Debussy

Feux d'artifice
La Cathedrale engloutie
Les Collines d'Anacapri
Les Sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir
La Terrasse des audiences du clair de lune

"Children's Corner" Suite
Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum
Jimbo's Lullaby
Serenade for the Doll
Snow is Dancing
The Little Shepherd
Golliwog's Cake-walk

Clair de lune

Ivan Moravec, piano
I came to music freely when I was young. There was no tradition of playing music in my home. I brought in the first instrument, a soprano saxophone, and the first record player. I studied music from love, not with any idea of making it a profession or to acquire "culture." Being so young, it filled many needs. When a friend died, I played a Sidney Bechet blues over and over again; and when grief grew acute, I turned to Beethoven for reminders of continuity.

I fantasized often to music, for there was time then to stop the world, time I do not often enough make for myself now. When I was quite young, as was frequent among those in my generation for whom music was an essential way of feeling, the fantasies were turbulent and venturesome (Wagner) or soothingly, deliciously sentimental (Tchaikovsky). As I grew older, I found another entirely unique musical principality. It was a place, as Erwin Stein once put it, of "half-shades and twilights." But such subtleties of shade and such extraordinarily evocative varieties of twilight that entering into his music was like—in the title of a book I remember from childhood—opening a door to a secret garden.

I remember wondering at the term "impressionism" applied to this music, the music of Debussy. The term did not seem to me to convey the precision, the accuracy of the scenes, sounds and sometimes almost even smells within the mysterious settings. And then, later, I read a letter he had written: "What I am trying to do is something 'different'—an effect of reality, but what some fools call impressionism, a term that is utterly misapplied especially by the critics who don't hesitate to apply it to Tchaikovsky, the greatest creator of mysterious half-shades and twilights."

It can be said of Debussy what was written of Marianne Moore—that he was a "literalist of the imagination." As for his piano music, which has seemed to me both more precise and more mysterious than his work in any other area, he urged that his interpreters imagine the piano as being without hammers. If that were done and if the piano were to be transformed into an instrument that could evoke real toads in imaginary gardens, what was needed was an exceptional knowledge of the piano. Required, Edward Lockspeiser pointed out in his book, Debussy, was "the closest analysis of touch and vibration, of keyboard harmony and figuration, of the immeasurable contrasts in tone and register—indeed, an analysis of all the technical resources of an instrument whose very limitations and defects were to be turned by Debussy into newly discovered virtues."

The first pianist I remember effecting that transformation with mysterious ease was George Copeland. Later, there was Walter Gieseking. And more recently, there is the Czech pianist, Ivan Moravec, whose previous recordings for Connoisseur Society revealed his command of the inner imperatives of the music of Beethoven and Chopin.

The first side is from the two books of Preludes. Feux d'artifice mirrors fireworks at a 14th of July celebration. As Claudia Cassidy wrote of a Moravec performance in Chicago of this piece, "The fireworks were all color and caprice, spinning sparks through the mountain slopes."

Les Sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir is a line from Baudelaire's Harmonie du soir and is a particularly enveloping evocative varieties of twilight that entering into his music was like—in the title of a book I remember from childhood—opening a door to a secret garden. Le Gnome's Cake-Walk was a black doll, popular with children of Chopin's time. And the piece, a Frenchman's conception of an American minstrel show, is meant both humorously (hear the quote from the Prelude to Tristan und Isolde) and as music actually to be danced. The latter point is overlooked by pianists who race through it. It is not overlooked by Moravec. After the Children's Corner Suite, the recording ends in moonlight.

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Bd. 1. "Children's Corner" Suite
a. Gymnopedies of
Parnassus
b. Jojo's Lullaby
c. Serenade for the Doll
d. Snow in Dancing
e. The Little Shepherd
f. Golliego's Cake-walk
Bd. 2. Clair de lune
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