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Debussy's *Canope* as Narrative Form

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I

Claude Debussy's twenty-four *Préludes* are among the composer's last and best-known works for piano. They were composed and published in two books of twelve; Book 1 was published in 1910 and Book 2 in 1913. These preludes are well known for the unique way in which they are titled. At the beginning, each piece is simply numbered. The numbers, however, are connected—in most editions by ellipses—to a word or phrase placed at the end of the piece, for example, "X. . . (. . . Canope)." Thus titled, each piece is provided a clear extra-musical association, but one given almost as an afterthought or subtitle.

Canope, the tenth prelude in Book 2, though lightly regarded by many critics, presents a particular challenge to the analyst. The musical form, appearing rather simple on the surface, hides deep connections and patterns of structure that resist traditional modes of explication. The title itself is problematic. Though it is an apparent reference to canopic jars—urns, often with elaborately carved stoppers, used in ancient Egyptian mummification process—the precise meaning in the context of this prelude is unknown. Even more puzzling is the relationship between the title and the music. What is it about this music that led the composer to offer "(. . . Canope)" as his postscript?

Debussy drew from a variety of sources for his evocative titles. Some are very specific; others are less so. *Danseuses de Delphes*, the first prelude in Book 1, is an example of a piece, which, like *Canope*, has an association with ancient art. According to Louisa Liebich, the composer's friend and biographer, the piece was inspired by a carved column or caryatid on display at the Musée du Louvre. Debussy was even very specific about the caryatid's location, saying it was, "at the top of the grand staircase . . . to the left of the 'Winged Victory.'"[1]

A good deal can be inferred about the origins of *Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*, the prelude in Book 2 immediately preceding *Canope*. From René Peter we have testimony of Debussy's avid support for Charles Dickens and his knowledge of *The Pickwick Papers*. According to Peter, Dickens was Debussy's "best and oldest companion. He fitted every mood, an infallible antidote and indefatigable healer for all ills. Spleen could be cured by a swift dose of Pickwick."[2] One may be left to wonder exactly what Debussy thought of Samuel Pickwick, Esq., imbued as the prelude is with its rather ungainly rendition of "God Save the Queen." But the reference in the title is unambiguous and Debussy's intimate knowledge of his subject matter gives his interpretation credibility.

Relatively little is known about the inspiration behind some of the other preludes, especially those with more suggestive and less tangible subject matter. With its free-

[1]Louisa Shirley Liebich, "An Englishwoman's Memories of Debussy," *The Musical Times* (1 June 1918), 250.

[2]René Peter, *Debussy* (Paris, 1931), quoted in Roger Nichols, *Debussy Remembered* (Portland, 1992), 140.

flying whole-tone scales and unhinged rhythms, *Voiles* seems to capture the wind, but we do not know whether the composer intended the title to mean veils or sails. There is credible evidence for both. *Le vent dans la plaine* appears to have its origins in a line of poetry by Charles-Simon Favart. Yet no particular plain is named, nor is one needed to appreciate the meaning of the title or to sense the blowing wind brought to mind by the ostinati. The music is simply an evocation of a landscape, as Roberts calls it.[3] Of the mysterious prelude *Brouillards* we know only the meaning of the word: mists.

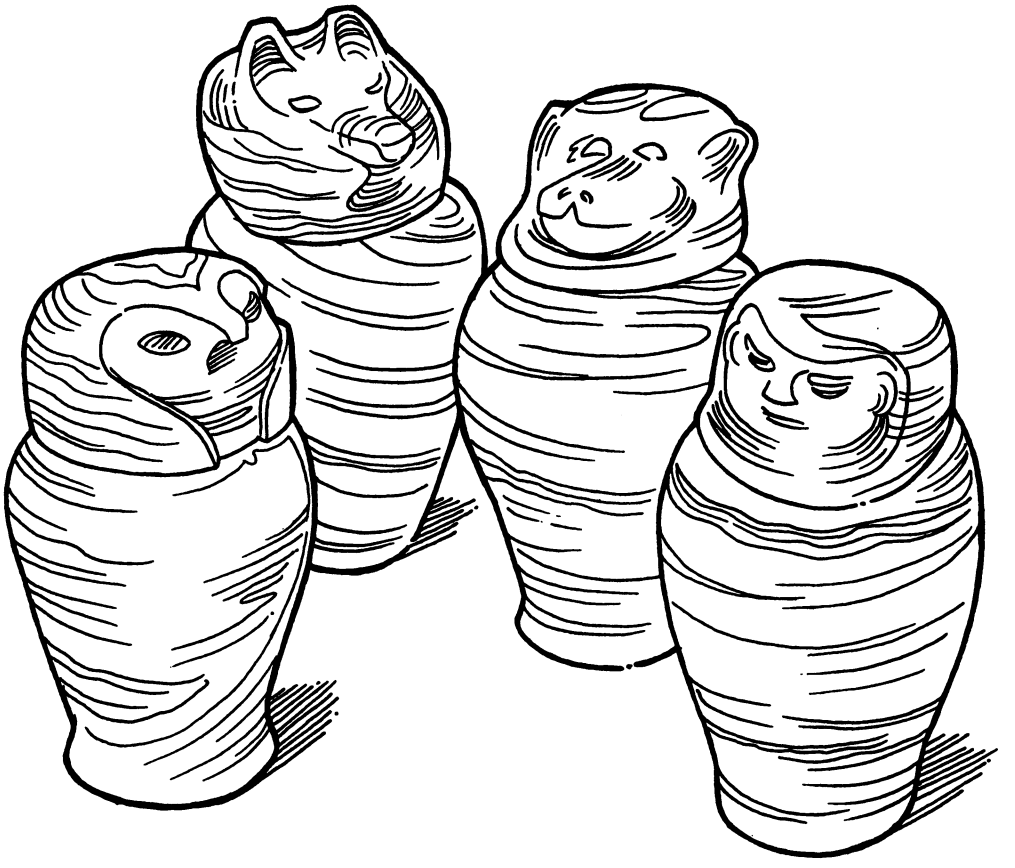
Our knowledge of the origins of *Canope* lies in an uncomfortable middleground. The allusion of the title is more certain than "mists" and, in referencing something of human origin, is more akin to the first two examples cited. But unlike those examples, there exists no first-hand testimony to link this prelude to any particular event or physical object.

