
Debussy

Practising the Piano
Annotated Study Edition

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

PRACTISING *the* PIANO

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Annotated Study Edition

La fille aux cheveux de lin

(The Girl with the Flaxen Hair)

Claude Debussy

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Caroline Bailey



INFORMANCE

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Introduction

La fille aux cheveux de lin (The Girl with the Flaxen Hair) is among Debussy's best-loved works for the piano. It is the eighth piece from the first book of *Préludes* and was composed around 1910. The title *La fille aux cheveux de lin* came from Leconte de Lisle's poem by the same name, included in the *Chansons écossaises* (Scottish Songs) from 1852.

The first few lines are translated thus:

*On the lucerne midst flowers in bloom,
Who sings praises to morning?
It is the girl with golden hair,
The beauty with lips of cherry.*

*For, love, in clear summer sunlight,
Has soared with the lark and sung now.*

Debussy is painting a picture of an innocent and naive Scottish girl, and uses conventional diatonic harmony blended in with pentatonic scales, modal cadences as well as parallel chord movement. The shape of the piece is ternary, the B section beginning at bar 19 (*un peu animé*) and the modified A section from bar 24. The climax of this short 39-bar piece is the C_b major chord in bar 21; the range of dynamics is from *pp* to *mf* only. As in all the preludes, the title comes at the end of the piece, in brackets. It is as though Debussy wanted the listener to form their own impressions of the music first – unencumbered by any preconceptions.

Teaching Note

Debussy's own style of playing was based on simplicity; it was unmannered and free of rhythmic distortions. French music of this period requires a style of playing that is in general much cooler and more objective than Germanic music, for example. We should guard against romanticising the piece by not adding extra *rubato* – Debussy marks all timings and articulations scrupulously in the score. The metronome mark of crotchet = 66 is the composer's own.

In the key of G_b major, and only 39 bars long, *La fille aux cheveux de lin* is deceptively difficult to bring off despite its apparent simplicity. It is a study in tone, and it may be helpful to think in terms of delicate pastel shades. The dynamic level of the first half of the piece is predominantly *p*; after the climax (a mere *mf*) we find passages at the *pp* level. Balance in the chordal passages (bar 5-6, and 21-28) needs to be carefully judged so that the upper notes are clearly audible, but with just the right amount of substance from the lower notes to create a unified texture at the required dynamic level. Achieving the right sound requires a lot of experimentation in the practice room – this can be quite a painstaking process relying on careful, critical listening.

Pedalling is problematic in this piece, requiring thought and organisation - especially in the places with big LH chords (bars 6, 31-32, and 36) and where a bass note needs to be caught in the pedal. Timing the foot with the hands precisely is key in these places. The pedal markings I have included are suggestions only. I have not indicated the shift (soft) pedal at all (*una corda*) but it is of course there to be used and can certainly assist in creating tonal contrast. Remember that the shift pedal changes the timbre of the sound, and its effects depend largely on the individual piano. It is not all to do with creating a soft dynamic but rather a woolly, unfocussed type sound and can therefore be used in dynamics up to about the *mf* level (experiment with playing firmly with the shift pedal down). When all is said and done pedalling is a subtle and personal matter that can never really be notated satisfactorily.

“Pedalling cannot be written down, it varies from one instrument to another, from one room, or one hall, to another.” - Claude Debussy

A legato fingering is essential in a legato context wherever possible, not only for joins but also to ensure good phrase shaping and natural timings. I have indicated fingerings that help achieve a legato by hand (where appropriate), and these include finger substitutions and sliding the 5th finger from a black note to a white to avoid breaking the line. Both hands in bars 14-15 and 21-35 can be connected by hand; it requires positioning the hand so that fingers can go over other fingers but it can be done and will feel and sound very good with a little perseverance. Practise such spots without pedal, getting as close as possible to a connected sound before adding the pedal carefully (remember you do not have to go all the way to the bottom of the pedal).

Last but no means least, maintaining the pulse during long notes is another consideration. I have suggested two rhythmic subdivisions at the start of the piece that may be imagined on the long notes; if this is helpful you might want to add your own in other places.

Annotations and Multimedia Content

This edition is designed to be used at the keyboard in print or digital format. Numbers on the score correlate to footnotes at the bottom of the page on which they appear. Multimedia content e.g. videos, audio clips or other downloads can be accessed by clicking on a QR code on the digital version. In print, these QR codes can be scanned using a barcode or QR code reader on your mobile phone (or tablet) to take you directly to the link for the relevant resource.



