

Claude Debussy

Girl With The Flaxen Hair



This month **Bridget Mermikides** transcribes a wonderfully romantic piece by the French Impressionist composer, Claude Debussy...

ABILITY RATING



Moderate/Advanced

INFO	WILL IMPROVE YOUR
KEY: Various	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Technique
TEMPO: 66 bpm	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Expression
CD: TRACKS 13-15	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Classical repertoire

THE FRENCH BORN CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918) is one of the most famous piano composers of all time, and practically synonymous with the Impressionistic field of music. His talent as a pianist awarded him a place at the junior department of the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 10. As a composer, however, he had a much harder time; composing for Debussy was challenging and extremely difficult. Perhaps this was due to his drive to create something completely new and a lot of his compositions were abandoned and left unfinished. His first major work to achieve public success was in 1894 at the age of 32 with his symphonic poem: *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*. This piece with its non-conformist approach to harmony and musical structure

TECHNIQUE FOCUS

FREE STROKE, REST STROKE

Two common picking techniques in classical guitar are free stroke and rest stroke. With rest stroke the picking finger plucks a string and then comes to rest against the adjacent one. With the thumb this is the next string down (towards the floor) and with fingers it's the next string up (towards the face). With free stroke the finger doesn't rest on an adjacent string after plucking, but floats free until it's required to pick again. Rest stroke is usually used for single note playing, while free stroke is for polyphonic playing (chords and arpeggios).

represents the transition from late Romantic to early modernist music. The piece has since become so popular that it has been rearranged and played by musicians such as Brazilian jazz keyboardist Eumir Deodato (it's on his album *Prelude*). It has also been described by the late Michael Jackson as his "favourite song"!


Debussy's music seems so familiar and accessible today with its lush, descriptive qualities and non-traditional compositional techniques, but by the prevailing classical standards of his time it was quite revolutionary and even controversial.

“The pentatonic scale so familiar to guitarists today, was rarely used and was even actively avoided in the classical music of the time”

This month's classical guitar piece is a transcription of one of Debussy's best-known piano pieces: *La Fille Aux Cheveux De Lin* (The Girl With The Flaxen Hair). Written in 1910, this beautiful piece comes from his first book of piano preludes and contains many unconventional elements for its time. The piece is characterised by the opening melody based around a G major pentatonic scale. The pentatonic scale, so familiar to guitarists today, was rarely used in 'classical' music of the time. Incidentally, Debussy may have first been influenced to use pentatonic scales when he heard Japanese music at the 1889 Exposition

Universelle, the opening of the Eiffel tower. The piece also includes ambiguous key centres (fluctuating between G major and E major), unresolved dominant chords and chords moving in parallel motion, again so common to guitarists today, but unusual - and even actively avoided - in the music of the time.

This arrangement has been changed from the original key of Gb to G to make it more playable on the guitar, and should be performed as atmospherically and legato (smooth and connected) as possible.

In the original manuscript are some of Debussy's own thoughts on his intended mood of this piece. The main atmosphere is expressed at the beginning with "Tres calme et doucement expressif" ("Very calm and gently expressive"), and "sans rigueur" ("without rigidity"). So, take it nice and easy at the start and follow the fretting hand fingering suggestions for a smooth melody line. This piece should prove a great addition to your repertoire. 

GET THE TONE



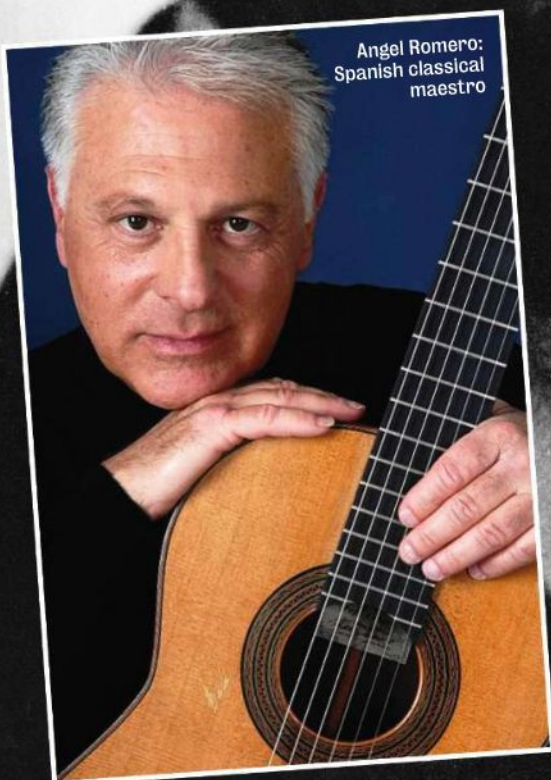
One vital element increasing great tone on a classical guitar is well groomed fingernails. Nails should ideally be filed smooth and rounded at the tips. Classical players don't usually play with flesh at all, so nail length should protrude somewhere between two and four millimetres from the ends of the fingers. Tone is usually varied by picking further towards the bridge (for more treble bite) or towards the soundhole (more bass and warmth). The above settings are suggested for an acoustic amplifier.



