

Debussy

Listener's

Guide

Debussy's Chamber Classics Classical Connections Series

Concert Three February 7 & 8, 2013

Program Quartet in G Minor, op. 10,
Preludes for Piano, Sonata for Cello
and Piano, Sonata for Flute, Viola and
Harp & Sonata for Violin and Piano



If you follow my "Neal's Notes" essays in DPO programs, you probably know that my three favorite composers are Johannes Brahms, Claude Debussy, and Steve Reich. Of course, I love Beethoven and Bach and Haydn and Mozart and Schumann and Mahler and Strauss and Tchaikovsky and Lennon-McCartney and many others. But when it comes to favorite composers, Debussy, the focus of tonight's program, is in my top three.

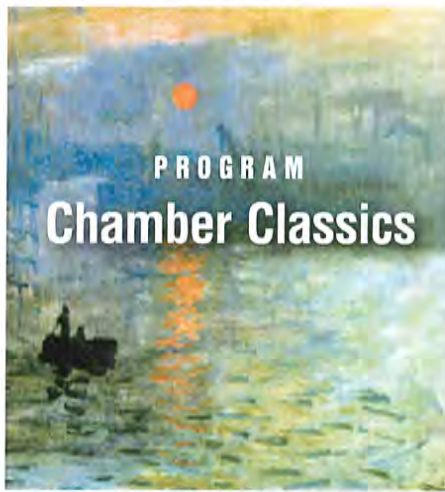
Strange then, that we've given Debussy the "CC Treatment" only twice before: *La mer* in October 1998 and *Nocturnes* in October 2004. Strange too, that there are only seven performers onstage instead of the 83 you're used to. While Classical Connections focuses on great works of the orchestral repertoire, I love the idea of occasionally looking at important pieces of chamber music.

"Debussy's Chamber Classics" presents a broad overview of his musical language and personal history. The String Quartet (1893) represents the early part of Debussy's career, when he began to introduce the world to his unique ear and innovative way of thinking about music. Piano Preludes from 1910 and 1913 represent the mature flowering of his compositional style. The trio of chamber sonatas (1915-1917) represent a tantalizing look at the new kind of music that Debussy was creating before his life was cut short. Although my main focus as a conductor is on Debussy's orchestral works, I often turn to the Preludes and Sonatas to deepen my understanding of Debussy's music and my wonder at its beauty.

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I hope this chamber music program will leave you amazed at the intimate music-making of your orchestra's principal players, rather than wondering, "Where's everybody else?" (And don't worry, they'll all be back for April's Classical Connections concert!)



DEMIRJIAN CLASSICAL CONNECTIONS

February 7 & 8, 2013
8:00 p.m., Schuster Center
Q&A after the concert
Neal Gittleman, host
Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Jessica Hung, violinist
Kirstin Greenlaw, violinist
Sheridan Currie, violinist
Andra Padrichelli, cellist
Rebecca Andres, flutist
Leslie Stratton Norris, harpist
Joshua Nemith, pianist

Quartet in G Minor, op. 10 (1893)
I. Animé et très décidé
II. Assez vif et bien rythmé
III. Andantino, doucement expressif
IV. Très modéré

Preludes for Piano
I. Fairies Are Exquisite Dancers (1913)
II. The Sunken Cathedral (1910)

Sonata for Cello and Piano (1915)
I. Prologue
II. Serenade
III. Finale

Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp (1916)
I. Pastorale
II. Interlude
III. Finale

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1917)
I. Allegro vivo
II. Intermezzo
III. Finale

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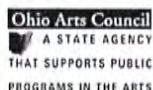
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June 1, 2013 at 10:00 a.m.

Classical Connections Listener's Guide
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Impressions

BY NEAL GITTLEMAN

Most listeners know that Debussy was an Impressionist. What does that mean? What do Debussy's notes on paper have to do with Monet's brushstrokes on canvas?

Maybe nothing. Maybe a lot.

