

# Debussy – *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

## Background

Debussy composed his first set of 'Fêtes Galantes' to poems by Paul Verlaine, his favourite Symbolist poet, in 1882. (Indeed, 18 of Debussy's 87 songs are settings of Verlaine texts.) With no thematic, harmonic or narrative links, the songs were not originally intended to form a song cycle and were related only in terms of their poet and their dedicatee, the singer Blanche-Adelaide Vasnier. In 1892, however, Debussy grouped three of the songs together – 'En sourdine', 'Fantoques' and 'Clair de lune' – and published them under the title 'Fêtes Galantes'. (By this time Debussy's association with Vasnier had ended and the songs were published with different dedications.) In June 1904, nearly 13 years after the composition of this first set, Debussy returned to Verlaine's 'Fêtes Galantes' poems and set three new texts, the third of which was *Colloque sentimental*.

The time at which Debussy composed a setting for this second set of love poems was a time of personal transition for the composer. At this point in his life Debussy shared Verlaine's cynical attitude towards love, and in June 1904 he left his marriage to engage in a relationship with Emma Bardac, whom he would eventually marry. His dedication to this second set of 'Fêtes Galantes' was 'to thank the month of June, 1904' and was followed by the letters 'A. l. p. m.' ('À la petite mienne' – 'to my little dear one'), the way in which he addressed Emma Bardac in his correspondence with her.

The second set of 'Fêtes Galantes' rejects the ambiguity typical of Symbolist poetry in favour of a more narrative form, which was also something of a departure from Debussy's usual choice of texts. Each of the three songs begins monophonically, a characteristic of Debussy's style (the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* perhaps being the most famous example of this), with the opening motif becoming associated with a particular mood or character. The monophonic opening of 'Le Faune', the second of the three songs, is flute-like and has the same melodic contour as the famous opening of the orchestral *Prélude*.

In a letter to Emma Bardac, Debussy had this to say on his attitude to music and text:

*'Music begins at the point where the word is incapable of expression; music is made for the inexpressible.'*

In *Colloque sentimental*, two ghosts recall their former love. For one the passion is still real, but for the other their love, like them, is dead. The poem/song contrasts the nostalgic regret of one ghost with the cold indifference of the other. (Some commentators appear for some reason to have assumed – perhaps merely on the ground of pitch – that the ardent ghost is female while the more disenchanted ghost is male. However, Verlaine, presumably deliberately, gives the reader no indication of the gender of the two ghosts concerned. In the analysis below they will be referred to merely as 'Ghost 1' and 'Ghost 2'.)

## Debussy – *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

Here is Verlaine's poem with a fairly literal English translation:

Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé  
Deux forms ont tout à l'heure passé.

In the old, lonely, icy park  
Two shapes just passed by.

Leurs yeux sont morts et leur lèvres sont molles,  
Et l'on entend à peine leurs paroles.

Their eyes are dead and their lips are limp,  
And their words are barely audible.

Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé  
Deux spectres ont évoqué le passé.

In the old, lonely, icy park  
Two ghosts recalled the past.

Te souvient-il de notre extase ancienne?  
Pourquoi voulez-vous donc qu'il m'en souviennne?

Do you remember our former ecstasy?  
So why do you want me to remember it?

Ton coeur bat-il à mon seul nom?  
Toujours vois-tu mon âme en rêve? – Non.

Does your heart beat at the mere mention of my name?  
Do you still see my soul in your dreams? – No.

Ah! Les beaux jours de bonheur indicible  
Où nous joignons nos bouches! – C'est possible.

Ah! The inexpressible days of happiness  
When our lips met! – Maybe.

Qu'il était bleu, le ciel, et grand, l'espoir!  
L'espoir a fui, vaincu, vers le ciel noir.

How blue the sky was, how great the hope!  
Hope has fled, defeated, towards the black sky.

Tels ils marchaient dans les avoines folles,  
Et la nuit seule entendit leurs paroles.

So they walked in the wild oats,  
And night alone heard their words.

