

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

THE COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC, VOL. I

BENNETT LERNER, PIANO

- 1 Danse bohémienne (2:00)
- 2 Arabesque No. 1 (3:23)
- 3 Arabesque No. 2 (3:15)
- 4 Intermède (3:22)
- 5 The Little Nigar (0:59)
- 6 Rêverie (3:33)
- 7 Danse (5:16)

Children's Corner (14:23)

- 8 Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum (2:01)
- 9 Jimbo's Lullaby (2:40)
- 10 Serenade for the Doll (2:05)
- 11 The Snow is Dancing (2:32)
- 12 The Little Shepherd (1:55)
- 13 Golliwogg's Cake-walk (2:53)

Préludes, Book II (33:31)

- 14 Brouillards (2:36)
- 15 Feuilles mortes (2:10)
- 16 La Puerta del Vino (2:53)
- 17 "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses" (2:37)
- 18 Bruyères (2:19)
- 19 "General Lavine" -- eccentric (2:25)
- 20 La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune (3:17)
- 21 Ondine (2:45)
- 22 Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P. P. M. P. C. (2:15)
- 23 Canope (2:04)
- 24 Les tierces alterneés (2:33)
- 25 Feux d'artifice (4:55)

Claude Debussy was born on August 22, 1862, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a suburb of Paris. His birthplace now houses a small museum, with manuscripts, letters, bibelots, and other souvenirs of his life. He died on March 25, 1918, and was buried in the cemetery in Passy.

Debussy was the most important of the so-called Impressionist composers, for whom the capturing of subtle moods and atmosphere was more important than either the clarity of Classical musical forms or the strong emotions of the Romantic style. Debussy wrote a large body of piano music -- 83 separate pieces -- in which he discovered new ways of writing for the piano. Never-before-heard colors and textures were invented through harmonic innovations, the use of whole-tone and other exotic scales, the complex layering of musical ideas, and, especially, an extensive use of the damper and una corda pedals. Words commonly used to describe his music are "lush," "voluptuous," "elegant," "sensitive," and "delicate." While these words are appropriate, it must be added that Debussy's music is also intense, passionate, and, at times, acerbic or even violent.

My first memory of playing Debussy's music dates from when I was ten years old and performed the "Golliwogg's Cake-walk." Six years later, I studied "Voiles" (from *Préludes*, Book I) and my great love for Debussy's music crystallized. I decided then that I would include his works in my recitals until I had played every one of them. My teacher, the Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau, who was famous for his cycles of the complete works of Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin, Schumann, Bach, and almost every other major piano composer, felt that "to really know a composer well, to better understand his total language, one must play all of his works, including minor works. Sometimes there are little enigmatic qualities in a composition that almost defy understanding until suddenly, through analogies [to other works], what was vague before now becomes clear" (Elise Mayer: *Great Contemporary Pianists*

Speak for Themselves, Dover, 1991, p. 3.). When you have mastered a composer's complete oeuvre, each piece within it comes to seem a part of a larger whole. Individual works refer to each other, both from past to future and future to past. A measure in an early work informs a place in a late work, sometimes giving the solution to a pianistic or interpretive problem. A measure in a late work shows the potential of a spot in an early piece. There are ideas that develop, hints taken up later and expanded, and quotes from earlier works. The pieces all interact, parts of a single organism.

For the listener, the task is similar. To listen to the complete works of a composer is to get to know him in depth. Arrau's instructions to learn a composer's total output are for the listener as well as the pianist.

This is now the third time that I have studied the complete works of Debussy (and there are now two more pieces than there were the last time: the recently found *Intermède* and *Les soirées illuminées par l'ardeur du charbon*). Each time, I discover a different Debussy. Previously, I was led by the lushness of the music into a kind of slow playing, with a lot of time-taking and what might be called "emoting." Ten years later, I find that I am more interested in the quick changes of mood and the music's complete lack of sentimentality. This does not mean that I do not still respond to its voluptuousness, color, and sensuality, without which Debussy would not be Debussy, but it does mean that my tempos are faster than they used to be and that I don't linger. (Leonard Bernstein, one of the great lingerers of all time, could no longer growl at me, as he did some twenty years ago, "Beautiful, but you linger too much!")

