

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 19 June 2023
1.00pm

Impressions

Carousel Chamber Music Ensemble

Annelien Van Wauwe clarinet
Agnès Clément harp
Jill Jeschek flute
Alexandra Soumm violin
Samuel Nemtanu violin
Mihai Cocea viola
Louis Rodde cello

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (1891-4) *arranged by Jelle Tassyns*

Wim Henderickx (1962-2022)

Lagrimas (Tears of Hope) (2016)

Claude Debussy

Première rhapsodie (1909-10) *arranged by Jelle Tassyns*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Introduction et allegro (1905)



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

www.carousel-ensemble.com



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This concert aims towards the piece in which Ravel invented the Carousel Ensemble's set-up: a miniature orchestra comprising flute and clarinet, harp and string quartet. We begin, though, with music by **Debussy** arranged for the same formation by the Belgian composer **Jelle Tassyns**. Debussy was 32 when his 'Prelude to *The Afternoon of a Faun*' was first performed, by which time he had quite an output behind him: songs, chiefly, but also piano, choral and orchestral pieces, and even an unfinished (and never-to-be-finished) opera. However, this new composition went beyond all that in introducing music that glows and hovers, music that creates, out of the aging 19th-century tradition, something absolutely fresh and immediate.

The starting point came from Stéphane Mallarmé. In 1890 Debussy became an occasional guest at Mallarmé's weekly soirées, and was evidently fascinated. Very soon he was involved in composing a prelude, interludes and 'final paraphrase' for a reading of the poet's *L'après-midi d'un faune* (published in 1876), in which a faun – man down to the waist and goat below – contemplates the erotic possibilities of the afternoon, semi-doing between memory and desire. Only the prelude was written, in 1891-4, but the piece can certainly be understood as a paraphrase as well, setting the warm and tranquil outdoor scene, and evoking the faun's imaginings.

So wedded to its orchestral colouring, right from how it is set in motion by a solo flute, the piece has been a persistent challenge to arrangers, among whom Ravel was one of the first, with his piano-duet version of 1910. Tassyns, unlike Ravel, has the flute available and can maintain its fertility. Mentioned by the faun in the poem, the instrument comes to slowly breathing life as it goes down and up through almost chromatic scales, then opens out into the beginning of melody. The harmony is uncertain, and the extension ripples away, so the flute must start again, differently. Everything continues from here, elaborating the flute solo, spinning away with part of it, finding a complementary melody, bringing the original back. Chamber scoring highlights pleasures of interplay, especially between flute and clarinet, and may allow us to appreciate more how this is a work of elegant counterpoint as well as poetry.

Also from Belgium, **Wim Henderickx**, who sadly passed away unexpectedly in December 2022, wrote his *Lagrimes* for the same Ravelian ensemble in 2019. 'The statue of the Madonna della Macarena in Seville', he wrote, 'was the inspiration for this work. These lagrimas (tears) are also tears of hope for the composer, hope rather than the fear and violence of these confusing times.' (Henderickx refers to a life-size wooden image of the Virgin of Hope, with glass tears affixed to the face.)

He goes on to acknowledge his 15-minute work's debt to Ravel but also its difference: 'Ravel's work incorporates the idea of the concerto, in which the

harp has a central role. In *Lagrimes* the winds, strings and harp are of more or less equal importance. Sometimes it is often a question of woodwind versus strings, with the harp as a catalyst.

'Nine separate episodes, each with its own character, ranging from almost complete silence to exuberant energy, blend into one another. Some parts are very precisely written at the rhythmical level; others leave the performers a lot of freedom and suggest a non-linear perception of time. The work is pure chamber music, in which the musicians communicate with each other.'

Jelle Tassyns's second Debussy arrangement is of the *Première rhapsodie* the composer wrote in the winter of 1909-10 as a test piece for clarinet students at the Paris Conservatoire. The work conveys what Debussy, 30 years or so before, had told one of his Conservatoire professors was his guiding principle: pleasure – pleasure here in musical imagination, in compositional craft and in the destined instrument. This re-envisioning of the piece also completes an evocative diptych: one faun's afternoon and perhaps another's night.

At its outset the music seems to be showing how it was made, piecing itself together around a three-note motif heard descending in double octaves on violin and viola, then rising on the clarinet, under the appropriate marking *Rêveusement lent*, 'dreamily slow' – and seductive. An alternative eventually reveals itself in a skipping dance, but the basic motif is not forgotten. (There is some parallel in this with the earlier Debussy piece.) The two kinds of music proceed in intertwining growth, generating an atmosphere of sensual playfulness that pre-echoes the composer's ballet *Jeux*. Nightfall intensifies the excitement, and takes the clarinet from its lowest register to its highest.

We end with the ancestor of all this in terms of scoring: the *Introduction et allegro* that **Ravel** wrote during a week in June 1905 (including, by his own account, three sleepless nights) before dashing off to join friends on a boating holiday. The piece had been commissioned by the musical instrument company Erard as a rejoinder to the pair of *Danses* that Debussy had written for the rival firm of Pleyel to show off their new chromatic harp. Ravel's brief was to demonstrate that the Erard pedal harp could be just as harmonically colourful.

The harp writing is brilliant throughout, and full of the swishing glissandos Debussy had avoided. The themes put forward in the slow introduction belong, however, to the woodwind couple (first two) and the cello (the third, at a peppier tempo). Opening the ensuing *allegro* alone, the harp is ready to join its companions and then take a more active part in the thematic working of a sonata form that ends with a splash.

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