

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 11 December 2024
7.30pm

Tim Horton piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Préludes Book II (1911-3)

Brouillards • Feuilles mortes • La puerta del vino • Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses • Bruyères • General Lavine - eccentric • La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune • Ondine • Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C. • Canope • Les tierces alternées • Feux d'artifice

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

24 Preludes Op. 28 (1838-9)

*Prelude in C • Prelude in A minor
Prelude in G • Prelude in E minor
Prelude in D • Prelude in B minor
Prelude in A • Prelude in F sharp minor
Prelude in E • Prelude in C sharp minor
Prelude in B • Prelude in G sharp minor
Prelude in F sharp • Prelude in E flat minor • Prelude in D flat • Prelude in B flat minor • Prelude in A flat • Prelude in C minor • Prelude in E flat • Prelude in C minor • Prelude in B flat • Prelude in G minor • Prelude in F • Prelude in D minor*

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Among **Debussy's** earliest piano compositions are a mazurka, a nocturne and a ballade, all dating from the early 1890s. These are trademark Chopin genres, and in adopting them Debussy paid tribute to a Polish composer whose significance for French music, already during his lifetime but even more after his death, was immense. Chopin resided in Paris from 1832 onwards, and he was promoted by the conservatoire, and also by critics and scholars, as integral to the narrative of French music history, a bridge between the clavecinistes of the late 18th Century and the piano music of Fauré, Debussy and Ravel. When, some 20 years after those early pieces, Debussy composed two books of *Préludes* (1909-10 and 1912-13, respectively), he consolidated and strengthened that same narrative.

An important difference between their respective cycles of preludes is that while Chopin resisted any linkage with the world beyond the notes, Debussy assigned descriptive titles, even if the symbolic gesture of placing them at the end of each piece was indicative of his growing reticence about programme music. Only the penultimate *Prélude*, *Les tierces alternées* (Alternating Thirds) eschews external imagery, and in this it foreshadows Debussy's next major piano work, the 12 *Études* of 1815, significantly dedicated to Chopin's memory. Then, in a further nod towards our historical narrative, Debussy paid homage to Couperin and Rameau in his three late chamber sonatas.

For the most part the second book of *Préludes* comprises some of Debussy's most harmonically opaque music, as in the first prelude *Brouillards* (Mists), whose title aptly conveys its lack of tonal definition. The stratified textures here are also characteristic of the second *Prélude*, *Feuilles mortes* (Dead Leaves), a sombre elegy to autumn. And there is a similar mood and a comparable harmonic opacity in the seventh piece, *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* (The Terrace of Moonlight Audiences). This stands in the sharpest possible contrast to the fifth prelude, *Bruyères* (Heather), the only one to depict a pastoral scene in relatively simple harmonies and without formal discontinuities.

Even when Debussy returns to exotic tropes familiar from his earlier music – Spain in the case of No. 3, *La Puerto del vino* (a reference to a Moorish gate in the Alhambra), and antiquity in No. 10, *Canope* (an ancient Egyptian vase) – the tone is starker and more austere, as though these exoticisms were now viewed from a strategic distance. Likewise, in No. 4, *Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses* (The Fairies are Exquisite Dancers), the fleetness of the dance is distanced by oneiric moments where time seems to stand still (passing hints of a slow waltz), just as the darting movements of the water nymph in No. 8, *Ondine*, are distanced by contrasted materials in a mode of quasi-cinematic intercutting. No. 6, *Général Lavine – Eccentric*, and No. 9, *Hommage à S. Pickwick*, stand somewhat apart, nodding towards Erik Satie and some

of the parodic techniques that would later be associated with some members of *Les Six*. As for the final prelude, *Feux d'artifice*, this is *sui generis*, a triumph of post-Lisztian virtuosity.

Debussy's *Préludes* could hardly be further removed from the original meaning of the genre title: an introduction, often improvised, designed to test the instrument (especially its tuning) and to give practice in the key and mood of the piece to follow. It was **Chopin** who re-defined the genre, creating in Op. 28 a succession of miniatures of great emotional power and unrivalled artistic quality. Op. 28 retains an outward similarity to traditional collections of preludes, but it really initiated a quite separate tradition of concert preludes that would be further developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Contemporaries were sometimes confused by this departure from tradition, and not only contemporaries. 'I must admit that I do not wholly understand the title that Chopin chose to give these short pieces', was André Gide's comment. 'Preludes to what?', he went on to ask.

As far as we can tell, most of the Op. 28 Preludes were composed in Paris during 1838, but the cycle was completed during that ill-fated winter Chopin spent on Majorca with George Sand (1838-39). It is no doubt significant that he brought Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* to Majorca, for this work provides a helpful context for Op. 28. Much of the figuration has origins in Bach. There are *moto perpetuo* patterns, as in Nos. 11 (a kind of three-part invention), 14 and 19; there are figurations that allow linear elements to emerge through the pattern, as in the 'trill' motives of Nos. 1 and 5; there are characteristic contrapuntal figures made up of interactive particles, as in Nos. 1 and 8; and there are bolder contrapuntal polarities, as in the dialogue of melody and 'singing' bass in No. 9.

All this was part of a larger debt to Bach, the master of counterpoint. But formally, too, the Preludes evoke Baroque practice, crystallising a single *Affekt* in a single pattern and unfolding either in a ternary design (Nos. 15 and 17), or as a simple statement with conflated response (Nos. 3 and 12). Finally, we may note that each Prelude of Op. 28 is itself a whole, with its own character, its own melodic, harmonic and rhythmic profile, and even its own generic type; thus, at various times Chopin invokes the nocturne (No. 13), the étude (No. 16), the mazurka (No. 7), the funeral march (No. 2), and the elegy (No. 4). Yet at the same time, the individual Preludes contribute to a single over-arching whole, a real 'cycle' that is enriched by the complementary characters of its components and integrated by the logic of their tonal ordering. This is reinforced by the structural weight and intensity of expression assigned to the last prelude in the cycle. Not for nothing did Hans von Bülow label it 'The Storm'.

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