



Debussy

***Preludes***  
***Book One***

*Ronald Farren-Price*

**move**

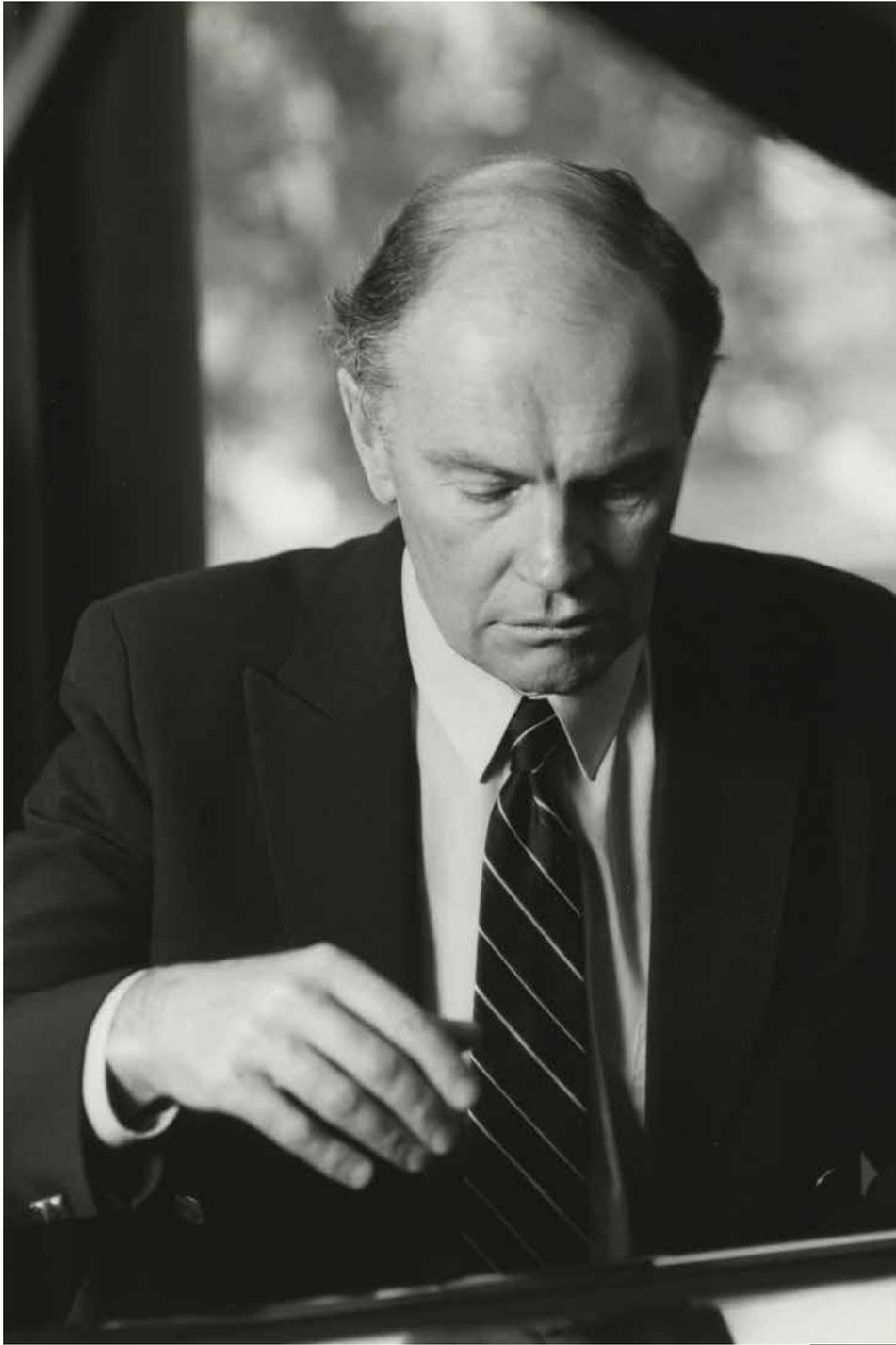
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

## *Preludes Book One*

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*Veils or Sails*
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- 4 **“Lessons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir” Baudelaire**  
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*Minstrels*

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*Wine door*



Ronald Farren-Price is one of Australia's most celebrated pianists. Resident in Melbourne, where he is Reader in Music at the University of Melbourne, he makes annual forays to the Northern Hemisphere and often as many as three international concert tours to different parts of the globe in the one year.