Impressionist art came first, in 1863, when the jury at the École des Beaux-Arts rejected a large number of paintings submitted by young artists for the annual Salon exhibition. The counterexhibition of works by Manet, Whistler, and others—the Salon des Refusés—was the first salvo in a war that ultimately overthrew the old guard of the art world. In 1863, Wagner was only halfway through *The Ring of the Nibelung*, and Claude Debussy was in diapers.

When the First Impressionist Exhibition took place in 1874, Debussy, 12 years old, was in his third year as a student at the Paris Conservatory (the musical equivalent of the École des Beaux-Arts) and had just begun to show serious promise

as a musician. Across town, an art critic scornfully reviewed Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* and invented what he thought was a sufficiently derogatory term for the outlaw painters: Impressionists.

Impressionist music began sometime in the 1880s, when passers-by in the corridors of the Paris Conservatory noticed strange sounds emanating from the practice room of

young Mr. Debussy.

They didn't just pass by. They stayed to listen, fascinated and shocked at what they heard coming from Debussy's piano. My teacher Nadia Boulanger entered the Conservatory in 1896, when she was nine years old, and for the seven years she studied there,



CLAUDE DEBUSSY

tales of Debussy's improvisations still circulated (the shock replaced with admiration and wonder).

Was there a link between Impressionist painters and composers? Impressionist artists were attacked because their finished paintings supposedly resembled the first- or second-draft sketches of more traditional artists. The same criticism doesn't map well onto music, but Debussy was certainly

taken to task for failing to follow the procedures of well-formed composition and the rules of traditional harmony.

Neither Impressionist artists nor Impressionist composers liked the label. Logical, as the label was meant as a slight, but the label is apt. Impressionist artists painted the world as they saw it, filtered through their own eyes, and colored by their own, well, impressions of what they saw. With the advent of photography, painters no longer had to paint what was there. They could paint what they felt when they looked at what was there.

Debussy's approach to music was similar. His goal was to present reality, but reality as he experienced it, reality as colored by his vivid imagination and his well-tuned ear. He composed to explore, in his own words, "the mysterious correspondences between Nature and the Imagination." Debussy was a fan of Whistler's paintings, particularly his evocative Nocturnes series. Whistler's biographer Théodore Duret writes: "Whistler's nocturnes leave the subject in an indeterminate state, in a general envelope of atmosphere or shadow... [I]n the nocturnes of Debussy, the melody or musical

motive is enveloped in an indefinite and continuous harmony which forms the framework of the piece."

Some of Debussy's most deeply Impressionist works are his Piano Preludes, composed between 1909 and 1913. Each of these 24 amazing pieces, which range from two to seven minutes, creates a unique and very real world. Although most contemporary editions of the



NADIA BOULANGER



CLAUDE MONET

Preludes print them conventionally, with Debussy's poetic, enigmatic titles at the top of the page, that's not how Debussy intended them. The original printing has no title headings. But at the end of each prelude, under the last measure, Debussy puts the title. You experience the music first, make your own impressions, and only then does the composer reveal his: "the sunken cathedral", "fairies are exquisite dancers", "footsteps in the snow",

"the girl with the flaxen hair", "homage to S. Pickwick, Esq., P.P.M.P.C."

In the last three years of his life, inspired by a renewed interest in the works of old French composers Couperin and Rameau, Debussy began to explore a new, simpler approach to music. As World War I raged, he also saw composing as an act of patriotism, writing, "I want

to work not so much for myself, but to give proof, however small it may be, that not even 30 million Boches can destroy French thought."

The crowning achievement of this new esthetic was to be Six Sonatas for Diverse Instruments, including the three sonatas that close our February Classical Connections

program. Debussy didn't live to start the other three: one for oboe, horn, and harpsichord; one for trumpet, clarinet, bassoon, and piano; one for an unspecified ensemble that would have included double bass. All of these works were signed as the composer signed all his wartime works: "Claude Debussy, musicien français".