Still, the allusion is captivating. (. . . Canope). With this single word, the composer invites his listeners back in time thousands of years to ancient Egypt—to the time of Khufu and Amenhotep, and the land of pyramids and papyrus—to ponder the rituals of that ancient culture. It is most probable that *Canope* refers to a particular type of jar made primarily in the Nile delta region of Egypt near the city known to the ancient Greeks as Canopus and to us today as Abu Qir. Jars were made of a variety of materials including wood, limestone, and alabaster, and were used to protect the internal organs of the deceased during conveyance to the afterlife. The earliest extant examples date from the period of the Old Kingdom (c. 2500 B.C.E.) and are topped with simple, unadorned stoppers. Later, during the Middle Kingdom (c. 1900 B.C.E.), the stoppers were carved to resemble human heads, sometimes a representation of the person for whom they were created. About this same time each jar was placed under the protection of one of the four sons of Horus, guardian of the dead; the sons were in turn placed under the protection of a specific goddess. Still later during the New Kingdom (c. 1500 B.C.E.), the stoppers were often carved with the sons of Horus appearing as genii. The only figure to retain a human head, Imsety (also known as Amset), guarded the liver. Hapy, appearing as a baboon, protected the lungs. Duamutef, carved as a jackal, protected the stomach. Qebehsenuef, given the head of a falcon, guarded the intestines.[4] The set of jars pictured in Example 1 is of this most recent variety.

[3]Roberts, *Images*, 247.

[4]Additional historical information on canopic jars and a wonderful array of photographs are found in the following: Gun Björkman, *The Smith Collection of Egyptian Antiquities* (Uppsala, 1971); Mohamed Saleh and Hourig Sourouzian, *The Egyptian Museum Cairo* (Cairo and Mainz, 1987); David Silverman, *Searching for Ancient Egypt* (Dallas and Ithaca, 1997). Christiane Ziegler, *The Louvre: Egyptian Antiquities* (Paris, 1990).

Example 1. A set of canopic jars[5]



Some of the likely connections between the canopic jars and the music of *Canope* are easy to locate. The sight of a stark, slender canopic jar itself may have suggested the unadorned, blocked chords of the opening section. The narrow and quiet dynamic palette—*p* and *pp* are the only markings—adds to the sense of mystery. Tinges of modality and echoes of plainchant conjure times past and suggest a serious and contemplative subject matter. David Lewin is able to infer still more: "[O]ne presumes that Debussy, to the extent he had the jar in mind, used the word *canope* as a metonym for the city, the temple, the associated rites, the dead civilization itself, and the funeral ideas of a more general nature."[6] He continues saying:

> Debussy's piece is saturated with the atmosphere these associations suggest. Things preserved from a remote and bygone past impinge upon modern sensibilities; we are fascinated by things in spite of—and because of—the cognitive dissonance arising from our relations to them .... I am ... beset by fantasies about the person buried in the beautiful Egyptian urn, the potter who cast that compelling art-work, and so on.[7]

[5]Original pen and ink drawing by Paula Gron, 1999.
[6]David Lewin, "Some Instances of Parallel Voice-Leading in Debussy," *19th-Century Music* 11 (1987), 66n.
[7]Lewin, 67.

While the title alone is enough to rouse in Lewin quite vivid images, nothing is known with certainty about the origin of *Canope* or the images the composer had in mind.

Fortunately the quest for answers need not end here. It is possible, for example, to draw some specific connections between Debussy and canopic jars. In his introduction to the *Œuvres complètes*, Roy Howat writes that Debussy actually owned a pair of jars and kept them on his work table, though there is no further indication of where he got them or what significance he attached to them.[8] It is likely, however, that he saw complete sets of jars on display at the Musée du Louvre, a place he frequented, and where, for at least one other prelude, *Danseuses de Delphes,* he found inspiration. Canopic jars carved with both human and animal images were among items exhibited by French Egyptologist Jean-François Champollion on the Egyptian museum's opening in 1827 and continue to be displayed to this day.[9]

We also may speculate regarding what Debussy, as a well-educated Parisian, might have known about canopic jars. Reference works of the time make clear a modern understanding of the word *canope*, applying it both to canopic jars and to the city whose name they bear. As early as 1867, Larousse's *Grand dictionnaire universel* (Paris, 1867) accurately describes the jars and mentions their use in sets of four. The *Nouveau Larousse illustre* (Paris, 1898), likewise contains a detailed description of the jars and includes reference to the four sons of Horus. Still exactly what Debussy knew and exactly what he intended when he titled this prelude remains a mystery.

