

Analytical notes
on selected piano Preludes of
Claude Debussy

Brouillards
Bruyères
“General Lavine” - eccentric
Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq.
Canope
Feux d’artifice

by

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Claude Debussy

(1862-1918)

Claude Debussy was born in France in 1862 and died there in 1918. He was one of the most significant figures in the development of 20th-Century European music. He studied at the Paris Conservatoire, and also in Rome from 1885-1887 after winning the *Prix de Rome*. Visits to Bayreuth in 1888 and 1889 led to a brief intoxication with the music of Wagner (though this soon developed into an utter rejection of Wagner's approach to composition). Another significant influence at this time was hearing Javanese music in Paris.

Debussy's output includes the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, orchestral music (including *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and *La mer*), many songs, chamber and choral music, and much piano music (including *Images*, *Estampes*, *Children's Corner*, *Préludes* and *Etudes*, and *Fantasy* for piano and orchestra). In his music, he deliberately attempted to create a distinctively French style, proudly describing himself as "Musicien Français".

Debussy's musical style has an affinity with two other characteristically French genres - the *impressionist* painters (e.g. Monet, Manet and Degas) and the *symbolist* writers (e.g. Verlaine and Mallarmé). The label "impressionist" is the one most commonly applied to Debussy's music (in spite of the fact that the composer himself objected to it). It is a very imprecise term; Oscar Thompson attempted to define it as applying to art which aims to "suggest rather than depict . . . to interpret a fugitive impression rather than to seize upon and fix the permanent reality". The visual artists of this school frequently explored the effects of light and water in their work, often resulting in a general haziness of outline; much of Debussy's music similarly has a vagueness in its harmony, rhythm and formal outline, and an interest in the sensuous aspect of sound. Symbolist poetry is subtle and suggestive, concise and understated in its emotions and having a free and lyrical approach to meter. The opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, many songs and the titles of some piano pieces are based on the work of symbolist writers.

The other great "impressionist" composer was Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), who of course was also French. Other contemporaries of Debussy composing in very different styles include Puccini, Mahler, Bartók and Stravinsky.

Debussy's Preludes for Piano

Debussy's *Préludes* (consisting of two books each containing twelve short pieces), were composed between 1909 and 1913. Unlike Chopin's *Préludes*, they follow no particular key sequence. Each *prélude* has a title, containing either a literary reference or a description of a scene, character or event. The titles are placed at the end of each piece (not at the beginning as expected), almost as an afterthought; they are suggestions for the stimulation of the performer or audience, capturing a moment or an impression, rather than describing a full "programme".

The *Préludes* demonstrate Debussy's mature keyboard style; they display a vagueness of harmony, rhythm and formal outline, and an interest in the sensuous aspect of sound, through the use of modal, pentatonic and whole tone scales; pedal points and ostinati; parallel movement of perfect 5ths or of chords; frequent 7th and 9th chords; absence of functional harmony and traditional cadences; sophisticated pedal techniques and subtlety of rhythm.

Brouillards

(Claude Debussy)

Brouillards is the first prelude in Book II. It refers to mists - swirling ambiguously, then lifting to reveal the brilliance of the sun.

The main tonal centre is C major, but *bitonality* is used almost constantly - usually the combination of a white-note key in one hand and a black-note key in the other. It is in a free formal structure, based on two alternating motives.¹

Impressionistic characteristics include parallel 5ths and triads, modal or pentatonic scales, bitonality, ostinato, and frequent 7th and 9th chords.

- b.1-9 First motive. The left hand has parallel triads on the white keys, centred around the tonic and dominant triads of C major. The right hand has “wispy” broken chords, mostly in quintuplets. The upper stave part is mostly on black keys, creating bitonality with the lower stave(s); it is sometimes *pentatonic* (e.g. b.4, where only the five black keys are used), and at other times it is in Db dorian (Db - Eb - Fb - Gb - Ab - Bb - Cb - Db).
- 10-17 The first motive continues, beneath a new figure in the upper stave; this figure is mostly on black keys, but is decorated with *acciaccaturas* a semitone above.
- 18-24 Second motive - an austere unison melody, with the two hands widely spaced. The tonal centre is C# minor. The melody contains a sequence of 4ths (D - G, D# - G#) and ends with a descending tonic triad. The first motive can still be heard, between the phrases of the second motive.
- 24-28 First motive.
- 29-31 A dramatic parting of the mists, with bitonal arpeggios and chords.
- 32-37 *Un peu retenu*. Interlude. A poignant melody in the left hand, with tonal centre of D, against shimmering arpeggios (with no 3rd) in the right hand, with a tonal centre of D#. Bars 36-37 are a transposition of b.33-34 down a 5th.
- 38-42 Second motive in left hand only, C# minor. Diminution is used in b.41 (i.e. shorter note values). The shimmering arpeggios in b.40 are again bitonal, and contain no 3rds.
- 43-52 Coda. Based mostly on the first motive, now fainter and more fragmentary. There is a tonic pedal (i.e. C) in the bass in b.43-48. The figure in b.47 is reminiscent of the second motive in outline, but transposed to a tonal centre of C. The last four bars use the parallel triads of the first motive in a somewhat aimless fashion, so that the piece ends in a rather unresolved manner.

