

DEBUSSY *Images. Jeux. Nocturnes. La Mer. Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. Scottish March. Printemps. L'Enfant Prodigue*: selections. *Berceuse héroïque* • Stéphane Denève, cond; Royal Scottish Natl O • CHANDOS CHSA5102(2) (2 SACDs: 146:26)

DEBUSSY *La Mer. Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. Images* • Daniele Gatti, cond; French Natl O • SONY 88697974002 (68:42)

DEBUSSY *La Mer. Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun. Nocturnes* • Michel Tabachnik, cond; Brussels PO • BRUSSELS PHILHARMONIC BPR001 (58: 00)

The Impressionism of Claude Debussy seems at times like a mood ring for the metaphysical preoccupations of conductors and program annotators. Each of the CDs here comes with a full and painstaking philosophical superstructure laid out in its booklet. Given the usual Rubik's Cube of French existentialism, it amuses and astonishes me to say that it all seems immediately to make sense this time. The CDs sound like the ideas from which they spring.

Take *La Mer*, for instance. Stéphane Denève, an apostle of Charles Munch, comes out staunchly against the "Debussyan blur" and in favor of the pictorial aspects of sea, spray, and birds. Daniele Gatti's annotator conceives of *La Mer* as literature derived from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Michel Tabachnik stresses the deep abstract intimacies of emotion and a sort of emotional introspection derived from the idea of the sea. All work well on their own terms.

Here is what it means in practice, and I think it makes Denève's set the winner by head and shoulders. The Royal Scottish Orchestra, recorded in ravishingly subtle surround sound, makes the most beautiful Debussyan noises I have ever heard. No string instrument scrapes too close to the bridge, no trumpet penetrates unpleasantly. Each delicate wind sounds softer and more ravishing than the next. The progress of this orchestra into the front ranks in recent years has been steady, but I never expected anything this good. Denève's ability to synthesize total clarity, velvet, and the fire of Charles Munch into a dazzlingly live tour of Debussy's world marks him, for me, as today's preeminent French conductor. It all sounds disarmingly eager and spontaneous. *La Mer* is gorgeous and white-hot; so, too "Fêtes." The neglected *Printemps* is the best since Munch, and *Gigues* is just about the most danceable I've encountered. There is not a letdown in the set. Even *Jeux* doesn't sound as dry as usual. *Iberia*, in fact, is the most alive since Bernstein's. And the small occasional pieces are done with equal attention. If, in Denève's notion of Debussy's world, we appear to experience every breeze, shadow, sun-dapple, eddy, burst of spray, and seagull-cry, with Gatti we come upon Debussy as an institution, like Brahms. These are rich, romantic performances. To the extent that Gatti's *La Mer* is pictorial at all, we hear the

ocean itself rise and fall slowly, but without much detail. Everything is rounded, opaque, and general. This works well in *La Mer's* big moments. In the first movement, for example, the three great descending octave chords midway through are slurred and almost Sibelian in their power. So, too the chorale ending of the movement. But after a while, it is all too vague, indeed "Impressionistic." This heavy quality persists throughout the other pieces. *Images* really isn't by Respighi! Perhaps this is my way of saying this Gatti CD is too Italian. The French National Orchestra plays well, but heavily; you sometimes sense an institutional orchestra has gotten tired of its own repertoire and started to fossilize. The recorded sound is atmospheric, but there is not quite the feeling of transparency one would hope for from the orchestra.

It is interesting to encounter a CD from the Brussels Philharmonic under Michel Tabachnik, a partnership most of us probably find unfamiliar. The orchestra plays extremely well in a neutral, gemlike way. It is well recorded. Quite exciting, even! But this is not pictorial conducting—rather more the sort of performance one would have gotten from George Szell in a warmer and fuzzier mood than his usual self. It has an alabaster purity and detachment, without ever veering into the pointillistic coldness of Boulez. The brasses are appealing and the climaxes well voiced. The *Faun* and *Nocturnes* exhibit similar virtues.

