

**GOING BEHIND THE NOTES: EXPLORING THE GREAT PIANO COMPOSERS  
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**CLAUDE DEBUSSY: SEEKER OF THE INEXPRESSIBLE**

Dr. George Fee  
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Performance: Sarabande from Suite Pour le piano

Overview of Debussy's Life (1862-1918)  
Debussy's Esthetics  
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Performance: Preludes, Book I, 1 . . . Danseuses de Delphes  
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Playing Debussy's Piano Music

Performance: Preludes, Book I, 10 . . . La Cathédrale engloutie  
11 . . . La danse de Puck  
12 . . . Minstrels

Concluding Thoughts on Debussy

## RECOMMENDED READING ON DEBUSSY

- Briscoe, James R., ed. Debussy in Performance. Yale University Press, 1999.
- Lesure, Francois. Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography. English Translation and Revised edition by Marie Rolf, University of Rochester Press, 2019.
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- Thompson, Oscar. Debussy: Man and Artist. Originally published, 1937, Dover, 1967.
- Walsh, Stephen. A Painter in Sound. Faber and Faber, 2018.

## DEBUSSY'S BEST-KNOWN MUSIC

- Piano: Suite Pour le Piano, Estampes, L'isle Joyeuse, Images I and II, Children's Corner, Preludes Books I and II, Etudes
- 70 Songs
- Orchestral: Prélude a l'après-midi d'un faune, Nocturnes, La Mer, Images

## PIANO MUSIC INTERPRETERS

Walter Gieseking, Jeffrey LaDeur

## CLAUDE DEBUSSY: SEEKER OF THE INEXPRESSIBLE

PERFORM: Sarabande from Suite Pour le piano

### Overview of Debussy's Life (1862-1918)

Achille-Claude Debussy was born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a village 11 miles west of Paris in 1862. His birthplace was rather recently turned into a museum. His undistinguished father owned a china shop at the time Claude, the oldest of four children, was born. (He actually went by his given first name of Achille until the age of 28). His mother was, at least at one period of time, a seamstress. They moved to Paris when Claude was two and the family barely subsisted from various odd jobs. They were suffering so much financially that when Claude was eight, he was sent to live with his aunt in Cannes. Unlike his parents, his aunt and her husband were highly cultured and rather wealthy, and they introduced the young child to the finer things in life, including painting and his first piano lessons.

After several months in Cannes, Claude returned to Paris to be with his family, and since his huge musical talent had been discovered, piano lessons were resumed. The new teacher proved to be a very fortunate choice. This teacher, who was the mother of the composer Charles de Sivry, and the mother-in-law of the poet Paul Verlaine, instilled in Claude a life-long love of the music of J.S. Bach as well as the principles of how to play the piano as Chopin taught and played. In only two year' time, she had given him such excellent training that he was accepted at the Paris Conservatory at the age of 10, apparently the youngest student ever to be admitted. She also provided an example of a free-spirited lifestyle which would intrigue and prove influential on the young boy. At age 12, Claude was awarded the Conservatory prize as the top pianist, having only studied piano for four years. However, during the next year he lost interest in piano study, becoming much more enthralled with his harmony and solfège classes. (Solfège is the vocal conversion of written music to audible pitches, and the understanding of their relationships.)

Having won the prestigious Prix de Rome at age 22, Debussy spent the next two years in Rome. He was totally miserable there and longed for his beloved Paris. From his return to Paris at the age of 25 until the age of 40 he lived a truly bohemian lifestyle, with his only income coming from teaching an occasional piano lesson and from sporadic accompanying (He was terrible at the former, though phenomenal at the latter.)

Most of Debussy's compositions until the age of 30 were songs, many of which are extraordinary. He received a little fame at the age of 32 with his path-breaking orchestral composition, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. (This word Faun, does not refer to a young deer, but rather to a half-human, half goat mythological creature which was a symbol of fertility.) His first real fame came in 1902 at the age of 40 with his one, and only, opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. However, he received little income from this work, after having labored on it off and on for nearly a decade.

His orchestral work, *La Mer (The Sea)*, which premiered at the age of 43, brought him much additional fame. But again, fame did not translate into significant income. While he continued to compose for the rest of his life, he was always desperate for income. This need forced him to travel to

England, Russia, and other places in Europe to guest conduct his own works, despite his knowing that he was a very ineffectual conductor. Many of these tours took place after he had been diagnosed with colorectal cancer at the age of 47. His cancer gradually worsened, causing him extreme pain and suffering. He died in March of 1918, not yet 55 years old.

### Debussy's Esthetics

In my other presentations I have early on discussed the personality of the composer. However, today I feel it best to go right to the essence of the thought and music of our featured composer, and delay illuminating his personality until later.

For over a century most people have considered Debussy to be an Impressionist. However, he emphatically, vehemently, complained that he was NOT an Impressionist, and consistently maintained that that term was very inappropriate for his music. He did not relate to the fact that the Impressionist painters were essentially realists who thought in terms of the visible.

Debussy insisted he was a Symbolist, having submersed himself in the poetry of the Symbolist writers since his teenage years. This is extremely important in understanding Debussy and his music. The Symbolists were concerned with what lay behind external appearances – the intangible and the inexpressible. The Symbolists received their name because they interpreted what they saw as a symbol of a more spiritual experience. The Impressionists depicted. The Symbolists and Debussy suggested. The Impressionists portrayed objects. Debussy and the Symbolists expressed emotional reactions to objects.

The Symbolists were obsessed with dreams and viewed them as representations of the imagination, and the true reality. Jules Laforgue wrote: "A poem should be drowned in dreams." Debussy saw music as "a dream from which the veils have been lifted" and said that his goal was to write music which would be "supple and adaptable to fantasies and dreams." He wrote that "an artist by definition is one who is used to dreaming -who lives among apparitions." He urged that one should "have the courage to go on living in one's dream, and the energy to go on searching for the inexpressible, which is the ideal of art."

Closely related to dreams was mystery. Debussy said that he, himself, was a man who saw "mystery in everything." He would have approved of Einstein's statement, "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious." Debussy loved the work of other creative artists who depicted mystery and considered the painter J.M.W. Turner to be the "finest creator of mystery in the whole of art."

The works of Edgar Allen Poe were read voraciously by Debussy and his fellow Symbolists. Debussy believed that "Poe possessed the most original fantasy among the literature of all lands; he found a note absolutely new and different." Debussy eventually started to compose operas based on two works of Poe- "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Devil in the Belfry." Sadly, these works were never completed.

This love of mystery led to seeking a spiritual reality. Edvard Munch saw the artist's role to be that of transforming the visible world by presenting "the inner picture of the soul – the pictures on the reverse side of the eye." (This is similar to the admonition to artists from the painter, Caspar David Friedrich which I included in my Schumann presentation: "Shut your physical eye and look at your subject first of all in your spiritual one.") Mallarmé believed that poetry should explore "the mysterious meaning of the various aspects of our existence." Debussy himself said, "I have made mysterious nature my religion." He also once stated, "The outside world almost doesn't exist for me."

Perhaps people would relate more deeply to Debussy's music if they viewed it as a vehicle of Symbolism and not of Impressionism. Impressionism, by definition, deals with the surface (although late in life Monet did explore profound depths in his art and transcended Impressionism). Symbolism sought the essence of life.

The ideal vehicle to express the aims of the Symbolists was believed to be music. Schopenhauer wrote: "The effect of music is more powerful and penetrates far more deeply than that of the other arts: for they communicate in shadows, whereas it communicates the essence." Debussy wrote: "The beauty of a work of art must always remain mysterious. Let us at all costs preserve this magic peculiar to music, since of all arts it is most susceptible to magic." He also wrote that "music is not just the expression of a feeling – it is the feeling itself." He once stated his compositional goal was "to arrive at the naked flesh of emotion."

