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STEVEN OSBORNE - PIANO

Thursday 1 December 2022, 7.30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall

PROGRAMME

Pour le Piano

Claude Debussy

Berceuse Héroïque

Étude Retrouvée

Études, Book 2 (Nos 7-12)

Interval

Improvisation on a Theme by Keith Jarrett

Steven Osborne

Piano Sonata No 1 in D minor, Op 28

Sergei Rachmaninov

There is a Sennheiser Infrared enhanced hearing system in the Djanogly Recital Hall; please request a headset from our front-of-house staff to enhance your enjoyment of this evening's concert.

Pour le Piano

Claude Debussy
(1862-1918)

Prélude

Sarabande

Toccata

There is a strange discrepancy in Debussy's development as a composer, in that he achieved his individual musical style much earlier in his songs and orchestral works than in his solo piano music. It has been suggested that in this early part of his career he regarded music for solo piano as something of a sideline. But whatever the reason, it is only with *Pour le Piano* (For The Piano) composed between 1894 and 1901, that the characteristic elements of his mature keyboard style first become recognisable, before their complete flowering two years later in the three pieces that make up *Estampes*. *Pour le Piano* therefore bridges the join between the rather conventional salon world of Debussy's early piano music and the more radical explorations of the instrument's sonorities that characterise mature works such as the *Preludes*.

All three movements of *Pour le Piano*, in their different ways, reveal a debt to earlier music. The two outer movements recall the keyboard writing of composers such as Bach, Couperin and Rameau. The opening *Prelude* adds textures and harmonic colours, particularly in the gentler episodes, that set down markers for the way Debussy was to develop.

The *Sarabande*, a stately dance in triple time, was a standard movement in baroque instrumental suites. Debussy's example is a revised version of a piece originally dating from 1894 and entitled 'Souvenir du Louvre', one of a group of pieces he called *Images* (a title he would use again). It appeared separately in a periodical in 1896, but the set as a whole was not published until 1978, with the title *Images Oubliées* (Forgotten Pictures). The most overtly archaic-sounding movement of *Pour le Piano*, it probably owes something to the *Sarabandes* for piano composed by Satie in 1887, as well as to baroque models.

The *Toccata* has more in common with Debussy's earlier piano writing but may well also reflect his experience of hearing gamelan music at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1889.

Berceuse Héroïque

By 1914, Debussy was experiencing a creative block. The renewed compositional energy that produced his set of twelve *Etudes*, and the first three of a projected group of six chamber sonatas, was still to come when, somewhat reluctantly at first, he composed *Berceuse Héroïque* (Heroic Lullaby) in November that year. He was one of a number of artists, writers and composers commissioned by the English writer Hall Caine to contribute to *King Albert's Book*, an anthology he compiled as a gesture of solidarity with the Belgian King and people following the invasion by Germany, and published by the *Daily Telegraph*.

Berceuse Héroïque is based on the Belgian national anthem, 'The Brabançonne', though this is quoted directly only once, after the more animated middle section has died back. Debussy described the music as "melancholic, discreet; the Brabançonne is not bellowed out in the piece. It is a simple calling card, with no other pretensions than to pay tribute to so much patient suffering."

Étude Retrouvée

A six-page sketch titled 'Pour les arpèges composés', whose existence had been known for some time, was discovered among Debussy's papers in 1977. Previously assumed to be a preliminary version of Etude No 11, which shares that title, it was discovered to be a very different piece, though it explores the same piano technique. It was realised by pianist and scholar Roy Howat, and it was published under its present title ('Rediscovered Étude') in 1980.

Études, Book 2 (Nos 7-12)

In 1915 Debussy prepared an edition of Chopin's waltzes and polonaises for his publisher, Jacques Durand. Chopin was always one of his favourite composers, and in dedicating his Études to Chopin's memory he acknowledged his debt to his predecessor, in particular for the idea of developing exercises in keyboard technique into pieces with intrinsic musical interest.

