

THE VERY BEST OF  
DEBUSSY



2 CDs

# CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

## HIS LIFE

Claude Debussy exercised widespread influence over later generations of composers, both in his native France and elsewhere. He was trained at the Paris Conservatoire, and decided there on a career as a composer rather than as a pianist, his original intention. His highly characteristic musical language, thoroughly French in inspiration, extended the contemporary limits of harmony and form, with a remarkably delicate command of nuance, whether in piano-writing or in the handling of a relatively large orchestra.

## HIS MUSIC

### Operas

Debussy attempted many operas, two based on stories by Edgar Allan Poe. But he completed only one, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, a version of the medieval play by Maurice Maeterlinck, with its story of idealised love perfectly matched with the composer's musical idiom.

### Orchestral Music

The most influential piece of orchestral music by Debussy is the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun), based on a poem by Mallarmé. This was later used for a ballet, with choreography by Nijinsky, who created a considerable scandal at the first performance. The music evokes a pagan world, as the faun of the title takes his ease in the afternoon shade on a summer day. The three symphonic sketches that constitute *La Mer* (The Sea), published with a famous woodcut known as *The Wave*, from the Japanese artist Hokusai's views of Mount Fuji, an indication of oriental influence on Debussy, offer evocations of the sea from dawn to midday, of the waves and of the dialogue of wind and sea. Other orchestral works by Debussy include the three movements of *Nocturnes - Nuages* (Clouds), *Fêtes* (Festivals) and *Sirènes*. *Images*, a work in three movements completed in 1912, includes *Gigues*, *Ibéria* and *Ronde de printemps*, the last a celebration of spring. His *Le martyr de Saint Sébastien*, finally scored by André Caplet, was in origin a theatrical and choreographic collaboration with the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio. Debussy sketched out orchestration for his *Rapsodie arabe* for saxophone and piano, completed after his death by Roger-Ducasse, an interesting addition to the repertoire of an instrument more often neglected by classical composers.

## Chamber Music

Debussy's chamber music includes a fine string quartet, known as the first, although the second, like so much of the composer's work, existed only as a future project. *Syrinx*, for unaccompanied flute, in which the pagan god Pan plays his flute, was originally written as incidental music for the theatre. Towards the end of his life Debussy planned a series of six chamber works, patriotically announced as by Claude Debussy, *musicien français*. He completed three of these projected works, a violin sonata, a cello sonata, and a sonata for flute, viola and harp.

## Vocal Music

Debussy made a significant addition to the French song repertoire, capturing the spirit, in particular, of the work of poets like Verlaine and Mallarmé, but also turning to earlier poets, including Villon and Charles d'Orléans. His *Chansons de Bilitis*, settings of verses by Pierre Louÿs, turn again to the pagan world, while the settings of the Verlaine *Fêtes galantes*, including 'Clair de lune', capture the nostalgia of the poems, yearning for an unattainable past.

## Piano Music

In his writing for the piano, Debussy proved himself a successor to Chopin, who had died in Paris thirteen years before Debussy's birth. His own debt to Chopin was overtly expressed in his two books of *Etudes* (Studies), completed in 1915. The two *Arabesques*, early works, enjoy continued popularity, as does the *Suite bergamasque*, with its all-too-popular *Clair de lune*. *Estampes* (Prints) evokes the Far East in *Pagodes*, Spain in *La soirée dans Grenade* (Evening in Granada), and autumnal sadness in *Jardins sous la pluie* (Gardens under the Rain), while *L'isle joyeuse* turns to Watteau for inspiration. Two sets of *Images* offer further delicate pictures, while the two books of *Préludes* offer still more varied images, from *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (The Girl with Flaxen Hair) and *La cathédrale engloutie* (The Submerged Cathedral) to the final *Feux d'artifice* (Fireworks). The single *La plus que lente* (More than slow) of 1910 and the light-hearted *Children's Corner Suite* form a further part of a larger series of works.

