

To What extent is "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune" representative of the 20th Century?

The Prélude was composed between 1892-94 and was based on the poem written by Mallarmé, close friend of Debussy since 1887. Originally, this one movement orchestral piece was going to have a prelude, an interlude and a "paraphrase finale" but only the prelude was ever written. This was Debussy's first major experiment in writing for orchestra and is said to be the first example of impressionism in an orchestral piece.

Debussy, born in 1862, was one of the most potent influences on the course of music in the twentieth century, for example his rich use of timbre was of great influence on composers like John Cage. His style of composition is designed to create descriptive impressions by evoking moods through rich, varied harmonies and timbres. The melodies, harmonies, colours and rhythms make the musical language completely different from that of the German Romantic tradition (e.g. Wagner). He equals, in contrast with the German tradition, the importance of timbre with the importance of harmony and melody.

The piece depicts the sensual world of the faun (a half-man, half-goat mythological character), who although intellectual, has to follow its erotic animal instincts. The faun, tired from chasing nymphs and naiads falls asleep in the heat of the afternoon. Fauns are usually represented playing a pipe so the initial sensuous flute melody could represent him and his "animal instincts". This melody, which sets the tone for the rest of the piece, is recurred and ornamented all along the Prélude. The music is vague, shifting and sectional and has the similar qualities of impressionist works by Monet or Renoir.

The piece's tonal ambiguity (E major or C# minor) and meandering harmony are a characteristic of a twentieth century piece. In terms of structure the chord progressions give the sensation of a dream that goes nowhere, however romantics such as Wagner used the chord progressions with the purpose of going somewhere i.e. to reach a climax. Traditional chord progressions are ignored and instead the **sevenths** without resolution and colourful **ninth and eleventh** chords are used. This could be called colouristic harmony, with no structural purpose but to give the effect of recreating a dream. Colouristic harmony can be seen in bars 103-104, where beneath the chromatic oboe solo are the chords of C major, A minor, C major 7th, F# minor, F# minor 7th. Here the chords of C major and F# are as distant from each other as possible, they are a tritone apart and the chords are chosen only because of their sound.

Debussy uses a non-functional harmony which consists of successions rather than progressions of unrelated alternating chords (bar 28). This effect makes the music sound unresolved and meandering which again recreates the sensation of a dream. However functional harmony is not absent in the Prélude, he uses a perfect cadence in E major in bars 105-106, this is a symbolic resolution of all the unresolved diminished chords, 7th chords etc... ; here all ideas come to rest. . Another way in which the music is unified is by the recurrence of the initial flute theme, though each time it is subtly altered in terms of shape and accompaniment.

Melodies are in no clear key or rhythm and are ambiguously related to the harmony; i.e. the flute solo in bar 1 uses an unstable semi chromatic tritone (C* to G). Here all notes are included and not just a selection which would point to a particular major or minor key (E major or C# minor). This tritone could lead to a diatonic piece however as commented previously the piece starts and ends in E major to give a vague sensation of a complete structure and tonality. Chords are left hanging without resolution or followed by silences as in bar 6, or unrelated chords (i.e. C-F#). Also not just the tonal area is ambiguous but also the **meter** much of the time. Also the use of triplets (bar 65 harp) adds to this ambiguous meter effect. **The few cadences (only for structural purposes as mentioned before), the chromatic melody (bar 1 flute) and**

harmony (bar 13-14), the whole tone scale and the use of the dominant 7th without resolution make the piece ambiguous with respect to tonality.

Debussy aims to suggest a dream in the Prélude, to manage this he uses several compositional techniques. Making the melody chromatic, using alternating unrelated harmony, ambiguous tonality, a lack of any sense of pulse, the gentle harp glissandos (i.e. bar 4, which blur under the violins and the muted strings (bar 5)). This is why Debussy is described as the first modern composer as he was the first one to evoke moods through harmony and tone colour, much unlike previous composers such as Strauss who emphasised melody and form. Also the fact that the music is not programmatic (such as Wagner (Tristan und Isolde) or Strauss and its symphonic poems) but only suggest and gives impressions of a story makes the music a 20th century piece.

The orchestration has some aspects which could be considered to be of the 20th century. The strings are playing very low in their usual register (bar 28 violin 1). To enrich the sonorous effect the strings use shimmering tremolando (sur la touché bar 11). The cellos (bar 24) and woodwind (bar 69) are playing very high in their register creating a very rich timbre. This use of instruments was not in the German romantic tradition and it broke the rules of orchestration of the moment.

However there are some romantic characteristics in the Prélude such as the chromatic harmony (bar 13-14), the repetition of a melody with different orchestration (bar 22) The piece has complex rhythms, the melodic variation (the "leitmotiv" such as the ascending minor 4th).