Module 5 – Analysis of Piano Repertoire

Lessons 1 and 2

Debussy Preludes

The student must look for the book “The Piano works of Claude Debussy”, by E. Robert Schmitz. Dover publication, Inc., NY. It is a very descriptive book where all the formal, structural, harmonic and contextual analysis of the work can be found. Following you have a small commentary on the preludes.

Debussy Preludes:

Debussy wrote two books of Preludes (published in 1910 and 1913 respectively). They have a natural sequence of more abstraction and somehow, difficulty, from the first to the second. Under the pianistic viewpoint, one can say that the Etudes are the logical technical continuation of the Preludes.

The history of the Prelude form, as a preliminary piece for a set of dances for example, has its sequence in Debussy. Chopin started with the idea of an independent piece and Debussy continues that evolution, by adding more completeness of form, without losing its brevity characteristic.

All these small little pieces are full of different moods, tasteful subjects, impressions, rhythms, concentrations of materials that are never repeated. It is a fast view of the ensemble, a precision show of suggestion. The pianistic style is simple in form, has clear and precise rhythms and elastic melodies. The Preludes are structured mainly in a ternary form, not as a preconceived frame, but as a consequence of a scope of colours.

The titles of each Prelude are placed at the end. Two are the reasons: avoid the preconception of the work and make it clear that first comes the music. No previous stimulus, no presets of mood. The range of subjects treated here in these two books of preludes varies from literature to landmarks, passing through painting, architecture, archaeology, natural phenomena, etc.
Book One

_Danseuses de Delphes_ – “Female Dancers of Delphi”

Delphi is the name of an ancient Greek city, the place of the Temple of Apollo, God of Oracles, Poetry and Arts. One notices here the mythological characters and the symmetry of Grecian art. The modal materials are mixed with diatonic, pentatonic and chromatic fragments, all based on the classical relation of tone centres. Three are the levels that plastically draw this piece: the dotted sustained melody, the detached chords and the percussive accents.

_Voiles_ – “Veils” or “Sails”

It has two possible translations: it can be either veils that envelope feminine forms, or sailing boats that are anchored on a fixed point. It is completely written using the whole-tone scale that offers a vaguer palette comparing to the diatonic scale. There is no half-step and its absence does not form a pull of gravity among the related tones of a musical piece. The technical levels one can see here are: the melody, the ostinato and the pedal.

_La vent dans la plaine_ – “Wind in the plain”

Together with Voiles and _Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest_, they form a real study of the wind phenomena. Here, the language used is more pentatonic, with the middle-section in a whole-tone scale. This is a very descriptive piece where one can see the expansion of the plain, feel the dry wind succeeded by their pauses, the quietness, the breeze, the tempest, the final murmured breath.

_Le sont et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir_ – “Sounds and perfumes swirl in the evening air”

It is inspired in a Baudelaire poem, _Fleurs du Mal (Harmonies du Soir)_ . The melodic line has the form of a _Lied_ in close writing to a chamber music. This prelude has a clear A major tonal center, with harmonic wandering in the middle of its body. It reminds the modulating fluency of Fauré melodies.
Les colines d’Anacapri – “Hills of Anacapri”

The island of Capri, Italy, has two villages: Capri, on sea level and Anacapri, around 500 meters above sea level. It is located in the Bay of Naples with a remarkable view of the blue sea. The name Capri comes from the goats, the first inhabitants of the island. Founded as a Greek colony about 400 B.C., passed into the hands of all history conquerors, valid for crimes, water, markets, rush, etc. It is a garden of song, pungent scents, sun, sky, sea and hills. Happiness are expressed in the Neapolitan songs with their national tarantella dance, in a 6/8 rhythm with percussion of tambourines in a fast and gay way of the dance itself, which is supposed to be originated as a treatment for the bite of tarantulas. Debussy matches all of this with his bright music. From distance, bells and snatches of tarantella are carried on the breeze. A popular tune is settled, later, a love song appears in an Italian opera style. Tambourines and popular melodies join in a rich fanfare to the blue sea.

Des pas sur la neige – “Footprints in the snow”

This is an austere prelude, not as innocent as a child amusement in a winter scene. It has to have a value of melancholy. The persistent rhythm must contrast with the hesitating steps on the surface that later sink into the snow. The melodic line, with its feeling of emptiness, must bring a vision of solitude, sense of loss, which the footprints will later recall. The structural levels are the ostinato (footfalls), the melody and the pedal.

Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest – “TRANSLATIONS”

It represents the power of the Atlantic wind, lashing coasts, battering precipices, destroying constructions, bringing people to exalted terror. Here Debussy is no more the poet or the tender painter. He shows a fascination to evil, uses a dynamic scope from pp to ff. This prelude, harmonically complex, has two opposed pentatonic series resulting in their intersection, a whole-toned scale.

La fille aux cheveux de lin – “The girl with flaxen hair”

This clam and lyric prelude is totally the opposite of its precedent one. It has a beautiful melody that became very popular and therefore, heard in almost every home with a piano. It is inspired by the homonymous poem by Leconte de Lisle, in the collection Poèmes Antiques: Chansons Ecossaises.


**La serenade interrompue** – “The interrupted serenade”

We are now in Spain, more precisely in Andalusia, probably Seville or Granada. This is the story of a frustrated guitar player, who persists to give up his serenade despite the multiple interruptions that test his temper. It is a night scene, with a Moorish melody. Ironic moments appear to interrupt our musician, as the shut of windows, the wandering of a man or a group of people that do not want go to bed. This is one of the preludes in rondo-sonata form.

**La cathédrale engloutie** – “The engulfed Cathedral”

This is one of the most mystic piano pieces of Debussy. It is based on the legend of Brittany, describing the Cathedral of Ys, engulfed in the fourth or fifth century because of the impiety of its people, but that rises again at sunrise. Debussy adds his pagan rite to the sea and the main materials of the prelude characterize both forces: plainsong treated in medieval organum and motifs of the calm sea.

**La danse de Puck** – “Puck’s dance”

A delightful caricature of a trouble-maker, whose touch of lightness and fleetness is a moment capriciously teasing. Page to Oberon, Puck is an agile elf with a sarcastic laugh. A stirrer in the fairy kingdom of the forests is known by the mistake resulting from his management of the love elixir and the result mixup among all the characters of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”. The structure is again closed to the sonata form; an exposition with three subjects and one motif, a development of the two opening materials, a resumed recapitulation with the first material and the passing through motif, serving as well as a coda.

**Minstrels**

This is a scene of the USA, where household servants around the first half of the 19th Century put on minstrel shows with Bones and Rastus; cake-walks, cornet solos, all that feature minstrel groups appeared in Europe around 1900 on the boardwalks of the seaside of Deauville. The precision of the steps of the dance used to fascinate the spectator, who would be astounded by the overconfident gesture of the figures with tailcoats and top hats. It was something exotic for Europeans and settled a style of music-hall entertainments. The jazz elements exposed were followed by trots, blues,
Ragtime, rhythms that easily fascinated European composers who incorporated it in their compositions, announcing a series of American (USA) influence on the European music scene. Debussy was one of the first composers captivated by the minstrel groups.

**Book two**

*Brouillards*

This is a fantasy piece with an enormous variety of personalities. It has a Poe-spirit, a mixture of terror and loneliness with familiar tenderness. A kid is watching fog through the window, hearing the wisps, seeing the luminosity reflected by the mist, the white quietness. Suddenly one is lost, a feeling of nightmare surrounds, the beloved are near, but invisible. Nothing stable can be reached.

*Feuilles mortes* – “Dead leaves”

The key word here is autumn. They are the falling golden leaves, the suspension of life that regrets sadly the past. The soft music touches an incurable sore. Like *Canope*, one searches in vain for an answer to the finality of life’s disappearance, getting as a result, only the accpetation of the living cycle we are submitted. Fluctuating harmonies and a ternary form is used here by Debussy.

*La Puerta del Vino* – “The wine’s gate”

This prelude is based upon a postcard Debussy received from Falla, showing indeed *La Puerta del Vino*, which is a gateway to the Alhambra Palace in Granada, once more, Spain. This beautiful palace was built on the 13th Century and was occupied by the Moorish princes. It is totally walled with several gates built in different ages. The spirit of this prelude does not recall the architecture schema of the gate, rather is the ambient of the square in front of it that is pictured here; the joys of wine, the flamenco dance, drunk people, and the rhythm of the habanera, that so much influence caused into European musicians in general, by its changing moods, sharp accents followed by indolent grace. It is a piece of great contrasts of passion and brutality. Debussy never
visited Spain, was considered though as a great master of its music. This piece with *Soirées dans Grenade* and the *Sérénade interrompue* forms the Spanish triptych, being the first and the third, part of the series of *Préludes*. This prelude is built on the habanera rhythm; melodies that alternate rhythm of a triplet and two eight-notes and middle-voiced pedal points.

