



Martin SKAFTE

24 PRELUDES FOR PIANO

Jonas Olsson

MARTIN SKAFTE'S ENCOUNTERS WITH DEBUSSY

by Anastasia Belina

Martin Skafte (born in Kungsbacka in 1980) is a Swedish composer best known for his works for solo piano, chamber music and voice. He began his musical journey at an early age, taking piano lessons at a local music school, but he didn't feel a strong connection with the instrument and discontinued his studies. Around the age of seventeen, he developed an interest in music for video games and, with a friend, he composed and recorded over 300 themes inspired by the genre. His interest in piano was reignited and he began to practise again on his own, even trying his hand at composition by writing a song setting a Swedish text. He also resumed his formal music education, initially at the Kulturskolan (School of Culture) in Kungsbacka, followed by two years at the Gotland School of Music Composition in Visby and a further five years of composition studies at the Academy of Music and Drama in Gothenburg.

His first encounters with 'classical' music and literature in his late teens left a lasting impression: Chopin was the first classical composer truly to inspire him, at around the same time that he discovered Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which he devoured in only a few days. His interest in literature is something that sustains his creativity and continues to inspire him on a daily basis. He composes with pen and paper, at the piano, focusing on one work at a time. He aspires to write music that is beautiful: the content dictates the form, with style being secondary. For him, composition is akin to a spiritual experience, and his main aim when writing music is trying to convey and recreate the feeling of transcendence which he first experienced as a teenager.

Martin Skafte has held artist residencies at the Visby International Centre for Composers, on the island of Gotland, in 2016, 2019 and 2020, and at the Villa San Michele, Anacapri, Capri, in 2019. He is the recipient of multiple grants and

scholarships, which include funding from the Swedish Arts Grants Committee, Swedish Performing Rights Society (STIM), Helge Ax:son Johnson Foundation and the Längmanska Foundation. His compositions are published by the leading Swedish publisher Gehrman's Musikförlag and Norsk Musikforlag in Norway.

Among his most notable compositions are three reworkings of selected mazurkas by Chopin, Three Études, Six Bagatelles (to be performed with Beethoven's Op. 126 *Bagatelles*), a piano trio for viola, cello and piano, and a song-cycle (*Preludier*) for mezzo-soprano, *Scala Fenicia* for cor anglais and piano and *Engång* for mixed choir and solo soprano. His music has been championed by the leading Swedish pianist Peter Jablonski, for whom he has written a *Fantasia on Two Pieces by Scriabin* (the mazurka, Op. 25, No. 3, and Piano Sonata No. 9, 'Black Mass'), premiered at the Karlskrona International Piano Festival on 14 November 2021. His piano music has been performed and promoted by Jonas Olsson in Sweden and Stephen Porter in the USA.

He came to international recognition in 2017 when his 24 Preludes – which bear the subtitle 'Inspired by Claude Debussy's *Préludes* for Piano' – were published by Gehrman's Musikförlag. He was invited to speak about the work to international audiences, including the Boston Conservatory at Berklee in Boston, USA, and the Norges musikkhøgskole and Musikhögskolan i Malmö in Scandinavia. The cycle is recorded here by Jonas Olsson, to whom Book Two is dedicated.

In Skafte's own words:

Each of the 24 *Preludes* are – in one way or another – inspired by one of the 24 *Préludes* by Debussy. Sometimes the connections are obvious, and sometimes they are not. The thought behind creating the suite was initially to learn more about the peculiarities of Debussy's music, which I wanted to understand more from a composer's point of view, through actual practice of composing.

The overarching idea through the first book of the suite is that of a music gradually taking shape under the influence of Debussy. As Debussy's influence eventually begins to take over, it is then time to try to extract the core experiences from the influence and move on from there, hopefully a lot richer from the experience.

The second book is then all about trying to refine and personalise the musical voice that emerged through the process. The pieces here are more interconnected than in Book 1, since they need something more than just the slowly fading connections with Debussy's originals to keep it together as a whole.¹

Although Skafté's preludes would not exist without the inspirational force of Debussy's music on his work, Skafté has not only achieved his aim of learning about Debussy's music but has also clearly developed his own musical practice through this 'experiment'. Skafté's cycle is a work that shows creativity, imagination, invention and, above all, inspiration and mastery of piano-writing. Each of Skafté's 24 Preludes has two titles: his own, followed by Debussy's in brackets. But they do not follow Debussy's chronological order, with one exception: 'Vit vind [White Wind] (... Bruyères ...)' is the direct correspondent of 'Bruyères'.

The music in the first book of preludes (2012–13) ranges from the dancing, rhythmic playfulness of the opening 'På väg hemåt [Going Home] (... Les sons ...)' to the reflective melancholy of the closing 'Inte idag [Not Today] (... La cathédrale ...)'.

