

Claude Debussy Preludes for Piano

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Annotation The article is devoted to Preludes for piano by the greatest French composer of impressionism, Claude Debussy. Several well-known preludes, their figurative content, structure, and stylistic features are analyzed in detail. Several well-known preludes, their figurative content, structure, stylistic features, the composer's innovative approach to the traditional genre of prelude and the resulting features of this well-known genre are analyzed in detail.

Key words: Impressionism, preludes, preludes for piano, french Impressionism, musical performance, french music, piano.

Introduction: The cycle of twenty-four preludes created by Debussy at the end of his creative career (the first book in 1910, the second book in 1913) essentially completed the development of this genre in Western European music, the most significant phenomena of which had hitherto been the preludes of Bach and Chopin (The development of the prelude in the 20th century was connected almost exclusively to the work of Russian and Soviet composers - Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Shostakovich, Kabalevsky and others. In their work new ways of evolution of this genre were outlined.).

With Debussy, this genre sums up his creative path and is a kind of encyclopaedia of everything most characteristic and typical in terms of musical content, the range of poetic images and the composer's style. The ability of the prelude to embody individual, successive impressions, the absence of compulsory schemes in the composition, the improvisational freedom of expression - all of this was close to the aesthetic views and artistic method of the impressionist composer.

Debussy's Twenty-four Preludes is a cycle of miniature musical paintings, each of which contains a completely independent artistic image.

Main part: Unlike Chopin's preludes, there is little sense of cyclicity here, that is, the interconnectedness of all or part of the preludes, conditioned by a common idea or unified logic of musical development. In Debussy's preludes, we will not find such rich imagery and genre links as in Chopin's (Chopin's series of preludes reveals to the listener the tremendous richness of man's inner world, the broad spectrum of his thoughts and feelings - from light and serene lyricism to dramatic pathos, from unbridled passionate impulse to concentrated grief. This extraordinary wealth of emotional states and shades of human experience Chopin embodied in bright and varied genre illumination. He drew into this seemingly most

"intimate" genre of music the features of the most common everyday musical genres - song, romance, dance, March, nocturne, etc. While each of the preludes is completely independent, Chopin's entire cycle has a definite dramaturgical idea.), but they are remarkable for the variety of pictorial and poetic themes and the vivid coloring of the language. Each prelude has a program title, which is given only at the end of the piece (in a way the composer emphasizes his unwillingness to "impose" his idea on the performer and listener), which is almost never connected with the literary source. If there is a connection, it lies only in close poetic images: "**Fragrances and sounds in the evening air roar**" (from a poem by Charles Baudelaire) or "**A terrace lit by moonlight**" (by Pierre Loti).

The program titles of most of Debussy's preludes, as well as those of his other piano works, are linked to impressions of nature ("**Mists**", "**Sails**", "**Heather**", "**The Hills of Anacapri**", "**Wind on the Plain**"). The choice of landscape motifs sometimes reveals features of symbolism, contained in the hidden meaning of certain titles, in the desire to give the preludes a more significant content than just a landscape: "**Footsteps in the Snow**," "**Dead Leaves**". But such titles are rare and do not define the figurative side of the entire cycle. A special place among the preludes is occupied by genre and everyday musical pictures ("**Serenade Interrupted**", "**Alhambra Gate**") and musical portraits ("**The Girl with Flaxen Hair**"), often tinged with humor and grotesque features ("**General Lyavin the Eccentric**", "**In Respect of S. Pickwick**"). In these preludes, Debussy makes particularly extensive use of common everyday musical genres, and especially of dance genres - of a wide variety of ages and nationalities. Here we find both Spanish folk dances ("**Interrupted Serenade**" and "**The Gates of the Alhambra**") and Debussy's modern pop dance of the kek-uok ("**General Lyavin the Eccentric**" and "**Minstrels**"). Debussy's attitude to all of these subjects is characterized by the fact that he does not seek to embody by musical means a particular image, most of which is associated with visual impressions. He is rather interested in the atmosphere surrounding a given image, that is, the phenomenon together with its surrounding background, as well as the purely emotional perception of this phenomenon in conjunction with all sorts of visual or auditory associations. This trait is also evident in the preludes related to fairytale and legendary themes ("**Peck's Dance**", "**Fairies are Pretty Dancers**", and "**The Sunken Cathedral**"), and especially in the preludes inspired by works of fine art ("**Canopa**" and "**Delphic Dancers**"). This manifested one of the characteristic aesthetic features of Romanticism and Impressionism: the desire to bring together the various forms of art - music, literature, painting, sculpture, and thus to enrich the content and expressive means of each of them (in this case, music).

