

**CHANDOS**

# DEBUSSY

*Piano Duets* Volume 2



HÉLÈNE MERCIER · LOUIS LORTIE



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Achille-Claude Debussy, with Emma Bardac, from 1908 his second wife,  
in the garden of their home at Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, Paris

## Achille-Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

### Works for Piano Duet and Two Pianos, Volume 2

- 1 **Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune, L 86b** (1891 – 94) **8:42**  
*de Stéphane Mallarmé*  
for Orchestra  
À Raymond Bonheur  
Transcribed 1895 for Two Pianos, Four Hands by the Composer  
(1: HM; 2: LL)  
Assez lent – En animant un peu – Animez toujours – Retenu –  
Premier mouvement – Retenu – Même mouvement – En retenant –  
Mouvement du début (avec plus de langueur) – Plus lent – Très lent
- 2 **Clair de lune, L 75 / 3** (c. 1890, revised 1905) **4:36**  
No. 3 from *Suite bergamasque*  
for Piano  
Transcription for Two Pianos, Four Hands by Henri Dutilleux (1916 – 2013)  
(1: HM; 2: LL)  
Andante très expressif – Tempo rubato –  
Un poco mosso – En animant – Calmato – A Tempo I

	<b>Nocturnes, L 91</b> (1897 – 99)	<b>22:50</b>
	for Orchestra	
	À Georges Hartmann	
	Transcribed 1909 for Two Pianos, Four Hands	
	by Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)	
	(1: HM; 2: LL)	
3	I Nuages (Clouds). Modéré – Un peu plus animé – Plus lent – Encore plus lent	6:57
4	II Fêtes (Feast Days). Animé et très rythmé – Le double plus lent – A Tempo – Un peu plus animé – Modéré, mais toujours très rythmé – Même mouvement – Un peu retenu – A Tempo	6:10
5	III Sirènes (Sirens). Modérément animé – Un peu plus lent – Retenu avec force – Tempo un peu plus lent – Revenir progressivement au Tempo I – En augmentant peu à peu – Tempo I – Retenu – Plus lent et en retenant jusqu'à la fin	9:42

6 **Lindaraja, L 97** (1901) **6:03**  
for Two Pianos, Four Hands  
(1: LL; 2: HM)  
Modéré (mais sans lenteur et dans un rythme très souple) –  
En animant un peu – Plus animé –  
Premier Mouvement – Plus lent et plus *pp* – Encore plus lent –  
Plus rien...

7 **La Soirée dans Grenade, L 100 / 2** (1903) **5:48**  
(Evening in Granada)  
No. 2 from *Estampes*  
for Piano  
À J.E. Blanche – Juillet 1903  
Transcription 1907 – 10 for Piano Duet  
by Jacques Durand (1865 – 1928) and Léon Roques (1839 – 1923)  
(Prima: LL; Seconda: HM)  
Mouvement de Habanera. Commencer lentement comme dans un  
rythme nonchalamment gracieux – Retenu –  
Tempo giusto – Tempo rubato – Retenu –  
Tempo giusto – Très rythmé – Tempo rubato – Retenu –  
Tempo I (avec plus d'abandon) – Tempo giusto – Léger et lointain –  
Tempo I – Léger et lointain – Tempo I – Mouvement du début

	<b>Deux Danses, L 103b</b> (1904)	<b>9:07</b>
	for Harp and Strings	
	À Gustave Lyon – 1904	
	Transcribed 1904 for Two Pianos, Four Hands by the Composer	
	(1: LL; 2: HM)	
8	I Danse sacrée. Très modéré – Sans lenteur – En animant peu à peu – Retenu – Tempo I – Retenu –	4:30
9	II Danse profane. Modéré – Animez – Tempo I – Animez – Retenu – A Tempo – Animé – Retenu – Très retenu – Le double moins vite (Tempo rubato) – Plus lent et retenu – A Tempo (Animez) – Retenu – Tempo I (Un peu plus mouvementé) – Retenu	4:37
10	<b>Rêverie, L 68</b> (c. 1890)	<b>4:44</b>
	for Piano	
	Transcription for Piano Duet by Henry Woollett (1864–1936)	
	(Prima: HM; Seconda: LL)	
	Andantino sans lenteur – Un peu retenu	

**En blanc et noir, L 134** (1915)

14:39

Three Pieces for Two Pianos, Four Hands  
(1: LL; 2: HM)