Apparently, Debussy did not (or, far more likely, chose not to) consider the disenchanted ghost's 'C'est possible' in line 12 as another dismissive, indifferent response to the first ghost's questioning – as though he/she can't remember. The negative intention of this response is surely confirmed by Ghost 2's final, damning statement in line 14 – 'L'espoir a fui, vaincu, vers le ciel noir'. Instead, Debussy has set these words – 'C'est possible' – as though they represented a moment of hope, an acceptance of the real possibility of the ghosts experiencing once more the passion of their former love – not so much a throw-away 'could be', more of a heartfelt 'it really **is** possible'. Although this is not the usual accepted reading of Verlaine's poem, we must take on Debussy's rather unconventional interpretation in order to understand and appreciate his musical setting in full.

Note how Ghost 1 uses the more personal and affectionate 'tu' while addressing Ghost 2, while the latter uses the more formal and more distant 'vous'. (This is similar to the use of 'ti' and 'chi' in Welsh.)

# Debussy - *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

## Analysis

“Colloque sentimental” falls neatly into three sections that can perhaps aptly be termed:

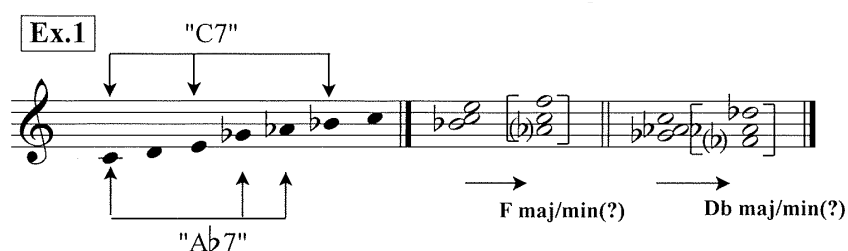
**Prologue (bars 1-18)   Dialogue (bars 19-48/50)   Epilogue (49/51-end)**

This makes an overall **ABA'** form, though, as is often the case with Debussy, **A'** combines elements of **A** and **B** material. (There is an “overlap” of material from the Dialogue into the Epilogue of the type we encountered in “Reflets”, which accounts for the alternative bar numbers given for the sections). The song actually consists of three different musical ‘styles’, each associated with the characters involved. The third of whom, a narrator is, in fact, more of a dispassionate bystander or witness to the proceedings than one who merely tells the story. The scenario presented to us has only just happened – the two ghosts have ‘only just passed by’. The narrator is given recitative-like material with quite sparse accompaniment. Ghost 1’s material is lyrical and almost operatic in style, while Ghost 2, the disenchanted lover, is mostly accompanied by static chords, with a far less expansive line than that of Ghost 1.

### A [‘Prologue’] [Bars 1–18]

Like the other two songs in the second set of ‘Fêtes Galantes’, *Colloque sentimental* begins monophonically, with a single bar repeated and a bass part added. Bars 1–3 consists of a whole-tone ‘complex’ formed from two distinct lines in the LH and RH of the piano. Though based on the same whole-tone scale, the two lines divide the scale into two discrete motifs, each making an incomplete dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord, one on C and the other on A $\flat$  – see **Ex.1**. (C is common to both motifs. A shared note is inevitable in view of the whole-tone scale’s limited pitch content; D is not used, while B $\flat$  also appears as a passing note in the LH part.) C7 suggests resolution to a chord of F major/minor, A $\flat$ 7 to D $\flat$  major/minor. Of course, as an Impressionist composer, Debussy could be using these chords merely for ‘colouristic’ purposes. Only the subsequent music can determine whether these ‘dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chords’ have any tonal or structural function. [According to Boyd Pomeroy: ‘The principle of tonic–dominant polarity is arguably still operative in much of Debussy’s music, albeit typically under the surface rather than as a salient feature of chord-to-chord harmonic process .’]

