

Preludes, Book 1

DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

1. *Danseuses de Delphes* (Dancers of Delphes)
2. *Voiles* (Veils/ Sails)
3. *Le vent dans la plaine* (The Wind in the Plain)
4. *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soirs*
(The sounds and fragrances swirl through the evening air)
5. *Les collines d'Anacapri* (The Hills of Anacapri)
6. *Des pas sur la neige* (Footsteps in the Snow).
7. *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* (What the West Wind has seen)
8. *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair)
9. *Le serenade interrompue* (Interrupted Serenade)
10. *La cathédrale engloutie* (The submerged Cathedral)
11. *La danse de Puck* (Puck's Dance)
12. *Minstrels*

Debussy wrote his two books of Preludes quite late in his career. The first book was written in 1910 and first performed a year later by Jane Mortier at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. The premiere of the second book was given by the English pianist Walter Morse Rummel in 1913 in London. Interestingly, the titles are written at the end of each work, allowing the performer to experience each individual sound world without being influenced by Debussy's titles beforehand.

The concept of writing descriptive preludes was not new to Debussy – his wonderfully evocative orchestral *Prélude de l'Après-midi d'un faune* was written in the early 1890s. The two books of piano Preludes that he wrote almost twenty years later reflect his admiration for the music of J.S.Bach and were inspired by Bach's two books of 24 preludes known as *The Well-Tempered Klavier*. "Well-tempered" is a reference to the fact that under the system of equal temperament tuning, devised during Bach's lifetime, it was now possible to write music in all of the 24 keys available.

Debussy did not follow Bach's idea of writing a piece in every key and indicated that the pieces need not necessarily be played in the order he wrote them, but he succeeded in writing a series of atmospheric descriptive miniatures that are unique in the annals of music.

The opening prelude of Book 1 (*Danseuses de Delphi*) offers a gentle start and is marked by the Impressionist chord textures that are such a characteristic feature of Debussy's style. The gossamer-like textures of *Voiles* are followed by the animated breathlessness of *Le vent dans la plaine*, while *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*, inspired by Baudelaire's poem *Harmonie du soir*, is relaxed and atmospheric. The majesty and grandeur of *Les collines d'Anacapri* is complemented by the slow and cautious tread of *Des pas sur la neige*.

The threatening and stormy texture of *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest* in turn is complemented by the tender image of *La fille aux cheveux de lin* with its haunting arpeggio motif of descending and rising sevenths (probably the best-known of the Preludes and played for us last season in an ingenious arrangement for saxophone and harp by Huw Wiggins and Rosanna Rolton). The tongue-in-cheek *La serenade interrompue* is followed by another of the most popular preludes of the group, *La cathédrale engloutie* with its distant sound of church bells as the ruins of the engulfed cathedral gradually appear into view, only to disappear again. This was surely the inspiration for Olivier Messiaen's organ piece *Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle*, written two decades later. The twelve preludes conclude with the capricious and impish *La danse de Puck* and the rumbustious *Minstrels*.

Claude Achille Debussy was born in St. Germain-en-Laye, near Paris and received piano lessons from the age of eight. Three years later he entered the Paris Conservatoire, studying piano and composition, and in 1884 won the coveted *Prix de Rome*. He made his name in the 1890s with a series of successful compositions, including his only string quartet (1893), *Prélude de L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1894) and his three orchestral *Nocturnes* (1899). His only opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) and the great orchestral seascape *La Mer* (1905) followed. Debussy's Impressionist style of writing became the hallmark of his work – its kaleidoscopic harmonies and shifting tone-colours the counterpart of the elusive style of the Impressionist painters and the Symbolist poets. Most of his piano music was written in the last dozen years of his life, his final years being affected by the onset of cancer. He died in Eastbourne in the final year of World War One, at a time when French music was flourishing also in the hands of others such as Ravel, Erik Satie and the great school of early 20th century organ composers, including Widor, Vierne and Marcel Dupré.

