

# WJEC AoS F: Impressionism

KS5

## Phil Baker

### Introduction

The resource provides an analysis of the three set works in WJEC's AoS F, List A, Strand 1: Impressionism. We'll discuss the cultural context of musical Impressionism as it relates to the various art movements of the times, as well as tracing some of the influences on the music of Debussy and Ravel.

The works discussed are Debussy's 'Reflets dans l'eau' (from *Images*, Book 1) and 'Colloque sentimental' (from *Fêtes galantes*), and the 'Prélude' from the orchestral ballet version of Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye*. We'll also summarise the main features of the composers' styles, and include activities and questions for discussion and 'food for thought' to balance the focus between technical analysis and aesthetic appreciation.

### Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Born in 1862, Claude Debussy was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten. His piano works include two books of *Images*, Book 1 of which includes 'Reflets dans l'eau' discussed here. He also composed songs setting poems by the Symbolist poets Paul Verlaine ('Colloque sentimental' is discussed below as an example) and Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as the opera 'Pelléas et Mélisande' with a libretto adapted from the play by Maurice Maeterlinck. Along with that of Maurice Ravel, Debussy's music came to be known as 'Impressionism' mainly because of its associations with the art movement of the same name.

### Titles are important

Debussy's titles provide clues to the poetic or expressive character of his music. On the other hand, however, the titles for his individual piano *Préludes* are placed at the *end* of each piece, rather than the beginning, suggesting that they might not be so significant.

But whether they're at the beginning or the end, Debussy's titles shouldn't be ignored. 'Feux d'artifice' ('Fireworks') ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6HmrgbVplo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6HmrgbVplo)) in the *Préludes*, Book 2, or 'Des pas sur la neige' ('Footsteps in the Snow') ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eym3nCRxevo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eym3nCRxevo)) in Book 1, persuade listeners about links with titles and music. Listen to these works and see for yourself how convincing their titles are. There's always the possibility of hearing the music without any imaginary associations, of course.

Phil Baker is a composer, an author of analytical guides for A level students, an experienced teacher and an examiner. He has written on a range of topics including Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony, the development of jazz, and Thomas Adès's 'Ecstasio' and Sally Beamish's String Quartet No. 2, 'Opus California'.



Claude Debussy in 1908

**Activity: responding to the music itself**

This activity will work best if students do not already know the title of 'Reflets dans l'eau'. It will still work if they do know what the piece is called, and it should still encourage some discussion.

Listen to 'Reflets dans l'eau' once attentively, and select which of these images seems to connect best with the music:



Whatever results you get, whether more students choose the third image than the other two will be interesting. Equally interesting, however, might be a discussion of how features of the music and any of the pictures relate to each other.

In any case, this activity should focus students' minds on the music and its aesthetic stance. All works of art invite us to respond, to engage, and to form a relationship with them. Not all music is as imaginatively inviting as Debussy's and, despite the associations with fine art, his music can still be experienced simply as music.

## Impressionism

Debussy's music is associated with, and was influenced by, the art movement known as Impressionism, the paintings of JMW Turner, and the Japanese artists Hokusai and Hiroshige. The art nouveau movement was also influential in some of Debussy's piano music, which has florid passages often called arabesques that might be seen as similar to some of art nouveau's flower- and plant-like decorations.

Such connections with the visual arts are not, of course, unique to Debussy. The formality and symmetry of forms such as rondo and sonata in Classical styles reflect the social and aesthetic environments of the 18th century in architecture and garden design, for example, and their concerns for symmetry. Influences on Debussy's style were not only musical and artistic but also literary. Writing about his 1905 orchestral work *La mer* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUFpcPEcwTo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUFpcPEcwTo)), Debussy said that music can express the changes of light and movement more effectively than visual art. He also wrote that *La mer* is not a musical depiction of the sea, but instead an expression of his feelings about the sea.

Debussy's later piano music exploited the sustaining power of the piano, and the instrument's capacity to create the blended effects that are so closely associated with a perception of artistic Impressionism. Such blending also relates to Debussy's interest in dream-like states, and its ambiguity expressed through tonal ambiguity and a degree of formal uncertainty.

