

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 22 April 2024
1.00pm

Alexandre Tharaud piano

François Couperin (1668-1733)

Les Baricades mystérieuses (pub. 1716-7)
Les Calotines (pub. 1722)
Les Roseaux (pub. 1722)
Le dodo, ou L'amour au berceau (pub. 1722)
La Logivière (pub. 1713)
Les Ombres errantes (pub. 1730)
Passacaille (pub. 1716-7)

Erik Satie (1866-1925)

Gymnopédie No. 1 (1888)
Avant-dernières pensées (1915)
Idylle • Aubade • Méditation
Gnossienne No. 1 (1890-3)
Gnossienne No. 3 (1890-3)
Gnossienne No. 5 (1889)
Je te veux (?1900)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899)
La valse (1919-20) *transcribed by Alexandre Tharaud*



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The composers on Alexandre Tharaud's programme have French nationality in common, but while the pieces are played this afternoon on the piano, in many cases this was not their original medium. **François Couperin's** keyboard works were of course composed for the harpsichord, though Tharaud's reimagining for the piano is entirely convincing. His 2007 Couperin album *Tic Toc Choc* focused on the 'playful aspect' of the composer, particularly on his inventive writing for keyboard.

In *Les Baricades mystérieuses*, off-beat suspensions create an aura of mystery, and this atmosphere persists in *Les Calotines* whose title references members of a secret military society (La Calotte) who wrote satirical verse and wanted to introduce a lighter mood at court. Within a regular phrase structure, *Les Calotines* features lively ornamentation and dialogue between different voices. French music has always had an affinity with woodwind instruments, as evoked in *Les Roseaux* ('reeds'); we can imagine the melody played by an oboe, and the mobile bass accompaniment by the bassoon. In *Le dodo*, a simple melodic line with an oscillating accompaniment conveys a hand rocking a cradle. In 2024 we are distant from the courtly world of Couperin, but 'le dodo' ('bye-byes') is a slang word that is still used today.

The title of *La Logivière* is obscure and perhaps references a specific person. This piece is an allemande, a popular dance form of the Baroque era, though it's a French-style allemande in quadruple time which features a great variety of keyboard figuration, sometimes underpinned by a drone in the left hand. *Les Ombres errantes* ('Wandering Shadows') has a rocking, minor-tinged gently melancholic melody. Couperin constantly varies his material, never allowing the music to settle down: wandering shadows indeed. The 6-minute-long *Passacaille in B minor* has an ascending theme (marked 'rondeau') that acts as a refrain, with variations appearing between repetitions. Its stately character with elaborate ornamentation characterises French Baroque style.

Today, **Satie's** first *Gymnopédie* (1888) is one of the most celebrated of all piano pieces, though when he wrote his three *Gymnopédies*, the composer was eking out a modest living as a cabaret pianist in Montmartre. The pieces only gradually attracted attention: by 1912, Satie was recognised as a musical precursor and the *Gymnopédies* were performed in major Paris venues. The title is a somewhat invented word which has connotations of naked Greek youths exercising. Satie's *Gnossiennes* (1890-3) also have a pseudo-Greek title. Their melodies tend to rotate around a few notes, poignantly never coming to rest.

The *Gnossiennes* are the first Satie piano pieces to have amusing in-score texts which are not part of the performance, and they were originally composed without barlines, not for musical reasons but because Satie preferred the appearance of a barline-free score.

Composed in 1915 during a period when Satie wrote many short piano pieces, the *Avant-dernières pensées*

('Next to last thoughts') have a characteristically witty title. It is also typical of Satie that there are three pieces in the set, each with its own title and in-score text.

Idylle is dedicated to Debussy, and its unchanging left-hand accompaniment evokes undulating waves, perhaps a tribute to the author of the most celebrated French musical seascape. The text is far from idyllic ('but my heart has shivers of fright'). There are similar mixed messages in the other two pieces: *Aubade* ('Dawn song') combines gentle guitar-like strumming with an odd love story featuring a beauty and a poet; alas, the poet is struck down with flu. Another ill-fated poet appears in the ironically busy third piece, *Méditation*. The song 'Je te veux' ('I want you'), sung by the cabaret artist Paulette Darty, was one of few popular successes in Satie's lifetime, and he made a piano transcription of the slow waltz.

Ravel composed the original piano version of *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (1899) when he was a student at the Paris Conservatoire. The title is multiply evocative, though Ravel claimed he chose it purely because he liked the sound. The pavane is a Renaissance dance, usually performed by couples in a procession. Ravel's mention of an infanta locates the dance in the Spanish court, making this one of his many works which evoke an imaginary Spain. *Pavane pour une infante défunte* is essentially a theme with variations and a contrasting central section. It is reminiscent of Chabrier, an important influence on Ravel: in places it sounds like a slower version of Chabrier's *Idylle*. The piece was played at Marcel Proust's funeral in 1922, but Ravel did not approve of funereal-paced performances. Indeed, Charles Oulmont, who played the piano version to Ravel, reported in 1938 that the composer had reprimanded him for playing it too slowly: 'Watch out, young man, it's not a dead pavane for an infanta.'

Ravel's orchestral work *La valse* (1919-20) was originally titled 'Vienna.' He loved dance, and particularly the triple-time rhythm, as heard in his *Valses nobles et sentimentales* for piano which took Schubert as their starting point. Today, Alexandre Tharaud plays *La valse* in his own piano transcription. In his preface to the score, Ravel states that the location is 'an imperial court, about 1855' and 'Waltzing couples may be faintly glimpsed through the swirling clouds. As they slowly clear, we see a huge ballroom filled by a whirling crowd...' One imagines the dancers viewed from above, as in a Busby Berkeley film sequence. But the work was written after World War I, and *La valse* can also be interpreted as a tribute to a destroyed Viennese culture. We, the audience, are horrified onlookers who are unable to stop its momentum, and by the very end, even the triple-time rhythm is no more: the penultimate bar features four crotchets in the time of three.

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