**Ex.1**



It has been suggested that these two lines depict the two ghosts, and the treatment of this material throughout the song would seem to support this notion. Based on the opening bars alone, it would be quite possible to come up with acceptable contradictory reasons for apportioning each line to a particular ghost. The RH line is more repetitive in its use of a 3-note motif, giving the impression of moving aimlessly while continually circling back on itself. Its use of triplets and ties (and the subtle change in the motif in bar 3 in both pitch and rhythmic outline) tends to obscure the beat/pulse. (Some, however, might consider the higher pitch and upward trajectory as suggestive of something more positive.) By contrast, the LH part is more ‘goal-directed’, moving downward throughout bars 1–3; it is also more sure-footed in its use of simple quavers and crotchets, with no trace of syncopation. (Conversely, some might view the downward motion as a more negative aspect, signifying a more depressed state of mind.) Depending on one’s point of view, based on the descriptions above,

## Debussy – *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

either line could stand for either ghost. As we shall see, however, the song's tonal trajectory strongly supports one interpretation over the other.

- Discuss the alternative 'explanations' given above for the material used to differentiate between the two ghosts. Can you find any other reasons for choosing one ghost over the other at this early stage of the song?

In bar 3 the  $G\flat$  in the LH is absorbed into the RH 'arpeggios', functioning as a flattened 5<sup>th</sup> in a  $C7^{(b5)}$  chord that cadences onto the F tonic of the RH's C7 melodic motifs. The left hand and the right hand still maintain their own pitch content, however, until the  $G\flat$  resolves onto F in bar 4. Over this tonic F major chord the RH presents a modified version of its motif from bar 3, with its last note eliminated, the  $B\flat$  changed to  $B\sharp$  and some note lengths altered. The presence of an E suggests the addition of a major 7<sup>th</sup> to the tonic chord, but we will have to wait until the end of the song to understand the exact significance of this note/chord.

Taking off from the E of the F major7 chord, the narrator's opening phrase is mostly unaccompanied, with its written part appearing to contradict completely the natural stress of the poem's text. Its recitative-like line seems not to follow any particular metre. A fragment of the 3-note motif from bar 4 separates the narrator's first two lines. The music becomes more chromatic and harmonically ambiguous, the previous E having now changed to  $E\flat$ . But there is also an imitative entry of this motif in bar 7<sup>1</sup> starting on  $F\sharp$ , with its opening rhythm again changed and its closing notes subjected to augmentation. Above this the vocal part 'doubles' the first motif's final sustained  $E\flat$  in a repetitive chant-like line.

As the narrator begins to describe the appearance of the two ghosts (bar 9), the music reverts to the opening whole-tone scale as the piano's RH repeats its 'triplet' figure from bar 2, ostinato-like, through to bar 11. Note, however, the alteration of  $B\flat$  in the song's motif from bar 2 to  $B\sharp$  (on 'morts' – 'dead') in bar 10, now expressly associating that note with the idea of death. The LH enters only in bar 11 with a veiled reference to its own opening material, now in the form of a descending whole-tone scale in steady crotchets. Compare this, in particular, with the descending scalar figure from  $C \rightarrow G\flat$  in bars 2<sup>2</sup>–3<sup>1</sup>, reaching  $G\flat$  before it, too, circles back on itself, treading its weary path hesitantly back up first to D, then a step higher to E to a return of the F major7 chord from bar 4. (Note also the slight alterations to the RH ostinato in bars 12–13 and the highlighting of  $A\flat$  and  $B\flat$  in bars 13–14<sup>1</sup> by doubling their (expected) lengths.) Over this sustained chord both the text and melody from line 1 are repeated in bars 14<sup>3</sup>–16.

The  $B\flat 7$  chord in bar 16<sup>2–3</sup> is one of those buffering pivot-like chords encountered in 'Reflets dans l'eau'. It forms a smooth progression from the previous F major7 chord, the chords' roots ascending by a perfect 4<sup>th</sup> while, at the same time, it also refers back to the whole-tone material at the start of the song, since  $B\flat$ , D and  $A\flat$  are all components of that scale. More importantly, it contains an  $A\flat$ , a note that will feature prominently in the song's 'dialogue'.

