



OLGA STEZHKO

1-3 Images, Book I (1901-05)

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| 1. | Reflets dans l'eau (Reflections in the water) | 05:21 |
| 2. | Hommage à Rameau (Homage to Rameau) | 07:19 |
| 3. | Mouvement (Movement) | 03:36 |

4-9 Children's Corner (1906-1908)

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|----|----------------------------|-------|
| 4. | Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum | 02:12 |
| 5. | Jimbo's Lullaby | 03:53 |
| 6. | Serenade for the Doll | 02:33 |
| 7. | The Snow is Dancing | 02:32 |
| 8. | The Little Shepherd | 02:59 |
| 9. | Golliwog's Cakewalk | 02:39 |

10-13 Suite bergamasque (1890, revised 1905)

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|-----|---------------------------|-------|
| 10. | Prélude | 04:47 |
| 11. | Menuet | 04:23 |
| 12. | Clair de lune (Moonlight) | 04:47 |
| 13. | Passepiéd | 03:57 |

Et la lune descend Claude Debussy – Piano Suites

14-16 Images, Book II (1907)

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|-----|---|-------|
| 14. | Cloches à travers les feuilles (Bells through leaves) | 04:59 |
| 15. | Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut (And the moon descends on the temple which has been) | 05:48 |
| 16. | Poissons d'or (Goldfish) | 04:16 |

17-22 Six épigraphes antiques (1914, transcribed for piano solo 1915)

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|-----|---|-------|
| 17. | Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été (for summoning Pan, god of the summer wind) | 02:37 |
| 18. | Pour un tombeau sans nom (for a tomb without a name) | 03:18 |
| 19. | Pour que la nuit soit propice (I hope I get lucky tonight) | 02:59 |
| 20. | Pour la danseuse aux crotales (for the dancing girl with cymbals) | 03:03 |
| 21. | Pour l'Égyptienne (for that Egyptian girl...) | 03:08 |
| 22. | Pour remercier la pluie du matin (thankful for the morning rain) | 02:15 |

Playing time:	83:17
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Et la lune descend

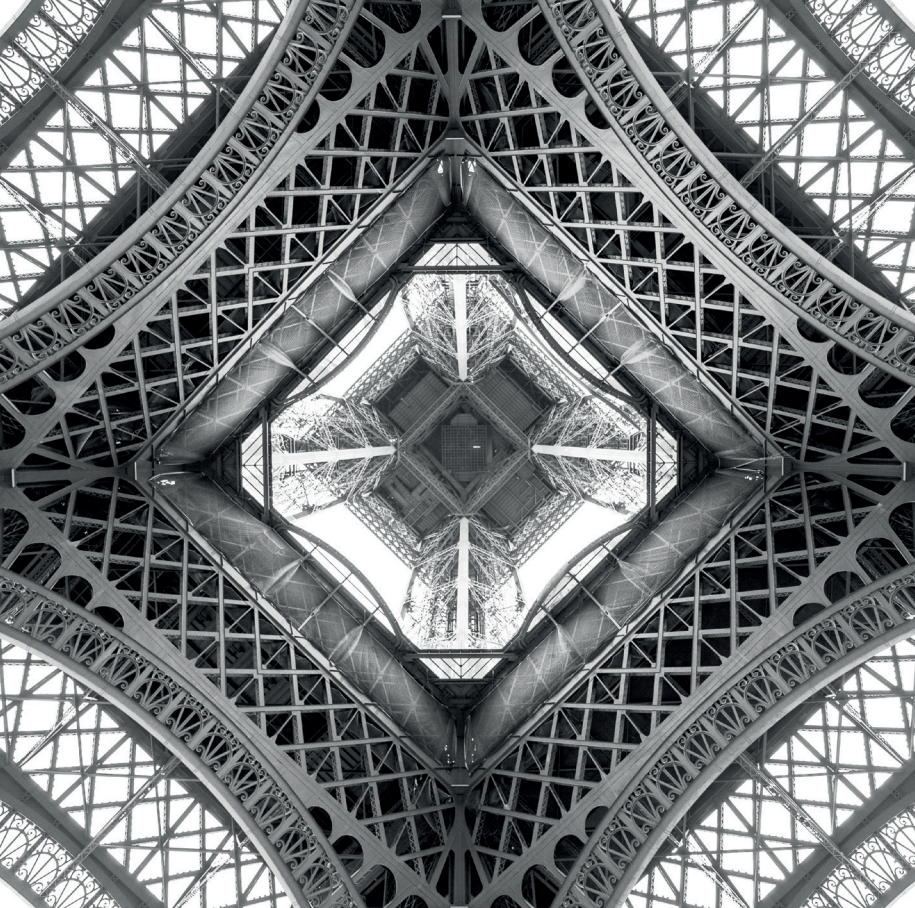
I see a nine-year old girl, sitting at a brown upright piano, experimenting with unresolved streams of quartal and seventh chords. It is a winter Sunday afternoon and the room is bathed in pale gold light. Supposed to be working on pieces for my looming piano exam, instead I am reading books by C. S. Lewis and Jules Verne that I hide behind the scores. As so often on Sundays, I mute any piano sound with the middle pedal, so that my parents in the nearby living room don't notice that I am not practicing properly. Perhaps I am, in fact, doing exactly what I should: rather than mastering passages, I am completely lost to imaginary worlds.

