

## II

### DEBUSSY: THE PRELUDES

*J'adore l'indécis, les sons, les couleurs frêles,  
Tout ce qui tremble, ondule, et frissonne, et chatoie,  
Les cheveux, et les yeux, l'eau, les feuilles, la soie,  
Et la spiritualité des formes grêles;*

Albert Samain.

*Le désir seul donne la beauté aux choses.*

Anatole France.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY was born August 22, 1862, at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a small town but a few miles out of Paris and in the Ile-de-France, the province where French traditions of taste and culture are commonly said to be the purest. His family was apparently not musical and his father planned to make a sailor of him. Consequently, the boy had no musical instruction until 1871, when, during a visit to his aunt, at Cannes, he took some piano lessons from an Italian named Cerutti, who saw in him no signs of exceptional talent. A little later Debussy made the acquaintance of Charles de Sivry, a brother-in-law of Verlaine and a composer of light operas. It was de Sivry's mother who, just about the time her daughter was separating from Verlaine, divined the unusual musical talent of the boy who was later to write some of his greatest songs on poems by her son-in-law. She declared that Debussy must become a musician and took charge herself of his elementary musical education. She must have

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performed her task creditably, for, in the fall of 1873, Debussy was able to enter the Paris Conservatory and continue his studies there under Lavignac, Marmontel and Guiraud. The first three years, he won medals in solfeggio; in 1877, a second prize in piano; in 1880 a first prize in accompaniment, but, curiously enough, he was never given any distinction in harmony.

During the summer of 1879, Debussy went to Russia as family pianist to Madame Metch, the wife of a Russian civil engineer. The influence of this trip on Debussy's musical development has probably been somewhat exaggerated. Many critics are inclined to regard it as having been the composer's "road to Damascus", the capital and decisive point in his artistic development. That he heard in Russia some of the works of Borodine and Rimsky-Korsakow is at least probable (though these composers were relatively little known at this time) and we know that he was impressed by the freedom and abandon of Russian gypsy music. But with the music of Moussorgsky he did not become acquainted until later.

On his return to Paris, Debussy continued, of course, his studies at the Conservatory. Guiraud, his professor of composition, appears to have realized something of the extent and significance of the boy's talents and gave him no little individual counsel and encouragement. Under Guiraud's wise guidance, Debussy made rapid progress and a few years later (1884) won, with his cantata "The Prodigal Son", the much coveted Prix de Rome.

From Rome, in accordance with the regulations, Debussy sent back to the Institute as proofs of his industry: the first part of an opera based on Heine's *Almanzor*; "Spring", a suite for orchestra and chorus without text; a "Fantaisie" for piano and orchestra and "The Blessed

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Damozel" a work for chorus of women's voices, soli and orchestra, after the well-known poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. But this last composition was not finally completed until after his return to Paris.

In 1889 Debussy made a trip to Bayreuth and was greatly moved by performances of "Tristan", "Meistersinger" and "Parsifal". Shortly afterwards, however, a friend showed him a copy of Moussorgsky's "Boris Godounow"—in its original form, that is, before it had been "corrected" by Rimsky-Korsakow. Debussy was struck by the simplicity of the music, its freedom from operatic oratory, but he seems to have been even more impressed by the directness of the style in "Without Sunlight", a group of songs by the same composer. Just how clearly he recognized the obscure affinity which doubtless exists between his own and Moussorgsky's sensibility, we cannot say. But we know that when he returned, the following year, to Bayreuth, the spell was broken. In the light of the new insights which Moussorgsky's music had given him, Wagner seemed heavy, grandiloquent and incompatible, therefore, with the characteristic qualities of the French temperament, to which clarity, proportion and taste are a spiritual necessity.

Nothing is more astonishing in the personality of Debussy—a personality of brutal force and almost savage instincts—than its deep and insistent desire for refinement. During the years in Rome, Debussy was profoundly unhappy, largely, perhaps, because of the inadequacy of his culture, which prevented him from revelling, as one might have expected him to do, in the rich atmosphere of Roman antiquity and the Italian Renaissance. On his return to Paris he set resolutely to work, reading voraciously, frequenting poets, painters and visiting picture galleries and

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expositions; in short, doing everything which seemed humanly possible to fill in the gaps left by his insufficient education. As a result of these efforts, he gradually acquired a culture of extraordinary breadth and subtlety which permitted him to move, and to feel at home, in the most refined and intelligent circles of Parisian society.