This  $A\flat$  is all that is retained from the  $B\flat 7$  chord in the piano in bars 17–18, its syncopated repetition in bar 18 preparing for the  $A\flat$  pedal that persists throughout almost the whole of the 'conversation'. Over this  $A\flat$  in bars 17–18 the narrator continues with his recitative-like material, the notes of which (along with the piano's  $A\flat$ ) hint at an  $Fm6$  chord ( $F-A\flat-C-D$ ).

## Debussy – *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

The structure of the 'Prologue' could be regarded as follows:

a <sup>1</sup> [Introduction]	b <sup>1</sup>	a <sup>2</sup>	b <sup>2</sup>
1-4(5')	4 <sup>3</sup> -8	9-14	15-18

- Describe (i) Debussy's use of texture and (ii) his writing for the piano in the 'Prologue'.
- Do you agree with the outline of the structure given above? Discuss any alternative version(s).

### **B ['Dialogue'] [Bars 19–50]**

In 'En sourdine' ('Muted'), the opening song of the first set of his 'Fêtes Galantes', Debussy used a motif in the piano's RH to depict the nightingale mentioned in Verlaine's poem. 'En sourdine' describes the deep connection between two lovers, with the events taking place at dusk. In the final verse one of the lovers refers to the nightingale as the 'voix de notre désespoir' ('voice of our despair'), stating that it will sing 'when the evening falls from the black oaks'. 'En sourdine' is the penultimate poem in Verlaine's 'Fêtes Galantes', preceding 'Colloque sentimental' in the collection. Commentators have, therefore, linked the two poems and assumed the lovers to be the same in both. To underline this, Debussy brings back the nightingale motif which he used in the earlier song in the second section of *Colloque sentimental*. **Ex.2 (i)** gives the opening of 'En sourdine', where the nightingale's song is initially accompanied by the 'Tristan chord'. This much discussed chord, described as 'the 19<sup>th</sup> century's most famous musical icon of desire', is so called after its use at the opening of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* – see **Ex.2 (ii)**. Analysts have debated its function and argued over which notes may or may not be notes of the chord and which mere embellishments. Whatever Wagner considered the underlying chord to have been here, the 'sound' (vertical sonority) of the Tristan chord is that of a half-diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord, one found abundantly in Debussy's music (the first chord heard in his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, for example). At the opening of 'En sourdine' the chord is spaced identically to that in Wagner's iconic opening and uses the same pitches (an octave higher at first but, when repeated in bar 5, also identically), so highlighting the connection. The harmonization at the start of this conversation is very different, however, reflecting the change in the lovers' situation.

# Debussy - *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

**Ex.2(i)** *Rêveusement lent*

*pp doux et expressif*

"Tristan chord"

Bar 5 repeats bar 1 an 8ve lower, so reproducing the "Tristan chord" at its original pitch.

**Ex.2(ii)** *Langsam und schmachkend*

*pp*

"Tristan chord"

The  $A^b$  pedal point in this section (the key signature of which has changed to five flats) is one of the longest used by Debussy in any of his works and is obviously of some significance.  $A^b$  was the root of the apparent dominant 7<sup>th</sup> in the LH at the start of the song, and so is associated with one of the ghosts. It would seem at this juncture that the opening  $A^b7$  motif (with a possible resolution to a  $D^b$  major/minor tonic) is connected to Ghost 1, that is, the ghost who initiates the conversation. This would imply that the  $C7$  motif, along with its implied  $F$  major/minor tonality, is related to Ghost 2.