TRACK RECORD: If you're looking for a CD with similarly dreamy tracks to think about playing or transcribing yourself, why not consider the (awfully titled) *Most Relaxing Guitar Album In The World... Ever*. It contains great tracks from the likes of Rodrigo, Bach, Vivaldi and many more. But it also features *The Girl With The Flaxen Hair* played by the Spanish maestro Angel Romero so is well worth checking out.

»

CLAUDE DEBUSSY: GIRL WITH THE FLAXEN HAIR



Angel Romero:
Spanish classical
maestro

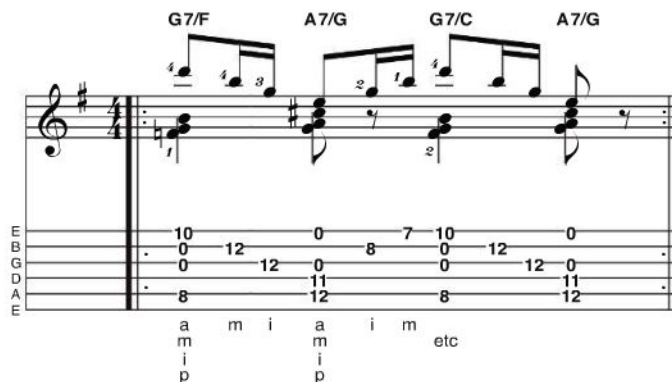
Claude Debussy:
great composer
of romantic music

EXAMPLE1: SMOOTHLY DOES IT

CD TRACK 14

It's worth isolating this tricky bar to examine the precise finger placement of each note in the chord. For an effective musical result, this should be played as smoothly and resonantly as possible.

G7/F A7/G G7/C A7/G




E 10 0 7 10 0
B 0 12 0 8 0 12 0
G 0 12 0 8 0 12 0
D 8 11 8 11
A 8 12 8 12
E

a m i p a m i p etc

EXAMPLE2: OCTAVE PENTATONICS

CD TRACK 14

Here is the E major pentatonic scale in octaves (starting on B) which occurs in bar 21. Scales in octaves are an excellent test of fretboard knowledge and a great technical workout. The plucking hand here suggests alternating the first (i) and second finger (m), together with the thumb. A repeating second finger (m) would also be fine.



E 0 2 0 2 4 7 4 2 0 2 0
B 2 4 2 4 6 6 4 2 4 2
G 2 4 2 4 6 6 4 2 4 2
D 2 4 2 4 6 6 4 2 4 2
A 2 4 2 4 6 6 4 2 4 2
E

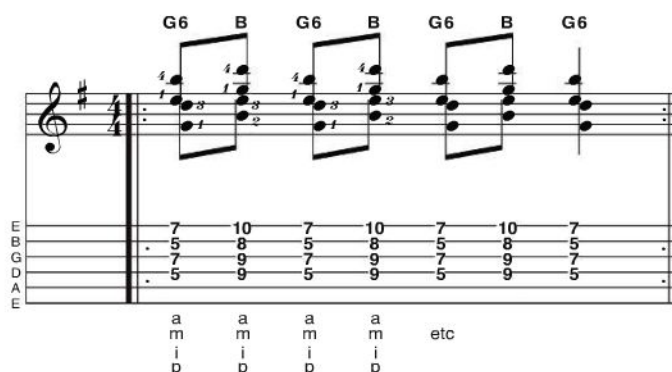
i p i p i p a i m i p i p i p

EXAMPLE3: CONNECTING SECTIONS

CD TRACK 14

Isolating this small section is done in order to work on achieving a seamless connection between these two positions of G6. In the fretting hand, the third and fourth fingers do not need to lose contact with the strings; they simply slide from one position to the other.

G6 B G6 B G6 B G6



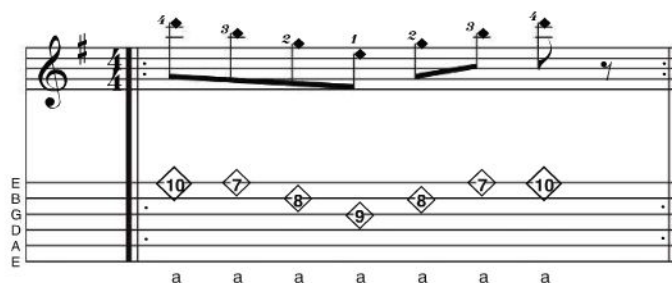
E 7 10 7 10 7 10 7
B 5 8 5 8 5 8 5
G 7 9 7 9 7 9 7
D 5 9 5 9 5 9 5
A 5 9 5 9 5 9 5
E

a m i p a m i p etc

EXAMPLE4: ARTIFICIAL HARMONICS

CD TRACK 14

These artificial harmonics are produced by touching the string with the first finger of the plucking hand directly over the fretwire, one octave (12 frets) above the note being fretted, the string is then plucked with the third finger of the same hand. For the first note (D) the 22nd fret doesn't exist on the classical guitar so an imaginary fret off the end of the fretboard has to be visualised in order to locate the exact spot.