'På väg hemåt [Going Home] (... Les sons ...)' [1] is at first intensely articulated, lively and full of expectation. The excitement soon gives way to a suddenly subdued mood, and a succession of short phrases and melodic fragments develop into figurations that eventually evaporate in the high register of the piano, giving the impression of a sudden end. But a final section emerges from the same register, and the prelude concludes with the movement and direction with which it began, although not so energetically.

There are three preludes that require the piano to be prepared: 'Från och till [Now and Again] (... Minstrels)', 'Linjer och tidslinjer [Lines and Timelines] (... Danseuses ...)' and 'Ska vi leka? (... Voiles)'. In all three, a C in the fifth octave must be prepared with a piece of Blu Tack, resulting in a percussive, woody sound when played. 'Från och till (... Minstrels)' [2] begins with a steadily pulsating prepared C, with the broken-up, angular, wandering melodic line in the left hand straddling both bass and treble clefs. A haunting melody in the top brings song-like lyricism to an otherwise

¹ Letter to Peter Jablonski, dated 1 May 2019.

percussive atmosphere, which is soon broken by the arrival of powerful chords, which are themselves interrupted by the return of the haunting melody. A percussive ending, brought on with dense, accentuated chords in both hands, highlights the return of the prepared high C.

A capricious 'Dimman har många röster [Eloquent Mist] (... La danse ...)' [3] features a technique where clusters of chords are held, with keys released one by one, creating an impression of mist lifting and clear air emerging. One of the more famous examples of such a technique can be heard at the very end of Schumann's *Papillons*, Op. 2, but despite its effectiveness it is not something that is often encountered in piano literature.

Changing soundscapes in 'Och vintern var ovanligt lång [A Long Winter Season] (... Des pas ...)' [4] lead effortlessly into 'Linjer och tidslinjer (... Danseuses ...)' [5], which starts with rumblings in the lower register of the piano, suddenly breaking into ragtime, then a salsa and then a bossa nova, with all three dances interspersed by the initial opening figurations. Dance-like moments also appear in the next prelude, 'Ni är inget utan mig! [You're Nothing Without Me!] (... La sérénade ...)' [6], which begins with a delicate, almost fragile melody that eventually struggles to overcome the joyful, pulsating thirds in the right hand.

With the arrival of 'Det återfunna minnet [Finding Memory Again] (... La fille ...)' [7], the spirit of Debussy is very much present in the melodic and harmonic language and crystalline figurations in the top register of the piano. This prelude clearly shows the inspiration for the whole cycle, paying homage to the French composer, but avoiding imitation or copying.

'Förväntansfullt [In Suspense] (... Ce qu'à ...)' [8] begins with the use of second and third intervals which somehow create dry and yet flowing arpeggios. The intervals are sometimes joined by larger ones, although never exceeding a pure fifth. A break-away flight of the melodic figurations in the right hand appears, before the prelude evaporates into *pianissimo* chords.

‘Svaga band [Weak Ties] (... Le vent ...)’ [9] appears out of the stillness, with subtle elements of piano technique, such as the silent depressing of keys and the use of the *sostenuto* pedal.

The last three preludes gradually wind the first book to a subdued conclusion. A hesitantly playful ‘Ska vi leka? (... Voiles)’ [10], with the Blu Tack-prepared string and its active, charming sections of play and repose, leads into a slow, introverted ‘Ett välkommet avbrott [A Welcome Break] (... Les collines ...)’ [11], with fragmented melodies. Finally, the arrival of ‘Inte idag [Not Today] (... La cathédrale ...)’ [12] brings a more dramatic mood and a sound-world that, in a kind of parallel universe, harks back to Debussy’s own ‘La cathédrale engloutie’.

The second book of preludes (2015–17) shows Skafte’s development in various ways: clear guidance to the performer in the use of the pedals and of extended techniques, such as harmonics in ‘Vit vind [White Wind] (... Bruyères ...)’ [17], ‘Där ute finns både och [It’s All Out There] (... Canope ...)’ [20] and ‘På återbesök [Revisiting] (... La Puerta ...)’ [22], and, of course, prepared piano in ‘En sista återblick [One Last Look Back] (... Feux ...)’ [24].

It is important to mention Skafte’s treatment of pedals or, rather, his precise demands described in the score, which show a very clear idea of what he wants to achieve in each case: for example, instructions such as ‘Pick up resonance with pedal’ in ‘Gaias navel [Gaias Navel] (... Ondine ...)’ [18] and ‘Pedal from blurry to clear between measure 90 and 95’ in ‘Avkylda drömbilder [Faded Expectations] (... La terrasse ...)’ [23]. There is a clear divergence from Debussy, who, although knowing the effect he wanted to achieve, left the pedal decisions to the performer, rarely giving specific pedalling directions.