La fille aux cheveux de lin

CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

Très calme et doucement expressif (♩=66)

First system of the musical score, measures 1-4. The piece is in 3/4 time with a key signature of three flats. The tempo is marked 'Très calme et doucement expressif' with a metronome marking of ♩=66. The first measure is marked *p sans rigueur*. The music features a flowing melody in the right hand and a more static accompaniment in the left hand.

Second system of the musical score, measures 5-8. The melody continues with a *p* dynamic marking. The accompaniment consists of chords and moving lines in the bass.

Third system of the musical score, measures 9-13. Measure 10 is marked *dim.*. A section starting at measure 11 is marked *Mouv* and *Cédez - - - //*. The dynamic is *p*. The tempo and character change significantly here.

Fourth system of the musical score, measures 14-16. The melody is marked *più p*. The accompaniment features a more active bass line.

Fifth system of the musical score, measures 17-20. The melody is marked *p*. The piece concludes with a final cadence in the right hand.

Musical score for measures 20-22. The piece is in G-flat major (three flats) and 3/4 time. Measure 20 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. Measure 21 features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. Measure 22 contains a triplet of eighth notes. The bass line includes a 7th chord in the final measure.

Cédez - - // Mouvt

Musical score for measures 23-26. Measure 23 begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes. Measure 24 is marked piano-piano (*pp*). Measure 25 is marked piano (*p*). Measure 26 features a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piece is marked *Mouvt* (Mouvement).

Cédez - au Mouvt *très doux*

Musical score for measures 27-31. Measure 27 is marked *très doux*. Measure 28 contains a double bar line. Measures 29-31 show a melodic line in the right hand with a crescendo hairpin. The bass line consists of sustained chords.


Murmuré et en retenant peu à peu

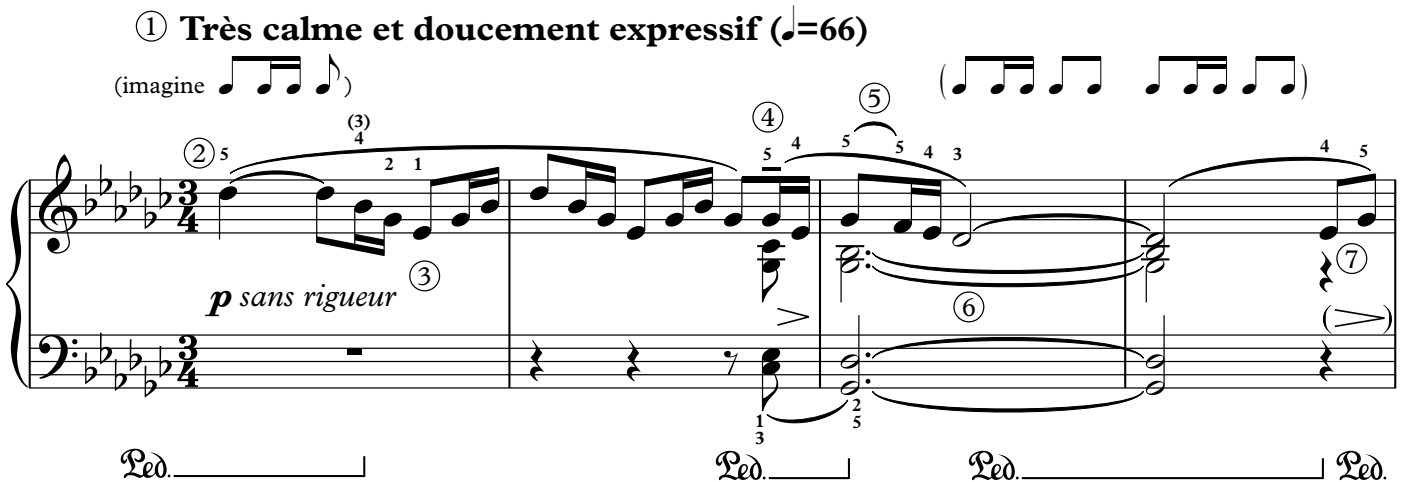
Musical score for measures 32-34. Measure 32 is marked piano-piano (*pp*). Measures 33-34 continue with a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic. The piece is marked *Murmuré et en retenant peu à peu*.