*Les Fées son d’exquises danseuses* – “Fairies are exquisite dancers”

This prelude illustrates the fairy tales imaginary. The tales go since the medieval duality between evil and good to the different types of spirits, passing through mocking forms, witchcraft superstitions until beauty, ethereal powers. Fairies were associated to knight desires, helping Muses, guardian angels, etc. Debussy understands them as an enchanted beauty of the motion. The structure of the piece is a rondo which main theme is the opening flying subject. In a classical treated form, Debussy alternates periods of fleet dance and lyric passages.

*Bruyères* –

This is a pretty and pastoral scene, maybe on the grass of a Scottish or Irish garden, or among the lavender-rose bush of Brittany. Debussy was a frequent visitor of the Paris exhibitions before the War. There, many works of painters specialized in mountains landscapes at sunset were exposed. The pentatonic melody Debussy uses in this prelude, its delicacy that evokes a folk tune, is underlined throughout a diatonic outline. The structure of this piece produces a delightful contrast of tenderness with the improvisations in cadenza-like passages.

*General Lavine – eccentric*

We are again into the American (USA) scene, caricaturizing an Anglo-Saxon stylishness of joking, of comedy. The harmonic mood is comparable with *Minstrels*, with contrast of discordant rhythms. *General Lavine* is more sophisticated, tactful in his humour. It does not have a folk expression as *Minstrels*, but a refined satire. We are here in a rondo-sonata structure.

*La terrasse des audaces du clair de lune –* “The terrace for Moonlight audiences”
This title can describe two situations: 1) according to Pierre Loti’s *L’Inde Sous les Anglais*, it is described as a terrace to have counsel at moonlight, and 2) to René Puaux, a description of a ceremony of coronation of King George V, it talks about the victory’s hall, the *hall of pleasure*, garden of sultanesses, the *terrace for moonlight audiences*. This Hindu scene is not musically painted in this piece, rather the feeling of the moonlit, tenderness, passionate unrest, languor, loneliness; this is what captivated Debussy by reading this title.

**Ondine**

The interest of Debussy of unreal beings has here another chapter. His love for nature elements and phenomena (sea, wind, forests), Puck, elves, fairies, are always well expressed. Now, Ondines are around. They are, according to northern mythology, water nymphs, with crystal palaces in deep river beds or lakes. They sing, they dance and they attract incautious fishermen and voyagers, transporting them to their deep water where days pass in unconscious delight, surrounded by beauty and timeless absent-mindedness. The water allusion appears in this prelude in its melodic and accompanying figures.

**Hommage a S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C**

Rich prelude with comic contrasts, large ranges with little doted melodies. The character is the guardian to three members of the Pickwick club. Sam Pickwick is very moody. The music starts with a sonorous “God save the King” in the bass line.

**Canope**

It is a city on the Nile River of ancient Egypt that gave its name came to porous urns that, containing digestive organs of a deceased person, were buried with the mummy. That is why some Etruscans jars covered by a likeness of the deceased are also called Canopic jars. The mood evoked by the urn and Debussy’s own reactions to these associations is what concerns him in this prelude. He evokes old processions, sadness, with pleading accents, searching the key to the mystery of death. Simple melody and deep touching phrases, parallel chords that succeed each other, modal treatment; are some of the ambience one find in this prelude.

**Les tierces alternées**
Suddenly reality comes back. We are no more in the world of fairies, mummies, winds, characters, places. Now we are approaching the technical problems of the piano as an instrument. For the pianist, the challenge is get out from the unreal world and get to the daily work, “ thirds” work. We are finishing the “Préludes” and getting close to the “Études”, and Debussy will work with all kind of thirds, clusters piled into a chord, polytonality of thirds, chords that crash onto other, stationary thirds that form pedal-points, melodic thirds, middle-voiced, chromatic…. these are the materials he will merge.