Nocturne no.2 in C minor

CHOPIN
(1810-1849)

The term *notturmo* (night-piece) was first used in Italy to describe a serenade for a group of chamber instruments in several movements. The first Nocturnes for piano were written by John Field (1782-1837), an Irish composer and pianist, who spent much of his life working in St. Petersburg. The main features of Field's nocturnes were *cantabile* melody lines, often elaborately ornamented, over an arpeggio accompaniment, and these were taken up and developed by Chopin in a genre he made very much his own.

Chopin wrote 21 Nocturnes in all, 18 of which were published during his lifetime. *Nocturne no.2 in C minor* was one of three Nocturnes published posthumously. Chopin wrote the piece in 1837 but it was not published until 1938. The main theme is a folk-song style melody over a gentle arpeggio accompaniment. Typically ingenious ornamentation of the melody follows and the music finishes in the minor key – unusual in Chopin's Nocturnes.

Grande Valse Brillante in Eb major, op.18

The waltz was another musical form that Chopin made very much his own. Published in 1834 and dedicated to his pupil, Laura Hansford, it is very much the work of a young man, full of flamboyance and showmanship. It was his first published waltz of the 17 he wrote and one of his most popular.

As is usual with Chopin's waltzes, there is a very clear structure. Fanfare-like repeated notes introduce the main theme and a second theme, also beginning with repeated notes, soon follows. Both themes are repeated, leading to a central section in D flat major, again with two themes, the second which is marked by a playful passage of acciaccaturas, before the music returns to the home key and the opening themes recur, eventually brought to a powerful climax.

(acciaccatura – a grace note, usually one note above the note it precedes. It is crushed into that note as quickly as possible)

Ballade no.1 in G minor, op.23

The Ballade was given its name as an allusion to the narrative type of sung ballad in vocal music. Chopin was the first composer to use the term – the first of his Four Ballades was written in 1833. The title was used later in piano music by other 19th century composers, notably Liszt and Brahms. The Ballade in G minor is generally considered to be one of Chopin's most technically and musically demanding works.

The main section of the ballade is built from two main themes. The brief introduction with its unresolved, questioning final chord fades into the main theme, which is developed dramatically. The second theme, appearing over left hand arpeggio figures is then quietly introduced in Eb major. The two themes then undergo transformation in the central development section, moving through other keys (A minor and A major) before being restated in their original keys, but now in reverse order. A thundering chord introduces the coda, marked *Presto con fuoco*, in which the introduction to the piece reappears as the music builds to a conclusion with fiery double octave scales run down the keyboard.

Andante Spianato and Grande Polonaise Brillante, op.22

The Polonaise was a traditional stately Polish dance in 3/4 time, which was used by Bach in Brandenburg Concerto no.1 and in the Orchestral Suite in B minor, In Chopin's hands it became something much more powerful, retaining its 3/4 time and ABA form, but possessing a virtuoso quality that made it very individual to Chopin's style. Chopin wrote twelve polonaises, the first when he was only seven years old.

The *Grande Polonaise Brillante* was originally written for piano and orchestra, but even in Chopin's lifetime it was mostly performed on the piano alone. The Polonaise is another work of the early 1830s, written during Chopin's final months in Warsaw before moving to Paris. The introductory *Andante Spianato* followed later. The combined work was first performed by the composer in Paris in April 1835 in a long-awaited opportunity to perform in one of the conductor Antoine Habaneck's Conservatoire Concerts. It was dedicated to Madame d'Este.

The *Andante Spianato* ("spianato" means even or smooth) is in G major and begins with a quiet rippling section in 6/8 time, a gradually more elaborate right-hand melody appearing over left hand arpeggio

figures. A more chordal and very serene central section follows before the return of the opening material.

The *Grande Polonaise Brillante* opens with a fanfare, originally played by orchestra, and then moves into one of Chopin's most fearless and dramatic statements.