

William Fried

Mandeville Recital Hall
Wednesday, November 12, 2008
8pm

Preludes, book 2

Claude Debussy

i. Brouillards

ii. Feuilles mortes

iii. La Puerta del Vino

iv. "Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses"

v. Bruyères

vi. "Général Lavine" – excentric

vii. La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune

viii. Ondine

ix. Hommage à S. Pickwick, Esq. P. P. M. P. C.

x. Canope

xi. Les tierces alternées

xii. Feux d'artifice

Intermission

Vigils

Paul Elwood

Klavierstück X

Karlheinz Stockhausen

The Preludes – Claude Debussy

It may be that the curious history of the non-functional keyboard Prelude may finally be coming to an end. The prolific American composer Frederic Rzewski called his recent collection of miniatures “Ludes.” After all, they are not “pre-” anything.

Keyboard preludes – short free-form quasi-improvisations introducing larger works – have been around as long as the keyboards themselves. They figure prominently in J S Bach’s two volume Well-Tempered Clavier – each cycle of twenty-four preludes and fugues covering the major and minor keys – to name a famous example.

But it was Chopin, writing a century later, who freed the Prelude from its introductory role. Chopin was a great admirer of Bach, and, as Bach had, set out to compose a cycle of short pieces covering all of the major and minor keys. But by Chopin’s day, the fugue was an outmoded form, and Chopin called his twenty-four miniatures simply Preludes, though each was “prelude” to nothing in particular. The quality, success, and ingenuity of the cycle inspired other composers, among them Scriabin, Debussy, Rachmaninoff, and Shostakovich to try their hand composing in the form. The collection of miniatures became an accepted form in its own right, and, accidentally as it were, there was a ready made name for the component parts: Preludes.

Though Debussy composed the requisite number of twenty-four Preludes, he did not refer them to particular keys, and several are either tonally vague or have few ties to traditional tonality (many eschew functional harmony or are constructed from whole tone scales, etc.). Debussy’s Preludes are longer than Chopin’s and he composed two cycles of twelve each: Book 1, dated 1909-1910; and Book 2, 1912-1913. Although each book was published as a complete set and ordered artistically, Debussy and his contemporaries often programmed excerpts, and the composer’s writings suggest he expected them to be excerpted as often as performed in their entirety.

Unlike Bach or Chopin, Debussy gave his Preludes descriptive titles, many of them references to art, history, literature, fable, mythology. But illustrating Debussy’s reluctance to influence his audience with a specific image, each title in the manuscript is found at the end of the Prelude, rather than at the beginning. In this spirit, I have listed only the French titles in the *programme*. For those who wish their listening experience influenced by Debussy’s inspiration, English translations – along with notes – are included below.

Brouillards [Mists]: Delicate layering of material gives the aural impression of a simple tune obscured in fog.

Feuilles Mortes [Dead Leaves]: A static scene invoking the melancholy of autumn.

La Puerta del Vino [The Wine Gate]: Spain was romanticized and used as inspiration by many of the French Impressionists, Debussy included, and here he offers a piece in a habanera rhythm. Debussy never traveled to Spain. The title refers to one of the gates of the Alhambra in Granada, imagined through a watercolor.

“Les Fées sont d’exquises danseuses” [“The fairies are exquisite dancers”]: The image of nymphs dancing in the woods recalls *Puck’s Dance* from book 1, though without the caprice of the latter. At one point in the score, Debussy indicates to the performer *doux et rêveur* – sweet and dreamlike.

Bruyères [Moors]: The first of two pieces (the other is *Pickwick*) that refer to England. Debussy spent some time across the channel, and here he offers a pastoral scene, not unlike the famous *Girl with the Flaxen Hair* of Book 1, using the heath of southern England as inspiration.

