

Motivic Development in the fourth movement of Debussy's Op. 10 No. 1 String Quartet IV. Très modéré – En animant peu à peu – Très mouvementé et avec passion

As an influential composer of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Achille-Claude Debussy (1862-1918) ventured through varying styles of harmony and timbre. Debussy composed his only string quartet in 1893, early in his compositional lifetime, consisting of qualities such as long lyrical melodies, fairly tonal harmonies, and mixed modality. The fourth movement of Debussy's Op. 10 No. 1 String Quartet deviates in terms of harmony and structure from the previous three movements; however, it is still linked by emphasized motives that are developed and altered with variations in a cyclic form.

Claude Debussy refrained from composing similarly to the German aesthetic ideals of his mentors, forming his own style that was purely French. He was greatly influenced by symbolism and poetry by Mallarmé and Verlaine, who were both major French poets during the second half of the nineteenth century. Distinctively, Mallarmé's poetry was described to have "tortuous syntax, ambiguous expressions, and obscure imagery", which parallels Debussy's music (Mallarmé). Further inspirations included the English Romantic painter, William Turner, whose paintings portrayed motion. Debussy's music aurally portrays the activity from Turner's paintings in his string quartet. Prior to the publication of his string quartet, Debussy composed *Nocturne*, for solo piano, which predominantly adheres to the style of Franz Listz, which was part of his earlier stage in composition. Following the *Nocturne*, Debussy planned to write two string quartets, but only one resulted. The quartet was premiered on December 29, 1893, by the Ysaÿe Quartet at the Société Nationale in Paris, which was followed by mixed reviews from the public. Originally intended to be dedicated to Ernest Chausson, a French romantic composer and friend of Debussy's, the quartet's dedication was altered after a falling out between their friendship. Following the quartet's premiere in 1893, Chausson described Debussy's quartet as "lacking in decorum" (Nichols). Out of the generally negative reception from the premiere, French composer Joseph Guy Marie Ropartz, however, was infatuated by the work and Debussy's musical style. Ropartz described the quartet as a work "dominated by the influence of young Russia" (Jameson). The final movement of Debussy's string quartet was the most difficult for Debussy compositionally, compared to the first three movements. In a letter written in August 1893 to his colleague, Prince André Poniatowski, Debussy writes, "I think I can finally show you the last movement of the quartet, which has made me really miserable!" (Woodstra 357). The difficulty that Debussy experienced in the fourth movement is understood by theorists due to his portrayal of several transformations in theme and harmony.

Debussy incorporates subtle inflections of the French language and poetry in relation to the character and length of sound in his music, rather than traditional strong metrical and rhythmic accents. This method is extended to melodic, harmonic, and timbral elements as well. Debussy's vocabulary of sound correlates to sensual qualities that are created with varying timbres. Additionally, he focuses on intervallic relationships and parallelism in his structure, which transpire throughout the string quartet. His style incorporates whole-tone and pentatonic scales, chains of thirds, sevenths, ninths, and elevenths, many of which are arranged in diatonic or chromatic patterns. Rhythmic and phrase structures are also built on parallelism and symmetry. Debussy incorporates many of these elements throughout the last movement.

With an ominous unknowing atmosphere that is introduced by the cello, Debussy opens the final movement with a tonal center of Db major, quickly cadencing to a hopeful E major chord that closes the introduction. Outlined by a particularly loose sonata form, the exposition follows, which incorporates [014] and [036] motives. The development, which is immensely contrasting in proportion, opens in a tonal center of G minor, and embarks on a harmonic journey through an array of distinct harmonic centers, growing more and more intense towards the first climax that temporarily relaxes through quintal harmonies. The intensification leads to the recapitulation, incorporating [025] and [015] motives, reaching once more to the second climax of the whole work. Through a gradual build up through fauxbourdon and quintal harmonies, Debussy closes the entire quartet with a vivacious coda centered around triplet motives and pitch-class sets, concluding the piece with a vibrant G major resolution.

The fourth movement consists of fourteen total themes that prevail, each offering subtle variations rhythmically and texturally. Presented in the opening, theme 1 centers around Db major, with a rhythmic acceleration followed by a rhythmic ritard, creating an unsettling aura. This theme is then repeated by the first violin a few measures later, with a truncated phrase length. Through the optimistic resolution to E major, one would assume a transition into a brighter mood, yet Debussy deters from the norm and begins the exposition with a continued ominous character with greater momentum and rhythmic energy. Theme 2 is developed from the start of the exposition, marked *En animant peu à peu*, and written in 12/8 time. The perplexing chromatic triplet motor edges into the silent texture following the introduction. Adding layers into the fervent disposition, each member of the ensemble enters one by one, edging each other on until everyone is in unison, which leads to an alteration of the theme. The altered theme becomes transitional material with running sixteenth notes in the upper two voices that accompany the dialogue of theme 2 between the lower voices, elevating the tension. With a four-bar intensification, theme 2 finally erupts into an aggressively accented variation using [014] and chromatic descending motions that gradually evaporate with a final *pp* breath from the cello.