The **B** section begins with the nightingale motif in the piano alone, so evoking the two lovers from the earlier 'En sourdine'. The  $A^b$  pedal is syncopated, though each note mostly lasts a crotchet beat, and the nightingale motif is underpinned by the bittersweet harmonies of two octatonically related, diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chords, against which the  $A^b$  – not being part of the scale – is dissonant (see **Ex.3**). (The syncopated accompaniment is initially confined to Ghost 1's questions/statements, and is conspicuously absent from Ghost 2's first response. Is it too fanciful to suppose that this could represent the beating heart mentioned in line 9, this heartbeat signifying life and, by extension, their former love?) Note that the nightingale's song is completely contained within the notes of the prevailing octatonic scale. Ghost 1's melody in bars 22–23 (with recitative-like elements) is also octatonic, with the chromatic appoggiatura  $A^b(s)$  on 'souvi-ent-il' ('remember') the only 'rogue' note. Note too, the end of the phrase – a cadential-like fall from  $E^b$  to  $D^b$ .

**Ex.3**

$A^{o7}$   $E^{o7}$

Ghost 2's response (in the form of a surly question) is prefaced by a brusque  $Fm6$  chord that retains the pedal though merely as a sustained note, with no sense of 'pulse'. The vocal melody is based on the notes of the  $Fm6$  chord with two embellishments – one of which again occurs as a chromatic appoggiatura on 'souvien-(ne)', perhaps suggesting that the memories are in some way distressing.



## Debussy - *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

The association of the Fm6 chord with Ghost 1 (as an alternative to the Prologue's F major(7) chord) accords perfectly with the earlier analytical hypothesis. Should we, then, at some point, expect a resolution of the song's opening supposed A $\flat$ 7 chord to a D $\flat$  tonic which will be associated with Ghost 1? [Interestingly, a minor 6<sup>th</sup> chord contains the same pitches as a 'Tristan'/half-diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord – e.g., Fm6 = F–A $\flat$ –C–D while D half-diminished = D–F–A $\flat$ –C.]

As Ghost 2 concludes his/her own question the pedal, A $\flat$  resumes its syncopated form (bar 26) and the nightingale motif returns in an abridged version. The harmonic content of Ghost 1's second question is modified, too. Bar 27 starts off from the second of the two diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chords from bars 19–22, but the following chord (bar 28) is an F $\flat$  major6 chord. As before, both chords belong to the same octatonic scale. More than this, they have two notes in common. (See **Ex.4**.) Additionally, the pedal is now part of the new octatonic scale, meaning that dissonance is slightly reduced here. [The whole of bars 27–30 could be analysed as octatonic, with the usual chromatic embellishments. The basis of bar 30 is a diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord on D (D–F–A $\flat$ –C $\flat$ ).]. The range of Ghost 1's melodic material has increased from a 5<sup>th</sup> in bars 22–23 to an octave in bars 28–30. It has also become more expansive and lyrical, with the introduction of the first sustained note in bar 29, its highest pitch so far. The piano part, too, has become more prominent, with new RH material in bars 28 and 30, the latter based on the nightingale motif. Additionally, note the increase in dynamics in bars 27–28.

**Ex.4**



The musical notation shows a single staff with a treble clef. The first part is a melodic line consisting of eighth notes: E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5. This is followed by a double bar line. After the double bar line, there are two chords: E $\circ$ 7 (diminished 7th chord on E) and E6 (major 6th chord on E). The notes for E $\circ$ 7 are E $\flat$ , G $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , and D $\flat$ . The notes for E6 are E, G, B, and C.

- Comment on the RH melody in the piano in bars 27–30, discussing the use (and possible derivation) of any new material.

