



more than the score...

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Arabesque No. 1

for piano solo

Presented by Roy Howat

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Roy Howat

talks about

Debussy's Arabesque No. 1

Debussy's title *Arabesque* can be traced to several things. Schumann, of course, had already explored the idea of Arabesque, and Debussy certainly loved Schumann's music. With Debussy, the visual arts – and probably also poetry – are always going to feature somewhere. In this case, it's literally Arabesque: Arabic ornamentation and the flowery patterns – the curving patterns that underlie Art Nouveau at the time Debussy was composing this piece. The patterns have their own expression, but are not directly the main focus of vision: in Debussy's music you have wandering lines that are not supposed to be our main focus.

Debussy has a distinctly eastward gaze – always looking towards the exotic and slightly towards Oriental models. He likes this refreshment of the Western musical tradition, which he always felt had become a bit tired and stuck in rather rigid formulae. He liked the greater rhythmic freedom and the modal freedom. Of course, with these arabesque patterns, there's a terrific amount of invention. He likes the way, I think, anything can bypass our immediate attention and percolate its way into our perception without us sitting and staring at it. This is important to Debussy. The way it works in the music is that he'll often start figurations going, and from these figurations, we'll gradually become aware that there's a slower, main melodic line emerging from inside these figurations.

The two Arabesques were taken on by the publisher Durand in 1888. They are early pieces and sold very slowly for some years and didn't seem to be going anywhere until Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* hit the boards in 1902. Suddenly, Debussy was famous, and everybody wanted to buy his arabesques, just at a time when Debussy wanted to be known by much more recent works. He found it a little bit galling, as any composer would. These pieces, nevertheless, mark a very skillful young composer who knew exactly

what he was doing. I think it's very important for us to play them for all they're worth, as if our lives depend on it, and not to play them at a kind of arm's length, as if saying, 'Well, this was just a young composer'. We mustn't play these in any sort of condescending manner. They are as a result of a composer writing at his very best, and his very best is very good.

Debussy and Liszt

When Debussy was in Rome for his scholarship, he met Liszt. He always had a high regard for the great talent of Liszt and he remembered all his life how Liszt had played. This music must have left an impression. It has often been noticed in this first arabesque

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that the figure in the right hand at bar 6 is very close to the figure that runs through 'Sposalizio' from Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage*, particularly the way it occurs on the last page of Liszt's piece. At the same time, there is a fundamental difference, because Liszt is using the figure to close off a piece and let it die away. Debussy, much more

challengingly, is starting a piece and saying, 'I'm going to make something of this'. You'll notice the way the figuration comes down, creating a little bit of melody. Then, more and more, the melodic line of the piece takes shape and the piece crystalizes and becomes clearer and clearer. It's a very original concept, in its way.

Arabesque No. 1

from *Deux Arabesques* (1888)

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Andantino con moto

p

rit. - - - - a tempo

pp

7

10

poco a poco cresc.

stringendo - - - -

sempre cresc.

14

rit. - - - - (a tempo)

p