The last outburst from the cello is immediately interrupted by the sudden key change to G minor, with the alto voice introducing the agitated and restless eighth note and dotted motion, forming theme 3. The alto anxiously passes the unsettling theme around to all the other voices, leading to sudden tutti outbursts. Following the trail through octatonic motives and chromatic planing, the viola is insecure in character, displayed through consecutive repeated dotted rhythms, later becoming a lyrical driving motor that is further developed with transitional material. The material builds up intensity, only to die away into unsettling and questioning eighth notes after. Following the second violin's constant dotted rhythms that grasps onto their last

breaths for air, they transition into a reminiscent memory in the first violin, forming theme 9. Debussy diminishes theme 9, progressively reaching the first climactic outburst incorporating an augmentation of the theme. Following the second climax with a variation on theme 9, Debussy ventures through various themes and harmonies; the final resolute triplet theme transpires in the coda, followed by a virtuosic final eruption into a liberating G major resolution. Through the vast variety in motivic material within the movement, Debussy reveals his ability to originate and transform his music.

Although not a major source in Debussy's quartet, he incorporates set-theory, which enhances his motivic material. The use of pitch-classes were specifically prevalent in the exposition, recapitulation, and coda. [014], [036], [015], and [026] were commonly used in chromatic triplet material that enhanced the intensity through the harmonic variance, resulting in an unnerving color. Furthermore, the use of [016], [013], and [025], were predominantly incorporated within augmented triplet lyrical material that provided sequential motion, leading to new material.

Debussy's quartet consists of the traditional four movement structure, and hints at cyclicism all throughout. Using the fourth movement as the control group, the first hint at cyclicism is in theme 2, which opens the exposition. Theme 2 from the final movement hints at the opening theme in the viola from the second movement; both consist of the triplet motive and six eighth notes that serve as a rhythmic *accelerando* to the following measure. Additionally, theme 9 from the final movement, which is the second climax, alludes to the opening of the first movement, although theme 9 is more augmented in comparison. The indirect references to other motives throughout the whole work are subtle, but the hint of cyclicism in Debussy's compositions in general is part of his musical language.

Despite Debussy's remarkably meticulous musical and technical indications, his music still allows for many different methods through which artists can interpret the music. Debussy incorporates very specific markings in articulation and dynamics which are crucial in achieving his style. The use of silences, resistance, and advancements are pivotal qualities in performance practice that allow for effective expressions, which is also the cause of variances in interpretation from different artists. Specifically, the opening motive is essentially a solo cello melody, in which the performer has the liberty to add their own musical expression and nuance to the melody. For instance, one can emphasize the opening measure into two sub-phrases, indicated with the division of notes by slurs, in which the Cb is slightly elongated, leading to a delayed escalation of sixteenth notes. In contrast, one is also at liberty to open with a slightly eager quality in character, resulting in a slight emphasis on the gradual rhythmic *accelerando* in the cello, which relaxes in the next measure with a triplet motive that serves as a sigh. Pertaining to the triplet motive in the opening introduction, the notation could imply either a sigh motion or progressive eagerness in nature, both of which portray completely different sentiments to the listener. Contrastingly, climactic points are less open to vast differences in interpretation, especially with the specified details that Debussy incorporates, such as *crescendo*, followed by *molto crescendo*, and consecutive accents leading up to the first climax in measure 181, marked *ff avec passion et très soutenu*. Furthermore, the second climax in measure 252 consists of a rather straightforward execution both rhythmically and technically. Debussy's markings clearly indicate implicit phrasings, specifically through slurred indications. For example, the first violin's restatement of the opening theme 1 has a slur over the whole bar, which is technically inapt, but rather, is used to indicate a longer phrase gesture that should be executed. In terms of interpretation, Debussy is quite descriptive in his labels for specific sections: the introduction is indicated with *Très modéré* and a tempo of $J=58$; following the brief cadence to E major, the exposition is marked *En animant peu à peu*, with $J=108$. Other descriptive expressions include, *Très mouvementé et avec passion*, *expressif*, *doux et expressif*, *Tempo rubato*, *très soutenu*, *Très animé*, and *Très vif*.

Throughout the movement, Debussy clearly indicates the hierarchy of voices texturally; for example, theme 9 in measure 125 undeniably portrays the first violin as the main melody, with the rest of the ensemble supporting the nostalgic lyrical line. However, there are other examples that would require detailed discussion by the ensemble for balance in terms of the texture. As a variation of the anxious character from theme 3 appears in measure 166, theme 9 simultaneously cries out, intensifying the texture leading to the first climax. Through the coexistence of two main themes, an ensemble would need to discuss the balance of voices to portray the certain emotions persisting within the section. As Debussy extended beyond the traditional forms of Joseph Haydn's string quartets, modern performers must all have distinct characteristics of varying styles in order to portray accurate performances of the work. Debussy's repertoire integrates challenges with ambiguous harmonies, complex rhythms, and unique timbres, contrasting to Haydn's clean and articulate style.

