

La Cathédrale Engloutie – Claude Debussy

Préludes premier livre

Nr. 10

General

The title (cathédrale engloutie; the sunken cathedral) guides our imagination to the following possible associations:

- the story of the sunken cathedral reminds of the legend of the mythical city of Ys, according to legend located in Brittany (Bretagne)
- Roman/gothic churches/cathedrals were built in the Middle Ages; Debussy clears important space for the octave with perfect (open) fifth in the introduction¹, including the use of parallel fifths and octaves (contributing to a “medieval” atmosphere, moving in pentatonic or hexatonic scale patterns)
- Important episodes of the composition appear in a high and a low register; “above” and “below” water level, so to speak

Form and structure

The composition is made up of several clear delineated episodes.²

Episode 1: Introduction (A in Howat)

Open fifths in high and low register followed by an ascending parallel motif in a pentatonic framework (g-a-b-d-e) The motif is characterized by a step and a leap. As a consequence of pedaling a diatonic soundfield develops. The bass descends stepwise from g to e and just the e remains.

Pitch collection: strictly diatonic (“white keys”).

Episode 2 (6):

E is the temporary tone center, reached with a descending line in the bass from the beginning: g(1) – f(3) – e(5). The scale pattern is *lydian*. In bar 14 and 15 the atmosphere of the beginning returns, functioning as a bridge to the next episode. Here too a descending bass line from e to b, the start of episode 3.

Episode 3 (16):

B is the temporary tone center. Pitch collection of *B major*.

The quarter note movement in the right hand moves now in chords (triad based with added (mild) dissonants).

The melodic contour of the motif is (still) step-leap.

Also the rhythm becomes more dense as a result of the use of triplets in the left hand.

The overarching musical goal of this episode (together with episode 4) is the increase of tension toward the introduction of the “choral-chord-melody”. This is one of the two dynamic peaks of the composition (*ff*).

Episode 4 (22):

¹ Historically an artistic choice; European music had been triad-based for centuries, Debussy steps away from this principle and reintroduces the pure open fifth in harmony (1-5-8).

² I differ from the global form sections that are presented by Howat.

Return of the open fifth-octave sound of the beginning; the step-leap motif stays, and is repeated with the contour pitches g-a-d, against which a descending scale in octaves is played, arriving at the pedal note C (bar 28).

Episode 5 (28): (B in Howat)

The choral-chord-melody has c as final and a *mixolydian* scale pattern. It starts with the familiar step-leap motif (c-d-g). This motif is also presented during the last chord (bar 40 and 41).

Episode 6 (42):

Consists of a repeated chord (Gsus4³) above bass notes (Bb-Ab/G#). Functions as a bridge toward episode 7.

Episode 7 (47): (C in Howat)

The enharmonized Ab (G#) functions as a pedal, giving the suggestion of a G# aeolian scale pattern.³

The “under water” version of episode 2 appears, continued with versions of the step-leap motif in a build-up toward the second dynamic peak (*ff*) in bar 61.

In bar 63 (with pick-up) a chord-melody appears consisting of parallel dominant seventh chords, moving toward and around G#.

The contour is [$\hat{5}$ - $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$ - $\hat{2}$ -($\hat{4}$)- $\hat{1}$] [$\hat{5}$ - $\hat{1}$] [$\hat{4}$ - $\hat{1}$].⁴

The bars 68 to 71 function as a bridge toward episode 8 (preparation of the basso ostinato).

Episode 8 (72): chord-melody “choral” (B in Howat)

The choral-chord-melody reappears in “under-water” version in combination with a basso ostinato.⁵

Episode 9 (84-89): Coda (A in Howat)

Return of material and atmosphere of the beginning. The final tone center is C (major). The notes in the right hand remind us of the Big Ben:

e-c-d-g

g-d-e-c.

Maybe a little debussyan joke again?

Form and proportions

In his compositions Debussy often uses two principles of design: the golden section⁶ and symmetry, related to the duration of the composition.

This prelude also shows those two principles.

Always there is a kind of layered structure to be found.

Sometimes both principles are used in different parameters at the same time⁷.

Roy Howat discusses a tempo issue of this prelude while using information of piano roles played by Debussy, remarks in manuscripts, and eye-witness accounts.⁸

³ The pitch collection is the same as E *lydian*, now everything circles around G# instead of E.