Ghost 2's response is an extremely abrupt 'Non'. The harmonic accompaniment is the same Fm6 chord, but it has now adopted a syncopated rhythm. Does this suggest that, despite his outward indifference, Ghost 2 is beginning to be affected by Ghost 1's reminiscences of their former love? Perhaps picking up on this, Ghost 1's fervour intensifies, spilling over into the piano part which takes off from an ascending arpeggiated version of Ghost 2's Fm6 chord as an anacrusis into the next passage marked *Animez et augmentez peu à peu*. Bars 33–40 are the climax of the song. This time Ghost 1 does not pose a question. Rather he/she evokes a vivid memory of the lovers kissing in their days of indescribable pleasure. For the first time, the music has no real suggestion of octatonicism, and the (dominant) pedal A $\flat$  is a part of every chord but one – the brief G $\flat$ 7 chord in bar 38 – making this the most consonant of Ghost 1's utterances so far. For the first time, too, the passage begins with a half-diminished 'Tristan' chord – but it is not just any 'Tristan' chord, it is **the** 'Tristan' chord, respelled to fit in with the D $\flat$  key signature, Debussy's F–A $\flat$ –C $\flat$ –E $\flat$  = Wagner's F–G $\sharp$ –B–D $\sharp$ . (See **Ex.5**.) It could be significant that the piano part in bar 33, the start of Ghost 1's statement that finally dispels Ghost 2's cynical attitude to love, begins on a C flat, the enharmonic of B natural. This means that the note that elsewhere in the song (always in the piano part) appears to symbolize death, here initiates Ghost 1's greatest outpouring of love. The C flat is prefaced and highlighted by the upward sweeping Fm6 arpeggio in bar 32<sup>3</sup> and by it (and the whole of the ensuing RH melodic line till bar 39) being in 8ves, the first time this "texture"/piano writing has appeared in the song. It also reappears in bars 43<sup>2</sup>–47.

## Debussy - *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

**Ex.5**

Note F $\flat$  and D $\flat$   
suspensions/appoggiaturas

Bar: 33 34 35 36 37 38-39 40 41 42

"Tristan chord"

I IV9 I

F $\flat$ 7 F $\flat$ 7 F $\flat$ 7 A $\flat$ 7 F $\flat$ 7 F $\flat$ 7 G $\flat$ 7 A $\flat$ 7 B $\flat$ 7 F $\flat$ 7 D $\flat$  G $\flat$ 9 D $\flat$

- Compare and contrast Debussy's use of texture in bars 19–32 with that in bars 1–18.
- To what extent do you consider any differences to be the result of 'word painting'?

The tempo directions *Animez et augmentez peu à peu* (33) → *Retenu* (38) → *a Tempo* (40) all seem to point to bar 40 as being the focal point of the entire song. The *pp* dynamic (bar 38) is all the more effective after the *p cresc. molto* passage (35–37), giving the impression of a rapt whisper as the vivid memory of the past replaces the gloomy reality of the present. (The vocal part contains no discrete dynamic markings in the song, instead, following those in the piano part.) The piano's syncopated rhythms in bar 40 are either a variant of the previous syncopated 'heartbeats' – in diminution, as though Ghost 2's heart has started to race at the recollection, after ceasing to beat completely during bar 37 – or a reference to the syncopated fragment of the nightingale motif. Although the underlying harmony is 'consonant', consisting of a variety of 7<sup>th</sup> chords (half-diminished, dominant and diminished, the usual Impressionist fare), both the vocal melody (which reaches a sustained F $\flat$  in bars 36<sup>3</sup>–37<sup>3</sup>, its highest pitch in the song) and the piano's RH material (also at its highest pitch in the song) contain some poignant non-harmonic notes (suspensions, etc.), all of which give the appropriate sense of yearning. Note also how the piano 'develops' the nightingale motif in bars 34 (syncopated fragment repeated on the third beat) and 36 (opening beat repeated on the second and third beats of the bar). To further underline the text in bar 38, Ghost 1's vocal melody becomes diatonic for the only time during the 'conversation'; and, to clarify beyond any doubt the connection with the opening bars' distinct 'ghost motifs', the notes used are none other than A $\flat$ , C and G $\flat$ , i.e. the notes of the LH's incomplete A $\flat$  dominant 7<sup>th</sup>. Also, the series of parallel dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chords in the piano (bars 38–39) outlines a stepwise ascending augmented 4<sup>th</sup> from F $\flat$  to B $\flat$ , recalling the LH's falling tritone from C to G $\flat$  in bars 3–4.