During his career he has performed in twenty-four countries in the world's major music cities; including Queen Elizabeth Hall London, Carnegie Recital Hall New York, the National Gallery Washington, Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow, Philharmonic Hall Leningrad (which he considers the most beautiful in the world), Die Doelin (Rotterdam, Brahms-Saal Vienna and the Sydney Opera House.

Less formally he has performed concerts on many occasions as soloist with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra to audiences of up to 20,000 at the unusual open air venue, The Sidney Myer Music Bowl in the heart of Melbourne's gardens.

Conductors with whom he has appeared as soloist include Antal Dorati, Ferdinand Leitner, Eugene Goossens, Charles Groves, Hiroyuki Iwaki, Willem Van Otterloo, John Hopkins, Moshe Atzmon, Harry Blech, Hubert Soudant and Fuat Mansurov.

Mr Farren-Price had the honour of being the first Australian pianist invited to play in the USSR, to which he has returned for six successive and acclaimed concert tours of that country.

His recordings include: • Beethoven — Recital • Haydn — 250th Birthday Celebration • Stravinsky — Rite of Spring/Ravel — Mother Goose Suite (original four hands versions with Rosslyn Farren-Price)

• Schumann — Fantaisie in C, op. 17/Beethoven/Liszt — An die ferne geliebte (To the distant beloved)

Music is a sum of scattered forces.

You make an abstract ballad of them!

I prefer the simple notes of an Egyptian shepherd's pipe; for he collaborates with the landscape and hears harmonies unknown to your treatises. Musicians listen only to the music written by cunning hands, never to that which is in Nature's script. To see the sun rise is more profitable than to hear the Pastoral Symphony.

Debussy, *Monsieur Croche*, *Anti-Dilettante*

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Together with the twelve Etudes of 1915, the two books of Préludes by Debussy (published in 1910 and 1913 respectively) belong among the great foundational masterpieces of early 20th century piano music. Dating from a period in the composer's development notable not only for various conducting engagements but also for the incidental music to d'Annunzio's *Le Martyre de Saint Sebastien* and the *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, they inhabit a miraculous new world no longer Romantic in aspiration or stable in destiny. Reflecting the pagan and the elemental in the magical alchemy of their profiles, they explore parameters of light and mystery learnt from Monet and Turner; they seek the mysticism, the symbolism, "the crazy dream-world" of Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Poe; they embrace dimensions of experience and expression at once orientally meditative and occidentally antique. To analyse them in specific terms is to destroy their fragility of presentation and development. To exaggerate their imagery is to give them false perspective. Not without reason did Debussy put the titles of each at the *end*. Ultimately he wanted neither artist nor audience to be responsorially pre-conditioned by the innuendos or connotations of prefatory labelling. As he put it in 1913: "Let us maintain that the beauty of a work of art must always remain mysterious; that is to say, it is impossible to explain exactly how it is created. Let us at all costs preserve this magic peculiar to music, for of all the arts it is the most susceptible to magic . . . In the name of all the gods, let us not attempt to destroy or explain it."

**No. 1 *Danseuses de Delphes*** The inspiration for this seems to have come from a reproduction of a sculptured Grecian fragment in the Louvre, which showed three dancers performing rites at the Temple of Apollo in the ancient city of Delphi at the foot of Mount Parnassus.

**No. 2 *Voiles*** A Prelude built almost exclusively on the whole-tone scale, and equally suggestive of either "sails" or "veils" — in some extraordinary way an intermingling of the picturesque and the sensual.

