

Claude Debussy



Suite Bergamasque

PRÉLUDE • MENUET • CLAIR DE LUNE • PASSEPIED



Maurice Ravel

Gaspard de la Nuit

ONDINE • LE GIBET • SCARBO

Dear Nancie,
Thank you for bringing back
these shades of long ago. Cordially
FRANK GLAZER PIANIST

POLYMUSIC **PR** RECORDS

Frank Glazer
9/26/53

record belongs to: Rancie Montoux-Baurende

CLAUDE DEBUSSY: Suite Bergamasque

MAURICE RAVEL: Gaspard de la Nuit

THE term "Impressionism" has been borrowed from the art of painting to apply to the musical style of a small group of composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The leader of this group was Claude Debussy (1862-1918). Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) was the most distinguished of his contemporaries writing in the same style.

The actual direct relationship of painting to music is very slight. The titles of musical compositions may suggest scenes or poetic moods. The similarity of titles used by Debussy and Ravel is startling.

DEBUSSY	RAVEL
<i>Images</i>	<i>Miroirs</i>
<i>Reflets dans l'eau</i>	<i>Jeux d'eau</i>
<i>Ibèria</i>	<i>Rapsodie Espagnole</i>
<i>The Children's Corner</i>	<i>Ma Mère l'Oye</i>
<i>Hommage à Rameau</i>	<i>Le tombeau de Couperin</i>
<i>Hommage à Haydn</i>	<i>Menuet sur le nom d'Haydn</i>

To the prime philosophic aspects of Impressionist painting music bears no relationship, for actually, music can depict no scenes, and poetry can only be evoked by its inclusion as words within the musical composition. The acceptance of music as a painting device depends on a set of ambiguous equivalents, like the repeated tone in Ravel's *Le Gibet* (Gallows) for the tolling of a bell, or the undulating figures in Debussy's "La Mer" for the sea.

If anything was borrowed from the art of painting, it was the technique of Pointillism. Applied to music, it is revealed as the apposition of phrases; irregular phrases set one after the other without connective techniques. Impressionist phrases shift from one to the next, as their chords glide from one to the next in parallel motion. The functionalism of triadic tonality is absent. Phrases are continuous by the listeners' indulgence of hearing them connected. The repetition of phrases and sonorities, and the limitation of thematic material unify impressionist compositions by limiting their horizons.

The essential terms of impressionist vocabulary are shifting chords, broken and unbroken; dissonant chords built on triads, but not resolved triadically; the opposition of diatonic melody with non-triadic harmony; whole tone and modal scales; the avoidance of direction and the functionalism that direction implies in the construction of phrases, melodic lines and tonal centers.

The simultaneous issuance of the *Suite Bergamasque* of Debussy, and the *Gaspard de la Nuit* of Maurice Ravel sets these two masters of French Impressionism in provocative relationship. It makes the point, too frequently overlooked, that the master of the keyboard was Ravel, and, that of all his contemporaries, Debussy learned most from Ravel in the treatment of the piano. Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*, written in 1901, was the crucial work in establishing techniques for the Impressionist keyboard style. By that time Debussy had written the least mature of his piano works, though he had already completed many of his most beautiful song settings. This chronological relationship of piano works was cited by Ravel when he was confronted with the "charge" that he borrowed

his piano style from Debussy. The period of Debussy's great piano works begins with the *Estampes* of 1903, which show a strong dependence on Ravel's earlier production. The *Suite Bergamasque*, here recorded, was originally written in 1889, and only slightly revised for its publication in 1905. Ravel's particular concern for the problems of piano writing is evidenced by his statement that in the *Gaspard* set of three pieces he attempted "to write pieces of transcendental virtuosity which are even more complicated than Islamey."

The *Suite Bergamasque* of Debussy (SIDE A) is by far the simpler of the two recordings. The movements are: *Prélude*, *Menuet*, *Clair de Lune* and *Passepied*.

Despite the use of the term "Suite" in the title, and the use of dance names for the individual pieces, this is by no means a classic suite.

That the whole work is still much closer to the earlier music of functional tonality is seen immediately in the opening of the *Prélude*. The bass announces a relationship of fifths that moves into a cadenza-like figure in the top voice accompanied by simple chords. There are many literal repetitions of phrases, and what later appears as a developed technique of shifting harmonies, now appears as thematic or melodic parallelism in scale passages, and within chords. The form of the Impressionist melody is already complete.

