

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 2 December 2024
1.00pm

Path to the Moon

Laura van der Heijden cello
Jâms Coleman piano

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

Reflets (1911)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Clair de lune Op. 46 No. 2 (1887)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Cello Sonata (1915)
I. Prologue • II. Sérénade • III. Finale

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Sonetto XXX: Veggio co' bei vostri occhi un dolce lume
from *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* Op. 22 (1940)

Florence Price (1887-1953)

Night (1946)

Tōru Takemitsu (1930-1996)

Will Tomorrow, I Wonder, Be Cloudy or Clear?

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

Die schönste Nacht from *Die stumme Serenade* Op. 36

Benjamin Britten

Cello Sonata in C Op. 65 (1960-1)
*I. Dialogo. Allegro • II. Scherzo-Pizzicato.
Allegretto • III. Elegia. Lento • IV. Marcia.
Energico • V. Moto perpetuo. Presto*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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With its rippling piano accompaniment and luminous, upward-unfurling melodies, there is a haunting beauty to the song 'Reflets' (here arranged for cello), composed by **Marie-Juliette Olga 'Lil' Boulanger** (1893-1918). Boulanger was a Parisian-born musical prodigy who died aged just 24 from tuberculosis. Despite her fragile health, she was the first woman to win the prestigious Prix de Rome at the age of 19, and her legacy of works includes sacred choral works and song cycles, as well as some forty works left incomplete, including an opera.

'Reflets' evokes a realm of moonlit dreams in which the reflections of flower petals 'descend, eternally, / Beneath the dream's water and into the moon.' The text was written by Maurice Maeterlinck, best known for his 1893 play, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which became the basis of Debussy's opera.

In **Gabriel Fauré's** (1845-1924) much-celebrated *mélodie*, 'Clair de lune', a playful yet poignant nursery-rhyme piano tune is followed by serene phrases in which the singer (or in this arrangement, the cellist) evokes an imaginary pastoral scene. Fauré chose to set a text by Paul Verlaine from his 1869 *Fêtes galantes* poetry collection, which was in turn inspired by the semi-mythological subjects of Antoine Watteau's 18th-century paintings. Yet even without words, the music conjures up a world of moonlit, sylvan beauty – and curious emotional detachment.

The moonlit escapades continue with **Claude Debussy's** (1862-1918) cello sonata, originally subtitled 'Pierrot is angry at the moon', and composed in 1915. Perhaps in homage to Pierrot's theatrical origins, there is an improvisatory quality to the opening Prologue, which sings, skitters and dances across the whole range of the cello. The second movement is capricious in character, with *pizzicato* punctuation from the cello, while the final movement canters along with irrepressible energy – perhaps another nod to the tragic-comic clown of *Commedia dell'arte* tradition.

British composer **Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976) composed the *Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo* in 1941, during his self-imposed exile to America as a conscientious objector. The Sonnets have been described as a tribute to the *bel canto* opera tradition, but they are more commonly viewed as a thinly disguised love letter to the songs' dedicatee, the tenor Peter Pears, with whom Britten had emigrated to the States. In this song, crepuscular piano harmonies bloom around a sonorous cello line, swooning and soaring in its devotion to a cherished lover: 'Alone, I am like the moon in the sky which our eyes cannot see / save that part which the sun illumines.'

Expansive piano chords and a generous, warm-hearted cello melody characterise this song by **Florence Price** (1887-1953), an African-American composer

whose oeuvre includes four symphonies, four concerti, over 100 songs, countless choral works, a large assortment of chamber music and a panoply of solo instrumental works too. This song is a setting of a poem by Louise C. Wallace. The song unfolds with a melody of gentle wonder, expanding and soaring upwards in an awestruck paean to the beauty of darkness: 'Night comes, a Madonna clad in scented blue'.

Born in Tokyo, **Tōru Takemitsu** (1930-1996) was a prolific composer and writer. During his career, he was active across a variety of genres, combining composition for film and orchestra alongside avant-garde experimentation and academic writings on music and aesthetics. But as serious as all this may sound, 'Will Tomorrow, I Wonder, Be Cloudy or Clear?' (1985) – a characteristically poetic song title – is a surprisingly whimsical affair, drawing on Takemitsu's love of jazz and blues. There is humour to be found in the song's wistful harmonies, lending a uniquely bittersweet charm to this two-and-a-half-minute miniature.

Die stumme Serenade (The Silent Serenade) may have been characterised by its composer as a musical comedy, but in reality, it was a mixture of operetta and musical revue. Sadly, the combination did not lend itself to commercial success, and the piece, which the Austrian-born composer **Erich Korngold** (1897-1957) worked on from 1946-51, received negative reviews. Yet *Die stumme Serenade* has not been silenced altogether. This intimate, moonstruck Serenade survives, and dares the listener to resist its unabashed sentimentality.

In 1960, one year after the Soviet transporter Luna 2 first landed on the surface of the moon, Benjamin Britten witnessed Mstislav Rostropovich perform Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto at the Royal Festival Hall. That evening, Britten resolved to compose a sonata of his own for the great Russian cellist. He created a piece that puts the soloist through their paces, with harmonics, *glissandi*, four-string chords and intricate *pizzicati* (plucked notes). The influence of Shostakovich is clear throughout, from the splintered waltz of the opening movement to the demonic Serenade-gone-wrong of the second (those buzzing *pizzicato* figures!) and the lopsided March. The final movement even contains a homage to the Soviet composer in the form of the 'DSCH' theme – a four-note, stepwise-descending motif invented by Shostakovich as a kind of musical monogram. At the Sonata's first play-through the following year, Rostropovich recalled that they needed 'four or five very large whiskies' before they could begin. ('We played like pigs,' he added, 'but we were so happy'). The piece – by turns taut, ironic and passionate – remains an enduring testament to one of the great friendships of the musical universe.

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