

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 5 December 2022  
1.00pm

Steven Osborne piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Etudes Book I (1915)

*Pour les cinq doigts • Pour les tierces •  
Pour les quartes • Pour les sixtes •  
Pour les octaves • Pour les huit doigts*

Berceuse héroïque (1914)

Etude retrouvée (1915)

Etudes Book II (1915)

*Pour les degrés chromatiques • Pour les agréments •  
Pour les notes répétées • Pour les sonorités opposées •  
Pour les arpèges composés • Pour les accords*

BBC  
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Unwell, seemingly unsure of himself, and then disheartened by the war, **Debussy** wrote almost nothing in 1914. During the summer of the next year, however, while staying at Pourville outside Dieppe, he produced two chamber sonatas and a bunch of piano pieces: the solo Etudes and *En blanc et noir* for two pianos. 'I spent nearly a year unable to write music,' he wrote to the conductor Bernardino Molinari, 'After that I've almost had to *re-learn* it.' With the relearning came a more abstract, and perhaps a more analytical approach: these were studies not only for pianists but also, in the first place, for the composer. 'What beauties there are in music "by itself",' he went on in the letter to Molinari: 'This power of "the right chord in the right place"....'

*Pour les cinq doigts*, which opens the set, immediately places Debussy's studies at an angle to those of his more doggedly pedagogical predecessors. As he wrote to his publisher Jacques Durand: 'I'm sure you'll agree with me that there's no need to make technical exercises over-sombre just to appear more serious; a little charm never spoilt anything.'

Next come four studies devoted to increasingly larger intervals: thirds, fourths, sixths, and octaves. *Pour les tierces* has its thirds in the right hand in almost continuous swirls of semiquavers, which, like flowing water currents, remain always the same yet always different, never exactly repeating themselves, as the interlacing left hand keeps coming up with other things – sometimes running thirds of its own. The one slight interruption, a clamouring gesture early on, returns to give the piece its culmination, and finally the right hand is released from its thirds into stout octaves.

In *Pour les quartes*, the composer promised Durand, 'you'll find unheard-of things, even though your ears are well accustomed to "curiosities".' This is one of Debussy's most allusive compositions, using its dedicated interval to wander from fanfare to café music to exotic dance and away.

With the same five-flat signature as the piece in thirds, *Pour les sixtes* is more various in its motion, beginning and ending at drifting pace, but with more hurried elements appearing intermittently. The music keeps finding itself in similar places, but again there is no exact repetition.

*Pour les octaves* shows how much can be done with one harmonic interval and one three-note motif. 'Joyous and transported,' goes the marking, 'the rhythm stamped freely.'

The eight-finger exercise, *Pour les huit doigts*, is nearly all in four-note runs, the hands alternating as they slide around the keyboard. In the reprise, a melody comes forward. But soon it is all over.

At this halfway point between Debussy's two published books of studies Steven Osborne interposes two pieces from the same period. The *Berceuse héroïque* had come just earlier, in November 1914, for *King Albert's Book*, published to support Belgians after their country's rapid conquest; hence the presence of the opening phrase of the Belgian national anthem, which arrives shortly after some bugle calls have been added to the 'heroic lullaby' in slow march time.

This is followed by an extra study, discovered by Roy Howat at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1977. Headed 'Pour les arpèges composées', this had been assumed to have to do with the published étude of the same name, No. 11. Howat recognised it, however, as an entirely different piece, which Debussy had then replaced but not discarded, perhaps keeping it in reserve for a potential further volume. Hence this '*Etude retrouvée*', whose 'composed arpeggios' turn at different speeds and through different modal colours in continuous opalescence.

Returning to the published sequence, *Pour les degrés chromatiques* is a ripple of chromatic figures over slower music that keeps coming back to a folksong-like strain. This must be one of the studies Debussy wrote first, doing so because he found fast music 'hardest to write and to get some variety into'.

Debussy placed eighth the study he wrote last, one of the longest in the book and most elusive in how it drifts or skips from one idea to another, the opening idea reappearing veiled and then open towards the end while other motifs slip away never to return. 'It borrows the form', he suggested, 'of a barcarolle on a somewhat Italian sea' – a fitting image for the mercuriality of the piece, and for its light.

*Pour les notes répétées* turns back to the whole-tone harmony of earlier Debussy, but at speed. In the omnipresent wobbles of repeated notes there is again 'a little charm', and a hint of the circus and music-hall portraits of the *Préludes*.

Debussy could have applied his tenth étude's title, *Pour les sonorités opposées*, equally to other pieces in the collection, though it certainly suits this continuous alternation of stark and soft, low and high, velvet and gauze. This is again one of the most fluid of the pieces in form, though a fanfare motif, marked at first 'distant, but clear and jubilant', remains on hand.

The official *Pour les arpèges composés* is a diatonic sister to the study on chromatic degrees, and another piece that slides easily from one character into another.

Common chords and octaves, jumping with off-beat accents, make up the main material of the étude for 'accords', i.e. chords. A middle section listens to these same chords another way. And with *Pour les accords*, Debussy ends his final piano collection at a peak of energy.