Debussy: *Arabesque* No. 1

1. What Does the Title Mean?

An arabesque is an Arabic decorative design made from flowing, curving and intertwining lines. Debussy creates the same effect in music through flowing melodies and continuous patterns that weave around each other. This includes flowing triplet patterns, smooth melodies, light textures, changing harmonic colours and a feeling of continuous movement.

2. What Style and Period Is This From?

Period: 20th Century **Style:** Impressionist (though Debussy considered himself symbolist) **Composed:** about 1888 to 1891

Debussy was one of the most important Impressionist composers. This style often focuses on atmosphere, colour and sound rather than strong dramatic contrasts.

Feature	Meaning in this piece
Harmony	Colourful chords, seventh chords, added notes and less emphasis on traditional dominant to tonic progressions.
Scales	Major and minor scales combined with pentatonic and modal sounds.
Rhythm	Flowing rhythms and two against three cross rhythms.
Texture	Light, transparent textures with several musical layers.
Dynamics and pedal	Subtle changes of volume and sustain/damper pedal create shading and resonance/colour.

3. Who Was the Composer? Composer genres

Claude Debussy, 1862 to 1918

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) was a French composer who had a significant influence on twentieth-century music. He entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten, where he studied piano and later composition with Ernest Guiraud. In 1884, he won the Prix de Rome and travelled to the Villa Medici in Rome in January 1885. Unhappy with the restrictive academic environment, he returned to Paris in March 1887, before completing the customary three-year residency. During his time in Rome, he encountered the music of Palestrina and Orlando di Lasso and met Franz Liszt.

Debussy's early influences included Chopin, Liszt, Wagner and French composers such as Massenet and Fauré. He also admired the music of Russian composers, particularly Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Although initially attracted to Wagner's music, he later distanced himself from the German composer's influence. A significant event was the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle, where Debussy encountered Javanese gamelan music. He was also influenced by the Symbolist literary movement, particularly the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine, and by contemporary French art. Although frequently associated with Impressionism, Debussy resisted the label.

Debussy's personal life was marked by tumultuous relationships. He had a long relationship with Gabrielle Dupont before marrying Rosalie ‘Lilly’ Texier in 1899. In 1904, he left Texier for Emma Bardac, causing a public scandal. Debussy and Bardac had a daughter, Claude-Emma, affectionately known as Chouchou, in 1905, and married in 1908. Debussy was devoted to his daughter, dedicating his piano suite *Children's Corner* (1908) to her. He also composed the ballet *La boîte à joujoux* (The Toy Box), inspired by the world of children's toys. Debussy spent most of his life in Paris. He underwent surgery for cancer in 1915 and died on 25 March 1918, aged 55, during the First World War.

Genres

- **Choral music –** Sacred and secular works for chorus, including Trois chansons de Charles d’Orléans.
- **Songs / mélodies –** Numerous French art songs and song cycles, including Ariettes oubliées and Fêtes galantes.
- **Solo instrumental music –** Syrinx for solo flute is an important example.
- **Chamber music –** String Quartet, Violin Sonata, Cello Sonata, Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp.
- **Incidental / theatre music –** Le Martyre de saint Sébastien.

- **Opera –** Pelléas et Mélisande; he also left operatic projects unfinished.
- **Ballet / dance works –** Jeux and Khamma.
- **Symphonic poems / orchestral preludes –** Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune.
- **Orchestral music –** La mer, Nocturnes, Images pour orchestre.
- **Piano duet and two-piano music –** Petite Suite, Six épigraphes antiques, En blanc et noir.
- **Solo piano music –** Préludes, Images, Estampes, Études, Suite bergamasque, Children's Corner, Arabesques.

4. Analysis: Form, Sections and Keys

Overall form: A, B, A1, Coda **Key:** E major

The piece has a broad ternary structure. Debussy begins in E major, moves through contrasting tonal areas and returns to E major at the end.

Bars	Section	Key or tonal area	Main features
1 to 4	Introduction	E major (starts on sub-dominant)	Flowing triplets establish the arabesque character
5 to 16	A: Main theme	E major	Lyrical main theme and important two against three rhythm
17 to 25	A: Development of main theme	E major	Sequences, flowing patterns and changing harmony
26 to 38	Bridge between sections.	D major chords, B major, F# minor, back to E major.	Increasing intensity prepares the contrasting section
39 to 54	B: New theme	A major	Contrasting theme and texture with warmer harmonic colour
55 to 62	B Development/restatement of B theme	A major	Theme develops through repetition and sequence
63 to 70	Transition	C major	Builds and prepares the return
71 to 94	Return to Section A	E major	Opening arabesque texture returns
100 to 107	Coda	E major	Finishing section

Main key plan: E major to A major to E major. This can be understood as tonic to subdominant to tonic.

Important Musical Features

Two against three: Two notes in one musical layer are heard against three notes in another, making the melody appear to float.
Pentatonic writing: Five note scale patterns reduce the strong pull of traditional major and minor harmony.
Sequences: A musical pattern is repeated at different pitch levels.
Colouristic harmony: Chords are valued for their sound and colour as well as their traditional harmonic function.
Texture and register: Debussy creates climaxes by moving higher, becoming louder and increasing the thickness of the texture.

5. Musical Notation and Meanings

Notation or term	Meaning
Andantino con moto	Moderately, at a gentle walking pace, but with movement
p, piano	Soft
pp, pianissimo	Very soft
cresc.	Gradually get louder
dim., diminuendo	Gradually get softer
rall.	Gradually slow down
a tempo	Return to the original tempo
dolce	Sweetly and gently
espressivo	Expressively
legato	Smooth and connected
staccato	Short and detached
8va	Play one octave higher than written
Ped.	Use the sustain pedal
Triplet, 3	Three notes played in the time of two
Slur	Play legato (smoothly)
Accent, >	Accent the note (marcato)
Crescendo	Gradually become louder
Diminuendo	Gradually become softer
Risoluto	Resolved
molto	Much
Poco a poco	Little by little
Stringendo	Pushing forward
Rit.	Immediately held back
Tenuto	Hold the note for its full value
Mezzo staccato (staccato with slur)	Moderately short and detached
Mosso	More (faster tempo)
Piu	Little
sempre	Always