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What Would Debussy Do? Three Composers Have Ideas

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

In 1915 Debussy began a project to compose six sonatas for diverse instruments. Ill with cancer, he lived to complete only three of them: the eclectically scored and delicate Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp; the restless and deceptively humorous Sonata for Cello and Piano; and the elegant, rhapsodic Sonata for Violin and Piano, finished in 1917, the year before his death.

A few years ago [Carnegie Hall](#) asked three composers — Steven Stucky, Kaija Saariaho and Marc-André Dalbavie — to, in a sense, complete Debussy's project as part of the pianist [Emanuel Ax's](#) adventurous Perspectives series. The premieres were given at Zankel Hall in 2004.

On Friday night at Alice Tully Hall, the [Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center](#), which signed on to the project during its planning stages, presented the three new works in the ideal context: interspersed with Debussy's sonatas. Debussy sounded more daringly modern by the company he kept. And for all their differences, the vibrant new scores did seem inspired by Debussy.

Debussy intended to compose a sonata for harpsichord, oboe and horn. In his alluring "Sonate en Forme des Préludes," Mr. Stucky took on the challenge of writing for this mismatched combination of instruments. To prevent the modest harpsichord from being overwhelmed, he uses it mostly as an instrument of color and texture. From the opening movement, "Broken Chords," the harpsichord part abounds in arpeggios and cascades of passagework: the sonic equivalent of needle showers. Against this blurry backdrop the oboe and horn converse, sometimes ruminatively, sometimes in burly debates.

In Ms. Saariaho's viscerally compelling five-movement work for piano, viola and cello, titled, in English translation, "I Feel a Second Heart," she evokes forces moving in close proximity. Two movements are fraught with violent, searing clashes among the instruments. But in the quizzical final movement the force fields Ms. Saariaho evokes are the beating hearts of a mother and her unborn child.

Mr. Dalbavie's "Axiom" for piano, clarinet, bassoon and trumpet proved an eruptive yet organic work. It begins with thunderous descending octaves in the piano, which provoke the other instruments to action. Yet the tumultuous musical materials become increasingly refined and specific as Mr. Dalbavie explores them in music of shifting moods, pungent harmonies and milky colorings.

Though there are too many fine performers to cite, special mention goes to Gilbert Kalish, who did double duty, playing the harpsichord in Mr. Stucky's piece and the daunting piano part in Mr. Dalbavie's work; the fearless young pianist Inon Barnatan in Ms. Saariaho's trio; and the cellist Gary Hoffman, who excelled in the Saariaho and in Debussy's cello sonata, for which he was joined by the dynamic pianist Jeffrey Kahane.

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