



Celestial Blue

Celia García-García

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Celia García-García [celesta](#)

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|---|--|------|
| 1 | Claude Debussy
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7	Erik Satie Gnossiennes: No. 3	3:09
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10	Jesús Guridi Tres piezas breves: Nostalgia	2:45
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13	Johannes Brahms Cradle song	2:01
	Total playing time	43m44s





About the album

I first heard about the existence of the celesta during my piano studies in San Sebastián, Spain, in 2004, playing the original version of Debussy's *Les chansons de Bilitis*: a dancer, two harps, two flutes, celesta, and a pseudotranslation of Ancient Greek poems. So enchanting!

Normally playing celesta is just an incidental experience for an aspiring pianist, too busy unraveling the difficulties of endless piano repertoire. As a matter of fact, many professional pianists have not even as much as played one key of a celesta. As I continued my studies, I moved to The Netherlands and dedicated my Masters to orchestral playing. Playing celesta is an important task of the orchestral pianist: in symphonic repertoire the celesta shines.

During my time at the conservatory, I came in contact with Schiedmayer Celesta in Stuttgart, Germany; the only manufacturer of celestas in the world. Elianne Schiedmayer kindly answered all my questions, and there were many as I did not have an instrument at my disposal except during the short periods when I was playing with an orchestra.

Der Rosenkavalier, Lieutenant Kijé, Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta, Das Lied von der Erde... at the sound of the first notes of the celesta, the atmosphere changes; from mundane to magical, from gloomy to hopeful. It often struck me that despite the hypnotizing sound and technical possibilities of the instrument, there was barely any original repertoire for celesta more than 120 years after its invention, and no solo recitals or recordings whatsoever.

I decided to act: with Schiedmayer's support I began arranging (mostly) piano music and organizing celesta concerts. I was terrified for my first concert: perhaps no one writes solo pieces for celesta because the audience does not want to hear it? It took just one performance and the sight of the delighted faces in the audience after each piece to realize that there was no celesta music because people did not realize that the celesta even existed!

At first sight, the celesta may look like a piano because of its keyboard, but the

qualities of its sound make it a completely different instrument. It has a maximum of 5,5 octaves; that is 66 keys opposed to 88 on a piano. The attentive listener will notice small differences from the original scores in this album, for example in the left hand of the Arabesque and the Rêverie; and in most arrangements, there is a change or jump in octave registers respecting the original to fit the composition into the range of the celesta.

Thick chord textures in the high register that work beautifully in a piano result in a cacophony of ringing harmonics in the celesta. The lower register of the celesta has a shorter sustain than the heavy low strings of a piano. The sound does not build up in the low and middle register as it does on the piano, because of the fast decay of the sound in the struck steel plates, as opposed to vibrating strings in a piano. All of this means that not every (piano) piece is suitable for a celesta version.

The particularities of its sound translate into poor expressive possibilities in, for example, Romantic repertoire, but on the other hand, these particularities create excellent conditions for many compositions including Baroque harpsichord music and plenty of Impressionistic compositions. Thick low chords that may sound fuzzy in the piano deliver delightfully rich chords in the lower register of the celesta. The celesta's long sustained and penetrating high notes make for very expressive melodies. The low/middle register is very pleasing to the ear, but it is underrepresented in the existing original repertoire. In this album I have made abundant use of these and other compositional resources that work best on the celesta.

The celesta is dreamy, heavenly, and invokes magical fairytale scenes. This album is a journey that highlights the dream and the magic, but touches upon some darker, desolated and gloomy contrast along the way, before arriving at a soothing and calming end.

It is celestial. It is blue.

Celestial Blue.

The celesta

The celesta was invented in 1886 in Paris by Auguste Mustel and his father Charles-Victor Mustel and got its name due to its celestial or heavenly sound (the fact that Auguste Mustel's sister was called Célesta probably did not hurt either!). It was presented to the public for the first time at the World Fair in Paris in 1889. The instrument won the *Grand Prix de l'Exposition Universelle de Paris 1889* and Victor Mustel received the order *Chevalier de la légion d'honneur* for his invention.