No listener would be unhappy learning this music from any of the three CDs reviewed here. The Tabachnik grows on me each time I replay it. But I must say, I find Denève's set completely addictive. I haven't come up for air in two months. It is a good wallow! Bring scuba gear and water wings. It doesn't get much better than this! **Steven Kruger**

This article originally appeared in Issue 36:2 (Nov/Dec 2012) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Denève's Vintage Debussy - ClassicsToday

David Hurwitz Artistic Quality:10 Sound Quality:10

This is Debussy in the great French tradition, the sort of playing and conducting that used to be associated with national schools of performance. Of course, Stéphane Denève comes from the right school, but you have to care enough about it to cultivate the aesthetic, and for much of the 20th century French musical institutions did their best to trash everything that was great in the pre-War style. The situation with orchestras was even worse. Not that French orchestras were great in a technical sense; largely they were not, but they were distinctive in a way that was particularly well suited to French repertoire, and they contained superb individual players. This is why orchestras with a similar sonority, such as the Czech Philharmonic, with lean strings and prominent, colorful winds, often with a touch of tangy vibrato in the brass, play the music so well to this day.

What Denève has done is recreate this sonority in his Debussy performances, and the result is marvelous. This is no mean feat. Today's orchestras do not naturally take to this style of playing, but this less blended, more individual approach was in fact the "authentic" sound of the late 19th and early 20th century. Debussy orchestrates in layers, and however fuzzy or "impressionistic" the resultant sonority, these layers should remain distinct. This means that woodwind timbres must often balance the strings, as they do in this performance of Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, with tellingly supple results. Jeux, that miracle of slithery half-tints and suggestions, really speaks in this performance; it becomes a genuine dance drama rather than a mere abstraction.

Much of Denève's success also stems from his consistently lively, flowing tempo choices. These Nuages float across the sky with a welcome sense of purpose and emotional point. The concentration of the Scottish wind players here, and throughout the three Images, is particularly impressive. Iberia's three movements cohere as a single span—clearly Debussy's intention, but something we seldom actually hear either in concert or on disc. And as for La Mer, well, it's just as exciting as hell. Try the closing bars in the sample below. The art of playing loud while retaining the integrity of Debussy's carefully balanced textures is another of those virtually lost arts happily recaptured here.

Chandos has provided terrific SACD multichannel sonics for this production, which may well be headed straight for reference status. A major achievement.

Stéphane Denève Conducts Debussy Review by Blair Sanderson

AllMusic Review Rating: 5*/5*

Stéphane Denève has established himself as a versatile maestro with a highly varied repertoire, from concert fare to operas, but his recordings have revealed him to be a specialist in French orchestral music, notably in his coverage of works by **Albert Roussel** and **Guillaume Connesson**. This double hybrid SACD from Chandos offers Denève's interpretations of the orchestral works of **Claude Debussy**, and the lavishly detailed and expressive performances by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra show a conductor and an orchestra in complete sympathy with the music. Because the presentation by Chandos is first-rate from an audiophile perspective, with spectacular reproduction and close-up, credible presence, the listener is immersed in **Debussy's** dazzling colors from the opening of Images, and surrounded by fully dimensional sonorities throughout the album, which includes such other masterpieces of impressionist music as Jeux, Nocturnes, La Mer, Printemps, and Prélude à l'après-midi d'une faune. When the clarity of the notes, the richness of the timbres, and the depth of the orchestra's sound are appreciated altogether, it's truly a seductive experience, and **Debussy's** lush and atmospheric music achieves its potential in this impressive package. Indeed, it's difficult to pull away from these gorgeous performances, so prepare to

listen to both SACDs in one long, leisurely sitting. It's that good.

Claude DEBUSSY (1862-1918) - MusicWeb - Recording of the Month!

Orchestral Works

Images [35:55]

Jeux [17:32]

Nocturnes [24:13]

La Mer [23:58]

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune [10:14]

Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire [6:32]

Printemps [15:12]

Two movements from *L'Infant Prodigue* [7:04]

Berceuse héroïque [4:34]

Women of the RSNO Chorus (Nocturnes)

Royal Scottish National Orchestra/Stéphane Denève

rec. Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, 10-12 October 2011 and 7-9 February 2012

CHANDOS CHSA 5102(2) [78:04 + 68:22]

2012 marks the 150th anniversary of Debussy's birth, and it also sees Stéphane Denève's final year as music director the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. As a double commemoration, Denève and his orchestra have been performing Debussy's major orchestral works in concert this season, and as a parting gift he leaves us this recording. It's a present worth receiving, something which enshrines his love of the music but also stands as testament to the outstanding work he has done with the RSNO over the last seven years. It may well turn out to be one of the finest releases in this Debussy year, and possibly the finest in a considerably longer period.