- 11 I À mon ami A. Kussewitsky. Avec emportement –  
Sans rigueur – Un poco meno mosso. Scherzando –  
Tempo I – Sans rigueur – Tempo rubato –  
Poco a poco al Tempo I – Risoluto (Meno mosso) –  
Tempo I – Meno mosso – Tempo rubato – Meno mosso –  
Tempo rubato – Meno mosso –  
Tempo I – Meno mosso – A Tempo – Appassionato 4:18
- 12 II Au Lieutenant Jacques Charlot, tué à l'ennemi en 1915, le 3 Mars.  
Lent. Sombre – Poco animato – Cédez – Tempo (Poco animato) –  
Premier Mouvement (sans traîner) – Calme –  
Sostenuto e espressivo – Sempre sostenuto e poco animando –  
Premier Mouvement – Sourdement tumultueux – Poco più –  
Sempre animato – Alerte (Sempre animato) –  
Molto tumultuoso – Joyeux –  
Mouvement du début – Un peu animé (Expressif et recueilli) – Cédez –  
Mouvement du début – Très retenu 6:01
- 13 III À mon ami Igor Strawinsky. Scherzando – Cédez –  
Au Mouvement – Cédez – Au Mouvement – Cédez –  
Au Mouvement – Poco meno mosso – Au Mouvement – Stringendo –  
Au Mouvement – Tempo meno mosso –  
L'istesso Tempo, ma ritornare poco a poco 'au Mouvement' –  
Au Mouvement – Cédez – Au Mouvement – Senza ritardare – Retenu –  
Au Mouvement – Poco meno – Au Mouvement 4:20



**La plus que lente, L 121a** (1910)

4:55

*Valse pour piano*

(Waltz for Piano)

Transcribed 1910 for Piano Duet by Léon Roques

(Prima: LL; Seconda: HM)

Lent (*molto rubato con morbidezza*) - Retenu -

Mouvement - Animez un peu - En serrant - Retenu -

Rubato - En serrant - Rubato - *Appassionato* - Retenu -

Mouvement (*Rubato*) - En serrant - Retenu -

En animant - Cédez - Cédez encore plus -

Tempo animé - Moins animé - Animé - En retenant - Très retenu -

Premier Mouvement (en animant peu à peu) - En retenant -

Tempo animé - Cédez - En serrant - Retenu -

Plus lent - De plus en plus lent et *pp* jusqu'à la fin

TT 81:24

**Hélène Mercier** piano

**Louis Lortie** piano

## Debussy: Piano Duets, Volume 2

### Lindaraja

*Lindaraja*, for two pianos, is a rather forgotten jewel in the work of Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918) the origin of which is rather shrouded in mystery. We have no knowledge that it was commissioned, nor does it have a dedicatee, nor any mention in the extant correspondence of the composer. Yet listen! It is a piece which will hold your attention rather hypnotically. Its shape is also very clear: there is a rather improvised opening, as if a Spanish guitar – or perhaps two – were prelude with a fragment of melody, using different modes. Out of this a habanera rhythm gradually establishes itself, a treble triplet beginning each bar, underpinned by the well-established four-note bass so familiar from *Carmen*, and from many subsequent pieces. Remember, Debussy was reputed to be able to sing Bizet's opera by heart! No doubt he would also have known Chabrier's orchestral *Habanera*.

Experimenting with the modes, the piece is varied over the repeated bass by presenting the habanera theme in all kinds of different modal guises, often on typically Andalusian-inflected modes beginning, unlike traditional western modes, with a semitone rather than a tone.

The piece dates from 1901 but was not published or performed until the 1920s when its première was given by Jean Roger-Ducasse and Marguerite Long. Music for two pianos, four hands, often remains obscure so *Lindaraja* continues to be one of Debussy's least-known pieces: first-rate experimental Debussy for the connoisseurs! Manuel de Falla greatly admired the Spanish music of Debussy, even though the composer had only once made a trip to Spain – for a day.

### En blanc et noir

Begun in Paris, the triptych *En blanc et noir*, for two pianos, was composed in 1915. Debussy originally had the title *Caprices en blanc et noir* in mind, taken from Goya's series of monochrome drawings of horrific scenes from the period of the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in the early nineteenth century. Entitled *Caprichos*, these had become widely available in the later nineteenth century owing to advances in the technology of reproduction. They were popular among the huge influx of Spanish refugees into France, including such musicians as the García family as well as Fernando Sor who was given a safe passage by

the French after having collaborated in various ways with the Napoleonic regime.

Debussy spent the summer of 1915 at Pourville, on the Normandy coast, not that far from the western front where the war was raging, its heavy-artillery fire sometimes audible there. Reports of its casualties in the trenches were everyday news. Debussy was not only deeply disturbed by the ongoing war, but also by his declining health. It was while working on the second 'Caprice' that he began to have doubts about the reference to Goya's album of sketches and he discussed the matter with his friend and publisher Jacques Durand. Increasingly, he found Goya's images too distressing, causing him to write darker music than he had intended.

By the end of the year, he had abandoned the association and erased the word 'Caprice' from the title. Durand approved of his move, and it was agreed to truncate the title to 'En blanc et noir' to which Debussy now assigned a more abstract meaning. Writing to another close friend, Robert Godet, from Paris in February 1916, he explained that

the pieces draw both their colours and their emotions simply from the piano itself! – similarly to the 'greys' of Velázquez, if you like.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ces morceaux veulent tirer leur couleur, leur émotion, du simple piano! – tels les 'gris' de Velásquez.

