

Debussy for clarinet solo: The music and the Conservatoire context

ClarinetFest® 2001

John Gaulty

Anna Briscoe, pianist

James R. Briscoe, musicologist

By 1910 Debussy had outgrown his youthful rebelliousness toward the 19th-century Paris Conservatoire, formulaic and opera-dominated as it had been, and he had acknowledged Fauré's progressive leadership of the institution after 1905. That context underlies Debussy's writing for solo clarinet. Debussy composed two works for clarinet in 1910, the "Morceau à déchiffrer pour le concours de clarinette de 1910" ["Sight-reading piece for the 1910 concours"] and the significant *Première rhapsodie*. The "Morceau" [renamed "Petite pièce"] and *Rhapsodie* were published that same year in their original scorings with piano, and the *Rhapsodie* appeared with Debussy's orchestration in 1911.

Napoléon Bonaparte founded the several arts academies in the 1790s, including the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris-the Conservatoire. At its founding in 1793 as the Institut National de Musique, director Bernard Sarrette drew upon the preceding military-band school, the Free School of the Parisian National Guard [Ecole gratuite de la garde nationale parisienne], and Sarrette looked to the Opéra regarding voice instruction. Because of the vast importance of outdoor, ceremonial music to Napoléon, wind instruments were treated with the same emphasis as the strings: at the beginning Sarrette proposed and received fully 26 clarinet professors to teach 104 students. 1

By 1796, when the Institut was renamed "Conservatoire," the numbers remained at 19 professors of clarinet as compared with only 8 of violin. Because of Napoléon's ceremonies and the music to sustain that atmosphere, Paris by 1800 had become the woodwind center of Europe and, most would argue, remained so until after World War I). The woodwind quintet as a genre was born at the hands of Antoine Reicha, and the Conservatoire soon appointed such virtuosi as the oboist Gustave Vogt, the clarinetist Hyacinthe Klosé and the cornettist Jean-Baptiste Arban.

The formula for the exit examinations in instrumental education, centering on the initial sight-reading pieces and the competition solos, evolved somewhat irregularly throughout the 19th century. In his monumental study published in 1900, Constant Pierre reported that rules had been regularized in the form that is present today. The Director of the Conservatoire and governing council advised the primary teachers on the jury decisions, although the students' instructors and even retired instructors recused themselves. So bent upon avoiding nepotism was the Conservatoire that it forbade a professor if he or she and given the candidate even one private lesson in any capacity during the preceding year. There were indeed women professors and students at the Conservatoire throughout the 19th century. 2 That was virtually unique in Europe, although at the Conservatoire women attended different classes, faced less rigorous courses and Concours, and anticipated a lesser professional status.

Four levels of prizes had stabilized by 1900, the Premier and Deuxième Prix and the Premier and Deuxième Accessit, or honorable mention. If a candidate acceded to the Concours twice without receiving a first or second prize, he or she was dismissed from the Conservatoire. However, the number of prize recipients was not limited, and Constant Pierre notes that in times of war the number of prizes increased. Receiving a Premier or Deuxième Prix rather frequently led to a stable professional situation.

When Gabriel Fauré became Director in 1905, he instituted decisive reforms that broadened the horizons of instrumental students. Music history became obligatory for instrumentalists and vocalists as it had been for students of harmony and composition. Even so, students seemed not to take their classwork seriously, and "Parisiennes"-amateur matrons-dominated in the music history classes. But in 1915, Fauré mandated that all classes at the Conservatoire be closed to the general public, and he insisted on rigorous teaching, written assignments, and examinations in all classes. Likewise, Fauré solidified standards and procedures in instrumental teaching. In a mandate of 1915, he arranged for all Premier Prix laureates to audition with the two leading orchestras of Paris, the Colonne and Lamoureux Concerts. [3](#)

