

MUZIKOLOŠKI INŠTITUT
ZNANSTVENORAZISKOVALNI CENTER SAZU

De musica disserenda

Letnik/Year XVI

Št./No. 1

2020

Ljubljana 2020

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Izdajatelj / Issuer: ZRC SAZU, Muzikološki inštitut
Založnik / Publisher: Založba ZRC

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Novi trg 2, p. p. 306, 1001 Ljubljana, Slovenija
E-pošta / E-mail: dmd@zrc-sazu.si
Tel. / Phone: +386 1 470 61 97
Faks / Fax: +386 1 425 77 99
<http://mi.zrc-sazu.si>

Revija izhaja s podporo Javne agencije za Raziskovalno dejavnost RS.
The journal is sponsored by the Slovenian Research Agency.

Cena posamezne številke / Single issue price: 6 €
Letna naročnina / Annual subscription: 10 €

Naročila sprejema / Orders should be sent to:
Založba ZRC, p. p. 306, 1001 Ljubljana, Slovenija
E-pošta / E-mail: zalozba@zrc-sazu.si
Tel. / Phone: +386 1 470 64 64

Tisk / Printed by: Collegium graphicum, d. o. o., Ljubljana
Naklada / Prinrun: 150

De musica disserenda je muzikološka znanstvena revija, ki objavlja znanstvene razprave s področja muzikologije ter z muzikologijo povezanih interdisciplinarnih področij. Izhaja dvakrat letno. Vsi prispevki so anonimno recenzirani. Revija sproti izhaja tudi v prosto dostopni elektronski obliki: <https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/dmd> (ISSN 2536-2615). Na navedeni spletni strani so objavljena navodila avtorjem in informacije o reviji.

De musica disserenda is a journal of musical scholarship, publishing musicological as well as interdisciplinary articles regarding music. It is published twice a year. All articles are anonymously reviewed. The journal is simultaneously published in open e-form: <https://ojs.zrc-sazu.si/dmd> (ISSN 2536-2615). On this web-site are published guidelines for contributors and information on the journal.

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DIABOLUS IN MEMORIA

OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE USE OF THE TRITONE IN DEBUSSY'S ENDINGS

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Università degli studi di Torino

Izvleček: Na začetku 20. stoletja je Claude Debussy na raznolike načine eksperimental s tritonusom v harmoniji in melodiji. V zaključkih v njegovih instrumentalnih skladbah je pogost tritonus v tematičnem gradivu, ki spodbuja primerjavo med sedanostjo in preteklostjo. Za razliko od drugih francoskih skladateljev je Debussy bolj naklonjen latentnim glasbenim reminiscencam, ki zdrsnejo pod zavedno percepcijo, kot pa jasnimi povezavam.

Gljučne besede: tritonus, Claude Debussy, glasbene reminiscence, spominski procesi

Abstract: In the first decade of the twentieth century Debussy experimented with different uses of the tritone in harmony and melody. The endings of his instrumental compositions exhibit a tritonization of thematic material aimed at stimulating a comparison between past and present. In contrast to other French composers, Debussy prefers latent musical reminiscences to explicit connections, in order to slip under the listener's conscious perception.

Keywords: tritone, Claude Debussy, musical reminiscence, memory processes

The Tritone in French Treatises of the Early 1900s

An interval handled with care from the Middle Ages¹ to Wagner,² the tritone often proved to be an essential resource for twentieth-century composers. Many scholars have considered this interval to be the perfect way of explaining the popularity of octatonic scales. David Smyth, taking up a number of ideas put forward by Pieter C. van den Toorn and Richard Taruskin, has highlighted how the tetrachord [0,2,3,5], which appears frequently in Stravinsky's compositions (particularly in *The Rite of Spring*), covers the entire octatonic scale when duplicated at the distance of a tritone: [0,2,3,5]+[6,8,9,11] = [0,2,3,5,6,8,9,11].³ Allen Forte also noticed the result of a tritonal transposition in the frequent use of hexachord 6-30, formed by two octatonic fragments, in *Jeux*.⁴ Fabion Bowers, applying theories expounded by Boleslav Yavorsky in those same early decades of the twentieth century, analysed the presence of the octatonic scale in Scriabin's music (particularly in relation to the Sixth

¹ Fux, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, 51–52.

² Moser, "Diabolus in Musica".

³ Smyth, "Stravinsky's Second Crisis", 120.

⁴ Forte, "Debussy and the Octatonic", 150.

Sonata), connecting two successive tritones that resolve to major thirds.⁵ However, interest in the tritone's resources undoubtedly started with Schönberg:⁶ one need only think of his Suite op. 25, the first entirely serial composition ever written, where most of the essential transpositions occur at a distance of three whole tones; or the same recurrent use of the interval in a number of ostinato passages (the Double of the "Musette" is structured over a G-D \flat bass);⁷ or even in "Farben", op. 16, no. 3, where the very small movements of the five voices in the floating chord developed by the *Klangfarbenmelodie* all cover a tritonal interval.⁸ Elliott Antokoletz stressed the importance of that same element in the music of Béla Bartók: as far back as 1982, in an article on the theoretical approaches of American musicology, he cited Roy Travis's Schenkerian analysis of the Fourth String Quartet (first movement, Allegro) as a model for a fresh new way of approaching tonal solidity ("the tritone as a fundamental chordal structure analogous to the perfect fifth of the triad and set based on traditional harmonic-root associations").⁹ Then in his landmark monograph, published in 1984, Antokoletz identified the tritone as the tool entrusted with a new "tonal centrality", based on symmetries in pitch levels.¹⁰ However, it is perhaps in Scriabin that this process asserts itself most clearly, thanks to a number of recurring superimpositions that are closely associated with a mystical meaning. The so-called "Prometheus Chord" is created by just such a layering of fourths, two of which are augmented; often, the tension of the dominant seventh (or ninth) in this Russian composer's work is supplemented by a diminished fifth that produces a vertical cross between two tritones; this addition becomes entirely tritonal in the chord made up of hexatonic scale notes. After all, it was during this same period that Stravinsky developed one of the most effective ideas of all time in *Petrushka*, thanks to the overlapping of two triads separated by an augmented fourth (C major + F \sharp major).

