

Sounds of Childhood



STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

My intention with this program is to explore the idea of childhood through the piano works of four great composers.

All four composers on this program maintained a “wide-eyed” and “wide-eared” curiosity to the human condition in the essence of a child’s world. Like Robert Schumann when he wrote “Kinderscenen” at twenty-eight, at fifty-four I am remembering a joyful childhood.

As a little boy I would sit on the living room floor surrounded by records and listen for hours. I remember time spent with my grandmother on the swing set in our backyard. The two of us would hum and whistle familiar tunes or improvise new ones. These memories evoke a visceral experience of the timelessness of pure contentment. When allowed unstructured time to daydream and imagine, a child’s mind has the potential to delight, inspire, and offer new perspectives on the world we live in.

My goal as a pianist is to reach a level of “play” when working on a piece and ultimately when performing it. A great masterpiece is always fresh and inspiring, so long as the performer taps into their child’s mind. This state of mind can provide a sense of discovery, a sense of optimism, and ultimately, a sense of hope.



Concert Program

MOZART
1756-1791

Twelve Variations on
“Ah, Vous Dirai-Je, Maman”
K 265

SCHUMANN
1810-1856

“Kinderscenen”
Op. 15

CAGE
1912-1992

“Suite for Toy Piano”

DEBUSSY
1862-1918

“The Children’s Corner”



Cover Art: Untitled Edward Hopper, thought to be drawn at 9 years old

W.A. Mozart 1756-1791

W.A. Mozart was born in the beautiful, mountainous city of Salzburg, Austria on January 27, 1756. Mozart's musical legacy is immense. He wrote music for keyboard, violin, organ, orchestra, small chamber groups, symphonies, and opera. One of the giants of classical music, Mozart was fated to be born to an accomplished composer and violin teacher of significant reputation, Leopold Mozart. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was the youngest child and had the further good fortune to have an exceptionally gifted sister named Nannerl. The Mozart siblings were both virtuoso pianists and composers. Unfortunately, Nannerl was dissuaded by her father from pursuing her gifts professionally, primarily because women in the eighteenth century were discouraged from having a profession. Nannerl remained close to her brother and continued to provide support and perspective on new compositions. As a young man W.A. Mozart moved to the music capital of Vienna to pursue greater opportunities than those in Salzburg. He married Constanze Weber, an opera singer from a family of musicians. Their stable marriage produced six children, but only two would survive to adulthood. Karl the eldest, and Franz his younger brother, were fine pianists. Franz pursued a career in music and paid homage to his father through his composition style. Karl moved to Italy and became a government official. Neither brother married nor had children and the Mozart line ended with Karl's death in 1858. Years of travelling coupled with the stresses of life took a toll on Mozart and he died in Vienna on December 5, 1791, a month before his thirty-sixth birthday. Recent scholarship suggests Mozart died from complications due to strep.

Seeds of Childhood

During his youth, Mozart was the most famous child in Europe and his musical gifts became the standard by which all prodigies would be measured. Along with his elder sister Nannerl, Mozart entertained the aristocracies of Germany, Austria, France, England, Czechoslovakia, and Italy. (An exhausting schedule for the most seasoned traveller even by today's sophisticated modes of travel.)



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 1763-64
by Jean-Baptiste Greuze

Nannerl was Mozart's musical playmate. They created four-hand keyboard duets, accompanied one another on the violin, and composed together. Composing was a form of play for Mozart. Monarchs would devise musical test games for the child to solve. Mozart often improvised on a theme or melody by a leading composer of a country he was visiting. Scholars think Mozart was capable of constructing and

retaining an entire musical composition prior to writing it down.

A sophisticated mind like Mozart's was always playing with musical ideas. As a child Mozart absorbed and ultimately found the most elegant musical solutions to the harmonic theories he encountered. The ultimate child, Mozart lived in his musical imagination almost continuously, as a result he produced some of the most sublime works of art expressing the human condition. "...it is no wonder that his art drew its greatest strength from his wonderful ability to observe his fellow human beings. This was an innate gift, occurring, albeit in a childlike form, even during his boyhood and finding expression in which he characterized the artists he met." (p.731 of Hermann Abert's distinguished biography *W.A. Mozart*)

Twelve Variations on “Ah, Vous Dirai-Je, Maman”

Composers in the eighteenth century would commonly use familiar melodies from various European countries to generate a wider audience for their compositions. Mozart adopted this practice for his Twelve Variations on “Ah, Vous Dirai-Je, Maman,” a French children’s folk song based on the nursery rhyme “La Confiance Naïve.” One can imagine the original lyrics of the folk song inspiring the unique character of each Mozart variation. The following are examples.

