



**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS**

**UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS INTERNATIONAL CONCERT SERIES**

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Clothworkers Centenary Concert Hall

**Elisa Tomellini**

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After the recital there will be CDs of Elisa's recordings for sale in the foyer and she will be there to sign autographs.

## **Programme Notes**

### **Claude Debussy (1862-1918) - Children's Corner Suite (1906-8)**

Written between 1906 and 1908 for Debussy's only daughter Chou-Chou (Claude-Emma 1905-19), a very gifted child, and the English titles are perhaps because she had an English governess. Debussy, himself, however, had warm feelings towards England and the English. The Suite was dedicated *'to my beloved little Chou-Chou, with the tender excuses of her father for that which follows'*. It is thought Debussy wrote it to inspire her in make-believe play with her toys.

Although the third item, the 'Serenade of the Doll' was published separately beforehand, Harold Bauer gave the 1st performance in Paris on the 18th December of 1908. In 1911 the Suite was orchestrated by Andre Caplet, a friend of Debussy.

Stephen Hough<sup>1</sup> in 2022 has said...*'... they seem like very simple pieces written for his daughter. But if you look at them, they're astonishing. They're absolutely crammed with information. There are almost more dots and markings than there are notes in those pieces. And so, yes, he wants you to feel the improvisation, but he also knows exactly how he wants it to sound.'*

**I Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum:** 'Gradus ad Parnassum' ('Steps to Parnassus') was a work on counterpoint by Fux (1725), and also a set of 100 studies by Clementi (1817), regarded earlier as the foundation of piano technique. Debussy perhaps had his tongue in cheek when he named it. A contemporary reviewer<sup>2</sup> wrote that it was a *'tiny masterpiece full of mischievous wit'*.

The piece may seem quite simple at first hearing but it is described as follows<sup>3</sup>... *'From a basic C-major assumption, which returns several times, and closes the composition, the harmonic scheme romps through modal sections, series of chords outlining juxtapositions nearly bitonal in their essence, a number of diatonic schemes and successive polytonality in his approach to the orthodox cadence'*.

The 5 page piece is in simple rondo-like form and is *piano* or *pianissimo* for much of the time, and is mostly diatonic, but with modal passages. On the 2nd

appearance of the rushing semiquavers (*'a Tempo'*) they are accompanied by a staccato high melody, usually from a crossed-over left hand.

The next section (*'expressif'*), is a calmer, simpler and slower short passage of 12 bars leading to a little motif of 2 notes in thirds before the 1st semiquaver section returns with the staccato melody.

The opening passage returns finally, with a right hand melody within the semiquavers. The final 10 bars (*'Tres anime': 'very animated'*) have 4 bars of accented open 5ths, sounding deliberately a little archaic, before semiquavers descend to end with emphatic *fortissimo* staccato chords and a final 2 accented notes.

**II Jimbo's Lullaby:** Debussy depicts a slow moving, heavy elephant, possibly the familiar one in the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris. Chou-Chou also had an elephant stuffed toy. The instruction to the pianist is *'soft and a little awkwardly'* (*'doux et un peu gauche'*). Ranging from *piano* to *pianississimo* (triple piano), only 1 bar of *mezzo forte* occurs throughout. It is written mostly in the low register, with over half the piece (of the 4 pages) written in the bass clef for both hands.

The opening is very simple and uncomplicated, with lower notes on the keyboard moving slowly. A low pentatonic theme ends with dissonant clusters of sustained seconds before being repeated in the treble. A slow, five note French baby's song *'Do do l'enfant do'* (*'Songs for babies'*) appears and is repeated *'un peu plus mouvementé'* (*'a little more quickly'*), but with a quickening bass line suggesting the elephant starting trotting. A new quaver motif appears, and persists, soon to be combined with the 1st motif in the treble.

The piece finally subsides into the sparseness of the beginning with a final appearance of the first pentatonic theme with long notes almost fading away, but with the accompanying quavers gently appearing yet again before Debussy's final staccato note. It is *'surely the most light-fingered of all elephantine music'*<sup>4</sup>.

**III Serenade of the Doll:** Published separately in 1906 as *'Serenade to the Doll'*, this may have led to the composition of the whole Suite. *'Serenade'* suggests the use of the guitar (or mandolin) and *forte* arpeggio chords in the middle reflect this. Debussy's instruction to the pianist is: *'One must hold down the soft pedal*

*for the entire duration of this piece, even at the passages marked f.'* This may help retain the guitar-like feel of the passages in the middle.