Denève has long been a passionate advocate for Debussy. He writes in the liner-notes about the transformational effect of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, which he first heard as a young man, something which sparked a love of this music which he still feels. That love comes out in every moment of this recording. The set comes across as a labour of love, a summation of Denève's current thinking on Debussy and a document that, in my view, stands comparison with many more famous or well established Debussy teams out there. One of the things he does rather successfully, to my mind, is to challenge some established views about the composer. More often than not, Debussy's music is seen as impressionistic (a term the composer hated), shimmering and ill-defined. The nebulous half-light is there in places and is used to outstanding effect at times, but Denève rejects any idea that with this must come poor definition or blended homogeneity. "Everything must be heard", he writes, and one of his achievements here is to combine a forensic exploration of the notes in all their detail with a convincing architectural

picture that gives the music coherence and a sense of trajectory. That openness and clarity are apparent right from the start of *Images* as the flute, clarinet, harp and celesta all stand out with razor-sharp clarity against the backdrop of icy strings. Denève doesn't reject the post-Romantic sound-world in which the composer moves, however, and creates a sense of heady opulence that would please any sensualist. The opening of *Ibéria* then explodes out of the speakers with all the brash confidence of a Mediterranean fiesta, reminding us that Debussy is as good at evoking sun-drenched clarity as he is at moonlit mystery. As if to prove this, *Les Parfums de la Nuit* has a languid, almost decadent feel but each instrumental voice is clear and potent, relishing its due place in the overall scheme.

A similar grasp of compelling contrast comes across in the *Nocturnes*. The gently ambling clouds of *Nuages* sound almost anaemic but hugely atmospheric in the orchestra, and there is something wonderfully suggestive about the cor anglais solo towards the end. After this *Fêtes* is perky, rhythmic and celebratory, crowned by triumphant brass cadences, and the effect of the approach of the distant band is brilliantly played and paced. The world of the Sirens, too, is properly seductive, the ladies of the RSNO Chorus sliding evocatively through their chromatic lines and placed at just the right distance from the orchestra.

Denève is a master of the big picture as well as of the detailed components of this music. In fact, the image that kept coming to my mind when listening to these discs was of the conductor as an artist working on a canvas, crafting something organic which is taking shape before the listener rather than setting down something concrete and complete. Nowhere is this more true than in *La Mer*. The shading of the dynamic range is done in the way that a painter evokes light; a phrase will be highlighted or faded back with lightning precision, like a snatch of sunlight catching the glint of a wave. There is also a tremendous sense of movement and organic progress, a love of the momentary without losing sight of the overall scope of the music. The mid-day climax to the first movement, when it comes, is electrifying, all the more so because it has been so well prepared. The *Dialogue* captures a sense of yearning as well as of conflict, given a sense of almost transcendent resolution (around the 4:34 mark) then growing to a grandiose conclusion which sets the seal on the whole work. In fact, you always feel that Denève is bringing out the sense of structure inherent in the music rather than imposing something on it. It's a sign of his success that this process never feels didactic but organic and developmental. Even (or especially) in the *Prélude*, the music seems to unwind gently, lazily, as if hanging in midair, but even here the recurrence of the languid flute theme gives the music shape, making a virtue out of recurrence.

Perhaps the biggest revelation of the set is *Jeux*. Not for Denève the idea that this music is cerebral and abstract. He reminds us that it was written as a ballet for

Diaghilev, and as if to underline this the notes give us detailed descriptions of each scene, track by track, as the music unfolds. Denève brings out the descriptive demands of each scene, but more important than this is the sense of scarcely concealed sexual tension that permeates the musical atmosphere: after all, it's basically a depiction of a *ménage à trois*, and the music rises inexorably to the climax (literally!) of the triple kiss. Debussy's music is at its most kaleidoscopic in this work, themes darting briefly across the soundscape before giving way to others, but they never appear tokenistically: instead Denève uses each one like a painter, again, to create a moving image that shimmers and glides before our ears.

What fantastic colours Denève has at his disposal! Under his directorship the RSNO have gone from strength to strength and it is no exaggeration to say that they can now hold their own in the company of the great orchestras of Europe. With this conductor they have become particularly highly praised in French music and they showcase this new expertise at every opportunity in this disc. The strings are delicate and suggestive, the brass evocative and the percussion brilliantly colourful. The winds, in particular, are especially pungent, adding a touch of perfume to everything they touch. It's extraordinary just how good the orchestra now is at this sort of repertoire, and it will be interesting to see in what direction they go after Denève. Richard Morrison of *The Times* once described the RSNO as "the best French orchestra north of Calais". These discs will show you why.

