

Eduqas A level AoS E: Debussy's *Nuages*

KS5

Simon Rushby

Introduction

Nuages is one of the two works set by Eduqas for Area of Study E: Into the Twentieth Century. This AoS focuses on the early part of the century, when there was much change and experimentation in musical style. Debussy was at the forefront of efforts to take music in a new direction, away from the complexity of late Romantic music, and a variety of new styles emerged at this time.

This resource will focus entirely on Debussy's *Nuages*, to help students prepare for the component 3 written exam. There's more detail on the kinds of questions that can be asked, as well as a sample question, at the end.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

In the late 19th century, French composers were enjoying some time in the spotlight. At the Paris Conservatoire, where Claude Debussy studied, teachers such as César Franck and Gabriel Fauré encouraged modern approaches and free thinking in composition.

Despite coming from a poor suburb of Paris, Debussy spent his younger years under the patronage of Russian millionairess Madame Nadezhda von Meck, with whom he toured Europe and Russia during summer holidays from the Conservatoire, meeting some notable Russian composers. He won the Conservatoire's composition prize, the Prix de Rome, in 1884 and became familiar with the music of Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt.

These early studies and encounters influenced the young composer, but he very quickly set out to develop his own unique style, which some commentators dubbed **impressionism** after the school of painting that had flourished some years earlier. Debussy did not like the term, but for many it became synonymous with his sound world.

Understanding impressionism

In a resource from [March 2017](#) on Debussy's *Estampes* (1903) I suggest exploration of his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* as a way to understand this style more closely. In that earlier resource, the following broad list of 'impressionist' musical features is drawn up:

- ▶ Short melodies often based on **non-diatonic scales** or infused with **chromaticism** and developed **fragmentally**.
- ▶ Rich harmony, with chains of **parallel added chords** such as **7ths** and **9ths**.
- ▶ An absence of **functional** harmonic and tonal progressions.
- ▶ A rich palette of instrumental textures, timbres and colours.
- ▶ Ambiguous and fluid musical forms that are often based on the **transformation** of an initial theme.
- ▶ Influence from other art forms and cultures – particularly poetry.
- ▶ Atmospheric pieces with evocative and descriptive titles.

The three *Nocturnes* come from this relatively early period in Debussy's output. Arguably Debussy's most Impressionist-like work is his orchestral piece *La mer* (1905), which calls to mind the seascape paintings of Claude Monet and JMW Turner.

Simon Rushby is a freelance musician, writer and education consultant, and was a director of music and senior leader in secondary schools for more than 25 years. He is author of a large number of books and web resources, an examiner, a composer and a performer.



Claude Debussy in 1908

NB: the Eduqas **AS** music specification comprises **two** areas of study, and does **not** include AoS E.

Exploring Debussy's style

While Debussy acknowledged Wagner's influence, he set out to break away from its pull, and this can most clearly be seen in their differing approaches to the use of harmony. Both wanted to make their harmony less functional, but for different reasons. Wagner's approach was to create unresolved tension through complex chromaticism, while Debussy explored the **sonority** and **colour** of chords by extending them with non-harmony notes and removing progressions such as cadences and modulations. Debussy's chords moved seamlessly and often in parallel, resulting in harmonic fluidity that made the tonality ambiguous.

Debussy's strongest artistic influences were probably the **Symbolist** poets, such as Stéphane Mallarmé, on whose poem *L'après-midi d'un faune* Debussy based his *Prélude*. Symbolism was a literary movement in which evocation and suggestion trumped description, and ambiguity was preferred to clarity. Debussy relished the Symbolist ideal that artists should react against realism through evocative timbres, suggestion and colour.

Getting to know Debussy's style: a listening journey

Students could usefully embark on a listening journey through some of Debussy's other key works, having first got to know the *Prélude*, for example:

- ▶ 'Clair de lune' from *Suite bergamasque* (1895, pub. 1907):
www.youtube.com/watch?v=FoD_AxKoJDs
- ▶ 'Pagodes' from *Estampes* (1903): www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsWHSnJoRlw
- ▶ *La mer* (1905): www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUFpcPEcwTo
- ▶ Any of the *Images* for orchestra (1905-12): www.youtube.com/watch?v=TerWx9fesy0
- ▶ 'Voiles' or any of the other *Préludes* for piano (there are two books):
www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVVojkZC4jl

Students could be encouraged to summarise Debussy's key influences and ideals as they listen. A list of these was supplied in the resource on *Estampes*.

