ALFRED CORTOT

THE PIANO MUSIC OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY

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BY

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THE PIANO MUSIC OF CLAUDE DEBUSSY.

We have been told often and ably what constitutes the novelty and the technical invention of Debussy's music. Mention has been made of the refined audacity of a harmonic language which seems to elude analysis, praise has been bestowed on the subtilty of a style which neglects the ceremonious conventions of modulation and which tolerates between tonalities, apparently most remote from each other, relations of unexpected and delicious intimacy, and the marvel of an art whose substance and aim is renewed by one and the same stroke is justly acknowledged.

In fact, at the same time that he revived the mysterious pleasure of sounds by creating the fine harmonic atmosphere in which his sensibility or his fancy delights, Debussy restored to instrumental virtuosity a singular poetic value and a power of pleasing of which it seemed that the Franckist tendencies had for the time being deprived French music in favour of a more austere direction.

Whether in his orchestral work or in the quartett or in the three sonatas following each other, unfinished alas! one meets with this acute knowledge of the exceptional resources of the instruments, adapted with so happy a precision to the sensations he means to suggest.

Now it is the detail of particular accent which, by means of the ingenious rhythm, touches up a picturesque passage lightly but definitely; again the employment of unusual registers which, by altering the tones, gives the intense colouring of most of the descriptive pieces, or else the fluid, transparent, almost motionless sonority of those harmonic depths which are so familiar to him and from which the musical images seem gradually to emerge, voluptuous or confidential, to melt into them again as they vanish.

None of these effects or combinations, it is true, but have long been known to instrumentalists curious of the limits of their art, though rather as a kind of sport or extra-musical artifice. It needed the extraordinary acuteness of perception and the imaginative lucidity of an artist as delicately sensual as Debussy to discern the advantage given him by them and to incorporate with such perfect taste, such appreciation and liberty, new elements

like these in the musical language proper to him. In spite of the apparent impersonality of the sonority of the piano, Debussy succeeded as well in drawing from it combinations of tones exactly appropriate to his descriptive needs and just as characteristic as those he employed for the orchestra or for ensemble music, from his first attempts.

In a remarkable article which appeared the day after the first representation of "Pelléas," Paul Dukas declared himself unable to analyse separately a music intimately bound to the poem and compared such an attempt to one consisting in the wish to see a stained glass window in the shade to enjoy its splendour, deprived of the light which assures its reflections.

Debussy's piano music, too, has its constant poem living in it, moderating or sharpening its inflections, precipitating or slowing down its pace, imposing its silences, inspiring its details, modelling its proportions, and this secret poem is imagination. Not only musical imagination, such as Chopin's or Schumann's or Fauré's, which is sufficient to itself and which translates without explicit formulation human dreams and wishes, but a precise imagination employing the most definite suggestions of the mind and the senses.

We would like, in the course of this study, to avoid the reef pointed out by Dukas, without concealing from ourselves however that it is a bold design to attempt, along with the description of so personal a musical form, the analysis of the inner feeling which must dictate its interpretation.

Yet it may be that by means of an epithet the sonorous charm of a phrase may be rendered sweeter, more insinuating; that in attaining sensibility by evoking images, we shall prepare a more fertile soil for musical emotion, and, without pretending to have penetrated always the intentions of the composer, that the very fact of wishing to explain to oneself all the reasons of a preference may dispose others to feeling it also.

The first works for piano, composed between 1888 and 1890, the two Arabesques, the Ballade, the Mazurka, the Rêverie, the Nocturne, the Valse romantique, are, to tell the truth, but feeble in foreshowing that refined musical sense, sovereign in its power, expert in dispensing sensations, which will be that of the "Préludes," the "Estampes," or the "Images."

Spite of the frequently ingenious use of rhythms and sonorities which are not familiar to the lyrical pieces of most of his contemporaries, Debussy yet seems in these to be sensitive like them to

the combined influence of Grieg and of Massenet, whose entirely amiable tyranny raged at this time among so-called "drawing room pieces." The graces which flourish in these somewhat colourless works still savour of the classroom and one finds it hard to explain why, at the very time that saw the birth of these wise productions, the Institute thought it a duty to denounce the audacious tendencies of the musician of "Printemps" and "La Demoiselle Elve." But, if we must wait some years yet before being able to enjoy that incisive and luminous technique by which the pianistic writing of Debussy shows its relation to certain Degas canvases or Chinese prints; we may agree to pick out of the production of this period three pieces which, under different aspects, merit special attention: the "Fantaisie pour piano et orchestre," the "Suite Bergamasque," and "Danse."

It is known that Debussy, having withdrawn the "Fantaisie" (written in 1888 and constituting the last part of that music sent from Rome, so badly received by the musical section of the Institute) from the programme of a concert of the Société Nationale, on the pretext of the defective orchestration of the Finale, did not authorize its publication during his lifetime.

Hence to the cry of sacrilege on the recent first hearing of this work, was only a step for some musicians whom one did not suspect of being so careful of the posthumous glory of Debussy, but there is reason to believe, to reassure these honest minds, that the reasons which moved the harshness of the author were not exclusively of the musical order. In any case, while admitting Debussy's reserve with regard to certain weaknesses of orchestral realisation and that not only in the Finale, in regretting even a defect of proportion which cuts short the last part as well as the recapitulation and the coda of the first movement, there remains all the same the fact that the Fantaisie is a work containing more than the promise of a student, as has been said rather inconsiderately. The freshness and simplicity of the ideas of the first movement, the dreamy and tender melancholy of the slow movement, the mysterious transition which links it to the Finale and the decision of character which, in this movement, underlies the rhythmical modifications of the initial theme, all this belongs to a musician sure of himself, in possession of his personal expression if not yet absolute master of his business. And if we were to study that which, in the writing of the piano part, treated in imitation of Vincent d'Indy's "Symphonie sur un thème montagnard," as a concerting rather than solo instrument, is different

from the earlier works of the same period and foreshadows the caressing technique of the descriptive pieces, it is precisely the intelligence with which its special tone is employed and the amount by which the piano, mingling with the orchestra, enriches and diversifies the presentation of the musical phrase by the contribution of its light virtuosity, the enveloping quality of its pedals and the picturesque colouring of its sonority of percussion.

