

Music

by

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**Abstract:** The senior recital is the capstone of a musician's education. All of the musical background knowledge and skills learned over four years culminate in one final performance. The repertoire that is performed is representative of the pianist's work over the years studying the masters of western classical music and their masterpieces. The works that I have chosen for my recital are all masterworks and are representative of their respective composers and stylistic eras.

The works that will be performed on the recital are the following: Debussy's *Pas sur la neige*, *La danse de Puck*, and *La cathedrale engloutie* from the first book of piano preludes; Ludwig van Beethoven's *Sonata in E-flat major Op. 81a*, ("*Les Adieux*"); Frederic Chopin's *Ballade no. 1, Op. 23*; and Maurice Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. These masterpieces represent their historical time period in musical style and form. The recital will be included in CD format. In addition to the performance, I will include program notes including brief biographical information of the composers, historical context of the piece, and a brief description of the musical style.

## **Claude Debussy**

Claude Achille Debussy was born in St Germain-en-Laye, France on August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1862. During the Franco-Prussian war, his family fled to Cannes to live with his aunt Clementine. While living in Cannes, he took his first piano lessons from the Italian musician

Jean Cerutti. At the age of ten he entered the Paris Conservatoire. He won minor awards in piano and solfège. In 1884, he won the Prix de Rome and subsequently spent two years in Italy at the Villa de Medici. In 1889, he heard a Javanese Gamelan at the Universal Exposition of 1889, and it influenced him greatly. The composer often spent time at the home of the symbolist poet Stephan Mallarmé. Debussy completed his opera *Pelleas and Melisande* in 1895, but the work was not premiered until 1902. Although the work was received coolly, it eventually became an influential work. The composer made his conducting debut by directing *La mer* in Cologne, Germany to critical acclaim. During the latter part of his life, Debussy got commissions from ballet impresarios such as Sergei Diaghilev, Maud Allan, and Ida Rubinstein. Although he started showing signs of illness as early as 1909, Debussy continued to compose music and give concert tours to support his family. During the last few years of his life, World War I put a damper on his creative output and he composed relatively few pieces until his death on March 25, 1918 (Lesure, 2016).

Debussy is known mostly for his piano and orchestral works. Some of his more well-known piano works are the *Preludes* (books 1 and 2), etudes, *Images* (books 1 and 2) and *Suite Bergamasque*. His better known orchestral works include *Nocturnes*, *Images*, *La mer*, and *Prélude à l'après-midi*. Some of his more recognizable influences include the Russian music that he encountered while living in Russia teaching the children of Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patroness, during some of his summers in the early 1880s. Another influence would be the Javanese Gamelan that he heard at the 1889 Exposition. One hears the influence especially in the piano piece *Pagodes* from *Estampes*, but it can also be detected in pieces such as his *Fantasie for Piano and Orchestra* and *Toccata from Pour le Piano*. He was familiar with symbolist poetry and spent much of his time at the Tuesday salons hosted

at the home of the symbolist poet Stephan Mallarme. Debussy wrote the *Prélude à l'après-midi* based on the poem of Mallarme. His original texts for *Proses Lyriques* were influenced by the symbolist poets. He was also greatly influenced by the visual arts. He once stated to Edgard Varese "I love pictures almost as much as music" (Lesure, 2016). Showing his appreciation for visual art, he dedicated three of his works to his artists of the day. Although he took a lot of his inspiration from impressionistic painting, Debussy abhorred the term impressionism and did not want it associated with his music (Lesure, 2016).

Debussy's music uses extended harmonies. The composer also liked to use octatonic, pentatonic and whole tone scales. In his orchestral music, the composer used interesting combinations of instruments to create certain timbres. In his piano playing, Debussy wanted to eliminate the percussive sound of the instrument and wanted it to sound as if it had no hammers. Alfred Casella describes his playing:

"No words can describe his playing of some of the *Preludes*. He did not have the virtuosity of the specialist, but his touch was extremely sensitive. One had the impression that he was actually playing on the strings of the instrument, without the mechanical aid of keys and hammers. He used the pedals as nobody else ever did. The result was pure poetry." (Schonberg, 1997, 462). The composer's music and playing was truly innovative.

### **Selections from the *Preludes Book 1***

Debussy wrote twenty-four preludes in two sets of twelve. The first book was written between 1909 and 1910, and the second book was written between 1911 and 1913 (Grove).

