

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 23 October 2021 7.30pm

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet piano

Quatuor Danel

Marc Danel violin

Gilles Millet violin

Vlad Bogdanas viola

Yovan Markovitch cello

Leon Bosch double bass



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

String Quartet in G minor Op. 10 (1893)

*I. Animé et très décidé • II. Assez vif et bien rythmé •
III. Andantino, doucement expressif • IV. Très modéré*

Danse sacrée et danse profane (1904)

Danse sacrée • Danse profane

Interval

César Franck (1822-1890)

Piano Quintet in F minor (1879)

*I. Molto moderato quasi lento • II. Lento, con molto sentimento • III.
Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco*

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Debussy wrote his only string quartet in 1893. It was his first piece of mature chamber music and while it is immediately recognisable as Debussy, two influences are also apparent: Russian music, especially Borodin; and the cyclic forms and harmonic fluidity of Franck. The quartet was a success at its first performance on 29 December 1893, given by Eugène Ysaÿe's quartet at the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris. The Belgian critic Octave Maus described it as 'alluring art, at once simple and complex', noting that the scherzo second movement was 'delightful in its grace and ingenuity'. Another early enthusiast was Paul Dukas who wrote that the slow third movement was 'truly exquisite in its poetry and supreme delicacy of thought.' The work went on to influence slightly younger French composers, notably Ravel, whose quartet of 1902–3 owes much to Debussy's model.

The first movement opens with a modal theme which comes to dominate the whole work. While other ideas come and go during the first movement exposition, it is only at the end of it that Debussy introduces a more lyrical second subject which is then varied in place of a conventional development. The recapitulation offers more variations on both main ideas. The second movement is a scherzo, based on a reworking of the main theme of the first movement with a new rhythm. Perhaps the most striking feature of this movement is the dazzling colour and inventiveness of Debussy's string writing. The slow movement was described by Edward Lockspeiser as having 'a trance-like mood of contemplation', while the finale sees the work's principal theme heard in yet more novel guises, bringing the quartet to an exhilarating close. Mindful, perhaps, of the seriousness with which a string quartet should be presented, Debussy gave it an entirely spurious opus number ('Op. 10'), and described it, optimistically, as his '1er Quatuor', though no successor was ever written.

The Pleyel company commissioned the *Danse sacrée et danse profane* to show off their new chromatic harp. The dances were written in 1904 with a dedication to Gustave Lyon, the inventor of what proved to be an intractable instrument. Debussy always envisaged performances with a conventional pedal harp or a piano, and both options are suggested on the title page of the first edition. The two dances are linked: the 'sacred' dance suggesting antique formality, while the faster 'profane' dance is a kind of gentle waltz.

The establishment of the Société Nationale de Musique in 1871 led to a rich harvest of new French chamber music. Its founding

members included Saint-Saëns, Fauré and **Franck**, and in its first concert the programme included Franck's Piano Trio in B flat (Op. 1 No. 2) which he had composed in the late 1830s. It was another forty years before his next piece of chamber music. The Piano Quintet was composed in 1878–9 and the première was given at the Société Nationale on 17 January 1880. A work of passionate extremes, its ardour was almost certainly inspired by Franck's feelings for his pupil Augusta Holmès, a situation which led Franck's wife to take a violent dislike to the quintet, blaming Franck's pupils (including Holmès) for forcing her husband to compose an 'abhorrent work'. As Franck's biographer Léon Vallas wrote: 'so exaggerated an attitude can hardly be explained solely on musical grounds.' Opinions were divided at the première between a minority who were shocked by its emotional violence, and the majority who let themselves be transported by its fervour. The performance was given by the Marsick Quartet with Saint-Saëns at the piano. Intriguingly, Saint-Saëns was among those who were hostile, but he was also the work's dedicatee. Saint-Saëns made his low opinion abundantly clear at the end: coming off the platform but ostentatiously leaving on the piano the manuscript inscribed by Franck 'à mon bon ami Camille Saint-Saëns'. In view of this slight, it's no surprise that this was changed to the more muted 'A Camille Saint-Saëns' when the quintet was published in 1881.

The quintet is in three movements and Franck uses cyclic form, a process in which themes from one movement return later in the work. The first movement begins with a slow introduction presenting two strongly contrasting themes. This gives way to the main *Allegro* where the principal idea is derived from the introductory material, now in a muscular new guise. The serene second theme revolves around one note, venturing further from it little by little. It is crucial to the whole work: as d'Indy put it, a melody which 'hovers over all three movements.' It reappears in the middle of the slow movement (after a magical key change), serving as a point of light in a movement that is predominantly dark-toned. The finale is full of exhilarating energy and harmonic mobility. It opens with tremolos on the strings, punctuated by piano octaves and hints of a melodic idea which finally emerges on the strings, while a second theme is introduced by the piano. Near the end, the cyclic theme makes a radiant final appearance before a fiery coda.

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