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Claude Debussy's Children's Corner – A Pedagogical Guide

Nolan Pribnow

BACKGROUND

Claude Debussy was a composer of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Known for his distinct approach to music, Debussy was a prominent musician in the era known as *Impressionism*. The son of two storeowners, Debussy was born and raised in Burgundy, France. He began piano lessons at a young age, studying with the famous Italian musician, Jean Cerutti. After the arrest and imprisonment of his father, Debussy was sent to live and study with French pianist, Antoinette Mauté, who prepared him to enter the Paris Conservatory in 1872 (Howat, Lesure). During his education at the conservatory, Debussy won several prizes and awards. In addition to his academic accomplishments, he was also the recipient of the coveted *Prix de Rome* in 1895. He had the opportunity to attend recitals of the master performers of the time such as Franz Liszt. Debussy's rigorous education and performance studies eventually enabled him to become a renowned pianist and composer. He composed hundreds of works for solo voice, piano, chamber ensembles, and orchestra throughout his life, premiering several of his own works. Debussy was one of the first Western composers to step out of the accepted sound palette and structural mindset of traditional composition and is considered a seminal figure in the twentieth century (Hinson, *Guide to the Pianist* 306). His works remain part of the pianists' standard repertoire.

Debussy wrote the *Children's Corner* (1906-1908) for his daughter Claude-Emma, who he called Chouchou. The suite consists of six pieces that, despite their French origin, have English titles. Some of the pieces were named after visual scenes and Chouchou's toys, while others were given satirical titles (Gordon 368). Although named *Children's Corner*, the pieces are not to be performed by children but intended to evoke childhood memories, fantasies, and images by mature performers, and require a well-developed technique.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

A student learning Debussy's *Children's Corner* must be properly trained to handle a wide range of physical and musical demands. An experienced teacher, who is able to analyze and anticipate musical and technical challenges, demonstrate specific musical passages, and develop an organized plan of sequential learning steps, will successfully guide the student-learning process. As a teaching guide, this project addressed each piece individually, highlighting various technical and musical challenges, followed by pedagogical recommendations for addressing these challenges.

DOCTOR GRADUS AD PARNASSUM

The first piece of the suite was given a satirical title "Gradus ad Parnassum" (Latin—steps to Parnassus used to signify gradual progression of learning). It playfully mocks the technique exercises practiced by young pianists of Debussy's time. The piece is a representation of a young student practicing his technique exercises. The fast moving sixteenth notes at the beginning of the piece portray a student beginning his daily regimen of technique exercises.

Midway through the piece, the student slows down in his playing, portraying boredom and deviation from practice. However, the pupil is scolded at the end by his teacher and quickly speeds up into a toccata section ending with a dramatic finale. In a letter to his friend, Jacques Durand, Debussy wrote, "*Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* is a kind of health-oriented, cumulative gymnastics: it should be played every morning before breakfast, beginning *moderato* and ending *spiritoso*." The exertion of the piece is ironic because it surpasses the difficulty of the exercises of Clementi or Czerny (Hinson, *Debussy—Children's Corner* 2).

Students learning this piece face technical challenges of dexterity in fast passages, voicing of separate lines within one hand (indicated by double stems), and the use of several different articulations, often concurrently within each hand. In addition to many technical barriers, there are also several musical challenges present in this piece. Students must be able to voice within the context of an individual line and use expressive elements to engage the audience.



Example A: *Doctor Gradus Ad Parnassum* (mm. 1-2)

Finger independence is a challenge presented within the first two measures of the piece. In addition to being able to play the piece with facility, the student also must shape phrases dynamically through the use of crescendos and diminuendos. Finally, the student must be able to voice the melodic line that is present in the first note of each group of sixteenth notes. Practice suggestions include: playing scales and arpeggios with various articulations, tempos, and dynamics; and playing each of the sixteenth note figures above at slow tempos, making effort to voice the first of each four note group.



Example B: *Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum* (Debussy mm. 3-4)

Similar to Example A, measures three and four also present challenges of dexterity. However, these measures incorporate contrasting articulations between two hands and a musical challenge of voicing two melodies in the context of one line. Practice suggestions for

articulations include first practicing the passage *staccato* then *legato*, feeling the extremes of both articulations, thus aiding the student in achieving a middle ground for the counter melody while playing the eighth note melody with a vibrant staccato touch, and second, playing each sixteenth note figure at a slow tempo, taking time to acquire the desired sound with a very gradual increase in tempo.

