

# 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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## Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

### Chansons de Bilitis

(1897-8)

arranged by Jake Heggie

*Pierre Louÿs*

### Songs of Bilitis

#### La flûte de Pan

Pour le jour des Hyacinthies,  
il m'a donné une syrinx  
faite de roseaux bien  
taillés, unis avec la blanche  
cire qui est douce à mes  
lèvres comme le miel.

Il m'apprend à jouer, assise sur  
ses genoux; mais je suis un  
peu tremblante. Il en joue  
après moi, si doucement que  
je l'entends à peine.

Nous n'avons rien à nous dire,  
tant nous sommes près l'un  
de l'autre; mais nos chansons  
veulent se répondre, et tour à  
tour nos bouches s'unissent  
sur la flûte.

Il est tard; voici le chant des  
grenouilles vertes qui  
commence avec la nuit. Ma  
mère ne croira jamais que  
je suis restée si longtemps  
à chercher ma ceinture  
perdue.

#### La chevelure

Il m'a dit: 'Cette nuit, j'ai rêvé.  
J'avais ta chevelure autour  
de mon cou. J'avais tes  
cheveux comme un collier  
noir autour de ma nuque et  
sur ma poitrine.

'Je les caressais, et c'étaient les  
miens; et nous étions liés pour  
toujours ainsi, par la même  
chevelure la bouche sur la  
bouche, ainsi que deux  
lauriers n'ont souvent qu'une  
racine.

'Et peu à peu, il m'a semblé,  
tant nos membres étaient  
confondus, que je devenais  
toi-même ou que tu entrais  
en moi comme mon  
songe.'

#### The flute of Pan

For Hyacinthus day he  
gave me a syrinx made  
of carefully cut reeds,  
bonded with white wax  
which tastes sweet to  
my lips like honey.

He teaches me to play, as  
I sit on his lap; but I am  
a little fearful. He plays  
it after me, so gently  
that I scarcely hear him.

We have nothing to say,  
so close are we one to  
another, but our songs  
try to answer each  
other, and our mouths  
join in turn on the flute.

It is late; here is the song  
of the green frogs that  
begins with the night.  
My mother will never  
believe I stayed out so  
long to look for my lost  
sash.

#### The tresses of hair

He said to me: 'Last night I  
dreamed. I had your  
tresses around my neck. I  
had your hair like a black  
necklace all round my  
nape and over my breast.

I caressed it and it was  
mine; and we were  
united thus forever by  
the same tresses,  
mouth on mouth, just  
as two laurels often  
share one root.

And gradually it seemed  
to me, so intertwined  
were our limbs, that I  
was becoming you, or  
you were entering into  
me like a dream.'

Quand il eut achevé, il mit  
doucement ses mains sur  
mes épaules, et il me  
regarda d'un regard si  
tendre, que je baissai les  
yeux avec un frisson.

When he had finished, he  
gently set his hands on  
my shoulders and  
gazed at me so  
tenderly that I lowered  
my eyes with a shiver.

#### Le tombeau des naïades

Le long du bois couvert de  
givre, je marchais; mes  
cheveux devant ma bouche  
se fleurissaient de petits  
glaçons, et mes sandales  
étaient lourdes de neige  
fangueuse et tassée.

Il me dit: 'Que cherches-tu?'  
– 'Je suis la trace du satyre.  
Ses petits pas fourchus  
alternent des trous dans  
un manteau blanc.' Il me  
dit: 'Les satyres sont morts.

'Les satyres et les nymphes  
aussi. Depuis trente ans il  
n'a pas fait un hiver aussi  
terrible. La trace que tu  
vois est celle d'un bouc.  
Mais restons ici, où est leur  
tombeau.'

Et avec le fer de sa houe  
il cassa la glace de la  
source où jadis riaient  
les naïades. Il prenait de  
grands morceaux froids,  
et les soulevant vers le  
ciel pâle, il regardait au  
travers.

#### The tomb of the Naiads

Along the frost-bound  
wood I walked; my hair,  
across my mouth,  
blossomed with tiny  
icicles, and my sandals  
were heavy with  
muddy, packed snow.

