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FOREWORD

Historical
Context
of
*Pour
le
piano*

Pour le piano (For the Piano) was begun in 1894 and completed in 1901. Its first performance, on January 11, 1902, was given by Ricardo Viñes in the Salle Erard for the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris. Viñes premiered many works of Debussy, Ravel and other contemporary composers. The Toccata movement was repeated as an encore.

An early version of the second movement, Sarabande, first appeared in the *Grand Journal*. This early version contained a number of different harmonies that Debussy changed in the final version we know today. It originally was part of a series entitled *Images*, dedicated to Yvonne Lerolle, that remained unpublished during Debussy's life. This series was finally published as *Images oubliées* in 1978.

The publisher Fromont issued *Pour le piano* late in 1901. The first movement is dedicated to Mlle. Worms de Romilly, a student of Debussy, who said that Debussy "tellingly evokes the gongs and music of Java" in the work. The second movement, Sarabande, revised somewhat from its 1894 version, retained its dedication to Yvonne Lerolle, who had become the wife of the publisher E. Rouart. The third movement, Toccata, was dedicated to another of Debussy's students, Nicolas Coronio, a wealthy dilettante and amateur musician.

The first performance received an enthusiastic review from the critic of the *Temps* (Times), Pierre Lalo. Maurice Ravel orchestrated the Sarabande, and the first performance of this arrangement took place on March 18, 1903, in the Salle Gaveau, with Paul Paray conducting.

Analysis
of
*Pour
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piano*

This suite is a major landmark in Debussy's compositional career. It is his first mature piano work and shows the disciplined influence of Bach as well as of the 17th- and 18th-century clavecinists. Yet in spite of the backward glance to its earlier harpsichord and organ ancestry, it marvelously exploits the entire expressive resources of today's concert piano.

The material in *Pour le piano* is classically proportioned and contains elements 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. Debussy's extensive use of the whole-tone scale was his most daring harmonic divergence from the diatonic tonality that characterized his earlier piano works. Whole-tone usage such as that heard in the *Prélude* (measures 57–58, 75–96, 134–141, 151 and 153–157), contrasted with Aeolian mode patterns, adds greatly to the musical material.

The suite is divided into three movements: Prélude, Sarabande and Toccata.

Prélude. This movement is in sonata-allegro form: Exposition = measures 1–58; Development = 59–96; Recapitulation = 97–133; Coda = 134 to the end. It is based on modal (Aeolian) harmony combined with whole-tone scales. The rapid *martellato* (strongly marked) theme is accompanied by reiterated figures that encircle it and is sometimes emphasized by brilliant, full chords.

Sarabande. Debussy was fond of the sarabande and constructed this ethereal movement on daring, solemn, parallel seventh and ninth chords. The Baroque form of this noble dance was slow and dignified and in triple meter without an upbeat. A stress, frequently on the second beat of the measure, characterized this dance. Debussy's sumptuous movement contains all of these characteristics. It is written in an ABA song form: A = measures 1–22; B = 23–41; A¹ = 42–59; Coda = 60 to the end. The A¹ section includes some beautiful reharmonizations that add much interest, while the Coda uses material that refers to the B section.

Toccata. This brilliant "perpetual motion" movement is full of arpeggios, scalar passages and triadic figurations. It was Debussy's most virtuosic pianistic piece and adventurous exploration of sonorities to date. Fast 16ths in repeated-note technique give it a distinctive Baroque quality. Its formal plan is a large ternary design: A = measures 1–77; B = 78–138; A¹ = 139 to the end.

From this work on (1901), Debussy's writing for the piano displayed greater maturity and the essential characteristics of his style. The correct performance of this suite requires a special interpretive style in keeping with Debussy's ideas and intentions. According to Louis Laloy's notes, published in 1909, which reflect Debussy's own ideas, pianists should avoid all romantic affections. There should be no effort to emphasize the melody since its proper prominence is provided for in the music as written. Likewise, there should be no stressing of chords that form the harmonic framework of the thematic material. Instead, the pianist should aim at a blending of patterns so as to produce a "sonorous halo." The grace notes with strokes through their stems (as in measures 63–64 in the Sarabande, page 18), should be neither detached nor emphasized; rather, play them with a bold, transparent tone (but not percussively), then let the keys go while the pedal sustains the sound. Debussy played this suite with an intently trained ear rather than "with heart." A successful performance of this suite requires the pianist to be concerned with sound rather than to search for passion, heroism, sweetness or any kind of "argument."

Prélude. This movement is a marvelous study in pedal sonorities and requires subtle use of all three pedals. The use of una corda and sostenuto pedals in measures 27–34 and 97–114 might require a slight adjustment of the left foot: turn the heel of the left foot slightly outward (towards the left) to more easily depress both pedals simultaneously. The opening subject and its return (measures 1–5 and 43–56, 119–133) should be powerful (*forte*), steady in tempo (*très rythmé*), nonlegato (indicated in the score at measure 1) and *martellato* (indicated by dashes and wedge-shaped accents in measures 1–4). One of the movement's greatest problems (after measure 5) is sustaining the low bass A. If a sostenuto pedal is available, depress it quickly after playing the bass octave A at measure 6 and hold it through measure 23; it should be released on the first note of measure 24. Depress the sostenuto pedal quickly again at measure 27 to catch the low A; release it on the first note of measure 39. Keep the section from measures 6–40 as mysterious sounding as possible. Do not begin a crescendo before measure 40. Keep the chords at measures 43–45 in tempo; play these chords with firm fingers, with the first chord having the fullest sound. Play the glissando with the third finger, beginning almost piano, and crescendo greatly toward the top C. Debussy wanted this sort of glissando scale to be brushed off in virtuoso manner with a follow-through comparable to the gesture of a tennis player after a strong stroke.¹ Try to keep the 16ths beginning at measure 59 murmuring

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without blurring. Keep the whole-tone section (measures 71–96) under careful control so that it reflects absolute, clocklike precision. In the cadenza (measures 148–157), play in free rhythm but keep in mind the proper relation between 16ths, 32nds and 8ths. Make the scampering runs in measures 150–153 fill approximately the four beats of each measure. Measures 154–155 require less time, and measures 158 to the end are bold and courageous and should be projected with dramatic clarity.