## MUSIC NOTES

### **Nocturnes II. Fêtes (CD 1, track 1)**

Debussy completed *Nocturnes* in 1896. The second movement, *Fêtes* (Festivals), is a re-creation of holiday festivities in the Bois de Boulogne.

### **String Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 10: I. Animé et très décidé (CD 1, track 2)**

The string quartet looks forward in many ways to the musical language that Debussy was to develop as entirely his own, characteristic in its use of exotic scales, in its subtle harmonies and texture, and in its clarity of form. The quartet was given its first performance in December 1893 by the Ysaye Quartet in Paris.

### **Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (CD 1, track 3)**

The famous *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* was completed in 1894. It was later to achieve unwarranted notoriety in the overtly erotic mime of the dancer Nijinsky, when the score was used by Diaghilev for a ballet in 1912. The poem is about a faun, half-goat, half-man, who is stirred by the sight of passing nymphs, as he lies resting from the heat of mid-day in a wooded glade.

### **Estampes III. Jardins sous la pluie (CD 1, track 4)**

*Estampes* (Prints) was completed in 1903. The set ends with *Jardins sous la pluie* (Gardens in the rain), a reworking of an earlier unpublished piece.

### **Cello Sonata in D minor: I. Prologue (CD1, track 5)**

Debussy described the *Cello Sonata* as 'presque classique...' (almost classical...). There is something of the eighteenth century about the work, although it is rather a curious, ghostly past that is summoned to mind.

### **Suite bergamasque III. Clair de lune (CD 1, track 6)**

The *Suite bergamasque* includes *Clair de lune* (Moonlight), which has enjoyed an enormous popularity.

### **Violin Sonata in G minor: II. Intermède: fantastique et léger (CD 1, track 7)**

Debussy's *Violin Sonata's* second movement provides an example of French ornamental orientalism.

### **24 Préludes No. 8. La fille aux cheveux de lin (CD 1, track 8)**

Debussy's poetic sensibility and his delicate use of keyboard nuances are shown clearly in the books of *Préludes*, the first set completed in 1910. These were published with titles given only at the end of each piece, suggesting that they were not absolutely essential to the performer. The gently expressive portrait of *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (The girl with flaxen hair) is one of the most familiar of the *Préludes*.

### **La Mer II. Jeux de vagues (CD 1, track 9)**

The three evocative symphonic sketches that form *La Mer* were completed in 1905. Although analogies with French Impressionism were drawn by contemporaries, others have seen a reflection of the composer's admiration for the English painter Turner. The first sketch (see CD 2, track 7) takes us from dawn to noon on the sea, in a rich and varied musical texture, a mosaic of orchestral sound. This is followed by the sport of the waves, a playful second movement.

### **Pelléas et Mélisande Act III Scene 1 (CD 1, track 10)**

Première: Paris, Opéra-Comique (Salle Favart) on 30 April 1902.

Debussy's setting of *Pelléas et Mélisande* is based on the play by Maurice Maeterlinck. Accentuating the symbolism of the original drama, the opera seemed to invoke a dream world, filled with characters with very human thoughts and emotions.

The third act opens on one of the towers of the castle. It is a beautiful summer night and Mélisande is combing her long hair by an open window. Pelléas, below, begs her to come out, since he plans to leave in the morning. She lets her hair down and he fondles it in delight. Their conversation is interrupted by her elderly husband, Golaud, who sees them as a pair of innocent children.

### **24 Préludes No. 12. Minstrels (CD 1, track 11)**

The first book of *Préludes* ends with *Minstrels*, inspired, it has been said, by a black street-band that Debussy heard in Eastbourne, England, in 1905.

### **Rapsodie arabe for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra (CD 1, track 12)**

It was with considerable reluctance that Debussy undertook a commission to write a work for the saxophone. The American player of the instrument, Mrs. Richard J. Hall, was nothing if not persistent. She commissioned the work in 1895, but it was not completed until 1908, in a version for alto saxophone and piano. The scoring for orchestra sketched by Debussy was completed in 1919 by Roger-Ducasse.

### **Images II. Iberia (CD 2, track 1)**

The second section of *Images, Iberia*, is in three movements, *Par les rues et par les chemins*, *Les parfums de la nuit*, and *Le matin d'un jour de fête*. The streets of Spain are evoked in bright orchestral colours, including the sound of the castanets and the tambourine. The second movement gives a languorous dream-picture of the delicate fragrances of the night. The music moves to a climax of intensity and as the peace of night returns, the bells of morning are heard.

## **24 Préludes No. 10. La cathédrale engloutie (CD 2, track 2)**

*La cathédrale engloutie* (The submerged cathedral) evokes, through the sea-mist, the mystery of the ancient Cathedral of Ys, its chant, and the sound of its bells, drowned now beneath the waves that engulfed it long ago.

## **Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire (CD 2, track 3)**

*Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire* (Scottish March on a popular theme), originally in the form of a piano duet, was written at the request of the Scottish General Meredith Reid, a descendant of the lords of Ross, and makes use of a traditional melody associated with the clan.

## **Images I. I. Reflets dans l'eau (CD 2, track 4)**

*Images I* was both written and published in 1905. The first movement, *Reflets dans l'eau* (Reflections in the water) is one of the composer's many water pieces and Debussy himself pictured the opening as dropping a pebble into the water and seeing the ripples make concentric circles.

## **Rêverie (CD 2, track 5)**

The piano piece *Rêverie*, written in 1890, offers first a gentle melody over a repeated accompaniment pattern, developing into a passage of contrasted mood, before the return of the opening material.

## **L'isle joyeuse (CD 2, track 6)**

Considered one of Debussy's, and indeed piano literature's, greatest accomplishments, *L'isle joyeuse* was composed in the summer of 1904. With its intoxicating mix of dance rhythms and surging melody, it provides a richly evocative cameo of the island of Jersey.

## **La Mer I. De l'aube à midi sur la mer (CD 2, track 7)**

See CD1, track 9

## **La plus que lente (CD 2, track 8)**

*La plus que lente*, a waltz that is slower than a slow waltz, dates from 1910 and has the direction *Molto rubato con morbidezza*, a hint, perhaps, at a mildly satirical intention.

## **Danse sacrée et danse profane II. Danse profane (CD 2, track 9)**

The two dances, *Danse sacrée* and *Danse profane* were written in the spring of 1904 and scored for chromatic harp and strings. The second dance calls for a virtuosity that often challenges the player.

## **Two Arabesques Arabesque No. 1 (CD 2, track 10)**

The *Arabesques* of 1888 rival *Clair de lune* in popularity.

**Children's Corner VI. Golliwogg's Cake-walk (CD 2, track 11)**

*Children's Corner Suite* was written for his daughter Emma-Claude in 1908 and given English titles, a reflection of the influence of Emma-Claude's English governess. *Golliwogg's Cake-walk* is a light-hearted version of a dance that had been popularised in the music-halls of Paris in the 1890s.

**For more of Debussy's music, why not explore:****Orchestral Music**

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| Clair de lune / Children's Corner (orch. Caplet) .....    | 8.223751 |
| Images / Le martyre de Saint Sébastien / Others .....     | 8.550505 |
| Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune / La Mer / Others ..... | 8.553275 |
| Music for Saxophone and Orchestra (Rapsodie arabe) .....  | 8.554784 |

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|   |          |
|---|----------|
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| Cello Sonata .....                      | 8.555762 |

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|   |          |
|---|----------|
| Suite bergamasque / Arabesques .....                  | 8.553290 |
| Children's Corner / La boîte à joujoux / Others ..... | 8.553291 |
| Images / Estampes / Others .....                      | 8.553292 |
| Préludes Books 1 and 2 .....                          | 8.553293 |
| Debussy Piano Favourites .....                        | 8.555800 |

