

Claude Debussy's *Danses Sacrée et Profane* – Decoding the Modality, Harmony, and
Form of Debussy's Harp

Claude Debussy's *Danses Sacrée et Profane* for harp and string quartet is a staple in the harp repertoire. Initially written for the chromatic double-strung harp, the *Danses* explore the harp's full range of harmonic and coloristic capabilities through advanced chromaticism, planing, and whole-tone harmonies. However, previous attempts to analyze the complex nature of the *Danses* have skimmed over influences of Exoticism and Portuguese composer Francisco de Lacerda, and do not fully decode the modal, thematic, and harmonic tools used by Debussy to expand the harp's capabilities. In this paper, an analytical approach is used to understand the influences on the work's conception, as well as explore the utilization of modes, harmonies, and formal structures in Debussy's *Danses*.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the harp saw several developments in harmonic flexibility. The *Danses* were originally written for the cross-strung chromatic harp, under a commission from the Pleyel instrument firm in Paris for their newly developed instrument. The *Danses* were later adapted by harpist Henriette Renié for the double-action pedal harp, which relies on foot pedals to change accidentals rather than playing different strings. In addition to understanding the instrument for which Debussy was writing, cultural influences and Exoticism play an important role in the conception and composition of the *Danses*. Following Debussy's exposure to Javanese gamelan at the 1889 *Paris Exposition Universelle*, the composer's music began to explore the usage of pentatonicism and blending Western harmony with quintal harmonies and melodic lines. Both movements heavily utilize pentatonic harmonies and vertical, quintal harmonies. The European fascination with the Exotic serves as a large influence in many of Debussy's works, including the *Danses*. These ideals evolved and blossomed into Debussy's

contributions to the Impressionist and Symbolist movements, both of which brought together Debussy and Portuguese composer Francisco de Lacerda, whose *Danse du voile* also serves as a source of inspiration for the *Danses*.

Debussy and Lacerda connected in 1904 at the *Revue Musical* Composition Contest, at which Lacerda was awarded the top prize for his composition, *Danse du voile*. They shared a history of mutual admiration and respect for compositional techniques, from their first interactions and discussions in 1904 at the competition contest, through the next few years of their careers. Debussy, a panelist for the *Revue Musicale* Composition Contest, was very impressed by the work for its musical coherence to the competition's prompt (a work written in a five-beat time signature). Harmonically, the *Danse du voile* heavily utilizes perfect fifths and tertian relationships, sonorities that lend themselves into the French trends of parallelism and Exoticism. The multi-layered texture and modal tendencies present in the *Danse* share many elements of Debussy's early and mid styles, qualities that M. Debussy must have admired as a panelist. In the next publication of *La Revue Musicale*, the second judge, Vincent d'Indy, provided feedback about the competition winner, stating that, "According to M. Debussy, 'c'est de la musique aérée.'" A description of "airy music" from Debussy himself shows the admiration he had for the piece's floating, evocative character. Lacerda was included in the notoriously exclusive weekly appointments for lunch with Debussy. In an exchange between the two composers, Debussy requested to "borrow" parts of the *Danse du voile* to use in his own writing. In a testament from Ernest Ansermet (close friend of Debussy), Debussy asked Lacerda, "I enjoy your composition so much that I would like to use something from it. Would you allow me to do so?" However, due to his own modesty as an individual and musician, Lacerda never

brought up the fact that he believed that Debussy owed him some of the themes and motives in the *Dances*.