There are 2 basic themes in the piece, but also a number of short fragments of phrases which occur repeatedly and also in sequences.

The piece starts *Allegretto ma non troppo*, subtitled '*léger et gracieux* ('light and graceful'). The opening left hand rising 4th and dropping 5th in the melody (accompanied by grace notes) being repeated soon in the right hand - both accompanied by simple E major 5ths.

Simple phrases and clusters moving in adjacent notes occur in the left hand whilst accompanied by light off-the-beat right hand accompaniments. Clusters of repeated staccato notes occur, sometimes against a 3 note pattern, and soon the opening theme returns accompanied by the clusters of guitar-like strumming.

The main theme returns over a simple E major accompaniment (in the treble) and the piece ends simply and quietly with a whole bar of sustained silence - after the final high staccato note.

**IV The Snow Is Dancing:** With 6 pages, this is the equal longest of the 6 pieces. Apart from a high spread chord (bar 38) midway, marked *sf* ('*sforzando*') the piece is mostly *p-ppp* ('*pianississimo*': very, very soft). The constant quick movement and staccato notes suggest rapidly falling snow, whilst repeated, staccato high triplet Bs in the middle add a touch of further bleakness.

The piece often uses the Dorian mode (D-D with no sharps or flats). Staccato semiquavers and quavers suggest the falling snow. At '*doux et triste*' (*soft and melancholy*), a diminished 4th in the melody is repeated slightly lower and this leads to a middle part ('*cedez un peu*') with repeated high, staccato triplet Bs.

Repeated E flats in the middle voices lead to a rising chromatic passage, and then a return of the smoother, gentler opening, albeit with fragments of phrases heard earlier.

The piece ends with a high 6 bars of figuration (*ppp*) over open left hand chords and finishes on a high spread chord - a more gentle ending to the falling snow than would be first imagined.

**V The Little Shepherd:** This is the shortest of the pieces, being only 2 pages long, but with a very effective structure. The impression given is of the shepherd boy playing on his flute - *'improvised cadenzas'*<sup>4</sup>.

Three times, flute-like dotted themes in the right hand (each with a differing left hand) lead to neat, pianissimo perfect cadences. The middle passage extends higher and higher, and to *'mezzo forte'* - but with the same gentle perfect cadence. After the first appearance of the flute-like theme a differing, more improvisatory one occurs (*'au mouvement'*- *'lively'*) – but, again, with the same perfect cadence in E major. The final flute-like theme recurs with a differing gentle, left hand accompaniment, but to end with the, by now, familiar, gentle perfect cadence (*ppp*).

**VI Golliwog's Cakewalk:** The most famous and recognisable piece in the Suite, it is often performed separately, and known for its distinctive, opening syncopated rhythm

Described as *'one of his gayest, least inhibited pieces'*<sup>4</sup>, it is famous for its distinctive, opening syncopated rhythm and is *'one of Debussy's least misinterpreted pieces'*<sup>3</sup>. One can imagine Debussy playing with his beloved Chou-Chou's doll with her and making it walk for her across her bed.

The piece is diatonic, but Debussy *'spices this with 'altered ninth chords, added sixth chords, chromatic passages, appoggiaturas sounded with chords, passing bitonality; a syncopated harmony to match the rhythmic dexterity of our friend's supple cake walk'... 'humor in quantities... brought by sudden halts, sharp accents, dynamic contrasts... as the little puppet takes us through an array of dance steps, of grotesque poses, tumbles, tumbles, recoveries'*.<sup>3</sup>

A central section (*'un peu moins vite'*: *a little less quickly*) slows the tempo and has off beat chords (the doll walking slowly?), leading to where Debussy quotes at least 4 times the famous 3 bars from the opening of the *Tristan & Isolde* Prelude of Wagner. Firstly instructed for the pianist *'avec une grande emotion'* (*with great emotion*), he ends this 4 note quotation by ornamenting jazz-like, his own 3 chords humouring Wagner. The leap of the minor 6th in the right hand (then sliding down) starts this quotation.

At the 1st performance, Debussy paced anxiously outside the hall and then later met Harold Bauer, the pianist, saying '*You don't seem to object today to the manner in which I treat Wagner*'. Bauer was mystified. These 3 bars were not obvious to him until Debussy explained. Bauer then congratulated him on his humour<sup>5</sup>.

