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Review: Piano series opens not with bang but with courtly dance and beautiful breeze

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Imagine: You are strolling through a shallow wooded glen in the south of France. The trees are not so thickly grown that sunlight and wind cannot wend their way through the branches. The leaves rustle silverly. And in the distance, emanating from a small unseen village, you hear church bells ringing, their clear chimes traveling across the valley and reaching you in the wood, now faint and partially obscured by the sounds stirred by the breeze.

Now imagine you want to represent this experience in music. That's what Claude Debussy achieved masterfully in his set of three impressionistic renderings compiled in "Images, Book II" and played with a languid confidence by Alexander Schimpf on Tuesday night at the Sottile Theatre.

Schimpf kicked off the 23rd season of the College of Charleston's International Piano Series, a set of solo piano recitals organized by founder and artistic director Enrique Graf and executive director Chee-Hang See.

It was an auspicious start. The German-born and acutely musical Schimpf played with a controlled passion and intellectual rigor that **made the Debussy sparkle.** He infused every phrase with feeling and significance, refusing to overplay his hand. His performance was fresh in its modesty; he let the music do the talking.

The program was smartly assembled. Schimpf began with Bach's French Suite No. 5 in G major, seven courtly dances that he played with precision and a light touch. The Debussy followed, offering not only bells and rustling leaves but also moonlight on ancient ruins and

playful fish darting to and fro under the surface of a pond.

His thoughtful work at the piano made it possible to envision these scenes. The recitalist's affinity for this music was evident. He closed the first half with Debussy's "L'Isle joyeuse," a gorgeous short work that seems to disassemble music and piece it back together askew, almost like a painting by Cezanne.

Two great Germans arrived in the second half. First a young Beethoven whose famous "Pathetique" sonata was played in a way that emphasized its Classical characteristics. Clear hints of Beethoven's Romantic Sturm und Drang rang out, and Schimpf made the most of them, but never at the expense of his meticulous interpretation.

Closing the show was Franz Liszt's very big Ballade No. 2 in B minor. It was fascinating to hear Schimpf approach this effusive and virtuosic piece with such aplomb. The larger-than-life Liszt never got the best of him; rather, it was Schimpf who remained in utter command.