In 1909 Fauré appointed Debussy to the governing council of the Conservatoire, le Conseil Supérieur, a sign of prestige and an appointment that paid a stipend Debussy desperately needed. His wife's elevated lifestyle kept him strapped for money, and he was deeply concerned over the cancer that appeared in early 1909 and that would be fatal in 1918. On the Superior Council he was obliged to hear certain of the year-end concours, and the teaching of the woodwind professors clearly pleased Debussy. After hearing the July 1909 juries, he wrote to his editor Jacques Durand, "I've just been sitting on the jury for the woodwind competitions...and I can give you good news of the high standards of the flutes, oboes, and clarinets; as for the bassoons, they're admirable..." [4](#) All the while, Debussy remained independent in his approach to Conservatoire obligations: in May 1910 he wrote to Fauré, "Once again I swear on Ambroise Thomas's ashes [Thomas the archetypal regressive] that I decline to sit on the jury for the singing examinations." [5](#) Of course he did hear the clarinet juries in July 1910, when his *Rhapsodie* was performed. On 8 July he indicates to Durand that he will report on the eleven clarinetists "if I survive." However, on 15 July he writes, "The clarinet competition [the previous day] went extremely well and, to judge by the expressions on the faces of my colleagues, the *Rhapsodie* was a success...One of the candidates, Vandercruyssen, played it by heart and very musically. The rest were straightforward and nondescript." [6](#) He thanks Durand for agreeing to publish the sight reading morceau, which would be titled "Petite pièce." Debussy scarcely seemed pleased by the artistic merit of the customary Solos de Concours, for he continues, "You've no idea of the sort of thing these poor devils are given to play! In particular a Concertstück for bassoon...it's not even well written for the instrument...That's one of the many areas where changes are needed; let's hope our friend Dukas will put things straight." [7](#) Paul Dukas had just been appointed to the Conseil Supérieur, and clearly Debussy thought Fauré had not been rigorous enough. In preparing the yearly exam, the candidate approved for the competition was given thirty days to study the Solo de Concours with his teacher as necessary, having not studied it before. The candidates also were tested on the sight-reading morceaux a few days prior to playing the more expansive Solos de Concours.

Debussy wrote the brief "Petite pièce" quickly in July 1910, apparently just days before the Concours. Having reviewed a vast number of these sight reading pieces at the National Archives in Paris, I can affirm that the practice of hasty composition was indeed standard. Debussy, however, had the compositional chops to succeed admirably. He composed the Rhapsodie over a longer, clearly deliberative expanse, from December 1909 through January 1910, and dedicated it to the prominent clarinet professor Prosper Mimart "as a testimony of my true feelings." [À P. Mimart, en témoignage de sympathie"] Gaston Hamelin performed as clarinetist in the orchestral premiere of 1911 at the Société musicale indépendante, Salle Gaveau. By no means incidentally, John Gaulty has clarified that the technique and "school" of Mimart ought to be considered. Mimart, played and Debussy heard this work with the lip-up technique, which yields a softer, more refined sound in John Gaulty's view. As you know, that concerns surrounding the mouthpiece by both lips turned in.

Debussy's other ongoing projects shared significant ideas with the Clarinet Rhapsody. In late 1909 and early 1910 he also was absorbed by the movements *Gigues* and *Rondes de Printemps* from the *Images pour orchestre*. Time does not permit a comparison of shared idioms, but one might note that the scherzando attitude heard in portions of the *Rhapsodie* has parallels in the *Rondes de Printemps*, especially.

Perhaps more importantly, Debussy was hard at work on the *Piano Preludes* Book I at the very time he was composing the Rhapsody for Clarinet. The prelude "Footsteps in the snow" was completed in December 1909, as Debussy began the Rhapsody. Please see Example 1a (from "Footsteps in the snow"). The elegiac prelude draws close in attitude to theme I of the Rhapsody (example 1b). In "Footsteps" as in several of the preludes, Debussy is fixed on the minor third, or third-plus-second, as the melodic gesture, which occurs both melodically and structurally. A most conspicuous relative is also found in "Minstrels," the primary motive of which is seen in example 2a ("Minstrels"). We will soon discuss the "jocular face" of the *Rhapsodie*, example 2b, which is based on the second-plus-third motive that seems lodged in Debussy's creative process in late 1909. In Example 2b, announcing the scherzando, the mood is not yet as spirited as it soon becomes in the Rhapsody.

