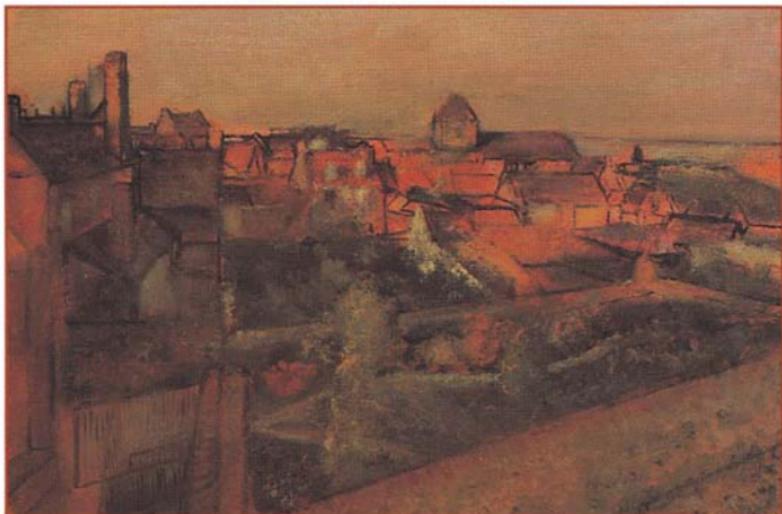


DEBUSSY

Piano Works Volume 1

Suite bergamasque • Ballade
Deux Arabesques • Pour le piano
Nocturne • Rêverie • Mazurka • Danse
Valse romantique • Danse bohémienne

François-Joël Thiollier, Piano



Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Piano Works Volume 1

Claude Debussy was born in 1862, the son of a shop-keeper who was later to turn his hand to other activities, with varying success. He started piano lessons at the age of seven and continued two years later, improbably enough, with Verlaine's mother-in-law, who claimed to have been a pupil of Chopin. In 1872 he entered the Conservatoire, where he abandoned the plan of becoming a virtuoso pianist, turning his principal attention to composition. In 1880, at the age of eighteen, and in the following two summers, he was employed by Tchaikovsky's patroness Nadezhda von Meck as tutor to her children and house-musician. On his return to the Conservatoire from the first of these visits abroad, he entered the class of Bizet's friend Ernest Guiraud and in 1884 won the Prix de Rome, the following year reluctantly taking up obligatory residence, according to the terms of the prize, at the Villa Medici in Rome, where he met Liszt. By 1887 he was back in Paris, winning his first significant success in 1900 with *Nocturnes* and going on, two years later, to a succès de scandale with his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, based on the play by Maurice Maeterlinck, a work that established his position as a composer of importance.

Debussy's personal life brought some unhappiness in his first marriage in 1899 to a mannequin, Lily Texier, after an intermittent liaison of some ten years with Gabrielle Dupont. His association from 1903 with Emma Bardac, the wife of a banker and an amateur singer, led to their eventual marriage in 1908. In the summer of 1904 he had abandoned his wife, moving into an apartment with Emma Bardac, and the subsequent attempt at suicide by his wife, who had shared with him the difficulties of his early career, alienated a number of the composer's friends. His final years were darkened by the war and by cancer, the cause of his death in March 1918, when he left unfinished a planned series of chamber music works, describing himself patriotically as *musicien français*, only three of which had been completed.

The *Suite bergamasque*, its very title bearing connotations of Verlaine, *Fêtes galantes* and a fin de siècle nostalgia for the world of Watteau and including pieces written between 1890 and its date of publication, 1905, opens with an F major *Prélude*. This is in the immediately identifiable harmonic language of Debussy. The following *Menuet* travels far from the original dance and explores remoter harmonic regions than the key of A minor might immediately suggest. *Clair de lune* has enjoyed such popularity that it is difficult to hear it with new ears. In a mysterious F minor it suggests the moonlit *vieux parc, solitaire et glacé* of Verlaine in delicate and evocative textures. The *Suite* ends with a *Passepied* in F sharp minor, a dance that here has a more overtly neo-classical air to it.

