

An Analysis of “Petite Piece” by Claude Debussy

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I believe that “Petite Piece” by Claude Debussy is an atonal piece centering around pitch class 6, and the loss of pitch class 6 is the causation for the piece coming to a close. Before

Measure 1	(1,4,6,7)	A theme	Measure 20	(6,8,T,E,2)	
Measure 2	(1,4,6)		Measure 21	(6,8,T,E,1,3)	
Measure 3	(4,6,7,9,E,0)		Measure 22	(6,8,T,1)	
Measure 4	(3,6,7,E)		Measure 23	(4,6,7,9,E,0)	Return of A theme
Measure 5	(2,4,6,7,9,T)		Measure 24	(3,6,7,E)	
Measure 6	(T,0,2,5,6,8)	transitional material	Measure 25	(2,4,6,7,9,T)	
Measure 7	(T,0,2,5,6,8)		Measure 26	(0,2,4,6,7,8,9)	
Measure 8	(T,0,2,5,6,8)		Measure 27	(T,0,2,5,6,8)	Transitional piano material
Measure 9	(6,7,9,E,0,2,4)	B theme	Measure 28	(T,0,2,5,6,8)	
Measure 10	(6,7,9,E,0,2,4)		Measure 29	(6,7,9,E,0,2,4)	Return of B theme
Measure 11	(1,2,4,6,7,9,T,E)		Measure 30	(6,7,9,E,0,2,4)	
Measure 12	(9,T,E,0,2,4,5,6)		Measure 31	(2,4,5,7,9,T)	Similar material to m11 with pitch class 6 replaced by 5.
Measure 13	(9,T,E,2,3,4,6,7)		Measure 32	(2,4,5,9,T)	
Measure 14	(2,6,9)		Measure 33	(8,9,T,2)	
Measure 15	(0,1,2,4,6,7,9)	C theme	Measure 34	(9,T,2,4,5)	
Measure 16	(E,1,2,5)		Measure 35	(T,E,2)	Not including pickup including triplet pickup
Measure 17	(T,E,1,2,4,6,7)		Measure 36	(2,4,6,7,9,E,0)	
Measure 18	(T,E,1,2,4,6,7)		Measure 37	(7,9,E,2)	
Measure 19	(T,E,0,1,2,4,6,8)		Measure 38	(7,E,2)	

Figure 1: The pitch classes used in each measure of Claude Debussy’s “Petite Piece”.

preparing this piece, you should have a very solid understanding of the form and contents. In *Figure 1*, I have created a table organized by measures of the piece and the pitch classes that occur in them from both the clarinet and piano parts. This table paints a clear picture of the journey that this piece goes on from simply highlighting pitch class 6, to adding more and more pitches outside the key signature, to eventually departing from pitch class 6 altogether. I have also labeled where I believe the different themes begin as well as where they return. Boxes that are shaded in green contain information about the different themes, and boxes shaded in blue show the measures that



Figure 2: The A theme, transitional material, and B theme from Debussy’s “Petite Piece”.

do not contain pitch class 6. As seen in *Figure 2*, the piece begins with a very simple melody from the clarinet that contains several repeating patterns focusing mostly on pitch class 6. The piano is in the treble register for the first four bars with the clarinet. It has several assortments of long tones held out, supporting the

clarinet line. I will call the melody from the clarinet in this first section the A theme.

In the sixth bar, which can be observed in *Figure 2*, the piano suddenly leaps down into the bass register and develops a more rhythmic, repetitive ostinati as the clarinet melody fades out for the first time. This material from the piano is the transitional material between the A and



Figure 3: The beginning of the C theme from "Petite Piece" by Claude Debussy.

B theme. The clarinet line then

picks up again in a pick-up to

measure nine with the same

rhythmic material, but its melody

contains several more pitch classes. I will refer to this section as the B theme.

At measure fifteen, the piano part returns to half notes in the treble register, allowing the new material from the clarinet to be the focal point and the only source of constant meter. This is shown in *Figure 3*. The clarinet line at measure fifteen has new pitch classes and rhythmic material. This is the first time that the clarinet has written notes outside of the key signature. Up until this point, the only pitch classes that the clarinet has played are 6, 7, 9, E, 4, 2, and 0.

Measure fifteen is not the first time that pitch class T or 1 has been played in the piece, but it is the first time that it is heard from the clarinet part. This is quite jarring as it is the clarinet's first departure from the key signature. At measure nineteen, as seen in the first bar of *Figure 4*, the clarinet line makes an even more surprising change when it plays pitch class 8 for the first time. Up until measure twenty-three, when the A theme comes back, the clarinet plays pitch classes T, 1, and 8 in abundance. This creates a very different sense of pitch center compared to the rest of the piece up until this point.

At measure twenty-three, when the first phrase of the new clarinet material comes to an end, the piano takes over the melodic line, with the clarinet line serving more as accompaniment

to the piano line. This is marked by A' in *Figure 4*. Although the clarinet and piano are in unison and have the same marked dynamic, the registers that Debussy chose to use alter their actual played dynamics. The lower register on the clarinet, as with most wind instruments, tends to be

Figure 4: The return of the A theme, transitional piano material, and B theme; and the departure and subsequent one-bar return of pitch class 6 in Debussy's "Petite Piece".

much quieter than the upper register. The piano line here is written in its upper register, which will sound louder and easier to hear than the low clarinet.

Rather than attempt to match the piano dynamic, I would suggest that the clarinet player embrace the softer dynamic range of their instrument and allow for the piano to be the focus during this section. The material that the piano and clarinet play here is identical to the line that the clarinet plays in measure three from the original A theme.

Immediately after the reprise of the

A theme, in measure twenty-seven the

piano goes back to the bass register and into the same rhythmic, repetitive ostinati. This section is a reprise of the transitional material from measure six at the beginning. At measure twenty-nine, material very similar to the B theme comes back as well. At the end of this reprise, rather than going into the material from the C theme at measure fifteen, it repeats the B theme again, but with pitch class 5 replacing pitch class 6 in the clarinet line. This is the first time that pitch

class 6 has been missing. This occurs from measure thirty-one until measure thirty-five. In the pick-up to measure thirty-six the clarinet line returns to pitch class 6 in the familiar melody from the B theme and then finishes the piece seemingly early by resolving on the clarinet's final note of pitch class 7. This can all be observed in *Figure 4*. This is quite surprising, because every other time we have heard this melody from the clarinet, such as in bars nine through fourteen, this melody lasts several more bars and eventually ends on pitch class 2. At the end, however, the melody finishes after just one bar and goes down to pitch class 7 rather than the expected pitch class 9, such as in bar thirty and ten. After measure thirty-one, rather than getting more complex, building energy, or transitioning to the B material like the piece did in measures 5 and 25; the piece starts to relax, unwind, and come to a close. The absence of pitch class 6 seems to cause a lack of an anchor for the piano part as well. The piano part in thirty-one transitions to longer tones, similar to what happened in measure fifteen when the clarinet part experienced another major change with the addition of new pitches, allowing the clarinet to control the tempo. I believe that the replacing of pitch class 6 with pitch class 5 in bars thirty-one through thirty-five causes a disruption in the pattern and continuous motion that has been set up in the rest of the piece, causing the ending that also has an absence of pitch class 6.