

Claude Debussy
Complete Solo Piano Music
Larissa Dedova, piano



4 CDs

THE PIANO MUSIC OF
CLAUDE-ACHILLE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

The piano was Debussy's instrument. Until the age of 17 he pursued serious piano studies and began developing, largely through his own resourcefulness, a highly personal comprehension of the piano's capabilities that would serve him well as a composer. Fortunately Ernest Guiraud, Debussy's principal composition teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, encouraged the young musician to pursue his own path.

After a series of travels that included Russia, Italy and Germany, Debussy returned to Paris to embark upon a steady stream of works that would eventually encompass nearly all genres. Still, a strong case can be made that his piano music represents the central element of his creativity. Their tremendous variety and their startling innovations remain as potent now as when his music first appeared.

Throughout his life, Debussy was able to seize upon a nearly infinite number of inspirational sources. Some he readily assimilated; others he eventually discarded. To name only a few: the piano writing of Chopin; the earlier keyboard traditions of Couperin and Rameau; Russian music, especially Mussorgsky; Spanish music; the operas of Wagner; the French symbolist poets and impressionist painters who were his contemporaries; the dances of antiquity; the world of childhood; the gamelan orchestras of Indonesia; and exotic places and landscapes of all kinds.

In any case, it was not until the 1890s that signs of Debussy's mature musical style became evident. His early piano compositions have often been maligned for their lack of originality, but it must be said that even

now they convey a distinctive flavor and appeal. In this group are the *Deux Arabesques*, *Nocturne*, *Ballade* (originally called *Ballade slave*), *Rêverie*, *Mazurka*, and *Valse romantique*, as well as much of the *Suite bergamasque*. Generally moderate in tempo and reflective rather than dramatic, they reveal Debussy as an ideal weaver of dreams. Indeed, within the *Suite bergamasque* we find his most popular single piano work, *Clair de lune*. In his later piano music Debussy would pursue the evocation of mood, atmosphere, and character with ever greater sophistication and intensity.

The earliest surviving Debussy piano piece is the *Danse bohémienne*, written in 1880. Then, in 1888, the two *Arabesques* appeared, followed in close succession by the other works mentioned above as well as a *Tarantelle styrienne* that re-emerged in 1903 as simply *Danse*.

Of particular interest is a set of three pieces dating from 1894 that remained in obscurity until 1978. Stylistically they are a significant advance over his earlier piano music. Now known as the *Images oubliées*, they seem to have been intended for publication, but were abandoned for unknown reasons. Still, Debussy thought enough of the second piece, a stately *Sarabande*, to incorporate it (with a few minor changes) into his 1901 suite called *Pour le piano*. (The later version is included in this recording.)

For much of the decade of the 1890s, Debussy was occupied with his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* and with the composition of his three *Nocturnes* for orchestra. The same period produced his String Quartet and the pathbreaking *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune*. In the year 1901, however, we encounter a turning point in Debussy's outlook toward piano writing. It was in that

year that Maurice Ravel came forth with a piece called *Jeux d'eau* (The Fountain, or more literally, "Play of the Waters".) In Ravel's harmonic language, as well as in the vivid, picturesque virtuosity of his textures, Debussy discovered new possibilities that he would soon exploit in his own manner.

Debussy did reveal a new element of virtuosity in *Pour le piano*, especially in the concluding Toccata, but pure technical display was never one of his preoccupations. His next piano compositions were published in 1903 as a group of three; Debussy called them *Estampes* (prints, or engravings). Here we encounter for the first time the descriptive titles that would characterize all his piano works for the next decade. (There was a clear precedent for this practice in the harpsichord pieces of his 18th-century compatriots François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau, both of whom Debussy revered.) The first piece, *Pagodes*, reflects Debussy's fascination with Javanese Gamelan music. It is a study in sonorities as much as anything else. *La soirée dans Grenade* masterfully represents the essence of Spanish music from the pen of a composer who at the time had never visited Spain. Here the rhythmic element predominates along with an unfolding narrative of changing moods. Concluding the group is *Jardins sous la pluie*, which briefly quotes two French nursery songs amidst its toccata-like motion and kaleidoscopic changes of harmony.