These emotional feelings were not of a heroic, majestic and grandiose nature. Instead they were intimate, subdued, and atmospheric. Mallarmé, seen as a leader of the Symbolists, and the poet of the "Afternoon of a Faun", for which Debussy wrote the prelude mentioned earlier which contains some of the most beautiful and atmospheric music ever written, wrote that poetry should "evoke in a deliberate shadow the unmentioned object by elusive words." As it has been said, Debussy's music "evokes a half-light in which the conscious and subconscious meet."

Debussy's art is the art of the interior. He told an interviewer that he sought to write down his musical dreams in the spirit of utter self-detachment and to sing his "interior visions....I live in an imaginary world... and I feel exquisite pleasure in searching deeply within myself."

Debussy's music reflects the poetry of the Symbolists who wrote through implication and suggestion, rather than through direct statement.

While the French Symbolist poets furnish more insight into Debussy's aims than do the Impressionist painters, the world of painting does have a relationship to Debussy's art. Debussy aspired to be a painter in his youth and at one point wrote "I love pictures about as much as music." He was especially inspired by the paintings of Turner, Whistler and Degas. He always treasured the palette that he had used as a young person in his own painting. Perhaps his closest affinity with the impressionists is his exploitation of light and color in music. He spoke of the conscious "special effects of light", and the "fleeting impressions" in his music.

Another crucial part of Debussy's esthetics was his identification with, and personification of, the long-established fundamental qualities of French music. It was a German philosophy to primarily perceive music as a vehicle of moral uplift and to desire powerful emotions to be expressed by music. In contrast, French musicians have for many centuries wanted music to appeal to the intelligence and to the senses, and to embody a sense of perfect proportion, clarity, logic, and balance. The sensuous was to be expressed only with grace and restraint.

Debussy himself wrote: "To a Frenchman, finesse and nuance are the daughters of intelligence. French music is all clearness, elegance, and simple, natural declamation. The aim of French music is, before all, to please."

Debussy's models were the great 18<sup>th</sup> century French composers, Couperin, and Rameau. What Debussy saw in Rameau's music was delicacy, charm, and restraint – the true authentic French tradition.

This suggests the French language. The French language is different from English and German which are comprised of heavily accented words and syllables. French is very lightly accented, if at all, and the consonants are soft.

Near the end of his life, Debussy signed three of his pieces "Claude Debussy, musicien Français." This was partly because France and Germany were at war. However, Debussy perceived the war as being not only political and military, but also a struggle between cultures. By signing his name in this manner, he was calling attention to the musical heritage which he was continuing.

Rameau was Debussy's role model in writing his own opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. This opera clearly demonstrates the essence of Debussy's thought and approach to music, and it provides a key to understanding all of Debussy's music. It exemplifies understatement, the primacy of the text over the music, and a respect for the inflections of the French language. Even before writing this opera, Debussy had expressed his belief that "music in opera is far too prominent." He was opposed to all exaggeration in opera, including the traditional big, bold, dramatic arias and the easily accessible tunes. He wanted to avoid the grandiloquence, histrionics, and large scenes of Italian and German opera. He wanted his opera to be allegorical, to be set in no specific country, in no particular point in time, and he desired that there be little action, and that "things be half-said."

Debussy asked the cast of *Pelléas et Mélisande* to forget that they were singers, and he asked them to sing as if they were real people and to declaim in a "speech – song" which would resemble speaking.

Debussy was not at all seeking to take emotional expression out of his opera. His understated approach was not from a lack of feeling, but rather, from desiring a subtle communication of feeling. He wanted to express and reveal the state of mind of the characters and wanted external events to be subordinated to the sentiments of the soul. He praised one of the singers in the cast for her ability to "abstract herself entirely from the material world, so that it became so supernatural." What he sought was to create a subtle, symbolist dreamworld. He achieved this partly through a discrete use of the orchestra, and melodic and rhythmic writing which enhanced the declamation of the text.

The end result was that Debussy produced an exceptional work of French art. It is definitely the most subtle opera ever written. However, it remains a connoisseur's opera, largely underappreciated and underperformed outside of France. It does not contain the excesses which the general public has always loved, and still continues to love, in opera. The famous German opera composer Richard Strauss even exclaimed after attending *Pelléas*, "What, that's not an opera!" It is not an opera in the usual sense of opera. It is something more interior.

### Debussy's Music

Debussy was among the most radical of all composers. He was also among the most important and most influential composers in the nearly 1000 years of Western European music. His unique, personal musical style wielded a pivotal influence on a vast number of composers after him. They would call him "the father of us all", and few in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would escape his influence. His contemporary, composer Maurice Ravel, incorrectly perceived as a rival by many people, wrote after hearing Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, "On hearing this work I really understood what music was....There is nothing in the world more perfect...I would like to die listening to it."

Debussy was a true revolutionary, breaking whatever rules he wished with a daring attitude to forge an entirely new path and follow his own personal vision. He was a constant experimenter from age 12, demanding of his prestigious professors why his ear alone should not be permitted to be the sole determinant of the sonorities which would comprise his compositions. He stated, "my pleasure is the law." Once while on vacation later in life, he wrote that he had just spent only 75 centimes for a table to write "things that will revolutionize the world."

Debussy was unique in basing his compositions primarily on the element of sonority. Since music is comprised of sound, one might think that music had always been created with color as a priority. However, this is not the case. Until the early 18th century, chords, as self-contained entities, did not really exist in music. Music up to that point was primarily conceived as simultaneous melodic lines which were composed in such a manner that they interlocked without producing undesirable clashes. As late as the music of J.S. Bach and Handel, music was usually constructed with this concept as its foundation. However, by this time, chords were beginning to be recognized as entities in themselves and were being accepted as a crucial element in composition, supplementing the older linear, horizontal, approach. By the mid-18 century, the concept of constructing music primarily through a series of chords became dominant, and we see the results in the music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. Melody was still important. But harmony is what a piece was fundamentally built upon, and one could say that harmony "called the tune."

At that time however, a chord was not selected for use based on how sensuous and how lovely it was by itself. Rather, it was selected according to how the tension created by the chord affected its relationship with the harmonies that preceded and followed it. A chord assumed its meaning and emotional import only by its location.

There were not an unlimited number of chords available to be used, and not every chord could be preceded or succeeded by just any other. People might be surprised if they consider the fact that

compared to today, relatively few chords and only a limited number of “permissible” successions of chords were available to Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert when they composed their sublime masterpieces.

Their music was not built around color. Their music was built on structure and form. Color and chords were a means to an end and not an end in themselves. If an especially intense chord was placed at a certain point in a vocal work, it was usually because the word at that spot needed to be emotionally enhanced. If it occurred in an instrumental work, it was because the structure of the piece or the phrase called for extra tension at that point. It was not because the composer said to himself, “I like the particular sound of this chord. I think I’ll use it now and follow it with another beautiful one I am drawn to.”

Especially colorful or intense chords were limited in number and the composer had better employ them at strategic places, and not just anywhere. The idea of expanding the number of available chords was not something which occurred to Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. They took the existing chord possibilities and created edifices of greatness from them.

Composers were not usually greatly concerned about individual specific instrumental color up through 1820 or so. J.S. Bach arranged wind pieces for strings and string pieces for keyboard. Composers usually didn’t care whether one played a keyboard piece on a harpsichord, clavichord, organ, or piano. They often hardly took the precise individual instrument into account when writing for it. The music was conceived in a composer’s head and then notated for whatever instrument was selected. After Beethoven wrote his Violin Concerto, the violinist who premiered it complained that it did not suit the violin. Beethoven’s response was, “Do you think I was thinking of your wretched fiddle when I was writing your Concerto?”

