

PROGRAM NOTES

The piano music of Debussy and Ravel is well known, but perhaps it is often categorized too quickly as “Impressionistic” without enough regard for its more subtle nuances. Labels are by their very nature a matter of convenience, but they can be very limiting. Whether we call Debussy or Ravel an Impressionist, a Neoclassicist, or even a Symbolist is essentially inconsequential. It is much more interesting to see how both composers successfully infused formal structures of the past with their individual tonal, harmonic, and rhythmic innovations and used the sonority of the piano as a vehicle for conveying extramusical impressions, especially those related to nature.

Regarding the neoclassical tendencies, both composers overtly paid homage to music of the past through the use of antiquated dance movements (Debussy with his Sarabande in *Pour le Piano* and his Menuet and Passepied in *Suite Bergamasque*, Ravel with his *Menuet Antique* and *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, as well as the Forlane, Rigaudon, and Menuet in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*) and through the invoking of other composers’ names in their own titles (Debussy with his *Hommage à Rameau* and *Hommage à Haydn*, Ravel with his *Menuet sur le nom d’Haydn*, *À la manière de Chabrier*, and the aforementioned *Le Tombeau de Couperin*). The neoclassical traits go deeper than mere titles, though, for both composers utilized structures prevalent from the 18th century, including sonata form, a practice that had all but fallen into oblivion in the early 20th century. Within these traditional forms each composer spoke with his unique harmonic language (for example, Debussy’s whole-tone scales and Ravel’s diminished octaves, secondary ninths, and raised dominant elevenths).

Ravel is considered the stricter of the two composers, for only some of Debussy’s early works are neoclassical, but Ravel’s neoclassicism generally pervades his entire career. In addition, Ravel’s music tends to be more objective and less expressive (although there are exceptions) than that of Debussy. F. H. Shera says it another way, “Debussy finds classical form a nuisance, and prefers to spin his stories each to its own pattern, but Ravel seems to look to the form first, to the idea second.” One example of Ravel’s meticulous craftsmanship can be found in Ravel’s *Sonatine*, in which all three movements are unified by their key relationships and a recurring motive based on the interval of a perfect fourth.

While Debussy is generally considered more of an Impressionist than Ravel, both composers shared an affinity for capturing the sounds in nature, especially sounds related to water (sometimes called “musical naturalism”). Paul Roberts claims that “Debussy explored the complex question of what equivalents for visual phenomena there might be in sound. Sound too can be reflected, distorted, and transformed, and especially sound on the piano.” The difference in the two compositional approaches regarding both impressionistic sonority and technique is evident, particularly when comparing their “watery” pieces. For example, Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* makes frequent use of the high register, seventh and ninth chords, and pervasive arpeggiation, all of which create a wide variety of sound possibilities in the portrayal of water, whereas Debussy’s *Reflets dans l’eau* uses mostly the ripple effect, with only some brief arpeggios that support his motivic treatment.

Both composers were certainly familiar with and influenced by the other’s works. The Cambridge Companion to Ravel states: “Ravel having been thirteen years Debussy’s junior, it is easily assumed that he started by emulating Debussy before finding his own voice. Closer acquaintance suggests the contrary: that his understandable admiration for Debussy added an extra dimension, one that he assimilated and developed so quickly that it soon concealed its model and even started to stimulate the older composer.”

This program thus presents a variety of mostly familiar works by these two composers, and the works are mostly grouped according to their similar classification (neoclassical or impressionistic) to highlight the corresponding tendencies and distinctions of each.

Debussy began working on the suite **Pour le Piano** in 1894 and finished it in 1901. Elements are found here that were to become essentials of Debussy's harmonic language: unresolved harmonic progressions; parallel fifths and octaves; whole-tone, pentatonic, and synthesized scales; and tonal ambiguity. The opening Prelude is rooted in sonata form and features thematic ideas usually accompanied by rapid figuration. While much of Debussy's piano music is not generally considered to be virtuosic, the multiple glissandos in this movement certainly make a splash. The movement closes with a cadenza that highlights the whole-tone scale. The beautiful Sarabande that follows was composed in the style of the 18th-century slow dance in triple meter but is infused with Debussy's signature parallel seventh and ninth chords. This movement is to be played "with slow and solemn elegance" and follows a basic ABA form. The concluding Toccata features constant rhythmic motion, but plenty of variety is achieved through contrasting thematic ideas, tonal centers, registers, and dynamics. The exciting ending is heightened by an impressive chordal fanfare.

Ravel composed the *Pavane pour une infante défunte* ("Pavane for a Dead Princess") in 1899 while he was studying at the Paris Conservatoire under Gabriel Fauré. Ravel was forthcoming about the influence of French composer Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894) on the piece. He described the piece as "an evocation of a pavane that a little princess might, in former times, have danced at the Spanish court." (The pavane was a slow processional dance that enjoyed great popularity in the courts of Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.) This antique miniature is not meant to pay tribute to any particular princess from history, but rather expresses a nostalgic enthusiasm for Spanish customs and sensibilities. The piece is sectional, with slight variations upon each return of previous material.