**No. 3 *Le vent dans la plaine*** A toccata-like nature poem: "The untrammelled expanse of the plain, the growing momentum of the dry wind, zephyr-like at first, it whirls and grows, suddenly pauses in its course, there is a deceitful calm, but its strands multiply, rally in squalls, a wicked gust lashes at the landscape, is reiterated, and the rumble spends itself, lost in a last murmured breath" (Robert Schmitz). It is interesting to note that this Prélude is in some ways the exact reverse of *Voiles*: there the whole-tone outer sections of flanked a pentatonic interlude; here pentatony surrounds a central whole-tone paragraph.

**No. 4 "*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*"** The title was taken from Baudelaire's "Harmonie du Soir", originally published in his collection *Fleurs du Mal*. The text attracted Debussy (he set it as a song around 1888), and its opening verse (given here in the translation by J. McKinnon Wood) sums up something of the atmosphere and melos that was to be crystallised in this sensuously exquisite masterpiece of nostalgia, regret, mystique and memories:

Each flower vapourises, as does a censer;  
Sounds and perfumes stir in the evening air;  
A melancholy waltz, a dizzy languor.

The manuscript is dated 1 January 1910.

**No. 5 *Les collines d'Anacapri*** A beautifully judged montage of effects which blend to suggest the atmosphere of the hills behind Anacapri, surrounded by the Bay of Naples. Marguerite Long suggested by the Bay of Naples. Marguerite Long suggested that in this piece "light and movement are in opposition to each other": subtly realised bell sounds, echoes of tarantella rhythms, a popular song (almost like a Neapolitan *gamin*, intended by Debussy to be intense and bewitching, "the timbre of an invisible lover") all contribute to the total picture.

**No. 6 *Des pas sur la neige*** Frank Dawes has observed that in contrast with the technicolour world of *Les collines d'Anacapri*, this desolate Prelude is "a study in monochrome". It is indeed bleak. Debussy felt that the piece, with its symbolic associations, "should have the aural value of a melancholy, snowbound landscape", "as a tender and sad regret". (Long)

**No. 7 *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest*** A violent study of the west wind blowing in from the Atlantic, "a savage epic poem" dramatising "terrific squalls of a hurricane, with an ocean unleashed". (Long)

**No. 8 *La fille aux cheveux de lin*** One of the most famous of Debussy's pieces, simple in its fragile beauty and its handling of diatonic vocabulary. Although widely believed to have been inspired by a pre-Raphaelite poem of the same name by Leconte de Lisle (published in the collection *Poèmes Antiques: Chansons Ecossaises*) and to be a symbolic impression of an unidentified Scottish or Nordic beauty, it has been suggested more recently (by Ruth Nye) that its enigmatic nuances might in fact enshrine a portrait of Mélisande, of a strange figure suspended in time: "no-one knew where she came from and what she wanted — quite mysterious". Bearing in mind the appearance of Mary Garden when she created the role of Debussy's Mélisande at the Opéra-Comique in April 1902, this suggestion may not be so wide off the mark.

**No. 9 *La sérénade interrompue*** Among the finest of Debussy's Spanish evocations, this is full of Moorish overtones, snatches of *cante jondo*, guitar patterns — sounds that like shadows materialise from nowhere and vanish just as suddenly. In a commemorative essay dated 8 November 1920, Falla, supreme exponent of the authentic Spanish style, said that *La sérénade interrompue* "appears to be inspired by a type of scene frequently met with in romantic poetry: two serenaders vie with each other for the favours of a damsel who, hidden behind the flowers of her latticed window, follows every incident of their gallant contest".

**No. 10 *La cathédrale engloutie*** Debussy performed this Prélude on 25 May 1910 at the Société Nationale, and it has from the beginning been a favourite with both pianists and audiences. In it Debussy returned to the theme and associations of one of his favourite subjects, the sea, and projected its paganistic rhythm as a backcloth against which an ancient legend of Brittany is unfolded. This tells how the Cathedral of Ys was engulfed by the ocean "because of the impiety of the inhabitants". But from time to time at sunrise it can be seen to rise above the water, its form coalescing through the mist, its bells ringing in resplendent confusion — only to submerge again beneath the waves, to be hidden from mortal eyes. The Prélude is one of the few instances in Debussy's work of genuine programme music, and he achieves some spectacular effects from the opening bell sounds, the use of mediaeval *organum* (open fifths in parallel motion), and the imagery of the ocean and its tidal to and fro, to the vast "cathedral" theme itself. The world of Monet, particularly his impressions of the west front of Rouen Cathedral, finds a striking evocation in Debussy's tonal canvas: illusionary scenes float by like reflections, dreams, thoughts, symbols of things left unsaid.