The number twenty-four is significant because it follows in the footsteps of Bach, who wrote two sets of twenty-four preludes in every major and minor key. Many great composers such as Heller, Hummel, Alkan, Busoni, Scriabin, and Cui followed the tradition of writing 24 preludes. Although many of composers, including Chopin, wrote preludes in every major and minor key, Debussy did not. One thing that distinguishes the Debussy *Preludes* from the other sets of preludes are the various programmatic and poetic titles of each piece (Bruhn, 1997, xxi-xxv).

### ***Des pas sur la neige (Footsteps in the Snow)***

Debussy writes “Trist et lent” (sad and slow) at the beginning of this prelude. There is a recurring, uneven rhythmic and melodic motive that occurs throughout the piece representing the footsteps. In the score he describes the rhythm, “Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d’un fond de paysage triste et glace” (this rhythm should have the sound value of a sad, icy landscape), and the melody as “expressif et douloureux” (expressive and sorrowful). The rhythm occurs at the same pitch level many times with varying melodies and accompaniments changing around it. As the piece goes on the texture becomes thicker and the harmony becomes less stable. After an emotional climax, the motive is repeated in an upper register and the piece slowly dies away (Bruhn, 1997, 89-96).

### ***Le danse de Puck (The Dance of Puck)***

This prelude represents Puck, the fairy who played pranks and jokes in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Debussy would have been very familiar with Shakespeare’s work; he had the New Temple Shakespeare series in his library. The illustrator of the New

Temple Shakespeare series was Arthur Rackham, whose illustrations inspired several of Debussy's pieces and possibly this one (Bruhn, 1997, 146-150).

The scholar Bruhn (1997) has claimed that Debussy was trying to represent the scene in which Puck tricks Queen Titania into falling in love with a clown with a donkey's head at the request of King Oberon for help in a lover's quarrel. The composer writes a playful, skipping melodic line to represent the rollicking fairy. A horn like motive represents King Oberon. Puck's playfulness is depicted by grace notes and the disjunct melody of the piece. One can hear the fairy tiptoeing around as he tries to sneak up on Queen Titania. The composer creates anticipation several times in the piece by using tremolos. The piece ends with King Oberon and Puck laughing before the little fairy scurries off into the woods (146-150).

### ***La cathedrale engloutie (The Engulfed Cathedral)***

The title of this prelude hearkens back to an old Breton legend from around the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century. It is about a town that was engulfed by the sea because of its impious inhabitants. The cathedral is able to rise out of the waters sometimes at sunrise, representing the pious part of the town. Some people tell stories of seeing the cathedral and hearing the monks chanting on foggy mornings (Bruhn, 1997, 41-44).

The piece begins by depicting the calm waters on a foggy morning. The composer evokes this image with the instructions "Profondement calme, dans une brume doucement sonore"(profoundly calm, in a softly reverberating haze). One can hear the soft ringing of the cathedral's bells and a chant-like melody. Then there is a rumbling in the bass and more bells signifying the cathedral rising out of the water. The cathedral rises fully out of the water, and

an organ-like passage can be heard in thick, parallel chords. A soft chant like section occurs after that. Then one can hear the grandeur of the cathedral once again before it sinks back into the ocean. The cathedral sinks back into the ocean as we hear the organ theme again but with a soft rolling accompaniment (Bruhn, 1997, 41-44).

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### **Ludwig van Beethoven**

Ludwig van Beethoven was born on December 16, 1770 in Bonn, Germany. He was the third generation of musicians at the court of the Electorate of Cologne. His grandfather was a fine bass singer and was appointed Kapellmeister in 1761. His father was a tenor as well as piano and violin teacher. Ludwig received lessons from his father from an early age in violin and piano. By the age of eleven and a half he was filling in for his teacher Christian Gottlob Neefe, the court organist. In 1792, Beethoven went to Vienna to study with Haydn. He and the old master got along well at first, but Beethoven felt that the older composer was not teaching him well, so he studied with Albrechtsberger and then Salieri. The composer

was also a brilliant virtuoso pianist that had a promising career as a performer until he started going deaf. In 1802, Beethoven spent his summer in Heiligenstadt, a village near Vienna. It was there that he wrote the Heiligenstadt Testament, a document in which he accepts the fact that his hearing loss may be permanent. The letter is especially poignant and expresses the anguish that the composer experienced at that time. Despite worsening hearing loss, Beethoven still continued to be an outstanding composer. Napoleon's brother, the King of Westphalia attempted to bring him to his court in western Germany, but three patrons in Vienna established a generous annuity for him so that he would stay in Vienna. In 1809 the French army invaded Vienna for the second time in four years, the composer stayed in his brother Caspar Carl's cellar with pillows over his head to protect his already poor hearing. Upon the tragic death of his brother in 1815, a three-year battle ensued regarding the custody of his nephew Karl. By 1818, he was totally deaf and had to carry out conversations by writing them down in notebooks. He continued to compose some of his greatest masterpieces until his death in spite of his deafness (Kerman, 2016).

