

Claude DEBUSSY

CENTENARY EDITION 2018

I DANSEUSES DE
DELPHES

PRELUDES book 1



Piano Practical Editions

pianopracticaleditions.com

Musical Health Warning : please be aware that these editions are definitely not urtext and should be consulted together with a traditional version. They have been devised purely to help solve musical and technical problems at the piano.

Please send comments and error reports to
Ray Alston : contact@pianopracticaleditions.com

Claude DEBUSSY 1862 - 1918

I DANSEUSES DE DELPHES

P R E L U D E S B O O K I

Debussy was always searching for exotic stimuli, and this first prelude dating from December 1909 centres on Greek antiquity and the oracle at Delphi, the Temple of Apollo, patron of the arts and a god of music and dance. Some 15 years earlier this *caryatid** had been discovered by French archeologists during *la Grande Fouille* (the Great Excavation). Displayed at the Louvre, Debussy particularly admired *la colonne des danseuses de Delphes*, three priestesses clothed in *chitoniskos*** , bare feet suspended and arms raised, and depicting dancers or participants in a religious ritual.

The first prelude, *Danseuses de Delphes*, was inspired Debussy told an English admirer by the beautiful column of that name exhibited on the landing of the grand staircase of the Louvre, a plaster copy of a stone original recently excavated by the French archaeologist Théophile Homolle at Delphi. Perhaps the sculpture was rotated so that the three female figures appeared in succession, or perhaps one could walk round it. There is certainly some feeling in the prelude of a slow circling, as of stately dancers with linked arms. But the real miracle of this piece is its harmonic concentration, the alternation of music made of soft dissonance and music made of plain triads in irrational but perfectly poised sequence. If, as the autograph suggests, the piece was written in a single day (7 December 1909), one might picture Debussy at the piano - literally or metaphorically - carefully testing each chord, each sequence, listening to the spacing and balance, the resonances, the dynamic shadings, the effect of the two pedals (not indicated, as usual). At first



glance, this is not difficult music to play, but to play it well, with attention to every nuance, every painstaking detail, is a serious exercise in mental and physical control. Hearing Debussy play it, his English friend reported "was like hearing a poet reciting some of his own delicate lyrics. He had a soft, deep touch which evoked full, rich, many-shaded sonorities....I have never heard more beautiful pianoforte playing."

— Stephen Walsh

In 1894 Debussy had composed an *image oubliée* entitled *Souvenir du Louvre**** and I wonder whether its heading might have influenced the slow and dignified character of this first Prelude — *dans le mouvement d'une "Sarabande", c'est-à-dire avec une élégance grave et lente.*

Or could it be that the composer, always attracted to original and evocative ideas, just liked the catchy caption? Perhaps it is not useful to seek inspiration from the bracketed afterthought placed as always following the final bars.

In any event, with some gravitas "The Dancers of Delphi" brings to life stones from antiquity, an asymmetric Brahmsian sarabande of hypnotic and sombre sensuality.

According to Marguerite Long, distinguished pianist, pedagogue, friend and colleague: "Debussy played this piece slowly, with almost metronomic accuracy. Its dynamics remaining soft and of a hierarchical density, so that the figures became more priestesses than dancers. The last two chords portray a form of prostration".

Temple of Apollo

Archaia Korinthos, Greece



During the course of the 2018 centenary year *Piano Practical Editions* became a creative and critical working publication; in addition to several suggestions of fingering and hand distribution, you will find significant modifications to the general layout.

The strong influence of French piano music is surely identified with Chopin and Debussy who share a unique position as masters of an exceptional instrument; through an extensive affinity with the sustaining pedal they each created a personal language conceived to communicate their work with the greatest authenticity.

Some quotations by the composer:

“Absence of fingering is an excellent exercise, negating musicians’ perverse desire to completely dismiss the composer’s, and thereby vindicating words of eternal wisdom: ‘If you want something done well, do it yourself’. Let us seek our own fingering!”

“I believe more and more that music in its essence is not a thing that can be poured into a rigorous and traditional mould. It is made of colours and rhythmical beats.”

“Music is a mysterious mathematical process whose elements are part of infinity.”

Much of what happened to music — and to art in general — in the twentieth century marked a break, conscious or unconscious, with the nineteenth. The past was an orphan parent, rejected by its children, despised by its grandchildren. Debussy, too, found fault with his forebears and tried to do things differently from them. But while he questioned their methods, he never doubted their fundamental intention, which was to create beauty and to share sensibilities, to communicate wonder at the richness of the world around us and the various ways our senses give us of responding to it. His music is without ideology and without doctrine. Like the world, it simply is, take it or leave it.

Debussy: *A Painter in Sound* (2018)
by Stephen Walsh

* a sculpted female figure acting as support of a much larger structure — the Akanthos Column standing at 1.95 metres — a monument probably from 330 BC.

** short tunics — possibly worn by the three daughters of Cecrops I, the legendary first king of Attica

*** the second of three *Images Oubliées* dedicated to Yvonne Lerolle — later revised and published as the second movement of the suite *Pour le Piano* (1901)

lent et grave [♩=44]

doux et soutenu

I

doux mais en dehors

11 **2** *pp*

* *Sost. Ped*

14

* *Sost. Ped*

17 *

4 *mf*

3 *f*

[*mp*]

pp *più pp* *ppp*
 20 *diminuendo* *pp*
pp *più pp* *ppp*

23 *p* *più p* *p*

27 *p* *pp* *pp*

29 *ppp* *pp* *pp* *f* *pp*

(... danseuses de Delphes)

Appendix

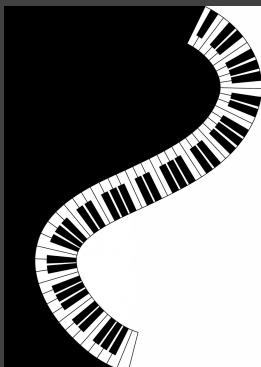
Comments, afterthoughts & French vocabulary

Duration: 3 minutes

- In the first book of Preludes, the composer indicated metronome speeds in brackets, and once wrote: “as a rose which might only last for one morning, a metronome speed might only work for one bar.” Might this explain why there are no metronome speeds in the second book?
- a wonderful study in the control of dynamics which Debussy has detailed with great clarity
- **3 - 17** editorial modification of time-signatures
- **11 & 14** editorial *sostenuto* pedal to be coupled with the sustaining pedal
- **13 & 16** this edition features a few practical ‘arrangements’ — it can be effective to project the melody notes (minims) as tied acciaccaturas
- **17 - 26** modification of portamento crotchets (syncopated chords) and key-signature
- **18** RH D missing, probably in error

doux et soutenu *gentle and sustained*
mais en dehors *but in relief*





D E B U S S Y
D A N S E U S E S D E D E L P H E S

published May 2023

Please send comments and error reports to
Ray Alston : contact@pianopracticaleditions.com



Piano Practical Editions
pianopracticaleditions.com