

# Class 1 : First Impressions

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## B. Debussy at the Piano

Talking about music is more difficult than talking about painting, because at a certain level it is absolutely enhanced by knowing some of the technical terms involved. But that does not deny the validity of simply listening carefully and describing what one hears. That is the place where I want to start, though I may try inching you towards something more formal later; we'll see. All the pieces in this hour will be piano works by **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918). Most are around 3½ minutes long, though our first piece is twice that.

### 1. Debussy and *La cathédrale engloutie*

We'll start with his *Cathédrale engloutie*, or Sunken Cathedral, from the first book of *Préludes* (1910). Unlike most of the other pieces in the collection, this one has a story of sorts. Debussy refers to “*an ancient Breton myth in which a cathedral, submerged underwater off the coast of the Island of Ys, rises up from the sea on clear mornings when the water is transparent. Sounds can be heard of priests chanting, bells chiming, and the organ playing, from across the sea.*” [Wikipedia]. I am going to show you the score along with a recording by Daniel Barenboim. It doesn't matter if you can't read the music; at least the page numbers (which I'll add to the video) will give you references as you listen.

I'll ask you now to get some scrap paper and a writing implement, and jot down any one-word adjectives that occur to you on any particular page; we'll have a shout-out after the performance is over. You should listen for changes in tempo, volume, or texture that distinguish one section from another. I will also annotate the score with letters (A, B, C, etc.) that correspond either to where Debussy himself has made a break or where there is some other pretty obvious change in texture; you can refer to these too, if you like.

### 2. Debussy: *La cathédrale engloutie* (Daniel Barenboim), 7 minutes

### 3. Debussy and *La cathédrale engloutie* (repeat)

Let's go through this section by section. For now, unmute yourself and call out any adjectives you might have written down; one word at a time only, please. When we have done this, I'll mute you again, and perhaps some people might raise a hand to see if they have been able to make a scenario, or musical story-board, out of what you have heard.

### 4. *Préludes*, Book 1; score cover

### 5. *La cathédrale engloutie*, final page

Here is the cover for an edition of the *Préludes*. You will see that the publishers have added an Impressionist-ish picture, but it is not really illustrating anything; they use the same cover for *all*

Debussy's works. Debussy himself knew that his music had descriptive qualities, but you may have noticed that he puts his titles at the *end*, not the beginning. He was quite happy to have the listener form pictures in response to hearing the music, but he did not want his music to be heard in the light of whatever people might conjure up from reading the title in advance.

#### 6. *Préludes*, Book 1; score cover (repeat)

I am going to play another two of the Preludes now, but this time I'll hide the titles and *not* tell you what they are. We'll see if you can guess them at the end. And one other thing: however misty these pieces may sound, they are actually quite firmly constructed. Again, I will mark different musical sections, and I would ask you whether you hear same musical material introduced in one section and returning later.

#### 7. Debussy: *Bruyères* (Daniel Barenboim), 3½ minutes

#### 8. *Préludes*, Book 1; score cover (repeat)

Let's try the adjective game again, though not as a one-word shout-out; what images came to mind? [AS ALWAYS, IF YOU ACTUALLY **KNOW**, DON'T CHIME IN!] Actually, Debussy's own title doesn't say much: *Bruyères*, heather, or heath lands. And what about the shape? I chose this because it was fairly clear: a sandwich with an opening section which comes back at the end, and two fillings, the one misty and the other bright, actually marked "joyful." You will hear the same sandwich structure in the next piece but its mood is entirely different; I will ask you to compare them. I'm not going to mark the sections, but I will translate the various scraps of description that Debussy writes into the score itself. Is any of the music something that you would actually hear in the setting that he is describing?

#### 9. Debussy: *Les collines d'Anacapri* (Daniel Barenboim), 3½ minutes

#### 10. *Préludes*, Book 1; score cover (repeat)

What did you hear? I don't expect anything especially precise, but I would be interested if anybody picked out the literal elements: the popular song he refers to, or that solo bit that sounds like a pipe. This one does have a very exact title: *The Hills of Anacapri*, one side of an island in the Bay of Naples. I camped out there once, and have very strong memories, mainly of the scent of the vegetation. So I must admit to listening in just the ways that Debussy wanted me *not* to, because I knew the title first, and the sound of the music has welded inextricably to the memories I already had.

#### 11. Various late 19th-century paintings of Anacapri

I looked up a number of paintings of the island, but while I recognize the facts in them—the rocks and the olive trees, for example—they don't do it for me. The musical evocation is far stronger, and my scent memory is stronger still.

#### 12. Cakewalk poster

Finally, one or more Debussy pieces that show his reaction to the new Black American music that was coming over at the start of the century, specifically the **Minstrel Show** and the **Cakewalk**. Two years before the first book of Preludes, he published *Children's Corner*, which ends with a now-very-well-known piece, the *Golliwogs' Cakewalk*. Here it is, played by **Paul Barton** under a rather more PC title.

Again you will hear the sandwich structure, with a contrasting middle section that abandons strutting for what can only be called a sultry slide. [If you know Wagner, you might pick up in this middle section Debussy's parody of a famous theme.]

13. Debussy: *The Golliwogs' Cakewalk* (Paul Barton), 3½ minutes

14. Cakewalk poster (repeat)

Anyone catch it? The theme is the opening phrase of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*; three times Debussy quotes it, then immediately laughs it offstage! But I really played this to give you a relatively simple use of the Cakewalk idea, and the strut/sultry/strut sandwich, to have you compare it with one or both of the *Préludes* in which Debussy uses the idea in slightly more complex pieces: *Minstrels* from Book I, and/or *General Lavine, Eccentric* from Book II; the latter was apparently the stage name of a noted Black performer of the time.

15. Debussy: *Minstrels* (Daniel Barenboim), 3½ minutes

16. Debussy: *General Lavine, Eccentric* (Daniel Barenboim), 3½ minutes

17. Debussy and the Cakewalk