

**PHILIPS**

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**STEREO**



**PIERRE**  
**MONTEUX**

DEBUSSY  
IMAGES GIGUES — IBÉRIA  
— RONDES DE PRINTEMPS  
LE MARTYRE DE SAINT SÉBASTIEN —  
FRAGMENTS SYMPHONIQUES  
LONDON SYMPHONY



STEREO

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MONO

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# CLAUDE-ACHILLE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

## IMAGES

*Gigues* (1909-1912)

*Ibéria* (1906-1909)

*In the streets and lanes*

*Perfumes of the night*

*Morning of a festival*

*Spring Roundelays* (1906-1909)

## THE MARTYRDOM OF SAINT SEBASTIAN (1911)

*Symphonic fragments from the music to*

*Gabriele d'Annunzio's Mystery-Play*

I. *The court of lilies*

II. *Dance of ecstasy, and Finale to Act I*

III. *The passion*

IV. *The good shepherd*

PIERRE MONTEUX conducting the London Symphony Orchestra

Roger Lord, oboe

### Contrasts in Debussy — the sensuous and the mystical

DEBUSSY COMPOSED THREE SETS of *Images*, and all were originally conceived for piano, this orchestral set being thought of first as a two-piano piece. In it the composer really harks back to the piano-work *Estantes*, for both the three movements of the orchestral *Images* and *Estantes* set out to transmit some feeling of various national characters. Thus in this case *Ibéria* depicts Spain, *Rondes de printemps*, France, and *Gigues*, England. A certain temptation exists of course to see the *Images* as the logical successor to Debussy's previous large-scale work *La mer*, but the connection is actually tenuous. *La mer*, for all its lush use of the orchestra and its visionary magic, is very nearly a genuine symphony, and thus foreshadows the formal preoccupations of the last sonatas, as well as providing some hint that even as early as this, Debussy was at least partly aware of the problems inherent in absolute "impressionism."

*Images* is quite different. In each case, structural integrity is achieved by the manipulation of folk-themes (though with *Ibéria* the themes seem to be invented) which provide a sort of leit-motiv cement. Debussy uses these both as a melodic starting-point and often as a harmonic base. He also detaches them from their simple, warm peasant context and sifts them through a spectrum of subtle orchestral shades, immensely versatile rhythms, and fine-grained harmonies. The result is often a grotesque irony, nearly always a sense of rarified insubstantiality, as if nationhood were seen as no more than a mirage and its life as brief as the music itself.

In *Rondes de printemps*, however, Spring comes to France and the score is optimistically prefixed with an inscription taken from an old Tuscan song as quoted by Pierre Gauthier: "Vive le mai! Bienvenu soit le mai avec son gonfalon sauvage." Allusions to the French songs *Nous n'irons plus au bois* and *Do, do l'enfant* do struggle to find full shape amidst the onrush of trills and tremolos. Arias of light and scampering shadows play through the orchestra. The spontaneity of Spring loses itself in an orchestral tracery as delicate and transient as winter frost on a window-pane. In the end, Spring is as brief as a bubble and April, after all, the cruelest month.

England, on the other hand, is a seasonless Ultima Thule, a Nordic Avalon which recedes like some Gothic fantasy before our closer approach. These *Gigues* were first, with poignant irony, called *Gigues tristes* and in the music they remain so.

Long, chilled notes in strings and woodwind herald our arrival across a fog-bound sea and ghostly harp arpeggios part the vapors. Half in irony, half as a dream vision, the notes of the cheerful Northumbrian folk-song *The keel row* take on a spectral shape, move the orchestra to life, sag, break off, and disappear. Like voices calling in a mist, they answer one another through the harmonies. The land stays wrapped in antique mystery.

*Ibéria*, divided into *Par les rues et par les chemins*, *Les parfums de la nuit* and *Le matin d'un jour de fête*, could not avoid somewhat harsher, more primary colors. Manuel de Falla, who should know, acclaimed it with *Soirée dans Grenade*, as so authentically Spanish that serious Spanish composers have turned to it as a model for the more refined use of their own native music—yet in fact it contains not one genuine Spanish folk-song. It by no means avoids grotesquerie. A sardonic angularity often seizes upon the rhythm, and the clamor of *Le matin* is in many ways a sublimated din, carried through with a fastidiousness of detail that sweeps the dust and odor from the festive streets and leaves instead the etched outlines of a most sophisticated portraiture. Yet if this is Debussy's Spain, it is also Debussy's vision, no mere metropolitan travel-brochure. *La nuit* is heavy with a deep sensuousness which is Debussy himself and the three bells which toll it into the hot, white dawn like the prelude to an apocalypse.

