

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 15 April 2023  
7.30pm

Supported by Sam and Alexandra Morgan

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Ballade slave (c.1890)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 2 in F Op. 38 (1836-9)

Claude Debussy

Mazurka (c.1890)

Fryderyk Chopin

Mazurka in B minor Op. 30 No. 2 (1837)

Claude Debussy

Valse romantique (c.1890)

Fryderyk Chopin

Waltz in F minor Op. 70 No. 2 (1842)

Claude Debussy

Tarentelle styrienne (c.1890)

Fryderyk Chopin

Tarantelle in A flat Op. 43 (1841)

*Interval*

Pierre Boulez (1925-2016)

Notations (1945)

*Fantastique • Modéré • Très vif • Assez lent •  
Rhythmique • Doux et improvisé • Rapide •  
Hiératique • Modéré jusqu'a très vif •  
Lointain - Calme • Mécanique et très sec •  
Scintillant • Lent - Puissant et après*

Claude Debussy

From *Etudes Book I* (1915)

*Pour les cinq doigts • Pour les tierces •  
Pour les quartes • Pour les sixtes •  
Pour les octaves*

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Please note, the programme order has changed since these programme notes were written.

The piano music of **Debussy** runs throughout this programme, from pieces composed in about 1890 to a group of *Études* from 1915 – his last major works for solo piano. Debussy had immense admiration for Chopin and his edition of Chopin's complete works was published in Durand's *Edition classique* between 1915 and 1917. When he was ten years old, Debussy's piano teacher at the Paris Conservatoire had been Antoine François Marmontel, who had often heard Chopin play (and who owned Delacroix's portrait of Chopin which today hangs in the Louvre). Chopin and Debussy shared a fascination for discovering new colours and sonorities on the piano, and Debussy was also drawn to Chopin's innovative handling of short forms, sometimes taking them as models. The *Ballade slave* was composed in 1890 or earlier, and it was one of four 'pièces pour piano' published by Choudens in 1891 (the others were the *Valse romantique* and *Tarentelle styrienne* along with the *Marche écossaise* for piano duet). The *Ballade* is an immensely attractive piece, but any parallels with Chopin's ballades are remote. The 'slav' element of the title is a mystery too: though Debussy spent time in Russia in the early 1880s as the house pianist for Nadezhda von Meck, there's nothing explicitly Russian slavic about the piece. In the *Valse romantique* Debussy seems to have taken some of the harmonic twists and turns of Chopin's waltzes and repurposed them in his own youthful style. Though probably composed in the 1880s (and inadvertently sold by Debussy to two different publishers in 1891), the *Mazurka* did not appear in print until 1904. Here the form and the musical features (rhythms, drones and the like) typical of Chopin's mazurkas are apparent in Debussy's piece, which feels like a direct homage to Chopin. The title of the *Tarentelle styrienne* is another puzzle: while the music loosely resembles an Italian tarantella, the people of Styria in Austria are never known to have danced tarantellas at all. Debussy later renamed the piece '*Danse*', the title under which Ravel made his orchestration in 1922. It's a wonderfully spirited piece – unmistakably Debussy, but with delightful echoes of Borodin and Chabrier.

Debussy's greatest tribute to Chopin was the twelve *Études*, dedicated 'à la mémoire de Frédéric Chopin'. Debussy finished his edition of Chopin's *Études* for Durand in February 1915, noting that although working on the manuscripts was 'truly terrifying', Chopin's achievements had lasting significance for modern composers. After a year of creative silence, Debussy's own *Études* composed in the summer of 1915 were a spectacular affirmation of this. Each of the five études played tonight poses specific technical challenges: 'for the five fingers – after Monsieur Czerny', in which a deadpan five-finger exercise serves to introduce a brilliant character piece, 'for the thirds' which ends

with climactic chords marked to be played 'con fuoco', and 'for the fourths', where Debussy explores the expressive possibilities of a favourite interval. Debussy wrote about his study 'for the sixths' that 'for a long time the continuous use of sixths reminded me of pretentious young ladies sitting in a salon' but was pleased with his own efforts ('not bad!'). 'For the octaves' is a magnificent kind of concert waltz, exploring the entire tonal and dynamic range of the piano and ending in a trenchant blaze of E major.

**Chopin** completed his Ballade No. 2 in F in 1839 and dedicated it to Schumann, who noted in his diary that 'a new Chopin Ballade has appeared and it is dedicated to me. It gives me greater joy than if I'd received some royal command.' In a review, Schumann described it as less ambitious but 'no less fanciful and imaginative' than its predecessor (the G minor Ballade), adding that 'it evokes the most intimate thoughts'. The Waltz in F minor was composed in 1842 but only published after Chopin's death. His biographer Wilhelm von Lenz recalled that 'I often heard him play it, and how incomparably! This nostalgic piece could be entitled *Melanconia*.' Chopin's mazurkas include some of his boldest harmonic experiments and the B minor *Mazurka* is no exception: its main melody has some surprising peculiarities, and the piece ends in the 'wrong' key of F sharp minor. Chopin knew Rossini's vocal tarantella 'La danza' (from the *Soirées musicales*) and it prompted him to compose his own *Tarentelle* in June 1841. Schumann thought it was 'in Chopin's most extravagant manner', though the composer himself had his doubts about it. It may not be one of Chopin's most important works, but it's an entirely charming nod to Rossini.

**Pierre Boulez** composed the 12 *Notations* in 1945. In a 2009 interview with his publisher, the famously fastidious composer revealed that he had written them in 'maybe one week. It was composed very quickly – I was very spontaneous at this time, but I was still only twenty when I composed it'. Asked about what his intentions had been, an amused Boulez replied that it was 'to make fun of twelve tone [music]. There are twelve pieces, every piece is twelve bars long ... it was to make fun of the dogmatism of [René] Leibowitz.' This humorous inspiration gives these brilliant pieces a human dimension that is both touching and funny. Each piece is extremely short, and though composed in a strict 12-tone style, it is possible to detect influences (sometimes remote) from Boulez's teacher Messiaen (the voicing of some of the chords in No. 1 and No. 12), Bartók (No. 4), and particularly Debussy (the short-long motif in No. 7, the repeated figurations in No. 8, the dark, misty sonorities of No. 9). Though he rarely played in public, Boulez was a fine pianist and the *Notations* explore the expressive and colouristic potential of the piano to memorable effect.

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