Throughout the dialogue so far, Ghost 1's dominant pedal appears to have been seeking tonic resolution to D $\flat$  in an attempt to convince Ghost 2 of the possibility of reliving their former love. In bar 40, Ghost 2 finally accepts this and with it Ghost 1's D $\flat$  major key, with an equally rapt 'C'est possible' – over a plain D $\flat$  triad in the piano, the RH part of which also reverts to the simple version of the syncopated pedal motif. (The fall from E $\flat$ -D $\flat$  in bar 40 recalls the similar cadential figure in Ghost 1's first statement (on "extase ancienne"), thus linking this moment of acceptance with the initial mention of the ghosts' "former ecstasy") In bars 41–42 the piano echoes the previous vocal fragment (*très expressif et soutenu*), underlining the possibility of reliving the past, in a plagal cadence (IV9→I), the appoggiatura E $\flat$  (over the subdominant chord) adding a little more dissonance than in bar 40. There is, too, the suggestion of a perfect cadence in bars 38–40 with Ghost 1's A $\flat$ 7-based melodic line over the dominant pedal (left unaccompanied at the end of bar 39) and its "resolution"



## Debussy - *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

to the following tonic D $\flat$  major chord.

- Discuss the following comment by a musicologist in his own brief analysis of bars 38–40: ‘*The woman’s excitement is coolly met with nondescript major chords and the man’s reply of “It’s possible”.*’ Do you agree with this interpretation of these bars? Give musical reasons for your answer.

There is one final statement from Ghost 1 (bars 42<sup>2</sup>–45). The harmony reverts to the preceding cadential IV9 chord in bar 43 while the piano’s RH again alludes to Ghosts 2’s melody from bar 40, extending it first with another veiled allusion to itself (44–45<sup>2</sup>), then with an echo of Ghost 1’s *grand l’espoir* motif (compare the voice in bars 44<sup>2</sup>–45 with the piano in bars 45–46<sup>2</sup>). Also note the ‘countermelody’ in the uppermost line of the LH part in bars 44–45, its stepwise movement and repeated B $\flat$  in bar 44–45<sup>1</sup>, falling to A $\flat$ , possibly linking it to the ‘c’est possible’ figure. Its chromatic twist in bars 45<sup>3</sup>–46<sup>1</sup> hints at Ghost 2’s ‘change of heart’ in his/her next and final utterance. The same basic harmony persists in bars 44–45, but we begin to lose the sense of the chord’s G $\flat$  root, leaving us instead with a half-diminished ‘Tristan’ chord – (G $\flat$ )–B $\flat$ –D $\flat$ –F $\flat$ –A $\flat$ . As the piano echoes Ghost 1’s A $\flat$  (compare bars 45 and 46), the spell is broken by the return of the octatonic diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord on A (with its dissonant A $\flat$  pedal) encountered at the start of the dialogue (bar 19). Sure enough, its attendant E diminished 7<sup>th</sup> also returns, the chords alternating in bars 46–47. Ghost 2’s final descending line is octatonic, too, save for the final A $\flat$  (its lowest pitch in the song) in which it joins the otherwise monophonic pedal in the piano.

As Ghost 1’s pedal peters out wearily in bars 49–50 in the piano (*Retenu*), decorated by its lower auxiliary G $\flat$  as a final remnant of its opening A $\flat$ 7-based motif, shadowy reminiscences of Ghost 2’s C7-based material appear in the RH. Almost immediately, this, too, dissipates, seemingly having no energy (or will) to continue.

During the dialogue, the degree of dissonance in the underlying harmony of Ghost 1’s musical utterances is carefully calculated, becoming progressively more consonant and leading to the chain of (‘identical’) parallel dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chords in bars 38–39 before reverting to a slightly more dissonant dominant 9<sup>th</sup> in bars 43–45. In contrast, the harmony associated with Ghost 2 and reflecting his/her attitude to reliving their former love is, from bars 24–32, ‘lifelessly’ static, devoid of any sense of emotion and tied to a single, unchanging Fm6 chord. Even the ‘c’est possible’ statement is over one sustained D $\flat$  major chord. The only instance of any harmonic movement occurs in his/her final bleak declaration of hopelessness in bars 46–48, and even this peters out on a solitary A $\flat$ , so leaving the pedal note, the means by which their love could be experienced once again, ultimately unresolved, as it reverts to its former state of one of the constituent notes of an ambiguous whole-tone complex, vanishing suddenly in bar 51.