However, along came Frédéric Chopin who wrote basically only for the piano and whose music actually originated from the unique timbre of the piano. Along came Hector Berlioz who made the color of each orchestral instrument a crucial, integral ingredient of his compositions. (It is noteworthy that both of these composers were French.) Many other composers followed suit, making instrumental color an essential component of their pieces.

Chopin and Liszt sought out innovative harmonies. Wagner followed Liszt’s path, and after Wagner, composers had a larger vocabulary of harmonies to employ, as well as many more permissible successions of harmonies. However, there were still many preconceptions and guidelines which even progressive, forward-looking composers like Wagner honored. But Wagner and Liszt had stretched the limits. The stage was set for someone to emerge and break down the remaining barriers and create a new path to the future, where compositions would be built around innovative sonorities themselves and the unlimited possibilities of successions of harmonies. Claude Debussy became that pioneer.

While much attention should be given to Debussy’s approach to tonality, the way Debussy organized his pieces was also entirely different from those of his predecessors and is of crucial importance. They created their musical ideas and developed them. His musical ideas are frequently fragmentary, and he intentionally chose not to extensively develop the ideas. This went against most of

the entire history of music, which had been based on developing motivic ideas. Repetition, whether literal or varied had also previously been a prime component of the construction of music. However, there is little repetition in Debussy's pieces. He wrote: "It is disastrous to repeat oneself....Do you think that in composition the same emotion can be expressed twice?....Music by its very essence is not something that can slip into a rigorous and traditional form. It is made of colors and of rhythmicized time."

The contrapuntal writing of J.S. Bach was a lifelong inspiration to Debussy who stated that "Bach has said all there is to say in music--the rest of us only say it in different forms." He also, as a result of Liszt's urging, explored the music of the Renaissance, most specifically the music of the great 16<sup>th</sup> century composer, Palestrina. The contrapuntal aspects as well as the scroll--like, curling, curving melodic lines of the music of the Renaissance and J.S. Bach provided Debussy with models for his own music. The very frequent use of several parallel horizontal layers is an important aspect of Debussy's music. Proving to be a master of his own version of counterpoint, Debussy expanded the Renaissance and Baroque concept of a number of single melodic lines proceeding horizontally at the same time, to a texture where more than one succession of harmonies could proceed horizontally at the same time.

I will very shortly show examples at the piano of what I am discussing.

Debussy's probing of earlier music also led him back to Gregorian chant and to the church modes. (Modes are scales with different patterns of whole steps and half steps than just our major and minor scales of the past few centuries.) The use of modality is extremely prominent in Debussy's music, and lends an atmosphere of antiquity, austerity, and purity to his music.

A crucial event in Debussy's musical life was his exposure to the gamelan music from Java which he heard at the Paris World Exposition when he was 27. A gamelan orchestra is one consisting of tuned bells and gongs, a melody instrument, and hand drums. The music utilized different patterns of pitches than Debussy had ever previously heard. These were quite symmetrical in the spacing of the pitches, rather like the whole tone scale. Therefore, they lacked the tension and directional pull of scales containing half-steps in Western music. The rhythm of the gamelan music also did not have the strong metrical accentuation patterns found in Western music. The sound was extremely refined and translucent one. This experience transformed Debussy's entire concept of what music could be, and its influence on him cannot be overstated.

#### Preludes Book I, Nos. 1-3

Debussy wrote much piano music--about 80 pieces. Almost all of them were composed after he was nearly 30 years old, and the truly important, pathbreaking piano works were all written after he was nearly 40. He was very frustrated that his early Arabesque and Reverie became so popular and frequently played when they were not nearly as distinctive as his later piano works. (He even called his Arabesques "dreadful."). Some of his most significant and best-loved music is listed in the program.

The two books of 12 preludes each are Debussy's last significant piano works other than his very forward-looking, monumental Etudes. However, the compositionally more advanced études have never

achieved the popularity among listeners that the preludes have. Everything we are discussing today about Debussy's music can be found in his preludes.

The first book of preludes was written when Debussy was 47. Chopin used the word "Prelude" to indicate that the piece could be used to introduce other pieces in the same key and he frequently performed them in this way. Debussy did not envision his preludes to be used to introduce other works but adopted the title in tribute to Chopin. There is no evidence that Debussy ever conceived of his preludes being performed in their entirety, just as Chopin would have never dreamed that his preludes would have been performed as a set. However, the tonal relationships of the adjacent Debussy preludes show that he gave careful thought to the specific final order in which he placed them. Debussy himself would perform a couple of them at one time, and this has been the usual practice ever since. However, it is not uncommon today for a pianist to perform the entire book on one occasion and very rarely a pianist will even perform both books on one recital. The total performance time of the first book of Preludes is about 40 minutes.

Debussy placed the so-called "titles" at the end of the pieces, in small letters, preceded by 3 dots. He was obviously concerned that if he placed them at the beginning people would expect to hear a literal depiction of the titles. He wanted the listeners to focus on the emotions engendered by the music and not to look for an exact, literal pictorial illustration.

GO TO PIANO:

The title (I use that term for want of a better one) of the **first Prelude," Dancers of Delphi"**, was inspired by a column with that name on the landing of a staircase in the Louvre near the "Winged Victory" statue. Delphi was the site of the Temple of Apollo, the Greek God of music, poetry, art and healing. (I find it significant that the Greeks included healing with music and the other arts since healing is what I believe music and the other arts should provide.) This piece is stately, solemn and exudes an archaic atmosphere. We can hear the influence of the gamelan orchestra, with the representation of quiet bells and gongs, in this piece. This work also evidences the horizontal layers we will hear in so much of Debussy's music. We can hear the melody in the middle of the texture, with bells simulated above, and a gong below. **Play 6-10.** In the next phrase the gong has become a pedal point. A pedal point is where a low note is sustained below higher melodic lines. It received its name from organ music which had the organist hold a low note with the foot playing a pedal. In this example from the prelude, the melody will be on the top and the soft bells are in the middle. **Play 11-12.** Notice that the bells consist of successive parallel chords, which were universally forbidden in Debussy's time. **Play parallel chords of 11-12 again.**

Debussy frequently used augmented triads, and progressions of successive augmented triads. (An augmented triad is made up of two major 3<sup>rd</sup>s, **Play augmented triad.** This is different from a major triad or a minor triad, each of which consists of a major third and a minor 3<sup>rd</sup>. **Play M and minor triads.**) Here is an example of Debussy's use of successive augmented chords. **Play 26 with the 3 augmented chords.** This creates an effect of vagueness since there is no directional pull from an augmented chord. A V7 wants to go to I (**Show V7-I.**) A diminished seventh chord wants to go to I. (**dim.7-I**) The

augmented chord is content to just sit there, and writing successive augmented chords only increases the vagueness and directionlessness.

Despite the exotic harmonies being employed, the listener still senses that the piece is centered around one pitch--in this case, B-flat. We will hear in all the Preludes that Debussy did not abandon the concept of one note being used as a tonal center of a piece, despite that tonal center's potency having been greatly reduced from what it had been in his predecessor's and contemporaries' music.