Performance time: 4 minutes.

Sarabande. A fine performance of this movement requires a sensitivity to the noble quality of the dance—one that respects its grave and slow elegance. A sensitive rhythmic control in a manner free of rubato is desirable. Arpeggiate only the chords so indicated and roll them as inconspicuously as possible, beginning on the beat. Keep the rhythm firm and stately, even though the dynamics of the melodic line should be clearly shaded with slight crescendos and decrescendos. Differentiate clearly the triplet in measure 1 from the two 16ths plus an 8th at measure 5 and similar places. Emphasize the tension and release in the harmonic texture: measure 1 builds in tension to be released in measure 2, etc. Distinguish the *portato* dots in measures 2, 4, 16, 18, etc., by playing them not quite legato. Be aware of the general lyric smoothness of chords in section **A**—note the contrast with section **B**, which uses chords that produce a more dissonant effect.

Marguerite Long said Debussy played this movement “as no one could ever have done, with those marvelous successions of chords sustained by his intense legato. ‘To the metronome,’ he said one day before I started playing. This shows how solicitous he was that his tempos should remain immutable for all time.”²

Performance time: 4 minutes.

Toccata. This movement is an example of neoclassicism in its balanced integration of melody, harmony, rhythm and counterpoint. *Vif* means lively, brisk, or quick, but not fast—many pianists begin this movement too fast. A fine performance will reflect a classical clarity of all the patterns, steady tempo, and exactness of all the note durations Debussy indicated. Measures 1–8 must be clear and brittle, while beginning at measure 9, the 16ths need only be well articulated. Do not exaggerate the crescendos in measures 50–61, but match them to the generally quiet dynamic level throughout this section. Beginning at measure 78, the left-hand melody must be heard and the repetition of the quarter note should be played with another sonority, like a lively echo. The tone quality of the pianissimo sections (measures 26–41, 81–89, 137–180) should be delicately penetrating; it should sound like a fortissimo heard at a distance. The tone quality of the fortissimo sections (measures 198–204, 228–235, 249 to the end) should be ringing rather than blatant. A springy, resilient and cushioned touch can help achieve this ringing quality. Be especially careful of the numerous dynamic marks in measures 236–249; follow them strictly. The final nine measures should sound like a glorious fanfare, achieved with the help of one long pedal. In later issues of the Fromont edition, the direction *Le double plus lent* (not quite twice as slow) was added. Marguerite Long says: “Beware of a wrong instruction (*Le double plus lent*) at the end of the piece in some older editions. Debussy never knew the culprit who was responsible for this.”³

Performance time: 4 minutes.

The "Anatomy of a Classic" series is designed to help the pianist take apart, then reassemble, the masterpiece presented. It will help the performer in synthesizing many of his/her previous musical disciplines that may have been experienced separately. By discussing and analyzing the work in its proper context with other compositions and events, these editions allow the intelligent pianist to realize a more accurate stylistic performance.

At some point it is absolutely necessary for players to study the compositional process to realize a more correct performance. This editor believes that analysis is an indispensable part of preparation for performance.

The first edition (Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, Vm⁷ 17827) published by Fromont in 1901 was used as the basis for this edition. The Peters (Leipzig, 1973) and Henle (1984) editions were also consulted.

All pedal, metronome marks, fingerings, measure numbers and translation of French terms are editorial. All marks in parentheses are editorial. "Una corda" (one less string) indicates to use the soft pedal. "Tre corde" (three strings) cancels the una corda, so that all three strings are struck by the hammer. "Sos." indicates use of the sostenuto pedal, while "off sos." indicates release of this pedal.

Performance time is approximately 12 minutes.

The editor hopes this performance, analytical and pedagogical edition will help the pianist to understand more clearly some of Debussy's creative processes and introduce him/her to one of the composer's masterpieces.

I would like to thank the staffs of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris and the Centre de documentation Claude Debussy in Saint-Germain-en-Laye for their assistance with this edition.

About This Series and Edition

Debussy on Music. The critical writings, collected and introduced by François Lesure; trans. and ed. by Richard L. Smith. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

Roy Howat. *Debussy in Proportion.* London: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Béla Siki. *Piano Repertoire.* New York: Schirmer Books, 1981.

This edition is dedicated to Dr. Arthur R. Tollefson
with admiration and appreciation.

Maurice Hinson

For Further Reading

¹Maurice Dumesnil, "Coaching with Debussy," *The Piano Teacher* 5 (1) (Sept.–Oct. 1962): 12.

²Marguerite Long, *At the Piano with Debussy* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1972), p. 23.

³*Ibid.*, p. 24.

Endnotes

Pour le piano

(For the Piano)

I. Prélude

Claude Debussy
(1862 - 1918)

Assez animé et très rythmé (Rather lively and very rhythmic) ♩ = c. 132

2 2 3

f

1 2

non legato

4

1 4 2

dim.

p

un peu retardé (slightly relaxed)

1 1 2

7

3 2 2 1 2 3

sos. peu à peu reprendre le mouvement (gradually return to first tempo)

1 1 1

10

2 5 1 4 2 5

13

1 2 1 2 2 2 1 3 2

