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Guest Recital, Aleck Karis, Piano, A Program of Late Debussy, January 9, 2019

Lawrence University

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Guest Recital

Aleck Karis, piano

A program of late Debussy

Wednesday, January 9, 2019

8:00 p.m.

Harper Hall

Children's Corner (1908)
Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum
Jimbo's Lullaby
Serenade of the Doll
The Snow is Dancing
The Little Shepherd
Golliwogg's Cake Walk

Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

Etudes, Book I (1915)
I. pour les "cinq doigts"
II. pour les tierces
III. pour les quarts
IV. pour les sixtes
V. pour les octaves
VI. pour les huit doigts

Debussy

◆ INTERMISSION ◆

Sonata (1924)
♩=112
Adagietto
♩=112

Igor Stravinsky
(1882-1971)

Etudes, Book II (1915)
VII. pour les degrés chromatiques
VIII. pour les agréments
IX. pour les notes répétées
X. pour les sonorités opposées
XI. pour les arpèges composés
XII. pour les accords

Debussy

PROGRAM NOTES BY ALECK KARIS

Claude Debussy (1862-1918): *Children's Corner* (1908)

Debussy was an acerbic and difficult person, who was unsparing in his criticisms of others ~ and of himself. His relationships were fraught, with one shining exception: his daughter, Claude-Emma, "Chouchou", whom he adored. Shortly after her birth in 1905 he began his "Children's Corner" suite, dedicated to her, with titles written in English in honor of her English governess.

Dr Gradus Ad Parnassum: actually, the first title is in Latin, a spoof on Clementi's piano exercises "Gradus ad parnassum" (Steps to Parnassus). The opening passagework, all in white notes, loosely reflects the kind of sequential writing found in Clementi or Czerny. This soon gives way to flights of fancy as the bonds of piano drudgery are broken. Debussy was from an early age impatient with any kind of orthodoxy, especially the musical kind then so prevalent at the Paris Conservatory.

Jimbo's Lullaby: Debussy's charming misspelling of Jumbo, a famous real elephant who briefly resided in the Paris Jardin des Plantes before moving on to London and, sadly, P. T. Barnum. Jumbo was also the name of Chouchou's stuffed elephant. Debussy writes "gentle and a bit clumsy" ("Doux et en peu gauche") in the score. The opening is a single line, which perfectly captures the lumbering loneliness, the melancholy of a captive elephant. In one of the most magical moments of Debussy's opera *Pelleas and Melisande*, the orchestra is silent as Melisande sings a beautiful a capella line as she combs her hair. Debussy had a fascination with the unadorned line, and many of the pieces played tonight either begin with a single line or have one emerge at some point as the rich texture around it melts away. This gently humorous piece quotes a popular French children's lullaby, "Do, do l'enfant do."

Serenade of the Doll: Clearly, a little girl like Chouchou would have had a whole collection of dolls of different nationalities. Each makes an appearance (sometimes dancing), and sometimes they interact in the playful way that dolls do in the hands of imaginative children.

The Snow is Dancing: Debussy has one other snow-themed piano piece, *Footsteps in the Snow* from the first book of preludes, also in shifting d minor modes. This could be an actual scene of swirling snow, or it could represent a snow globe, which were introduced in the Paris Universal Expositions of 1878 and 1889, both of which Debussy attended. It's not a stretch to imagine that he purchased one for his daughter in 1905. Though not bleak like "Footsteps", it is the most serious piece in the set.

The Little Shepherd: Like Debussy's most famous orchestral work "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun", the piece begins with a single flute line. Here each of the works' three phrases begins with a single line evoking the shepherd's flute. With great economy, Debussy paints a lyrical portrait of wistful solitude.

Golliwogg's cake walk: Minstrel shows, cabarets, music halls, and the circus were all wildly popular in Belle Epoque Paris, and Debussy wrote a number of works inspired by the infectious popular music coming from America. Chouchou no doubt had a doll of a minstrel character. Here the exuberant outer sections frame a satirical middle section in which attempts to play the opening of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* ("with great emotion") are interrupted and mocked by the irrepressible cake-walkers.

