

TIFFANY POON
piano

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)
Von fremden Ländern und Menschen
(approx. 2 minutes)

CLARA SCHUMANN (1819–1896)
Mazurka Op. 6 No. 5
(approx. 3 minutes)

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)
Davidsbündlertänze Op. 6
1. Lebhaft. (Florestan and Eusebius)
2. Innig. (Eusebius)
3. Etwas hahnbüchen (Florestan)
4. Ungeduldig (Florestan)
5. Einfach (Eusebius)
6. Sehr rasch und in sich hinein (Florestan)
7. Nicht schnell mit äußerst starker Empfindung (Eusebius)
8. Frisch (Florestan)
9. --- (Florestan)
10. Balladenmäßig sehr rasch (Florestan)
11. Einfach (Eusebius)
12. Mit Humor (Florestan and Eusebius)
13. Wild und lustig (Florestan and Eusebius)
14. Zart und singend (Eusebius)
15. Frisch (Florestan and Eusebius)
16. Mit gutem Humor
17. Wie aus der Ferne (Florestan and Eusebius)
18. Nicht schnell (Eusebius)
(approx. 35 minutes)

INTERMISSION

CHARLES-VALENTIN ALKAN (1813–1888)

Le Festin d'Ésope Op. 39 No. 12
(approx. 10 minutes)

LOUIS-CLAUDE DAQUIN (1694-1772)
Le Coucou
(approx. 2 minutes)

FRANÇOIS COUPERIN (1668-1733)
Les Papillons
(approx. 2 minutes)

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU (1683-1764)
La Poule
(approx. 4 minutes)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)
Bruyères
(approx. 3 minutes)

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)
Reflets dans l'eau
(approx. 6 minutes)

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)
Oiseaux tristes
(approx. 5 minutes)

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)
Une barque sur l'océan
(approx. 7 minutes)

LILI BOULANGER (1893-1918)
D'un jardin clair
(approx. 3 minutes)

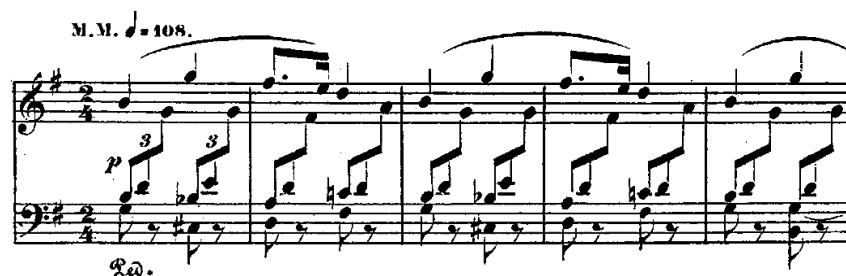
Robert Schumann

Kinderszenen Op. 15 No. 1

Von fremden Ländern und Menschen

The *character piece*, a short work expressing a single mood or illustrating an idea suggested by its title, was a typical product of the Romantic era, and Robert Schumann was a major contributor to the genre. In 1838 he composed 30 such works, publishing 13 of them in a collection that he picturesquely called *Kinderszenen* (Scenes from Childhood).

Anyone who has entertained the pleasant thought of travelling somewhere far away will identify with the daydreaming mood of the first piece in the collection, *Von fremden Ländern und Menschen* (Of foreign lands and peoples).



Its opening melodic gesture, the leap of a rising 6th, evokes the leap of a child's imagination to distant lands, while in the background the rippling arpeggiations and wide chord spacings in the left-hand accompaniment create a quietly sonorous backdrop for this piece's carefree and eminently hummable melody.

Clara Schumann

Mazurka Op. 6 No. 5

As modern concert programs are gradually making clear, Clara Schumann was a significant figure in 19th-century music, not just as the pianist wife of Robert Schumann and a close friend of Brahms, but as an important composer in her own right.

She was best known for her short piano pieces, of which the Mazurka from her collection entitled *Soirées musicales* Op. 6 is typical.



