

DAYTON PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
CLASSICAL CONNECTIONS, 2016-2017 SEASON
CLASSICAL CONNECTIONS #3

Debussy's Images

Sunday, March 26, 2017, 3:00pm

Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

Suite Bergamesque: Moonlight

Images for Piano, Book 2: Bells Across the Leaves

Joshua Nemith, Piano

Images for Orchestra

Spring Rounds

Jigs

Iberia

I. In the Streets and On the Roads

II. Perfumes of the Night

III. Morning of a Festival Day

Claude Debussy's one of my favorite composers, in second place, just behind Johannes Brahms and just ahead of Steve Reich. So maybe it's odd that in 21 years of Classical Connections concerts we've only done three Debussy programs: *La mer* in October 1998, *Nocturnes* in 2004, and a program on his chamber music in 2013.

This makes four: an in-depth look at *Images*, an orchestral triptych composed between 1905 and 1912. Debussy never wrote a symphony. But the three *Images* are the next best thing: some of his most beautiful, most colorful music encompassing a kaleidoscope of moods and a vivid musical trip to Spain.

You wouldn't know it by listening, but Debussy struggled with these pieces. In 1905 he published a three-movement set of piano pieces titled *Images*. Then he began work on a second set of *Images* for two pianos. As those pieces got more and more complicated he decided they'd work better for orchestra. But the work went slowly, as the chronology shows:

Ibéria: 1905-1908

Rondes de printemps: 1905-1909

Gigues (1909-1912)

Debussy's progress was delayed in 1907, when he decided to put *Ibéria* and *Rondes de printemps* aside to write a second set of solo piano *Images*.

Because these *Images* for orchestra are so entwined with *Images* for piano, I thought it would be nice to put some Debussy piano music on the program. That's why, in addition to hearing *Images*, you'll also get to enjoy DPO Principal Keyboard Joshua Nemith performing Debussy's famous *Clair de lune* and his mysterious *Cloches à travers les feuilles*.

Get ready for an afternoon of beautiful musical images by one of my favorite composers!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Al Gilman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "A".

Impressions of Impressionism

I've now written this essay four times. Each time we've done a Debussy Classical Connections program I've written an article exploring the links—real and imagined—between impressionist art and impressionist music.

Time to do it again. Time to re-examine my premises and test whether the things I believe about Debussy and impressionism still hold.

Claude Debussy was an impressionist.

Right?

Let's ask him: "I'm trying to write something else—*realities*, in a manner of speaking. What imbeciles call 'impressionism' is a term employed with the utmost inaccuracy, especially by art critics who use it as a label to stick on Turner, the finest creator of mystery in the whole of art!"

OK, so maybe not!

Or maybe Debussy just bristled at the word "impressionism". There's nothing pejorative in the term now. But in Debussy's time, to call something impressionism was a put-down. An impressionist painting was one that looked sloppy and unfinished, a mere impression rather than a polished creation. An impressionist piece of music was one that was substandard in musical form or development.

If Debussy didn't like the word "impressionism", what words did he like? Reality. Mystery. Let's see how those words apply in Debussy's *Ibéria*.

Reality

Debussy saw himself as a realist. So did the impressionist painters. Disparaging art critics thought their paintings looked sketchy and unfinished. The painters believed they were using new techniques to portray real life as they saw it.

Same with Debussy. Here he is describing the magical passage that links the second movement of *Ibéria* ("Perfumes of the Night") to the finale ("Morning of a Festival Day"): "it comes to life, with people and things waking up... There's a man selling watermelons and urchins whistling. I see them quite clearly."

Note the specificity of the imagery. Watermelons. Not Spanish La Mancha melons. Watermelons

How can Debussy make you hear exactly what kind of melons the vendor is hawking? He can't, of course. He admits that while he heard an urchin whistling, "not everyone finds it all so obvious—some people think it was a serenade."

The music isn't reality. It's personal *impressions* of reality.

Debussy can't portray the reality of a Spanish town transitioning from sleepy to bustling, unless he's using a tape recorder instead of an orchestra. All he can do is write music and movement titles suggesting that you'll experience the perfumes of the night and then the sounds of a busy morning. The reality was in Debussy's imagination as he composed. If he's a good composer, we're a good orchestra, and you're a good listener, then the reality will also be in your imagination as we play his music.

Debussy thinks it's reality. But it's really impressionism!

Mystery

I can think of no more mysterious (or beautiful) a piece of music than Debussy's "Perfumes of the Night". Against a nearly static background sonority we hear fragments of sound. A hesitant oboe solo. A faint dance rhythm in the cellos, basses, and tambourine. Gentle slides in the violins and woodwinds. A hint of a habanera in the muted trumpets.

What's going on? We don't know. All we know is what Debussy, master of poetic, evocative titles ("Bells Across the Leaves", "Girl with the Flaxen Hair", "Fairies are Exquisite Dancers", "Morning to Noon on the Sea") tells us: "Perfumes of the Night".

