

10th March 2014 Michael Lewin Presents Beau Soir, An All-Debussy Album

Tell me about this Debussy album you're working on. Why Debussy? Why now? When did you fall in love with Debussy?

Debussy is one of the most special composers for me. He wrote what is for me some of the most beautiful, rewarding music to play and to live with.

Actually, when I was growing up I hadn't played much Debussy. I played a lot of meat and potatoes things in my teens. I played a lot of Chopin and Liszt and also Beethoven and Brahms, German and Romantic music. I was blessed with a certain natural virtuosity, or technical pianistic affinity. But I was very serious, not that interested in things like Rachmaninoff.



[\[http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-Vjfb2NztmGE/Ux4h20V9bII/AAAAAAAAAFw/RqiT_3UNzM4/s1600/Beau_Soir_Cover_RGB.jpg\]](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-Vjfb2NztmGE/Ux4h20V9bII/AAAAAAAAAFw/RqiT_3UNzM4/s1600/Beau_Soir_Cover_RGB.jpg)

When I entered Juilliard I felt that one of the few things I hadn't played enough of was the French Impressionists- Debussy and Ravel. I was very interested in French culture, and growing up was always reading French literature- historical fiction by Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo, and contemporary authors like Françoise Sagan.

In fact, my desire to really understand Debussy was a factor in my choosing to study with Irwin Freundlich when I entered Juilliard, as he was known for his acute understanding of French music. This music is very particular, and requires great sophistication, cultivation and sensibility.

After graduating I had the opportunity to work with Yvonne Lefébure who was one of the great French pianists and pedagogues and for two summers I studied with her in France. She was a disciple of Alfred Cortot, and she had known and played for Debussy in her youth. (She was in her 80's when I studied with her)! Her famous summer sessions were in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, which was the town Debussy was born in. I had my lessons and practiced at the same Conservatoire in Saint-Germain where Debussy had studied. It was amazing to walk those same streets, and to soak up the virtually unchanged atmosphere in which he had lived. On Bastille Day I would lie in the park and watch the fireworks as he once did, which must somehow effect my ideas about Feux d'artifice, which is on this disc. These kinds of physical experiences make you feel very close to a composer, and I was so fortunate to be able to study this

music with a woman who could actually tell me, "oh no, mon cher, Debussy liked it like this!"

Ever since then, it's been an important part of my repertoire. I am so grateful and excited to have the opportunity to be able to record some of my beloved Debussy, it is such a privilege.

Talk about interpreting Debussy. Were the historic piano roll recordings of Debussy playing influential at all?

To play Debussy requires a certain amount of what they call *sensibilité* in French, a certain cultivation that transcends just music. So much of it is about sound and the piano rolls don't capture sound, the piano rolls capture tempos, and sometimes attitude, but I can't say that I was really influenced by Debussy's piano rolls, although he was a wonderful pianist. He made very interesting performance editions of Chopin- but unfortunately didn't write any fingerings to help us in his own music!

In the second Book of *Préludes* which comprise a large part of this recording he was influenced by so many things- an urn that he saw, or a postcard he received from Spain that triggered a Spanish piece, or a work of Dickens that made him to write *Hommage à Pickwick* from the *Pickwick Papers*, or by nature. Other works were stimulated by art, such as *L'isle joyeuse* being inspired by a Watteau picture. Three of the pieces are Waltzes. His imagination and reaction to stimuli is unbelievable.

I think that to be a great Debussy pianist, you have to be extremely accurate in following what he wrote because he was so specific in his markings. After that, in many ways the options are limitless. You need great taste and imagination and most importantly, you must be a colorist.

A certain worldview is captured in the way you play Debussy. If you're well read, and you love art, and you love nature, and your imagination is free and unfettered and you're always acutely conscious of sound, then, perhaps, one can play Debussy beautifully. It's a very specific style and aesthetic.

Talk about this particular recording, Beau Soir.

The first two recordings that I did before this for Sono Luminus were theme recordings. If I were a Bird is a collection of pieces that were inspired by birds. In the one that just came out a few months ago, *Piano Phantoms*, the pieces are inspired by ghosts and goblins and phantoms- the spirit world.

This is the first album I've done for Sono Luminus where a majority of the pieces on this disc are standard repertoire, many of them often recorded. One should really have something very, very special and particular and unique and hopefully compelling and convincing to say about standard repertoire if one is going to set it down for posterity. Hopefully this disc will reflect my long involvement and experiences with Debussy.

