

**F.A.M.E. III October 2006**  
**Claude Debussy**  
**1862 – 1918**

*(costume: white shirt, black coat, black hat, black pants)*

**Biography**

Achille-Claude Debussy (də-bü-sē') was born on August 22, 1862 in a Paris suburb. His mother worked as a seamstress, his father a traveling salesman and they owned a china shop. His aunt noticed his musical talent and as a result, Debussy started taking piano lessons from a student of Chopin. At 10, he entered the Conservatory in Paris. It was at the Conservatory that Debussy began to experiment with harmonies, much to the displeasure of his professors. When one of his professors inquired as to the rules Debussy followed, Debussy reportedly replied "None – only my own pleasure!"

In 1880, he went to work for Madame von Meck (von Meck provided a pension to Tchaikovsky, making a provision to Tchaikovsky that they were never to meet). While employed by von Meck, Debussy was required to teach piano lessons to her children in addition to playing classical music at the pleasure of his employer. He traveled with the family to Italy, Austria and Russia. He left von Meck's employ in 1882, returning to the Conservatory where he won a prestigious award, Prix de Rome. As part of the award, he studied in Rome where he became very depressed, yearning to return to Paris.

Debussy's music was influenced by Chopin, Liszt, and Wagner. He was influenced by Oriental music, especially after attending the Paris Exhibition in 1889. Early in his career, Debussy would appear in public as a pianist or as a conductor of his own works. He didn't enjoy performing and from the mid 1890s focused almost exclusively on composing. However, Debussy would periodically need to perform or conduct in order to support his somewhat lavish lifestyle. (A bit of trivia – Debussy supposedly couldn't compose unless his favorite porcelain frog was sitting in front of him).

He married twice, and had a daughter, Emma with his second wife. Unlike many of the F.A.M.E. composers, his circle of friends did not include composers but rather he associated with some of the leading French Impressionist poets and painters. In fact, he had little respect for most composers, referring to Beethoven as the "old deaf one" and later poked fun of Wagner in one of his compositions (*Golliwog's Cakewalk*).

Debussy struggled with colon cancer but continued to compose. He lost all interest in composing with the outbreak of World War I. After a year, he realized he would help in the struggle in the only way he could "by creating, to the best of my ability, a little of that beauty which the enemy is attacking with such fury". Debussy died from cancer in March 1918. France was under attack by the Germans, consequently there was no public funeral. The funeral procession made its way through the deserted streets of Paris as shells from German guns were ripping through the city.

**Music**

***"The Snow is Falling"***

**"The primary aim of French music is to give pleasure"**

*"There is no theory. You have only to listen. Pleasure is the law. I love music passionately. And because I love it, I try to free it from barren traditions that stifle it. It is a free art gushing forth, an open-air boundless as the elements, the wind, the sky, the sea. It must never be shut in and become an academic art"*.

While Debussy is referred to as an Impressionist composer, he was not pleased with that title. Instead, he viewed himself as a “Symbolist”, using sounds to stir feelings and sensations in the listener’s mind. He would spend long periods of time at the piano, trying out new rhythms, harmonies, new combinations of notes. His pieces also expected much pedaling on the piano to help create the feeling and mood. He wanted his music to sound improvised even though it was meticulously written.

*Sometimes the notes were bunched together, while other times they were laced at the end of the keyboard; and pedals were used to make notes and harmonies shift and blend. He found inspiration in the same images as those that attracted the French Impressionist painters - clouds, rain, wind, water, sunlight, and shadow. The result was a new and magical world of sound that inspired several generations of classical and jazz musicians.*

Debussy wrote the Children’s Corner Suite for his daughter Emma, who Debussy fondly referred to as ChouChou. Chou Chou literally means little cauliflower, but is a term of endearment, like “peanut”. It was made up of six movements. He used an English title for each of the pieces, in part to reflect his daughter’s relationship with her English nanny.

#### *The Snow is Dancing (track 17)*

It was made to be misty, sad and monotonous, and not too fast – not fast at all. The music is interpreted as a picture of a child watching the falling snowflakes from her window and waiting for the return of her playmates in the shining sun. Imagine you can feel the snow falling and twirling all around you as the music plays. Listen for the sustain pedal of the piano (the pedal designed to hold or prolong a note). It is used to get the “misty” effect. In other sections of the music he doesn’t use the pedal. Listen to how the snow falls, do you hear the drop to the lower notes of the piano, do you hear the piano notes rising as the snow is swirling, rising and falling to the ground?

#### *Golliwogg’s Cake Walk (track 19)*

This piece is inspired by American ragtime music. A Golliwogg is an impeccably dressed black rag doll that was popular when Emma was a child. The cake walk was a dance that was popular in the music halls of the 1890s. In the game, you walked to the music using specific steps. Whoever looked the most enthusiastic about getting cake would receive a slice. Debussy uses two melodies for this piece of music. The first, bounces around in a lively dance between loud and soft, then the next melody takes over, with a slower, calmer melody with the original melody returning to dance around the floor once more. Close your eyes. Can you imagine the cake walk taking place?

Feel free to play other tracks on the CD, the goal is to expose the children to his music. Track 14 from the Children’s Suite pokes fun of a piano student having to practice scales. Track 15 is a lullaby for a stuffed elephant, Jimbo. (*Imagine the mother elephant rocking her baby to sleep with her trunk*). Track 16 is a song for a doll. Track 18 is a little shepherd playing the flute in mountains (*you can hear the echo of his flute in the mountains*). Track 1 is one of his most well-known pieces, Clair de Lune. Children have probably heard this song in music boxes.