

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 12 September 2021 7.30pm

Sabine Devieille soprano
Alexandre Tharaud piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)
Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Nuit d'étoiles (1880)
Notre amour Op. 23 No. 2 (c.1879)
Après un rêve Op. 7 No. 1 (1877)
Au bord de l'eau Op. 8 No. 1 (1875)

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

La courte paille (1960)
Le sommeil • Quelle aventure! • La reine de cœur • Ba, be, bi, bo, bu • Les anges musiciens • La carafon • Lune d'avril

Claude Debussy

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1891-4) *transcribed by Alexandre Tharaud*
Romance: L'âme évaporée (1885)
La romance d'Ariel (1884)
Apparition (1884)

Interval

Louis Beydts (1895-1953)

Chansons pour les oiseaux (1950)
La colombe poignardée • Le petit pigeon bleu • L'oiseau bleu • Le petit serin en cage

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

5 mélodies populaires grecques (1904-6)
Chanson de la mariée • Là-bas, vers l'église • Quel galant m'est comparable • Chanson des cueilleuses de lentisques • Tout gai!

Claude Debussy

Ariettes oubliées (1885-7 rev. 1903)
C'est l'extase • Il pleure dans mon cœur • L'ombre des arbres • Chevaux de bois • Green • Spleen

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'Nuit d'étoiles' was **Claude Debussy's** first song to be published, and one of many associated with the amateur soprano Marie Vasnier, with whom the 19-year-old composer fell in love. The piano twinkles and shimmers with the glittering starlight of Banville's poem, and the vocal line soars and swoops with a richness redolent of Massenet.

Just a few years earlier, in the late 1870s, **Gabriel Fauré** was much involved with the singer and composer Pauline Viardot and her family, and fell deeply in love with Viardot's daughter Marianne. This musical and romantic link with the Viardots is no doubt responsible for the songs we hear tonight: 'Notre amour' is a passionate description of the nature of true love, the accompaniment rolling with barely suppressed excitement beneath the vocal line; whilst the steady chords of 'Au bord de l'eau' reveal that in the face of all that passes, love remains eternal. 'Après un rêve', surely Fauré's most famous song, was likely inspired by Pauline Viardot's settings of Tuscan folk poetry, and uses a French translation of an Italian popular song.

From early Fauré we move to late **Poulenc**: his final song cycle of 1960, *La courte paille*. The opus was written for his dear friend and duo partner Denise Duval to sing to her six-year-old son. The perspectives of parent and child alternate throughout. Thus 'Le sommeil' is a good-natured *berceuse* sung by the adult; and we then hear from the child in 'Quelle aventure!', a flea hopping and dancing around the manuscript paper, and melodramatic cries of 'Mon dieu!' that sound very much like a little boy copying the tones of his mother. 'La reine de cœur' is melting and strange, a grown-up song of ethereal beauty, whilst 'Ba, be, bi, bo, bu' is full of cheeky childish chaos and madcap rhymes. 'Les anges musiciens' and 'Le carafon' are each rather surreal – one dreamy, the other fantastical – whilst 'Lune d'avril' is a magical call for peace, both of the moonlight and of humanity.

One of Debussy's earliest pieces to earn international acclaim was his 'Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune', an orchestral piece inspired by a lengthy Mallarmé poem. The score was transcribed for solo piano in 1912 by Leonard Borwick, a pupil of Clara Schumann; tonight we hear it in a new arrangement by **Alexandre Tharaud**. This is followed by three early songs of the mid-1880s: 'Romance: L'âme évaporée' is a lush setting that hints again at Massenet and even Schumann, though more familiarly 'Debussyian' harmonies are also beginning to appear. 'La romance d'Ariel' alternates ethereal passages of vocalise with a rich Wagnerian climax. And 'Apparition' rings with both operatic passion (it was intended for Marie Vasnier) and something of the fairy tale in the delicate sound of falling petals.

We begin the second half with a less familiar name. **Louis Beydts** enjoyed a brilliant career in Paris from the 1920s onwards as a

composer, critic and recording producer, and was briefly the director of the Opéra Comique. His *Chansons pour les oiseaux* was composed in 1950, and is as touching as it is witty. 'La colombe poignardée' (The bleeding heart dove) has a Debussyian sense of both harmony and rhythmic freedom, whilst the singer's desire to be 'Le petit pigeon bleu' hints at Fauré in the soft whirring of the little bird's wings in the piano part. Yet in the final few bars, the pigeon calls in the piano *à la Messiaen* (whose mighty *Catalogue d'oiseaux* would be written later the same decade); and this idiom becomes still more evident in the crystalline chords of 'L'oiseau bleu', the singer soaring high above the stave as they conjure a litany of poetic names and images. We return to earth to hear the witty cautionary tale of 'Le petit serin en cage': canaries, it seems, can't be too careful...

When **Ravel** was still a student at the Paris Conservatoire, he became friends with a young man of Greek parentage named Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi. Calvocoressi was to become an important critic, but he was also keenly interested in translation – just as Ravel was fascinated with folksong arrangement. In 1904, the two collaborated on a clutch of songs that were subsequently published as *5 mélodies populaires grecques*. Of course, Greek folksong is not (as in the case of most folk traditions) written in major and minor keys, and Ravel's deft harmonisations both accentuate and complement the unusual, sinuous vocal shapes and the vivid range of moods on offer. Thus the sonorous, pensive 'Là-bas, vers l'église' is followed by the proud calls of a boastful young boy who kicks up his heels in delight in 'Quel galant m'est comparable?'

Finally, we return to Debussy. The collection published in 1903 as *Ariettes oubliées* had begun life as *Ariettes, paysages belges et aquarelles* in 1888, a set completely ignored by both the public and critics. (The cycle's new title is a nod to one of the Verlaine collections used in the composition – and also perhaps a wry reference to their initial reception.) Debussy set more texts by Verlaine than any other poet, and it is easy to see the appeal of his graceful, evocative and often ambiguous texts. From the sensuous languor of 'C'est l'extase' to the galloping merry-go-round horses of 'Chevaux de bois', and the relentless pattering of 'Il pleure dans mon cœur', Debussy's settings capture the sumptuous imagery and fluid gestures of the poet's *Romances sans paroles* (1874), and the delicately shaded final two 'Aquarelles' – 'Watercolours'.

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