A short quotation precedes each of the movements, the first from the libretto, by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, to Gounod's opera based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. It comes from the prologue, 'Le Bal des Capulets', in which the various characters all sing in praise of the joys of youth, the whole scene being underpinned by a waltz rhythm, as is Debussy's first movement:

Qui reste à sa place  
Et ne danse pas,  
De quelque disgrâce  
Fait l'aveu tout bas!

[Who remains in his place  
and does not dance,  
silently admits  
some secret shame.]

Transposed to Debussy's piece, the idea seems to allude to nostalgia for one's own youth and better days. Perhaps daunting for the listener, as well as for the pianists, the piece presages the clarity of the twelve *Études* which Debussy would write the following year. No more fogs, water sprites, or cathedrals rising mistily out of the sea! Rather, in all three movements there are more complex structures, feelings of instability, and relentless motion expressed in harmonic languages which are noticeably more dissonant.

The second movement is preceded by a quotation from François Villon's *Ballade contre les ennemis de la France*:

Prince, porté soit des serfs Eolus  
En la forest où domine Glaucus  
Ou privé soit de paix et d'espérance  
Car digne n'est de posséder vertus  
Qui mal voudroit au royaume de France!

[Prince, may the bright-winged brood of  
Æolus  
To sea-king Glaucus's wild wood cavernous  
Bear him bereft of peace and hope's least  
glance.  
For worthless is he to benefit us,  
Who wishes evil to the kingdom of  
France!]

Echoes of trumpet fanfares and drumbeats are set between dark passages in the low register of both pianos, and both loud and soft bell sounds. Unusually, Debussy enters instructions to the pianists that refer to the emotional character which he requires rather than restricting himself to indications of tempi and dynamics: *sourdement tumultueux* (mutedly tumultuous), *plaintif* (plaintive), and *joyeux* (joyful) succeed one another unpredictably as the fanfares become more and more prominent.

The final movement has a single line as a preface:

Yver, vous n'este qu'un villain...  
Charles d'Orléans

[Winter, you are nothing but a villain...]

Marked *Scherzando*, this movement seems to be characterised by unexpected interruptions and sudden changes of tempo before it settles down into something more reminiscent of the composer's slightly earlier style: an extended passage of pointillist static harmony under which the second pianist plays a melodic motive. But as the piece becomes more frenzied, the interruptions return. Is it too speculative to read into this a sense of the unpredictability of the war, and how France will emerge from it? Whatever the case, Debussy, who styled himself 'Claude de France', was in a state of anxiety at this time, expressed both in his correspondence and in his move away from the comfort of his earlier music. Each of the three movements was dedicated to a different musician: the first to the Russian conductor Koussevitzky, the second to Jacques Charlot (arranger of several pieces of Debussy for piano duet, killed in action in March 1915), and the third to Stravinsky.

#### Clair de lune

'Clair de lune', from *Suite bergamasque*, must be the most popular of all Debussy's early

pieces, and justifiably. Along with the First Arabesque it gained popularity slowly but later sold particularly well and was arranged for all kinds of instruments. Among Debussy's later pieces, 'La Fille aux cheveux de lin' (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair) is perhaps the direct offspring of this early style, even though its surrounding Preludes in Book I are much more advanced in their harmony, which had by the time Debussy composed them (early in the new century) embraced all kinds of new scales, principally modal, which would become an important element in his later music.

His way with more traditional harmony had been remarked upon by his two Conservatoire teachers, after he gave up on his aspirations to become a virtuoso pianist. His first Professor was a harmony specialist, Émile Durand, who had a respected treatise to his name. Although his fellow student Maurice Emmanuel claimed that Durand 'loved neither music, nor his profession, nor his pupils',<sup>2</sup> the exercises which Debussy completed for him were excellently and thoroughly done. But they were too original and did not conform to the rules! His subsequent Professor of Composition, Ernest Guiraud, was of a similar view: that Debussy had ingenious solutions to composition exercises and much

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<sup>2</sup> il n'aimait ni la musique, ni son métier, ni ses élèves

flair, but Conservatoire professors had to steer a course between getting the young composers through exams and encouraging their innovations and talent.

We should perhaps forget his mature style when listening to his earlier compositions. As far as we can see, *Suite bergamasque*, including 'Clair de lune' as its third movement, was composed in the 1890s, sometime after Debussy left the Conservatoire. Its style, however, rather suggests that it was conceived somewhat earlier, even perhaps during the time that he spent in Russia, as pianist for Mme von Meck, most celebrated for her correspondence with Tchaikovsky: its middle idea seems decidedly Russian in character.

Perhaps there was originally a literary association, the most obvious being Verlaine's poem of the same title (though moonlight was a pretty ubiquitous theme in late-nineteenth-century French poetry). Verlaine's poem is worth quoting as it is certainly relevant to the Masques and Bergamasques of the *Commedia dell'arte*, who are the subject of Verlaine's poem:

Votre âme est un paysage choisi  
Que vont charmant masques et  
bergamasques  
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi  
Tristes sous leurs déguisements  
fantasques.

[Your soul is a chosen landscape  
Where charming masked and bergamasked  
go,  
Playing the lute and dancing, almost  
Sad beneath their fanciful disguises.]

