

Jean-Yves Thibaudet

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate end time: 9.30pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Programme

Claude Debussy *Préludes*

Book 1

1. Danseuses de Delphes
2. Voiles
3. Le vent dans la plaine
4. 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir'
5. Les collines d'Anacapri
6. Des pas sur la neige
7. Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest
8. La fille aux cheveux de lin
9. La sérénade interrompue
10. La cathédrale engloutie
11. La danse de Puck
12. Minstrels

Book 2

1. Brouillards
2. Feuilles mortes
3. La puerta del vino
4. Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses
5. Bruyères
6. 'General Lavine' – eccentric
7. La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune
8. Ondine
9. Hommage à S. Pickwick Esq, PPMPC
10. Canope
11. Les tierces alternées
12. Feux d'artifice

Jean-Yves Thibaudet makes a stylish return to the Barbican in music from his native France; in his hands, Debussy's *Préludes* transcend the keyboard, conjuring a world of beauty, musical originality and irresistible characterisation.

'There is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law.' So Claude Debussy famously told his long-suffering composition teacher. But that gives little idea of the meticulousness with which he composed, of the effort that went into creating music that sounds so effortless. For Debussy, the piano was all about illusion – he wanted pianists to imagine they were playing an instrument with no hammers. If his *Préludes* follow in the line of Chopin (a composer he revered), they take the genre in a strikingly new direction. The placing of the evocative titles at the end of each piece is intentional, supposedly to avoid over-influencing the interpretation. But once you know the title and its inspiration, it's difficult to imagine the piece could be about anything else.

The 24 pieces are arranged into two books, dating from 1909 and 1911–13 respectively. Some have become so famous that they have a flourishing life outside the cycle, but when heard as a sequence, as we do tonight, they pull us all the more powerfully into Debussy's entrancing world.

In the First Book he travels far, not just geographically and historically but also intermingling high and low art. The opening two pieces, 'Danseuses de Delphes' and 'Voiles', draw us in with their mystery, the first alluding to Ancient Greece, the second conjuring the sound-world of the East. For 'Le vent dans la plaine' Debussy draws inspiration from the 18th-century poet Charles-Simon Favart, conjuring a landscape where you can almost hear the wind as it intensifies. The evocative title of 'Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir' is Baudelaire's, Debussy capturing to perfection the hazy and slightly claustrophobic air of the original poem. 'Les collines d'Anacapri' is an explosive evocation of the kind of dazzling light peculiar to the Mediterranean, complete with the introduction of a sultry pseudo-Neapolitan folksong – Debussy mingling his own music with fake vernacular. Just as abruptly the temperature plummets, with the stuttering 'Des pas sur la neige', the torpor replaced with frenetic energy in the Hans Christian Andersen-inspired 'Ce qu'a vu le vent d'Ouest', in which Debussy gives Liszt a run for his money in terms of sheer virtuosity.

Up until this point, the *Préludes* have been unpeopled, but then comes the famous 'La fille aux cheveux de lin', Debussy conjuring a rather more innocent portrait than the erotically charged original poem. To Spain next (a country that held an enduring fascination for the composer, even though his experience of it was limited to a few hours spent over the border) for 'La sérénade interrompue', with its heady evocation of strummed guitar.

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We then plunge into the depths for the awe-inspiring 'La cathédrale engloutie', based on a Breton legend of the cathedral in the drowned city of Ys, which could occasionally be glimpsed, rising out of the sea through the mists. From textural richness to the sinewy, darting lines of 'Le danse de Puck', a delightful sketch of the Shakespearean character whose unpredictability is magically conjured. We end Book 1 in Eastbourne: while the composer was staying there, completing his tone-poem *La mer*, he encountered a group of musicians parading through the streets, which he captures in 'Minstrels', a heady mix of the commonplace and the artful.

By contrast with the travels of the First Book, the Second is more inward-looking. Like Book 1, the first two pieces are misty, ungraspable, from the amorphous swirling of 'Brouillards' to the disquieting 'Feuilles mortes'. We are flung into a more upbeat mood with 'La puerta del vino', its inspiration a postcard of the Moorish gate in Granada's Alhambra. A visual prompt of a very different kind is behind 'Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses': a delicate, if faintly sinister Arthur Rackham illustration for JM Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. 'Bruyères' reminds us irresistibly of the flaxen-haired girl of Book 1, before the buffoonery of 'General Lavine', a portrait said to have been inspired by the American clown Ed Lavine, whose talents included playing the piano with his toes.

The sensuously beautiful 'La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune' was inspired by a newspaper article describing the 1911 durbar at which George V was crowned Emperor of India, an occasion abounding in pomp, ceremony and outfits so lavish that the king complained the bejewelled crown made his head ache! From emperors to water-sprites, and 'Ondine', a figure given a certain malice in Debussy's vision.

Debussy was a great Anglophile, but that didn't stop him poking fun, which he does with great aplomb in 'Hommage à S Pickwick Esq, PPMPC', complete with its quotation of *God Save the King*. The 'PPMPC', meanwhile, are a dig at the British tradition of appending letters after a person's name, and stand for 'Perpetual President-Member Pickwick Club'. More time travels in 'Canope', as we visit the ancient Egyptian city of Canopus, which was famed for its funerary jars, the music aptly austere. From stillness to manic energy in 'Tierces alternées', which harks back not only to moto perpetuo pieces from Debussy's *Pour le Piano* and *Estampes*, but further back to the illustrious clavecinistes of centuries past, notably François Couperin and Rameau. The *Préludes* end with a bang, with 'Feux d'artifice' imagining the spectacular fireworks of Paris's 14 July celebrations, complete with snatches of the Marseillaise.

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Performers

Jean-Yves Thibaudet piano

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