

## PROGRAM

### *BOOK I (1909-1910)*

1. *Les danseuses de Delphes (The female dancers of Delphi)*
2. *Voiles (Sails, or Veils)*
3. *Le vent dans la plaine (The wind o'er the plain)*
4. *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir (The sounds and scents waft through the evening air)*
5. *Les collines d'Anacapri (The hillsides of Anacapri)*
6. *Des pas sur la neige (Footsteps in the snow)*
7. *Ce qu'a vu de vent d'Ouest (What the West Wind saw)*
8. *La fille aux cheveux de lin (The girl with the flaxen hair)*
9. *La sérénade interrompue (The interrupted serenade)*
10. *La cathédrale engloutie (The sunken cathedral)*
11. *La danse de Puck (Puck's dance)*
12. *Minstrels (Minstrels)*

### *BOOK II (1911-13)*

1. *Brouillards (Fog/Thick Mist)*
2. *Feuilles mortes (Dead leaves)*
3. *La puerta del Vino (The Gate of Wine)*
4. *Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses (Fairies are exquisite dancers)*
5. *Bruyères (Heathlands)*
6. *General Lavine – excentric (General Lavine – eccentric)*
7. *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune (Audiences out on the terrace in the moonlight)*
8. *Ondine*
9. *Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq., P.P.M.P.C. (Homage to Samuel Pickwick, Esq., P.P.M.P.C.)*
10. *Canope (Canopic Jar)*
11. *Les tierces alternées (Alternating thirds)*
12. *Feux d'artifice (Fireworks)*

## Claude Debussy: The Enigma, and the Preludes

The more one learns about Claude Debussy, the more the enigma grows – a composer who revered Bach and Mozart, yet ultimately eschewed Teutonic formalism (witness his condemnation of Beethoven's Opus 131 Quartet in a letter to Pierre Louys, dated 2/22/1895); a composer who attempted to revive the French musical tradition handed down from Couperin and Rameau, yet who relished contemporary foreign musical influences; a composer who responded strongly in his early years to the sensuous excesses of Wagner, yet who rejected much of this esthetic shortly thereafter, striving for a simplicity, a distillation of these very same senses in his great opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*; a composer very much of the *avant garde*, who knew the literature and the world of art of preceding eras better than many, if not most, of his contemporaries, yet who made precious little mention of any of his contemporary compatriots in art and literature in his copious, not to say voluminous, letters and critical writings. From these contradictions came an individual who changed the course of classical music.

Achille-Claude Debussy was born in St. Germain en Laye, a suburb of Paris, on August 22, 1862, the oldest of five children. His father had a small china shop, his mother was a seamstress. In 1870, his mother took him to the south of France to escape the ravages of the Franco-Prussian War. There, age 7, Debussy started piano lessons, paid for by a wealthy aunt. His second teacher was Marie Mauté de Fleurville, a kindly lady meant to have been a student of Chopin. Though these claims were never substantiated, Mme. De Fleurville's influence on his development was such that Debussy entered the Paris Conservatoire at age 10. Confounding his professors at the conservatory with his unconventional manner and his acerbic observations ('the conservatoire is still this dark and dirty place where the dust of bad tradition remains in the fingers', he writes to André Caplet many years later in November of 1909), he nonetheless managed to win the *Prix de Rome* on his third attempt in 1884, the stipend from which entitled him to spend four years in the Eternal City. Finding the environment there stifling, he lasted only two of those years (he also pined for the wife of his benefactor, Henry Vasnier, back in Paris). One lasting influence from those years in Rome, one which would have wide-ranging repercussions in his subsequent piano music, was experiencing Franz Liszt in concert. We do not know what he heard the master play, but we do know that the experience affected him deeply, in particular Liszt's use of the pedal, so central to Debussy's piano music (many years later, in a letter dated 9/1/1915 from his summer holiday on the English Channel in Pourville, Debussy writes to his publisher Jacques Durand that Liszt *used the pedal as one breathes*. In typically witty fashion, he goes on to say: '...pianists are, for the most part, bad musicians. They cut up music in unequal segments, just like [trussing] a chicken!').