The man had the rare knack of recognizing his spiritual ancestors at first sight, of knowing just where to turn for stimulus when stimulus was needed. The same infallible instinct which perceived his artistic kinship with Moussorgsky and which realized so clearly the dangers to a Frenchman of the Wagnerian influence, led him with equal insight to the symbolist and impressionist poets and painters. From about 1890 to 1895 Debussy was a frequent visitor at Mallarmé's apartments in the rue de Rome where, on Tuesday evenings, the great leader of the symbolists received his ever widening circle of disciples and friends. To these gatherings came: Jules Laforgue (for whom Debussy had particular affection, though he never set any of his poems), Gustave Kahn, Stuart Merrill, Henri de Régnier, Pierre Louÿs (author of the "Chansons de Bilitis"), Degas, Whistler, Verlaine (sixteen of whose poems were set to music by Debussy), and others; a choice but heterogeneous company of spirits, held together, for a time, at least, by their common admiration for Mallarmé, by the charm of his personality and the incomparable lucidity of his mind and conversation.

"One entered the room", writes André Gide, "it was evening and you noticed first the extreme silence of the place. The last faint noises of the street died away as one crossed the threshold. Then Mallarmé would begin to speak in that low, musical, unforgettable tone of voice. Strange to say, he thought before he spoke. In his presence

and for the first time, one had the impression of touching, as it were, the reality of thought itself. And silently, insensibly and of its own accord, the conversation would rise to heights of almost religious solemnity”.

One can easily imagine what such hours in such company meant to a sensitive spirit like Debussy; and of the kind and extent of their influence, we shall have occasion, a little later, to speak in some detail. It was great and wholly valuable and it was indeed fitting that Debussy, in 1892, should have dedicated to Mallarmé his first important work for orchestra, the “Prélude to the Afternoon of a Faun” (*Prélude à l'Après-Midi d'un Faune*).

For nine years, from 1893 to 1902, Debussy worked on his one and only opera, “Pelléas and Mélisande”. That he should have chosen Maeterlinck's drama for his text is a tribute to his literary insight and another example of his marvellous knowledge of his own nature and its artistic requirements. The deep humanity of the music; its restrained intensity of expression; the ease and naturalness of a diction which has taken over all the subtle inflections and rhythms of prose, and which is neither speech nor song, but both at once; and, finally, the marvellous unity of atmosphere that pervades the music from beginning to end—an atmosphere heavy with the sorrow and mystery of human life and oppressive, at times, with its burdening sense of man's helplessness before the dark forces of destiny; all these things combine to make the work one of the most extraordinary pieces of lyric drama that has ever been written.

Historically, “Pelléas” represents an almost complete revolution in operatic technique. In it, Debussy both raised and solved the problem of a symbolistic music drama and solved it so well that nothing more remains to be done in

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that direction. It would be indeed difficult for a composer to write another opera based on the same conceptions as "Pelléas", just as it will be impossible, in the future, to ignore its many and far-reaching innovations. It is truly a pity that so many excellent musicians have yet to make acquaintance with a work which has its place beside Monteverdi's "Orpheus", "The Marriage of Figaro", "Tristan" and "Boris", as one of the few really great operas in the history of music.

Other important compositions also date from the period when Debussy was working on "Pelléas": "Fêtes Galantes", first series (1892);<sup>1</sup> "String Quartet" (1893); "Nocturnes: <sup>2</sup>—Nuages, Fêtes, Sirènes" (*Clouds, Fêtes, Sirens*), from 1897-1899; "Chansons de Bilitis"<sup>2</sup> (1898). The orchestral works, "La Mer" (*The Sea*) and "Images" (*Gigues, Iberia and Dances of Spring*) are later, appearing in 1905 and 1911, respectively. Deserving of more than the mere casual mention which, for lack of space, we are obliged to give it here, is "The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian", incidental music for a "Mystery Play" by d'Annunzio, some numbers of which the composer later arranged into an orchestral suite. Except in certain pages of "Pelléas" and in the first two "Ballads of François Villon" (1910)—which are likewise far too little known—Debussy had never before attained to heights of such serenity and pathos.

All the well-known piano works, apart from the early and rather sentimental "Suite Bergamasque" (1890), appeared after 1900, beginning with "Pour le Piano" (*For the Piano*) in 1901, and leading up to the two volumes of "Préludes" (1910) and the "Études" (1915).

