

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 7 March 2024
1.00pm

La Muse Oubliée

Antonio Oyarzabal piano
Natasha Loges speaker

Mana Zucca (1885-1981)

Prelude Op. 73 (by 1926)

Mel Bonis (1858-1937)

Phœbé Op. 30 (pub. 1909)
Desdémona Op. 101 (pub. 1913)
Viviane Op. 80 (pub. 1909)
Mélisande Op. 109 (?1898)

Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944)

Automne Op. 35 No. 2 (c.1893)

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918)

3 Morceaux (1914)
D'un vieux jardin • D'un jardin clair • Cortège

Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983)

Larghetto (1946)
Valse lente (1948)

Lūcija Garūta (1902-1977)

Prelude in E (1927-9)

Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915-1940)

April Preludes Op. 13 (1937)
Allegro ma non troppo • Andante • Andante semplice • Vivo



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This afternoon's recital connects composers linked not only by time and place, but a shared commitment to lyricism. The programme title reclaims the word 'muse', referring to the nine goddesses who presided over the arts and sciences, rather than the countless women who inspired and supported male creativity at the cost of their own creative lives.

One reason why women are often 'forgotten' is their exclusion from the powerful coteries which underpinned the reputations of the prestigious composer-conductors, as well as from the music histories and concert programmes which subsequently cemented those reputations. By connecting the programme through a series of *imaginary letters* we present these women as a network, offering mutual support and criticism. Wherever possible, the letters draw on their actual words. However, women's private documents, such as correspondence and diaries, are often not systematically preserved and catalogued.

'**Mana Zucca**' (1885-1981), born Gussie Zuckermann to Polish immigrants in New York, was a child prodigy. She enjoyed a successful career in Europe, initially as a pianist, then as a singer in musical comedies. After her marriage, she settled in Florida, taught and wrote popular songs, some with her husband. Her energetic, surging *Prelude Op. 73* was recorded in 1926 by the pianist Shura Cherkassky. Hundreds of her works, including operas and concertos, are preserved at Florida International University.

Four pieces by **Mel Bonis** (1858-1937) follow. Despite a lower-middle-class background, Bonis studied at the Paris Conservatoire, but an unfortunate love affair precipitated her marriage to a much older, wealthy husband. While raising five stepchildren, four of her own and running several households, Bonis composed steadily in all genres. Her work was widely performed alongside that of her French male contemporaries and enjoyed considerable renown. Oyarzabal has selected four of seven pieces gathered posthumously by the publisher Furore into a collection titled *Femmes de légende*. *Phœbé* recalls the moon; *Desdémona* Shakespeare's tragic heroine-victim from *Othello*; *Viviane* is a water-sprite; and *Mélisande* – composed several years before Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* – responded to Maurice Maeterlinck's 1893 play depicting a mysterious and doomed infatuation.

Bonis's life differed greatly from that of her contemporary **Cécile Chaminade** (1857-1944). An international star, Chaminade built a huge career on her finely crafted solo piano works, spawning Chaminade-themed toiletries, as well as Chaminade Clubs in the USA. *Automne Op. 35 No. 2*, one of her best-loved works, is the second of her *6 Concert Etudes*, a work she herself recorded for Welte-Mignon. After a deceptively tranquil opening, it demands considerable virtuosity in a central passage, possibly depicting an autumn storm.

Though **Lili Boulanger** (1893-1918) was born nearly 40 years after Chaminade, their stylistic worlds overlapped. After Boulanger's tragically early death, her surviving compositions were cherished and championed by her

sister Nadia, one of the most influential composition teachers of the 20th Century, and a formidable musician in her own right. The 3 *Morceaux* were composed in 1914 at the Villa Medici in Rome. *D'un vieux jardin* paints a mysterious crepuscular dreamscape. The lilting *D'un jardin clair* evokes a content gardener in a sun-drenched paradise. *Cortège* uses archaic harmonies to depict a joyous procession, complete with masks and acrobats; it also exists in a version for violin and piano. The 21-year-old Boulanger dedicated these pieces to her friends Lily Jumel, Ninette Salles and the violinist Yvonne Astruc; all were published by Ricordi in 1916.

Boulanger's contemporary **Germaine Tailleferre** (1892-1983) composed her hypnotic *Larghetto* in 1946. 20 years earlier, she had gained fame as the only female member of *Les Six*, a collective of French composers, but the values of that group rapidly fractured; perhaps only Francis Poulenc has remained a familiar name. Through two troubled marriages, Tailleferre wrote steadily in many popular genres, including the soundtracks for nearly 40 films. Her gently sorrowful *Larghetto* also exists in a version for two pianos and is based on music for the 1946 film *Coincidences*. *Valse lente*, dated 1948, was dismissed in one review as 'exceedingly feminine', however it deliberately rejects the overwhelmingly male modernity of post-war music and recalls the soundworld of Boulanger's *D'un jardin clair*.

The composer, pianist and poet **Lūcija Garūta** (1902-77) spent most of her life in her native Latvia but studied in Paris in the late 1920s. A tremendously successful performer during the 1930s, she lost her international career when the Soviets occupied Latvia in 1940 (Latvia gained independence in 1991). Though now mainly remembered for a patriotic cantata, Garūta tackled many genres. Her *Prelude in E* is steeped in romantic nostalgia, a style derided as reactionary under a determinedly 'optimistic' Soviet regime. Garūta's inclusion is a reminder that women from countries regarded as peripheral often experience a 'double-forgetting' because nationalist cultural projects are usually male-driven.

This 'forgetting' is gradually shifting for the phenomenally gifted Czech composer **Vítězslava Kaprálová** (1915-1940), who, like Lili Boulanger, died young. After initial studies in Brno and Prague, she went to Paris in 1937 on a French Government scholarship, where her compatriot Bohuslav Martinů became her close friend and champion. Her country was invaded by the Germans on 15 March 1939; Kaprálová was forced to remain, penniless, in Paris, before moving to Montpellier to avoid invasion; she died of illness shortly afterwards. She left roughly 50 works including songs, chamber music, orchestral works and concertos. Her *April Preludes Op. 13*, composed during her Prague studies, were popularised after a successful Paris première by Rudolf Firkušný. They provide a varied, dramatic and witty close to the afternoon.

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