Debussy's *Nocturnes*

Debussy's first orchestral work since the success of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, the *Nocturnes* were completed in 1899 and the first two, *Nuages (Clouds)* and *Fêtes (Festivals)* were performed in Paris in 1900, with the third, *Sirènes (Sirens)* added the following year. The work brought many accolades to the composer from those who saw him as a fresh, new and essential voice in the development of early 20th-century music.

In the programme notes for the first performance, Debussy wrote that the title 'is not meant to designate the usual form of the Nocturne, but rather all the various impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests'.

Nuages is understated and restrained – a large orchestra is required, as was common in late Romantic German music, for example, but it is rarely used loudly. Debussy preferred stillness to movement and treated the ensemble like a vast palette of colour rather than a source of power and noise. Again from his programme notes:

'*Nuages* renders the immutable aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds, fading away in grey tones lightly tinged with white.'

To analyse *Nuages* in the traditional way would be to miss the point of Debussy's approach, since he wrote that he wanted 'to rid music of the legacy of clumsy, falsely interpreted traditions'. This quote by Debussy's biographer, Léon Vallas, sums up the academic reaction to *Nuages*:

'The professors who respected classical usage and the conservatives who were faithful to the traditional habits were once more horrified. They were bewildered by an instrumentation that was so utterly different from the opaque style to which they were accustomed. The absolute freedom of the harmony caused even more amazement than the other elements of this music.'

Listening to *Nuages*

It's important that students first allow themselves to be transported into Debussy's sound world as they listen. As they hear *Nuages*, they can focus on some simple concepts:

- ▶ The **sound** of the orchestra, not the names or combinations of instruments used.
- ▶ The **colour and effect** of the harmony, not the names of chords or keys.
- ▶ The melodies and rhythms ideas that **stand out**, not the lengths of phrases or numbers of repetitions.
- ▶ The **sonic picture** of a cloudy sky over the river Seine, which partly inspired the music. Students could compare the American painter James Whistler, who used the term *Nocturne* to describe a series he completed in the 1880s. There's more on those paintings here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nocturne_(painting))

Nuages – picking apart the music

Once a general familiarity with *Nuages* has been established, a closer look can be taken at how Debussy creates this music. There are many analyses available, one of the most comprehensive being that provided by Eduqas on its website. In this resource, I will explain as clearly as possible the most significant features, with the understanding that teachers and students may want to use other resources to deepen their understanding of these overarching concepts.

Eduqas recommends Ravel's two-piano arrangement of *Nuages* for study. This is freely available online here ([https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/5/5a/IMSLP01679-Debussy-Ravel_-_Nocturne_No.1_\(2_pianos\).pdf](https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/5/5a/IMSLP01679-Debussy-Ravel_-_Nocturne_No.1_(2_pianos).pdf)) and also here (<https://musescore.com/user/2749876/scores/6737192> – subscription required).

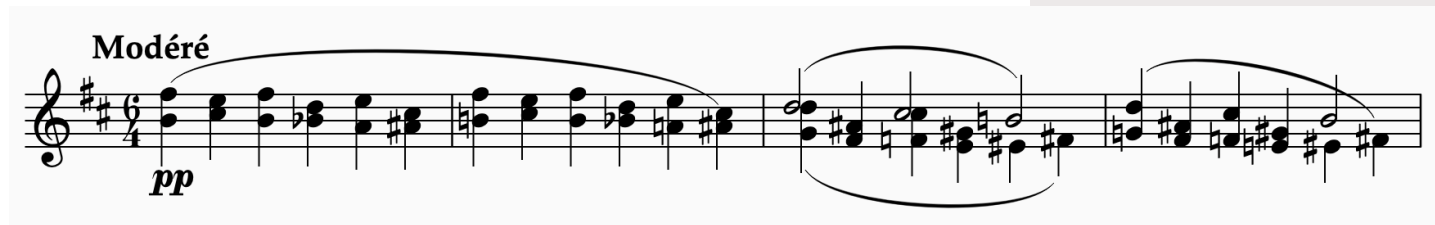
Students also need to use a full orchestral score to understand more about Debussy's orchestration. Again, there's a free copy available online here: <https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/4/46/IMSLP42479-PMLP04968-Debussy-Log1fsPL.pdf>

