About the melodic and harmonic organization of Debussy's Prelude 'Canope' (1913)

'Canope' is a piano prelude of Claude Debussy (1862-1918). The title refers to a type burial urn from the city of Canope in Egypt. It has like Debussy's prelude a simple, stylized classical design. However, Debussy's 'Canope' is strongly influenced by Javanese gamelan music. The music of Java was according to Debussy a music full of subtle nuances. And technically spoken, Debussy described the gamelan music as a music where tonic and dominant had become "empty shadows of use only to stupid children."

And indeed, the Prelude 'Canope' does not show any tonal functions. However, as shown in other analyses of Debussy's works (see www.bestmusicteacher.com) strategies in melodic and harmonic organization can be found, that have some relations to tonal procedures. The fascinating and unique interaction between melody and harmony could be seen as a new answer to old tonal usances.

1. Central tones as point of melodic orientation.

The bars 1-5 present a simple melody, the first melodic idea, than can be seen as a prolongation of tone D.



This melody recurs in a modified version in bar 26 -29.

The second melodic idea show a important role for neighbour tones of tone D and for tone A as second point of orientation (that could be already noticed in bar 1 - 5).



Bar 16 - 19 are built around tone D and A. Bar 20 - 25 are more or less repetitions of earlier ideas. Notice the nice role for tone C and Eb in bar 24 and 35: these neighbour tones are -in a way- longing for D.

2. Central tones as point of harmonic construction.

A relevant question in 'Canope' is how we do a harmonic analysis, now a tonal approach is not valid. There are two main tasks:

- 1. which sounds are used?
- 2. how are these sounds connected to each other?

The melody of bar 1-5 is harmonized by major and minor triads. This could be described as an organum technique, referring to a medieval way of making sounds. The closing sound in bar 5 is the D minor triad.

In bar 6-9 the basic structure triad is extended with a seventh, creating a dominant seventh chord. Notice that the progression could be described as: D minor triad (bar 5) > D major triad + minor 7. This means that -apart from the extension of the seventh-

a. both sounds have tones in common (D and A)

b. a tone is modified, in this case chromatically (tone F > Tone F#)



Bar 11 - 16 can be analyzed and fully understood with these techniques:

- bar 11, G minor triad, extended with tone E (added 6)
- bar 12, G major triad, extended with tone E (added 6)
- bar 13, Eb major triad, extended with tone Db (added 7 > dominant seventh chord)
- bar 14, first sound, C major triad, extended with tone D (added 2)
- bar 14, second sound, C minor triad, extended with tone D (added 2), tone A (added 6) and F (added 4)

The next example shows the sounds and the progression of sounds in a reduced form, for reasons of readability. Reduced form means that all sounds appear on one stave and that octave information is removed.



As can seen all sounds sounds have tones in common: tone D (!) and/or tone G. In most cases in the succession of sounds, one or more tones are different: either replaced by a neighbour tone or chromatically changed.



Three observations:

- the sound of bar 18 is related to the second sound of bar 14 and 15 (common tones)

- the sound of bar 22 is the most dissonant sound of the piece; the triad as basic structure

is only in this bar missing: tone E of bar 20 has moved to F, that has dissonant relations with G, C# and B.

- all sounds are related to each other by the common tones D and/or G; tone A is in most cases present also.

Conclusion

'Canope' shows stability when we investigate its melodic and harmonic organization. Melody can be understood in terms of tone D and A and their neighbour tones. Harmony seems to be a construction game with the tones D and A and/or G where changes in the degree of dissonance can be seen as some sort of development, as a planful action, emphasizing the overall structure of 'Canope'.

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