Although less personal and subject occasionally to reminiscences of Fauré, which are not its least attraction, the " Suite Bergamasque," gently swayed by the Verlainian breeze, already contains that slightly affected mixture of the modern and the antiquated which will characterise a number of later pieces in which are invoked the delicate shades of the harpsichordists, those chosen ancestors of Debussy.

He here renews, without caricaturing, their graces and manners, indicating the happy formula which will be stated with so much elegance in the suite called " Pour le Piano," in " Mouvement," in the first set of " Images," or in the prelude : " Les Tierces alternées," to quote examples.

With the capricious speed and the patches of sun and shade in the piece called " Danse," we also enjoy by anticipation the bounding pleasure of the rhythm which will animate Debussy's music with a joy so new and so personal. Here already are the accents and combinations of the " Collines d'Anacapri," of "Masques," of the " Cakewalk," of " Children's Corner," and the melodic design, while offering a singular analogy to the theme of the " Fantaisie pour piano et orchestre," which it reproduces almost literally, foreshadows also the lively arabesque of the " Danse de Puck."

If we now seek for the reasons by virtue of which these three works seem to us superior to the pianistic production of the same epoch in Debussy's career, and indicate so exactly what his mature style will be, we should remark that two of them, " Danse" and " Suite bergamasque," are of a descriptive order, evoking sensations rather than sentiments, and that in the " Fantaisie," it is from the colouring of tones and the play of rhythms rather than from the development of ideas that the work takes its value.

We here touch on one of the secrets of the acute and intuitive genius of Debussy.

He had such a perfect gift of embodying in sound visual impressions, whether direct or suggested by imagination, the plastic arts or literature, that he has been able to give the full

measure of his art in a domain of sensations hitherto almost closed to music. It is rare to find at the back of his inspiration one of those sentiments which, since the Beethoven revelation, have moved the soul of composers and animated their works, that is to say human passions, griefs or enthusiasms. Not that he repudiates or disdains musical emotions, but by a sort of aristocratic reserve, he intends rather to suggest it to us by rebound than to make us feel it directly.

And rather than act sentimentally on our organism by the pathetic solicitation of a personal emotion, rather than create that sonorous architecture, beautiful in line and form, whose pure discipline knows how to content our spirit, it is almost without our cognisance, by the secret voluptuousness of two linked chords, the vibrating nervosity of a rhythm or the mystery of a silence, that he releases full into our sensibility that arrow whose insinuating and delicious poison will procure us, as intensely as reality, the sensation he had intended. An art with a mechanism so delicate, which supposes such harmony between the gift and the business must naturally lend itself to the translation of the rarest sentiments. We shall see indeed that the interpretation of Debussy's work exacts an imaginative collaboration more literary and more subtly shaded than any music hitherto had required.

There are some who, with regard to this mode of expression, so different from what our ears and our intelligence had accustomed us to experience or to imagine, by which Debussy opens before us the beautiful virgin horizon of unsuspected sensations, have spoken of Russian influence and specially of Moussorgsky's. In the orchestral works it is true, certain manners of instrumentation, the frequent divisions of the strings, the characteristic use of the wind instruments, the artificial modifications of their timbre, witness to an undisguised taste of Debussy for the inventive technique of a Rimsky or a Balakirev. But it is only a question of a passing assimilation of descriptive means which does not lessen either the originality of the writing or that of the ideas. And when we compare the almost confidential character of the most significant piano works of Debussy with the clearly exterior tendencies which adorn the compositions of the Russian school, with that restless sensuality brought to it by the East, that popular or legendary sentiment which conceals under a designedly naïve musical illustration a cunning mechanism and a conscious recognition of the effect, we cannot entirely accept the insinuation.

There remains Moussorgsky, for whose music, it is true,

Debussy professed a comprehensive affection analogous to that formerly inspired in Robert Schumann by the musical poems, so astonishingly novel, so full of exaltation and of repressed tears, of the Pole Frédéric Chopin. We shall find him, with regard to the "Chambre d'enfants," expressing sincere emotion in speaking of the mysterious power which slumbers in the few notes of these intuitive pages. And we know what pains he took, with a personal activity foreign enough to his habits, to arouse enthusiasm about him for "Boris Godounof" or "Khowanchina," which he was undoubtedly the first to recognise in France. But even if some analogies of manner or of writing to an art so profoundly admired are to be discovered in Debussy's work, the essential differences of race and of culture which separate the two temperaments remain but the more noticeable.

An interval of a decade separates the production of the youthful works from the piano compositions in which the magic power of Debussy will henceforth be revealed. Ten years filled with the tender and sad meditation which inspired "Pelléas," with the ecstatic ardour of the "Quatuor," with the sensual languor of the "Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune," with the new sonorities of the "Nocturnes," in which the reflection of sky and sea, the richly repressed burst of sound of the patrician rejoicings seem, by a miracle of orchestration, to be born from the very music which translates them; ten years during which Debussy was daily making more supple his means of expression by the patient research of an art undaunted by the fatigued eloquence of romanticism, and was comparing his own sensibility with the most refined literary forms of Baudelaire, of Verlaine, and of Stéphano Mallarmé, or with those sentiments which in Maeterlinck seem to float between two depths, whose sleeping mystery his music will elucidate.