On the Parisian scene writings about the function of the tritone recurred quite frequently at the turn of the twentieth century. Even a late nineteenth-century composer and educator such as Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray challenged the historical prohibition that weighed on this interval, imagining that it was possibly the result of an incorrect interpretation of ancient treatises:

[...] l'horreur du triton, que l'on appelait le diable (diabolus in musica), – ne peut venir que d'une règle des traités anciens mal comprise et faussement interprétée par les moines, qui seuls à cette époque s'occupaient de littérature et d'art.¹¹

⁵ Bowers, *Scriabin*, 161.

⁶ Schönberg was the first to draw attention to the links between tritones, tracing dotted lines within the Circle of Fifths reproduced in the *Harmonielehre*: visual links between keys that stress the symmetries created by the C-F \sharp axis. A relevant bibliographical reference discussing this subject is Perle, *Twelve-Tone Tonality*.

⁷ Whittall, *Music since the First World War*, 122–123.

⁸ Burkhart, "Schoenberg's *Farben*".

⁹ Antokoletz, "Music of Bartók", 68.

¹⁰ Antokoletz, *Music of Béla Bartók*, 138–203.

¹¹ *Le Ménestrel*, 8 December 1878, 15.

Even Émile Durand, the teacher of Debussy and dedicatee of the Piano Trio (1880), in his treatise on harmony, first published in 1883 and used as a textbook by students at the Paris Conservatoire for many years, handled the prohibitions regarding the use of the tritone with a certain level of flexibility and observed an enormous difference between augmented fourths and diminished fifths (their inversion): according to this musical theorist, the latter sounds less harsh thanks to its frequent use in ancient times.¹² Though recommending that his students avoid the introduction of the false relation inherent in tritones, Théodore Dubois cited Palestrina in his *Traité de Contrepoint et de Fugue* of 1901 on account of the latter's tolerance towards this way of handling parts; and in his earlier notes to Henri Reber's treatise¹³ Dubois had preached the efficacy of tritones positioned between the bass and tenor in sequences built on diminished sevenths.¹⁴ In the theoretical-aesthetic section of the *Encyclopédie de la Musique* edited by Albert Lavignac, published for the first time in 1923, this interval (in its dual identity as augmented fourth and diminished fifth) was classified as a consonance, in contrast to the ruling of many earlier treatises:

La *quarte augmentée* et la *quinte diminuée* sont *consonances attractives* ou *appellatives*, parce que les sons qui les composent ont une tendance *naturelle* à se porter, à se résoudre, sur les notes voisines, qu'elles semblent tirer, appeler. [...] La *quarte augmentée* et la *quinte diminuée* ne sont pas, à la vérité, des consonances de même nature que les autres, puisqu'elles ne peuvent produire qu'un effet suspensif, et non pas cette impression de repos qui est le propre de la véritable consonance. [...] C'est en raison de cette tendance, naturellement résolutive, qu'on leur a donné la qualification d'*attractives* et aussi d'*appellatives*. C'est également cette raison qui les a fait considérer comme dissonances par plusieurs théoriciens.¹⁵

Last but not least, Charles Koechlin's *Traité de l'Harmonie* (1927) mentions the usefulness of the tritone when moving toward the dominant, taking up ideas exploiting the third inversion of the chord built on the fifth that had undoubtedly been circulating in the Paris Conservatoire for years; he also suggested the natural melodic movement of the tritone in cadenzas built on the dominant seventh.¹⁶

Among scholars of the *nouveau siècle*, perhaps Julien Tiersot particularly stood out on account of some illuminating observations by him on the importance of this interval in musical cultures other than those of Europe. His research had driven him to delve into the exotic language that many composers were discovering in this period. In his articles on musical ethnography, which happened to coincide with the Exposition Universelle of 1900, Tiersot devoted a number of pages to an analysis of Japanese dances, stressing the frequent use of the tritone, which was perceptible despite the different temperament of oriental orchestras:

¹² Durand, *Traité Complet*, 19: "Par ce renversement, le rapport de *quarte augmentée* qui existait primitivement se change en celui de *quinte diminuée*, beaucoup plus doux; ce qui rend *plus admissible* la succession des *deux sixtes mineures* que celle des *deux tierces majeures*."

¹³ Dubois, *Traité*, 3.

¹⁴ Dubois, *Notes & Études*.

¹⁵ Lavignac, *Encyclopédie de la Musique*, 246.

¹⁶ Koechlin, *Traité de l'Harmonie*, 68–69.