How is the recording process different from playing a concert? Which do you like better?

It's always better to record music that you have already known and performed, if possible.. Sometimes I've made recordings of repertoire that I've learned for the recording. That never feels as good.

What I did for these sessions was always start by just performing each piece. Sometimes two, three times. Then I'd go over a few spots, make sure everything was clean, but hopefully the feeling will remain that it is a real performance, not

a stitched-together studio patch-job, but rather one that's feels like a concert experience. I basically did all the playing for this recording in two days.

Concerts and recordings are two different things, each with their own specific gratifications.

What is recording at Sono Luminus like? The piano? The space?

For me the entire Sono Luminus experience is unrivalled. I love it out here in the horse country of Virginia. There's something so calming and beautiful about it. And actually it felt specifically very nice for Debussy because there's so much nature. At home in Boston where I live, I'm a very fast driver. I'm very aggressive. I grew up in New York. I've driven in all the cities that people think are the most dangerous, and I embrace that. Here I drive like an old person. I look at the trees and the horses and the animals and it makes me feel transported, tranquil. It has felt very nice and appropriate for Debussy.

The whole setup here at Sono Luminus is so great. This big old stone church is a great recording environment, and having the whole company be headquartered here is so convenient and familial. I love the Steinway here, and it's great that I don't have to adjust to a new piano, but can return to one which I already know. I love my producer, Dan Mercurio, and we have a fantastic working relationship. I love everything here. It's just perfect. I stay at a magnificent antebellum mansion a few minutes away. I can't imagine a more idyllic environment in which to record.

Also, the superb quality of the recorded sound, and the contemporary and cutting edge way the company is going about presenting itself, and me, and all their projects is just tremendous. I just couldn't be happier. I'm also super excited that "Beau Soir" will be released in surround sound, which is a passion of Dan Shores and which has become a specialty of the label.

Is there such a thing as a typical week for you? What does the life of an artist look like?

Everything is a question of balance. Balance of time, of obligations, of need for solitude. As a pianist, and by inclination, I spend a great amount of time by myself. I prefer to just read and play the piano. However, I must balance my concert career and traveling, and my many responsibilities at home. I'm thrilled that my son Jeremy is here at the sessions with me, which is really special. The only thing that could make this week more perfect would be if my dog could be here! Although he sings when I play, so we would never get anything recorded...

When I am on tour, everything is very regimented, but in some ways blissfully simple. All I worry about is practicing, sleeping, playing the concert, eating. I love room service at hotels. In fact, I love hotels in general! Although I play in many fabulous places, much of the time all I see is the airport, the hall and the hotel. I do get to meet many spectacular people and make special friends when I travel, and that is a wonderful career benefit that I cherish.

At home I have a select group of eight students at the Boston Conservatory. They are quite gifted and advanced, so I can leave them to do their own work when I travel. Some of them are already playing a lot of concerts, entering big competitions, and they also come and go.

There is always the need to have sufficient time to practice, to learn new repertoire. The balance of repertoire is always central. Learning music for future performances and recording projects, for current concerts, and integrating that with all the other things that I need to do. My biggest struggles are to manage the "normal" aspects of life and my obligations

and responsibilities for other people. But I am so fortunate to be spending my life doing the only thing I have ever wanted, since I was six years old.

How much time to you spend at the piano each day?

There is no consistent answer to that. I practice the most when I have deadlines. If I have a concert next week, then the terror inspires makes me practice more. Deadlines are great for me. The busier I am the more that I work and I have no choice but to work. Otherwise I might spend more time just reading. On a normal day, I practice about four hours, but that can go up or down drastically.

Also, I'm thinking about music almost all of the time. Whether I'm reading about music, listening to music, teaching, or just thinking about it subliminally- my involvement is always percolating. So while there's time at the instrument, there's also a lot of time I wouldn't know how to calculate. I'm immersed in music in one way or another for most of my waking hours.

What's next for you?

Next year will be a follow-up Debussy disc including the 1st Book of Préludes, Estampes and other pieces that are not yet determined. If we are all very lucky, perhaps I can even convince Koji Attwood to whip up another beautiful transcription that will rival "Beau Soir"! I am extremely excited and grateful to make another Debussy recording for Sono Luminus, and look forward immensely to another year of immersion in this music.

In July 2013, Michael answered these questions on video for a promotional piece for the album Beau Soir. Here he has edited his answers to make them more readable. Here is the original video:

Michael Lewin - Beau Soir



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