

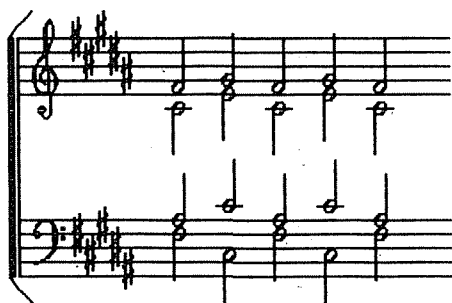
Debussy's *Trois Chansons* reveal a blend of the modern with the ancient. Composed in 1908, ten years before the composer's death, these miniatures stand as an anomalous musical retrospective. As to the reasons for this stylistic anachronism we can only guess. Perhaps the composer felt that he should be more conservative while writing for unaccompanied chorus (this is his only venture into that medium); perhaps he was feeling a gravitation to the sixteenth-century French *chanson*; perhaps he was inspired by the exotic antiquity of the lyrics, taken from the poetry of the fifteenth-century Charles, Duke of Orleans.

Anticipating the neo-classical trends of the 1920's, Debussy integrated a number of Renaissance devices within a twentieth-century framework. Thus retrogressive traits such as modality, equal-voice polyphony, *faux-bourdon*, madrigalistic word-painting, and cadential figures reminiscent of Gabrieli are couched in a modern language replete with dominant ninths, half-diminished sevenths, polychords, non-functional progressions, and a generally heightened chromaticism.

Modality

Modal inflections are audible from the opening chords of the first *chanson*. (Example 1)

Ex. 1. I: mm. 1-2 (in outline).



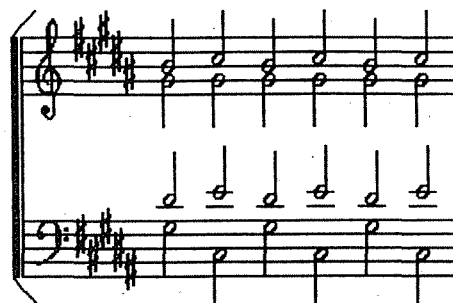
Through the sound of the minor dominant chord, the listener is immediately drawn into the coloration of the mixolydian mode. The minor dominant is heard again in m. 12, this time in the context of the aeolian mode. (Example 2)

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Debussy's *Trois Chansons* An Analysis

by Joshua R. Jacobson

Ex. 2. I: m. 12 (in outline).

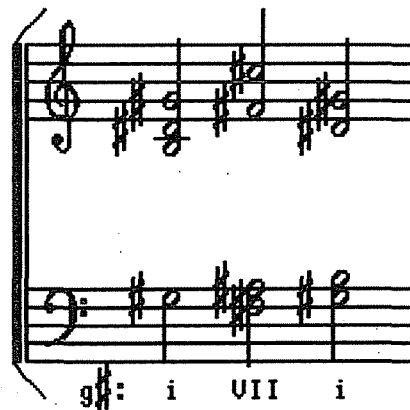


At no point in the first *chanson* is there a clear V-I cadence.

The second *chanson* is largely based on an aeolian (fluctuating with dorian) mode on F#. The dominant chords heard in mm. 12 and 25 to introduce the two brief sections in the relative major signal the only unobscured V-I cadences in the entire set.

The third *chanson* begins in E-aeolian. At m. 11 there is a shift to the parallel major (the brief mixolydian inflection of D-natural in m. 11 is soon replaced by a consistent D#), yet even here, despite the prevalence of the major mode, there are virtually no V-I cadences. When the modality shifts to G#-aeolian in m. 23, the lowered leading tone is again highlighted. (Example 3)

Ex. 3. III: m. 23 (in outline).



After a chromatic transition the *chanson* ends in the opening modality of E-aeolian.

Another modal sound often used for dramatic contrast, is the progression to the flatted sixth degree within a major key. In particular the invariant juxtaposition of F#-major

with D-major is heard in each of the *chansons*: I: mm. 5-6, II: mm. 43-50 and III: mm. 43-47. The table below indicates all modal areas and major structural cadential figures.

