



**Debussy Images**  
Saskia Giorgini

**IMAGES**

**Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**

1	<b>Danse, "Tarantelle styrienne", L. 69</b>	5. 16
	<b>Deux arabesques, L. 66</b>	
2	No. 1, Andantino con moto	4. 03
3	No. 2, Allegretto scherzando	3. 29
4	<b>Nocturne in D-Flat Major, L. 82</b>	6. 35
	<b>Pour le Piano, L. 59</b>	
5	I. Prélude	4. 13
6	II. Sarabande	5. 20
7	III. Toccata	4. 04
	<b>Estampes, L. 100</b>	
8	I. Pagodes	5. 04
9	II. Soirée dans Grenade	5. 02
10	III. Jardin sous la Pluie	3. 49

**Images, Set I, L. 110**

11	No. 1, Reflets dans l'eau	5. 15
12	No. 2, Hommage à Rameau	7. 16
13	No. 3, Mouvement	3. 30

**Images, Set II, L. 111**

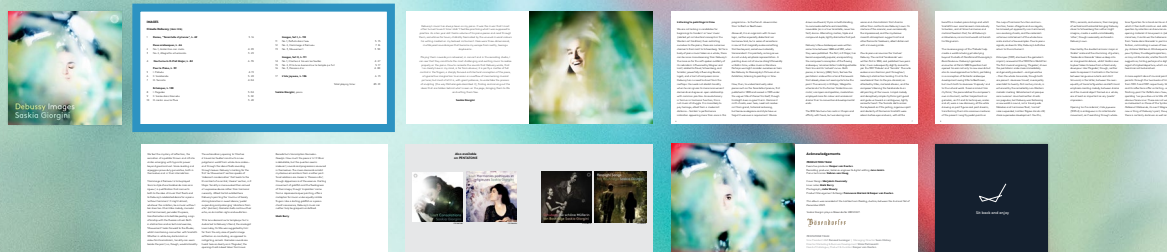
14	No. 1, Cloches à travers les feuilles	4. 27
15	No. 2, Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut	5. 17
16	No. 3, Poissons d'or	4. 00

**L'isle joyeuse, L. 106**

6. 13

Total playing time: 83. 01

**Saskia Giorgini**, piano

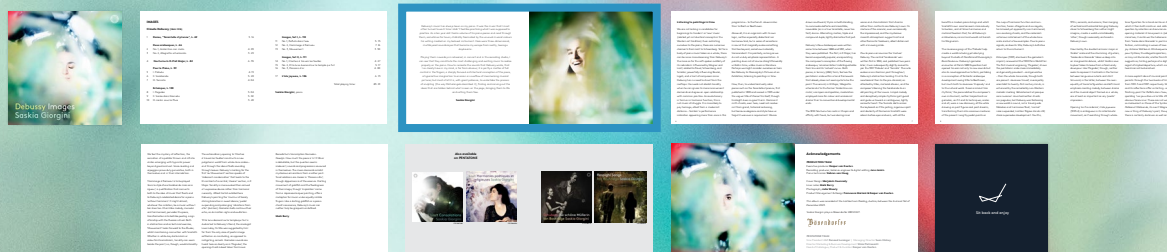




Debussy's music has always been on my piano. It was the music that I most often turned to each time I didn't feel like practicing what I was supposed to practice. As a ten year old I had a volume of his piano pieces and read through them, sometimes for hours, childishly fascinated by the unusual musical colours his writing created on my beloved instrument. Here were three-dimensional, multilayered soundscapes that became my escape from reality, teenage daydreams.

Playing them nowadays in rehearsal, in concert and in the recording studio, I can see that they constitute the most challenging and exciting music to realise properly on the piano. How to recreate the sounds that Debussy wrote, that I so clearly have in my mind, is far from obvious; it is partly a matter of full control in the fingers, a sharply focused architectural conception of the piece, a hyperactive imagination to envision an overflow of mesmerising musical pictures; but most of all it is, with great patience, to undertake the process of sculpting (the way Michelangelo described it), finding and carving out the ideas that are hidden behind what is seen on the page, bringing them to life and setting them free.