Another "Prelude" of 1910 is the "Petite pièce," composed as the sight reading piece for the concours that year, example 3. In many structural and aesthetic ways it is analogous to the piano preludes just completed. Like them, the "Petite pièce" centers on a motive enunciated in the clarinet on beats one and two. Harboring on the interval of a second, the motive can arch delicately up or down a third. Although Debussy advances the momentum by chromatic motion in the piano, there too the major third is the fundamental and often exclusive sonority. And yet, the "Petite pièce" offers a dimension not heard in the piano preludes, the third or sometimes fourth level of texture and sonorous interchange between clarinet and piano. Notable too-as we will remark further in the Rhapsody-is the clarified neoclassicism of the later Debussy. We might listen from the modified recapitulation, m. 23 of Example 3 (at the arrow), please.

Thank you. The unique adventure and achievement of Claude Debussy was in uniting Germanic logic with French joie de vivre. Debussy learned enormously from Wagner and the internationalist French such as Franck and Fauré, and he gained immeasurably from the Symbolist literati like Mallarmé and the impressionist painters, such as Monet. It is the literati,

more than the "pure" French national composers, who suggested the deep essence of the French spirit perfect in understatement, in sensuality, and in structural care that is nonetheless disguised- Debussy's need to "avoid the heavy scaffolding."

I believe that the Clarinet Rhapsody is one such unique expression of logic and spirit. I would like to make that point by relating it to Debussy's post-impressionist aesthetic of his later years, by signaling its particular unity around a central motive, by showing that attitude of the imagination and not picture is key, and by showing how his treatment reveals his compositional genius.

Paul Cézanne's post-impressionist values might be viewed in the pictorial example 4, found at the back of the handout. No longer is the effect of spontaneity from 1870's impressionism at hand-of Monet's "Red Poppies" or Renoir's "Girls at the Piano." Instead, immediate sensual response has evolved into firm artistic design, into a post-impressionism in the 1895 "Woman with a coffee-pot." While Cézanne continues as a representational artist in this painting, it is as if the form of the woman and the structure of color are the driving forces. Notable is Cézanne's center on design and not portraiture, such as the linear frames of the background or the conical shape of the coffee-pot. The structure and not the sensual human figure is the focus: here the woman seems a mass, without personal facial features.. Analogously, from *La Mer* of 1905 onward, Debussy seems intrigued by structure. The critic Edouard Lalo wrote that "I do not hear, I do not see, I do not smell the sea,." ⁸ Defending his evolving aesthetic, Debussy rebuked Lalo's analytic approach, stating that his music could not decide a given response and was not "picturesque" in *La Mer*; it could only give rise to a personal attitude. While after 1905 the visual or "impressionistic" component remains in quite a few works, Debussy as in the *Clarinet Rhapsody* moves into abstract music. The *Etudes* and the three late sonatas are likewise good examples of an intensifying neoclassic tendency toward abstract design.

May we turn to the important structural cohesion of the Clarinet Rhapsody, but adjacently to its post-impressionist attitudes. Please see example 5, the chart-analysis of the work. Seeking an overview, note that Debussy conceives the composition in three sections closely related structurally. Section I (m. 9) is a rhapsody followed by a soaring elegy. He introduces section II at m. 58, titling its tempo *modérément animé* but elsewhere "scherzando." At m. 152 Debussy recalls the tonic V chord and the first motive simultaneously, a practice that of course suggests sonata allegro form, and he arrives at the tonic I chord at measure 169..

Please see examples 6, the motives of section I. Example 6a is the prologue, but even here Debussy the designer introduces the central stuff of the work. It is a minor third followed (or at times preceded) by a major second. In m. 2 in the piano, a major second (including chromatic passing tone) and minor third occur, quickly the clarinet mirrors that cell, minor 3rd and major second. A fantasy follows until m.easure 9. At measure 9, example 6b, tonic G-flat is suggested by its dominant, and the primary motive IA occurs in the clarinet. In example 6c, the motive of the third expands as theme IB. It soars into an elegy, with the third and with the sixth as inverted third.