This time around I am also responding more to what I see as the deep eroticism of the music, sometimes overt and sometimes concealed. The music has an undeniable sexual charm. (After all, Debussy seduced both his wives with his song

“C’est l’extase.”) In his book *Debussy and Wagner* (Eulenberg, 1979), Robin Holloway postulates that Debussy’s main musical objective was to depict the sexual act. Perhaps not the act itself, but certainly the sensations surrounding it. This is a challenge to realize in performance. The erotic quality of the music must be expressed through the body, arms, hands, and fingers of the pianist. A challenge for the performer, yes, but the compensation is the sheer pleasure of making and hearing beautiful sounds. Basically, it’s all ecstasy.

The prime technical challenge in this music is its demand for colors. The colors “are the expression of mysterious, enigmatic, and very deep, perceptions” (Arrau, op. cit., pp. 5-6). Some might say the meaning of the music is in the colors. To achieve their full spectrum, one must use varying amounts of arm weight combined with various amounts of finger firmness and flexibility. Heavy arms with soft fingers will give you a Brahms sound. Firm fingers with light arms will produce a Mozart sound. Debussy demands everything in between, in hundreds of combinations, all waiting to be discovered, to be used two or three at a time, in different registers, and, sometimes, even within the same hand. Finding the right balances for these different levels is difficult. This is one reason you cannot play Debussy on a bad piano, though you can Bach or Beethoven.

From reading about the history of rubato and performance practice in Debussy’s time (see suggested reading list below), from hearing the playing of Walter Rummel, a pianist whose playing Debussy loved and respected, and, most significantly, from my own experience of playing Debussy’s works, I have arrived at a conception of Debussy’s music as a music without bar lines. Roy Howat, in his book *Debussy in Proportion: A Musical Analysis* (Cambridge, 1983), describes Debussy’s use of natural forms in structuring his pieces (through the use of Golden Sections and Fibonacci numbers). I extrapolate from this the use of natural rhythms. Nature has

no metronomes. Hearts are not machines. Music without rubato has no life, no charm. As Walter Rummel wrote, “Non-rubato is perfection wedded to death” (Timbrell: *Prince of Virtuosos*, Scarecrow, 2005, p. 190). Pianists of a century ago did not worry about whether to play freely or not, or whether their hands were exactly together. Rubato (whether in both hands at the same time or with the hands independent of each other) was part of their natural language. Flexibility of tempo (such as speeding up when excited, easing up at the end of a phrase, or taking time for a breath) was not something they questioned. Modern pianists try hard not to rush and often feel self-conscious about rubato as well. Recordings are partially responsible for this as rubato heard over and over again loses its spontaneity and can come to sound mannered in a way that it would not in a live performance. The problem in a recording session is to play spontaneously and accurately at the same time, a somewhat contradictory task.

As for the use of the pedal, Debussy envisioned a “piano without hammers,” but also a piano with a damper pedal. Debussy is a composer who wrote pedal markings very rarely but who demands the use of lots of pedal. (He also very rarely writes *una corda*, but does write *pianississimo* often.) My teacher, the American pianist Robert Helps, wrote, “The pedal -- what an incredible device! [It] can impart a glow and magic...which nothing else can” (liner notes for LP recording, *Music by Robert Helps*, Desto, undated). The pedal is the very soul of the piano. Another of my teachers, the Argentine virtuosa Arminda Canteros, who was a friend and student of Walter Giesecking, the great German Debussy player, told me that Giesecking sometimes attached signal lights to his pedals so that his students could see how he pedaled. Debussy sometimes indicates pedalling with long, tied bass notes, impossible to realize without using the damper pedal. It seems to me self-evident that without liberal use of the pedal you cannot get the right sound for Debussy.

Of all the composers that can be seen to have an affinity with Debussy, Chopin among them, I feel that the closest is Beethoven. This, because of the spiritual depth of their music, but also because of their shared liking for crescendos followed by piano subitos (*cresc. p*), which device expresses emotions both intensified and restrained. (Debussy's etudes are filled with this marking.) Also, both composers use two-note phrases in the same way, phrases that must be very clearly played, the second note softer and shorter than the first. Debussy sometimes notated this with a staccato on the second note (as in "'General Lavine' -- eccentric").

Another, more recent composer who has an affinity with Debussy is Toru Takemitsu, perhaps Debussy's modern successor. Takemitsu's music has influenced my playing of the music of his precursor (see Borges's masterful short essay "Kafka and his Precursors"). It breathes and flows naturally, with no sense of bar lines, and has a rare sensuality in its sounds. Takemitsu once told a pianist, "Play as if time had gone" (Noriko Ogawa: notes, *Takemitsu: Complete Piano Works, Bis*, 1996).