**Saskia Giorgini**





### Listening to paintings in time

We are not lacking in candidates for beginnings to 'modern' or 'new' music (related yet not identical concepts in the Western art tradition). Even restricting ourselves to the piano, there are numerous claimants from Liszt to Schoenberg. Yet for a body of piano music taken as a whole, there can be none more deserving than Debussy's: the more so for the soft-spoken subtlety of its radicalism. Influenced by Wagner and Liszt; related to Ravel, Schoenberg, and Scriabin; powerfully influencing Boulez, Ligeti, and a host of composers since: Debussy has no need to shout from the rooftops. He needs not abolish tonality when he can ignore its more inconvenient demands and agree an open relationship with common practice. As revolutionary in form as in harmonic function, this is not music of struggle. It is more likely to pay homage, albeit from a modernist distance – 'l'ointain' a performance indication appearing more than once in this

programme – to the French *clavecinistes* than to Bach or Beethoven.

Above all, it is an organism with its own logic, neither especially dialectical nor hermeneutical, but a series of sensations in sound that magically evoke something that lies beyond, somehow materially transcendent. It is painterly, so long as we do not unduly emphasis representation. A painting does not of course straightforwardly unfold in time, unlike music or literature. Perhaps we might consider ourselves as heirs like Debussy to Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, listening to paintings in time.

How, then, to understand early salon pieces such as the *Tarantelle styrienne*, first published in 1890 and revised in 1903 under the vaguer title of *Danse*? As itself, though hindsight does no great harm. Dominant ninth chords, even here, need not resolve: not from grand, historical reckoning, but because elegance and style have us forget it was ever a requirement. We are

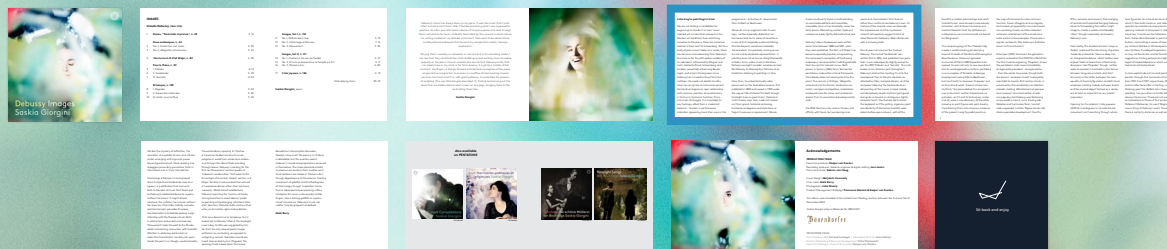
drawn southward, Styria notwithstanding, to *commedia dell'arte* and irresistible, inexorable (as in a true tarantella, never too fast) dance. Alternating metres, triple and compound duple, lightly dramatise that pull.

Debussy's *Deux Arabesques* were written some time between 1888 and 1891, when they were published. The first, in E Major, has become especially popular, encapsulating the composer's conception of the flowing arabesque, 'ornamentation' indistinguishable from line and its 'natural' curve.. Both pieces, in ternary (ABA) form, feature the pentatonic scale within a tonal framework that already does not seem quite to be the point. The second, in G Major, 'Allegretto scherzando' to the former 'Andantino con moto', scampers and sparkles, modulation employed more for colour and occasional drama than to conventional developmental ends.

The 1892 *Nocturne* has roots in Chopin and affinity with Fauré, but wandering inner

voices and chromaticism that charms rather than confronts are Debussy's own. Its mixture of the oracular, even occasionally the impassioned, and the mysterious moonlit-atmospheric suggest Liszt and other Romantic forebears, albeit distanced with a knowing smile.

*Pour le piano* announces the 'mature' Debussy. The central 'Sarabande' was written first in 1894, and published two years later; it was subsequently slightly revised to join the 1901 'Prélude' and 'Toccata'. The suite evokes a non-German past throughout, Debussy's abstraction tending if not to the neoclassical then to the pre-classical, as attested by titles, material allusion, and the composer's likening the Sarabande to an old painting at the Louvre. Limpid melody and deceptively simple rhythmic gait guard and guide us toward an ambiguous, lightly sorrowful heart. The Toccata darts across the keyboard as if the jesting, ingenious spirit and dexterity of Domenico Scarlatti were reborn before eyes and ears, with all the



benefits a modern piano brings and which Scarlatti's own sonatas seem miraculously to beckon, and at times harmonies and metrical freedom that, for all Debussy's ambivalence, cannot and would not banish his Wagnerism.