Form

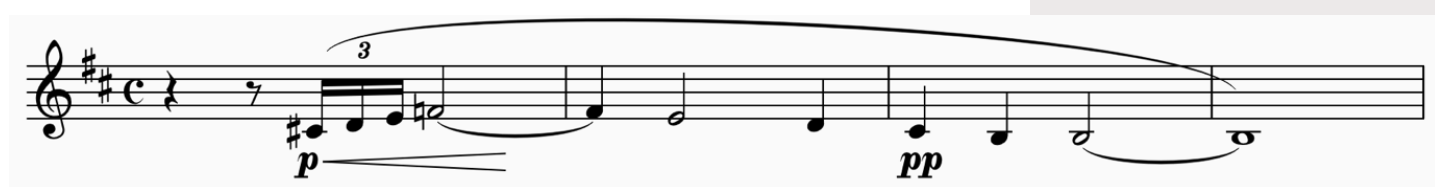
Analysts have divided up the music of *Nuages* in various ways, each entirely valid and acceptable in exam answers. It's worth students knowing more than one of these suggestions, so here are three!

What becomes clear when trying to impose any kind of form on *Nuages* is that the music is based on two important thematic ideas. To align with Eduqas's own notes, we will call these **X** and **Y**. Both are presented in the opening bars of the piece.

X:



Y:



Structure 1

This broad ternary approach was the most popular way of describing *Nuages*'s structure until quite recently:

Introduction (bars 1-20)	Presenting the two thematic ideas X and Y.
Section A (bars 21-63)	Developing these ideas.
Section B (bars 64-79)	Introducing a new idea, first heard in flute and harp. There seems to be a new tonal centre, making this a convincing, if short, central section.
Section A1 (bars 80-94)	Ideas from Section A are heard again, but in different guises, making this return far from convincing.
Coda (bars 94-102)	Melodic fragments from X and Y.

Debussy's lack of clear tonality – he prefers to use notes as **tonal centres** rather than keys with cadences – makes this traditional ternary approach tenuous. However, it represents an overview that students can consider before looking at other approaches.

Structure 2

In his book *The Music of Claude Debussy*, Richard S Parks divides *Nuages* into **six** sections:

Section 1	Section 2	Section 3	Section 4	Section 5	Section 6
Bars 1-20	Bars 21-42	Bars 43-63	Bars 64-79	Bars 80-93	Bars 94-102

This idea is briefly referred to in the Eduqas notes and is worth considering.

Structure 3

Perhaps the most logical and convincing approach, favoured by Eduqas, was proposed by US musicologist James Hepokoski in a paper entitled *Clouds and Circles: Rotational Form in Debussy's Nuages*. Hepokoski encourages us to look at *Nuages* as a series of five **rotations** around the use of idea X followed by idea Y, the latter always played by the cor anglais.

Additionally, all rotations except the first include an **interpolation** – an addition of new material – that interrupts the progress from X to Y. One of these interpolations – the one that begins in bar 64 – is the ‘new material’ that persuaded previous analysts to start the B section here.

If you place Hepokoski’s rotational idea against the use of material X and Y throughout the movement, you can see the logic of this approach:

James Hepokoski’s paper is available here: <https://jameshepokoski.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2010-Clouds-Circles-Debussys-Nuages.pdf>

Bar	1	5	11	21	29	43	57	64	80	94	99
Material	X	Y	X	Y	X	Y	X	New	Y	X	Y
Hepokoski	Rotation 1		Rotation 2		Rotation 3		Rotation 4			Rotation 5	

The table below superimposes all three of the possible forms, so that students can listen to *Nuages* and come to their own conclusions:

Bar	1	5	11	21	29	43	57	64	80	94	99
Material	X	Y	X	Y	X	Y	X	New	Y	X	Y
Ternary	Introduction			A				B	A1	Coda	
Parks	Section 1			Section 2		Section 3		Section 4	Section 5	Section 6	
Hepokoski	Rotation 1		Rotation 2		Rotation 3		Rotation 4			Rotation 5	

Melodic construction

Composers since Bach tended to favour **diatonic** scales – majors and minors – to underpin their melody writing. In the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, a number became interested in folk idioms and incorporated **modes** and the **pentatonic scale** into their compositions. These melodic forms have been the keystone of much jazz and popular music of the 20th century.