On his return to piano music after this long retirement, he wrote in 1901 the three pieces of the suite "Pour le piano," in which are inscribed in most attractive fashion the modifications effected in his technique since the works in his first manner, and which may be considered as a sort of transition from those works to the others whose secret he already bore within him.

No suggestive title—the pieces are called: "Prélude," "Sarabande," "Toccata," and are apparently inspired only by the rapid and clear pleasure of a play of sounds, or, in the "Sarabande," by the noble and peaceful gravity of an ancestral cadence.

But their writing reveals a precise ingenuity, a diversity of means, a harmonic taste so appropriate to the expression of the sensations that they already seem to break forth in blossom on the surface of a music which scarcely continues to conceal them.

From 1903 to his death, the piano compositions succeed each other in almost uninterrupted succession and form the essential part of his production, with the exception of some songs, of "Saint Sébastien" and of two orchestral works: "Mer" and "Images." And as to the last it must be noticed that they only form the third series of a suite of pieces given out under the same generic title and inspired by an analogous sentiment, of which the first two sets are composed for the piano.

It is with the "Estampes," written in 1903, that Debussy really crystallizes the kind and form of those deep or charming works which renew the poetry of the piano, in which there laughs and plays, listens or sighs, infinitely multiplied by each vibration, that Ariel with invisible wings, who knows all the perfumes of the night, all the shivers of the water, all the voices of the wind, all human emotions.

He will henceforth like to suggest their atmosphere by a title or an epigraph elastic enough not to freeze the interpretation by a puerile care for imitation yet at the same time definite enough to maintain it in the quality of expression required by them, and will only abandon this principle in his very latest works, where a third manner seems to be announced: that of the "Sonates pour divers instruments" and the "Etudes pour piano," whose musical or technical argument is their only pretext.

The three pieces which form the set of "Estampes" offer a happy example of that adaptation of title to the character of the music and show how this prolongs mysteriously the delicate impulse given to our sensibility. The first of these pieces: "Pagodes," might have no other ambition than that of awaking in us the idea of a site and architecture of the farthest Orient by slightly conventional employment of exotic sonorities and modulations. But by the magician's privilege proper to Debussy, from the first notes of the careless, though precise and unhesitating rhythm which embroiders the minute design of its successions of fourths, thirds and seconds on the immobile held notes of the syncopated accompaniment, there is not only that purely descriptive sensation imposed on our minds, but, as in a dream, the delicious nostalgia of those lands of delicate light in which are harmonized the gentle rites and traditional dances, the feasts of

fishermen, and the cunning, patient and premeditated chronicles of a distant civilisation.

" Soirée dans Grenade " also is not content with evoking only the nights of Spain and their conventional delights of guitar and castanets, but we shall feel there the voluptuous shivers of an occidental soul at the troubling and perfumed thought of the Alhambra gardens in the evening heavy with odours ; we shall hear through its desire those sad love songs which rise at night from the Moorish quarter in which are expressed monotonous and feverish destinies, and also the stifled sounds of those Iberian rhythms which start the dancing of the beautiful girls, grave and arrogant.

In "¡Jardins sous la pluie¿" there is, over the thickets of Paris rusted by the summer, the light shower through which the sun laughs. A print, indeed, but of so fine and penetrating a quality, that, in spite of the continual vivacity of the fingers on the notes, we shall perceive in it, under the melancholy colour of a nursery round, the furtive regret as it were of a vanished happiness. " Masques " and " l'Isle joyeuse," written and published in 1904, seem to mark a slight return towards the form and kind of the early works, " Masques " especially, of which certain passages are striking in analogy to the piece called " Danse," or to many formulas of accompaniment of the first songs with Verlaine's words. Both pieces are rather long, seeing the generally limited dimensions of Debussy's piano pieces. And in spite of their perfect achievement, in spite of the care shown of a musical development normally sustained, or perhaps even because of this care, they seem not to have all the persuasive originality of the works of the same period.

Without doubt there lives and moves in " Masques " all the comedy of Italy, its colour and movement : Scaramouche with his fine doings, Cassandra ridiculed, Zerbinette irritating, Pierrot dreaming to the moon and hidden by friendly night, Harlequin at the feet of Colombine. And " l'Isle joyeuse " spreads the snare of its laughter and easy pleasures before the careless lovers whose light barks draw up on its fortunate shores, under the friendly looks of Watteau, of Verlaine and of Chabrier of whom one must think under the sensual bent of this music. Further, what we may call the pianistic orchestration of these compositions—in the absence of terms which might define more exactly the variety of combination of registers which animate them with their caressing fancy—is literally an enchantment and Debussy has never sur-

passed the ease and assurance with which he makes the rhythms play with them.

In spite of this, in spite of the fire and ingenuity of these two pieces, their musical attraction and the perfection of their construction, it may be we do not find in them, at least to the extent of our expectation, that rare pleasure whose secret Debussy has taught us, because the subjects he has proposed have sinned by too direct suggestion.

Indeed it is not unjustly that it has been said of Debussy that he is above all the musician of those mysterious relations of sensations by which, as Verlaine says " l'imprécis au précis se joint." He himself defines the quality that touches him especially in some musical works as—a transposition into sentiment of the invisible in Nature. So when, instead of awaking in us, by the sonorous and powerful magic of the harmonies and rhythms, one of those states of subtle receptivity which incites us to perceive the indefinable that sings and vibrates under the appearance of things and beings, he proposes to us a picture whose composition is finished far enough to exact no longer that intimate collaboration of our sensibility, we cannot prevent ourselves from experiencing a feeling which is almost that of deception.

But in the long run, is there a proof more convincing than this same deception of the depth reached in us by those feeble accents of eternal poetry which are the revelation, the new essence of his music, which carry in them the inexpressible power of genius ?