JIMBO'S LULLABY

It is not certain why the name “Jumbo” was changed to “Jimbo” in this piece, but some believe that Debussy's poor English was the reason for this change. In the original manuscript, the time signature was 4/4. In a letter to his friend Durand, Debussy says, “For Jimbo's [tempo] *moderato* should be just right.” In later editions however, the time signature was changed to 2/2. The edited time signature gives the piece a rocking motion that represents an elephant walking (Hinson, *Debussy—Children's Corner* 3).

Unlike the subsequent pieces in the suite, “Jimbo's Lullaby” explores the lower register piano (Gordon 369). Technical challenges include physical control of dynamics, voicing specific tones within chords, arm (lateral movement) efficiency, and use of pedals. Musical challenges include phrasing direction, voicing of lines, and dynamic control. Because of the uniqueness of this piece, it is common for elements of categories to overlap.

Example C: *Jimbo's Lullaby* (Debussy m. 19) Example D: *Jimbo's Lullaby* (Debussy m. 25)

Measures nineteen (Example C) and twenty-five (Example D) present challenges of arm suspension and dynamic control. In measure nineteen, the left hand drops on the first and second beat, suspending the arm on the third and fourth beat. Great care must be taken not to emphasize the second beat of the measure, particularly in measures twenty-one through twenty-eight, which are not marked with a *tenuto* on beat two. Maintaining a consistent, measure-to-measure lateral gesture provides a “rocking” accompaniment, like that of a toy elephant, with prominence given to the melodic line above. In addition to the challenges associated with the left hand, the right hand also deals with relaxed arm suspension to accommodate the multi-voiced texture. The right hand must depress the whole notes in measure twenty-five in the alto line while articulating the melody in the soprano line (see Example D). To do this, the student needs to develop balanced arm weight within one hand by practicing a wide variety of five-finger scales with one finger depressed in a key during each ascent and descent.



Example E: Jimbo's Lullaby (Debussy mm. 33-35)

Example E displays a number of voicing, shaping, physical coordination, and articulation challenges. The student must play the passage at a pianissimo dynamic, being careful not to exceed *piano* at any point. At the same time, the student must also voice (bring out) the top note of the right hand triads. Playing at a quiet dynamic level and further lessening the dynamic levels, while emphasizing certain parts, is a challenging concept for all pianists. Slight shifts in weight can make noticeable, undesirable changes, making this particular skill especially difficult to execute. To become proficient, one must practice playing a wide variety of chords slowly, voicing a different chord tone each time. In addition, the slurs marked by Debussy indicate his desire for musical phrasing that requires the coordination of disparate gestural movements of the arms in varied directions and at varied points in each measure.

SERENADE FOR THE DOLL

Commemorating Claude-Emma's favorite toy in "Serenade for the Doll," Debussy uses a pentatonic melody coupled with clipped grace notes to depict a guitar-like sound in this piece (Hinson, *Debussy—Children's Corner* 3). In addition, Debussy notes that the *una corda*¹ pedal be depressed throughout the whole piece in order to obtain a unique sound pallet. Technical challenges of the piece include quick arm movements, use of different articulations, and effective use of pedals. There are several places throughout the piece where the student is required to move quickly across the keyboard. Without proper practice, these fast movements can cause the student's arms to "lock up" and hold muscle tension. To avoid this problem, the student should block fast moving chords at a slow tempo, focusing on arm placement. Eventually, the movements will be engrained in muscle memory and the student will slowly work up to a faster tempo. In addition, several different articulations are utilized throughout the piece. The use of flatter fingers, while staying close to the keys, gives each tone a less abrasive attack while allowing for emphasis. There are several places throughout the piece where this phenomenon occurs.

¹ When the *una corda* pedal (sometimes called the soft pedal; on a grand, it is the left of the three pedals) is engaged, it moves the keyboard and corresponding hammers slightly to the right, thereby allowing the hammers to strike two strings rather than three.

Musical challenges in “Serenade for the Doll” include rhythmic changes, use of long crescendos/decrescendos, and rolled chords. This piece also contains elements of *hemiola*². To make ease of this technique, students can practice by separating the two voices using both hands, allowing for complete independence. Students can also add melodic shape to the less important parts in effort to control balance. Finally, independent practice of voices will reinforce rhythms. Another musical challenge in this piece is the use of dynamics. In general, the piece is marked *piano*, excluding a few *forte* sections. Within these quiet sections *crescendos* and *decrescendos* emerge. To find an optimal balance of sound, students should practice segments at both loud and soft levels, finding a happy medium. The final musical challenge presented is rolled chords (toward the end of the piece). Students should be warned not to take too much time with these rolls, as they are to be played quickly—beginning before the beat, with the final note “on” the beat. To achieve the desired sound, students should play each chord a number of times blocked, then rolled, by additive technique. This form of practice will help students developed the rolled sound at a consistent tempo.