Debussy was also very interested in alternatives to the diatonic major and minor scales. His interest in music from other cultures – particularly those of the Far East – spurred him on to develop the use of pentatonic and **whole-tone** scales in his musical language, as well as the **octatonic** scale. Let's look at the use of scales and modes in *Nuages*.

The major/minor scale is only hinted at, since Debussy wanted to avoid the clear pull of a given key. The X material is the closest we come as far as a 'feel' of diatonic tonality is concerned, but Debussy is careful to leave out the critical 3rd degree from many of his chords and add chromatic notes, deliberately placing a veil over the sense of key. In fact, this X material is part diatonic, part octatonic and part chromatic, as shown below.

The octatonic scale is perhaps the most exotic and complex in *Nuages*, and it underpins the X and Y material quite noticeably. It consists of alternating tones and semitones as follows:

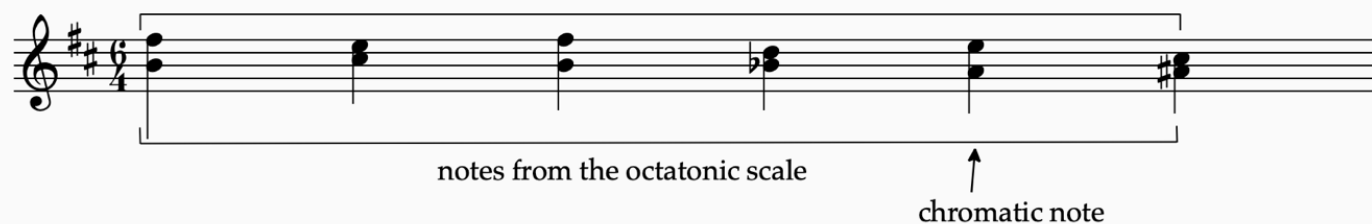
Octatonic scale on B



This interesting scale also consists of two **diminished 7th** chords – the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th degrees make one on B, and the even-numbered degrees make one on C sharp.

Both thematic ideas have octatonic flavours, along with hints of other scales:

First 5 notes of B minor



First 5 note of octatonic scale on B



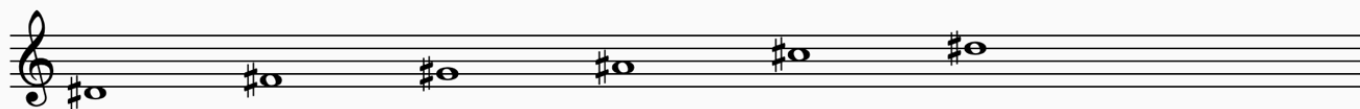
In the section from bars 21 to 28, Debussy combines the octatonic scale with whole-tone ideas, beginning it on G and making what's often known as an **acoustic** scale, due to its reliance on overtones from the harmonic series:

Acoustic scale on G



The 'new' material in bar 64 is based on the D sharp minor pentatonic scale, and can be played on the black notes of the keyboard:

Minor pentatonic on D#



Un peu plus animé



Harmony

Debussy's approach to harmony is **tonal** but **non-functional**. This means that he uses a wide range of chords – **triads, open 5ths, added chords, chromatic chords** – all of which hint at tonalities, but he removes the traditional context and sense of progression associated with chords in 18th- and 19th-century music.

This isn't new – other composers in Europe were doing very similar things – but the fundamental difference between Debussy and many of the late 19th century's German and Eastern European composers is that while they strove to make their harmonic languages more complex, creating unbridled tension and unsettled atmospheres, Debussy went the other way, focusing on creating colour and suggestion through his ambiguous tonality. In short, Debussy liked **tonal centres** – single notes that suggested keys but never took us there, and he put chords together for sonic effect, not as a road map to any key, avoiding things like **cadences** and **dominant-tonic relationships**.