Simplified Children’s Version

Oh! Shall I tell you, Mama,
What is causing my torment?
Daddy wants me to reason
Like a big, big person,
But I say that candies
Are worth more than the reason!

Original Poem

Ah! Shall I tell you, Mama,
What causes my torment?
Ever since I saw Silvandre
Look at me so tenderly,
My heart says every moment:
Can I live without a lover?

The original melody was composed by an anonymous source. Countries around the world have adapted this tune to simple children’s lyrics such as Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, the ABC song, Baa, Baa, Black Sheep, and numerous lyrics from European countries. Mozart composed his variations in the key of C major. This key is often used to suggest innocence and is the foundation key that all other keys are built on in the scale system known as the Circle of Fifths. Recent scholarship suggests these variations were composed between 1781-82, rather than Mozart’s Paris period of 1778, as originally thought. This melody has been used by J.C. Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Listz, and twentieth century composer John Corigliano.

“Ah, Vous Dirai-Je, Maman”

Theme in quarter notes.

1. Floral passage of the melody in sixteenth notes.
2. Sixteenth note scale patterns in binary form with the melody in fourths, fifths, and sixths.
3. The melody in triplets.
4. Accompaniment in triplets.
5. Playful, conversational treatment of the melody in rhythmic groups of two, then three.
6. Melody in eighth and sixteenth notes.
7. Lyrical scale passages with the feeling of a toccata.
8. Written in C minor, the parallel key to C major.
9. Elements of a canon with a return to C major, which echoes Haydn's Surprise Symphony, especially in the contrasting dynamics.
10. A character piece suggesting a conversation between a parent and child.
11. A melody anticipating Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 K. 267, the Andante movement, written in 1785.
12. In this variation, Mozart seems to say: “catch me if you can” through its binary form: the A section is a hide and seek while the B section is a duet of sixteenth note passages. The A section recapitulates, followed by a Coda.

Robert Schumann 1810-1856

Robert Schumann, the youngest of six children, was born on June 8, 1810 in Zwickau, Germany. Schumann would inherit his parents' passion for both music and literature. Schumann's father was an author and publisher while his mother adored music. The Schumann family had achieved an upper middle-class lifestyle through the success of their publishing company, financially sustaining young Robert into early adulthood.

Schumann had a classical education preparing him for a career in medicine or law. His music education was not as rigorous as his peers, Chopin and Mendelssohn. His family did make an effort to find good piano instruction and a foundation in music theory and composition, which he studied while receiving his classical education. Schumann studied law in college, but he was drawn to music composition and dropped law completely without finishing



The Music Lesson, 1860 by Christian Eduard Bottcher

his degree. Schumann married Clara Wieck in 1840 despite her father's objection to Schumann – perceiving him to be a second-rate composer and a rake. The Schumann's personal and professional relationship would become one of the great love stories in music history.

Clara was a renowned concert pianist at the time of her marriage to Robert. Despite their busy careers, Robert and Clara would have eight children, two of whom would become well-respected piano teachers. Recent scholarship suggests that Schumann was probably bi-polar, but his creative work in composition and music criticism helped keep his emotional life in balance. Middle age, however, brought a sharp decline in his mental health and Schumann died in an asylum in 1856.

Seeds of Childhood

Robert Schumann was extremely sensitive. Reading and music were his childhood companions. Music composition became a vehicle for his complex emotional world. "Above all, Schumann had a remarkable talent for improvisation, and he used this gift not only for his own satisfaction but also to entertain and amuse his friends. Almost every biographer of the composer mentions his ability to produce musical portraits that captured people's mannerisms, movements, speech patterns, and physical appearance in sound." (Peter Ostwald regarding Schumann's emotional world from Ostwald's book *Schumann, The Inner Voices of a Musical Genius*. p.17)

"Kinderscenen"

(Composed in 1838)

