



Jean- Yves Thibaudet

the **magical** worlds of Debussy



About the Artist

For more than three decades, Jean-Yves Thibaudet has performed world-wide, recorded more than 50 albums, and built a reputation as one of today's finest pianists. From the start of his career, he delighted in music beyond the standard repertoire, from jazz to opera, which he transcribed himself to play on the piano. His profound professional friendships crisscross the globe and have led to spontaneous and fruitful collaborations in film, fashion, and visual art.

He is the first-ever Artist-in-Residence at the Colburn School in Los Angeles, where he makes his home. Thibaudet's recording catalogue has received two Grammy nominations, the Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik, the Diapason d'Or, the Choc du Monde de la Musique, the Edison Prize, and Gramophone awards.

His most recent album, 2021's Carte Blanche, features a collection of deeply personal solo piano pieces never before recorded by the pianist. In 2010 the Hollywood Bowl honored Thibaudet for his musical achievements by inducting him into its Hall of Fame. Previously a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, Thibaudet was awarded the title Officier by the French Ministry of Culture in 2012. In 2020, he was named Special Representative for the promotion of French Creative and Cultural Industries in Romania. He is co-Artistic Advisor, with Gautier Capuçon, of the Festival Musique & Vin au Clos Vougeot.



Entering Debussy's atmosphere

In the last decade of his life, Claude Debussy composed two books of 12 Préludes for piano; 24 in all – following in the tradition of Bach and Chopin. But the French composer's intentions were different than that of his preluding forebears. As Jean-Yves Thibaudet reveals, Debussy invented an entirely new musical language in his Préludes and used it to generate two dozen magical miniatures. Few pianists are as intimately familiar with these works as Thibaudet, whose discography includes the complete works of Debussy. In this video, Thibaudet introduces you to the solar system of Debussy's Préludes and visits some of the most fascinating sound worlds in the whole piano repertoire.

A black and white portrait of Jean-Yves Thibaudet, a French pianist, looking upwards and to the right. He has a beard and is wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie.

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PIANO

Introduction and harmonic language

Debussy's 24 Préludes differ from those by Bach and Chopin. They're not related by tonality like those of his predecessors. They also don't need to be played as a complete set – there isn't necessarily a story from one piece to the next. Interestingly, Debussy wrote the titles at the end of each score rather than at the beginning, as if to prevent pianists from getting fixated on a specific image too early.

Claude Debussy developed a new harmonic language with his preludes. Analyses of his harmonic innovations often credit him with bringing to the fore extreme upper extensions, non-functional dominant chords, parallelisms, whole-tone scales, and more. But there's a signature in his style that goes far beyond the notes. Nor did Debussy identify with the word "Impressionism" or think it was an apt descriptor for music. Instead, it's the sheer sensuousness of his piano writing – his aptitude for colors and the wide range of ideas he evokes in all five senses – that make his writing so unique and powerful. In Thibaudet's words, "the harmonies would taste delicious!"



The first prelude Thibaudet performed was “Fireworks,” around the age of 14–15. Only later did he decide to learn all of Book 1, playing them often (and sometimes pairing them with Chopin Préludes).

Debussy's world/Debussy's words

One day, Thibaudet heard that Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli (pictured left), one of his heroes, was giving a concert playing all of Debussy's Préludes, Book 1 and 2, in Milan. This inspired him to one day decide to perform both books together.

You have to be willing to go deep into the world of each prelude; each piece is full of majestic atmosphere and vibrant colors. Thibaudet can spend many hours on one piece, discovering new things, playing it again and again, and he'll never get bored!

Left image: Michelangeli in 1969. Center image: Debussy in 1909. Right image: *La neige à Louveciennes* by Alfred Sisley (1909), which could have influenced Debussy's sixth prélude *Des pas sur la neige*.