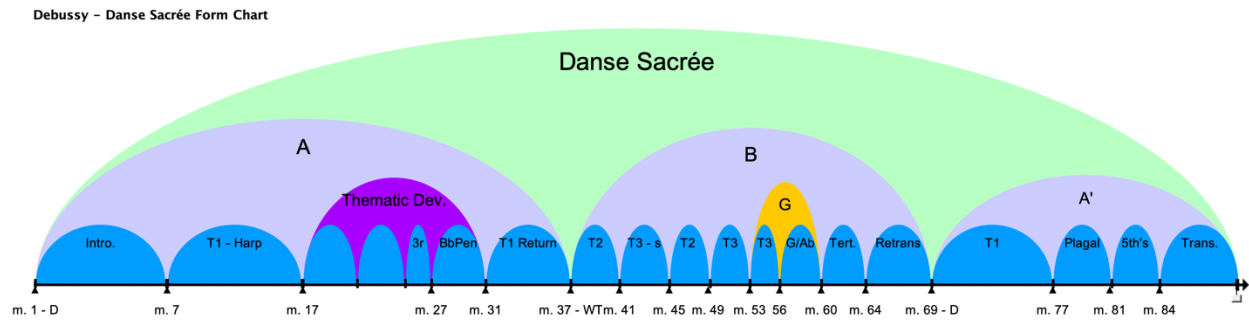


Figure 1. Formal structure of the *Danse Sacrée*, with marked measure numbers, overarching sections, and themes.

The first movement, *Danse Sacrée*, follows a relatively straight-forward ternary form, stating the first theme in the A section in D pentatonic minor, moving to a whole-tone environment in the B section, and returning to the D tonal center in the truncated return of A. The movement begins with a short introduction within the string accompaniment, establishing an A minor pentatonic mode and melodic fragment. Upon closer inspection, this modal introduction serves as a quasi-dominant harmony (minor v) before the harp firmly establishes the D minor tonality.



Figure 2. Debussy's *Danse Sacrée* – violins, mm. 1-4.

The *Danse Sacrée* introduces the melodic line (Figure 2) in the strings, with the A G C relationship, as well as the high and low points at D and E. Interestingly, this opening theme is never stated again, and only serves as an introductory theme.



Figure 3. Lacerda's *Danse* - mm. 8-11.

Comparing the opening theme of the *Dances* to Lacerda's primary theme in the *Danse du voile* (Figure 3), one can find similarity in the contours of the themes. Both have an initial stepwise descent, a leap up to the next pitch, with an eventual return to A.

The primary theme, T1, is set in a D F G A C pentatonic mode, with D as a tonal center (see Figure 4.)

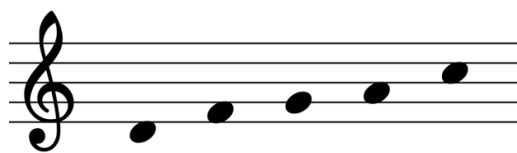


Figure 4. The D pentatonic minor scale used in *Danse Sacrée*.

Debussy uses this pentatonic scale to create the modal melody, T1 (see Figure 5.) This modal writing is reminiscent of Eastern melodies, as a manifestation of Debussy's influence from Javanese gamelan writing.



Figure 5. T1 without triadic harmonization.

The pentatonic modality is obscured through Debussy's usage of harmonic parallelism. Rather than having the harp play the movement's T1 melody in a single line within the D pentatonic, the composer fills in the melody with diatonic triads. Debussy frequently utilizes consecutive vertical structures to maintain a sense of placidity and horizontal motion. T1 is just one example of how parallel motion creates a stable sense of tonality around D, while maintaining the pentatonic motion in the outlined melody (see Figure 6.)



Figure 6. T1 of *Danse Sacrée*, as stated by the harp - mm. 8-9.

Similarly, quintal harmonies in mm. 15-16 create harmonic placidity with similar planing. These vertical structures are interesting in their inverted quintal construction – rather than being built with pure open fifths, Debussy inverted the “root” and created dissonant seconds in the chords (see Figures. 7 and 8.)

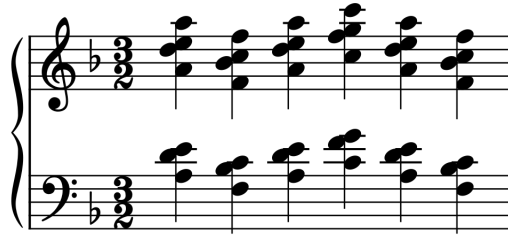


Figure 7. m. 15 in its original, written presentation.



Figure 8. m. 15 rewritten to highlight the quintal construction, with the pentatonic melody notes in parentheses.

