy proceeds to do next after a brief repetition of this quavers phrase.

The music continues by quickly changing to a major key:

At bar 19 the triplet-quaver rhythm ceases suddenly and is followed by a flowing passage with a wider range of movement than before. Although not evident in the score, when heard bars 20 and 21 is distinctively major. The presence of an F $\flat$ , C $\flat$  and all other notes flattened would suggest the key is G $\flat$ -major. This is interesting as this is a modulation to the submediant which is usually used to change to the relative minor key from a piece with major tonality. However in this case it is the reverse, with a modulation to a major key from a minor tonality. The function of this phrase could be explained better if the context which it appears is known. Here the music is preparing to enter the final section restating the opening theme of the piece after a further modulation at bar 22. This brief major section “prepares” this modulation by providing contrast between the previous and following minor sections. Without this clear separation the two sections would be indistinguishable. The key which proceeds the major phrase is its relative E $\flat$  minor. This conveniently sets up the final modulation to the original key in bar 24 since the tonic B $\flat$  is the dominant of E $\flat$ . Once again Debussy does not adhere to the rules of Classical music. A modulation to the dominant is effective since the pitches of each note of the scales are shared by both the original and destination keys but such a modulation is normally to a major key. This minor to minor modulation is unusual if this piece was composed in earlier periods but as more modern Romantic music this is totally plausible. This is yet another example of how Debussy was at the forefront of a change in a movement of change of traditional music methodology. However without closely examining the music it is difficult to discern all of the features present in “Syrinx” but this subtlety in the effect which the music creates is what makes it so well-known.

One of Debussy’s works which “Syrinx” could be compared to is his earlier composition “Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune”. Scored for strings and woodwinds this tone poem also depicts the story of a dreaming faun. The similarities in the two pieces are stark. First of all, the main theme is again assigned to the flute:

We immediately notice that this melody is chromatic in nature. Indeed this chromaticism continues throughout the piece. It is fair to say that the choice of the flute is due to reasons

similar to that of “Syrinx”. The difference is that other instruments are present to “tell” the story. The ensemble nature clearly contrasts with the solo instrumentation of “Syrinx”. This is because “Prélude” is composed to the program of a poem compared to “Syrinx” which depicts Pan in a scene. In other words “Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune” is closer to the real definition of “program music”, as it is music set to a full story, whereas “Syrinx” is a close “character study”. The variety of instruments at the composer’s disposal of course also opens up many other possibilities. For example the opening theme, a motif representing the faun, is passed around by many different instruments, mainly in this case the clarinet and oboe. The composer is also freer in setting the harmony of the music. In “Syrinx” Debussy has to resort to flowing and quick -changing melodies in order to convey the potential harmony which could accompany the solo melody. This restricts his choices as a single instrument could only go so far in expressing his ideas. With the availability of more instruments, Debussy is able to choose from a wider selection of chords and features, such as the full use of the unique sound of a glissando on a harp to enforce the sleepy and drowsy theme of the music. Essentially a fast chromatic scale, this technique is also a hallmark of Romantic music.

The compositional techniques present in “Syrinx” are also similarly used in “Prélude”. For example:



Here again Debussy uses both triplet-quavers and triplet-semiquavers in the same piece. From the viewpoint of the audience this has the artificial quickening effect as previously mentioned. The selection of notes is also consistent with that of “Syrinx”. The composer wastes no opportunity in using chromatics in the melody and superimposed on this is a whole tone sequence, conveying an image of sleep or dreams. The choice of keys is also interesting. The key of E $\beta$  minor present in “Syrinx” makes an appearance near the end of the piece, hinted by the use of C $\beta$ s:



Note the whole tone triplet-semiquavers again used. The music at this point is about to modulate in a minor third interval back to the tonic C minor. This is nearly an interval of a major third, which is used for a relative major/minor to tonic modulation. However the distance between the two keys is deceptively close. On the score it is easy to see that the two is remote, but this difference of a semitone interval when heard could be difficult to spot.

Another contrast which could be made between “Syrinx” and “Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune” is the difference in their forms. “Syrinx” is very free in structure, the only predictable feature being that the main theme is reiterated but this serves to preserve the unity of the piece. On the other hand “Prélude” is fairly structured. The piece could be described as having an extended rondo form. The opening theme with and without accompaniment is repeated many times throughout, with each playing separated by distinct sections which also develops previous material heard in the piece. Again this difference in form between the two pieces could be explained by the program and subject they are set to. “Syrinx”, being a depiction of a scene of a solitary faun playing the panflutes, is well suited to

a free, performer-centred and almost impromptu form. “Prélude”, being set to a whole story, is better served by having a more defined structure.

Both “Syrinx” and “Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune” are examples of the works of a Romantic composer at the zenith of his productivity. By using chromaticism, whole tones, complex harmonies and unusual and distant modulations they are strong examples of the departure from the orthodox melodic and harmonic features found in the earlier Baroque and Classical eras. The link between them is uncommonly strong for two different works by the same composer due to their common program. This, and the fact that at the time they are at the cusp of a transformation of the prevailing music style from Late Romantic to Modernism, ensures these pieces will continue to have both artistic and historical value and will be enjoyed long into the future.

## Analytical Commentary Plan

Debussy:

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

- Orchestration
- “Modern” harmony
- Tone “qualities” and voicing
- Motifs
- Imagery imagined by the audience
- Evaluation and personal response
- Comparison and similarities with

Syrinx

- Depiction of a faun
- Representation by the flute
- Harmonic similarities
- Orchestral vs. unaccompanied
- Free form
- Romanticism
- Departure from strict structures in earlier eras
- Brief comparison with earlier music
- Why does it work?