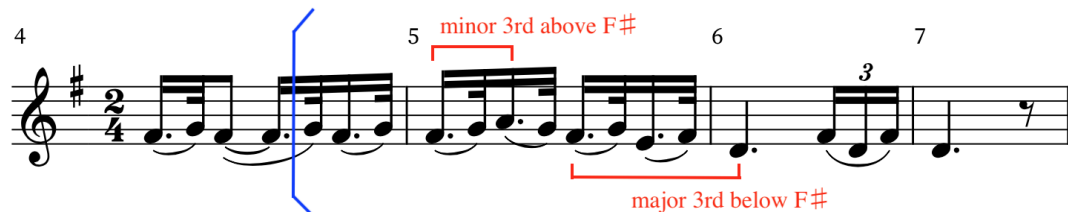


## The Role of Thirds in Debussy's *Petite Pièce* for Clarinet and Piano

In my opinion, Debussy uses the interval of a third in both its minor and major forms to generate the melodic and harmonic content of his *Petite Pièce* for Clarinet and Piano. In this paper, I will explore the significance of the minor and major third through the points of view of melody, harmony, and key relationships.

Debussy's *Petite Pièce* is indeed short as the title implies, and its thirty-eight measures comprise a small ternary form, with sections A (mm. 1–14), B (mm. 15–22), and A' (mm. 23–38). The first complete melodic idea of the piece occurs from beat 2 of measure 4 to the downbeat of measure 7. See Example 1:

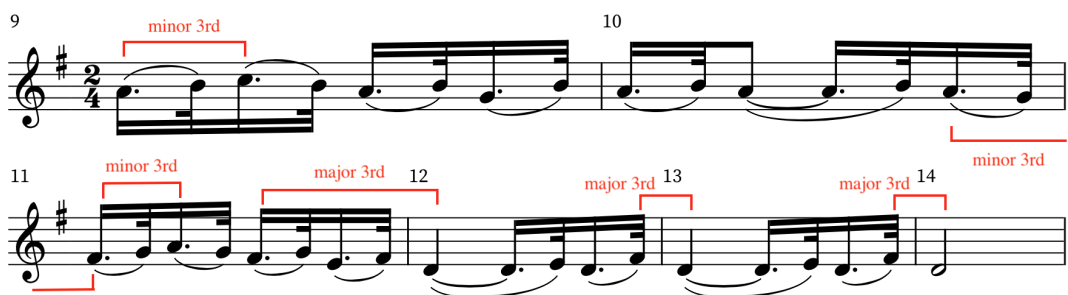
**Example 1:** the first complete melodic statement in the clarinet, mm. 4–7 (concert pitch)



The contour of this melodic statement is defined by thirds. Rising to a minor third above F#4 and falling to a major third below F#4, the melody generated by this technique is musically symmetrical about the central note. Additionally, Debussy underscores the importance of the major third interval by repeating the motion from F#4 to D4 at the end of m. 6. These two pitches are particularly important in both the melodic and harmonic construction of the work, which I will continue to show through later examples.

Debussy uses this idea of melodic contour defined by minor and major thirds and symmetry about certain pitches to construct many melodies in the clarinet part, including this longer segment in mm. 9–14. See Example 2:

**Example 2:** clarinet melody, mm. 9–14 (concert pitch)



This melody is composed of three segments. The first segment (mm. 9–10) is constructed of thirds symmetrical about A4 (spanning from C5 a minor third above to F#4 a minor third below). The second segment (mm. 11–12) is similarly constructed, using the same symmetry about F#4 illustrated in Example 1. In these measures, Debussy uses the compositional techniques of thirds and symmetry to develop the earlier music idea and extend the range of the melody from a perfect fifth to a minor seventh. Then, in the third segment (mm. 13–14), Debussy again stresses the importance of F#4 and D4, here repeated to emphasize a melodic arrival.

Melodies in the B section of the piece (mm. 15–22) differ from those in the A section in both contour and range, yet the idea of the third as a germinating element is still present. See Example 3:

**Example 3:** initial clarinet melody in the B section, mm. 15–17 (concert pitch)



In this passage, the melody moves by thirds every strong subdivision of the beat. However, in contrast to melodies in the A section, the melody is not symmetrical and does not orbit about a single pitch. Instead, the resulting melody has a wide range (major ninth) and emphasizes the highest pitch content of the clarinet part in the whole piece. The melody lingers on G#5—a hint of the earlier symmetry present in the oscillation between F#5 and A#5—and in strong contrast to the archlike shape of earlier melodies, resolves rather abruptly back down to F#4 in m. 22. The B section shows Debussy stretching this developmental technique to its limit, and, in combination with the dynamic climax of the piece, creates a highly expressive moment.