### **Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849) - Fantasie-Impromptu in C sharp minor, op 66 (posth) (1834-5)**

Despite being one of Chopin's most famous, popular and instantly recognisable works, it was not published in his lifetime, existing in manuscript for 20 years (and published posthumously by his friend Julian Fontana). In 1960, Arthur Rubinstein acquired an album of a Mme d'Este in Paris which had a copy from 1835 in Chopin's hand (and so it was in private property). Rubinstein was satisfied it was the original and this seems the most likely explanation.

Another earlier theory is mentioned<sup>6</sup>, however, and that is that this work bore some resemblance to a similar (but lesser) work by Moscheles, the then famous composer and virtuoso pianist, and hence Chopin was reluctant to publish his version.

Because the earlier Fontana version has been in wide circulation for many years, there are some slight discrepancies between that and the 1960 2nd version.

'Impromptu', of course, means 'improvised', but then much of Chopin's compositions had characteristics of improvisation. The piece is basically in an extended ternary form (ABA) but with much repetition of 4 and 8 bar phrases and their subtle variations, extensions and embellishments. For example, there is the repetition of a theme, but with accents subtly occurring just a semiquaver later than in the original appearance, and being barely noticeable except in the score. Extensions by a bar or two on re-appearance are frequent.

Two noticeable features occur almost throughout the piece. Firstly, a 5 bar phrase of busy semiquavers (*'piano'*) in the right hand, often starting with a semiquaver rest (an anacrusis - like a breath) and repeated. This also occurs as a *Presto* passage near the end. And secondly, left hand arpeggios (usually of 6 notes) which occur almost continuously throughout.



Two famous singing melodies also occur in the right hand: an early 4 bar accented melody (*'forte'*) of 16 crotchets, repeated an octave higher, and extended to 16 bars. Later (after 2 bars of *'largo'* arpeggios), an 8 bar right hand singing melody (*'Moderato cantabile – sotto voce'*) in D flat, extended to 40 bars.

Listeners will instantly recognise these two right-hand singing melodies and their variations and extensions as they return, and it will be remembered here that Chopin loved Italian opera and particularly Bellini and his Bel Canto style of melodies. Wagner mischievously remarked once that Chopin was *'a composer for the right hand'*<sup>7</sup> - a remark he may well have regretted later.

An interesting modern aside here is that some people here may know that this second *'Moderato cantabile'* melody appeared in popular song as *'I'm Always Chasing Rainbows'* sung by Frank Sinatra and many others. It was also recorded by Alice Cooper on his 1976 disc *'Alice Cooper Goes to Hell'*.

In the final 8 bars, the *Moderato cantabile* D flat melody is repeated in the bass line, but in C sharp minor, and in augmentation (slower). It is held on the dominant for 2 bars before a cadence of 2 triple pianissimo (*ppp*) spread chords to end.

### **Fryderyk Chopin - Berceuse in D flat major, op 57 (1844, published 1845)**

Originally entitled by Chopin as *'variations'*, this delightful piece featured regularly in his programmes as one of his most popular pieces. It was possibly inspired by Pauline Viardot's infant daughter Louise, whom Chopin adored<sup>7</sup>.

Listeners may be surprised to know that the piece is entirely in D flat throughout its 70 bars, as this is almost hypnotically disguised. This gives the feeling that *'one has the impression of listening not so much to an ingenious musical construction as to an inspired improvisation'*<sup>8</sup>. Originally it was entitled by Chopin as *'variantes'* (*'variations'*), and there is evidence in sketches<sup>7</sup> that there were more variations existing than he used.

The D flat pedal note of each bar continues throughout as an ostinato, followed by 4 quiet accompanying notes/chords. After 2 bars of gentle rocking from the left hand, the *dolce* theme (probably inspired by Bellini and others) of only 4 bars

starts. At the end of the 4th bar, a new line in the treble accompanies. Thereafter, the 16 variations follow *'each one enhancing the basic idea with amazing skill and delicacy'*<sup>7</sup>. This is a *'matchless lullaby'... 'a cradle song to end all cradle songs'* and *'a jewel of a work'*<sup>7</sup>.

Many other composers, of course, have written Berceuses (including Debussy who wrote one entitled 'Berceuse Héroïque'). But Liszt also wrote a Berceuse in 1854, publishing a second, longer, more complex, and more difficult to play version in 1865. His Berceuse was inspired and influenced directly by Chopin. *'The one [Chopin's written in 1844] serves as the unconscious model for the other: both are in D-flat major; both consist of an increasingly elaborate series of variations on a simple four-bar theme; and both pieces unroll across a tonic pedal-point'*<sup>9</sup>, ... and Liszt *'identifies so closely with Chopin's musical style that he temporarily incorporates some of its leading characteristics into his own works'*<sup>9</sup>. The Liszt versions, especially the second, are not often played, however.