I am now going to play six notes. **Play A-flat--B-flat--C--D--E--F-sharp.** You can hear that each one is one whole step, equivalent to two half-steps, apart from the next note. They are each perfectly symmetrical to each other. One could keep going to infinity playing notes a whole step apart without using another note than these six. These notes make up a whole tone scale. Since there are twelve notes in an octave, there exists the potential for another whole tone scale made up of the other six notes of the 12-note chromatic scale. Like the augmented triad, just discussed, a whole tone scale produces an effect of vagueness, motionlessness, and directionlessness. Debussy constructed 90 % of his **second Prelude, "Voiles"** with only the six notes of a whole tone scale I played for you. Composers had normally utilized all 12 notes of the chromatic scale in a piece. It takes a genius to create a successful four-minute piece almost entirely out of one whole tone scale of six notes.

Again, in this piece we see distinct layers of sonorities. One layer is represented by the following first five measures. **Play 1-5.** A B Flat pedal point then enters. **Play 5-7.** This repeated low B Flat will occur in every one of the subsequent measures of the piece. A new melody then enters in a middle register. **Play melody by self 7-14.** The only departure from exclusively whole tone scale usage occurs 2/3 of the way through the piece when a pentatonic scale is used exclusively for 10 % of the piece. A pentatonic scale can be any scale comprised of any five different notes. The most common usage is of the five notes which comprise the five black keys of the piano. These are the pentatonic scale notes Debussy uses here in the middle of this prelude. **Play 41-47.**

The word, "Voiles" can mean sails or veils. It is unknown which Debussy intended. If it were "veils", it would probably have been inspired by an American dancer who was famous in Paris at that time and was known to Debussy. She swirled veils around herself as she danced. I personally relate more to the translation "sails", and it is known that Debussy loved the sea. In fact, water or aerial aspects are involved with a vast majority of the words Debussy placed at the end of each of his Book I Preludes.

The title of the **third Prelude, "The Wind on the Plain"**, comes from a poem by Favart, "The wind in the plain holds its breath". I remember that when I first spent time on the plains, I was amazed how there was always a continuous wind. How vividly Debussy captures this, as well as portraying the occasional violent gusts which can interrupt the humming of the wind on the plains. This is the third consecutive Prelude which frequently employs a low pedal point on B-flat and also features B-flat as the tonal center of the piece. These pedal points help to anchor the tonality of a piece, since Debussy used such a large variety of unexpected harmonies above the pedal points.

PERFORM: Preludes 1-3

## Debussy's Personality

Debussy was rather short, with extremely short legs and wide shoulders. His forehead was huge and was described as projecting like the bow of a ship. He wore his fuzzy black hair nearly down to his eyebrows to cover some of his large forehead, and he had a beard his entire adult life. Many people described him as looking like a Renaissance Florentine. His black eyes were heavily lidded and displayed a unique striking intensity. Even when he was a teenager everyone seemed to notice and comment about the penetrating intensity of his eyes. The novelist Colette observed: "In his unrelenting gaze the pupils of his eyes seemed momentarily to dart from one spot to another, like those animals of prey hypnotized by their own searching intensity."

Debussy's voice was very low and quiet and was described as sepulchral. Later in life he was always hoarse from too much tobacco. He spoke very hesitantly, and in incomplete phrases, as if always searching for the perfect word. His plump fingers were described as being square at the ends. He was a very sedentary person who loathed walking. His physical motions were frequently awkward and clumsy.

Debussy was a private person, being incredibly shy and reserved except with close friends, of which he never had many in his entire life. Even as a child it was noted that he watched other children play rather than play himself. He seemed withdrawn and uncommunicative as a child, and never did develop any closeness to either of his parents. Throughout his life he could be solitary, melancholy, moody, and sullen. He was hyper-sensitive and easily offended. He was not polished in dealing with strangers, and rarely, on a first meeting, did he disclose anything of himself. He hated to have his picture taken.

Later in life, he totally hated the celebrity status which he had attained. It is so unfortunate that his need for income required him to travel and make guest appearances conducting his own works, when it was obvious he did not have the temperament and skills to conduct an orchestra, or to meet people after the concerts. He once nixed someone from hosting a party in his honor, saying, "I know I am a bear. Don't hold it against me. I was born that way." On another occasion Debussy blamed his absorption in his music for his being guilty "of about ten acts of incivility an hour."

Despite his withdrawn behavior around those whom he did not know, Debussy could be extremely amiable and charming with his few close friends or people whom he found interesting. In these settings he smiled readily and was in ebullient spirits. He was a natural bohemian, relishing extremely late hours in the cafés of Montmartre in Paris, where he loved hearing the pop singers, while enjoying ham or foie gras sandwiches, English ale, German beer, and Welsh rarebit. He also adored caviar. Hot chocolate was a favorite, and he could be very particular about his tea. Even as a small child if he was permitted to buy a sweet, his friends would load up on the largest quantity of the cheapest candy, and he would buy one tiny, elegant delicacy. As an adult, he would retain his aristocratic tastes, in spite of his always precarious financial state.

Debussy was a very fussy person. Once before commencing a coaching session with a performer, he insisted that a tiny, almost invisible thread first had to be picked up off the rug. A picture

hanging crooked on a wall drove him crazy. If the little porcelain frog always on his well-ordered desk was not turned exactly the way he wanted it, he could not work.

Debussy took great pains to dress well, including being sure that his tie was tied exactly. He sometimes wore a black cape. I find it amusing that the pictures of him standing on the beach seem to always show him dressed in a 3-piece suit and tie. He loved to wear hats, especially ones with large brims. His collection included many American cowboy hats. He was perpetually smoking cigarettes, apparently always puffing vehemently on them. He was noted for his virtuosity at rolling his own cigarettes.

Debussy had a passion for art objects and especially loved fine prints, antiques, figurines, and knick-knacks. Asian art most attracted him.

At times he owned a dog. But it was cats which he adored, and he always owned at least one—always a gray angora or a Siamese. It is interesting that his own physical movements were described by contemporaries as feline, and many biographers have referred to his personality as also being very feline. It was said that he preferred cats to people.

Debussy was absolutely obsessed with the color green, and green objects sometimes became targets of his kleptomaniacal acts. He loved flowers, red roses most of all. He also loved the sea, saying: “Listen to the sea, it is the most musical of things.” However, he hated the crowds and the touristy towns he had to endure in order to visit the ocean.

He frequently conveyed a naive innocence, and a child-like playfulness. He adored clowns and the circus and said he could have gone to the circus every day of his life. He loved games, with his favorite game being one similar to pinochle. However, he played it poorly, and was known for his cheating and being a very poor loser.

He was totally disengaged from anything political.

At three different times in his life he wrote about music for journals. These articles are filled with his jaunty wit and ironic banter, and some are extremely caustic. However, they are highly insightful, and they gave him a forum for his thoughts and views on music.

He also wrote some plays and poems, including a few texts for his own songs. He preferred to hang out with poets, writers, and cabaret musicians, avoiding most of the establishment classical musicians in Paris. When he was conversing with the literary people, he preferred to discuss non-musical subjects. He did not entertain at his home, desiring it to be a place of serenity and solitude.

Debussy always lived beyond his means. When he was younger and penniless, he would borrow money, and anyone who loaned it to him knew they would never get it back. Later in life, when he was generating income, the problem was that he and his wife, Emma, were living in a home on the ritziest street in Paris which they could not afford, and they kept spending on non-essentials. He accepted a number of commissions for which he was advanced money, but habitually procrastinated on the composition of the works. Debussy once said, “I am a lazy composer,” and he was well aware of his

habit of procrastination. Of course, in the last years of his life, he was horribly ill . But even earlier in life, with his perfectionism, he found composition such a grueling process that he would frequently put it off. He had so many advances for future compositions as well as personal loans from his publisher that when he died, he was a couple hundred thousand dollars of today's buying power in debt to his publisher.

