Claude Debussy
“Nocturnes”

ACHILLE-CLAUDE DEBUSSY was born at St. Germain-en-Laye, France, on August 22, 1862, and died in Paris on March 25, 1918. His three Nocturnes, which went through an extended genesis described below, were composed during the 1890s, reaching more or less their present form between 1897 and 1899. Debussy later made substantial revisions in the orchestration, particularly in “Fêtes” and “Sirènes”; the work is now performed according to the revised score, which was published posthumously in 1930. “Nuages” and “Fêtes” were first performed at the Concerts Lamoureux in Paris on December 9, 1900, Camille Chavillard conducting. The same performers premiered the complete set of three pieces on October 27, 1901.

“NUAGES” (“Clouds”) is scored for two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, timpani, harp, and strings. “FÊTES” (“Festivals”) is scored for three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets in F, three trombones, tuba, two harps, timpani, cymbals, snare drum, and strings. “SIRÈNES” (“Sirens”) is scored for three flutes, oboe, English horn, two clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets in F, two harps, wordless female chorus, and strings.

The first performance of the Prélude à l’Après-midi d’un faune in 1894 had made Debussy instantly famous. By the date of that performance he had already embarked on his next major orchestral work, the Nocturnes, which, with Pelléas et Mélisande, were to occupy his attention for the rest of the 1890s. It seems that the Nocturnes went through at least two early versions before resulting in the music we know today, although Debussy’s manuscripts for the earlier versions—if they were ever written out—no longer exist. As early as 1892, when Debussy was planning a tour of the United States (which never took place), he wrote to his patron Prince Poniatowski that the work he was planning to introduce during the tour, Trois Scènes au crépuscule (“Three Scenes at Twilight”), was “almost finished, that is to say that the orchestration is entirely laid out and it is simply a question of writing out the score.” This work was based on the poem “Scènes au crépuscule” by Debussy’s friend Henri de Régnier, a close associate of Mallarmé. Since the music of this version does not survive at all, it is impossible to compare it to the final work, but it is worth noting that one of the poems involved the imagery of flutes and trumpets that might have inspired Fêtes, and a reference to a female choir might have motivated the inclusion of the wordless women’s voices in Sirènes.

Be that as it may, the first appearance of the actual title Nocturnes in Debussy’s work comes in a letter written late in 1894 to the great Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, to whom the composer wrote: “I am working on three Nocturnes for violin and orchestra that are intended for you. The first is scored for strings; the second for three flutes, four horns, three trumpets, and two harps; the third is a combination of both these groups...This is, in fact, an experiment in the various arrangements that can be made with a single color—like the study of gray in painting.”

Debussy greatly admired a series of paintings entitled “Nocturnes” by the American artist Whistler, and the musical title could well have been suggested by that connection. Moreover, the composer’s reference to “the study of gray in painting” recalls Whistler’s most famous work, known popularly as “Whistler’s Mother,” but called by the artist “Arrangement in Black and Gray.” He was also familiar with the work of other Impressionists—Gauguin, Renoir, Pissarro, and Sisley—and he was especially fond of Turner. Two years later Debussy again wrote to Ysaÿe, requesting that he defer the performance of the Nocturnes until he could give it in Brussels. This would suggest not only that a full score for the violin-and-orchestra version existed at that time, but also that Ysaÿe had seen it, though no one else has ever managed to put hands on the manuscript. If such a score does exist, its rediscovery would be a wonderful contribution to our knowledge of Debussy’s musical thought. In any case, between 1897 and 1899 Debussy completely recast the work into its present form.

Debussy’s comment likening his music to “the study of gray” fits best with Nuages (“Clouds”), one of his most personal musical expressions. The subdued orchestral colors and dynamics (mostly piano and pianissimo, with only two forte passages, each lasting only a measure or two) hold the music within carefully prescribed limits. The spare opening gesture in clarinets and bassoons—alternating open fifths with thirds—grows and intensifies in the divided string parts, while the English horn solo interpolates a chromatic figure that outlines a diminished fifth. This English horn figure keeps reappearing, virtually without change, like a solid object around which the clouds float and swirl. Debussy himself wrote a program for the movement in which he said, “Nuages renders the unchanging aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds, fading away in gray tones lightly tinged with white.”
The clouds have dispersed for the second movement, *Fêtes* (“Festivals”). Debussy is supposed to have said that he was inspired by the merrymaking in the Bois de Boulogne, although the brilliant processions through Paris at the time of the Franco-Russian alliance, signed in 1896, probably played a part in the final conception of the music, with its fanfares heard softly in the distance, growing to splendid display, and then fading away as the music again dissolves into silence.

Debussy’s fascination with the sea constantly resurfaces in his music, from the third *Nocturne*, called *Sirènes* (“Sirens”), to certain passages in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and culminating in the great sea symphony, *La Mer*. *Sirènes* is music of iridescent color, of decoration without themes in the normal sense, of fluid rhythmic interplay. Literary inspiration may have come either from a poem of Henri de Régnier (*L’Homme et la sirène*) or from one of Swinburne (*Nocturne*); both poems deal with mermaids and the effects of their love on mortals. The instrumental use of the women’s chorus, singing wordlessly, evokes the song of these sirens from the ocean’s depths.

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THE FIRST AMERICAN PERFORMANCE OF DEBUSSY’S “NOCTURNES” took place in Boston on February 10, 1904, in a Chickering Production concert conducted by B.J. Lang.

THE FIRST COMPLETE BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES OF “NOCTURNES” were given by Max Fiedler in December 1908, with the Choral Club of the New England Conservatory of Music, though Vincent d’Indy had already led the BSO in “Nuages” and “Fêtes” in December 1905. Subsequent BSO performances of the “Nocturnes” (complete or in part) were given by Ernst Schmidt (“Nuages,” performed in Debussy’s memory the week after his death), Henri Rabaud, Pierre Monteux, Serge Koussevitzky, Albert Stoessel, Richard Burgin, Charles Munch, Ernest Ansermet, Erich Leinsdorf, Claudio Abbado, Sergiu Comissiona, Sir Colin Davis, Joseph Silverstein, Charles Dutoit (the most recent Tanglewood performance of the complete set, on August 9, 1992, with the women of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, John Oliver, conductor), Seiji Ozawa, Bernard Haitink (first in March 1990 with the New England Conservatory Women’s Chorus, Tamara Brooks, director; more recently in November 2009, with the women of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, John Oliver, conductor, those being the most recent complete subscription performances), and Robert Spano (the most recent subscription performances of “Nuages” and “Fêtes” as a pair).