J. & P. Schiedmayer, later to be called Schiedmayer Pianofortefabrik, built the first celesta in Germany in 1890, following the precise specifications in the patent of the inventor. Mustel terminated production in 1975. Other celesta makers appeared, such as Morley (England) and Simone Bros (USA), but they have also ceased production. Schiedmayer Celesta GmbH in Stuttgart (Germany) remains the only company in the world to manufacture the celesta according to Mustel's patent.

The instrument used in this recording is a Schiedmayer 5 ½ octave model studio kindly provided by Schiedmayer Celesta GmbH.

The unmistakable sound of the instrument is produced by its special mechanism: by pressing a key on the keyboard, a felt hammer is triggered which strikes the top of a steel sound plate. Beneath the plate is a wooden resonator. This resonator makes a big difference in timbre between a celesta and for example a keyboard-glockenspiel, which has a much sharper tone. The celesta has one pedal which follows the same principle as the sustain pedal in a grand piano. It is a transposing instrument, sounding an octave higher than notated.

While the mechanics of the instrument still follow the design by Mustel, the outer case of the celesta has been adapted to be more comfortable for the player. The keys of modern models are the same size as piano keys rather than the smaller keys of older exemplars. The pedal has been moved to the right side instead of the middle of the instrument for a more comfortable reach. Celestas are built entirely in the factory in Germany and one celesta takes up to twelve weeks to

complete.

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899) used the celesta as soon as 1888 in his incidental music for *La tempête* by W. Shakespeare. The breakthrough for the instrument came in 1892 with the premiere of the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* from the ballet *Nutcracker* by P. I. Tchaikovsky. From that moment on, composers regarded the instrument as a valuable extra tool for special moments in their compositions.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) made use of the celesta for many of his ingenious instrumentations: the celesta doubles the French horn in C major in the *Boléro*, while two piccolos play the same melody in E and G, as a manner of emphasizing the harmonics and giving extra glow to the French horn. The celesta is prominently featured in *Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodes*, a piece that reproduces a miniature orchestra in *Ma mère l'oye*. In *Une barque sur l'ocean*, the celesta illustrates the glistening surface of the water.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) used the celesta in *Der Rosenkavalier* during the captivating entrance of the Rosenkavalier, and to represent the magic of the silver-plated rose. In his *Eine Alpensinfonie*, the celesta depicts a waterfall amidst cascades of notes in the woodwinds.

Ottorino Respighi (1879-1936) also used the celesta for a similar water effect in *Fontane di Roma*. He lavishly used the celesta in *Pini di Roma* and other compositions.

Gustav Holst (1874-1934) succeeds in creating a spectral atmosphere in *Neptune, the Mystic*, from *The Planets*, thanks to the celesta; just as Béla Bartók (1881-1945) in his *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) gave a great role to the celesta in the original version of *Firebird*, which was later reduced in favour of the piano part; he also wrote for celesta in *Petrouchka*, the *Requiem Canticles*, and other symphonic compositions.

The list goes on, with great names such as Gustav Mahler, Dmitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, George Gershwin, Erich Korngold, Aaron Copland, Manuel de Falla, Lili Boulanger, Olivier Messiaen, John Adams, and many others.

The celesta is featured in chamber music ensembles such as Debussy's *Les chansons de Bilitis* and Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Sextuor mystique*; but also in numerous non-classical numbers in other styles: The Beatles, Björk, The Velvet Underground, Herbie Hancock, Buddy Holly, U2, Thelonious Monk, and more. It is a usual guest in film scores, most notably in John Williams' scores such as *Harry Potter* and its iconic *Hedwig's Theme*, but also *Star Wars*, *E.T.* and *Home Alone*.