Example F: *Serenade for the Doll* (Debussy mm. 30-32)

Example F depicts the fast right arm movement needed by the pianist. Slow practice and blocking are the best ways to achieve fluency in these parts, coupled with practicing small “snippets” or measures at a very fast tempo to familiarize and engrain the fast kinesthetic motions of the arm and fingers.



Example G: *Serenade of the Doll* (Debussy mm. 75-76)

² *Hemiola* is a rhythmic technique that features a vertical 3:2 metric relationship between voices.

Example G shows the use of vertical *hemiola* in the piece (the right hand is grouped into two main pulses as if in 6/8 time, while the left hand plays in three as if in 3/4 time). Gaining familiarity in this section requires playing the soprano and tenor lines separately before adding the remaining voices. The use of isolation will reduce confusion and rhythmic mistakes during practice sessions.

THE SNOW IS DANCING

Named to describe the experience of a snowstorm from a child's viewpoint, "The Snow is Dancing" is arguably the most demanding piece in the *Children's Corner*, presenting several different technical challenges throughout. Because the piece represents an image of nature, Debussy utilized a wide variety of dynamics and articulations to make the vision apparent to the audience. The physical challenges of the piece include finger independence, arm efficiency, physical sensitivity to dynamics, and trills. What makes the piece even more difficult is the fact that all of these challenges appear together throughout the piece. Musical challenges include expressive elements, rhythmic changes, polyrhythms (three against four), and emerging themes.



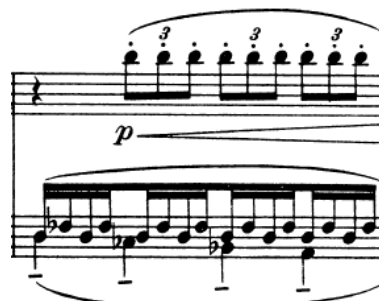
Example H: *The Snow is Dancing* (Debussy mm. 13-15)

In this section (Example H) the pianist is challenged to maintain fluency and dexterity in the sixteenth notes while performing the articulations and slurs in the moving half notes. The sixteenth notes present a further challenge as they are exchanged between the two hands. The pianist has to be able to play the sixteenth notes with a very even tone, as though they are being played with the control of a single hand. To achieve technical success in this section, the pianist should start by practicing the sixteenth note figures, playing them first with a *legato* and then *staccato* articulation. Next, the student should play the half note slur gestures, playing slowly at first, making sure to hear the line and dynamic shape. After the student has gained independent proficiency with the half notes and sixteenth notes, he or she should begin to put both parts together, very slowly at first. Following this, the student should practice individual measures at an increasingly faster tempo. To have success playing the half notes, students should navigate around the keyboard moving their hands "in and out" (into and away from the keyboard) rather than jumping from chord to chord. This will ensure success because the student will be able to see exactly where his or her hands are going. In addition to the physical challenge of finger dexterity, the student is also challenged musically by expressive elements and emerging themes.



Example I: *The Snow is Dancing* (Debussy mm. 40-41)

The section above (Example I) deals primarily with physical challenges of sensitivity to dynamics and trills. Although the passage is marked *pianissimo*, more finger action is required to make the melody in the bass clef project (due to the large bass strings). In contrast, the right hand notes must be depressed just at the key escapement level.³ These differing technical demands and dynamic qualities can be difficult to master. To begin, the student should practice the melody at a loud dynamic level, making sure the melody projects without excess pressure (known as key bedding or playing to the bottom of the key). The student should practice the melody at several dynamic levels, then practice the trills alone, giving them melodic shape and direction. This exercise will make it easier for the pianist to focus on the melody, keeping the controlled trills in the background.



Example J: *The Snow is Dancing* (Debussy m. 42)

This excerpt (Example J) provides an example of the rhythmic challenges present in the piece—a classic three against four pattern. The best way to become comfortable with this section is to practice the continuous pattern in the left hand, adding the triplets slowly.



Example K: *The Snow is Dancing* (Debussy mm. 49-50)

³ The escapement level of each key is reached at approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the key descent—the point at which the hammer “falls back” from the string, ready for repetition. Playing to this precise level of the key requires extraordinary technical sensitivity.

Example K illustrates the challenge of performing trills between two hands. This section can be awkward because two fingers in two different hands are forced to share a single note while alternating at a quick speed. The best way to execute this passage is to practice each measure slowly, building up the speed gradually.