Other influences on the imagination of Debussy were the prints of the Japanese artists Katsushika Hokusai and Ando Hiroshige, whose art manipulated light and shade in ways similar to the French Impressionists themselves. It's not insignificant that Debussy asked for a reproduction of Hokusai's print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* for the front cover of the published score of *La mer*.



Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, 1831

Another important influence on Debussy's style was Wagner's later music, with its tonal fluidity achieved through a lack of regular unambiguous cadences, frequent chromaticism, and constant modulation. Wagner's chromaticism also came to represent the beginning of a new pathway into modernism for the composer Arnold Schoenberg, whose music and techniques would go on to influence many later composers. Debussy's music represents a different pathway towards the music of the 20th century. Where Schoenberg identified the end of tonality, Debussy found different ways of using tonality, melody and – importantly – timbre. In addition, Debussy's music has a particular approach to tempo that is often very flexible, changeable, and irregular, as was his approach to rhythm.



### Summary of Debussy's musical style

- ▶ Musical motifs are used like tiles in a mosaic being placed in different relationships with each other, rather than developed in the traditional manner of Classical or Romantic music.
- ▶ Emphasis on colour in terms of timbre, sonority and harmony.
- ▶ Different scales and modes are used alongside the major/minor diatonic system: pentatonic, octatonic, hexatonic (or whole-tone) and chromatic, as well as modes of different kinds.
- ▶ Rhythm is often flexible, phrasing irregular and tempo flexible.
- ▶ Chords assume roles as colour rather than playing a part a system of functional harmony: each chord is treated as a 'sonorous unit' (or 'tache sonore').
- ▶ Tonality is sometimes reinforced by pedal points, although dissonance is treated freely and often remains unresolved.
- ▶ The movement from one key to another is not typically managed by modulation but by direct change.
- ▶ Chords are often blended (especially in the piano music), and also blurred by filigree melodic figurations and arabesques.
- ▶ Chords with added 7ths and 9ths commonly combine and occur in streams that overlap their tonal functions. Non-harmony notes and chromatic additions emphasise the loss of their tonal functions.
- ▶ Chords move in parallel like a modern form of medieval organum.
- ▶ Chords may be formed in 4ths, 5ths and even tritones, rather than as more conventional triads.

### Debussy: 'Reflets dans l'eau'

The piece's title immediately directs the listener to a visual representation, inviting you to hear a fluid image moving through time. How Debussy achieves that effect is a question not only for analysis, but also for imaginative engagement with the music.

The analysis that follows is not so much to be read through as to be used as a map to track the piece's musical landscape. Take each point in turn, listen to the relevant extracts, and make sure you connect the points by verifying them with the score. You might even disagree with them.

### Analytical commentary

#### Bars 1-8

Andantino molto [Tempo rubato]

- ▶ Andantino molto (Tempo rubato): Debussy uses two musical terms for his tempo marking, showing his concern for a fluid interpretation. The 'Andantino molto' suggests a changeable tempo that's sometimes quicker, sometime slower, and 'Tempo rubato' reinforces that first marking.
- ▶ The key is D flat major.
- ▶ The time signature is 4/8.
- ▶ The first sound is an open perfect 5th, the tonic and its dominant establishing the tonality in the first eight bars. The texture consists of a series of triads tracing curved two-bar phrases.
- ▶ In between the rippling light of these chords, an inner melodic line follows a simple three-note figure of A flat-F-E flat, not quite a melody in its own right, singled out with tenuto marks.
- ▶ The first phrase uses three chords: G flat, F minor, and a cluster type of B flat, D flat and E flat.
- ▶ The figure repeats an octave higher on beats 3 and 4, before the chords are reordered in the second bar.
- ▶ The bass 5th functions is the tonal centre, while the chords move freely as 'taches sonores' rather than as a harmonically functional progression. The opening bars are repeated in bars 5 to 8.

Poetically, the alternating triads might be seen as evoking the glistening of light upon water, while the inner melody might express another feature of the image, conveying movement.

**Bars 9-10**

- ▶ These bars precede the double bar, which indicates the beginning of a new section in the piece's form. Bars 9-10 begin with a semiquaver rest creating a hiatus as the chord B flat minor is left to sound.
- ▶ The left hand rises chromatically from A flat, and the first chord may be analysed as an incomplete minor 9th (F-A flat-C-E flat (omitted)-G flat).
- ▶ The progression that follows uses chords mainly for their sonority.
- ▶ Bar 10 repeats bar 9, but the progression is extended to cadence on a B flat chord with its 7th omitted and with a flattened C9th.

