

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)
Images, Books I & II · L'Isle Joyeuse

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)
Gaspard de la nuit · Jeux d'eau · La Valse

ALESSANDRO TAVERNA piano

DEBUSSY

Images, Book I

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------|------|
| 1 | 1. Reflets dans l'eau | 5:23 |
| 2 | 2. Hommage à Rameau | 6:47 |
| 3 | 3. Mouvement | 3:36 |

Images, Book II

- | | | |
|---|---|------|
| 4 | 1. Cloches à travers les feuilles | 4:16 |
| 5 | 2. Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut | 5:32 |
| 6 | 3. Poissons d'or | 4:19 |
| 7 | L'Isle Joyeuse | 5:58 |

RAVEL

Gaspard de la nuit*

- | | | |
|----|-------------|------|
| 8 | 1. Ondine | 6:49 |
| 9 | 2. Le Gibet | 6:48 |
| 10 | 3. Scarbo | 9:57 |

- | | | |
|----|------------|------|
| 11 | Jeux d'eau | 5:36 |
|----|------------|------|

- | | | |
|----|-----------|-------|
| 12 | La Valse* | 12:27 |
|----|-----------|-------|

Total duration 77:41

*Recorded live at Turner Sims during a recital on 16 January 2016

DEBUSSY

Images, Books I & II
L'Isle Joyeuse

RAVEL

Gaspard de la nuit
Jeux d'eau
La Valse

**ALESSANDRO
TAVERNA**
piano



DEBUSSY and RAVEL

PIANO MUSIC

In considering European music of the last half-millennium, one occasionally encounters popular ‘pairings’ of composers, who, for reasons of shared nationality or genre, or having been broadly contemporaneous, are perceived to be similar in outlook and musical language. Pairings – such as Bach and Handel, Haydn and Mozart, for examples – can often be a useful shorthand in making a point, but run the risk of superficiality in terms of overlooking their essential differences.

It is only through examining the totality of a great composer’s output that his individuality becomes apparent: such considerations of course take time, and it is fascinating to see how perceptions of composers, once thought to be very similar in outlook, have changed, as later studies reveal aspects of their music that were previously either overlooked or unknown, showing them as quite different artistic equals.

Debussy was 13 years Ravel’s senior, but both composers came to prominence around the same time – in the last years of the 19th century – their subsequent careers, up until the first years of World War I, running concurrently, as music for orchestra and for solo piano became dominant for both composers.

It was undoubtedly their parallel output in these genres, as well as their shared nationality, that led to them being ‘paired’ in the way earlier masters were, but later generations have learned their essential differences. For Debussy, perhaps the more withdrawn artist, the evolution of a fresh musical language based upon the whole-tone scale enabled him to probe more deeply into the inner feelings of his mind, a superfine creativity that often heard his music inspired through visual terms; for Ravel – half-Basque in his background – a no less sensitive composer, the existing tonal framework continued

to be a fount of inspiration, wherein his piano music – as with many of his contemporaries – took the relatively recently-established transcendentalism of the post-Lisztians as a *sine qua non*, his writing for the instrument demanding a virtuoso technique, but necessarily restricting the practicalities of performance.

Equally, as with their fellow-Impressionists in visual art, both Debussy and Ravel explored the new musical Impressionism – another connexion between them, but at heart a superficial one – each in their own, quite different ways: Debussy as if through the half-lights and tints of Monet or Manet – and even, as in our recital, music directly inspired by the 18th-century painter Jean-Antoine Watteau, and Ravel as if by way of the somewhat brighter representation of Sisley, Degas or Pissarro. There are exceptions to these broad rules in the work of both composers, of course, but we have Debussy’s letter to Edgard Varèse of 1911 in which he wrote ‘I love

pictures almost as much as I love music.’ Not every one of Debussy or Ravel’s mature masterpieces was inspired by visual stimuli, for it is their musical genius that defines them not superficial similarities that may have tended to mislead earlier commentators.

Our notes accompanying the music begin with the first work in the recital to be written, Ravel’s *Jeux d’Eau*. This dates from 1901, when the 26-year-old was still ostensibly a student of Gabriel Fauré, to whom the work was dedicated. It is, however, wholly representative of Ravel’s mature style, and the Lisztian influence we mentioned earlier is nowhere more self-evident in Ravel’s piano music than here, a work clearly suggested by Liszt’s *Les jeux d’eau à la Villa d’Este* (which is found in the third book of the *Années de pèlerinage*).