The musical structure of *Canope* presents its own set of puzzles. On the surface the piece is a textbook example of so-called additive process or non-developmental form.[10] Additive process is often described as a compositional procedure in which small, often unrelated sound blocks are placed side by side or layered to build up a larger whole, much as an artist creates a mosaic or a stone mason constructs a wall. The venerable tradition of motivic development—what for Schoenberg was epitomized in Wagner's music as "model and sequence" and in Brahms's as "developing variation"[11]—is almost entirely foreign to Debussy's additive technique. In the place of long, spun out, melody-driven phrases is what Robert Morgan describes as "a sort of floating balance among subtly interconnecting musical entities, giving rise to wavelike motions characterized by extremely fine gradations of color, pacing, and intensity."[12]

Delineation of the sound blocks used to construct *Canope* based primarily on contrasts in texture and rhythm reveals six musical ideas, which are placed side by side, sometimes overlapped, and laced together with subtle musical connections to produce nine discrete formal sections. Example 2 shows a simple, formal segmentation.

[8]Roy Howat, *Œuvres complètes de Claude Debussy,* Sr. 1, vol. 5 (Paris, 1985), xvii. The jars, according to Howat, are now in the museum of the Paris Opera.

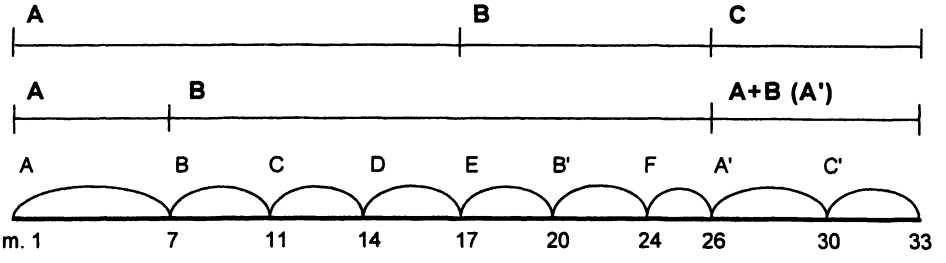
[9]I am indebted to Christiane Ziegler and Catherine Bridonneau of the Département des Antiquités Egyptiennes at the Musée du Louvre for providing this and other information on canopic jars in the museum's collection.

[10]"Textbook" in this instance is not a cliché. The piece appears prominently in two current texts to illustrate additive procedure. See: Ralph Turek, *The Elements of Music*, Vol. 2, 2nd ed. (New York, 1996), 309-311; and J. Kent William, *Theories and Analyses of Twentieth-Century Music* (Fort Worth, 1997), 156-158.

[11]Schoenberg uses these terms and concepts frequently in his writing and lecturing, for example in his essay "My Evolution," in *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg* (Berkeley, 1984), 80.

[12]Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music* (New York, 1991), 48.

Example 2. Traditional segmentation showing possible interpretations of higher-level groupings[13]



Viewed in this way, the work appears largely non-developmental, or as primarily a stream of discontinuous events. Points of formal articulation and repetitions of musical material give some sense of large-scale design, but the analysis reveals no other meaningful high-level groupings. Such an explanation is not wholly convincing; other organizing principles must be at play.

II

An approach I have found useful in probing the structure of this prelude is to read the piece as a story, that is, to find in the work a narrative design consistent with the implications of the title and complementary with the objective formal segmentation shown in Example 2. Literary theory describes the parts of a classic narrative in much the same way music theory describes the parts of a classical composition. The reader expects to find certain fairly well defined sections and expects that they will be connected in an organized and comprehensible way. Aristotle, among the first in the Western tradition to discuss narrative structure, writes that actions in a narrative should be organized so that "if any one of them is displaced or taken away, the whole will be shaken and put out of joint."[14]

Modern critics have sought to define the four or five specific sections of a classically designed narrative plot.[15] According to this model, a narrative usually begins with an introduction or exposition that sets the stage and provides background or atmosphere. The end of the introduction may be marked by an inciting moment or "force," which signals the beginning of conflict and propels the action onward. The second section is often referred to as the rising action. In this section the writer defines the conflict through series of actions or complications. At the height of the complication lies the climax or peak moment. Depending on the nature of the narrative, the climax might be a moment of crisis, an epiphany, or a reversal of fortune. Following the climax is a

[13]The top line shows the large-scale form as described by Serge Gut in "'Canope' de Debussy, analyse formelle et structure fondamentale," *Revue Musicale de Suisse Romande* 33 (1980), 60-65. The second line is my own conjecture based on various textbook discussions of the form.

[14]Aristotle, *Poetics,* translated with introduction and notes by James Hutton, (New York, 1982), 54.

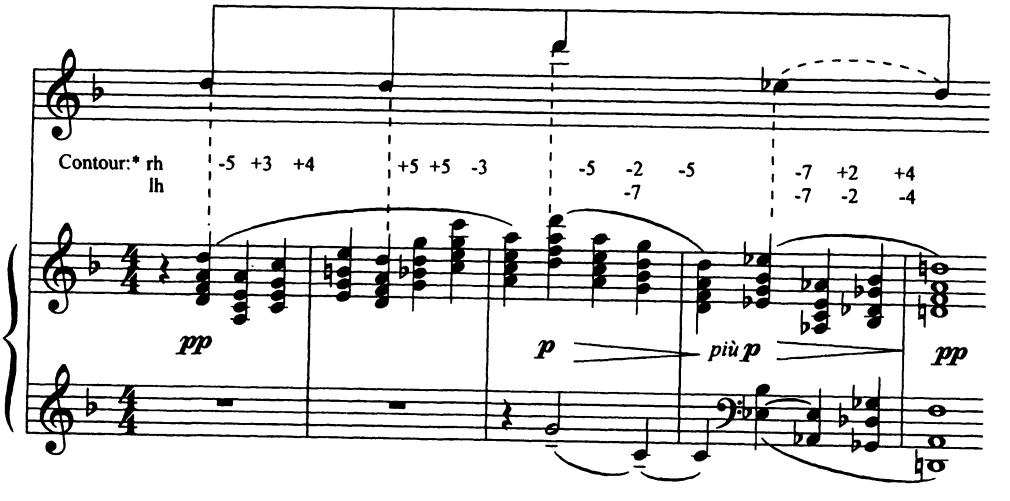
[15]This common method of plot analysis is modeled after "Freytag's Pyramid," Gustav Freytag's concept of structure in a typical five-act tragedy, described in *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863).

