

"Prélude", or its variants in other languages, is an intriguing term that embodies a number of different definitions. The term appeared as early as the middle of the 15th century, and early preludes usually are loose in structure and have an improvisatory nature. It is particularly true in unmeasured preludes by such composers as Louis Couperin, François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau, in which the duration of notes is at the discretion of the performers. Later in the Baroque era, retaining or regaining its literal meaning, many preludes act as short introductions to another piece, or they serve as prefaces in a multi-movement work. Preludes of this type are best represented in the exemplary Preludes and Fugues by J.S. Bach, in his two books of the Well-Tempered Clavier. In 1839, Chopin bestowed a whole new meaning upon the term "prelude" by publishing a set of 24 Preludes, covering all 24 major and minor keys. These self-contained character pieces, while breaking away from the introductory nature, recall the spontaneity and impromptu mood of their predecessors. Being a great admirer of Chopin's music, Debussy wrote his set of 24 *Préludes* between 1909 and 1913, dividing them into two books of twelve. In fact, he finished the first book amazingly fast within merely three months. Each individual prelude is a distinctive, independent piece of a rather small scale. It is most enigmatic that at the end of each prelude, Debussy provided a brief description in parenthesis and preceded by an ellipsis. One can only speculate if they are indeed descriptive titles which have provided inspirations for Debussy to compose the pieces, or they are just after thoughts that Debussy found to add life to the pieces. Or are they intended to be some sort of riddles for the performers to guess what was behind Debussy's mind?

Danseuses de Delphes ([Female] Dancers of Delphi)

The opening prelude is a mysterious piece in a very slow tempo. It has no specific structure, and after the first 5-bar phrase, the pulse is of the dotted-rhythm melody is obscured by the off-beat harmonic chords. Such obscurity creates a dreamy state like that of a *déjà vu*, with a lethargic and heedless atmosphere. Delphi is a historical city in Greece, about 160km northwest of Athens. No one is certain how Debussy came up with the title "Dancers of Delphi". One can only assume he might have seen a reproduction of, or the actual statue of the same name, which was discovered near the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, and is on display in the Delphi Archaeological Museum.

Voiles (Sails)

Despite the ambiguity of the French title which could be translated into either "Veils" or "Sails", for a number of reasons, it is safe to say "Sails" prevails! Firstly, "Veils" is a vague description which is incongruent with "titles" of all other preludes which are specific and explicit. "Sails" would be a subject that fits into Debussy's fascination for "La Mer". Musically, in the middle *En animant* section, the rapid pentatonic scale escalates the music to a climax, which seems to portray a strong gust rather than a veil. And the indication *Emporté* (blown away) should really reveal the enigma. The ensuing fast and soft pentatonic scales quite vividly paint a picture of sails being carried away by light breezes.

Le vent dans la plaine (The Wind in the Plain)

This prelude is vividly descriptive here with a constant sextuplet figure, which is to be played as lightly as possible, representing an ongoing breeze in the plain. The breeze does occasionally subside and come to a brief pause, portrayed by descending chords in quavers. A few sudden gusts of wind stand out as climactic moments in the middle of the piece.

Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir (Sounds and scents swirl in the evening air)

This prelude is not as literally descriptive as the previous one. In spite of Debussy's dislike of being coined an impressionistic composer, this prelude paints an impressionistic musical picture of the atmosphere of an evening as the title suggests. The title is actually the third line of the first verse in *Harmonie du soir* (Harmony of the evening), a poem written in 1857 by French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). *Harmonie du soir* is one of five Baudelaire's poems, all of which included in the collection *Les fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil), that Debussy had set to songs earlier in 1887-1889. The alternating meter between 3/4 and 5/4, and the numerous and constant indications of flexibility in tempo, all contribute to a sense of timelessness and freedom in the evening air. Listeners are given much room for imagination of the environment of the evening. However, it is not easy to relate the sounds of distant horns, as indicated by Debussy at the end of the piece, to the timbre produced by the piano.

Les collines d'Anacapri (The Hills of Anacapri)

It is unknown when Debussy travelled to Anacapri, or if he had ever visited the town. Anacapri and the town of Capri are the two communities on the island of Capri, which has an area of only 10 square kilometers. Located off the shore of Sorrentine peninsula and on the south side of the Gulf of Naples, this tiny island was a strategic port fought over by the British and French troops, a haven for the rich and famous, as well as an inspiration for artists and writers. The magnificent cliffs along the coastline must have inspired Debussy to write a joyous and rapid dance in the style of a tarantella. Despite the fast pace, the tempo is never strict as Debussy gives frequent indications of slowing down and resuming tempo, plus an indication to play "with freedom of a popular song". For contrast, the composer inserts a simple, lay back but sensuous melody in salon style in the middle of the prelude. The vivid dance returns and the prelude concludes brilliantly with some of the highest notes on the keyboard.