Schumann originally composed thirty reminiscences of childhood for *Kinderscenen* (Scenes from Childhood), but ultimately chose twelve for the set, and added a short piece at the end, "The Poet Speaks," which acts like a coda or commentary. Still a young man at twenty-eight when "Kinderscenen" was composed in 1838, Schumann seemed nostalgic about his own childhood and eagerly anticipated having his own family with Clara. Schumann wrote to her in 1838 while she was on tour: "It was like an echo of the words you once wrote to me: 'that I often seemed to you even to be like a child'; - in short, it was exactly as if I were in the heyday of my youth again." (*Jugendbriefe von Robert Schumann*, fourth edition, edited by Clara Schumann, Leipzig, 1910)

“Kinderscenen”

1. A Tale of Distant Lands (Key of G major) *
2. Curious Story (Key of D major)
3. Blindman’s Bluff (Key of B minor)
4. Pleading Child (Key of D major)
5. Perfect Happiness (Key of D major)
6. Great Adventure (Key of A major)
7. Reverie (Key of F major)
8. By the Fireside (Key of F major)
9. On the Rocking Horse (Key of C major)
10. Almost Too Serious (Key of G sharp minor)
11. Hobgoblin (Key of G major)
12. In Slumberland (Key of E minor)
13. The Poet Speaks (Key of G major)

*See the following description of key characteristics to find out why Schumann selected a particular key for each piece.

Affective Musical Key Characteristics

The association of musical keys with specific emotional or qualitative characteristics was fairly common prior to the 20th century. It was part of the shared cultural experience of those who made, performed and listened to music. When Mozart or Beethoven or Schubert wrote a piece in **A_b** major, for example, they were well aware that this was the “key of the grave” and knew that many in their audiences were as well. We lose a part of the meaning of their music if we are ignorant of their affective choices. Although these characteristics were, of course, subjective, it was possible to conceive of each key as unique because each key actually sounded distinct within unequal temperaments. When equal temperament became the dominant tuning after 1917, the aural quality of every key became the same, and therefore these affective characteristics are mostly lost to us. (*The Piano’s Ivory Cage*, David Loberg Code, Western Michigan University)

One of the most influential descriptions of characteristics shared in German-speaking cultures in the late 18th and early 19th century was from Christian Schubart's *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst* (1806).

C major: Completely pure. Its character is innocence, simplicity, naïvete, children's talk.

C minor: Declaration of love and at the same time the lament of unhappy love. All languishing, longing, sighing of the love-sick soul lies in this key.

D^b major: A leering key, degenerating into grief and rapture. It cannot laugh, but it can smile; it cannot howl, but it can at least grimace its crying. Consequently, only unusual characters and feelings can be brought out in this key.

C# minor: Penitential lamentation, intimate conversation with God, the friend and helpmate of life; sighs of disappointed friendship and love lie in its radius.

D major: The key of triumph, of hallelujahs, of war-cries, of victory rejoicing. Thus, the inviting symphonies, the marches, holiday songs and heaven-rejoicing choruses are set in this key.

D minor: Melancholy womanliness, the spleen and humours brood.

E^b major: The key of love, of devotion, of intimate conversation with God.

D# minor: Feelings of the anxiety of the soul's deepest distress, of brooding despair, of blackest depression, of the most-gloomy condition of the soul. Every fear, every hesitation of the shuddering heart breathes out of horrible d minor. If ghosts could speak, their speech would approximate this key.

E major: Noisy shouts of joy, laughing pleasure and not yet complete, full delight lies in E major.

E minor: Naïve, womanly, innocent declaration of love, lament without grumbling; sighs accompanied by few tears; this key speaks of the imminent hope of resolving in the pure happiness of C major.

F major: Complaisance and calm.

F minor: Deep depression, funereal lament, groans of misery and longing for the grave.

F# major: Triumph over difficulty, free sigh of relief uttered when hurdles are surmounted; echo of a soul that has fiercely struggled and finally conquered lies in all uses of this key.

F# minor: A gloomy key, it tugs at passion as a dog biting a dress. Resentment and discontent are its language.

G major: Everything rustic, idyllic and lyrical, every calm and satisfied passion, every tender gratitude for true friendship and faithful love; in a word, every gentle and peaceful emotion of the heart is correctly expressed by this key.

