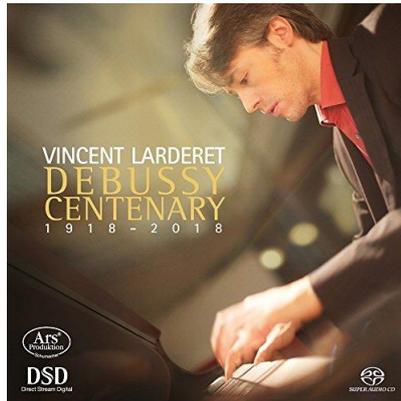




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SACD Review by [Myron Silberstein](#)

DEBUSSY *Images*, Book 1. *Préludes*, Book 2. *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien*: Extracts (arr. Caplet and Larderet) • Vincent Larderet (pn) • ARS 38 240 (SACD: 79:52)



Debussy Centenary
AUDIO CD; HYBRID SACD - DSD
ARS Produktion



This is a stunningly played recital of two of Debussy's most familiar cycles and a world premiere of pianist Vincent Larderet's expansion of André Caplet's piano reduction of Debussy's incidental music to Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien*. Reviews in these pages of Larderet's previous work have been unanimously positive. Peter Burwasser recently (40:4) grouped him with Pollini, Brendel, and Badura-Skoda as "masterful technicians and intellectual[s]." John Bell Young wrote (39:3) that Larderet "has blossomed into a great pianist indeed." And Colin Clarke (35:5) described his playing as "gripping and multitimbred." I will add that it is full of vivid colors, subtle rubato, and an equal affinity for the contemplative and the virtuosic aspects of Debussy's writing. And sound technician Manfred Schumacher has captured the Steinway D on which this recital was recorded in a rich, luscious acoustic that highlights Larderet's warm tone production (though the engineering also captures damper-release sounds a bit too prominently in quiet passages).

Larderet's approach falls somewhere between Gieseeking's hazy soft-focus and Michelangeli's cascades of color. The beginning of "Reflets dans l'eau" (*Images* No. 1), for example, is warm and luxurious in the accompaniment, but the sustained melodic notes have just enough bite to stand out without breaking the idyllic mood. And Larderet is extremely sensitive to color: The jazzy chords that answer the initial statements of the melody *do* break the mood like a sudden movement under the water; Larderet gives them a brighter articulation than the more pastel surrounding material, like trumpets answering flutes. Larderet also allows for a good deal of push and pull in tempo; my only criticism is he could afford to vary his liberties more: He tends to accelerate to centers of phrases, both in "Reflets dans l'eau" and elsewhere, which occasionally becomes mannered rather than spontaneous. But in "Hommage à Rameau" (one of the highlights of his recital), he demonstrates a subtle, deeply-felt, mature sense of line. He gives the initial recitative-like measures an almost cantorial quality, and after his conversational approach to the opening pages, the austere middle section takes on an inexorability akin to that of Ravel's "Le Gibet." And in "Mouvement," Larderet maintains a superb contrast between the breathlessly hushed

ostinato figure and the periodic rushes of celebratory color. He is one of a very few pianists for whom the figuration is neither unshaded background *à la* Gieseeking nor a ceaseless virtuoso display *à la* Michelangeli. It is always subsidiary to the interjectory bursts, but it has a life of its own nonetheless. Among the *Préludes*, Larderet is most successful with “Feuilles mortes,” in which he has a deep understanding of the contrast between varying levels of dissonance, the transformation of foreground to background and back again, and the shading needed to bring harmonic tension to resolution. More simply, the mood is just right. Other highlights include “Ondine,” in which he offers jarring (and I mean that as a compliment) shifts both between loud and quiet and between brilliant and pastel coloration while maintaining an exotic, erotic atmosphere throughout; and “Canope,” in which he achieves such a sense of meditative contemplation in the opening measures (intriguingly, by the way, Puccini used similar gestures to the same effect in *Suor Angelica* five years later) that the slithery melodic interjections take on the aura of an internal reflection rather than a shift toward exoticism. Larderet is less effective in “La Puerta del Vino”; certainly, the opening measures are meant explicitly to be brusque and violent, but Larderet’s evocation of violence is monochromatic, both in these opening measures and in the periodic dissonant interjections peppered throughout the piece. Even in this *Prélude*, though, there are many passages in which he insinuates rather than announces, and he has a fine ear for mystery. Overly sharp accents similarly mar “General Lavine—excentric”; there should be more delicate humor and joy along with the predominating grotesque.

I tend to be on the fence about piano transcriptions of orchestral works. Items like Liszt’s fantasies on various operatic themes or Godowsky’s *Symphonic Metamorphoses on Johann Strauss Themes* succeed because they thoroughly transform the originals into piano works (and into personal expressions of the transcriber). But transcriptions devised for study, for rehearsal, or to exhibit symphonic works in cities lacking a symphonic orchestra strike me as existing on the piano solely *faute de mieux*. Caplet’s piano reduction of Debussy’s incidental music for *Le Martyre de saint Sébastien* was “necessary for rehearsals,” as this disc’s liner notes indicate, rather than conceived of as a concert piece for solo piano. Larderet has expanded several of the movements and has made small changes in voicing and figuration in Caplet’s score. The music is lovely, and Larderet’s performance is characteristically colorful. But it does not succeed as piano music. Many passages involve extended treble tremolos. This would not bother me in Scriabin, whose late piano music explores tremolo effects extensively; it is an uncharacteristic gesture in Debussy’s piano music, though, and advertises the piano as substituting for orchestral instruments in these passages. Again, there is plenty to please the ear both in the transcription and in the performance, but I can’t hail it as a needed addition to Debussy’s piano repertoire, and I would have preferred to hear what Larderet does with the second series of *Images*. That said, this is a very fine recording and I recommend it. I’m glad to have it in my library, and readers who feel differently than I do about orchestral transcriptions will be thrilled with it.

Myron Silberstein