Beethoven wrote symphonies, piano concertos, piano sonatas, string trios, and string quartets as well as many other works. Beethoven's works are generally grouped into three periods of his life, early (1770-1802), middle (1803-1812), and late (1813-1827). The early period consists of formative works such as the string quartets, piano sonatas and symphonies. The middle period consists of the more heroic works such as the Eroica Symphony, piano sonatas Op. 53 ("Waldstein"), Op. 57 ("Appassionata"), and Piano Concerto no. 5 (the "Emperor"). The late period consists of more introspective emotional works such as the String Quartet in c-sharp minor, the Ninth symphony, and the Missa Solemnis (Kerman, 2016).



Beethoven is one of the most influential composers of all time and his music influenced the course of music history. After his death, he was revered as a genius and his music was championed for its German spirit. Many symphonic composers struggled to follow in his footsteps of his Ninth Symphony. His quartets and sonatas served as models for many composers to come (Kerman, 2016).

### **Sonata in E-flat major, Op. 81a (“Les Adieux”)**

- I. Das Lebewohl (the farewell)**
- II. Die Abwesenheit (the absence)**
- III. Das Wiedersehen (the return)**

Beethoven wrote this piece for Archduke Rudolph, one of Beethoven’s patrons and pupils. The Archduke started studying with Beethoven at the age of sixteen and would have been a very great performer had his social status permitted him to perform. Beethoven dedicated many works to his friend including the Fifth Piano Concerto (“Emperor”). The Seventh Symphony, the Missa Solemnis, and the Sonata in E-flat, Op.81a (“Les Adieux”) (Scherman, 1972, 761-764).

The sonata was written after Archduke Rudolph left Vienna when Napoleon invaded Austria in 1809. At the top of the first movement, Beethoven wrote “Vienna, May 4, 1809 on the departure of his imperial highness Archduke Rudolph” (Thayer, 1970, 464). At the top of the third movement he wrote “The arrival of his imperial highness the revered Archduke Rudolph. Jan. 30, 1810”. (Thayer, 1970, 464). The inscriptions must have been important to him because he was angry when Breitkopf and Härtel did not include them when the sonata was published; as indicated in this statement: “One is not permitted to dedicate things to kings without requesting it. - Besides, there was no dedication of the “Lebewohl” to the

Archduke; and why were not the year, day and date printed as I wrote them? In the future you must agree in writing to retain all superscriptions unchanged as I have written them” (Thayer, 1970, 518).

The first movement starts with a horn-like, descending three note motive. Under these notes Beethoven writes each syllable of the word “Le-be-wohl.” The introductory adagio leads the listener to expect a cadence in the tonic, but it evades listener expectations and never actually completes an authentic cadence. The adagio leads into the first theme. The second theme brings back the Lebewohl motive, but this time much faster. In the brief development, the material from the first theme is taken through a variety of harmonies until the music dies down to almost nothing and then crescendos in the recapitulation. The coda of this movement is quite long and brings back the Lebewohl motive and layers the tonic and dominant harmonies together as they fade off into the distance like the Archduke as he leaves Vienna (Scherman, 1972, 761-764).

The second movement starts off with a theme that shows the forsakenness of the absence of the Archduke and suffering of the French occupation of Vienna. The second theme of this movement is more cantabile and ornamented (Scherman, 1972, 761-764). It leads into a harsh transition with staccato accompaniment that is somewhat jarring after listening to the legato lines from before. The second movement leads directly into the more joyous third movement. It starts with a bold arpeggiated figure and then begins the statement of a happier first theme. This gleeful melody is repeated with many embellishments over it throughout the piece. The second theme is somewhat simple and accompanied by a trill and involves many fast and energetic scales that work the piece up into a frenzy. The piece ends with a brief coda that is suddenly slower and more introspective before a quick finish.