I hear blue jazz, hushed voices and the gentle tinkling of ice in crystal glasses. Two dancers perform an elaborate exotic routine for less than a handful of sophisticated viewers. On a table right next to the dance floor, a beautiful elegant couple sits. From

their appearance they might be lovers but their dialogue is as stiff as their drinks. They smile indifferently into the distance, their relationship appearing as alienated as the city outside the nightclub's walls. The couple is Jeanne Moreau and Marcello Mastroianni in Antonioni's *La Notte* and the city is Milan. It could equally be Paris of the 1900s, or any modern metropolis. The setting and props might change but the overarching sentiment does not. A big city with all its bright lights, bustling avenues and bewitching skyline will always appeal to aspiring newcomers. Yet, they are unaware of what the seasoned city dwellers know all too well: behind that seductive decadence and promise of fulfilled ambitions lurks the shadow of urban loneliness.

I feel the quiet beauty of the Gulf of Trieste on the Adriatic coast where the sky and the sea merge in a pastel-coloured vastness. Tender is





the evening and the atmosphere is so serene it almost aches. At dusk it is a place of nowhere and the place of all dreams. It is the place I return to every spring to shed the husks of daily routines and unnecessary conversations. The thread of the remote blue horizon holds teenage dreams intact. And the beautiful, complex, troubled people who walk alongside me are just as young and surprising as if no years had passed since we first discovered our innermost selves together.

The city and the sea, the urban geometry and the unmoored sky, the magic of a child's inner world and the adventures of adulthood - this is what I see, hear and feel in the coded kaleidoscopic harmonies, rhythms and structures of Debussy's music.

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The music of Debussy manages to be both relevant to our contemporary experience and instinctively timeless. Yes, Debussy is the composer of the moon, the bells and the sea and beautiful escapism. At the same

time, he is a *realist*, firmly rooted in the fast-paced urban environment of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, the melting pot of ideas and the avant-garde. Without completely breaking away from its bourgeois past and present, the city of his time looked firmly into the globalised future, absorbing and incorporating the new and the exotic. One of the most fascinating catalysts of that cultural cross-pollination was the Exposition Universelle of 1900. From the largest telescope of the time to diesel engines and the new medium of talking films, the Exposition displayed an incredible showcase of the latest technological and artistic achievements, all meant to propel the world into the next century.

Debussy, it is believed, first heard traditional gamelan music from Java during the previous International Exhibition of 1889, an encounter that inspired his groundbreaking explorations in rhythm, colour and tonality which ultimately affected almost every other major composer of the 20th century. Nowadays it is easy to forget how revolutionary Debussy

was as his music is so ubiquitous and accessible to anyone's ear, unlike the works of his other extraordinary contemporaries Schoenberg and Stravinsky. In this recording I tried to look beyond the multifaceted beauty of Debussy's piano pieces and bring out the edge and ambiguity of gamelan's tone and the feeling of urban grittiness that constantly pushes one forward.

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The advent of a bright new world introduced a new set of problems at the turn of the 20th century. Scientific advances gave us ever-increasing prosperity and a sense of unprecedented control and power over nature. For the first time we were not mere humans but true semi-gods (and quite often semi-devils too). However, progress came at a price. Our growing scientific knowledge highlighted the uncomfortable realisation that all human thoughts and behaviours could potentially be attributed to a series of chemical and biological processes. As religious worldviews gave way to positivism - a philosophical system that rejected any type of theism and

metaphysics and recognized only what can be scientifically or mathematically proven - a spiritual vacuum emerged. Politically, long-established values and traditional orders gave way to new ideologies and social experiments, and while the rise of capitalism undoubtedly promoted the global dialogue between various cultures, it also began to turn them into a commodity.