Skafte, by contrast, is exceptionally clear in his performance directions, which are detailed and plentiful, ranging from guidance on expression and emotional mood to the use of pedal and articulation. His poetic but always clear indications for the musical effects he seeks to achieve are also notable: ‘Like frozen bells’ [5]; ‘With unreleased emotion (just waiting to burst out)’ and ‘With small ad lib. fluctuations in tempo and dynamics, mimicking a passing breeze’ [8]; ‘Serenely and colourfully’ [13]; ‘Effortlessly;

with warmth – playfully’, and ‘With certainty to the end, creating an illusion of necessity’ [15]; and ‘Like waves, suddenly appearing on a blurred surface’ [16].

Book Two opens with ‘I hörnet [In the Corner] (... feuilles mortes ...)’ [13], which uses the *sostenuto* pedal throughout, beginning with holding a silent chord cluster, out of which grows velvety, deep sonorities in the piano bass.

No. 2, ‘Och vägarna formar [The Paths Decide] (... Les tierces ...)’ [14], introduces the use of *touches bloquées* (the ‘blocked keys’ are depressed silently), a technique perhaps best known from György Ligeti’s eponymous *Étude* No. 3. Here Skafe interprets the technique as rhythm resulting from playing on both open and blocked keys.

No. 3, ‘Flyktiga språng [Leaping Lightly] (... les fees ...)’ [15], employs the silent releasing of piano keys, but the development is clear from a similar effect heard in ‘Dimman har många röster (...La danse...)’ [3], in which these silent releases bring a quiet, ethereal melodic quality. Skafe recalls how he discovered this technique: ‘I just sat at the piano one day and found that by releasing keys rhythmically, melodies could be heard as the new bass notes became audible one by one. I thought that those “shadow melodies” were really beautiful.’²

The intensity and virtuosity of No. 4, ‘Fyra steg åt sidan [Four Steps to the Side] (... Brouillards ...)’ [16], offers stark contrast, with juxtaposed distantly related keys and dynamic irregularities.

No. 5, ‘Vit vind [White Wind] (... Bruyères ...)’ [17], uses harmonics to create the sound of bells, heard both within and above a sombre chorale. This is the only prelude of Skafe’s that corresponds to Debussy’s own chronology in his Second Book, and it is marked by the only musical reference, although indirect: a descending minor third at the beginning of this prelude, just as it is heard in the opening of Debussy’s ‘Bruyères’. Although Skafe uses descending B flat–G (Debussy uses a descending E flat–C), he does bring it back towards the end of the prelude in Debussy’s formation, as a distant echo of his inspiration.

² E-mail to Anastasia Belina, dated 15 May 2022.

A ‘funky’ ‘Gaias navel [Gaias Navel] (... Ondine ...), No. 6 [18], is relentless in its use of irregular and challenging devices to plot out the rhythmic landscape. Its fast motivic development gradually spirals out of a narrow range to broader reaches, without ever losing the dynamic core. It concludes with the extension of sound through silent keys.

No. 7, ‘En strid och en seger [Emerging Victorious] (... Hommage ...)’ [19], brings all sorts of contrasts: tonal, rhythmic, textural and dynamic, with *fortissimo* quickly moving to *piano* and *pianissimo*. This prelude is framed by one of Skaftes trademark devices in his cycle of preludes – harmony dissolving through the release of the keys one by one.

Out of the silence bursts No. 8, ‘Där ute finns både och [It’s All Out There] (... Canope ...)’ [20], where the relentlessly driven opening passages give way to the bell-like sounds of *piano* harmonics, which eventually vanish without a trace.

The short ‘En tid för allt [A Time for Everything] (... General Lavine ...), No. 9 [21], opens with a freely flowing introduction, indicated by tempo indication, which gives the performer flexibility of phrasing. A harmonic and rhythmic three-bar hint of Debussys ‘cakewalk’ signals the arrival of the final section, which evaporates with the help of a *sostenuto* pedal harmony.

No. 10, ‘På återbesök [Revisiting] (... La Puerta ...)’ [22], pays homage to one of Debussys own inspirations, the Balinese gamelan, and here the use of harmonics is aptly applied. A slow eerie ostinato of harmonics quickens the pace, evolving from a percussive to a lyrical, flowing polyphony. Skaftes architectural thinking emerges with clarity in this prelude, through the spaciousness of vertical notation and sensitive use of the pedal that lifts the harmonies.