Debussy was one of the great *autodidacts* of his era, widely versed in literature and the visual arts, in addition to music. During the 1870s, he came under the influence of the Symbolist poets. The Symbolist movement in literature, influenced greatly by the macabre writings of Edgar Allan Poe (particularly *The Fall of the House of Usher*), was in part a reaction to the realism of the *Enlightenment* writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Initiated in France with the publication of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*Flowers of Evil*) in 1857, the movement also rejected the sentimentality of the Romantics, demanding that absolute truths and ideals be represented symbolically, rather than directly. Debussy knew the works of Poe and Baudelaire intimately, making use of the latter's poetry in an early song cycle from 1889. He also made use of texts by the Symbolist poets Verlaine and Mallarmé.

Within the visual arts, Debussy's tonal palate had even broader influences – the *fêtes galantes* paintings of Antoine Watteau (1664-1721), including an allusion to *L'isle joyeuse* of 1905 in a 1914 letter to the organist, Desiré Walter (the great poet, novelist and essayist, Henri de Regnier, wrote in 1921: *A painting of Watteau is to be listened to as much as to be looked at – [he is] the most musical of [all] painters*); the impressionist seascapes of J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851); the esoteric works of James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), who characterized many of his own paintings in musical terms; and, the pre-Raphaelites of Great Britain, most notably Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882). Debussy is known to have loved the works of Degas and to have attended an exhibition in the early 1900s of the works of Gauguin (barring these two, however, no mention is made in his writings of other

contemporaries, such as Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso; Monet gets a brief mention in 1916). The Japanese wood block prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige also influenced his piano works after 1900.

Debussy was deeply affected by the *gamelan* music he experienced at the Javanese pavilion at the World Exposition of 1889, held in Paris (the Eiffel Tower, to which the vast majority of Parisians were opposed, is the lasting symbol of that moment in time). The complicated rhythmic patterns, the sonority of 'new' percussion instruments (particularly the variety of gongs), and the use of the pentatonic scale (the whole tone scale, so often associated with Debussy's music, might have been an outgrowth of this, although it had, in fact, already been used by Liszt in his later compositions), the resultant abnegation of many of the tenets of Western tonality, all resulted from this encounter.

What we hear, by the time the first set of preludes were written (all but three were composed from December, 1909 to February, 1910), is an amalgamation of the above-mentioned influences. A reaction to the strict parameters of the German school results in, among other things, a frequent stasis of unresolved harmonies, a simplicity of line and detail, an impressionistic haze along with a clarity of vision (the two are not mutually exclusive), and the use of medieval modes and plainchant. These pieces are more *tone poems* than preludes, in a mould echoing the Rachmaninoff preludes of Opus 23 and 32 (completed in 1903 and 1910, respectively).

**BOOK I (composed December, 1909-February, 1910,  
nine of the twelve with dates attached; published April, 1910)**

***Les danseuses de Delphes (The female dancers of Delphi)*** opens the series. Delphi and its temple were the home of Apollo, patron of the arts. Debussy is said to have told Louise Liebich, a British friend, that this prelude represented a *caryatid* (a sculpted female figure acting as support of a much larger structure) at the Louvre. Such imagery informs the performer in a very direct way.

***Voiles (Veils, or Sails)***, with its exoticism of pentatonic and whole tone scales, gongs, and even muted brass, might evoke a seascape of Turner. Conversely, the composer Edgard Varèse, a friend of Debussy's, suggested that it represented the diaphanous veils of the well known American dancer, Loïe Fuller. This ambiguity was probably intentional on the part of the composer. The pulsating B flats in the bass are a unifying factor between this prelude and those that precede and follow it.

***Le vent dans la plaine (The wind o'er the plain)*** is another instance (i.e., similar to *Voiles*) of program music that acts in a circular fashion – that is, it lacks developmental direction, returning to its original state. The title is from a poem by the eighteenth century dramatist, Charles-Simon Favart, later incorporated into *Ariettes oubliées* of Verlaine: *Le vent dans la plaine suspend son haleine (The wind o'er the plain holds its breath)*.

***Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir (The sounds and scents waft through the evening air)*** is quoted from Baudelaire's *Harmonie du soir (The harmony of the evening)*, one of a hundred poems originally published in 1857 under the title *Fleurs du Mal (Flowers of Evil)*, the work which launched the Symbolist movement that gave impetus to much of Debussy's work:

*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir, Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige !*

*(The sounds and scents waft through the evening air, [a] melancholy waltz and [the] giddiness of love!).* The *chant plaintif* of a *chanteuse* of the French music halls can be heard twice in the middle of the piece. Baudelaire's poem suggests memories of a past love, albeit one perhaps not so distant. The title, incidentally, is the only direct literary quote in all of Debussy's instrumental music.

