



# Starry Night

Préludes Book I & Other Works

## Claude Debussy

Michael Lewin - Piano

## Estampes

- |  |      |
|--|------|
| 1. I. Pagodes                                    | 5:55 |
| 2. II. La soirée dans Grenade                    | 5:23 |
| 3. III. Jardins sous la pluie                    | 3:47 |
| 4. Arabesque No.1 in E Major                     | 4:17 |
| 5. Golliwog's cake walk                          | 3:05 |
| 6. "Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon" | 2:34 |
| 7. Nuit d'étoiles (Arr. Attwood)                 | 4:36 |

## Préludes, Book I

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|---|------|
| 8. I. Danseuses de Delphes                                    | 3:12 |
| 9. II. Voiles   | 3:39 |
| 10. III. Le vent dans la plaine                               | 2:12 |
| 11. IV. "Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir" | 3:31 |
| 12. V. Les collines d'Anacapri                                | 3:06 |
| 13. VI. Des pas sur la neige                                  | 3:51 |
| 14. VII. Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest                           | 3:28 |
| 15. VIII. La fille aux cheveux de lin                         | 2:33 |
| 16. IX. La sérénade interrompue                               | 2:30 |
| 17. X. La cathédrale engloutie                                | 6:06 |
| 18. XI. La danse de Puck                                      | 2:52 |
| 19. XII. Minstrels  | 2:30 |

Total Time: 1:08:56

## Estampes (Prints) (1903)

**I. Pagodes** (Pagodas) are Asian temples, often quite large, notable for their curved roofs and graceful structures. The Japanese colored woodblock prints were the most avidly collected of all prints, and Debussy enthusiastically embraced the French fascination regarding the Orient and Japan in particular, 'Le japonisme.' (It was at this time that the famous French pickup line appeared: "Would you like to come up and see my Japanese prints?") Debussy incorporates the pentatonic scale as well as bells, gongs, and gamelans, all suffused with a luminous atmosphere, stylized delicacy, elegant dance movement, and rhythmic counterpoint.

**II. La soirée dans Grenade** (Evening in Granada) is one of Debussy's three Spanish piano pieces. His uncanny insight into the Spanish soul is particularly remarkable considering that he never even visited his neighboring country. It employs his novel compositional technique of alternating and juxtaposing various musical ideas rather than developing them, thereby creating a very modern and almost cinematic sense of splicing, fragments presented without transition. Tied together with the Habañera dance rhythm made so famous in "Carmen," the strumming guitars, castanets, flamenco melodies, smouldering passion and intoxicating languor magically create a sultry scented summer evening in Spain.

**III. Jardins sous la pluie** (Gardens in the Rain) – The rain in France seems somehow unique- sometimes gauzy, then coming down in horizontal sheets, a sensation which is vividly captured in this, the most virtuosic of the three pieces. Light showers flecked by sunlight become gusts of wind-swept water, creating motion and excitement. The touching appearance of the children's song "Nous n'irons plus au bois" in the middle section conjures a little



Claude Debussy  
1862-1918

girl gently humming while watching the rain through her bedroom window. At the end, following the furious downpour of the rainstorm, a flash of lightning, then a rainbow!



**Arabesque No. 1 in E Major** (1888) One of the first Debussy pieces I ever heard, I forever associate it with childhood, innocence and purity. It was one of his earliest piano pieces, written when he was 26 and under the influence of Chopin. In a simple ABA form, and utilizing traditional harmonies, the gentle beauty of its flowing triplets and beautiful melodies are hypnotic and graceful, sweet arabesques of sound. The little episode in C Major before the return of the theme seems charmingly Heraldic, yet evocative of the French Baroque composers that Debussy adored.



**Golliwog's cake walk** (1908) Golliwog's cake walk is the final piece from the "Childrens Corner" Suite, written for Debussy's beloved and precocious daughter Emma (nicknamed Chouchou) shortly before her 3rd birthday. The jazzy cakewalk was a popular and comical music hall dance born of American ragtime, with exaggerated offbeats, syncopated rhythms and sudden dynamic contrasts. Golliwog was a famous and popular little black doll, who Debussy employs here as a dancing puppet with elbows flying and an endearing awkward virtuosity. The middle section includes a send-up of Wagner's "Tristan" prelude, and some of the funniest grace notes ever.



