

# WIGMORE HALL 125

Tuesday 16 December 2025  
1.00pm

## Leeds Piano Competition 2024 Prizewinner Recital

Junyan Chen piano

François Couperin (1668-1733)

Les baricades mystérieuses from *Second livre de pièces de clavecin* (pub. 1716-7)

Le tic-toc-choc ou Les maillotins from *Troisième livre de pièces de clavecin* (pub. 1722)

From *Quatrième livre de pièces de clavecin* (pub. 1730)  
*Les ombres errantes • Les tricoteuses*

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

From *Préludes* (1928-9)  
*La colombe • Un reflet dans le vent*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Le tombeau de Couperin (1914-7)  
*I. Prélude • II. Fugue • III. Forlane •  
IV. Rigaudon • V. Menuet • VI. Toccata*  
  
La valse (1919-20)



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As with the Bach family in Germany, the Couperins created an impressive dynasty over five generations in Paris, with **François Couperin**, known as 'Couperin le Grand', and his uncle Louis the most prominent members of a clan that extended from the end of the 17th Century well into the 19th. Their heyday was the high Baroque period of King Louis XIV, where both were appointed as musicians in royal service. Louis Couperin also became organist at the church of St Gervais in Paris, a prestigious post that stayed in the family for the best part of 200 years.

François Couperin was influenced by Lully and Rameau, and was completely smitten by Corelli's music. He and Bach never met but they corresponded with each other. There is church, organ and chamber music, but François Couperin is best known for his *pièces de clavecin* (keyboard pieces), some 226 of them presented in 27 *Ordres* over four volumes that still fascinate musicians and music lovers. The *Ordres* are suites, some of which follow the conventional sequence of dances, as in the Bach Suites and Partitas, while others are a progress of idiosyncratic character pieces with titles to do with famous personalities, beautiful women, colourful mood and nature pieces or, in the example of *Les Fastes de la grande et ancienne ménestrandise*, taking sides in a bitter political dispute between Parisian musicians. Not much is known about Couperin's life, but his music suggests wit, sly humour and wisdom with a keen appreciation of human fallibility, meticulously crafted with the often elaborate ornamentation precisely detailed.

Junyan Chen's recital opens with *Les baricades mystérieuses*, the title a subject of much speculation. A woman's eyelashes defying entry to the soul, or masks worn by actors in an entertainment are just two of many. The gentle main rondeau theme is interspersed with three couplets. The meaning of the title of *Le tic-toc-choc, ou Les maillotins* is also uncertain: the fixed pace of a ticking clock, or a contemporary reference to the Maillot family of rope-dancers. Originally a *pièce croisée* for two manuals, with both hands playing in the same register, on a one-manual piano it requires considerable agility for the hands not to get in the way of each other. The sombre harmonies and counterpoint of *Les ombres errantes* (The wandering shades) portray a soul adrift in limbo, as Couperin reflects on mortality. The group ends with *Les tricoteuses* (The knitters), the steady purpose of needles with perhaps a hint of a dropped stitch in the brief coda.

**Olivier Messiaen** wrote his eight *Préludes* for piano in 1928/9, at the end of his time at the Paris Conservatoire. The poetic titles suggest the influence of Debussy, as do the ambiguous harmonies and

expansive sonorities, and in the first *Prélude, La colombe* (The dove), there is Messiaen's voice of spacious mysticism, more concerned with colour than with progression. The title of the eighth *Prélude, Un reflet dans le vent* (A reflection in the wind), is impressionist and oblique, but there is no doubt about the music's virtuosic and stormy energy. For Messiaen, music and colour were synaesthetically and inextricably linked. *La colombe* was orange and violet; *Un reflet* was violet, orange and purple.

**Maurice Ravel** composed *Le tombeau de Couperin* through the First World War, in which he enlisted as a truck driver. He dedicated each of the six movements to friends who had been killed, and it is as much a memorial to them as an homage to the music of the French high Baroque, a suite of dances like a procession of ghosts, edging in and out of nostalgia for what has been lost, then bustling with energy. Ravel was not a great pianist, yet wrote some of the finest piano music of the 20th Century, noted as much for its technical challenges as for its polish, precise detail, poise and spiritual depth. The *Prélude* has all this in a beautifully crafted *moto perpetuo*. The *Fugue*, the only one he published, is sober and remote, followed by the first piece to be written, a *Forlane* based on a movement from a suite by François Couperin. The *Forlane* originally was a sinuous Italian folk dance, here cast as a rondeau in seven sections. The *Rigaudon* is a busy, foot-tapping dance with a slightly slower middle section. The stylised antique poise of the *Minuet* recalls Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte* and its *Musette* middle section slips into a brief climactic crescendo. Like the *Prélude*, the closing, lively *Toccata* is brimming with insouciant virtuosity.

Ravel's *La valse* is best known as an orchestral showpiece, but he wrote it first for solo piano then for two pianos, the latter version Serge Diaghilev, who commissioned it for his Ballets Russes company in 1919, heard before he rejected it. The two men never spoke to each other again. Ravel had had in mind a homage to the waltz-king Johan Strauss since 1906, and a motif the composer used in his *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911) made its way into *La valse*. Ravel described the scene of mists parting to reveal waltzing couples in the imperial court of 1855. By the time of the Diaghilev rejection and of the death of Ravel's mother in 1917, the composer had witnessed first-hand the horrors of the First World War, but he flatly denied that *La valse* was his vision of a culture that had been destroyed, although it is easy to understand why people might think it was. In its solo version, it is one of the Everests of the piano repertoire.

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