A Functional Analysis of Claude Debussy’s *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* from the *Children's Corner Suite*

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Claude Debussy composed *Children's Corner*, a suite of six pieces for piano, between the years 1906-1908. They were dedicated to his daughter Claude-Emma (known as “Chou-Chou”) who was three years old at the time. Interestingly, the six short pieces bear English titles (probably due to Chou-Chou's English governess at the time): *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum, Jimbo's Lullaby* [sic] (intended to be *Jumbo's Lullaby*; a mistake by the composer), *Serenade for the Doll, Snow is Dancing, The Little Shepherd*, and *Golliwogg's Cakewalk.*¹

As the work's title, *Children's Corner*, indicates, the pieces are meant to reflect childhood. (Though they were not necessarily meant to be played by children due to their technical virtuosity).² The pieces use a tonal framework that teeter-totter somewhere between the old tradition of functional harmony and Debussy's progressive functional ambiguity. Debussy was 44 when he began composing these and died 10 years after finishing them, so the works are potentially useful for analysis since they show both his use of tonal ambiguity during the height of its maturity while simultaneously reflecting the traditions of functional harmony which he nevertheless inherited.

*Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* (literally, Doctor “Steps to Parnassus”) is the first piece in the suite and is a striking example of Debussy's ability to extend tonal harmony without abandoning it, and we will attempt to show the ways in which this piece conforms to a Schenkerian model (and some of the ways in which it does not, or rather ways in which it has been extended beyond the confines of the model). The piece makes satirical references to Muzio Clementi's instructional piano set, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, not only by way of the title but the use of the opening sixteenth patterns which are indicative of a piano finger study (see Figures 1, 2 on the next page).

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Figure 1. Mm. 1-2. Opening to Debussy's *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum*, from *Children's Corner*. Notice the unravelling sixteenths motivic pattern with the lone left-hand note.

Figure 2. Opening to Clementi's, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, Study No. 53. Similar to the Debussy satire, though not an exact source, it resembles some of the patterns Debussy might have based his own “piano study” on.
Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum begins with a thematic motive characterized by Schmitz as “perpetuum mobile” for its seemingly endlessness (see Figure 1). This motive also occurs later in both B-flat major and A-flat major in a rhythmic augmentation in which the values have been doubled in time:

![Motive in B-flat major](image)

**Figure 3.** Mm. 33-40. Here we see in the first system the opening motive in B-flat major with rhythms doubly slow, as well as a similar treatment in the second system, though in A-flat major.

These presentations of the opening theme in keys which are whole steps away is typical of Debussy's whole-tone language, and so we will ignore them and other effects of harmonic color for the purpose of our functional analysis. More interestingly, and what lends credence to the notion that this piece might indeed be built upon a tonal framework, is the use of dominant-tonic relationships. For example, near the end of the piece we have the opening motive underneath a G pedal thus initially creating a I⁶d chord (see Figure 4). Since the I⁶d suspension indicates a dominant harmony and suggests that the piece is perhaps based in tonal harmony at a deeper level.
When Debussy concludes the piece, he does indeed cadence, however at first glance it appears to be a plagal cadence indicating a tonic expansion:

![Music notation image]

CM:  I W  IV7 (V?)  I

**Figure 5.** Mm. 72-76. Showing the plagal cadence ending the piece. Notice that the appearance of the B and D suggests that there might be an implied root of G, and by consequence the V chord that would support scale degree 2.

There are three possible interpretations here: (1) the IV7 chord acts as a plagal cadence and the B and D act as neighbors to the following I chord; (2) the B and D actually provide us with an implied seventh chord since with the F and A we can build a vii half-diminished seventh chord in second inversion; (3) we can extend the previous concept even further to allow that the G be implied which
would allow for an authentic cadence following V to I. Note that although Debussy does use scale degree 3 in the first resolution to tonic (thus creating an imperfect authentic cadence), we can still treat this as a diminution so that at a lower level we are left with only scale degree 1. Adopting the third approach will provide a means to interpret this piece in the context of background level tonic-dominant relationships, however obscure they may be in the foreground.

