

WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 6 November 2025
7.30pm

Alim Beisembayev piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Images, Series 1 (1901-5)

Reflets dans l'eau • Hommage à Rameau • Mouvement

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Etudes symphoniques Op. 13 (1834-7)

I. Thema. Andante • II. Variation 1. Un poco più vivo •

III. Variation 2. Andante • IV. Étude 3. Vivace •

V. Variation 3. Allegro marcato • VI. Variation

4. Scherzando • VII. Variation 5. Agitato • VIII. Variation

6. Allegro molto • IX. Variation 7. Sempre marcatissimo •

X. Étude 9. Presto possibile • XI. Variation 8. Allegro

con energia • XII. Variation 9. Andante espressivo •

XIII. Finale. Allegro brillante

Interval

Claude Debussy

Images, Series 2 (1907)

Cloches à travers les feuilles • Et la lune descend

sur le temple qui fut • Poissons d'or

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 35 'Funeral March' (1837-9)

I. Grave – Doppio movimento • II. Scherzo •

III. Marche funèbre • IV. Finale. Presto



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In a letter of 1905 to his publisher Jacques Durand, **Claude Debussy** expressed the hope that his first three *Images* would ‘take their place in piano literature [...] to the left of Schumann or to the right of Chopin’. How fitting, then, that tonight Alim Beisembayev performs all six *Images* alongside substantial works by both these composers.

Debussy once told Edgar Varèse that ‘I love pictures almost as much as music’. Indeed, his friend René Peter observed that ‘to judge by his works, and by their titles, he is a painter’. His music’s pictorial qualities are never more evident than in the *Images*, written in 1901-5 (Book 1) and 1907 (Book 2).

Book 1 opens with the popular ‘Reflets dans l’eau’, which Debussy jokingly claimed was composed ‘according to the most recent discoveries in harmonic chemistry’. Pianist Marguerite Long described the opening as evoking ‘a little circle in water with a little pebble falling into it’. From these quiet beginnings the music builds to a sweeping climax, then dies away to an introspective close. ‘Hommage à Rameau’ pays tribute to the French Baroque composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. Spare-textured outer sections characterised by archaic harmonies contrast with a rich-hued and intense central episode. Debussy instructed that the rapid closing ‘Mouvement’ be played with ‘implacable rhythm’ and ‘fantastical yet precise lightness’. A recurrent fanfare-like motif gives it a jubilant air, though its final bars are hushed and mysterious.

Images Book 2 is still more pictorial. ‘Cloches à travers les feuilles’ evokes the sounds both of church bells and of the Javanese gamelan music that Debussy had heard at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. The piece is notable for its flexible tempo, quiet dynamics and subtly interwoven melodic lines (counterpoint). Gamelan-like sonorities also feature in ‘Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut’, a delicate sonic depiction of a ruined East Asian temple illuminated by moonlight. The set ends in virtuoso style with ‘Poissons d’or’, inspired by a Japanese lacquer panel of two carp touched up with mother-of-pearl and gold. Leaping bright-hued melodic motifs and rippling figuration suggest their rapid movements in their natural watery element.

In 1834, the aspiring composer Baron Ignaz Ferdinand von Fricken sent **Robert Schumann** a set of his variations. Schumann was struck by their theme, and decided to make it the basis of a work of his own. He toyed with calling it either *Variations pathétiques* or *Etüden im Orchestercharakter von Florestan und Eusebius*, the latter title representing his imaginary alter egos, the extrovert Florestan and the introvert Eusebius. In the event, though, the work was published in 1837 as *XII Études symphoniques* – the adjective ‘symphonic’ indicating the quasi-orchestral nature of the piano writing. Schumann later revised the piece and reissued it in 1852 as *Études en forme de Variations* – tonight, we hear his original version.

Other than the rhapsodic No. III, the bravura No. IX and the finale, the 12 *Études* are all variations on Frick’s simple and majestic theme. Striking features include the melody’s shift to the bass in No. II, melodic imitation (canon) in No. IV, cascading figures in No. VI and stately dotted rhythms modelled on the Baroque French Overture in No. XIII. The song-like, flowing style of No. XI may reflect the influence of Fryderyk Chopin, whom Schumann had hailed in 1831 as ‘a genius’. A flamboyant arrangement of the chorus ‘Du stolzes England, freue dich’ (Proud England, rejoice) from Heinrich Marschner’s Walter-Scott inspired opera *Der Templer und die Jüdin* brings the work to an exuberant conclusion.

In 1837, **Chopin** composed a *Marche funèbre* (funeral march), either (it is thought) to commemorate the anniversary of the failed Polish November Uprising of 1830, or to mark the end of his relationship with the pianist and artist Maria Wodzińska. He subsequently decided to incorporate it into a four-movement sonata, his second. The remaining movements were composed in 1839 at the country house of his new partner George Sand (Aurore Dupin), and the Sonata No. 2 was published in 1840. It had a mixed initial reception, with Robert Schumann – normally an admirer – describing its movements as ‘four unruly children smuggled under this name [sonata] into a place they could not otherwise have penetrated’. Chopin scholar Jim Samson suggests that early listeners may have been baffled by the work’s originality. As he observes: ‘Essentially [Chopin] used the sonata genre as a framework within which the achievements of his earlier music – the figurative patterns of the *Études* and Preludes, the cantilenas of the Nocturnes, and even the periodicity of the dance pieces – might be drawn together in a kind of synthesis.’

The first movement is characterised by contrasts, epitomised in its two main themes: the first rapid and agitated, the second expansive and lyrical. Unusually, the compressed recapitulation (reprise) focuses on the second theme, with the agitated first one only returning in the dramatic closing bars. A lively *Scherzo* follows, whose energetic outer sections – full of leaping chords and sudden shifts in dynamics – frame a song-like trio.

Like the *Scherzo*, the *Marche funèbre* is in ternary form. Its austere, dark-hued outer sections contrast with a gentle central episode whose melodic beauty recalls the composer’s intimate nocturnes. The *Marche*’s stark grandeur and memorable main theme have made it very popular as an independent work, and it has been performed at many state funerals. The enigmatic finale is one of Chopin’s most unusual creations: a hushed *moto perpetuo* in which the pianist’s left and right hands move consistently in octaves until the sudden explosive final chord. Pianist Anton Rubinstein likened it to the wind sweeping through a graveyard, while for Schumann it resembled ‘a mocking smile’.

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