

FANFARE

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CHOPIN Nocturnes: No. 1, op. 9/1; **No. 5**, op. 15/2; **No. 7**, op. 27/1; **No. 8**, op. 27/2; **No. 17**, op. 62/1; **No. 18**, op. 62/2. **DEBUSSY Suite bergamasque. Préludes, Book 1: La fille aux cheveux de lin. Études: No. 11**, “Pour les arpèges composés” • Carlos Gardels (pn) • MSR 1847 (58:16)

The pianism on this recital disc is unusually poetic, particularly for our time. When Jane Austen titled one of her novels *Sense and Sensibility*, one might assume that sensibility, being poetic and refined, was preferable to the cool rationality of sense. In fact, she had the opposite in mind: Sensibility was a suspect trait, tied to unreliable emotions, fancies, and self-delusion. The 18th century doesn't foretell that the next hundred years would be swamped in sensibility—the Victorian era prized fantasy and romance at its height. It was an age when poets could be cultural heroes; it took its cue from the Elizabethans, when ambitious young men like Shakespeare and Marlowe sought the main chance in London by writing verse drama.

Whatever it was that crushed this aesthetic in modern times (the unimaginable carnage of two world wars is the beginning of an explanation), poetry is no longer the mark of our cultural heroes. I read the program notes to this superb recital of Chopin and Debussy piano music before listening to it, and a phrase jumped out at me when Carlos Gardels described the connection between the two composers as “a cosmic, eternal symbiosis between this pair of musical souls.” That's a Victorian flourish, and Gardels's style follows suit by placing musical poetry on a pedestal.

A native of Los Angeles who still performs and teaches there, Gardels plays six selected Nocturnes as beautifully as I've ever heard them. He has abundant technique—at 15 he made his concerto debut with a community youth orchestra playing the Rachmaninoff Third, a stunning feat. After training at the Manhattan School of Music and Indiana University in Bloomington, Gardels returned to southern California, where he teaches at a local college, performs concert lectures (150 to date, focusing on schools and retirement homes), nurtures many private students, writes a music blog, and also composes. It's the kind of profile you see from many musicians in the thriving culture of American music outside the international spotlight.

Yet you'd never expect from this sketch that Gardels possesses the kind of sensibility perfectly attuned to the Nocturnes. If you wanted to parse the necessary elements that a Chopin nocturne calls upon, they include advanced technique displayed effortlessly, skill at transitions between the lyrical tenderness of the outer sections and the drama of the middle section, a feeling for Chopin's aria-like melodies (derived, as frequently noted, from his love of the bel canto style of Bellini and Donizetti), an instinctive feeling for how to handle rubato, and the ability to sustain the moving line while executing elaborate embellishments. Finally, all of these elements must be fused into a whole that sounds natural and spontaneous.

Setting the bar this high, only a select group of pianists can be praised for arriving at the perfect result. I think Gardels has, which makes him rare but not unique—once every two or three years I encounter pianists who aren't well known but who, like him, maintain the highest standards. The only quality that great Chopinists on the order of Nelson Freire and Maurizio Pollini possess that sets them apart from Gardels is the utmost subtlety of touch. Occasionally his touch can be a little overstated, but this might be due to the piano, which has been somewhat thinly recorded and is lacking in richness.

The six Nocturnes cover a wide range, from op. 9 in 1831–32 to op. 62 in 1845. In the same vein, the Debussy group moves from early to late: *Suite bergamasque* was begun in 1888, and Étude No. 11, a study in arpeggios, is from 1915, three years before Debussy's death. This is such familiar music that no description is necessary, and arguably Debussy's two most famous pieces, “Clair de lune” and “The girl with the flaxen hair,” are included. Gardels gives everything the same instinctive poeticism as in his Chopin. He is never precious; in fact, he might have gone a shade too far in making Debussy sound direct. That he takes great pains to shape every phrase is shown in how personally Gardels interprets “Clair de lune”—it isn't a hackneyed piece, but it has received many hackneyed performances.

It is only natural in a debut recital for a pianist to put his best foot forward, and I'd have to hear a lot more to arrive at a settled judgment about Gardels's potential. I am confident that he has a special gift for Chopin and is very satisfying in Debussy. He's a genuine artist who deserves wider recognition. **Huntley Dent**