

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 30 October 2024
1.00pm

Garrick Ohlsson piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Suite bergamasque (c.1890, rev. 1905)

*I. Prélude • II. Menuet • III. Clair de lune •
IV. Passepied*

Thomas Misson (b.1992)

Convocations (2023) *UK première*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Barcarolle in F sharp Op. 60 (1845-6)

Impromptu No. 1 in A flat Op. 29 (c.1837)

Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 31 (1837)



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Debussy composed the *Suite bergamasque* in 1890, making it one of his earliest pieces still in the standard repertoire, but it was not published until 1905, by which time works like the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and the orchestral suites *Nocturnes* and *La mer*, had transformed his reputation. Even his name was different: he went by 'Achille' rather than 'Claude' until the year in which the suite was composed. Its title references the Italian city of Bergamo, traditionally regarded as the home of several of the characters in the *commedia dell'arte* that so fascinated turn-of-the-century musicians, writers and artists, including Debussy. The second line of Paul Verlaine's *Clair de lune* ('Moonlight') – a poem that Debussy had already set once, in 1882, and would set again the year after composing the suite – refers to 'charming masques and bergamasques', elegantly rhyming a courtly entertainment with a rustic Italian dance to create a composite image of theatrical revelry. This single line of poetry provided a title not only for Debussy's suite but also for Gabriel Fauré's suite of incidental music for orchestra, published in 1919; Debussy doubled down on his suite's Verlainian associations when he changed its third movement's title from 'Promenade sentimentale' to *Clair de lune*.

Under its new name, this gently evocative miniature became perhaps the most famous of all Debussy's works: it is easy to hear its rippling arpeggios as a representation of moonlight, though knowing that 'Clair de lune' was not the original title should warn against the tendency to interpret Debussy in overly pictorial terms. The suite's other three movements – much less celebrated but full of charm and early intimations of Debussy's harmonic originality – reference the French Baroque tradition that inspired the composer throughout his career, even if the *Passepied* (originally titled 'Pavane') and *Menuet* interpret their respective dance forms in a notably idiosyncratic manner.

It is not entirely clear why Debussy's then publisher, Fromont, should have suddenly decided to bring out the manuscripts submitted 15 years earlier to Choudens, publishers of the early salon pieces for piano – shortly before it appeared, Debussy planned to entitle an entirely different set of piano pieces 'Suite bergamasque' – but the desire to cash in on the composer's new-found fame was likely a significant motivation. Debussy's ambivalent attitude to the suite is revealed by the fact that, while he took great trouble to revise it for publication, he also insisted on inscribing the date '1890' over the score, as if to distance himself from this earlier version of his musical persona. © Michael Downes 2024

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In 2021, I was approached by Paul Kildea from Musica Viva Australia to write a piece for Garrick Ohlsson for his 2023 Australian tour. He would be playing music by Franz Liszt, Samuel Barber, Franz Schubert, Alexander Skryabin and Frédéric Chopin (of whom Garrick is a famous interpreter). While researching and reflecting on how my creative voice could complement the programme I

stumbled on a description of Garrick's playing saying that he possessed a 'calmly demanding presence'.

I decided I would channel a piece by Liszt which evokes the same descriptors for me, *Sposalizio* (meaning 'marriage') from *Années de pèlerinage* ('Years of pilgrimage'). In this piece, Liszt describes Raphael's high-renaissance painting, *Lo Sposalizio*, in musical form. Though some of the motivic and structural scaffolding owes to the Liszt, conceptually and stylistically, the piece has come to resemble something more pluralistic than a marriage. *Convocations* combines the unlikely and disparate elements of the Romantic piano giants, modernist styles, an Australian tour, a Tasmanian composer and an American concert pianist in a congregation that aims to give life to a spiritual soundworld. © Thomas Misson 2024

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Chopin composed the *Barcarolle in F sharp*, the only one of his works with this generic designation, between autumn 1845 and summer 1846, a period during which both his health and his personal life were at a low ebb. He was mourning the loss of his beloved father, who died in 1844; the illness – probably tuberculosis – that dogged him for his entire adult life was becoming ever more serious; and his nine-year relationship with George Sand was approaching its end as the couple became mired in bitter disputes about the complex love lives of the novelist's two children. Little of this personal turmoil is evident in this masterful and formally unique work: true to the Venetian origins of the form, its themes suggest melodies that might be sung by gondoliers, which Chopin elaborates in sophisticated and harmonically adventurous fashion.

The two Chopin works that conclude today's recital were both composed in 1837, when Chopin was at the height of his fame in Paris, where he had lived for the last six years, unwilling to return to a Poland that was being torn apart by conflict with Russia. Having initially established himself in France as a pianist and teacher, by the mid-1830s he increasingly focused his energies on composition. The *Impromptu in A flat* – the first of three works to which Chopin gave this title, borrowed from Schubert – gives a clear impression of what the playing of the young Pole who charmed the salons of Paris must have sounded like, in a work whose apparently improvisational character belies its careful construction. The *Scherzo in B flat minor*, meanwhile, is an altogether more imposing work, one that takes the form far from its etymological connection with the idea of a 'joke': only its A-B-A formal outline really connects it with the more ebullient scherzos that typically provide a middle movement in the works of Beethoven or the later Haydn. Such is its emotional range that Robert Schumann aptly compared it to a poem by Byron, 'overflowing with tenderness, boldness, love and contempt'. © Michael Downes 2024

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