In the following program notes, I offer just a few facts and suggestions of what to listen for, what I listen for. Musicological and analytic discussions of these pieces are readily available elsewhere. I have been playing some of these pieces for more than fifty years, which attests to my great love for this music, but also may account for some idiosyncrasies in the playing. Some of these may, indeed, be misreadings, but some may reflect decisions arrived at after many years of experience with this music.

I live in Thailand, a country where people believe in ghosts. A Thai *mor duu* (psychic) comes to all my concerts and tells me repeatedly that Debussy comes to them as well, and, further, that Debussy and I have been close friends in many past lives. This psychic insists that Debussy's spirit, on one occasion, entered into my body while I was performing. (I did have rather a bad backache the next day!)



Debussy, age 54, and Claude-Emma, 1916

Whether one believes in such things or not, it is nice to think that, perhaps, Debussy has been enjoying my playing. At least, his ghost hasn't strangled me when I didn't play exactly what was written on the page! As for recordings, such as the present one, they only document how one played on one particular day, in one particular room, on one particular piano. Hopefully, Debussy's spirit was present.

Recommended reading:

Robin Holloway: *Debussy and Wagner* (Eulenberg, 1979)

Roy Howat: *Debussy in Proportion: A Musical Analysis* (Cambridge, 1983)

Roy Howat: Notes to recordings of Debussy (Tall Poppies, 1997-2003)

Richard Hudson: *Stolen Time: The History of Rubato* (Clarendon, 1994)

Robert Philip: *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (Cambridge University, 1992)

Charles Timbrell: *Prince of Virtuosos: A Life of Walter Rummel, American Pianist* (Scarecrow, 2005)

With one exception, the pieces in the first group on this disc date from the early years of a composer who was somewhat slow in finding his own voice. Salon pieces all, they are generically French Romantic in style (one thinks of Massenet or Gounod). Nevertheless, each of them has a spot that, by way of a harmonic turn, an exotic scale, or a pedal effect, foreshadows the color, the sensuality, and the ecstasy of Debussy's later style. Notable are those spots that require long pedals and those that ask the pianist to produce two or three simultaneous colors in differentiated levels.

Danse bohémienne (1880), *allegro*, is the earliest extant piano piece by Debussy. The eighteen-year old was then under the influence of Russian composers and this piece might be more accurately called *Danse slave*, sounding, as it does, rather like a polka that might have been written by Tchaikovsky. (There is more than a passing resemblance to Tchaikovsky's "Polka de Salon," Op. 9, No. 2.). *Danse*

bohémienne was not published until 1932, when it was put up for sale by Alexandre de Meck, the son of Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patroness. (She had shown the piece to Tchaikovsky, who commented, "Charming, if a bit short.") The piano writing, it must be said, is rather awkward. The trills are especially uncomfortable. The melody is often in the middle voice, sometimes divided between the hands, with accompaniment both over and under, requiring very clever fingerings. (This was, to be sure, a favored texture of French Romantic composers.) In the vigorous and masculine section in G major (00:42) the melody is in the bass. Debussy's talent shows only in that the piece wears well upon repeated hearings, keeping its charm and grace.

Arabesque No. 1 (1888-91), *andantino con moto*, lives up to its title with its light, tripping, repeated figurations. Many characteristics of Debussy's later style are evident here: the use of bass-note resonance to make the sound of the piano shimmer; the four-bar introduction being louder (marked piano) than the theme it introduces (marked pianissimo); the subtle changes to the second measure of the theme in the gentle middle section (1:11) at each of its four statements (which makes it hard to memorize!); and, especially, the use of the pentatonic scale in the main theme of the work. The arabesques of the first section are flowing, descending pentatonic figurations, and the piece ends with a pentatonic sweep upward, then gently comes down to earth.

Arabesque No. 2 (1888-91), *allegretto scherzando, piano et très léger*, repeats a "diddle-dum" figuration that probably derives from Tchaikovsky's piano piece "Chant d'alouette" (from *Album for the Young*, Op. 39). After the opening section returns, there is one of those spots of foreshadowing (2:25), *armonioso*, in which the music goes into "slow motion" and, to add to its ecstatic effect, requires long pedallings. (Debussy has written unplayably-long bass notes -- unplayable without using the damper pedal, that is.)