The two books of " Images," each composed of three pieces which form a contrast to each other according to a plan of tonalities and of movement of which an example has already been given in the suite " Pour le piano " and the " Estampes," are respectively written and published in 1905 and 1907. They are very significant of the conscious and, from this period, definite orientation, which draws Debussy towards the search for a musical expression as subtle as the sentiments and impressions he wishes to translate, and which are, henceforth, the sole inspirations of the form.

Their virtuosity constitutes the atmospheric element, if it may so be called, which envelopes and bathes, attenuates or crystallizes the relations of the sonorities. This very new conception of the character and power of the instrument confers on the piano technique of Debussy a poetic personality which protects it from being confused, even superficially, with the inventive virtuosity of Liszt or of Chopin, of which it is nevertheless the offspring.

But while with those two musicians the ornaments and arabesques are added to the essential melodic line, proceed from a theme, enhance a development, augment by some means the expressive and dynamic life of the composition, the fluid formulas of Debussy tend to blunt the contours, to veil the harmonies and almost to prolong silence.

Three pieces at least, of the six which make up the " Images," will permit us to taste the very special flavour of this plan and the happiness of its application. These are, in the first series, " Reflets dans l'eau," and in the second, " Cloches à travers les feuilles " and " Poissons d'or." Here, in " Reflets dans l'eau," is the luminous and floating slumber of the reversed aspects and the slow images drawn out of the swaying mirror of the sonorities, in the delicious transparency of chords and florid arpeggios ; in " Cloches à travers les feuilles " the murmur of branches scarcely poised, the sweet cradle song of the silence, green shade and repose, penetrated without disturbance by distant vibrations, suspended and prolonged as it were by the enveloping pedals. And " Poissons d'or " which, in the trembling of running water of the lively and clear virtuosity, give the dazzling flight of a gleam—a reflection, then another—a quivering and capricious life, which now hides, now bounds forth, captivated by the sorcery of the music.

We may add to these pieces as participating in the same spirit, although the volubility of execution is there absent and only the harmonic language and the employment of the pedal assures its suggestive character, the second " Image " of the second series : " Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut."

Notwithstanding the preciosity of the title, its sentiment is simple and penetrating and is in harmony with the meditative beauty of a site slowly composed by time, which pursues into the misty night the silent dream of its ruins. "L'Hommage à Rameau" and "Mouvement," which complete the first series of " Images," proceed from a motive less deliberatively of the nature of an invocation, although it is not possible to ignore the discreet appeal to imagination made by the titles. And it is possibly no error nor sentimental exaggeration, which gives us to suppose that the magnificent and solemn lyrical effusion of " l'Hommage à Rameau " is addressed, under the symbol of a favourite name, to the whole line of brilliant geniuses issued from our land, affiliation to whom may so justly be claimed by Claude Debussy, the French musician, as he liked to call himself.

It is the profound soul of the race that is recognised in this noble song, which confers on it, with the emotion, its measure and its melancholy dignity. And the poetic amplification which here seems to be imposed on the interpreter, can assuredly only honour the music which knows how to inspire it.

Under the apparent indifference of a design of repeated crotchets urged and pursued by an equal murmur of triplets, the piece called "Mouvement" really gives birth to the sort of rhythmic tyranny which Stravinsky and, after him, Bartok, Casella and some other young musicians have ingeniously and consciously used to advantage. We shall not find in Debussy's work, it is true, the untiring obstinacy of a rhythm which persists, grows eager and exasperated by its own monotony, and determines that sensation of elementary and primitive force which is one of the most recent, if not the most characteristic acquisitions of music. The dominating impression in "Mouvement" is that of a light and lively joy, of activity without frenzy, but the principle we have just mentioned is nevertheless found deliberately expressed in it.

A new sentiment, of inexpressible charm and tenderness, appears in 1908 in Debussy's piano music, with "Children's Corner," dedicated "à ma chère petite chou-chou, avec les tendres excuses de son père pour ce qui va suivre." And "ce qui suit" is so delicately moved, so mischievous and dreamy at the same time, so ingenuously filled with all childish poetry, that we shall only find to compare to it in the vast musical production which owes its inspiration to similar sources the "Kinderscenen" of Schumann, the "Chambre d'enfants" of Moussorgsky and "Dolly" by Gabriel Fauré; an adorable triptych in which are to be read sentiments both puerile and profound, where intuition mingles with remembrance and where the touched smile that looks on is sometimes veiled by involuntary tears.

We do not know how to define better what touches us so delicately in "Children's Corner" than by borrowing from Debussy himself the terms he used with reference to the "Chambre d'enfants." Here is what he wrote in 1901 in an article of the Revue blanche, dedicated to Moussorgsky: "No one has spoken of the best in us with a tenderer or more profound accent . . . . . never has so refined a sensibility been translated by such simple means . . . . . it is sustained by and composed of little successive touches, bound together by a mysterious link and by a gift of luminous clairvoyance."

Are these not the very words needed to characterise the idea and the plan of " Children's Corner ? " And the relation of these lines to the miniature chef-d'œuvre by which Debussy himself was to confide to us, a few years later, the harmonious secret of paternal happiness, does it not give a very singular force to the known maxim that to understand is to be equal to ?

For the rest, beyond the initial similitude of subject, no comparison of form or of spirit between the two works. The melodies of Moussorgsky awake in us the highly flavoured and popular notion of the Slav child's life, full of spontaneity, impetuous and naïve. They evoke its reveries without sense and its magnificent romps, the sudden tendernesses and the turbulent vivacity which is a rough trial of the scolding vigilance of old Niania, the familiar and superstitious dispenser of wonderful stories.

Debussy, on the other hand, depicts in " Children's Corner " the elegant and supervised games, the discreet archness, the charming movements of a little town girl, and even of a Parisian child already a coquette and a bit of a woman, whose witty fancy seems sometimes tempered by the half divined presence of a traditional English Miss.

