

Claude Debussy

“Petite Suite” (orch. Henri Büsser)

ACHILLE-CLAUDE DEBUSSY was born at St. Germain-en-Laye, Department of Seine-et-Oise, France, on August 22, 1862, and died in Paris on March 25, 1918. The “Petite Suite,” for piano duet, is a very early work, probably dating from late 1888. Debussy himself and his future publisher Jacques Durand gave the first performance, on March 1, 1889. Debussy entrusted an orchestra version to Henri Büsser in 1907, the orchestral version being premiered in November of that year.

THE SCORE OF THE “PETITE SUITE” in Büsser’s orchestration calls for two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, cymbals, tambourine, triangle, harp, and strings.

Debussy composed his popular *Petite Suite* soon after the publication of the two *Arabesques* for piano, his first works to see print, and it is part of the same world of delicacy and grace, though as of yet only hinting at the original voice that Debussy was to develop in just a few years (*Prélude à l'Après-midi d'une faune* was composed 1891-94). But it has become very popular in the transcription for small orchestra of Henri Büsser (1872-1973; yes, he lived to within two months of his 102nd birthday), one of the last remnants of the French 19th-century tradition. The pieces are unassuming, yet charming, and—as Debussy’s biographer Edward Lockspeiser has pointed out—each one seems to echo a different predecessor in French music. Moreover, the titles of the first two pieces appear in Verlaine’s *Fêtes galantes*, one of Debussy’s favorite places to look for song texts, so it is possible that he had images in mind from the Verlaine poems with those titles. Certainly the third movement is a transcription of another Debussy song, from 1882, by coincidence entitled *Fête galante*, but with a text by Théodore de Banville; Debussy described the song as “Louis XIV music with 1882 ideas.”

*En bateau* is a cool barcarolle that suggests Fauré. The second movement, *Cortège*, has a colorful swagger with the lilt and color of Bizet. The soft and delicate *Menuet* is a gem of lightness, possibly pointing to Massenet. And the final *Ballet* suggests, at least in its main material, the verve of Chabrier, though the central waltz could come straight out of a ballet by Delibes. All in all, entirely suitable models for a young French composer, who here shows that he has learned quite well how the musical world of his day works—and after this set out to change it.

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