

# Debussy Prelude nr VIII ...La File aux cheveux de lin

...an analysis



Claude Debussy

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Conventions Used in the Analyses

Notes are enclosed with single quotation mark to differentiate between a note vs. an article; ‘A’ major triad on..., vs. ‘A major triad is ...’ Accidentals are usually spelled out; ‘A-flat’, ‘B-natural’, ‘C-sharp’, etc. Chord functions are indicated with Roman numerals in Times Roman, 12pt; ‘VI, bII, V’, etc. ...below the bass staff.

The key the work is in is located above the treble staff and in Times Roman 14pt bold ‘**I**’ ‘**VI**’, etc. Modulations are also indicated in Times Roman 12pt bold, ‘**III**’, ‘**bVI**’ etc. When a key is described it is done with the word starting in a capital letter, ‘The key of the Tonic’ (**I**), ‘The key of the Super-Tonic’ (**II**), etc., in Times Roman 14pt, not in bold.

Lower case for minor ‘ii’ ‘iii’, etc. are never be used as they appear to be an alteration from the norm. ‘II’ and ‘III’ *are* minor. They are normal in a major key and need no special indication to show them as minor. In any case, vii is *not* minor. Elements of theoretical indications must be kept separate to avoid any possibility of confusion; ‘ii’ combines function with quality, ‘V<sub>7</sub>’ combines function with figured bass and is erroneously regarded as a symbol of a harmonic identity

A super-tonic triad in a minor key is a normal diminished triad and is functionable (II). A diminished-seventh chord is not functionable *under any circumstance*. It is considered a dominant with a missing root (sans root), and will be indicated with a ‘o’ in front of the x; ‘<sup>o</sup>x<sup>m9</sup>’ and ‘<sup>m9</sup>’ the fourth note. Thus, a ‘B-diminished’ seventh chord will be indicated with ‘G’ as the missing root; G-B-D-F-Ab.

A distinction must be made between ‘function’ and ‘identity’. Dominant function (V) is not to be confused with dominant identity (x). ‘V’ is only a function and may be minor, major, or dominant identity. Chord identity indications are placed between the staves, chord functions below, and modulations in Roman numerals above the staves. Figured bass is not included here as its use is limited. Instead, include the function (number) of the chord that is the lower-most note; ‘3’, where ‘3’ indicates that the third is the lower-most note of the chord, ‘7’ where ‘7’ is the lower-most note, etc., instead of a ‘figured bass’ symbol where ‘6’ indicates the first inversion with the 3<sup>rd</sup> the lower-

most note, or ‘2’, the third inversion where the 7<sup>th</sup> is the lower-most note. Figured bass is simply not a useful tool, functional symbols are.

The Prelude begins in the key of ‘G-flat’ major, and a triple meter. The first five beats are the upper four notes of the ‘C-flat’ major sub-dominant (IV) chord. The root is delayed until the 3<sup>rd</sup> beat of measure two. This chord is confirmed with the line at measure 28, (see).

Debussy’s harmony moves according to the circle of 5ths, and sometimes not, but always interesting. The second and third beats of measure six show altered chords from the normal minor to major. Now, this is interesting information, but beyond that it must be heard and listened to as it is played. Another point that is necessary is the separation of Function, roman numerals under the staves, and chord identities between the staves. This provides a definite understanding of what is there.<sup>1</sup>

Measures 8 and 9 contain a different harmonization of the opening theme. The chords are dominant (x) with the major 3rds, ‘B-flat’ and ‘C-natural’ respectively, and the minor 7ths, ‘F-flat’ and ‘G-flat’ respectively on the tonic (I) and super-tonic (II). Figured bass to indicate the inversion of the chords is clumsy, so far better, simply draw a line under the tonic (I) and under that write ‘7’, then do the same for the super-tonic (II). Easy and less cumbersome. Learn the movements of the chords via the roman numerals and alongside of those listen to the identities of the chords; M, M, x, and their characteristic intervals. Measure 11 contains a major harmony with the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>, but without a 3<sup>rd</sup>, its characteristic interval. Call it then, an ‘assumed harmony’ with the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See ‘Compound Symbols’ by the author

Measure 14 moves from the sub-dominant (IV) to the tonic (I) in measure 14 that is a dominant (x) 9/11 chord on the tonic (I) on the with its root, 'G-flat' on the second beat, and again, without the characteristic interval of a major 3<sup>rd</sup>, 'B-flat', but with the minor seventh 'F-flat', that creates the dominant (x) identity on the tonic (I). 'F-flat' is not just a note, but a characteristic interval of the dominant (x) so hear it, and anticipate its identity.

Measure 17 changes to the parent key of 'E-flat' minor (VI) with a IV-VII-IV-V-I movement, but in E-flat major with major 3<sup>rds</sup> and major 6<sup>ths</sup>, 'G-natural' and 'F-(natural)' respectively. Listen carefully to these changes, they are not *just* information.

The third beat of measure 21 reverts back to the key of the Tonic (I), 'G-flat' major with the addition of 'C-flats', except on the super-tonics in measures 21 and 22, that creates major triads on both. Observe and listen to them.

The chords in the following line are mostly built from the 'G-flat' major harmony except IV and V of measure 22 that contains another dominant (V) and (x) as an 11<sup>th</sup> chord without the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Measure 27 has a familiar II-V movement.

The line at measure 28 is a confirmation of the sub-dominant (IV) with the theme as the upper four notes of that sub-dominant, as seen at the beginning of the Prelude.

The chords from measure 32 to the end are on the IV 'C-flat' II 'F', and I 'G-flat' harmonies as a broad analysis. More detailed if wished.

32

M

I IV II VI

3

36

I