The *Menuet* is a far cry from the stately court dance of the 18th century. We again see the adherence to the earlier conventions of harmonic movement, but now the melody uses the device of extension through broken chords.

Clair de Lune is probably the best known work of Debussy. It is unfortunate that musicians and public alike have taken to over-sentimentalizing this very simple piece. Debussy himself had once made that mistake, when in 1892 he set the poem *Clair de Lune* of Paul Verlaine, taking at its face value the sentimental scene of 18th century lovers in the moonlight, that Verlaine had intended as ironical mockery. Included in the *Suite Bergamasque*, *Clair de Lune* takes on a more just proportion.

The suite ends with a *Passepied*, that makes no pretense of using the classic form. To a regular bass figure reminiscent of the classic Alberti bass, Debussy sets a melody, and evolves simple melodic and rhythmic variations.

Gaspard de la Nuit, 3 Poemes pour piano (SIDE B), took their professed inspiration from the work of Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841), who had spent his life on the writing and revision of his only volume, *Gaspard de la Nuit, Fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot* (publ. Paris, 1842). The nature of these prose poems may best be illustrated by the following excerpts from each of the three sections that inspired Ravel. From *Ondine*, which Ravel dedicated to the pianist Harold Bauer:

And when I replied that I loved a mortal, pouting and vexed, she wept a few tears, flung into laughter, and vanished in a shower that streamed whitely over my blue window panes.

"THE PLAYING OF FRANK GLAZER, PIANIST, last night in Carnegie Hall," wrote Olin Downes in the New York Times, "...had reached that all-important point where the artist discovers himself and is able to mold and release the thing that is within him and impress and stir an audience by it. ... The virtuoso playing came with the Ravel pieces, the shimmer and iridescence of the Ondine; the melancholy winds of the Gibet, the lightning swiftness and fantastical effects of Scarbo. Brilliant performances of a young artist coming significantly into his own."

Mr. Glazer, whose debut performance for POLYMUSIC of the Second Sonata for violin and piano of Charles Ives was so brilliantly received, (PRLP 1001) is here presented in his first solo performance on records.

From *Le Gibet*, dedicated by Ravel to Jean Marnold, French music critic and founder of *Mercure Musical*:

It is the clock striking on the walls of a city in the distance, and on the gallows, the carcass of a dead man reddening in the setting sun.

From *Scarbo*, which was dedicated to the American pianist, Rudolf Ganz:

... the dwarf grew tall between the moon and me, like the steeple of a Gothic cathedral, a golden bell swinging from his pointed cap!

But soon his body shone with a bluish lustre, grew diaphanous as the wax of a candle, his face grew pale as the wax of a candle-end,—and suddenly he went out.

Ondine begins with a shimmering tremolo, and then adds a simple melody, often repeated and shifted chromatically, to the established sonority. There is a constant fast moving use of running figures through which the original melody is heard. Just before the final brilliant ending, there is a bare statement of the unaccompanied melody, now in slightly altered form.

Le Gibet begins with a repeated tone which is used as a continuing pedal throughout the composition. The entire piece finally returns to this original open pedal tone. Melodic material also gives a stationary effect, and is shifted chromatically. The piece is conceived as a large ornamentation of the original pedal tone, and the application of the repetition-effects to the harmonic and the melodic material.

Scarbo shows many more breaks in continuity than do the first two pieces. The breaks are achieved by actual rests, and by setting off short staccato figures with runs and tremolos, as well as the contrasts of slow simple melodic fragments with fuller running figures. In *Scarbo* there is the long, well-known section that utilizes parallel seconds in the melodic top voice. Though the intervals of a second and a seventh are stated earlier in the piece in continuous form, here they are reduced to their simultaneous intervallic relationship.

ALVIN BAUMAN

[The Bertrand verses quoted above were translated by Louise Varèse.]

The etchings reproduced on the front cover are by one of the great artists of the French Baroque, Jacques Callot (1592-1635). Though he served the court of Lorraine during his most active period, he was much concerned with the non-noble aspects of everyday existence. His *Commedia dell'Arte* figures of Ricciolina and Mezzetin (at the top of this cover) were most likely enacted by players who came from the North Italian region of Bergamo where the Arlequin figure was born.

Ravel, as well as Debussy, knew Callot's world, for Bertrand's *Scarbo* is one of the many dwarfs the great French etcher engraved.