

NEPTA PRESENTATION, September 25, 2017

– Catherine Kautsky: “*Teaching Debussy: A Gateway to Story-Telling, Pedaling, Coloration, and Imaginative Listening*” –

Summary prepared by Natacha Rist

- In her talk, Catherine Kautsky addressed musical and technical issues encountered in playing Debussy and in teaching his music to students.

She also talked about the wider culture and art of his time, in Paris and in Europe, that she researched in her newly published book: “*Debussy’s Paris: Piano Portraits of The Belle Epoque*”.

- C. Kautsky has recorded Debussy’s Preludes, book I & II on Centaur Records, in 2014.
- You’ll find her handouts on pages 2 & 3 of this summary.

Additional resources mentioned by C. Kautsky during her talk:

- *Les musiques bizarres à l’Exposition de 1900*

Author: Judith Gautier

Publisher: Société d’éditions littéraires et artistiques, Paris : Libraire Ollendorff, 1900.

- Percy Grainger: arrangement of “Pagodes” for Gamelan orchestra
- Debussy Durand editions

There are now two Durand editions, the first one has also been used by Dover and has some mistakes; the new (second) Durand edition: Durand-Costellat, has been edited by Roy Howat, (with no fingerings) .

"Teaching Debussy: A Gateway to Story-telling, Pedaling, Coloration, and Imaginative Listening"

NEPTA, Sept. 25, 2017

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Summary: Playing Debussy provides students with an introduction to 20th century aesthetics (dissonance, non-sequitors, non-western scales) while providing short forms, accompanying narratives, and music that is relatively easy to navigate technically, particularly for small hands. The music is a gateway into coloristic use of the instrument, and the titles/stories accompanying many of the pieces provide snapshots of history that lead to consideration of major social issues.

Some pertinent musical issues:

- Pedaling (how to create atmosphere without creating a mudbath!)
- Articulation (how to distinguish the many degrees of separation Debussy demands, often with the pedal down)
- Layering (how to hear simultaneous lines which are often ostensibly unrelated to one another)
- Color (how to make a piano sound like a gamelan, a harp, a guitar, or a trumpet!)

Some pertinent technical issues:

- Hand crossing and interweaving
- Gestural rapid passagework
- Control of soft dynamics

Some pertinent historical issues:

- Evolution
- Theory of relativity
- Nationalism
- Racism
- Orientalism
- Feminism

Related arts and artists:

- Poets: Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé
- Novelists: Gide, Proust
- Painters: Delacroix, Gerome, Moreau, Redon, Matisse, Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec
- Architects: Guimard (metro stops) Eiffel (Eiffel Tower)
- Dancers: Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Loie Fuller, Jane Avril

Repertoire Examples:

Arabesque No. 1: Cross rhythms with two against three, rubato, voicing

La fille aux cheveux de lin: flats, pedaling of large rolled chords, handling of long pedals through dissonance

Related non-musical issues: Art nouveau, role of women

Other pieces to consider: *Arabesque No. 2*, *Bruyeres*

Pagodes (from *Estampes*): imitation of gamelan, layering

Poissons d'or (from *Images*, Bk. 2): reading on three staves, rapid figuration, trills, and tremolos

Related non-musical issue: Eastern sensibility, Orientalism.

Other pieces to consider: *Canopes*, *Danseuses de Delphé*, *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*

La puerta del Vino: layering, reading on three staves, varieties of articulation

Soirées dans Grenade: layering, large chords

Related non-musical issue: colonialization, perceptions of Arab populations

Other piece to consider: *Lindaraja* (two pianos)

Voiles: parallel thirds, layering

Valse romantique: l.h. waltz bass with leaps, duplet to triplet conversions, two against three, large chords

Related non-musical issue: role of dance as barometer of social change

Other pieces to consider: *Sarabande* from *Pour le Piano*, *Hommage à Rameau* from *Images*, Bk. 1, *Danse*, *Ballade*, *Mazurka*

Golliwogg: syncopation, flats, l.h. leaps

Le Petit nègre: syncopations, varieties of articulation, arpeggios

Related non-musical issue: role of minstrel shows and cakewalk in racial stereotyping

Other piece to consider: *Minstrels* (from *Preludes*, Bk. 1)

"General Lavine" – *excentric* – : Repeated notes, possible use of sostenuto pedal

Claire de Lune: Rhythm conversions from duplets to triplets, double note legato, dynamic control

Related non-musical issue: role of clowns, the circus, and the Commedia dell'arte in Paris

Other pieces to consider: remainder of *Suite Bergamasque*, *Masques*

Feux d'artifice: pedal, hand crossings, speed attained through groupings and gesture

Les Soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon: Reading on three staves, parallel thirds

Related non-musical issue: nationalism

Other piece to consider: *En blanc et noir* (for 2 pianos, and very difficult!)