The Javanese gongs of the 'Prélude' help create a world including yet also lying beyond the bells of *Parsifal* and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*. Debussy's gamelan encounter at Paris's 1889 Exposition had opened his ears not only to new sounds but also to novel approaches to form, partaking in a conception of fantastic arabesque development owing little to Beethoven, but much both to Javanese 'rhapsody' and to the natural world. 'Assez animé et très rythmé,' the piece relishes the composer's own instrument, neither harpsichord nor gamelan, as if it and its techniques, scales and all, were a new discovery, all the while drawing on past figures and past dreams, transforming them into sonorous creatures of the present. Lengthy pedal-points on

the cusp of harmonic function and non-function, fusion of *legato* and *non legato*, hammered yet apparently non-hammered, non-resolving chords, and the cadenza's victorious instatement of the whole-tone scale are but a few examples. *Pour le piano* signals, as does its title, Debussy's definitive return to the instrument.

*Étampes* (1903) also bears the gamelan's imprint, renewed at the 1900 Paris World Fair. The first musical engraving, 'Pagodes', shows the pentatonic scale more immediately and generally prevalent – and generative – than the whole-tone scale, though both are present. Javanese 'mood', inescapably orientalist to twenty-first century minds, is enhanced by the remarkably non-Western melodic marking 'délicatement et presque sans nuances'. Java had neither chords nor pagodas, but Debussy was fashioning a new world in sound, not a travel guide. Melodies and harmonies float, 'normal' rules suspended; Lisztian filigree stands still; stasis supersedes development. Fourths,

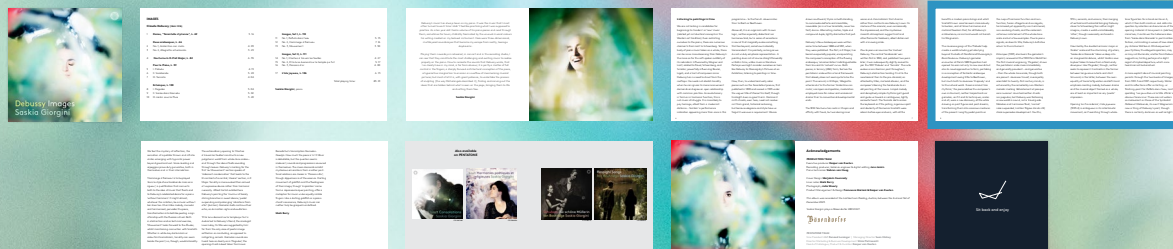
fifths, seconds, and unisons, their merging of vertical and horizontal bringing Debussy closer to Schoenberg than either might imagine, create a world unmistakably 'other', though necessarily anchored in Debussy's own.

Haunted by the double harmonic major or 'Arabic' scale and the strumming of guitars, 'Soirée dans Grenade' takes us deep into an imagined Andalusia, whilst 'Jardins sous la pluie' takes its leave from a Normandy downpour. Like 'Pagodes', though, neither seeks to represent. Contrasts in the former between languorous rubato and strict time and, in the latter, between the near-equality of toccata figuration and left-hand emphasis creating melody, between drama and the musical object framed as a whole, are at least as important as any 'poetic' impression.

Opening 'as if a cadenza', *L'isle joyeuse* (1903–4) is ambiguous in its initial kinetic movement, as if searching through whole-

tone figuration for a tonal centre on A, which it then both insists on and calls into question by retention and recurrence of the opening material. A tone poem in (relative) miniature, it continues the habanera idea from 'Soirée dans Grenade' in post-Lisztian fashion, culminating in waves of love-island joy. Antoine Watteau's *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*, the alleged inspiration, may or may not illuminate; a letter from Debussy suggests so, hinting perhaps at a slight regret of implied departure, which once heard cannot be banished.