As written, the inverted quintal harmonies at m.15 have the melody present in the outermost voices, whereas the open fifth construction (as shown in Figure 8) would create a much hollower sound and present technical challenges in execution. These planed quintal harmonies connect the harmonized pentatonic melody of T1 to a more triadic section beginning in m. 17. Thus, these inverted quintal structures (with the dissonant seconds) serve as the connective tissue between Debussy's pentatonicism and Western triadic harmony.

Debussy further develops the T1 theme's contour with continued usage of harmonic parallelism. In mm. 21, a series of parallel and chromatic triads are sequenced, and highlighted by quartal relationships in the strings/accompaniment. Debussy shifts to this new harmonic realm through a common tone and tertian relationship, ending m. 20 on a G major harmony, and shifting to Eb major on the downbeat of m. 21. The next two measures are full of color shifts, and even chromatic tertian shifts between mm. 22 and 23 (Bb major, Db major, F major.) All of these chromatic chords ascend and arrive to the Db major chord in m. 25, which begins a

complimentary tertian descent through m. 27. Beginning in m. 25, Debussy utilizes a blend of descending stepwise motion and chromatic tertian relationships (Db major, Bb major, and Gb major). In order to repeat this sequence, Debussy adds an extra step in the right hand on the last beat of each measure (see Figure 9), and this triplet figure can even be heard as a reference to the opening T1 theme.

The image shows a musical score for measures 25 and 26. The top system is for the Harpe (Harp), with two staves. The right-hand staff contains a triplet figure of quarter notes, and the left-hand staff contains a descending stepwise line. The bottom system is for the strings, with five staves: Violons (Violins), Alt. (Alto), Vellés (Violas), and C.B. (Cello/Bass). The string parts show descending stepwise and chromatic tertian shifts. The harp part is marked *p* and the string parts are also marked *p*. The string parts are marked *arco* in measure 26.

Figure 9 – mm. 25 and 26, highlighting the descending stepwise and chromatic tertian shifts.

This sequence arrives at a Bb major pentatonic region in m. 27. Here, a pentatonic outline forms in the string melody and harp chords (see Figure 10), with the triplet quarter note figure in the strings again alluding to T1. This passage transitions the music back to T1 in original D tonality.



Figure 10. mm. 27-30, with the strings and harp outlining a Bb pentatonic scale (Bb C D F G.)

In mm. 31-36, T1 is presented in a purely quintal environment, with the melody harmonized with open fifths (see Figure 11.) Mm. 33-34 feature an oscillating figure between D minor and major harmonies, before arriving to an open fifth figure built on D (notably missing the third.) This brings the A section to a close with D firmly established as the tonal center.



Figure 11. Mm. 31-36, harp and violins, with T1 stated with open fifths and the D minor-major figure.

In m. 37, whole-tone harmonies begin to destabilize the tonal center of D and introduce the two main themes of the B section. T2 is introduced in the left hand of the harp, underneath the quadruple eighth note ostinato that drives the whole B section (see Figures 12 and 13.) Initially introduced in fragments of whole-tone harmonies, this ostinato is present in all but four measures of the section. Additionally, this passage introduces the important tritonal relationship between D and Ab/G# that exists throughout both movements of the work. Although the two pitches do not occur at the same time (articulation wise) as the harp presents these two new themes, the instrument's natural resonance allows for the tritone's dissonance to be subtly presented and heard.

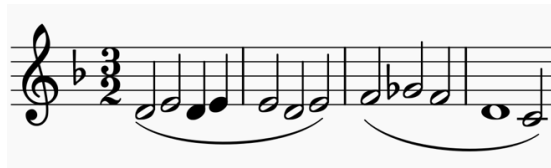


Figure 12. T2, as stated in the left hand of the harp, in m. 37.



Figure 13. The quadruple eighth note ostinato above T2, in m.37.

Sans lenteur

p très espressif

Figure 14. Harp alone, with T2 and the ostinato figure above, mm. 37-40.

