

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 13 November 2022  
7.30pm

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Images, Series 2 (1907)

*Cloches à travers les feuilles •*

*Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut • Poissons d'or*

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Improvisation on Hungarian Peasant Songs Op. 20 No. 7 (1920)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Nocturne No. 6 in D flat Op. 63 (1894)

Claude Debussy

Estampes (1903)

*Pagodes • La soirée dans Grenade •*

*Jardins sous la pluie*

Interval

Claude Debussy

Préludes Book I (1909-10)

*Danseuses de Delphes • Voiles •*

*Le vent dans la plaine • Les sons et les parfums*

*tournent dans l'air du soir • Les collines d'Anacapri •*

*Des pas sur la neige • Ce qu'a vu le vent de l'ouest •*

*La fille aux cheveux de lin • La sérénade interrompue •*

*La cathédrale engloutie • La danse de Puck • Minstrels*

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In the Debussy memorial number of *La Revue musicale* published in December 1920, Alfred Cortot wrote an article on Debussy's piano music which appeared in English in 1922. Cortot claimed that Debussy 'revived the mysterious pleasure of sounds' while he 'restored to instrumental virtuosity a singular poetic value and a power of pleasing.' These features are particularly apparent in the three *Estampes*, composed in 1903, which drew abundant praise from Cortot. Debussy, he wrote, recalled 'that Ariel with invisible wings who knows all the perfumes of the night, all the shivers of the water, all the voices of the wind, all human emotions.' In the first piece, *Pagodes*, Debussy creates something much richer than a mere evocation of the mythical 'Far East': according to Cortot, 'as in a dream, the delicious nostalgia of those lands of delicate light in which are harmonised the gentle rites and traditional dances...' *Soirée dans Grenade* also went beyond 'the conventional delights of guitar and castanets' (though these are present), to a deeper experience: 'troubling, perfumed thoughts of the Alhambra gardens', and 'sad love songs which rise at night from the Moorish quarter ... the stifled sounds of those Iberian rhythms which start the dancing of the beautiful girls, grave and arrogant.' Finally, *Jardins sous la pluie* is indeed a print ('*estampe*'), but one that Cortot considered to be 'of so fine a quality that, in spite of the continual vivacity of the fingers on the notes, we perceive in it ... the furtive regret of a vanished happiness.' These may be subjective remarks, but they come from a musician who had known Debussy and understood music from a performer's perspective.

Debussy planned all six *Images* (two sets of three) by 1903 but composition took several years. The second set, published in 1907, opens with *Cloches à travers les feuilles*, a startling evocation of bell sounds, heard through a quietly flickering haze. *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* induces a sense of almost Zen-like stillness at the site of a ruined temple, while *Poissons d'or* was inspired by a Japanese lacquer plaque that hung in Debussy's study, depicting twisting and diving carp, brilliantly reimaged in sound by the composer. Cortot drew attention to Debussy's originality, 'this very new conception of the character and power of the instrument', which had a 'poetic personality' distinct from any predecessors.

The first book of *Préludes*, composed in 1909-10, comprises 12 pieces, the titles printed at the end of each as a kind of poetic footnote. The softly hieratic tread of *Danseuses de Delphes* is characterised by Cortot as 'grave and silent.' *Voiles*, famous for its use of whole-tone scales, was partly inspired by the veiled dances of Loie Fuller which so entranced Debussy, though for Cortot it was a more straightforward depiction of 'boats at rest in a luminous port.' *Le vent dans la plaine* depicts the wind, 'furtive and rapid' in Cortot's words, interrupted by a couple of stronger

gusts. *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir* ('Sounds and scents turn in the air of the evening') is a quotation from Baudelaire's *Harmonie du soir* which Debussy had set as a song more than 20 years earlier. For Cortot, it recalled 'the languishing dizziness in which a heart faints without reason.' *Les collines d'Anacapri* takes us to the sun-drenched hills near Naples, a tarantella rhythm mingling with snatches of a popular song under a brilliant blue sky. *Des pas sur la neige* is one of the bleakest *Préludes*: a frozen winter landscape with faint tracks in the snow showing the departure of an absent friend. According to Cortot, it expresses 'the memory of a happiness that is gone' and Debussy's markings suggest something similar: the infinitely tender falling phrase near the end marked 'comme un tendre et triste regret.' *Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest* is tempestuous, and Cortot finds in it 'the howlings of the unchained sea', in music that ends with uncompromising violence and dissonance. *La fille aux cheveux de lin* could not be more different. The title comes from a poem by Leconte de Lisle that Debussy had set for voice and piano in 1882, but its emotions are here transformed into an exquisite song without words. *La sérénade interrompue* is neatly described by Cortot as 'a nocturnal and malicious fantasy à la Goya'. It is followed by *La cathédrale engloutie* which recalls the Breton legend in which the great Cathedral of Ys emerges from the ocean and then disappears. *La danse de Puck* is capricious and ironic, Cortot noting that 'the subtle Shakespearian genius flies, flees away and returns.' *Minstrels* completes the set, with a humorous and whimsical evocation of Music-Hall, complete with tumbling acrobats.

The issue of *La Revue musicale* in which Cortot's essay appeared also included a supplement of pieces entitled *Le Tombeau de Claude Debussy*. Alongside Stravinsky, Ravel, Falla, Dukas, Satie and others, **Bartók** contributed the seventh of his *Improvisations on Hungarian Peasant Songs* (marked *Sostenuto, rubato*). Debussy had been an important influence, and Bartók was particularly proud of this work, declaring that in it he reached 'the extreme limit in adding the most daring accompaniments to simple folk tunes.'

**Fauré** composed his Sixth Nocturne in July and August 1894. He was delighted with the result, writing to the Princesse de Polignac that 'modern piano music that is also a little interesting is *exceedingly rare*'. A decade later, that was no longer the case as Debussy and Ravel had revolutionised piano writing, but the symphonic sweep and expressive range of Fauré's nocturne is remarkable, and much more than 'a little interesting'.

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