A more explicit idea of musical painting persists through the two books of *Images*, from 1901–5 and 1907 respectively. Water and its reflections offer a starting- or finishing-point for *Reflets dans l'eau*, Liszt's sparkling 'Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este' an obvious forerunner. These are not waters so malevolent as those of the Symbolist *Pelléas et Mélisande*, its overt Wagnerism now a thing of Debussy's past, though there is certainly darkness as well as light.





We feel the mystery of reflection, the sensation of a pebble thrown and infinite circles emerging with hypnotic power beyond good and evil. Voice-leading and arpeggios prove duly generative, both in themselves and in their interrelation.

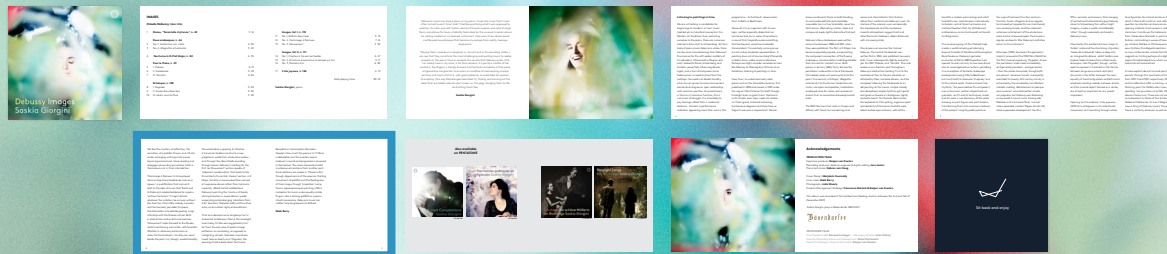
'Hommage à Rameau' is to be played 'dans le style d'une Sarabande mais sans rigueur,' a qualification that connects both to the idea of music that floats and to Debussy's celebrated desire for a piano 'without hammers'. It might almost, whatever the notation, be a music without bar-lines too. Chant-like melody, monodic and harmonised, pervades the piece, transformation into bell-like pealing a sign of kinship with the Russian school. Both in abstraction and as technical exercise, 'Mouvement' looks forward to the *Études*, whilst maintaining connection with Scarlatti. Whether in white-key diatonicism or colourful chromaticism, tonality can seem beside the point; so, though, would atonality.

The extraordinary opening to 'Cloches à travers les feuilles' constructs a new polyphonic world from whole-tone scales—and through the idea of bells sounding through leaves. Debussy's marking for the first 'au Mouvement' section speaks of 'iridescent condensation' that leads to the lit contrast of a central, 'clearer' section, in E Major. Tonality is more evoked than arrived at: expressive device rather than harmonic necessity. Alfred Cortot extolled here Debussy's painting the 'murmur of barely stirring branches in sweet silence,' pedal suspending and prolonging 'vibrations from afar' (*lointain*). Gamelan bells continue their echo, as do Lisztian sighs and exultation.

'Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut' is dedicated to Debussy's friend, the sinologist Louis Laloy. Its title was suggested by him: far from the only case of poetic image settled on as concluding, as opposed to instigating, remark. Gamelan sounds are heard here as clearly as in 'Pagodes', the opening chord indeed taken from Louis

Benedictus's transcription *Gamelan-Goedjin*. How much the piece is 'in' E Minor is debatable, but the question seems irrelevant, sounds and progressions savoured in themselves. The moon descends amidst mysterious emanations from another past. Tonal relations are clearer in 'Poissons d'or', though slipperiness is of the essence. Darting movement of goldfish and the fleetingness of their image, though 'inspiration' came from a Japanese lacquer painting, offer a metaphor for music under equally nimble fingers. Like a darting goldfish or a piano chord's resonance, Debussy's music can neither truly be grasped nor defined.