Modal Areas


	measure	mode	characteristic cadence
I.	1-5	F# mixolydian	v-I
	6-10	transition	
	11-15	C# aeolian	v-I
	15-17	transition	
	18-19	C# harmonic minor	ii-V
II.	20-25	transition	
	26-29	F# mixolydian	v-I
	1-12	F# aeolian	i-iv
	13-18	A major	I-iii
	18-20	F# major	I-IV
	21-25	F# aeolian	i-iv
	26-29	A mixolydian	
	29-31	transition	
III.	32-39	C major	
	40-42	F# aeolian	
	43-49	D mixolydian/lydian	
	50-51	F# cadence	
	1-10	E aeolian	ii-i
	11-21	E major	
	22-33	G# aeolian	v-i
	34-46	transition	
	47-49	B aeolian	
	49-70	E aeolian	

Texture

Another aspect somewhat reminiscent of Renaissance styles (or of twentieth-century writing) is the polyphonic texture in which all voices seem to participate as equal partners. In the first *chanson*, although the texture appears at first glance to be homophonic, upon closer analysis we realize that the dominant line is not in the topmost voice. Indeed, it is the tune in the alto line at the beginning of the *chanson* that ultimately becomes revealed in the soprano voice in mm. 14 and 28 as the major theme. The opening alto line is further reinforced by the tenor moving in parallel motion a third lower. The bass alternates between a purely harmonic function (mm. 1-5, 10-13, 18, 26-29) and a non-foundational melodic function (mm. 6-9, 15-17, 19-25).

While in the first *chanson* the voices engage in free exchange and

imitation, in the second there is a distinct horizontal layering effect. In mm. 1-12 each of the choral voices continues an almost unvarying repetition of the ostinato figures assigned them in the opening bars. In mm. 13-18 the layered ostinato texture continues, but with different figures: under the soprano melody the alto and tenor share a short staccato figure in rhythmic canon, and the bass moves in long legato two-measure phrases. At m. 25 the opening texture briefly returns. Then in m. 26 yet another layered texture is introduced: the middle voices move

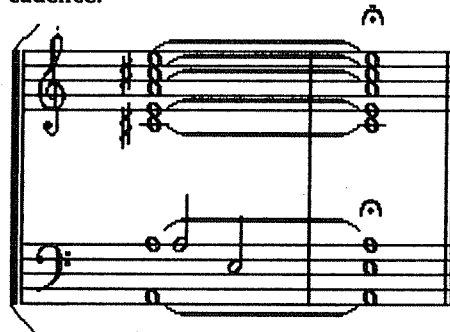
together in parallel first-inversion chords, reminiscent of the old *faux-bourdon* style, while the bass continues the familiar  rhythmic pattern. The concluding bars constitute a loose recapitulation of the opening.

There is an interesting touch in the last measure of this chanson. By reiterating the fifth degree of the chord in the baritone part, Debussy conjured up a figure strongly reminiscent of a typical cadential figure of the sixteenth-century Venetian composer, Giovanni Gabrieli. (Example 4a and 4b)

Ex. 4a. II: mm. 51-52.



Ex. 4b. Gabrieli, In *Ecclesiis*, final cadence.



The third *chanson* is polyphonically the most active. In the first eight measures the main melody is passed from alto to tenor to soprano and bass before its dissolution in m. 9. Again in m. 11 a melody is passed from soprano to alto to tenor before assuming a *faux-bourdon* guise in m. 15. That same texture continues in the solo section which starts in m. 22, although from m. 25 the bass deviates from the norm, moving contrary to the upper three voices. A brief imitative episode in m. 35 leads to another section in layered texture. A recapitulation begins at m. 48 with the initial theme in a fugato presentation. Beginning at m. 57 each voice is given an ostinato or pedal tone, building in intensity until the final tutti statement of the theme.

Text and Music

The particularly close wedding of words and notes in *Trois Chansons* is reminiscent of the tone painting of the Renaissance madrigalists. In the first *chanson* one is immediately struck by the graceful delicate legato used to describe "la gracieuse bonne et belle."

In the second *chanson* the choral parts are given figures suggestive of distant drums and bugles ("le tabourin sonner pour s'en aller"), while the soloist's long sinuous line represents the soporific urge *not* to follow ("ne levé mon chief du coissin; en disant: il est trop matin ung peu je me rendormiray"). This kind of pro-

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grammatical imitation certainly has its ancestry in the *chansons* of the sixteenth-century.

The music of the third *chanson* capitalizes on the contrast portrayed in the poem between winter and summer. "Yver, vous n'estes qu'un villain" is portrayed by an angular line with accented staccato articulation, sharp grace notes and a *forte* dynamic. But all the harshness melts away through mm. 9 and 10 into "Esté est plaisant et gentil." Here the dynamic is softer, the articulation legato, the motion conjunct, and the texture thinner.