Musical score for measures 35-38. Measure 35 is marked *perdendo* and piano-piano (*pp*). Measure 36 features a triplet of eighth notes. Measures 37-38 continue with a piano-piano (*pp*) dynamic. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

La fille aux cheveux de lin

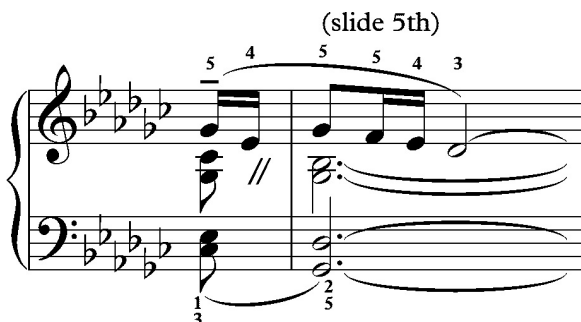
CLAUDE DEBUSSY
(1862-1918)

① **Très calme et doucement expressif** (♩=66)
(imagine )



- 1 Very calm and gently expressive (*sans rigueur* = freely).
- 2 Fill up the first long note with a subdivision that you imagine, such as the example given (or something else) to help connect it to the rest of the phrase.
- 3 The wrist needs to be very free and the hand mobile in the opening phrase for suppleness of phrasing. The touch is legato; pedal is not necessary but you can use tiny dabs here and there for colour.
- 4 The upbeat to bar 3 needs to be firm; lean on the quaver chord (*tenuto*), giving it weight and a little extra space. Play the top RH line and the LH using a physical legato – since the lower two RH notes cannot join, gently release this pair of fingers without affecting the legato in the upper line:

(slide 5th)



- 5 Slide the 5th finger from black note to white, aiming to preserve the legato.
- 6 Make sure to hold this chord for its full value (which is quite long). It may help to imagine a rhythmic subdivision as you hold the chord (the one given is a suggestion only).
- 7 Notice the phrase end – the two quavers form the end of this short phrase, we need to feel this somehow. My suggestion is to phrase off, with a diminuendo through the two quavers. At the phrase end, lift the hand very gently and move to the new position, keeping very close to the keys. A little pedal here will keep the sound smooth.



Debussy: La fille aux cheveux de lin

Cédez - - // Mouvt (a tempo) slide
(rit.)

8 Tonal balance is important here: listen very carefully that you achieve a good blend between the top melody and the other notes in the chords (no two pianists will do this the same way). Using the technique of chord legato, make sure to create a physical legato in as many voices as possible as you move from one chord to the next, quietly releasing those fingers that cannot join. Here is what it looks like when notated:

9 The LH chord is a well-known troublespot for pianists but I can give you an easy and elegant solution, guaranteed to sound good provided you time the pedal precisely with the hands, as notated in the example from footnote 8. I suggest playing the bass E \flat first and then the remaining three notes – but you might spread the chord upwards instead. The secret is to make sure to hold the RH top B \flat until after the pedal change on the bass E \flat (which needs to be caught in the pedal); that way you will achieve a legato line on top and no blurring of the pedal whatever on the harmony change.

10 Take care with the pedal in the next two bars. Practise first with no pedal, aiming to achieve an absolute finger legato (look closely at the score to determine which notes are held on, and exactly when fingers release their keys). Thereafter, my suggested pedalling will add some warmth and colour to the sound.

11 There is no way to make a clean pedal change here without losing the bass G \flat – Debussy obviously intended a little mistiness here. There are two ways to pedal this. One is to do a very quick pedal change (or partial change) on the downbeat of bar 13 – if done well you will preserve something of the bass note (G \flat) while clearing some of the residual harmony left over from bar 12. The alternative is to flutter or vibrate the pedal on the downbeat, again preserving as much as possible of the bass while cleaning up the middle texture somewhat. You may need another flutter on the second beat.