It appears the only use overlooked for the celesta was as a solo instrument. Until now! It is my hope that this recording will spark the interest of composers for this instrument!

Debussy: Clair de lune

An audience favourite around the world, and perhaps the most famous composition by Claude Debussy, he was reluctant to publish this music as he considered it did not reflect his later, more mature language.

Clair de lune is the third movement of *Suite bergamasque* (1890, revised in 1905). The suite refers to baroque dances in its form and in the titles of the other three movements (*Prélude*, *Menuet*, *Passepied*). Debussy originally named this piece *Promenade sentimentale* ('sentimental walk'). Both names come from poems by Paul Verlaine (1844-1896).

The poem *Clair de lune* (from Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*, 1869) inspired not only this famous piece, but also songs by Debussy (in two different versions), Gabriel Fauré and Alphon Diepenbrock.

The light of the moon, the birds dreaming in the trees, the fountains sobbing... all these images are echoed in the light sound of the celesta. The lower chords are less deep than in the piano version (the lowest notes of the piece are missing) but the celesta compensates this by adding to the ethereal character of the piece.

Clair de lune has been arranged and performed over and over again, from concert halls to popular culture, never losing its charm thanks to its enthralling

melody and mesmerizing harmonies. 'Triste et beau', sad and beautiful, perfectly captured in Debussy's *Clair de lune*.

Satie: *Gnossiennes*, Nos. 1 & 3

The title of the seven *Gnossiennes* is as intriguing as the composer and the music itself: one theory posits that it is a reference to gnosticism, a collection of religious ideas and systems Satie was involved with, which emphasize personal spiritual knowledge (gnosis) above the orthodox teachings, traditions, and authority of religious institutions. Other theory links the title to Knossos, the largest Bronze Age archaeological site on Crete, discovered in 1878. Both explanations provide a mysterious context for this captivating music that transcends worldly endeavors.

The *Gnossiennes* are originally written for piano. Satie used no time signature or bar divisions, using altered scales that produce a melancholic and mysterious ambience for Western ears accustomed to major/minor duality.

Glazunov: *Raymonda* Ballet, Act III, Variation IV

In the original ballet version, this haunting melody is played by a piano accompanied by delicate pizzicati in the strings and a few notes in the woodwinds. This unusual instrumentation was the creative solution by Glazunov in order to mimic the sound of the cimbalom, giving the music a folkloristic air, reminiscent of Hungarian and Eastern European music. In this version, the celesta shares the metallic quality of the cimbalom, contributing to the eerie atmosphere.

The folk inspiration was not only present in the music, but also in the original choreography by the legendary choreographer Marius Petipa, where the ballerina dances seemingly weightless on pointe shoes while elegantly clapping and using choreographic elements of character dance, which was the rage at the time.

Saint-Saëns: Aquarium

Saint-Saëns did not give permission to publish his *Carnival of the Animals - Grand Zoological Fantasy* during his lifetime, with the exception of the famous *Le cygne* (The swan). He found the cycle a frivolous entertainment piece that did not align with his pursuits as a serious composer. Ironically, it became his best known composition after its posthumous publication. If you desire to honor Saint-Saëns' wish to present more 'serious' works, make sure to check out his *Third Symphony* (Organ Symphony), *Concerto for cello* or the *Introduction and Rondo capriccioso*.

The *Carnival of the Animals* is full of quotes, humorous references, and straight jokes (pianists portrayed as animals!), but some of the movements are lyrical and mysterious, and in the case of the seventh movement, *Aquarium*, whimsical as well. In the original instrumentation, Saint-Saëns calls for 2 pianos, strings, and a glass harmonica doubling the flute; an ethereal sound that comes naturally to the celesta.

Debussy: Première Arabesque

The two *Arabesques* were composed by a young Claude Debussy and they have yet to display the style characteristics of the late influential composer that he would become. Nevertheless they are two distinctive and charming pieces, both jovial and optimistic.