Debussy's last compositions are frankly inferior. But

<sup>1</sup> For orchestra.

<sup>2</sup> Songs.

this is not strange, since they were written under the strain of the war and the steady progress of an incurable disease. André Suarès has described, in moving lines, the man's last appearance in public. "He was paying out of his own purse", says Suarès, "his admission to a charity concert at which some of his works were being given. . . . He had just been very ill and people said he was doomed. He was; for, a short time later, he fell again into the clutches of the malady that was to kill him. I was struck not so much by his thinness as by his air of absence, his appearance of gravity and lassitude. . . . In his eyes, which avoided all contacts, one recognized that desperate irony which men who are soon to depart this life have for those whom they leave behind. Between such people there is already such an abyss. That day, whatever one may suppose or whatever may have been his own hopes for himself, Debussy said his farewell." He died, after months of struggle and suffering on the thirty-first of March, 1918.

Émile Vuillermoz, one of the ablest of French music critics, tells about Debussy an illuminating anecdote which is worth repeating, for it is so pre-eminently characteristic of the way in which the composer approached problems of form. In the light of certain events which it would be useless to recall here, Vuillermoz had been led to write, under Debussy's direction, a sort of manifesto, which summed up the regulative ideas of the composer's attitude toward his art. "With all the zeal inspired by my respect and affectionate admiration for the man, I endeavored", writes Vuillermoz, "to give to my résumé all the clearness, balance and irrefutable logic which so attractive a theme seemed to demand. I took especial care to solder the arguments and to chain my phrases firmly together, so that the arm of an adversary should find no vulnerable spot in

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my armor. Consequently, I presented to the master a well forged mechanism whose every bolt had been tightened with a wrench.

"To my great embarrassment, Debussy did not seem to appreciate these scruples of a professional adjuster. After giving his approval to the ideas which formed the nucleus of my work and after appreciating the logic of their sequence, he begged me, with ironic gentleness, to remove all the artifices of style which assured the solidity of the construction, to loosen the pitiless bolts of every conjunctive locution, to abandon the *consequentlys*, the *buts*, the *fors* and the *howevers* which held things together like so many rivets and mortises. He carefully cut what electricians call 'the connections'. Wherever I had sought to tie two propositions together, he intervened and, with a delicate snap of his scissors, set the phrases afloat. Like a master architect who selects and orders his materials so well that he needs no cement for the construction of a vault, Debussy isolated my arguments, gave them air and freedom. And when the task was finished, I could not but recognize that all these 'unharnessed' phrases ran more surely and quickly to their destination than the verbal train whose carriages I had so conscientiously coupled together."

This desire to conceal art by art, to suggest, imply and insinuate rather than to state outright the hidden relationships which guide the sequence of one's ideas, is thoroughly characteristic of Debussy's music and is likewise a master motive in the technique of symbolist and impressionist poetry. There are other obvious points of contact between Debussy and the symbolists and we can consider with profit, for a few moments, the common aspects of their art. But in so doing, however, we would do well to remember that both the music of Debussy and the poetry of the symbolists



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were largely predetermined by certain fundamental ways of thinking and feeling characteristic of the epoch in which they lived, and in which such outwardly contrasting forms of art as the brutal and naturalistic novels of Zola and the delicate, impressionistic poetry of a Verlaine both took their source.

In "Monsieur Croche anti-dilletante",<sup>1</sup> Debussy has occasion to speak of Karl Maria von Weber and suggests that he, Weber, was perhaps the first among musicians to be "troubled by the relationship which must exist between the manifold soul of nature and the soul of a human being". It would be difficult to state more concisely an idea which, though not new—in France it has been, in one form or another, a source of inspiration to writers ever since the days of Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre—was a central notion of the symbolists' *Weltanschauung* and a prime factor in Debussy's own personal attitude toward the world of nature. Your English poet, Byron, in a stanza which Liszt inscribed on the fly-leaf of his "Bells of Geneva", has suggested the same thought from a slightly different angle:

"I live not in myself, but I become  
Portion of that around me; and to me  
High mountains are a feeling."  
(Childe Harold III, 72)

But the lines which are usually quoted in this connection and in which the idea is accompanied by the specifically symbolist note of mystery and of sensuous revery, are these verses of Baudelaire:

<sup>1</sup>The title of the volume in which Debussy published some of the critical articles which he wrote for the *Revue Blanche* and *Gil Blas*, in 1901 and 1903, respectively. In these essays, quite bristling with irony and paradox, he affirms, as one might expect him to do, his predilection for works of taste and refinement, for such men as Mozart, Couperin, Rameau, Watteau and Racine.

