



University of North Texas College of Music

Doctoral Recital | Sunday, November 16, 2025 | 2:00 p.m. | Recital Hall

Bohao Wang, collaborative piano

from Ariettes oubliées (1886–1887) Claude Debussy

1. C'est l'extase (1862–1918)

3. L'ombre des arbres Text by Paul Verlaine

4. Chevaux de bois

5. Green

6. Spleen

Fêtes galantes I (1903) Claude Debussy

En sourdine Text by Paul Verlaine

Fantoches

Clair de lune

Jessica Ferring Glenn, soprano

Première Rhapsodie (1910) Claude Debussy

Kean Xiong, clarinet

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1917) Claude Debussy

I. Allegro vivo

II. Intermède: Fantasque et léger

III. Finale: Très animé

Hongrui Wang, violin

Program two hundred seven of the 2025–2026 season
Photography and videography are prohibited

Program Notes

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) is often called a pioneer of “Impressionism,” but he himself didn’t like being boxed in. Trained solidly in the classical tradition at the Paris Conservatoire, he spent his career breaking the frame—experimenting with harmony, form, tone color, and what music can actually mean. He wanted sound to speak for itself rather than to tell stories or paint pictures. Debussy drew deeply on late-nineteenth-century Symbolist poetry—preferring suggestive images that stir feeling—and he also absorbed “Orientalist” colors like pentatonic and whole-tone collections. Wagner shook him early on, though he later kept a careful distance.

In practice, he often splinters melody into small motives and “breathing” lines, with supple, elastic rhythm. His harmony favors parallel and extended chords, stepwise modal shifts, and nonfunctional links, so tonal centers drift like mist; the sonority feels veiled yet luminous. As he matured, he relied less on external literary or visual programs and focused on turning “color” into something you can hear: expanding instrumental techniques and ranges, spotlighting texture and touch, and letting form grow organically—almost like water. The shadow of World War I left him low and slowed his output, but around 1915 he still produced music that’s sharper and more modern. In short, he ran alongside Impressionism yet leaned closer to Symbolist poetics and sonic experiment—one hand drawing on tradition, the other using color, breath, and silence to open a new path for twentieth-century music.

Songs

Debussy said: Musicians who don’t understand anything about poetry ought not to set it to music. They can only ruin it and Music and poetry are the only two arts that move in space.¹

Claude Debussy composed roughly eighty-seven art songs (*mélodies*). In selecting texts he preferred poets of his own time—above all the Symbolists Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé. For Debussy the poem is both the point of departure and the framework of composition: its meter, accentuation, and the sonic color of its syllables directly shape melodic contour, rhythmic breath, and harmonic shading. He grasped the poem’s inner suggestiveness and turned verbal nuance into layers of sound, so the melody does not merely “illustrate” the text; it grows from it, intertwines with it, and, when needed, extends or even refracts the poem’s mood and meaning. Each Debussy song is therefore a kind of sonic portrait of the poem—lines that follow the inflection of speech, harmonies that drift with gentle mobility, and delicate color and chiaroscuro that both honor the poetic landscape and quietly expand its boundaries.

Ariettes oubliées (1886–1887) | Text by Paul Verlaine

This six-song set to poems by Paul Verlaine is Debussy’s first big statement in the *mélodie* genre—earlier than both books of *Fêtes galantes*. Debussy dedicated the set to Mary Garden, the celebrated first *Mélisande*, offering it as an affectionate tribute and even joking that the music was “already a little old-fashioned.”

The texts come from three different Verlaine collections—three poems from *Romances sans paroles*, two from *Aquarelles*, and one from *Paysages belges*. When Debussy first published the set he simply called it *Ariettes*. About fifteen years later—after *Pelléas et Mélisande* had made waves—he reissued it under the title we use today, *Ariettes oubliées* (“Forgotten Little Songs”).

¹ Carol Kimball, *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*, rev. ed. (Hal Leonard, 2006)

1. C'est l'extase | Translation by Emily Ezust

C'est l'extase langoureuse,
C'est la fatigue amoureuse,
C'est tous les frissons des bois
Parmi l'étreinte des brises,
C'est vers les ramures grises
Le chœur des petites voix.

O le frêle et frais murmure!
Cela gazouille et susurre,
Cela ressemble au cri doux
Que l'herbe agitée expire...
Tu dirais,
sous l'eau qui vire,
Le roulis sourd des cailloux.