## Reference

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### **Maurice Ravel**

Maurice Ravel was born in the Basque village of Ciboure in 1875 to a Swiss father and Basque mother. When he was only three months old, the family moved to Paris.

Although he moved to Paris at a very early age, Ravel felt akin to his Basque heritage and to Spain. Ravel started taking piano lessons at the age of seven. He entered the conservatoire in 1889. The composer experienced many failures while at the conservatoire including being dismissed from some of his classes after not winning prizes in harmony or composition. He continued studying with Faure as an auditor until 1903 even after he was dismissed from his composition class. He also attempted to win the Prix de Rome five times between 1900 and 1905, the last attempt being so controversial that it caused a scandal at the conservatoire (Kelly, 2016).

Around 1902, Ravel and his friend Ricardo Vines, the Spanish pianist, joined the group *Les Apaches* (the Ruffians) which included critics, artists, composers, and writers (Kelly, 2016). Vines and Ravel had been friends since they met in their early teenage years at the conservatoire, and Ricardo Vines premiered many works of both Debussy and Ravel, including *Jeux d'eau* (Ravel, 1990, 62). After leaving the conservatoire, Ravel worked on a

number of theatrical works. World War I broke out in 1914 and Ravel volunteered for the air force but was deferred for health reasons, so he became a truck driver in the motor corps. While Ravel was ill from dysentery in Paris, his mother died suddenly. The combination of the suffering from the war and his mother's death affected him greatly and he had much difficulty composing after this. During the 1920's and 1930's, Ravel did many tours including a very successful North American tour. Despite many plans for upcoming works Ravel's health declined and he was unable to compose during the last years of his life until his death in 1937 (Kelly, 2016).

Ravel was a composer who valued craftsmanship greatly. He stated that "conscience compels us to turn ourselves into good craftsmen. My objective, therefore, is technical perfection. I can strive unceasingly to this end, since I am certain of never being able to attain it" (Kelly, 2016). Ravel studied the scores of other great composers in preparation for his own composition projects. One influence other than the great composers of the past include his Spanish heritage. He and Debussy influenced each other as well. Ravel was a master orchestrator, and his orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* is highly regarded. Ravel's music requires almost machine-like rhythmic rigidity, so much so that Stravinsky called him the "Swiss Watchmaker". In addition to writing impressionistic music, Ravel wrote in the Neoclassical style in which he brings twentieth century harmony to the form and melodic structure of the past (Kelly, 2016).

### ***Jeux d'eau***

*Jeux d'eau* was premiered in 1902 by Ricardo Vines. The work was thought of as excessively elaborate and noisy. The piece's name means "Playing Water" (Ravel, 1990, 62). The work was dedicated to Ravel's "dear teacher" Gabriel Faure (Ravel, 1990, 35). The

title evidently stems from Liszt's *Les Jeux d'eau a la Villa d'Este* (1883). Both compositions are very technically challenging and use the upper register of the keyboard extensively (Orenstein, 1975, 154). The work is inscribed with the epigraph "the river god laughing at the water which titillates him" from Henri Regnier's poem *Fete d'eau*. Ravel must have thought a great deal of this epigraph because he requested that it be printed in the concert program at a concert (Ravel, 1990, 62-63). In his article "An autobiographical sketch, the composer writes of the piece: "Jeux d'eau which appeared in 1901, marks the beginning of all the pianistic innovations which have noted in my works. This piece, inspired by the sound of water and the musical sounds made by fountains, cascades and streams, is based on two themes. Like the first movement of a sonata, without however submitting to the classical tonal scheme" (Ravel, 1990, 30). The piece starts and ends with a major seventh, a hallmark of many of Ravel's piano pieces (Mawer, 2000, Companion 76). The first theme consists of disjunct arpeggiating motion while the second theme consists of more conjunct motion and is pentatonic. The piece builds up to a climactic trill followed by a glissando. The first theme returns with a G-sharp pedal. A cadenza follows the recapitulation of the first theme. The cadenza juxtaposes F-sharp major and C major in a bitonal arpeggio. The work ends with the second theme being played in a grandiose manner and then fading away in an arpeggio ending on a major seventh (Orenstein, 1975, 154).

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**Frederic Chopin**

Frederic Francois Chopin was born on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1810 in Zelazowa Wola, Poland near Warsaw. His father was French and his mother was Polish. His family moved to Warsaw when he was only seven months old. A brilliant pianist and gifted composer from an early age, his earliest existing works are two polonaises composed at the age of seven. Although the city of Warsaw gave Chopin some musical opportunities, it soon became clear to him that he needed to go elsewhere (Michalowski, 2016).