**Feux d’Artifice**

This is a coronation for a series of twenty-four preludes. French in its heart, one sees a variety of small moments of a 14th of July; military display, popular dancing, loitering in cafés, picnics in woods. When all the noise of the festivity falls down, we hear the “Marseillaise”.

Questions:

1. Why Debussy preferred to write the titles of his preludes by the end of each of them?
2. What are the non-musical elements Debussy had in mind to write these 24 preludes?
3. Explain all the titles of the whole series of Preludes: where names come from, what they mean, etc.
4. First prelude, Danseuses de Delphes: This piece has three elements to be taken care of. Explain them as you are telling a student about their existence. Explain also the use of the pedal, which has an important role here.
5. Second prelude: Voiles: Also here we have three elements, but they are different in nature from those of the first prelude. Compare them. How can you help pedaling to become more expressive?
6. Third prelude: Le vent dans la plaine: What is the main harmonic color of this prelude? How is it built? Why did the author say not to melt together the sounds of the opening trill?
7. Fourth prelude: Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir: According to a quotation of O. Thompson, could you find that fragment that could arbitrarily be based on a twelve-tone scale? What is the form of this prelude? How could you define the rubato passages? In which sense? What is it used for?
8. Fifth prelude: Les colines d’Anacapri: Do you consider this a
programmatic music? If so, describe the program.
9. Sixth prelude: Des pas sur la neige: Which are the (musical and non-
musical) elements here described?
10. Seventh prelude: Ce qu’a vu le vent d’ouest: Which are the preludes that
are based on the alternate of pentatonic and whole-toned series with
chromatic passages? The indicating crescendo and decrescendo on
ascending and descending pitch levels relate to the nature of the work.
What else can be found in this piece related to the nature?
11. Eighth prelude: La fille aux cheveux de lin: What is the harmonic duality
pointed out here?
12. Ninth prelude: La sérénade interrompue: Describe the form of this
prelude. Which are the harmonic musical elements that characterize
this piece as a Moorish one? (How do you listen to them?) Under the
performing viewpoint, which kind of other instrument is evoked here?
13. Tenth prelude: La cathédrale engloutie: Which other piece by Debussy
has a similar beginning to this one? What must be taken in
consideration before perform this prelude?
14. Eleventh prelude: La danse de Puck: Precise all the parts that could build
a sonata form at this prelude.
15. Twelfth prelude: Minstrels: What is a minstrel? A personal appointment:
since this is a piece that has a popular root, do you think it must be
played with rhythmical freedom or rather, strictness should be applied?
Justify here as an instrumentalist.
Give bar numbers to specify them. What is the main concern of the
Author when talking about impressionism performing?
17. Fourteenth prelude: Feuilles mortes: How can this prelude be formally
divided? According to the tips of performance given and according to
the form, how would you apply the use of pedaling at this piece?
18. Fifteenth prelude: La puerta del vino: How many are the elements that
build this prelude? Which are they? What is the cause of polytonality
here? About the tempo marking, specifically here, what does
“movement de habanera” mean?
19. Sixteenth prelude: Le fées sont d’exquises danseuses: How do you define
formally this prelude? What is the harmonic texture of this prelude?
Show it (by using measure numbers).
20. Seventeenth prelude: Bruyères: even the short notes are given a legato
singing quality. Why Debussy avoid dryness here?
21. Eighteenth prelude: General Lavine – eccentric: What is the main
character difference between this prelude and Minstrels? What is the
form applied? According to our own opinion, the motivic thirty-second-
notes should be played differently? Why?
22. Nineteenth prelude: La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune: Point out
the formal parts of the Prelude.
23. Twentieth prelude: Ondine: At the second section, which kind of
atmosphere gives the antique minor scale to the round-tune? What
types of motifs are here found? Which kind fits the “evoked” round-tune in?
24. Twenty-first prelude: *Hommage a S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C.*: Could we set a diatonic tonality here? Which one? The piece is well-humored, but at some points there are expressive moments that should be underlined. Can you find them?
25. Twenty-second prelude: *Canope*: Under a subject viewpoint, what do you think that gives to the piece a sense of far-off, lost in essence, unanswered questions?
26. Twenty-third prelude: *Les tierces alternées*: What makes this piece different from the other 23 of the series?
27. Twenty-fourth prelude: *Feux d’Artifice*: For your point of view, which are the mentioned pianistic technique Debussy had to develop to reach all the extra-musical effects showed in this prelude?