This new, godless universe provided a fertile ground for the emergence of symbolism - the artistic and poetic movement of the late nineteenth century to which Debussy was most closely aligned as a composer. Symbolists took on the role of the prophets who would address our undiminished yearning for the divine. Their works were both an expression of the societal anxieties and a protest against an increasingly materialistic outlook, which the movement aimed to transcend. Symbolism proclaimed art to be the bearer of absolute truth that cannot be described and comprehended through the crude directness of realism. Symbols and



allusions were better suited for expressing a deeper meaning that is concealed in the reality of individual emotional experiences.

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My relationship with Debussy's music began when I studied *Children's Corner* at the age of eight or nine. I learnt the whole cycle as a birthday present to my teacher and performed a few pieces in concerts every now and then. At the time, my imagination was taken over by the ballets and children's music of Prokofiev, whom I found somewhat more direct and accessible. When I was nine, I even composed a ballet called *Cinderella* as a reaction to Prokofiev's work of the same name. After *Children's Corner* I did not play Debussy for more than a decade until I accidentally stumbled upon the first book of *Images*. The set was lying at the bottom of a pile of scores I brought with me when I moved to London from Duino, that magical place in the Gulf of Trieste on the Adriatic coast. And so my obsession began.

Debussy once said: 'I wish to sing

of my interior visions with the naïve candour of a child.' It is estimated that 80% of children's learning occurs through visual processing of information. In early childhood, we devour the world with our eyes. Then at one point, when our initial appetite for learning is partially sated (for me it was the period between 9-15 years old), something wonderful occurs. Our gaze turns inwards and we begin to experience that wonderful fusion of our inner selves with the outside world that will remain unique to our adolescence.

The books we read, the albums we listen to, the first parties and freshly acquired bad habits, sensual and sexual awakenings and young idealism all inform and enrich the shaping of our identity. We are our own works of art in progress. We look into the sky and daydream for hours because our imagination is a force of nature that can actually change reality. At this tender age, we think a lot about death and the meaning of eternity. We want to leave our marks on the world, akin to the creators of the prehistoric



hand stencils in the caves of Spain and Indonesia. Through our individual formative experiences, we relate to people across the continuum of human history.

Then, year-by-year, as we become older, we start to lose the intensity of that inner experience. We dim the lights of our imagination and turn our gaze back to the outside. We become more *visual* again. That brings me to the place where, in my opinion, the misunderstanding of Debussy's poetically evocative titles occurs. These titles are not mere pictorial suggestions but rather psychological triggers into the limitless inner journeys of our childhood. In other words, it is not about *what* we see but how we *feel* when we see something. How is it that we forget our imaginary friends, magical egocentrism and the ability to fantasize wildly - the things that once seemed to possess everlasting powers?

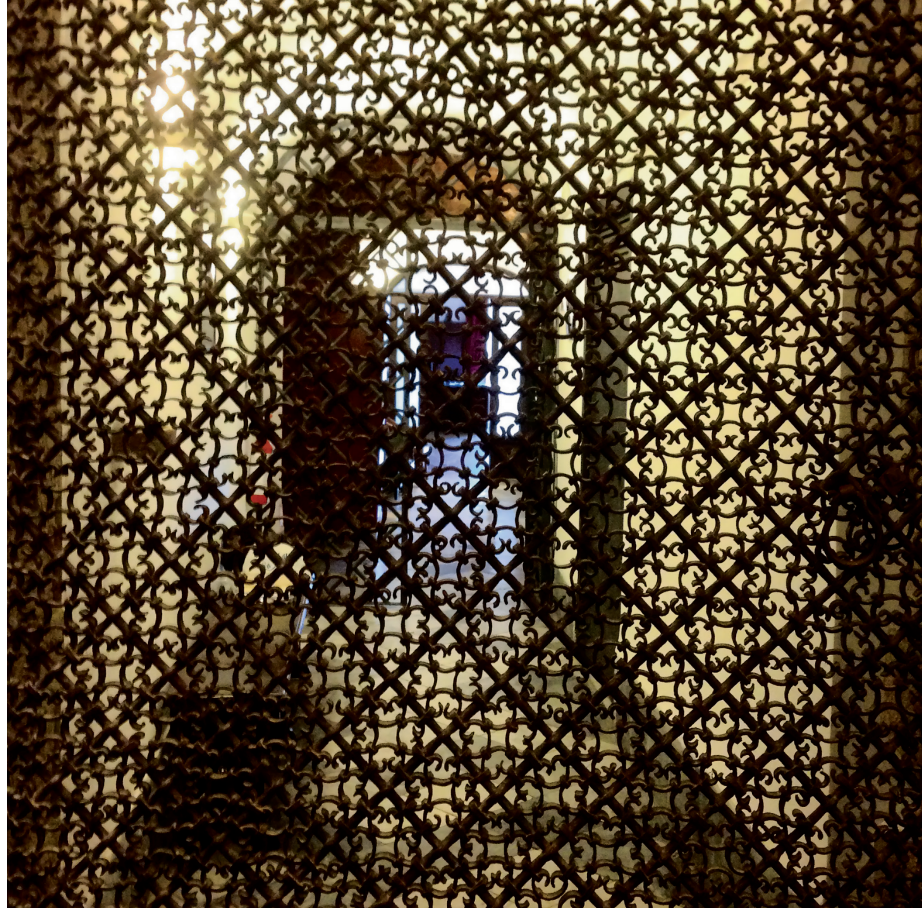
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The latest addition to my Debussy repertoire were *Six épigraphes*