“The Snow Is Dancing” is one of the most difficult pieces in the suite to play because of the diverse physical and musical challenges. One of the foremost musical challenges is the development of effective imagery to portray the spirit of the piece—the swirling flakes, the cold, the ice, and the build-up of the wind. Each section represents a different part of the storm and it is an experienced teacher’s job to help guide a student’s interpretation of the piece.

THE LITTLE SHEPARD

The least technically challenging work of the suite, “The Little Shepherd” is a melancholy piece that alternates with a lively dance (Hinson, *Debussy—Children’s Corner* 4). The primary challenge of this piece is the variety and complexity of contrasting rhythms. Written in 4/4 time, the piece contains several sixteenth and thirty-second note patterns. These patterns can often be challenging to count, considering the player’s ability to add *rubato* where appropriate. To deal with this challenge effectively, a student should practice the piece keeping in mind the macro and micro (large and small) beats. Practicing with the macro beat in mind ensures that the *rubato* will not exceed an appropriate amount while the micro beat ensures that the pianist keeps a steady pulse with gradual fluctuation. In addition, the pianist playing this piece must be able to pedal effectively, using the ear as a guide (recordings and live performances will provide valuable examples).

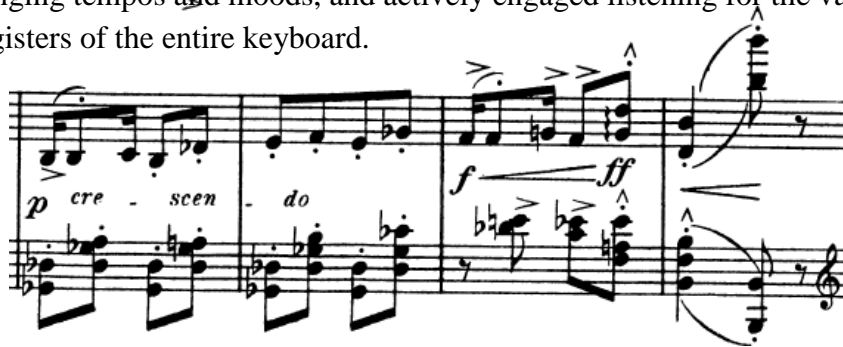
Example L: *The Little Shepherd* (Debussy mm. 21-22)

This excerpt contains examples of both rhythmic and pedaling challenges. In order to become comfortable with this passage, a student should practice the right hand alone, focusing first on the micro beat and then focusing on the macro beat. After the student masters the right hand, it would then be appropriate to bring in the left hand, practicing two beats at a time. These two methods provide a student with a vertical and horizontal approach to practice. Pedaling in this work requires very sensitive listening skills. At times only a touch of pedal is used to “enhance” a particularly harmony; at others, quick changes are necessary (sometimes on every eighth note) to avoid a blurred texture that obscures the melodic content.

GOLLIWOG'S CAKEWALK

Named after an African doll created by Florence Upton in 1895, “Golliwog’s Cakewalk” is arguably the most popular piece from the *Children’s Corner* suite. The syncopations, “snappy” grace notes, and upbeat tempo make it a precursor for ragtime and jazz. The piece alternates between two keys, E flat and G flat major, enhanced with several chromatic passages. In addition, Debussy inserted a satirical twist to the music, poking fun at Wagner by using one of his most famous and memorable chords from his opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Debussy adds much humor to the piece by adding a variety of accents, sudden stops, and jerky rhythmic motives. All of these elements are used to represent “Golliwog’s” dance steps as he stumbles (Hinson, *Debussy—Children’s Corner* 4).

Regarded as one of Debussy’s least misinterpreted pieces (Schmitz 125), “Golliwog’s Cakewalk” is straightforward in both musical and technical direction. The primary technical challenges of the piece include a wide range of articulations, voicing melody/chords within the hand, the use of the sostenuto pedal,⁴ and wide and fast lateral shifts that encompass the entire keyboard, while the musical challenges include syncopations, numerous accidentals and key changes, changing tempos and moods, and actively engaged listening for the various qualities of the varied registers of the entire keyboard.



