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<sup>1</sup>aaziz@sdsu.edu**Et Tu, Debussy and Ravel: *fin-de-siècle* Recapitulations, 1890–1925****ABSTRACT****Background**

Following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, French composers — particularly Saint-Saëns, Franck, Fauré, and d’Indy — began to compose works in a musical form that had to that point been associated almost exclusively with Austro-Germanic composers: the sonata. The next generation of French composers experimented with the form’s thematic and harmonic dimensions, highlighting the recapitulation in particular as a potential source of dramatic meaning. Among them, Debussy and Ravel experimented with sonata forms in ‘abstract’ and ‘programmatic’ genres. In their abstract pieces, they responded to the conventions associated with a work’s title, e.g. ‘sonata’. In the programmatic works, they supplied sonata forms for works that provided a blank formal canvas.

**Aims and Repertoire Studied**

This paper identifies some important differences in the recapitulatory strategies chosen by Debussy and Ravel in their programmatic and abstract pieces. I approach these pieces through the lens of listener expectation: because the titles of programmatic works do not imply sonata forms, such works paint their sonata pictures, as it were, on a blank canvas. For works with an abstract title, the listener is interacting with an *a priori* formal template. The pieces under consideration include: Debussy’s String Quartet (1893), *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1894), ‘Fêtes’ from *Nocturnes* (1899), *L’isle joyeuse* (1904), ‘Par les rues et par les chemins’ from *Iberia* (1905), Cello Sonata (1915), and Violin Sonata (1917); and Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* (1901), String Quartet (1905) and ‘Scarbo’ from *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), Piano Trio (1914), and Violin Sonata (1923).

Early examples of sonata-allegro form are found in the first movements of both composers’ string quartets, introducing their formative conceptions of recapitulations within an abstract genre. *Prélude*, ‘Fêtes’, and ‘Par les rues’ are three orchestral compositions of Debussy that execute explicit sonata processes — containing novel approaches to recapitulation — within a programmatic setting; both composers continue to modify these patterns within their virtuosic piano works (*Jeux d’eau*, *L’isle joyeuse*, and ‘Scarbo’). Finally, in their late chamber works, both composers hearken back to works that employ an abstract title — as displayed through their quartets — as a canvas for sonata composition; in these works, Debussy and Ravel’s final conception of the recapitulation crystallized.

**Methods**

As articulated above, I consider works from both composers’ early, middle and late periods, comprising an *oeuvre* of both programmatic and abstract compositions; both venues contain

novel approaches to recapitulatory processes that evolve over their compositional spans. Through analysis of form, I employ the theories of Caplin, Schmalfeldt, and Hepokoski and Darcy to understand the ways in which Debussy and Ravel build sonata expositions that set up expectations for how the recapitulation will proceed. To show how this section is treated differently in the two repertoires, I supplement these theories with original analytical categories entitled ‘generic clash’, ‘generic restoration’, and ‘resetting of the formal compass’, which I define below.

**Implications**

The first movements of both composers’ string quartets foreshadow compositional trends that manifest throughout their sonata *oeuvre*. To start, the exposition of Debussy’s quartet is mired in harmonic flux; after the primary theme (P) traces the zone of G minor/Phrygian, the transition (TR) futilely tries to settle in the tonal area of E-flat, progressing toward an emphatic arrival on the dominant of E minor. The next theme (based on P), serving as closing, placidly answers the bell in another temporary key (F-sharp minor). Undeterred, the very same material modulates once again — *back* to tonic G minor — and veers toward the development, voiding any possible expositional resolution in a secondary key. This raises the question of how the recapitulation will ‘respond’ to an exposition that suggests tonal closure.

The analogous closing passage in the recapitulation is able to achieve what the exposition does not — repose in a key other than the tonic (D major), often articulated using a large-scale pedal point. Previously, during the retransition of the development section, D — also as a pedal point — functions in the manner of a ‘standing on the dominant’; in the recapitulation, however, D is recalibrated to function as a tonic prolongation, stripped of any tendency to resolve to its home key of G minor (the ultimate resolution to G occurs within an expansive coda). Thus: 1) the exposition is reluctant to settle in any particular key beyond tonic; 2) the recapitulation responds by providing explicit tonal duality unachieved by the exposition. To describe this phenomenon in works with abstract titles (such as ‘sonata’ or ‘quartet’), I propose the following terms; expositions often do not modulate as prescribed by the external sonata template (‘generic clash’), while recapitulations do provide this large-scale tonal contrast (‘generic restoration’), previously unfulfilled by the exposition.

In Ravel’s string quartet, one observes a tamer progression of themes and keys; additionally, the sections of ‘S’ and ‘C’ that one might normally observe within earlier instantiations of sonata-allegro form are now compressed into a singular theme, S/C. The expositional P-zone takes shape as a rounded binary, with a prevailing chorale texture throughout. Giving way to an active sixteenth-note passage (a similar passage occurs in the Debussy quartet, albeit *within* P), the transition sets sail in

search of a harmonic destination, which it ultimately achieves with a prototypical standing on the dominant that articulates V of D minor, via a well-defined medial caesura (MC). Unlike Debussy's quartet, however, the following thematic passage confirms the prepared key area of D (natural) minor, achieving harmonic repose. Due to the section's modal nature, however, one may question whether D is truly a different 'key' from F major, or if a different modal center within the diatonic collection is being promoted. The recapitulation script reflects upon this irony; tapping into the equivalence between these modally-related keys, S/C — at least initially — reproduces nearly identical music to the exposition, save for the bass line, which replaces expositional 'D's with 'F's.

