

# Literal and Symbolic Cyclic Form in Debussy's Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp



Christiane Stagg ❖ Gary Don, Faculty Mentor ❖ Music Theory ❖ University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

## Literal Cyclic Form

"I don't know whether it should move us to laughter or tears. Perhaps both."

"I've never liked 'variations.' They're just a slick procedure for making a lot out of very little."

### First Occurrence

The flute first states the theme *melancoliquement*, or gloomily, and is answered by the viola, which plays *doux et penetrant*, or sweetly and penetratingly.

The harp's opening Gb resolves downwards to F.



Pastorale, Measures 1 - 2

### Second Occurrence

The flute's theme is now played *dolce*, or sweetly, rather than gloomily as before.

The harp's first note, originally voiced as Gb, now appears as an F#. This is for voice leading reasons, and resolves upwards to G.



Pastorale, Measures 72-73

### Third Occurrence

By the end of the piece, this same theme has become *dolce espressivo*, or sweetly and expressively, completing the journey from the gloomy beginning.

The theme now occurs a minor third higher, in order to end the piece with a descending A-F progression.



Final, Measures 109-110

## Symbolic Cyclic Form

"It's not for me to say anything about the music... Although, I could do so without blushing, because it's by a Debussy I no longer know!"



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### Refuge from War

The piece was composed during the summer of 1915 and was the second to last piece of music completed by Debussy. While the cello sonata clearly shows the influence of World War I, the Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp serves a different purpose. Full of subtle explorations of color and mood, the piece serves as a canvas for the deathly ill Debussy's emotions. In October of 1915, he described his wartime home as a "little spot by the sea" where he could attempt to "try and forget the war."

### Reference to Debussy's Earlier Work

Debussy described the piece as a "memory" of a "Claude Debussy of long ago, of the *Nocturnes*, perhaps?"

The shifting colors in this sonata are similar to those employed in *Nuages*, the first of the *Nocturnes*. *Nuages* uses the metaphor of clouds to explore a wide palette of color changes, and Debussy uses similar techniques to explore colors in the Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp. Harmonics in the viola are similar to muted held notes in the violins of the *Nocturnes*.

### Ancient Music

Prior to the completion of this piece, Debussy commented that he had spent "nearly a year unable to write music" and "almost had to relearn it." It was, to him, a "rediscovery, and seemed... more beautiful than ever!" Written during this time, he described this Sonata as being in the "ancient [Greek], flexible mould."

The flute and harp are both ancient instruments, with the viola serving as the modern link.

The harp relates to Apollo, and the flute references Dionysus and Pan, as also seen in Debussy's *à l'après-midi d'un faune*.