

At the Piano

The series “At the Piano” is intended for all those who have some experience playing the piano and would now like to play easier original works by famous composers. Students, teachers and those returning to the piano will encounter a wealth of well-known works.

Contents

Each volume in the series is devoted exclusively to one composer. This is because each composer has his own style and thus places his own very personal demands on his piano works – not only from the point of view of technique but also as regards musical interpretation.

Technique

All of the pieces have been arranged in progressive level of difficulty. They enable you to practise very different pianistic skills, including runs, breaking chords, arpeggios, parallel thirds, trills, playing chords and polyphonic playing. Thus most of the pieces also prepare you for more demanding pieces by the composer in question. We have endeavoured to keep variety in mind when compiling the pieces: slower ones follow faster ones, dances come after studies, variations after sonata movements, etc.

Urtext

All of the pieces have been edited according to the strictest Urtext principles, as have all Urtext editions by G. Henle Publishers. In short, this means that the musical text is unaltered and presents the composer’s intentions. Additions that are essential – even great composers occasionally make mistakes – have been given in parentheses. And as we do not wish to dispense with the

aid of fingerings, we clearly differentiate between the ones we have added (in normal writing) and those that are original (in italics). Composers in the Baroque, Classical and even Early Romantic periods were extremely sparing with indications regarding articulation, phrasing, dynamics and tempo. This was because in those days they could assume that experienced players already knew how something was to be played. This might not always be immediately clear to musicians today. Nevertheless, in our Urtext editions we deliberately do without “well-intentioned” additions and questionable alterations, as are often to be found in other editions. Those who use our editions are free of such patronisation; they can be sure of the authenticity of the musical text and make the most of the ensuing flexibility for their own stylistically confident interpretation.

Guide

This cannot, of course, be done without any help at all. The series “At the Piano” provides an introduction to dealing with Urtext editions as well as a first pedagogical guide on how to get to grips with original works of an easy and medium level of difficulty from a technical and musical point of view. To this end, each piece is preceded by some information on practising it, on its history and on understanding the musical text. In so doing we would like to provide players with a foundation upon which they can develop their own approach to the work, their own personal interpretation and above all, enjoy making music. Pianists who are enthusiastic and prepared to put in a little effort – no matter whether young or old, starting to play or returning to the instrument – will then be able to play their Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms or even Liszt with conviction.

Playing Debussy

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) was born into rather modest circumstances in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a smaller town west of Paris. Although his father was a passionate operetta enthusiast, hardly any other musical stimuli came from the family home. It was Debussy's godparents who organised his first piano lessons. Luckily the attention of a professional piano teacher – Antoinette Mauté – was soon drawn to the boy. She took him under her wing and within two years had prepared him for the entrance exam to the Paris Conservatoire, which he passed. She claimed to have been a pupil of Chopin and the influence of Chopin's harmony and musical language proved ground-breaking for Debussy. He considered Chopin to be the greatest of all composers for the piano, as “with the piano alone he already discovered everything”. It was probably also predominantly Chopin's cultivation of a refined touch which Antoinette Mauté passed on to her pupil and which was to become so typical for his piano style. It was no coincidence that following his initial success as a solo pianist at the Conservatoire, Debussy was predominantly recognised for his qualities as an accompanist.



Stylistically other musical influences were of significance for Debussy. He was a great admirer of the French Baroque composers Rameau, Lully and Couperin (see no. 6, *Sarabande*) and prized the music of J. S. Bach. Of course, the musical giant of the time, Richard Wagner, also influenced his composing. As piano teacher to the children of Nadezhda von Meck, who had also been Tchaikovsky's patroness, he travelled to Russia in 1880 and was filled with enthusiasm for Rimsky-Korsakov's and Borodin's music. Alongside these European models, there were above all non-European influences that shaped his music, including the music

of the Javanese gamelan orchestra, which he had come across at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1889, or later also jazz music, which was still in its infancy. In the case of the former it was especially the unfamiliar intonation with its pentatonic scales that fascinated him, and in the latter he was enthralled by the free harmony that arose from improvisation and the new feeling for rhythm (see no. 5 *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*). However, the influence of the much maligned “salon music” of the time should also not be underestimated. Although Debussy rejected its superficial sweetness, he gladly adopted its fine, iridescent harmonies, fusing them with his own tonal language (see no. 7, *La plus que lente*).

Debussy forewent giving opus numbers to his works. The French musicologist François Lesure edited a catalogue of Debussy's complete works in 2003, arranging them chronologically and assigning them consecutive numbers (from L. 1 to L. 150).



Pieces 2, 4 and 6 in this volume are works from the early 1890s; all of the other ones were written between 1901 and 1910, during which time Debussy increasingly devoted himself to piano and chamber music. So these are all works from his mature period. As with many artists this meant less superfluous padding and greater clarity. At the same time he also increasingly dissipated Classical-Romantic harmony. For this reason his pieces are often not easy to read for pianists who are used to the music of Bach, Beethoven or Brahms, as they do not progress with the usual combination of chords and sequence of notes, but instead go in completely new directions, without, however, ever becoming atonal. For this reason, you also have to approach Debussy's piano pieces to a certain extent from a visual perspective.