



Claude  
Debussy

Préludes  
(1er Livre)

George Lepauw  
*piano*



## Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

### Préludes

#### 1er Livre (1910)

1	Danseuses de Delphes ( <i>Dancers of Delphi</i> )	3.38
2	Voiles ( <i>Sails/Veils</i> )	4.28
3	Le Vent dans la Plaine ( <i>The Wind in the Plain</i> )	2.11
4	"Les Sons et les Parfums tourment dans l'air du soir" ( <i>Sounds and Scents Waft in the Evening Air</i> )	3.55
5	Les Collines d'Anacapri ( <i>The Hills of Anacapri</i> )	3.01
6	Des pas sur la neige ( <i>Footsteps on the Snow</i> )	3.33
7	Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest ( <i>What the West Wind Saw</i> )	3.21
8	La fille aux cheveux de lin ( <i>The Girl with the Flaxen Hair</i> )	2.28
9	La sérénade interrompue ( <i>The Interrupted Serenade</i> )	2.16
10	La Cathédrale engloutie ( <i>The Sunken Cathedral</i> )	5.44
11	La danse de Puck ( <i>Puck's Dance</i> )	2.47
12	Minstrels	2.17
	<b>Total time</b>	<b>39.39</b>

George Lepauw, piano

## The Preludes

In his seminal book on the composer's life and music, *Debussy* (London, Dent & Sons Ltd, 1980 revision) Edward Lockspeiser called his hero "[...] a unique artistic phenomenon in the history of music" (Lockspeiser 162). Debussy was a fiercely independent composer, who like Beethoven learned from past masters only to blaze ahead on his own path, always the seeker. "For like Beethoven, Debussy knew that the burden of the explorer is that the promised land is never reached, and that each discovery, miraculous as it may be, is yet another of music's imperishable illusions" (Lockspeiser 162). He was a part of no group and left no school behind him, although he was deeply influential to many strains of modernism.

The twenty-four preludes Claude Debussy composed for piano, divided into two sets of twelve, are a cornerstone of his mature creative output. Although they stand as some of the most inventive works ever written for piano, most listeners are hardly aware of their existence as a cohesive set. Again, in the words of Lockspeiser:

*"In the two books of Preludes we are escorted on many novel journeys, the focus of Debussy's musical telescope [...], continuously changing as exotic images are revealed of the Orient, Spain, Italy and [...] Scotland; as harsh, magnified caricatures are presented of the Victorian music-hall; as legend, prose and poetry are delineated in music; as the mysteries of nature are yet again evoked [...]. Debussy shows himself in the Preludes to be as much a clairaudient as a clairvoyant. His mysterious conception of the tactile properties of music is equally remarkable, and there are pages which might almost bring music to the borders of an odoriferous [...] art"* (Lockspeiser 155-156).

Debussy was naturally curious and found profound musical inspiration in the exotic sounds of the Javanese Gamelan (which he discovered in 1889) and early American syncopated music (ragtime, banjo, band music), as well as in images of Japanese prints, in the lore of Moorish Spain, in the mysteries of Indian spirituality, in the symbolist poetry of Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé, in the 18th century of Rameau and Watteau, of English children's lore, of cinema, theatre, dance and circus, and of various legends and fairy tales from around the world. Inspiration came easily to Debussy: "[I am] a man who sees mystery in everything [...]", he once said.

His manner of composing for the piano was revolutionary. He was able to find colors in the sound production of the instrument that composers before him had never even explored. Having seen Franz Liszt perform as an old man in Rome, he was struck by his use of the sustaining pedal as "a kind of breathing;" Debussy's writing, especially in the more virtuosic preludes, is very Lisztian indeed, as well as indebted to Chopin (who had been Debussy's first teacher's teacher). But he went further: "[...] the piano was to be transformed into an instrument of illusion [...]" (Lockspeiser 155). He was, above all, a keen observer and listener, and it was the variety and beauty of the outside world, which led his inner world to flourish. In Debussy's own words:

*"The sound of the sea, the curve of the horizon, the wind in the leaves, the cry of a bird register complex impressions within us. Then, suddenly, without any deliberate consent on our part, one of these memories issues forth to express itself in the language of music. It bears its own harmony within it. By no effort of ours can we achieve anything more truthful or accurate. In this way only does a soul destined for music discover its most beautiful ideas" (in Lockspeiser 99).*

Debussy's genius is on full display in these preludes, all of which are conceptually vast, if miniature, masterpieces. As a set, they represent the quintessence of the composer's mastery and reveal the deep well of his soul.

While the titles to each prelude are of utmost interest and help guide the mind in its attempts to understand Debussy's sometimes mysterious music, it is to be noted that the composer placed these titles in the score not at the top of each piece but at the end, a rather unusual place for a title. The reason for this is that Debussy did not want the title to define the music, but rather for the music to define the title. What was important to Debussy, ever a man of the senses, was for the listener to feel his music rather than to understand it...