Henri Dutilleux's arrangement for two pianos is quite a challenge. Giving greater resonance to the piece, it contains several passages in which the pianists play intricate parts together. Giving way to the expressive *rubato* often used by solo pianists in this piece would be tricky. Either there must be total empathy between the pianists, or they stay strictly in time!

#### **Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune**

Debussy possessed an often forgotten skill at arranging orchestral music for pianos. As early as 1880, when he was eighteen, a Russian publisher brought out a selection of dances from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* which he had reduced to piano duet. He went on to produce transcriptions throughout his life. No doubt some of them were initially written to earn his keep – duets for both amateurs and professional concert performers – but they were also a way of learning the techniques of capturing orchestral textures on one or two pianos. Examples include transcriptions of several substantial pieces by Saint-Saëns, the Overture to Wagner's *Der fliegende*

*Holländer*, and a set of Canons by Schumann, originally for pedal-piano or organ. Piano scores were also useful for his own music, often first written in versions easily readable on piano, before being assigned to full scores, which necessitated complicated transpositions and clefs. The *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is a case in point: a beautiful early score exists (a short score, or *particelle*), with different coloured inks indicating the orchestration.

How one would like to have been a fly on the wall at its first performance, on 22 December 1894 at the salle Harcourt, in Paris, not least to see the audience's reaction! The eighteen-year-old Georges Barrère played the exposed solo flute which opens the piece. Significantly, it begins with a long, sustained C sharp, the unfingered open note on the flute, a pitch which orchestration treatises advise against using. Each subsequent variation of the melody begins on this note, but presents subtle differences in the orchestral backcloth.

The *Prélude* had not begun life as the orchestral piece we know today. On the cover of an earlier piece, it was announced as some kind of triptych: *Prélude, Interlude et Paraphrase finale pour l'Après-midi d'un faune*, perhaps suggesting that it was conceived as a kind of illustrative incidental

music to a recitation (or even an acted version) of Mallarmé's long poem. Debussy himself probably wrote the note printed in the programme of the première:

The music of this Prelude is a very free illustration of the beautiful poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. It doesn't pretend to follow the narrative of the poem. It's more like a succession of the various places which form the background to the faun's desires and dreams as they change during the heat of the afternoon. Tired of the refusals of these fearful nymphs and timid naiads, he satisfies his dreams in the intoxicating sunlight, possessed entirely by the universe of nature.<sup>3</sup>

There are many musical references in the poem: 'a long slow prelude' and tuning of the flute which the faun has himself fashioned from a reed, searching for 'perfect A'. Perhaps that explains the open C sharp on the flute as he searches for the perfect, seductive sound which will cause the nymphs to give way to his erotic desires.

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<sup>3</sup> La musique de ce Prélude est une très libre illustration du beau poème de Mallarmé. Elle ne désire guère résumer ce poème, mais veut suggérer les différentes atmosphères, au milieu desquelles évoluent les désirs, et les rêves de l'Égipan, par cette brûlante après-midi. Fatigué de poursuivre nymphes craintives et naïades timides, il s'abandonne à un sommeil voluptueux qu'anime le rêve d'un désir enfin réalisé: la possession complète de la nature entière.

Debussy's own transcription for two pianos, by its layout, suggests that the pianists must emphasise the contrasts of timbre which render the orchestration of the piece so novel. The prominence of the horns, creating a backcloth to the Faun's seductive flute playing, perhaps evokes Diana's hunting nymphs (she was the goddess of both hunting and chastity). The highlighting of the harps maybe represents the lyres of classical ancient Greece.

In terms of both its text and its music, the piece clearly evolved from an earlier operatic scene which the composer had written to a text, *Diane au bois*, by Théodore de Banville. In this, Eros seduces Diana with a magic flute borrowed from Selenius, an old rake who had great success with nymphs. Here, too, hunting horns form a backcloth but the musical ideas are nowhere near as fine as in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.

#### **Deux Danses**

Debussy wrote his two Dances for harp and orchestra in 1904 in response to a commission from the piano-manufacturing firm of Pleyel. This firm – founded in the eighteenth century by an enterprising Austrian, both composer (a pupil of Haydn) and scientist – was by Debussy's time an agent for other instruments, especially the

harp the dominant models of which used the English pedal system, patented by his arch-rival, Erard, early in the nineteenth century. The firm ran the Salle Pleyel, a recital hall in Paris designed by the musician and acoustician Gustave Lyon, to whom Debussy dedicated these pieces.

Pleyel patented a newly designed double-harp, which had a separate string for each chromatic note, eliminating the need for pedals. This was achieved by cross-stringing, similar to that of the overstrung upright pianos which evolved over the turn of the century. In 1903, composers were commissioned to write pieces for it, to be showcased in a competition at the Brussels Conservatoire the following year. The *Deux Danses* were duly performed on the newly designed harp by Mme Wormser-Delcourt at the Concerts Colonne in 1904. However, for a harpist accustomed to the pedal-harp, adapting to the double-harp involved a major change of technique, and becoming accustomed to considerable extra weight, as the instrument was made of metal. There was much debate on it: Saint-Saëns waded in, pointing out that you could not do that favourite French trick – *glissandi* – on it, so it was useless in the modern orchestra. Debussy and his publisher, Durand, were rather slow to react but in 1910 the *Deux Danses* were performed for the first time on a pedal-harp.

