

Trace the development of harmony from Schumann through Brahms to Debussy. Drawing on pieces you have studied.

In studying three composers, Schumann, Brahms and Debussy, it is possible through analysis, to construct a Harmonic development through time - from early 1800's to early 1900's. I will go about deducing a harmonic timeline by individually looking at each composer then will conclude with a final comparison summarizing how different harmonic elements develop with the Romantic Movement and its progression.

The harmonic journey will start with Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, or *Scenes from Childhood*. This is a set of thirteen reminiscences of childhood, written during a temporary separation from Clara. They are works about children, rather than music written for children, and require a high degree of polish to perform them. It is interesting as the two sides of Schumann's personality can be depicted in his *Kinderszenen* for instance in the 13th movement *Frightening*, one could say that *Eusebius* is scared by *Florestan* in random bursts. The harmony in these pieces play a large part in distinguishing between the personalities, for instance in *Frightening*, section A is mostly homophonic with mainly conjunct harmonic movement. Section B, however, doesn't move in one functional unit, with the melody in the left hand and chords in the right hand - this top heavy harmony creates juxtaposition, magnifying the sense of craziness and vigour that is a trait of *Florestan's* personality.

In "*Of foreign lands and Peoples*" section A's harmonic texture is flipped upside-down in section B, with the theme in the bass and with crochets throbbing in the upper part. Indeed, both A and section B contain a regular arpeggiated texture that runs throughout. The melodic and harmonic movement is mainly conjunct which compares greatly to Debussy's *Sarabande*. Bar 13 (and 14) also consists of a repeated perfect

cadence in C major over a C pedal in the bass. The use of pedal here is later magnified in many of Brahms' pieces, particularly in Rhapsody No.2.

In Schumann's "Frightening", in bar 21, the C major chord is followed by a tritonal harmonic leap onto a *sforzando* dominant seventh chord of F-sharp major at beat 2. This chord, together with a rising chromatic line heralds the return of the tonic key. Schumann has reinterpreted the chord of C major as the *Neapolitan* chord (the flattened second) of b minor (the tonic), making the surprising tritonal leap more logical than it initially seems. The original motivic material is presented exactly as it occurred in bars 1-4 to provide an aesthetic harmonic balance to the piece. Textually, Schumann's harmony strikingly contrasts the other pieces, for instance, there are often offbeat semiquavers in the right hand creating a busier/more contrapuntal texture

The next harmonic platform is in the study of Brahms' devices and techniques in harmony and texture. It is important to note that Brahms, in particular, led the strongest resistance to the more extreme tendencies of musical Romanticism in general (as epitomised by Wagner's music) and I feel this comes across in his use of harmony. Through his diligent study and appreciation of Renaissance and Baroque music his works, in particular his Rhapsody No.2, shows his practical experience with varying harmonic techniques.

Firstly, in comparison to Schumann's music, this piece is surprisingly dissimilar. The most obvious is the use of syncopation, melodically and harmonically, which is certainly not as apparent/frequent in the Schumann pieces. With a key signature of G Minor, in the first sequential few bars, Brahms writes around the key through F C B. In this sense, Brahms' work is less tonal and more harmonic, with more notes, more chromatics and also more chords that are used mainly just for colour - even if it affects a harmonic movement. For instance in bar 37, the D flat on beat 2 creates a diminished dissonance which creates colour yet completely diverts the sense of key.

In this way Debussy's Sarabande incorporates both modality and tonality (earlier French composers such as Fauré had used modal aspects in their works) and he is

reported by Maurice Emmanuel to have said around 1889-90 that '*music is neither major nor minor*', something evident in this Sarabande. This vagueness in terms of key is caused by his general avoidance of '*traditional*' diatonic cadences. Also, he uses parallel block chord harmonies, where a chord is used not within the context of a harmonic progression, but specifically for its sound and "*colour*" and so in this way, he is developing the use of discordant chords for sound as seen in Brahms's works. One of the most common examples of this is the use of parallel dominant seventh chords in bars 11-12.

The harmony, generally, is homophonic with chords built up of mainly 5ths, 4ths and 3rds. This element can be traced back to Javanese music and specifically, in reference to the quartile harmony starting in bar 23, drawn from Organum in which parallels were also heavily used, moving as units instead of singularly as seen in some of Brahms' works - i.e. Rhapsody No2 in which most sections, the parts move independently (bars 14-20).

The Sarabande does contrast to both the Brahms and Schumann in different ways. Primarily the ambiguity of the key, although seen in the opening bars of Schumann's "Frightening" is a particular element that is forward looking in Debussy's music; the persistent parallels are archaic and are used effectively as a method of traveling through many different keys in a short space of time. Another harmonic contrast is that Debussy's texture is by and large thicker, including many notes in each chord. For instance at one moment, Debussy has written 10 pitches in a chords (bar 53 second beat) and therefore one could deduce that his harmony is more saturated or more rich, giving larger scope for more complexly built up chords.

Another harmonic development seen in Debussy's Sarabande is the use of the number 3, harmonically, structurally and melodically. The interval of a third is exploited melodically in each of the main three motifs on which the work is based, and parallel chord movement often rises or falls through this same interval (e.g. in the left hand bars 9, 19 and 56). On a structural level, it was pointed out that consecutive harmonic pauses,

such as those at bars 4, 8 and 14 display similar relationships. The key signature shows four sharps, suggesting either E major or c-sharp minor as the tonic and the music is often ambiguous as to which of these is the true home key. It could be pointed out that there is a *mediant* (third) relationship between these keys. So in this way, Debussy has tied in the harmonic patterns with other elements to the piece, helping the fundamental elements of the music to reach a state of symbiosis which, perhaps, is lacking or is not as well expressed in other pieces.

Lastly, Debussy made use of a variety of scales such as the whole-tone, octatonic and pentatonic. In this piece, he mainly uses the whole tone scale; its relevance is that it helps hide the key to create tension for the listeners and performers. Here, despite having a key signature of four sharps, the music never settles comfortably in E major or c-sharp minor, with many more keys suggested than actually reached; this is heightened by his general avoidance of 'traditional' diatonic cadences.

Debussy is representing the latter end of the harmonic development and it has been interesting to depict this evolution from Schumann through Brahms to Debussy's Sarabande, exploring the ways the composers innovated previous works, creating new experiences for the audience. The fundamental developments are the depth of texture, the use and building up of different intervals, the movement of the parts on top of one another and finally the harmonic movement through keys; be it ambiguous (Debussy), established via writing around the key (Brahms) or a cocktail of diatonic and tonal writing (Schumann).