**Opera**

|                            |             |
|----------------------------|-------------|
| Pelléas et Mélisande ..... | 8.660047-49 |
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## CD1

|    |   |              |
|----|---|--------------|
| 1  | Nocturnes II. Fêtes .....   | 6:56         |
| 2  | String Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 10 I. Animé et très décidé ..... | 6:11         |
| 3  | Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune .....                               | 10:29        |
| 4  | Estampes III. Jardins sous la pluie .....                             | 3:43         |
| 5  | Cello Sonata in D minor I. Prologue .....                             | 4:25         |
| 6  | Suite bergamasque III. Clair de lune .....                            | 4:26         |
| 7  | Violin Sonata in G minor II. Intermède: fantastique et léger .....    | 4:17         |
| 8  | 24 Préludes No. 8. La fille aux cheveux de lin .....                  | 2:14         |
| 9  | La Mer II. Jeux de vagues .....                                       | 7:29         |
| 10 | Pelléas et Melisande Act III Scene 1 .....                            | 14:22        |
| 11 | 24 Préludes No. 12. Minstrels .....                                   | 2:05         |
| 12 | Rhapsodie arabe for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra .....                | 10:50        |
|    | <b>Total Timing</b> .....   | <b>78:00</b> |

## CD2

|    |   |              |
|----|---|--------------|
| 1  | Images II. Iberia .....                               | 21:43        |
| 2  | 24 Préludes No. 10. La cathédrale engloutie .....     | 5:47         |
| 3  | Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire .....         | 6:10         |
| 4  | Images I I. Reflets dans l'eau .....                  | 5:15         |
| 5  | Rêverie .....   | 3:50         |
| 6  | L'isle joyeuse .....                                  | 5:29         |
| 7  | La Mer I. De l'aube à midi sur la mer .....           | 9:18         |
| 8  | La plus que lente .....                               | 4:44         |
| 9  | Danse sacrée et danse profane II. Danse profane ..... | 5:16         |
| 10 | Two Arabesques Arabesque No. 1 .....                  | 5:05         |
| 11 | Children's Corner VI. Golliwogg's Cake-walk .....     | 3:09         |
|    | <b>Total Timing</b> .....                             | <b>76:17</b> |

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*"I could not do without his music. It is my oxygen"*

(Francis Poulenc on Debussy)

Claude Debussy's music combines late nineteenth-century Romanticism with a soundscape that has been called an audible version of an Impressionist painting. This 2-CD set includes Debussy's most frequently performed and recorded works, including *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*, excerpts from *Images*, and his opera *Pelléas and Mélisande*.

Compact Disc 1

- 1** *Nocturnes* Fêtes **2** *String Quartet No. 1 in G minor, Op. 10* Animé et très décidé **3** *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*  
**4** *Estampes* Jardins sous la pluie **5** *Cello Sonata in D minor* Prologue **6** *Suite bergamasque* Clair de lune  
**7** *Violin Sonata in G minor* Intermède: fantastique et léger **8** *24 Préludes* La fille aux cheveux de lin  
**9** *La Mer* Jeux de vagues **10** *Pelléas et Mélisande* Act III Scene 1 **11** *24 Préludes* Minstrels  
**12** *Rapsodie arabe for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra*

Compact Disc 2

- 1** *Images* Iberia **2** *24 Préludes* La cathédrale engloutie  
**3** *Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire* **4** *Images I* Reflets dans l'eau  
**5** *Rêverie* **6** *L'isle joyeuse* **7** *La Mer* De l'aube à midi sur la mer **8** *La plus que lente*  
**9** *Danse sacrée et danse profane* Danse profane **10** *Two Arabesques* Arabesque No. 1  
**11** *Children's Corner* Golliwogg's Cake-walk



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