Des pas sur la neige (Footprints in the Snow)

Instead of painting a musical landscape, Debussy is using musical notes to create an impression of what the title suggests here. The tempo indication is sadly and slowly (*Triste et lent*). A short-long ostinato rhythm which persists throughout the piece, portrays weary footsteps in the snow. Debussy explicitly instructs that "this rhythm must have the sound quality of a sad and icy landscape." The music dies away towards the end and it finishes with a chord played by two hands spreading wide apart, creating a sense of emptiness and desolation.

Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest (What the West Wind Saw)

Whether the title was borrowed from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Garden of Paradise" or Percy Shelly's poem "Ode to the West Wind", it was Debussy's intention to write a virtuosic prelude to display the technical prowess of the player. Debussy's West Wind is no gentle breeze. Marked "Animated and tumultuous", this prelude is full of raging arpeggios and rumbling tremolos. Strong articulations, and frequent and drastic dynamic contrasts between the loudest and softest vividly portray the violence and furiousness of the gust.

La fille aux cheveux de lin (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair)

This little gem is easily the most popular and most often heard from the collection. The title refers to a poem of the same name written by the French poet Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894). The prelude is much-loved for its sheer beauty, tranquility and simplicity of melody. Nothing is contrived or exaggerated. With or without its descriptive title, its popularity results in many transcriptions for various instruments, of which the version for violin and piano by American violinist Arthur Hartmann is most adored.

La sérénade interrompue (The interrupted serenade)

This is a wonderful example of Debussy's inventiveness and imagination. On one hand, not only did he compose in a Spanish flavor, he also used the keyboard to imitate the musical effects of a Spanish guitar. On the other hand, the piece is highly programmatic and the plot is almost humorous. It depicts a Spaniard tuning up his guitar, then starting to play to serenade a presumably young maiden. Somehow, the serenade is interrupted a couple of times by some unwelcoming acts and eventually the Spaniard gives up and walks away in frustration.

La cathédral engloutie (The engulfed Cathedral)

This intriguing prelude is based on a legend about a mythical city called Ys, which was located on the coast of Brittany, a region on northwestern tip of France. The Cathedral of Ys was swallowed by the sea as a punishment for the wrongdoing of the princess, whose father was the pious king of the city. The cathedral was allowed to emerge from the water once a day at sunrise, as a warning to those who were not devout enough. Music begins softly and mysteriously, representing the ringing bells of the cathedral, as the misty image of the cathedral gradually appears. The music reaches the climax and the grandeur of sonority is at its peak when the cathedral is fully emerged. Debussy's skillful impressionistic writing, including the use of pentatonic mode and parallel chord progression, simultaneously depicts the solemnness of the cathedral, and its emergence from the moving water and finally its submergence back into the sea. The effectiveness of this prelude attracts various rearrangements, including a well-known orchestral version by Leopold Stokowski.

La danse de Puck (The Dance of Puck)

The protagonist of this prelude, Puck, is a good-natured but mischievous sprite in Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream". He is also a servant and jester to Oberon, the king of fairies. He is a comic relief in the play as he is full of pranks and yet quite lousy in his missions. Marked "Capriciously and light", this dance is full of dotted rhythm, sporadic fast runs and rapid strings of grace notes to bring out the witty and naughty spirit of a sprite.

Minstrels (Minstrels)

Historically, minstrel music could either refer to medieval troubadour music, or a type of popular music of African origin that appeared in Britain and America in around 1830. Minstrel shows – variety shows with "Blackface" entertainers – were very popular for decades but eventually declined due to their highly controversial racist connotations. Debussy must have been exposed to minstrel show music that was staged in Paris. As a composer of international horizon, Debussy clearly did not intend any racist remark in this prelude. He was simply intrigued by music of different nationalities, particularly exotic ones, and tried to adopt them in compositions, like preludes no. 5 and no. 9, in which Debussy adopted Italian style and a Spanish plot respectively. This last prelude, which is full of humors, has rapid changes of characters which accurately portrays the eclecticism and the entertaining quality of the minstrel shows.