



CHANDOS :: intro

CHAN 2024

an introduction to Claude Debussy





Classical music is inaccessible and difficult. It's surprising how many people still believe the above statement to be true, so this new series from Chandos is not only welcome, it's also very necessary.

I was lucky enough to stumble upon the wonderful world of the classics when I was a child, and I've often contemplated how much poorer my life would have been had I not done so. As you have taken the first step by buying this CD, I guarantee that you will share the delights of this epic journey of discovery. Each CD in the series features the orchestral music of a specific composer, with a selection of his 'greatest hits' played by top quality performers. It will give you a good flavour of the composer's style, but you won't find any nasty surprises – all the music is instantly accessible and appealing. The discs are beautifully presented, and very good value for money, too.

I sincerely hope this CD marks the start of your own lifelong passion for classical music.

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Classic FM presenter



Achille-Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

- | | | |
|----|---|--------------|
| | Children's Corner* | 17:16 |
| | Orchestrated by André Caplet (1878–1925) | |
| 1 | I Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum. Modérément animé | 2:51 |
| 2 | II Jimbo's Lullaby. Assez modéré | 3:10 |
| 3 | III Serenade for the Doll. Allegretto ma non troppo | 2:46 |
| 4 | IV The Snow is Dancing. Modérément animé | 3:06 |
| 5 | V The Little Shepherd. Très modéré | 2:26 |
| 6 | VI Golliwogg's Cake-Walk. Allegro giusto | 2:55 |
| 7 | Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune | 9:19 |
| | After Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898)
Colin Fleming solo flute | |
| | Petite suite* | 13:01 |
| | Orchestrated by Henri Büsser (1872–1973) | |
| 8 | I En bateau. Andantino | 3:34 |
| 9 | II Cortège. Moderato | 3:21 |
| 10 | III Menuet. Moderato | 3:02 |
| 11 | IV Ballet. Allegro giusto | 3:02 |
| 12 | La plus que lente | 5:25 |
| | Lent
Derek Bell solo cimbalom | |
| 13 | L'Isle joyeuse | 6:19 |
| | Orchestrated by Bernardino Molinari (1880–1952)
Quasi una cadenza – Tempo: modéré et très souple | |



- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 14 | Clair de lune
Orchestrated by André Caplet
Andante, très expressif | 4:19 |
| | La Mer
Three symphonic sketches | 22:11 |
| 15 | I De l'aube à midi sur la mer. Très lent –
Modéré, sans lenteur (Dans un rythme très souple) | 8:22 |
| 16 | II Jeux de vagues. Allegro (Dans un rythme très souple) | 6:26 |
| 17 | III Dialogue du vent et de la mer. Animé et tumultueux | 7:22 |
| | Total time 77:52 | |

Ulster Orchestra
Richard Howarth* • Paul Willey leaders
Yan Pascal Tortelier

children's corner

Claude Debussy's young daughter Chouchou was once heard to say, 'Daddy wants me to play the piano, but he forbids me to make any noise'. Perhaps he could not bear the sound of those endless scales and Clementi studies! But Debussy did make up for it with a special musical present of the suite *Children's Corner* (1906–08) which pictures the games of Chouchou with four of her favourite toys: Jumbo the elephant (whom Debussy insisted on calling 'Jimbo'), a doll, a cardboard shepherd, and a golliwog. There is also a wistful interlude which describes the gently falling snow seen from the nursery window. The titles of the pieces are in English – in deference to Chouchou's English governess – except for the severe Latin of the opening 'Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum', which parodies those infamous Clementi studies. André Caplet made the orchestral arrangement of the suite in 1910 and conducted the first performance that year in New York.

© Edward Blakeman

prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

Debussy originally set out to compose a three-part 'Prélude, Interlude et Finale pour l'après-midi d'un faune', probably designed to accompany a performance of the poem which Mallarmé had always intended should be declaimed as a stage monologue. In the event only the *Prélude* was completed, and given its first performance in Paris in 1894, but Mallarmé was deeply impressed by this music which

presents no dissonance with the text, but rather goes further into its nostalgia and light, with subtlety, unease, and richness.

Mallarmé's poem evokes a mythical landscape and the sultry thoughts and erotic longings of a faun for a group of passing



nymphs. Debussy described his music as 'the remains of dreams in the recesses of the faun's flute', and Pierre Boulez later maintained that 'modern music was awakened by *L'après-midi d'un faune*'.

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petite suite

The original piano duet version of the *Petite suite* of 1889 was largely ignored until the orchestral transcription – made by Debussy's colleague, the conductor Henri Büsser – appeared in 1907.

One of the duties with which Debussy was charged during his student holiday job as tutor to the von Meck children was to play duets with Madame von Meck (Tchaikovsky's elusive patroness), so it is not surprising to find the *Petite suite* among Debussy's earliest piano works. It unfolds a panorama of the French musical world of Debussy's youth: the first movement recalls Fauré, and the other three respectively owe something to Bizet, Massenet and Chabrier – with even a hint of Delibes towards the end.

