

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 6 June 2022 1.00pm

Nelson Goerner piano

BBC  
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

**Claude Debussy** (1862-1918)

Estampes (1903)

*Pagodes • La soirée dans Grenade • Jardins sous la pluie*

**Robert Schumann** (1810-1856)

Etudes symphoniques Op. 13 (1834-7)

*Thema. Andante – • Etude I. Un poco più vivo • Etude II. Andante •  
Etude III. Vivace • Etude IV. Allegro marcato • Etude V. Scherzando •  
Etude VI. Agitato • Etude VII. Allegro molto • Etude VIII. Sempre  
marcatissimo • Etude IX. Presto possibile • Etude X. Allegro con energia •  
Etude XI. Andante espressivo • Etude XII. Finale – Allegro brillante*

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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 *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 *oeuvre* 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'.

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. Not a man for the sonata principle (until he practically redefined the term in three late chamber works), his spiritual home was the suite: the charming *Petite Suite* for piano duet (1889), the *Suite bergamasque*, with the surpassing hit, *Clair de lune* (1890), and *Pour le piano* (1901). The latter established a mid-career pattern of three-movement piano collections: *Estampes* (1903) and two sets of *Images* (1905-7). His mature orchestral works come in groups of three as well. Two books of 12 Préludes each appeared in 1910 and 1913. The final major piano works were a dozen Etudes in 1915.

*Estampes* means 'prints', and reminds us (as does the title *Images*) of the visual aspect of Debussy's imagination. He was especially inspired by the paintings of Turner and Whistler, and he detested the word 'Impressionist', whether applied to painting or music. 'Pagodas' uses the oriental resonances of the pentatonic scale. 'Evening in Granada' similarly uses an exotic scale to evoke Spain. 'Gardens in the rain' quotes snatches of two French nursery-tunes, one a ubiquitous lullaby, the other, written by Madame de Pompadour, a nursery-song with political overtones, rather like the English Humpty-Dumpty.

Words and music were very closely linked in **Schumann's** mind – he, of all composers of the Romantic period, is the one most likely to give a piece a title, beyond a genre description like Mazurka or Song without Words. His father was a publisher and a novelist (fascinating to speculate about chicken and egg here!), and young Robert was inspired to write stories, poems and plays.

He always remained a literary man, an editor and a critic. So, reading a romantic novel could lead to a piano suite, while a poem might not confine itself to becoming a song – it could start a symphony: the motto theme of the First Symphony, for instance, perfectly fits the poetic line that inspired it.

Schumann's original title for Op. 13, which he began in 1834, was 'Studies of an orchestral character for pianoforte, by Florestan and Eusebius', the latter being two of the alter egos which Schumann allowed to inhabit his persona – perhaps unwisely. Florestan was the extrovert and Eusebius was the clever, shy one. Later, Schumann could also become David, always fighting the Philistines (a personification of artistic ignorance that seems to have originated with Schumann). If you notice that Clara (eventually his wife), David, Eusebius and Florestan, form an alphabetical sequence, you'll get some idea of how Schumann's mind worked.

Schumann's alternative title for the *Etudes symphoniques* was 'Studies in the form of Variations'. They are inextricably linked with Schumann's complicated love-life. He became engaged to a fellow pupil of Friedrich Wieck, Ernestine, not knowing that her protecting 'relative', a Baron von Fricken, was in fact her father. Besotted with Ernestine, Schumann wrote a set of variations on the notes A-S-C-H (the name of the town where she and the Baron lived – all those letters are note-names in German). The present Etudes are based on a theme actually composed by the Baron, though the first edition merely remarks that 'the notes of the melody are the composition of an amateur'. In 1835, Robert found himself spending a great deal of time with Wieck's daughter, Clara – their first kiss occurred on 25 November – and he also discovered the truth about Ernestine's parentage. Ernestine was given her marching orders on New Year's Day, but Schumann carried on with the variation-studies on her father's theme. The two versions published by Clara contain essentially the same music, though with a bar less here and there, or a *ritardando* omitted. The first version numbers the variations from 1 to 12, and calls them all 'Etudes'. The later version calls most of the sections 'Variations' (numbered from 1 to 9, but with no Variation 2). Three sections are called 'Etudes' (numbered 2, 3 and 9), while the last section is now called 'Finale'. Bewildering enough, but long after Schumann's death, his disciple Brahms published five more variations, numbered from 1 to 5, with no indication as to where he had found them or they might slot in. However, since the first known performance of any of the piece was when Clara played just three variations to mark her secret engagement to Robert, perhaps the order and even the selection of variations don't matter as much as the underlying message.

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