In 6d, motive IC, Debussy interjects the scherzando element, later becoming altogether jocular in Section II. Here too the germ is maintained, with the G-A-C of the clarinet tracing the second-

plus-third. That is reiterated in the third measure of Ex, 6c, on D, C, D, F. In 6e, Debussy rounds out Section I, returning to the rhapsody. But a woodwind-ish bridge to section II blows through at example 6f, unsettling the tonality and stirring up the tempo to double time.

Section II is shown in example 7, motive E1. The critical motive remains, a major second then a minor third in the clarinet, D-sharp, E-sharp, G-sharp. That motive or a subdivision, such as the undulating major second, is basic. Likewise, variations of the section II theme, E2 and E3, and the return to themes B and the bridge theme D, derive from the central motive. It is especially significant that Debussy chooses A major as the key of Section II, for that is a minor third relationship enharmonically to tonic G-flat. Thus, the overarching tonal structure of the Rhapsody derives from the central motive, the minor third.

At the modified recapitulation of section I, example 8a, Debussy recovers all ingredients of the A-section rhapsody, the key (referenced by its dominant D-flat), the tempo of "dreamily slowly" (*rêveusement lent*), and the motive. The soaring elegy theme IB, the mirror of theme IA, recurs in example 8b, as does the jocular "animé" theme E, example 8c. The neoclassic Debussy of the later years thus is proven, whereby he integrates the disparate parts into a whole.

Please see example 9. Here Debussy presents the structural climax of the Rhapsody. The central motive in its C, or scherzando form returns. The tempo increases to its most intense and, most importantly, Debussy attains tonic G-flat. He has withheld tonic altogether until this moment of climax. Bridge idea D rips upward a fourth at moments at measure 176, but hews close to the outline of interlocking minor thirds with chromatic fill. These structural thirds likewise propel the piano part at measure 179 to 185. At example 10, Debussy explodes his fireworks in a fanfare recalling the orchestral *Images*, a fanfare structured initially of major seconds (left hand) and minor thirds (right hand). Considering how that motive permeates the composition, I respectfully disagree with David Hite in his edition [Southern Music, 1988] and suggest that the infamous, final E of measure 201 must be an E natural, preceded of course by the D natural. (The D-sharp grace note is insignificant.) One recalls that the original piano and orchestra scores are at variance in this detail, whereby the piano score has E-flat as printed, and the orchestral score the next year gave E-natural. Pursuing that logic, one must ask why, in example 10 on the downbeat of measure 203, Debussy does not give the clarinet E-double flat? That would have provided the central motive, enharmonically concert C, D, F. But Debussy has arrived at the concluding sonority, tonic G-flat, and a harsh raised fourth, concert C on the downbeat, would have weakened the spirited conclusion. He does permit the harsh enharmonic concert D to precede concert F on weak beats two and three, thereby providing the minor third that is central. However, that "bite" can be subsumed within the climax.

In the *Première Rhapsodie*, Claude Debussy has encapsulized the essence of the clarinet. He has wrought into a balanced equilibrium its two faces. In many passages of the major orchestral works-the Faun, the Nocturnes, La Mer and the Images-he had written beautifully for the elegiac, wood-hued, and soulful timbre for which the instrument is renowned. But never before had he captured its jocular face as he does in theme C, in the scherzando. Here we reach a moment of delightful concinnity: New Orleans.

Debussy had encountered stylized African-American music in 1905, when he heard a troupe of blackface minstrels as he vacationed in Eastbourne, England. He had explored the pre-jazz, minstrel idiom in two piano works previously, "Golliwog's Cakewalk" from Children's Corner in 1908 and "Le petit nègre" in 1909. Rather soon afterward he began "Minstrels" from Book I of the Preludes, and in December 1909 he began the Rhapsody for Clarinet. Refer to example 11a, the mock-serious song of "Minstrels." Please note its attitude, timbre, and articulation, and then refer to example 11b, the Benny Goodman josh with stride piano of the Rhapsody scherzando. I am convinced that New Orleans is indeed to be heard in the Clarinet Rhapsody.