section of falling action or dénouement (literally "unknotting"), leading to a conclusion or resolution.

The construction of *Canope* suggests a striking similarity to classical narrative form. Viewed simply, a seven measure introduction is followed by four short episodes leading to a climax in m. 20. What follow is a period of dénouement, reaching a conclusion in the final measures of the prelude. It is on this narrative-based scaffolding that I will hang a more detailed musical analysis.

The prelude begins with an introductory or expository section (mm. 1-7, section A in the traditional segmentation shown in Example 2). Measures 1-5 present sixteen sonorities, slurred as three asymmetrical phrases or grouped by texture into two gestures, each two measures in length. Under the first slur are two sets of four triads, each related to D and sharing similar intervallic and pitch material. These first two sets also introduce the first instance of modal ambiguity in the prelude, presenting the pitch collections of D-Dorian (with B-natural) and D minor (with B-flat) side by side. Timbral and tonal complexity increases with the addition of a second line in the left hand, G to C moving in parallel fifth motion with the planed triads. A lower register is introduced as the music shifts dramatically to an E-flat centered collection, containing both a modally ambiguous G and G-flat, and the D-flat, suggestive of Mixolydian. The descending perfect 5th, G to C, is echoed by the motion from E-flat to A-flat in the first two chords. A thickening of the texture is accompanied by the first appearance of contrary motion as G-flat major follows A-flat major on the way to the widely spaced, sonorous D minor triad, bringing the introduction full circle back to D. The section closes with an echo of the opening melody presented in spare octaves in the lower register of the piano in mm. 5 and 6.

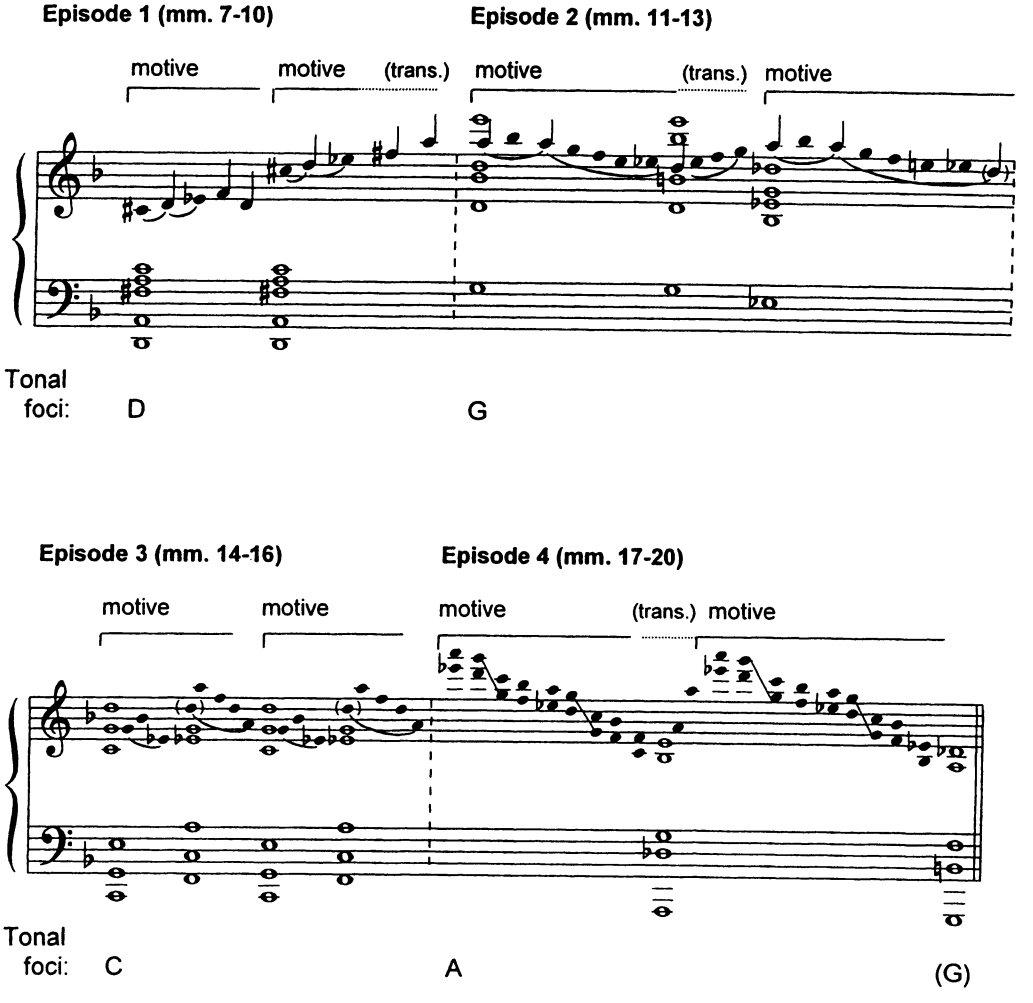
Example 3. Introduction, mm. 1-5



*The contour is expressed in directional intervals showing the number of half steps between chord roots.

