

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 15 February 2024
7.30pm

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet piano
Steven Isserlis cello
Irène Duval violin

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Violin Sonata in G minor (1916-7)

*I. Allegro vivo • II. Intermède. Fantasque et léger •
III. Finale. Très animé*

André Caplet (1878-1925)

Elégie (1903)

Claude Debussy

Elégie (1915) *transcribed by Jean-Efflam Bavouzet*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Sonata for violin and cello (1920-2)

I. Allegro • II. Très vif • III. Lent • IV. Vif, avec entrain

Interval

Sally Beamish (b.1956)

Suite for cello and piano (2006) *based on Claude Debussy*

*I. Prélude (Intermezzo) • II. Rêverie • III. Scherzo •
IV. Nocturne • V. Danse bohémienne*

Claude Debussy

Cello Sonata (1915)

I. Prologue • II. Sérénade • III. Finale



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'Where is French music? Where are the old harpsichordists who had so much true music?' It was thoughts like these that prompted **Claude Debussy** to embark on a series of instrumental sonatas at the start of World War I. The teenage Poulenc, eager to acquire Debussy's autograph, wrote to the composer in October 1915 (masquerading as a Belgian music critic) and Debussy replied: 'This is a time when we should be trying to regain a hold on our ancient traditions: we may have let their beauty slip from us, but it has not ceased to exist.' It was in this frame of mind that Debussy set out to write his six sonatas. Weakened by cancer, he only completed three of the planned set, but on the title page of each, the composer proudly described himself as 'musicien français'.

The Cello Sonata was the first to be finished, in the summer of 1915, and it was originally going to have a title: 'Pierrot angry with the moon.' As well as links to a vanished past, the Cello Sonata has debts to more recent music including use of a cyclic theme – a device borrowed from César Franck. Debussy used this technique in his early String Quartet, but here there is much greater refinement in his handling of musical material. The first movement opens with a gesture that introduces the motif which unites the musical ideas in the work. The second movement is a ghostly *Sérénade* full of enigmatic harmonies, and leads to a more flowing and restless *Finale* that seems reluctant to settle until the closing D minor chords.

The Violin Sonata was the third to be composed. Debussy's original plan had been to score it for violin, cor anglais and piano but he eventually settled on just violin and piano. Debussy was seriously ill during the war years, but in October 1916 he wrote to Jacques Durand that 'going for a walk recently ... I found the cellular idea for the finale of the Violin Sonata. Unfortunately, the first two movements don't want to have anything to do with it. Knowing myself as I do, I'm not going to force them to put up with an awkward neighbour.' The sonata was finished by the end of April 1917. Gaston Poulet and Debussy gave the first performance at the Salle Gaveau on 5 May 1917 in what turned out to be the composer's last public appearance. Two days later he wrote to Robert Godet: 'I've at last finished the sonata for violin and piano. By one of those very human contradictions, it's full of happiness and uproar ... It was played last Saturday at a concert for the benefit of blind soldiers. The public had come with charitable purposes and applauded it.' He later told Godet that 'the sonata will be interesting as an example of what an invalid can write in time of war', but it is a great deal more interesting than that. The *Allegro vivo* opens with piano chords over which the violin spins a melody which is initially rather melancholy, before becoming more animated, all

within a highly concentrated sonata form. The *Intermède* (marked *Fantasque et léger*) is capricious, its moods shifting from playfulness to introspection, its energy eventually spent as it dies away. The *Finale* begins with an allusion to the first movement, but what follows more closely mirrors Debussy's description of the sonata as 'full of happiness and uproar'. It was his farewell to composition.

Debussy's *Elégie* was composed in 1915 for solo piano and published in *Pages inédites sur la femme et la guerre*, a volume honouring the contribution of women to the First World War. It is heard in a transcription for cello and piano by **Jean-Efflam Bavouzet** – just the sort of arrangement that was made of Debussy's short piano pieces during his lifetime.

Alongside this is the *Elégie* by Debussy's friend and collaborator **André Caplet**. A gifted composer, he was also a fine conductor and assisted Debussy with the orchestration of *Le martyr de Saint Sébastien* and *La boîte à joujoux*. Caplet's early *Elégie* for cello and piano is characteristic of his style in the years immediately after his success in the Prix de Rome which he won in 1901. It was published in his home town of Le Havre in 1903.

The first movement of **Ravel's** Sonata for violin and cello was the composer's contribution to the Debussy memorial volume published by *Revue musicale* in December 1920. This movement was performed on its own at a concert in January 1921, but Ravel always planned a work in four movements. The première of the complete sonata took place on 6 April 1922, played by Hélène Jourdan-Morhange and Maurice Maréchal. Ravel himself wrote that the work 'marked a turning point in the evolution of my career. In it, thinness of texture is pushed to the extreme and harmonic charm is renounced.' This more austere musical language was – intentionally or not – extremely apt for a work dedicated to the memory of Debussy.

The *Suite* by **Sally Beamish** after Debussy was completed in 2006 and first performed by Steven Isserlis in 2007 (in a version with orchestra). Beamish's idea was to reimagine the suite for cello and orchestra that Debussy is thought to have composed in 1881-2. All that is known is that one movement was called *Intermezzo*. In order to recreate this lost suite, Beamish has taken the surviving *Intermezzo* as the opening movement and arranged other Debussy pieces dating from around 1880: the *Réverie* for piano, a *Scherzo*, the song *Nuit d'étoiles* and the *Danse bohémienne*.

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