### **Fryderyk Chopin - Ballade no 1 in G minor, op 23 (c1835, published 1836)**

Chopin wrote 4 Ballades between about 1835 and 1843, all published and played in his lifetime. Two were in major keys and two were in minor keys, the first and the last being in the minor keys. He may have started this one in 1831 in Vienna, and completed it in Paris, but it is thought he kept re-writing it, maybe an example of his *'bizarre composing habits'*<sup>10</sup>. Schumann told Chopin *'it was dearer to me than anything'*<sup>7</sup> to which Chopin replied that it was one of his then favourite pieces too.

Almost contemporary with the famous Scherzo no 1 in B minor, this first Ballade in G minor op 23 is very popular, and, in fact, the most popular one in Poland. It is dedicated, as other pieces were, to Baron de Stockhausen, the Hanoverian Ambassador to Paris who, along with his wife, received piano lessons from Chopin.

The Ballade is very loosely in sonata form (as not many Chopin works were - he used mostly ternary form A B A), which is not very recognisable as the piece progresses. There is available an extensive description and analysis of the complexity of how the 2 themes occur in alternation, identifying 10 different versions along with transitions and developments and their changes of key<sup>11</sup>.

The piece is characterised, however, by the 2 short, quiet singing right hand melodies ('*Moderato*' and '*Meno mosso*') – which make the entry of the themes easily recognisable, even when there are full fortissimo chords as the piece progresses. Much ornamentation occurs, the more so as the piece progresses, and much bravura writing, often in scales. These, however, do not obscure recognition of the 2 main themes when they are re-introduced.

The final 2 pages ('*Presto con fuoco*') and the many following fortissimo passages there lead to a number of aggressive rising and falling 'sforzando' (*fz*) scale passages, with 2 brief quiet chordal bars interspersed. Then, 2 bars of discordant converging octaves ('*grinding discords*'<sup>7</sup>), with appoggiaturas in each hand, lead to 2 bars of descending staccato octaves - and the final chords.

### **Astor Piazzolla (1921-92)**

The famous Argentinian composer has instantly recognisable music, with over 800 compositions recorded. He blended tango, classical music and jazz in bold and revolutionary ways, using chromaticism, dissonances, counterpoint, cross rhythms and accents, so creating the new '*tango nuevo*'.

At the age of 12 he was given a second-hand *bandoneon* by his father. Like a concertina, but with no keyboard, this uses only buttons and a squeeze box. Eventually, he learned tango on this from his father's records.

Piazzolla, too, had piano lessons from Bela Wilder, a neighbour, formerly a Rachmaninov student, and was then taught for 5 years by the composer Alberto Ginastera (recommended by Arthur Rubinstein), studying Bach, Chopin, Stravinsky and Bartok. Piazzolla also had orchestration lessons in 1953 from the conductor Herman Scherchen, and in 1954, with his composition '*Buenos Aires in Three Movements*' op 15 for symphony orchestra and bandoneon, he won an award to study in Paris with the noted classical teacher Nadia Boulanger, who encouraged him greatly to develop his tango compositions. He worked closely with many eminent jazz musicians, such as Duke Ellington, Gerry Mulligan, Glenn Miller, Paul Whiteman, Stan Getz, and Tommy Dorsey, and also with many classical ensembles and musicians, including Rostropovich and Yo Yo Ma, the cellists<sup>12</sup>.

Piazzolla said. *'I make elaborated music that has nothing to do with the origins of the tango- although it contains the perfume of the tango. Underneath this surface you can hear the tango'*<sup>13</sup>.

The two pieces played today are Elisa's own unique arrangements.

### **Astor Piazzolla - Oblivion (1982)**

This is considered one of his most popular tangos, though least innovative. It is a quiet, reflective piece. It was used in the 1984 film of *'Enrico IV'* (Henry IV - based on a play by Pirandello), directed by Marco Bellochio. *'Oblivion'* has been recorded in many different versions and for many combinations of instruments.

The piece is in ternary form here (ABA). There is much repetition and ornamentation of the main theme in the right hand accompanied by a simple and unobtrusive left hand throughout. It is a quiet and reflective piece and is described as *'haunting'*, *'atmospheric'*, and with *'whispered sadness'*<sup>14</sup>.