Composing was always a stressful process for Debussy, due to his being a meticulous, ruthless perfectionist when it came to music. His innate talent would have permitted him to write quickly. However, his uncompromising approach to composition never allowed him to do so.

He said that he would begin with a subject. Then he would improvise. Following that, he would leave the piano and mull over ideas in his head. During this process he would pace back and forth and hum to himself with the omni-present cigarette in his hand. Being extremely self-critical, he would rethink and rethink and fuss over the smallest detail. He said of himself: "I sometimes require weeks to decide upon one harmonious chord in preference to another."

When writing down his pieces, his handwriting was extremely small, well-spaced, and very precise. The long flat desk where he composed was always in perfect order. He was always reluctant to accept that a piece had been completed and he was known to have destroyed completed works with which he was not sufficiently satisfied. He once referred to his "strange need to never finish." Doesn't this sound exactly like Chopin's process of composing as we discussed in the Chopin presentation?

#### Additional Influences on Debussy's Music

Every composer, even a revolutionary one, builds upon the music of his predecessors, and reflects the musical experiences he or she has encountered.

Wagner's operas were a gigantic influence on all musicians in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. French composers especially fell under this spell and most of these composers, including Debussy, made pilgrimages to Bayreuth, the home base for Wagner's operas, to experience Wagner's music firsthand. Initially Debussy was intoxicated by his exposure to Wagner's music. But he gradually divorced himself from the Germanic philosophical and structural aspects of the music, though preserving his love for the harmonic aspects.

Chopin was Debussy's primary role model regarding the piano and piano music, and Debussy considered Chopin's music to be among the most beautiful ever written. "Chopin is the greatest of them all, for through the piano alone he discovered everything." From his earliest days of playing the piano Debussy felt a very close affinity with Chopin's music. When he was only 12 years old the professors at the Conservatory were astounded at how insightfully he played the music of Chopin. (They were also in disbelief at how poorly he played the music of Beethoven.) In very ill health at the end of his life, Debussy found it to be a labor of love to produce an edition of Chopin's études. One could say that there is a lot of Chopin in Debussy's music and a lot of Debussy in Chopin's music.

When Debussy was a student in Rome, he spent an entire afternoon with Liszt. It is known that Liszt played some of his latest compositions for Debussy. Many of these later, highly experimental, Liszt

works, including the Fountains at the Villa d'Este, evidence obvious impressionistic qualities. Debussy spoke for the rest of his life about the profound effect which hearing Liszt's use of the pedal had on him. Liszt's being influenced in his own music by literature, art and nature has this in common with Debussy, as you remember from our last presentation, "Franz Liszt: Spiritual Seeker."

Modest Mussorgsky was also an inspiration to Debussy for having had the courage to "march to his own drummer." He had gained exposure to Mussorgsky's music, as well as that of other Russian composers when, starting at age 18, he spent three summers in Russia and elsewhere in Europe, teaching the children of the wealthy widow of a railway multimillionaire, who, interestingly, was Tchaikovsky's patroness.

Another influence, until they had a falling out, was the composer Eric Satie. They would talk at the Paris bistro, Chat Noir, where Satie played cabaret music on an old upright piano. Satie encouraged Debussy to pursue his own path, a path that should be definitively French. Satie's advice was: "We should have a music of our own – if possible, without any sauerkraut!"

It is significant that other than the abovementioned music, and the music of Mozart, there was very little music which Debussy liked or by which he was influenced. The music he outspokenly and emphatically disliked included that of Beethoven, Brahms, Berlioz, Franck, Gounod, Massenet, and Saint-Saëns, who was a bitter life-long personal enemy.

#### Preludes 4-5

We now continue with more preludes. The title of the **4<sup>th</sup> prelude, "Sounds and Perfumes Swirl in the Evening Air,"** comes from Baudelaire's poem, "Harmonie du soir", Evening Harmonies. Here Debussy writes a voluptuous, seductive waltz, tinged with melancholy. "Tournet" is a word which is not easily translated but implies a languorous spiraling. Many fragments combine to make this a quintessential Debussy piece. The rhythm is exceptionally free and supple. A low A pedal point frequently anchors the piece in that tonality. Many surprises occur in this luscious piece. At the conclusion Debussy asks the player to play as if creating the sound of distant horns.

Some of you, as well as I, have been to the island of Capri, in the Bay of Naples. Debussy never was there. But he saw pictures, possibly on a label of an Anacapri wine bottle. Capri has been a resort since the time of the Romans and was frequently visited by writers and artists in Debussy's time. Anacapri is the main town on the island. The main attraction, other than the famous nearby Blue Grotto, is the sight of the hills on which goats have grazed since ancient times. The name Capri is even derived from Capra, the Latin word for goat. The bright Mediterranean sun blazes down on the island, and contributes to a joyous, relaxed ambience.

#### GO TO PIANO:

In the **fifth Prelude, "The Hills of Anacapri,"** Debussy certainly captures this vibrant mood. A representation of distant bells opens the work. **Play 1-2.** Next, we hear the faint strains of a Tarantella, the most famous dance of southern Italy. **Play 3-4.** The tarantella is expanded a little further on. Shortly

after that we hear a melody which Debussy tells us to play with “the liberty of a popular song.” **Play 32-39.** Soon we get another simulation of a popular song, this one even more sensual and seductive. **Play 49-54. A** reprise of the Tarantella is then heard, and the piece ends representing the luminous brightness of the Mediterranean sky and the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

PERFORM: Preludes 4-5

10 MINUTE BREAK

### The Women in Debussy's Life

Even if the facts are not flattering, I believe Debussy's relationships help one to better understand the man, and what his life was like as he was composing during the different periods of his life. Highly flawed human beings have produced, as composers and performers, some of the world's most beautiful, meaningful, and even spiritual, music. If we are to suppress the contributions of past and present great creative artists due to their highly flawed lives, we will end up cancelling a lot of the greatest art which has been or is being produced.

There were many women in Debussy's life, and he ended up making a mess of most of their lives as well as his own. He once said: “My life is still in the same sad mess. I have never been able to live in the reality of things and people .”

The first important woman in Debussy's life was Marie Vasnier, a 32-year-old married mother of two, whom Debussy met through his being an accompanist in a private voice studio when he was 18. Soon after, he became a perpetual daytime visitor in the Vasnier home, rehearsing songs with her, composing his own songs, and reading Symbolist poetry - among other activities. A redhead, she was the first of his affairs with women who had green eyes. Though not a professional singer, she possessed a wonderful high soprano voice and excelled at effortlessly floating high coloratura. Without her, music history might have been different since her voice was the inspiration for Debussy's writing about 30 wonderful songs. In fact, until he was about age 30, he had produced almost no compositions of substance except songs. The affair with Madame Vasnier, lasted for about four years until his two-year study in Rome suspended it. Their relationship was not the same after he returned from Rome, though he did go on to write another 3 dozen or so extraordinary songs during the rest of his life.

Shortly after Debussy's return to Paris in 1887, he met a green-eyed woman from Normandy, Gabrielle, known as “Gaby of the Green Eyes.” (Her eyes were also said to be “cat-like.”) She would share his impoverished bohemian life for the next nine or so years. In fact, she was apparently his primary financial support during these years, though no one has ever discovered exactly what she did for income. Their tiny apartment at the foot of Montmartre consisted of a wash basin, a small table, three cane chairs, a borrowed piano, and what has been described as a “sort of bed.” Apparently at times they had nothing to eat. Debussy had various infidelities during these years including a very brief engagement to someone named Theresa. Gaby was finally driven to attempt suicide- unsuccessfully. Debussy became bored with her and she eventually disappeared.