Was it to underline this malicious appellation with a tenderly amused accent that Debussy was pleased to give, in harmony with the title of the whole, an English name to the six numbers which constitute, according to his own formula, the " programme " of " Children's Corner ? " For anyone who knows how much a certain form of humour, scarcely indicated, was a habit of his, whether in talking or thinking, a reply in the affirmative is no matter of doubt. But the artistic quality of such rare and, in some degree, universal order of these pages and the penetrating sweetness of their sentiment, only allow such part of these humorous details to show as is necessary to give the troubling character of resemblance to these sketches from a beloved model.

From the very first measures of " Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum," there is the charming vision of the child at the piano, and the slightly humorous tale of her frank, unequal and resigned struggle againt the monotonous complications of the perfidious Muzio Clementi. What boredom, what unfathomable discouragement or what invincible need of distraction by a ray of sunlight, by a passing fly, by a rose shedding its petals, is revealed by those brusque stops, those sulky slowings down. And towards the end, what an irresistible bound to movement, to games, to liberty at last recovered ! Then, with " Jumbo's Lullaby," we have the

fine stories chanted gently to the placid felt elephant, too big for the little arms that nurse him.

She tells them to him without using words, these stories she invents herself, a Scheherazade six years old, who pursues in waking moments that inner prodigious dream of childhood, more intense than reality, more captivating than fairy stories. Then is it the child or the plaything that goes to sleep? Perhaps both.

We must no doubt impute to the rudimentary knowledge of the English language possessed by Debussy the slight error which makes him call the following piece: "Serenade of the Doll," while the index on the front page of the series gives: "Serenade *for* the Doll." The French translation certainly gives the exact sense in giving: "Sérénade à la poupée," and not "*de* la poupée." It is a very small detail, but has nevertheless its interest for the interpreter, since it allows one to substitute for the slightly sarcastic imitation of mechanical movement all the defiant grace and free fancy of a childish joke, gazed on by the fixed smile of the new doll, immobile in the exaggerated attitude in which the last caprice has left it.

"Snow is dancing"—and it is a melancholy pleasure to follow with one's eyes, one's face pressed againt the window of the warm room, the indolent fall of the flakes. But what has happened to the birds and the flowers? And when will the sun shine again?

"The little Shepherd;" little imaginary charming herd of the naïve flock which has just been taken out of its box and which smells so good of varnish and resin, how you bear in you all the poetry of that unsuspected life which your ingenious metamorphosis creates, all its pastoral sweetness, its silence and its distances!

"Golliwog's Cake Walk;" ataxic and dislocated, the puppet puts itself out of joint according to the free rhythm which breaks its bounds and there are such bursts of fresh laughter, such delicious gaiety in guiding its comic attitudes, that an inexpressible emotion makes the hand noting the game tremble with tenderness.

There is scarcely need to point out the art with which the pianistic writing of "Children's Corner" harmonizes with its subject. No virtuosity or scarcely any, a delicious care for the shades and colours, a sort of fragile perfection of the business which equals the delicacy of the idea.

The year 1909 and the beginning of 1910 are occupied by

the orchestration of the third series of "Images," and by the composition of some songs; two short pieces alone, during this time, augment Debussy's pianistic production without enriching it, and separate the publication of "Children's Corner" from that of the "Préludes." The first, called "Sur le nom d'Haydn," was intended for a musical supplement of the review S.I.M. published in 1909, which, under the general title of "Hommage à Haydn" comprised six sketches due to the collaboration of Debussy, Dukas, R. Hahn, V. d'Indy, Ravel, and Widor. A sort of musical acrostic, planned after the German tradition, identifying the letters of Haydn's name with notes, furnished the initial theme of these pieces. Debussy's is pleasing and ingenious, no more, and indeed, without pretending to more.

In 1910 appeared a waltz, "La plus que lente," half a parody, half serious, and beyond question totally insignificant. But in the same year which saw the blossoming of this indigenous flower, the genius of Debussy asserts itself more sensitively inventive, more sensitive and more varied than it had yet been, with the publication of the first book of the "Préludes."

The romantic conception of the "Prelude," as it was born in the sensitive imagination of Chopin, the ardent and comprehensive expression of a human sentiment which has no other constraint than the very limit of its torment or of its exaltation, would only suit Debussy transposed according to the exigences of a more objective art and of a less impulsive sensibility.

Not that he ignores the penetrating accents of a music by which is given out a sad secret, nor that he neglects the tumultuous and agonising power of a sonorous paroxysm: "Des pas sur la Neige," or "Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest," show this in a sufficiently convincing manner, but he does not abandon for that the exact control of his emotion, and when he intends to provoke ours, it is not by the feverish means of a passionate inspiration.

He insists, on the contrary, in his last works, on that apparent reserve of feeling, which determines not only the personal character of his piano music but also the special pleasure it procures us.

It solicits our receptivity gently, invites it by the wise choice of subjects to a delicate effort which is almost collaboration and is satisfied with a feeble impulse, whose speed it knows will be multiplied by our imagination.

Adapted to this new and expressive mode, the "Prelude" with

its character of improvisation, the poetic value of its limit, its docility in translating all musical ideas without imposing on them the severity of a pre-established development, was bound to offer to Debussy the resources of a form especially favourable to the realization of his tendencies. In fact, none of the piano works has reflected more faithfully than the "Préludes" the freshness and diversity of an art whose magic power seems to grow still finer.

In France and Italy principally, the commentary of the "Préludes" has been attempted several times. We do not think that the fear of an inevitable accord of sentiment or expression with those excellent essays should forbid a new analysis of the most significant pianistic work of Debussy, and in making our excuses for the repetitions the reader may find in it, we hope that in the absence of other qualities they will at least bear witness to the descriptive certainty of a musical process which brings to light such remarkable agreement.