L'emploi du triton est, notamment, très caractéristique. On sait qu'au point de vue mélodique cet intervalle est, depuis le moyen âge, considéré comme contraire à notre sentiment musical: la raison de cette répugnance est que les deux notes qui le composent se repoussent mutuellement, de telle sorte que, dans l'harmonie, a sa résolution obligée et en sens contraire. Chez les Japonais rien de semblable: le triton ne les effraie pas plus que la quarte la plus juste ou la quinte la plus parfaite.¹⁷

Something similar undoubtedly occurred in the music of Java that Debussy and his contemporaries had the opportunity to admire at the Exposition Universelle. A number of examples recorded by Jaap Kunst in his imposing study of Javanese traditions confirm this taste for tritonal accompaniment: particularly in a dance known as *kuda képang*, where the harmony is often created by this very interval, so feared by Westerners (music example 1, diminished fifths in the *penitir panengah* part).¹⁸

Music example 1

An extract from a Javanese *kuda képang* taken from Jaap Kunst's *Music in Java* (1973).

The musical score for 'kuda képang' consists of four staves. The top staff is for the *suling* (flute), written in treble clef. The second staff is for the *pentir panengah*, written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The third staff is for the *dogdog kechér*, written in a double bar line with a key signature of one flat. The bottom staff is for the *gong*, written in bass clef. The score shows a tritonal accompaniment, with the *pentir panengah* and *gong* parts featuring diminished fifths.

Observations such as these, combined with visits to the pavilions along the Esplanade des Invalides, undoubtedly left their mark on the imagination of many musicians searching for new lexical elements that could be used to modernize musical language.

Debussy, as we know, was particularly interested in research into Indonesian music. His interest in Javanese music was piqued from the very first time he came across a gamelan in 1889, something he referred to many times in the years that followed. Again, in 1895 (22 January), Debussy reminded Pierre Louÿs of the sensations he had felt on hearing that surprising orchestra of percussion instruments, but his memory was not captivated as much by the timbre of South Eastern Asian music as it was by a harmony that was able to call into question the usual tonal poles:

Mais mon pauvre vieux! Rappelle-toi la musique javanaise qui contenait toutes les nuances, même celles qu'on ne peut plus nommer, où la tonique et la dominante n'étaient plus que vains fantômes à l'usage des petits enfants pas sages.¹⁹

The use of the tritone undoubtedly contributed, in the ways mentioned above, to the

¹⁷ Tiersot, "Etnographie Musicale", 347.

¹⁸ Kunst, *Music in Java*, 284–285.

¹⁹ Debussy, *Correspondance*, 237.

feeling shared by French composers that such music had overcome (or perhaps avoided from the start) the tension produced by tonic and dominant. Accordingly, Debussy probably began to think about the resources that tritones offered as he strolled through the pavilions of the Exposition Universelle. Subsequently, he continued to work on that device, offering his own personal contribution to the European debate of the early twentieth century. Allen Forte in particular has highlighted a systematic interest in the symmetry of hexachord 6-30, formed by three tritones as well as one entirely octatonic chord.²⁰ Richard S. Parks has often stressed, using the language of pitch-class set theory, the genetic importance of the interval in many compositions written after the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.²¹ As we shall see, other musicologists have focused on specific cases. However, it is in the endings of some of Debussy's compositions that this composer resorts to the tritone in a particularly expressive way.

The Use of Tritones in Debussy's Endings

We can start with an example in the *Chansons de Bilitis*, the collection of *mélodies* composed in 1898 on texts written by Pierre Louÿs. "La flûte de Pan" opens with a clear reference to a shepherd's flute, given as a gift to emphasize strong erotic tension: this is the object that brings the lyrical narrator closer to Pan, the faun, the couple's lips touching to the notes of the music ("et tour à tour nos bouches s'unissent sur la flûte"). Much of the sensuality of this score derives from the propulsive power of the tritone: the interval stands out (B-E#) in the modal scale (Lydian) that dominates the first section of the *mélodie* (a motif that can easily be associated with the song of the flute; see music example 2a). The score is entirely generated by the B-E# relationship up to bar 12, where the piece takes another harmonic turn that leaves the tritone's colour in the background (in the two repetitions of the flute motif on the Lydian D \flat of bars 15–16). As Parks observes, Debussy uses a number of pitch-class sets in order to represent, even at a formal level, two different episodes in the text:²² first the moment of seduction and then the physical union. At the conclusion, when the "chant des grenouilles" announces that night is falling and therefore the couple's separation is at hand, the mind of the narrator returns to savouring those pleasures that will soon be only a memory, thinking back to the flute motif (music example 2b).

Nevertheless, there is a substantial difference between the two thematic apparitions: the support in the lower register formed by a perfect fifth at the start becomes a diminished fifth at the conclusion, occupying the pitches of those same notes B-E# that had characterized the erotic tension of the first two verses. Debussy highlights the reference to memory by his direction "très lointain", often encountered in his endings.²³ The repetition of a

²⁰ Forte, "Debussy and the Octatonic", 128.

²¹ Parks, *Music of Claude Debussy*.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

²³ Compare, for example, the conclusions of "Fêtes", "La puerta del vino", "Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut", "Feuilles mortes".

Music example 2a–b

Claude Debussy, *La flûte de Pan*, bar 1 (left) and bar 27 (right).

familiar motif forces us to relish once more the *déjà-entendu*, but the transformation of the bass interval into a tritone acts as an element distinguishing the past from the present.