“Général Lavine” – *excentric* [“General Lavine”– eccentric]: In his lifetime, Debussy wrote several pieces in the style of the popular comedic “cakewalks.” General Lavine was no doubt a popular character from turn of the century vaudeville, well known to Debussy’s audiences. [As an aside, Debussy’s markings have always been a source of fascination for me, sometimes puzzling, often humorous (like his famous *Moderato ma non troppo*), yet nearly always evocative. One of my favorites is found in the *Général*. At one point Debussy indicates *spirituel et discret* –spiritual and discreet. For some inexplicable reason the music here, or the marking, or a combination of the two, brings to mind for me the quasi-mythological 1930’s Mississippi of the 2000 film *O Brother Where Art Thou?*.]

La Terrasse des audiences du clair de lune [The terrace for moonlight audiences]: Moonlit scenes were a favorite subject of Debussy's (including his often heard *Clair de Lune*), and here he offers up one of his best.

Ondine was a water nymph who, as the story goes, fell in love with a mortal man only to be passed over for a rival. As the personification of the seductiveness, caprice, and sheer destructive nature of the sea, this mythical character must have been a particularly attractive subject for an impressionist composer, attested to by the fact that the same nereid was the inspiration for an earlier piano piece by Maurice Ravel. Yet while Ravel's *Ondine* is a virtuosic showpiece replete with water imagery, Debussy's is a character sketch as capricious as the sea itself: luminous one moment, menacing the next.

Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C. [Hommage to S. Pickwick, Esq., P.P.M.P.C]: A tribute to Charles Dickens. The subject here of course is Samuel Pickwick from the *Pickwick Papers*. The letters after his name are nonsense – Debussy was just poking fun at the English with their titles and advanced degrees. At the opening, attentive listeners may hear “God Save the Queen” in the bass.

Canope likely refers to the funeral urns used in ancient Egypt to store the various organs of the dead prior to mummification. The canopic jars were plain, with lids carved to represent the four sons of Horus: Duamutef the Jackal, Qebehseuef the falcon, Hapi the baboon, and Imseti the human. Alternatively, *Canope* may have referred to Canopus, the Greek name of a city on the Nile in ancient Egypt. The intention, evidently, was to evoke the feel of the ancient world, a rather ironic fact considering the unmistakable musical influence of Javanese Gamelan here.

Les Tierces Alternées [Alternating Thirds]: This is a bit of a nonsense title, referring to what the pianist does physically (the hands alternate playing thirds) rather than to any imagery. In this sense, the piece is a precursor to the Etudes, to which Debussy gave similar titles referring to the technical challenge presented the pianist. There is evidence that *les Tierces* was a late addition to replace a prelude based on Rudyard Kipling's “Toomai of the Elephants” that was later abandoned. I always felt he should have called this one *La pluie sur les toits* – Rain on the rooftops.

Feux d'artifice [Fireworks]: An explosive Bastille Day fireworks display. The Marseillaise can be heard at the end, as if floating by on the evening air.

Vigils – Paul Elwood

Paul Elwood's *Vigils* is a somewhat later addition to the program. I first heard Elwood's music in Boston when the Callithumpian Consort played a chamber piece of his called *Stanley Kubrick's Mountain Home*, with the composer accompanying on his banjo. A while back, when I was ordering the score to the Stockhausen online from a music warehouse in New York, I saw a piece of Elwood's (*Vigils*) advertised in the site's clearance sale, and – remembering the Callithumpian performance – I promptly snapped it up. Playing through it afterwards, I was delighted at my find, and decided that the piece's meditative nature would be a welcome complement to the Debussy and Stockhausen.

Paul Elwood is currently a professor of music composition at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley. Some time ago, I emailed him asking for program note information, and he was kind enough to oblige:

Vigils was premiered August 6, 2000 by Harold Martina, at the Sigma Alpha Iota Convention in Dallas, Texas. Sigma Alpha Iota Philanthropies, Inc. presented *Vigils* with the Inter-American Music Award.