Arabesque means "in Arabic style", and in music this is translated to heavily embellished melodic lines that emulate the intricate nature-inspired ornaments in Arabic architecture. The choice for an Arabesque also reflects the sensibility of the Art Nouveau and its representation of nature. Debussy had a love of visual art. He collected prints by renowned artists such as Hokusai, Turner and Whistler, and spoke in terms of literal colour about his compositions. Unsurprisingly he named some of his pieces *Estampes*, *Images*.

‘The musical arabesque or rather the principle of the ornament is at the basis of all forms of art. The divine arabesque was used by Palestrina and Orlando. They discovered its principle in Gregorian chant and provided support for its interlaced designs with strong counterpoint”

Debussy, *La Revue Blanche*, 1901

All these influences and approaches produced a *Première Arabesque* with a flowing organic melody, and in a smaller scale, a stream of swirling notes. In this arrangement, the pattern in the left hand has been adapted at moments from bar 26 in order to fit the piece into the range of the celesta.

Tchaikovsky: Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy

Tchaikovsky had been given a mission by choreographer Marius Petipa: to write a piece that would sound like “water drops shooting from a fountain” for his *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* in the new ballet *The Nutcracker*. During a visit to Paris in 1891, Tchaikovsky discovered a new instrument, “something between a small piano and a glockenspiel with a divinely marvelous sound”: the celesta. It was the perfect instrument for the job. Tchaikovsky was afraid that Rimsky-Korsakov or Glazunov, both masters of instrumentation, would hear the celesta and use it before the premiere of *The Nutcracker*, so shipped the instrument to Saint Petersburg in secrecy. All worked out according to plan, and the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy* became the first major piece featuring the celesta.

Tchaikovsky used an accompaniment of pizzicato strings to reinforce the effect of drops of water. Only in the second theme do the lines become more legato, the wind instruments join, and some of the tension of the main theme is released. A mesmerizing torrent of arpeggios in the cadenza for solo celesta brings us back to the initial theme. In the solo celesta version, the atmosphere is whimsical and mysterious throughout the whole piece.

The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy is extensively represented in popular culture.

It is often associated with either spooky scenarios, tiptoeing, or Christmas, the latter especially used in the United States where performances of the ballet *The Nutcracker* are iconic of the Christmas holidays. You will often come across this piece in movies, television series, commercials, video games, in a variety of arrangements, quotations and remixes such as Duke Ellington's *Sugar Rum Cherry*, Disney's *Fantasia*, TV series *The Simpsons*, and video games *Tetris* and *Grand Theft Auto*. The list is endless, the evocative power of the *Dance of the Sugar Plum* never ceases to inspire.

Debussy: Des pas sur la neige

In all of Debussy's *Préludes*, the title is never really a title, but more of a comment or impression written between parentheses at the bottom of the last page, under the last notes: (...Des pas sur la neige). In this case, and just to be sure that the atmosphere is right, Debussy gives the interpreter the following instruction in the first bar: '*Ce rythme doit avoir la valeur sonore d'un fond de paysage triste et glacé*' ('This rhythm must have the sonorous value of a sad and frozen landscape').

Footsteps on the snow is based on a simple lethargic motif (D E, E F) that keeps being repeated and can be interpreted as footsteps: left, right, left, right... The number of notes is sparse, but the richness of the harmony is vast: the furthest tonalities and modes are explored in contained emotional outbursts, but the music always returns to the hypnotizing "walking" motif.

Everything in this piece is intangible and desolate. Not even the last chord gives a feeling of resolution in a piece that is full of questions and no answers.

Granados: Oriental

Oriental is the second of the *Twelve Spanish Dances* for piano by Granados. The touching melody, written in thirds, is particularly typical in Spanish guitar music. In the middle section, the embellishments and syncopations replicate flamenco singing.

