

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 28 April 2025
1.00pm

Anne Quéméné piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)	Piano Sonata in B flat K333 (1783-4) <i>I. Allegro • II. Andante cantabile • III. Allegretto grazioso</i>
Claude Debussy (1862-1918)	Reflets dans l'eau from <i>Images, Series 1</i> (1901-5) Clair de lune from <i>Suite bergamasque</i> (c.1890, rev. 1905)
Gabriel Dupont (1878-1914)	Après-midi de dimanche from <i>Les heures dolentes</i> (1905)
Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947)	From <i>Le rossignol éperdu</i> (1902-10) Hivernale • Le banc songeur
Charles Koechlin (1867-1950)	Chant de pêcheurs from <i>Paysages et marines Op. 63</i> (1915-6)
Florent Schmitt (1870-1958)	Glas from <i>Musiques intimes, Book 2 Op. 29</i> (1989-1904)



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Anne Quéffélec's programme brings us some of the delightful byways of French piano music. An English parallel (though English piano music lacks a figure of Debussy's stature, whatever I might think of Bax) could be a programme of Cyril Scott, Roger Quilter and Frank Bridge. (Sir Hubert Parry's piano miniatures bring him to mind in this context, but the true analogue of the great song composer directing the RCM is the great song composer directing the Paris Conservatoire – Gabriel Fauré.) So, a great chance to delve below the headlines of French Musical Impressionism – an imprecise phrase, disavowed by Debussy, but useful enough.

In 1870, **Claude Debussy** escaped with his mother from the Prussian Siege of Paris to Cannes, where he began piano lessons. His father remained in Paris, fighting with the Commune, which was briefly in power in 1871. On the return of the national government, Debussy's *père* was imprisoned for a year. The themes of pianism and revolution can thus be seen to have established themselves early in Debussy's mind: much of his *œuvre* deals with them, though his musical revolution is so euphonious that it often slips past unnoticed. For many years, Debussy toyed with the order of his Christian names: sometimes he would be Achille-Claude, and sometimes Claude-Achille. It was not until his 30th year that he settled for plain 'Claude'. It's interesting that this enabled his monogram, an entwined CD, found on the title-page of all his mature works and on his gravestone, to fit in with his euphonious revolution. In a nutshell, Debussy's great stride forward was to establish the interval of a second – two adjacent notes – as a concord not requiring 'resolution'. C-D is a lapidary expression of that.

His personal life was tumultuous. His offhand dismissals of women he had tired of, on one occasion resulting in an attempted suicide, lost him many friends, including Ravel, who pointedly contributed to a fund to support Debussy's abandoned first wife. 'Reflections in the water' is a compendium of Debussy's personal style – pentatonic and whole-tone scales, supple arabesques somersaulting into surprising modulations, the Golden Section, and a satisfying central climax. 'Clair de lune' needs no introduction, but don't miss the poignant C flat at the return, and the mystic significance of the subsequent rising bass-note, where earlier, it fell.

Gabriel-Dupont (whose publisher's hyphen seems to leave him with no Christian name) filled his *Doleful Hours* – he wrote it while convalescing during a temporary respite from tuberculosis – with titles like 'Death Gnaws', 'The Doctor Comes' or 'Song of the Rain'; but also 'Sun in the Garden' (Animated and Joyful) and 'A Lady-Friend Brings Flowers' (Elegant and Light). 'Sunday Afternoon' is a bit of both. Marked 'with a sentiment of intimate melancholy', it's a slow waltz, interrupted by joyful bells.

Reynaldo Hahn arrived in Paris from Caracas at the age of three, hobnobbed with Napoleon's niece, and

wrote his hit-song (*Si mes vers avaient des ailes*) at the age of 14. Like Mendelssohn, he came from a Jewish family of bankers who converted to Christianity. Verlaine wept at his settings of his poetry – Mallarmé wrote a poem about it. Lover of Marcel Proust, confidant of Sarah Bernhardt, collaborator with Sacha Guitry (on a comic opera called *Mozart*), Hahn was at the very centre of Parisian artistic life. 'Winter Piece' is the penultimate item of 53 *Distracted Nightingale* pieces set out in four books. Seven beats in a bar, a plaintive tune with a wispy, off-beat accompaniment. At the end (rather in the manner of the after-titles of Debussy's Preludes) is a note: *Environs de Versailles 1910*. 'The Thinking Bench' (No. 49), also very slow, mentions *Grand Trianon 1910*.

Koechlin came from a family of wealthy philanthropists, and inherited their social conscience. His passionate engagement with the new made him president of the French section of the International Society for Contemporary Music, but denied him any prestigious official appointment: he had to sell one of his houses to survive. His obsession with Rudyard Kipling led him to produce his *Livre de la jungle* – four symphonic poems and three orchestral songs. 'Fishermen's Song' (the tenth of the dozen numbers of *Landscapes and Seascapes*) obsesses with a simple snatch of melody.

Schmitt's 'Passing Bell' was first published (with 'Cloister', from the same set of six *Intimate Musics*) in a music magazine in 1911, with the note: 'the unique and wilful artist who is Mr. Florent Schmitt was inspired by beautiful verses by Verhaeren to compose this pianistic poem of poignant beauty'. Op. 29 was published complete the following year, joining the earlier set of six *Musiques intimes*, Op. 16, which had been published in 1901. The 'wilful artist', when working as a music critic, would occasionally shout his opinions from his seat in the hall. He was a friend of Delius, and prepared the vocal scores for four of his operas.

The **Mozart** calling-card that opens the programme was composed on the way back to Vienna from the second of two visits to Salzburg. The first visit introduced Leopold Mozart to his new grandson, also Leopold; but unfortunately, little Leopold died on his return to Vienna. Mozart took a new Mass with him on the second trip to Salzburg – Constanze sang the solos. On the way back, he composed this sonata and a symphony in the city of Linz. Both first and second movements of the sonata adopt the submissive Rococo cadence where the bass arrives at the tonic while the harmony is still bowing to the dominant – a favourite of Mozart's friend, JC Bach. The second part of the slow movement begins with some extraordinary chromatic harmony. The *Rondo* finale is like a concerto without orchestra, complete with cadenza.

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