

NAXOS

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Piano Works Vol. 5

Étude Nos. 1-12 • D'un cahier d'esquisses

François-Joel Thiollier



Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Piano Works Vol. 5

Debussy was born in 1862 in St Germain-en-Laye, 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, allegedly a pupil of Chopin. In 1872 he entered the Paris 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 Nadezhda 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 1883 won the second Prix de Rome and in 1884 the first prize, the following year reluctantly taking up obligatory residence, according to the terms of the award, 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 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 a singer of some ability, led eventually to their marriage in 1908, after the birth of their daughter three years earlier. In 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 many of 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.

Debussy acknowledged a continuing debt to Chopin, overtly in his two books of studies, the *Douze Etudes*, completed in 1915 and dedicated to the memory of Frédéric Chopin. In a foreword Debussy explains his reason for omitting any guide to fingering, something he regarded as intrusive in view of the differing formation of hands. He had been busy with his own edition of Chopin for the publisher Durand and this not entirely congenial task he put aside to return to his own composition, after a fallow year. In a modest letter to his friend André Caplet he later described the studies as not always particularly entertaining but at times ingenious.

The first book offers a humorous homage to Czerny, whose exercises had long been familiar to every pianist. *Pour les cinq doigts* (For the five fingers) starts with a simple five-finger exercise, with the direction *Sagement* (Wisely). Into this another note soon intrudes, as the study gathers motion and takes on its own character. The second study, *Pour les tierces* (For thirds), opens with right-hand thirds, moving on to a passage marked *murmurando*, with a melodic fragment appearing in the left hand. The study ends with a final *con fuoco*, a dynamic climax. This is followed by *Pour les quartes* (For fourths), a study in which Debussy promised strange sonorities. Here there are textures and effects reminiscent of the orientalism of some of the earlier piano works. *Pour les sixtes* (For

sixths) uses an interval that Debussy had once associated with affected young ladies sitting moodily in a drawing-room listening to the wanton laughter of giddy ninths. His chains of sixths are effective and evocative, as always entirely in his own distinctive musical language. The fifth study, *Pour les octaves* (For octaves) is marked *Joyeux et emporté, librement rythmé* (Joyful and passionate, freely rhythmical), the first adjectives aptly describing its mood. The first book ends with *Pour les huit doigts* (For eight fingers), to which is added the warning that the changing position of the hands makes the use of the thumbs awkward and its performance with them becomes acrobatic. The distinguished pianist Marguerite Long, however, found the use of the thumbs practical, leading the composer to concede the possibility of their use here.

The second book starts with *Pour les degrés chromatiques* (For chromatic steps), a study in rapid chromatic figuration, providing a texture through which melodic fragments appear. *Pour les agréments* (For ornaments) again offers characteristically swirling textures, idiomatic harmonies and melodies, a study described by Debussy as a *Barcarolle* on a very Italian sea. It is followed by the brusque *Pour les notes répétées* (For repeated notes), a rapid *scherzando*. The tenth study, *Pour les sonorités opposées* (For opposing sonorities), is gently evocative in its varied timbres and sounds and leads to *Pour les arpeges composés* (For written arpeggios), with its harmonies suggested by arpeggios and arpeggiated chords, finally allowed to melt into the distance. The last of the studies, *Pour les accords* (For chords), with its fuller chordal textures, ends a work that combines technical challenges with musical achievement, as Chopin had done some eighty years before.

D'un cahier d'esquisses (From a Book of Sketches) was written in 1903, the year of *Estampes*. As its title indicates, the piece was taken from a musical sketch-

book and was later arranged by a Belgian publisher, who acquired the rights to it, for cinema orchestra. It was given its first public performance by Ravel in 1910. Its first publication had been in 1904 as part of an *Album de Musique* issued by *Paris Illustré*. Once again Debussy explores the delicate sonorities of the piano in a musical language that he had now made his own.

Written in 1909, *Hommage à Haydn* (Homage to Haydn) starts with a gentle waltz, followed by a much livelier passage. In both Debussy makes use of the notes B(=H) A D(=Y) D G(=N), relying on this cryptogram for his tribute. The delicate *Élégie* came in 1915, as he turned again to composition, while the *Morceau de concours* (Competition Piece) of 1904 is a brief test of technical prowess.

Page d'album, with the additional explanatory title of *Pièce pour le Vêtement du blessé* (Piece for the Clothing of the Wounded), composed in 1915, has something of the simple charm of Satie. To this the *Berceuse héroïque* of the previous year, written as a tribute to King Albert I of the Belgians and his soldiers, provides a distinct contrast. Starting with a bleak enough passage, its texture is pierced by distant bugle calls, leading to *La brabançonne*, the Belgian national anthem.

Masques brings a return to 1904. It was first performed early in 1905 by Ricardo Viñes. Debussy is again in the world of Verlaine, three more of whose *Fêtes galantes* he set in the same year. Here *la mandoline jase / Parmi les frissons de brise* (the mandolin chatters in the quivering breeze) and in this nostalgic idyll of the past, appear *masques et bergamasques / Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi / Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques* (masks and bergamasks, playing the lute and dancing, as if sad under their fantastic disguises).

Keith Anderson

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 concertos, 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.

Debussy's *Études*, like those of Chopin, to whom they are dedicated, combine technical challenge with musical achievement. Shorter pieces here included range from the rhythmic excitement of the nostalgic *Masques* of 1904 to evocative war-time compositions such as the *Berceuse héroïque*, a tribute to contemporary Belgian heroism.

Claude
DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

Piano Works Volume 5

1	Étude 1	2:56
2	Étude 2	4:12
3	Étude 3	5:00
4	Étude 4	4:29
5	Étude 5	3:17
6	Étude 6	1:38
7	Étude 7	2:29
8	Étude 8	4:39
9	Étude 9	3:44
10	Étude 10	4:44
11	Étude 11	4:31
12	Étude 12	4:37
13	D'un cahier d'esquisses	4:10
14	Hommage à Haydn	2:01
15	Élégie	1:40
16	Morceau de concours	0:39
17	Page d'album	1:08
18	Berceuse héroïque	3:47
19	Masques	5:02

François-Joel Thiollier

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 Cover Picture: *Arbres et maisons (Trees and houses)* c.1885 by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)
 The Art Archive / Jean Walter & Paul Guillaume Coll/Dagli Orti

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