

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 25 June 2023
7.30pm

Francesco Piemontesi piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Préludes Book II (1911-3)

*Brouillards • Feuilles mortes • La puerta del vino •
Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses • Bruyères •
General Lavine - eccentric •
La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune • Ondine •
Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq. P.P.M.P.C. • Canope •
Les tierces alternées • Feux d'artifice*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828)

*I. Molto moderato • II. Andante sostenuto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza – Trio •
IV. Allegro ma non troppo*

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It's worth noting that Debussy put the titles of his *Préludes* at the end of each piece to make the point that whatever the inspiration behind it, the music comes first. To enjoy the full Debussyian idea, you may want to read this note after the first half and not before...

Tonight, Francesco Piemontesi offers (at least) two completely different ideas of what a piano can be: the song-writing Schubert of Vienna in 1828 meets painter-composer Debussy, Paris, 1913. With one piece after the interval and 12 before it, both halves last around the same length; both open reflectively and close with fireworks, but Schubert's sonata explores a glorious world at glorious length, while Debussy stays in no one place, century or reality for more than a few minutes. This meeting is also entertainingly provocative as we know that Debussy had little time for Schubert. He wished the 'Unfinished Symphony' would remain unfinished (i.e. unperformed) for ever, 'in concert halls as in text,' and called the songs 'inoffensive.' Thankfully, he kept any thoughts on the piano sonatas to himself.

Debussy wrote two books of 12 *Préludes*. They may be performed singly, in any combination or as complete cycles: all the above happened in his lifetime. He himself performed them in small groups, partly because most of them were beyond him as a pianist. Taken as cycles, both books could be seen as kin to Musorgsky's *Pictures from an Exhibition*. Like Musorgsky, Debussy is inspired by landscapes, landmarks, portraits, poetic ideas, grotesques, myths. Certain topics recur in both books as they do widely in his oeuvre; where Monet had his haystacks, Debussy had the effects of light, mists and water as subjects to which he returned repeatedly over decades: a whole festival might be programmed just of his water music.

Book II takes a winding path from the half-light of autumnal mists in the first two pieces to the virtuoso flourish and fireworks in the last two. Debussy balances six introspective pieces with six more brilliant ones. A mood may be sustained across several pieces (as it is in the opening pair) or rudely interrupted, as *General Lavine* banishes the delicacy of *Bruyères*. Debussy drew inspiration from a capricious array of sources: a postcard of the Alhambra prompts the Moorish fantasy of *La puerta del vino* with its percussive guitar strums. Of the two colourful, not to say grotesque, character studies, one is a real person – *General Lavine*, AKA celebrated circus performer Ed Lavine, who could play the piano with his toes – while one is fictional (Dickens's Mr Pickwick, comically evoked with the British National Anthem). Rackham's illustrations inspire his dancing fairies (from Peter Pan) and the water spirit, *Ondine*. Some works arose from the daily *vie parisienne*. *Feuilles mortes* was conceived after an autumn walk, perhaps in a lovely park with a bandstand where distant fanfares sound. Only one of all the 24 preludes

is purely about piano playing: *Les tierces alternées* ('Alternating thirds') which anticipates Debussy's next publication of 12 pieces. These would be *Études*, not *Préludes*, and their titles state technical challenges to be addressed. *Les tierces alternées* would fit right in. Two pieces illustrate beautifully Debussy's gift of controlling time; interestingly, both have a far-flung inspiration – India in *La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune* and Egypt in *Canope*. Its exquisite chords unfold like rows of ancient statuary – a moment of deep calm before the closing fireworks.

Both Debussy and **Schubert** had the gift of writing remarkable music at remarkable speed. The *Book II Préludes* were all written in a matter of months, and Schubert's last three piano sonatas in as many weeks in 1828. He played them all himself for the first time on 25 September and mentioned them in a letter to a publisher a week later: 'I have composed among other things three sonatas for pianoforte alone, which I want to dedicate to Hummel...' His letter had no happy outcome: within two months Schubert would be dead and those sonatas lay unheard for a decade.

D960 has a quietly magical start: the pianist begins, pauses for thought and begins again. Such a very human moment, as though we join Schubert in private exploring his thoughts at the keyboard, savouring a phrase that delights him, playing it again. This intimacy extends to the whole movement. Three factors are striking. First, simplicity – almost all the thematic activity is in the top voice, giving it the quality of a song. The 'accompaniment' is notable for its perpetual motion: there are few bars in which the melody is not underpinned with quietly repeated chords or pedal notes (a single note that is held while the harmony around it changes) which sometimes emigrate to the top line. Schubert often used repeated notes to disturb (think of 'Erlkönig'), but here they are mostly gentle. Finally, there is interruption – magical because used so sparingly. The restarting of the opening theme is one example, but equally important is the very low trill – the antithesis of that radiant theme – which grows in importance as the movement progresses.

In most performances, the first movement lasts as long as the remaining 3 put together. Both middle movements are in three sections, ABA, but where the *Andante sostenuto* opens and closes with a sombre song in the mezzo register and interrupts it for a brief return to the radiant world of the first movement, the *Scherzo* frames an oddly intense central section with pure Viennese high spirits which also set the stage for the finale. Having made such telling use of interruptions in the opening movement, Schubert here takes them to extremes, abruptly changing direction, or simply stopping dead on a single stabbed note. Is it a joke or a portent?

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