

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Suite bergamasque iii. *Claire de lune*

A GUIDE TO INTERPRETATION BY COSMO BUONO



The "[Suite bergamasque](#)" was originally composed in 1890 but was not published until 1905 in a revised version. It is named after the northern medieval Italian city of [Bergamo](#) located in the foothills to the Alps. The entire suite consists of four movements: "Prelude", "Menuet", "Clair de lune", and "Passepiéd". However it is this movement, "Clair de lune" that has taken on a life of its own, and is one of Debussy's most beautiful and popular compositions. The suite pays homage to the ancient Italian musical traditions of the 17th and 18th centuries in naming the movements after forms and dances of the period. "Clair de lune" means "moonlight"

and was probably inspired by the symbolist poet [Paul Verlaine's poem](#) of the same name. It was originally entitled "[Promenade sentimentale](#)" but was changed for its publication by the composer. Here is the poem:

Your soul is as a moonlit landscape fair
Peopled with maskers delicate and dim,
That play on lutes and dance and have an air
Of being sad in their fantastic trim.

The while they celebrate in minor strain
Triumphant love, effective enterprise,
They have an air of knowing all is vain,—
And through the quiet moonlight their songs rise,

The melancholy moonlight, sweet and lone,
That makes to dream the birds upon the tree,
And in their polished basins of white stone
The fountains tall to sob with ecstasy.

This work truly is a landmark, as it is one of the first impressionist compositions and a masterpiece. To play it successfully, please consider the visual as well as the emotional

elements that are presented in the work. Always bring your experience with the subject matter to it, as you then provide a personal interpretation that is unique.

STYLE AND INFLUENCES

Debussy was an extraordinarily original composer who is credited with creating music's Impressionist style and was arguably its greatest exponent, even though he did not like being labeled an Impressionist composer and his major influences were the Impressionist artists and the Symbolist writers. Fascinated with nature and the way that light would reflect from an object particularly with water, their goal was not to produce a photograph of a subject, but an "impression" lacking clarity and detail. In order to play his music well, I believe students must immerse themselves in the work of [Claude Monet](#), [Pierre-Auguste Renoir](#), [Édouard Manet](#), [Camille Pissarro](#), [Alfred Sisley](#), and the sculptor [Auguste Rodin](#). Notice the depiction of light as it changes in atmospheric conditions, and the movement of water and clouds. Read the symbolist writers including [Stéphane Mallarmé](#), [Paul Verlaine](#), [Arthur Rimbaud](#) and [Maurice Maeterlinck](#), who used suggestion rather than realism to convey their meaning. These were all important influences upon Debussy.

In playing Debussy, you should take a very different viewpoint in your interpretation. You are creating pictures through sound. Think about your relationship with a particular subject such as water, moonlight, or any atmospheric condition that is depicted, and bring this to your interpretation. Color is of utmost significance, so achieve this by changing the angle and intensity of the finger when you depress a key; think about the balance and how that creates different effects; use the damper pedal creatively in the length of time you employ it; as well as half- and quarter-pedal effects; and use the *una corda* to create a veiled and mysterious atmosphere.

"Clair de lune" is in 9/8 and in D-flat Major. Notice Debussy's use of both French and Italian indications. The tempo "*Andante très expressif*" would indicate that when choosing a tempo, be sure it is neither so fast that you cannot slow down within it, nor so slow that you cannot get faster, as the work needs *rubato* throughout.

Also, later on the tempo indication gets quicker, and you do not want to start so fast that it sounds out of character. The first issue is the term "*con sordina*". This has confused many students. It means "with mutes", so use the *una corda* from the beginning.

(continued on next page)

III. Clair de Lune

Andante très expressif

pp *con sordina*

1

2

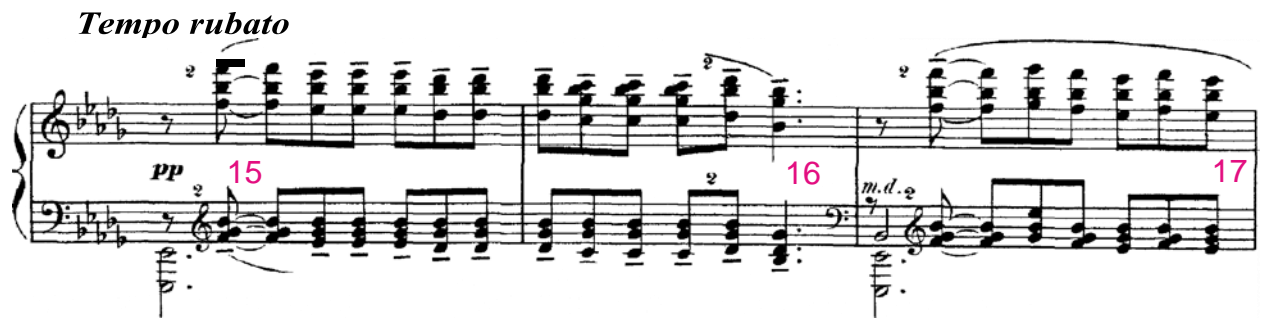
3

You must then decide where you feel it should be lifted, and where you want the color to change. Perhaps at measure 9, but the decision is yours, as Debussy has not indicated it. One difficulty of this first page is patience in counting. Be sure that you observe the dotted quarters, as their length creates a lovely sense of peace and calm. Be sure also, in measure 3, to give the groups of two notes their proper time. Decide what is important to you visually and emotionally in this first section. For me, it is a peaceful moon shrouded behind clouds.