G minor: Discontent, uneasiness, worry about a failed scheme, bad-tempered gnashing of teeth, resentment and dislike.

Ab major: Key of the grave. Death, grave, putrefaction, judgment, eternity lie in its radius.

Ab minor: Grumbler, heart squeezed until it suffocates, wailing lament, difficult struggle, the color of this key is everything struggling with difficulty.

A major: This key includes declarations of innocent love, satisfaction with one's state of affairs; hope of seeing one's beloved again when parting; youthful cheerfulness and trust in God.

A minor: Pious womanliness and tenderness of character.

Bb major: Cheerful love, clear conscience, hope, aspiration for a better world.

Bb minor: A quaint creature, often dressed in the garment of night. It is somewhat surly and very seldom takes on a pleasant countenance. Mocking God and the world, discontented with itself and with everything, preparation for suicide sounds in this key.

B major: Strongly coloured, announcing wild passions, composed from the most glaring colours. Anger, rage, jealousy, fury, despair and every burden of the heart lies in its sphere.

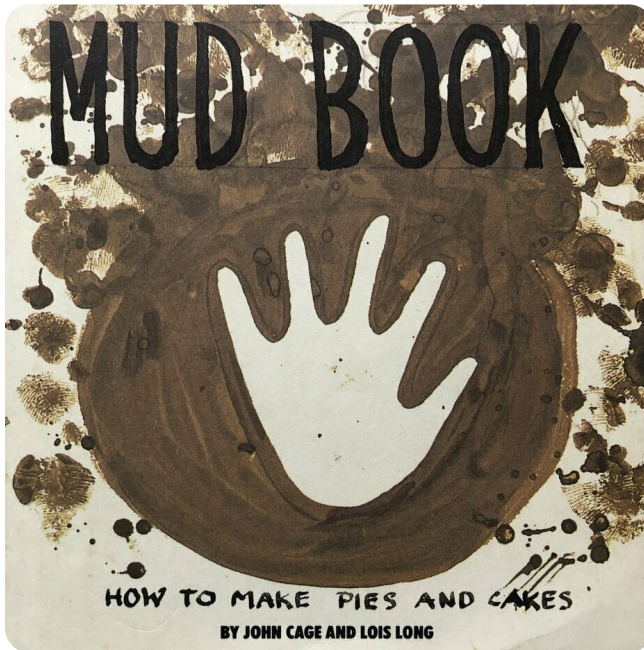
B minor: This is, as it were, the key of patience, of calm awaiting one's fate and of submission to divine dispensation.

Translated by Rita Steblin in *A History of Key Characteristics in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*, UMI Research Press (1983).

John Cage 1912-1992

John Cage, a native Californian, was born on September 5, 1912. Born to an inventor father and a journalist mother, Cage amplified their curious, innovative, and boundary-pushing minds and brought an American west coast sensibility to his musical composition, visual art and literary writings. Cage explored the possibilities of sound beyond the limits of his time.

As a college student, Cage studied music composition with Arnold Schoenberg, the Viennese modern composer whose compositions stretched the rules of classical harmony to a breaking point. Originally, Cage studied religion, philosophy and literature before deciding to devote his life to a career as a composer. He dropped out of college and travelled throughout Europe, absorbing its literature, sounds, visual art and atmosphere. One can imagine Cage asking himself: What is music? What is art? What are words? What is silence? Cage's travels led him back to the west coast in order to pursue fresh ideas. Cage was inspired by the world of modern dance



The Mud Book, 1983 by John Cage and Lois Long

to create music in a new way; he collaborated with modern dance visionaries such as Merce Cunningham, who became his lifelong romantic partner and artistic collaborator.

Cage influenced modern dance, performance art, traditional ideas about instruments (i.e. prepared piano*, toy piano), philosophy, spirituality, and encouraged awareness of the entirety of the world we inhabit. Cage's greatest legacy may have been his ability to perceive the arts and humanities with an eye, ear, mind and heart open to question. A life of creating, writing, painting, and composing ended on August 12, 1992 in New York City.