Modéré - at a moderate speed; *extrêmement égal et léger* - extremely even and light; *la m.g. un peu en valeur sur la m.d.* - the left hand a little more emphasised than the right hand; *più* - more; *Cédez* - to yield (i.e. slower); *Mouv[emen]t* - return to the former speed; *Un peu retenu* - hold back the speed a little; *un peu marqué* - a little marked; *en retenant et en s’effaçant* - holding back the speed and fading away; *presque plus rien* - fading to almost nothing.

¹ some writers (e.g. E. Robert Schmitz in *The piano works of Claude Debussy*) consider the structure to be a type of sonata form.

Bruyères

(Claude Debussy)

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Bruyères ("Heather") is the fifth prelude in Book II. The title refers to a low-growing purple-flowered shrub that is common in the British Isles, particularly on the Scottish moors.

Bruyères is very similar in structure and character to *La fille aux cheveux de lin*. The form is ternary, with the *Un peu animé* passage forming the central section.

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| Section 1 (b.1-22) | The key is A flat major, although the opening melody has a pentatonic feel to it. There are brief modulations to the dominant (E flat major, bar 16) and subdominant (D flat major, bars 19-22). |
| Section 2 (b.23-37) | In B flat major. There are four bars of dominant ninth harmony (in F major, b.29-30, then B flat major, b.31-32), a commonly used chord in impressionist music. |
| Section 3 (b.38-51) | Begins with a reprise of bars 8-13, and concludes with a final statement of the opening melody, an octave higher at first (b.44-46), and then in elongated rhythm (b.46-49). It remains in A flat major throughout. |

Other "impressionistic" features include the sense of rhythmic freedom, especially in the opening bars, and the use of parallel fifths and chords which are not triads (e.g. b.14-15). Most of the writing in this prelude, however, is diatonic (using only notes belonging to the key), and is based around dominant-tonic cadences, making it more traditional in its harmonic organisation than many of Debussy's other preludes.

French Terms

Calme - calmly.

Doucement expressif - sweetly expressive.

doux et léger - sweetly and lightly.

Un peu animé - a little animated.

joyeux - joyful.

Cédez - to yield (i.e. hold back the tempo).

au Mouv^t - return to former speed.

En retenant - becoming slower.

doucement soutenu - sweetly sustained.

sans lourdeur - without heaviness.

“General Lavine” - eccentric

(Claude Debussy)

Debussy's *Préludes* (consisting of two books each containing twelve short pieces), were composed between 1909 and 1913. Unlike Chopin's *Préludes*, they follow no particular key sequence. Each *prélude* has a title, containing either a literary reference or a description of a scene, character or event. The titles are placed at the end of each piece (not at the beginning as expected), indicating that they are suggestions for the stimulation of the performer or audience - they capture a moment, or an impression, rather than describing a full “programme”.

“*General Lavine*” - *eccentric* is the sixth prelude in Book II. It is the style and tempo of a Cakewalk - a dance of African-American origin with syncopated rhythms and a ragtime (early jazz) style. *Golliwog's Cakewalk* and *Le petit Nègre* are other well-known examples of cakewalks by Debussy. The title refers to the American comedian Edward Lavine, whose stage name was “General Lavine, the Eccentric”. Debussy captures his stiff wooden gait and his comical juggling antics.

The main key is F major, and the form is ternary.

Introduction (b.1-10) The strident flourish decorating a dominant pedal point is a characteristic gesture of the General, and will return at various points throughout the piece, intruding on the cakewalk as a humorous interruption. The right hand has unrelated parallel triads, a typically impressionistic device.

Section A (11-45)

11-22 The cakewalk proper, in F major, though mostly pentatonic (F-G-A-C-D). The introductory motive makes an intrusion in b.17-18.

23-34 Cakewalk continues, with increasing chromaticism. Bars 25-28 use Neapolitan and dominant 7th chords of G, without ever fully settling in the new key. A dominant pedal in b.31-34 returns the tonal centre to F.

35-45 Cakewalk melody returns as in b.11, but with new harmonisation in b.39-42 using 7th chords. The introductory motive returns in b.43-45, now based around the tonic rather than the dominant.

Section B (46-69) Db major. Begins with the parallel triads of the introduction, now legato and more lethargic compared with before. There is a dominant pedal throughout much of this passage, interrupted by passages of unrelated parallel triads (b.51-54 and 63-64).

