



Emma McConaghy Class: 8K

*CLAUDE DEBUSSY
- THE GOLLIWOG'S CAKEWALK -*

- Music Extension Assignment -

- Claude Debussy -

Claude Debussy was born in Paris on 22 August 1862, and died a very unfortunate death in Paris from cancer, on 25 August 1918. He began learning the piano when he was seven years old from an elderly Italian, paid for by his aunt. From age nine he studied with a student of Chopin.

Debussy's talents soon became obvious, and he moved on to be taught by some of France's best piano teachers. At eleven years of age, he entered the Paris Conservatoire. During his twelve years at the Paris Conservatoire, beginning in 1872, he studied composition with Ernest Guiraud, harmony with Emile Durand, piano with Antoine-Francois Marmontel, organ with Cesar Franck, and solfeggio with Albert Lavignac, as well as other significant figures of the time.

From the beginning, though extremely talented, Debussy was also argumentative and experimental. He challenged the Academy, which was very inflexible in its teaching, preferring instead dissonances and intervals. From 1880 - 1882, he was employed by the patron of Tchaikovsky, 'Nadezhda von Meck', giving music lessons to her children.

Debussy was trained in the classical European tradition. He had the most Classical European training among the new composers of his time, and was of the most independent. He was not only gifted as a pianist but also as a composer. He won the 'Prix de Rome' for composition and traveled across Europe meeting Liszt and Verdi, among others. His music, however, was not in any way similar to that of these other composers.

Debussy's music virtually defined the transition from the late Romantic music to Twentieth Century Modernist music. Debussy was regarded as somewhat unconventional, always questioning the boundaries of the musical traditions, though his usage of the piano in particular was revolutionary. His music seemed to avoid the

percussive tendencies of the piano, instead he wove strands together creating flowing waves and delicate flourishes. His music was concerned with mood and colour, but some of his greatest works seem to have been structured around mathematical models such as the golden mean and Fibonacci sequences.

As a French composer, along with Maurice Ravel, Debussy is considered one of the most well-known musicians working within the field of “Impressionist” music, though he strongly disliked the term “impressionist” when it was applied to his compositions. Debussy was not only one of the most important French composers, he also was one of the 20th century’s most influential composers and his music influenced almost every major composer.

As well as writing music for the piano, Debussy composed orchestral music, and music for the opera and ballet.

His most well most known piano compositions include sets of “Images”, “Preludes” and “Etudes”, the “Suite Bergamesque” and finally, the “Children’s Corner Suite ”.

The “Children Corner” is a suite for solo piano, completed in 1908. It is dedicated to Debussy’s daughter Claude-Emma, known as “Chou Chou” - who was three years old at the time. The pieces were not intended to be played by children - rather they are meant to evoke the essence of childhood and fantasies if youth. In fact, they are quite difficult pieces.

“Children's Corner Suite” was published by Durand in 1908, and was given its world premiere in Paris by Harold Bauer on December 18, 1908. A typical performance of the suite will last around 15 minutes.

The “Golliwog’s Cake Walk” is the final and most familiar piece from his “Children’s Corner Suite”- (1906-1908). It was inspired by American ragtime music, which, considered common in its native country, had taken Europe by storm.

A Cake-walk is a traditional African-American form of music and dance which originated among slaves in the Southern United States. The game involved walking to the music and whoever looked most enthusiastic about getting cake, received a slice. Cake was offered around as prizes to the best dancers - a rare treat during slavery - giving the piece its name.

The Golliwog, a rag doll that was popular in Chou Chou's day, was a children's literary character created by Florence Kate Upton in the late 19th century. The Golliwog was inspired by a blackface minstrel doll that Upton had as a child in America.

This piece is humorous and includes a satirical takeoff of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The tempo is moderate (allegro giusto - not too fast) as in most early Ragtime music.

Debussy takes the familiar cakewalk elements- the rhythmic pattern, vamping the left hand, and traditional chord progressions – and shows his French influence and individual musical interpretation.

The Golliwog's Cake-Walk is in simple ABA form, with A being a very ragtime-like syncopated dance tune. The dynamics range from *pp* to *ff*, sometimes very suddenly, but sometimes very conventionally. After a short introduction, pause and a 4-bar vamp, the main tune steps out in E flat, gives way to unisons, and then chords in G flat. Following this the characteristic pattern is played with dissonant seconds, then thirds and then repeated and then fades out.

The B section is an almost flirtatious, lilting section. In the midst of a theme in G flat, the theme that begins at measure 61 is taken from the prelude to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (marked with "intense feeling") It is accompanied by light grace note chords and syncopated harmonics.

The general effect is one of a somewhat silly singer taking over the dance floor to romance his love, with twittering laughter (or a musical chuckle) in the background.

The *Tristan* theme is repeated three times.



As in jazz, ragtime's successor, it is hard to play the Golliwog's Cake-Walk incorrectly, as long as you hit the correct notes. It works in a variety of tempos and dynamics so long as the pianist is having fun playing it.

This piece although, not characteristic of Debussy's style, is a delightful and humorous work, and showcases his ability to create unique contrasts and tone, while allowing the individual pianist to add his/her personal touch.

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