

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 3 February 2024  
1.00pm

Simon Callaghan piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)	La plus que lente (1910)
Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)	3 movements from <i>The Firebird Suite</i> (1919) <i>arranged by Guido Agosti</i> <i>I. Danse infernale • II. Berceuse • III. Finale</i>
Claude Debussy	Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir from <i>Préludes Book I</i> (1909-10)
Percy Grainger (1882-1961)	Country Gardens (1918)
Claude Debussy	La fille aux cheveux de lin from <i>Préludes Book I</i> (1909-10)
Percy Grainger	Molly on the Shore (1918)
Cyril Scott (1879-1970)	Piano Sonata No. 1 Op. 66 (1908) <i>I. Allegro con spirito • II. Adagio • III. Allegro • IV. Fugue</i>



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The fascinating figure of **Cyril Scott**, represented by one of his most significant works, is the lynchpin for all the pieces in this programme. Scott knew all the composers personally, and there are stylistic connections between them. Born in Oxton, Cheshire in 1879, Scott studied piano and composition in Frankfurt with Lazzaro Uzielli (a pupil of Clara Schumann) and Iwan Knorr. During this time he formed a lifelong friendship with eccentric Australian composer-pianist Percy Grainger – a fellow-member of the ‘Frankfurt Group’ of Anglophone students. He soon fell under the spell of Symbolist poetry and Impressionist music, being dubbed the ‘English Debussy’. The flamboyant aesthetics of the fin-de-siècle informed Scott’s personal image and tastes throughout his life; he favoured velvet suits and cravats, and his windows were shaped by an arch template to create an ecclesiastical air, heightened by the burning of incense. His many compositions and writings are deeply invested in mysticism and the occult. Renowned in the early 20th Century for an ‘ultramodern’ musical style, he died in Eastbourne in 1970 having fallen distinctly out of fashion. In more recent years interest in his music, writings and life has grown, with a change in critical consensus accepting a wider range of aesthetic outlooks.

Moving to London in 1901 enabled Scott’s entry to artistic society. A publishing contract with Elkin & Co led to a reputation as a composer of salon pieces. His musical aims were much higher though, exemplified by the substantial Piano Sonata Op. 66 (1908), premièred by the composer himself in this very Hall on 17 May 1909. In his autobiography Scott confessed that a friend had to pay for the engraving to persuade Elkin to publish such a ‘difficult, “discordant” and unsaleable work’ in 1909. Through encounters with Debussy, he gained a publishing contract for his serious work with Schott & Co; Debussy wrote that ‘Cyril Scott is one of the rarest artists of the present generation’.

Laid out in a rhapsodic form encompassing four movements played continuously, the Sonata combines elements reminiscent of the then-modern French and Russian schools (arabesque, whole-tone scales, chord streams) with chromatic harmony and a Straussian élan. Its most distinctive feature, however, is the irregular rhythmic flow achieved through constant time signature changes. Scott credited Percy Grainger’s metrical experiments as his inspiration, though Grainger was more self-effacing in his note for his own performances of the piece, writing: ‘In our own times the outstanding vehicle of musical progress has been the Cyril Scott piano sonata ... with its irregular rhythms (originally an Australian invention), its “non-architectural” flowing form, its exquisitely dissonant harmony’. It is sometimes cited as an influence on Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, which Stravinsky played to Scott on the piano as a work-in-progress during a visit the latter made to Switzerland.

The opening *Allegro con spirito* features continuous transformation and development of the opening

chromatically-rising theme. The *Adagio* second movement presents a calmer context for the pervasive rhythmic fluidity, before a greater focus on counterpoint and chordal melody. Reprise of a three-chord figure from the close of the *Allegro* heralds the return of the fast tempo, this time in a scherzando movement, whose virtuosity is leavened by episodes reminiscent of Debussy’s ‘antique’ style. The finale is a *Fugue* whose extrovert counterpoint and sequential development lead to an organ-like peroration.

Scott the pianist came to curse Scott the composer for making the sonata so difficult, while Uzielli’s wife Julia reportedly found the Sonata so exciting it gave her ‘palpitations’. Grainger championed the piece, though he took exception to a glissando passage in the third movement, apparently whipping out an elasticated handkerchief mid-performance to protect his hands.

Of **Grainger’s** two items represented here, *Country Gardens* needs little introduction. ‘Written out’ (Grainger’s term) in New York in June 1918, the chunky virtuosity of the piano writing with its stride left hand belies the catchiness of the English folk tune. Several times the pianist is instructed to use their fist for emphasis. *Molly on the Shore* was – again in Grainger’s quirky verbiage – ‘dished up’ for piano in April 1918. This Irish reel is based on the titular tune and also *Temple Hill*, both tunes from Cork. The folklike modality is only occasionally disturbed by chromatic slips or added notes; as with *Country Gardens*, the writing is characterised through using different registers of the piano.

Book I of **Debussy’s** *Préludes* (1909-10) offers a welter of different inspirations, though Debussy avoids foregrounding these for the pianist, placing titles at the end of each piece rather than the beginning. *La fille aux cheveux de lin* (‘The girl with the flaxen hair’) is the most familiar, its nonchalant melody guiding us through piano ‘orchestrations’ which, as with Grainger, deploy the instrument’s different registers to great effect – this time much more sensually. Even more is this the case with *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir* (‘Sounds and scents turn in the evening air’), which focuses on texture and motif in response to the quoted line from Baudelaire’s poem *Harmonie du soir* (‘Evening harmony’) from the collection *Les fleurs du mal* (‘The flowers of evil’), epitomising Debussy’s Symbolist aesthetic. *La plus que lente* can be viewed as a postscript to the first book of *Préludes*, being written shortly after as a sardonic reaction to the popular ‘valse lente’ genre.

The virtuosic transcription of **Stravinsky’s** *Firebird* suite by **Guido Agosti** (1901-89) is based on the 1919 version of the 1910 ballet score. Like all the pieces in this programme it shows full command of the range and resources of the concert grand piano, here translating the original dazzling orchestral colours into pianistic wizardry to brilliant effect.

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