Having presented an argument that the piece is built on a foundation of functional harmony, we proceed to determine the nature of the *Urlinie*. When we do a foreground reduction of the first three measures we find the following:

![Initial ascent and reaching over](image)

**Figure 6.** Analysis of the first three measures. Notice the reaching over in the inner voices, the initial ascent to scale degree 5, and the expansion of the tonic scale degree.

Of special interest are the use of reaching over and initial ascent which establish the *Kopftone* as scale degree 5. The *Urlinie* should thus descend 5-3-1 with additional support for the passing tones 4 and 2. It is apparent from the last five measures (see Figure 5) that if we assert that a dominant function does exist due to the presence of the B and D in the third to last measure, then it is a simple matter to
construct the 3-2-1 portion of the *Urlinie*. All that remains is finding suitable dominant support for the fourth scale degree, which is necessary in order for the piece to be argued to contain a 5-3-1 descent. To do this we will carefully examine the piece in the sections following the *Kopftone*.

Following the *Kopftone* is a linear intervallic pattern which connects the tonic harmony at scale degree 5 with the vi chord in C major. After the vi chord is another linear intervallic pattern that heads toward the IV\(^7\) chord (which will later predictably come to signify in this piece that a harmonic change is about to happen). The bass note of the IV\(^7\) chord, the F, resolves down by half-step to the E, and Debussy invokes the key of E through a common-tone modulation.

**Figure 7.** The linear intervallic pattern following the initial ascent to the *Kopftone* heading towards the vi chord.

The section from mm. 12-21 does not easily present functions because it is bitonal, simultaneously sounding an amm\(^7\) chord in the left hand and a bmm\(^7\) or dmm\(^7\) in the right hand (see Figure 8). The passage is brief and when it ends we return to the opening theme, so we will exclude it from our analysis since it does not serve a tonal function.
Figure 8. Showing bitonal passage in which the left hand seems to present an amm7 chord, while the notes of the right hand present either a bmm7 or a dmm7 chord.

In mm. 22-24 the opening theme reappears but instead of repeating the initial ascent to the Kopftone on scale degree 5, the motivic pattern turns into a 7-10-7-10 sequence which modulates to the key of E minor (which is interesting in that the bitonal section the immediately preceded this modulation centered around the pitch E).

The passage from mm. 24-31 involves a linear intervallic pattern which arrives at the key of G minor momentarily, but it finds its way, via Debussy's common-tone modulation technique, to the key of B-flat major in mm. 33. Previously in Figure 3, we saw how Debussy took the opening theme and doubled the length of the note values, thus slowing the process of reaching over and ascent. After reprising the theme for four measures in B-flat major with doubled rhythmic values, he planes the key down by a whole step and repeats the process, this time in A-flat major (although with a D-flat major key signature thereby creating a Mixolydian mode).

After four measures, we arrive at a pedal A-flat in m. 41, over which the composer alternates an A-flat major-minor seventh chord with another chord that appears to be a G-flat major-minor seventh chord over a pedal A-flat. Curiously, following the G-flat major-minor seventh, Debussy launches right back into the opening theme, except that instead of using a C in the bass, we have a G instead thus creating a I64 (dominant) chord in the key of C major.
Ab Mm\(^7\) over A-flat  
Gb Mm\(^7\) over A-flat

**Figure 9.** Showing a peculiar modulation from what appears to be D-flat major to C major.

Gb Mm\(^7\) over A-flat  
Ab Mm\(^7\) over A-flat

**Figure 10.** Showing one substitution possibility which allows the modulation to make functional sense as well provide support for scale degree four.