Vigils takes its title from a poem of Arthur Rimbaud's collection *Illuminations*. The piece is a meditation on this work that begins “C'est le repos éclairé, ni fièvre, ni langueur, sur le lit ou sur le pré.” *[It is repose in the light, neither fever nor languor on a bed or on a meadow.] And later “Des deux extrémités de la sale, . . . des elevations harmoniques se joignent.” [From the two extremities of the room . . . harmonic elevations join.] While the work isn't programmatic in nature, the colors and harmonies seek to emulate the images of Rimbaud's poetry.

The overall interpretation of the composition should be quiet and meditative, though the pianist should recall that a certain amount of heat may be generated in meditation ("Neither fever nor languor. . .").

*Translations are from *Illuminations*, Arthur Rimbaud, New Directions Paperbook, second printing, 1957, trans. Louise Varèse.

Klavierstück X – Karlheinz Stockhausen

The constant goal of my searches and efforts: the power of transformation – its operation in time; in music. Hence a refusal of repetition, of variation, of development, of contrast. Of all, in fact, that requires 'shapes' – themes, motives, objects, to be repeated, varied, developed, contrasted; to be dismembered, rearranged, augmented, diminished, displayed in modulation, transposition, inversion or retrograde. All this I renounced...

...Never is the same thing heard twice. Yet one has the clear feeling that an immutable and extremely homogenous continuity is never abandoned. There is a hidden power of cohesion, a relatedness among the proportions: a structure. Not similar shapes in a changing light. Rather this: different shapes in a constant all-permeating light.

Karlheinz Stockhausen, 1956, for a radio broadcast of his music

There are few pieces of music that I would call "cosmic," but *Klavierstück X* is one of them. I mean this not in the usual hyperbolic sense (though if it applies anywhere it would be here), but quite literally: The piece seems to me to be the birth of the universe, acted out on the piano. From the initial cosmic explosion, a kind of primeval "Big Bang" from which all of the material of the piece's universe is contained, to the final apotheosis, with those same building blocks wheeling through space and time, there is an undeniable celestial quality to the music. To me it is a kind of modern myth of Genesis, in music.

Klavierstück X literally means "Piano Piece 10," but the number refers more to its place in an unfinished series of 21 piano pieces rather than being a chronological designation (#11 was completed before #9 or #10). For a ten year period between 1951-1961, Stockhausen's efforts at the piano were directed at this cycle, and he completed the first eleven pieces before apparently losing interest in the project. The *Klavierstücke* were to be grouped together in sets according to a specific numerical sequence (4 6 1 5 3 2), and *Klavierstück X* was originally conceived as the last piece of the second set.

Much of the piece's aesthetic is grounded in the tradition of the post-war European avant-garde, of which Stockhausen was a major figure. The generation of composers growing up in Europe between the wars came of age in the 1950's; they found themselves heirs to a world in ruins and a musical tradition all too easily subverted for totalitarian purposes. To create a credible art for this brave new world, they looked to the twelve-tone techniques of Schoenberg and Webern, and the possibilities of expanding those same techniques to determine all parameters of composition – what is now referred to as serialism.

Stockhausen once said in an interview that he felt that, at its heart, serialism was simply a process of mediation between extremes. In his own notes to *Klavierstück X*, he refers to those extremes as "organization" and "non-organization," or, more colorfully, as I prefer for the purposes of program notes, order and chaos. More specifically, the piece charts a gradual process from chaos to order. This may lend some credence to my Genesis analogy, since, as Herbert Henck reminds us in his book-long analysis of *Klavierstück X*, "The change from disorder to order is the definition of creation."

To those interested in further exploration, I wholeheartedly recommend a website set up by French pianist Florent Boffard, a kind of interactive program notes, as it were: <http://fboffard.free.fr/StockFlashA.swf> For the uninitiated, Boffard recommends approaching the music the way a person would discover the music of another civilization, or watch a play in a foreign language. I would go one further, and imagine this the music of an alien civilization. No doubt Stockhausen, who famously claimed to be from outer space, would have approved.