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"Nature is a temple whose living pillars at times let fall confused words. There man passes through forests of symbols which observe him with familiar glances.

"There—like echoes, which at a distance, mingle into a dark and profound unity, vast as the night and as the light of day—the colors, sounds, and perfumes to each other make answer"<sup>1</sup>.

Beautiful and prophetic lines which foreshadow clearly the manner in which the changing, sensuous beauty of the spectacle and, most of all, the mystery of man's relationship to it were to fascinate and tease the minds of the symbolists. For a Mallarmé or a Samain, so strange and obscure is the nature of man's part in it all, that one cannot hope to state, or even to describe, the quality of the relationship. It is too dark, too subtle and eludes all efforts at analysis.

Yet man's sense of his kinship with the outer world is deep and ineradicable. He feels, though he does not understand it. It is a matter of instinct rather than of reason. Consequently, if he would draw aside the curtain and look beyond, the poet must abandon, for a moment, the ordinary processes of thought, sink back into the realms of the subconscious and trust for temporary guidance to the obscure, spontaneous movements of the soul and to the warm immediacy of sense perception.

Then and then only can he paint the beauties of the outer world and at the same time suggest, by the psychological accuracy of his images and the order in which they occur, that dim and distant region where nature and human nature touch, where the objects of the visible world melt,

<sup>1</sup> *La nature est un temple où de vivants piliers  
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;  
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles  
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.*

*Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent  
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,  
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,  
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.*

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as it were, into their spiritual and human reality and significance.

To be a symbolist, then, is to be an imagist and, more important still, to be a master of suggestion who knows how to throw into the background and, at times, even to eliminate, by a subtle emphasis of their "color" and sound, the too precise and circumscribed concepts which attach to words.

Because of the ineffable mystery of his theme, the symbolist, like Verlaine, dreams of writing "the grey song, in which the precise and the indefinite meet". He avoids, as too harsh and crude, the ordinary uses of words. ("To name an object is to destroy three-fourths of one's pleasure in it.")<sup>1</sup> He has an eye not so much to their actual, as to their possible meanings and prizes them, above all else, for their musicality,<sup>2</sup> their color and sensuousness—in short for their suggestive values.

Naturally, one must not look, in symbolist poetry, for heroic moods, for long impassioned flights of lyricism nor for the cumulative effects of "architecture" and "development".<sup>3</sup> They inevitably have no part in an art which moves in the realms of the subconscious and is based so largely on the fleeting impressions of the senses. The intensity and life of symbolist poetry lie rather in its vividness of imagery and suggestion and if it shuns "construction", it does not, for that reason, become formless. It has form and it has logic, but its logic is the logic of the senses and its form, the form inherent in the natural sequence of sense impressions. In the nature of the case it could not be otherwise.

<sup>1</sup> Mallarmé.

<sup>2</sup> "Music, first of all." (*De la Musique avant toute chose.*) Verlaine.

<sup>3</sup> "Take eloquence and wring its neck." (*Prends l'éloquence et tords-lui le cou.*) Verlaine.

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An art thus based on the fugitive impressions of sense and instinct is peculiarly adapted to rendering those diffused and subtle moods of revery which rise mysteriously to the surface when the mind is silent and the senses alert. The half-shades of the evening with their accompanying sense of the changing and transitory, the languorous melancholy, the silence, mystery, and the magic beauty of the night;—these are the themes which inspire the poems of Mallarmé and his school, poems which, in the words of Rémy de Gourmont, are “the most marvellous pretext for revery that has ever been offered to man”.