He said to me: 'What do you  
seek?' 'I follow the satyr's  
track. His little cloven hoof  
marks alternate like holes  
in a white cloak.' He said  
to me: 'The satyrs are  
dead.

The satyrs and the nymphs  
too. For thirty years there  
has not been so harsh a  
winter. The tracks you see  
are those of a goat. But let  
us stay here, where their  
tomb is.'

And with the iron head of his  
hoe he broke the ice of  
the spring where the  
naiads used to laugh. He  
picked up some huge  
cold fragments, and,  
raising them to the pale  
sky, gazed through them.

## Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

### Nocturne for violin and piano (1911)

### D'un matin de printemps (1917-8)

*Texts continue overleaf*

## Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)

### Poème de l'amour et de la mer Op. 19 (1882-90 rev. 1893)

arranged by Franck Villard  
Maurice Bouchor,  
Anonymous

#### La fleur des eaux

#### The flower of the waters

L'air est plein d'une odeur  
exquise de lilas  
Qui, fleurissant du haut des  
murs jusques en bas,  
Embaument les cheveux des  
femmes.  
La mer au grand soleil va  
toute s'embraser,  
Et sur le sable fin qu'elles  
viennent baiser  
Roulent d'éblouissantes lames.

The air is full of the  
exquisite scent of lilac  
which, flowering all over the  
walls from top to bottom,  
fills the women's hair with  
fragrance.  
The sea in the high sun is  
set aflame,  
and over the fine sand which  
they come to kiss  
roll dazzling waves.

O ciel qui de ses yeux dois  
porter la couleur,  
Brise qui vas chante  
dans les lilas en  
fleur  
Pour en sortir tout embaumée,  
Ruisseaux qui mouillerez sa  
robe, ô verts sentiers,  
Vous qui tressaillerez sous  
ses chers petits pieds,  
Faites-moi voir ma bien aimé!

O sky which must wear  
the colour of *her* eyes,  
breeze which goes  
singing through the  
lilacs in bloom  
to emerge all perfumed,  
brooks which bedew her  
dress, O green paths,  
you who tremble beneath  
her dear little feet,  
let me see my beloved!

Et mon cœur s'est levé par  
ce matin d'été;  
Car une belle enfant était sur  
le rivage,  
Laisant errer sur moi des  
yeux pleins de clarté,  
Et qui me souriait d'un air  
tendre et sauvage.

And my heart is lifted by  
this summer morning;  
because a beautiful girl  
was on the shore,  
letting her bright eyes  
wander to me,  
and smiling at me with an air  
both gentle and fierce.

Toi que transfiguraient la  
jeunesse et l'amour,  
Tu m'apparus alors comme  
l'âme des choses;  
Mon cœur vola vers toi, tu le  
pris sans retour,  
Et du ciel entr'ouvert pleuvaient  
sur nous des roses.

You whom youth and love  
transformed,  
you appeared to me then  
like the spirit of all things;  
my heart flew towards you,  
you took it for your own,  
the sky opened and roses  
rained upon us.

Quel son lamentable et  
sauvage  
Va sonner l'heure de l'adieu!  
La mer roule sur le rivage,  
Moqueuse, et se souciant  
peu

What a pitiable and  
barbarous sound  
blazons the hour of parting!  
The sea rolls over the shore,  
mocking, and little  
concerning itself

Que ce soit l'heure de  
l'adieu.

that it should be the hour  
of parting.

Des oiseaux passent, l'aile  
ouverte,  
Sur l'abîme Presque  
joyeux;  
Au grand soleil la mer est  
verte -  
Et je saigne, silencieux,  
En regardant briller les  
cieux.

Birds pass, wings  
spread,  
almost joyful over the  
depths;  
beneath the high sun the  
sea is green -  
and I bleed, silent,  
watching the heavens  
shimmer.

Je saigne en regardant ma vie  
Qui va s'éloigner sur les  
flots;  
Mon âme unique m'est  
ravie  
Et la sombre clameur des  
flots  
Couvre le bruit de mes  
sanglots.

I bleed watching my life  
about to float away on the  
waves;  
my very soul is taken  
from me  
and the deep roar of the  
waves  
drowns out the sound of  
my tears.

