

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 21 November 2023  
7.30pm

Jean-Guihen Queyras cello  
Alexandre Tharaud piano

**Marin Marais** (1656-1728)

Suite No. 1 in A minor from *Troisième livre de pièces de viole*  
(pub. 1711)

*Fantaisie • Allemande • Courante • Sarabande • Gigue •  
Double • Gavotte • Minuet • Autre • Rondeau • Prelude •  
Gavotte le Petite • Grande Ballet*

From *Deuxième livre de pièces de viole* (pub. 1701)

Prelude from Suite in D minor  
Sarabande from Suite in D minor  
Couplets de folies (Les folies d'Espagne)

*Interval*

**Claude Debussy** (1862-1918)

Cello Sonata (1915)

*I. Prologue • II. Sérénade • III. Finale*

**Francis Poulenc** (1899-1963)

Sonata for cello and piano (1940-8, rev. 1953)

*I. Allegro – Tempo di marcia • II. Cavatine •  
III. Ballabile • IV. Finale*

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'His science and beautiful execution distinguish him from all others, and make him justly admired by all who hear him', wrote the French viola da gamba virtuoso Jean Rousseau of his contemporary **Marin Marais**; composer, virtuoso and *Ordinaire de la chambre du roy pour la viole* at the court of Versailles from 1679 to 1725. Marais, like Rousseau, had studied with the great Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe, but his own teaching was, if anything, even more rigorous. In later life he expected his apprentices to play through the whole of his five published *Livres* for viol.

Although a passionate defender of tradition, he had studied composition with Lully; his four operas were a success in Paris and even his music for viol shows a flair for the picturesque and theatrical (his instrumental works include a musical depiction of an operation for a kidney-stone, complete with simulated screams). 'It may be said that Marais carried the viol to its highest degree of perfection', wrote the French musical historian Évrard Titon du Tillet in 1755; and Louis XIV, upon hearing Marais performing with three of his 19 children in 1709, remarked that 'I am delighted with your sons, but there is still only one Marais: their father'.

The A minor suite from Marais's *Troisième livre* contains no fewer than 13 short movements, beginning with an improvisatory *Fantaisie* before exploring the full range of dance forms – *Courante*, *Gavotte*, *Menuet*, *Gigue* – that would be expected from any musician of cultivated and fashionable taste, and culminating with a virtuosic *Grande Ballet*. Two haunting movements from the *Deuxième livre's* D minor suite precede the extraordinary *Couplets on Les folies d'Espagne*: ten far-ranging variations on the old Iberian melody *La Folia* – also used by Lully, Corelli, Vivaldi, Bach and Handel, and in the 20th Century, Rachmaninov. Like the rest of the *Deuxième livre*, they were published in Paris in 1701.

**Debussy's** initial response to the outbreak of war in 1914 was a withdrawal from composition. But, mindful that music was the mainspring of his life, he searched for a justification for continuing to write, and by the summer of 1915 he'd found one: 'It would be a form of cowardice to think only of the horrors being committed, without trying to react by creating, to the best of my ability, a little of that beauty against which the enemy rages'. He announced a series of six instrumental sonatas, each to be published under the name of 'Claude Debussy, musicien français' and intended 'as proof, however slight, that, even if there were 30 million Boches, French thought is indestructible'. The first, for cello, was completed in the late summer of 1915. It was premièred on 24 March 1917 in Paris, with Debussy as pianist and Joseph Salmon on cello.

By reverting so publicly to the archaic practice of producing a set of 'six sonates pour divers instruments', Debussy was consciously reaching back to a time in French music before the influence of Wagner, Beethoven and even Mozart. Yet the special fascination of the Cello Sonata lies in the way it seems poised

between the age of Rameau and Couperin and the 20th-century modernism to follow. Of particular significance is Debussy's original, abandoned title for the sonata – *Pierrot fâché avec la lune*. The figure of a moonstruck Pierrot or Harlequin (a *Pierrot lunaire*, if you like) serves as a symbol for the piece – archaic but timeless, capricious and at the same time sad.

That's most obvious in the central serenade, with its quicksilver mood-changes. The rapturous climactic outpouring of the *Prologue*, and the forthright declamations that repeatedly stay the *Finale's* caperings, are simply veils for the 'terrible melancholy' Debussy admitted to feeling as he wrote these sonatas. 'I don't know whether one should laugh or cry - perhaps both?'

String music wasn't really **Poulenc's** métier, and the conventions of Romantic chamber music left him cold: in fact, worse than cold. 'The *prima donna* violin over an arpeggio piano makes me vomit', he told one friend. 'Nothing is further from human breath than the bow stroke'. He described his single, unsuccessful attempt at a string quartet as 'the disgrace of my life'.

Happily, French music offered a different model. Poulenc's string sonatas follow the example of Debussy's wartime sonatas; they're clear-cut, melodious and bursting with what he called 'youthful vitality'. And like Debussy, they were conceived in wartime – this time, the Second World War. Poulenc's violin sonata dates from 1943; his cello sonata was sketched in 1940, and completed in 1948, with a joint dedication to the French cellist Pierre Fournier and Poulenc's close friend Marthe Bosredon. He described its creation to the musicologist Claude Rostand:

Sketched in '40, when I started [the ballet] *Animaux modèles*, it is closely related. I had abandoned my sketches, when in '48 the admiration and affection I had for Pierre Fournier made me finish this work.

Debussy's sonata turns the cello into Harlequin, a figure of light, shade and quicksilver wit. Poulenc's *Animaux modèles* was a playful zoological ballet inspired by the fables of La Fontaine. So his cello sonata (he actually reversed the title, in 18th-century style: 'Sonata for piano and cello') is a four-part suite of concise, elegantly-constructed miniatures, each with a descriptive title – *Tempo di Marcia*, *Cavatine*, *Ballabile* ('dance-like'), and *Finale* – that may or may not imply more than a first glance suggests. Certainly, looking back from the impassioned melancholy outbursts that open and close the darting *Finale*, to the brusque toytown march that launches the first movement, there's a sense of having travelled further, and through rather darker regions, than one perhaps realised at the time. 'Do not analyse my music. Love it!' joked the composer. But he confessed, in all sincerity, to being 'quite fond' of his only cello sonata.

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