Études (1915)

The outbreak of the war with Germany in August 1914 was a terrible blow for Debussy, and it coincided with a deterioration of his health due to the cancer which would take his life four years later. He became depressed and was unable to compose for almost a year. Never the most cheerful sort, he once wrote to a friend: "if my little Chouchou weren't here I'd blow my brains out". During this fallow period he did agree to prepare a new edition of Chopin's piano music, suggested by his publisher since the German editions were no longer available. Chopin was the Romantic composer Debussy loved above all others, and it seems likely that immersion in Chopin's magnificent etudes, Opus 10, Opus 25 and the "Trois Nouvelles Etudes" inspired Debussy. He informed his publisher that he had "a few ideas" and was eager to leave Paris to compose in a quiet setting. He rented a villa overlooking the sea in Normandy, where he lived for about four months with his wife and daughter. During this time, in a truly remarkable burst of creative activity, he composed his final works: the sonatas for violin and piano, cello and piano, and flute, viola and harp; *En Blanc et Noir* for two pianos; and the etudes.

In her wonderful new book, *Debussy's Paris*, Catherine Kautsky writes: These succinct masterpieces [the *Études*] moved Debussy into a style more modern than anything he had previously written. They are, by turns, acerbic, violent, comic, and achingly beautiful, often within a page. They leave behind entirely the descriptive allusions of his earlier works, nor are there references to the war. But they represent a distillation of his style that shouldered the burden of both the historic moment and the need to make a final statement.

He noted that he had “rediscovered my ability to think in music, which I’d lost for a year...I’ve been writing like a madman, or alike a man condemned to die the next morning.” Other composers too have written their finest works when faced with death – Franz Schubert, in particular, comes to mind – and, at this moment, Debussy was faced not only with his own mortality but also with the incalculable losses of the war.

Book I

I. pour les “cinq doigt”: d’après Monsieur Czerny – for the five fingers

This first etude starts by teasing the audience, whose members might feel some dread as they hear the first eight notes – as dull and dry as any piano study by Czerny. The marking is “Sagement”, which could be translated as “in a well-behaved way” – French parents tell their children to be “sage” when they are misbehaving. Fortunately, by the second bar of the piece a subversive note has intruded, and soon the pianist breaks into flights of fancy, in the spirit of *Dr Gradus Ad Parnassum* – but always based on the original five-finger idea.

II. pour les Tierces – Thirds

The Études are inscribed “to the memory of Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849)”. In his Opus 25, Chopin included etudes in thirds, sixths and octaves, as does Debussy, though no etude in fourths, which would have been impossible in Chopin’s style. Here, every bar contains passagework in parallel major and minor thirds, sometimes in both hands. The interval is treated both vertically in complex harmonies and horizontally in melodic material moving in thirds. Debussy’s most popular piano piece, *Clair de Lune*, written in 1890, is also a study in thirds. The affection of the public for this particular piece bothered the composer, as he did not find it superior to many of his other works for piano.

III. pour les Quartes – Fourth

Etude III is marked *Andantino con moto*, with floating, dreamlike music occasionally interrupted by more brilliant figures – all in fourths, of course. Etudes II-V can be seen as compositional investigations into all the functions and contexts of the given interval. Since each piece is held together by the ubiquity of one interval, Debussy allows the music to flow freely in unexpected directions. The harmony is fluid, the mood quixotic, and the texture can change abruptly, as when a single line suddenly emerges as the other voices melt away. In the climax, the fourths move to the bass to create the feeling of a march (in $\frac{3}{4}$ time).

IV. pour les Sixtes – Sixths

This is the slowest and most sensual of the Book I etudes, the moving sixths in both hands creating very rich and ambiguous harmonies. There are two interludes, marked *un poco agitato*, which lend contrast.

V. pour les octaves

The most exuberant of all the etudes, marked “Joyeux et emporté, librement rythmé” (joyous and carried away, freely rhythmic). “Emporté” could also be translated as “hotheaded” which also fits. The octaves abound in both hands, but there are many passages where octaves are alternated with single notes.

VI. pour les huit doigts – for the eight fingers

This etude contains a single fast-moving line made up of four-note groups meant to be played with the four fingers on each hand, and without thumbs. It is the only etude in the set which almost entirely stays in a single texture, as etudes traditionally do.

