

Debussy wrote *Syrinx* for solo flute in 1912 as a bit of incidental music for a play called *Psyché* by his friend Gabriel Mourey. *Syrinx* means “panpipes,” an instrument made of reeds of different lengths, fastened in a row and blown across their ends. The instrument was associated in Greek mythology with the demi-god Pan, and in Mourey’s play the flute solo accompanied the scene at the end where Pan dies. The piece was not published until 1927, nine years after Debussy’s death.

With its ambiguous harmonies and free rhythm, *Syrinx* sounds like the kind of music Debussy was thinking of when he wrote, “my favorite music is those few notes an Egyptian shepherd plays on his flute: he is a part of the landscape around him, and he knows harmonies that aren’t in our books.” On closer inspection we begin to see that the ambiguity and freedom are carefully contrived. The opening phrase elaborates the notes of a whole-tone scale (Bb, Ab, Gb, E). The whole-tone scale is incompatible with common-practice harmony, because it contains no 5ths and no half steps, making traditional cadences impossible and eliminating tonic-dominant polarity. Debussy used whole-tone scales in many works as a way to confound his listeners’ tonal expectations and to explore new harmonic possibilities. Here, though, he does not limit himself to the whole-tone scale. He decorates it with chromatic neighbors and passing tones in the first two measures (A, B, G, F). In measure 4 he exchanges it for an ascending chromatic scale (Bb, B, C, Db). In measure 11 he turns to a pentatonic scale (Gb, Ab, Bb, Db, Eb) with an added note (F). In measure 15, which begins the middle section of the piece, he uses a fully chromatic scale. At measure 26 (the recapitulation) he returns to the initial whole-tone scale. Then in the very last measure he switches to the *other* possible whole-tone scale (B, A, G, F, Eb, Db), which is how the piece ends. In this very short piece Debussy exchanges pitch materials almost compulsively, but he steadfastly avoids the major-minor diatonic scale.

Debussy’s rhythms are similarly subtle, and like his harmonies, they confound his listeners’ expectations. The piece is in 3/4 throughout, but the variety of note values, the frequent fermatas and the written-in tempo changes make it impossible to hear a triple meter. Instead of the strong-weak-weak pattern typical of 3/4, we hear long-long-short patterns, sometimes contained within a single bar (m.1), sometimes stretching over several bars (m. 6-8). Later on Debussy modifies this to long-long-long (m. 13, 15), long-short (m. 18, 19), and other combinations. In all cases Debussy’s rhythms are based on length rather than on stress – i.e. on long-short rather than strong-weak. This corresponds to the rhythmic principles of French speech, which is differentiated by syllable length rather than syllable stress.