Cette âme qui se lamente
En cette plainte dormante
C'est la nôtre, n'est-ce pas?
La mienne, dis, et la tienne,
Dont s'exhale l'humble antienne
Par ce tiède soir, tout bas?

It is the languorous ecstasy,
It is the fatigue after love,
It is all the rustling of the wood,
In the embrace of breezes;
It is near the gray branches:
A chorus of tiny voices.

Oh, what a frail and fresh murmur!
It babbles and whispers,
It resembles the soft noise
That waving grass exhales.
You might say it were,
under the bending stream,
The muffled sound of rolling pebbles.

This soul, which laments
And this dormant moan,
It is ours, is it not?
Is it [not] mine[?] -- tell [me] -- and yours,
Whose humble anthem we breathe
On this mild evening, so very quietly?

3. L'ombre des arbres | Translation by Peter Low

L'ombre des arbres
dans la rivière embrumée
Meurt comme de la fumée,
Tandis qu'en l'air,
parmi les ramures réelles,
Se plaignent les tourterelles.

Combien, ô voyageur,
ce paysage blême
Te mira blême toi-même,
Et que tristes pleuraient
dans les hautes feuillées, -
Tes espérances noyées.

The shadow of the trees
in the misty river
fades and dies like smoke;
while above,
among the real branches,
the doves are lamenting.

Oh traveler, how well
this pale landscape
mirrored you pallid self!
And how sadly, in the high foliage,
your hopes were weeping,
your hopes that are drowned.

4. Chevaux de bois | Translation by John Glenn Paton

Tournez, tournez, bons chevaux de bois,
Tournez cent tours,
tournez mille tours,
Tournez souvent et tournez toujours,
Tournez, tournez au son des hautbois.

L'enfant tout rouge
et la mère blanche,
Le gars en noir et la fille en rose,
L'une à la chose
et l'autre à la pose,
Chacun se paie
un sou de dimanche.

Turn, turn, good horses of wood,
turn a hundred turns,
turn a thousand turns,
turn often and turn always,
turn, turn to the sound of the oboes.

The red-faced child
and pale mother,
the boy in black and the girl in pink,
the one pursuing
and the other posing,
each getting a penny's worth
of Sunday fun.

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Tournez, tournez,
chevaux de leur cœur,
Tandis qu'autour de tous vos tournois
Clignote l'œil du filou sournois,
Tournez au son
du piston vainqueur!

C'est étonnant
comme ça vous soûle
D'aller ainsi
dans ce cirque bête
Rien dans le ventre
et mal dans la tête,
Du mal en masse et du bien en foule.

Tournez, dadas, sans qu'il soit besoin
D'user jamais de nuls éperons
Pour commander à vos galops ronds
Tournez, tournez, sans espoir de foin.

Et dépêchez, chevaux de leur âme
Déjà voici que sonne à la soupe
La nuit qui tombe et chasse la troupe
De gais buveurs que leur soif affame.

Tournez, tournez ! Le ciel en velours
D'astres en or se vêt lentement.
L'église tinte un glas tristement.
Tournez au son joyeux des tambours!

Turn, turn,
horses of their hearts,
while all around your turning
squints the sly pickpocket's eye --
turn to the sound
of the victorious cornet.

It is astonishing
how it intoxicates you
to go around this way
in a stupid circle,
[plenty] in the tummy
and aching in the head,
very sick and having lots of fun.

Turn, turn! The velvet sky
is slowly clothed with golden stars.
The church bell tolls sadly.
Turn, to the happy sound of drums.

5. Green | Translation by Emily Ezust

Voici des fruits, des fleurs,
des feuilles et des branches
Et puis voici mon cœur
qui ne bat que pour vous.
Ne le déchirez pas
avec vos deux mains blanches
Et qu'à vos yeux si beaux
l'humble présent soit doux.

J'arrive tout couvert encore de rosée
Que le vent du matin vient
glacer à mon front.
Souffrez que ma fatigue,
à vos pieds reposée,
Rêve des chers instants
qui la délasseront.

Sur votre jeune sein
laissez rouler ma tête
Toute sonore encore
de vos derniers baisers;
Laissez-la s'apaiser de
la bonne tempête,
Et que je dorme un peu
puisque vous reposez.