The less substantial works on the set are just as stylishly played. The *Marche écossaise* is based on a genuine Scottish ancestral melody, a melody we were treated to in its entirety when [the orchestra opened their season with this work](#). You can sense the tune's Scottish origin, not least through its rhythm, but Debussy very much makes it his own and it's an interesting, Gallicised hybrid of styles. *Printemps* is a youthful work depicting the "laborious birth" of Spring, but it contains lots of suggestions of the composer's later work, both in its colour and its texture. It's well shaped and attractively played here, especially by the leaping horns in the second section, though the ending is surprisingly conventional for Debussy. The movements from *L'Enfant Prodigue* both set evocative scenes from the cantata, and the dance has the scent of Palestinian night about it, to my ears at least. The *Berceuse héroïque* was written as a tribute to the Belgian soldiers of the First World War. It's a rather odd piece, contrasting gentle melancholy with some plodding march rhythms, but it's effective enough in its own curious way.

Throughout the set Denève and his team get help from the tremendous quality of the recorded sound, captured with outstanding clarity by Brian Pidgeon and his Chandos engineers, and giving a real sense of space to the sound, allowing each instrument to be picked out and enjoyed in its own right, as well as relishing its contribution to the whole. This sets the seal on an outstanding release, a praiseworthy contribution to the Debussy anniversary year, and a memento of what has become one of the most distinguished musical partnerships of recent

years. Invest with confidence.

Simon Thompson

Claude DEBUSSY (1862-1918) - Second MusicWeb Review

Images (1905-12) [35:55]

Jeux (1912-13) [17:32]

Nocturnes (1897-99)* [24:13]

La Mer (1903-05) [23:58]

Prélude à l'après-midi d'une faune (1891-94) [10:14]

Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire (1890) [6:32]

Printemps (1887) [15:12]

Two movements from *L'Enfant prodigue* (1884; revised 1907-08) [7:04]

Berceuse héroïque (1914) [4:34]

Women of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra Chorus*

Royal Scottish National Orchestra/Stéphane Denève

rec. 10-12 October 2011 and 7-9 February 2012, Royal Concert Hall, Glasgow

CHANDOS CHSA 5102(2) [78:04 + 68:22]

This is one heck of a collection, and beautifully performed throughout. I've mentioned that feeling of a record feeling 'right' in the groove almost before the music starts, and this is very much one of these. The opening of *Images* is genuinely haunting, the unearthly sounds sending one scurrying for the score to find out what is going on. Fear not; 'tis only a trio clarinets, but those little grace notes never sounded quite so spooky. Don't turn up the volume too loud, as the opening of the second movement *Ibéria* will blow your wig off.

This is the kind of state of the art recording which will mercilessly reveal inaccuracies, but everyone is at the top of their game, and you can hear the care and preparation which has gone into making these performances better than many or most, perhaps even all. Such attention to detail might of course lead to over-analytical sterility, but there are plenty of little touches which will automatically raise a smile. Have a listen to those brass glissandi at 5:04 in that second of the *Images*. These things aren't always as apparent as they might be in recordings, and Denève does just enough to give them prominence without becoming vulgar. *Le Matin d'un jour de fête* is tremendously pictorial, with hefty string pizzicati and a powerful sense of folksy fun and perhaps even some danger - the spirit of Stravinsky just around the corner. The rhythmic power towards the end of *Rondes de printemps* is irresistible.

Jeux was Debussy's last original orchestral work, and written for a Diaghilev ballet - first performed in fact just two weeks before Stravinsky's infamous première of

Le Sacre du printemps. Debussy is less overtly controversial than Stravinsky, but this remains music full of enigmatic tonal questions and a remarkably complex structure. This is one recording and performance in which all of the “brief, kaleidoscopically changing themes [and] orchestration continually in flux” of Roger Nichols’ booklet notes can be heard with startling clarity. This is tricky enough music to play let alone to create a choreography for or to dance to, but the imagination is set alight by such a brilliant performance. The booklet has a complete outline of the narrative, which is a fascinating read.

