

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 17 April 2023
7.30pm

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet piano
François-Frédéric Guy piano

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Rapsodie espagnole (version for 2 pianos) (1907-8)
*I. Prélude à la nuit • II. Malagueña •
III. Habanera • IV. Feria*

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Jeux (1912) *arranged by Jean-Efflam Bavouzet*

Interval

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

The Rite of Spring (version for 2 pianos) (1911-3)

Part I:

Adoration of the Earth • Introduction: Lento, tempo rubato – • The Augurs of Spring (Dances of the Young Girls): Tempo giusto – • Game of Abduction: Presto – Spring Rounds: Tranquillo – • Games of the Rival Clans: Molto allegro – Procession of the Wise Elder: Lento – • Adoration of the Earth: Lento – Dance of the Earth: Prestissimo

Part II:

The Sacrifice • Introduction: Largo – Mysterious Circles of the Young Girls: Andante con moto – • Glorification of the Chosen Victim: Vivo – Evocation of the Ancients: Vivo – • Ritual of the Ancients: Lento – Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen Victim)

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The *Rapsodie espagnole* had its origins in a habanera for two pianos which Ravel composed in 1895 and then set aside. In 1907, he added three movements to create the *Rapsodie espagnole* and completed the original two-piano version by October. The new work opened with the hushed *Prélude à la nuit*, followed by a short *Malagueña*. The earlier *Habanera* formed the third movement, and the *Rapsodie* ended with the wonderfully exuberant *Feria* ('Festival'). The orchestral version was finished by February 1908 and its première was given in Paris on 15 March 1908. A few days before that first performance, Durand published Ravel's transcription for two pianos (or piano duet), while the orchestral score followed in August 1908. The full version is a glorious demonstration of Ravel's skill as an orchestrator, but as the first to be composed and published, his two-piano version has a special status.

Debussy's *Jeux* was composed for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in August and September 1912, and the first performance was given – to a largely indifferent audience – at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on 15 May 1913, two weeks before the legendary and scandalous première of *The Rite of Spring*. Both ballets were choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky. Subtitled a 'poème dansé', the scenario of the ballet evolved from Nijinsky and Diaghilev's original idea (involving, among other things, three male lovers and a plane crash) to the more benign setting of the jealousies of a young man and two women that emerge while they search for a lost tennis ball during a game. Debussy was unhappy about the original scenario but his objections were mollified by Diaghilev doubling his fee. The score of *Jeux* is one of the marvels of Debussy's later years: he told André Caplet that one aim was to find a new kind of orchestral sonority 'which seems to be lit from behind', but the most remarkable innovations of *Jeux* are in its startling harmonies and its seemingly free form. This was eloquently described by Pierre Boulez, who wrote about a work that is 'as changeable in an instant as it is homogenous in development'; Boulez underlined the need to find the work's 'fundamental unity ... at the same time as placing in relief incidents which ceaselessly intervene', concluding that '*Jeux* marks a date of capital importance in the history of contemporary aesthetics.' Debussy himself planned to produce a two-piano version: he wrote to his publisher Jacques Durand in September 1913 that 'as soon as I get back the orchestral score of *Jeux* I'll make a two-piano arrangement of it.' Debussy never got around to this, and Jean-Efflam Bavouzet's transcription aims to realise the composer's known intentions.

Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* is enshrined in musical history for the riotous circumstances of the première, given by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 29 May 1913. The story of that first night has been retold many

times (every eyewitness seemingly giving a slightly different account), but for Diaghilev himself there could be no better publicity than a full-blown scandal, particularly after the lukewarm reception of Debussy's *Jeux* two weeks earlier. Within a year of its première, *The Rite* had started to be performed in concert halls (rather than being shouted down in the theatre) and was quickly recognised as a masterpiece, not least by fellow composers – never an easy constituency to impress.

Debussy and Ravel were both familiar with the score before the first performance. Debussy had played the work through with Stravinsky in the composer's piano duet (or two piano) reduction in 1912 at the home of musicologist Louis Laloy, who recalled that after the performance 'we were stunned into silence by this hurricane that had come from the depths of the ages and that tore up our life by its roots.' A few months later, Debussy recalled this performance in a letter to Stravinsky: 'it haunts me like a beautiful nightmare and I try in vain to recapture the terrifying impression it made.' On the day of the première in 1913, Debussy wrote to his friend André Caplet that '*The Rite of Spring* is an extraordinary, ferocious thing. If you like, it's primitive music with every modern convenience.' For Debussy, it seems *The Rite* was always that 'beautiful nightmare' – a work about which he was to remain slightly ambivalent. But Ravel had no doubts. He visited Stravinsky at Clarens on Lake Geneva in March 1913 and was shown the recently completed full score. He told his friend Lucien Garban: 'You must hear *The Rite of Spring*. I really think it's going to be an event as important as the première of Debussy's *Pelléas*.' After the scandal of the première a few weeks later, Ravel was quick to defend Stravinsky, earning the composer's gratitude: 'In the tumult of contradictory opinions, my friend Maurice Ravel intervened practically alone to set matters right.' Among Stravinsky's Russian contemporaries, the work's most enthusiastic supporter was Sergey Prokofiev. Sceptical when he first heard it in 1914, the following year he played the piano four-hand arrangement with Stravinsky in Italy, recalling that 'Stravinsky boiled, became bloodshot, sweated, sang hoarsely and gave the rhythm so confidently that we gave *The Rite of Spring* with stunning effect. I completely and unexpectedly saw that *The Rite* was a marvellous piece in its surprising beauty, clarity and craftsmanship. I sincerely hailed the composer, and in response he praised my sight-reading.' Stravinsky's version for piano duet or two pianos was the first appearance of *The Rite* in print, published by Editions Russes de Musique in 1913, eight years before the orchestral score. In this arrangement, the work loses none of its visceral energy – or its enduring power to shock.

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