Intermède (1880), *moderato*, was only discovered in 2001 in the papers of Debussy's friend and colleague Maurice Dumesnil, in whose hand the manuscript is written. It is similar to *Danse bohémienne* in its Russian flavor, its key (B minor), and the awkwardness of its piano writing (especially the trills). It is the same music as the "Scherzo-Intermezzo" from Debussy's early piano trio. Although there is no textual evidence, i.e., no manuscript, I suspect that the piano version came first because it lies more comfortably under my hand. After seven bars of introduction -- Debussy's introductions are often odd-numbered in bar length -- and two bars to set the tempo -- Debussy often arrives at a new tempo a few bars before a theme actually enters -- the right hand plays the main tune in staccato chords, rather like the light, sparkling, chattering woodwinds of Glinka or Tchaikovsky. The "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* is recalled by the bassoon-like, five-note, rising scale in the left hand. The middle section (1:17) again shows the French predilection for melodies in the middle voice, a challenge in voicing for the pianist. (In Debussy's piano trio, this tender, *cantabile* theme is played by the cello.) The end of the piece, like the beginning, makes one think of woodwinds.

The Little Nigar (1909), *allegro giusto, très rythmé*, has, needless to say, an unfortunate title. (Perhaps it sounds better with a French accent?) Originally in English, this title has often been Frenchified as *Le petit nègre* or euphemized as *The Little Black Boy*. It was composed for a volume of teaching pieces, the *Méthode Élémentaire de Piano*, collected by the pedagogue Theodore Lack, and was only one page long. When it was republished in 1934, the publisher, Schott, added to its length with a not-quite complete repeat. The piece is a cakewalk (ragtime without syncopation), as is "Golliwogg's Cakewalk." Nine measures into the piece, the left hand must be placed on top of the

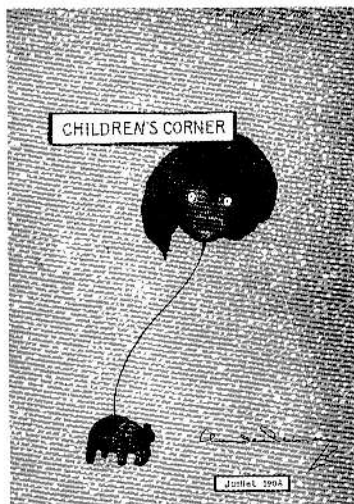
right hand, its notes being both over and under those of the melody in the right hand. A four-bar transition creates a moment of repose (0:17), in which a long pedal makes the repeated B-flats in the right hand sound like bells. This leads to the middle section, in which the right hand must play the *doux et expressif* melody legato and pianissimo, rather like a whistling *flâneur*, and, at the same time, play the accompaniment staccato and even softer. (The left hand doubles the melody at the lower octave.)

Réverie (1880), *sans lenteur, très doux et expressif*, is a work of the utmost tenderness. Its atmosphere of daydreaming is created with very long pedals and resonant basses. (Playing arpeggios softer than the basses under them produces a warm, vibrant piano sound.) In the middle section (1:12) the melody is in the bass under a delicate right hand accompaniment. Towards the end of this melody there is a moment of ecstasy. The mild, musing, and questioning D minor section that follows (1:43), with its *portato* chords, is answered by a soothing legato in E major. A moment that foretells the Debussy of the future is the return of the opening theme (2:31), now in the treble register, divided between the hands, with an ethereal pianissimo accompaniment, also divided between the hands. Both hands must play both colors, demanding great delicacy and control of dynamics.

Danse (1890), *allegretto, très léger*, looks forward to *Masques* (1903-4) with its constant oscillation between 6/8 and 3/4 time, its washes of color, and its sudden dynamic changes. The basic sonority is bright, cheerful, clear, and bell-like (as in the right hand in the opening measures). The opening theme (which shows up in the song *L'échelonnement des haies*) establishes the rhythmic contours of the piece, two measures in 3/4 and two in 6/8. In the middle section (2:33), at the beginning of which forward motion momentarily ceases,

we have three-note figures in open fifths and arpeggios in alternating hands that surround the melody (divided between the two hands) with washes of color. This requires that the pianist create three simultaneous sounds, to ravishing effect.

Children's Corner (1906-08) is an adult's view of a child's world,



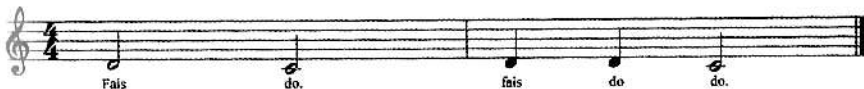
Debussy's Cover

written not for children to play but to be played for their pleasure. It was dedicated to Debussy's three-year old daughter Claude-Emma, nicknamed "Chouchou," and the dedication reads, "To my dear little Chouchou, with tender apologies from her father for what the future will bring." The whole suite is permeated with the French lullaby *Fais do do* ("Go to sleep"). Debussy himself painted the cover of the sheet music in the style of the Japanese print maker Hiroshige. The titles, except for the first piece, which is partly in Latin, are originally in English.

Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum, *modérément animé, égal et sans sécheresse*, is a tribute to the hours one spent as a child practicing boring piano etudes. The title, "Dr. Steps to Heaven," comes from a book of etudes by Clementi, but the piano figuration of the opening section comes from Cramer (almost note for note from etude No. 46 in *84 Etudes*). The next section (0:18) uses the texture of Czerny's Op. 261, No. 51, and the coda is from No. 52 of the same work (*125 Exercises*

in *Passage Playing*). As in Debussy's etude "pour les cinq doigts," with its subtitle "d'après Monsieur Czerny," the humor here comes from breaking out of the tedium of the exercises. After daydreaming a bit (0:51) -- *Fais do do* making a sighing, yawning appearance -- the bored, beleaguered student escapes, and the music runs away with itself in a coda expressive of freedom and release.

Jimbo's Lullaby, *assez modéré, doux et un peu gauche*, is a lullaby for Chouchou's pet elephant who snorts, grunts, sneezes, and dozes, while a tender lullaby is sung. Jimbo is probably a baby Asian elephant, as the slightly awkward main theme is pentatonic. *Fais do do* is heard throughout. The second appearance of the main theme (0:44) is hummed gently and the middle section (1:22) hints at nightmares. When the bad dreams subside (2:03), an especially tender version of the lullaby is sung. At the end Jimbo falls asleep and a slightly out-of-key *Fais do* is heard.



Serenade for the Doll, *allegretto ma non troppo, léger et gracieux*, is a depiction of another of Chouchou's dolls (perhaps the kind that golliwoggs love to tease; see below). The composer directs the pianist to use the una corda pedal throughout ("even in the places marked forte"), which creates an atmosphere of dusty lace and faded china. This gentle, delicate waltz requires great sensitivity in the use of the damper pedal to achieve its nostalgic color.

The Snow is Dancing, *modérément animé, doux et estompe*, paints a snow scene, perhaps in a glass sphere. Its sad, cold mood, with its repeated, monotonous D's, prefigures the prelude "Des pas sur la neige." What seem to

be quotes of children's songs ("Three Blind Mice" and a teasing song), appear through the flurries of snow. After the one forte in the piece (1:38) with its strong gusts of wind (and its forceful "Three Blind Mice"), the music dissolves into a blur. As in many of Debussy's pieces, there are no pedal markings, although a liberal use of pedal is necessary here to create the atmosphere.

The Little Shepherd, *très modéré, très doux et délicatement expressif*, takes us into the mountains, where we meet a lonely shepherd boy playing his flute. The music alternates between a plaintive melody and an awkward dance (the rhythm and tune of which recall *L'isle joyeuse*), followed by moments of silence that express the "sound" of the mountains. In the middle section (1:05), the music becomes agitated and, at the climax, there are cries of solitary despair.

Golliwogg's Cake-walk, *allegro giusto*, is a cakewalk (a high-stepping, strutting routine originally devised by black Southern slaves to parody their white masters' pomposity). A marvelous example of a cakewalk can be seen in the "race," i.e., black, movie musical *Stormy Weather* starring Lena Horne. An ensemble of dancers performs a cakewalk, complete with golliwogg faces on their costumes. The golliwogg, a character created in 1895 by the American writer and illustrator Florence Upton in a series of children's books, is a doll representing a black boy with long, frizzy hair who is very naughty and delights in scaring other dolls, especially fair-skinned Dutch ones. Debussy quotes (1:18),



Golliwogg scares the Dutch dolls

with great irony (*avec une grande émotion*), the opening of the prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. This sumptuous, questioning phrase is answered by the golliwogg's mocking laughter, after which the "golly" (to use the more politically correct term that doll collectors now use) momentarily loses, or pretends to lose, his energy (Is he contrite?), only to bounce back to boisterous life.

