



# PIANO WORKS DEBUSSY

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## INTERVIEW WITH LISBETH GRUWEZ AND CLAIRE CHEVALLIER

**By its very title, *Piano Works Debussy* hints at a choice made among the many works for piano by the French composer. How did you make that choice?**

**Lisbeth Gruwez:** You can also read “works” as a transitive verb: “piano *works* Debussy!” We didn’t really focus on the “young Debussy,” but rather on his later works, compositions which are generally more solid, more anchored. But we first and foremost made choices based on what drew us, what carried us away, the pieces sort of chose themselves. We wanted to avoid illustration, and beyond that, to find a specific language for each piece. The whole show works according to that mindset: it’s a journey. What immediately drew us both in was the desire to bring together the dance of today and a pre-existing, written music, which remains strangely contemporary in its nature, almost “daring” in a way, by its colours, its tones.

**Claire Chevallier:** We indeed chose finished works to provide a platform for a new choreographic language. Some of them come from the *Préludes* cycle, which is at once the result of a research and a laboratory in and of itself. Some of the pieces from that cycle are more like textures, like formulas. We realised right away that the so-called “mature” pieces were indispensable, that they provided material for the dance, allowed us to find developments, when other couldn’t lead to the same richness of movements, didn’t in a word provide the same intensity. The *Estampes*, a cycle of three movements, which isn’t played as often, was the starting point of this work, soon joined by two *Préludes* from the first book and two from the second.

**Lisbeth Gruwez, three years ago you created a choreography set to Bob Dylan songs. Did your work with Claire Chevallier on Claude Debussy require you to approach the music differently?**

**Lisbeth Gruwez:** To find the right choreographic language for a piece, I have to improvise. I always try to make sure any given gesture corresponds to the music, be it Dylan or Debussy. *Lisbeth Gruwez dances Bob Dylan* only used hits. The idea for *Piano Works Debussy*, in addition to the improvisation during the creative process, would be to offer a trip, a journey. And to do so while remaining always open-minded, without any preconceptions. Claire plays with her back to me, while I move according to a different tempo. At first, I thought about dancing between the notes. This intuition changed over time, even though the feeling of a suspended dance remains in the show. Anyway, there is, in addition to the both of us, a third element: the space. We want to show its uniqueness. To find a different rhythm between music and dance, to play with the idea of being off beat, for instance by starting some movements and not finishing them. Our choreography turns the stage into a Debussy landscape.

**There’s something ineffable to the author of *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*. It’s a music it’s difficult to talk about, in spite of the visual nature of its titles. How would you talk about it today, Claire Chevallier, now that you’ve experimented with it beyond performance, on the stage?**

**Claire Chevallier:** The genius of Claude Debussy is the deconstruction of construction. He puts things in place, as in *Les Préludes – Des pas sur la neige* or *La Soirée dans Grenade*, and although he uses rhythmic formulas in a piece, he can all of a sudden deconstruct everything, ask the performer to slow down, to change their playing slightly, in an almost unspeakable way, but always with elegance! The pianist has to be supple and change the tempo; the shape of the piece evolves with those new variations. This form of flexibility with time, with rhythm, of which he writes in his letters, allows you in a way to lose track of time. When a musician plays his music, the challenge is to manage to keep a consistent beat. With this show, my playing sounds different: I’m in a dialogue with someone moving to it.

**By his work on form, isn't Claude Debussy an ideal composer for contemporary dance, which relies heavily on improvisation?**

**Lisbeth Gruwez:** When I listen to Claude Debussy, as someone who doesn't know much about classical music, I find myself in front of an incredibly and highly complex soundscape. Claude Debussy eschews leitmotifs, surprises us with his daring, the breaks in his music! I find this writing, this way of thinking, truly fascinating. It suits my work as a choreographer: the idea is not to discard recurring motifs entirely, but to find, by keeping the show about fifty percent improvised, ways to surprise the audience and myself. I'm always trying to find new things through improvisation, knowing that the material I end up with can always be reworked. All while working on this show, I've felt as if I was standing in front of a painter, trying to match colours. Just like in a watercolour painting, in which the use of water can change both the colours themselves and their depth, with subtlety and lightness.

**Claire Chevallier:** We exchanged a lot while working on this show; I talked a lot about this music to Lisbeth. Claude Debussy, like a third artist, is physically present with us onstage, with his genius for red herrings: melodies are always appearing and disappearing at the same time. To play like that, with my back to Lisbeth, only highlights the sensory nature of this "physical duo." But I've watched her during rehearsals! Lisbeth surprised me right away: in three or four "debussyst" notes, she was able to find unique gestures and ways to move through the music that are all hers. It's very impressive!

**Let's talk about your respective "artistic nature," without trying to box you in. Lisbeth Gruwez, your dance is, in a troubling way, at once fluid and sharp; as for you, Claire Chevallier, your recordings of Franz List, Maurice Ravel, or Francis Poulenc attest to your very earthly style, focused but not at all obsessed or cerebral...**

**Claire Chevallier:** I'll own to it, which doesn't mean this earthly quality is a permanent truth. For this type of performance, you also have to take into account the choice of period instruments, pianoforte or Érard piano. If the way you approach a new composer is always different, working with period instruments allows you to avoid the obvious and to venture into a new way of playing. Playing on an Érard piano or a pianoforte means a more dangerous battle with the score! It's riskier than on a modern instrument. I remember this concert, many years ago, where people thought I was improvising! You have to be aware of how people anticipate your movements when you play such an instrument: they can sound very different from what they expect, more strongly or softly!

**Lisbeth Gruwez:** Without trying to qualify my dance, I can see how I worked on some shows and composed them: how to explore a speech in *It's going to get worse and worse and worse my friend*, or a continuous movement with shifts in *Pénélope*. Today, my goal is not to let myself get trapped in any one process, to cut away everything superfluous to reach the essence of movement in my dance. A form of purity, even if I want this *Piano Works Debussy* to be urban, a sort of sneakers-wearing Debussy.

**Claire Chevallier:** What brought us together is this natural instinct, not cerebral at all! Even if our personalities are different, my performing style is similar to Lisbeth's. We trust each other: at our age, our instinct is sure. Jean Cocteau talked of instinct and method: instinct without method won't get an artist anywhere, but if method shapes instinct, it can lead to the creation of a superior instinct, that of the artist. That's where we meet, each with our own experience, and a shared taste for adventure.

**Lisbeth Gruwez:** There's this subtle line we walk between listening to the music and a precision in the movements which, in the end, lets us listen to the music differently. It requires an effort we've committed to. I used to come on stage as a performer wanting to conquer the space. In time, this desire changed. While fears and doubts are always a part of creation, *Piano Works Debussy* attests to our desire to work together in service of this music, rarely chosen by choreographers when it comes to those piano pieces. We went to that music right away to create a floating space, the hesitant trajectory of a tree leaf in movement, going this way and that, down, up, before falling to the ground. And with the fierce desire to give those piano notes physical shape...

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet the 15<sup>th</sup> January 2020 and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach