Claude Debussy: “Those around me resolutely refuse to understand that I’ve never been able to live among real things and real people... After all, an artist is by definition a man accustomed to dreams and living among apparitions.” (July, 1910, letter to Jacques Durand)

This lecture recital will seek to identify a few of the many apparitions – shapes, places, people—that Claude Debussy and his Parisian compatriots lived among in the Belle Époque.

**Arabesques:** Debussy and his compatriots loved arabesques, and the shapes come to us with a curious history dating back not only to the art of the ancient Moors and Romans, but also to the later writings of Edgar Allen Poe, entitled “Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.”

**Deux Arabesques** (1888) – These early pieces from 1888 provide proof of Debussy’s fascination with the spirals that similarly inspired Raphael, Schumann, Matisse, and myriad other artists.

**La fille aux cheveux de lin** (1910) – This prelude opens with a musical arabesque surely meant to evoke the curvaceous shape of a woman’s hair, a shape similarly appealing to the impressionist painters and symbolist poets.

**Pour les arpèges composé**s (1915) – This etude features arpeggios that swirl across the keyboard in every imaginable register, rhythm, and shape.

**“Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir”** (1910) This prelude, based on Baudelaire’s poem “Harmonie du soir,” evokes synesthesia, or the blending of the senses, and the music, like the senses, circles around with intertwining motifs.

**Colonies and the Greater Orient:** Debussy’s age was one of expansionism, with France acquiring colonies in northern Africa and Asia and artists drawing particular inspiration from these foreign, distant cultures. Painters such as Gerome, Delacroix, Renoir, and Matisse all painted scenes from Northern Africa, writers such as Baudelaire, Huysmann, and Gide were likewise part of the Orientalist movement, and composers too were drawn in.

**Estampes:** (1903) – *Pagodes*, with its pentatonic scales and percussive gongs, is clearly an evocation of the southeast Asian temples and gamelan that Debussy had first encountered at the 1889 Paris World Exposition. *Soirée dans Grenade* accentuates the Moorish influence the French imbibed from Spain and from their Arabic colonial possessions, Morocco and Algeria.

**Images, Book 2** (1908) – This set draws again on Javanese dancers and musicians at the 1889 World Exposition. *Cloches à travers les feuilles* is made up almost entirely of whole-tone scales and *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* sets up a sense of time and layering highly suggestive of both the gamelan and Eastern philosophy.

**Danseuses de Delphes** (1910) – This prelude is named for a Greek sculpture; Debussy had probably seen a reproduction of it in the Louvre. The French had undertaken enormous archeological digs in Delphi from 1892-1903, much to the dismay of local citizens, and archeology was a popular news topic.
**Canope** (1913) – Debussy owned two Egyptian burial urns named after the ancient city of Canope. Both England and France took an active mercantile and political interest in Egypt in the nineteenth century. (Witness Saint-Saëns’s “Egyptian” Piano Concerto no. 5 of 1896).

**La Terrasse des audiences du clair de lune** (1913) – This prelude celebrates the coronation of King George V of England as Emperor of India in 1911. The coronation was marked by great festivities, eagerly reported by French journals, and Debussy must have shared in the excitement.

**Clowns, Commedia, and Cakewalks:** French artists in the early 20th century had a passion for the masks, pantomime, and wizardry of the circus and the Commedia dell’arte. When the cakewalk arrived with minstrel shows as yet another piece of popular entertainment, its associations with blackface and unknown distant lands proved similarly alluring and the repercussions of those racist and stereotyped are still very much alive in the present day.

**Suite Bergamasque** (1890-1905) – This suite pays homage to the dances and manners of the ancient régime as well as the fêtes galantes of Watteau and Verlaine. Poetry, paintings, and music are replete with references to Pierrot, Harlequin and others of the Commedia dell’arte, and Picasso was particularly intrigued with these characters, presenting himself frequently as Harlequin in his paintings.

**Masques** (1904) – Here is another, later, evocation of the masks and characters of the Italian Commedia dell’arte. Debussy referred to Pierrot and his comrades throughout his life: witness the early songs, “Pierrot” and “Clair de Lune,” and the late (though questionable!) reference to “Pierrot angry with the moon” in the Sonata for Cello and Piano.

**Golliwogg’s Cake-walk:** (1906-08) – This piece is based on an 1895 children’s book by Florence Upton which recounts the adventures of a black “gnome” who meets and eventually befriends two Dutch dolls. It has ensured the fame of the cakewalk into perpetuity, and with it, of course, the racist legacy of the minstrel show.

**Le petit nègre** (1909), **Minstrels** (1910) – These pieces are modeled on the American minstrel shows and cakewalks that Parisians so enjoyed, beginning with the World Exposition in 1900. They were performed both by whites in blackface (faces painted with burnt cork or black greasepaint) and, increasingly, by black Americans in the first decades of the 20th century.

**“General Lavine” – excentric** – (1913) – `General Lavine was an American circus clown who appeared in Paris in 1910 and 1912 and was known for soldiering/juggling acts. Here the pianist is instructed to play “dans le style et le Mouvement d’un Cake-Walk,” thus emphasizing the overlap among minstrel shows, music halls, and circuses, all fashionable in early 20th century France.

**Recommended reading:**

*Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* by Paul Roberts

*Debussy’s Paris, Piano Portraits of the Belle Époque* by Catherine Kautsky

*Selected Tales: Edgar Allen Poe* (Penguin Popular Classics)

*The Flowers of Evil* Charles Baudelaire (Oxford World Classics)

*Debussy: A Painter in Sound* by Stephen Walsh (Knopf)