* hold top RH B \flat until after the pedal change (E \flat bass)

Un peu animé (a little livelier)

12 The next two bars need to be played clearly, avoiding smudges from the pedal. Although a little fiddly to begin with (sometimes fingers will need to go over or under other fingers), it is worth striving for an absolute finger legato in this bar. Thinking in four independent parts (SATB), first practise each part alone (with the fingering you'll end up using) before combining in all combinations of two and then three parts (thus SA, ST, SB, AT, AB, TB, SAT, SAB, STB, ATB). Omit the pedal during this stage of practice, adding tiny dabs as appropriate after you have achieved a reliable finger legato. The given pedal is probably overkill, but will work nonetheless. (see practice worksheet)



13 It is important to change pedal on the bass grace note (Cb), and **not** on the LH chord (or you will lose the bass). If you hold onto the top RH note (Ab) at the end of bar 15 as you change the pedal you will clear the previous harmony without breaking the melodic line.

14 Respect the composer's careful notation in the LH by releasing the thumb quaver Bb and the pedal, holding the minims by hand. He is drawing our attention to the syncopation on the next LH thumb Bb, with the *tenuto* mark.

15 A little livelier here. Notice the climax of the piece (bars 21-22) only reaches *mf*.

Cédez//au Mouvt *très doux*

Murmuré et en retenant peu à peu

18 Don't voice the C \flat chord too much to the top. Hold the pedal through to bar 31 (you will be tempted to change it on bar 30 but resist, or you will lose your bass).

19 Another moment where careful pedalling is essential. Here is my suggestion:

20 If you cannot play the LH chord with all notes together, you might break it thus:

21 Apply the same practice techniques from footnote 12 (see practice worksheet).

35

(22) 1 *perdendo* - - - - -

pp (23)

(24)

22 Release the RH thumb C_b as soon as you have caught it in the pedal. Feel free to change the given fingering in this bar if you find an alternative that suits you better. I have given some practice suggestions (in the practice worksheet).

23 Organise the LH spread chord with the pedal thus:

24 Hold the pedal down throughout. In general, it is good practice to keep hold of the keyboard in pedal textures like this rather than lift the hands away (visually distracting and disruptive to line). Debussy gives us no choice here, but we can avoid breaking the spell by holding the hands close to the keyboard until the rests in the final bar.



Two possible deconstructions for bar 21-23

Top line alone

Musical notation for the top line of bars 21-23. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature signature, and a common time signature. The music features a melodic line with various articulations and dynamics. The first measure starts with a *mf* dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) with a slur over them and fingerings 4, 5, 4. This is followed by a quarter note (B4) with fingering 3. The second measure continues with a quarter note (A4) with fingering 5, followed by a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) with a slur and fingerings 4, 5, 4. The third measure starts with a *p* dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) with a slur and fingerings 5, 4, 5, 4. This is followed by a quarter note (B4) with fingering 3, and then a quarter note (A4) with fingerings 3, 4. The fourth measure ends with a quarter note (G4) with fingering 5.

All parts minus the thumb

Musical notation for all parts minus the thumb of bars 21-23. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature signature, and a common time signature. The music features a melodic line with various articulations and dynamics, and a bass line with fingerings. The first measure starts with a *mf* dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) with a slur over them and fingerings 4, 5, 4. This is followed by a quarter note (B4) with fingering 3. The second measure continues with a quarter note (A4) with fingering 5, followed by a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) with a slur and fingerings 4, 5, 4. The third measure starts with a *p* dynamic and a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) with a slur and fingerings 5, 4, 5, 4. This is followed by a quarter note (B4) with fingering 3, and then a quarter note (A4) with fingerings 3, 4. The fourth measure ends with a quarter note (G4) with fingering 5. The bass line has fingerings: 2, 2, 3, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2.

Chord tapping exercises for bars 24-25

At a slow tempo, tap the top note twice while holding the lower notes. Then repeat with the middle note of the RH, and then the lowest note of the RH. If necessary, continue on down with the LH.

Musical notation for chord tapping exercises for bars 24-25. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The notation includes a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a common time signature. The exercises are designed for the right hand (RH) and left hand (LH). The first exercise shows a chord with fingerings 5, 2, 1 in the RH and 5, 3, 1 in the LH. The second exercise shows a chord with fingerings 5, 2, 1 in the RH and 5, 3, 1 in the LH. The third exercise shows a chord with fingerings 5, 2, 1 in the RH and 5, 3, 1 in the LH. The fourth exercise shows a chord with fingerings 5, 2, 1 in the RH and 5, 3, 1 in the LH. The word "etc" is written below the exercises to indicate they can be repeated.

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