

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 12 January 2023
1.00pm

Dame Sarah Connolly mezzo-soprano
Dinis Sousa piano
Principal Players of Royal Northern Sinfonia
Maria Włoszczowska violin i
Eva Aronian violin ii
Michael Gerrard viola
Daniel Hammersley cello
Dinis Sousa piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)	Chansons de Bilitis (1897-8) <i>arranged by Jake Heggie</i> <i>La flûte de Pan • La chevelure • Le tombeau des naïades</i>
Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)	Nocturne for violin and piano (1911) D'un matin de printemps (1917-8)
Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)	Poème de l'amour et de la mer Op. 19 (1882-90 rev. 1893) <i>arranged by Franck Villard</i> <i>La fleur des eaux • Interlude • La mort de l'amour</i>

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A sense of fragility runs through this programme – the fragility of love, but also the fragility of life itself. All three featured composers died prematurely. Lili Boulanger's tragically short life was ended by tuberculosis in 1918, at the age of 24. Debussy died from cancer just ten days later, at the comparatively advanced age of 55. Chausson had earlier lost his life in a cycling accident, in 1899, at the age of 44.

When **Debussy's** *Chansons de Bilitis* appeared in 1898, audiences must have found them shockingly bare. The marking at the end of the first song is 'almost without voice', an odd instruction for a singer but one that perfectly captures the quality of understatement that distances these songs from a more conventional lyricism.

The title is borrowed from the literary work in which Debussy found his texts. *Les chansons de Bilitis*, published in 1894, purported to be a translation of poems by an ancient Greek poetess recently discovered in a tomb from the 6th Century BC. In fact, the poems were the work of Pierre Louÿs, scholar of ancient and Oriental cultures, accomplished linguist, unapologetic sensualist and one of Debussy's closest friends.

In 'La flûte de Pan', Debussy's matter-of-fact tone adds to the *faux naïveté* of the text, whose real content (the erotic direction taken by this flute lesson) finds expression in the richly sensuous harmonic pools into which the innocent vocal line is led.

In a similar way, 'La chevelure' references far more than a woman's hair: a key erotic signifier in French Symbolism (notably in Baudelaire's poem of the same title), it was also a distinctive feature of Pre-Raphaelite painting, much admired by Debussy.

In the wintry landscape of 'Le tombeau des naïades', love is firmly in the past. The satyrs and nymphs are long gone and the pond is frozen over. But note how the music offers a late efflorescence that exceeds the poem: as the poet recalls the place where the nymphs used to laugh, the voice reaches its highest point in a brief restoration of a former happiness.

Debussy's work is heard here in a sympathetic arrangement by Jake Heggie. The string quartet amplifies the latent sensuality of the piano accompaniment and draws out the sense that, beneath the voice, there murmurs a kind of suppressed activity we cannot quite grasp.

Lili Boulanger's *Nocturne* is one of her earliest pieces, written in 1911, whereas *D'un matin de printemps*, from 1917-8, is one of her last. That itself points to the tragic brevity of her career. While these two pieces are also brief, they are by no means slight. One of the astonishing qualities of Boulanger's music is her capacity to achieve more in a few minutes than many composers do in far longer works.

Within a span of just a few minutes, the *Nocturne* presents the micro-history of a powerful emotion,

from the merest whisper to a full-blooded avowal and back. The simplicity of the opening suggests something modest, but the poignant restraint gives way to a duet of fulsome romantic intensity. No sooner has this wordless love song reached a climax, than it fades, though not without a magical sidestep.

D'un matin de printemps opens with a mechanically regular accompaniment, a nod to the Neoclassical style that was still very new in 1917, but its coolness offsets the joyous energy of the violin's asymmetric phrases. Once again, the dialogue between the two instruments has a real intensity. If, in the later stages, the music reverts to something more detached, this acts as a foil to a wonderfully magical passage (marked *mysterieux*) before the *brillant* ending.

The music of **Chausson**, a pupil of both Massenet and Franck, has a brooding lyrical intensity that sets him apart from many of his contemporaries. It's a quality that is central to his *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, composed between 1882 and 1890. This is a substantial orchestral song cycle but is heard here in a 2008 arrangement by Franck Villard for the same reduced forces Chausson himself used for his *Chanson perpétuelle* (1898).

The *Poème* is in two parts, divided by a central instrumental interlude, and is based on extracts from poems by the composer's friend Maurice Bouchor (1855-1929). Chausson had already set Bouchor's poetry in a number of earlier songs, one of which, 'Le temps des lilas', is reused here in the final section.

Part 1, 'La fleur des eaux', draws on familiar topics of late 19th-century love poetry – the scent of flowers and the shoreline where the sea and the sun meet in a kiss. But while these images serve as reminders of the beloved, the poet's desire culminates in the entreaty 'Let me see my beloved!' It makes for the first big punctuation point in Chausson's music and is followed by an instrumental transition which returns the poet to a memory of his encounter with the beloved. Even here, however, there is an anticipation of the inevitable hour of farewell.

The instrumental *Interlude* (marked *Lent et triste*) that forms the centre of the piece is built on the main melody of 'Le temps des lilas' and thus anticipates the ending of the work.

Part 2, 'La mort de l'amour', begins with a reprise of some of the earlier poetic topics but already anticipates its own bittersweet ending. If Part 1 had successfully rekindled the presence of the beloved, Part 2 ends by dwelling on the irretrievable quality of loss: its keyword is oblivion (*l'oubli*). To the lamenting motif anticipated in the central instrumental interlude, the final lines of text are resolutely final: 'The time of lilacs and the time of roses is dead forever, along with our love.'

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