Following the first statement of the ostinato and T2, the strings introduce T3, a slightly more chromatic and complimentary theme to T2 (see Figure 15.) While the two melodies share

rhythmic parallels, their contours are polarized. As T2 generally ascends in pitch, T3's chromatic sinking line gives it a stronger sense of descending gravitational pull.



Figure 15. T3 in its first statement, mm. 41-44.

T3 is also the first instance of chromatic planing that Debussy utilizes in the work. Note the pitch relationships between mm. 41-42 and mm. 43-44 – the first two measures present the motivic idea, then the motive is restated a whole-step lower, in the same sequence of pitch alterations. This technique differs from harmonic parallelism, as the entire motive is shifted down (chromatically) by one whole step, as opposed to being harmonized or restated diatonically in the second statement. Similarly, note how seamlessly the two iterations of T3 are – Debussy utilizes a common tone shift from the end of the first statement in m. 42, so that the F tied over the bar line concludes the first statement, and serves as the starting point for the second statement.

Following the presentation of these two developmental themes, Debussy restates the motives with increased texture and harmonic realization. In m. 45, T2 is restated in the middle voice of the harp, with persistent articulations of D and Ab in both the harp and accompaniment (emphasizing the important tritone of the work.) In m. 49, T3 is stated in the harp and strings alike, while the soloist also maintains the ostinato, leading into the last statement of T3, shifted up a half step. In mm. 56-57, the repeated motivic fragments put emphasis on the G#, at the highpoint of volume and tempo in the passage (*f* dynamic and previous *accelerando* leads to this

passage). Notably, this climax at the G# highlights the vital tritone relationship of the work and coincides with the movement's Golden mean.

This musical score excerpt covers measures 53 to 60. It features five staves: Harpe (Harp), Vions, Alt. (Alto), Velles (Violas), and C.B. (Cello/Bass). The Harpe part begins with a *pp* dynamic and a complex rhythmic pattern of sixteenth notes, which intensifies to *f* by measure 56. The vocal parts (Vions, Alt., Velles) sing the lyrics "cre - - scen - - do" with a *mp* dynamic, marked *Div. arco* (divisi, arco). The Vions part includes a *Cuis.* (Cuisine) instruction. The C.B. part provides a bass line with a *p* dynamic. The score concludes with a *f* dynamic in the Harpe part.

This musical score excerpt continues from the previous system, covering measures 53 to 60. It features five staves: Harpe (Harp), Vions, Alt. (Alto), Velles (Violas), and C.B. (Cello/Bass). The Harpe part starts with a *f* dynamic and a complex rhythmic pattern, then transitions to *dim.* (diminuendo) and *p* (piano) dynamics, ending with a *p cresc. molto* (piano, molto crescendo) instruction. The vocal parts (Vions, Alt., Velles) sing the lyrics "cre - - scen - - do" with a *f* dynamic, marked *dim.* (diminuendo) and *p* (piano). The C.B. part provides a bass line with a *p* dynamic. The score concludes with a *p* dynamic in the Harpe part.

Figure 16. Score, mm. 53 – 60 of the *Danse Sacrée*.

Debussy is known for his incorporation of the Golden mean into his works, often revolving around the important climaxes of a piece. In this movement, the Golden mean begins in m. 53, with the final statement of T3, beginning at *pianissimo* and building to mm. 56 and 57. In these two measures, the soloist and accompaniment all arrive to each downbeat, and *crescendo* through the end of each measure. The striking Ab (enharmonic to G#) in m. 57 reminds the listener of the tritone relationship, strategically placed at the highpoint of the movement. This Golden ratio relationship can be found by multiplying the total number of measures in the work by the Golden mean (.618.) In this movement, there are 87 total measures, so $87 \times .618 = 53.766$. While m. 53 begins in a quiet/soft environment, it marks the starting point for the dynamic and harmonic climax in mm. 56 and 57.