Its opening section coyly alternates between a resolute *forte* evocation of village life, complete with open-fifth drone in the bass, and a more gracious response at a *piano* dynamic level.

A middle section continues to toy playfully with the dotted rhythm of the opening gesture but with even more decorative ornamentation.

Robert Schumann

Davidsbündlertänze Op. 6

Schumann's fancifully named *Davidsbund* or "League of David" was founded, conceptually at least, as a cultural resistance movement, and a militant one. Its aim, like that of its eponymous Biblical hero, was to do battle with the "Philistines," a term Schumann scornfully applied to the purveyors of cheap salon music being published in Biedermeier, Germany to feed the expanding middle-class market for *Hausmusik*, i.e., music for home entertaining rather than for concert performance.

Charter members of Schumann's League were two imaginary characters, the dreamy *Eusebius* and the passionate *Florestan*, personalities whose existence in Schumann's mind was so vivid that he actually ascribed to them the authorship of many articles in his newly founded music journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, and as the composer of each of the dances in his *Davidsbündlertänze*, published in 1838.

The 18 short pieces in this collection are not really dances at all but rather character pieces, each exemplifying the type of music Schumann considered suitable for upholding the great German tradition of art music established by Bach and continued by the Viennese school up to Beethoven.

But a more personal inspiration also infuses Schumann's collection, that of the composer's future wife Clara (née Wieck), the love of his life, whose Mazurka Op. 6 No. 5 is quoted as a "motto" at the opening of the first piece.



Attributed to *both* Florestan and Eusebius in the printed score of the first edition, this opening piece displays the contrast between these two characters as the music crosses the double bar line. Also evident is Schumann's penchant for *metrical dissonance* in the way the strong beats of the bar are constantly being undercut by syncopations over the bar line and by counter-metrical groupings of chatty voices surging up in a polyphonic texture from the bass to the mid-range.

This tendency is even more evident in the contemplative second piece, marked *Innig* (Inwardly) and attributed to Eusebius, in which Schumann obsesses over the sigh motive in the Clara Wieck motto while simultaneously teasing the ear with two-beat and three-beat metrical pulses in the texture.



While Florestan is easily recognized by his rhythmic verve and passionate energy, readily perceived in the third piece,



even he is not immune to Schumann's obsession with irregular rhythmic and metrical patterning, as the fourth piece shows:



The collection proceeds in vivid alternation between these two characters, with Florestan displaying the widest range of personality "quirks," most notably his robust sense of humour combined with daredevil acrobatics in the 12th piece in the set.



By the end, however, it is Eusebius who brings the collection to a close. After lulling our ears into receding from the scene in No. 17, marked *Wie aus der Ferne* (From a distance),



and with a brief recall of the pathetic sighs of No. 2 in the set, Schumann declares an end to this fictional ballroom drama in No. 18 with a nostalgic series of quasi-dance-like sighs, to a lilting oom-pah accompaniment.



Charles-Valentin Alkan

Le Festin d'Ésope Op. 39 No. 12

The brilliant but reclusive pianist-composer Charles-Valentin Morhange, known professionally as Alkan, is one of the great enigmas of 19th-century music. Widely recognized as one of the leading virtuosos of his time, on a par with Chopin, Thalberg and Liszt, he published more than 70 opus numbers of imaginative and finely-crafted works for piano.

And yet he remained virtually absent from concert programs until his “re-discovery” in the late 20th century.

This might well be because while he possessed many talents, the talent for self-promotion was not one of them. Shy and almost misanthropic by nature, he gave few concerts and disappeared completely from view for long periods of time, so the public was largely aware of him through his publications alone.

And therein lies the rub, since these works present challenges that won them few public performances during the composer’s lifetime.

His scores are black with notes, often written in remote keys (he actually wrote a piece in A-flat minor), and their technical demands placed them out of reach of all but the top-ranked performers of his day.

