

WIGMORE HALL 125

Sunday 9 November 2025
7.30pm

REVERIE: The life and loves of Claude Debussy

Lucy Parham piano
Sir Simon Russell Beale narrator

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Rêverie (c.1890)

Danse bohémienne (1880)

Arabesque No. 1 (c.1890)

From *Estampes* (1903)

La soirée dans Grenade • Pagodes

La fille aux cheveux de lin from *Préludes Book I* (1909-10)

Jardins sous la pluie from *Estampes*

Interval

Des pas sur la neige from *Préludes Book I*

Reflets dans l'eau from *Images, Series 1* (1901-5)

Poissons d'or from *Images, Series 2* (1907)

Golliwogg's Cake-Walk from *Children's Corner* (1906-8)

Clair de lune from *Suite bergamasque* (c.1890, rev. 1905)

Pour les huit doigts from *Etudes Book I* (1915)

L'isle joyeuse (1904)



Help us raise £125,000
for 125 years of music

To find out more visit wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate



Join & Support
Donations

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management. In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions. Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141. Wigmore Hall is equipped with a loop to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [Wigmore-hall.org.uk](https://wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan

The piano works by Debussy that perhaps most readily spring to mind are such ever-popular melodious gems as 'The Girl with the Flaxen Hair', *Arabesques*, *Rêverie*, 'Clair de Lune' and the 'Golliwogg's Cake-Walk'. But Claude Debussy is far more than a charming miniaturist. His contribution to the piano repertoire and its development is immense and his far-reaching influence as a turn-of-the-20th Century composer is hard to overestimate. The two books of *Préludes*, *Etudes* and *Images*, *Estampes* and *L'isle joyeuse* all transformed the use of harmonic structure and instrumental tone colour, creating a new idiom with colours, subtleties and complexities that had never seen before. The use of the whole-tone scale, an innovative harmonic palette and judicious use of the pedal are just some of elements that contribute to making Debussy unique.

Born the eldest of five children into a humble family just outside Paris in 1862, Claude-Achille Debussy overlooked his prodigious pianistic talents in favour of becoming a composer. In 1885, whilst still a student at the Paris Conservatoire, he won the coveted Prix de Rome, which enabled him to spend two years studying at the Villa Medici in Rome, mixing with artists, architects, musicians and sculptors. But, feeling both artistically stifled and lonely, Debussy was miserable for most of his time there and longed to return to Paris. The French capital was to remain his home for the rest of his life and central to his existence as a composer. He and his close friends Chausson and Dukas came to be at the heart of the city's musical scene.

A thick-set man, with dark hair and a high forehead, Debussy did not present the classic image of a lothario. His relationships with women were, however, both numerous and complex. He had several affairs and two marriages – the second to Emma Bardac who, during her previous marriage to a wealthy banker, had also been mistress to Gabriel Fauré. Such was the scandal created by her affair with Debussy that the couple had to escape temporarily to Eastbourne and Jersey. His first wife, Lily Texier, was so distraught that she tried to commit suicide by shooting herself with a revolver in the Place de la Concorde. Although she survived, the incident caused Debussy deep humiliation from which he never fully recovered.

Debussy, who for his part was always wary of people's judgements on others' lives, wrote, 'Another man's soul is a thick forest in which one must walk with circumspection'. Ironically, it was recognition he had so craved as a young man that became the source of

his depression as he grew older. The only person who brought him true and deep happiness was his daughter, Claude-Emma (or 'Chouchou' as he affectionately called her). He spent endless hours with her in his beloved garden of his house in the Bois de Boulogne with their dog, Xantho. He wrote *Children's Corner* for her and – unsurprisingly, with the eponymous toy being all the rage – her favourite piece was the 'Golliwogg's Cake-Walk'. Also central to his compositions was his love of the art of the Far East. Japanese lacquer and the Javanese Gamelan music he first heard as a young man were to influence many of his works. His study was crammed with *objets d'art*, paintings and books (including several English novels), all of which had their own specific effect on his output. But the cancer that was to eventually take his life was worsening and his compositional output was now consequently in decline.

The First World War had a profound effect on Debussy and he was frustrated that his lengthy illness prevented him becoming actively involved. As he lay in bed listening to the nightly air-raids, he wryly noted: 'French art needs to take revenge as seriously as the French army does'.

Debussy died from rectal cancer in 1918 and, in a further tragedy, his beloved Chouchou died from diphtheria only months later at the age of 14.

Debussy's legacy is immense. *Rêverie* features a number of his piano works, but it was his entire output (including masterpieces such as the Violin and Cello Sonatas, the Quartet, numerous songs, the orchestral works *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faune* and *La Mer* and the opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*) that set the course for the century which followed him. Discarding outworn rules, he forged a new and liberated future for classical music.

I have compiled *Rêverie* from Debussy's writings and correspondence. The music of the programme is not in strict chronological order – it was chosen first and foremost to reflect the mood of the letters.

Rêverie received its London première in Wigmore Hall's 2012 London Piano Series to critical acclaim, with actor Henry Goodman. Other actors joining me include Dominic West, Alistair McGowan, Simon Russell Beale, Robert Glenister, Tim McInnerny, Samuel West, Simon Callow, Alex Jennings and Michael Maloney.

© Lucy Parham 2025

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.