Seemingly rather lacking interest in the chromatic harp, Debussy also suggested that it could be replaced by a piano, or by two for which he had prepared a version in 1904.

The 'Danse sacrée' (Sacred Dance) recalls the style of two of the Preludes in triple time: the solemn 'Danseuses de Delphes' and 'La Cathédrale engloutie', particularly in its use of chains of parallel chords adopting the ecclesiastical modes (avoiding the chromatic notes which the chromatic harp was designed to facilitate!). The theme of the 'Danse sacrée' is borrowed from Francisco de Lacerda (1869 – 1934), a Portuguese musicologist and composer whom Debussy admired.

The triple time of the 'Danse profane' (Profane Dance) is in waltz rhythm, clear from the slightly syncopated opening of the piece. Both dances have a contrasted central section, its simple melody prominent, and much interest in the often arpeggiated and more ornate and idiomatic accompanying figures.

#### **Nocturnes**

Debussy had achieved his first orchestral success in the 1890s with his Prelude to Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*; its relationship to the poem remains somewhat enigmatic but the orchestral score perfectly complemented both the narrative and the

atmosphere of the elusive poetry. His next major orchestral work, which occupied him through the 1890s, could hardly have been more different. Instead of the sensuality and sometimes overt eroticism of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, the three orchestral *Nocturnes* rather explored the blue-grey shades of twilight, contrasted with holiday celebrations. Of his own explanation of them only a few hints remain, for Debussy was a composer reluctant to share with his public too many kitchen secrets, and in his short burst of music criticism took a somewhat anti-analytical stance.

However, some scant but revealing programme notes were printed for the first complete performance, in October 1901, in which one suspects that the composer had a hand. 'In this case', we read,

the title 'Nocturnes' should be taken in a more general and above all decorative sense. It doesn't relate to the normal form of the Nocturne but more to what the term implies in the way of impressions and special lighting effects.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere Debussy gave a few further clues as to what was at the back of his mind although the long gestation of the work makes it difficult

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<sup>4</sup> Le titre de Nocturnes veut prendre ici un sens plus général et surtout plus décoratif. Il ne s'agit donc pas de la forme habituelle de Nocturne, mais de tout ce que ce mot contient d'impressions et de lumières spéciales.

to confirm that his earliest ideas on the pieces were carried through to the final version.

In 1894 he wrote to his friend the painter Henri Lerolle that he had

started some pieces for Violin and Orchestra which would be called Nocturne. Here I will use separate orchestral groups in order to find nuances within those individual groups<sup>5</sup>

The conception of the piece as featuring a solo violin can be easily explained, the comment about the 'nuances within the groups' needs a little more reflection.

The violinist for whom these pieces were originally to be written was the Belgian virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe, but in the course of negotiations the idea of a violin soloist was abandoned. The listener must judge whether the other idea, of a grouping of orchestral forces and the finding of 'nuances' within them, was retained. 'Nuance' is in any case a difficult word to define. It should, I think, be taken widely, embracing colours, textures, and harmonies especially suited to particular timbres. Certainly, in more than one place the division of the orchestra into groups seems to follow Debussy's first conception.

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<sup>5</sup> J'ai commencé des morceaux pour Violon et Orchestre qui seront intitulés Nocturne où j'emploierai des groupes d'orchestre séparés, pour tâcher de trouver des nuances avec ces seuls groupes...

In the case of 'Nuages' the original programme booklet described the movement thus:

The unchanging aspect of the sky and the slow, melancholy passing of the clouds, ending in a grey colour softly tinged with white.<sup>6</sup>

'Fêtes' was described as

the motion, the dancing rhythm of the atmosphere with bursts of bright light. It's also the apparition of a procession (a dazzling and chimerical vision) passing through the celebration and getting bound up with it. But the setting remains constant, and the music is inextricably mixed in with it all, a sort of luminous dust which contributes to the overall rhythm.<sup>7</sup>

'Sirènes' is

about the sea and its uncountable rhythms amongst which the waves, lit up by the silvery moon, are heard, laughing: the passing, mysterious song of the Sirens.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C'est l'aspect immuable du ciel avec la marche lente et mélancolique des nuages finissant dans une agonie grise, doucement teintée de blanc.

<sup>7</sup> C'est le mouvement, le rythme dansant de l'atmosphère avec des éclats de lumière brusque, c'est aussi l'épisode d'un cortège (vision éblouissante et chimérique) passant à travers la fête, se confondant en elle, mais le fond reste, s'obstine, et c'est toujours la fête et son mélange de musique, de poussière lumineuse participant au rythme total.