Something similar, though reversed, occurs in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. This composition (1894), written just before the *Chansons de Bilitis*, has often attracted the attention of scholars because of its links with Stéphane Mallarmé's text: Anne Roubet noticed an extraordinary similarity in the way the text and music treat myth non-narratively, preferring a representation of the dialectical relationship between dream and reality (a perspective that would also make room for a non-specific comparison between the tritones and perfect fourths and fifths).²⁴ David J. Code's impressive parallel interpretation comparing Debussy and Mallarmé highlights the ambiguity of the first interval, particularly in the harmonization of the central section (bars 63–78), where the bass moves between D \flat and G, emphasizing both the alternation between diatonicism and the hexatonic scale and the elusive contrast between the poem's "je" and "tu".²⁵ Working within the bounds of his chromatic Circle of Fifths (a diagram of keys that allows us to identify simple similarities between the harmonic rhythms of bars), Stephen Jablonsky has highlighted an important tritonal relationship in the chordal movements of the last bars (94–110), and – as we shall see – has spoken of a tritonal compression in bar 107.²⁶

Here, too, the final episode of the composition uses the tritone in order to trigger the processes of memory. The interval plays an essential role, particularly in the first part of the *Prélude* (up to bar 54), expressing the heightened sensuality of the text. The faun motif itself seems to melt away (thanks to a gradual rhythmic relaxation) within a tritone: C \sharp and G are the two pitches that limit the range of the melodic line (music example 3a). The two notes are the poles around which the motif revolves, and therefore the tritonal relationship strikes the sensibilities of the listener with all its harmonic force. Sensuality means, first and foremost, tension, and it is this relationship between the two unstable basses that triggers the erotic power of the main idea. This desire continues in the first chord of the composition, played by clarinets and oboes, that isolates another tritone (E–A \sharp) in the higher register: the interval is immediately repeated in bar 7, in the first violin part, after a striking bar of silence that helps to heighten the intensity of this overlap. Even the Tristan Chord that forms at bar 19 in the strings owes much of its strength to the tritone (B–E \sharp), played there by the cellos and violins. The subsequent four repetitions of

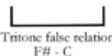
²⁴ Roubet, "Debussy et le Mythe", 53–54.

²⁵ Code, "Hearing Debussy Reading Mallarmé", 541.

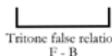
²⁶ Jablonsky, "Introduction aux Graphes de Tonalité", 99–103.

the faun motif continue to stress melodically the polarity created in the first bar (C#-G). The central section's atmosphere subsequently changes radically, harking back to motifs of late Romantic musical literature without, however, abandoning the tritone's profile, which from bar 55 generates most of the movements in the bass. In all these combinations Debussy avoids traditional ways of resolving the tritone, thereby increasing the tension created by that interval and accordingly the representation of the frustrated desire that undoubtedly lies at the heart of Mallarmé's poetic thought. Even in section A', where the faun motif reappears in a consonant harp accompaniment (bar 79), the tritone continues to be present in the two interruptions (bars 83–85 and bars 90–93) that give the impression of stabilizing a momentary contact with a parallel dimension: both fragments are actually produced by a false tritonal relation between the double basses and cellos (figure 1).

Faun Theme (79-82)	Interruption I (83-85)	Faun Theme (86-89)	Interruption II (90-93)
E major	C major	E♭ major	B major



Tritone false relation
F# - C



Tritone false relation
F - B

Figure 1

Tritonal relationships in bars 79–93 of Claude Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.

In the conclusion (bars 94–110), following the development occupying the central section, the faun motif reappears in its original form, albeit “avec plus de langueur”, as Debussy notes. The unbroken dialogue between the solo violin and flute seems to express an emotional contact between the faun and nymph; a general lengthening of notes in the decorative arabesques in combination with Debussy's agogic instructions (*retenu, très retenu, très lent et très retenu jusqu'à la fin*) creates a sense of relaxation for the listener, culminating in nothing less than an unmistakable moment of rest in the perfect cadence of bars 105–106. As Jablonsky emphasizes, the process that leads to this traditional close is in actual fact anything but conventional.²⁷ However, the agogic relaxation gives listeners the time they need to savour the IV–V–I progression. Debussy, perhaps slightly contradicting what is expressed by Mallarmé's text, ends his composition with a sense of gratification, which helps relieve all the tension created during the piece, almost as if the faun's desire has been satisfied, to which there is no reference in the poem. The erotic tension is removed to the sphere of memory, and even the final, fleeting repetition of the main theme loses its electric charge, fading away in an *en plein air* reference in the horns. Nevertheless, the theme's tension becomes relaxed by that same variation of the melody at bar 107, which reduces the ambitus from a tritone to a major third (music example 3b).

As soon as desire turns into a distant memory, Debussy chooses to work with an interval associated with our *déjà-entendu*; and he does this in a bar that stands out in comparison with the rest of the ending for various differing reasons: the sudden acceleration of harmonic rhythm; the timbre of the horns, which creates spatial depth; and a C major-E major relationship has continued to reappear ever since the first variation of

²⁷ Ibid., 101.

Music example 3a

Claude Debussy, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, bars 1–3.



