

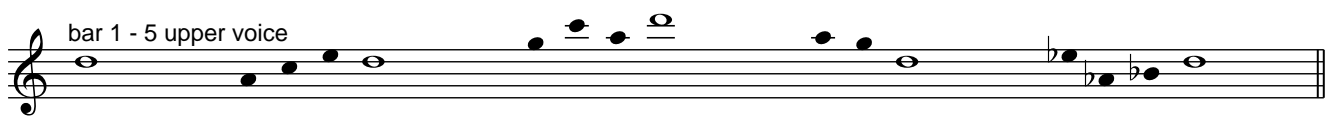
About the melodic and harmonic organization of Debussy's Prelude 'Canope' (1913)

'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.



bar 5

bar 6-9

in a reduced form

bar 5

bar 6-9

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 staff and that octave information is removed.

bar 5

bar 6-9

bar 11

bar 12

bar 13

bar 14-16

As can be seen all 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.

bar 17

bar 18

bar 19 (= 21)

bar 20 (= 22)

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 playful action, emphasizing the overall structure of 'Canope'.

About the author:

Reinier Maliepaard, psychologist, software engineer, organist and teacher at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands (music theory and music history).

His freeware music notation program MC Musiceditor (Windows) can be downloaded at www.mcmusiceditor.com This article has been typeset with MC Musiceditor 8.4.2 (www.mcmusiceditor.com).