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la plus que lente

La plus que lente started life in 1909 as a cheeky parody of the 'valse lente' (hence its title, which might be translated as 'The slow waltz outwaltzed'). When his publisher Durand had a hack orchestration made of the original piano version, Debussy, dissatisfied, responded with his own – doubtless to Durand's delight. The opening cimbalom cadenza, Debussy mischievously explained, was added because

it's impossible to begin the same way in a brasserie as in a salon; you absolutely need a few bars' preparation... And then, why limit ourselves to brasseries: what about the countless 'five o'clock' teas with the beautiful lady listeners I had in mind?

For all the gleefully rampaging sentiment of the piece, it is exquisitely crafted, and the teasingly prolonged cadence of the final ritornello is a masterpiece of harmonic punning.

© Roy Howat

l'isle joyeuse

L'Isle joyeuse began life in 1903 as the intended finale in a set of three piano pieces. The plans to publish these were dramatically disrupted by Debussy's elopement with Emma Bardac, in July 1904, to Jersey – Debussy's own 'isle joyeuse'. Over that summer Debussy recast and completed this most brilliant and exuberant of all his piano pieces. In a letter to his publisher he acknowledged that the piece pushed the piano's resources to the limits, while Ravel, on sight-reading it, called it 'an orchestral reduction'. In 1915 Debussy told his friend the conductor Bernardino Molinari that he had long intended to orchestrate the piece; but as Molinari saw Debussy's health deteriorate over the following year, he took the initiative of orchestrating it himself, with guidance from Debussy.

© Roy Howat

clair de lune

It is to the composer André Caplet – one of Debussy's most trusted friends – that we owe the orchestration of *Clair de lune*. Composed in 1890, this piece forms the imaginative high point of Debussy's



Suite bergamasque, taking its title from one of Verlaine's *commedia dell'arte* poems.

© Roy Howat

La mer

Impressionism: Style of painting, music, or writing, such as to give general tone and effect without elaborate finish or detail.

Debussy may not have had the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* to hand in 1908, but it was perhaps some similar half-truth of a definition, with its implication of things vague or ill-defined, which made him react so strongly against the term 'impressionism' being applied to his music. 'A term used with absolute inaccuracy by... imbeciles', he complained to his publisher Jacques Durand. After all, nothing could have more elaborate 'finish' and 'detail' than the intricate score of *La Mer*.

Nevertheless, an impression of 'general tone and effect' is at least part of what Debussy wished to communicate, and surely music is ideally suited to the impressionist concept of the study of light and its changing effect on nature. Monet's famous paintings of the west front of Rouen Cathedral at contrasting times of day give a sense of progression, but also of discontinuity, existing out of time – a sort of 'frozen music'. *La Mer*, however, unfolds in real time to render more vivid Debussy's panorama 'from dawn to midday' – even if Satie, that arch debunker, wickedly declared that he especially liked the bit at a quarter to eleven!

Debussy began work on *La Mer* in Burgundy in 1903 and finished it in Eastbourne two years later. He described it as 'three symphonic sketches': 'From dawn to midday on the sea', 'Play of the waves', and 'Dialogue of the wind and the sea'. The first performance took place on 15 October 1905, with the Lamoureux Orchestra conducted by Camille Chevillard.

The problem was that the titles and subtitles which Debussy gave to his works were often more useful to him than to the listener. They were starting points only, stimulating his imagination and setting in motion the creative process, but they did not dictate the course of the *musical* events. That was what contemporary critics found so hard to grasp as they argued the pros and cons of Debussy 'the impressionist'.

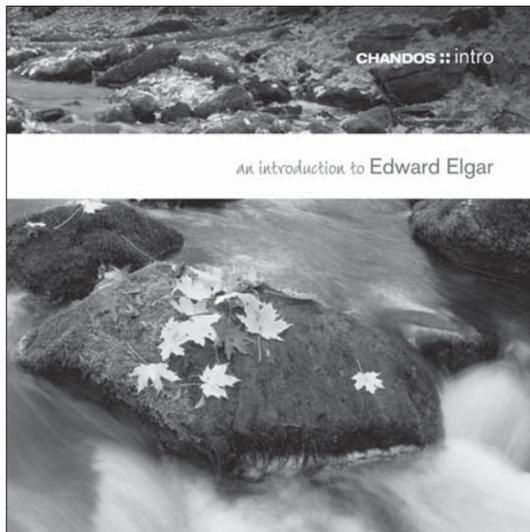
In his book *Impressionism in Music* (1973) Christopher Palmer identifies three preoccupations of the impressionist painters: nature, distance, and dreams. It is a measure of his greatness that in *La Mer* Debussy both fulfils and transcends them. In a letter to the composer Messager he wrote:

You perhaps do not know that I was destined for the fine life of a sailor and that it was only by chance that I was led away from it. But I still have a great passion for Her [the sea]. You will say that the ocean doesn't wash the hills of Burgundy... and that what I am doing might be like painting a landscape in a studio. But I have endless memories, and, in my opinion, they are worth more than reality, which generally weighs down one's thought too heavily.

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Achille-Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Often described as an 'impressionist' composer, Claude Debussy was one of the most original voices of the early twentieth century, with a distinctly French musical outlook. He was an innovator of the first degree who with an acute ear for instrumental colour revolutionised the composition for piano and for orchestra; the effects are understated and his atmospheric sound world enchanting.

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