Préludes, Book II (1911-13) With the second book of preludes we have a composer at the height of his powers. With concision, unerring choice of colors, and wit, he can do anything he wants, go anywhere he wants; and so he does. From the comedy of the Parisian music hall to the hieratic solemnity of the Egyptian pyramids, from the lush highlands of Scotland to a deserted temple in India, the variety of these pieces is amazing: sweetness, comedy, morbidity, gentleness, liveliness, flirtation, and violence. Throughout there is a feeling of spontaneity, of sustained ecstasy, and even a touch of madness. Although Debussy underplays it by placing his titles in parentheses and after an ellipsis at the end of each piece (as in *Préludes*, Book I), the pieces are, nevertheless, pictorial, descriptive, and narrative.

Brouillards (Fog), *modéré, extrêmement égal et léger*, depicts different kinds of fog. At the opening, simple white-key triads in the left hand conflict with nearly inaudible (mostly) black notes in the right hand, producing a blur, obsessive and cold, behind which something scary and haunting lurks. The mood is oppressive. A motif in wide-spread double octaves (0:40) increases the ominous mood. After the frisson of two arpeggios rising in sudden crescendo like an apparition (1:08), there is just a hint of an almost painful melody, with ghostly arpeggios in the right hand. The final page dissolves into low-C gongs, with wisps of fog, *presque plus rien* ("almost nothing").

Feuilles mortes (Dead Leaves), *lent et mélancolique, doucement soutenu*

et très expressif, is a depiction of exhaustion, of dead leaves falling to earth. Distant horn calls add to the lonely, outdoor atmosphere. This is a good example of multi-leveled music, often demanding three colors simultaneously, so that one hand or both must play at least two different colors, lines, or textures at the same time. We sense a slow, painful death, cold and icy. This is one of the more dissonant pieces in the set. The middle section, *un peu plus allant et plus grave-ment expressif*, (“a little more flowing and more solemnly expressive”) begins with a ghostly march. At one point (0:57) there are four simultaneous levels of sound: the right hand plays dissonant chords outlining tritones, while the left hand must play the intense melody, the accompanying chords, and the low pianissimo bass (which must sound inside the total sonority, causing a shimmer). The high level of dissonance between the parts creates a feeling of pain. After a reprise of the horn calls, the opening returns. At the very end, which echoes the closing of Liszt’s piano sonata, we have the “sound” of death.

La Puerta del Vino, *mov't de habanera, avec de brusques oppositions d'extrême violence et de passionnée douceur*, was inspired by a postcard of the Wine Gate in the Alhambra Palace in Granada. Debussy’s musical Spain is a place of violence, flirtation, and sensuality, all jostling together, “with brusque oppositions of extreme violence and passionate sweetness.” It is a world of veils and fans, Carmen, toreadors and gypsies, and the deep emotion of flamenco’s *cante jondo*. The piece opens violently (“*âpre*,” “bitter”), followed by a melody limned with Moorish ornamentation. The broken chords sigh or perhaps a maja haughtily closes her fan (0:38). The piece is permeated with the rhythm of the *habanera*, played always softly in the left hand. The moods change suddenly, from bitter to flirtatious to passionate to ironic to gracious. At the very end, with a sigh, the fan closes for the last time.

“Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses” (“Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers”), *rapide et léger*, takes its title from a line in J. M. Barrie’s early telling of Peter Pan stories, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906). The book was illustrated with drawings by Arthur Rackham. Hovering, whirring, and flitting, like Puck in *Préludes*, Book I, the fairies dance to wisps of waltzes that float in and out, the first of many waltzes in these preludes. As in “La Danse de Puck,” there are horn calls. The music is lush and danceable and the climax (1:37), as in Debussy’s ballet *Jeux*, is a slow, *caressant* waltz. Near the end (1:45) there is a long, almost inaudible, trill; the music is all vibration, *doux et rêveur* (“sweet and dreaming”), after which the fairies disappear.

Bruyères (Heather), *calme, doucement expressif*, takes us to the Scottish highlands, where the heather swathes the hills in purple. This piece is happier than most of the preludes in Book II -- in fact, it is marked *joyeuse* -- and the ecstasy is sustained by both the Art Nouveau sweetness of the harmonies and the spaciousness of the sound.

“General Lavine” -- *eccentric, dans le style et le mouvement d'un cake-walk*, is a character portrait of the music hall clown “General” Ed La Vine (“The Man Who Soldiered All His Life”), who performed in Paris in 1910. La Vine wore a comic soldier’s uniform with very long shoes. One can hear him



Arthur Rackham's fairy



tumbling, tripping, and falling over the long tips of his overlarge shoes, picking himself up, and falling down again. The music is quirky and witty, and, to be sure, eccentric. The repeated sixteenth-note chords (1:05) may be a reference to Gottschalk's salon piece "The Banjo." The instructions to play *strident* and *spirituel et discret* are surely ironic. The "General" has moments of anxiety and sadness, but also moments of joy. Near the end (2:07) a low D major chord is rather like a double take, a deadpan look. The piece ends with one last tumble.