Harmonic Language

Even with all the musical anachronisms listed above, these *chansons* unquestionably maintain Debussy's characteristic sound. Non-functional dominant seventh chords infest the score, as can be seen in the following list:

measure	sonority
I. 6	D7
7	B7
8	D7
9	B7
16	B-flat 7
18	G#7
23-24	B7
II. 29	F#7
43-49 (!)	D7
III. 11	E7
39-40	D#7
43	F#7

Of course, on a macro-harmonic level, these dominant sevenths cease to be heard as "non-functional." For example, a reduction of the oscillation of D7 and B7 chords that occurs in mm. 6-9 of the first *chanson* reveals passing and neighbor motion between two statements of the tonic F# major. (Example 5)

Ex. 5. I: mm. 6-9 (in outline).

Another characteristic of the Debussy sound is the frequent use of the half-diminished seventh chord, functioning as an incomplete dominant ninth. The following chart traces

the use of this sonority in the three *chansons*.

measure	sonority
I. 7	d#ø7 = B9
15	a#ø7 = F#9
16, 17	D#ø7 = B9
19	b#ø7 = G#9
II. 22	g#ø7 = E9
34, 38	bø7 = G9
III. 3, 4, 6	f#ø7 = D9
30	a#ø7 = F#9
34-37	g#ø7 = E9
38-39	f#ø7 = D9
69	bø7 = G9

Once again we may note that these sonorities may arise out of neighbor and passing motion. (Example 6a and 6b)

Ex. 6a. III: mm. 38-39 (in outline).

Ex. 6b. III: mm. 69-70 (in outline).

In several instances the composer adds coloration to a conventional progression by a reversal or transposition of the pitches of the bass line. (Example 7a and 7b)

A similar coloration is effected by the use of appoggiaturas and pedal tones to obscure cadential figures in the sections from mm. 32 to 39 in the second *chanson* and from mm. 58 to 67 in the third *chanson*.

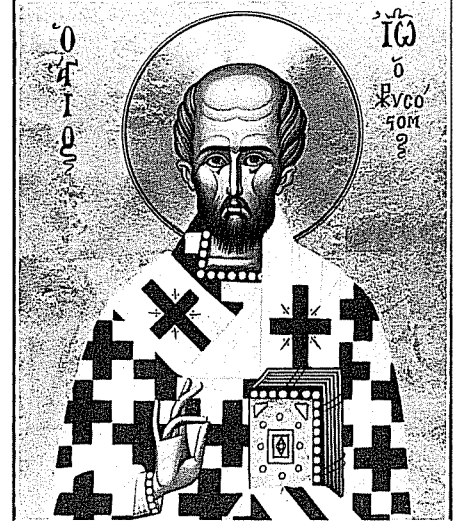
In the second *chanson* we see an interesting case in which the composer phases out one chord while simultaneously phasing in another, thus briefly creating a polychord out of two overlapping sonorities. In each of the first six measures we hear the progression f#-minor to b-minor (or

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Ex. 7a. Reversal: I: m. 18 (in outline).

Ex. 7b. Transposition: III: mm. 28-29 (in outline).

B-major in the second bar). In m. 12 the progression has changed to f#-minor to E-major. Measures 8-11 serve as a transition section in which both b-minor and E-major are sounded simultaneously. (Example 8)

Ex. 8. The transformation of the last chord in mm. 6-12.

There is one other progression so striking that it deserves special mention. In mm. 7-8 of the third *chanson* a French augmented-sixth chord on C is hammered five times in rapid succession. This intense display

marks the end of the first section depicting the villain, Winter. Normally such a chord would resolve through a dominant triad on B to a tonic triad on E. But while the music does eventually progress to E-major in m. 11, the striking effect of this augmented sixth chord is the manner in which it is left hanging unresolved in m. 8 with only the tenor C remaining. That C then "melts away" in a modal whole-tone ascent to E. The bass A#, which was passing chromatically up from A in mm. 3-6, never resolves in register to the expected B until m. 15, although the prominence of the soprano B in mm. 11-20 serves as some compensation for this disappointment. (Example 9a and 9b)

Ex. 9a. Expected resolution of the augmented sixth chord.

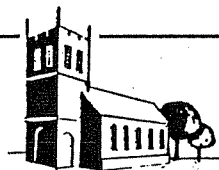
Ex. 9b. Debussy's resolution of the augmented sixth chord.