From the same period, 1903-04, come three independent pieces that may well have been intended as a triptych: *Masques*, *D'un cahier d'esquisses* ("From a Sketchbook"), and *L'isle joyeuse*. *Masques* harkens back to the commedia dell'arte of 15th-century Italy, while a painting by Watteau evidently inspired the riotous orchestral coloring and pianistic brilliance of

L'isle joyeuse.

In a 1905 letter Debussy remarked about his "most recent discoveries in harmonic chemistry". Debussy's harmonic practice has been the subject of countless studies and analyses, but in no case were his innovations mere experiments or academic illustrations of new theories. On the contrary, they consistently served clear-cut musical purposes as dictated by his imagination. This expansion of possibilities in the domain of harmony is one of the main components of his style. No less significant is his emancipation of sound and sonority, which became as essential for him as were melody, harmony, and rhythm for earlier composers. Debussy's unique use of the piano's expressive potential involved a thorough exploitation of the entire keyboard range, an uncanny ear for the layering and balancing of textures, a focus on the lower end of the dynamic scale (*piano* to *pianissimo*), and a requirement for the most subtle use of touch and the pedals. (Curiously, however, Debussy's left no pedal indications in his scores, nor any fingerings—apparently trusting the resourcefulness and good judgment of his interpreters.) More than once, Debussy stated that his ideal piano sound was that of "an instrument without hammers."

One of the more intriguing aspects of Debussy as a composer, but evident only upon inspection of his scores, is his extremely meticulous notation combined with numerous verbal indications of how he wanted his music to sound. Here are a few examples (in translation) from the piano works: "strident"..."scintillating"..."nervous and with humor"..."tumultuous"..."anguished"..."luminous"..."like a distant sound of horns"..."with the sonorous quality of a sad and frozen landscape"..."with abrupt oppositions

of extreme violence and passionate gentleness.”

Reflets dans l'eau, the miniature masterpiece that opens the first set of *Images* (1905), is one of several Debussy works concerned with aquatic imagery. In the second piece we encounter a tribute to Rameau in the form of an austere Sarabande of great nobility. Concluding the group is *Mouvement*, a toccata-like perpetual motion. After a pause of two years, Debussy brought forth a second book of *Images* for the piano. The first of these, *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, carries Debussy's mastery of color and imagery to a new level of refinement. The second piece, *Et la lune descend sur la temple qui fut*, blends the medieval and the exotic, while *Poissons d'or* brings to life the motion of gold-colored fish on a Japanese lacquer.

In the wake of the second book of *Images* came a six-movement suite called *Children's Corner*, which Debussy dedicated to his three-year-old daughter. Its opening and closing pieces, titled respectively *Dr. Gradus ad Parnassum* and *Golliwog's Cake Walk*, reveal the humorous and parodistic side of Debussy's personality. Their companion pieces portray dancing snow, the piping of a little shepherd, a serenade for a doll, and a lullaby for his daughter's toy elephant. As with Schumann's *Kinderscenen*, these pieces depict childhood as seen through an adult's eyes.

At the end of 1909 Debussy began a series of twelve pieces, completed within just a few weeks, that he soon published together under the title of *Préludes*. A second dozen followed in 1913. As a totality they represent the essence of Debussy's piano writing in all its variety. Always a firm believer in the power of suggestion, rather than explicit portrayal, Debussy

placed the title of each *Prélude* in parentheses at the end—almost as an afterthought. Nonetheless, in this kaleidoscopic gallery we readily discover the sights and sounds of nature, several exotic and mythological subjects, an occasional caricature, the world of the dance, the mysteries of the night, and some unique personages.

Préludes, Book One

Danseuses de Delphes: a glimpse of antiquity, possibly inspired by the sculpted figures on Greek vases.