The 'song of the Sirens' was originally sung by a wordless female chorus, but in his transcription for two pianos, Ravel captures their song mainly on the first piano, retaining their pitch as it would have been sung. But it is bathed in a complex rustling of textures for both pianos, presenting enormous challenges to the pianists, not least because they imitate the hushed backcloth of shimmering orchestral textures. Ravel often endows them with extreme *pianissimo* markings.

The work was not as much of a success as the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, not least because of the performance of the ladies' chorus in 'Sirènes', which was by all accounts execrable. Debussy, I am afraid, called them 'little cows'<sup>9</sup> on account of their failure to sing in tune. As usual, Debussy made many revisions to his score. Without doubt *Nocturnes* has ended up as one of the key works of so-called musical impressionism, just as Ravel's orchestration of it is a masterpiece of keyboard transcription.

### La plus que lente

*La plus que lente*, which might be translated

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<sup>8</sup> C'est la mer et son rythme innombrable, puis, parmi les vagues argentées de lune, s'entend, rit et passe le chant mystérieux des sirènes.

<sup>9</sup> Les petites vaches qui tâchent à représenter des 'Sirènes'

as 'Slower than slow', was originally a free-standing piece for solo piano, written in 1910, but was already published in a version for piano duet, and also in one for violin and piano, before its first performance, in March of the following year. It was written for Leoni, the leader of the orchestra at the luxurious Hôtel Carlton, in Paris, allied to the Ritz (where Escoffier ran the kitchen). It seems impossible that it was not frequently given there in the version for violin. One can imagine it played in the gypsy style so fashionable at the turn of the century, perhaps with its first phrase all on the G string. Debussy seems to have had a particular affection for this *Valse* (Waltz), as it was titled, arranging it in 1912 for flute, clarinet, piano, and strings, with the addition of a cymbalom.

It is one of several pieces making clear reference to entertainment music: almost like a thirteenth Prelude to Book I, which had been composed immediately before. There he had written 'Minstrels', in imitation of a band of Black musicians. In Book II, dating from the following year, he would compose two more parodies of popular entertainment: 'General Lavine - eccentric' and 'Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.'. *La plus que lente* is perhaps wittier than either of these in employing a 'wrong-note' theme for the opening, a two-note oscillating figure - not

much of a tune - and it does not fit the harmony below. Then it suddenly changes into a corny imitation of a *café-concert* slow waltz. At its centre, the piece should raise a smile as the hackneyed chords and phrases imitate what could have been played at some entertainment venue. Even the arpeggios of a popular show-off pianist are added.

Debussy himself recorded the piece on a piano-roll along with 'Minstrels'. In the composer's hands, both pieces have extraordinarily free interpretations not notated in the scores, with exaggerated contrasts of loud and soft playing and dislocation between treble and bass. This was quite unlike the way he recorded the other, more impressionist pieces, which followed his scores more precisely. But in its way, this piece could also be related to the visual art of the turn of the century: if some of his more pointillist pieces recall Monet, *La plus que lente* was a sound picture perhaps recalling the work of Toulouse-Lautrec or Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*.

#### **La Soirée dans Grenade**

For anyone who has visited Granada, the Alhambra, the Albaicin district, and the Alcaiceria (the Arab Bazaar), the first impressions of Debussy's 'La Soirée dans Grenade', the second of the three *Estampes*,

might well be of the total authenticity in its evocation of this wonderful city. It certainly does seem as if Debussy had a particular affection for it. The piano piece by Isaac Albéniz which he most admired was 'El Albaicin', from *Iberia*, evoking the Moorish quarter; and after the *Estampes*, he titled one of his *Préludes* for piano 'La Puerta del vino' after this gate to the Alhambra palace. You might be surprised, reading up about the composer, to find that he had never been anywhere near Andalusia, having only once set foot in Spain, on a day trip to a bullfight in San Sebastian, only a stone's throw from the French border.

Manuel de Falla, who was himself from Cádiz but lived in Granada for some eighteen years, wrote a eulogistic tribute to the Spanish music of Debussy in an issue of *La Revue musicale* dedicated to articles on him, in 1920.

Claude Debussy came to know Spain through books and paintings, through songs and dances performed by native Spaniards.<sup>10</sup>

Falla was referring to a personal memoir of Debussy and Paul Dukas listening to exotic music at the Paris World Fair. Falla was

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<sup>10</sup> Claude Debussy connaissait l'Espagne par des lectures, par des images, par ses chants et ses danses chantées et dansées par des Espagnols authentiques.

particularly enamoured of 'La Soirée dans Grenade' (Evening in Granada):

something of a miracle if one considers that it was written by a foreigner. [...] Here we are actually given Andalusia, [...] although not a single bar is taken from Spanish folklore, the whole piece, down to its smallest detail, brings Spain to us.<sup>11</sup>

Dating from 1903, it is held together by the rhythm of the habanera heard high up in the treble at the beginning and end. Underneath this, we are introduced to an extraordinary melody, its mode particularly – like Granada itself – on the cusp between southern Spain and North Africa. It recalls the days when the city was under Moorish rule, up to the fifteenth century. Its mode is not like that of the melodies so popular from Bizet's *Carmen* onwards, but much more Arabic in inflection. The piece then turns the monody into chordal sections, no less convincing, and the insistent habanera rhythm is overlaid with triplets, which form fascinating cross-rhythms with the characteristic habanera pattern. Falla had said that it was Debussy's