Here are some fruit, some flowers,
some leaves and some branches,
And then here is my heart,
which beats only for you.
Do not rip it up
with your two white hands,
And may the humble present
be sweet in your beautiful eyes!

I arrive all covered in dew,
Which the wind of morning
comes to freeze on my forehead.
Suffer my fatigue as I repose
at your feet,
Dreaming of dear instants
that will refresh me.

On your young breast
allow my head to rest,
Still ringing
with your last kisses;
Let it calm itself after
the pleasant tempest,
And let me sleep a little,
since you are resting.

6. Spleen | Translation by Corinne Orde

Les roses étaient toutes rouges
Et les lierres étaient tout noirs.

The roses were all red
And the ivy was all black.

Chère, pour peu que tu te bouges
Renaissent tous mes désespoirs.

Dear, it only needs one move from you
For all my despairs to reawaken.

Le ciel était trop bleu, trop tendre,
La mer trop verte et l'air trop doux.

The sky was too blue, too tender,
The sea too green and the air too mild.

Je crains toujours, --
ce qu'est d'attendre
Quelque fuite atroce de vous.

I fear all the time,
ever waiting,
Some terrible flight from you.

Du houx à la feuille vernie
Et du luisant buis je suis las,

Of the holly with its varnished leaf
And of the shining boxwood I am weary

Et de la campagne infinie
Et de tout, fors de vous, hélas !

And of the never-ending countryside,
And of everything, except you. Alas!

Fêtes galantes I (1903) | Text by Paul Verlaine

Fêtes galantes I sets three poems from Paul Verlaine's 1869 collection *Fêtes galantes*, itself inspired by the fêtes-champêtres of Antoine Watteau—elegant ladies and gallant cavaliers wandering manicured gardens under moonlight and masks. Debussy wrote two cycles under this title (and set other Verlaine poems as well). The first cycle gathers three self-contained miniatures—"En sourdine," "Fantoche," and "Clair de lune." They share no narrative, but they breathe the same light and shadow: whispered intimacy, playful theater, and reflective moonlight. Here Debussy crystalizes a "text-begets-sound" method: vocal lines grow from French speech rhythm and stress; harmony is tinted by modal color, pentatonic inflections, and half-step shifts; the piano paints wind, grass, branches, and masks while tiny motives thread the scenes together, as if all three panels were washed in one Watteau-like glow.

En sourdine | Translation by Peter Low

The poem treats nature as refuge from earthly suffering. It is dusk—not yet night. Branches shelter the lovers, wind ripples the grass, and the nightingale mirrors their sorrow. The speaker urges surrender to nature with a string of verbs—*pénétrons*, *fondons*, *ferme*, *croise*, *chasse*, *laissons*. Debussy's setting is almost hypnotic: vocal phrases hover between declamation and murmured speech, widening only occasionally and never rising above mezzo-forte. Much of the melodic profile leans on a "black-key" pentatonic color. The piano sustains a muted, sensuous atmosphere with softly tinted chords and undulating triplets—rustling grass and rocking breeze made audible. There is no extroverted climax; the music unfolds by breath, shading, and diction, drawing us inward to a private, twilight garden. (The poem's nightingale—symbol of disillusioned love—returns musically in "Colloque sentimental," the last song of *Fêtes galantes* II.)

Calmes dans le demi-jour
Que les branches hautes font,
Pénétrons bien notre amour
De ce silence profond.

Calm in the half-day
That the high branches make,
Let us soak well our love
In this profound silence.

Fondons nos âmes, nos cœurs
Et nos sens extasiés,
Parmi les vagues langueurs
Des pins et des arbousiers.

Let us mingle our souls, our hearts
And our ecstatic senses
Among the vague languors
Of the pines and the bushes.

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Ferme tes yeux à demi,
Croise tes bras sur ton sein,
Et de ton cœur endormi
Chasse à jamais tout dessein.

Laissons-nous persuader
Au souffle berceur et doux,
Qui vient à tes pieds rider
Les ondes des gazons roux.

Et quand, solennel, le soir
Des chênes noirs tombera,
Voix de notre désespoir,
Le rossignol chantera.

Close your eyes halfway,
Cross your arms on your breast,
And from your sleeping heart
Chase away forever all plans.