Form

The three *chansons* are almost exactly equal in length, each taking just under two minutes to perform, yet the three are quite different in character. Each seems to follow its predecessor in a logical progression. The tempo progresses from *très modéré* to *modéré* to *alerte et vif*. There is also a progression in the opening intervals of the themes of each movement from third to fourth to fifth. (Example 10) The dynamics likewise progress from soft in the first two *chansons* to loud in the third. The mode of articulation changes from legato in the first *chanson* to legato combined with a staccato accompaniment in the second to staccato and marcato in the third.

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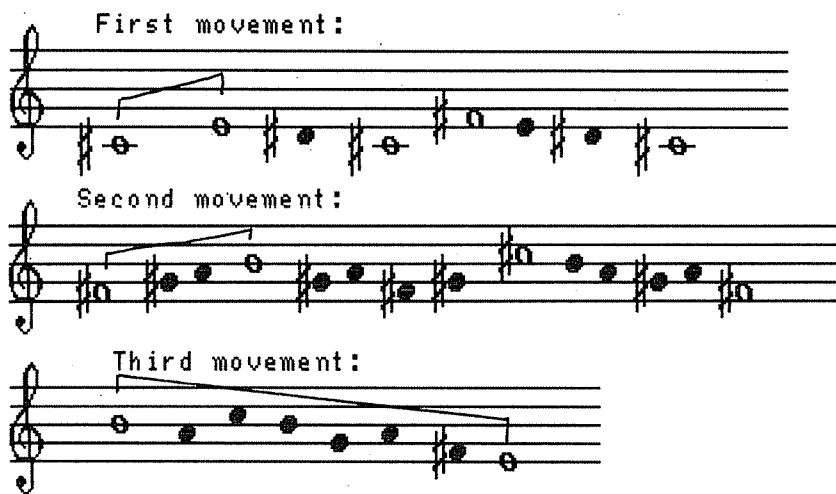
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Ex. 10. Skeletal structure of the opening theme in each chanson.



The macro-tonality of the set serves to reinforce this progression as well. The first two *chansons* are in the key of F#; the third is in the key of E, with the opening pitch B providing the tonal bridge from F# to E. (This harmonic transition is also imbedded in the middle of the third *chanson*. The middle section of the movement ends at m. 46 in F#, a transition through B follows in mm. 48-49, then at m. 51 there is a cadence in E.)

As shown in the following chart, the first two *chansons* are set in the short rondo form, while the third is in a simple ternary structure.

measures	section
I. 1-5	A
6-13	B
14-17	A
18-25	C
25-29	A
II. 1-12	A
13-18	B
19-25	A
26-39	C
40-51	A
III. 1-10	A
11-47	B
48-70	A

It is interesting to note how the refrain of the first *chanson*, portraying the beautiful and graceful woman, is related to the second theme of the third *chanson*, depicting the pleasant and gentle summer. (Example 11 on next page)

An examination of the third *chanson* reveals that a number of significant formal divisions coincide with the proportion of the "golden mean." This proportion can be formulated as $a+b:a = a:b$, where $a+b$ represents the total length of a line, a its larger section and b its smaller section. In

other words, the whole is to the larger part as the larger part is to the smaller part. When a line is divided in such a way, the dividing point, or "golden section," will be found at a point that is approximately .618 of the total length. (Example 12)

Ex. 12. The golden mean.



This formulation is more than a mere academic exercise. Psychologists have found that golden mean proportions appeal to our sense of symmetry. Subjects consistently chose golden mean patterns over all others when asked to identify aesthetically pleasant shapes. Similar proportions have been found in areas as diverse as the poetry of Virgil, Minoan architecture, classical Greek vases, Gothic cathedrals, the growth of shells and leaves, and the distances of the planets from the sun. In music, we often find that a climactic point will occur at the golden section, dividing the *duration* of a composition into the same proportions as the *physical length* of the objects mentioned above.

Returning to the music at hand, we note that the high point of the third movement occurs at the downbeat of m. 43. Furthermore, as one can see in example 13, the climactic point of the second theme in the middle section occurs at the downbeat of measure 29. In both cases these significant formal divisions occur at the golden section: .618 of the line. (Example 13)

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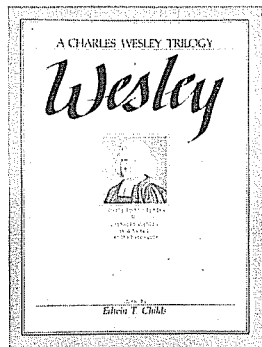
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Ex. 11. Relationship of themes from the first and third chansons.

I: mm. 1-3, alto

III: mm. 10-12, soprano

III: mm. 11-12, alto

Ex. 13. III: mm. 22-34 (melody only).

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