Each of the preludes has a completely finished and slender form. We almost never find preludes like sketches, sketches, or simply improvisations. With Debussy great freedom of expression is enclosed within a fairly strict framework of composition. The form of most preludes has signs of "reprise" (three-part or two-part form with reprise), which always gives the piece greater integrity.

The cycle opens with the prelude "**The Delphic Dancers**". The spiritual beauty of the marble sculptures of the antique bas-relief evoked vivid musical and poetic associations for the composer. This sculptural image is revealed in the prelude in the genre of a very slow austere dance. The basic melodic image of the prelude is extremely undeveloped, consisting of one brief chromatic motif in the middle voice:



All of its development in the first part of the prelude (up to the eleventh measure) is reduced to the repeated repetition of the motif in the same (middle) register, slow tempo, and minimal dynamics. Debussy avoids the purely danceable "squareness" in his presentation by unexpectedly changing the meter from 3/4 to 4/4 in the fourth and ninth bars and extending the four-stroke constructions to five-stroke.

The sense of sculptural volume and convexity of the image in the prelude is achieved primarily by the texture of the narration, when it is gradually divided into three plans: melody in the middle register, bass and chord accompaniment. The register gap between these three plans later becomes more and more noticeable and sometimes reaches five octaves.

The middle of the prelude is somewhat more expressive due to the gradual increase in the dynamics to *f*, the counter-movement in the melody and accompaniment. But the development that had begun is suddenly interrupted before it reaches its climax (this impressionistic device can often be found in various works by Debussy). It fades into what appear to be hanging chords in the air on the *pp*, extended into the extreme registers of the piano. The harmonization of the main theme in the reprise with enlarged triplets and the gradually "fading" sound subtly convey the feeling of a dance stopped and frozen in a stone sculpture of a bas-relief.

Debussy's cycle is a very complete series of landscape preludes, including the poetic images of the sea in "Sails", the numb winter cold in Footsteps in "the Snow", and the sparkling, splashing sunlight of Italian nature in "The Hills of Anacapri".

Among these plays, the prelude "The Hills of Anacapri" stands out for its colorful coloring. It is built on a natural combination of scenic and pictorial and genre and everyday life. Their organic fusion allows Debussy to create a vital, vivid and very real image. The introduction to the prelude (the first eleven bars) resembles the plucking of the strings of a plucked instrument (mandolin or guitar), gradually dying out in the air. This impression is underscored by the author's instruction: "finish by vibrating."

The main dance image of the prelude does not emerge immediately in the introduction, but gradually from a single rhythmic figure and a short, interrupted motif. It is still only a hint of an independent image, but thanks to the trio rhythm and rapid movement it already has certain genre features, reminiscent of the Italian folk dance tarantella.

The significance of the introduction in this prelude is to create a certain colorful background with a quick change of flashing images (without any disclosure of them), against which the

main theme should emerge. Her appearance (in the twelfth measure) begins the first section of the prelude's three-movement composition. This theme is embodied in a relief melodic line and a slender beat structure (1 + 1 + 2) and has the pentatonic harmony inclination frequently used by Debussy. This harmony, found in the folk music of many nationalities, almost always has a light emotional coloring, which obviously attracted the composer when embodying the landscape sparkling in the sunlight.