Measure 7 begins the first in a series of four episodes that provide a sense of rising action continuing through the climax in m. 20. Arriving at a proper segmentation for this series of episodes is critical to understanding the larger formal design. The brevity of each section combined with the carefully constructed transitions blur the formal boundaries. Several musical features, however, make the segmenting possible. Each episode is built around a unique melodic and rhythmic motive, which is stated twice, though with slight alterations allowing for a transition to the next segment. Changes in register, texture, and dynamics also help define each episode.

Example 4. The four episodes, mm. 7-20



The first episode, section B in Example 2, is four measures in length and is connected tonally to the introduction (section A) through shared focus on the pitch D. The monophonic echo of the opening planed triads in mm. 5 and 6 terminates on A, which is

immediately absorbed into the D7 sonority that forms a tonal underpinning of the episode. Above is an undulating melody that emphasizes D though upper and lower leading tones, C-sharp and E-flat. Measures 9 and 10 are a near repetition of mm. 7 and 8, with the melody presented in octaves and modified near the end to prepare for a tonal shift in the second episode. The modal ambiguity introduced in the opening permeates this section as well. Ten of the twelve pitch classes appear. Notably absent are B and B-flat.

A common tone, A5, completes the quintal structure, D-A-E, sounding high in the right hand, and links the first episode with the second. Sounding below is a G minor triad also placed higher relative to the accompanying sonorities of the first episode. A return to *piano* following a crescendo further helps identify this as a new section. The lightly syncopated melodic motive has a downward contour and explores the D-A fifth. The stepwise ascent of m. 12 returns the line to A5 and, along with the crescendo, prepares for the repetition of the motive in m. 13. This time the descending melody appears over a more dissonant $E\text{-flat}^7$ reharmonization, reminiscent of the shift to E-flat in the introduction. E-flat also serves to mediate the perfect fifth between G, the tonal center of the second episode, and the C sonority that begins the third episode in m. 14. The modal ambivalence in this episode is captured by E-natural and E-flat alternating throughout the melody and B-natural and B-flat alternating in the accompanying harmony. The stepwise descent of the melody, leading chromatically to D, provides a seamless transition to the following section.

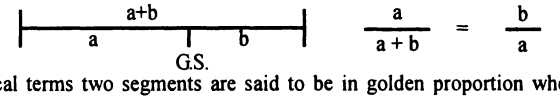
Only two measures in length, the third episode (section D) is shorter and somewhat less melodic than the previous two. Its identity as a new episode is again signaled by changes in register (now lower) and the explicit return to a *piano* dynamic level. This episode too contains a new melodic and rhythmic motive, and features a distinct change in texture with the melodic interest passing between inner and upper voices. The melody is harmonized by a pair of Quintal/C major polychords and F^{13} sonorities, with E-natural and E-flat again alternating in the accompanying chords. The design of internal repetition continues; m. 15 is a literal repeat of m. 14.

The sustained F harmony of m. 15 is interrupted by E-flat grace note, marking a transition to the fourth episode labeled section E, mm. 17-20. The beginning of the episode is marked by a new melodic and rhythmic idea along with a change to a higher register, a softening of the dynamic level to *pianissimo,* and the direction *Animez un peu*. This section is the least melodic of the four episodes. Its melody is characterized by a repeated figure of upper neighbor grace notes leading to perfect 4th dyads, creating a pair of parallel lines, and producing a sweeping descent through five octaves from A1 through A6. A also serves as the tonal center of this section. A begins and ends the first statement of the motive (mm. 17 and 18), and is the entire substance of the rapidly ascending figure in m. 18. The repetition of the motive (mm. 19 and 20) begins as did the first statement with an A grace note, but ends on G, creating a tonal link for the return in m. 20 of material from Section B.

If *Canope* is read as a narrative, m. 20 marks the turning point or climax of the plot and the beginning of the dénouement. Measure 20 also marks the golden section of the

work.[16] Proportion in music and golden section proportioning in particular have been investigated by a number of scholars in recent years.[17] Two studies in particular have focused on proportion in the music of Claude Debussy.[18] In *Debussy in Proportion,* Roy Howat makes a strong case for Debussy's awareness of golden proportion through his association with French artists. More explicit evidence exists with regard to one specific work for piano, *Jardins sous la pluie.* According to Howat, Debussy wrote to his publisher Jaques Durand in August 1903 noting the omission of a measure from the proof and insisting that it be corrected because [quoting Debussy] "it is necessary as regards number; the divine number . . . " (*elle est nécessaire, quant au nombre; le divin nombre*). While perhaps Debussy's statement is not conclusive proof, Howat correctly notes that it "certainly gives us good reason for investigating numerical possibilities in his musical forms."[19]

[16]The golden section, golden mean, or golden proportion can be described as a division of a segment whereby the ratio of the longer segment to the whole is equal to the ratio of the shorter segment to the longer segment. Golden proportion can be expressed graphically and algebraically as follows:



In practical terms two segments are said to be in golden proportion when the ratio of the smaller to the longer equals approximately 0.618. To find the golden section of a whole, multiply the length of the whole by 0.618.

