

Whittington Festival May 2021 Programme

Friday 21st May 7pm

Music exploring the theme of transformation

Syrinx, for solo flute

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Claude Debussy was born in St Germain-en-Laye in 1862, where his parents ran a china shop – unsuccessfully, it turned out, for they moved to Paris soon after. This enabled Debussy to begin at the Conservatoire – aged just 10 – in 1872. He may have begun early, but he continued to study there until 1884, as winner of the prestigious Prix de Rome – surely the most thoroughly trained Western European composer of all time? If he is thought to have been a revolutionary in his style, he at least had a full knowledge of what he was rejecting.

In some ways, Debussy created a new style of French music. He fought hard to resist the lure of any Wagnerian influences, became alienated from Italian opera while resident in Rome (1884-87), became enamoured of Russian music whilst tutoring two Russian children, and in 1889 discovered the plangent delights of Javanese gamelan at the Paris Exhibition. Further threads in this complicated warp came from two friends, the symbolist poets Verlaine and Mallarmé, and he was deeply influenced by the dreamy world of Monet and Cézanne. Impressionism in art ‘began’ in 1870, and was therefore just taking hold when Debussy began at the Conservatoire. In casting to one side the accepted concepts of art realism, Impressionism focused more of effects – especially of texture and light – and that is exactly what seems to be reflected in the new music of Debussy. It first manifested itself in one of his most popular works - *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* – an 1894 work, which, according to Boulez, caused ‘...the art of music to begin beating with a new pulse.’ A new, sultry languor, extended contemplation and momentary beauties characterised the work, elements that would colour all his later output, including this evening’s *Syrinx*, whose sultry, sinuous dreaminess recalls the mesmeric quality of a snake-charmer’s pipes - perhaps apt for our Arabic oasis analogy. Impressionism had crept into music.

These years of the 1890s proved the acme of his contentedness. Sadly, as the years passed, the more difficult side of his not altogether pleasant character emerged: he could be fickle, had a caustic tongue, and was self-obsessively depressive. He was rabidly nationalistic (signing himself ‘*C. Debussy, musicien français*’), and was jealous of Ravel and scornful of Fauré. Be this as it may, a stream of wonderful music continued to flow from him – orchestral, piano and chamber – until his life was brought to a painful early end from cancer in March 1918.

Syrinx was originally composed in 1913 as part of the incidental music to a three-act play, *Psyche*, by his playwright friend Gabriel Mourey. Unfortunately, by the time the play was produced, all that remained of the music was this small flute solo. Called *La flute de Pan*, it was played in the wings whilst Pan died onstage. Pan, ever one for the women, had been pursuing the beautiful nymph *Syrinx*. Reaching a river, she begged the river gods for help and was transformed by them into hollow water reeds. Pan found that by blowing on them, he could create a haunting sound to match his mood – yet, in the cutting, his love had died.

Trio for alto flute, piccolo and cello (world premiere) Jeremy Sams

Now, the first of three works this evening by Gabriel Fauré, a composer whom Debussy reputedly scorned. Quite extraordinary.

Elégie in C minor Op 24

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Gabriel Faure was born in 1845 in Pamiers, SW France, the youngest son of a schoolmaster, who, recognizing his natural talent (especially on the harmonium), sent him off to the Niedermeyer School for budding church musicians in Paris, aged eleven. It was there that the young Gabriel met the person who would become his lifelong friend, mentor and champion – his piano teacher, Camille Saint-Saens. Faure himself would go on to become the bridge in French music between the 19th and 20th centuries, being born in the age of Romanticism, and dying in the age of Jazz. Outwardly traditional yet inwardly revolutionary, he was never a composer to follow fashion at the expense of musical integrity. In 1877 he became choirmaster of the Madeleine (the high society Parisienne church where Saint-Saens was organist), following the popularity of his first violin sonata and his song ‘*Après un rêve*’. The biggest personal change in his life came in 1883, with his marriage to Marie Frémiet; now with a family to support, he spent most of his working years in a bit of a struggle – teaching, choir-mastering and snatching holiday time to compose. Migraines and periods of depression took their toll, and then, in 1903, he began to suffer a cruel loss of hearing. Perhaps it was this that in some way accounts for the very individual and deeply personal nature of his music: it is as though he retreats into an inner, ecstatic world of the imagination, filled with heady atmospheres. His harmonies have a feel of timelessness – think of that lovely mix of tonality and modality in the *Requiem*, 1888, for example – that make his music easily recognizable.

The final phase of his life came with his appointment as director of the Paris Conservatoire. There was a certain irony here: he had always rather rejected the conventional, being, perhaps, a radical in disguise. As may be expected, he soon began a programme of reform, lasting until his retirement in 1920, aged 75. He died at home in Paris in 1924, leaving a small treasure trove of compositions – mainly chamber works, piano music and songs.

This moving *Elégie* was originally conceived as the slow movement for a proposed cello sonata that never materialised (though two others did.) When the *Elégie* received a warm reception at an unofficial play-through at the home of Saint-Saens in 1880, and at its first public performance in 1883, he decided to keep it as his Op 24, later recasting it for cello and orchestra. The mood of the work is one of real anguish, in which he reveals himself to be a master at combining passion with grace in his long-lined melodies. It was played at Fauré’s own funeral.