In sum, the Clarinet Rhapsody reveals the highest structural integrity and artistry. It exhibits the "new" Debussy of post-impressionism, tending toward the attitudinal and design-oriented more than the suggestively sensuous. The Rhapsody shows a direction toward neoclassicism, which will be the preponderant model in Western concert music following Debussy's death in 1918 and the Great War. In that light, the significant classic unity and the clarinet dual spirit show a fused composer who draws masterfully from the Germanic and Latin "minds" of music. This is the sort of remarkable composition, and this the particular composer, who leads the twentieth century.

Endnotes

1. Margelli, Tad. "The Paris Conservatoire Concours Oboe Solos: the Gillet Years (1882-1919)." <http://idrs.colorado.edu/publications/journal/jnl24/paris.html>.
2. Pierre, Constant. *Le Conservatoire National de Musique et de Déclamation: Documents Historiques et Administratifs*. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1900. P. 11.
3. Gee, Harry R. *Clarinet Solos de Concours, 1897-1980: An Annotated Bibliography*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981. P. 165.
4. Debussy, Claude. *Debussy Letters*. Ed. François Lesure, trans. Roger Nichols. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard, 1987. P. 205
5. Debussy (ed. Lesure), p. 22.
6. Debussy (ed. Lesure), p. 222.
7. Debussy (ed. Lesure), p. 223.
8. Debussy (ed. Lesure), p. 164n.

1a Prelude "Des pas sur la neige" ["Footsteps in the snow"], m. 1-3

Triste et lent (♩ = 44)

pp *p expressif et douloureux*
piu pp

This system shows the first three measures of the piece. The right hand has a melody with a fermata over the first measure. The left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *pp*, *p*, and *piu pp*.

1b Rhapsodie pour clarinette, m. 11-14

pp doux et égal *pp doux et pénétrant*

This system shows measures 11-14. The right hand has a melodic line with a first ending bracket over measures 12-13. The left hand has a complex accompaniment with many sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *pp* and *pp*.

2a Prelude "Minstrels," m. 9-12

8 Cédez - *f* Mouvi (Un peu plus allant)

pp *p* *(très détaché)*

This system shows measures 9-12. The right hand has a melodic line with a fermata over measure 10. The left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *pp*, *p*, and *f*. Performance instructions include *(très détaché)*.

2b Rhapsodie, m. 58-59

5 Modérément animé (Scherzando) (♩ = 72)

Modérément animé (Scherzando)
pp *dolce sost.*

This system shows measures 58-59. The right hand has a complex melodic line with many sixteenth notes. The left hand has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Dynamics include *pp*. Performance instructions include *dolce sost.*

PETITE PIÈCE



pour Clarinette et Piano

CLAUDE-DEBUSSY

Example 3, "Petite pièce"

Modéré et doucement rythmé

CLARINETTE en Si^b *mf* *P doux et léger*

PIANO *mf* *pp*

molto dim.

p marqué

Tous droits d'exécution réservés.

12 x 5 5002

Paris: 4 Place de la Madeleine

First system of the musical score. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "cres - cen - do" and features a dynamic marking of *f* followed by *pp*. An arrow points to a specific note in the vocal line. The piano accompaniment also has the lyrics "cres - cen - do" and includes dynamic markings of *f* and *pp*. A first ending bracket labeled "8" is present in the piano part.

Second system of the musical score. The vocal line continues with a melodic line. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand. Dynamic markings include *p*, *pp*, and *pp*. A first ending bracket labeled "8" is present in the piano part.

Third system of the musical score. The piano accompaniment continues with a steady eighth-note rhythm in the right hand and sustained chords in the left hand. A dynamic marking of *p* is visible.

Fourth system of the musical score. The vocal line begins with the instruction "Un peu retenu" and has a dynamic marking of *piu p*. The piano accompaniment also has a dynamic marking of *piu p*. The system concludes with the instruction "Un peu retenu" and a dynamic marking of *pp*.