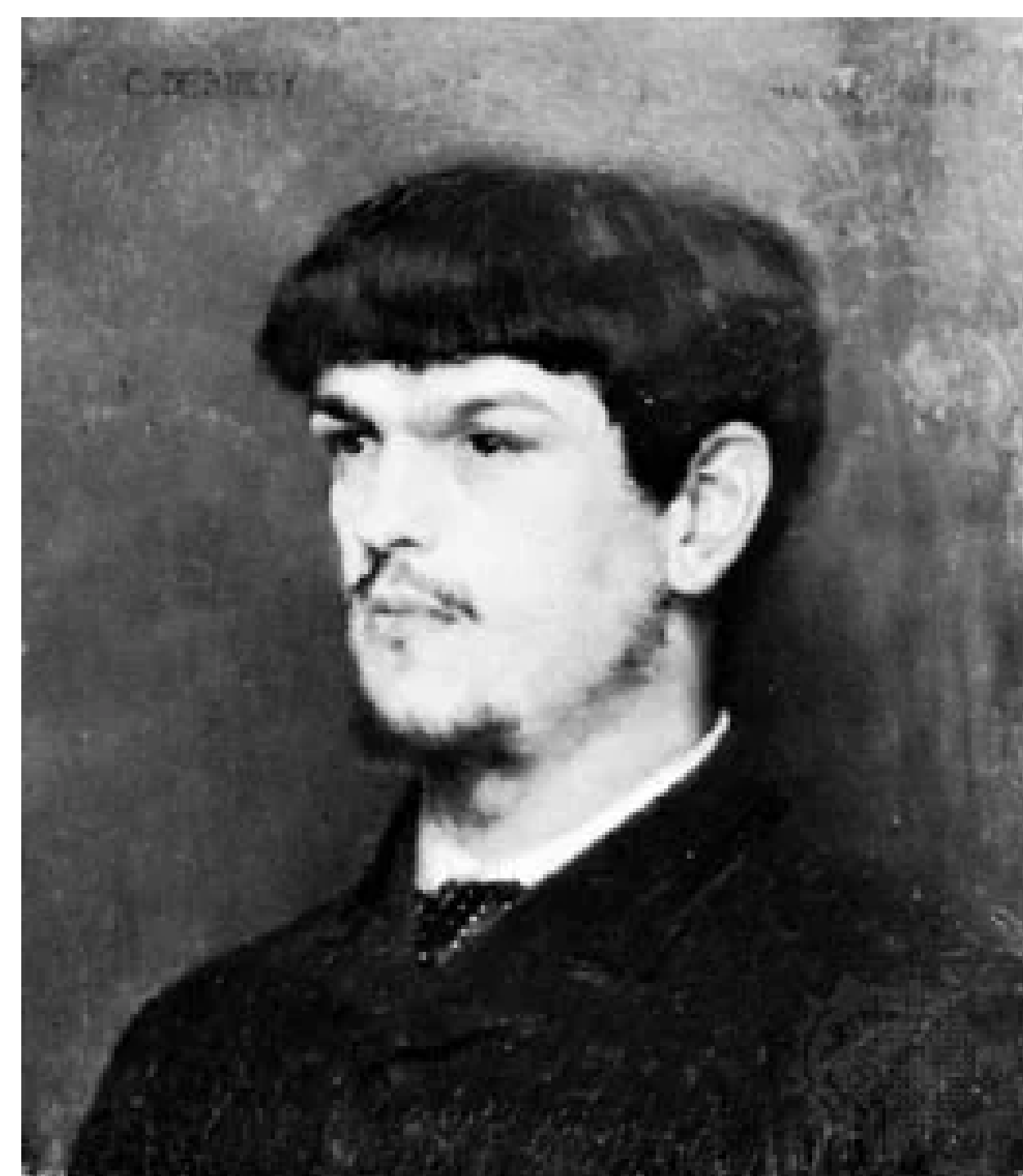
Everything is written in the score – Debussy (and Ravel) were obsessive about details. There may be a sense that the composer is micromanaging us, but if you look carefully, there is still tons of room for interpretation. Now, this also means that if Debussy didn't write a *rallentando*, for example, we probably shouldn't add one. It's our job to first learn everything the way it's written, and then we can start having fun with it and making it our own.

Debussy's precision and exactness with words are a crucial part of his music. He might have three or four different ways of telling us to slow down in the same piece. Each word triggers something in our brain that makes us play differently, even if the only description is a poetic indication of a feeling. Debussy was perfectly intentional with every word.



*Debussy and the composer
Ernest Chausson in 1893*

*Claude Debussy, painting by
Marcel Baschet, 1884; in the
Versailles Museum*



A sensuous composer

What creates the sensuousness of Debussy? There's a quality that's similar to but quite distinct from Chopin, and hard to describe. The piano is a fundamentally sensual instrument because of the tactile relationship the player forms upon striking a key. Debussy's awareness of different touches, colors, and sounds gives his music this uncanny quality of appealing to all of the senses.

Common misconceptions

With Debussy's music, you can do a lot of cerebral work away from the piano, especially in the second book. When Thibaudet has time while traveling, he'll look at a score and remind himself of everything going on.

You don't have to be the nationality of a composer to play their music. Anyone who spends enough time with French music can understand it, just as with French culture and language.



*Manuscript for Debussy's L'isle joyeuse,
a solo piano piece written in 1904*

There used to be different schools of piano playing between countries (less so now due to the internet and greater frequency of travel). However, there are still cultural traditions that apply to French music – elegance, distinction, perfume, aristocracy, beauty – that are all a part of the French heritage. Debussy's music should never be vulgar or overly romantic! Both Debussy and Ravel were very much moving away from Romantic music (though they rejected the term "Impressionist"). The end of *L'isle joyeuse* may be the only Romantic moment in all of Debussy's oeuvre. His emotions are controlled and calculated, but never cold: just restrained.

There is one more commonly misunderstood element of Debussy's music, and that is that pedal should always be used. This is false! While Debussy's music does call for more pedal than Ravel might, this doesn't mean we have to abuse the sustain pedal. Pedal is a tool to serve the music, and to make what's written in the score possible. It is not there to cover up our mistakes! You really have to listen to yourself play to decide how much is right to use. Work on sounds you can create at the piano, both with and without the pedal. There are millions of possibilities, perhaps more than in some other music.



Thibaudet performing the complete Debussy Préludes on December 1, 2021 at Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, CA

Timeless music

At the turn of the 20th century, much classical music signified a goal-oriented drive toward a harmonic, motivic, or emotional culmination. On the other hand, Debussy rarely writes climaxes, and his pieces are much more about creating space. They're somewhat hypnotizing, as if time stops. When a concert starts and people have settled in, you can freeze time with Debussy. After performing both books, Thibaudet himself is even hypnotized. There's no room for an encore – what would you say after a play by Shakespeare? Over time, Thibaudet has created a coherent story out of the complete sets, rarely playing preludes by themselves.

Playing a character

Thibaudet definitely feels he's playing a character when he performs – he fully enters a world, whether it's a person, a painting, a place, or a weather event. Debussy's music isn't often thought of as humorous, but there is certainly humor in there (look at General Lavine, for example). Making the audience smile during a performance can go a long way.





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