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ELOQUENCE

DEBUSSY

Prélude à l'après-midi
d'un faune

Nocturnes

Images

London Symphony Orchestra
Pierre Monteux

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

1	Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune	9'20
	Nocturnes	
2	I Nuages	6'54
3	II Fêtes	5'58
	Images pour orchestre	
4	I Giges	7'09
	II Ibéria	
5	1. Par les rues et par les chemins	7'11
6	2. Les parfums de la nuit	8'06
7	3. Le matin d'un jour de fête	4'48
8	III Rondes de printemps	7'58

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Total timing: 58'02

For Debussy, three must have been a favourite number. *La Mer*, his orchestral depiction of the sea, is in three movements, and three separate works constitute his Images: *Gigues*, *Ibéria* and *Rondes de printemps*. *Ibéria*, the middle work, itself is in three sections. Although Debussy conducted all three works on the same orchestral program in 1913, *Gigues* and *Ibéria* received separate premieres in 1910, suggesting that the composer did not insist on the three works being performed as a triptych. Indeed, *Ibéria* has surpassed its companions in popularity, and is frequently recorded and performed on its own.

Gigues – originally titled ‘Gigues tristes’ (Sad Jigs) – is the first part of the triptych, but it was the last to be completed. As Debussy’s original title suggests, this is not jolly highland music, nor even a look back at the *gigues* that Louis Couperin and Bach, among others, had introduced into their keyboard suites in earlier centuries. An air of veiled unhappiness hangs over the music, and when the oboe d’amore introduces the jig theme – a fragment from the Scots folk song ‘The Keel Row’ – it sounds distant, ironic, and maybe even a little malign, despite the score’s marking of ‘doux et mélancolique’. *Gigues* was written during a

relatively fallow period for Debussy, who (unlike Puccini, for example) found it difficult to compose on demand, as it were. In an interview with *The New York Times* in 1910, he compared composition to vegetable farming, saying, ‘I can’t force myself ... If you put a lot of chemicals and goodness knows what in the earth you may be able to raise salad in the winter, but it is not the real, true salad ... And in the same way, music born under such conditions is not true music – it is a hot-house product.’

If Debussy was unconvinced about the intrinsic gaiety of British folk music (and of the British isles, which he visited several times), he showed no such ambivalence in *Ibéria*, a cheerful and colourful portrait of Spain – a country he visited just once. This is the score in which Debussy, for all his differences, most resembles Maurice Ravel. ‘Par les rues et par les chemins’ places the listener in the streets and byways of a Spanish town. Rather than writing picture-postcard music, however, Debussy uses scraps of Iberian rhythms here and characteristic melodic turns there to create a vivid but non-literal impression of Spain.

‘Les parfums de la nuit’ serves as an interlude; the intermittent rattle of a tambourine and fragments of themes heard in the previous section remind us that the time has changed, but not the country. As the title suggests, this is music whose sensuousness one can practically smell.

The final section, which arrives without pause after a sly transition (‘it sounds as though it is improvised,’ remarked the composer) evokes the morning of a festival day – a cue for the use of orchestra bells. Other percussion instruments (castanets, tambourine, xylophone, etc.) add to the brilliant atmosphere, yet Debussy skilfully avoids Spanish clichés and writes music so authentic that even composer Manuel de Falla approved of it.

From the Scotland of *Gigues* and the Spain of *Ibéria*, Debussy returns to his native France in *Rondes de printemps*, or ‘Spring Rounds’. (The title implies an element of dance.) In the course of about seven minutes, the music seems to depict an earth awakening – not without poignancy – from its winter slumbers and at first slowly, and then more explosively, breaking forth in fruits and blossoms. The nationalistic element comes from the quotation of two

French songs, the nursery lullaby ‘Do, do, l’enfant, do’ and ‘Nous n’irons plus au bois’.

Nocturnes (1897-99) is another tripartite orchestral work, although the third section (‘Sirènes’) is sometimes omitted – as it is on Montoux’s recording here – because it calls for a wordless women’s chorus. If we are to believe the overall title, these are night pieces. ‘Nuages’ refers to clouds, but not necessarily, as fellow composer Paul Dukas correctly noted, in the meteorological sense: the music suggests quiet restlessness, and that which is unfixed and constantly shifting. Debussy referred to it as a ‘grey agony, tinged gently with white’.

This cloud-piece, so ethereally devoid of fleshly substance, is succeeded by the vibrantly living and breathing ‘Fêtes’ which swirls with human activity, cheerful light, popular music and dancing. Perhaps the setting is Paris, because in the middle of the celebrations, a military band appears in the distance – the Garde Républicaine, perhaps? – and draws ever closer. At the climax, the military procession merges with the people’s celebration, and then Debussy skilfully dims the lights on both of them, leaving listeners to wonder whether what they heard was real or imaginary. Comparing *Nocturnes*

favourably to *La Mer*, French critic Pierre Lalo praised 'the subtle sensations of the night, wind, and clouds passing through the sky' in 'Nuages' and 'the dazzling and delicate impression of dances, light, and distant uproar' in 'Fêtes'.

The orchestral work in which Debussy arrived at his mature style was *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (Prelude to 'The Afternoon of a Faun'). Biographer Edward Lockspeiser, alluding both to the work's unprecedented form and content, wrote, 'something had snapped, and something also had disintegrated.' Stéphane Mallarmé's Symbolist poem describes a woodland faun, who, awakening in a languorously erotic state of mind, is not sure whether he only has dreamed about a visit from the forest nymphs, or whether it has actually occurred. The music, full of fine 'painterly' details, perfectly mirrors the still yet supercharged atmosphere of Mallarmé's hazy, sexual poem.

At its 1894 premiere, there was fogeish muttering from more conservative elements. This, however, was nothing compared to the scandal that erupted in 1912 when Vaslav Nijinsky turned it into a ballet and made its

implicit auto-eroticism very explicit indeed. A bit of stage business involving the faun blissfully lowering himself groin-first onto a nymph's discarded veil might raise eyebrows even today. By the second performance, the police was present, in case a disturbance erupted in the auditorium. What Debussy thought of Nijinsky's masturbatory interpretation of the score's closing moments is not on record, but a few years later he gave an interview to a Roman journalist and decried the dissonance between the indistinct outlines of his music and the sharp edges of Nijinsky's choreography, taken as a whole.

Raymond Tuttle

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Recording producer: Erik Smith (Prélude, Nocturnes)

Recording engineer: Kenneth Wilkinson (Prélude, Nocturnes)

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