The pentatonic theme is accompanied by a transparent and anxious accompaniment that "glistens" with different colours, sometimes in sharp second combinations. The accompaniment is as picturesque as the main melodic images of the entire prelude:



Another image in the first movement of the prelude, "in the spirit of a folk song" (as the author's remark says), has a roughly humorous character thanks to the octave-like presentation in the bass of the rather sweeping melody and its sudden stops on the weak beat of a measure:

153 Cédez a Tempo (Avec la liberté d'une chanson populaire) Cédez - - -

a. Tempo

The middle part of the prelude contains a contrasting image, although its nature is also dance-like. After the impetuous and dynamic dance, which gradually slows down by the end of the first part, there is a slow, smooth, somewhat languid waltz-like dance, built on intricate rhythmic "breaks" of two and three-sided meters (6/8 in the right hand and 3/4 in the left), on the alternation of 6/8 and 5/8 meters:

154 Modéré et expressif

un peu marqué

By the end of the middle section, the already slow dance "freezes" in a contemplative stupefaction.

The third movement begins unexpectedly, without a gradual transition, with an "explosion" of swirling, upward motion. The theme of the tarantella this time enters without

accompaniment on the background of a single pedal seventh chord of the sixth step in B major, which causes a feeling of layering of one sound layer on another (similar to the layering of one paint on another on a canvas).

The second (songful) theme in the prelude reprise sounds very joyful and "open" in *ff* in the upper register in a complex multi-planar texture. This is a rare example of a dynamic reprise by Debussy, in which previous images acquire new qualities. Toward the end of the prelude, the movement becomes more and more impetuous, acquiring the character of a general mass dance. Two glistening as if "glissanding" passages create the sensation of a dazzling flash of light. This prelude is on a par with such significant works by Debussy as the prelude *Fireworks*, *Island of Joy*, and the symphonic *Festivities* and *Iberia*, where the connection with images of the living real world without a shadow of symbolism becomes especially direct and noticeable.

"**The Interrupted Serenade**" is among the many genre preludes connected, in accordance with the program idea, with pictures of folk life. The "Alhambra Gate" prelude is one of them. In these two pieces there is an especially noticeable musical folk and domestic basis, associated with a wide use of characteristic features of melody, rhythm, harmonies, the sound of folk instruments of different nations (mainly Spanish).

"The Interrupted Serenade" is essentially a scene from Spanish life, which the composer reveals with real juicy folk humor (it's a serenade that never gets started). At first, the sounds of a single-string guitar with characteristic fretwork, rehearsed repetitions of one note, and then of pure quintas, are heard from afar. Twice (in the nineteenth and then in the thirty-second bars) the signs of a melody are outlined. But the dominant expressive role, of course, belongs to the characteristic colorful instrumental accompaniment. Finally, a more vividly delineated melody appears, reminiscent of a Spanish lyrical song:

155 [Modérément animé]

The image shows a musical score for measures 155 to 158 of 'The Interrupted Serenade'. The score is in 2/4 time and features a piano accompaniment with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and a melodic line in the right hand. The tempo is marked 'Modérément animé' and the dynamics are 'pp'.

But it also cannot be called the main melodic image of the prelude because of its "sketchiness", incompleteness, and extremely small melodic range. On the other hand, its harmonic illumination, colorfully beginning with tart quintic sequences, moves on to "juicy" nonaccords.

The prerequisites for establishing a new image in the prelude are created from the moment the "brandishing" chords appear in 2/4 in the characteristic marching rhythm of the copla

(one of the common dances in Spain). They sound like a guitar introduction to a dance. But this time, too, the introduction remains without a continuation. The dancing meters of 2/4 and 3/8, the different texture of the statement freely and unexpectedly replace each other and make the anticipation of the serenade proper more and more tense. At certain moments, unexpected dynamic contrasts and insistent repetition of the same rhythmic figure create the complete illusion of a song's introduction. The spicy harmonic language further emphasizes the atmosphere of love's languor. But instead of a serenade at the end of the prelude, the strings become more and more distant and muffled until they are completely silenced in the distance. The author's remark "leaving" shades the soft humor of this surprisingly lively genre scene even further.