The third significant woman in Debussy's life was Lilly, a sweet, blonde country girl from Burgundy. Seeking some stability after the dozen years of bohemian poverty, he married Lily. He gave a piano lesson after their morning city hall marriage so that they could afford to go to lunch, and their honeymoon consisted of going to the Paris zoo that afternoon. Apparently, the amount of money he had to his name at the time of their wedding would have had today's buying power of about 30 dollars.

After four years of marriage which included a number of infidelities, Debussy tired of Lilly, and became enamored of Emma, a highly intelligent, lively, witty, charming, sophisticated amateur singer. She was the wife of a very wealthy banker and also possessed green eyes. She previously had been the lover of the very significant French composer, Gabriel Fauré. Lilly was no competition for Emma, and when Debussy left Lilly when he was 42, Lilly also unsuccessfully attempted suicide with a pistol, the same method Gaby had employed. This caused a major scandal and the majority of Debussy's friends became disgusted with him and wanted nothing to do with him, after his having deserted two lovely women whom they liked and admired for having put up with him.

There were many challenges during Claude and Emma's 14 years together, the last 10 of which they were married. These included Emma's being rather high-strung and accustomed to living in a lavish lifestyle, and Debussy's self-absorption and desire for solitude and independence. He wrote "In real life, I cannot live up to the ideals I have in music....I have to have a lot of patience to put up with myself." Through all their challenges, Debussy was still always deeply in love with Emma.

They had one child and that little girl brought enormous happiness to both of them. Debussy proved to be a very devoted, loving, and solicitous father. Claude-Emma, known as "Chou-Chou," was a precocious, musically talented, cheerful girl who was very wise beyond her years. Debussy found a joy in her which he had never previously found in life, and many of you know his suite of six piano pieces written in honor of her, entitled "Children's Corner." I have always found Debussy's love for his daughter to be very touching. Tragically, she died of diphtheria the age of 13, one year after her father's death. Emma lived 16 years after her husband, dying in 1934, at the age of 72. She and Chou-Chou are both buried with the man who loved them both so very much. It was a very moving experience for Susan and me to stand by their graves in the very exclusive Passy Cemetery, which lies near the Champs-Élysées in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower.

#### Preludes 6, 7--9

There is frequently a sadness in Debussy the man and his music. He wrote, "My life is always so distressing...I have never been able to live in the real world....I live in memory and regret, a sad pair of companions! But they are more faithful than joy and happiness." He adored the playing of a gypsy violinist at an ordinary Parisian café because his playing "called up from the bottom of your soul a kind of melancholy that we rarely bring to the surface." He loved the music of Couperin, whom he called "the most poetic of our harpsichordists, whose tender melancholy is like some adorable echo from the mysterious depths of those landscapes where Watteau's characters grow sad." Watteau's most famous painting is the well-known one formerly called "Gilles" and now called "Pierrot." The clown in the white satin costume seems isolated from the immediate world around him, and his face displays a very

enigmatic expression. Watteau, Couperin, and Debussy all expressed the poignant loneliness that lies beneath the surface in all human beings.

Debussy's **sixth Prelude, "Footprints in the Snow,"** to me, exemplifies profound loneliness. We do not know the derivation of the title. However, the essence of the music is expressed in Debussy's instruction in the score "with the sonority of a bleak frozen landscape." We have all heard the term "Footprints in the Sand," which is centuries old. I find it significant that Debussy changed it to "Footsteps in the Snow." It calls to my mind the powerful expression of utter human and spiritual desolation which Schubert had depicted 72 years earlier in his profoundly wrenching and devastating song cycle, "Winterreise." (Winter Journey).

GO TO PIANO:

This Debussy prelude opens with a D pedal point which will recur throughout much of the piece, and a rhythmic figure which will also be persistently repeated in most all the measures of the piece. It seems to represent a solitary figure doggedly trudging through the frozen snow. **Play 1.** What melody we get in this piece is very fragmentary, and usually enters on weak beats, as if too fragile to enter on a strong beat. After a note or two, it is usually interrupted, as if the figure uttering it is too exhausted to maintain a normal melodic phrase. Near the end of the piece the singer does put together two phrases of one measure each. Debussy instructs that it should be played "like a tender and sad regret." At the end, the music slowly descends into the depths of the piano, only to be succeeded by a widely spaced chord with seemingly endless desolate space between the top and bottom of the keyboard. I request that there be no applause after this piece.

PERFORM: Prelude 6

The **seventh** prelude has the title, "**What the West Wind Saw.**" The West Wind has traditionally been thought of as the gentle, peaceful wind of spring and early summer. However, in "The Garden of Eden" by Hans Christian Anderson, a writer whom Debussy adored, each wind recounts what it had witnessed. The West Wind, known as Zephyr, recounts his wild tale of raising "a storm that splintered the lofty trees to shavings." A listener can certainly feel terrifying hurricane and gale winds in this work. Yet it is not all fury in this piece. There are distant plaintive cries which emerge at times. F Sharp is used as a frequent pedal point, though other notes at times serve in this capacity.

Debussy used this note of F sharp, rewritten as G Flat, the same note on a piano, to be the foundation of the **next Prelude, "The Maid with the Flaxen Hair."** The title derives from the Scottish poems of Leconte de Lisle, one of the French poets of the Parnassian movement which bridged Romanticism and Symbolism. Debussy here writes one of his most delicately wistful and diatonic pieces of his maturity. Pentatonic scales as well as modes are utilized. Its seeming simplicity has made it one of Debussy's most famous pieces. But like many pieces of apparent simplicity, it is not an easy piece to play exquisitely.

Debussy was only in Spain for a few hours at a border town. Yet many Spanish composers have credited him with having written some of the most evocative Spanish music ever written. In the **ninth**

**Prelude, "The Interrupted Serenade,"** one can easily perceive a Spanish flavor. In it we can feel the frustration of an imaginary Spanish guitarist who is continually interrupted in his love song. We can imagine the guitar tuning up at the opening-and then something goes wrong. **Play1-4.** He continues **Play 5-10.** Soon we hear a Moorish influence ,which is frequently found in Spanish music. **Play32-40.** B Flat is the foundation of this piece, although the music turns to D Flat Major about 2/3 of the way through, and then that is interrupted twice by a totally unexpected, shocking D Major! **Play 75-85.** It seems that the poor serenader can contain his frustration no longer and bursts into a rage. **Play 90-93.**After one more verse of serenade, another interruption occurs, and he finally seems to give up and disappears.

PERFORM: Preludes 7-9

### Playing Debussy's Piano Music

Debussy's own playing was characterized above all for its effortlessly improvisatory nature. He wrote "I don't feel music the same way every day." His playing was also most famous for the infinite range of shadings, all of which lay between the markings of triple piano and one forte. He tenderly caressed the keys with very flat fingers, and his mellow, velvet touch, and ethereal, floating sound were envied by all who heard it. Marguerite Long, the one pianist whose playing Debussy actually liked, wrote, "we could never hear nor play the piano after Debussy in the same way we did before him." Even at the Conservatory at age 12 the professors marveled at the mature refinement and subtleties of his sound.

Debussy admonished pianists to "forget that the piano has hammers." He loved his own Blüthner- Aliquot grand piano, which had extra strings vibrating in sympathy with the strings which were actually struck. His wish was that the piano lid be closed when his works were performed and he was livid when a pianist once came to his home to receive coaching from him, and marched into the music room and raised the lid of the piano.

Debussy was emphatic that his editorial markings in his scores be rigorously observed, saying they were "of supreme importance. Before putting in an accent or a nuance, I sometimes brood over it for several days." I know of no composer who supplied more editorial markings in his music (although Bartók came close). However, Debussy was very flexible about the metronome marks which he sometimes supplied saying, "they are alright for a single bar, like roses that bloom for a solitary morn."