In addition to being the basic building blocks of the melody, minor and major thirds make up the foundation of Debussy's harmonic language in this piece. Debussy harmonizes the opening bars of the clarinet melody with a series of chromatically descending thirds, which create a variety of qualities of chord in combination with the repeated F# in the clarinet, as shown in Example 4:

**Example 4:** chords in mm. 1–5 (reduction) (clarinet in concert pitch)

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

Clarinet

Piano

F#m7                      F#ø7                      BM                      Bb aug

The resulting harmonies are not the result of any tonal function or deliberate progression. Rather, the chords created are coincidental, determined by the static F#4 in the clarinet—a central pitch to this piece—and the chromatic motion in the piano. Interesting, the distance between the lowest note in each of the piano chords spans a minor third, from C#4 in m. 1 to B ♭ 3 in m. 5. In this way, rather than using a tonal center to motivate harmony, Debussy uses third relationships to determine the content and duration of the progression.

The influence of thirds on the harmonic structure of the piece is present even when the thirds themselves are not readily audible. In Example 5, we see an example of whole tone-inspired harmony that has its roots in third relationships:

**Example 5:** piano part, mm. 6–8

The image shows a musical score for the piano part, measures 6 through 8. The music is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The right hand (treble clef) features a melodic line with a major third interval (Bb3 to D4) and a major triad (Bb3, D4, F#4) in measure 7, followed by an augmented triad (Bb3, D4, F#4) in measure 8. The left hand (bass clef) features a tritone interval (Ab2 to D2) in measure 6. Red brackets and labels highlight these intervals and triads.

The majority of these notes belong to the whole tone even collection. In the upper voice of the right hand, Debussy sketches out a major third from B ♭ 3 to D4. Similar melodic motion determined by thirds is present in the left hand, with the tritone (equivalent to two minor thirds) between A ♭ 2 and D2. What is most interesting about this section, however, is how Debussy treats triads. The F3 in the right hand is one of the only notes present that does not belong to the whole tone even collection, which Debussy uses to create a B ♭ major triad. This triad alternates with a B ♭ augmented triad at the end of each measure. Perhaps Debussy uses this nod to tonality in a passage of predominantly whole tone harmony to hint at the role that B ♭ major will play later in the piece.

Finally, Debussy uses third relationships to determine the overall form of the piece. Although Debussy avoids harmonic motion that creates a strong pull toward a tonic pitch, each section contains a triad that suggests a central pitch for that section. See Example 6 for important chords in the A section (m. 14), B section (m. 22), and A' section (m. 31).

**Example 6:** piano chords in m. 14, m. 22, and m. 31

The image shows three piano chords in 2/4 time, key of D major. Measure 14 (m. 14) features a D major triad (D, F#, A) in the right hand and a D major triad (D, F#, A) in the left hand. Measure 22 (m. 22) features an F# major triad (F#, A, C#) in the right hand and an F# major triad (F#, A, C#) in the left hand. Measure 31 (m. 31) features a Bb major triad (Bb, D, F) in the right hand and a Bb major triad (Bb, D, F) in the left hand. The chords are labeled below the staff: DM, F#M, and BbM.

Notice that the root of the second chord (F#) is a major third above D, and that the root of the third chord (Bb) is a major third below D. Thus, the overall structure of the piece parallels the construction of the melody in Example 1: after the A section ends on a D major triad, the music progresses up a major third to a section where F# major is a prominent harmony, then down a major third to a section where Bb is a prominent harmony. Debussy emphasizes the idea of symmetry about a particular pitch class at the level of form in addition to the level of harmony.

The arrival at the Bb major chord in m. 31 is the point where the melody of the A' section (mm. 29–34) diverges from the melody of the A section (mm. 9–14). See the new ending of the clarinet melody in mm. 31–34 below in Example 7:

**Example 7:** clarinet melody, mm. 31–34 (concert pitch)

The image shows the clarinet melody in measures 31–34. The melody is in 2/4 time, key of D major. Measure 31 starts with a half note F4. Measure 32 starts with a half note A4. Measure 33 starts with a half note G4. Measure 34 starts with a half note F4. Red brackets indicate intervals: a major 3rd above F (from F4 to A4) and a minor 3rd below F (from F4 to G4).

Here, Debussy uses the same compositional techniques illustrated in Examples 1 and 2, using thirds to construct a melody symmetrical about a central pitch. However, this time the melody revolves around F4 rather than F#4. Consequently, the interval that Debussy emphasizes through repetition at the end of this passage is a minor third instead of a major third. The melody has been transformed by the new harmony that underlies it. Through this transformation, Debussy creates a sense of development and arrival without using traditional tonal means to do so.

Although Debussy appears to draw on a variety of tonal and post-tonal sources for the melodic and harmonic content of his *Petite Pièce for Clarinet and Piano*, at the heart of the work lie two simple intervals upon which all of the musical content is based: the minor and major

thirds. Debussy uses these intervals to construct melodies that are musically symmetrical and then subverts the listener's expectations by writing asymmetrical ones. Harmonically, he uses third relationships to create progressions rather than relying on tonal functions. Structurally, he creates symmetry in the form by giving each section a prominent chord whose roots are separated by thirds. Through these compositional techniques, Debussy thoroughly develops the initial musical idea stated by the clarinet to produce a satisfying transformation in a concise thirty-eight measures.