The prelude, The Gates of the Alhambra, also belongs to a series of genre scenes, but dramaturgically and figuratively resolved in an entirely different way. Its connection with Spanish folklore is clearer and more direct - the character, tempo and rhythm of one dance, the habanera, are maintained throughout the piece:

158 [Mouv't de Habanera]
P très expressif

The musical score consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a piano (P) dynamic and a 'très expressif' instruction. The music is in 4/4 time and features a melodic line in the right hand and a rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. The second system continues the piece, showing a 'pp' (pianissimo) section with a 'simile' instruction, indicating a change in dynamics and texture. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Retaining one image that dominates the entire piece, Debussy gives it different shades of meaning and imbues it with a variety of emotional states: there is an angular dance with unexpected melodic turns and accents (in the first bars of the prelude), a dance full of sensual tenderness, a passionate, wild impulse, or a dance with a touch of mockery and irony. The "impressionisticness" of the prelude lies in the fact that each of these new states, shades of image, appears as suddenly as they disappear. The prelude ends with a complete gradual "disappearance" of the dance with the author's remark "from afar."

Among the preludes that combine features of a genre sketch and a musical portrait, Minstrels stands out. Debussy reveals the images of the actors of the modern Negro variety theater in a grotesque refraction through the fashionable at the time of the dance of the kek-uok (The use of a common modern dance in a grotesque and caricatured form is characteristic of many composers of the 19th and 20th centuries - Mussorgsky, Stravinsky, Richard Strauss, Mahler, Shostakovich, and others. For all the differences in their creative natures and artistic methods, many of them used this technique to create sharply

characteristic and sometimes satirical musical images). The main expressive dramaturgical role in the prelude is assigned to the dance met-rhythm. The rhythmic pattern is sharp:



with an accented second beat plays a framing role throughout the first nine and last nine bars of the prelude. The author's remark "nervously and with humor" clarifies the caricature nature of this image, which determines the emotional structure and genre flavor of the prelude. The frequent changes in tempo throughout the prelude with a large number of rubato, sudden rises and falls of dynamics, the abundance of interrupted cadences, as if on purpose to disrupt the calm presentation, is the main means of musical characterization of minstrels, because it gives the music the character of either sarcastic mockery or an ugly grimace.

Among the preludes - musical portraits, "**The Girl with Flaxen Hair**" takes center stage. The somewhat restrained and at the same time crystal clear main image of the prelude is embodied in the unhurriedly unfolding single-voice melody, which in timbre and register brings to mind the winding of a shepherd's horn. This melody is remarkable for its length and the softness of its outlines, rare in Debussy:

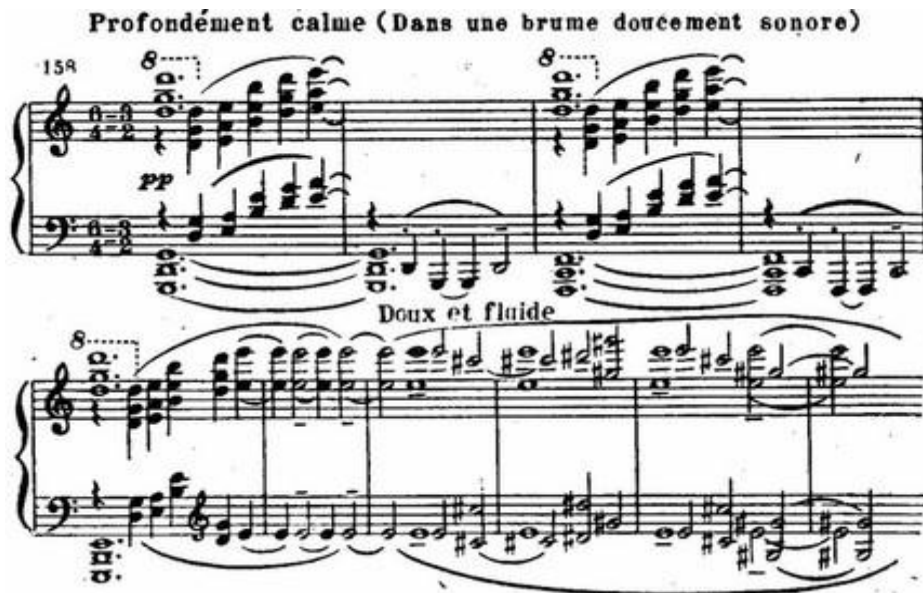


The impression of restraint and somewhat cold beauty is created by the almost complete avoidance of the introductory tone in the melody. This gives it the features of pentatonic (the semantic content of this harmony here is completely different from that in "The Hills of Anacapri") and deprives the theme of sharp gravitation. The harmonic plan of the prelude is dominated by quiet plagal turns (VI-I or IV-I, etc.), chains of quart-sextachords, sequences of unresolved nonachords, repeated movements of the same chord, which evoke the sensation of just a subtle play of colours, without creating a tense harmonious harmonic development.