It's a mystery. Like the mystery that Debussy so admired in Whistler's paintings, which, in the words of his biographer Théodore Duret, "leave the subject in an indeterminate state, in a general envelope of atmosphere or shadow". Those same words could also describe Debussy's "Perfumes of the Night"! The seductive sonorities of Debussy's masterful orchestration envelop the listener in the atmosphere—and shadow—of the wee hours of a sultry Spanish night.

Debussy said that he composed to explore “the mysterious correspondences between nature and the imagination.” That’s exactly what happens in “Perfumes of the Night”, a kaleidoscope of specific, intricately detailed musical gestures presented in an evocative sonic landscape.

It’s mystery. Mystery created by a series of musical impressions.

Impressionism

Debussy didn’t like the I-Word. Tough! He’s stuck with it. Stripped of hostile critics’ snark, it’s an accurate description of the magical alchemy that allowed Debussy to be simultaneously realistic and mysterious.

Like the impressionist painters, Debussy used precise techniques to create shimmering works of art that evoke images and emotions in his audience. The images aren’t exactly lifelike, but they’re perceived as honest depictions of real-life experience. Debussy called this reality and mystery. We call it impressionism.

Everybody’s right. Except those critics!

(French) Boys Gone Wild (in Spain!)

There's somethin' happenin' here. What it is ain't exactly clear.

Now forget about Buffalo Springfield and think, instead, of the big Spanish pieces in the classical repertoire.

Carmen. By Georges Bizet. French.

España. By Emmanuel Chabrier. French.

Boléro. By Maurice Ravel. French.

Rapsodie espagnole. By Maurice Ravel. French.

Symphonie espagnole. By Eduard Lalo. French.

Ibéria. By Claude Debussy. French.

Why is all the great Spanish classical music by French composers?

It's not *all* by French composers. There's wonderful Spanish music by Isaac Albéniz, Manuel de Falla, Enrique Granados, Joaquin Rodrigo, and other Spaniards. But when it comes to Spanish-sounding classical music, the French definitely tried to corner the market.

Why?

I think it goes back to late 19th- and early 20th-century composers' search for exotic sounds to spice up their music. Exoticism had long been a recurring theme in classical music. Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes* (1735) set in Turkey, Peru, Persia, and Illinois. (*Illinois?* Remember, exotic is in the eye of the beholder!) Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782), set in Turkey. Saint-Saëns's *Samson and Delilah* (1877), set in the ancient Holy Land. Dvorak's *New World Symphony* (1893), evoking the distant landscapes of the American south and west.

For French composers like Bizet, Chabrier, Ravel, Lalo, and Debussy, Spain was exotic. And Spain's folk music was filled with exotic temptations: memorable melodies, catchy rhythms, hot-blooded emotion.

Spaniards have a term for this Franco-Iberian repertoire: *música turística*. It's wonderful music, but it's not authentic. With apologies to all the wonderful Spanish composers, it's Debussy's version of Spain that

you'll hear this afternoon. Maybe we'll give the Spaniards equal time on a future Classical Connections program.

In the meantime, if you want to do some exploring on your own, check out these wonderful pieces:

Rodrigo: *Concierto de Aranjuez*, and *Fantasia para un gentilhombre*

Albéniz: *Ibéria* (for solo piano and also orchestrated)

de Falla: *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*, and *El amor brujo*

You'll be glad you did.

Olé!

Debussy Timelines

- 1862** **August 22**, Claude Debussy born in St. Germain-en-Laye to Manuel-Achille Debussy, a shopkeeper, and Victoria 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 life-long fascination with non-Western music.
- 1890** Suite Bergamesque for piano, including the famous piece *Clair de lune* (Moonlight).
- 1901** Begins *Images*, Book One for Solo Piano. Completed 1905.
- 1905** Starts *Images* for Orchestra. Writes *La mer*.
- 1910** Premiere of *Rondes de printemps* and *Ibéria*. Diagnosed with colon cancer.
- 1912** Completes *Gigues*, with orchestration perhaps assisted by André Caplet.
- 1913** First complete performance of all three *Images*.
- 1918** **March 25**, dies of cancer in Paris as German artillery bombards the city.
- 1862** Second battle of Bull Run. Lincoln signs the Emancipation Proclamation. Foucault measures the speed of light. Victor Hugo write *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*.
- 1890** Statehood for Idaho and Wyoming. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*.
- 1901** Queen Victoria dies. Picasso turns blue (period). Thomas Mann writes *Buddenbrooks*.
- 1905** Revolution in Russia. Special Theory of Relativity.
- 1910** Halley's Comet swings by. NAACP founded by W.E.B. DuBois. Manhattan Bridge opens.
- 1912** Woodrow Wilson elected. Titanic sinks. Scott reaches the South Pole but doesn't make it back.
- 1913** Great Dayton Flood. Grand Central Terminal opens.
- 1918** World War I ends. Leonard Bernstein born. Red Sox win the World Series, then wait 86 years.