If we assume that the Ab Mm\(^7\) chord indicates a dominant function, then we would have an implied key of D-flat major. Since D-flat is a half step from C, we can assume that the two keys are connected harmonically, albeit through a chromatic modulation. Instead of trying to reckon with Gb Mm\(^7\) in the context of C major, let us create a substitution chord which preserves both the bass note of A-flat, and the soprano note F. Keeping in mind that we are heading towards a dominant function in C major, we might imagine that a D half-diminished seventh chord in second inversion, would sound very close to the Gb Mm\(^7\) chord over the A-flat. In other words, we have chromatically altered B-flat to C,
G-flat to F, and D-flat to D thus discovering the chord that is functionally implied—a ii half-diminished followed by a $V^6$ suspension, which is now a functional harmonic progression.

Recall the soprano had the note F in this modulation back to C Major. The pitch F also happens to be scale degree four in our hypothetical $Urlinie$, and if it is supported, then we can argue that the $Urlinie$ is of the type 5-3-1. Indeed, the G dominant pedal in m. 45 (at the reprise of the theme) supports the F, and thus supports scale degree four. The hypothetical $Urlinie$ 5-3-1 now contains support on all tones.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 11.** Showing the substitute second-inversion ii half-diminished chord as well as the dominant pedal support for scale degree four.
Now let us examine all of the evidence in favor of a 5-3-1 Urlinie by summarizing the key findings. In the opening measures of the piece, we found reaching over in an initial ascent to scale degree 5. After a couple linear intervallc patterns, the composer modulates to a bitonal section which in terms of analysis would become a diminution due to its lack of function. Following the bitonal section is the theme reprised in B-flat and then again in A-flat Mixolydian. Using the D-flat key signature, Debussy uses a chromatic modulation, of which the pivot chord acts like a chromatically altered ii half-diminished spelled instead as a G-flat major-minor seventh chord over an A-flat pedal. The soprano contains an F that eventually resolves downward to E indicating its function in the melodic descent. This descent is supported by a dominant pedal in the bass which starts following the modulation to C major, and is the only use of dominant pedal in the entire piece.

Following the support of scale degree four, the opening theme continues to unravel as a series of essentially plagal cadences, whereby the chords IV and I rapidly alternate. The series of plagal cadences (mm. 57-66) acts as a tonic expansion and supports, as we would expect, scale degree three. The soprano note E, scale degree three, does not appear until after the plagal cadences have finished, but the tonic expansion still remains thereby supporting the scale degree.

![Figure 12](image-url). A model of tonic-predominant-dominant-tonic found at the foreground level. Here we have what would be I-bIII-#IV-V-I. If it were forced to become diatonic it might resemble I-ii-IV-V-I.
As the piece comes to a close, there are a few tonic-dominant reinforcements on the local level in mm. 67-70. Curiously in mm. 68 and mm. 70 (see Figure 12 above) we have the chord progression C major, E-flat major, F-sharp major, G major, and C major (in roman numerals this would equate to I, flat III, sharp IV, V, I). Though the harmonic language is being extended for harmonic effect, what is clear is the tonic-predominant-dominant-tonic model being presented in the foreground.

Beginning in mm. 71 there is a downwards arpeggiation across the tonic C major chord which supports scale degree three. In mm. 73 we arrive at the mysterious IV\(^7\) chord which we earlier interpreted as a predominant that leads to a dominant with an implied root. This dominant under the guise of an IV\(^7\) chord is important in that at the background layer it must support scale degree two. Finally, a cadence concludes the melodic descent to scale degree one and the piece ends.

**Figure 13.** The end of the piece showing scale degree three, supported by an arpeggiated tonic chord passing through scale degree two with an implied dominant and resolving on scale degree one with tonic.

With the matter of the background support taken care of we can now present a graph of piece in its entirety. With the graph as a whole we can evaluate different aspects of the composition to see whether or not a Schenkarian analytical approach is useful for this particular piece.
Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum

initial ascent

reaching over

common tone modulation

Bitonal area focussing on "E"

CM: I

IV7/iii VII/iii V7/iii em: i V6% gm: IV i

IV BohM: A♭M:

CM: II/4 V7/vi V/vi -> E

ARP

C.T.