Music example 3b

Claude Debussy, *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, bar 107.



the main melody (bar 21).²⁸ At the end of the piece the listener has heard the faun motif too many times to fail to assimilate its tritonal impact: our memory of it continues to perceive the ghost of that relationship between pitches, which can then offer us a chance to compare it with our previous experience. Debussy may seem to make the impression of having chosen an opposite approach to the one described for the *Chansons de Bilitis* (there, the presence of the tritone unleashed mnemonic processes, while here it is its absence that does so), but in actual fact he is once again using the same interval to create a connection between distant moments. The tritone's disappearance forces us to distance ourselves from the rest of the composition where that colour dominated; and, with a rapid gesture, Debussy manages to suggest a temporal change that his listeners can perceive.

Once again, *Nuages* (1900) owes much of its harmonic construction to the same resource. Taruskin has highlighted this process, visualizing the composition's axes in this way:

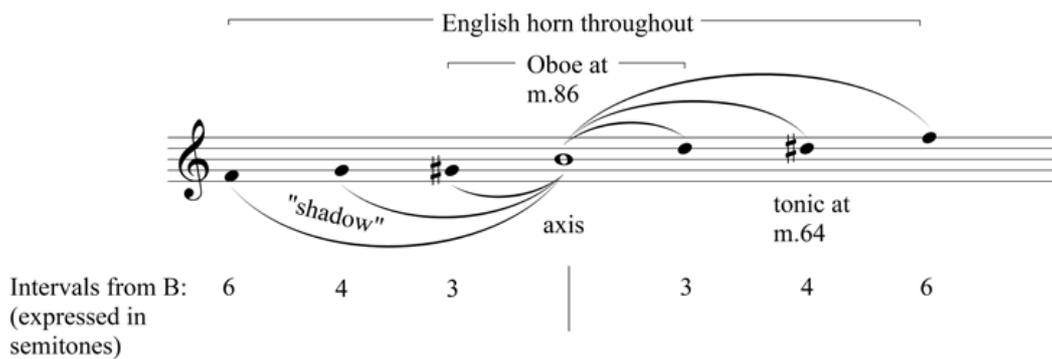


Figure 2

Richard Taruskin's diagram of the harmonic polarizations in Claude Debussy's *Nuages*.

According to Taruskin, Debussy exploits the scalar symmetries created by the tritone in order to polarize the entire composition around B in a condition of reduced tonality, as

²⁸ It returns in bars 26, 79–85 and 94.

argued by Mark DeVoto.²⁹ Most of this logic stems from the hypostatization of the interval in the cor anglais part, via that strident and isolated call that keeps repeating itself. The melody culminates on F only to gradually descend to B, and Taruskin sees in these two extremes the poles forming the basis of an obsessive thematic idea. Nevertheless, his comments on the formal structure, which he sees as divided into three parts, are equally interesting. This simple interpretation³⁰ of the general architecture of the piece is disputed by James Hepokoski, who prefers to think in terms of a rotational structure unfolding in five cycles of differing lengths.³¹ But I want to point up the relevance of a tripartite structure that does not reflect any particular proportional relationships:

Table 1

Section A (<i>Modéré</i>)	Section B (<i>Un peu animé</i>)	Section A' (First Tempo)
Bars 1–63	Bars 64–79	Bars 80–102
Static pattern in $\frac{5}{4}$ + English horn phrase	Pentatonic melody in flute and harp	Cor anglais phrase, fragments of the static pattern in $\frac{5}{4}$ and the pentatonic melody

The A' section not only divests itself of the static pattern ($\frac{5}{4}$) to which the main idea seemed tied: it also condenses itself in a few bars of recapitulation. Rather than being a reprise, it seems a reminiscence of what has been presented earlier, isolating part of the familiar material. The filter of memory is triggered by a number of different processes: a general disruption of the phrase, which dissolves the rhythmic solidity of the initial bars; the partial disappearance of the static pattern according to a selective system that is typical of mnemonic processes; the vibrato of the strings on an evanescent fifth (E-B), which seems to conceal the main melodic prompts; the prolonging of the cor anglais phrase in a kind of fragmentary echo that twice delivers only the last three notes of the phrase (bars 88–89; bars 92–94); and finally, in the section beginning with the direction *Encore plus lent* (bar 98), a hint of the pentatonic phrase of the central section; and, just before that, a skeletal restatement of the static pattern in the cello part that becomes progressively deprived of its chordal nature (bars 94–97). All these features contribute to turning the last page of *Nuages* into the physiognomy of a floating memory that has difficulty focusing on one single object; and the use of the tritone heightens this impression, becoming a destabilizing element within the compositional fabric. This interval continues to sound in the oboe and horn parts, interrupting the continuity of the phrase: it recalls an interval pattern with which the listener is familiar, but it always intervenes as an interruption of the melodic reminiscences of the ending. The melody in the cor anglais begins to fall apart right after the oboe's tritonal call (music example 4a), just as the flute's pentatonic phrase is similarly interrupted by the augmented fourth in the horn section (music example 4b).

²⁹ DeVoto, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality*, 96–125.

³⁰ DeVoto summarizes this consolidated interpretation by speaking of a “three section-form” resembling that of many Debussy works from *Arabesques* to *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (ibid., 113–114).

³¹ Hepokoski, “Clouds and Circles”.

Music example 4a

Claude Debussy, *Nuages*, bars 84–89 (oboe and cor anglais parts).

The image shows a musical score for two parts: Oboe and English Horn. The Oboe part is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with a trill-like figure in bars 84-85, marked with a *p* dynamic and an accent (>). The English Horn part is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with a trill-like figure in bars 84-85, marked with a *p* dynamic and a hairpin (<<). The score is written for bars 84-89.