Among Debussy's preludes with a literary or pictorial source, "**the Sunken Cathedral**" stands out. This prelude was inspired by a Breton legend about the ancient city of Ise, once

swallowed up by the sea and, according to fishermen's tales, sometimes rising at dawn from the waves to the distant chime of bells. In interpreting this subject, Debussy was far from the romantic and condensed and even more so from the religious and mystical connotation that might have been given to this dramatic legend. The genre basis of the prelude and the means of musical expression are subordinate here to the task of reproducing in music as finely as possible the picturesque scene of the seascape, the gradually dispersing fog and the coming dawn, the bells ringing from the depths of the sea, and finally the rising city.

The author's indication "sounds quietly in the thick fog" has here not only a performing, but also a concrete programmatic meaning:



Debussy gradually clarifies his colouring (a kind of "fog dispersal") through increasing dynamics from pp to ff, changes in texture (slowly alternating chords are replaced by a broadly expanded chain of unfolded triads), colourful tonal changes (H-Es-C) and, most importantly, the appearance of a quite complete melodic image with a definite genre colouring. At first, it begins as a severe solemn chorale (a peculiar symbol of the Middle Ages) in a parallel diatonic movement of quart-sextak chords. At the beginning of the middle section of the prelude, a melody similar in intonation to the beginning of the first movement appears. Here it has the character of concentrated reflection. Its calm restraint suddenly gives way to an explosion of sound and an expansion of the register range, tremendous in its formidable power. The harmonic accompaniment of the theme is considerably sharpened (instead of the quarto-quinta harmonies of the beginning of the prelude and parallel quartoseccords in the chorale, second combinations predominate here, giving great tension to the sound):



For four bars, this dramatic, churning climax creates the picture-like impression of a cathedral rising out of the water. But a rapid drop in dynamics and register at the end of the middle section, on a "chain" of parallel unresolved seventh chords of different tonalities, brings the listener back to the calm narrative.

The compressed reprise of the prelude is based on the chorale theme, but in a transformed form. It sounds *pp* against the rattling arpeggiated accompaniment and is perceived as a remembrance of vanished images of the past. The little coda almost repeats the introduction. It is as if it were the same picture of the calm surface of the sea, once again closing in on the cathedral that has disappeared. This framing is dramaturgically important, giving the entire composition of the prelude an exceptionally integral character.

Conclusion: Debussy's piano music, more than any other area of his work, underwent a significant evolution from the early to the late period of his composing career. The peculiarity of Debussy's piano work lies first and foremost in its imagistic structure. None of the composers of the past embodied in piano music such a variety and richness of subjects connected with pictures of nature. Debussy did not strive, in his choice of themes close to him, connected with pictures of nature, to a purely pictorial solution (that is, to a precise concrete musical depiction of phenomena in the surrounding world). For him, the problem of colorfulness and flavor has always been associated with the transmission of a certain mood, feeling and his own attitude to a particular poetic image. Each of his landscape sketches has a certain emotional coloring - now a quiet, dreamy contemplation, now a majestic meditation; a stern and sometimes gloomy mood can instantly change to intoxicating joy. Having abandoned traditional forms (sonata, variations and concerto), Debussy nevertheless retained a coherent and integral composition in the majority of his works.

When we compare Debussy's piano works with the legacy of his great predecessors who revolutionized world piano music and performance (Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin and Liszt), we see that Debussy's works are certainly inferior to them in depth of content, in emotional range, in the scale of ideas and forms. But such an aspect of Debussy's artistic method as colorful and coloristic contributed to the maximum expansion of the timbre and sound possibilities of the piano and enriched the piano literature of the 20th century with many remarkable works.

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