Ravel explained the work’s origins: ‘*Jeu d’eau* begins the pianistic novelties which one may find in my work. This piece, inspired by the noise of water

and by the musical sounds suggested by sprays, cascades, and brooks, is based on two motifs as in a sonata movement – without, however, having a classical tonal plan.’

Ravel later wrote on the manuscript ‘Dieu fluvial riant de l’eau qui le chatouille..’ – a quotation from the French symbolist poet Henri de Régnier’s *Cité des eaux*, which did not in fact appear until 1903, but which Ravel clearly felt put into words the essence of *Jeu d’eau* – ‘The river God laughs as the water tickles him..’

By the time of Ravel’s suite for piano, *Gaspard de la nuit: trios poèmes pour piano* (1908), he was widely regarded as a leading figure in the younger generation of French composers. The work takes its title from a posthumously-published prose poem, written in 1836, by Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841), which had a great influence on the later Symbolist poets. The full title of Bertram’s work

is *Gaspard de la Nuit, fantaisies à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*, so for poet and composer the inspiration was essentially visual, and the titles of the three movements of Ravel’s suite are taken directly from Bertrand.

In this work, Ravel takes post-Lisztian transcendentalism to the limit; the first movement, *Ondine*, depicts the water-nymph singing seductively to entice the listener to the depths of the lake in which she dwells. The connotation of water in *Ondine* is reminiscent of that in *Jeu d’eau*, but in the later work the technical demands are greater as the drama is darker and more pronounced throughout – clearly, the expression is more startling, more sudden and intense in its drama – most notably in the climactic outburst before the closing pages wind the music down.

The second movement, *Le Gibet*, hauntingly depicts a gibbet in the desert, holding the body of a hanged man, and a bell in the distance marks the inexorable passing of time as if

questioning the scene – Bertrand’s poem itself begins with a quotation from *Faust* – as insect-like elements of life surround the hanging corpse.

Scarbo is a goblin of the night, unstoppable in energy and impish devilment, only occasionally pausing to observe the nightmares his behaviour has caused before he is off again, frighteningly active until – at the very end – he virtually disappears into thin air, expressed in piano writing of which the difficulties and technical demands bid fair to surpass any Lisztian expectation.

Both Ravel and (a little later) Debussy were commissioned by Serge Diaghilev to compose music for his Ballets Russes. Ravel replied with *Daphnis et Chloé*, first performed in Paris in 1912, later becoming better-known through two concert suites extracted from it, although the complete score is now relatively frequently heard in concert. *Daphnis et Chloé* clearly established Ravel’s credentials as a ballet composer,

but although he did not follow that work with a ballet of similar length and scope, his fascination with dance had certainly been broadened by the experience – and by the success *Daphnis* enjoyed.

Soon after war had broken out in August 1914, Ravel volunteered to join the Army. At 39, he was not too old for active service, but served as an artillery driver at Verdun, the privations of which undermined his previously robust health. After the War, Ravel returned to composition, taking up an idea he had harboured for almost 15 years – a musical tribute to Vienna, a different city post-war to that which had rivalled Paris at the dawn of the 20th century.

Ravel’s idea was to honour, musically, the Vienna of the mid-19th century – the Vienna of the Strauss dynasty through the dance most closely associated with the Austrian capital – the waltz – the title, *La valse*, becoming his first post-war composition.

Now discharged from the Army, and fully established – since Debussy's death in 1918 – as the leading French composer, Ravel conceived *La valse* as a ballet score, originally giving it the title *Vienne*. An interesting aspect of Ravel's career as a composer was his habit of orchestrating several of his solo piano works, effectively making one work fulfil the functions of two, but he did not produce orchestral versions of either *Jeu-d'eau* or of *Gaspard*. In *La valse* the habit was reversed: first written as a brilliant orchestral score, Ravel then produced the version for solo piano we hear in this recital.