The following passage of the B section demonstrates the harmonic flexibility of the harp, as Debussy employs extreme chromaticism through tertian shifts and planing. In m. 60 and 62, ascending triads moving by a minor third, outline a fully diminished triad. This sequence begins on a C major chord and returns to a C major harmony in the first instance. Sandwiched between the tertian shifts (m. 61), Debussy maintains the ostinato in a more diatonic presentation, floating above the C major accompaniment. The second instance, at mm. 62-64, presents the same ascending tertian figure, but the EbM triad resolves in a perfect authentic cadence to AbM, again emphasizing the tritone relationship of the work between D and Ab (see Figure 17.) Notably, this is the first perfect authentic cadence of the movement – in no prior section of this movement is there a strong V – i/I cadence.

Figure 17. mm. 62-64 – chromatic planning in the harp, the first PAC of the movement to AbM, and the [0134] chromatic planing over T3’s fragmented statement in the accompaniment.

The following phrase employs more chromatic planing, moving the ostinato figure (beginning on D Eb F Gb) as pitch-set [0134] up by half steps in the harp, while the strings play a fragment of T3. This juxtaposition of planing in the ostinato and the descending chromatic line of T3’s fragment creates unique contrapuntal motion that initially resolves to a Gb pentatonic mode in m. 65. Following another planed statement of the ostinato as a [0134] pitch-set, the phrase concludes with a BbDom9#11 harmony, with continued and emphasized repetition of Ab in the harp’s ostinato, before returning to the A section in D pentatonic minor.

The A’ section (m. 69) states T1 in its entirety and includes truncated material from the initial A section, with a smooth restatement that closes the movement. In m. 77, Debussy mimics a plagal cadence (iv – i), with another series of quintal harmonies oscillating over a G pedal.



Figure 18. The plagal pedal point leading to the cadence, mm. 77-80.

The harp’s quintal harmonies reference the earlier vertical harmonies from mm. 15-16, with mm. 77-78 rocking between the same two chords from the first two beats of m. 16. In mm. 79-80, the second chord in the harp is an inversion of a quintal chord built above F (5x5 on F), maintaining the quintal environment. While the harp repeats these harmonies, the viola moves between G and F, and the bass’ pizzicato G’s reinforce the plagal pedal point. The cadence occurs on the downbeat of mm. 81, as the harmonies return to D and begin a new, unique sequence.

The movement closes with another “borrowed” idea from Lacerda’s opening measures of the *Danse du voile*. In the opening four bars of the Lacerda, open fifths are sequenced in a descending pattern (see Figure 19.)



Figure 19. Lacerda's *Danse du voile*, mm. 1-4.

This idea is presented in the very opening of the work but returns in more chromatic iterations later in the piece. Rather than purely diatonic tertian shifts, a series of chromatically altered tertian relationships destabilize the tonal framework temporarily, before returning to the first harmony. Through this chromatic planning, the same fifth relationship is maintained as Lacerda moves down by thirds. In the last two instances, both series of descending fifths occur over F tonic pedals, before resolving to the third and fifth of F major (see Figures 20 and 21.)



Figure 20. Lacerda's *Danse du voile* - mm. 51-56.



Figure 21. Lacerda's *Danse du voile* - mm. 111-123.

This idea must have been one of the most striking elements to Debussy, as he was not one to directly quote harmonies (or even melodies for that matter) from many other works or composers. Yet, at the end of the *Danse Sacrée* (mm. 81-83), we have a parallel series of harmonies to those of Lacerda's descending fifths. The tertian relationships between the first three sets (D/A, F/Bb, Db/Gb) mimic Lacerda's sequence, and then shifts to the minor dominant before the next statement repeats. This idea is repeated a total of three times, descending in register from the top of the harp to the middle/low range, before concluding the end of the movement.

Figure 22. *Danse Sacrée* – harp alone - mm. 81-87.

Debussy repeats this pattern three times, descending in register, until arriving at m. 84. Here, Debussy introduces a bass line, D A D Bb (see Fig. 13), that transforms into the ostinato for the second movement. This ostinato fits into the D minor pentatonic environment and concludes the movement as the soloist executes a *retenu* over the last four bars, seamlessly leading into the next movement.

Figure 23. *Danse Sacrée* - harp alone - mm. 84-87.