Features to listen for:

- 1) 4 bars of quiet introduction from the left hand (which continues accompanying) lead to the main Theme (I) in the right hand, starting, as often with a Piazzolla melody, with a sustained note. It extends sequentially downwards twice.
- 2) A 3rd repetition of the main theme ends with a drop from a right hand C to F sharp (without the expected A flat bass note) - to approach the C minor cadence a little unusually (D major 7th (inversion) – G major 7th - a sustained C minor chord with a 2nd added) and to close this section, with four quiet notes (derived from the accompaniment).
- 3) Theme II starts with a sustained chord of F minor with a 7th, moving to triplets and repeated sequentially downwards. It is repeated an octave higher with arpeggios, and the 4 quiet notes.
- 4) Theme I is then repeated 4 times with elaboration: a) extensive trills and a downward sequence, b) repeated higher and touching the top of the keyboard, with quickly-repeated notes, c) repeated with ornamentation, then with the

augmented 6th (French 6th, and the A flat bass note this time) modulating to the quiet C minor cadence, d) with tremolandos on C-G-C-G moving quietly upwards and almost stopping there ... then with the 4 sudden quiet notes in the right hand, and a final, sustained C minor chord – with a 2nd added.

### **Astor Piazzolla - Libertango (1974)**

Published and recorded first in Milan, this is '*a pure concert tango*'. It is seen as '*one of Piazzolla's pure concert tangos for its compact and dynamic composition*'<sup>15</sup>. The title is a combination of '*libertad*' (Spanish for '*liberty*') and '*tango*' - so showing Piazzolla's break from classical tango.

It is known in many arrangements and for varied ensembles, including Yo Yo Ma's 1997 album '*Soul of the Tango: The Music of Astor Piazzolla*', and Grace Jones's 1981 single '*I've Seen That Face Before (Libertango)*'.

Features to listen for:

1) even though in 4/4 time (common time), the insistent dotted rhythm of the bass in octaves (and at times in chords) falls irregularly in the bar. Accents are on the 1st (dotted) crotchet, and the 4th crotchet but also on *a quaver* between. That is, 3 accents in the bar. This rhythmic pattern occurs strongly in chords in the left hand, and also steadily descends by semitones and in octaves in the bass in the left hand.

2) An insistent 7 quaver motif (quaver rest and 7 quavers), frequently occurs in both hands throughout. It dominates the closing bars forcefully in the right hand, but with contrary forceful, accented patterns in the left hand, often over an A bass line. It also combines with the well-known Libertango melody.

3) The eventual, well-known Libertango melody of 3 bars (starting with a long held note) arrives and it is often accompanied by the 7 quaver motif and the forceful rhythm. It is repeated downwards in sequence, each time starting on the next lower tone (eg E, D, C, B). An inner part also moves down - but in semitones. The melody finally reaches a high point - and with embellishment.

4) The vigorous, insistent quaver motif features in the final bars with the right hand very urgently using this pattern - and at *forte* dynamic level, over low A's in the left hand.

There are cross rhythms in both hands (with accents on 2+5+7 in the right hand and 1+4+7 in the left hand). The left hand has continuous and forceful low A's coming as a long pedal in each bar, taking us to the *forte* end in A minor....And more - in Elisa's arrangement.

### **Debussy as a pianist...**

It is sometimes not known that Debussy was an outstanding pianist who could have performed professionally at a very high level. He had entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 10 and after one year, his teacher Marmontel<sup>17</sup> reported '*...true artistic temperament; he will become a distinguished musician; very promising future*', whilst later, an unknown newspaper critic was quoted as writing that he was '*a boy of twelve destined to become a first class virtuoso*'<sup>17</sup>.

At the Conservatoire, however, despite being an outstanding pianist, he steadily experimented and radically, too, and became more and more irritated by the requirements of his courses and by some of his more conservative tutors. His period of study was noted for:

*'rapidly earning a reputation for eccentricity; indeed, many looked upon him as a dangerous revolutionary. His independent attitude towards traditional teaching marked him out as a troublesome character, as did also, to an even greater degree, the fantastic pranks he indulged in in his improvisations...'*<sup>17</sup>.

After completing studying there, Debussy took piano appointments for a time and which involved accompanying, playing duets, performing chamber music, and teaching young children. These were on elegant holidays with Mme von Meck, the wealthy patroness of Tchaikovsky, with whom he travelled (including going to Russia), and also with a Mme Vasnier<sup>17</sup>.

