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DEBUSSY

Piano Works Volume 3

Images • Estampes • Images oubliées
La plus que lente • L'Isle joyeuse

François-Joël Thiollier, Piano



Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

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 be 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, he was employed by Tchaikovsky's patroness Nedezhda von Meck as tutor to her children and house-musician. On his return to the Conservatoire 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 Melisande*, 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 a liaison of some seven years with Gabrielle Dupont and a brief engagement in 1894 to the singer Thérèse Roger. His association from 1903 with Emma Bardac, the wife of a banker and an amateur singer, led eventually in 1908 to their marriage. In the summer of 1904, he had abandoned his wife, moving into an apartment with Emma Bardac, and the subsequent attempt at suicide by the former, who had shared with him the difficulties of his early career, alienated a number of his 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, only three of which had been completed.

As a composer Debussy must be regarded as one of the most important and influential figures of the earlier twentieth century. His musical language

suggested new paths to be further explored while his poetic and sensitive use of the orchestra and of keyboard textures opened still more possibilities. His opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* and his songs demonstrated a deep understanding of poetic language, revealed by his music, expressed in terms that never overstated or exaggerated.

Keith Anderson

Piano Works Volume 3

A casual glance at the works of Debussy reveals a penchant on the composer's part for the triptych. The three sets of *Images* on this recording, as well as *Estantpes* (Engravings) offer evidence, and then, of course, there are the orchestral works, *La Mer*, the three *Nocturnes*, the orchestral *Images*. It is more than a mere coincidence, however, if you consider Debussy's use of the Golden Section in some of his pieces, and his fondness for architectural proportions, balance and an almost classical sense of structure. Small wonder too, that he was so attracted to the works of Rameau, whose spirit he invokes in the second of *Images: Book I, Hommage à Rameau* or correspondingly, the second of *Images oubliées* (Forgotten Images): both are sarabandes. Here, as in the last of the *Images oubliées* – '*Quelques aspects de "Nous n'irons plus au bois" parce qu'il fait un temps insupportable*' ('Several aspects of "We go no more to the woods" because the weather is so unbearable') – where he interweaves a favourite French nursery rhyme into the texture, Debussy's homage to his spiritual masters on the one hand, and his tradition on the other, is completely devoid of pastiche. Paul Valéry said of tradition that it is not doing again what others have done before you, but finding the spirit that lies behind those great achievements, and one could apply much the same principle to Debussy's harnessing of tradition in his music.

Debussy wrote the *Images oubliées* towards the end of 1894 and called them simply *Images*. They formed part of the collection of Alfred Cortot, and

were, in the years between their composition and eventual publication in 1976, largely overshadowed by the two 'books' of *Images*; hence the title of this triptych – *Images oubliées* (Forgotten Images). The autograph of this set is prefaced with a recommendation which could largely govern all the music on this disc, and indeed a large proportion of the output of Debussy:

These pieces would fare poorly in les salons brillamment illuminés where people who don't like music usually congregate. They are rather conversations between the piano and one's self; it is not forbidden furthermore to apply one's small sensibility to them on nice rainy days.

And indeed, speaking of rainy days, Debussy was to reuse material from the last of the *Images oubliées* in the corresponding piece of another triptych, *Estampes*, now entitled *Jardins sous la pluie* (Gardens in the Rain). The set opens with an un-subtitled piece, like the first of *Préludes: Book I*, inviting the listener to share its own private, gentle world. The second was reworked as the sarabande from *Pour le piano*, its arguably clumsy-sounding (or forward-looking?) dissonances now smoothed out.

Images I came eleven years later, and was both written and published in 1905. Debussy was justifiably proud of them, inquiring of his publisher Durand if he had played them, for 'without false vanity, I think these three pieces work well and will take their place in piano literature [...] to the left of Schumann or to the right of Chopin ... as you like it'. The first, *Reflets dans l'eau* (Reflections in the water) is one of the composer's many water pieces and the composer himself pictured the opening as dropping a pebble into the water and seeing the ripples make concentric circles' (note, again, the penchant for balance, proportion, symmetry). The central sarabande, as mentioned, a homage to Rameau, uses not only the entire range of the keyboard, but a vast dynamic range, from *pppp* to *ff*, and in the final *Mouvement* we see yet again the evocation of symmetry. It is a *perpetuum mobile*, with its busy activity dispersed

like some centrifugal force.

If the physical appearance of a composer's manuscript perhaps reveals more about how he wanted the music approached than is often credited, the layering of *Images: II* composed in 1906-07 and published in 1908, assigned three staves instead of two, further reinforces the individual tone-colours, and the subtlety of both metrical and harmonic rhythm.