The following notes refer to the twelve "Préludes" of the first book :

"Danseuses de Delphe ;" grave and silent, they evolve to the slow rhythm of harps, zithers and flutes. And in the mysterious shade of the temple, in which hover the heavy vapours of the sacred perfumes, there reposes, invisible and present, the unknown God who meditates destinies.

"Voiles ;" boats at rest in the luminous port. Their sails flap gently and the breeze which swells them draws towards the horizon, where the sun is sinking, the flight of a white wing over the caressing sea.

"Le Vent dans la plaine ;" furtive and rapid it glides over the cropped grass, fastens on the bushes, tumbles the hedges, and sometimes, in the young ardour of the morning, with a more brusque breath, bows the springing corn with a long trembling wave.

"Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir ;" this is the lingering trouble of the dying day, the perfumes which slink in the caress of the air, the confused vibrations that the gentle night gathers up as it advances, and, to limit one's self to the sense of Baudelaire's epigraph, the languishing dizziness in which a heart faints without reason.

"Les collines d'Anacapri ;" movement in light, a sunny vision of the hills of Naples ; a lively tarantella rhythm rolling along to the nonchalance of a popular refrain, the delicious and banal nostalgia of a love cantilena mingles intensely with the

vibrations of too blue a sky, wounded by the untiring and piercing animation of a rapid flute.

" Des pas sur la neige ; " on the sad and frozen background of the winter landscape whose sonorous spell is pronounced by Debussy, there are faint tracks still showing after the departure of the absent friend, each one sadly awaking the memory of a happiness that is gone.

" Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest ; " across the livid gleams of the dawn, or in the terror of the night, this is the awful vision of the tempest in which, among the howlings of the unchained sea, there pass cries of agony rejected by the waves.

" La Fille aux cheveux de lin ; " a tender paraphrase of the Scoteh song of Leconte de Lisle, who tells the charm and sweetness of the distant beloved, " seated in the flowering heather."

"La Sérénade interrompue;" a nocturnal and malicious fantasy à la Goya, translating the timid passion of a " novio," his love songs under a closed window, and his fearful or angry emotions at a sudden noise or for an " estudiantina " passing in the neighbouring alley, on a rhythm of guitars, nervous and arched, already found in " Iberia."

" La Cathédrale engloutie ; " a Breton legend tells that in clear mornings when the sea is transparent, the Cathedral of Ys, which lies slumbering and accursed under the waves, emerges sometimes slowly from the depth of the ocean and of the ages. The bells ring and the chanting of priests is heard. Then the vision disappears again under the indolent ocean.

" La Danse de Puck ; " capricious, mobile, ironic, aerial, the subtle Shakespearian genius flies, flees away, returns, here plays with a rustic whom he tosses over, there with a couple whom he insults, then swiftly vanishes.

" Minstrels ; " a humorous and genial evocation of the atmosphere of a music-hall. Some English acrobats give themselves up phlegmatically to terrifying turns on the stage, while a burst of sensual music suggests the facile charm of the haunt of pleasure.

The twelve Preludes of the second book, published in 1913, are inspired by impressions of like character, perhaps still more filmy and elaborate. Besides this, the composition of some of them seems determined by the initial seduction of a combination of sonorities to which the subject is adapted afterwards, rather than by the sensation itself expressed by those sonorities.

Debussy seems thus to prepare himself for the writing of the

Etudes in which we shall see him abandon the translation of sentiments and images for the sole graces of refined virtuosity and of an essentially physical musical pleasure. But in spite of the evident traces of this advance to a new manner, this set is so closely related to the one preceding it by the general unity of style and by the fineness of the decoration that we shall find in it for the same causes the same reasons for admiration and attachment.

" Brouillards ; " a mist of sonorities, suspended by the superposition in the minor second, of tonalities which mingle in confusion, lend an unreal, almost phantasmal aspect to the melodic line which tries to free itself. Some brief gleams, lighthouse rays snapped up at once by the fog, the abrupt vanishing of which renders the atmosphere still more equivocal and uncertain .

" Feuilles mortes ; " the gentle, slow whirling of leaves which come to rest noiselessly on the ground ; the melancholy splendour of an autumnal sunset which seems to bear all the emotions of a long and sad farewell.

" La Puerta del Vino ; " a bold and popular picture of the corner of a Spanish street, the gloomy inn where the muleteers linger exciting with their guttural voices and dry clapping of their hands the nervous and sensual dancing of a black haired girl.

" Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses ; " here, following the charming caprice of an aerial virtuosity, is the light flight of impalpable visions, the fleeting play of reflections, the dancing life of the flame, the whirling column of smoke, all that flies and dissolves under the caress of the air and in the joy of light.

" Bruyère ; " the pastoral and familiar poetry of a thicket where the penetrating perfume of the earth joins the dull splendour of purple patches.

" Général Lavine eccentric ; " the ironic precision and humour of a Toulouse-Lautrec. This is the puppet himself as shown to us by so many Folies-Bergère, with his vast coat and the living wound of his mouth, splitting the fixed beatitude of his smile. It is above all the clumsy bound of his gait, complicated by the intentional accidents of a burlesque pantomime and broken suddenly by the tremendous spring of a pirouette.

" La Terrasse des Audiences du clair de lune ; " under this slightly hermetic title, whose pretentious charm has the flowery grace of certain Chinese literary fantasies, is hidden one of the most deeply musical and most deliciously sensitive works of

Debussy. A brief exposition of the popular melody " au clair de la lune," only the first notes, poetised by a delicate harmonization of sevenths, on which there seem to glance and rest the lunar rays of a slow chromatic descent, and there we have all the amorous restlessness of the perfumed nights and their voluptuous emotions.