Book II

VII. pour les degrés chromatiques – chromatic degrees (or half-steps)

It is difficult to write a convincing piece of music with constant chromatic scale movement. Rimsky-Korsakov, in *Flight of the Bumblebee* succeeds in writing a light, humorous character piece. Debussy altogether superior effort features every possible pattern using half-steps along with a jaunty melody (not in half steps) which appears four times in the left hand, each with a different harmony.

VIII. pour les agréments – ornaments

Debussy mostly steers clear of the trills and turns that make up Baroque and Classical ornamentation, defining the term in the broadest possible way. This florid etude covers an amazing amount of musical territory in a short time, moving through ten different key signatures with constantly shifting tempos and moods.

IX. pour les notes répétées – repeated notes

Edgar Allen Poe was one of Debussy’s favorite writers, and this *scherzando* etude takes its tone from Poe’s “imp of the perverse”. The devil’s interval, the tritone, is everywhere. There are similarities here to the *Sérénade* and *Finale* from the cello sonata, the former for its quirky character, the latter for its repeated notes.

X. pour les sonorités opposées ~ opposing sonorities

Debussy experimented with polytonality in his later works, especially the “opposing sonorities” of keys a half step apart. This layered,

expressive, and highly chromatic etude moves forward inexorably, building to a climax marked *fortissimo*, fairly unusual in Debussy. This is followed by *subito pianissimo* leading to a *pianississimo* chord featuring F major above E sharp major above F sharp major: sonorities which oppose each other but also blend to create a moment of shimmering beauty.

XI. pour les Arpegges composés – composed arpeggios

Arpeggios can be nothing more than simple chords rolled up or down, but here the arpeggiated figures are as varied and rich as the harmony, starting in the first bar. The marking is *lusingando* (seductive), and that mood is quickly established by the circling, rhythmically ambiguous arpeggios in the opening figure. This watery dreamscape will eventually be interrupted, most unexpectedly, by music from the cabaret, as if a gentle troupe of clowns wandered into a play about a water nymph.

XII. pour les accords - chords

The final etude of the set is the only one in a clear three-part form, with a very slow middle section flanked by faster outer sections marked “decided, rhythmic, and without heaviness”. The juxtaposition of chords far removed from each other (f minor, A major) make the harmony here quite dizzying.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971): *Sonata* (1924)

Stravinsky, like all the composers of his generation, was strongly influenced by Debussy. Debussy befriended the younger man and was impressed by the works of his Russian period, especially *Petrouchka*. Stravinsky's *Piano Sonata* is a great early example of his neoclassical style, whose austerity and dry wit make a sharp contrast with the dazzling colors and sheer exuberance of the early ballets. There are passages in Debussy's etudes which anticipate the techniques used by Stravinsky in his neoclassical works, but Debussy gave himself far more latitude to explore his ideas wherever they might lead him. Stravinsky made a conscious choice to take his inspiration from Bach, Haydn and Beethoven, and severely limit his compositional and pianistic palette. As he wrote in *Poetics of Music*:

My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit.

PERFORMER BIO

Aleck Karis has performed recitals, chamber music, and concertos across the Americas, Europe, Japan, and China. As the pianist of the new music ensemble Speculum Musicae he has participated in over a hundred premieres and performed at major American and European festivals. His appearances with orchestra have ranged from concertos by Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin to those of Stravinsky, Messiaen and Carter. His six solo discs on Bridge Records include Chopin/Carter/Schumann, Mozart, Stravinsky, Cage, Feldman/Webern/Wolpe, and Poulenc. His two discs on Roméo Records are Music of Philip Glass and Late Chopin. His recording of Feldman's last work, "Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello" was listed as one of the top 25 classical releases of 2015 in the *New York Times* and one of the 10 best contemporary releases of 2015 in the *Sunday Times* of London. Of his 2015 Poulenc disc, *Icon* magazine wrote: "Aleck Karis plays with dazzling, radiant, detail throughout". His most recent recording on Bridge, with Erik Carlson, is *For John Cage*, by Morton Feldman. He has studied with William Daghlian, Artur Balsam and Beveridge Webster, and is a distinguished professor of music at the University of California, San Diego.