LIP

LIP

V^5

^3

^2

^1

IV^7 A♭+ I IV I IV I I V I
We can now address the issue of whether or not this piece by Debussy is functionally tonal. Since the piece mixes functional elements with non-functional ones, the answer is not straightforward. Some sections distinctly lean one way or the other, but others, due to chromatic and modal alteration are more difficult to evaluate.

For example, the substitute chord that we have come across is an example of something which on the surface appears to be non-functional, but when its appearance is reverted to a diatonic chord, we find that the chord easily fits into place within the tonal model. Debussy is the master of disguising tonality, and so these alterations can be misleading. On the other hand, in this piece there was a nearly bitonal section, and it would be nearly impossible to separate its elements into harmonies that could be identified by their function.

Yet this piece still contains a detectable Ursatz with an elaborate 5-3-1 melodic descent. To say that it did not exist would leave us with too many coincidences. For example, the surprise dominant pedal in the second half of the piece did after all serve its intended purpose and did resolve to the subsequent tonic prolongation (which became the 3-2-1 descent). Also, the linear intervallic patterns and the strategic use of initial ascent and reaching over seem to indicate that the composition does contain many functional elements straight out of the common-practice period. (We would in part expect this since the piece is meant to be a satire of Clementi's piano studies.) The non-functional elements only act as subordinate interludes and if they were stripped away, the piece's functional parts would be left undisturbed (though the result would be too mangled to appreciate from a musical standpoint).

Now, with the graph of the Ursatz in hand we can appropriately tackle the issue of form in this piece. First, let us evaluate the various sections of the piece to uncover an underlying basic organizational idea that guides the piece, then let us take that basic mold and examine the ways in which Debussy has altered it or stretched it for the purposes of this composition.

We notice first of all that the thematic material appears three times with two interludes. The last
time the theme appears it begins with the dominant pedal and is extended with a coda. We could summarize these sectional goals as: A B A' C A". Indeed the piece resembles a rondo at a basic organizational level. The delineations between the first three sections A B A' are clear. The B material is completely unrelated to the A material and is in a bitonal key area unrelated to the C major key of the surrounding sections. On the other hand, due to some deliberate compositional choices by Debussy, the boundaries between A' C A" are blurred. For example, at the onset of A' we almost immediately have a modulation within one measure. Whereas before Debussy uses an obvious common-tone modulation to move from A to B, here we have a rapid development of the A material which leads us to C.

Figure 14. Mm. 27-32. Showing the C section. It is characterized primarily by a melody which is always contained within the third. Immediately following are the two false reprises of theme A, the first in B-flat major, the second in A-flat major (see Figure 3).
Even more interesting is what follows C and comes before A": the theme slowed down by a factor of two in the keys of B-flat major and then A-flat major. Note that the keys are a whole step away from each other and a whole step away from C major—in essence, tonal planing (see Figure 3). These brief appearances of A in the “wrong” key and tempo are not simply false starts, rather they indicate a deliberate preparation to return to A from a distant key. As the analytical graph shows, without the use of the theme in A-flat major we could not have been able to as easily support scale degree four. So then these false reprises of A are in a sense reverse developments that act as transitions into the final return A, and they are not actual thematic statements even though the melodic line is similar. When considering them within the context of the rondo model, let us say that they are not part of A" rather they are part of C which is a developmental section.