All of Debussy's music is cyclic in a broad approach based on the unification of his writing style, which is what makes him so distinct from others. Expanding beyond typical Classical and Romantic styles of those before him, Debussy integrates his unique taste in nonfunctional harmonies with its sonorous value. It is often easy to recognize a work of Debussy's due to his distinct style, even if one does not know the title of the work. With his main focus on the "supremacy of musical color over form and design", Debussy's incorporation of ambiguous harmony, technique, and cyclicism, imprints a distinct genre for his music (Kuntz).

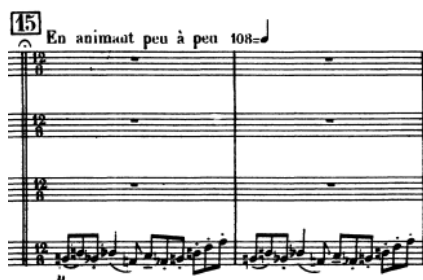
Debussy's string quartet portrays a unique structure that drifts from composers before him. The final movement of his only string quartet incorporates numerous transformations of themes, and the presence of singular themes. Through the alterations in themes, his ability to link all four movements through those transformations are enthralling as a performer and listener. The transformations allow performers to incorporate personal interpretations with each alteration, making each transformation memorable. Debussy's unconventional structure within the traditional four movement method of string quartet repertoire conveys his unique voice that continues to be narrated by musicians for centuries to come.

Themes

Theme 1



Theme 2



Alteration of Theme 2



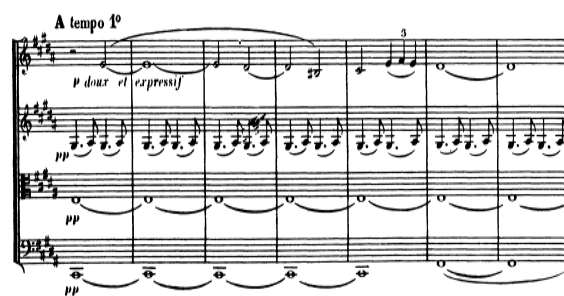
Second Alteration of Theme 2



Theme 3



Theme 9



Theme 9 diminished



Theme 9 augmented

ff avec passion et très soutenu

ff très soutenu

Cyclicism

Theme 2 Mvt. IV

En animant peu à peu 108=♩

p

Variation of Theme 2 Mvt. II

f

Theme 9 Mvt. IV

A tempo 1°

p doux et expressif

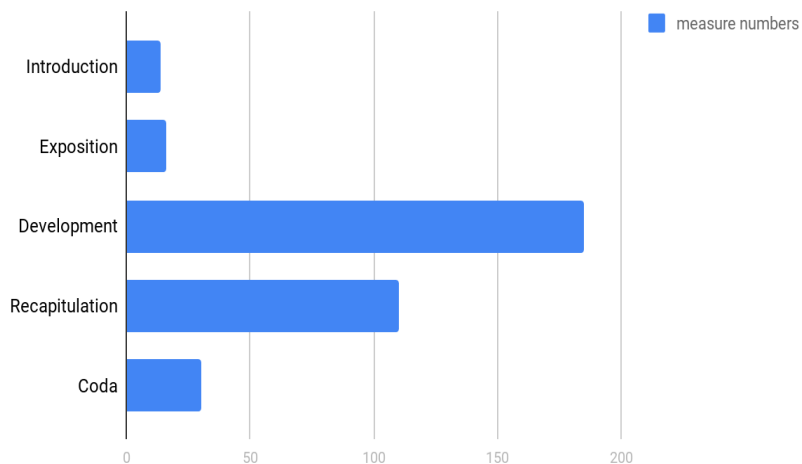
pp

Variation of Theme 9 Mvt. I

f

Form Diagram

IV. Très modéré – En animant peu à peu – Très mouvementé et avec passion



INTRODUCTION	m. 1-14	DbM → EM Chromaticism, [015], [024], [013]
EXPOSITION	m. 15-30	[014], [036], [026], [015]
DEVELOPMENT	m. 31-215	gm; chromaticism, [016], [013], octatonic, whole tone, G-mixolydian, climax in m. 181, quintal harmonies
RECAPITULATION	m. 216-325	[013], [025], [015], chromaticism, second climax in m. 252, fauxbourdon, quintal harmonies
CODA	m. 326-355	[025], [036], [014], [015], [024], [016], tertian harmonies, CM pentatonic, ends in GM

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