Debussy's conception of his piano music to be played on an instrument 'without hammers' is something of an anomaly when one considers it in the light of the first of *Images: II, Cloches à travers les feuilles* (Bells through the leaves) with its redolence of the composer's beloved Gamelan, and its evocation of what are essentially percussion instruments, bells. It has been suggested that this *Image* was inspired by a letter to the composer from Louis Laloy in which the latter describes 'the stirring use of the passing bell which tolls from Vespers on All Saints' Eve until the Mass for the dead, crossing, from village to village, the golden forests in the silence of the evening.' *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fût* (And the moon descends on the ruins of the temple) seems to stretch even further the atmosphere of mystery that hovers around the first piece – 'the sleep of an endless landscape, caressed and consoled by the fitful moonlight...' (Marc Pincherle). *Poissons d'or* (Goldfish) parallels the last piece in the first series of *Images* with its rapid gyration, motion that cancels motion. The composer's glee in depicting flashing fins and glints of sunlight has the extraversion of his *L'isle joyeuse* (Joyous Island), and again, as in *Mouvement* all is silent in the end, 'a calm at once visionary and voluptuous' (Bryce Morrison). The piece was inspired, we are told, by two goldfish depicted on a Japanese lacquered panel which adorned Debussy's office. His delight in bringing them to life is at once elusive and palpable, a dichotomy he would have so enjoyed.

Estampes predates both sets of *Images*. It was written and published in 1903 and first performed in January of the next year by Ricardo Viñes. Ever

witty, Debussy writing to André Messager (of among other things, *Les deux pigeons* fame) in 1903 said that he had written a set of three pieces whose titles he particularly liked. Given that the first two evoke exotic landscapes – *Pagodes* evoking Debussy's beloved *gamelan*, and of course, *La soirée dans Grenade* (Evening in Granada), he added, 'When you don't have any money to go on holiday, you must make do by using your imagination!' Of the triptychs on this disc, none is perhaps more contrastingly characterised than *Estampes*, with its still yet flowing *Pagodes* (I), its incisive sketch of Spain (II), and the drizzly evocations of *Jardins sous la pluie* (Gardens in the Rain) (III). As mentioned above, the third of these was a reworking of *Nous n'irons plus au bois* (We go no more to the woods) from *Images oubliées* and it is very likely that Debussy intended to orchestrate it, for in his notes on the original piece he indicated 'here the harps give a lifelike imitation of strutting peacocks'.

La plus que lente (A slower than slow waltz), dating from 1910, carries the unusual indication *Molto rubato con morbidezza*. It highlights Debussy's parodic intentions in a piece to which he never attached any particular seriousness, and its 'brasserie' style has led to a multiplicity of transcriptions, all of which dilute Debussy's sharp yet veiled sense of humour, of his implication of brevity (and economy) being the soul of wit.

There is no trace of parody in one of Debussy's, and indeed the piano literature's, greatest accomplishments, *L'Isle Joyeuse*, composed in the summer of 1904. With its intoxicating mix of dance rhythms and surging melody, it provides a richly evocative cameo of Jersey, where Debussy eloped with Emma Bardac. Jacques Durand, obviously impressed by the accomplishment, wrote to Debussy expressing his thrill at having received the piece but adding 'Heavens! how difficult it is to play ... I think this piece combines every possible way of treating the piano, as it combines strength with grace...'

'Strength with grace', 'Force in Gentleness ... Gentleness in Force' (Debussy to the pianist Marguerite Long) are largely the attributes of his music and its performance. The writer Victor Segalen, in conversation with Debussy, asked him what his inspiration was for this piece 'overflowing with joy'. 'Imagination, sheer imagination' came the reply, and it was in the realms of imagination, of escapism with the mind, his feet largely held firmly to the ground, that so much of the world of Debussy resided. The intangible beauty of his music sometimes hides his more esoteric attributes. As mentioned above, the exact proportion of the 'golden section' used by Greek architects, and since, long regarded in esoteric circles as having divine properties and also prominent in nature, was one of them. Yet it is a tribute to his skill that the structural techniques he might have incorporated never allowed his music to sound anything less than spontaneous. He expresses this suffusion of imagination and logic most eloquently in an article he wrote for the journal *Musica* in May 1903: 'Music is a mysterious mathematical process whose elements share something of the nature of Infinity. It is allied to the movement of the waters, to the play of curves described by the changing breezes. Nothing is more musical than a sunset! For, anyone who can be moved by what they see can learn the greatest lessons in development here. That is to say, they can read them in Nature's book - a book not well enough known among musicians, who tend to read nothing but their own books about what the Masters have said, respectfully stirring the dust on their works. All very well, but perhaps Art goes deeper than this.'

Perhaps the very roots of Debussy's genius lay in his ability to hear music in all he saw or read. As the pianist and scholar Roy Howat points out 'for him the clairaudient perceptions from between the poetic lines, from the painting, the sunset or the storm, were more of a reality than was an everyday world with which he never quite came to terms.'

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François-Joël Thiollier

Franco-American by birth, the pianist François-Joël Thiollier was born in Paris and gave his first concert in New York at 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

(1862-1918)

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François-Joël Thiollier, Piano

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Playing
Time
69:40

Images I

(15:51)

- 1 Reflets dans l'eau 5:15
2 Hommage à Rameau 6:56
3 Mouvement 3:26

Images II

(13:53)

- 4 Cloches à travers les feuilles 4:37
5 Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut 5:14
6 Poissons d'or 3:51

Estampes

(14:54)

- 7 Pagodes 5:33
8 La soirée dans Grenade 5:26
9 Jardins sous la pluie 3:43

Images oubliées

(14:04)

- 10 Lent (mélancolique et doux) 4:50
11 Dans le mouvement d'une "Sarabande" 4:26
12 Quelques aspects de "Nous n'irons plus au bois" 4:39
13 **La plus que lente (valse)** 4:43
14 **L'Isle joyeuse** 5:28

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