

Claude Debussy

“Dances sacrée et profane,” for harp and string orchestra

ACHILLE-CLAUDE DEBUSSY was born on August 22, 1862, at St. Germain-en-Laye, France, and died on March 25, 1918, in Paris. He composed these two “DANSES pour HARPE Chromatique avec accompt d’orchestre d’instruments à Cordes” (as the title appears on the first page of the score; “Dances for chromatic harp with string orchestra”) in 1904, also producing an arrangement for two pianos that year. Edouard Colonne conducted the first performance, in Paris on November 6, 1904.

The *Dances sacrée et profane* of Claude Debussy—who had composed his *Faun* Prelude about a decade earlier and was, in 1904, when he wrote these dances, still working on *La Mer*—were a promotional endeavor, commissioned by the piano- and harp-manufacturing firm of Pleyel to demonstrate the possibilities of the new design of the chromatic harp. The instrument, meant to make things easier for players of that angelic but bewildering (for non-harpists) instrument, was a failure. It was hideously heavy (about 130 lbs.), required players to learn an entirely new technique, and, worst of all, could only produce glissandos in the key of C. Still, we must be grateful to Gustave Lyon, Director of Pleyel, Wolff, & Cie., for his misstep, for Debussy transmuted his advertising copy into poetry. The “Sacred Dance” is atmospheric and grave, while the “Profane” one might best be described as a waltz with Spanish seasoning.

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