Voiles: billowing sails as seen through the mist of the whole-tone scale, except for a brief pentatonic outburst.

Le vent dans la plaine: only a mild wind, but with a few heavier gusts.

Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir: a phrase from a poem of Baudelaire, suggesting the mingling of the senses in a hothouse atmosphere.

Les collines d'Anacapri: a vivid Neapolitan scene with snatches of folksong and tarantella rhythms.

Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest: although we do not discover exactly what the West Wind saw, Debussy does assure us of its terrifying ferocity.

La fille aux cheveux de lin: an inspired melody sung by a young Scottish girl in a poem by Leconte de Lisle.

La sérénade interrompue: a Spanish atmosphere, guitar patterns, and a hopeful suitor who finally gives up in despair.

La cathédrale engloutie: evoking an old Brittany legend of a sunken cathedral that rises to the surface, then returns to the depths.

La danse de Puck: a gossamer scherzo straight out of Shakespeare.

Minstrels: wit and verisimilitude from old-fashioned on-stage entertainers.

Préludes, Book Two

Brouillards: dense fog, generated by Debussy's brand of bitonality.

Feuilles mortes: a bleak autumn landscape; in the composer's words, "bound by the spell of ancient forests".

La Puerta del Vino: another visit to Spain, this time to the famous "Wine Gate" of the Alhambra.

"*Les fees sont d'exquisses danseuses*": a line from a poem by Sir James M. Barrie, and another fine-spun scherzo requiring extreme deftness from the pianist.

Bruyères: a first cousin to the Scottish girl with flaxen hair in Book One, with similar unpretentious charm.

Général Lavine—eccentric: a character sketch of a vaudeville clown, using American cake-walk rhythms (as in *Minstrels*).

La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune: a romantic setting permeated by mystery and unreality.

Ondine: the water nymph of mythology, also portrayed five years earlier by Ravel in his *Gaspard de la nuit*.

Hommage à S. Pickwick: a witty depiction of the pompous hero of *The Pickwick Papers* by Dickens.

Canope: an austere mood evoked by contemplation of an ancient Egyptian funeral urn.

Les tierces alternées: the whirring perpetual motion of thirds, produced by pianistic legerdemain.

Feux d'artifice: showering sparks and flying rockets at a Bastille Day celebration.

Several miscellaneous pieces by Debussy date from around the same period as the 24 *Préludes*. In 1909 he joined several French composers honoring the centenary of the death of Franz Joseph Haydn. The result was *Hommage à Haydn*, in which Haydn's name is spelled out in a five-note motif that dominates the tex-

ture. From the same year comes the relatively slight *La petit Negre*, clearly related to *Golliwog's Cake Walk* but aimed at younger players. *La plus que lente* (1910) is an alluring, sophisticated Parisian salon waltz.

Three more separate piano pieces owe their origins to events surrounding the First World War. The *Berceuse héroïque* is a tribute to the king of Belgium and his fallen soldiers. The *Élégie* and the *Pièce pour le Vêtement du blessé* were written for charity concerts to aid the war effort. Then, in 1917, Debussy wrote the brief but eloquent *Les Soirs illumines par l'ardeur du charbon*, which remained unknown until 2001. The title reflects the need for rationing of coal during the bleak years of the war.

The carnage of the war deeply affected Debussy, and a diagnosis of terminal cancer made the last three years of his life difficult. Nonetheless, inspired by the example of Chopin (whose piano works he was then editing for Durand, his publisher), Debussy summoned all his creative powers for the *Douze Etudes* of 1915. The titles of the individual études describe precisely the technical focus of each, but as with the similar examples by Chopin and Liszt, these masterworks are equally significant as studies in musical expression. Once again Debussy places line, texture, sonority, harmonic innovation, mood and atmosphere far above any mechanical considerations or shallow virtuosity. Throughout the études, as in his entire invaluable legacy for the piano, Debussy challenges the player's imagination as much as his technique.