Seeds of Childhood

Not a great deal is written about Cage's youth, but we do know that he was an only child and began piano lessons in the fourth grade. He seemed to enjoy reading music rather than performing. In high school Cage studied with his first professional pianist, up until then he studied piano with knowledgeable relatives. Cage became passionate about writing and believed he wanted to pursue a career as a writer. He showed real promise and won a writing contest with a prize of speaking at the Hollywood Bowl. He graduated that year (1928) from Los Angeles High School as valedictorian, his prize-winning speech at the Hollywood Bowl proposing a day of quiet for all Americans. By being "hushed and silent," he said, "we should have the opportunity to hear what other people think." This speech is cited as an important moment in his life as it foreshadowed one of his most iconic musical compositions *4'33"* (*Four minutes, Thirty-three Seconds*) by more than thirty years.**

4'33" is performed at the piano. The pianist seems to be in a posture ready to play the keys, but instead the performer sits quietly for 4 minutes and thirty three seconds provoking the audience to experience the sounds in the room as music, which asks the question: "what is music?"

* Altering the string vibrations by inserting objects for percussive and unconventional affects

**John Cage (2021) Wikipedia. Available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/JohnCage>

“Suite for Toy Piano”

(Composed in 1948, scored for toy piano or acoustic piano)

In 1948, while faculty members at Black Mountain College, which attracted some of the most creative and influential minds of mid-twentieth century America, Cage and Merce Cunningham collaborated on a dance titled “A Diversion.”

Cage, with a healthy dose of humor, scored the short suite of five pieces for either toy or acoustic piano. Like a child pretending to be a composer, he included louds and softs and pedal effects – none of which are available on a toy piano. This seems to be Cage’s nod to the historic rivalry between Satie and Debussy: As a sarcastic joke aimed at Debussy and his meticulous notes to the performers of his compositions, Satie gave nonsensical directions to the performers of his.

“Suite for Toy Piano” is a perfect example of Cage asking “what if” or “why not”? The link between the dance and the music is the phrase structure instead of a formal story, which dominates much of the collaboration of choreography and music. Cage’s idea is that each art form would be independent of the other even though they were happening simultaneously, connected only by the length of the numerical phrase. Cage seemingly placed himself back in his child’s mind and composed



John Cage, photographed by Ben Martin, Time Life Pictures

“Suite for Toy Piano” with curiosity, playfulness, and unrestricted inventiveness. One can imagine Cage saying to Cunningham: “let’s play!”

The suite is composed of five short pieces and uses only nine white keys on the toy piano (E below middle C, up to F above middle C).

“Suite for Toy Piano”

1. 7 measure phrases G to D five of the nine tones
2. 7 measure phrases G to D five of the nine tones
3. 6 measure phrases E to F all of the nine tones
4. 6 measure phrases E to F all of the nine tones
5. 4 measure phrases G to D five of the nine tones

To further explore John Cage’s life, see “An Autobiographical Statement” at johncage.org.

Claude Debussy 1862-1918

Claude Debussy was born to a humble working-class family on August 22, 1862 in the Cote-d'Or region of France. Two years later the family moved to Paris for employment. As a child Claude showed a natural ability at the piano and was encouraged by his father's artistic friends to study at the conservatory. During his early years at the conservatory Debussy's unique musical ideas began to emerge. An underlying rebellious streak fueled Debussy's quest for an original and an essentially French sound. While on summer break from the conservatory Debussy became the piano teacher for the children of Tchaikovsky's patroness, Madame Melk, in Russia, which afforded him summer employment and exposure to the music and aristocratic surroundings of his employer plus the opportunity to travel with the family throughout Europe.

During this time Debussy fell in and out of love with the music of Wagner, the revolutionary dominating the European music world. Debussy admired the enormity of Wagner's gifts, but realized he had a very different musical language in mind. Debussy's ultimate rejection of Wagner, his embrace of musical exoticisms of the nineteenth century Russian school, and his exposure to the sounds of the far east that he experienced at the World's Fair of 1899, culminated in a cohesive sound of the senses throughout his compositions.

While married to his first wife, Debussy began a relationship with Emma Barduc, creating a scandal. The couple eventually married and had one child, Claude-Emma Debussy. "The Children's Corner" was written especially for Emma. Colon cancer and the ravages of WWI contributed to Debussy's relatively early death at the age of fifty-six. He died at home in Paris on March 25, 1918. His beloved daughter would die within a year from complications related to diphtheria.