Let us abandon ourselves
To the breeze, rocking and soft,
Which comes to your feet to wrinkle
The waves of auburn lawns.

And when, solemnly, the evening
From the black oaks falls,
The voice of our despair,
The nightingale, will sing.

Fantoches | Translation by Emily Ezust

Verlaine's witty tableau borrows masks from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*: the Doctor from Bologna, Scaramouche, Pulcinella, a pirate, and a young girl. In moonlit black, the two puppeteers—Scaramouche and Pulcinella—seem to direct everyone's movements; desire motivates the figures like pawns in their hands. Stagey cues pepper the text—*détresse* (distress, highlighting the pirate's lust), the "stage-prop" nightingale that shrieks on his behalf, and expressions like *avec lenteur* and *à tue-tête*.

Debussy asks for supple, speech-shaped singing: staccato and legato constantly juxtaposed. The Doctor's daughter receives the most vivid profile—etched in vocal shapes that match her looks, moods, and actions (*piquant minois*, *sous la charmille*, *se glisse*) and capped by a teasing "la-la" after the word *demi-nue*. The piano runs on a perpetual sixteenth-note motor; a short three-note motive introduced at the start acts as a unifying device, resurfacing in varied guises and returning twice in the final vocal bars as the puppeteers make their exit. When the Spanish pirate appears, Debussy hints at a habanera sway and guitar-like figuration—colorful and sly.

Scaramouche et Pulcinella
Qu'un mauvais dessein rassembla
Gesticulent, noirs sous la lune.

Cependant l'excellent docteur
Bolognaise cueille avec lenteur
Des simples parmi l'herbe brune.

Lors sa fille, piquant minois,
Sous la charmille, en tapinois,
Se glisse demi-nue, en quête

De son beau pirate espagnol
Dont un amoureux rossignol
Clame la détresse à tue-tête.

Scaramouche and Pulcinella,
brought together by some evil scheme
gesticulate, black beneath the moon.

Meanwhile, the learned doctor
from Bologna slowly gathers
medicinal herbs in the brown grass.

Then his sassy-faced daughter
sneaks underneath the arbor
half-naked, in quest

Of her handsome Spanish pirate,
whose distress a languorous nightingale
deafeningly proclaims.

Clair de lune | Translation by Peter Low

This is Debussy's second setting of Verlaine's famous poem (the first belongs to the *Vasnier Songbook*); he also borrowed the title for the well-known piano piece in the *Suite bergamasque*. "Your soul is a chosen landscape" opens the poem: fountains, music, dancing, gently swaying branches, and an overall calm that is both beautiful and melancholy. Masked figures play upon the "chosen landscape"—the soul or imagination—yet their happiness is only imagined, as fictitious as their masks. Debussy frames the song with a brief piano prelude whose motive again touches the pentatonic.

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Sustained vocal spans, akin to Song 1, are set against unexpected harmonic turns and modal shifts, lending a faint aftertaste of wistfulness. Select words—mode mineur, bonheur, chanson, sangloter d'extase, tristes—glow subtly through harmonic shading and displaced stresses rather than overt word-painting. Small motives tied to poetic images lie scattered through the accompaniment like glints of light on water, stretching time into a single, still moonlit view.

Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques
et bergamasques
Jouant du luth
et dansant et quasi
Tristes sous leurs
déguisements fantasques.

Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur
L'amour vainqueur
et la vie opportune,
Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire
à leur bonheur
Et leur chanson se mêle
au clair de lune,

Au calme clair de lune
triste et beau,
Qui fait rêver les oiseaux
dans les arbres
Et sangloter d'extase
les jets d'eau,
Les grands jets d'eau sveltes
parmi les marbres.

Your soul is a chosen landscape
charmed by masquers
and revellers
playing the lute
and dancing and almost
sad beneath their
fanciful disguises!

Even while singing, in a minor key,
of victorious love
and fortunate living
they do not seem to believe
in their happiness,
and their song mingles
with the moonlight,

the calm moonlight,
sad and beautiful,
which sets the birds
in the trees dreaming,
and makes the fountains
sob with ecstasy,
the tall slender fountains
among the marble statues!

Première Rhapsodie (1910)

This piece, composed between December 1909 and January 1910, was originally written for clarinet and piano, but was later orchestrated for orchestra by the composer himself in 1911. Dedicated to Prosper Mimart, professor of clarinet at the Paris Conservatory, it premiered on January 16, 1911, at the Salle Gaveau in Paris. At the time, Debussy was considered an avant-garde composer exploring timbre and structure with an Impressionist vocabulary. This short yet highly concise "examination piece" has long been hailed as one of the most beautiful and challenging works in the 20th-century clarinet repertoire: the piano version is limpid and ethereal, while the orchestral version expands the work's imaginative possibilities with even more vibrant layers of color.²

The piece oscillates between playfulness and reverie, imbued with a captivating freedom and poetry. The opening note, "Rêvèusement lent" (Dreamy Slowness), features the piano spreading the tones like a veil, while the clarinet enters with languid lines before gradually gaining momentum. The entire piece unfolds in a three-part structure (A–B–A') with an introduction and coda. Debussy eschews a long theme, instead weaving in and transforming a series of "cellular" elements: descending four-and-a-half-tones, a three-note quasi-pentatonic scale, a three-note loop, and minor third/major sixth intervals. These elements shift, overlap, and expand across various registers, textures, and harmonic contexts, creating a multi-layered dynamic from p to p to near silence, contrasting sharply with the faster, dance-like passages. The clarinet and piano alternately dialogue and interplay, showcasing improvisational breath and elasticity.

² Albert R. Rice, *Notes for Clarinetists: A Guide to the Repertoire* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 57–63.

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As an exam piece, the piece incorporates meticulous rhythmic and fingering "traps," demanding the performer maintain a rigorous sense of time while maintaining a long breath and timbre purity. At the same time, it offers ample space for "singing" and colorful expression, particularly in the gradually concluding and radiant finale, showcasing a captivating balance of lyricism and technical flair.

Sonata for Violin and Piano (1917)

Claude Debussy spent much of his career giving his music evocative titles—*Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, *Nocturnes*, *Images*, *La mer*—not to tell stories, but to hint at scent, light, and atmosphere. Late in life he pivoted toward "abstract" names: the piano *Études* and three *Sonatas* (for cello and piano; for flute, viola, and harp; and for violin and piano). He even signed them "Claude Debussy, musicien français," saluting French taste and, by extension, François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau—while pushing back against rigid, Germanic notions of form. For Debussy, music is first of all color and rhythm.

The backdrop was harsh: cancer from 1909, and World War I in 1914, which silenced him for a time. In 1915 he returned with the Twelve *Études* and launched his plan for "Six Sonatas" (he completed only three). Between the winter of 1916 and spring 1917 he finished the Sonata for Violin and Piano. Though it was the last work he completed, there's no "sickroom" aura—on the contrary, it's nimble, quick-witted, even a little flamboyant.

I. Allegro vivo. The violin throws out two striking gestures: a slow downward sweep of broken chords, followed by a fluttering up-and-down figure. Debussy states and stretches these ideas, then slips into a passage of rhythmic ambiguity, where the violin spins lines over the piano's light ripples—almost like improvisation. The opening material quietly returns, and a driving coda lifts the music to a compact climax. The form feels clear, but the rhetoric is motive-led and free, not textbook sonata-form.

II. Intermède: Fantastique et léger. Everything grows from one tiny cell: three descending chromatic notes. The piano plants it; the violin answers with three long trills, catching the idea and sending it roaming in inversion, displacement, and new harmonies. The mood is bright and playful, yet now and then a tender melancholy peeks through.

III. Finale. After a brief flashback to first-movement motives, the unaccompanied violin presents a theme that "turns back on itself like a serpent biting its tail," as Debussy wrote to his friend Robert Godet. What follows is a quasi-rondo: that "snake" theme undergoes five transformations, separated by contrasting episodes, and the piece closes with a finish that's both saucy and sensuous.

Playing—or even listening to—this sonata is like thinking in breath and color. It's not a ponderous late Romantic masterpiece; it thrives on a transparent timbre, agile vocal rhythms, and a precise interplay of rhythms. In the finale, as the slurring theme shifts in form and the opening motive resonates, you sense the true meaning of his late shift to the term "sonata": a classical clarity that opens up a new sonic imagination.³

³ Melvin Berger, ed., *Guide to Sonatas: Music for One or Two Instruments* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1990), 94.

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