

James Helton
Program Notes

Préludes, Premier livre, L117 (1907-1910)

Claude Debussy

Items in italics are translations of Debussy's indications in the score. Following words are from JH, but mostly shamelessly pillaged from Maurice Hinson's edition of the Preludes.

- I. *Slow and grave...* stately and somewhat like a sarabande... possibly inspired by a sculptured frieze of Greek dancers... tinges of Satie
... Dancers of Delphi
- II. *In a rhythm without rigor, and caressed... soft and very gentle... softer... yet softer... very supple... very calm and very diminished to the end...* the music could be depicting one of two things: sails, or the gently flowing veils of modern dance pioneer Loïe Fuller, with whom Debussy was smitten. (You can google images of Ms. Fuller.)
... Sails/Veils
- III. *Animated, always as light as possible,* yet toccata-like... mercurial... volatile outbursts...
... The wind over the plains
- IV. *Harmonious and supple... more animated and expressive... tranquil and floating... slower, like the sound of horns in the distance... even more distant and slower...* a heavily sensuous nocturne... The title is a quote from Charles Baudelaire's poem, "Harmonie du soir".
... "Sounds and perfumes mingle in evening air"
- V. *Joyous and light... with the freedom of a popular song... then moderate and expressive... luminous...* The Island of Capri is famous for its joyous dancing and beautiful fragrant flowers.... Hear bell sonorities, guitars, tambourines, plus lively bits of tarantella that all combine to depict local color.
... The hills of Anacapri
- VI. *This rhythm should have the resonant value of the depth of a solid frozen landscape... more animated throughout, always more expressive and tender... like a tender and sad yearning... slower... very slow...* a stark picture in the middle of winter... deep depression... faltering footsteps...
... Footprints in the snow
- VII. *Animated and tumultuous... plaintive and distant... strident... a little slower, but brought out and anguished... getting faster and louder... furious and fast...* a violent picture of storm and destruction
... What the west wind saw

VIII. *Very calm and gently expressive... murmuring, and slowing little by little... inspired by a collection of Scottish songs from Leconte de Lisle's "Poems antiques"... a maiden with soft blond hair?*

...The girl with flaxen hair

IX. *Like a guitar... the opening played as if a prelude... lessened, and with attentions to the nuances and interpretation... very fast (outburst)... a moment with liberty... moderate, from a distance—an angry outburst—suddenly moderate—then angry... returning to regular speed... rubato; gentle and harmonious... becoming further away... A Spanish fantasy, telling the story of a poor guitarist who attempts to serenade his sweetheart (the young lady from the previous prelude?), constantly interrupted by mocking hilarity... the guitar, the fragmented love song, an occasional curse, and finally the frustrated retreat. Manuel de Falla called it a masterpiece, that Debussy spoke Spanish like a native, all the more remarkable since he never visited Spain...*

...The interrupted serenade

X. *Profoundly calm; through a softly resonant mist... gentle and fluid... without nuances... gradually emerging from the mist... continually increasing in volume without accelerating... sonorous without harshness... expressive and intense/concentrated; a little less slow, with a feeling that becomes more grandiose... getting much softer... like an echo of the preceding phrase; floating and muted... with a sonority like the beginning... inspired by the ancient Breton myth of the cathedral on the Island of Ys, which sunk to the bottom of the sea, then rises up... sounds of chanting, bells, and organ can heard from across the water... There are differing, some fascinating, versions of the story. I encourage you to google the Cathedral of Ys...*

... The sunken cathedral

XI. *Capricious and light... light and airy... rapid and flying away... a scherzo of sorts, with dotted jerky rhythms and sudden changes of speed and mood... Shakespeare's elf scurries away at the end...*

... Puck's dance

XII. *Moderate; nervous and with humor... a little more movement... mockingly... like a drum... Probably the most directly humorous of Debussy's pieces... atmosphere of American minstrel show that became popular in Europe at the turn of the 20th Century... one can hear various 'acts' going on in the 'show' along with elements of ragtime, banjo, trombone, and drums...*

... Minstrels