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<sup>11</sup> tient du prodige quand on pense que cette musique fut écrite par un étranger [...] Ici c'est bien l'Andalousie que l'on nous présente: [...] étant donné qu'il n'y a pas une mesure qui soit directement empruntée au folk-lore espagnol et que, nonobstant, tout le morceau, jusqu'en ses moindres détails, fait sentir l'Espagne.

first attempt at Spanish but, in fact, Debussy had written some Spanish songs in his youth. 'La Soirée dans Grenade' is certainly one of his most exciting excursions to Spain, to my mind exceeded only by the three panels which make up his later 'Ibéria', the second part of the three *Images* for Orchestra, composed between 1905 and 1912.

#### **Réverie**

The *Réverie* is one of Debussy's early gems, dating from 1890, in a style comparable to that of the First Arabesque. It demonstrates exactly what his composition teachers found in Debussy: a mixture of skill at conventional harmony and ventures into some unconventional chords and harmonic progressions which caused them to raise an eyebrow while admiring him for the fertility of his ideas. But their job, as we have seen, and as they knew, was to get him through exams, so they reprimanded him for some unconventionalities.

The piece opens with a meandering single-line accompaniment before a long melody begins to unfold. As in the case of many of the early pieces on the present recording, the melody becomes gradually more chordal, and the accompaniment develops from its initial idea, embracing more of the keyboard. One thing it never does is resort to a simple

arpeggiated figure. A middle-section idea is an oscillating pattern of chords. When towards the end the initial melody returns, the mood of the opening is restored, but in texturally embellished form.

The Anglo-French pianist and composer Henri (Henry) Woollett (1864 – 1936) was a pupil of Massenet and Raoul Pugno and was in his day quite renowned as a composer in his own right. His arrangement of this piece for piano duet seems to show affection for it rather than turning it into a potboiler: his own music was indebted to Debussy. Based in Le Havre, he was also a teacher. Among his pupils figured André Caplet, Honegger, and Henry Février. He also collaborated with Gabriel Pierné on a reputed history of orchestration.

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Born in Montreal, **Hélène Mercier** began her piano studies at the age of six, quickly won first prizes in several national competitions, and was a laureate of the Prague International Chamber Music Competition. At the age of fifteen, she entered the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien, studying with Dieter Weber. She then studied with Sascha Gorodnitzki at the Juilliard School, in New York. From there, she went to France for lessons with Pierre Sancan, of the

Paris Conservatoire, and Germaine Mounier, at the École Normale de Musique. She also worked with Maria Curcio, Stanislav Neuhaus, and, in chamber music, with Gidon Kremer and Henryk Szeryng.

She performs throughout Europe, North America, and Asia and is heard on radio stations around the world. Performing regularly as a chamber musician and soloist, she has made notable appearances in Paris, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Théâtre du Châtelet, Salle Pleyel, and Salle Gaveau, in London, at the Barbican, Wigmore Hall, and South Bank Centre, as well as at the Konzerthaus Berlin, Gewandhaus Leipzig, Rudolfinum, Prague, Villa Medici, Rome, Teatro Dal Verme, Milan, Accademia Musicale Chigiana, Siena, Teatro Regio, Turin, and Megaron, Athens. She has also performed in Bergen, Geneva, Madrid, Monte Carlo, Moscow, St Petersburg, and Warsaw, as well as cities across the Near and Far East and North America. Finally, she has been a guest of orchestras such as the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, Prague Philharmonia, Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI, Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo, Orchestre de Paris, and the symphony orchestras of Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Among conductors who have invited her collaboration are Semyon

Bychkov, Sir Andrew Davis, Charles Dutoit, Edward Gardner, Neeme Järvi, Kurt Masur, Zubin Mehta, Seiji Ozawa, Trevor Pinnock, and Vladimir Spivakov. She has also partnered fellow soloists such as the cellists Gautier Capuçon, Natalia Gutman, and Mstislav Rostropovich. As a chamber musician she has performed with numerous ensembles as well as with the tenor Jonas Kaufmann, violinists Salvatore Accardo, Renaud Capuçon, Olivier Charlier, Augustin Dumay, Ivry Gitlis, Daniel Lozakovich, and Julian Rachlin, cellists Henri Demarquette, Edgar Moreau, Truls Mørk, and Kian Soltani, and pianists Boris Berezovsky, Frank Braley, Khatia Buniatishvili, Brigitte Engerer, Cyprien Katsaris, and Louis Lortie.

