

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 13 May 2024
1.00pm

Calefax Reed Quintet

Oliver Boekhoorn oboe
Bart de Kater clarinet
Raaf Hekkema saxophone
Jelte Althuis bass clarinet
Alban Wesly bassoon

- Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Fantasia and Fugue in G minor 'Great' BWV542 (c.1714-20)
arranged by Jelte Althuis
- Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) From String Quintet in E flat Op. 97 (1893) *arranged by Jelte Althuis*
Allegro non tanto • Allegro vivo
- Harry T Burleigh (1866-1949) Allegretto grazioso from *Southland Sketches* (1916) *arranged by Jelte Althuis*
- Claude Debussy (1862-1918) La puerta del vino from *Préludes Book II* (1911-3) *arranged by Raaf Hekkema*

From *Préludes Book I* (1909-10) *arranged by Raaf Hekkema*
Minstrels • La sérénade interrompue

General Lavine – eccentric from *Préludes Book II* *arranged by Raaf Hekkema*
- George Gershwin (1898-1937) An American in Paris (1928) *arranged by Raaf Hekkema*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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The programme has changed slightly since these programme notes were written.

Jelte Althuis has been in the reconstruction business since the childhood moment when he dismantled his grandmother's old pram and, with help from a local blacksmith, converted it into a racing go-cart. He likens the act of upcycling to the art of arranging music: each involves deconstructing an object or artefact and reassembling it in a slightly different yet new form. The process involves carefully handling and understanding the component parts, the notes and their formal relationship one to another in the case of a musical composition. 'Except for the moment that the final product comes into view', says Althuis, 'the dismantling phase excites and pleases me the most'.

The keyboard music of **JS Bach**, a central pillar of the Calefax repertoire, sets particular hurdles for the wind quintet arranger, not least those of adapting the original register of contrapuntal lines to suit each of the ensemble's instruments. 'In Bach's case', Althuis observes, 'the quality of the music is a huge asset. For me it's all about, on the one hand, the perfect balance between form and structure, and on the other, the emotion and the gestures. The combination of the head and the heart. Add to that I'm crazy about the church organ itself, as a piece of art and as a mechanical box of magic'. He found the ideal outlet for his passion in the *Fantasia and Fugue* BWV542, a work that thoroughly deserves its nickname.

The 'Great' G minor, originally named to distinguish it from Bach's 'Little' *Fugue* BWV578 in the same key, probably began as two distinct compositions, the *Fugue* created at Weimar during the early 1710s, the *Fantasia* possibly written after Bach's appointment to the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen in 1717. Whatever the work's history, it stands proud among the genre of keyboard fantasies, in which a set of short yet rich harmonies underpin strikingly elaborate melodic decorations; the *Fugue*, meanwhile, rises from a subject that Bach may have drawn from a Dutch song first published in Amsterdam in 1700.

Dvořák rewarded the admirable Kneisel Quartet, who gave the première of his String Quartet in F Op. 96 'American' at Carnegie Hall in New York, by presenting it with a new work for string quartet and a second viola. The String Quintet in E flat Op. 97, also nicknamed 'American', develops a theme in its first movement that the Czech composer heard in the summer of 1893 while staying at Spillville in Iowa sung by members of the Native American Kickapoo tribe. The *Allegro non tanto* opens with a wistful solo melody that forms the movement's first subject and gives way to the dotted rhythms of the Kickapoo-inspired second subject, the two infused with quicksilver shifts between joy and melancholy. A lively rhythmic riff and dancing main theme set the quintet's scherzo running, the energy of which is arrested in the trio section by a yearning minor-mode melody and restored by the return of the opening dance.

Despite **Debussy's** dislike of attempts to relate his music to the Impressionist style of painting, the subtle shading of his harmonies and seductive smoothness of his melodies certainly invite such comparisons. The titles given by the composer to his twenty-four *Préludes*, published in two volumes in 1910 and 1913, evoke powerful images, although the anthology is remarkable more for its stylistic diversity than for any conformity to a particular 'school' of composition. In fact, Debussy added the titles at the end rather than the beginning of each *Prélude*, as an afterthought preceded by three dots of ellipsis. 'I love [music] passionately', he wrote. 'And because I love it I try to free it from barren traditions that stifle it. It is a free art gushing forth, an open-air art boundless as the elements, the wind, the sky, the sea!' The *Préludes*, which pivot from strikingly popular dance forms to moments of daring harmonic experiment, are notably free from 'barren traditions'.

La puerta del vino embraces the sultry warmth of the habanera, a *contredanse* exported from Spain to the Americas in the 1700s, carried to Cuba by refugees from the Haitian wars of independence around 1800, enriched by exposure to Afro-Cuban rhythms and reintroduced to Europe as an exotic import. *Minstrels*, the last of the *Book I Préludes*, was inspired by a band of blackface musicians whom Debussy heard busking on the streets of Eastbourne while on holiday there in 1905. Its music also alludes to the funfairs of Belle Epoque Paris and the barrel organ that invariably greeted visitors *à la foire*. *La sérénade interrompue* ('The interrupted serenade') suggests the sentimental repertoire of the café-concert singer, who delivers a heartfelt tune to the accompaniment of Spanish guitar. *General Lavine - eccentric* was modelled on the bizarre stage routine of an eponymous character from the *Folies-Bergère*, whose hybrid clown-tramp costume gave the impression that he was nine feet tall. Debussy said that 'the fellow was made of wood', a condition reflected in composition's lumbering cakewalk rhythms.

An American in Paris arose when **George Gershwin** visited the French capital in 1926 and sketched ideas for a 'rhapsodic ballet'. He completed the piece after returning there two years later for a much-needed break from Broadway. Roaring 20s' Paris, with its supercharged blend of high art and popular culture, was a haven for expatriate American writers, artists and composers in search of inspiration. The boulevards and backstreet dives of the City of Lights presented Gershwin with a limitless supply of sights, sounds and impressions for his orchestral score, blaring taxi horns, jazz ballads and strolling flâneurs among them. The work's opening pitches listeners into the unruly world of Montmartre cabaret while its nostalgic slow central section brings American blues to the streets of Paris. *An American in Paris* concludes by combining the two to form a suitably grand finale.

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