**No. 11 *La danse de Puck*** This was introduced by Debussy at the same concert as the preceding Prélude. It was his tribute to Shakespeare's "joyous nomad of the night", complete with skittish moods and elfin horn calls.

**No. 12 *Minstrels*** In the evocative words of Schmitz: "This is the American scene and one of its rich Negro heritages, born around 1828 in the plantations, where households put on minstrel shows with Bones, Sambo and Rastus; cake-walks, cornet solos, scratchy banjos and drums, a sentimental song, a few corny jokes . . . and feline dances . . . One minute fascinated by the precision of dance-steps, then by the supple grace of the tumbling figures, the spectator would be rocked by laughter at a cocky gesture of the figures in white tailcoats and top hats, and caught off guard by a sudden glimpse of deep pathos and beauty." Marguerite Long was of the opinion that these scenes were transmuted by Debussy into a sound panorama comparable in imagery with the kind of visualism of a Toulouse-Lautrec or a Jean de Tinan.

*Ates Orga*

*Recorded at Melba Hall, University of Melbourne by Martin Wright using Sony digital equipment. The Steinway concert grand piano is numbered 366930.*

*The cover is **Woman with a Parasol — Madame Monet and her son** by Claude Monet; National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, USA; collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon 1983. Oil on canvas 1875.*

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## **FROM BOOK TWO**

**No. 1 *Brouillards (Mists)***: A brilliant musical description of a seemingly simple weather condition — quietly teeming, delicate. Harmonically, the work is quite advanced, with a strong suggestion of polytonality. Perhaps the most impressionistic of the Preludes. An even flow of notes combine with the single-note melodies that emerge from within a texture adding 'orchestral' color to the different layers of sound.

**No. 2 *Feuilles mortes (Dead Leaves)***: Debussy tell us the key to this prelude saying, "from the fall of the golden leaves that invest the splendid obsequies of the trees". One can imagine an autumnal scene and the changing colors of the leaves as Debussy explores a rich and changing harmonic palate, the tonal center always shifting leaving the listener in a perpetual state of suspense.

**No. 3 *La Puerta del Vino (The Gateway of the Alhambra Palace)***: One of the most effective Préludes of the set, this Spanish-inflected work has the rhythm of a habanera throughout. A habanera which Debussy marks to be played "with abrupt contrasts of extreme violence and passionate sweetness. Inspired after receiving a postcard from Manuel de Falla, Debussy began the second musical depiction of Spanish life in his preludes, the first being *La sérénade interrompue*. The gateway in question is one of many in the Alhambra Palace in Granada, built around 1231-1273 which, after the invasion by Arabic tribes, would be occupied by Moorish princes.

**Recorded at Melba Hall, University of Melbourne, Steinway 366930. Cover is *Woman with a Parasol — Madame Monet and her son* by Claude Monet, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, USA: collection of Mr and Mrs Paul Mellon 1983: oil on canvas 1875 — © 1986 and © 2016 Move Records**

**Ronald Farren-Price**, considered one of Australia's leading concert pianists, lives and works in Melbourne, where he is Reader in Music at the Faculty of Music at the University of Melbourne. His study overseas was under the guidance of the renowned Claudio Arrau; his association developed into a deep friendship and artistic liason.

Each year Mr Farren-Price leaves the southern hemisphere travelling to the farthest North - and often as many as three international concert tours to different parts of the globe in the one year. Mr Farren-Price has given performances in Queen Elizabeth Hall London, Carnegie Hall New York, the National Gallery Washington, Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow (He had the honour of being the first Australian pianist invited to play in the USSR, to which he has returned for successive and acclaimed concert tours of that country), Philharmonic Hall, St Petersburg (which he considers the most beautiful in the world), Die Doelin, Rotterdam, Brahms-Saal Vienna and the Sydney Opera House.

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