With Louis Lortie, on Chandos, Héléne Mercier has made numerous critically acclaimed recordings featuring works by Mozart, Poulenc, Rachmaninoff, Ravel, Saint-Saëns, and Schubert. They were ranked among the 'Top Six' in a Quarterly Retrospective and made Editor's Choice in *Gramophone* while earning a Rosette from the *Penguin Guide*. Their recording of Vaughan Williams's Concerto for Two Pianos received the Diapason d'Or. They released the first album in their complete survey of the works for piano duet and for two pianos by Debussy in 2022. Her discography also includes

recordings of works by Brahms, Chausson, André Mathieu, and Schumann. Hélène Mercier is a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.

The French-Canadian pianist **Louis Lortie** has appeared worldwide, his performances and award-winning recordings attesting to his remarkable musical range. A student of Yvonne Hubert (a pupil of the legendary Alfred Cortot), in Montreal, the Beethoven specialist Dieter Weber, in Vienna, and the Schnabel disciple Leon Fleisher, he won First Prize in the Ferruccio Busoni International Piano Competition in 1984 and the same year was a prize winner at the Leeds International Piano Competition. From then on, he embarked on an international career which keeps him in demand on five continents. In the course of his four-decade-long career, he has established long-term partnerships and performed with orchestras such as the BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestre national de France, and Dresdner Philharmonie, in Europe, the Philadelphia Orchestra, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, San Diego Symphony, and St Louis Symphony Orchestra, in the US, and the Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Ottawa, and Calgary symphony orchestras, in Canada. Further afield, he has collaborated with the

Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, where he has also served as artist-in-residence, as well as the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, Taiwan, and Adelaide and Sydney symphony orchestras. He enjoys regular partnerships with conductors such as Thierry Fischer, Edward Gardner, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Jaap van Zweden, Antoni Wit, and Simone Young, and performed frequently with the late Sir Andrew Davis.

As a recitalist and chamber musician, Louis Lortie has appeared at venues and festivals across Europe and North America. He is co-founder and Artistic Director of the LacMus International Music Festival, on Lake Como, and was a Master in Residence at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel, in Brussels. A decades-long relationship with Chandos Records has to date produced a catalogue of more than forty-five recordings, spanning repertoire from Mozart to Stravinsky. It includes a complete cycle of Beethoven's sonatas as well as Liszt's complete *Années de pèlerinage*. Recent projects include the complete works for piano by Chopin and a series focussed on piano works by Fauré, to which he has brought new light. As a champion of twentieth-century music, he has built a discography that includes a highly praised recording of Lutosławski's

Piano Concerto, with Edward Gardner and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Exploring the Piano Concerto by Vaughan Williams, he has recorded not only the original version, with Peter Oundjian and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, but also the version for two pianos, reworked by the composer, with his duo partner, Héléne Mercier, and the Bergen

Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Andrew Davis. Louis Lortie and Héléne Mercier have also recorded *Le Carnaval des animaux*, with Neeme Järvi and the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, and Rachmaninoff's complete works for two pianos, as well as two volumes of works for two pianos and for piano duet by Debussy.

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**Héléne Mercier  
and Louis Lortie**

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**Sound engineer** Jonathan Cooper

**Editor** Jonathan Cooper

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Héliane Mercier and Louis Lortie

## Achille-Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

## Works for Piano Duet and Two Pianos, Volume 2

- |       |  |       |
|-------|--|-------|
| 1     | PRÉLUDE À L'APRÈS-MIDI D'UN FAUNE, L 86B (1891 – 94)<br><i>de Stéphane Mallarmé</i><br>for Orchestra<br>Transcribed 1895 for Two Pianos, Four Hands by the Composer  | 8:42  |
| 2     | CLAIR DE LUNE, L 75 / 3 (c. 1890, revised 1905)<br>No. 3 from <i>Suite bergamasque</i><br>for Piano<br>Transcription for Two Pianos, Four Hands by Henri Dutilleux (1916 – 2013)                                       | 4:36  |
| 3-5   | NOCTURNES, L 91 (1897 – 99)<br>for Orchestra<br>Transcribed 1909 for Two Pianos, Four Hands by Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)   | 22:50 |
| 6     | LINDARAJA, L 97 (1901)<br>for Two Pianos, Four Hands   | 6:03  |
| 7     | LA SOIRÉE DANS GRENADE, L 100 / 2 (1903)<br>(Evening in Granada)<br>No. 2 from <i>Estampes</i><br>for Piano<br>Transcription 1907 – 10 for Piano Duet<br>by Jacques Durand (1865 – 1928) and Léon Roques (1839 – 1923) | 5:48  |
| 8-9   | DEUX DANSES, L 103B (1904)<br>for Harp and Strings<br>Transcribed 1904 for Two Pianos, Four Hands by the Composer  | 9:07  |
| 10    | RÊVERIE, L 68 (c. 1890)<br>for Piano<br>Transcription for Piano Duet by Henry Woollett (1864 – 1936)   | 4:44  |
| 11-13 | EN BLANC ET NOIR, L 134 (1915)<br>Three Pieces for Two Pianos, Four Hands  | 14:39 |
| 14    | LA PLUS QUE LENTE, L 121A (1910)<br><i>Valse pour piano</i><br>(Waltz for Piano)<br>Transcribed 1910 for Piano Duet by Léon Roques   | 4:55  |

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