Debussy's piano *Nocturne*, like *Rêverie*, *Ballade*, *Danse* and *Valse romantique*, bear the date 1890. They were published in 1903. The first of these, in title and poetic mood a continuation of the Parisian tradition of Chopin, is pleasing and relatively conventional in the terms of its day. It is followed here by the *Danse bohémienne* of 1880, a piece that lives up to its title in rhythmic energy, inevitably suggesting Chopin's use of native Polish dance. *Rêverie*, marked *très doux et expressif*, offers at first a gentle melody over a repeated accompanimental pattern and from this the first section is developed, to which a central chordal passage offers a contrast of mood and tonality, before the return of the material of the opening.

The *Mazurka* of 1891 adopts the Polish dance that Chopin had introduced to the salons of Paris. Melodic turns of phrase are recognisable at once as Debussy's, using as they do characteristic forms of scale. In F sharp minor, the piece has a contrasting D major central section.

The two *Arabesques* of 1888 rival *Clair de lune* in popularity. The first, in E major, has a contrasting central section, while the second, in G major, in similar form, makes much use of the decorative motif heard at the opening, a justification for the title.

Valse romantique, dedicated to Rose Depecker, opens with the melancholy simplicity of Erik Satie, before moving into more conventional territory. In conclusion the thematic material has been brightened by a change from minor to major, a touch of final optimism.

Debussy's *Ballade* and *Danse* originally had the titles *Ballade slave* and *Tarantelle styrienne*. The first of these, again with a title that Chopin had used, has less obvious narrative associations, but makes poetic use of the piano, its accompanying arpeggios finally replaced in a gentle ending. The rhythm of the *Tarantelle* persists in the *Danse*, allowing only a brief respite in a central passage.

The three pieces that make up the suite *Pour le piano* were written between 1896 and 1901, when they were published. They were first performed by Ricardo Viñes on 11th January 1904. The *Prélude* is dedicated to Debussy's former pupil Worms de Romilly, to whom he had had to give a lesson on his wedding-day in 1899 in order to pay for the wedding breakfast. It reveals at once more of the mature style of Debussy, innovative in harmony and in thematic material and calling for a degree of technical ability in performance. The second piece of the set, *Sarabande*, was dedicated to Madame E. Rouart, related by marriage to Chausson. It is marked *avec une élégance grave et lente*, an apt summary of its mood. The final *Toccata*, dedicated to his pupil Nicolas Coronio, is an energetic tour de force, a brilliant contrast to the gentle *Sarabande* that precedes it.

François-Joël Thiollier

Franco-American by birth, the pianist François-Joël Thiollier was born in Paris and gave his first concert in New York in the age of five. His teachers included Robert Casadesus in Paris and Sascha Gorodnitzki at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. His eight Grands Prix in international competitions include triumph in both the Brussels Queen Elisabeth and the Moscow Tchaikovsky Competitions. Boasting an exceptionally large repertoire of some seventy concerti, Thiollier enjoys wide international success, appearing with major orchestras and in recital in the most famous concert halls of Europe. At the same time he has made some forty recordings including a release of the complete piano music of Rachmaninov and of Gershwin, and, for Naxos, a world première compact disc recording of the complete piano music of Maurice Ravel.

Claude Debussy on Naxos

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Playing
Time:
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DEBUSSY

(1862 - 1918)

Piano Works Vol. 1

François-Joël Thiollier, Piano

8.553290

STEREO



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Suite bergamasque

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|---|------------------|--------|
| 1 | Prélude | (4:30) |
| 2 | Menuet | (3:51) |
| 3 | Clair de lune | (5:08) |
| 4 | Passepied | (3:52) |
| 5 | Nocturne | (6:38) |
| 6 | Danse bohémienne | (2:10) |
| 7 | Rêverie | (4:19) |
| 8 | Mazurka | (3:04) |

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|----|------------------|--------|
| 9 | Arabesque 1 | (5:04) |
| 10 | Arabesque 2 | (3:31) |
| 11 | Valse romantique | (3:27) |
| 12 | Ballade | (6:20) |
| 13 | Danse | (5:10) |

Suite: Pour le piano

- | | | |
|----|-----------|--------|
| 14 | Prélude | (3:45) |
| 15 | Sarabande | (4:29) |
| 16 | Toccata | (3:55) |

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from 28th November to 1st December 1994

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Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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