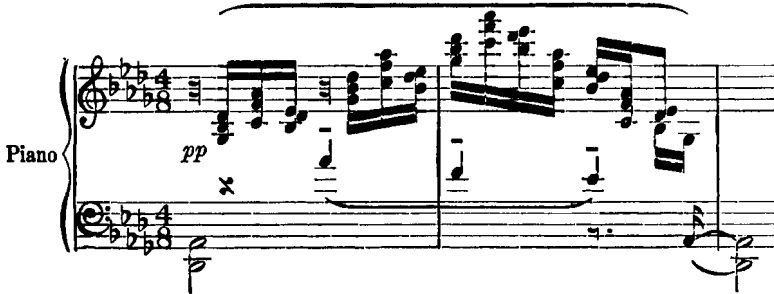
The statement is equally apt when applied to the music of Debussy, for the latter springs from the same pantheistic view of nature and is the product of a similar technique of sensuous suggestion. The landscape, for Debussy, as it is for the symbolists, is “a state of the soul”. He is haunted, as they are, by the desire to render simultaneously its outward and visible beauties and their inner and human significance. Consequently, the marvellous imagery of his music is a means, not an end. For example, what is chiefly remarkable about “Nuages” is not the faithfulness of the picture but rather the manner in which the composer has suggested the melancholy solitude and desolation of spirit which the sight of clouds, drifting slowly and aimlessly across the sky, so frequently arouses in us.

Consider, for a moment, the titles of some of Debussy’s compositions: “Clouds”, “Wind on the Plains”, “Reflections in the Water”, “The Sea”, “Fog”, “Goldfish”, “Perfumes of the Night”. Obviously what attracts him most, as it does the symbolists, is the fugitive and mysterious side of nature.

In the human realm, however, Debussy is drawn in pre-

cisely the opposite direction, that is, toward the unreflective, the spontaneous, the involuntary and instinctive. Hence, his predilection for childlike natures, for the dramas of Maeterlinck, whose shadowy characters act less than they are acted upon—by Fate. As Rémy de Gourmont says of them, “they can but suffer, smile, love; when they try to understand, their troubled efforts give way to anguish and their revolt fades into sobbing. They are climbing, always climbing, the painful slopes of Calvary only to strike their heads against an iron door”. In a word, it is the “human” side of nature and the “natural” side of man which particularly interest Debussy. And in this respect he is thoroughly characteristic of his age and generation, the generation of Bergson, that was brought up on Darwin, Taine, Bernard and Renan.

There are also illuminating analogies between certain coloristic aspects of Debussy’s music and the technique of impressionistic painting. Take, for example, the opening measures of “Reflections in the Water”, where, by the use of



the sustaining pedal, Debussy has blended a whole series of chords into one large, composite stretch of diaphanous sonority. The procedure is quite characteristic of both his piano music and the works for orchestra (where he secures the same effect by *glissandi* on the harp, or by a subtle, overlapping arrangement of the harmonies) and recalls

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the manner in which Monet, for example, gets his complementary tones and shades by a sharp juxtaposition of little daubs of primary colors which are fused and blended by the distant eye. The resemblance between the two methods is so striking that the musical device would almost seem to be a direct transposition of the technique of one art into the realms of another. Yet one would scarcely be willing to draw, from such circumstantial evidence, so audacious a conclusion.

Among the specifically musical influences which assisted in the formation of Debussy's style—a style which, in its harmonic aspects, seems at first sight so personal and revolutionary that one might easily make the mistake of thinking that it represents a complete break with the past—we have already had occasion to speak of "Boris Godounov", of the relationship which doubtless exists between the simplicity and directness of Moussorgsky's diction and the free, arioso-like recitative of "Pelléas and Mélisande". Some historians have gone farther and largely on the strength of the resemblance between these measures from "Clouds",

Clarinet

Bassoons

*pp très expressif*

The image shows a musical score for Clarinets and Bassoons. The top staff is for Clarinets and the bottom staff is for Bassoons. Both staves are in 6/4 time and have a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music consists of a series of chords and dyads, with a dynamic marking of *pp très expressif*. The notes are mostly sustained, creating a rich, atmospheric texture.

and the following passage from a song in Moussorgsky's "Without Sunlight"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See also these measures from Stravinsky's "Nightingale":

The image shows a musical score for Stravinsky's "Nightingale". It consists of two staves, likely for voice and piano. The key signature is two flats (Bb and Eb) and the time signature is 3/4. The music features a melodic line in the upper staff and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the lower staff. A dynamic marking of *p* is visible.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece with piano accompaniment. The vocal line is written in a single treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a common time signature. The lyrics are: "Prin - temps pas - sés, ar - deurs, ex - ta - ses re -". The piano accompaniment consists of two staves: a right-hand treble clef staff and a left-hand bass clef staff. Both piano parts feature complex harmonic textures with frequent triads and chords, many of which are marked with a '3' indicating a triplet. The overall style is impressionistic, with a focus on color and texture over traditional melodic development.

have established a direct and certainly exaggerated connection between the harmonic styles of the two composers. The passage in question may well represent an unconscious reminiscence, on Debussy's part, of a song with which we know he was acquainted. But the fact still remains that the measures from "Without Sunlight" are far more characteristic of Debussy's than they are of Moussorgsky's style. They represent, on the part of the latter composer, one of those mysterious anticipations of the language of a future age, of which there are so many examples in musical history and which have too often tended to provoke controversies that are more amusing than they are illuminating.