" Ondine ; " for those who know how to see her, she rises to the waist, dripping, fascinating and nude, from the calm sparkle of the waves that rock her. And for those who can remember, how attractive and tender she is, her murmuring voice telling of the treasures of the floating palaces and of the sweetness of her love.

" Hommage à S. Pickwick, Esq., P.P.M.D.C. ; " it is not possible to conceive a more spiritual musical adaptation, not only of the character of Dickens' hero, but of Dickens' very style. Here is his caustic good humour, his spicy malice, and every measure of this piece is a detail that counts, from the serio-comic use of " God Save the King " to the jaunty whistling of the last page, while the music passes through those alternations of absent gravity, timidity, and pleasure in himself which compose the humorous personality of Mr. Pickwick.

" Canope ; " the pensive and gentle lines of this piece have the nobility itself and the measured design of the antique cinerary urn which serves it as symbol. This sad and tender chant, trembling through the voice of a languishing flute, tells the inextinguishable love of the adolescent shade whose secret torment sleeps in these light ashes with a slumber that does not forget.

" Les Tierces alternées ; " the technical argument of the harpsichordists renewed, which is the cause of this fantasy, has been utilized by Debussy with charming ingenuity. For him it is a pretext not only to amuse himself with the sonorities, but also with the feline grace of the movement that gives birth to them. He juggles with this round interval of the third, like a cat with a ball of wool, makes it bounce, sends it into a corner, then, after a moment of apparent indifference, with a brusque blow of the paw, brings it back again into the game.

" Feux d'artifice ; " this last " Prelude " is an enchantment of magic virtuosity. Slumbering vapours of Bengal lights, from which solitary sparks rise up, the explosion of fuses, slow parabolic descents of stars, the humming of suns, the dazzling display of multicoloured bouquets, all that sparkles and shines in the night, all the fairyland of light, is in the music. And with the

coquetry of an artist who adds finishing touches to his canvas, Debussy slips into the last measures a few notes of "The Marseillaise" which become all the popular poetry of the dusty nights of the 14th of July.

We should like in passing to note the unusual typographic disposition affected by Debussy in the two sets of Preludes, which consists in giving at the end only of each piece the title allotted to it, as if he seemed to desire the reader to take pleasure in guessing the sentiment he describes musically, so that the verification of a right sensation may cause a sort of intimate glow of satisfaction. This is a piece of graphic tactics à la Mallarmé, inspired undoubtedly by the purest symbolism and of which the artificial effect can only be of the shortest duration.

One more remark, the Preludes are without dedication. Also dedications are rare with Debussy. Here is to be seen a new sign of his somewhat haughty reserve, not of indifference or pride; he never, like some of his contemporaries, went so far as to dedicate his works to himself, as a proof of his self-esteem, but he only did homage with them as a proof of special ties of affection, admiration or friendship. The dedications of the sonatas or of "Children's Corner," "l'Hommage à Rameau," the names of intimate friends such as J. E. Blanche, the engraver Charpentier, Louis Laloy, Ricardo Viñes who was the first interpreter of most of the piano works, or even that of Chopin which figures on the title page of the Etudes, establish the delicacy and sureness of his choice.

There can be no question of including in the works for the piano specially, the mischievous and charming relaxation called "Boîte à Joujoux," a ballet for children in five pictures, which Debussy wrote in 1913 after the text and paintings of André Hellé. This mobile music, accompanying and crystallizing childish events, cannot be deprived of the assistance of the pantomime which animates with its artificial emotions and fictitious existence the naïve troupe of children's playthings.

But it is an exquisite pleasure to follow out for oneself the musical fancy and spiritual invention of this piano part, which, without even exceeding the sonorous limits of a discreet commentary, lives like an orchestra with feigned colours and delights in its own mischief in every bar.

The war found Debussy already cruelly stricken by an inexorable illness which he concealed with that sort of distant coolness which was not the least singular external trait of this

nature whose artistic reactions all showed a quivering sensitiveness. The sad trend of events, even more than illness, was bound to slow down a production that drew its inspiration only from the free and subtle joys of the spirit whether by choice or native elegance.

Two pieces however are directly inspired by the idea of the war; one dated December, 1914, written originally for piano and orchestrated later, called "Berceuse héroïque," whose dedication is: "pour rendre hommage à S. M. le Roi Albert 1er de Belge et à ses soldats;" and the other for song and piano, "Noël des enfants qui n'ont plus de Maison," dated 1915. "La Berceuse héroïque" is a moving and dignified page, worthy of the sentiment which dictates it, in which, in an atmosphere whose tragic simplicity makes one think sometimes of Moussorgsky, resounds in noble guise that "Brabançonne," whose voice, formerly intimate and modest, became the sublime voice of a people at war.

A task, at once musical and patriotic, but unexpected, and which, without the war, probably would not have claimed the attention of Debussy, was also to occupy a part of his last months of existence by attesting once more his taste in piano matters. Begged by Jacques Durand to collaborate, by a revision of some text, in a French edition of music classics designed to replace foreign editions, he chose the work of Chopin, for whom he professed, from the time of his studies at the Conservatoire, a preference that had never been given up, even at the time when the sense of a nice opportunity commanded musicians, hailed as such beforehand, to neglect tendencies not under the formidable auspices of Wagnerism.

In this revision it is of no use to seek analytical notes, advice as to interpretation, modification of fingering or any indication whatever of pedagogy. Debussy had an aversion from this sort of parasitic observations which did not exclude disdain and of which the preface to the Etudes is a piquant testimony.

But his delight is in the delicate harmonic flavour and the purity of the melodic design, and his corrections, if not all inspired by an exact and profound knowledge of Chopin's work, at least show a sensitive love of his genius. In Debussy's own circle they liked to say that he played the piano like Chopin. In fact, his touch was delicious, easy, sweet and mysterious, made for fine nuances and intimacy, without jerks or interruptions; he used the pedals with infinite art and, like Chopin, he preferred pianos with a tone sweet to an extreme. But these are purely superficial

coincidences and that which gave the profound personality to the playing of Chopin or of Debussy was beyond doubt more than a question of sonority.