**Mark Berry**





Also available  
on PENTATONE



PTC5187045



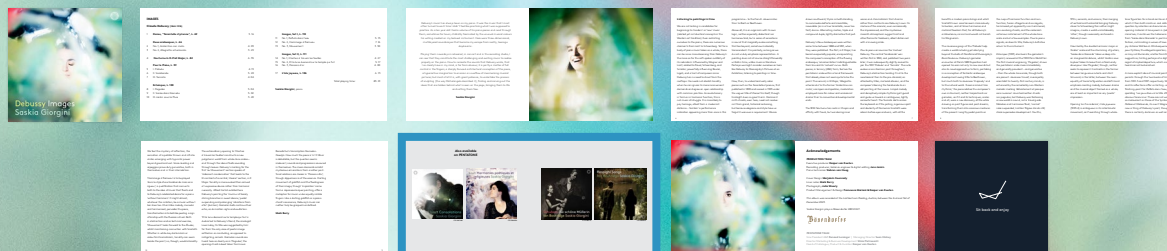
PTC5186296



PTC5186775



PTC5186872







## Acknowledgements

### PRODUCTION TEAM

Executive producer **Kasper van Kooten**

Recording producer, balance engineer & digital editing **Jens Jamin**

Piano technician **Siebre van Hoog**

Cover Design **Marjolein Coenrady**

Liner notes **Mark Berry**

Photography **Julia Wesely**

Product Management & Design **Francesca Mariani & Kasper van Kooten**

*This album was recorded at the Lisztzentrum Raiding, Austria, between the 2nd and 3rd of December 2023.*

Saskia Giorgini plays a Bösendorfer 280VC227.

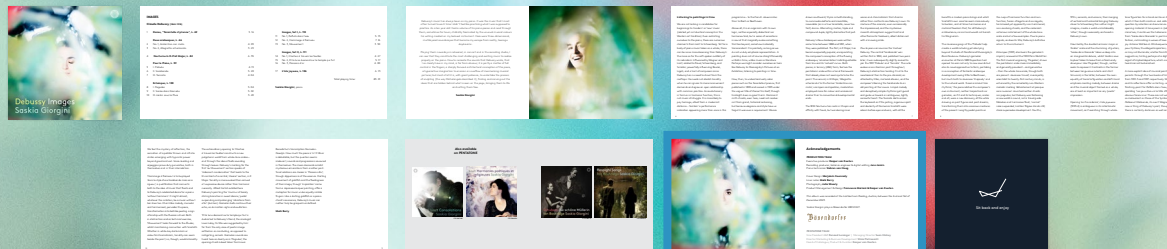
# Bösendorfer

### PENTATONE TEAM

Vice President A&R **Renaud Loranger** | Managing Director **Sean Hickey**

Director Marketing & Business Development **Silvia Pietrosanti**

Head of Catalogue, Product & Curation **Kasper van Kooten**







Sit back and enjoy



Track	Time	Track	Time
1. Menuet	0:58	10. Marche	3:00
2. Clair de lune	3:00	11. Danse	2:30
3. Clair de lune	3:00	12. Danse	2:30
4. Clair de lune	3:00	13. Danse	2:30
5. Clair de lune	3:00	14. Danse	2:30
6. Clair de lune	3:00	15. Danse	2:30
7. Clair de lune	3:00	16. Danse	2:30
8. Clair de lune	3:00	17. Danse	2:30
9. Clair de lune	3:00	18. Danse	2:30

Debussy Images, Saskia Giorgini

Album released on 15/09/2023

Label: Naxos

Genre: Classical

Instrumentation: Piano

Recording location: Naxos Studios, London

Recording date: 2022

Producer: Naxos

Engineer: Naxos

Mastered by: Naxos

Artwork by: Naxos



Debussy Images, Saskia Giorgini

Album released on 15/09/2023

Label: Naxos

Genre: Classical

Instrumentation: Piano

Recording location: Naxos Studios, London

Recording date: 2022

Producer: Naxos

Engineer: Naxos

Mastered by: Naxos

Artwork by: Naxos

Debussy Images, Saskia Giorgini

Album released on 15/09/2023

Label: Naxos

Genre: Classical

Instrumentation: Piano

Recording location: Naxos Studios, London

Recording date: 2022

Producer: Naxos

Engineer: Naxos

Mastered by: Naxos

Artwork by: Naxos

Debussy Images, Saskia Giorgini

Album released on 15/09/2023

Label: Naxos

Genre: Classical

Instrumentation: Piano

Recording location: Naxos Studios, London

Recording date: 2022

Producer: Naxos

Engineer: Naxos

Mastered by: Naxos

Artwork by: Naxos

