

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 27 September 2024  
1.00pm

Saskia Giorgini piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude S173 No. 3 (1848-53)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Danse (c.1890)

Estampes (1903)

*Pagodes • La soirée dans Grenade • Jardins sous la pluie*

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Prelude in A Op. 32 No. 9 (1910)

Prelude in B minor Op. 32 No. 10 (1910)

Prelude in B Op. 32 No. 11 (1910)

Prelude in G sharp minor Op. 32 No. 12 (1910)

Prelude in D flat Op. 32 No. 13 (1910)

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Browse programmes of the many solo piano recitals Rachmaninov gave in his last 30 years and you will find few composers who feature more regularly than the three we hear today. Not these exact pieces – he played only the last of Debussy's *Estampes*, and rarely (if ever) his own Op. 32 *Preludes* or Liszt's *Bénédiction*. Even so, hearing this trio together intriguingly highlights some common ground and stark differences between them. Above all, he and Liszt belonged to an unbroken tradition of virtuoso composer-pianists: his mentor, Tchaikovsky, venerated Liszt, while another teacher and early champion – Alexander Siloti – was a student of Liszt. The capacity of 10 fingers to draw richly complex, quasi-orchestral or even operatic sounds at the keyboard was an alchemy they loved. On a nerdy note, Liszt and Rachmaninov had strikingly different hands, as you can see from plaster casts online. Liszt's right hand was surprisingly beefy while Rachmaninov had huge and slender hands. Yet their shared feeling for the piano's possibilities and techniques is all the plainer for being heard either side of Debussy's pianism. Even a piece as relatively conventional as *Danse* – which is arguably as Lisztian as Debussy ever got – shows how differently he made the piano sound. Importantly, he was certainly no virtuoso and rarely wrote music for himself to perform. Many of his own works were beyond him, so he had to choose carefully from among them when putting together concert programmes. Perhaps it was because his imagination was not limited by his personal technique that he ventured into such extraordinary new sound worlds for the piano.

Liszt and Rachmaninov were also both men of faith (which Debussy was not), and *Bénédiction de Dieu* shows Liszt at his most ardent and mystic. His encounter with the devotional poetry of French politician and writer Alphonse de Lamartine inspired him to write a cycle of piano pieces in his 30s which he named after Lamartine's *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. He prefaces the *Bénédiction* with a quotation from Lamartine: 'D'où me vient, ô mon Dieu, cette paix qui m'inonde?' ('From where, oh my God, comes this peace that overwhelms me?'). To express this ecstatic serenity. Liszt challenges the pianist to sustain the loveliest singing *legato* melody amidst a constantly shifting accompaniment of harmonies spanning many octaves, all to be executed with quiet virtuosity.

Rachmaninov published his Op. 32 *Preludes* in 1910 to complete a full cycle of one prelude in each key (after the model of Chopin's 24 *Preludes*), which began with his famous C sharp minor *Prelude* in 1892. The selection you hear today highlights how many different kinds of piece might pass under that one title of 'prelude'. Most are shortish, two to three minutes long, exploring one or two tightly defined thoughts; but No. 10 and No. 13 are more expansive and bring to mind another composer whom Rachmaninov regularly performed in recital:

Schubert. Both reveal a Schubertian obsessiveness in developing the musical motifs and No. 10's opening clearly remembers Schubert's *Moment musical No. 2*. There is something in Rachmaninov's handling of key shifts that is reminiscent of Schubert, and also the way he handles the return to his opening thoughts after having let the music travel far beyond them. These traits give those two *Preludes* a heroic stature. Although there is no evidence that he intended all 24 *Preludes* to be performed as a complete cycle, No. 13 feels like a finale grand enough for such an epic.

If Rachmaninov used one title to mean many different things (he almost never used a fanciful or evocative title for any piece), Liszt and Debussy used their titles to convey their shared fascination with music's potential to evoke ideas, places, people or moods; put another way, non-musical ideas inspired their often experimental and ground-breaking musical language – and by revealing this inspiration in their titles they offered performers and listeners a key, as it were, to the extraordinary sounds they were hearing.

Debussy's *Estampes* is a perfect example – three evocations of places; two exotic (Debussy visited Spain and Asia only in his imagination) and one familiar to him, if you assume that his rainy garden was in Paris. They are called *Estampes* ('prints') – rather than *images* ('paintings') – suggesting he intended them to have the distilled, decorative quality of the Japanese prints he loved. In *Pagodes*, he draws on memories of hearing gamelan in Paris to evoke a dreamy landscape of temples and jungles: amidst ravishing bell sounds, interlocking rhythmic and melodic patterns combine in a harmonic world of unusual five-note scales inspired by Indonesian modes. This is piano as percussion orchestra, a sound that is mesmerising in its delicacy and transparency and worlds away from the tradition of Liszt and Rachmaninov. Short as it is, *Pagodes* is so immersive that moving on to *La soirée dans Grenade* is quite a jolt. Here, Debussy stands on more conventional ground as he was far from being the first Frenchman to write 'Spanish' music. Like his celebrated forebears, Bizet and Chabrier to name but two, he draws on the *habanera* rhythm: languorous, sexy, 'nonchalantly graceful' (in Debussy's own words), it is a world of guitars and castanets that no less an authority than Spanish composer Manuel de Falla judged to be quintessentially Spanish: '...the miracle when one realises that this music was composed by a foreigner...there is not even one bar of this music borrowed from Spanish folklore, and yet the entire composition in its most minute details conveys, admirably, Spain'. Having journeyed far, Debussy closes *Estampes* nearer to home in a domestic Parisian scene, using nursery songs to portray children playing in a garden in the rain.

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