Once more, keyboard technical difficulties did not deter him, for he had previously made a version for two pianos, which he and the Spanish composer Alfredo Casella had premiered. But in reducing four hands to two, Ravel produced a demanding solo piano work of considerable difficulty. In the event, *La valse* became the work that led to the break between Ravel and Diaghilev, who

never produced the score as a ballet, and was not a little miffed when it soon became a popular concert item, yet the Russian did describe Ravel's score as 'a masterpiece.'

Diaghilev was right on both counts: lacking a story, and lasting less than fifteen minutes, *La valse* is not a ballet in the traditional sense, being more evocative of one: it is certainly a masterpiece. Ravel later explained the background to the work:

'Set in an Imperial court, about 1855, through whirling clouds, waltzing couples may be faintly distinguished. The clouds gradually scatter: one sees an immense hall peopled with a whirling crowd. The scene is gradually illuminated until the light of the chandeliers bursts forth.'

If Ravel could be described as the first 20th-century metropolitan French composer *par excellence*, Debussy's more distant muse may have had its

roots in classical forms albeit expressed in textures imbued with (as Edward Sackville-West wrote almost seventy years ago) 'constant effects of colour, of shadow and of light, which form his unique contribution to music.'

Composed in 1903-04, Debussy's *L'isle joyeuse* (The Happy Island) is a brilliant evocation in tone of the composer's fount of inspiration – Jean-Antoine Watteau's painting *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* (*The Embarcation for Cythera*). Cythera (or Kythira) is the Greek island regarded as the legendary birthplace of Venus, the goddess of love. Watteau's painting depicts a couple, clearly lovers, close by a statue of Venus, as a group is seen approaching a golden boat in which they are to depart.

Debussy centres the piece upon the key of A major, the intensity of the music reflecting the enchantment of the island, the warm sunshine, and perhaps the sheer animation of life itself. Debussy's piano writing here is as demanding as anything by Ravel.

The work's tripartite structure opens with a scene-setting passage of great brilliance which eventually leads to a lyrical secondary idea, perhaps expressing the couple's tender affections before the more vivid foreground returns, the exhilaration of the others almost tangible as the breathless coda brings to an end Debussy's most extrovert and thrilling work for solo piano, a masterpiece reaffirming his individual genius.

The undoubted achievement of *L'isle joyeuse* led Debussy to extend his mastery of the medium on a larger canvas, once more in a three-movement work, *Images – première livre*, composed in 1904-5, succeeding two earlier tripartite cycles *Pour le piano* (1901) and *Estampes* (1903), but which in some ways reaffirms his developmental use of the whole-tone scale.

In this first book of *Images*, the title of the first movement, *Reflets dans l'eau*, cannot but help recall Ravel's *Jeu d'eau*

but any similarities are superficial, for the ‘reflections’ are, of course, in the nature of an extended contemplation. In this first piece, the developmental growth Debussy extracts from a tiny three-note nucleus is remarkable – yet this is no technical exercise: it is a living organism existing in time, spreading outwards, the personification in musical terms of what Debussy explained to the pianist Marguerite Long as ‘a little circle in water with a little pebble falling into it.’ As ripples spread – as if across a lake – the music expands to a climax before subsiding once more.

A little-appreciated fact of early 20-century musical history is the re-discovery, in its early decades, of the music of the classical period, which in turn gave rise to the post-World War I neo-classical movement. Debussy’s *Hommage à Rameau* “in the style of a Sarabande” is one of the earliest examples of such stylisation (which Ravel was later to embody in his suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin*), Jean-

Philippe Rameau being one of the greatest French composers of the 18th century, the Sarabande a slow and stately evocation of the period.

The *Hommage* is the longest movement in either Book of *Images* (Debussy went on to compose a second set, in 1906). To close the first Book, the non-Impressionist title *Mouvement* brings the technical aspects of keyboard writing to the fore, the three-notes of the first *Image* becoming an ostinato, a subtly delicate evocation of constant movement – as a will-o’-the-wisp, rather than a blustery storm: a magnificent conception of musical thought, brought off with a virtuosity that remains an astonishing achievement.