Example 4 Paul Cézanne, "La femme à la cafetière"
["Woman with coffee pot"] 1890-1895



Example 5. Analysis of the *Première Rhapsodie*

Measure	motive	key	tempo	section	attitude
1	(A)	chr	lent	prologue	fantasy
9	A	V/ G flat	lent	I A	rhapsody
21	B [A]	bVI	poco mosso	I B	elegy
31	C [A]	chr.	Scherzando	bridge	jocular
40	A	V/ G flat	lent	I A	rhapsody
45	D	chr.	[scherzando]	transition	whimsy
.....					
58	E 1	A	modérément animé	II	scherzando jocular
76	B [A]				elegy
84	E 2				jocular
92	E 3				
114	D	A flat		transition	whimsy
130	B			transition	elegy
.....					
152	A	V/ G flat	rêveusement lent	I A	rhapsody
158	B				elegy
163	E 4	f/vii	animé		jocular

6a "prologue-fantasy," m. 1-4

Rêveusement lent (♩ = 50)

CLARINETTE
en Sib

PIANO

p doux et expressif

pp

Detailed description: This musical score is for measures 1-4 of the 'prologue-fantasy' section. It features a Clarinet in B-flat and a Piano. The tempo is 'Rêveusement lent' with a metronome marking of quarter note = 50. The key signature has three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The piano part begins with a very soft (*pp*) accompaniment. The clarinet part is marked *p doux et expressif*. The music is in 4/4 time.

6b "rhapsody," m. 9-14

pp doux et pénétrant

pp doux et égal

Detailed description: This musical score is for measures 9-14 of the 'rhapsody' section, featuring a Piano. The tempo is 'Rêveusement lent'. The key signature has three flats. The piano part is marked *pp doux et pénétrant* in the upper register and *pp doux et égal* in the lower register. The music is in 4/4 time.

6c "elegy," m. 21-24

[2] Poco mosso

Poco mosso

p

Detailed description: This musical score is for measures 21-24 of the 'elegy' section, featuring a Piano. The tempo is 'Poco mosso'. The key signature has three flats. The piano part is marked *p*. The music is in 4/4 time.

6d "jocular, scherzando," m. 31-32

En serrant

Le double plus vite

Scherzando

f

Detailed description: This musical score is for measures 31-32 of the 'jocular, scherzando' section, featuring a Piano. The tempo is 'Scherzando'. The key signature has three flats. The piano part is marked *f*. The music is in 4/4 time.

6e "rhapsody," m. 40-41

[3] 1^o Tempo

pp

Detailed description: This musical score is for measures 40-41 of the 'rhapsody' section, featuring a Piano. The tempo is '1^o Tempo'. The key signature has three flats. The piano part is marked *pp*. The music is in 4/4 time.

Example 7 Section II beginning, m. 58-61 “jocular, scherzando”

5 Modérément animé (Scherzando) (♩ = 72)

Modérément animé (Scherzando)

pp / *dolce sost.*

Examples 8 Section I, modified recapitulation

8a “rhapsody,” m. 152-153

9 1º Tempo

1º Tempo

pp

morgue

8b “elegy,” m. 158-159

Animé et augmenté, peu à peu

p

8c “jocular, animé,” m. 163-165

Animé

mf

Example 9 climax: “scherzando” theme C, m. 169-176

Plus animé (Scherzando)

Plus animé (Scherzando)

p

Example 10, "Fanfare finale," m. 197-201 (end)

12 Un peu retenu

Un peu retenu

ff

au Mouvt

ff

ff sec

11a Prelude "Minstrels," m. 9-12

8 Cédez - // Mouvt (Un peu plus alliant)

pp

P

(très détaché)

Ped. *

11b Rhapsodie, m. 58-61

5 Modérément animé (Scherzando) (♩ = 72)

Modérément animé (Scherzando)

pp dolce sost.

Copyright © ICA 2004-2012. All Rights Reserved.