***Les collines d'Anacapri (The hills of Anacapri)*** is full of Neopolitan *joie de vivre*. In his excellent book, *Images – The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, the British pianist and musicologist, Paul Roberts, has suggested a parallel in the opening bars of *Les Collines* to the peeling of the bells in Liszt's *Les cloches de Genève (The bells of Geneva)*, the last of Book I of *Les Années de Pèlerinage*. Both works are in B Major.

***Des pas sur la neige (Footsteps in the snow)*** is a study in suspended time. A certain forlornness, even despondency becomes apparent, although not altogether without hope. The phrase marked *comme un tendre et triste regret* ([to be played] with a tender and sad sense of regret/ resignation), its falling thirds lacking the telltale *crescendo* signs of a similar phrase eight bars earlier, is especially poignant. I have always been intrigued that the French say ‘footsteps on the snow’, not ‘in the snow’. What a lovely imagery of *treading ever so carefully*...

***Ce qu’a vu le Vent d’Ouest (What the West Wind saw)*** is an anomaly in Debussy’s output, a virtuoso work of great turbulence and violent emotions. The use of major seconds (and, conversely, major sevenths and ninths) is revolutionary. Tritones (the *diabolus in musica – the devil in music*) abound. Debussy’s West Wind is not the Zephyr of Greek mythology, bearer of Spring rains and abundance. This West Wind, on the contrary, mirrors that of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Garden of Paradise*, published in French shortly before Debussy wrote this prelude, the wind boasting of its destructive powers to its Mother (Nature). Although this work is Lisztian in scope, I do not remember Liszt’s ever having composed anything representing evil quite as blatantly, nor arguably as successfully.

***La fille aux cheveux de lin (The girl with the flaxen hair)*** provides a complete antithesis to the previous work. The title is taken from a poem by Leconte de Lisle. At times wistful, at times quietly passionate, it awakens memories of an idealized love, perhaps one long gone.

***La sérénade interrompue (The interrupted serenade)*** represents a musical sparring between two guitarists, vying for the hand of one fair damsel. Intensely Andalusian in character, it belies the fact that Debussy visited Spain but once (a fleeting visit to the northwestern city of San Sebastian, itself a world apart from the Moorish influences in the south). Manuel de Falla, considered by many the most authentic of Spanish composers, held Debussy’s incursions into this realm in the highest regard.

***La cathédrale engloutie (The sunken cathedral)*** is based on the legend of the cathedral at Ys on the coast of Brittany. According to the story, the cathedral was swallowed up by the ocean because its congregants wouldn’t adhere strictly to the tenets of the Catholic faith, yet it would rise up mysteriously out of the mist on clear and calm mornings. The use of parallel octaves, fifths and tone clusters evokes a mirage of church bells, an organ and the singing of monks, all within a mammoth structure of undefined proportions. The piece comes full circle at the end, the cathedral slipping back quietly into the sea.

***La danse de Puck (The dance of Puck)*** brings us to the willful, capricious, humorous and devilish elfin character of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. My favorite moment is at the very end, when Puck vanishes in a flash, as if a light has been suddenly extinguished.

***Minstrels*** represents a humorous view of a troupe of roving musicians. The somewhat drunken opening is followed by a sort of gig and a momentary allusion to the music halls so popular at the turn of the twentieth century in Paris, perhaps even the *Folies Bergères* itself. One member of the troupe pouts, the others make fun of him, he picks himself up and dances again, a tom-tom beats, and suddenly we are in the middle of *fin de siècle* Paris and the *joie de vivre* of the *Folies*. The work finishes on an un-hymn like plagal cadence, as if to say: ‘So, there!’

## **BOOK II (composed 1911-1913; published April, 1913)**

***Brouillards (Fog/Mists)*** is another study in near stasis, the bi-tonality C Major/D flat hanging in the air as if by a thread. *Brouillard* implies a rather thick fog, as versus *brume* (the mist of early morning, for example), hence the momentary heightening of tension in the middle of the piece as we come upon a hitherto unseen object!

The opening of ***Feuilles mortes (Dead Leaves)*** uses the same falling-chord pattern (akin to an appoggiatura) as the beginning and end of *Brouillards*. It evokes a barren landscape, desolate, lonely, punctuated at a certain point by a choir of brass. One remembers the immortal words of Verlaine: *Les*

*sanglots longs des violons de l'automne blessent mon coeur d'une langueur monotone...pareille à la feuille morte* (*The long sobs of the violins of autumn wound my heart with an incessant sadness...similar to a dead leaf*). Otherworldly and mysterious, its resolution is beautifully cathartic.