Reading material:

- *Debussy's Paris: Piano Portraits of the Belle Époque* by Catherine Kautsky, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, see also <http://www.debussysparis.com>
- *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* by Paul Roberts, Amadeus Press, 1996
- *The Pianist's Guide to Pedaling* (Ch. 13) by Joseph Banowitz, Indiana University Press, 1985
- *Strategies for Small-Handed Pianists* by Lora Deahl and Brenda Wriston, Oxford University Press, 2017

Editions:

- Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy, Durand-Costellat, Ed. Roy Howat
- Schirmer Performance Editions edited by Christopher Harding (available for *Suite Bergamasque*, *Children's Corner*, and *Seven Favorite Pieces*)

PLAYING AND TEACHING DEBUSSY

Debussy's music, with its built-in flux, plastic lines and sense of time, natural (and impressive) gestures, gentle handling of dissonances, serves as a good gateway to playing 20th century music and can be more approachable to students at first, than later compositions of the 1920s-30s-40s-50s-60s.

Many students tend to play Debussy better than Bach or Beethoven...

Later 20th century works can be more difficult to play and might sound more abrasive to students (Bartok, Schoenberg, etc...).

Debussy's music will introduce them to pentatonic and whole tone scales, the lack of tonal centers, the use of long pedals.

There are also stories and evocative titles for some of the pieces, that can stimulate the imagination, through images, poetry (Verlaine, Baudelaire, P. Louÿs), fairy tales, evocation of faraway lands and exotic cultures.

Indeed one also finds issues of race, nationalism, political issues, colonialism as well as current events when researching the wider cultural context around some of the pieces.

PEDALING

- Chapter 13 of Banowitz's *"The Pianist's Guide to Pedaling"* addresses Pedaling in Debussy, and Giesecking's approach to it (note that there's sometimes a difference between what Giesecking said and what he actually did).

- Damper Pedal

not just on or off, but half, quarter, and "fluttering" Pedals are useful and essential.

- U.C.

Una Corda Pedal can also be used at several different levels.

- Sostenuato Pedal

Debussy did not have it at home, even though other pianos of his time had it.

Caution: can be unreliable (can catch more than one note); if using it, have a back-up plan without it.

- Use of the hands

Dynamics and voicing will affect whether you obtain a muddy swarm or a mysterious haze.

We find very few Pedal markings in Debussy.

Debussy said:

"Pedal is about hearing",

also *"Figure out your own fingerings"*,

and *"Metronome markings last as long as a rose bloom"*

DAMPER PEDAL USE

- Where you find Bass notes that cannot be held, assume the use of the Damper Pedal, as in p.1 from *Prelude* from “*Pour Le Piano*” Suite: to hold low Bass A, C. Kautsky avoids sostenuto Pedal, uses RH for all sixteenth notes in the RH at first, then uses some damper Pedal, as a bit of haze is OK.
- “*Collines d’Anacapri*”, from *Preludes, Book I*: gives us examples of “*French slurs*” (multiple slurs, one for each note of a chord): implies use of damper pedal, letting go of hands while chords continue to vibrate, as if releasing sound into the air. This creates a remoteness to the sound, and encourages the performer to “sit back”.
- “*Feux d’artifice*”, from *Preludes, Book II*: the indication is “*léger, égal et lointain*”; no damper pedal would be too dry; a lot of it would sound unclear; the answer lies in between.

TEMPO MARKINGS

- “*Mouvt*”, or “*au Mouvt*”, or “*au Mouvement*” means “*a tempo*” (“*General Levine*,” “*Minstrels*”).
- Double slashes above score mean: resume previous tempo.

USE OF THREE STAVES

Implies layering of the sound, with time marching at different rates (two or often three) simultaneously for different parts, and space considered from different vantage points. “*Lointain*” (far away) is a frequent indication in Debussy. Listening as if from far away is part of his esthetics.