Donald Manildi (Curator, International Piano Archives, University of Maryland)

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Larissa Dedova
By Stefan Sullivan

Larissa Dedova began piano studies at the age of 5, and trained at the renowned Gnessin School of Music, and the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory under the guidance of Tatiana Zaitseva, Lev Oborin and Eugene Malinin. In 1976, she won the title of Laureate and the Silver Medal at The J.S. Bach International Competition in Leipzig.

In a long and illustrious career, Larissa Dedova has since performed or collaborated with luminaries such as Dmitry Kabalevsky, Mariss Jansons, Vladimir Spivakov and The Guarneri Quartet, and mentored a new generation of rising stars including Valentina Igoshina and Robert Henry.

In the hands of an artist who relishes the muscular brushstrokes of the Russian romantics, or the architectonic perfection of Bach and Brahms, Debussy might



Photo by Anna Kondakova

seem not just vague and elusive, but almost dreamily effete. But for Dedova, his impressionistic immediacy, evocative timbers, the palette of shades and moods offers up a seductive template for the free-spirited iconoclast. "Debussy feels always new," she notes - a limitless soundscape for playful and poetic ideation. As a pianist noted for her "color, big sound and freedom of phrase," (Philadelphia Inquirer), Dedova and Debussy are then a match made, if not in heaven, then in an airy, sonoric cloudworld just below.

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CRC 3094/95/96/97

DDD

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Disc 1

| | |
|---|---------|
| Preludes – Livre 1 (Book 1) | (42:47) |
| 1 I Danseuses de Delphes (Dancers of Delphi) | 3:55 |
| 2 II Voiles (Veils or sails) | 3:27 |
| 3 III Le vent dans la plaine (The Wind in the Plain) | 2:28 |
| 4 IV <i>Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir</i> ("The sounds and fragrances swirl through the evening air") | 4:15 |
| 5 V Les collines d'Anacapri (The Hills of Anacapri) | 3:10 |
| 6 VI Des pas sur la neige (Footsteps in the Snow) | 4:02 |
| 7 VII Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Quest (What the West Wind has seen) | 3:45 |
| 8 VIII La fille aux cheveux de lin (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair) | 2:30 |
| 9 IX La sérénade interrompue (Interrupted Serenade) | 2:47 |
| 10 X La Cathédrale engloutie (The Submerged Cathedral) | 7:01 |
| 11 X La danse de Puck (Puck's Dance) | 2:58 |
| 12 XII Minstrels | 2:29 |

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| Images – Série 1 (Set 1) | (15:09) |
| 13 I Reflets dans l'eau | 5:11 |
| 14 II Hommage à Rameau | 6:30 |
| 15 III Mouvement | 3:28 |

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| 16 Dance bohémienne | 2:19 |
| Deux Arabesques | (7:56) |
| 17 I Andante con moto | 4:25 |
| 18 II Allegretto scherzando | 3:31 |

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| 19 Valse romantique | 3:27 |
| 20 Danse (Tarantelle styrienne) | 5:29 |

Total: 77:08

Disc 2

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|---|---------|
| Preludes – Livre 2 (Book 2) | (40:46) |
| 1 I Brouillards (Mists) | 3:28 |
| 2 II Feuilles mortes (Dead Leaves) | 3:16 |
| 3 III La puerta del Vino (The Wine Gate) | 3:33 |
| 4 IV <i>Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses</i> ("Fairies are exquisite dancers") | 3:19 |
| 5 V Bruyères ((Heather) | 3:16 |
| 6 VI <i>General Lavine - excentric</i> | 2:43 |
| 7 VII La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune (The Terrace of Moonlit Audiences) | 4:56 |
| 8 VIII Ondine (Undine) | 3:35 |
| 9 IX Hommage à Samuel Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C. (Homage to S. Pickwick) | 2:28 |
| X Canope (Canopic jar) | 2:50 |
| 11 XI Les tierces alternées (Alternating Thirds) | 2:44 |
| 12 XII Feux d'artifice (Fireworks) | 4:37 |

