Claude Debussy – La fille aux cheveux de lin (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair)

What does the title mean?

- La fille aux cheveux de lin means “The Girl with the Flaxen Hair”; flaxen describes very light golden or blonde hair.
- The title is linked with Leconte de Lisle’s poem of the same name. Debussy had also written an earlier, unpublished song setting of this poem in the 1880s.
- The piano prelude does not tell a literal story. Its restrained dynamics, uncluttered opening and predominantly pentatonic melody create a simple, pastoral atmosphere appropriate to the poetic image.
- In bb. 1–4 the melody begins alone before harmony enters, making the opening sound especially clear and unadorned.
- The return of the opening idea near the end (from b. 28) restores the quiet character after the more animated central passage.

Keys / Modulations

- Home key: G-flat major.
- bb. 1–4: G-flat major is established by the opening pentatonic melody and its harmonic support.
- bb. 5–7: a brief move to E-flat major, with a cadence in that key around b. 6; this is temporary rather than a large new tonal section.
- bb. 8–14: G-flat major is re-established.
- bb. 15–16: C-flat major (the subdominant) is briefly emphasised.
- bb. 17–21: E-flat becomes increasingly important; the passage reaches the work’s dynamic high point at b. 21.
- bb. 22–23: the harmony redirects toward G-flat, but the tonal effect is intentionally less clear-cut than a conventional Classical progression.
- bb. 24–38: G-flat major again governs the closing part of the piece.

Period and Style

- Early twentieth-century French music. The prelude belongs to Debussy’s Préludes, Book I, published in 1910.
- Debussy is commonly associated with Impressionism, although he objected to the label when it was applied to his music.
- 20th century Impressionism includes: use of modes, parallel harmonic movement, pedalling for colour, weakened cadence points, influences from world music e.g. ragtime, Javanese gamelan.

Claude Debussy – Biography

Claude Debussy was a French composer and one of the most influential composers early twentieth century. Born near Paris in 1862, he entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten, where he studied piano and composition. In 1884 he won the prestigious Prix de Rome, which enabled him to study in Rome. His music is often associated with Impressionism, although Debussy considered himself a Symbolist. Debussy's personal life was complicated. He had several significant relationships. He married Rosalie “Lilly” Texier in 1899, but the marriage later broke down. He subsequently began a relationship with Emma Bardac, whom he married in 1908. They had one daughter, Claude Emma Debussy, born in 1905 and affectionately known as Chouchou. Debussy was devoted to his daughter and dedicated his piano suite *Children's Corner* to her. His best known works include *Clair de lune, La mer*, *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune*, *Préludes, Images, Children’s Corner* and the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. He composed extensively for piano as well as writing orchestral, chamber, vocal and operatic music. Debussy developed cancer and underwent surgery in 1915. His health continued to deteriorate, and he died in Paris on 25 March 1918, aged 55, during the final months of the First World War.

Genres

- **Choral music –** Sacred and secular works for chorus, including Trois chansons de Charles d'Orléans.
- **Songs / mélodies –** Numerous French art songs and song cycles, including Ariettes oubliées and Fêtes galantes.
- **Solo instrumental music –** Syrinx for solo flute is an important example.
- **Chamber music –** String Quartet, Violin Sonata, Cello Sonata, Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp.
- **Incidental / theatre music –** Le Martyre de saint Sébastien.
- **Opera –** Pelléas et Mélisande; he also left operatic projects unfinished.
- **Ballet / dance works –** Jeux and Khamma.
- **Symphonic poems / orchestral preludes –** Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune.
- **Orchestral music –** La mer, Nocturnes, Images pour orchestre.
- **Piano duet and two-piano music –** Petite Suite, Six épigraphes antiques, En blanc et noir.
- **Solo piano music –** Préludes, Images, Estampes, Études, Suite bergamasque, Children's Corner, Arabesques.

Structure / Form

- A useful Grade 7 reading is ternary form with a coda: A – B – A^2 – Coda. Other analysts divide the piece differently, so the exact formal boundaries are interpretative rather than absolute. This is like a poem.

A – bb. 1–11

- bb. 1–4: the principal pentatonic idea is introduced, beginning without accompaniment.
- bb. 5–7: contrasting chordal writing leads briefly into E-flat major.
- bb. 8–11: the opening idea returns with fuller harmonic support and settles again around G-flat.

B – bb. 12–23

- bb. 12–16: the opening material is extended and developed; C-flat major is briefly brought into focus in bb. 15–16.
- bb. 17–21: the line rises and the texture intensifies, reaching mf and the registral high point at b. 21.
- bb. 22–23: the tension falls away and the harmony turns back toward the home-key area.

A^2 – bb. 24–32

- bb. 24–27: quiet parallel chordal writing prepares the return of the opening material.
- bb. 28–32: the opening melody returns high in the register above sustained harmony, now sounding more remote and settled.

Coda – bb. 33–38

- bb. 33–34: a softly repeated figure recalls material heard earlier in the central section.
- bb. 35–36: an ascending pentatonic gesture, voiced largely in parallel fourths, leads into the final tonic.
- bb. 36–38: G-flat harmony is prolonged to the end, with the sound fading away.

Notation and Terms

- **Très calme et doucement expressif –** Very calm and gently expressive.
- ♩ **= 60 –** Approximately 60 crotchet beats per minute.
- **sans rigueur –** Without strictness; the pulse need not be mechanically rigid.

- **Cédez –** Give way: ease the tempo.
- **Mouvt. / Mouvement –** Return to the preceding tempo.
- **très peu –** Very little.
- **un peu animé –** A little more animated.
- **sans lourdeur –** Without heaviness.
- **très doux –** Very gently / very softly.
- **Murmuré et en retenant peu à peu –** Murmured, while gradually holding the tempo back.
- **perdendosi –** Gradually dying away in sound.
- **p –** Piano – soft.
- **pp –** Pianissimo – very soft.
- **mf –** Mezzo-forte – moderately loud.
- **più p –** Softer / more piano.
- **crescendo hairpin (<) –** Gradually increase the sound.
- **diminuendo hairpin (>) –** Gradually decrease the sound.
- **tenuto line –** Sustain the marked note for its full value, often with slight weight.
- **accent (>) –** Give the marked note additional emphasis.
- **slur –** Play the notes as a connected phrase or gesture.
- **tie –** Sustain one pitch across the combined written note values.
- **triplet (3) –** Fit three equal notes into the duration normally occupied by two of the same written value.
- **spread-chord sign –** Sound the notes of the chord in rapid succession rather than simultaneously; follow the edition's footnote where a particular grouping is specified.