MUSICAL GESTURES

Debussy’s music offers many opportunities to use large musical/physical gestures (L. Shure: “less fingers”).

The evocation of different instrumental sounds, such as percussion, leads to experiments with different gestures as well.

CULTURAL REFERENCES

C. Kautsky showed a number of pictures (reproductions of photos, paintings, posters, illustrations) to illustrate her points.

- ***Transformation of Paris and search for a mythical world***

PIC: Photo of *The Old Paris*, with its tiny winding streets

PIC: *Place de l'Etoile* (now Place Charles-De-Gaulle)

PIC: "*Apparition*" by G. Moreau

PIC: "*Bouddha*" by O. Redon

In the 1850s, during the reign of Emperor Napoleon III (1852-70), Paris prefect Haussmann undertook a massive renovation of Paris, bulldozing many neighborhoods with tiny streets to create big arteries (one of the motivations was crowd-control during popular revolts). French writers and artists were unhappy with the destruction of much of the old Paris, and looked abroad for hidden treasures of older civilisations ("*Larger Orient*" included Spain, Greece, Egypt and the Far East).

- ***Anti-German feelings and new musical esthetics:***

In 1870, France was defeated in the Franco-Prussian war, lost the Alsace-Lorraine region and had to pay indemnities to the Germans, creating much animosity towards Germany (that would lead to WWI, 1914-1918).

"*La Belle Epoque*" is the period between 1871 and 1914.

German composers had dominated music in the 17th-18th-19th centuries in music, with Wagner dominating the late 19th century.

Debussy's writing was in stark contrast (for example writing many short pieces).

With a touch of irony, in "*Golliwogg's Cake-Walk*", Debussy includes a quote from Wagner's "*Tristan*": with the indication "*Cédez, avec une grand émotion*" (*slow down, with great emotion*).

Debussy's artistic contemporaries were the Impressionist painters and the Symbolist writers (Baudelaire as a precursor, and Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé).

PIC: "*Dust Breeding*", Man Ray (1920); later, Dadaism expresses the absurdity of existence, cobwebs is what the mind is about.

- ***Circus***

- PIC: Picasso, "*Famille de Saltimbanques*" (gypsy family, sketch from Bibliothèque Nationale de France). In "*General Levine, Eccentric*"; "*Dans le style et le Mouvement d'un Cake-Walk*"; Debussy combines the themes of the circus and the minstrels, with white keys/black keys distinct thematic elements, and a quote from *Camp Town Races*.

- ***French "Art Nouveau" architecture and Debussy's Arabesques***

- PIC: "*Abbesses*" Metro Stop (Guimard, architect). Built in cast iron and featuring curvaceous lines, metro stops built between 1900 and 1912 refer to the symbolism of plants and are considered classic examples of French "*Art Nouveau*" architecture. A comparison can be

drawn to the esthetics of traditional arabic religious art and architecture where no human figures, only plant motives are allowed.

Similarly, Debussy's "*First Arabesque*" (an early, and still somewhat conventional piece, circa 1888-91) illustrates that esthetics, and features winding shapes, shifting rhythms, no accents on the downbeats (accent on 2d beat of the measure in the first phrase).

Suppleness and curvaceousness, a certain aimlessness, circling round and round, with no arrival, no imperative, an unclear tonal center (Gb Major or Eb minor?), are all in marked contrast with the drive of a Beethoven Sonata.

Debussy was accused of writing "feminine" music, there certainly is no "macho drive" in his works. Concurrently, there was a new interest at the time in art and religion from the Far East, where spirituality claims to integrate both masculine and feminine energies...

• **Role and Image of Women in Society**

- PIC: Puvis de Chavannes, "*Young Women at the Seashore*". This French Symbolist painter features in his paintings many half-nude women with bland faces and long hair. Powerless women with long blond hair... Also think of Renoir's painting of two sisters at the piano.

As musical examples, we have Debussy's Prelude "*La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin*" (The Maiden with Flaxen Hair) and the opera "*Pelléas et Mélisande*". Mélisande spends her time sort of just combing her hair, then dies in childbirth, quite a passive image for the role of women.