Example M: Golliwog’s Cakewalk (Debussy mm. 12-15)

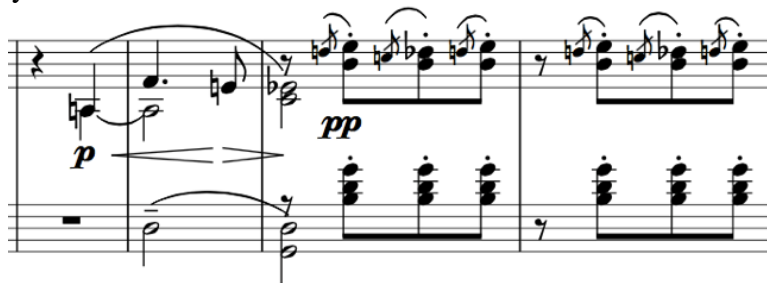
There are several technical and musical challenges associated with Example M. For instance, there are several different articulations: staccato, portato, tenuto, slurs, and various accents. Students should isolate different articulations and practice them repetitively in order to gain familiarity and consistency. This section also uses a wide range of the keyboard. To achieve success with this, students need to be able to hear the octave jumps before they play them. Using the thumbs to aim instead of the fifth finger will also ensure accuracy of the notes. Finally, there are several dynamic changes that the student must adhere to. Although the section is daunting with the amount of challenges, very clear interpretive directions are given through phrasing, dynamic markings, and expressive indications.



⁴ The middle pedal on most pianos that, when depressed, lifts only the dampers of the notes played.

Example N: Golliwogg's Cakewalk (Debussy mm. 26-29)

The challenges in Example N deal primarily with the left hand. The accompaniment pattern is a two-note octave jump, which is especially difficult to play accurately. There are two ways a student can successfully play this accompaniment. The first method is to use the fourth and fifth fingers on the down beats and the second and first fingers on the up beats. Although this is probably the best way to play the notes in terms of accuracy, it is difficult to distribute the proper weight between both ends of the hand, leaving the chance of holding tension. The second option is to play the two note groups with the first and second finger only, jumping from beat to beat. While this shape may be more ergonomically pleasing to a small-handed pianist, this option will likely lead to note inaccuracy. Either way, both methods require the pianist to use the “in and out” motion, giving the performer the ability to see a head-on view of the key attack. Through slow practice of the phrase and fast practice of small samples of the phrase, a student will achieve fluency with these lateral shifts.



Example O: Golliwogg's Cakewalk (Debussy mm. 61-64)

Although Debussy provided no pedal markings (as all pianos and pianists are different), Example O displays a primary example of a suitable place to incorporate the *sostenuto* pedal. Proper practice with the guidance and expertise of an experienced teacher will help a student become musically and technically comfortable with this passage.

FURTHER PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The *Children's Corner* is an early-advanced work that requires proper preparation for successful interpretation, study, and performance. The pieces introduce a variety of new concepts and techniques that serve as a foundation for more advanced study in piano. In addition, the order in which the pieces are learned require much thought and consideration. Technically and musically speaking, “The Snow is Dancing” is most difficult to play both technically and musically. A teacher might consider beginning a student with “Doctor Gradus ad

Parnassum,” as that piece primarily deals with facility. Next, a teacher might have the student learn “The Little Shepherd,” as it requires a certain interpretive and expressive maturity. Although there are many sequencing options for these six pieces, the expertise of an experienced teacher and ability of the student will ultimately determine the best sequencing of suite.

In addition to sequencing, there is also preparatory literature a student should be able to play before beginning this suite. A student who desires to play the *Children's Corner* should have facility and fluency in playing scales and arpeggios as many of the pieces of the work have “toccata like” passages that require quick fingers. Other pieces of the suite require the pianist to move around the entire keyboard at quick tempos, sometimes with the hands in close proximity. In all cases, accuracy of placement and attack is required. In addition to technique, students who wish to play the suite should have studied literature that prepares them to study *Impressionistic* music. Suitable precursor literature includes sonatinas by Clementi/Kuhlau (early pedagogical literature), early piano sonatas by Mozart/Haydn (clarity and facility), Bach two-part inventions (independent voices), *Lyric Pieces* book one by Grieg, early preludes/waltzes by Chopin, *Album for the Young* by Schumann, and the intermediate literature of Burgmüller and Kabalevsky (balance of the hands, voicing in chords, pedaling, and *rubato*).

Finally, students who wish to learn the *Children's Corner* suite must have exposure to the era of *Impressionism*. This will most likely be a student's first exposure to this era; thus, it is important that they are informed of how cultural changes influenced the art, literature, and music of the time. Exposing them to works of Symbolist poets, artists, other works by Debussy (particularly the orchestral works), and other Impressionistic composers like Ravel, will help students considerably in interpreting this suite. The *Children's Corner* is a wonderful addition to any pianist's repertoire, offering a wide range of technical and musical challenges of the highest artistic order that provides foundational preparation for further study at the piano.

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