antiques, also known as the *Songs of Bilitis*, which I discovered after I had already finished the recording of this album in Palermo - the city, which Debussy would undoubtedly appreciate for its unique history, multiculturalism and adventurous spirit. I instantly fell in love with *Six épigraphes antiques* when I first heard this rarely performed suite online. I thought it would be a fitting and beautiful conclusion to the album and eventually recorded the piece some time later in London - another global melting pot that I now call home.

Who was Bilitis?

'One must sing a pastoral song to invoke Pan, God of the summer wind' - she wrote around 2,500 years ago. Many centuries later, a collection of her poems was rediscovered in Paris and published in 1894. It took the bohemian circles of the city by storm. The exquisite beauty, vivid imagery and uninhibited sensuality of Bilitis' poetry kindled the imagination of many contemporary artists. Debussy was no exception and responded with





Six épigraphes antiques in various instrumental arrangements. Each piece was based on one of Bilitis' poems, starting with *For summoning Pan, god of the summer wind*.

All seemed well in this story so far apart from one little detail: Bilitis never existed. The collection was a brilliant hoax crafted by a man called Pierre Louÿs, an extravagant contemporary and friend of Debussy, who posed as the supposed translator of these forged Greek works. Needless to say, the book continued to enjoy enduring success even after being exposed as a literary fraud.

This episode colourfully illustrates yet again the spirit of artistic freedom, experimentation and mischief of an epoch that not only enriched us with some of the greatest masterpieces in art, music and literature but also unleashed tremendous social and technological forces, acting both as a blessing and a curse, as history would ultimately reveal.

On the surface, it is very easy to stop

at the pentatonic unisons, delicate textures and references to ancient Greece in the *Songs of Bilitis*. To me, however, this cycle opened the door to something more precious, visceral and much needed at that particular moment in my life: the poetry of Baudelaire. I loved Pasternak and Neruda for years but Baudelaire was something else - it stopped me in my tracks, took my breath away and illuminated my inner world once more with the amazing power of the first transformative books of my early teenage years.

Elevation

Above the valleys and the lakes: beyond
The woods, seas, clouds and mountain-ranges: far
Above the sun, the aethers silver-swanned
With nebulae, and the remotest star,

My spirit! with agility you move
Like a strong swimmer with the seas to fight,
Through the blue vastness furrowing your groove
With an ineffable and male delight.