Nocturnes is nothing if not atmospheric in its outer movements, and the opening *Nuages* is superbly melancholic here. The weight of the brass chords in the central *Fêtes* will blow your socks off, and the choir of *Sirènes* is suitably distant and ethereal, if just a fraction below the note in places. I’ve always liked André Previn’s London Symphony Orchestra Debussy recording, to be found in various guises on EMI, and his *Nocturnes* is inspiring. The choir is a little more forward and vibrato laden than with Denève and the Chandos production is a little more glossy, but Previn stands as a reminder that even the best of new recordings can’t take away the superlatives from some of the classic versions.

I’ve pulled a few references out to make comparisons for these pieces, but this Chandos recording and Stéphane Denève’s conducting knocks most of them into a cocked tricorn. Jean Martinon’s EMI collection with the Orchestre National de l’ORTF (see [review](#)) has plenty of French character and pungency, but also includes plenty of edgy intonation. A more recent collection on single discs has emerged from the Naxos label with the Orchestre National de Lyon conducted by Jun Märkl, and the playing here is of a higher if more homogenised standard to Martinon. These recordings are full of beautiful moments and received mixed if generally positive reviews when released, but once again Denève has the Lyon orchestra beaten at every turn. The atmosphere is more uniquely breathtaking, the dance rhythms lighter and more convincingly driven, the recording a more balanced and integrated orchestral picture with the Naxos sound tending to be a touch too spotlight, picking out solos beautifully but losing that essential sense of integration when everything is brought together.

Moving on to the second disc, and a *La Mer* which again is strong on atmosphere. We all have our individual associations with this kind of work, and for me this is a seascape of abstracts rather than redolent of any specific region – southern, Atlantic, it could be any impressive seascape. String separation is a notable feature of some passages in *De l’aube à midi sur la mer*, the clarity in the 5th minute creating striking darting spatial effects. There’s a greater sense of threat and danger in Martinon’s *Dialogue du vent et de la mer*, Denève’s cleanliness of texture holding out a scene which has an extra layer of Turner-esque objectivity; superb for the imagination, but without the feeling that you are about to be dragged under, to wonder briefly if your wristwatch really is Water Resistant before

being consumed by uncaring nature. The climaxes are magnificent however, and there are no real complaints to be heard from me.

Katherine Bryan's limpid flute solo in *Prélude à l'après-midi d'une faune* deserves a mention - every flautist's dream moment. The beautifully rounded horn sound and everything else is also gorgeously sumptuous. This is of course one of Debussy's sexiest scores, and the shimmering summer heat is beautifully portrayed, the effulgent scenario laid out with remarkable succulence. The *Marche écossaise sur un thème populaire* is something of a filler and gets a nice airing here. *Printemps* is a far more substantial addition, though with plenty of that earlier salon-style melodic facility which helped Debussy keep his head above water. This is however the first of his works to which the term 'impressionism' was applied, and the moods and orchestral sonorities are tinted with some remarkable colours and effects. This makes *Printemps* dangerously modern for its time, though this is hard to imagine that kind of opinion today with the RSNO's rich string tones and lyrical fluidity.

The revised movements from Debussy's early prizewinning cantata *L'Enfant prodigue* are closer to contemporary convention, but still manage to convey a strong pictorial sense, pre-echoing the composer's responses to nature and poetry. Both this and the final *Berceuse héroïque* are produced with the same attention to detail as every other score in this collection. This final track is by no means a pompous celebration of heroism, but is in fact a rather quiet wartime "tribute to the Belgian King and People" which includes quotations from the national anthem 'La Brabançonne'.

This double SACD set has been packaged in a slimline cardboard box which further houses a substantial booklet with full notes on each piece in English, German and French. The SACD production is superb, as much for the luxuriant and sonic fidelity as for the 5.0 spread of sound, which at times develops astounding acuteness. Debussy's orchestration and musical imagination is something which responds very well indeed to this treatment, and this is one collection in which you can bathe from beginning to end without having to change the bathwater. I'm not going to be critical in this regard, but some may see this collection as lacking in that last ounce of Gallic verve, the kind of edgy sense of near-anarchy which some older recordings can convey. The standard of playing and the layering of orchestral colours and harmonies are unsurpassed, and I will take this kind of playing, which does have its own character, over the inspired liabilities of numerous older recordings, classic status or no. To my ears this has been approached in the same way as baking cakes: that kind of cooking which demands carefully weighed and sifted alchemy to succeed. You may not want to be eating cake every day but the results here are delicious - moist and with great depth of flavour; not too sweet, and a feast for every sense - we'll be keeping Mr Denève's number and ordering more when the time comes.

Dominy Clements