He was unhappy with nearly all performances of his piano music, saying, "you cannot imagine how much my piano music has been distorted-even to such an extent that I often have trouble recognizing it." He attributed the cause of this to the fact that performers "try to impose themselves on the music." He advised performers to be "a vessel through which the music passes." He also complained that "everyone plays my music too loud(ly)." People praised his playing for being free of any mannerisms or distortion, and for embodying a simplicity which allowed the music to speak for itself.

When Debussy conducted his works, he was famous for saying "I'd like that to be more indefinite", "more blurred," or "always more distant." His scores are so frequently filled with the instruction, "lointain" , which means "distant." Understatement was what he was continuously seeking.

He was especially perturbed by pianists who over-projected melodies at the expense of the harmonies. "Pianists' fifth fingers are such an earsore", he said. For those of you who are not pianists, pianists are traditionally taught to prominently bring out the top voice with the 5<sup>th</sup> finger of the right hand, which can frequently undermine the richness of the inner voices, which were so extremely important to Debussy.

He was concerned that the crescendos in his music not be overdone and played too dramatically. Instead he urged that crescendos be started extremely softly. He often specified that a crescendo was to go from triple piano only to double piano and was distressed when pianists grew to a loudness beyond a double piano.

Certainly, the prime requirement for successful Debussy playing is a continuously beautiful sound and a capacity to create a palette with an infinite variety of colors. Perhaps some of you wonder how a pianist creates color at the piano. All a pianist can do to create color is determine exactly when to play a note and how fast to put a key down. A pianist can only control a key for 3/8 of an inch. The differing speeds at which a key is depressed are what creates the infinite varieties of dynamics. One feels colors being created when successive notes or chords are played with differing speeds of key descent. That, and the pianist determining the exact instant when a note is to be struck are, from the physics aspects, the only tools a pianist has.

The most pleasing piano sounds are created when a pianist employs a non-percussive approach to a key, meaning controlling the key descent rather than hitting a key from above the key surface. My personal view is that this is the desirable approach for nearly all piano music. But it is essential in nearly all of Debussy's piano music. Without a beautiful sound and a variety of colors Debussy's music can sound meaningless. The fact that Debussy's music is usually quite soft means that a pianist has only a narrow range of the speed of key descents with which to work.

In one's absorption in the sound, it is easy to overlook the crucial aspect of rhythm when playing Debussy's music. Every note value must be examined and taken seriously, with as much attention given to rhythm as to sound and color. Rhythmic flabbiness can destroy a Debussy piece, despite the presence of gorgeous sound. Slow pieces can especially lend themselves to accidental rhythmic inexactitude.

Tempo selection is extremely important in Debussy's music. If a player adopts an excessively slow tempo in an attempt to be overtly expressive, the music can suffocate. I believe French music suffers even more than German and Russian music from excessively slow tempi.

The fact that Debussy's music is very interior and subdued makes it especially essential that a performance not become square and lifeless. All music needs sufficient forward motion, and feeling a horizontal direction is frequently necessary to keep Debussy's music from potentially seeming dull to the listener.

The amount of tempo flexibility and fluidity is a subject of much controversy in French music. It is my belief that Debussy's music can absorb considerably more flexibility than much other French

music. However, it must be expressed with much subtlety. Excessive flexibility and lack of attention to a fundamentally unified tempo are two of the major miscalculations in playing Debussy's music.

French music in general, and especially Debussy's music, requires enormous discipline. I am told that most singers find French to be the most difficult language in which to sing. This is due to the extreme subtleties required by the diction in addition to the overall prerequisite of emotional restraint.

Discretion is a hugely important ingredient in the performance of French music. Achieving the right proportion of everything is essential, and there is little margin for error. Anything excessive can destroy the delicate equilibrium on which French musical interpretation rests. A highly refined sense of tactile and emotional control is always required.

Playing a French piece as if it is by a German composer, or composer of any other nationality, can be a fatal mistake. Different composers and different nationalities require their own styles, just as the cuisine of each nation requires a different preparation. French music is like dining at an exquisite French restaurant--everything must exhibit perfection with not too little or too much of anything.

Debussy's music is suggestive and evocative--one does not so much state or proclaim as to insinuate and suggest.

Despite this, a player must sufficiently project out to the listeners. Melodic lines and chords cannot be constantly muffled in vagueness. Since much of Debussy's music is composed of parallel layers of melodies and chords, it requires much insight and pianistic control to balance and grade the layers in an ideal proportion to each other.

Debussy's music usually swims in pedal. But it is essential that his pieces not be indiscriminately flooded with pedal.

It is a very sensuous experience to play Debussy's piano music, since it is frequently highly dependent on a loving approach to every key. Without a loose, flexible wrist the player is doomed. The secret to playing Debussy's music, and for that matter any composer's music, is what the pianist inwardly hears. Without a preconceived internal image of the desired sound and shape of the melodic lines, musicianship cannot be expressed. I love the story of when a concert attendee met the legendary pianist, Leopold Godowsky, and said "My, what small hands you have." Godowsky's response was: "Madame, do you think that I play the piano with my hands?"

There is a great personal, musical, and psychological affinity between Chopin and Debussy- in their personalities as well as in their music. They were both fussy perfectionists who suffered a very tortuous battle within themselves as they converted their inspired improvisations into finalized pieces. Neither was warm and fuzzy as a person, although Chopin mastered the art of superficially ingratiating himself to everyone. Both were famous mimics and created caricatures through their drawings as well as through musical impersonations. Both are arguably the two greatest harmonic experimenters in the history of music. Both preached against excesses in the performance of their music. In many ways both were classicists, despite being revolutionaries in their harmonic experimentation. In short, they both

exemplified the highest taste and refinement. It is my belief that being an exquisite Chopin player will fertilize one's Debussy playing, and the refinement needed for playing Debussy will enhance one's Chopin playing.

GO TO PIANO:

#### Preludes 10-12

The title of the **tenth prelude "The Sunken Cathedral,"** derives from the legend of the Cathedral of Ys, on the Brittany coast, which was engulfed by the sea as punishment for sinful behavior. Once a year, at sunrise, the cathedral was allowed to rise out of the water. It could be seen slowly emerging through the mist, and then it would slowly return to the depths. In this extraordinary piece, one of his best known, Debussy clearly captures the feelings engendered by the cathedral bells, the organ, and the chanting of the monks. In the first section, one hears sonorities which were used in the earliest Western music. These consist of only octaves, 4<sup>ths</sup>, and 5<sup>ths</sup>. **Play intervals of 4th, 5th, and 8va.** In the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the warm intervals we love today, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>ths</sup>, were regarded as decadent. 4ths, 5ths and octaves were seen as pure and worthy of use. Notice how Debussy has spaced his chords—the slower ones at the extremes of the keyboard and the faster moving ones in the middle registers. Debussy's harmonies are not in themselves the entire cause of the emotional effect of his music. How the notes are spaced and spread across the keyboard are a crucial part of what we perceive. Here is how the Prelude opens. **Play 1-2.**

In this first section we hear the pentatonic scale as well as modal scales. In the second section, the cathedral becomes more visible through the fog. Notice the 2nds and 9<sup>ths</sup> which Debussy includes in the bell-like sonorities. These additions to chords are prominent in all his works. **Play 16-17 and replay the chords with 2nds and 9ths.** Eventually the cathedral is seen resplendent in its full glory with the organ pealing out grandly. Debussy includes thirds in the harmonies here. It is noteworthy that the composer asks the performer in this section to play "sonorously, but without harshness." It is so crucial to avoid any harshness in Debussy's music. **Play 28-32 and explain how to avoid harshness.** In the 4<sup>th</sup> section one can envision the monks chanting. **Play 47-51.** Near the end of this section Debussy writes parallel dominant sevenths, none of which resolve. **Play 62-64.** By the 5<sup>th</sup> section, the cathedral is sinking back beneath the dark waves and the organ is a mere echo of its past self. The ending of the piece looks back to the opening and ends on peaceful C Major chords.