Music example 4b

Claude Debussy, *Nuages*, bars 98–99 (flute and horn parts).

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Flute and two Horns. The Flute part is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with a trill-like figure in bars 98-99, marked with a *pp* dynamic and an accent (>). The two Horn parts are in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/4 time signature. They feature a melodic line with a trill-like figure in bars 98-99, marked with a *pp* dynamic and an accent (>). The score is written for bars 98-99.

This interval, in the same descending pattern, has already been heard in section A (bars 23–24; bars 27–28), where it is once again associated with the tone colour of the horns. However, it is much harder to recognize, given the invasive presence of the static pattern in $\frac{6}{4}$; moreover, its function is not that of a disruptive cell: instead, it seems to match the surrounding material perfectly – so much so that the cor anglais motif continues to expand in all its song-like quality. In contrast, when we reach the conclusion, this element, which remained in the background at the beginning of the piece, gains most of its prominence, taking precedence over any memory of the past; and it is this very overlapping of sounds, now isolated, that becomes the piece's final melody (bar 100).

What happens at the end of *La Boîte à joujoux* (1913) is perhaps even more obvious. This *ballet pour enfants* relates the love story between dolls and toy soldiers that come to life in a toy shop. A soldier and Polichinelle fight over a pretty doll; the soldier is seriously wounded by his rival, but his defeat is insufficient to extinguish such strong feelings, destined to unite the two puppets forever. In the epilogue Debussy works on the theme of memory, evoking the main motifs of the work. The plot leaps forward in time: the two lovers are observed in their daily lives, twenty years after they have married. They have become successful sheep farmers, while the belligerent Polichinelle has become a groundsman; and the music leads us from one moment in time to another via an episode where it is none other than the tritone (C#-G) that accompanies Polichinelle's brazen theme and the playful motif initially associated with the dolls' awakening. This interval appears in harmonic form, colouring the bass for eight consecutive bars: its static quality contrasts with the lively nature of the themes that are re-evoked, perfectly recreating the mental image of a distant memory. The melodies are the same, but their spirited quality

has become corroded through the passage of time, as if the joys of yesterday have actually become the sorrows of today.

Music example 5

Claude Debussy, *La Boîte à joujoux*, epilogue.

EPILOGUE Peu à peu on revoit le décor du 1^{er} Tableau, avec les mêmes personnages.

un peu marqué mais toujours *pp*

La tête du petit soldat de bois apparaît; il fait le salut militaire au moment où le rideau tombe.

cresc. molto

f *ff* *ffz*

In *Pelléas et Mélisande* the tritonal relationship undoubtedly plays a key role. Richard Langham Smith has highlighted this aspect, reworking observations made by Carolyn Abbate concerning the C-F# contrast that characterizes the tonal scenario of the main character: the same contrast that had been used earlier in the “Prélude” to *Rodrigue et Chimène*.³² Antokoletz has stressed its importance for the octatonic compression of the hexatonic scale through tritones common to two tetrachords.³³ However, we also find a number of moments where the sonority of the interval acquires an obsessive feel: in the cave episode (Act 2, Scene 3), for example, the entire introduction features the recurrent presence of a diminished fifth (A \flat -D), constantly introduced in melodic form in the viola part at the beginning of the bar. Pelléas and Mélisande enter the cave to look for the lost ring, but a strong sense of foreboding oppresses them. This place, shrouded in night, feels sinister, and the tritonal sound, assigned to the dark timbre of the violas, is a constant companion to the characters’ emotional pulse. This obsessive quality seems threatening, as if that place – a kind of womb that attracts and yet frightens – is concealing something horrific. The lugubrious atmosphere, on a razor’s edge between a persecution complex and fear of the unknown, reaches its peak with the appearance of the three old beggars

³² Smith, “Tonality of Darkness”, 138–139.

³³ Antokoletz, *Musical Symbolism*, 131–135.

asleep in the cave; just as Pelléas's anguished observation ("Entendez vous la mer derrière nous? Elle ne semble pas heureuse cette nuit"), set to a progression of two tritones (Gb-C → Ab-D), constitutes the spoken expression of an unease that has been palpable in the orchestra since the scene began.

However, it is perhaps in the final scene of the opera that the tritone reappears with greater insistence. When Arkel announces the arrival of Golaud, the down-to-earth character who has never been able to raise himself to Mélisande's metaphysical heights, the tritone (C-F#) appears in the song, interrupted by a long fermata ("C'est... il ne faut pas t'effrayer"). That silence means a great deal: Arkel's indecision, torn between fatherly love and his affection for Mélisande; the girl's confused state, since she no longer recognizes the people around her; and the logical disintegration of the thoughts of those who face the borderline between life and death. The interval acts as a bridge between interruptions in speech, creating an impression that this moment of silence actually fills Arkel's mind with thoughts and memories.

Even the moment that introduces the intimate dialogue between Mélisande and Golaud starts with an diminished fifth (B-F), repeated twice in the same place (the double bass pizzicato); this solution creates the impression of a sinister bell tolling twice, presaging a difficult encounter between the two characters. Golaud wants to know the truth: he wants to know his woman's sexual past, whereas in actual fact Mélisande has been the most spiritual figure throughout the opera; he insists on unearthing the details of a past that he cannot know, and the same interval (F-B) contributes towards stressing his explicit demand for a confession by closing the statement "As-tu... avez-vous été coupables? Dis, dis, oui, oui, oui," as well as Mélisande's confused answer (in the viola part) to the violent demand for truth ("La vérité... la... vérité").