To ponder works like *La mer*, *La cathédrale engloutie* or *Danseuses de Delphes* is to be reminded of something fundamental about Debussy's art: that although it concerns itself so frequently with the scrutiny and interpretation of appearances, it never simply and naively illustrates. Debussy's "stories" and "pictures" are less narrative and depiction than a kind of oblique report, a metaphor as it were, on some central mystery which has come to fleeting rest in the object under survey and which can be articulated in no other way. Debussy himself said he saw "mystery in everything" and we can believe him. He is like a man who has mislaid some half-remembered faith and who strains, through intense contemplation of fragments of reality, to recall the whole philosophy: "Around me are the trees stretching up their branches to the skies, the flowers perfuming the meadows, the gentle, grass-carpeted earth... and my hands unconsciously assume an attitude of

worship. To feel the supreme and moving beauty of the spectacle to which nature invites her ephemeral guests—that is what I call prayer...."

It is this insight into some unnamed transcendental, trapped in the particular and often the minute, which explains the apparent paradox of Debussy's music for d'Annunzio's mystery play *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien*. The paradox is that an avowed atheist could write music of such radiant conviction on a sacred theme. Its solution is that Debussy responded not to some temporary faith-hypnosis but to the aesthetic externals of his material. For him, Saint Sébastien would be at his least compelling as an official Christian saint; at his most, as the type of half-pagan athlete curiously possessed of some Melisandre-like other-worldliness, sensuously immediate yet hauntingly remote. Once we understand this, the remarkable power and persuasiveness of Debussy's score comes as no surprise.

It was certainly fortunate that the approach d'Annunzio took stressed the very elements Debussy would find sympathetic. By the beginning of 1911, when the project was started, d'Annunzio had already been contemplating the play for many years but action was stimulated by his "discovery" of Ida Rubinstein, the beautiful Diaghilev dancer whose "Cleopatra" had swept Paris off its feet. When he wrote his play it was with her in mind: a creature whose agility was matched by a proud spirituality. From the start, therefore, the emphasis fell on aesthetics rather than faith, and in asking Debussy to write the incidental music, d'Annunzio was indulging a very sure instinct.

The portions selected for this recording are all orchestral passages (there are vocal sections, though the part of Saint Sébastien is entirely spoken) and these include the Prelude to Act I (*La cour des lys*), the saint's ecstatic dance on the burning coals at the end of Act II, his Passion, and the vision of the Good Shepherd vouchsafed him at the point of death. Throughout, the music is of Debussy's highest quality and the orchestral colors among the most vivid he ever produced.

The music was composed in March, April, and May of 1911, and the first performance of the play with Debussy's music took place on May 22, 1911, in Paris with Ida Rubinstein as Saint Sébastien.

DEREK JOLE

### Pierre Monteux, beloved moustache of music

PIERRE MONTEUX, who in 1964 was 89 years old, is today one of the last of the "old masters" from the Golden Age of the conducting art. Even at the beginning his career was sensational, and it has become through the years one of the vivid ornaments of the musical world.

The young Parisian started as a violist, but shortly thereafter settled down to a career of conducting, applying himself with special enthusiasm to modern music. His ability to assimilate quickly and his phenomenal memory gave him special advantages which were quickly recognized. He was an early exponent of Igor Stravinsky's music. Serge Diaghilev engaged him to conduct the premières of *Petrouchka*, *The Rite of*

*Spring*, and Maurice Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloë* in the famous Théâtre des Champs Élysées. Everyone knows of the scandal caused by the first performance of *The Rite of Spring*, when the audience revolted noisily and at length, but it is not generally common knowledge that most of their displeasure was aimed not at the music but at the choreography, which seemed to scoff at the beloved classical ballet which was so dear to Parisians.

In 1917 Monteux was appointed conductor of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City; then from 1919 to 1924 he was conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

He then returned to Europe for a few seasons, alternating with Willem Mengelberg the concerts of the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam, and conducting many concerts with the finest French orchestras. In 1936 he returned to the United States to conduct the San Francisco orchestra, and there he stayed until 1952. In 1961, already 86 years old, he was appointed principal conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. In addition he is one of the most popular guest conductors for the many excellent European festivals, where the little old man with the enormous moustache is invariably welcomed with a spontaneous and absolutely sincere ovation.

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