

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 11 January 2022 7.30pm

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet piano

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Gabriel Pierné (1863-1937)

Nocturne en forme de valse Op. 40 No. 2 (1903)

Abel Decaux (1869-1943)

Le Cimetière from *Clairs de lune* (1900-7)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Nocturne (1892)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

I. Ondine • II. Le gibet • III. Scarbo

Interval

Claude Debussy

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

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Gabriel Pierné, a pupil of Massenet and Franck, won the coveted Prix de Rome in 1882. As well as a long composing career, he was also a fine conductor, giving premières of major works by Debussy and Ravel with the Colonne Orchestra, and in 1910 he conducted the first performance of Stravinsky's *Firebird* for the Ballets Russes. His prolific output of compositions included a number of operas and ballets as well as instrumental works. The *3 Pièces pour piano formant Suite de concert* appeared in 1903, and the 'Nocturne en forme de Valse' is the second of these. The main idea is a poignant slow waltz theme, its rhythm dominating much of the piece, but a contrasting section (in a major key) is all the more surprising for being in 5/8 time. After a reprise of the waltz, the mood becomes more consoling and the piece ends in D flat major.

Abel Decaux was organist at the Sacré-Cœur in Paris for many years, but he was also an extraordinarily original composer. His piano cycle *Clairs de lune* was written between 1900 and 1907, but not published until 1913. These daringly inventive pieces seem like a pre-echo of slightly later music by the likes of Debussy and Schoenberg. The third of the set, 'Le cimetière', opens with an angular theme – its accompaniment increasingly dissonant – alternating with long, richly harmonised chords (marked 'mystérieux') which eventually outline the 'Dies irae' plainchant. From its dream-like state, the music reaches an imposing climax before returning to near silence and a final chord full of ambiguity.

The *Nocturne* by **Claude Debussy** was composed just after the *Suite bergamasque* and before the String Quartet. Originally called *Interlude*, it was first published in a newspaper supplement, *Le Figaro musical*, in August 1892. The outer sections have a serious, rather stately quality, but the central section, marked 'in the character of a popular song' (and in 7/4 time) is much freer, more like an improvisation.

Maurice Ravel completed *Gaspard de la nuit* on 8 September 1908, and the first performance took place on 9 January 1909, at the Salle Erard in Paris. The pianist was Ricardo Viñes, one of the most energetic advocates of new French and Spanish music, and a long-time friend of Ravel's. Exact contemporaries, they were both members of *Les Apaches*, a group of like-minded artistic friends. While they were students, Viñes had introduced Ravel to the poetry of Aloysius Bertrand that was later to inspire *Gaspard de la nuit*. Bertrand's prose poems had been published in 1842 (a year after his death), and influenced later Symbolist poets, notably Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Ravel's *Gaspard*, aptly subtitled 'three poems', begins with 'Ondine', a dream-like depiction of a mysterious water sprite. Ravel's music seems to mirror the strange beauty of the poem: 'Listen! ... it is Ondine who brushes drops of water on the resonant panes of your

windows, lit by the gloomy rays of the moon; and here in gown of watered silk, the mistress of the chateau gazes from her balcony on the beautiful starry night and sleeping lake.'

'Le gibet' is a grim evocation of a corpse hanging from the gallows. A bell – incessant and obsessive – tolls throughout the piece, represented by repeated B flats, the first and last sounds we hear.

Ravel once said his initial idea for 'Scarbo' had been to 'make a caricature of Romanticism', but admitted that 'perhaps it got the better of me.' Certainly the spirit of Balakirev's *Islamey* hovers over the piece, but the result is music of dazzling originality. The poem depicts a goblin who darts in and out of the shadows, and Ravel's piece mirrors this with quiet passages disturbed by sudden outbursts. The critic Vladimir Jankélévitch described 'Scarbo' as 'a fiendish encyclopedia of all the traps, obstacles and snares that a limitless imagination can devise for a pianist's fingers.'

Debussy's first 12 *Préludes* were written in 1909-10, and they were an immediate success. Two major works – *Le martyre de St Sébastien* and the ballet *Jeux* – intervened before he could start a second book of *Préludes*, but the new set was ready in 1913. Debussy gave the first performance of three of the preludes on 5 March, and his friend Ricardo Viñes introduced three more in April. The first performance of the complete set was given at the Aeolian Hall in London on 13 June 1913, by Walter Rummel, a German pianist who knew Debussy well from about 1910 onwards. Unlike earlier sets of preludes (notably Chopin's), Debussy's do not involve systematic exploration of different keys, but instead they are a series of miniature tone-poems, capturing elusive moods and exploring the colours and timbres of the piano with stunning inventiveness. As well as the complete première taking place in London, there's a British connection with two of the *Préludes*: 'Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses' and 'Feuilles mortes' are quotations from a French edition of JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*, which Debussy's daughter Chouchou had in an edition illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Debussy told a friend that Rackham's images had inspired his music. Other preludes in the collection range from depictions of the water-sprite Ondine to an American clown ('General Lavine'), and from Dickens ('Hommage à S. Pickwick') to the 'Puerta del vino' (the 'Wine Gate') at the Alhambra in Granada – prompted by a postcard sent to Debussy (probably by Manuel de Falla). The moods shift from the hieratic solemnity of 'Canopes' (evoking an Egyptian urn that Debussy kept on his fireplace) to the brilliant pyrotechnic display of 'Feux d'artifice' which ends the set.

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