He gave two highly acclaimed concerts in Vienna performing his *Variations on La ci Darem di Mano Op.2*. The warm reception in Vienna is indicated by his letter that he wrote to his family while in the Austrian capital “As soon as I appeared on the stage they started clapping; and the applause was so great after each variation that I could not hear the orchestral tuttis” (Chopin, 1963, 24). He returned to Warsaw and prepared to go on a European tour. A week after his departure, an uprising that caused political turmoil in Poland made the composer a political exile. He eventually moved to Paris in 1832 and started playing concerts there, mostly performing his own works in salons. He mostly avoided public performances after his early years, and he earned most of his money by teaching the children of the wealthy Parisian aristocrats (Michalowski, 2016). In Paris he met the novelist George Sand and started a long romantic relationship with her that lasted nine years. In 1838 Sand and Chopin went on a trip to Majorca with her children. The harsh winter climate did not agree with Chopin’s sickly temperament and his health was detrimentally affected by the climate. Relations became sour when disputes resulted from disagreements concerning Sand’s children. He never really recovered from his estrangement from Sand, but continued teaching and did a tour in Britain during the last year of his life. He died in Paris on October 17, 1849 (Michalowski, 2016).

His compositional output includes stylized versions of Polish dances such as mazurkas and polonaises as well as other dances such as waltzes. He also wrote nocturnes that were building on the earlier work of the composer John Field. In his earlier years, he wrote pieces based on classical forms such as rondos, variations, concertos, and sonatas, but as he got older he started writing more one movement pieces with freer forms not based on a set structure such as ballades, scherzi, and fantasies. He had many musical influences such as Bach. He wrote 24 preludes in every key just as Bach did. He was greatly influenced by Italian opera and drew many connections between singing and piano playing. Many of his ornaments seem to have been inspired by the ornaments of the bel canto singing of the day. The pianist composers of the classical era were also quite influential on him especially in his earlier years when he was writing many pieces based on classical forms but even in his later years the virtuosic figurations common to that style are still present (Samson, 1992, 101-119).

### ***Ballade no. 1 in G minor, Op. 23***

The *Ballade in G minor Op. 23* had a special place in Chopin's heart. In a letter to the conductor Heinrich Dorn, Robert Schumann spoke of a meeting he had with Chopin:

“he gave me a new *Ballade in G minor*. It seems to me his most inspired work (if not the one most filled with genius), and I told him I liked it best of all his works. After a long pause for reflection he said with great emphasis ‘I’m glad you think so; it is my favorite too’ (Chopin, 1963, 137).

The work was completed in 1835, but the composer could have started the sketches as early as 1831. It is his first large scale one movement work that did not stem directly from classical



models such as the sonata (Berger, 1992, 72). Chopin created a new genre when he decided to entitle his composition with the name 'ballade'. The word ballade had been used to describe literary and musical works that create a narrative. Some musical elements come from vocal ballades. One example of this would be that the ballades of Schubert and Loewe were often written in 6/8 and 6/4 meters, the same time signatures as the Chopin *Ballades*. The most characteristic element from literary and musical influences that Chopin drew on is the narrative nature of these works. The narrative nature is highlighted by the transformation and variation of two contrasting themes of the piece. Although the work is narrative in nature, it is not programmatic music. During the nineteenth century and early twentieth century many critics speculated that the ballades were based on the poems of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, but those speculations are generally disregarded today (Samson, 1992, 101-119).

The piece is structured somewhat like sonata form with an introduction and coda, but there is an episode in the middle that does not have recurring material from either theme (Samson, 1992, 101-119). The work begins with an introduction that outlines a Neapolitan Sixth Chord in the key of G minor, and then the melancholy first theme is stated in G minor. After a fiery transition, the sentimental second theme is played sweetly in E flat major. Once the second theme is played, the first theme returns in A minor, but it is fragmented and incomplete as if it is difficult to get started. The broken fragments of the first theme lead into a heroic statement of the second theme in A major with thick chords and octaves. After a cadenza-like passage, the brilliant and playful waltz-like theme leads to passagework full of scales and arpeggios that leads us into an impassioned statement of the second theme back in

the original key of E flat major. Then a broken statement of the first theme in the original key of G minor spirals into the virtuosic, fiery coda.

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