In 1912, Debussy received a postcard from Manuel de Falla of the famous *Gate of the Moors* at the Alhambra in Granada, a gathering spot for gypsies. This is the genesis of *La Puerta del Vino* (*The Gate of Wine*) – thus the swagger of the habañera throughout, the sense of danger lurking in the background. It is intensely evocative, with strong intimations of flamenco and the *cante jondo* (*deep song*) of Andalusia.

*Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses* (*Fairies are exquisite dancers*) is taken from *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* by J. M. Barrie (1860-1937). Specifically, it is the title of one of the illustrations for this book by the great Englishman, Arthur Rackham. Debussy had seen an exhibition of Rackham's work in Paris in 1912, and his daughter, Chouchou, had been given a copy of the book the previous Christmas by a family friend. In the illustration, Peter Pan is seen dancing on a strand of a spider's web (with a cricket playing a cello at one end!). The delicacy and the fantasy engendered by this drawing create an indelible impression. The ballet that ensues (a bit of a waltz, actually) includes some of Debussy's most inspired moments.

*Bruyères* (*Heather*) evokes pastoral bliss, an Arcadian landscape of peace and contentment. According to Debussy's good friend, the pianist Marguerite Long, it recalls the smell of sea mist mixed with coastal pines. Given the summer holidays that Debussy spent in the coastal towns of Normandy, this seems entirely plausible. *Bruyères* awakens memories of *The Girl with the Flaxen Hair*. Both are in the key of A flat.

*General Lavine - excentric* refers to the great American clown, Edward Lavine, famous in the early twentieth century music halls of France for his impersonations as both tramp and soldier. In the capacity of the former, he does a *cake walk* (a dance with its origins in the slave population of the American south), taking a tumble or two in the process. At two junctures, allusions to the American tune, *Camptown Races*, can be heard.

*La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (*Audiences out on the terrace in the moonlight*) has its origins in a letter of René Puaux from India, published in a French journal in December, 1912, describing King George V of England's coronation as Emperor of India. One particular line, *La terrasse des audiences...*, must have stuck in Debussy's imagination, for what issued forth was a work of Eastern exoticism, ethereal beauty and quiet contemplation.

*Ondine* evokes the mythical water sprite, the beautiful young maiden who steps out of the depths of the ocean onto land in order to seek a husband and claim a soul. She does, indeed, find her prince charming – one, however, married to an earthly mortal. Angered at what she perceives as a deception on his part, and realizing that she can't take him back with her to her watery home, she simply vanishes. Debussy's version was probably inspired by an adaptation of the legend by the German Romantic writer, Baron Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, published in French in 1912, with illustrations yet again by Arthur Rackham.

Debussy admired Charles Dickens above all nineteenth century British writers (including Thackeray, who was preferred by Proust). *Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.* is a humorous take on the pompous, yet lovable hero of *Pickwick Papers*. My favorite moment is where Pickwick goes whistling down the lane (in D Major triplets), oblivious to any and all altercations he might have left behind. It is thought that Debussy got the initials following *Esq.* wrong – that is, if you translate those initials from the English (Pickwick's title was *General Chairman – Member Pickwick Club*, ergo *G.C.M.P.C.*). On the other hand, the Français *Président Perpétuel et Membre du Pickwick Club* (*President in Perpetuity and Member of the Pickwick Club*) fits perfectly. Does it matter?

Expressing great dignity and solemnity in the juxtaposition of its opening chords, *Canope* depicts the images from the tops of two Egyptian burial urns, or canopic jars, that Debussy kept on his work table.

During mummification, four jars were normally used, in which the stomach, lungs, liver and intestines of the dead were placed (not, however, the heart, which remained inside the corpse). The tops of these jars were thought to represent the heads of the dead. The melody in *Canope* is an extension of medieval plainchant, the appearance of a zither suggesting a moment of religious solemnity.

*Les tierces alternées (Alternating double thirds)* is very possibly a precursor to the *Douze Études*, published in 1915. It is a charming and subtle *perpetuum mobile*, the double thirds executing a humorous *pas de deux* in the middle, its filigree extremely delicate, its difficulties hidden to all but pianists!