A small number of isolated passages from *Nuages* illustrates Debussy's harmonic language neatly. Here's the X idea from the very first bar of the piece:



The **key signature** suggests **B minor**, but the note D, which would clearly indicate the minor tonality, is left out of the first three chords. It appears in the fourth but is instantly weakened by the appearance of a chromatic note, B flat.

The final two chords of the bar take us ambiguously back to B via an open A 5th and a chromatic ascent through A sharp and C sharp. On the surface, this little passage (which is repeated in bar 2) is simple and almost tonal, but it does everything except tell us what key we are in.



The Y material (above), apparently supposed to represent the foghorn of a boat on the Seine, provides more interesting harmonic ambiguity. The **G major** 3rds held by flutes, horns and violins seem simple enough on the surface, but the cor anglais disrupts this by using the notes B, C sharp, D, E and F natural – the first five notes of the octatonic scale on B – covering the **dissonant** interval of a **diminished 5th** and adding copious fogginess to this otherwise simple harmonic idea.

This string of **descending dominant 9ths** is a Debussy staple. Traditionally, dominant chords progressed to tonics to make **perfect cadences**, clearly telling us what the current key was. Debussy glues them together in **parallel**, adding **extensions** to the top which – though technically dissonant – only serve to enrich the sound. Parallel chords and chord extensions became a harmonic feature of jazz, but here in the final years of the 19th century Debussy is blazing a trail.

Students can be asked to find other examples in the music – there are many – of these fundamental features of Debussy's harmony:

- ▶ Open 5ths.
- ▶ **Augmented** and diminished chords.
- ▶ Other suggestions of major or minor tonality disrupted by chromatic notes.
- ▶ Other parallel chains of similar chords.
- ▶ Other extended chords – 7ths, 9ths, 11ths and so on.

Orchestration and texture

Impressionist painters owed much of their style to combinations of colours, shades and brushstrokes, and Symbolist poets explored words for their sounds as well as their meanings. Similarly, Debussy re-imagined his use of the orchestra, thinking of it as both a canvas and a palette for his melodic and harmonic language.

The orchestra of *Nuages* is large but used sensitively. Big string and woodwind sections are joined by two harps, horns and timpani, and Debussy **sub-divides** the strings for fuller, more sonorous textures.

Mutes add new timbres and a wide range of woodwind instruments are used in ones and twos for melodic lines. Interesting and inventive playing techniques add further interest.

Here are some prompts to get students thinking about Debussy's orchestral sound:

- ▶ Different combinations of instruments create changes of colour and texture – for example, listen to the difference in sound between the very beginning and the return of the opening material in bar 11. How has this been achieved?
- ▶ How would the texture in the strings at bar 14 be best described?
- ▶ Why might Debussy repeatedly use the cor anglais (pictured) for the recurring Y motif?
- ▶ What does **con sordines** mean for the strings at the start? What about **sur la touche** in bar 23? How do these instructions alter the timbre of the strings?
- ▶ Can you find any examples of one-, two- or even three-octave **doubling** of melodic ideas? What effect might this have?
- ▶ Can you find an example of bowed (**arco**) and plucked (**pizzicato**) strings at the same time? What instruments – orchestral or non-orchestral – does this sound like?
- ▶ How does Debussy use harps in *Nuages*? What about timpani?



A cor anglais being played

A short walk-through

Having picked out the key features, it can be left to students, using this and other sources, to put together their own overview. The one offered below provides a starting point that students and teachers can flesh out as they see fit.