**Bars 11-16**

The image shows four staves of musical notation. The first staff is bar 2, the second is bar 9, the third is bar 10, and the fourth is bar 14. Each staff has a treble clef and a key signature of three flats. Bar 2 and 10 feature a staccato figure in the upper register marked with an 'X'. Bar 10 also has a 'pp' dynamic marking. Bar 14 features a staccato figure in the upper register marked with an 'X'.

- ▶ The staccato figure in the upper register (marked as X above) from bar 9 reappears without the same underpinning chords, but as a distinct melodic idea.
- ▶ Debussy places the idea within a fresh harmonic context, which coincides with the change of time signature for bar 11 only to 3/8.
- ▶ As the upper voice reflects that of bar 2, the bass in bar 14 reflects the earlier inner voice. Written enharmonically, the bass in bar 14 falls through the intervals heard in the inner voice of bars 1-2, so that A flat-F-E flat becomes D-C flat-B double flat-G flat, or, enharmonically, D-B-A-G flat.

Although such variations are small, they represent a form of development that typifies Debussy's style. At the same time, this kind of development is distinctly non-Classical, especially so since it does not relate to any clearly defined key.

**Bars 16-18**

**a Tempo** Pentatonic scales in contrary motion in 4ths and 5ths

- ▶ Bar 16 marks a climax (albeit still marked *pp*), with a progression in parallel movement and in contrary motion, cadencing with an open sonority using the perfect 5th F and C in the bass with C and D in the upper register, before the final quaver of a doubled major 2nd tied across the bar.
- ▶ The parallel chord progression in these bars follows pentatonic scales that contrast with the chromaticism of the previous sections.

**Bars 18-35**

- ▶ After the cadence, and the dissonant and inconclusive whole-tone C/D, the next section begins. It's characterised by Debussy's filigree or arabesque idiom which creates a rippling effect using demisemiquaver figuration tracing chords (related, as we've seen, not to artistic Impressionism but to a characteristic of some works of art nouveau). The marking is 'Quasi cadenza' which, as with the piece's initial tempo marking, emphasises Debussy's concern for flexibility of tempo.
- ▶ Although the progressions feature parallel 9th chords in different inversions, the order of intervals within those chords is significant. In bar 20, for example, the opening interval in each swirl of arpeggio is a diminished 5th or tritone (see music example above).
- ▶ The bass also ascends through a diminished 7th (see music example above), which destabilises tonality and adds continuous movement – perhaps of light reflected across the surface of water.
- ▶ Unstable tonality is partly arrested by the introduction of a long pedal note of A flat, which starts in bar 25.
- ▶ Above the pedal, and as an inner voice, is another abbreviated fragment of melody on a whole-tone scale on A flat. It is the same tone as the pedal, the dominant of D flat. As with Baroque pedal notes, it acts like tonal gravitation supporting harmonic change.



**Bars 44-48**

- ▶ This short episode is like the previous one except for a significant change. The filigree triplets continue, but the bass now ascends in octaves through another whole-tone passage with a slow crescendo below the rippling triplets.
- ▶ The notation of the bass below is enharmonic, as in the use of C flat:

**En animant**

The notation shows a bass line with filigree triplets. The bass line ascends in octaves through another whole-tone passage with a slow crescendo below the rippling triplets. The notation includes a G<sup>♯7</sup> chord.

**Bars 49-56**

- ▶ The beginning of a new section is shown by the key signature, which cancels the previous D flat major. But despite the lack of sharps or flats in the new key signature, there is no change to either C major or A minor.
- ▶ In bars 49-52, a B natural is held under the unravelling whole-tone scale filigree. In bars 53-54, the outline is a B9 (B-D sharp-F sharp-A-C sharp). At bar 55, the harmonic rhythm changes to a single-bar arpeggio of V7 of G.
- ▶ Bar 56 is a modulatory approach to the key of E flat which follows in bar 57. The chord outlined in bar 56 is G sharp 7 with an added flattened 9th, which is enharmonically an A flat 7 flat, linking to the E flat in the following bar.
- ▶ Emerging from the shimmering tonal flux that precedes it, bar 57 feels like a flash of light on the water.
- ▶ In the upper register (marked 'en dehors') throughout this section is another melodic or motivic variant from bar 25, which is rhythmically varied and ends with an ascending perfect 4th. The use of the whole-tone scale is clear:

25 **Mesuré**

The notation shows a bass line with a melodic motif. The marking is *pp doux et expressif*.