- Discuss the melodic material given to Ghosts 1 and 2 in the dialogue, noting any similarities or differences.

## Debussy – *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

### A' ['Epilogue'] [Bars 51–58]

The vestiges of the ghosts' musical material disappear in different directions, Ghost 1's G $\flat$  downwards to F, Ghost 2's B $\flat$  upwards to B $\natural$  – see **Ex.6**. In bar 51 the narrator takes up his recitative-like line, with its note repetitions and speech-like rhythms. The piano here presents new material in the form of four mostly syncopated 9<sup>th</sup> chords, the first of which, G9, is notable for not containing any of the notes connected with the ghosts' opening motifs. It does, however, contain a B $\natural$ , the note associated with 'death' in bar 10, as does the chord on A in bar 52, an Am9 chord, the only non-dominant 9<sup>th</sup> of the four.

**Ex.6**



G<sup>9</sup> F<sup>9</sup> Am<sup>9</sup> B $\flat$ <sup>9</sup>

As the narrator completes his/her account of the events that have unfolded, the nightingale twice sings its motif, harmonised by its diminished 7<sup>th</sup> chord on E. There is one significant change from its previous music, however. The bass A $\flat$  pedal, symbol of the means by which the ghosts have briefly regained their past love through attaining its D $\flat$  major tonic, has now been replaced by an A $\natural$  (symbolic, perhaps, of the futility of attempting to relive the past), which makes the music in bars 54–57<sup>1</sup> entirely octatonic. Only the nightingale remains in bars 56–57<sup>1</sup>, though it, too, fades (*plus rien* – 'to nothing'), sinking down an octave into a seemingly incongruous register.

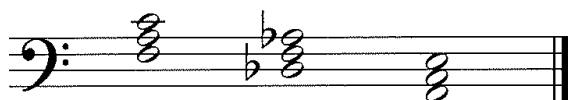
There is one final wispy recollection of Ghost 2, the embittered member of the pair (B $\flat$ –C–E in bars 56<sup>3</sup>–57<sup>1</sup>), in a manner similar to that in which A natural substitutes for the A flat associated with Ghost 1 in bars 54–55 B $\flat$  is replaced by a dissonant ('deathly') B $\natural$ . Bars 56–57, of course, recall bars 9–10 with its possible intimation of death. As this falls a 5<sup>th</sup> to E, we are left with an ambiguous C/E dyad. The previous recollection of Ghost 2's C7 motif briefly suggested a final resolution to an F major(7) chord, but this is not forthcoming. Instead, this anticipated chord has its root removed completely. There is no sense of hope in a major (7) chord here, only a chilling A minor triad, a tonality hinted at by the minor 9<sup>th</sup> chord in bar 52.

The song's focal tonal points, then, trace a pattern of major 3rds – intervals connected with the whole-tone scale – and the interval that separated the ghosts' motifs at the start (C–A $\flat$ ). F major (associated with Ghost 2) is briefly established in bar 4/5; then D $\flat$  major (associated with Ghost 1) in bar 40; and, finally, A minor in bar 58. (See **Ex.7**.) F major, D $\flat$  major and A minor are the only triads in the entire song. These two chords also form part of the only two 'standard' cadences in the song – the perfect cadence in bars 4–5 and the plagal cadence in bars 41–42.

# Debussy - *Colloque sentimental* (Sentimental conversation)

**Ex.7**

[Bar 5] [Bar 40] [Bar 58]



F major Db major A minor

└────────┘ └────────┘  
major 3rd major 3rd