The origins of Debussy's harmonic style are to be sought elsewhere; in Liszt, Chabrier and Fauré, rather than in Moussorgsky. The affiliations between Liszt's harmony and the harmony of Debussy are real but somewhat obscure and are most apparent, perhaps, in one or two mutually characteristic ways of connecting triads. The free and expressive manner in which Fauré uses seventh chords is prophetic of Debussy's similar and later use of chords of the ninth. The following cadential formula,



almost an obsession with Chabrier, occurs, in one form or another, again and again in the "Preludes", making the impression of reminiscence unavoidable. Chabrier's influence is likewise apparent in certain arpeggiated forms of melodic line (based usually on the notes of secondary seventh chords) common to both composers and in those sudden lapses into a rather vulgar lyricism and the more popular moods of street song and music-hall to which we shall later have occasion to draw specific attention.

In 1915, Debussy published his two volumes of "Études" for the piano and dedicated them "to the memory of Frederic Chopin". The inscription is significant, for it represents a conscious homage to the composer whose influence was a chief and guiding factor in the formation of Debussy's piano style.

For many musicians, Chopin's greatness has been somewhat obscured by his rather promiscuous popularity in the concert hall and by the flabby and spineless manner of playing his music which has gradually and insidiously established itself as a "Chopin Tradition". The electric force and abandon of his rhythms, the pride, nobility and martial splendor which are the national heritage of every Pole, have been sacrificed to an effeminate sentimentality which obscures both the refinement and the delicacy, as well as the essential manliness, of Chopin's music.

We shall have to rediscover Chopin, reappraise his amazingly original harmonies, the individuality of his piano



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style with its wide, delicately sonorous spacing of chords, and realize anew the astonishing prophetic qualities of measures like these :



In these final measures of the F major "Prelude", Chopin has dared to add the seventh harmonic to the triad and to treat it as a consonance, as a point of final repose. In that single Eb is implicit all the delicate and sensuous delight in sonorities so characteristic of modern music and to which we shall have frequently to refer in the following commentary on Debussy's Preludes.

### *Volume I.*

#### I. Dancers of Delphos (*Danseuses de Delphes*)

A slow, stately dance in the simple three part key-scheme found in so many of the Preludes of Bach, namely: Part I, tonic key with inflection, at the end, toward the dominant (measures 1-10); Part II, dominant, with allusions to related keys (11-20); Part III, tonic (21 to the end). Note, in the 18th measure, the delicately sonorous disposition of the harmony and the subtle way in which the timbre of the isolated octaves on C is modified by the addition of the Ab triad.

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II. Sails (*Voiles*—the word is ambiguous and could also be translated *Veils*).

The piece might well have been inspired by some remembered sight of sail-boats drifting listlessly at anchor. It is extraordinary for the vagueness of its atmosphere and the manner in which it suggests—to me, at least—the paradoxical sense of mobility in immobility. With the exception of six measures (based on one of the pentatonic scales: Eb, Gb, Ab, Bb and Db), the Prelude is entirely constructed on the notes of the whole-tone scale, a scale which, little by little, assumed a rôle of no slight importance in Debussy's work, and whose origins are far back in the past.<sup>1</sup>

III. Wind on the Plains (*Vent dans la Plaine*)

Obviously a "descriptive" piece, remarkable for the vividness with which the composer has suggested the light, swift, capricious movement of the wind and the silence and the vastness of the plains.

IV. "Sounds and Perfumes Turn in the Evening Air" (*Les Sons et les Parfums Tournent dans l'Air du Soir*—Baudelaire.)

The languor and mystery of a summer night with its accompanying, diffused sense of melancholy and solitude. On page 2, at the points marked "Rubato", are examples of the somewhat vulgar and equivocal lyricism characteristic of Chabrier, to which we have previously alluded. Notice also the originality and mystery of the sonorities in the passage marked "Tranquille et Flottant" and, at the very end, the chords—of such frequent and characteristic

<sup>1</sup>The more recent stages in the evolution of the whole-tone scale have been traced by Mr. Hill in his book on *Modern French Music*, p. 201 ff.