La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune (The Terrace Where the Moonlight Gives Audience), *lent*, takes us to a deserted Indian temple where the moon still gives *darshan*. This is the deepest, strangest, most dissonant of the preludes in Book II. It is an attempt to use music to describe stasis and death. It is otherworldly, lonely, and abandoned. There are ghosts of many other preludes here, as well as of Wagner and Brahms. The opening motif derives from the prelude "Ondine"

and the chords that follow may refer to "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir" from *Préludes*, Book I. After some horn calls (0:38) -- we have noticed horn calls in many previous preludes -- there are echoes (0:51), in the dissonance and the intensity of the appoggiaturas, of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. After a slow waltz (another waltz!) (1:05), reminiscent, in its simultaneous colors, of the etude "pour les sonorités opposées," a door opens and the ghost of Brahms waltzes in (1:20). The texture (octaves with thirds in them) and the harmonies recall Brahms's *Intermezzos* Op. 116, No. 4, in E major, and Op. 118, No. 6, in E-flat minor. After this, a noble, glacial procession in E-flat major (1:35), featuring horns calls

placed between widely spaced chords, re-introduces the ghost of Wagner with echoes of "Siegfried's Funeral March", all drums and cymbals. This fades and we float up (through *Tristan*) to stasis. We recall the falling of the dead leaves from the second prelude. In the final measures we hear distant bells, or, perhaps, the "sound" of moonlight.

Ondine, *scherzando*, is based on the Nordic legends about water nymphs who lured unwary fishermen to their deaths. Debussy's *ondine* shares qualities with the seductive and threatening creature of Chopin's A-flat Ballade, which was inspired by the ballad "Ondine" by the great Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz. Quite unlike the delicate creature depicted by Ravel in the first movement of his piano suite *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), Debussy's water nymph is dangerous. Her repeated-note motif echoes a motif in *Gaspard*, but it is from "Scarbo", the third movement, that Debussy chooses to quote, rather than "Ondine", perhaps because, of the two pieces, "Scarbo" contains the more frightening music. After much cajoling, the nymph sinks into lethargy (1:37) (in a sonority that recalls "Cloches à travers les feuilles," from *Images*, Series II) only to re-emerge (2:06) in an ostinato and crescendo filled with menace. On the last page, the *ondine* suddenly dissolves into green sea foam, in arpeggios to be played *aussi léger que possible* ("as lightly as possible").

Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P. P. M. P. C. (Homage to Samuel Pickwick, Esquire, Permanent (?) President (?) and Member Pickwick Club), *grave*, is an out-and-out narrative portrait. Samuel Pickwick is, of course, the founder of the Pickwick Club and the "hero" of Charles Dickens's novel *The Pickwick Papers*. His correct title is "G. C. M. P. C." (General Chairman - Member Pickwick Club). We are introduced to the proud but bumbling Englishman with a slightly pompous rendition of "God Save The King" that then eases into amiability. We hear Mr. Pickwick getting into various small scrapes, but his English unflappability always saves him. He does,

however, get into a genuinely terrible pickle (1:20) and cries desperately for help ("God Save the King," played loudly in a high register). Just in time (1:41), Mr. Pickwick's factotum, whistling Sam Weller, comes to the rescue! Mr. Pickwick regains his English pride and rises with a salute.

Canope (Egyptian Funeral Urn), *très calme et doucement triste*, takes us to the parched deserts of ancient Egypt for a funeral procession. A canope would contain the viscera of the deceased. We hear the wailing sounds of reeds or mourners (0:22) and the sound of *crotales* (small tuned cymbals) suspended in the wind (0:53). The mood, appropriately sad, is reminiscent of "The Little Shepherd."