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Alkan's epic *Twelve Études in All the Minor Keys* Op. 39, published in 1857, is generally regarded as his most important work. The concluding piece in this collection, entitled *Le Festin d'Ésope* (Aesop's Feast), is a theme and variations movement, wittily playing on the legendary tale of how the ancient fabulist's chef once served up a banquet meal of dishes all made from a single ingredient.

The theme is a simple, sparsely scored tune in a repeating rhythmic pattern, to be performed *senza licenza qualunque*, i.e., utterly deadpan, without rubato.



This “straight man routine” sets up 25 variations featuring some of the most imaginative and eccentric keyboard textures of any work from the 19th century.

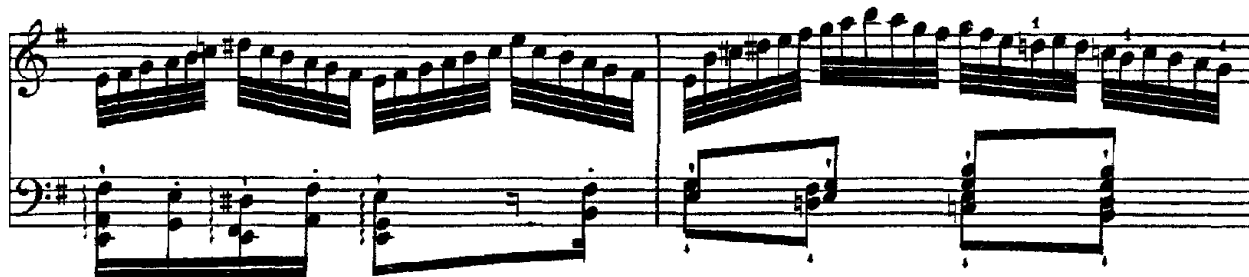
Alkan's first variation seems like merely a continuation of what preceded. It's in Variation 2 that listeners' eyebrows will begin to shoot up to the ceiling at the chromatic daring of the “hopping” right-hand accompaniment.



These “cutesy” opening gambits in Var. 3 and 4 are brushed aside, however, when the steel hand emerges from the velvet glove in Var. 5 with its muscular marching rhythm reminiscent of — or rather foretelling — Rachmaninoff.



And then it's game on, with every conceivable technical difficulty thrown into the mix, with quicksilver runs like these in Var. 7,



rapid-fire double notes in Var. 11



and with the odd lyrical *maggiore* variation thrown in for a sudden change in mood.

And the extremely wide range of moods in this set of variations is also one of its shocking eccentricities. Var. 13 scampers impishly *scherzando* in the upper register of the keyboard



while Var. 20 crashes like a series of anvils dropped on the lowest register.



And Alkan's sense of high drama does not fail him in the barn-storming coda to Var. 25 that will make you feel like you're seated in front of a loudspeaker at a rock concert — of your favourite band.

Louis-Claude Daquin

Le Coucou

Louis-Claude Daquin was among the most famous French keyboard performers of the 18th century. In his role as organist at such prestigious institutions as the Notre-Dame Cathedral and the Sainte-Chapelle he was revered as one of the finest improvisers of his time. And yet he left only two collections of his compositions to posterity: one for organ and one for harpsichord.

His best-known work, *Le Coucou* from his *Livre de pièces de clavecin* (1735, reprinted 1739), demonstrates his improviser's ability to skillfully develop a small musical motive — the falling third of the cuckoo bird's call — while at the same time appealing to the French taste for “descriptive” music.



This endearing piece of “bird music” is structured as a *rondeau* with a recurring refrain alternating with two intervening *couplets*.

François Couperin

Les Papillons

François Couperin worked at the French Court from the 1690s to the late 1720s, establishing himself there as the leading French composer of harpsichord music.

Like Daquin, he gave descriptive titles to his keyboard works so that his French listeners — inwardly convinced that all instrumental music was merely a “soundtrack” to some unstated scene or dramatic situation — could have the impression that they were *seeing* what they were *hearing*.

Tres légèrement.