[17]Studies are numerous. Good starting points include: David Epstein, *Shaping Time: Music, the Brain, and Performance* (New York, 1995); Jonathan Kramer, *The Time of Music* (New York and London, 1988); Ernö Lendvai, *Béla Bartók: An Analysis of His Style* (London, 1971), 291-306; and John W. White, *Processes of Structuring in Selected Free Improvisations of the Chamber Ensemble Oregon* (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1999).

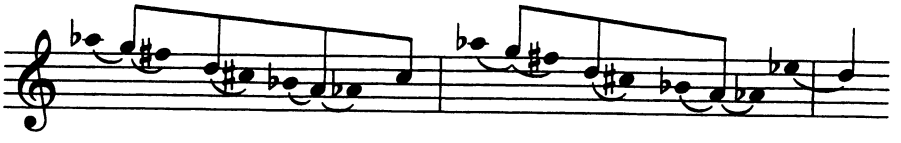
[18]Roy Howat, *Debussy in Proportion* (Cambridge, 1983); and Richard Parks, *The Music of Claude Debussy* (New Haven, 1989), especially 203-232.

[19]Howat, *Debussy in Proportion,* 6-7.

In its broadest interpretation the golden section has been shown often to mark a turning point or a point of maximum tension or tonal contrast in a work, that is, to mark the climax. This is, I believe, the case in *Canope*. In keeping with the mood of the piece, this climax is quiet and introspective, more a moment of illumination than crisis, and is conveyed to the listener by the return of the melody of the first episode. Intensification is slight, shown only through the added tenuto on the first note of the melody and the somewhat more complex sonorities supporting it. Musical aspects of three prior episodes—the first, second, and fourth—are recalled and combined in this section. The melody of the first episode is layered upon G, the tonal underpinning of the second. The fourth episode is represented by the grace note figures and sonorities borrowed from that section.

Dénouement continues in mm. 24 and 25 as events from the prior episodes are again recast in a new light. On the surface, the primary tonal event appears to be an elaboration of an A-flat major triad. A-flat here could be interpreted as a tritone-related antipole to D, the presumptive tonal center of the prelude, or tonally related to E-flat. Within this A-flat major arpeggiation, the composer has carefully placed fleeting references to the four episodes. Through patterns of half-step resolutions or rhythmic placement, the passage highlights the tonal centers of the four episodes: D, G, C, and A. The final E-flat in m. 25 functions as it did in m. 4, as an upper neighbor to and harbinger of the return of D, as well as a reminder of the ever-present modal ambiguity.

Example 5. Measures 24-25



With the return in m. 26 of the music from the introduction, the narrative moves resolutely toward its conclusion. In the recomposed music of the introduction, the planed sonorities, this time reinforced in the lower octave, suggest a richer, more deeply felt experience. The character of the story perhaps has gained a new perspective or has been transported to a higher plane. Pitch level also plays a role here. The third and fourth sets of chords this time sound a half step higher. The third set is transposed to E-flat, and the fourth set opens on E, thus presenting another dramatic moment of modal conflict. The pattern is altered on the third chord of the set with the introduction of the F minor sonority, setting up a stronger and more confident movement toward the final cadence on C.

The action ends with the cadential arrival in m. 30 on a sonorous quintal structure spanning nearly four octaves. The right hand plays the pitches of the now familiar four tonal areas of the episodes arranged this time in ascending fifths: C, G, and D, with the A added by the melody. The voicing of the left hand sonority as a C major triad provides stability and tonal focus on C, while still enabling the colorful ambiguity produced by the

quintal structure. The pitch E used to support the first appearance of this melody in m. 11 adds a fifth tone to the quintal sonority.

This section evokes a sense of remembering or looking back through another instance of recombined materials. Again three prior episodes are brought to mind. The melody is borrowed from the second episode, mm. 11-13, here suspended like a vaporous memory above the polychord first encountered with the third episode, mm. 14-15. The sustaining articulation is borrowed from the first episode, mm. 7-11. The ever present modal ambiguity is played out in one final dramatic moment as E-natural, not E-flat, leads the melodic descent and is absorbed into D, the highest sounding pitch of the underlying sonority.

With the cadential arrival on C, the sense of tonal discontinuity, always lying just beneath the surface, reaches a moment of crisis. Despite the modal ambiguity, from the opening triad the listener has been led to expect D eventually to emerge as tonic. Yet with the unexpectedly early appearance of the upper leading tone E-flat in m. 24, the tonal motion veers off through E to F, finally cadencing through plagal root motion on C. D remains as part of the final sonority but not as tonic.

The melodic pitches in this concluding section fit well with the underlying harmony, but it is a stretch to hear the melody in C. It is rather a melody that lies comfortably on its quintal underpinnings. A, D, and G frame the melody, while C provides a foundation in the bass. The earlier episodic melodies each displayed some degree of tonal discontinuity with their accompanying harmonies. The melody in the first episode begins on C-sharp above a D7 chord. The second episode begins with A above a G harmony. The third episode begins with a D over a C triad. The melody of the final episode begins with E-flat and D over the eventually emergent A harmony. The tonal and modal discomfiture that is so much a part of *Canope* finally finds a delicate balance in these final measures and provides an unexpected though fitting resolution to the story.

