

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 8 July 2024
7.30pm

Alim Beisembayev piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

4 Impromptus D935 (1827)

*Impromptu in F minor • Impromptu in A flat •
Impromptu in B flat • Impromptu in F minor*

Interval

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

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)

12 Etudes Op. 25 (1835-7)

*Etude in A flat • Etude in F minor • Etude in F •
Etude in A minor • Etude in E minor • Etude in G
sharp minor • Etude in C sharp minor • Etude in
D flat • Etude in G flat • Etude in B minor • Etude
in A minor • Etude in C minor*

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Schubert was the only great composer of the Viennese School actually to be Viennese – a reminder of the cosmopolitan nature of that swirling centre of empire. His natural form of self-expression was the piano; often in combination with a voice, of course, but on all sorts of other occasions too. A painting of a charade being acted by a group of his friends – ‘Adam and Eve’, with the morally dubious Franz von Schober as the Serpent, and the unusually tall Leopold Kupelwieser, the painter of the picture, as the Tree of Life – shows Schubert sitting at the piano in a corner, attended only by a patient dog, as he strums a doubtless dramatic chord with his left hand alone.

1828 was the year Schubert gave his public concert – just the one, in his whole lifetime. It dropped like a very small pebble into the Viennese musical pool, completely eclipsed by the enormous splash made by Paganini that same week. The receipts were soon spent, and Schubert, in declining health, found himself unable to take an essential holiday from the early industrial fug of Vienna. In an attempt to find cleaner air, he went to stay with his brother Ferdinand in his new apartment in a developing suburb. He was expecting to die from syphilis; but because the well in Ferdinand’s courtyard was not dug deep enough, syphilis found itself in a race with typhoid. On 4 November, deciding his counterpoint wasn’t good enough, he embarked upon a course with the noted theorist Simon Sechter. Schubert wrote a few exercises for him (which, amazingly, turned up suddenly in 1969), but on 19 November, at the age of 31, he died. The *Impromptus* D935 date from the previous year, though they were not published until 1839; Schumann suggested these four pieces formed a sonata in disguise, but if that’s the case, it is perhaps too good a disguise.

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; 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’; C-D is a lapidary expression of that.

His personal life was tumultuous. His offhand dismissals of women of whom he had tired, 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, the *Suite bergamasque*, with the surpassing hit *Clair de lune*, and *Pour le piano*. The latter established a mid-career pattern of three-movement piano collections: *Estampes* (1903) and two sets of *Images* (1905-7).

The title *Images* reminds us (as does *Estampes*, which means ‘prints’) 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. The first two of tonight’s *Images* develop the layered gamelan-inspired resonances Debussy had explored in *Pagodes*, the first piece in *Estampes*. *Cloches à travers les feuilles* ‘(Bells through leaves)’ was inspired by the church bells of a village in the Jura, home of his friend Louis Laloy, the dedicatee of *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*. Its title (‘The moon sets behind the ruined temple’) speaks to Laloy’s studies in sinology. *Poissons d’or* are more exotic than we might suspect – the French term for ‘goldfish’ is ‘poisson rouge’. These golden fish twist and sparkle in a way Debussy made his own.

Chopin did not so much play the piano – rather, he was the piano. A degree of self-identification with the instrument is indicated by his remark about the relative merits of Pleyels and Erards: Liszt preferred the latter, with their foolproof double-escapement action; Chopin explained that an Erard came with its sound all ready-made, but at a Pleyel, he had to make his own sound, which he preferred, if his health was good enough to allow the effort. As his friend George Sand remarked, ‘he made a single instrument speak a language of infinity’. ‘Chopin is the greatest of them all’, said Debussy, ‘for through the piano alone he discovered everything’. And of his fellow Pole, Szymanowski wrote: ‘Chopin was an eternal example of what Polish music was capable of achieving – a symbol of Europeanised Poland, losing nothing of his national features but standing on the highest pinnacle of European culture.’

Chopin’s first set of 12 studies, Op. 10, published in 1833, was dedicated to Franz Liszt, who immediately set about the first of several revisions of his own studies. Tonight’s second set, Op. 25, published in 1837, is dedicated to Marie d’Agoult, with whom Liszt had three children. Chopin’s studies have become much more influential, and much more popular, than Liszt’s; perhaps because their fastidious refinement of style does not preclude a simultaneous appeal to the emotions.

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