When Golaud resigns himself to commenting on Mélisande's irreparable distance from earthly things ("Je ne sais rien, c'est inutile... elle est déjà trop loin de nous..."), a bassoon interrupts with an ascending visionary melodic fragment enclosed within a tritone (D-Ab). The presence of the interval as a signpost forces us yet again to use our memory, because Mélisande has always seemed far away from all the other characters. When, in the first scene of the opera, Golaud asks her about her past ("D'où êtes vous? Où êtes vous née?"), she enigmatically answers "Oh! oh! loin d'ici... loin... loin...", declaring herself from the start to be entirely estranged from a world in which she seems to have suddenly appeared from a parallel universe, and the entire opera forces us to consider the vision of a *princesse lointaine* who seems to have erased her past following some traumatic event. As spectators, we cannot help but attempt to explore the character's memory in an effort to unearth a repressed memory; however, Maeterlinck's libretto never satisfies our curiosity, since the mystery remains unsolved at the end of the opera.

The final bars of *Pelléas et Mélisande* repeat that same ambitus (music example 6); the opera's last melodic fragment is encased within a tritone (C#-F*). Once again, it is the interval that stands out in the Lydian scale, as Smith rightly observes, theorizing the construction of the opera's main harmonic relationships by working backwards from its last chord.³⁴ A touch of harp harks back to the perpetual motion of the tower scene, which

³⁴ Smith, "Tonality of Darkness", 135.

was undoubtedly key to creating the erotic tension between the two main characters. For a fleeting moment, Debussy reminds his listeners of the only moment in the opera when Mélisande had taken on physical substance, using timbre and rhythm: Pelléas had enjoyed a fetishistic relationship with the physical substance of her hair. Now that she is dead, the episode can act merely as a momentary “flashback” of an experience that remains on the border between the tangible and intangible: just a quick moment of reflection, recalling a fleeting existence between two dimensions that we cannot understand. The presence of the tritone in this last impression is probably no coincidence: throughout the entire final scene the interval is used to open a door between past and present; and the concluding bars represent the peak of a reflection that works backwards, thanks to which the characters (and audience) have attempted to explore Mélisande’s history in vain. Her long, blond hair is the only part of her that we feel we have actually touched; these concluding bars therefore bring us to clasp for one last moment the memory of that now-distant physical sensation.

Music example 6

Claude Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act 5, final bars (harp and horn parts).

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Horns and Harp. The Horns part is in the upper staff, written in treble clef with a 12/8 time signature. It features a melodic line with several tritone intervals, marked with *pp* (pianissimo) and accents. The Harp part is in the lower staff, written in two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a 12/8 time signature. It features a complex, arpeggiated texture with tritone intervals, also marked with *pp* and accents. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#).

Conclusion

These observations provide further proof of the importance of the tritone in the musical language of the early 1900s. France in particular was already expressing a certain preference for the sonorities of this interval at a theoretical level. The interest in the symmetries created by the tritone within the scale and the Circle of Fifths was much greater in the German musical world; in contrast, French teachers and composers were fascinated by the overlapping (or sequence) of sounds that could shed an unmistakable light within the musical process. Proof of this emerges when we examine procedures typical of the Javanese music that was so admired by Debussy during the Exposition Universelle: a percussion accompaniment where the tritonal sound acts as a repetitive drone employing complex rhythm changes and polyphony.

This interest may have also stemmed from Russian music, much loved by Debussy. Roy Howat, for example, has highlighted the possible contact between this compositional practice and lexical habits found in Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*: he particularly focuses on the similarities between the tritonal sequences in the latter’s coronation scene and those of a number of piano pieces (*Images oubliées* and “Hommage à Rameau” from the

Images, series 1).³⁵ This is not surprising, given Debussy's clear interest in that opera: his admiration for Mussorgsky continued for most of his career. In 1908 a debate arose in Paris regarding the similarities between that particular Russian opera and *Pelléas*,³⁶ and a few years earlier (in 1903) Debussy himself had remarked on the performance of *Boris Godunov* at the Opéra in the columns of *Gil Blas*.³⁷

In the examples mentioned above, Debussy uses the tritone to stimulate a comparison between past and present: its naturally dark physiognomy (particularly in a low register) encourages a comparison between different moments in the chronological axis, lending one's memory of the past an unmistakable colour. In the introduction to Debussy's *Sonate pour flûte, harpe et alto*, it immediately confers on the cyclical material that harmonic originality advocated so passionately by Vincent d'Indy in his *Cours de Composition*,³⁸ while at other points during the composition it can prove to be a clear element of latent recursivity as deeply reconstructed by Jean-Louis Leleu.³⁹ This French scholar has especially highlighted the texture of infra-thematic relationships generated by the interval class 6 (especially C – Gb), observing its importance in conferring unity on the composition.⁴⁰ However, it is an obsessive presence that emerges in the endings of many other pieces by Debussy: in *Des pas sur la neige* the tritone leaves its insistent mark on the harmony of the first bars (up until bar 14), while in the conclusion it appears for the first time in melodic form at the height of the episode characterized by the direction "comme un tendre et triste regret" (bars 29–31), leaving the listener with a sense of *déjà-entendu*; whereas in the "Sérénade" from the *Sonate pour violoncelle et piano* it is the disappearance of the tritone in Section A' (bar 56) that forces the listener to think back, in the search for a psychological explanation for the removal of an element that has been obsessively repeated ever since the introduction.⁴¹

It is interesting to link these choices to memory processes. Debussy associated tritones with reminiscence, using the interval to contemplate a path that has already been completed, thereby looking at the past in a complex and problematic way. In actual fact,

³⁵ Howat, "Russian Imprints", 34–45.