Les Papillons (Butterflies) from the First Book of his *Pièces de clavecin* (1713) flutters about on the keyboard in endlessly varied patterns of triplets, like the flighty path of the delicate insect it purports to describe.

Jean-Philippe Rameau

La Poule

In Rameau’s **La Poule** the composer attempts to forge a link between the disparate worlds of concert performance and animal husbandry. And if the number of works inspired by farmyard animals is understandably low on most recital programs, the number directly descriptive of chickens, in particular, is even lower.

Rameau’s *The Hen* struts and frets its four minutes upon the stage and then is heard no more. And yet by dint of insistent repetition and development of the simple opening motive — five repeated notes and a rapid-fire arpeggio — the composer manages to enlarge his caricature into a riveting portrait of considerable tragicomic grandeur.



But given the social context of this piece, more may be happening in it than merely an amusingly accurate portrayal of the ambulatory clucking behaviour of this common barnyard fowl.

The very *portrayal* of this animal on such an aristocratic instrument as the harpsichord, the plucking quills of which are, after all, made from bird feathers (and isn’t *that* dark), makes the characterization live on two levels at once: the elegantly courtly and the rustically agricultural.

The question needs to be asked whether this proudly strutting but mindless creature is not really a hidden portrait of the many equally mindless French

aristocrats that strut around the halls of Versailles in courtier's plumage engaging in endless rounds of polite but useless conversation such as this



only to pick up a few seeds of royal favour from the ground and peck out their rivals for the spoils?

And dare one even mention that the symbol of France, the symbol of the French King himself, is *Le Coq*, i.e., the rooster?

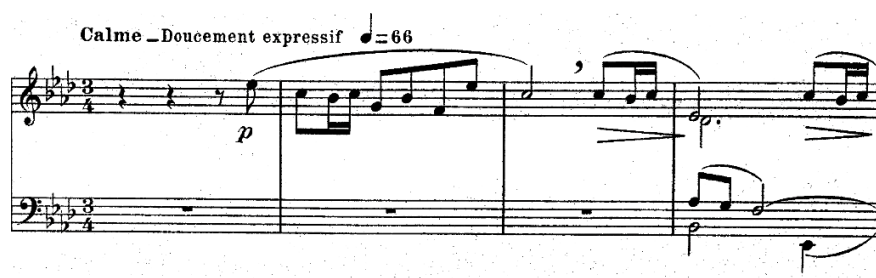
Claude Debussy

Bruyères - Reflets dans l'eau

Debussy was the composer who freed Western music from the claustrophobic confines of “functional” harmony, the set of rules that for 300 years had governed which chords fit best with which others according to how well their bass notes got along.

Few works sum up Debussy's practice in this regard more than his two sets of preludes composed between 1909 and 1913. This is music of infinite subtlety, much of it built up out of pianissimo murmurs swimming freely in a watery, finely pedalled haze of blurry piano tone out of which strands of melody occasionally float by the ear before disappearing off to the sonic horizon.

In *Bruyères* (Heather) we find ourselves out on the moors of the Scottish countryside.



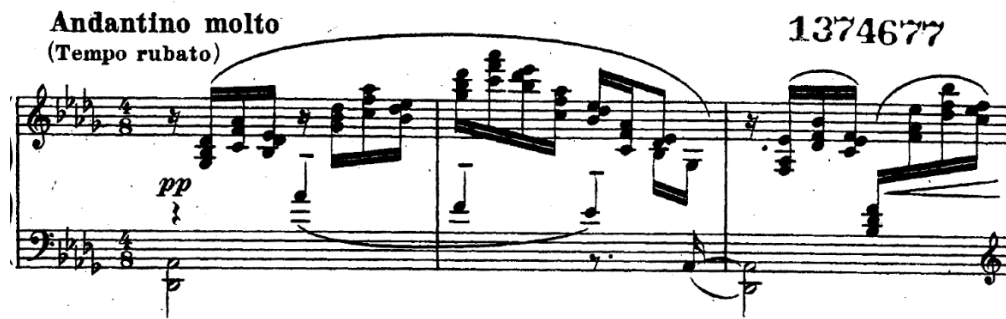
Light touches of the pentatonic scale give this prelude its rustic feel, along with the evocative calls of a distant shepherd's flute, similar to the simple solo melody that begins the composer's *The Little Shepherd* from *A Children's Corner*.

