

**Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**, three piano pieces, arranged for wind quintet by David Jolley

*Voiles*, from *Préludes, premier livre* (1909)

*Pagodes*, from *Estampes* (1903)

*Poissons d'or*, from *Images, deuxième série pour piano* (1907)

Three of the works on today's program are arrangements of piano pieces of Claude Debussy. Throughout his life Debussy turned frequently to the piano for the exploration of some of his most novel and profound ideas, explorations that earned him a place as one of the greatest composers for the instrument for his far-reaching contributions to the development of new pianistic techniques and resources. The first piece on the program, *Voiles* (Sails), from the first book of *Préludes*, is the latest in its composition, dating from 1909. The *Préludes* were among Debussy's most successful works from this middle part of his career, and have frequently been compared to those of Chopin. True to their daring and even experimental quality, for the time, of many of the *Préludes*, *Voiles* is an unusual work in its nearly exclusive use of the whole tone scale as a tonal resource, imparting to the music a suspended, floating quality broken only by a brief, climactic, pentatonic passage alluding to the key of E flat minor before the music of the opening returns.

The *Expositions Universelles* that took place in Paris in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889 and 1900 were in effect world fairs, enormously important, influential events intended to introduce Parisian society to the arts and accoutrements of other cultures. The 1889 Exposition presented, among many other things, a novelty to European ears, the sound of a Javanese Gamelan. *Pagodes* (pagodas), the first movement of Debussy's 1903 set *Estampes* (meaning prints, or engravings) reflects the influences the composer drew from this brief encounter with Asian music, both in the use of hocketing (alternating) rhythms, and the extensive use of pentatonic scales. Like *Voiles*, the piece is cast in a ternary, or three-part, ABA form, the contrasting middle section featuring a lyrical melody set in the somewhat exotic Lydian mode. The music is tranquil and contemplative, with instructions to the performer to play "delicately and almost without nuance" throughout, setting a serene mood.

The third Debussy work on tonight's program is *Poissons d'or* (Goldfish), from the second book of *Images* for piano, composed in 1907 in apparent reference to a Japanese lacquer Debussy owned depicting a goldfish and its reflection. Pieces referring to watery themes were not new in Debussy's output at this time, previous essays including two great masterpieces, *Reflets dans l'eau* (Reflections in the Water, 1905, from book one of *Images* for the piano), and the orchestral tone poem *La Mer* (The Sea, 1903-05). In *Poissons d'or* one easily imagines watery imagery in pastel shades throughout, and the rapid flitting motions of a goldfish sparkling in sunlight in the piece's interior. *Poissons d'or* is also in ternary form: the animated opening gives way to a contrasting middle section marked *capricieux et souple* (capricious and fluid, or supple), and later on *expressif et sans rigueur* (expressive and not rigid or strict). The middle section is focused on developing the material posited at the outset, rather than on a presentation of new themes.

Program notes © copyright 2014 by Richard Festinger