- PIC: Toulouse-Lautrec poster, "*Study of Loïe Fuller*"

Le Musée d'Orsay online resources feature several posters showing Loïe Fuller.

Loïe Fuller (1862-1928), an American dancer, became very popular in Paris around the turn of the century. She incarnated "*Art Nouveau*" esthetics and feminine ideal, featuring undulating silhouettes enveloped in long veils billowing in the winds, and sophisticated electric lighting. She choreographed several pieces by Debussy.

Debussy's Prelude "*Voiles*" could be translated either Sails or Veils; C. Kautsky considers "Veils" more accurate, as the influence of L. Fuller is well documented.

• **Orientalism**

PIC: photo of an Egyptian Sphynx statue as a setting for a Loïe Fuller dance show.

Napoleon I went to Egypt, the French colonized Algeria and Morocco in the 19th century. Northern Africa inspired Delacroix, St-Saëns, Gide...

As western Europeans extended their colonization of Africa and the Far East, Japanese prints became wildly popular. Archaeological digs in Egypt and Greece developed.

- PIC: Japanese print, "*The Great Wave of Kanagawa*", by Hokusai, used as frontispice for "*La Mer*" for the original edition of 1905.

- PIC: "*Eiffel Tower*" from the 1889 "Exposition Universelle" in Paris.

- PIC: "*Japanese Dancers*" from the same "Exposition Universelle".

Musical traditions from South-East Asia were featured, such as gamelan orchestra.

In Debussy's "*Pagodes*"; the piano imitates other instruments, such as gongs or percussion instruments. Note that Percy Grainger, the Australian pianist, arranged "*Pagodes*" for gamelan orchestra.

- PIC: *Alhambra Gate*, postcard sent to Debussy by Manuel de Falla.

Debussy's "*Soirée dans Grenade*" from "*Estampes*" evokes the Alhambra, the Moorish palace and fortress in Granada, southern Spain, considered exotic by Debussy's contemporaries, through the medieval Arab influence. Page 1 features: layering, minor 2nds and tritones, and "non sequitur" juxtaposition of musical motives (20th century music often dispenses with logical connections between motives). Debussy tritones sound mysterious - Schoenberg's have more Angst.

"*La Puerta Del Vino*", Prelude from Book II, refers to the gate of the Alhambra.

It is another example of different things going on simultaneously, with a combination of oppositions. In page 1, the rhythmic motive, divided between white and black keys, leads an independent existence from the B natural in the RH.

- PIC: "*Digs at Delphes*", 1892; the photo shows an archaeological site (villagers were driven out at gun point, so the artifacts underneath their village could be excavated)

- PIC: shows a Greek statue, with three or four dancers around a column. There's an inherent opposition between the motion evoked by the dancers and the stillness of the statues, illustrated in Debussy's Prelude "*Danseuses de Delphes*".

-PIC: *Two Egyptian funerary urns* owned by Debussy, both in the shape of a head.

His Prelude from Book II, "*Canope*" is written with three staves. In page 1, Dominant 7 chord on Bass D clashes (or maybe not) with melodic C # in the RH, creating tonal ambiguity.

• **African influences**

- PIC: Picasso, "*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*" features African masks.

• **Racist Connotations and influence of African-American music**

- PIC: Ad for chocolate, featuring images of black people.

- PIC: Cartoon featuring a white couple, a black couple and an "Apes" couple, "Man descends from the Apes"

- PIC: "*Le Savon Dirtoff nettoie tout*" (Dirtoff soap cleans everything), an ad for soap featuring images of black people.

- PIC: Ad for "Eau de Javel" (chlorine bleach) an ad also featuring images of black people.

- PIC: "*Golliwogg*", illustration from a children book published in the U.K. in 1895 by Florence Upton, an American author who moved to Britain in the late nineteenth century, featuring a furry black gnome with two (white) dolls. "*The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwogg*" was the first of a series of thirteen best-selling books published between 1895 and 1909. Inspired by a minstrel doll Upton had as a child. Upton illustrated 13 Golliwogg stories, set to verses written by her mother, Bertha.

Cakewalks would have been featured in Europe in minstrel shows (with performers in black face) traveling from the U.S.

Debussy's "*Golliwogg's Cake-walk*" and Prelude "*Minstrels*" show that Debussy saw some of these performances, and was interested in and appreciated African-American music.