UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA
FACULTY CONCERT SERIES

Bruce Vogt, piano

Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

PROGRAM

Images, Book I (1903)
  i. Reflets dans l'eau (Reflections in the water)
  ii. Hommage à Rameau (Homage to Rameau)
  iii. Mouvement (Movement)

Images, Book II (1907)
  i. Cloches à travers les feuilles (Bells Heard Through the Leaves)
  ii. Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fût (And the Moon Shines down on the Temple that was)
  iii. Poissons d’or (Goldfish)

Intermission
(Beverages and snacks available at the concession located in the lounge)
from *Fêtes galantes, 1st Series* (1891)

*Clair de lune* (Paul Verlaine)

**Susan Young, soprano**

Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques,
Jouant du luth et dansant, et quasi
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques!

Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur
L’amour vainqueur et la vie opportune.
Ils n’ont pas l’air de croire à leur bonheur,
Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune,

Au calme clair de lune triste et beau,
Qui fait rêver, les oiseaux dans les arbres,
Et sangloter d’extase les jets d’eau,
Les grands jets d’eau sveltes parmi les marbres.

- Paul Verlaine (1844-1896)

**Suite bergamasque** (1890, revised 1905)

i. *Prélude*
ii. *Menuet*
iii. *Clair de lune*
iv. *Passepied*

**Five Preludes** from *Preludes, Book 2* (1911-13)

i. *Brouillards* (Mists)
ii. *Feuilles mortes* (Dead Leaves)
iii. *La Puerta del Vino* (The Gate of Wine)
iv. *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (The Terrace for Moonlit Audiences)
v. *Feux d’artifice* (Fireworks)

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**Saturday, October 27, 2012 at 8:00 p.m.**

Phillip T. Young Recital Hall
MacLaurin Building, University of Victoria
Adults: $17.50 / Students & seniors: $13.50
Claude Debussy has emerged as one of the major composers – and major artists – of Western civilization. As a composer for the piano, it was he – along with Beethoven, Liszt and Chopin – who most fundamentally altered and added to the possibilities for composing piano music. He spoke of a desire to “create a piano without hammers” which would allow for the suspension of movement so fundamental to his music – a suspension that allows the many layers of rhythm and sonority their play. Ironically his creation of a hammerless style owes a great deal to the gamelan percussion orchestras from Bali which were such a revelation to him when he first heard them during the Paris World Expositions at the end of the 19th century.

In poetry and painting alike – and I can manage to think of a couple of musicians as well – men have tried to shake off the dust of tradition but it has only earned them the labels of “symbolists” or “impressionists” – which are certainly useful as terms of abuse. Journalists are only doing their job when they call them that. Clearly such imbeciles can always find something to ridicule in a fundamentally beautiful idea. And you can be certain there is more likely to be beauty in the work of those who have been laughed at than in those who calmly trail along like lambs to the slaughter – a fate for which they were predestined.

Images: Book I

Debussy himself recognized that these “images” were of a new stature in his pianistic output: he wrote to his publisher with simple confidence that: “these works will take their place to the left of Chopin or to the right of Schumann”. The first of these three pieces is perhaps the most often played and admired. Debussy did not care for the term “impressionism” applied to his works. Nonetheless **Reflets dans l’eau** is very near in spirit to the impressionism of a painter like Monet with his sensitivity to the rhythm of light, the constant changing of surfaces, the fleeting nature of any impression. With Debussy the rhythm of water – both its surface constantly in flux and its deeper currents, its hidden rhythms – are the direct inspiration for this meditation.

There was a long-standing tradition in Western music – particularly French music – of writing a homage or a “tombeau” to a deceased master. One of many examples: the 17th century harpsichord composer Jean-Henri d’Anglebert wrote a **Tombeau de M. de Chambonnières** (who was d’Anglebert’s teacher). Ravel wrote his **Tombeau de Couperin** of 1917 in this spirit and Debussy this **Hommage à Rameau**. Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) was not only a great opera composer but one of the great composers for harpsichord. Debussy makes no attempt to imitate Rameau’s keyboard music, but he uses a common dance of the 18th century – the
sarabande – as well as the typical symbolism of these works: the falling sonorities at the end representing death and grief. Overall there is a dignity and power suggesting the passing of a great tradition, a grand civilization.

The final image of the three – Mouvement – is no less original. It is barely three minutes in length and much of it strikingly diatonic. Yet its constant motion, its fantastic use of layers of sound, of whole tone and pentatonic scales, both affirm and undermine its tonality to magic effect.

Images: Book II

With these later Images, Debussy’s language reaches an extreme level of remoteness and mystery. In Cloches à travers les feuilles (Bells Heard Through the Leaves), this language is drawn from nature and the intensifying of the senses which nature can inspire.

I’ve discovered something which you may perhaps find valuable. I find myself using – quite spontaneously too – a means of expression which I think is quite unusual: namely silence. Now don’t laugh! It is perhaps the only way to give the emotion of a phrase its full power.

Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fût (And the Moon Shines down on the Temple that was) suggests a liberating contemplation of antiquity and of other world-views and cultures. In the early 20th century, Europe was just beginning to recognize the narrowness of its own cultural perspective. Asian music in particular helped Debussy recreate for music that which he felt it had so disastrously lost in the Western tradition: its ceremonial, religious essence which is so fundamental to its nature in cultures where art has not been separated from everyday life or from religion.

Poissons d’or (Goldfish) demonstrates other possibilities for rejuvenation in music. A quasi-improvisational texture, which begins with the trembling darting movement of the fish, ultimately leads to all manner of images. There are
even references to popular music; Debussy enjoyed popular music for its energy and for its unselfconscious vulgarity, qualities that he saw as a necessary antidote to the portentous Teutonic heaviness of late 19th century Romanticism.

Clair de lune

After the god Pan had put together the seven pipes of the syrinx, he was at first only able to imitate the long, melancholy note of a toad wailing in the moonlight. Later he was able to compete with the singing of the birds, and it was probably around this time that the birds increased their repertoire.

As a song composer, it was Paul Verlaine (1887-1904) to whom Debussy was most drawn: of Debussy's 59 published songs, 17 are settings of this poet. Clair de lune comes from the earlier of two sets of three settings from Verlaine's collection of 22 poems called Fêtes galantes, written in 1869, under the spell of the 18th century painter Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) and his Arcadian world of velvet lawns, trees and fountains with young costumed revellers taking part in a timeless festival. But Watteau's vision is tinged with a powerful sense of the passing of all things. Verlaine's poems reflect the elegant playfulness of this Commedia dell'arte world of Watteau along with a sadness at the transience and futility of love. Both the elegance and the melancholy are masterfully reflected in Debussy's setting.

Suite bergamasque

This Suite was originally written in 1890 but remained unpublished until 1905. Its language reflects the late romanticism of Debussy's early works but it is clearly coloured by the Fêtes galantes influence as well. The word “Bergamasque” is found in the song Clair de lune and its roots go back through the Commedia dell’arte to sources in the 16th century. The first two pieces retained their original titles when the suite was finally published. However the original title of Clair de lune was “Promenade sentimentale”. This work's unfortunate fate as the most transcribed work in the Western canon, made familiar through elevators and shopping malls throughout the world, should not blind us to its delicate beauty.

The last movement was originally titled “Pavane”. Debussy no doubt knew perfectly well that this piece bears no resemblance to either a pavane or a Passepied. Giving the work the title of a familiar dance from suites of the 17th and 18th century is the composer's way of positioning his music within the great tradition of French harpsichord composers, a tradition that ended in the second half of the 18th century. With its subtle play of articulation and its archaic modal harmonies, this work suggests something ancient and timeless.
Music really ought to have been an esoteric science, enshrined in tests so hard and so laborious to decipher that they discourage the herd of people who treat it as casually as they do a handkerchief! While I've been writing this, the girl in the flat above has been labouring away on the piano at something in D major. An appalling din and all too clear an illustration of what I've been saying.

Debussy was ambivalent about descriptive titles. He wrote them at the end of each piece only – and only in parentheses! On the one hand, he was against a slavish following of the implied programme by the listener and/or the performer; on the other hand, Debussy was a lover of all the fine arts and enjoyed making connections to poetry, to visual art and to literary sources. **Brouillards** (Mists) suggests not only an obscured landscape but also an obscure tonal landscape – one is never sure whether the key centre is Db or C. It is one of Debussy's most remarkable harmonic experiments. **Feuilles mortes** (Dead Leaves) suggests the dying season of autumn, a reminder of the inevitable passing of all things. **La Puerto del Vino** (The Gate of Wine) is thought to have been inspired by a picture postcard that Debussy received from the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, a card showing the famous gate of the Alhambra in Spain bearing the name given to this prelude. The prelude is marked “Mouvement de habanera” and its instructions for the performer evocatively suggest the range of expression encompassed in the work: “with brusque opposition of extreme violence and passionate softness”. It was on the basis of this work and a handful of others with Spanish themes that de Falla called Debussy (who never set foot in Spain) “the composer of Spain's truest art music.” **La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune** (The Terrace for Moonlit Audiences) was allegedly inspired by a reference to India in a magazine article. Debussy had a life-long interest in Eastern music and art: he saw it as an important model in his attempt to free Western musical language from the weight of 19th century Romanticism. In **Feu d'artifice** (Fireworks), Debussy says farewell to the prelude form with his most audacious technical display – which is the equivalent of the fireworks of the title. These are the kind of fireworks celebrated on Bastille Day in France, that country's most nationalistic holiday, and so it is appropriate that the piece ends with the sounds in the distance of the French National Anthem – **La Marseillaise** – as the crowd dissolves into the night.

- Bruce Vogt