[Written an octave lower than in score]

51

The notation shows a melodic motif in the upper register. The marking is 51.

**Bars 57-65**

- ▶ The key signature changes to three flats, and the first two bars of this section follow an unambiguous arpeggio describing the new tonal area.
- ▶ The octave melody above reflects the rising 2nds and 3rds that characterised the previous melody.
- ▶ The melody reappears as an inner voice in bars 60 and 62 as the excitement calms from bar 63, and the mood changes with the whole-tone rippling in bar 65.

**Bars 66-71**

- ▶ The melodic motif is repeated with rhythmical and harmonic alterations in bars 66, 67 and 69, moving to A major and a tertiary progression towards C minor in bar 68, returning to A major in the following bar.
- ▶ The roots of those chords are a 3rd apart but their tonalities are distant: for instance, the A natural forms a tritone relationship with E flat, and links to the whole-tone scale.
- ▶ From the final A major chord of bar 69, the harmony is conflicted between the A flat maj7 and the minim chord of E flat above.

**Bars 72-80**

- ▶ The final gesture between bars 71 and 72 alludes to the descending chord progression of bar 16.
- ▶ Bars 72-73 and 75-76 also allude to the inner melody heard in bars 1-2. A further motivic link is made with the left-hand triplet figure in bar 78 and the two bars that follow (bars 79-80).



**Bars 81-94**

- ▶ These bars form the coda.
- ▶ The inner voice is revisited in double octaves, and the upper octaves are arpeggiated in bars 81 and 82, exemplifying another fingerprint of Debussy's piano style.
- ▶ The harmonic rhythm slows, and moves between the following chords:
  - ▶ B flat major 7 (notated as a B double flat)
  - ▶ G flat 6
  - ▶ B flat major 7
  - ▶ G flat 6
  - ▶ E flat 7 (sus4)
  - ▶ G flat 6
  - ▶ E flat 7 (sus4)
  - ▶ D flat

Harmonic functions aside, the sonority of the chords is crucial here, arising from the spacing of the notes. The sonorous open 5ths and octaves combine with wide registers and create a sense of musical perspective. At the end of the piece, the play of light disappears, and we are now possibly gazing into the depths of the water, rather than at its surface.

- ▶ Above the harmonies, the inner voice from bar 1 repeats like a distant echo (marked 'lointaine') with the descending 4ths, B flat to F.

**Debussy: 'Colloque sentimental'**

Debussy's 'Colloque sentimental' dates from 1904 and is a setting of a poem by Paul Verlaine (1844-96). It is the third song in the second book that Debussy published under the general title *Fêtes galantes*. The poem itself is a sentimental contemplation of love, its passing, and what remains of it in death. The word 'colloque' suggests a form of meeting or discussion, and 'sentimental' indicates feelings about love.

Debussy's approach to word setting differed from the German style with its distinct accompaniment and vocal melody. Debussy responded instead to the mellifluous nature of the French language and its absence of strong accents.

**Analytical commentary****Bars 1-8**

- ▶ The disturbing character of Verlaine's opening lines is captured in bars 1-4. The piano provides only atmospheric moments, and its role is barely that of an accompaniment in the Germanic sense. Rather, it sets a scene, and establishes an atmosphere that captures the coldness and isolation mentioned in Verlaine's text, commenting on and responding to the melody and words.
- ▶ Technically, the music uses the whole-tone scale, especially its tritone interval (for example, E to B flat).
- ▶ The left hand in bar 2 traces the whole-tone scale clearly, but the B natural in bar 4 contradicts it as the music cadences to an unambiguous F major triad (to which the E-B flat tritone figure heard earlier would traditionally resolve).
- ▶ The inclusion of the quaver triplets against pairs of quavers blends the two lines together.
- ▶ The voice enters in bar 4, in stark contradiction to the whole-tone scale with a phrase in the Phrygian mode (E-D, but without the D used in this case). The line moves suddenly to E flat in bar 7.
- ▶ In this case, the use of a plainsong-like phrase places it at a distance; as the piano plays, it is separated from the voice like the 'Deux formes ont tout à l'heure passé' in Verlaine's text. The voice takes the E flat from the piano's tritone in bar 6, and vocalises on the single note as though chanting.

