

WATER MUSIC OF THE IMPRESSIONISTS

**CAROL
ROSENBERGER
PIANO**

**RAVEL, LISZT
DEBUSSY, GRIFFIS**

**BÖSENDORFER IMPERIAL
CONCERT GRAND**

DE 3006



DDD ORIGINAL DIGITAL RECORDING

**"WATER MUSIC" OF
THE IMPRESSIONISTS**
CAROL ROSENBERGER PIANO

"Ravishing, elegant pianism"
New York Times

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COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO

- Liszt:** 1 Les Jeux d'eaux a la Villa d'Este (7:30)
Griffes: 2 The Fountain of the Acqua Paola (3:52)
Ravel: 3 Jeux d'eau (5:36)
4 Ondine (6:54)
Debussy: 5 La Cathédrale engloutie (6:53)
6 Jardins sous la pluie (3:29)
7 Reflets dans l'eau (5:40)
8 Poissons d'or (3:48)
9 Ondine (3:20)



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Executive Producer: *Amelia S. Haygood*
Assistant Producer: *Mary Mark Zeyen*
Chief Engineer: *Stan Ricker*

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Bösendorfer Imperial Concert Grand
Piano Technician: *Heriberto Lurgenstein*
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NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

In the last years of his life, **Franz Liszt** (1811-1886) astounded his contemporaries with his remarkable innovative writing. As he once expressed it in a letter to the Princess Wittgenstein, his one remaining ambition was to “hurl a lance as far as possible into the boundless realm of the future.” The legendary master pianist hurled a lance into the impressionism of the early 20th century with his *Les Jeux d’eaux a la Villa d’Este* (from the *Années de Pelerinage*, Third Year: Italy), which was written in 1877 and first published in 1883. This work must have inspired the young Maurice Ravel (1875-1937), who, some twenty-four years later, broke new impressionistic ground in a piece with a similar title, *Jeux d’eau*. It is interesting to note that Claude Debussy (1862-1918) actually met Liszt and heard him play in 1885, on the aging virtuoso’s last visit to Rome. The young Debussy, living in Rome as a result of winning the *Prix de Rome*, was deeply affected by the experience and referred throughout his life to Liszt’s way of handling the instrument.

Liszt delighted in his visits to the Villa d’Este at Tivoli — a setting still renowned for its magnificent gardens and splashing fountains — and was inspired to describe musically the dazzling play of water. Cascading, spraying arpeggios and glistening tremolandos domi-

nate the first half of *Les Jeux d’eaux a la Villa d’Este*, but in the quieter middle section, the water takes on a mystical meaning, and Liszt has here inserted a quotation from St. John 4:14: “the water that I shall give him shall become in him a fountain of water springing up into eternal life.” Though the music churns up again to a great climax, the piece ends in a spiritual mood, with the chords of a plagal cadence.

The American composer **Charles Tomlinson Griffes** (1884-1920) was strongly influenced by both Debussy and Ravel, and must have known Ravel’s history-making *Jeux d’eau* well by the time he wrote his own version of the fountain in 1916. Yet *The Fountain of the Acqua Paola* departs from the virtuosic piano writing of both Ravel and his predecessor, Liszt. Of the three “fountain pieces” the Acqua Paola distinguishes itself by a gentle sentimentality, a quality to which Dane Rudyard referred when he wrote that “Griffes’ music has a peculiar nostalgia and inner sadness akin to the German *Sehnsucht*.” Published as one of the set called “Roman Sketches” (which also includes the famous *The White Peacock*), *The Fountain of the Acqua Paola* was built on a poem by William Sharp:

*“Shimmering lights,
As though the Aurora’s*

*Wild polar fires
Flashed in thy happy bubbles,
Died in thy foam."*

Griffes admired and practiced brevity in musical composition. The "shimmering lights," the nostalgic melodies, the dramatic arpeggios which surge from the depths of the piano's bass register and spray into the treble, have come and gone in under four minutes.

With the *Jeux d'eau*, **Maurice Ravel** (1875-1937) ushered in a new era of piano writing. As the composer himself wrote, in his autobiographical sketches:

"The *Jeux d'eau*, which appeared in 1901, stands as the point of departure for all new pianistic expressions one may find in my works. This work, inspired by the bubbling of water and the musical sounds of fountains, waterfalls, and brooks, is built on two themes in the manner of the first movement of a sonata, without, however, being subjugated to the classic tonal formula."

As a preface to the piece, dedicated to Ravel's teacher, Gabriel Fauré, the composer quoted a line from Henri de Regnier: "Dieu fluvial riant de l'eau qui le chatouille" (a river god laughing at the water which tickles him).

Indeed, the variety of liquid images vividly captured in *Jeux d'eau* all communicate joy and delight. When asked how this remarkable virtuoso piece should be

played, Ravel answered "like Liszt, of course." Another interesting suggestion about the interpretation of *Jeux d'eau* comes from the pianist Ricardo Viñes, who gave many of the Ravel and Debussy piano works their first performances: "Ravel recommended the use of the pedal in high passages to produce, instead of clear notes, the vague impression of vibrations in the air."

