

Claude Debussy was a striking and revolutionary figure in the world of classical composers who singlehandedly altered the trajectory of French music after him. Especially in the last years before his death in 1918, his system of harmony grew farther apart from the prevailing system of harmony espoused within the Paris Conservatoire, then the leading musical authority in France. Nowhere is this clearer than in his last great project for solo piano, the Twelve Etudes. Debussy pays homage to a number of figures in these Etudes, but above all Frederic Chopin's entries in the same genre. Chopin's Etudes were not only a demonstration of how lyrical and even profound studies for the piano could become, but they rewrote the playbook on piano technique entirely, and they are still the benchmark for most conservatories worldwide today. Debussy's Etudes seek to provide a much-needed 20th century update, and they do this by taking familiar ideas – interval relationships of thirds, fourths, sixths, octaves, rapid finger-exercises – and focusing them through the lens of color and harmony that form the basis of his compositional style. The type of technique then required of the pianist is not merely mechanical and physical, but requires a multifaceted cohesion of sound control, physical control, and interpretative engineering to render clarity in his abstract writing, a gargantuan task for any pianist.

The Twelve Etudes are split up into two books of six each. The first book is concerned primarily with the physical dimension of playing the piano, and pays homage more directly to Chopin. Highlights range from the deliriously joyful Octaves Etude (No. 5) to the quicksilver Etude for Eight Fingers (No. 6). The second book feels more introspective by comparison, concerned instead with the different dimensions of sound, color, and sonority that were Debussy's calling card. The Etude for Ornaments (No. 8) is a condensed romantic epic, containing some of the most intricate and difficult piano writing of Debussy's entire oeuvre, sandwiched by two mischievous exercises in chromatic and repeated notes (No. 7 and No. 9). Debussy saves his most bombastic writing for the final Etude for Chords (No. 12), whose thunderous and virtuosic leaps bring the set to a triumphant close.