*Feux d'artifice (Fireworks)*, a work of great virtuosity, might well allude to the fireworks of July 14<sup>th</sup>, French Bastille Day, given a cameo appearance of *La Marseillaise* at the very end. As with several other preludes in this second book, *Feux d'artifice* sounds at many junctures like a cousin of *Petrouchka*, first performed in 1911 (Debussy and Stravinsky had become friends in 1910). The importance of concluding Book II with this work is underlined by its proximity to the outbreak of World War I a year later.

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In preparing this program, I have consulted several editions. By far the most helpful and insightful is the volume of *Préludes, Série I, Volume 5*, from the *Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy (The Complete Works of Claude Debussy)*, edited by the excellent Scots musicologist and pianist, Roy Howat, and the great French pianist and pedagogue, Claude Helffer, and published by Durand-Costallat in 1985. Their extensive commentary and annotations are invaluable in understanding these great works.

[Program Notes © Craig Sheppard, 2012.]

Tonight's program is being recorded by the Seattle Symphony's incomparable **Dmitriy Lipay** for future release on CD through *Romeo Records*. In addition, my good friend, Dr. Fumio Ohuchi, Professor of Materials Science and Engineering here at the UW, is videoing the performance.

The piano is my own Hamburg Steinway model D, #489770, built in 1984. It has recently been refurbished with a new set of hammers by the School of Music's Doug Wood. Tonight's tuner is the School of Music's other great technician, Susan Cady. Our university is, indeed, blessed to have two such remarkable people in our midst!

Printed program formatted by Claire Peterson.

Professor of Piano, CRAIG SHEPPARD, came to the University of Washington in September, 1993. Since that time, he has built a reputation as one of America's leading pedagogues, with former students teaching in major universities and conservatories around the world.

Performing has always played an important role in Sheppard's view of pedagogy. In the October, 2012, issue of *Gramophone* magazine, Donald Rosenberg writes about Sheppard's recently released CDs of the first two books of Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage* (performed in Meany Theater last October): *Whether the music exults in lyricism or paints diabolical portraits, Sheppard has the pianistic gifts to convey the essence of Liszt's visions...the volcanic moments in Après une lecture du Dante are shaped with an exceptional blend of flair and tonal clarity. When Liszt steps back to gaze euphorically at a landscape, Sheppard lingers subtly on phrases even as he ensures that the integrity of the architecture is maintained. The performances are by turns absorbing and electrifying, with nary a hint of indulgence.*

In September, 2012, Sheppard undertook a two-week residency at the Conservatorium to the University of Melbourne in Australia, during which time he performed both the Liszt *Années* and tonight's Debussy program, in addition to holding seminars and giving numerous master classes and private teaching. In September, he also performed both recital programs in New Zealand, and taught at the Universities of Waikato (Hamilton) and Auckland. Previously, Sheppard had appeared at this summer's Methow Valley Chamber Music Festival and, in March 2012, at the Nehru Memorial Library in New Delhi, India, where he performed the Liszt *Années*. He also taught at the Delhi School of Music.

Craig Sheppard was born in November, 1947, and raised in Philadelphia. Following studies at the Curtis Institute with Eleanor Sokoloff and the Juilliard School with Sascha Gorodnitzki, Sheppard gave his New York début in January, 1972, at the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Eight months later, he won the Silver Medal at the Leeds International Pianoforte Competition in England, launching him on an international career that continues to the present. In 1973, he moved to London for twenty years, teaching at the Yehudi Menuhin School, Lancaster University, and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and giving master classes at both Oxford and Cambridge universities. He has performed with all the leading orchestras of Great Britain, as well as the Berlin Philharmonic and the orchestra of La Scala, Milan, on the European continent. In this country, he has performed with the major orchestras of Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco, Seattle, Dallas and Rochester, among others, with many of the leading conductors of the day, including Erich Leinsdorf, Sir Georg Solti, James Levine, Michael Tilson Thomas, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Lord Yehudi Menuhin, Aaron Copland, David Zinman and Sir Andrew Davis. Sheppard's commitment to chamber music is shown in his longstanding ties to the Seattle Chamber Music Festival, and he has collaborated with some of the biggest names of both past and present generations. Since 2002, Sheppard has traveled eleven times to the Far East to give master classes and perform in leading centers in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Singapore.

Sheppard and his colleague, Dr. Robin McCabe, are the directors of the highly successful *Seattle Piano Institute*, held every July at the School of Music for a group of select young piano students from around the world (<http://www.music.washington.edu/pianoinstitute/>).

More about Craig Sheppard can be found on his website: [www.craigsheppard.net](http://www.craigsheppard.net) .

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