Rotation 1 (10 bars)	
Bars 1-4	Idea X presented by lower woodwind over a B tonal centre. Use of chromatic notes makes the major/minor tonality ambiguous.
Bars 5-10	Idea Y in the cor anglais, using the octatonic scale on B, over a first inversion G7 chord. Superimposing 6/4 metre with 4/4 makes metre ambiguous.
Rotation 2 (18 bars)	
Bars 11-16	Idea X in divided strings followed by parallel descending dominant 9ths in bar 14. Pizzicato 5ths in bass part (bar 15) – these recur frequently.
Bars 17-20	An interpolation (brief new idea) over oscillating cello Gs and Ds.
Bars 21-28	Y in the cor anglais with a tonal centre of G. The octatonic scale incorporates whole-tone intervals, becoming an acoustic scale based on G. The horn tritone in bar 23 is to be a recurring feature, here answered by a D-G 5th in the basses.
Rotation 3 (28 bars)	
Bars 29-32	X presented with different intervals and melodic shape, settling on alternating chords of C major and E minor, pivoting around the note E in the horns.
Bars 33-42	An interpolation based on the crotchet movement of X and treated sequentially . Tonality is particularly ambiguous here, with a preference for whole-tone patterns. Strings and wind superimpose different ideas, both working in octaves which makes the texture quite sparse. The final bar of this interpolation, a climax of sorts, recalls the more fully scored parallel harmonies of bar 14.
Bars 43-56	Y in the cor anglais, again with a suggestion of G7 first inversion in the interestingly scored strings. A single horn answers. Basses slowly descend by step from B to F, covering a tritone.
At 28 bars, rotation 3 is equal to the lengths of rotations 1 and 2 combined.	
Rotation 4 (37 bars)	
Bars 57-63	X presented with different intervals and melodic shape, settling on alternating chords of C major and E minor, pivoting around the note E in the horns.
Bars 64-79	The change of key signature and tonal centre makes this interpolation sound quite different, prompting the 'B section' idea of previous analysts. This new melody is based on a D sharp minor pentatonic scale and presented on flute and harp – another new timbre. The whole-tone interjection returns in bar 66 and there are more pizzicato 5ths from the basses. A trio of string soloists answer the flute and harp.
Bars 80-93	Y in the cor anglais, reminiscent of rotation 3 (bar 43) but with different orchestration. The tritones are heard again before the harmony settles on an E7 chord in tremolo lower strings and timpani.
Rotation 5 (9 bars)	
Bars 94-97	The shortest rotation acts as a kind of coda, beginning with slowing fragments of X, first in bassoons and then in cellos, fading away over a B pedal. Harmonically we have come full circle.
Bar 98	A one-bar recall of the interpolation from rotation 4 (bar 64), on solo flute.
Bars 99-102	No Y motif from the cor anglais, but its horn tritones return over the G7 first inversion chord. The final notes, as would be expected, are Bs, but the G7 harmony veils any sense of key.

This annotated score and recording video from James Reeve will help flesh out students' notes: www.youtube.com/watch?v=S96Ojs9mcxg

A sample question on *Nuages*

The Appraising exam will test students' understanding of three major styles of the early 20th Century – **Impressionism, Expressionism** (including **Serialism**) and **Neo-Classicism** – not only through their knowledge of the set works but also through their wider understanding, which should cover a range of composers from the time – Eduqas suggests Debussy, Ravel, Schoenberg, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, Poulenc and Prokofiev.

Assessment of this Area of Study will take the form of **two** questions:

- ▶ An analysis question on **either** the Debussy **or** Poulenc set work.
- ▶ A question on an **unprepared** musical extract from the early 20th century.

This second question will be partly an aural perception question, and partly a comparison question asking students to make compositional links between the unprepared extract and music that they have studied during the course, not including the set works.

Here's a sample analysis question on *Nuages* for students to try.

You will hear an extract from Debussy's *Nuages*, from bars 11 to 28, **three** times with a one-minute pause between playings and a seven-minute silence at the end for you to complete your answers. You can use an unannotated score. **(15)**

- (a) Describe the harmony in bar 14. Make **two** points. (2)
- (b) Name the interval between the oscillating bass notes in bar 15. (1)
- (c) Name or describe the scale on which the cor anglais melody of bars 21-28 is based. (1)
- (d) Give bar numbers **from this extract** where each of the following musical **devices** can be found:
- A drone
- A tritone
- Pizzicato (3)
- (e) Describe **three** features of Debussy's **orchestration** and **texture** found in this extract. (3)
- (f) Debussy's approach to **form** and **tonality** differs from traditional structures found in earlier music. Outline any interesting or unusual features of form and tonality found in *Nuages*. (5)