

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 1 July 2023  
1.00pm

## Après un rêve

Emmanuel Despax piano

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Les soirées de Nazelles (1930-6)

*Préambule. Extrêmement animé et décidé*

*Cadence. Largo*

*Variations: Le comble de la distinction. Vif et gai*

*Le cœur sur la main. Modéré*

*La désinvolture et la discrétion. Presto*

*La suite dans les idées. Très large et pompeux*

*Le charme enjôleur. Très allant*

*Le contentement de soi. Très vite et très sec*

*Le goût du malheur. Lent et mélancolique*

*L'alerte vieillesse. Très rapide et bien sec*

*Cadence. Très large et très librement*

*Final. Follement vite, mais très précis*

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Après un rêve Op. 7 No. 1 (1877) *transcribed by  
Emmanuel Despax*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

*I. Ondine • II. Le gibet • III. Scarbo*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Danse macabre S555 (1876) *based on*

*Camille Saint-Saëns arranged by Vladimir Horowitz*



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**Francis Poulenc** started *Les soirées de Nazelles* in 1930 but did not finish it until 1936. A note in the front of the score explains the title: 'The variations which form the centre of this work were improvised at Nazelles during long evenings in the countryside, when the composer would play "portraits" for friends gathered around the piano. My hope is that these variations – presented between a *préambule* and a finale – will evoke the playful spirit of a Touraine salon, with a window opening into the night.' Poulenc was always diffident about his piano music, and once admitted that 'I have always loved and played the piano, but my piano compositions are perhaps too facile ... they do not represent my truest feelings.' Despite Poulenc's own view, *Les soirées de Nazelles* is certainly an attractive work. The central pieces which Poulenc calls 'variations' could more accurately be described as character pieces (all anonymous), and their contrasting moods seem to capture very well the work's playful, extemporised origins. The framing sections are a waltzing *Préambule*, two cadenzas, and a toccata-like finale. After the toccata comes a coda full of sudden mood swings and some fine pianistic effects, not least a *pianissimo* section near the end where the pianist is asked to 'create a kind of halo of sound using both pedals'.

**Gabriel Fauré** composed the song 'Après un rêve' in the 1870s and it was soon being transcribed as an instrumental piece (perhaps most famously by Pablo Casals, who made a version for cello and piano). Following in the footsteps of Liszt's solo piano arrangements of Schubert songs, **Emmanuel Despax** has made a transcription for solo piano in which the song's bewitching vocal line now shifts between soprano and tenor registers – almost creating the illusion of a love duet in miniature.

**Maurice Ravel** completed *Gaspard de la nuit* on 8 September 1908, and the first performance took place on 9 January 1909, at the Salle Erard in Paris. The pianist was Ricardo Viñes, one of the most energetic advocates of new French and Spanish music, and a long-time friend of Ravel's. Exact contemporaries, they were both members of *Les Apaches*, a group of like-minded artistic friends. While they were students, Viñes had introduced Ravel to the poetry of Aloysius Bertrand that was later to inspire *Gaspard de la nuit*. Bertrand's prose poems had been published in 1842 (a year after his death), and influenced later Symbolist poets, notably Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Ravel's *Gaspard*, aptly subtitled 'three poems', begins with *Ondine*, a dream-like depiction of a mysterious water sprite. Ravel's music seems to mirror the strange beauty of the poem: 'Listen! ... it is Ondine who brushes drops of water on the resonant panes of your windows, lit by the gloomy rays of the moon; and here in gown of watered silk, the mistress of the chateau gazes from

her balcony on the beautiful starry night and sleeping lake.' *Le Gibet* is a grim evocation of a corpse hanging from the gallows. A bell – incessant and obsessive – tolls throughout the piece, represented by repeated B flats, the first and last sounds we hear.

Ravel once said his initial idea for *Scarbo* had been to 'make a caricature of Romanticism', but admitted that 'perhaps it got the better of me.' Certainly the spirit of Balakirev's *Islamey* hovers over the piece, but the result is music of dazzling originality. The poem depicts a goblin who darts in and out of the shadows, and Ravel's piece mirrors this with quiet passages disturbed by sudden outbursts. The critic Vladimir Jankélévitch described *Scarbo* as 'a fiendish encyclopedia of all the traps, obstacles and snares that a limitless imagination can devise for a pianist's fingers.'

**Saint-Saëns** first used the themes of *Danse macabre* in a song written in 1872 (on a poem by Henri Cazalis). Two years later, he developed and expanded this material into the symphonic poem which was first performed at a Concert du Châtelet on 24 January 1875, conducted by Édouard Colonne. The orchestration included the novelty of a xylophone (an effect later parodied by Saint-Saëns himself in the *Fossils* movement of his *Carnival of the Animals*), and a solo violin, retuned to produce its distinctively diabolical sounds (the E string tuned down to an E flat).

**Franz Liszt** admired the work and willingly took on the challenge of making an arrangement for solo piano. The result was one of his most brilliant transcriptions, but initially Liszt was far from certain about its effectiveness. He wrote to Saint-Saëns on 2 October 1876: 'Very dear friend, I'm sending you today the transcription of your *Danse macabre* and beg you to forgive my inability to translate on to the piano the marvellous colours of your score ... Still, one must always aim for an *ideal*, however awkward and inadequate the means. Life and art are only good for that, it seems to me.'

Liszt need not have worried. His arrangement was a bravura concert piece, reimagining Saint-Saëns's orchestral original in brilliantly imaginative terms for the piano. In 1928, Vladimir Horowitz recorded a piano roll of Liszt's version, but in 1942 he produced a still more dazzling arrangement, incorporating many details of Liszt's transcription but adding his own virtuoso touches. Horowitz made an astonishing recording of it in September 1942 and the score was subsequently published. It's a spellbinding homage by one of the 20th Century's greatest pianists to two giants of the previous century.

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