Ravel completed the **Sonatine** in 1905. The first and last movements strictly adhere to sonata form, while the second movement is a minuet. As mentioned previously, all three movements are unified through their key relationships (F#m-Db-F#m) and a recurring motive. The opening theme of the first movement begins with a descending fourth, while the second movement starts with an ascending fifth (the inverse of a descending fourth) and features descending fourths repetitively near the end of the middle section. The final movement is toccata-like with its perpetual motion and although it opens with an ascending fourth, the descending fourth plays a prominent role in the secondary theme of both the exposition and recapitulation and throughout the coda.

Debussy composed his first book of *Images* in 1905. The first piece of the set, *Reflets dans l'eau* ("Reflections in the Water") has been described as the most subtle example of Debussian water-music. Debussy described the effect of the first three prominent melodic notes of the piece as "a little circle in water with a little pebble falling into it." As the piece builds, the passionate climax reaches Lisztian intensity before returning to the calm stillness at the end.

Ravel composed his first impressionistic work, *Jeux d'eau* ("Water Games"), in 1901. It is considered by many to be Ravel's supreme achievement, for it was a revelation in both piano sonorities and technique, and it was the first piece to exploit fully the illusory, evocative properties of the instrument. The composer himself said that "This piece, inspired by the sound of water and the music of fountains, waterfalls, and streams, is built up on two themes like the first movement of a sonata, without being entirely subjected to the classical scheme of tonality." While it was consciously modelled on Liszt's *Les Jeux d'Eaux a la Villa D'Este*, it was also inspired by the poem "Fête d'eaux" by Ravel's friend Henri de Régnier. It contains the line "Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille" ("river god laughing at the water that tickles him"), which at the composer's request is the heading in the printed score.

Debussy composed *Jardins sous la pluie* (“Gardens in the Rain”) in 1903 as part of a collection entitled *Estampes*. It is yet another Impressionist water-piece, for there is music symbolic of the patter of raindrops in the outer sections. A more tranquil middle section features a well-known French nursery tune over a murmuring ostinato of major seconds. The brilliant, exultant coda with its flashes of pentatonic arpeggios perhaps suggests that the sun has now finally broken through the clouds and is glistening and dancing on the flowers and greenery in the garden.

Debussy composed his second book of *Images* in 1907. The first piece of the set, *Cloches à travers les feuilles* (“Bells Through the Leaves”), represents a classic impressionistic synthesis of tolling bells and rustling leaves. The bells are first heard tolling in the far distance through the mists of the whole-tone scale, but gradually the atmosphere begins to clear and the ringers gain in confidence, and the culmination is a jubilant peal of sound. The whole piece is fraught with ambiguity in that it is impossible to distinguish between the sounds of tolling bells and rustling leaves, so sensitively are they here fused. Supposedly, Debussy was aware of the habit of some French villagers of sounding the church bells (as a knell) unceasingly from All Saints Day until time of the Mass of the Dead on All Souls Day. The nostalgic vibrations of the bells permeating the forests from one village to another from sunrise to evening is supposedly the stimulus of the idea which suggested this composition.

In 1905, Ravel composed *Miroirs*, a set of five pieces in which “he sought not so much to express and give life to states of mind as to represent the faces and scenes which give rise to them.” *La vallée des cloches* (“The Valley of the Bells”), the final piece of the set and the first truly Impressionist bell-piece, is perhaps a natural development from Liszt’s *Cloches du soir* but is not as subtly contrived as Debussy’s *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, undoubtedly the masterpiece of this genre. The opening of *La vallée des cloches* is very impressionistic with tinkling consecutive fourths, harmony notes struck and sustained by pedals and overtones represented by dissonant gong-like sustained notes in the lower reaches of the keyboard; but the melodic and harmonic tissue later becomes comparatively well-defined. Pianist Robert Casadesus said Ravel told him the piece was inspired by the sound of the bells at midday in Paris.

Composed in 1904 and described as Debussy’s only Impressionist sea-piece for piano, *L’isle joyeuse* (“The Joyful Island”) has been hailed by some as the most wonderful of all Debussy’s creations. It combines the sweeping lyrical abandon of the orchestral *La Mer* with an explosive, incandescent brilliance. The source of Debussy’s inspiration for the piece was Watteau’s *The Embarkation for Cythera*, and it is indeed imbued with the gaiety, animation, and sensual atmosphere of the painting. In addition, the piano writing in this piece is highly indebted to Liszt: the way in which the rapidity and lightness of Debussy’s figurations, allied to the fleeting dissonances of his harmony, create a translucency of texture appropriate to the evocation of sunlight and water, and the way in which he draws from the instrument an almost constant background shimmer.

Ravel composed *Le Tombeau de Couperin* between 1914 and 1917. He explained that the suite was an homage to eighteenth-century French music rather than a personal tribute to François Couperin (1668-1733). The suite is essentially a return to eighteenth-century clarity and elegance, recalling the spare textures, rapid ornamentation, perpetual motion, and brilliant virtuosity of the harpsichord works of Rameau, Couperin, and Domenico Scarlatti. Ravel’s work consists of six movements (Prelude, Fugue, Forlane, Rigaudon, Menuet, Toccata), each of which is dedicated to the memory of a close friend who died in World War I.

Sources consulted in preparation of the above notes include the following: Norman Demuth, *Ravel*; Burnett James, *Ravel: His Life and Times*; Maurice Hinson (editor), *Anthology of Impressionistic Piano Music*; Deborah Mawer (editor), *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*; Christopher Palmer, *Impressionism in Music*; Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy*; and F. H. Shera, *Debussy and Ravel*.