Debussy eventually decided not to pursue performing as a career in favour of composing. It was said that he was, anyway, *temperamentally ill-suited and*

*intellectually opposed to virtuosity*<sup>18</sup>. Later in his life (from about 1898 onwards), he frequently mentioned his own shortcomings as a pianist to others, and in writing too.

It is as a composer, of course, that Debussy is regarded as one of the major figures in classical music, and particularly in piano music, where he revolutionised piano technique such that *'nothing so original and unique had been heard on the piano since Chopin*<sup>16</sup>. He was also regarded as the one composer *'who might be called Chopin's truest heir*<sup>19</sup>, having many stylistic features coming directly from Chopin (for example 7ths not resolving, and the successive use of 7ths, 9ths, 11ths and 13th chords etc).

Schmitz<sup>3</sup>, who knew and played for Debussy and has since written in detail about all aspects of Debussy's pianism, wrote that *'Debussy's pianistic style is exacting; its demands on the instrument and the performer are indeed extensive'*... and that *'each new work brings a new set of technical problems, a new form of virtuosity to conquer'*.

It is worth examining briefly some aspects of Debussy's own piano technique. His hand position at the piano, and the quality of his touch, were noted. Dumesnil<sup>20</sup>, for example, reported about Debussy's playing whilst they were together:

*'He played a number of passages and the tone he extracted from the Bluthner was the loveliest, most elusive and ethereal I have ever heard. How did he do it? I noticed that at times the position of his fingers, particularly in soft chordal passages, was almost flat. He seemed to caress the keys by rubbing them gently downward in oblique motion, instead of pushing them down in a straight line...'*

It should be added that Bluthner invented a system whereby there was an extra string suspended above each of the regular strings, but which were not hit by the hammers and only vibrated, giving more sonority.

And Rosen<sup>10</sup>, our contemporary, added that *'In the soft sonorities of Debussy the hand must often be placed very close to the keys, so that the note is struck with minimal movement: that allows the note just to 'speak' and diminishes the impact of the hammer'*. In fact, Vallas<sup>17</sup> who knew Debussy well commented that *'He made one forget that the piano has hammers - an effect which he used to request his interpreters to aim at'*.

The quality of sound Debussy produced at the piano was often commented on, and in this aspect, we can draw on many contemporaries for eye- (and ear-) witness accounts of him playing. It seems he tended to play quietly and with '*a mellowness of touch*<sup>17</sup>'... and '*his piano style vibrated with quadruple pianissimos*'<sup>21</sup>. This, despite there being quite robust passages in some of his works.

Marguerite Long (1874-1966)<sup>18</sup> who worked closely with Debussy and had specialised knowledge of him as a composer and pianist wrote that...

*'as he glided with such a penetrating softness over the keyboard, he kept close to it and obtained from it tones of an extraordinarily expressive power....he played almost always in half tints but with a full and intense sonority without any harshness in the attack, like Chopin'*.

In his pedalling, Schmitz<sup>3</sup> told us that on Debussy's piano there were, in fact, three pedals, and the 'forte' pedal also operated on three levels: '*fully depressed, half or shallow*'. But Debussy did not like to specify the pedalling needed in his pieces, as, he said, this would vary according to the room and the piano. With the effects Debussy obtained through his use of the pedals, it was thought he even exceeded Chopin<sup>21</sup>.

It may be a surprise to know that Debussy recorded some of his works on piano rolls, possibly around 1912, and these may be thought to be authoritative about his performance. But they are generally not regarded as totally reliable indicators of his performing abilities, although '*...the rolls confirm his reputed control of touch, imaginative pedalling and powers of evocation*'<sup>22</sup>. It seems that tempi on piano rolls, for example, can vary considerably through transfer from master rolls.

It seems, then, that we now know much about Debussy, as we have an abundance of evidence about him at the piano from many sources of his time.



## Chopin as a pianist...

Chopin was, of course, a virtuoso pianist and became one with only a little early tuition, being seen as an established public performer from an early age. In fact, his performing technique was thought to be completely developed by the age of 25 (1835). Mendelssohn<sup>18</sup> wrote to his sister Fanny that Chopin '*... may be called a most perfect virtuoso...'*

Chopin, however, greatly disliked public performances, preferring to play in front of small groups in salons, saying to Liszt '*I am not fitted to give concerts, the public frightens me...*'<sup>18</sup> and his reputation as a virtuoso performer was made on the basis of a small number of performances (probably less than 30 is one estimate<sup>21</sup>) throughout his life. In 18 years in Paris – it was also estimated<sup>23</sup> that there were only 4 concerts in which Chopin was principal performer in Paris, and that he may have played in public there on only about 15 occasions.