Debussy utilized a unique meter signature for this piece:  $6/4 = 3/2$ . His own recording, made in the early days of recording, reveals the solution to this enigmatic meter signature. In certain places in the piece what were previously quarter notes are to be played at the speed of half notes and what were half notes are to be played at the speed of the subsequent quarter notes. Those of you who play the piece will know what I am saying. Those who don't, don't be concerned with this issue, unless you hear a performance of this piece which in some spots sounds very sluggish and stagnant. If you do hear such a performance, you will know that the pianist has not consulted Debussy's recording.

Debussy knew Shakespeare's works very well. The **11<sup>th</sup> Prelude, "The Dance of Puck,"** vividly captures the mischievous, mercurial, impudent spirit of Robin Goodfellow, (Puck), in Shakespeare's "A

Midsummer Night's Dream." Debussy marks the piece, rooted in E Flat, to be played "capriciously and lightly." Throughout, the listener hears aerial charm and can even imagine Puck sounding his horn. Note how Puck will seem to vanish into thin air at the end.

Debussy's music sometimes has had the image of lacking humor. But such a belief is far from accurate. He wrote several pieces blatantly loaded with humor and many others where humor intervenes amongst other moods. Debussy absolutely loved circuses and he was also fascinated by the minstrel shows coming from America which were the rage in Paris during his later life. These shows proved to be very significant vehicles which brought elements of jazz to the serious classical composers of Europe. It is not surprising that Debussy chose **to end his first book** of preludes with this humorous piece, "**Minstrels.**"

This two-minute work is a kaleidoscope of shifting moods and scenes. Their rapid juxtaposition is really quite amazing. We can imagine the characters initially emerging in a halting, stumbling manner. **Play 1-4.** They will subsequently seem to tumble and clown around. We can imagine hearing them play the banjo. **Play 9-12,** play the cornet, **Play 16-18,** and play the drums, **Play 58-63.** We hear a mocking tune. **Play 36-38.,** and then some trombone slides **Play 40-44.** Near the end we get a blatantly sentimental melody, **Play 63-71.** The piece ends with the characters seeming to rush off the stage, and we hear two brusque chords forming a plagal cadence the so-called Amen cadence, which seems to say, "That's all Folks!" **Play last two chords.**

PERFORM: Preludes 10-12

### Concluding Thoughts

It is unfortunate, but true, that the old saying, "Laugh and the world laughs with you. Cry and you cry alone," is applicable to musical performance. If one performs rousing, showy, superficial pieces, many audiences will yell their wild approval. If one performs introspective music, which in many ways is far more difficult music to bring off, listeners tend to be much less demonstratively responsive and appreciative.

Debussy's music is the product of a very private person who created music which seems to exist in its own uniquely private, highly sensitive world. It is not really concert hall music at all, and Debussy once said that many of his compositions should only be played "entre quatre-z-yeux" – which means, literally "among four eyes" - in other words, "in private." He described one of his sets of pieces as "conversations between the piano and oneself."

The great pianist Claudio Arrau, who believed there to be much spiritual meaning in Debussy's music, has described it as "sounding like it is from another planet." While there is some truth to this statement, I believe Debussy's music comes, not from far away, but rather from deep within. Debussy sought the inexpressible. There is a huge amount of quietness in it, and it frequently verges on a world of silence. Many of his works begin almost inaudibly. Of the 12 preludes we heard today, all 12 begin softly and nine of the 12 conclude softly. Debussy's music seems to take place in the world of the subconscious. It is open-ended. There is much that is left unresolved – figuratively and literally.

It is perhaps symbolic that Debussy's death in March of 1918 occurred as the Germans were shelling his beloved Paris. The funeral procession to his grave consisted of only 20 people, due to the acutely dangerous war-time conditions. It is interesting to note that when the great Austrian composer, Joseph Haydn, died 109 years earlier, it was while Napoleon and the French were shelling Haydn's beloved Vienna. With Haydn's death, the classical world was dead forever, and was followed by the chaos of the romantic world.

Debussy's death also marked the end of an era. The world was never the same after World War I.

Musicians tend to see Debussy as the pioneer of a radically new era, and from the point of view of purely musical analysis this is highly justified, and why I stressed this aspect earlier today. Especially after 1904 his works explored a new musical world and have been likened more to the art of Paul Gauguin than simply to Symbolism or Impressionism.

However, when one goes behind the notes, I believe that Debussy's music and ideals are spiritually not a beginning, but rather the last of 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism. It is certainly not German romanticism in its musical manifestations, and it is not a muscular, extroverted romanticism.

Romanticism is actually an extremely nebulous, almost meaningless concept, as every historian knows. Every person, as well as every historian, could legitimately define romanticism differently. To me what romanticism is, at its core, is consciously going inward in the search for a higher reality. I believe it is most valuable and admirable when this search can result in aiding us to do the same. We found this search taking place when we discussed the philosophical and emotional world of Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann. Beethoven aspired to this ideal as well. We find it in abundance in the man Liszt and in much of his music. I feel there is some of this aspect in Bela Bartok, as well as in Arnold Schönberg and Alban Berg. These latter three composers used radically new means and technics in their music, but in some respects spiritually maintained the subjectivity and personal emotional expression of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In many ways Debussy was a 19<sup>th</sup> century person and musician. There is nothing angular about his esthetics. His music frequently evidences a feeling of warm, languorous, voluptuous curves. He may have been very deficient in his dealings with other human beings. However, he is not the first person in the arts to create true beauty in his art, but not be able to show it frequently in daily life. When I hear Debussy's music, I frequently hear love trying to express itself.

It is very significant that Debussy absolutely hated and loathed Nijinsky's choreography for his music. Debussy wanted dance to be shrouded in mystery. Nijinsky's angularity was representative of Modernism in all the arts, an anti-romanticism. That was where the world was going in every area during Debussy's last years. Stravinsky was in his ascendancy. A few years after Debussy's death, even in his own France, there was a reaction against his music, most visibly with the group of famous composers nicknamed Les Six(The Six).

The 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Debussy's birth occurred in 2012 and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death occurred recently--in March 2018. Shockingly little was done to commemorate these events.

One of the few commemorations, by the way, was a magnificent recital in Carnegie Hall by a friend and colleague of mine, Jeffrey LaDeur. This pianist, whose playing may be heard on his website, and purchased on Amazon, truly understands Debussy and French music. He furnishes evidence that much of the best playing in the country today is frequently not by the pianists heavily marketed and promoted by the large commercial management firms.

What we all should celebrate is that Debussy's music is relevant today, and that it is there for each one of us to savor. It was never intended to produce the same kind of sublime, dynamic, dramatic life-changing uplift as was Beethoven's and Schubert's. What it clearly has is the capacity to reach into all our souls and deeply touch us if we allow it to. It stimulates us to feel -and to think.

Have we as a society lost our ability to go inwards and seek a higher reality? Have we lost our ability to contemplate? Can we not find, or take, the time to reflect?

I will give the last word to Debussy: "It is enough if music forces people to listen in spite of their little daily cares, so that they think they have dreamt for a moment of a magic and therefore undiscoverable place."