No. 11, ‘Avkylda drömbilder [Faded Expectations] (... La terrasse ...)’ [23], begins with a *chanson* section, which reappears throughout the prelude. Here Skaftes architectural thinking is made clear in his performance directions: ‘In these sections the melody should be very clearly in the foreground. The accented notes within the background texture are to be treated as a secondary layer, and the grace notes as a third layer’. The structural harmonic arches connecting different islands of tonality, with echoes of melodies and rhythms, create a soundscape where shimmering resonances

and extensive use of layered pedal treat the sound-colour in a true Debussy style, but also in Skafte's clearly unique musical idiom.

No. 12, 'Et sista återblick [One Last Look Back] (... Feux ...)' [24], does a superb job of taking the listener back to the very first prelude with a simple device – the familiar Blu-Tacked C. At the end, as the music slowly fades away, only the Blu Tack-prepared high C from the first book remains; the muted string closes the circle.

Listening to Debussy's and Skafte's cycles side by side leaves an unmistakable feeling of connection, but a connection created by scents, colours and distant memories. Although Debussy's preludes are not connected thematically, other than by occasional tonal links, Skafte's preludes have a sense of narrative, although employed subtly and almost subconsciously. There is, of course, no story as such, but rather a journey documented by inspiration, ideas and creative solutions in the quest to find the right sound, the right tonal flavour, the right touch. Here, content dictates the form, but the form itself is flexible enough to accommodate the creative impulses that give it birth.

Anastasia Belina is a writer on music, broadcaster, presenter and artist manager. She has published on a wide range of topics, including nineteenth-century music, Russian and British opera, operetta and the contribution to the world music heritage made by female composers and musicians. Most recently, her work on the life and music of Augusta Holmès led to the rediscovery of a forgotten symphony, which was published by Schott and premiered in 2019 by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, conducted by Valentina Peleggi. She was instrumental in bringing André Tchaikowsky's opera The Merchant of Venice to international stages in Austria, Poland and UK in 2013–17, and also appeared in a feature-length documentary about the composer, Rebel of the Keys (2017). Her publications include Die tägliche Mühe ein Mensch zu sein (Wolke Verlag, 2013), A Musician Divided: André Tchaikowsky in his own Words (Toccata Press, 2013), Wagner in Russia, Poland and the Czech Lands: Musical, Literary, and Cultural Perspectives (Ashgate, 2013), The Business of Opera (Ashgate, 2015), The Cambridge Companion to Operetta (Cambridge University Press, 2019) and Music History and Cosmopolitanism (Routledge, 2019). She wishes to thank Esaiás Järnegård for his important contribution to these notes.

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The Swedish pianist **Jonas Olsson** has established himself as one of the most adventurous pianists on the Scandinavian new-music scene today. Having initially studied with Hans Pålsson in Gothenburg, he made his debut with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra in 2007. He then spent a year at the International Ensemble Modern Academy in Frankfurt, followed by two years with Pierre-Laurent Aimard in Cologne, where he specialised in contemporary solo repertoire. Another important influence came from working intensely with Pierre Boulez as a member of the Lucerne Festival Academy between 2006 and 2009, where his solo repertoire included Boulez's *Sur Incises* and *Répons* and Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles*.

Dividing his time between Sweden and Germany, Jonas Olsson has a busy concert schedule, appearing at major venues which include the Lucerne Festival, Klavier-Festival Ruhr, Aldeburgh Festival, Carnegie Hall and the NY Phil Biennial. Highlights include the complete Boulez sonatas at the Klang Festival in Copenhagen in 2015 and a Rebecca Saunders portrait concert at the Aldeburgh Festival in 2016.

His repertoire comprises a large selection of works from the most significant late-twentieth-century composers such as Berio, Boulez, Carter, Ferneyhough, Lachenmann, Ligeti, Messiaen, Nono, Sciarrino, Stockhausen and Xenakis. Equally important is his commitment to a younger generation of composers, with whom he closely collaborates on exploring new playing techniques. He is a member of the Gothenburg-based contemporary-music ensembles Mimitabu and Gageego! and is regularly invited to play with other ensembles throughout Europe.



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MARTIN SKAFTE 24 Preludes for Piano

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5 No. 5 Lines and Timelines (... Danseuses ...)	2:11
6 No. 6 You're Nothing Without Me! (... La sérénade ...)	3:16
7 No. 7 Finding Memory Again (... La fille ...)	3:52
8 No. 8 In Suspense (... Ce q'a ...)	1:18
9 No. 9 Weak Ties (... Le vent ...)	1:19
10 No. 10 Shall we Play? (...Voiles)	2:05
11 No. 11 A Welcome Break (... Les collines ...)	2:15
12 No. 12 Not Today (... La cathédrale ...)	6:01

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19 No. 7 Emerging Victorious (... Hommage ...)	2:38
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