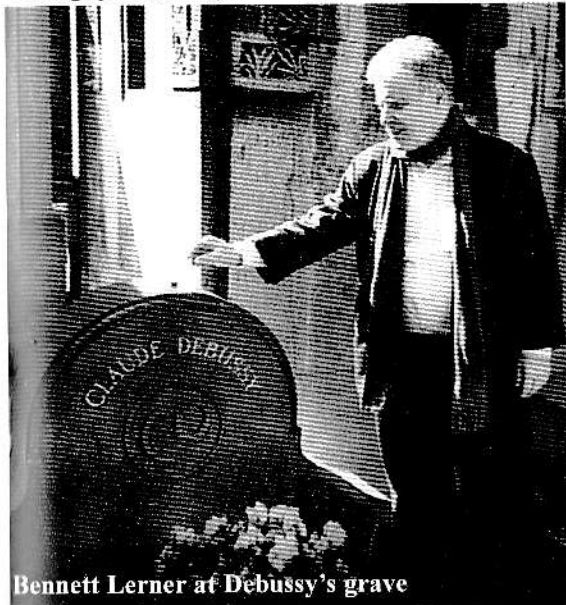
Les tierces alternées (Alternating Thirds), *modérément animé*, opens with a questioning motif, very much like Mime's motif in Wagner's *Siegfried*. What's going to happen? What happens is that we leave the world of pictorialism, narrative, descriptions, and impressions, for the world of abstractions, the world of Debussy's *Douze Études*. This piece is composed of only one interval, the third, in non-stop alternation between the hands, producing a blurring, whirring sound, with tiny bits of melody in the bass appearing here and there, including a sly quote from Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*. With its quicksilver changes of harmony and dynamics and the resulting changes in mood, this murmuring does not sound at all like an etude. The middle section (1:23), *doux et lié* ("sweet and legato"), is charming in another way, with a clear, flexible line and a lighter sound, altogether gracious and fluid. A dark, sinister, rumbling transition (1:48) leads to a return of the opening and the piece ends on a C-E third (the same third as at the end of "Voiles" from *Préludes*, Book I), repeated three times.

Feux d'artifice (Fireworks), *modérément animé*, is a grand improvisation of color and light, explosions, sparks, and sudden darkness. The unrelenting intensity of sensation verges on madness. This is gestural music and the occasional "math-

ematically incorrect" notation demands a creative interpretation. As with some pieces by Charles Ives, the pianist must trust his physical sense to show him the way, and allow himself to feel that he is improvising. The piece begins with great inner excitement, punctuated by sparks. There is a buildup, *en se rapprochant peu à peu* ("gradually approaching"), and suddenly, with a descending glissando (0:28), the lights go out. There is another buildup of excitement and this time the sky explodes with color (arpeggios like those in "Reflets dans l'eau," from *Images*, Series I). Falling sparks, changes of color, trumpets, and pizzicatos build up again to an avoid-

ed climax (1:50) and another quick subsidence. Energy temporarily spent, the music goes into slow motion (2:00) and time is suspended. Then (3:14) we have a third and final crescendo to the grand climax, after which there is a quick descent into a still-vibrating darkness. At the end we hear a distant trumpet playing, in farewell, a phrase from *La Marseillaise*.

-Bennett Lerner



Bennett Lerner at Debussy's grave

Bennett Lerner is well known as a performer of new music and has premiered music by composers such as Aaron Copland, Alexander Tcherepnin, David Diamond, Irving Fine, Marc Blitzstein, Otto Leuning, Paul Bowles, Samuel Barber, Roy Harris, Virgil Thomson, Vittorio Rieti, Christopher Berg, Narong Prangchareon, Phillip Ramey, Roger Zahab, and Tison Street.

Highlights of Lerner's career include a 1985 performance of Aaron Copland's *Piano Concerto* with the New York Philharmonic under Zubin Mehta, performances with the Los Angeles Symphony, the Boston Pops Orchestra, the Indianapolis Symphony, the Minnesota Symphony, the Sand Point Music Festival Orchestra, and at the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, Sicily. In 2002 he was soloist with the National Symphony of Thailand in the world premiere performance of *Bhawanka* by Thai composer Narong Prangchareon. Earlier recordings include *American Piano Music, Vols. 1 and 2, Alexander Tcherepnin: Piano Works*, and *Exposition - Paris 1937*, all on the Etcetera Label, and *Music By My Friends* on Albany Records.

Lerner's primary teachers were the Chilean virtuoso Claudio Arrau (through whose teacher, Martin Krause, can be traced a direct lineage to Liszt, and, through Liszt, to Czerny and Beethoven), Arrau's assistant Rafael de Silva, the famous Cuban pedagogue German Diez, the American pianist-composer Robert Helps, and the Argentine virtuosa Arminda Canteros (a friend and pupil of the great German Debussy player Walter Gieseking).

Lerner has his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from City University of New York and his Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from the Manhattan School of Music. He has lived in Thailand since 1990 and is currently a lecturer in the Music Department of Payap University in Chiang Mai.

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