The twelve Etudes for piano are contemporary with this revision, having been written during the summer of 1915, and their dedication " à la mémoire de Frédéric Chopin " shows the interest Debussy had taken in this intimacy of several weeks with the thought and works of the Polish master.

These are real studies of virtuosity, each one treating exclusively of a special difficulty, thus in the first set : for the " Five Fingers," for thirds, fourths, sixths, octaves, for eight fingers ; and in the second book : for chromatic steps, for ornaments, for repeated notes, for opposing sonorities, for composite arpeggios, and for chords. Debussy appears thus to establish, as Liszt and Chopin had done in compositions of analogous designs, the amount of technical processes of which a knowledge is necessary for the pianistic interpretation of his music.

Yet from each of these dry scholarly arguments he extracts such a variety of effect, he employs the musicality of these successions of intervals or of voluntarily identical formulas so ingeniously, he develops them with such independence of writing and so fine a sense of the natural poetry of the piano, that, far from seeming to resolve a definite problem, these studies one after the other, give the impression of a free translation of an inspiration which could find no more natural way of expression.

Here one meets, with combinations familiar to us already from the earlier works, in which the personality of Debussy inscribes itself in so characteristic a manner, a whole unsuspected gamut of pianistic sensations, all the more striking and original because the suggestion of a literary idea no longer comes in to explain or attenuate their audacious novelty. Independently of its musical quality, the technical value alone of this work, the first of this kind in which the principles of modern virtuosity are affirmed under the ægidius of a great name, will possibly suffice to create for Debussy a place, in the gratitude of the professors of piano of the future, of which his best and most ironical humour would assuredly never have conceived the exceptional didactic importance.

Such is Debussy's work for the piano. We may add some four-hand pieces, such as the spicy " Marche écossaise des Comtes de Ross," written in 1891, orchestrated about 1908, the popular and charming " Petite Suite," published in 1894, of which there

also exists an orchestral adaptation, but not by Debussy, and "Six Epigraphes antiques," which appeared in 1915, the lesser relations of certain of the Preludes. Three pieces for two pianos, united under the title "En Blanc et Noir" and composed in the middle of 1915, besides an unimportant composition "D'un Cahier d'Esquisses" for two hands, published in 1903 at Brussels, come to close this list of works conceived with love for an instrument which the greater number of French composers began to neglect from the date of the Wagnerian influence, in favour of sonorous translations of greater volume of sound.

The quiet and persuasive example of a Claude Debussy or of a Gabriel Fauré, confiding to the intimacy of the piano the translation of their emotion or fancy, in the epoch of exaltation in which music seems only able to express itself by means of the multiple voices of the orchestra and according to the dramatic or philosophic exigences of a sacred rite, has served not only to demonstrate the delicious and effortless originality of their spirit in giving back to the young musicians of our land the taste for that art at once living, sensitive, intelligent and reserved, valuable in quality rather than quantity, which, whether picturesque, impulsive or confidential, is always dominated by an exquisite sense of proportion, and which, in the playing, recreates both the form of the composition and the character of the instrument, the author of the "Préludes" and "Images" is well worthy of the glory he would choose, it seems, above all others, to dwell in our faithful memories as Claude Debussy, the French musician.

ORIGINAL PIANOFORTE COMPOSITIONS
OF
CLAUDE DEBUSSY

1888 **Arabesques** (Nos 1 et 2).
1890 **Rêverie.**
„ **Ballade.**
„ **Danse.**
„ **Valse Romantique.**
„ **Suite Bergamasque** (Prélude, Menuet, Clair de lune, Passepied).
„ **Nocturne.**
1891 **Mazurka.**
1901 **Pour le Piano** (Prélude, Sarabande, Toccata).
1903 **Estampes** (Pagodes, Soirée dans Grenade, Jardins sous la pluie).
„ **D'un cahier d'Esquisses.**
1904 **Masques.**
„ **L'Isle joyeuse.**
1905 **Images** (1re série) (Reflets dans l'eau, Hommage à Rameau, Mouvement).
1907 **Images** (2e série) (Cloches à travers les feuilles.—Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut.—Poissons d'or).
1908 **Children's Corner** (Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum, Jumbo's Lullaby, Serenade for the Doll, The Snow is dancing, The little Shepherd, Golliwog's Cake-walk).
1909 **Hommage à Haydn.**
1910 **La Plus que lente** (valse).
„ **Douze Préludes** (1er vol.) (Danseuses de Delphes, Voiles Le vent dans la plaine, Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir, Les Collines d'Anacapari, Des pas sur la neige, Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest, La fille aux cheveux de lin, La Sérénade interrompue, La Cathédrale engloutie, La Danse de Puck, Ministrels).
„ **Douze Préludes** (2e vol.) (Brouillards, Feuilles mortes, La Puerta del vino, Les Fées sont d'exquises danseuses, Bruyères, Général Lavine, eccentric, La Terrasse des audiences du clair de lune, Ondine, Hommage à S. Pickwick, Esq., P.P.M.P.C., Canope, Les Tierces alternées, Feux d'artifice).
„ **La Boîte à joujoux** (Ballet enfantin).
1914 **Berceuse héroïque** (Livre du Roi Albert, 1915).
1915 **Douze Etudes** (dédiées à la mémoire de Fréd. Chopin) : Vol. I. (Pour les cinq doigts, Pour les tierces, Pour les quartes, Pour les sixtes, Pour les octaves, Pour les huit doigts); Vol II. (Pour les degrés chromatiques, Pour les agréments, Pour les notes répétées, Pour les sonorités opposées, Pour les arpèges, Pour les accords).