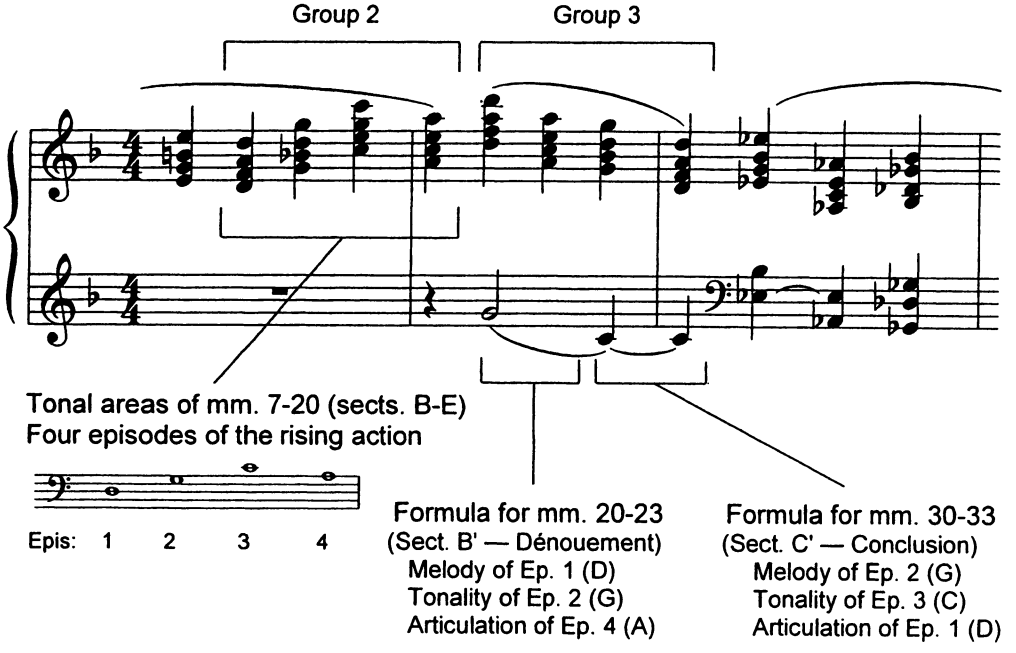
Along with its narrative-like formal structure, the prelude seems to make musical reference to other devices more commonly associated with literature. It is easy to imagine how the often evoked feelings of ambiguity and discontinuity assist in telling the story. Perhaps their presence in this piece represents the awkward feelings brought on by viewing funeral objects as objects of art. Confronted out of time and out of place, are these elegant urns or are they macabre reminders of death? Regardless, these feelings evoked contribute to the sense of mystery that permeates the work.

Just as a writer may create tension and alter the reader's perception of time by suspending the chronological presentation of the story, a composer can create a similar effect by making musical references to material found elsewhere in the piece. I have already described flashbacks occurring in the dénouement, wherein material from the episodes is reworked and recombined in a variety of intricate ways, suggesting a sense of remembering.

Three still more striking examples of musical foreshadowing link the planed triads of the introduction with the remainder of the prelude. These are summarized in Example 6. In the first example, the second group of four triads from the introduction—D minor, G minor, C major, and A minor (Group 2 in Fig. 6)—foreshadow the tonal foci of the four episodes in mm. 7-20: D, G, C and A.

The second and third examples of foreshadowing are more complex and involve the two passages that recombine previously heard materials: the first section of dénouement (mm. 20-23), and the conclusion (mm. 30-33). In these two sections, the melody, harmony, and articulation (or rhythm character) is each drawn from a different episode and recombined in a unique manner. Formulae showing how this material will be used appear to be encoded in the third set of four sonorities in mm. 3 and 4. In the code, pitch represents musical aspects of the episode associated with that tonality. D represents the first episode; G, the second; C, the third; and A, the fourth. The first two beats of the segment—D and A triads over a G—supply the key for the recombination in mm. 20-23. In those measures the melody of episode 1 (D) overlays the tonality of episode 2 (G) recomposed with the rhythm and articulation of episode 4 (A). The third and fourth beats—G and D triads over C—give the formula for the recombination of elements in the closing passage, mm. 30-33. The melody of episode 2 (G), appears over the polychord from episode 3 (C) with the ringing articulation of episode 1 (D).

