

Debussy's melodic organization of Syrinx (1913)

Syrinx of Claude Debussy (1862-1918), a piece for solo flute, is a wonderful example of the central tone technique. This technique implies that one tone become a point of melodic orientation, i.e. melody is an elaboration of this tone. The use of a central tone can be seen as reminiscent of tonality where a hierarchy of pitches is focusing on a single, central tone, the tonic. In the music theoretical literature, Syrinx has often been analyzed from a tonal point of view (without bothering about the lack of tonal functions). When studying the work of Debussy within a biographical and a historical context, one should use other melodic analytical points of view: modality and central tone technique could give an adequate analytical answer.

The form of Syrinx -based on **repetition** of the idea of bar 1- is A-B-A'.

A: bar 1-8

B: bar 9-25

A': bar 25-35

The section B can be divided in two parts, based on a unexpected **change in style**:

B1: bar 9-13

B2: bar 13-25

The form consists of four sections: A - B1 - B2 - A'

The next example shows the most important tones of section A.

Some observations:

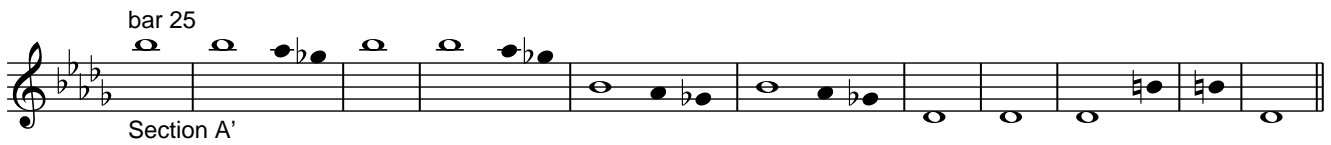
1. Tone Bb is without doubt the central tone. Register change is an effective tool for variety.
2. The fixation of central tone Bb is released by a small ascending line with highest tone Eb (bar 8).

The next example shows the most important tones of section B1 and B2 (question marks indicate a difficulty in an aural determining of the main tone; it's however not a problem for the comprehension of this text).

Some observations:

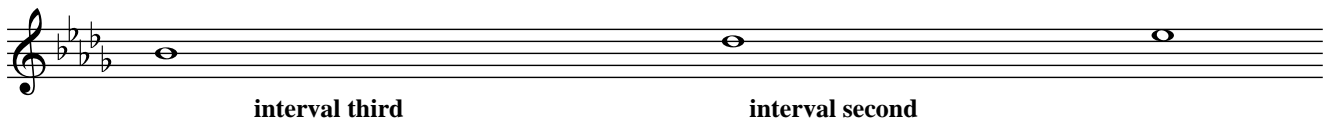
1. Tone Bb is without doubt the central tone of B1. Tone Eb (see bar 8) is introduced as neighbour tone of Bb.
2. Tone Eb is at the beginning the central tone of B2, embellished with neighbour tone D and Db.
3. At the end of section B2 is tone Bb central tone again.

The next example shows the most important tones of section A'.



Section A' is not a surprise at all: melodic ideas from section A are repeated. And as we see in other pieces of Debussy, some ideas from section B2 are reused as well: the neighbour tone Db seems to be a memory tone of Section B2 and also a memory tone of the melodic idea of bar 1. Surprise or not, tone Db is emancipated to the last tone of the piece.

To summarize: with the three tones Bb, Dd and Eb one can explain the melodic organization of Syrinx. In other words: this trichord -with its characteristic third and second interval- contains all structural tones (or central tones) of Syrinx' melodies. All other tones are mere embellishments of these trichord tones.



I leave one question for you: which tone is the most important one? Or is this an irrelevant question?

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Syrinx

à Louis Fleury

Cl. Debussy
(1913)

FLÛTE SEULE

Très modéré

mf

p

Retenu

p

Un peu mouvementé (mais très peu)

p

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gements réservés pour tous pays.

FLÛTE

mf *p*

Cédez Rubato
p *p* *p*

p *p*

p *p*

(trille) (trille) *au Mouvt (très modéré)*
mf

dim.

p *p*

En retenant jusqu'à la fin. *Très retenu*
p marqué *perdendosi*