⁴ It almost seems a (debussyan) reference to older tonal melodic-harmonic patterns; stepwise to the finalis followed by “V-I” and “IV-I”.

⁵ Of which the pitches are difficult to isolate; we hear just a kind of “rumble”).

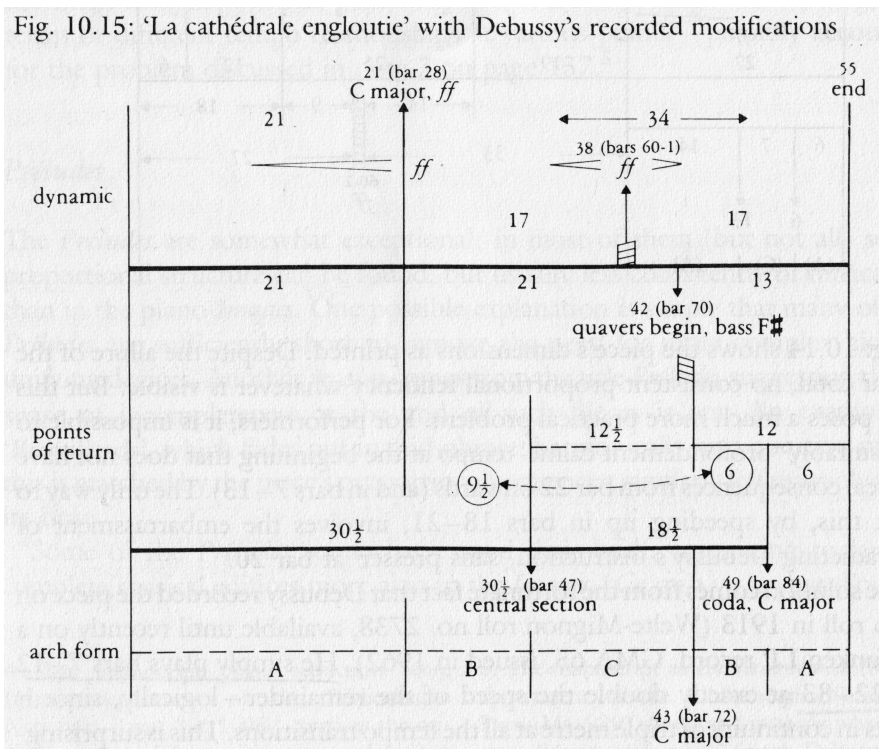
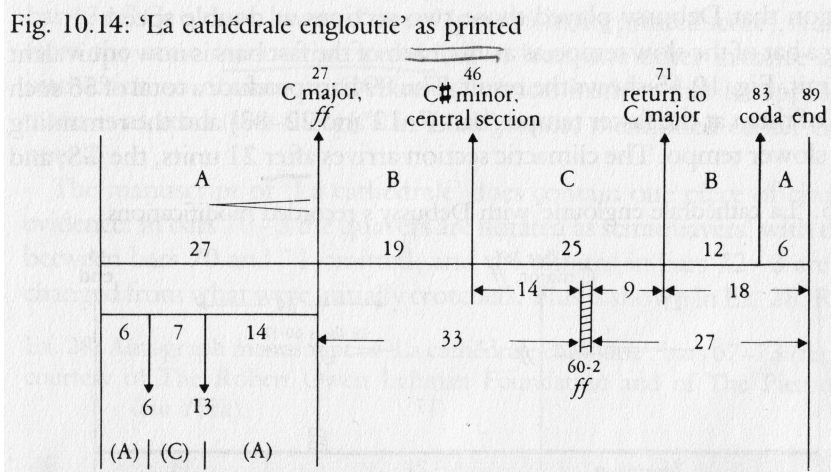
⁶ See: Fibonacci series and the number *Phi*.

⁷ For example the symmetric phrasing/grouping of measures during the build-up of tension leading to a climax on a GS-point (in *Isle Joyeuse* for example)

⁸ Roy Howat, *Debussy in proportion*, 159-162.

On this basis he uses the 6/4 measure or two 3/2 measures (bars 7-12 and 22-83) as the basic unit of duration.

From the analysis he presents the two following schemes: the first one based on bar numbers, the second takes into account the discussed “tempo issue”.



I urge the reader to verify these schemes while relating them to the score...