The Magic of Chamber Music

The music world is filled with technical terms that musicians bat around thinking that everyone knows them when, in fact, everyone doesn't. Sonata form. Recapitulation. Modulation. Development section. Fugue. Yadda-yadda...

In Classical Connections we often discuss technical details of the music. But when we address technical stuff, I try to avoid jargon as much as possible. When it's unavoidable, I do my best to define things in nontechnical terms.

So here's "chamber music", a term that's a natural part of musicians' inside-the-beltway language, but one that leaves most non-musicians feeling left out. This is a chamber music concert, so let's fix that.



Chamber music is music for a small number of performers, usually with just one person playing each part. That's different from orchestral or choral music, where you have many performers, and often more than one person, playing or singing the same music. As you'll see in our Debussy Classical Connections concert, there's no conductor in chamber music. The musicians just play, without anyone beating time, cueing them, or telling them what to do.

Sounds like fun, right?

It is!

"Chamber music" means just what it says: music for "the chamber" as opposed to music for the church, the court, or the concert hall. It's private music meant for the performers, not public music meant for an audience. The joy of chamber music is, first and foremost, in the playing. The fact that nowadays chamber music is sometimes performed in public for a paying audience is a joy for those of us who listen. But we should remember that when we listen to a chamber music recital we're getting a sneak peek into what would normally be a private affair: friends getting together to play music for the simple pleasure of getting together to play music.

And when they're getting together to play the beautiful chamber music of Claude Debussy, it's a very special thing, indeed!

(To hear some of our performers talking about chamber music performance and about the pieces on the program, check out the Classical Connections No. 3 podcast at daytonphilharmonic.com.)

A Debussy Timeline

1862

August 22, Claude Debussy born in St. Germain-en-Laye to Manuel-Achille Debussy, a shopkeeper, and Victorine Manoury, a seamstress.

1872

Enters the Paris Conservatory. Shows great talent but resists the school's traditional methods.

1882

Enters the prestigious Prix de Rome composition contest. Doesn't win, but takes 2nd Prize in 1883 and captures 1st Prize in 1884.

1889

Visits the Paris World Exhibition, where he hears the sound of the Javanese gamelan, beginning a lifelong fascination with non-Western music.

1893

Works on *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, Impressionism's first orchestral masterpiece. Composes String Quartet.

1910

Completes twelve Piano Preludes (Book One). Diagnosed with rectal cancer.

1913

Piano Preludes (Book Two) finished.

1915

Begins writing a cycle of six sonatas, marking the beginning of a new stylistic direction.

1917

Final public performance, playing piano part in Violin Sonata.

1918

March 25, dies in Paris as German artillery bombards the city. Three pieces in the planned six-sonata cycle remain unwritten.

1862

Second battle of Bull Run. Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation. Foucault measures the speed of light. Victor Hugo writes *Les Misérables*.

1872

U.S. Grant re-elected U.S. President. Whistler paints *The Artist's Mother*. Brooklyn Bridge opens.

1882

Tchaikovsky writes the 1812 Overture. Koch finds the bacterium that causes TB. First commercial electrical plant serves lower Manhattan.

1889

Benjamin Harrison inaugurated 23rd U.S. President. Eiffel designs a tower for Paris. Coca-Cola Company incorporated. Van Gogh paints *Starry Night*.

1893

U.S. annexes Hawaii. Dvořák's New World Symphony. World Exposition opens in Chicago. Arthur Conan Doyle kills off Sherlock Holmes.

1910

W.E.B. DuBois founds the NAACP. First commercial air freight flight, Dayton to Columbus.

1913

World War I. Panama Canal. *Tarzan of the Apes*.

1915

Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. U.S. Coast Guard.

1917

Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious*. Mata Hari arrested, tried, executed. First Pulitzer Prizes given.

1918

End of World War I. Worldwide flu pandemic. Birth of Leonard Bernstein. Boston Red Sox win World Series and start an 86-year wait.