

An impressionist painting of a forest scene with a river. The scene is characterized by vibrant, dappled colors of green, blue, and brown, reflecting light and water. The brushwork is visible and textured, typical of the Impressionist style. The river flows from the foreground into the distance, flanked by tall, slender trees. The sky is filled with soft, blended colors of blue and white, suggesting a bright, overcast day.

Chandos

ATHENA ENSEMBLE

DEBUSSY
CHAMBER MUSIC

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Against Germany in general, and Wagner in particular, Claude Debussy reacted long and loudly. The mood is not obvious in the refined, personal language of late works such as the Athena Ensemble has recorded, but it is central to the way this language evolved. Like most of his French contemporaries Debussy was under the spell of Bayreuth in his formative years. He visited the temple of Holy German Art in 1888 and 1889 already converted, and even by his own admission it was several more years before experience turned faith into agnosticism. His music owns up to the influence for a while longer. Where would Pelléas and Mélisande have been without Tristan and Isolde to help them? By then, though, he was already professing atheism towards Wagnerian creeds, and an interesting study can be made of the ways in which he told the world what he wanted to give up a little earlier than he did, which the English composer Robin Holloway has documented provocatively in his book *Debussy and Wagner*.

At the same time, vestiges of other traditions were working their way through Debussy's mind, and those were the symphonic sonata ideals. Everybody who knows Franck's symphony and Debussy's string quartet closely can trace the links – from Franck's beloved late Beethoven to his own more consciously cyclic and self-quoting procedures, and thence to his temporary pupil's passing flattery. The quartet, of 1893, suspends most thoughts of Wagner to build the most substantial abstract structure he was to create, revealing a good knowledge of Franck's practices, which persisted through to the 'symphonic sketches' of *La Mer*.

In the first decade and a half of the 20th century, Debussy's music was as anti-symphonic as it was anti-Wagnerian: this was the time of *Préludes* and *Images*, *Jeux* and *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian*. When his publisher suddenly announced 'Six Sonatas for various instruments' there were new reasons for raising eyebrows at the apparently Austro-German form, because the Great War had been under way for just over a year and he was writing, he said, 'not so much for myself but to give proof, however small it may be, that even if there were thirty million Boches, French thought will not be destroyed'. The sonatas he had in mind were, rather, the pre-Classical sort, alluding to Couperin and Rameau, not Beethoven and Schumann. In the three he wrote (he died in 1918) there was still no complete break with Debussy's past, just as there was none between the piano *Préludes* and the *Etudes*.

The **Sonata for cello and piano**, more than any of the succeeding works, finds a perfect poise among Debussy's new clarity of texture, his customary ironic and metaphorical form of eloquence, and his echoes of the Romantics' large-scale forms. Eighteenth-century composers are recalled most in the piano figuration: the extraordinary accelerating approach to the Prologue's central climax begins for all the world like a harpsichord toccata, recalled again in the accompaniment to the finale's main theme and breaking into a free, Bachian single line during the episode that follows. Debussy's voice at its most personal speaks in the Serenade that separates those two movements, free in tempo, seemingly rhapsodic, yet organised with exactitude and with an unequalled ear for harmony. Its

imitations of guitars – which are entirely idiomatic to the cello's own means of pizzicato double-stopping – may have had the stock characters of Pierrot and Harlequin and the rest of the *commedia dell'arte* as their inspiration, but by their modal inflections they suggest Spanish guitar music – a quality that unites all three movements, from the piano's very first move to its compressed reversal in the dry, hard chords right at the end. The outer movements are also held together by a cyclic process like *La Mer's*: the opening theme is transformed and varied in the Prologue, and spins off a variant for the finale that in turn slows itself into a desolate central episode before returning, with high drama, to the version that had formed the Prologue's climax. But the extent to which Debussy had grown away from Romantic kinds of sonata form is suggested by the harmonies and keys of these various reappearances, which do not correspond to conventional, tonal recapitulations.

Elements of the same thinking went into the **Sonata for violin and piano** – another serenade, and kinships between the outer movements – but without the same compressed intensity. The music has more vigour, brilliance and melodic charm, responding faithfully to the more extrovert character of the violin. The **Sonata for flute, viola and harp** is enigmatic, exploring a ravishing combination of colours at leisurely length, with a bleak absence of indulgence or even far-flung contrasts, 'a triptych of a single conception' as Edward Lockspeiser described it, again highly but unobtrusively organised. It points to what Debussy might have written later, for the three other sonatas he planned were to have been for oboe, horn and harpsichord; trumpet, clarinet, bassoon and piano; and an ensemble including double-bass.

Debussy's other solo wind pieces have different purposes. Both clarinet-and-piano works, for instance, were written in 1910 with academic aims: the **Rapsodie**, an extended movement of affecting poetry as well as highly-developed virtuosity, was a competition piece for instrumentalists at the Paris Conservatoire, and the **Petite pièce**, simpler in scope and sounding just as beautifully on the instrument, was a sight-reading test. **Syrinx** (1913) was meant to be incidental music for a play called *Psyché*, by Gabriel Mourey, and has lived on as the purest essence, even more than the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, of French flute writing. Here, in the grace of its haunting single line, Debussy reached the furthest extreme from Bayreuth's solemn and weighty heavings.

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Robert Maycock is editor of the fortnightly magazine *Classical Music*

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reproduced by courtesy of the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.
Sleeve Design: Clare Osborn

THE ATHENA ENSEMBLE was formed as a wind quintet in 1969 and quickly established itself as the leading group of its kind in London. Its members are among the most outstanding exponents of their instruments in the country and their polished and exciting ensemble playing has won wide-ranging critical approval. Later the quintet decided to widen the repertoire open to them and joined forces with several other distinguished musicians to make a larger ensemble, which rapidly developed a style and a sense of unity.

The Athena Ensemble plays music of all periods from the eighteenth century to the present day. They tour extensively and have made numerous BBC broadcasts and recordings. They have given the first broadcast and first recorded performances of music by Elgar and have commissioned works by Bernard Rands and Simon Bainbridge; such distinguished composers as Berio, Henze and Patterson have offered to write for them. They have recorded the complete music for wind quintet by Elgar, and works by Poulenc, Gounod, Ibert, Nielsen and Mozart.

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CLAUDE DEBUSSY

(1862-1918)

CHAMBER MUSIC

ATHENA ENSEMBLE:

RICHARD McNICOL (flute); ROGER FALLOWS (clarinet)
 HUGH MAGUIRE (violin); ROGER BEST (viola)
 STEPHEN ORTON (cello); IAN BROWN (piano)
 FRANCES KELLY (harp)

SONATA FOR FLUTE, VIOLA AND HARP

(1916) 16:50

- 1 I Pastorale – Lento, dolce rubato
- 2 II Interlude – Tempo di Menuetto
- 3 III Finale – Allegro moderato ma risoluto

4 SYRINX FOR SOLO FLUTE

(1913) 3:00

5 PREMIÈRE RAPSODIE FOR CLARINET AND PIANO

(1910) 8:38

6 PETITE PIÈCE FOR CLARINET AND PIANO

(1910) 1:48

SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO

(1917) 13:28

- 7 I Allegro vivo
- 8 II Intermède – Fantasque et léger
- 9 III Finale – Très animé

SONATA FOR CELLO AND PIANO

(1915) 11:12

- 10 I Prologue – Lent
- 11 II Sérénade et
- 12 III Finale – Modérément animé

ADD