When we finally reach A" the only change is the use of the dominant pedal instead of tonic. While this change may seem insignificant (after all, only two notes change), as we discovered before the dominant pedal actually acts as a support for scale degree four and thus completes the *Urlinie* melodic descent. This is a wonderful example of the skill Debussy has in being able to recast a musical idea in a different structural context with only very small changes, and this talent is one reason why the structure of his music is so innately interesting. Another example of relatively small changes at the local level effecting structural changes at the background level occurs some measures later when Debussy breaks out of the reprise of A" by changing what was previously a IV7 chord followed by E major to a IV7 chord followed by an A-flat augmented triad (the only difference being the B is raised to a C, and the G-sharp is repelled as A-flat). Just as composers of the previous era used the symmetrical fully-diminished chord as a secondary function to any one of four possible destinations, Debussy uses the symmetry of the augmented chord to choose any one of three possible destinations. One could imagine that if he had wanted, the composer could have taken the A-flat augmented triad and raised the C to a B (to create an E major chord) thus going into the key of E as he did at the beginning of the piece. Instead
he changes the A-flat into a G and he winds up with, appropriately, a C major chord which thus confirms the tonic scale degree. In essence he prepares the listener for a modulation, but the deceptively avoids it. The music that follows is essentially a coda in terms of form; however, it is still a crucial part of the piece in that it contains the final 3-2-1 melodic descent in the *Urlinie*.

**Figure 15.** Mm. 9-11. Showing IV7 chord turn into an E major chord (which leads to a section in the key of E).

**Figure 16.** Mm. 52-57. Showing the IV7 chord turning into an A-flat augmented chord and then turning back into a C major chord (at *En animant peu a peu*).
Let us now summarize our findings in form. Instead of using letters to denote sections, we will simply describe the process and the characteristics of the sections. We open with a primary theme in C major. After a rapid common-tone modulation we arrive at a section which focusses on the key E though is bitonal in some places. Using the E as a common-tone we modulate back to C major for a reprise of the primary theme however through a 7-10-7-10 sequence it modulates into a developmental area which wanders through many keys. As we depart the development, we hear a melodic anticipation of the return of the primary theme as we travel through the keys of B-flat and A-flat. The A-flat is used as flat scale degree 6 to lead to the dominant pedal which begins the final reprise of the theme. The theme proceeds verbatim until the IV7 chord turns into a functionally ambiguous augmented chord which leads back to the key of C major thus establishing the passage as a tonic prolongation. What follows in terms of harmony is a coda, but the descent of the Urline does not occur until the closing three bars in which an altered dominant chord stands in place for what would otherwise be a completely normal authentic cadence.

Now we shall discuss the appropriateness of Schenker's analysis technique for the study of this piece and other pieces by Debussy. It is well known that the music of Debussy is often primarily concerned with the sonorities of harmony as opposed to their function. Since the tools of Schenker's technique are not suited for non-functional analysis, we would normally reject their use in Debussy's music since they would not be able to elucidate the processes the composer may or may not have been using to create his music. In the case of this piece, however, which is a satire of the piano technique by Muzio Clementi, Debussy chose to use the common-practice model and bend it around his own musical language.

Though Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum is in some sense a trivial composition compared to his other mature works, it is interesting historically in that it provides a window into the musical mind of the composer. As a satirical composition it tells us things about the composer as a pianist and the tradition
that was apparent to him at the time (for example, it shows us that Clementi's piano studies were probably well known at the time). Further studies on this piece might reveal if there is an exact source for the primary theme to be found within the Clementi studies or whether Debussy's composition was merely mimicking the studies. In terms of harmonic analysis it might be interesting to see if there are any details in the background level which might correspond to similar harmonic approaches by Clementi. One would imagine though that most of the harmonic interest in the piece is by Debussy alone. After all the piece is a satire, so Debussy's intention was probably to make the study more interesting from a compositional point of view (instead of merely an exercise of the fingers).

In conclusion, *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* does adhere to the common-practice tonal model as described by Schenker, but with some caveats. There are sections of the composition which do not have a function and so they must be ignored. For example the bitonal section can only be reduced as an elaboration of the note E, and it is not clear whether that has significance for the bass line or the soprano line. However, there are other features of Schenker's theory that present themselves very clearly such as the presentation of an undivided Ursatz with a Urlinie descent 5-3-1. Also the use of an initial ascent and reaching over signify points of stable tonal writing however ephemeral they may be. As a result, *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* is a wonderful combination of Debussy's extended harmonic language and the principles behind the tradition functional tonality.

**Bibliography**