Piano Quartet No 1 in C minor, Op 15

Faure (1845-1924)

Next, this second work by Fauré, again full of deep passion, though this time with an actual biographical link, since it was inspired by a relationship that was drawing to a sad close.

Mixed emotions were swirling around in young Gabriel, then, as he wrote this appealing quartet, summed up as ‘*one of his most readily accessible works, charming and gently melancholic music off-set by a sparkling scherzo.*’ Just what was causing these swirling

emotions?

The quartet was written in 1879, at a time of considerable personal emotional turmoil. As was the case with Pan earlier, that mischievous Cupid was once again to blame: for Fauré, Love was in the air, but souring. For five years, he had wooed Marianne Viardot (daughter of a well-known singer) and had finally become engaged – only for his beloved to break it off.! The work is dedicated to the Belgian violinist Hubert Léonard. The first of two piano quartets written by Fauré, it is understandably one of his most popular chamber works, and has four movements.

I *Allegro molto moderato* There are the usual two main themes, the first an energetic, jerky C minor melody and the second, much gentler and yearning. With the movement following the regular pattern of sonata form, the development soon emerges, and a rather dream-like, lazy summer-afternoonish mood establishes itself. A linking section, moving through several keys, eventually leads to the recapitulation of the opening theme, back in C minor. A gentle coda ends the movement.

II *Scherzo: allegro vivo* This playful scherzo is one of those moments in Fauré when some virtuoso playing is called for. The piano's first theme is introduced by some pizzicato strings, in a lively 6/8 rhythm, in E flat major. This all bounces along happily until a rising 'kangaroo-jump' theme appears on the piano - all of which is then developed, leading into a Trio which doesn't really sound very different in mood. Things are rounded off by the reappearance of the ideas heard in the opening scherzo.

III *Adagio* Some sadness seems to permeate this C minor movement – remember that broken-off engagement? *'It is a movement striking for its unsettled, lachrymose air, which Fauré prolongs through a combination of frustrated harmonic progressions and ascending melodic fragments.'* The critic Stephen Johnson puts it well, saying that the movement *'...gives the listener more than a hint of sadness at the recent events... though the emotion is always nobly restrained, with not even the slightest hint of self-indulgence.'*

IV *Allegro molto* Back again in C minor, in an energetic finale which is so structurally complicated that I think the time has come to end technical notes and let you sit back and revel in this Gallic high romance, played so beautifully by these four super musicians.

Requiem Op 66

David Popper (1843-1913)

Though I am only too aware that I am writing for musically cultured cognoscenti, I nevertheless would lay a small bet that, like me, not many of you are familiar with David Popper or his music. (OK. Don't all shout at once!)

David Popper was born in Prague in 1843 into a musical family, the son of the city's Cantor. As a young man, he studied cello at the Prague Conservatory under the eminent German teacher Julius Goltermann, and within a few years had established a reputation as one of the finest cellists of his day. As soloist he toured the great European capitals for over thirty years – not unlike Franz Liszt, with whose life Popper's seems to have been closely linked. His first real position (as chamber virtuoso at the Court of Prince Freidrich von Hohenzollen) was obtained through the agency of the conductor Hans von Bulow, Liszt's son-in-law; in 1872 he married a pupil of Liszt, Sophie Mentor, reputedly the greatest woman pianist of her age, with whom Popper formed a duo partnership; it was in the year of Liszt's

death in 1896 that this marriage was dissolved; finally, in 1896, Popper settled in Budapest to teach at the Conservatory that Liszt had established there.

Through his great travels and burgeoning reputation he became acquainted with nearly all the leading composers of the day, including Wagner, Bruckner, Schumann and Brahms. He developed an equally fine reputation as a teacher, and his book of 40 cello studies – ‘High School of Cello Playing’ – is still even today familiar to advanced cello students. His many compositions included four cello concertos (rarely heard now) and numerous salon pieces, mainly for cello and piano.

This evening’s poignant work, his Op 66 Requiem, originally written for three cellos and orchestra, was first performed in London in 1891 and dedicated to his good friend and first publisher Daniel Rahter. Thought by many to be his most moving work, it is full of gorgeous flowing lines (both melancholic and elegiac) and intense climaxes. Each instrument is generously granted its solo opportunities, with its full tonal range fully exploited. The general sound world recalls the harmonic sphere of Brahms, highly expressive yet conservative, with key explorations usually closely related. It is marked ‘Andante sostenuto’, and is constructed around three discernible sections – the first, in F sharp minor, the second in B flat major, and then a return to the original key and material of the opening.

Sicilienne Op. 78 arr. for flute, strings and piano ***Fauré***

To close, the third of Fauré’s contributions, and one of his most popular short works, perhaps most often heard in its cello and piano guise.

This Op 78 was composed originally (1893) as part of the incidental music for a production of Molière’s play *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, but sadly the theatre folded before the play ran and so the music remained unheard. Five years later Fauré, determined not to waste everything, extracted from the score just one short piece, which he then re-cycled twice: first, as part of the incidental music for a production of Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and later as this evening’s *Sicilienne*. It was dedicated to the English cellist William Henry Squire, then a member of the famous Queen’s Hall Orchestra.

Programme notes: Christopher Symons

(We are deeply indebted to Oswestry School for the generous loan of their grand piano – yet one more example of the support they have given to the region’s music over many years, especially their lengthy underpinning of the Oswestry School Recital Series.)