Much of Chopin's time was spent in teaching in Paris, with many wealthy female pupils. He has been described as '*a busy society teacher*'<sup>21</sup> and '*extraordinarily dedicated*'<sup>24</sup> (derived from the writings of his pupils). Where a pupil impressed him he would carry on the lesson until both pupil and teacher were exhausted. Perhaps surprisingly, in lessons he always had a metronome on the piano, and he was strict over time, accent and rhythm in playing. His *rubato* was said to be very precise and the left hand was to keep strictly in time.

What were the characteristics of Chopin's playing which so amazed people? '*Four of the most celebrated pianists of the day - Hiller, Mendelssohn, Moscheles and Halle - all stressed one point, that Chopin's playing was quite unlike anything that had gone before...*'<sup>24</sup>. Mendelssohn<sup>18</sup>, again, was particularly observant of Chopin and wrote to his mother that Chopin '*...produces new effects, like Paganini on his violin, and accomplishes wonderful passages, such as no one could formerly have thought practicable*'.

One characteristic of Chopin's playing were amazing pianissimo sounds (in part, perhaps due to his reduced strength through ill health). Mendelssohn<sup>18</sup> was very impressed with this aspect, writing that '*His control over the most subtle shades of dynamics probably has never been surpassed*'.

Another characteristic was a superb singing tone (legato) of the right hand, probably derived from Chopin's love of Italian *bel canto* opera melody, and it has been remarked that *'He had mastered the art of legato playing to such an extent that he could make the piano sing as vividly as any vocalist'*<sup>24</sup>.

These two features (pianissimo and legato) are frequently commented on today. Again, Mendelssohn<sup>18</sup> was fulsome in praise remarking about *'thousands and thousands of nuances of an exceptional genius'*.

It was said that each time Chopin played, however, his interpretation was different<sup>21</sup>, and that he always gave the impression of improvising when playing. It seems, too, that there is little or no evidence of him composing away from the piano.

But how were these features produced by Chopin? Some observations of Chopin were recorded by Hipkins<sup>21</sup>, a contemporary (and Chopin's Broadwood piano tuner), and a fine pianist himself. Chopin, he observed, had a simple, natural position for his arms and kept his elbows close in to his sides, with the fingers, and not the arms, giving weight onto the keyboard.

Chopin had novel ideas for using his fingers. Changing fingers on the keys (like an organist), sliding fingers from key to key, including from black to white keys, and using the thumb on the black keys (not usually thought permissible), were all used. Passing his thumb below his little finger was also an idea of Chopin's, not usually used before. These were radical changes at the time<sup>21</sup>.

Though not very big, Chopin's hands were said to be very flexible ('supple' was mentioned) and slim, and Stephen Heller<sup>18</sup>, an eminent contemporary, wrote that they could spread so that they *'seemed to cover a third of the keyboard'*. Some études, of course, cover very large spreads for the hands (eg op 10, no 9).

What was Chopin's pedalling like in his playing and in his compositions? Hipkins<sup>21</sup>, again, stated that Chopin used much pedal, especially in left hand arpeggio passages *'which swelled or diminished like waves in an ocean of sound'*, and Marmontel<sup>7</sup>, of the Paris Conservatoire, wrote that *'No pianist before him had employed the pedals alternately or simultaneously with so much tact and skill... whilst making constant use of the pedal, obtained ravishing harmonies, melodic whispers that charmed and astonished'*. He also added that Chopin used both

pedals simultaneously, despite there being no marking in the scores to this effect. And at times, Chopin indicates that the sustaining pedal needs to be held down for a specified number of bars<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps this is a useful perspective on which to end...

*'In his day he was a revolutionary. To many his music was exotic, inexplicable, perhaps insane. Critics like Rellstab in Germany, Chorley and Davidson in England, dismissed much of Chopin's music as eccentricities full of earsplitting dissonance', and 'Liszt, himself, romantic of romantics, referred to Chopin's "bold dissonances and strange harmonies"' <sup>21</sup>.*

This all seems very remote from us today.

