

Orchestrating Debussy's Preludes

Written for the Naxos Complete Debussy Edition in 2011

I did not originally plan to orchestrate all of Debussy's Preludes. For the opening concert of the Hallé Orchestra's 2001/2 season, its newly appointed principal conductor, Mark Elder, asked to include a work of mine; but what emerged instead was the idea of orchestrating several of the Preludes. At that stage I had no thought of going any further; but I did decide that I would go in at the deep end by tackling two of the most pianistic preludes, *Ce qu'a vu le Vent d'Ouest* and *Feux d'artifice*, virtuoso pieces of almost Lisztian bravura. I added *Feuilles mortes*, one of my favourites, as a gentle interlude.

This initial venture seemed to work : the Hallé asked for more (I had been appointed their Associate Composer), and gradually I realised that I was going to have to transcribe all twenty four Preludes. I assembled them in groups of three or four, without following Debussy's order, and completed the sequence in the spring of 2007.

Why undertake such a project? In my own (very inadequate) playing of the Preludes I had always heard the sounds of the orchestra, and had in fact annotated two of them (*Voiles* and *La sérénade interrompue*) with possible instrumentation some time in the 1970s. I have always enjoyed working with the music of other composers and the insights that this brings, and the challenge of adding around 90 minutes to Debussy's orchestral sound world proved irresistible.

I decided early on that I would remain faithful to that remarkable sound world, and not try to convert the Preludes into something that they were not. But in order to avoid contriving a pastiche of Debussy's orchestral style I kept the sound in my head and did not look at a single orchestral score of Debussy's while working on the project. Some preludes needed to be transposed into different keys in order to work orchestrally; and in some I made compositional changes, usually small, that the orchestral version seemed to demand. In only one did I make a radical change : *La fille aux cheveux de lin*, a miniature portrait so simple and straightforward that I felt that the only way I could make it work orchestrally in the context of the other preludes was to slow it down to half speed.

The Preludes were composed in two books of twelve, the first in 1909-10 and the second in 1911-13. Debussy gave titles to each one, which significantly he placed at the end, and in brackets - thus (. . . Danseuses de Delphes). Not all the sources for the titles can be identified. He did not specify that they were to be performed in the order in which they were published, or as complete books, but performances of a single book are frequent, performances of all twenty four less so.

They have often been seen as a homage to Chopin's 24 Preludes, particularly as they were composed around the time of the centenary of Chopin's birth. But there is no attempt to emulate Chopin by writing each in a different key, and their elusive world of colour and fantasy is closer to Schumann and to Liszt. They are markedly different from Debussy's final work, the *Études* of 1915, where technique is as important as poetry.

Book 1

1. *Danseuses de Delphes*. 'Dancers from Delphi' - a stately dance, as portrayed on a Greek sculpture or vase. The first book begins with what is probably a tribute to Chopin, its opening chord identical to the closing chord of the twenty first of Chopin's Preludes.

2. *Voiles*. 'Sails', or 'veils' - possibly an allusion to an exotic dancer. The static, reflective music makes extensive use of the whole tone scale, a device highly characteristic of much of Debussy's music.

3. *Le vent dans la plaine*. 'The wind in the plain', a line quoted in a poem by Verlaine which Debussy had set in 1887. This whirling miniature seemed to need expanding in its orchestral transcription, and I added a development section near the end, which is itself recomposed.

4. "*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*". 'Sounds and perfumes swirl in the evening air', the third line of Baudelaire's 'Harmonie du soir', set by Debussy in 1888. The elusive but rich harmonies of this prelude cry out for orchestration.

5. *Les collines d'Anacapri*. 'The hills of Anacapri', possibly taken from the label of a wine bottle. A mixture of exuberance and reflection, another prelude to which I added an expanded coda.

6. *Des pas sur la neige*. 'Footsteps in the snow' : a bleak landscape. The source of the title is unknown, but speaks for itself.

7. *Ce qu'a vu le Vent d'Ouest*. 'What the West Wind saw', probably after Hans Christian Anderson. The swirling turbulence of the virtuoso piano writing is changed into orchestral textures which would be hard to transcribe back to the original.

8. *La fille aux cheveux de lin*. 'The girl with the flaxen hair', a poem by Leconte de Lisle (after Robert Burns). It would have been easy to arrange this, perhaps the best known of all the preludes, conventionally. But its familiarity demanded something different, and after much indecision I decided to halve the speed and score it just for strings and harps, giving it added weight and depth.

9. *La sérénade interrompue*. 'The interrupted serenade', source unknown but clearly Spanish : the second of the interruptions is music from Debussy's *Ibéria*, first performed in 1910.

10. *La Cathédrale engloutie*. 'The submerged cathedral', the Breton legend of the sunken city of Ys. The massive sonorities of the piano writing might seem to call for a heavyweight response, but I tried to keep the orchestration relatively veiled and subdued, with chiming bells and gongs.

11. *La danse de Puck*. 'Puck's dance', after an Arthur Rackham illustration for Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Almost a miniature tone poem, which changes direction every few bars.

12. *Minstrels*. Apparently inspired by black-faced minstrels Debussy saw at Eastbourne, where he took a holiday in 1905 after completing *La mer*.

Book 2

1. *Brouillards*. 'Mists', the source of the title unknown. Perhaps the most impressionistic of the Preludes, its cloudy textures inhabiting a remote harmonic world.

2. *Feuilles mortes*. Much too prosaic when translated as 'dead leaves', the title may derive from a book of verse by the little known Georges Turpin.

3. *La Puerta del Vino*. 'The Wine Gate', after a postcard of the Alhambra sent by Manuel de Falla. A habanera which Debussy marks to be played 'with abrupt contrasts of extreme violence and passionate sweetness'.

4. "*Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses*". Again the translation, 'fairies are exquisite dancers', lacks poetry; but the music, inspired by an Arthur Rackham illustration for J M Barrie's *Peter Pan*, is wonderfully light, airy and elusive.

5. *Bruyères*. 'Heather', source unknown, a prelude that stands apart from the others in its simple harmony and melodic writing, recalling *La fille aux cheveux de lin*.
6. "*General Lavine*" - *excentric*. 'In the style and tempo of a cakewalk' is Debussy's marking for this lively tribute to Edward Lavine, an American clown at the Théâtre Marigny in the Champs Elysées.
7. *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune*. 'The terrace of audiences of moonlight', from a newspaper description of the crowning of George V as Emperor of India. Solemn but magical.
8. *Ondine*. Probably after Arthur Rackham's illustrations to Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's *Undine*, the story of a water nymph. Another miniature tone poem, like *La danse de Puck*.
9. *Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.* After Dicken's *Pickwick Papers*, its subject's nationality underlined by the prelude's opening.
10. *Canope*. The covering of an Egyptian funerary urn, which Debussy kept on his desk.
11. *Les tierces alternées*. 'Alternating thirds', a technical term for the intervals used throughout the piece. The last prelude to be written, it replaced the unfinished 'Toomai of the Elephants', after Kipling, and looks to the world of the *Études* of 1915.
12. *Feux d'artifice*. The 'fireworks' of Bastille Day (July 14) are depicted in flamboyant keyboard pyrotechnics. At the end the Marseillaise is heard in the distance as this final prelude fades away into silence.