The "oriental" in the title is not to be taken literally here: it evokes the Moorish cultural background in the south of Spain.

Granados was a Catalan with a Cuban father and Spanish mother from Santander. He studied in Paris and was friends with, among others, Camille Saint-Saëns, Gabriel Fauré and Vincent d'Indy. Spanish folklore was the rage at the time, from Russia to France, and French composers adopted rhythms, melodies and harmonies from traditional music in Spanish-inspired compositions, so some elements of these Twelve Spanish Dances can be interpreted as nationalism as well as exoticism. As a Catalan, Granados received "insults and anonymous letters accusing me of writing Andalusian dances! As if that were some kind of crime!".

Guridi: Nostalgia

The melody of *Nostalgia* is written in 6/8 and the accompaniment in the left hand in 2/4. It is a soothing piece with a constant rhythmic flow and no sudden changes except the cadenza-like passage that leads to a reprise. The right hands plays the melody from the beginning, still in 6/8, plus a new counter-melody in 2/4.

The other two pieces in this short cycle of *Three short pieces for piano* are *Amanecer* (Dawn) and *Serenata* (Serenade).

The Basque composer Jesús Guridi studied in Madrid, Bilbao, and in the Schola Cantorum in Paris with, among others, Abel Decaux and Vincent d'Indy. He was influenced by late-Romantic music and applied elements from Basque folklore and culture in his music: *Amaya*, *Pyrenean Symphony*, *Diez melodías vascas*, *El Caserío* and more.

Debussy: Rêverie

Rêverie is one of Debussy's earliest piano pieces. Debussy despised bourgeois salons and, as it was a fairly conventional salon piece, he was not exactly proud

of it. He regretted having it published as his ambitions as a composer were set much higher. However, he had to give in because occasional appearances were essential and necessary for any aspiring composer.

Despite Debussy's reservations, there are some remarkable harmonies in this piece that anticipate his later innovations; *Rêverie* is definitely not uninspired and is a sweet and soothing composition.

Debussy: La fille aux cheveux de lin

The maid with the flaxen hair is inspired by a poem from the *Chansons écossaises* (Scottish songs) by Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894).

The character is uncomplicated, mellow, and the use of pentatonic scales and plenty of plagal cadences, combined with the diatonic system, gives it a pastoral or folk-like air. This portrait of a young Scottish girl sitting on a field is one of Debussy's most beloved pieces and has been arranged and recorded widely.

In this celesta version, the piece has been transposed one half tone higher, from G-flat to G, in order to accommodate the low C chords in bars 16 and 28 to the lowest octave of the instrument, achieving a richer sound than in the original key.

Brahms: Cradle song

Brahms originally composed the *Wiegenlied* as a lied, a song with piano accompaniment. He based it on his German heritage: the melody is a folk song from *Deutsche Volkslieder mit Ihren Original-Weisen*, and the lyrics come from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, an anthology of German folk poems.

The *Wiegenlied* was written for the occasion of the birth of Bertha Faber's second son, Johannes. Bertha (née Porubszky) was a singer and an old love of Brahms, with whom he had remained acquainted. He sent the song and this letter to her husband:

'Frau Bertha will realize that I wrote the 'Wiegenlied' for her little one. She will find it quite in order that while she is singing Hans to sleep, her husband sings to her and murmurs a love song.

Brahms had used a *S' is anderscht*, a duet about a shepherd and his lover that Bertha used to sing to Brahms, as counter-melody to the lullaby.

Brahms provides the accompaniment with an Austrian waltz rhythm that gives the song a rocking motion.

The transparent texture of the composition lends itself for a celesta arrangement: each note rings in the air, relaxing, soothing. More than 150 years later the Wiegenlied is still immensely popular in a wide variety of arrangements. It is sung and played daily in concerts and nurseries around the world for children and adults alike, who find comfort in its sweet simplicity.

Celia García-García
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