E 10 7 8 9 8 10
B 10 7 8 9 8 10
G 10 7 8 9 8 10
D 10 7 8 9 8 10
A 10 7 8 9 8 10
E

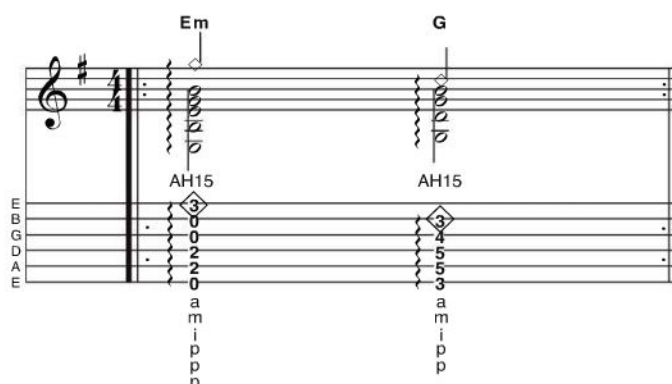
a a a a a a

EXAMPLE5: STRUM PLUS HARMONIC

CD TRACK 14

A chord with an artificial harmonic on top is played by picking the chord from the bottom note upwards with the finger indicated (a). As the top note is approached, the first finger quickly straightens out to touch the string an octave up and the harmonic is plucked with the third finger as in Ex.4.

Em G



E AH15 3 0 2 2 0
B AH15 4 4 5 5 5
G AH15 4 4 5 5 5
D AH15 4 4 5 5 5
A AH15 4 4 5 5 5
E

a m i p p p a m i p p

PIECE

CD TRACK 15

[Bars 1-12] On the first beat of bar 6, the D chord can be played using a hinge bar (keeping the first finger straight but only pressing onto the first string). Keeping the first finger extended when playing the high D note (fourth finger) is helpful

for a smooth switch to the B major barre chord on beat 2. On bar 12 pluck with the thumb twice in quick succession followed by the fingers for the spread Dsus9/E chord.

♩ = 66

1

5

9

12

15

15

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PIECE

CD TRACK 15

[Bars 14-18] In bar 14, there are two parts: melody plus descending chords. Aim to make these two separate elements clearly audible by holding on to the tied melody notes over the chords where possible (a similar passage also occurs

in bars 33 and 34). The five-note Am9 chord on beat 1 of bar 18 is played by dragging the thumb across the lower two notes and then the three fingers pick the rest of the chord.



The sheet music is divided into five systems, each with a guitar staff and a fretboard diagram. The fretboard diagrams show the positions of the fingers for each note and chord.

- System 1 (Measures 19-20):** Chords E and B^{sus}9. Measure 19 has a melody line with a tied note. Measure 20 has a melody line with a tied note.
- System 2 (Measures 21-22):** Chords E, C, D, Em, A, C, D, Em, A, D^{7sus}4, D⁷. Measure 21 has a melody line with a tied note. Measure 22 has a melody line with a tied note.
- System 3 (Measures 23-24):** Chords G⁶, Em⁷, G⁶/D, Em⁷, G⁶, B, G⁶, Em⁷, C^{maj}7, D^{7sus}4, G⁶, Em⁷, G⁶, B, D. Measure 23 has a melody line with a tied note. Measure 24 has a melody line with a tied note.
- System 4 (Measures 25-26):** Chords Em⁷, G/D, Am⁹, D, C. Measure 25 has a melody line with a tied note. Measure 26 has a melody line with a tied note.
- System 5 (Measures 27-30):** Chords Em, G. Measure 27 has a melody line with a tied note. Measure 28 has a melody line with a tied note. Measure 29 has a melody line with a tied note. Measure 30 has a melody line with a tied note.

Techniques indicated include AH (Artificial Harmonic) and NH (Natural Harmonic).

PIECE

CD TRACK 15

[Bar 20 to end] Bar 20 is indicated 'Un peu animé' (translated as more animated on the original) so the pace can be quickened a little here. Bars 22 and 23 are notated in a way that implies 6/8 time so the notes are phrased in two halves.

The artificial harmonics starting in bar 28 are explained in the primer exercise at the beginning of this article. In bar 35 there is a C major pentatonic scale double-stopped in 4ths and some natural harmonics to end.

Chords: C/G, D6/A, Cmaj7/G, Bmadd6/F#, Am/E, G6/D, D9/C, Am/E, G6/D D9/C, G6/D

Artificial Harmonics (NH) starting at bar 35.

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