## **“Les soirs illuminés par l’ardeur du charbon”**

(Evenings lit by the burning coals) (1917) – This poignant and virtually unknown work was only discovered and published in 2002, and is Debussy’s final piece for the piano. During the harsh winter of 1917, when Paris was under siege from World War 1 and the composer was in terrible pain from the cancer that would soon take his life, home heating coal was in short supply. His local coal merchant, a music lover, managed to secure the precious fuel for the Debussy home. In gratitude, the composer presented him with this piece, beautifully notated on music manuscript. The title comes from Baudelaire. It is ineffably tender, an otherworldly tone-poem of mournful resignation.



**Nuit d’étoiles** (Starry Night) (arr. Attwood) – This beautiful song, based on a poem by Banville, was set for voice and piano by the 18 year-old Debussy in 1880, and was his first published work. The text’s melancholy lover suffers from a “poor weary heart” dreaming of “a love long past,” her “blue eyes like the sky,” under the starry night. The refrain pleads for the awakening of “a love long dead.” My eternal thanks to Koji Attwood for once again gifting me with such a beautiful transcription for solo piano, a worthy companion to “Beau Soir.” This is its first recording.

## **Préludes, Book I** (1910)

**I. Danseuses de Delphes** (Dancers of Delphi) – The Préludes begin with this chaste and solemn processional, evoking grave slow-moving dancers and religious ceremony. It was inspired by a sculpture of three maiden dancers at the Temple of Apollo in Ancient Greece. They move in tranquility and reverence, employing finger cymbals, remaining forever mystical and mysterious.

**II. Voiles** (Sails or Veils) – A lover of ambiguity, Debussy wouldn’t clarify whether Voiles meant Sails or Veils- but I have always visualized the latter. One needs no technical understanding to succumb to its serene and eerie beauty, but it is remarkably complex. There are three elements in constant play- the opening’s whole-tone ostinato pattern (the gentle fluttering of the sails in the breeze), the mysterious and quietly insistent low B-flat’s in the bass (the play of the anchors in the lapping current), and the sinuous scale-based melody, (which provides the story line’s thread). The whole-tone glissandos at the end are particularly striking- the entire piece, true impressionism, exists well outside of the boundaries of traditional tonality.

**III. Le vent dans la plaine** (The Wind in the Plain) – Here Debussy paints a mostly light and dry wind, a toccata in perpetual motion, the breeze gusting and swirling over the vast plain and through the tall grass. In the middle, it suddenly blows more fiercely, before it subsides and disappears into the landscape.

**IV. “Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir”** (Sounds and scents swirl in the evening air) – The title comes from Baudelaire’s poem *Harmonie du soir*, from the hyper-sensual *Fleurs du mal*. “The season is at hand when swaying on its stem, Every flower exhales perfume like incense; Sounds and perfumes turn in the evening air; A melancholy waltz and languid vertigo!” *Les sons* conjures a fragrant musical dream state, a drowsy commingling of the senses, intoxicating sounds, a melancholic caressing of tonalities, voluptuous memories magically concluded by distant horn calls.

**V. Les collines d’Anacapri** (The Hills of Anacapri) – Distant bells from the hills above the sea on the Island of Capri to open, then a wild Ital-

ian Tarantella, the national dance. This technicolored and joy-filled Prélude is filled with sunny extroversion. The middle section brings forth a popular sensual and sentimental folk song, before returning to the dizzying tarantella and ending with the bells pealing in dazzling brilliance.

**VI. Des pas sur la neige** (Footsteps in the snow) – Debussy cuts to the bone with this perfectly chiseled elegy of sorrow, regret, doubt, loss and utter desolation. The weary drag of the ostinato rhythmic figure represents solitary footsteps walking with difficulty in the deep snow. (“You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” –Beckett.) The melody exhales disturbed memories, fragments of grief and spiritual pain, on the very borders of silence, descending finally to eternal nothingness.

**VII. Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest** (What the West Wind saw) – The shocking savagery of this violent wind, coming immediately after *Des pas sur la neige*, is unprecedented in the piano music of a composer known for his thousand degrees of pianissimo. The storm approaches, then unleashes primal fury as the gale-force winds and rain rage and beat against the cliffs. Nature’s powers are brutally unleashed with this relentless wind of destruction, utilizing Lisztian virtuosity coupled with aggressive modernity.

**IIX. La fille aux cheveux de lin** (The girl with the flaxen hair) – The calm and tenderness of this popular Prélude provides balm after the turmoil of the West Wind. The modal harmonies give it a pastoral innocence and endearing openness, and the melody a purity of spirit. The simplest piece of the set, its inspiration comes from a poem by de Lisle depicting a lovely flaxen-haired young Scottish girl singing unselfconsciously while daydreaming in the morning sun.