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occurrence in Debussy's piano music—so vividly suggestive of the timbre of the French Horn.

### V. "The Hills of Anacapri" (*Les Collines d'Anacapri*)

An impression of Italy—the clear and fathomless blue of its sky, the brilliance of its sun, the melodious clang of noon-tide bells and the nonchalant gaiety, the banale but irresistible romanticism of the Italian street-song. The piece is an interesting example of the way impressionism and realism tend, at times, to merge imperceptibly into one another, a phenomenon so typical of the impressionistic school of painting and also strikingly evident (though in a very different way as far as the emotional effect is concerned) in the work of Malipiero.

### VI. "Footsteps in the Snow" (*Des pas sur la Neige*)

An evocation of the melancholy solitude and desolation of a winter landscape. Two pages in which, by the magic of musical suggestion, everything is expressed but nothing said outright and yet which reach the most intimate recesses of the human soul.

### VII. "What the West Wind Saw" (*Ce qu'a vu le Vent d'Ouest*).

The tumultuous movement of the sea, lashed and whipped by the fury of the winds. The composer's expression marks—*animated and tumultuous, plaintive and distant, strident, incisive, rapid and furious*—indicate pretty clearly the range of the feelings that dominate the composition, but only the music itself can give any idea of its elemental grandeur and power.

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### VIII. "The Girl with the Flaxen Hair" (*La Fille aux cheveux de lin*).

Like the *Blessed Damozel*, a "Preraphaelite" composition, which, had the artist been as much of a musician as he was a poet and a painter, might well have been written by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the author of these lines:

Lady, I fain would tell how evermore  
Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor  
Thee from myself, neither our love from God.

The influence of Chabrier is apparent in the melodic turn of the theme and in the frequent use, in one form or another (measures 9-10, 12-13, 15-16, 18-19, 19-20, 20-21) of the cadential formula which we have previously cited in connection with Chabrier.

### IX. "The Interrupted Serenade" (*La Sérénade Interrompue*)

The title alone is sufficient indication of the idea of the piece, which is another example of the use of realistic detail in a composition that is essentially impressionistic in methods and mood. The incisiveness and precision with which Debussy, by a few well chosen strokes of his pen, has attained his end, is amazing.

### X. "The Cathedral under the Sea" (*La Cathédrale engloutie*)

The work was inspired by an old Breton legend which tells how the town of Ys, swallowed up long, long ago by the sea, rises, at times, from the depths of the ocean and gradually becomes visible in all its ancient grandeur, only to disappear again, a moment later, beneath the waves.

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Especially remarkable is the manner in which the theme gradually emerges from the misty harmony of the opening measure. Note, too, the specifically impressionistic technique by virtue of which the "primary colors" of successive chords are fused by the pedal into a single mass of hazy, shimmering sonority.

### XI. "Puck's Dance" (*La Dance de Puck*)

The flashing lightness and grace of swift, ethereal movement and the mischievous caprice and irony which we associate with the fantastic character of Shakespeare's play. The composer has used extensively the horn-like sonorities which we have already remarked were one of the characteristic features of his piano style.

### XII. "Minstrels" (*Minstrels*)

The boisterous humour and facile charm of the music-hall; a mood typical of Chabrier in his "hail-fellow-well-met" vein. What subtlety of observation lurks beneath the apparent facility of so banale a theme and what judgment in the selection of the details to be retained! A few decisive lines, sketched in under the guidance of an eye whose ironic glance seems to be wandering absently over the scene which, in reality, it is observing with pitiless scrutiny, suffice to suggest an entire picture and to establish completely the atmosphere which it evokes.

Only a genius could handle so vulgar a theme successfully. But, after all, in the presence of such a masterpiece, one realizes that, as far as art is concerned, there are no vulgar subjects, but only certain problems which are raised and solved, or not. Here the solution has obviously been found—and with bewildering ease and mastery.

*Volume II.*I. "Fog" (*Brouillards*)

Vaporous sonorities, hovering uncertainly in the air, from which there gradually emerges a short, phantom-like phrase that is soon lost again in the mists of suspended harmonies. A flash or two of brighter sonorities; then another fragmentary motive appears—and disappears. The first phrase returns, but once more fades away, in the slowly dissipating fog.