³⁶ Debussy, *Correspondance*, 1098.

³⁷ The perhaps excessively aggressive tone was soon moderated by Pierre Lalo and the composer himself. Cf. Debussy, *Monsieur Croche*, 117.

³⁸ For d'Indy, a cyclical sonata had to have a number of essential features. The cyclical theme had to be easy to memorize, thanks to a well-formed melodic profile, harmonies designed to satisfy the expectations of the listener and simple repetitions. These cyclical elements had to be central to each movement and not secondary to other material. Last but not least, the harmonic movement had to start from the tonic only to return to it, confirming the circularity of its progress. Cf. Indy, *Cours de Composition Musicale*, 391.

³⁹ Leleu, "Spécificités de l'agencement formel".

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ In "Dialogue du vent et de la mer" from *La Mer* the tritone often appears to alter the shape of the cyclical theme (bars 110ff); in *Des pas sur la neige* it systematically appears in harmonic form, only to return in melodic form during the conclusion at the moment where the instruction "comme un tendre et triste regret" appears (in this case, Debussy – at bar 31 – explicitly refers to an act of memory); in the "Sérénade" it disappears at the end, depriving the main idea of a distinctive characteristic, as occurs in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.

this is not a version of the familiar closing devices appearing in music of the late nineteenth century, where the repeat of a motif is used to add an organic element to a composition, appearing to the ear of the listener in an explicit way. The examples commented above show a different concept of cyclic unity, which strays from the models of César Franck and Vincent d'Indy proposed by Mark DeVoto, to favour a principle of latent connections.⁴² Debussy prefers to work on involuntary memory, on those subtle, hidden connections that we do not perceive in any conscious way. Marcel Proust can maybe prove helpful when we attempt to understand this approach. The two men met, but they did not seek out one another's company. This lack of contact has often been used as a pretext for not examining more deeply the aesthetic links between their respective oeuvres. Only recently has light really been shed upon the grid of poetic connections between Debussy and Proust. In particular, it is Jean-Yves Tadié who has given us an important in-depth study of this problematic theme, consisting of numerous threads tied to a common source: Proust's admiration for *Pelléas et Mélisande*, inhabited by the seductive force of the sea that they both felt, the idea of *arabesque* and above all an interest in mental intimate thoughts and the complex workings of the unconscious with particular reference to underlying movements of memory, which leads both Proust and Debussy to examine real life in all of its forms: "[...] le passé suscité, le passé regretté, le roman de ce qui aurait pu être [...]".⁴³

In *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, there are not only epiphanies of the past: there are, above all, detailed examinations of the moments that precede the appearance of the past. When the narrator dips a *madeleine* in his tea, his memory of the past does not suddenly appear: initially, his mind wanders in search of a tangible contact with the origin of that memory.⁴⁴ Proust dedicates a number of pages (in this case, as in the episode where he comes to terms with the loss of his grandmother, or the apparition of *temps retrouvé* after he falls on the pavement of the palace of the Guermantes) to reflecting on the sensation, somewhere between the conscious and the unconscious, that precedes the complete reconstruction of the past. Debussy often attempts the same mnemonic effort described by Proust: that mental state where every image struggles to take on a clear form. In the conclusions we have analysed, the tritone contributes to creating this effect, forming subterranean associations that cannot always be consciously discerned. The basic

⁴² DeVoto, *Debussy and the Veil of Tonality*, 13–14.

⁴³ Tadié, "Proust et Debussy", 116.

⁴⁴ Proust, *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, 45–46: "Et je recommence à me demander quel pouvait être cet état inconnu, qui n'apportait aucune preuve logique, mais l'évidence de sa félicité, de sa réalité devant laquelle les autres s'évanouissaient. Je veux essayer de la faire reparaître. Je rétrograde par la pensée au moment où je pris la première cuillerée du thé. Je retrouve le même état, sans une clarté nouvelle. Je demande à mon esprit un effort de plus, de ramener encore une fois la sensation qui s'enfuit. Et, pour que rien ne brise l'élan dont il va tâcher de la ressaisir, j'écarte tout obstacle, toute idée étrangère, j'abrite mes oreilles et mon attention contre les bruits de la chambre voisine. Mais sentant mon esprit qui se fatigue sans réussir, je le force au contraire à prendre cette distraction que je lui refusais, à penser à autre chose, où se refaire avant une tentative suprême. Puis une deuxième fois, je fais le vide devant lui, je remets en face de lui la saveur encore récente de cette première gorgée et je sens tressaillir en moi quelque chose qu'on aurait désancré, à une grande profondeur; je ne sais ce que c'est, mais cela monte lentement; j'éprouve la résistance et j'entends la rumeur des distances traversées."

attitude, deep down, is perfectly in line with the root of symbolism: that which Mallarmé considered to be a stimulus to suggesting rather than saying. The result lies somewhere between consciousness and unconsciousness, exploiting a melodic-harmonic element in order to activate a deep, yet fleeting, mnemonic process.

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