Two years after completing the first book, Debussy planned *Images, deuxième livre*, each of the three movements having a title more closely related to Impressionism. The title of the first piece in Book II, *Cloches a travers les feuilles* (*Bells among the*

leaves), is a reference to an experience Debussy encountered at the great Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1900, which was visited by over 50 million people, and which saw the effective launch of the *style Art nouveau*. The musical experience that struck Debussy very strongly was his first encounter with Javanese music, most significantly the gamelan, which long haunted his imagination. The image of tolling bells perceived through the leaves of a group of trees is wonderfully conveyed in purely musical terms, for, as Debussy later wrote of the Javanese, describing ‘a race of delightful people who learnt music as easily as we learn to breathe. Their academy is the eternal rhythm of the sea, the wind in the leaves, thousands of tiny sounds which they hear attentively whilst never consulting treatises.’

In this piece, the imagination of the attentive listener is given full rein from the simple opening to an ever-increasing complexity as the initial atmosphere returns at the

close, Debussy’s invention perfectly encapsulating the unusual sonorities through his adoption of the whole-tone scale.

The title of the second piece, *Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut* (*And the Moon sets over the Temple that was*), reinforces the Symbolist influence upon Debussy’s art, setting the listener’s imagination free to wander as the musical suggestions of religious contemplation of Far Eastern civilisations are conjured up in this magnificent work.

The final movement, *Poissons d’or* (*Goldfish*), is arguably the most popular of all six of the *Images* – musically perfectly encapsulating the goldfish as they stop momentarily before darting this way and that, idly musing over what to do next, their inherent elegance apparent to all.

Robert Matthew-Walker

© 2017

ALESSANDRO TAVERNA

Alessandro Taverna established his international career by winning top prizes at Minnesota Piano-e-Competition, London International Piano Competition, Leeds International Piano Competition and Busoni Piano Competition in Bolzano. Since then he has gone on to perform in some of the most important concert halls and seasons including Teatro alla Scala Milan, Musikverein Vienna, Berlin Konzerthaus, Munich Gasteig, Wigmore Hall and Royal Festival Hall in London, Bridgewater Hall Manchester, Salle Cortot in Paris, Philharmonic Hall Liverpool, Castleton Festival, Musashino Hall in Tokyo, Auditorium Parco della Musica Rome.

His success has led to many engagements with the most prestigious orchestras including Filarmonica della Scala, Münchner Philharmoniker, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Minnesota Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Bournemouth Symphony, Bucharest Philharmonic, Scottish Chamber, Orchestra of the Accademia Teatro alla Scala, Philharmonic Orchestra of Bergamo and Brescia Festival, working with conductors including Lorin Maazel, Riccardo Chailly, Fabio Luisi, Daniel Harding, Michele Mariotti, Reinhard Goebel, Thierry Fischer, Michael Guttman, Pier Carlo Orizio. The London Keyboard Trust has presented him in recitals in Europe and in the United States.

A native of Venice, he has studied with Laura Candiago Ferrari at Santa Cecilia Music Foundation in Portogruaro and with Franco Scala at Imola International Piano Academy. He later specialized at the Hochschule für Musik in Hannover with Arie Vardi, at Santa Cecilia National Music Academy in Rome with Sergio Perticaroli and at the Lake Como Piano Academy.

Taverna teaches at the Conservatory of Music in Campobasso and at the Music Academy Santa Cecilia in Portogruaro.

For his artistic achievements and his international career, in 2012 he was awarded the Premio Presidente della Repubblica by Italian State President Giorgio Napolitano.

A documentary on his life was shown on BBC4. He has also recorded for BBC Radio 3, Rai Radio 3, Slovenian National Radio and Television, RSI Swiss Radiotelevision.



Our discs are available worldwide from all good record shops. In case of difficulty and for further information please contact us direct: SOMM Recordings, Sales & Marketing Dept., 13 Riversdale Road, Thames Ditton, Surrey, KT7 0QL, UK. Tel: +(0)20-8398 1586. Fax: +(0)20-8339 0981. Email: sales@somm-recordings.com Website: <http://www.somm-recordings.com>

WARNING Copyright subsists in all SomM Recordings. Any unauthorised broadcasting, public performance, copying, rental or re-recording thereof in any manner whatsoever will constitute an infringement of such copyright. In the United Kingdom licences for the use of recordings for public performance may be obtained from Phonographic Performance Ltd., 1 Upper James Street, London W1R 3HG