### **Album presentation**

Despite being born and raised in France, my pianistic education was centered on Beethoven and Chopin. Debussy's music was revealed to me in his symphonic works, as my father was a member of the Orchestre de Paris and I had the privilege of hearing frequent performances of his *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, *Nocturnes*, *La Mer*, *Images*... Those powerful and enveloping sounds left their mark but it was not until my mid-twenties and in Chicago, that I fell down the rabbit hole and discovered Debussy's two sets of preludes, which shook my world. In a matter of weeks, I had learned them entirely and began performing them as concert programs. While these works have always stayed in my fingers and repertoire, this was a period of special effusion and of still-youthful excitement at the unexpected worlds Debussy opened up in my spirit. I also felt deeply connected to Debussy's lifelong spirit of rebellion and hard-earned independence.

Debussy's preludes also represent a breaking-of-chains from my formal musical studies, helping me to earn the mastery and the freedom I was seeking as a musician. I had just come out of music school and was yet unsure of myself. Amazingly, I was invited to spend a day with the great (and late) American pianist Earl Wild, who was born when Debussy was alive and who, upon hearing me play these works, gave me simple but life changing advice: "Music is a dance. Follow it!"

Less than a year later, in August 2007, I recorded the two books of *Préludes* in a single evening on the stage of the Music Institute of Chicago's Nichols Hall, in front of a camera crew (for a filmed version of this recording which I hope will see the light of day soon) and microphones. I performed all the preludes twice, straight through from start to finish. The resulting recording, a selection of the best takes from that night, is an honest portrait of the musician I was then. It retains, all these many years later, a special energy which I feel makes it worth listening to this day, even if my interpretation of these works has changed somewhat since then. This privately-organized recording would however not have been possible without the support and generosity of my parents Jane and Didier Lepauw and of my father's initiative in setting up and managing the recording event itself, for which I am grateful.

I hope you enjoy listening to this music as much as I have loved playing it!

George Lepauw, Paris, June 20, 2020

### **Something to keep in mind**

Debussy's titles are evocative and poetic, and each one of them deserves a more detailed explanation, which is not possible in our limited space here (more information will be made available on our website). However, a special note must be made here about the title to the last prelude of this set: *Minstrels*. This refers to the minstrel shows which were popular forms of variety show entertainment in the 19th and early 20th centuries. They originated in America and typically featured white actors in blackface as well as black actors making fun of black culture, real or imagined. However, they were generally culturally demeaning to African-Americans at a time when this was unfortunately normalized. Minstrel shows eventually merged and evolved into the wider spectrum of vaudeville and Broadway shows which were not exclusively focused on African-American culture. Minstrel shows did, however, introduce audiences to syncopated music which was the precursor to jazz and it was this music which made a sensation (along with the band music of John Philip Sousa) in England and France at the turn of the century. Debussy's primary interest was in the sounds he heard in the musical numbers he had a chance to hear. Debussy was a satirist by nature and his musical pastiches are great examples of his talent for making use, and poking occasional fun at popular entertainments of his day (as he did when parodying Wagner's music in other works). While this piece denotes a past acceptance for racist propaganda and cultural appropriation and distortion, we cannot much condemn Debussy in his time for finding inspiration in music he heard outside of its original American sociological and political context. What we can do, however, is use this piece as a motivation to better inform ourselves and learn about racism in our cultural histories. Further information on this and other aspects of this recording can be found on our dedicated website, [www.claudedebussy.fr](http://www.claudedebussy.fr).

## **George Lepauw**

George Lepauw is a Franco-American pianist based in Paris, France. His recent *Bach48 Album* of the complete *Well-Tempered Clavier* by J.S. Bach on Orchid Classics has earned wide praise from critics and audiences alike and his upcoming traversal of major Beethoven works including the Piano Sonatas and several Variation sets will be released beginning in late 2020 on Orchid Creative. George Lepauw's musical education has included private studies with Aïda Barenboim, Elena Varvarova, Brigitte Engerer, Rena Shereshevskaya, Vladimir Krainev, James Giles, Ursula Oppens and Earl Wild. He has been additionally mentored and supported by Carlo-Maria Giulini, Maria Curcio, Charles Rosen and Kurt Masur. He also holds degrees in History and Literature from Georgetown University and in Piano Performance from Northwestern University. George Lepauw is also recognized - he was named Chicagoan of the Year in 2012 by the Chicago Tribune - for his visionary artistic leadership in music, art and film festival programming. Concurrently to his performing and recording career, George Lepauw teaches piano online and in masterclasses, composes music, produces music films and writes occasional articles on various topics. Follow George Lepauw's musical journey at [www.georgelepauw.com](http://www.georgelepauw.com).

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Recorded August 1, 2007 at Nichols Hall, Music Institute of Chicago on a Steinway Model D from Hamburg, made possible by the kind assistance of Fiona Queen.

Recording producer: Maxim Anisimov

Album cover photo: Albert J. Kim

### **Album dedicated with love to David (in memoriam) and Shirley Toomim**

With gratitude to Matthew Trusler, to Jane and Didier Lepauw, and to Céline Oms for their participation and support in making this album come to life.

Learn more about this album and this Debussy journey at **[www.claudedebussy.fr](http://www.claudedebussy.fr)**.

For more information on Orchid Creative please visit  
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