Qui sait si cette mer cruelle  
La ramènera vers mon  
cœur?  
Mes regards sont fixés sur elle;  
La mer chante, et le vent  
moqueur  
Raille l'angoisse de mon  
cœur.

Who knows if this cruel sea  
will bring her back to my  
heart?  
My gaze is fixed on it;  
the sea sings, and the  
mocking wind  
scorns the anguish of my  
heart.

## Interlude

### La mort de l'amour

### The death of love

Bientôt l'île bleue et  
joyeuse  
Parmi les rocs  
m'apparaîtra;  
L'île sur l'eau  
silencieuse  
Comme un nénuphar flottera.

Soon the blue and happy  
isle  
will appear to me among  
the rocks;  
the isle will float silently  
on the sea  
like a water lily.

A travers la mer d'améthyste  
Doucement glisse le bateau,  
Et je serai joyeux et triste  
De tant me souvenir -  
bientôt.

Across the amethyst ocean  
the boat glides gently,  
and I will be happy and sad  
to remember such things  
- soon.

Le vent roulait les feuilles  
mortes; mes pensées  
Roulaient comme des feuilles  
mortes, dans la nuit.  
Jamais si doucement au ciel  
noir n'avaient lui  
Les mille roses d'or d'où  
tombent les rosées.

The wind rustled the dead  
leaves; my thoughts  
rustled like the dead  
leaves, in the night.  
The thousand golden roses  
from which the dew falls  
never glowed so softly in  
the black sky.

Une danse effrayante, et les  
feuilles froissées,  
Et qui rendaient un son  
métallique, valsaient,  
Semblaient gémir sous les  
étoiles, et disaient  
L'inexprimable horreur des  
amours trépassés.

A dreadful dance, and the  
crumpled leaves,  
making a metallic sound,  
waltzed,  
seeming to moan beneath  
the stars, and speaking of  
the inexpressible horror  
of perished loves.

Les grands hêtres d'argent  
que la lune baisait  
Étaient des spectres: moi,  
tout mon sang se glaçait  
En voyant mon aimée  
étrangement sourire.

The tall silver beech trees  
kissed by the moon  
were spectres: as for me,  
all my blood froze  
to see my beloved smile  
strangely.

Comme des fronts de morts  
nos fronts avaient pâli,  
Et, muet, me penchant vers  
elle, je pus lire  
Ce mot fatal écrit dans ses  
grands yeux: l'oubli.

Like the brows of the dead  
our foreheads paled,  
and, silent, leaning towards  
her, I could read  
that fatal word written in  
her wide eyes: oblivion.

Le temps des lilas et le  
temps des roses  
Ne reviendra plus à ce  
printemps-ci;  
Le temps des lilas et le  
temps des roses  
Est passés, le temps des  
œuillets aussi.

The time of lilacs and the  
time of roses  
will never return to this  
spring;  
the time of lilacs and the  
time of roses  
is over, the time of  
carnations too.

Le vent a changé, les cieux  
sont moroses,  
Et nous n'irons plus courir, et  
cueillir  
Les lilas en fleur et les belles  
roses;  
Le printemps est triste et ne  
peut fleurir.

The wind has changed,  
the skies are heavy,  
and we will no longer run  
and gather  
the lilacs in flower and the  
lovely roses;  
spring is desolate and  
cannot bloom.

Oh! joyeux et doux  
printemps de l'année,  
Qui vins, l'an passé, nous  
enseueillir,  
Notre fleur d'amour est si  
bien fanée,  
Las! que ton baiser ne peut  
l'éveiller!

Oh! happy and sweet  
spring of the year,  
which came last year to  
bathe us in sunlight,  
our flower of love is so  
thoroughly wilted,  
alas! that your kiss cannot  
awaken it.

Et toi, que fais-tu? Pas  
de fleurs  
écloses,  
Point de gai soleil ni  
d'ombrages frais;  
Le temps des lilas et le  
temps des roses  
Avec notre amour est mort à  
jamais.

And you, what are you  
doing? No blooming  
flowers,  
no bright sun nor cool  
shade at all;  
the time of lilacs and the  
time of roses  
is dead forever, along  
with our love.

*Translations of Debussy by Richard Stokes from A French Song  
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