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Reflets dans l'eau (Reflections in water) from Debussy's *Images Livre I* begins by evoking in gentle splashes of sound colour the outwardly expanding pattern of rippling waves in a pool of water into which a pebble – the opening perfect 5th in the bass – has been tossed.



Widely spaced sonorities measure the distance outwardly travelled. The highest register glistens dazzlingly with glints of sunlight.

Vivid as the scene is in the ear, the experience of taking it in is ultimately a mysterious enterprise, symbolized by recurring glimpses of the echoing musical motive: A-flat, F, E-flat.

Maurice Ravel

Oiseaux tristes - *Une Barque sur l'océan*

Ravel was a member of an avant-garde coterie of musicians, writers and visual artists who jocularly called themselves *Les Apaches*, Parisian argot for “ruffians” or “hooligans.” Between 1904 and 1905 he composed *Miroirs*, a suite of five pieces, each describing “in a mirror,” as it were, a fellow member of the club. While the connection with individual personalities is unclear, and may even have been fanciful, these pieces remain among the most pictorially vivid – and technically challenging – in the piano repertoire.

Ravel described *Oiseaux tristes* as “birds lost in the torpor of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer.” As the piece opens, we hear one solitary bird, singing alone at first but soon joined by others.



Fauré describes the texture as follows: “Fundamentally Ravel set store by the player bringing out two levels: the birdcalls with their rapid arabesques on a higher, slightly strident level and the suffocating, sombre atmosphere of the forest on a lower level which is rather heavy and veiled in pedal without much movement.”

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Une Barque sur l'océan paints the image of a boat floating and gently rocking on the ocean waves. Ravel opens his depiction with a three-layered soundscape.



A rich carpet of arpeggios sweeping up and down in the left hand suggests the action of the waves, while a chiming sequence of open intervals in the upper register outlines the vast expanse of the sea. Meanwhile, an unpredictable third voice emerges clearly but irregularly from the mid-range. Ravel uses virtually the entire range of keyboard colours in this scintillating depiction of the sea as a gentle giant cradling mankind in its embrace.

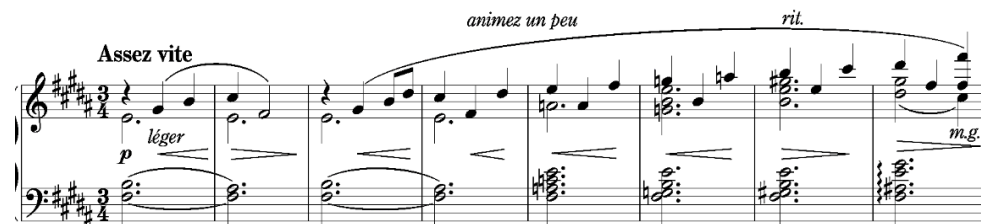
Lili Boulanger

D'un jardin clair

Lili Boulanger was born into a distinguished family of French musicians. She was, in fact, the sister of the most important musical pedagogue of the 20th century, Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979), whose students included Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein and Quincy Jones.

But whatever musical gifts she might have received by family inheritance, they did not extend to her physical health. An early case of bronchial pneumonia when she was a child, and the Crohn's disease which she later developed, left her severely immunocompromised and in frail health throughout her short life. She died at the age of 25 in 1918.

Virtually all of her surviving compositions date from the period 1910–1918.



In her small piano piece entitled *D'un jardin clair* from *Trois Morceaux pour piano* (1914) she displays an interest in the finely nuanced tone colours and streams of parallel chords typical of Debussy.

Donald G. Gíslason 2026