Section A (70-93) A reprise of b.11-34.

Coda (94-109) A return of the cakewalk theme in Gb major (the “Neapolitan” key, b.94-100), the parallel triads (b.101-102) and the introductory motive, concluding with a perfect cadence in F major in b.106-109.

Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C

(Claude Debussy)

Claude Debussy was born in France in 1862 and died there in 1918. His output includes an opera, orchestral music (including *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and *La mer*), many songs, chamber and choral music, and much piano music (including *Images*, *Estampes*, *Children's Corner*, *Préludes* and *Etudes*). His musical style, which was deliberately and distinctively French, has an affinity with the *impressionist* painters (e.g. Monet, Manet and Degas). The label "impressionist" (which Debussy objected to) is very imprecise; Oscar Thompson, in *Debussy, Man and Artist*, defined it as applying to art which aims to "suggest rather than depict; to mirror not the object but the emotional reaction to the object; to interpret a fugitive impression rather than to seize upon and fix the permanent reality". The visual artists of this school frequently explored the effects of light and water in their work, often resulting in a general haziness of outline; much of Debussy's music similarly has a vagueness in its harmony, rhythm and formal outline, and an interest in the sensuous aspect of sound.

Debussy's *Préludes* (consisting of two books each containing twelve short pieces), were composed between 1909 and 1913. Unlike Chopin's *Préludes*, they follow no particular key sequence. Each *prélude* has a title, containing either a literary reference or a description of a scene, character or event. The titles are placed at the end of each piece (not at the beginning as expected), indicating that they are simply suggestions for the stimulation of the listener.

Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. is the ninth prelude in Book II. It is a humorous piece, alluding to a Dickensian character. While not as obviously "impressionistic" as some of Debussy's other works, it does contain pedal points, ostinati, modal and pentatonic scales, augmented chords, chords with added 2nds, and parallel-moving triads, which are all characteristics of the impressionist style. The main key is F major, and the form is free.

- b.1-9 "God Save The Queen", quoted strongly and solemnly in the bass, **F major**, with a countermelody in the treble. There is an augmented chord in b.3 (A-C#-F). Modulates to D minor (relative minor) in b.5-6, and to C major (dominant) in b.6-9.
- 9-11 *Aimable*, F major; all diatonic apart from the two augmented chords with which it begins. This motive is derived from bars 3-5 (having a similar melodic shape and use of augmented chords, and having identical bass motives in bars 5 and 10).
- 12-20 *Peu à peu animé*. A new *léger* dotted rhythm motive prevails throughout. Begins in F major, with a tonic pedal in b.15-19. There are occasional chromatic passing notes in b.15-18, but the writing is diatonic apart from this. Modulates to C major in b.19.
- 21-26 Parallel-moving triads, returning to the solemn mood of the opening, all in **C major**.
- 26-30 *Mouv'*. Soft flourishes, alternating G mixolydian and F dorian. The *léger* dotted rhythm motive reemerges in b.29.
- 31-40 *Animez peu à peu*. The dotted rhythms persist. Begins with a sequence in **F major** (b.31-32) then Bb major (subdominant, b.33-34), with parallel 5ths in the bass. This is followed by a more tonally ambiguous passage, due to the use of the chromatic scale (b.35-36) and augmented triads (b.37).
- 41-43 *Mouv'*. The *Aimable* motive returns in F major.
- 44-47 *Même mouv'*. An unharmonised jig tune in **D major** (actually *pentatonic*, since there is no G or C#). Becomes D minor with a *sf* in b.46.
- 48-54 *Mouv' retenu*. A reprise of all of the principal motives in **F major**.

Aimable - amiable. *léger* - lightly. *Animez peu à peu* - becoming animated, little by little.

Retenu - slower. *lointain* - distant. *Même mouv'* - at the same tempo as the previous section.

Canope

(Claude Debussy)

Debussy's *Préludes* (consisting of two books each containing twelve short pieces), were composed between 1909 and 1913. Unlike Chopin's *Préludes*, they follow no particular key sequence. Each *prélude* has a title, containing either a literary reference or a description of a scene, character or event. The titles are placed at the end of each piece (not at the beginning as expected), indicating that they are suggestions for the stimulation of the performer or audience - they capture a moment, or an impression, rather than describing a full "programme".

Canope ("Canopic Jars") is the 10th prelude in Book II. The reference in the title is to the austere funeral urns used in the ancient Egyptian city of Canope (Canopus). It is in a free formal structure, containing three main motives. The tonal centre is D minor, using modal forms of the scale: *aeolian* (the natural minor scale) and *dorian* (with a raised 6th - B natural).