II. "Dead Leaves" (*Feuilles Mortes*)

The vague and regretful melancholy which we associate with autumn and the passing of the summer season. It is one of the compositions in which Debussy's powers of suggestion are at their highest. This chord or that, in a manner now tender, now profound, has a way of making one divine all that the composer would otherwise have kept secret. The diversity of the images, their incessant transformation have been so discreetly insinuated that no detail ever intrudes to break the general outlines of the piece. Misty, yet distinct and spotted here and there with gold, they are ever hovering before our wondering eyes.

III. "The Portal of the Vine" (*La Puerta del Vino*)

A marvellously vivid evocation of popular Spain, of the life in street and tavern, incarnate, as it is here in the spirit of the Spanish dance with all that the latter implies of insolent provocation, of voluptuous abandon and insinuating tenderness, of sudden violence and the sting of sharp desire. The piece was inspired by a mere picture-post-card which Manuel de Falla sent the composer from Spain

IV. "The Fairies are Exquisite Dancers" (*Les  
Fées sont d'exquises danseuses*)

Aerial lightness, rapidity and grace; the ethereal sensuousness of an impalpable world of fairy movement and color.

V. "Heather" (*Bruyères*)

A delicate and gracious bit of fancy and autumnal color. The influence of Chabrier is obvious.

VI. "The Eccentric General Lavine" (*Général  
Lavine-excentrique*)

Debussy's impression of a clown and a delightful piece of pompous humour and burlesque.

VII. "The Terrace where the Moon Receives"  
(*La Terrasse des Audiences du Clair de Lune*)

One of the greatest of the "Preludes" and a miracle of symbolist expressiveness which tempts one to quote the following passage from "Monsieur Croche anti-dilletante". . . . "Music alone has the power to evoke, at will, those imaginary sites and that fantastic but indubitable world which is secretly at work in the mysterious poetry of the night, in the thousand anonymous noises of the leaves, caressed by the rays of the moon."

The title comes from one of the "Indian Letters" which René Puaux wrote for *Le Temps*, but Godet, who divulged the origin of the phrase, is careful not to say whether the music was written before or after Debussy happened to encounter it.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In this and other connections it is interesting to note that Debussy has inscribed his titles at the end, instead of at the head of the "Preludes".

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### VIII. "Ondine" (*Ondine*)

The mobility and seductive grace of the mermaid and one of the many examples on the way in which the charm of flowing water fascinated and inspired the imagination of the composer of the "Preludes".

### IX. "Homage to Mr. Pickwick, Esq. P.P.M.D.C." (*Hommage à S. Pickwick, Esq. P.P.M.D.C.*)

A Frenchman's impression of the pompous amiability and humour of Dickens' celebrated character. The mock gravity in Debussy's citation of "God Save the King" is irresistible.

### X. "Funeral Urn." (*Canope*)

The cool and quiet melancholy of a bygone world—suggested by the chaste contours of an ancient urn. The opening measures,



offer a typical example of parallel melodic progression, similar in spirit to the old *organum* and of frequent occurrence in Debussy's music. The feeling of such passages is primarily melodic, the harmonies being rather a by-product of the multiple and parallel melodic lines.

### XI. "Alternating Thirds" (*Les Tierces Alternées*)

An *Étude*, whose technical difficulties conceal great delicacy and charm. Notice the long melodic phrase outlined by the upper notes of the first third in every measure. One cannot but marvel at the richness of an imagination which



sees in a mere technical problem so many possibilities of delight and beauty.

XII. "Fireworks" (*Feux d'Artifice*)

A brilliant piece of pictorial virtuosity, containing, at the very end, an "impressionistic" citation from the "Marseillaise".<sup>1</sup>

Musicians are loath to write about music, too add, as we have done here, verbal commentary to compositions like the "Préludes", compositions whose beauty and poetry speak so eloquently that one is ashamed to have approached them except in silence. One has only to listen to such music to love it and to understand why it is that all nations honor the memory of Claude Debussy and recognize him, not only as the representative of a characteristic moment of French sensibility, but as one of the truly great composers of the world.

<sup>1</sup>It would be difficult to read over the "Preludes" without remembering what those who had the good fortune to hear Debussy play have said about his touch. His manner of playing was quite inimitable. So exquisite was the delicacy, the richness of his sonorities, and so masterly were the effects of color which he conjured forth from his pedals, that one forgot that the piano was an instrument with hammers.