

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 12 March 2023
7.30pm

François-Frédéric Guy piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude S173 No. 3 (1848-53)
Tristan Murail (b.1947)	Le Misanthrope d'après Liszt et Molière (2021) <i>UK première</i> Mémorial (2021) <i>UK première</i>
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)	From <i>Préludes Book II</i> (1911-3) Brouillards • Feux d'artifice <i>Interval</i>
Franz Liszt	Pensée des morts S173 No. 4 (1848-53)
Claude Debussy	Reflets dans l'eau from <i>Images, Series 1</i> (1901-5)
Tristan Murail	Cailloux dans l'eau (2018) Résurgence (2021) <i>UK première</i>
Franz Liszt	Funérailles S173 No. 7 (1849)

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The framing pieces by **Liszt**, in this programme of poetic and pictorial images sketched by ten fingers at the piano, all come from his cycle *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*, on which he worked for over a decade before publishing it in 1853. The title he took from a book of poems by Alphonse de Lamartine, some of which prompted individual pieces.

Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude, playing for close on 20 minutes, is one such. Lamartine's poem is a long ode to the tranquility and faith to be discovered in leaving the noisy world for a remote valley, and this is where Liszt's music also finds itself. In a remarkable display of stasis in movement, the melody and its rippling accompaniment keep revolving, however much the harmony modulates around and away from the basic F sharp major. The revolutions circle back to the opening, for a varied reprise that rises to a high pitch of exaltation before giving place to a coda. That could be the end; however, it is only the end of the beginning. There follows a middle section discreetly recalling what was just heard. Then the piece moves slowly back towards another reprise of the beginning, perhaps even more impassioned. After this it is as if night falls, with starlight scintillating in the high treble, on the way to a new coda that achieves ultimate calm.

A later Liszt, the Liszt of *Nuages gris*, is recalled by the monotones and motionless or failing chords of *Le Misanthrope* (2021), the latest of the **Tristan Murail** pieces spaced through this programme; François-Frédéric Guy gave the first performance just over a year ago.

Composed earlier the same year, *Mémorial* considers the Holocaust memorial in Berlin: a city square filled with mute grey blocks. 'Wreaths of chords,' Murail writes, 'coming out of silence, returning to silence, trace straight lines that go over one another, tile time or criss-cross, to the point where one might sometimes think one hears several pianists.'

Two pieces from **Debussy's** second book of *Préludes* (1911-3) complete the first half. The book's opener has triads clouded and almost blended into one another by constant arpeggios: *Brouillards* ('Mists'). A figure is sometimes enveloped in the swirl, sometimes stands out starkly – a figure, it could easily be, from a tale by one of Debussy's favourite authors, Edgar Allan Poe.

Equivocations between figure and ground – figure becoming ground, ground becoming figure, figure standing out from ground or almost vanishing into it – are spectacularly developed in this book's grand finale, a firework display (*Feux d'artifice*) with strains of the 'Marseillaise' breaking in (the setting must be 14 July). Placing his titles as postscripts, Debussy wanted to underplay the element of depiction. Nevertheless, Alfred Cortot's take is irresistible: 'The slumbering smoke of Bengal candles emitting single sparks, the crackling of rockets, the gradual parabolic descent of stars, the whirring of Catherine wheels, the blinding radiance of brightly-coloured bouquets, everything that sparkles and shines in the night, the entire magic of light is contained in this music.'

We return to the Liszt collection for *Pensée des morts*, which again refers to one of the Lamartine poems, a meditation on death. Liszt begins with two themes, the first descending and ascending within dark diminished harmony in a low register, the other taking an upward leap of an octave. An introductory page ends in the far bass, to be followed by all the rampage and glitter of virtuoso elaboration. A bass chorus then takes over in chords, its words, from Psalm 130, printed over the music: 'De profundis clamavi' ('Out of the depths have I cried'). The initial themes come back in clarified harmony, leading into a long period of peace achieved.

Enter Debussy again with water, a potent metaphor in his music for both fluid form and ever-changing currents of emotion. *Reflets dans l'eau*, from his first set of *Images* (1901-5) has the right hand's opening little arches (up a fifth, down a fourth) reflecting the simultaneous falling three-note phrase in the left. These arches go on to be reflected in bigger ones, through extensions reaching a grand statement in parallel motion and dissolving into ripples, to a horn-like melody. This whole process is then done a different way, and done again in an atmosphere of conclusion.

This was the piece to which Murail responded in *Cailloux dans l'eau* (2018), which he wrote to mark the Debussy centenary. 'My own reflections', he explains, '– small stones [*cailloux*], cast freely – come to perturb Debussy's by agitating the surface of his water with some "spectral" waves....One can, nevertheless, make out the large form of the Debussy piece behind these perturbations. while the piano writing draws abundantly on the techniques at work in the *Images* (not only in *Reflets dans l'eau* but also in *Poissons d'or*) and attempts to place these at the service of my personal language.'

In *Résurgence* (2021) Murail turns his attention to Liszt. The piece is on one level an image of the Fontaine de Vaucluse, where the River Sorgue gushes out of the rock, but what Murail describes as these 'bubbings of sound, clouds of foam, rainbow mists' also derive from Liszt's water music.

And so back to Liszt for *Funérailles*, which he dated 'October 1849' to associate its melancholy triumph or triumphant melancholy with the failed Hungarian revolution, whose leaders were executed that month. The music starts as a funeral march of muffled bells and anger. This gives way to a strong theme originating in the bass and rising into the right hand with increasing excitement, to be followed by a glowing right-hand melody with arpeggiated accompaniment. The two subjects are audibly related, to each other and to the opening music, and another transformation comes out of them, a call to arms, with drums and fanfares. There is then an apotheosis of the melody from the second section, and the piece ends with recollections of the third and fourth – of hope and warning.

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