- b.1-6 First motive, D minor, usually in the natural minor form (aeolian mode), though briefly in the dorian mode at the start of b.2. The motive is harmonised with parallel triads. In bar 4, some harmonically unrelated triads are used, with parallel 5ths in the bass.
- 7-10 Second motive, in 2-bar phrases, chromatically undulating but ending on the tonic (b.8) or dominant (b.10) notes. It is harmonised with the dominant 7th of G (i.e. the keynote D now becomes a dominant rather than a tonic).
- 11-16 Third motive, limpid and gently syncopated, in D minor (with an Eb passing note). It is harmonised with parallel triads, each with a perfect 5th in the bass and one or more added notes (e.g. G minor with added 6th in b.11, G major with added 6th in b.12, Eb⁷ in b.13, C⁹ and F⁹ in b.14).
- 17-19 *Animez un peu* - a new motive, featuring 4ths, with the dominant note of D minor in both treble and bass in b.18.
- 20-23 Second motive, now harmonised using the whole tone scale (G-A-B-Db-Eb-F).
- 24-25 Free chromaticism, with demisemiquaver flourishes.
- 26-29 First motive, beginning in D minor, using chords unrelated to the key in b.28-29.
- 30-33 Third motive, left incomplete (i.e. not ending on the tonic). It is now harmonised with a C major chord with added 9th (i.e. the keynote D is now heard as a 9th above C).

Très calme et doucement triste means very calmly, with a sweet sadness.

Cédez means hold back the speed.

Mouv[emen]t means return to the former speed; *1^{er} Mouvt* means return to the first tempo.

Animez un peu means a little animated.

marqué means marked.

Retenu means becoming slower.

très doux et très expressif means very sweetly and very expressively.

Plus lent means more slowly; *Très lent* means very slowly.

encore plus doux means even more sweetly.

The comma at the end of b.25 indicates a "breath" between sections.

The impressionistic characteristics of this piece include:

- vagueness of tonality (frequently lacking a strong sense of harmonic goals).
- use of modal and whole-tone scales, parallel chords, parallel 5ths, pedal points.
- free formal structure and subdued dynamic levels.

Feux d'artifice

(Claude Debussy)

Claude Debussy was born in France in 1862 and died there in 1918. His output includes an opera, orchestral music (including *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and *La mer*), many songs, chamber and choral music, and much piano music (including *Images*, *Estampes*, *Children's Corner*, *Préludes* and *Etudes*). His musical style, which was deliberately and distinctively French, has an affinity with the *impressionist* painters (e.g. Monet, Manet and Degas). The label "impressionist" (which Debussy objected to) is very imprecise; Oscar Thompson, in *Debussy, Man and Artist*, defined it as applying to art which aims to "suggest rather than depict; to mirror not the object but the emotional reaction to the object; to interpret a fugitive impression rather than to seize upon and fix the permanent reality". The visual artists of this school frequently explored the effects of light and water in their work, often resulting in a general haziness of outline; much of Debussy's music similarly has a vagueness in its harmony, rhythm and formal outline, and an interest in the sensuous aspect of sound.

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Feux d'artifice ("Fireworks") is the last prelude in Book II. It is in a free formal structure, depicting the end of a Bastille Day celebration.

- b.1-17 Bitonal; using fragments of the two whole-tone scales (F-G-A and Gb-Ab-Bb-[C-D]). The staccato notes are from the second scale. Ends with a pentatonic glissando.
- 18-34 Tonal centre C. Begins with major 2nd and minor 2nd clusters centred around C. The decorative runs beginning b.25 are pentatonic. The main motive is introduced in b.27, *très en dehors*, with a C tonal centre (shifting briefly to C# and D in b.30).
- 35-43 Main motive, using whole-tone scale, then in Db major with dominant pedal.
- 44-56 Mostly whole-tone based derivatives of the main motive, featuring major 2nds.
- 57-64 Alternating pentatonic and whole-tone flourishes, *volubile*, with bass pedal notes. Bars 61-64 contain successions of parallel [unrelated] major triads.
- 65-70 Pentatonic flourishes, interspersed with fragments of the main motive and a bitonal cadenza.
- 71-78 Main motive in even demisemiquavers, in shifting whole-tone tonality, with an accompaniment of major and minor 2nds
- 79-87 Main theme, against whole-tone background, building to *ff climax*, followed by pentatonic glissando.
- 88-98 A few faint flickers of the fireworks remain, bitonal (reminiscent of the opening). Fragments of the *Marseillaise* (*de très loin*) from in the distance, as well as a last statement of the main motive, are heard in C major, with a bitonal accompaniment.

The impressionistic characteristics of this piece include

- vagueness of tonality (frequently lacking in strong sense of harmonic goals) and meter.
- use of pentatonic and whole-tone scales, parallel chords, pedal points.
- use of dissonance (particularly major 2nds) and bitonality.