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## ***Biography***

**Elisa Tomellini** belongs to '*...some of brightest talents among today's exceptional generation of young pianists...*' (The Guardian: UK 26.10.2016) and is a distinguished pianist from Genoa. Playing the piano from five years old, Elisa continued studying with Ilonka Deckers-Kuszler, herself a student of Istaván Thomán – a favourite student of Liszt. Study at 16 in the Music Academy 'Incontri Col Maestro' in Imola followed, and master-classes with famous pianists, such as Maurizio Pollini and Sviatoslav Richter. In 1997, she gained a Diploma with the highest scores at the Conservatoire 'G. Verdi' of Milan.

In Italy, Elisa plays regularly at the Quirinale Palace Live Concerts (RAI) in Rome and elsewhere, and broadcasts on Italian and Swiss radio. She has toured in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, the UK, and the USA. Elisa took a sabbatical from music for a time and lived in the Alps, where she skied, trekked and climbed mountains. Her concert return had debuts at the Kennedy Centre in Washington and the Gewandhaus in Leipzig. To link her sabbatical with being a pianist, Elisa performed the world's highest piano concerto on Monte Rosa (14,700 feet) in the Alps in 2017. Film rights are given to the Sanonani Association for a children's foster home in Kathmandu. Details of this film can be seen on her website:

<<https://www.elisatomellini.com/en/monte-rosa-dream>>

A 2018 album (*Dynamic*) features Elisa as the 1st woman in the world playing the *Transcendental Studies* of Liszt from Paganini in the 1838 original 1st version. This had two sets of 5 stars in Roger Nichols' review in BBC Music Magazine of February, 2019 (p98): "*... It is a rare delight these days to hear a pianist who dares to play pianissimo... There is charm here in abundance, together with staggering virtuosity.....Finally, not the least of Tomellini's abilities is her grasp of form....here everything unfolds naturally and meaningfully. And the piano sound is superb...."*

In 2018, Elisa founded, and is President of, the Association '*Genova Musica*', of which she and Luca Franzetti are Artistic Directors. Currently, Elisa has an alternative project with piano and electric cello ('*Eklectic Duo*'), with a large repertoire encompassing classical, pop, soundtracks and electronic music.

## ***Future Concerts***

### **Ensemble Performance: Choral Project**

**Friday 9 December | 1:05pm**

Following a semester of intense preparation, two vocal ensembles, one SATB and one all-female, will showcase their vocal and ensemble skills through a wide range of music spanning several centuries.

### **Ensemble Performance: Band Project**

**Friday 9 December | 7:00pm**

Band Project returns to under the mentorship of Hayden Minett. Taking place in Clothworkers Bar, the programme will feature short sets by School of Music bands working in a variety of styles and genres. Each band will demonstrate their performing and creative abilities through a selection of instrument and vocal covers, arrangements and original compositions.

### **concerts+ COMPOSERS: Kathryn Williams & Ed Cooper**

**Wednesday 4 December | 5:30pm**

Flautist Kathryn Williams and guitarist Ed Cooper present their new co-composed work commissioned by Cyborg Soloists, a UKRI-funded Future Leaders Fellowship project led by Dr Zubin Kanga. The piece uses Soundbrenner wearable metronomes alongside stethoscope microphones, creating dialogues with the performers' amplified heartbeats, ethereal guitar drones, and breathy flute melodies.

### **Ink Quartet**

**Friday 16 December | 1:05pm**

Formed in 2021, The Ink String Quartet is based in Manchester and offers chamber music performances and recordings. In this concert, they will present *Schubert in the Shadows*: Franz Schubert – String Quartet in D minor, D801, 'Death and the Maiden', and Quartettsatz in C minor, D703.





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Adrien Jurkovic (violin)  
Thomas Descamps (violin)  
Raphaël Pagnon (viola)  
Simon Iachemet (cello)

Luigi Boccherini – String Quartet in G minor, op 32, no 5  
Béla Bartók – String Quartet no 6  
Johannes Brahms – String Quartet in C minor, op 51, no 1

**TICKETS: £15 (GENERAL) | FREE (STUDENTS) AVAILABLE AT [CONCERTS.LEEDS.AC.UK](https://concerts.leeds.ac.uk)**

# QUATUOR AGATE



**SUNDAY 29 JANUARY | 3:00PM**

**CLOTHWORKERS CENTENARY CONCERT HALL, LEEDS**

The concert has been supported by Friends of University  
Art and Music (FUAM) in memory of Justin Grossman