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| Images – Serie 2 (Set 2) | (14:38) |
| 13 I Cloches à travers les feuilles | 5:11 |
| 14 II Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut | 5:29 |
| 15 III Poissons d'or | 3:58 |

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|-------------|------|
| 16 Ballade | 7:38 |
| 17 Mazurka | 2:57 |
| 18 Nocturne | 6:20 |
| 19 Rêverie | 4:27 |

Total: 76:48

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|---|--------------|---|----------------|
| Disc 3 | | Disc 4 | |
| Etudes – Livre 1 (Book 1) | (22:33) | Suite bergamasque | (16:54) |
| 1 I Pour les cinq doigts – d’après Monsieur Czerny | 3:23 | 1 I Prélude | 4:23 |
| 2 II Pour les tierces | 3:57 | 2 II Menuet | 4:10 |
| 3 III Pour les quarts | 5:43 | 3 III Clair de lune | 4:57 |
| 4 IV Pour les sixtes | 4:37 | 4 IV Passepied | 3:24 |
| 5 V Pour les octaves | 3:06 | | |
| 6 VI Pour les huit doigts | 1:47 | Pour le piano | (12:48) |
| | | 5 I Prélude | 4:01 |
| Etudes – Livre 2 (Book 2) | (28:07) | 6 II Sarabande | 4:21 |
| 7 VII Pour les degrés chromatiques | 2:28 | 7 III Toccata | 4:26 |
| 8 VIII Pour les agréments | 5:51 | | |
| 9 IX Pour les notes répétées | 3:52 | Estampes | (15:25) |
| 10 X Pour les sonorités opposées | 5:52 | | |
| 11 XI Pour les arpèges composés | 4:50 | 8 I Pagodes | 6:05 |
| 12 XII Pour les accords | 5:14 | 9 II La soirée dans Grenade | 5:16 |
| | | 10 III Jardins sous la pluie | 4:04 |
| Children’s Corner | (16:10) | | |
| 13 I Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum | 2:16 | Images (oubliées) | (7:58) |
| 14 II Jimbo’s Lullaby | 3:35 | 11 I Lent (Mélancolique et doux) | 3:56 |
| 15 III Serenade for the Doll | 2:30 | 12 II Très vite | 4:01 |
| 16 IV The Snow is Dancing | 2:47 | | |
| 17 V The Little Shepherd | 2:05 | 13 Masques | 5:09 |
| 18 VI Golliwogg’s Cake-Walk | 2:57 | 14 D’un cahier d’esquisses | 5:23 |
| | | 15 L’isle joyeuse | 6:28 |
| 19 La plus que lente | 4:15 | 16 Berceuse héroïque | 4:17 |
| 20 Hommage à Haydn | 2:18 | 17 Elégie | 2:16 |
| 21 La Petit Nègre | 1:42 | 18 <i>Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon</i> | 2:12 |
| 22 Morceau de concours | 0:54 | | |
| 23 Pièce pour l’oeuvre du <i>Vêtement du blessé</i> | 1:06 | | |
| Total: | 77:06 | Total: | 78:52 |
| | | Complete Set Time: | 5:09:54 |

Recorded May and June, 2008; April, May, June, October and November, 2009 at Elsie & Marvin Dekelboum Concert Hall at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland, College Park. Preludes Recorded July, 2002 at the Concert Hall of Gnessin Academy of Music, Moscow. Produced by Antonino d’Urzo. Preludes Produced by Pyotr Kondrashin. Engineered and Edited by Antonino d’Urzo. Preludes Engineered and Edited by Pyotr Kondrashin, ConClaRec. Mastered by Antonino d’Urzo, Opusrite. Steinway D pianos. Cover Painting: Claude Monet: *In the Corner of the Garden at Montgeron* (1877). Executive Producer: Victor E. Sachse.

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