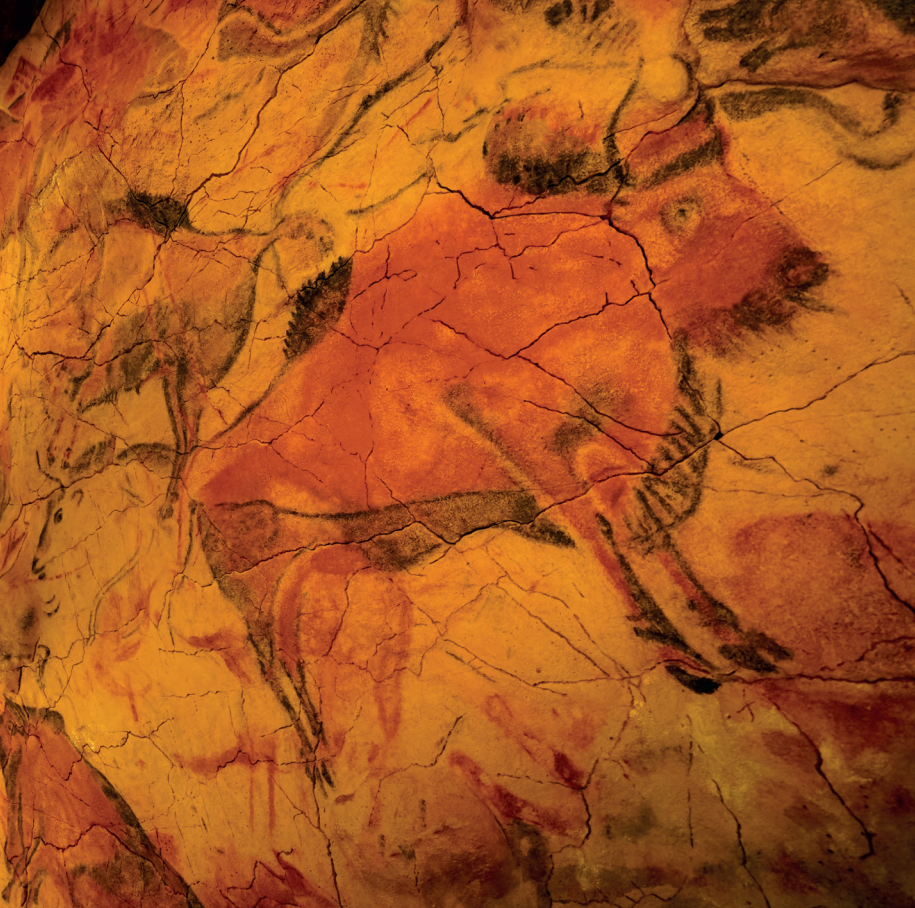
Far from these foetid marshes, be made pure
In the pure air of the superior sky,
And drink, like some most exquisite liqueur,
The fire that fills the lucid realms on high.

Beyond where cares and boredom hold dominion,
Which charge our fogged existence with their spleen,
Happy is he who with a stalwart pinion
Can seek those fields so shining and serene:

Whose thoughts, like larks, rise on the freshening breeze,
Who fans the morning with his tameless wings,
Skims over life, and understands with ease
The speech of flowers and other voiceless things.

- Charles Baudelaire, 1857, from *The Flowers of Evil*, translation: Roy Campbell





Each time I play the *Songs of Bilitis*, the Paleolithic painting of a bison in the Altamira cave in Spain comes again to my mind. We find a similar image of the bull in Minoan culture, where the animal was venerated as a creature of the cosmos, and in the paintings of Picasso who famously said: 'after Altamira, everything is decadence'. It

is a reminder that we must feel, feel, feel with all our rage and passion. It is an everlasting symbol of the invisible and indestructible thread of the continuity of time, the depth of human experience in all its multifaceted expressions, and the stubbornness of our spirit, which will forever continue to seek beauty and freedom.

In every poem, in every painting, in every piece of music we try to find a reflection of ourselves, a justification of ourselves, a confirmation of our inner universes.

In the solitude of art we look for the hints of humanity we so desperately need even if we deny it to others.
We forget and then we search
for the flames that would keep the memories of early love alight and exposed.

We want to make sense of it all through an all-encompassing, all-explaining metaphor, which we will never find.

There is only one sweet longing left
Of the world that could have been
... et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut...
when at tender dawn, reluctantly, we let go of the lucid dream.

- Olga Stezhko, 2018

Olga Stezhko is an award-winning classical pianist and a leading interpreter of early and mid-20th century piano repertoire. Acclaimed by Classical Source in a Wigmore Hall review as 'a supremely delicate master of her instrument' who possesses 'an extraordinary presence', Olga has performed worldwide from Barbican Hall to Salle Cortot to Carnegie Hall.

Her debut album *Eta Carinae* where she combined her passion for astronomy with music by Scriabin and Busoni, was praised by the Gramophone Magazine as 'an outstanding debut' and 'not a record for the faint-hearted but rather for those who enjoy dark and menacing regions of the mind'. Born in Minsk, Olga was educated in Belarus, Italy and the UK and completed her Bachelor's and Master's degrees with distinction at the Royal Academy of Music.

Producer: Jerome Lésar,
Palermo Classica

Images Book I, Children's Corner,
Suite bergamasque, Images Book II:
recorded in Palermo, Italy in June 2017.
Recording engineer: Antonio Zarcone

Six épigraphes antiques: recorded in
London, UK in April 2018.
Recording engineer: Pasha Mansurov

Mastering: Antonio Zarcone

Graphic design: Samir Guesmia

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