Claude Debussy and Claude-Emma known as Chou Chou,
early 20th century photographer unknown

Seeds of Childhood

Debussy was home schooled and grew up in Paris. Early in his childhood Debussy's mother moved the family to two tiny rooms to escape the Franco-Prussian War raging in Paris, a result of her husband's imprisonment during the war. One could imagine Debussy sitting for hours in a dream state to cope with the instability of his home life. "The episode was to leave its mark on him. It accentuated his introspective nature, left a secret resentment against officialdom, encouraged his sense of ambition, resolved him to avenge his father's failures and to establish himself in a world where the scrupulous have none of life's rewards." (p.311 of *The Family and Childhood of Debussy* written by Marcel Dietschy)

He began his studies at the conservatory around ten years old. While there Debussy was hired as an accompanist to Madame Pelouze-Wilson, a wealthy socialite and talented singer who owned Chenonceau, once the royal residence of Henry the Second and Catherine De Medici. This experience gave Debussy a taste for great beauty, fine art, good food, and exposure to the literary giants of his age such as Edgar Allen Poe among others. The following summer Debussy travelled with Madame Melk, teaching her children and

entertaining her guests. This relationship would have great artistic influence on young Debussy. He was regarded as part of the family and afforded access to Russian composers such as Tchaikovsky and Mussorgsky. “His own work was influenced not by Tchaikovsky, but by other Russian composers—Borodin, Balakirev, and especially Mussorgsky—whose works were steeped in the characteristic oriental flavors of Russian folk music... His summer at Chenonceau and three seasons with the von Melks were marvelous opportunities for him to learn the politesse of cultured society and to develop a useful patina of social grace.” (p.25 and p.26 of *Afternoon of A Faun* written by Harvey Lee Snyder)

“The Children’s Corner”

(Composed from 1906-1908)

Debussy’s masterpiece “The Children’s Corner” creates an atmosphere of childhood inspired by his daughter Claude-Emma Debussy. Debussy composed a sound world evocative of the senses of childhood. These six pieces encapsulate the essence of observation and preservation of his daughter’s childhood in sound. Debussy is quoted as saying: “I wish to sing of my interior visions with the naïve candour of a child.” (inspiringquotes.us)

“The Children’s Corner”

1. “Doctor Gradus and Parnassum”

- Written in the key of C major, a seeming pure sound
- A finger exercise becomes a melodic fantasy inspired by Clementi’s “Gradus ad Parnassum”
- A brief half-step departure to D flat major with sixteenth note arpeggios adds a wistful moment before returning to the key of C major

2. “Jimbo’s Lullaby”

- Playing between the key of B flat major and D minor
- Thought to be inspired by either a stuffed toy Emma owned or an elephant named Jimbo, who lived in a park in Paris
- Perhaps inspired by an outing to visit the elephant with father and daughter; melody in the bass representing the elephant’s tune

- A lighter melody enters later perhaps Emma's voice
- Debussy uses the Pentatonic scale for the elephant's melody

3. "Serenade for the Doll"

- Alternating between the key of E major and E flat major, known as a parallel modulation with a melody in the soprano range
- Perhaps a child singing to her doll or visa- versa. Maybe her dolls sharing a song?

4. "The Snow Is Dancing"

- Flirting with the key of d minor ending in the relative major key of F
- An exquisite atmosphere piece written with soft colorful pitches and requiring a very light touch from the performer
- A melody peers out like a child's emotions looking out a window on a snowy day or their disappointment at cancelled plans

5. "The Little Shepherd"

- Written in the key of A major with elements of the relative minor F sharp minor, ultimately ending in A major
- An ancient pastoral scene. Perhaps Greece, or France, or Spain
- A melody emerges and disappears
- May have been inspired by a work of art or memories of travel
- Ancient wood flutes seem to inspire the color and tone

6. "Golliwogg's Cakewalk"

- Written in the key of E flat major with a distant key modulation to the key of G flat major and returning to E flat major with a recap of the opening material
- A playful ragtime
- A sweet piece paying homage to American ragtime and the two-step

Ironically, the children's books that inspired this piece would not be published today for their racially insensitive portrayal of African culture. For all of Europe's sophisticated cultural developments, persistent nationalistic fervor was on the rise leading up to and beyond WWI. Musically the listener will hear the imitations of a banjo contrasted with lush melodic quotations from Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde." Debussy poking fun at Wagner.