**IX. La sérénade interrompue** (The interrupted serenade) – This descriptive piece features a Spaniard serenading his beloved with a guitar and a song. The guitar is uncannily recreated with both strumming and plucking, along with a passionate Moorish melody. The first interruption seems to be the slamming of a window by an irate neighbor, but the serenader carries on unperturbed, getting a little further along. After the second interruption by a crowd of revelers, our hero gets irritated, but settles down to try again, before departing in a fit of pique.

**X. La cathédrale engloutie** (The Sunken Cathedral) – According to ancient legend, the Cathedral of Ys was submerged beneath the sea as punishment for its sinful inhabitants, rising every 100 years as a cautionary example. The atmospheric and medieval opening, with its modal harmonies, depicts the church far underwater. Gradually it ascends in all its glory, finally emerging in a radiant C Major, with mighty majesty. As this wondrous vision subsides, the (mer)monks come forth to intone the sad tale, before the waves close over the submerging cathedral, bringing the great edifice back down to its watery grave. The use of bells, overtones, vibrations and booming pedal points are remarkable, as is the uncanny pictorial depiction of the cathedral’s rise and descent.

**XI. La danse de Puck** (The Dance of Puck) – The mischievous Puck of folkloric legend was immortalized by Shakespeare in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” as the “joyous nomad of the night” who administered love potions to the humans, resulting in comic and romantic mayhem. We are given a sprightly portrait of the fairy creature, with recurring interjections of an elfin horn motive. The nimble spirit is aerial and mobile, capriciously darting like quicksilver, teasing, then suddenly vanishing.

**XII. Minstrels** The set concludes with a visit to the popular American minstrel bands, the vaudevillian troupes beloved in Debussy's Paris. These acts included dancers, acrobats, clowns, ragtime, slapstick comedy, drums and banjos, and sentimental songs, the performers often in blackface. All of these elements appear in this humorous reenactment, a sophisticated and affectionate sketch which closes the Book with a burst of wit, charm and good-spirits.

Michael Lewin



## Michael Lewin

Michael Lewin enjoys a distinguished international reputation as one of America's most abundantly gifted and charismatic concert pianists, with an active concert career that has taken him to 30 countries.

*Starry Night* is his fourth recording for Sono Luminus, providing the companion disc to his critically-praised *Beau Soir* (DSL-92175), containing the Debussy Préludes Book II and other works. His popular earlier Sono Luminus releases are *If I Were a Bird* (DSL-92103) and *Piano Phantoms* (DSL-92168).

With an active repertoire of 40 piano concertos, Michael Lewin has appeared as soloist with the Netherlands Philharmonic, China National Radio Orchestra, Cairo Symphony, Bucharest 'Enescu' Philharmonic, Filharmónica de Guadalajara, State Symphony of Greece, Moscow Chamber Orchestra, the Boston Pops, the Symphonies of Phoenix, Indianapolis, Miami, Colorado, Nevada, West Virginia, Puerto Rico, Illinois, North Carolina, Sinfonia da Camera, and the Youth Orchestra of the Americas. He has premiered two Concertos by David Kocsis and performed Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" over 50 times. He has performed with conductors including Carlos Miguel Prieto, Keith Lockhart, Constantine Orbellian, Anton Kersjes, Seymour Lipkin, Ian Hobson, Sergei Babayan, Maximiano Valdés and Hugh Wolff.

Lewin's career was launched with top prizes in the International Liszt Competition, the William Kapell International Competition and the American Pianists Association Award. Following his New York recital debut in Lincoln Center the *New York Times* wrote that "his immense technique and ability qualify him eminently for success." Since then he has concertized widely in solo recital, with orchestras and as a chamber musician.

His discography reflects his interest in and command of a notably wide-ranging repertoire. It includes a best-selling collection of Domenico Scarlatti's Keyboard Sonatas, the complete piano music of American composer Charles Tomlinson Griffes (two volumes), "Bamboula!" - Piano Music of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, "A Russian Piano Recital" - (Scriabin, Glazunov and Balakirev), the Violin Sonatas of William Bolcom with violinist Irina Muresanu, and "Michael Lewin plays Liszt." He was the featured artist in the 2014 album "Winds of Samsara", which won the 2014 GRAMMY® Award in the New Age Category.

A Juilliard School graduate and a Steinway Artist, Michael Lewin was a student of Leon Fleisher. Debussy is one of his favorite composers- he studied the piano music with the legendary French pianist Yvonne Lefébure, who had played it for the composer. They worked together in Debussy's hometown of St-Germain-en-Laye, in the same Conservatoire where the composer himself had studied as a boy.

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DSL-92190 - Starry Night - Michael Lewin

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