Verlaine was a Symbolist poet, and in Debussy's setting, the music also seems to use a form of symbolism:

**1 Triste et lent**

[a] - Notes from hexatonic scale with emphasis of tritone

[b] - Bass descends through hexatonic scale with 3:2 rhythm which blurs the edges

[c] - B $\flat$  contradicts previous B $\flat$  together with 3:2 overlapping; cadence is to F

**Bars 9-14**

- ▶ The piano plays its opening motif, including the change from flat to natural on B coinciding with the word 'morts'.
- ▶ The voice follows another modal phrase ("Et l'on entend à peine leurs paroles") as the piano traces the whole-tone motif in rhythmically augmented crotchets from bar 11 in the left hand, beginning on D rather than the earlier A flat (another tritone distance).

**Bars 15-18**

14

17 **Retenu**

- ▶ Bar 15 repeats a variant of the previous Phrygian phrase (now using Dorian mode on D).
- ▶ Debussy illustrates the repeated reference to solitariness and coldness with another of his fingerprints of style: open octaves with bare 4ths and 5ths.
- ▶ The stark dissonance of F against E progresses to a B flat 7, whose A flat is tied across the bar and forms a tritone relationship with the D in the vocal line at 'spectres ont évoqué le passé'.
- ▶ The tempo is held back ("Retenu").

Bars 19-39

**Un peu plus mouvementé**  
*très expressif, mélancolique et lointain*

19  $A\flat 7(b9)$   $A\flat + maj11$

22  $B\flat 7$

*p* *pp* *sfp*

*pp*

Te sou-vient-il de notre ex-stase an - cien - ne?

- ▶ The A flat continues as a syncopation through to bar 39, acting like a pedal note.
- ▶ Harmonically, the first chord of bar 19 is A flat 7 (flat 9) and progresses to D flat dim 7 as a new figure ending on B flat, making another tritone intervallic relationship to the next vocal entry on E natural.
- ▶ Notice that the added semiquavers to the vocal line in bar 22 indicate how certain French words may be sung to sound their final vowels.
- ▶ The voice broadly follows the plainsong contour interspersed between the commentary from the piano figure.
- ▶ At bar 31, the texture becomes homophonic on the chord of Fm+6 in its first inversion (A flat-C-F-D) which marks the emphatic 'Non' and the approach to the climax.
- ▶ Tempo increases ('Animez et augmentez peu à peu').
- ▶ Harmonic tension increases from bar 34 and resolves to D flat, returning to the original tempo at 'C'est possible', expressing another short comment on futile optimism. With harmonic resolution, the mood has changed along with the return to the first tempo.

Bars 40-58

- ▶ The gentle rocking of the syncopated rhythm surrounds the echo of 'C'est possible' in bar 41 in the left hand (marked 'très expressif et soutenu'), and the motif continues until bars 49-50, where the mood changes again, and the music returns to the tritone motif with which the song began.
- ▶ The key signature changes to C/Am, returning to 'a tempo' and *pp*.
- ▶ Connecting with the line 'Tels ils marchaient...' ('As they walked'), Debussy places chords like footsteps along the way, beginning with G9 followed by F7, Am9 and B flat 7.
- ▶ The voicing is important: the LH bass moves in parallel 5ths, expressing the darkness of the poem, and the music generally becomes more bereft as the motif from bar 29 repeats, without moving harmonically from the tense diminished 7th against the A in the bass.
- ▶ The motif from bar 1 has morphed into that of bar 29 and retained the use of B natural in bar 57, and the cadence to an A minor chord in the last bar.