The magnificent *Ondine*, from the set *Gaspard de la Nuit*, is thought by some to be the masterpiece of all "water pieces." Ravel himself remarked on its "transcendent virtuosity," but that phrase doesn't begin to suggest *Ondine's* sensuous beauty, the "sad and tender" song with its passionate climax, the scintillating liquid figuration which somehow manages to convey richness, depth and transparency all at the same time. The preface to the score quotes the poem by Aloysius Bertrand on which *Ondine* is based:

". . . I thought I heard a vague harmony in my sleep,
and near me a murmur like the singing of a sad and tender voice.

"Listen! Listen! It is I, Ondine, who sprinkles with drops of water your resonant window-panes lit by the pale rays of the moon; while there, the Lady of the Castle, in a black gown, is gazing from her balcony at the lovely starlit night and the beautiful sleeping lake.

"Each wave is a water sprite swimming with the current, and each current is a path that leads to my palace,

and my palace is built of water at the bottom of the lake, in a triangle of fire, earth and air.

“Listen! Listen! My father dips a branch of green alder into the bubbling water, and my sisters caress with their arms of foam the fresh islands of grasses, water lilies and irises, or laugh at the frail and bearded weeping-willow fishing with a line.

“Having finished her murmured song, she begged me to place her ring on my finger, to show that I was married to an Ondine, and to go with her to her palace to be king of the lakes.

“And when I replied that I loved a mortal woman, she was angry and sulky; she cried a little, then, with a burst of laughter, she disappeared into a shower of drops that fell in pale streams on my blue window pane.”

The five **Debussy** works included in this album exhibit a remarkable range of expression, representing water in a variety of contexts. They, along with most of Debussy's major works for the piano, were all written when the composer was in his forties, after the appearance of the younger Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. *La Cathédrale Engloutie* (The Sunken Cathedral or The Engulfed Cathedral) is from the *Preludes Book I*, which were published in 1910. Mystic and unusually dramatic among Debussy's works, this well-loved prelude describes the Cathedral of Ys which, according to an old Breton legend, was engulfed in the

fourth or fifth century but could be seen, emerging from the sea, just at sunrise. The widely-spaced, empty chords suggest the distant cathedral's vastness — at the beginning, only faintly discernible through the water and the mists of early morning. As the cathedral rises, and the music reaches its climax, the chords become full and sonorous over the tolling of the great cathedral bell, the low C in the bass. As the cathedral recedes again, the music of the climax is echoed against a marvelously soft and rolling bass figure representing the water which once again submerges the cathedral.

Jardins sous la Pluie (Gardens in the Rain) appeared as part of the set *Estampes* (“Prints,” 1903). Debussy has woven themes from two popular French nursery songs “Dodo, l'enfant, do” (Sleep, child, sleep) and “Nous n'irons plus au bois” (We'll not return to the woods) through the work, and one can imagine children watching rain sweep through the garden. Steady patterns of rain-figuration change direction with gusts of wind, and change appearance with the varying shades of dark and light in the sky. There are soft drops of water clinging to leaves and flowers, sudden bursts and showers and a couple of thunderclaps. Toward the end, while raindrops are still falling, the sun suddenly breaks through in major, brilliant as it reflects on glistening surfaces.

Reflets dans l'eau (Reflections in the Water) is from the first set of *Images* (1905). There are many kinds of reflec-

tions to be found here: mirror images, augmentations, diminutions, arpeggiated “reflections” which spread out like widening ripples — some of these occurring simultaneously. The myriad tonal reflections of floating melodic and chordal motifs suggest not only visual imagery but inner, personal reflection as well. The warm emotional tone of the piece is underlined by the intensely lyrical climax.

Poissons d’or (Goldfish) appeared as one of the second set of *Images*, published in 1907. Some say that the inspiration for this piece was an Oriental lacquer; others that it was a piece of embroidery. Whatever it was that set Debussy’s creative imagination in motion, the descriptive figuration in this brilliant work conveys vividly the buoyant water, the gentle movement of fins, the darting motion of the fish, the sudden upward rushes and downward plunges, and the brilliant flashes of color as the fish leap through the surface of the water or dive to the depths. But most of all in this delightful piece one feels an infectious sense of joy and freedom in movement.

The Debussy *Ondine*, from the *Preludes Book Two*, published in 1913, differs strikingly from the *Ondine* of Ravel. Shimmering, undulating figuration portrays Debussy’s *Ondine* as cool and elegant, and whimsically abrupt arpeggios conjure up her playfulness. This

water sprite is elusive, and the glimpses of her are lovely but fleeting. Unlike her counterpart in the Ravel work, she never gives the illusion of human warmth and passion. She retains her identity with the mysterious deep where, as the motifs sounded in the bass remind us, there lurk dangers for any mortal who takes her song too seriously.

Carol Rosenberger

The hall we selected for this recording has a good music-making ambience: a large, warm, not-echoing room with height, irregular surfaces and lots of wood. With our engineering we tried to create the sensation that you (the listener) are seated in the choice seats — about ten to twelve rows back in the hall. I asked Stan Ricker, chief engineer for this recording, to place the microphones in such a way that one would hear the sound of the hall, and that the blend of the colors and tones of the instrument would be similar to the blend the audience hears. Since the music is all about water and liquidity and motion, I did not want to emphasize each tone at the sacrifice of the natural blend of the hall and the “watery” atmosphere created by the pianist.

Amelia S. Haygood