Even when the two composers adopted strictly programmatic titles — echoing the Symbolist movement around them — they continued to engaged hallmarks of sonata-allegro form. For example, in Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, there is an explicit sojourn to the dominant key at the end of the 'exposition' (see Pomeroy 2003); such a tonic-dominant polarity is also evident in his *L'isle Joyeuse*, primarily centered on A (articulated through a potpourri of scalar collections, see Tymoczko 2004), though E is ultimately achieved by the work's developmental section. In both cases, however, it is the appearance of a recapitulation — albeit in a truncated form — that inevitably confirms the destination of the sonata's itinerary. Thus, while harmony provides a generic signpost, it is the works' recapitulations that deliver formal synthesis.

Two of Debussy's orchestral works, 'Fêtes' and 'Par les rues et par les chemins' produce a similar effect. 'Fêtes's' dialogue with sonata-allegro form is explicit; it contains both clear bi-thematicism as well as a tonic-dominant polarity; like in his String Quartet, however, the exposition tonally veers off course, spilling into the development section — such developmental processes are explored in Parks 1989. The development that follows — longer than the exposition itself — engulfs the piece, placing the sonata's existence in doubt. Yet, it is the recapitulation of the primary theme *in tonic* that delivers the form, despite reprising only a single theme before dissolving entirely (a 'partial rotation' for Hepokoski and Darcy); 'Par les rues' provides similar bi-thematicism, though the P is juxtaposed with an explicitly modal/octatonic S-zone (in contrast to the I-V polarity of earlier works); following a similarly extensive developmental section as above, a truncated recapitulation rotation, initiated by P, completes the sonata trajectory.

Thus, I assert that in these programmatic works by both composers, coherent expositional rotations are formed by well-defined thematic areas and clear modulations to secondary keys. The recapitulations of these programmatic pieces, however, are atypical: 1) they are often truncated (as shown in the two Debussy examples) or 2) the rotation is subjected to a neutral formal function called 'resetting of the formal compass' (RFC) — marked by a wash of sound, often containing a symmetrical scale. In both cases, I reject arch or reverse recapitulation processes, instead underscoring the rotational principle of sonata form. The process of RFC is exemplified in two works by Ravel, *Jeux d'eau* and *Scarbo*; though both recapitulations are truncated, a hypnotic tonal event salvages both thematic rotations. In *Jeux d'eau*, a rogue pedal point at the end of the development (G $\sharp$ ,  $\hat{3}$ ) infects the lower register (a 'hostile subposition', as Heinzlmann 2008 describes in Ravel's Trio),

and thus the recapitulation must shake free in order to proceed thematically; a virtuosic octatonic flourish eradicates the viral pedal point, salvaging the sonata process both tonally and thematically. In 'Scarbo' — the development of which is notably absent — a recapitulation that reprises the diabolical opening bars dissolves into the ether, entering a hypnotic state of (mostly) octatonicism. In order to break the trance, the music virulently awakens from its stupor with a rash of sequences and virtuosic major seconds in the right hand, ultimately restoring the thematic rotation of the exposition.

The onset of World War I prompted Debussy and Ravel to restore abstract genres, particularly within the venue of the chamber sonata, starting with Ravel in his Piano Trio (1914) and Debussy in his Cello Sonata (1915). Possessing abstract titles, these works prescribe the hallmarks of sonata-allegro form, perhaps none more so than the propensity for expositional modulation. Ironically, such modulations are easily achieved by the composers' programmatic sonata processes, but yet resisted by their early chamber works, which *fore-shadow* the tendencies for generic clash and restoration within the later works.

Ravel's Piano Trio in A minor is the first work that hearkens back to the quartets previously discussed. Following well-defined P and TR thematic units, the path of transition ultimately achieves no tonal progression, as the standing on the dominant articulates V of the tonic key. Echoing the process of the string quartet, S answers the bell *in tonic* (a generic clash), suggesting that the movement will be reaching an imminent close; it is the recapitulation, however, that functions in a compensatory manner, achieving tonal contrast (generic restoration) in the form of C major. A similar process is found in Debussy's Cello Sonata, the exposition of which does not leave D minor (clash); though, a 'promissory note' of B natural — baked into the Dorian tendencies of the exposition — is functionally transformed into the leading tone of C major, the key of recapitulation (restoration). The exposition of the Violin Sonata, likewise, is resistant to leave the key of G minor, and does so only after a coda-like passage analogous to Ravel's Piano Trio. Finally, Ravel's contrapuntal and polytonal Violin Sonata takes a cue from his String Quartet. This exposition of this G major work sidesteps into the modal key of A Dorian; in tandem, the recapitulation recycles the precise key center *en route* to a double-leading tone cadence that restores the tonic key. All four of these works exemplify the paradigm of clash/restoration, crystallizing both composers' lifelong conceptions of sonata form.

### Keywords

Debussy, Ravel, Recapitulations, Sonata Theory, Rotation, Generic Clash, Generic Restoration, Resetting of the Formal Compass.

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