## Ravel: 'Prélude' from *Ma mère l'Oye*

Maurice Ravel's music both contrasts with Debussy's style and shares similarities with it. Like many of Ravel's works, *Ma mère l'Oye* was originally for piano duet (in 1908). The composer orchestrated it in 1911, and expanded the music into a ballet score the same year, with the addition of interludes and the 'Prélude' examined below.

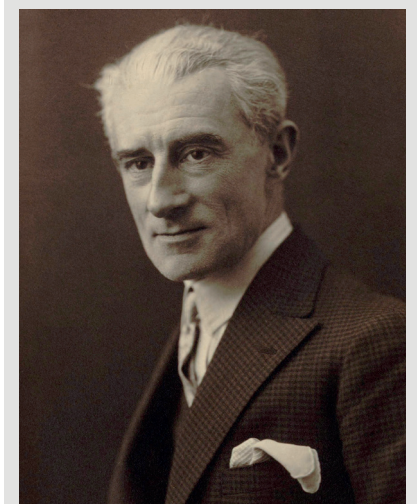
### Summary of Ravel's musical style

- ▶ Elaborate textures and textural contrasts, especially orchestrally.
- ▶ Uses triadic extensions such as chords of the 9th (like Debussy) but – less similarly – chords of the 11th.
- ▶ Non-harmony notes are often treated freely so are not always resolved.
- ▶ Like Debussy, Ravel uses scales from non-Western sources but rarely the whole-tone scale.
- ▶ National styles influenced Ravel's music (he was born in the Basque region that straddles France and Spain). The orchestral song cycle *Shéhérazade* captures an exotic, non-Western sound; *Rapsodie espagnole* reflects Spanish influences; *Valses nobles et sentimentales* reflects popular dance forms; and American jazz is incorporated into the Piano Concerto in G major and the Violin Sonata.
- ▶ Ravel's music is more harmonically stable than Debussy's, with less tonal ambiguity.
- ▶ Ravel favours short melodic ideas that are developed largely by repetition or modified repetition, or in terms of timbre and register.
- ▶ Ravel uses form very clearly, in a similar way to that of his Classical or Baroque predecessors.

### Analytical commentary

- ▶ The contour of the opening diatonic motif is disjunct, the upper voice falling a minor 7th. It is scored for two flutes and bassoons:

- ▶ A second brief melodic motif is heard on a single muted French horn. It has a more agitated rhythm and alternates intervals of a perfect 4th and minor 3rd framed within a pentatonic scale.



Maurice Ravel in 1925

**Activities**

The French horn motif is written below as it sounds. What is the interval of transposition? Re-write the bars as they appear in the score, without looking at the score.

Très lent 1o Sourdine

Horn in F [cor en fa]

Write the opening as it appears in the score

The chord progression is also diatonic. How would it be described or analysed? The following shows the progression in a simplified form so that you can complete the analysis:

|                      |                      |                      |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Chord name: .....    | Chord name: .....    | Chord name: .....    | Chord name: .....    |
| Chord type: .....    | Chord type: .....    | Chord type: .....    | Chord type: .....    |
| Chord position ..... | Chord position ..... | Chord position ..... | Chord position ..... |

- ▶ As the first horn phrase reaches the middle of bar 3, cellos, violas and second violins underlay the tied G with a first inversion G major chord played ‘sourdines’ (with mutes) and using harmonics.

Ravel talked about his music being stripped away to its bones and these opening bars seem to illustrate that. Ravel’s concern for timbre is shown by the choice of different woodwind. Notice that the flute player takes the piccolo (‘La 2e prend la Pte Fl’), which produces a less rich sound than the two ‘grandes flûtes’ used for the opening.

- ▶ From bar 5, the horn motif develops by repetition as cor anglais and clarinets repeat the disjunct phrase along with it. Like the French horn, the cor anglais transposes at the perfect 5th and so sounds a 5th lower than written.
- ▶ A significant change (and one associated with Debussy) is the tritone between the clarinet’s B flat and the E, which creates a poignant dissonance within the modified harmonic progression.

As in Debussy’s ‘Colloque sentimental’, the melody is like medieval plainsong.