Musical score for measures 8-11. The score is in G-flat major (three flats) and 3/4 time. Measures 8 and 9 are marked with a pink '8' and '9' respectively. Measures 10 and 11 are marked with a pink '10' and '11' respectively. The music features a mix of eighth and dotted quarter notes, with some chords and a fermata in measure 11.

At measure 15, where the indication changes to "*Tempo rubato*", don't start too fast, as Debussy indicates a crescendo and accelerando four measures later.



Musical score for measures 15-17. The score is in G-flat major (three flats) and 3/4 time. Measure 15 is marked with a pink '15' and the dynamic *pp*. Measure 16 is marked with a pink '16' and the dynamic *m.d.*. Measure 17 is marked with a pink '17'. The music features a mix of eighth and dotted quarter notes, with some chords and a fermata in measure 17. The tempo is marked *Tempo rubato*.

(continued on next page)

poco a poco cresc. e animato

Again the rhythm needs careful attention in the beats of 2 and then of 6 in the measure 19. The alternation between these and the regular eighth notes is extremely effective. In this section, I find the idea of the clouds parting and the moon in all its brilliance revealing itself very effective.

Think about the balance of the chords to the top notes for added brilliance, and then at the end of the section on measures 25 and 26 decide how fast the rolled chords should be. I would not hesitate to slow down the motion in measure 26. At measure 27, pay attention to the “*Un poco mosso*”, and try not to move too fast at first.

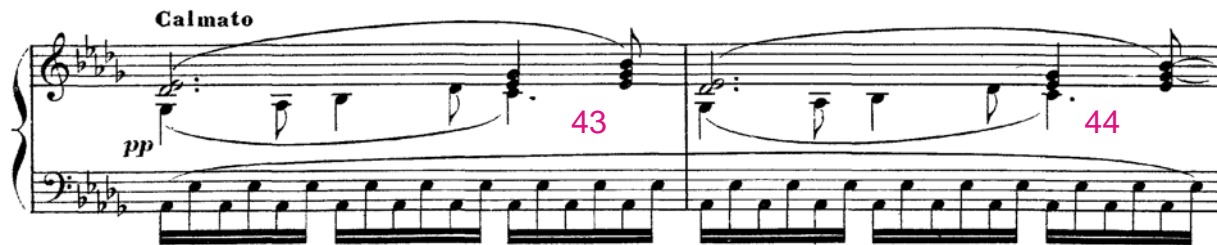
un poco mosso

I find here an Impressionist depiction of the moon over waves, so vary the left hand in rubato just as waves would rise and fall. Save your fastest playing for “*En animant*” at measure 37, and judge it so that the movement goes seamlessly to this moment.

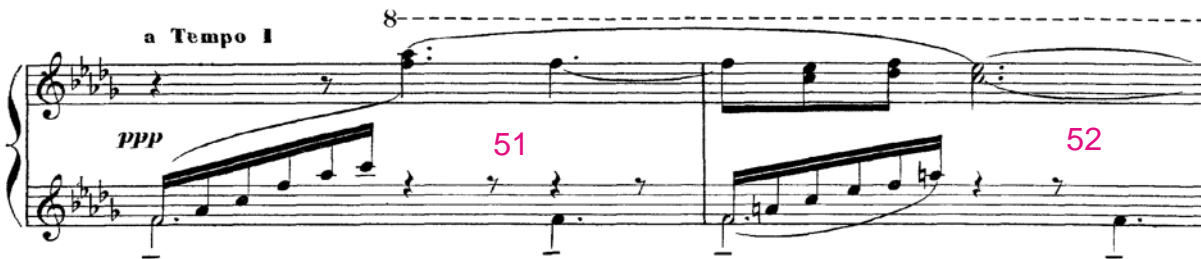
(continued on next page)



At measure 43, “*Calmato*”, think of it as a process of slowing down and also releasing the expressive energy from the climax gradually.



The beautiful passage at measure 51 where he indicates “*Tempo 1^o*,” for me is like a memory of the first page and brings us full circle emotionally.



(continued on next page)

Allow it to have its full rhythmical value as in the first page, and then treat the reference to the waves at measure 66 to the end as a memory of it as well.

pp morendo jusqu'à la fin



66 67

68 69



Photo courtesy of <https://www.facebook.com/pg/bergamo-e-bergamaschi-nel-mondo->