Example 6. Three instances of foreshadowing encoded in mm. 2-4



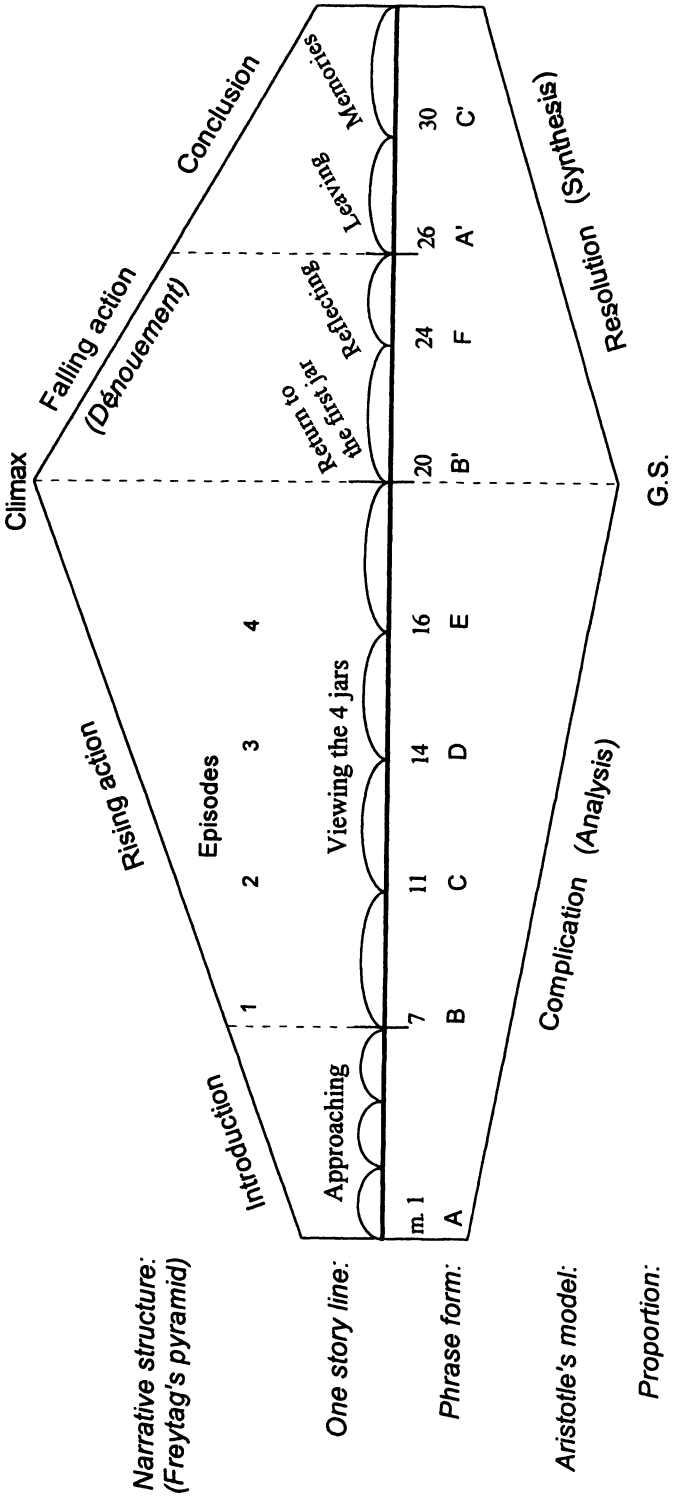
The linking of pitch material from the introduction to the four episodes helps clarify the formal structure in several significant ways. It reinforces the grouping of mm. 7-20 as a higher-level formal unit and supports the segmentation of the four episodes along tonal lines. It bolsters the narrative interpretation by revealing the expository nature of the opening, showing that it indeed contains musical seeds that grow later in the piece. It also draws the glissando-like passage of mm. 24 and 25 (section F) into the same web of tonal associations, illustrating yet again the significance of these four tonal areas to the structure of the prelude.

III

If *Canope* is a narrative, then what is it about? Who are its characters? And what is the setting? The title and the music give clues, but no firm answers. Perhaps the story is about a person seeing canopic jars in a museum. Debussy visited the Musée du Louvre often; perhaps he is the main character. Perhaps he tells the story in the third person. Perhaps it is we who are invited into the story to view these ancient jars. On hearing the introduction, I can imagine a set of jars as seen from a distance. Their stony visage portends deep mystery and hidden meaning, but they must first be examined closely. The four episodes of mm. 7-20 could describe the action of viewing a set of four jars, examining each jar in detail. The return of the melody of the first episode in m. 20 marks the return of the character's gaze to the first jar and provides a climax in the form of a moment of enlightenment. The intricate reworking of the material during the dénouement leads me to imagine the character reflecting on or synthesizing the experience of seeing the jars, perhaps comparing the carved images one with another, before finally carrying away the memory of a favorite. Perhaps the story is a historical one, about someone placing the jars in the tomb and remembering the person for whom they were carved. Although the prelude is titled with the singular *Canope* and not *Canopes*, the frequent occurrence of groups of four in the music suggest at least an allusion to a set of four canopic jars. It is though certainly possible that Debussy was describing a single jar, perhaps one he owned, perhaps seen in four ways, or at four times of day. The prelude also uses frequent pairs, a pair of motives in each of the nine sections, for example. Perhaps this is tied to his pair of jars, or suggests examining each jar from the front and the back, or thinking of each in two ways.

The possibilities are intriguing, but the particulars are unimportant. For the analyst the value lies in finding elements of classical narrative design overlaying traditional techniques of musical development. Several interpretations of form, beginning with the objective parsing proposed first in Example 2 and including several of the more speculative narrative-derived pursuits are brought together in Example 7.

Example 7. Complementary views of the musical form



One significant feature suggested by the narrative analysis is the formal significance of m. 20. The music preceding m. 20 presents a series of unique ideas with very few musical connections among sections, thereby creating musical complication. From m. 20 onward, the composer begins working out the complications and brings the piece toward resolution. In the flat version of form shown in Example 2, m. 20 begins yet another one of a number of trivially connected segments. It is a return of a previously heard melodic motive, but it is difficult to assign much formal significance to the event. In the narrative interpretation, m. 20 marks a critical turning point in the story and in the treatment of the musical material, a moment much more in keeping with traditional interpretations of golden section and the expectations of form in a classic narrative. The model also fits nicely with Aristotle's suggestion that a narrative be made up of two distinct sections: the complication and the resolution.[20]

A traditional analysis of musical form fails to tell the whole story of *Canope*. When it is read as a narrative, layers of structure and processes of development appear that are not easily captured in purely musical terms. Development occurs and musical hierarchies are created as Debussy's plot unfolds, and the characters in this story, whomever they are, move through their unique encounter with the mythical and mystical canopic jar.

[20]Donald W. Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* (Oxford, 1968), 182.