- ▶ In bars 8-13, the strings create a wash of sound with a single sustained chord played tremolando.
- ▶ Above, the bassoons root the chord to A natural while woodwinds chatter like birds, as the oboe repeats its short motif on G, connecting to that heard first on the horns.
- ▶ Both the tremolando wash of sound and the scale are typical techniques of the Impressionist style.
- ▶ Harmonically supporting the filigree of motifs above is a single 9th chord, as shown below:

A major → A7 / dominant 7th → A9

- ▶ Only the oboe’s G natural is part of that harmony.

- ▶ Can you identify the notes of the woodwind figures that directly conflict with the harmony?
- ▶ What is the intervallic relationship between the oboe and flute by the time the music has moved to bar 13?



- ▶ Overlaying the texture is the harp's glissando from bar 11, which is almost a defining feature of Ravel's orchestral practice. In this instance, also notice the simple melodic additions on the xylophone, the sound of which penetrates the long sweep of the harp and the flurries of woodwind and string tremolando.
- ▶ Bar 14 marks a repeat of the opening figure, coloured this time by clarinets with the horns in 3rds.
- ▶ A countermelody on the flute, with its characteristic descending perfect 4ths, is echoed a tone lower by oboe which redirects the melody through the E major triad. (The countermelody here looks ahead to the 'Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant', coming later in the ballet.)
- ▶ Decoratively, violins divide through a series of tremolando chords in parallel movement (planing).

Add the chords used in the following progression:

The harmony descends in parallel chromatic steps

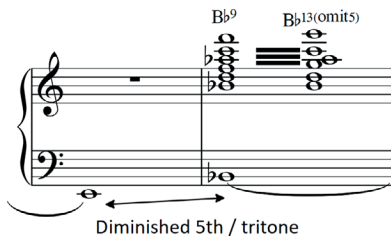
What is noticeable about the root progression?

- ▶ Ravel's spare use of instrumental colour is shown where the solo cello in bar 20 is echoed in canon by viola solo from bar 23 (another look ahead to music to come later in the ballet – this time 'Petit Poucet').
- ▶ The following episode changes its texture of parallel melodic lines to a pentatonic scale on E, ending in bar 36. The texture comprises parallelism coupled with pentatonic scales, arguably showing influence from Balinese and Javanese gamelan.
- ▶ The third solo entry from violin in bar 25 is a brief imitation that develops, and merges into, the predominantly pentatonic section. However, not all parts are pentatonic, such as the rising third violin line in bar 22.
- ▶ Like the xylophone touches, the major 2nds are coupled with harp minims from bar 26, which add flickers of orchestral colour.
- ▶ Clarinets and bassoons reintroduce the opening figure over a sustained E pedal note. It begins with a solo double bass chromatic descent (or glissando) to E, taken up by all basses in bar 38, with a slow timpani roll.
- ▶ The pedal note marks the repeat of the horn figures at bar 5 and variants of the filigree motifs, as well as the G triplet motif heard in the oboe from bar 44.
- ▶ The horns share an ascending 4th and descending 2nd motif at different pitches, which interlock with the second harmonic wash that starts in bar 43.
- ▶ The harmony is more complex here than in the earlier episode, and consists of two alternating extended chords: an E7 with a flat 9th (that is, the F sharp is changed to F natural) and the dissonant chord of E diminished 7th. The two chords alternate as a shimmering sonority rather than for any significant tonal function.

The distribution of notes within chords is important and is shown below. The basic form of the chords is followed by the notes as distributed in the orchestra. The sonority so achieved is significant.



The harmonic field simply moves up to B flat 9 alternating with B flat 13 (omit 5):



- ▶ The harmonic shift at this point marks a moment of increased tension, indicated partly by the tritone interval in the bass roots.
- ▶ Further obfuscation of the tonal field is given in the rapid harp glissandos, celeste, orchestral bells, timpani, xylophone and trilling in woodwinds, which all together express a tapestry of orchestral colours.
- ▶ The 'Prélude' flows without a break into the ballet's first scene, 'Danse du rouet et Scène'.

### Form

The structure of the 'Prélude' from Ma mère l'Oye is divisible as follows:

- ▶ A: bars 1-7
- ▶ B: bars 8-13
- ▶ A1: bars 14-35
- ▶ A2: bars 36-41
- ▶ B2: bars 42-51

However, the piece has a seamless quality about its structure, as ideas melt into each other and repetition (a defining quality of formal design in music) is never without variation.