In the Études, as in his other late works, Debussy moved decisively towards a more abstract approach to composition, without descriptive titles or content. They examine, from a composer's point of view as much as from a player's, the smallest details of musical material, and particular aspects of playing. In Book 1, comprising Nos 1-6, studies in specific intervals (differences in pitch between notes) are book-ended by studies in finger-technique.

Book 2 focuses on different kinds of figuration:

No 7. 'Pour les degrés chromatiques' (For chromatic steps). This is built from rapid four-note chromatic figures (using consecutive black and white notes). Debussy unleashes a (paradoxically) delicate torrent of energy, while a rhythmically more defined theme emerges, mainly in the left hand.

No 8. 'Pour les agréments' (For ornaments). The last of the twelve to be composed. According to Debussy, it "borrows the form of a Barcarolle on a rather Italian sea". It also pays tribute to eighteenth-century French harpsichord music by Rameau, François Couperin and others, in which ornaments were not merely surface decoration but integral to the musical fabric.

No 9. 'Pour les notes répétées' (For repeated notes). This is all about rapid staccato finger-work, and how the results can be light and ethereal, as well as robust and incisive.

No 10. 'Pour les sonorités opposées' (For contrasted sonorities). The contrast is between phrases placed high and low on the keyboard, and between the sombre opening, with its steady tolling notes, and the soft fanfare-like idea – marked 'distant but bright and joyful' – that appears later, and eventually brings the piece to an end.

No 11. 'Pour les arpèges composés' (For compound arpeggios). A compound arpeggio is one that spans more than an octave. At first, this might appear to be one of Debussy's pianistic water-studies, with the opening's calm surface later becoming more ruffled. But as it progresses it moves closer to the music-hall atmosphere of 'Minstrels', from his first book of Preludes, with its drum- and banjo-like figures. The two worlds are artfully combined in the final bars.

No 12. 'Pour les accords' (For chords). In earlier years Debussy used to insist that performers of his music should treat the piano as an instrument "without hammers". 'Pour les accords', on the other hand, is closer to the more percussive piano style of Stravinsky and Bartók. The quiet, introspective middle section, makes this almost another study in contrasted sonorities, but the chord figures of the opening gradually take over again, bringing Debussy's last major set of piano pieces to an unexpectedly abrupt conclusion.

Improvisation on a Theme by Keith Jarrett – to be introduced by Steven Osborne

Piano Sonata No 1 in D minor, Op 28

Sergei Rachmaninov
(1873-1943)

Allegro moderato

Lento

Allegro molto

Together with his Second Symphony, tone-poem The Isle of the Dead, and unfinished opera, Monna Vanna, the first of Rachmaninov's two piano sonatas was composed in Dresden, where he had moved with his family in 1906, in the wake of political uncertainty following the previous year's attempted revolution in Russia.

The Sonata was completed the following year, but Rachmaninov was concerned that it was too long and too complex (he was later to have similar doubts about both his Second Sonata and Fourth Piano Concerto). Fellow-pianist Konstantin Igumnov heard Rachmaninov give a private performance on a visit to Moscow in 1907. After inviting him to comment on the work, Rachmaninov revised the Sonata, making a number of cuts. Igumnov gave the first performance of the new version in 1908.

At first, Rachmaninov appears to have intended basing it on a programme taken from Goethe's dramatic poem Faust, but then abandoned the idea, though Igumnov stated that Rachmaninov described the three movements to him as portraits of the main characters, Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles, respectively, following the same sequence as Liszt's Faust Symphony.

The opening is built from a number of short motifs, together suggesting an air of uncertainty. A rush of energy appears to falter, but momentum gradually builds again. Amid the turbulence, a chant-like theme emerges, first surrounded by flickering arpeggios, then re-stated more clearly in the right-hand part. The questioning motifs of the opening return, leading to a sustained surge of energy. Both versions of the chant theme also reappear, but while the music's tensions are worked through, they remain unresolved, in spite of the gentle major-key ending, in which the chant makes a further appearance.

After the second movement's gentle introduction, an expansively lyrical right-hand melody rises over intricate accompanying figures. The music becomes increasingly impassioned, reaching a big climax, which then swiftly sinks back, leading to a brief cadenza. The lyrical theme returns, culminating this time in a passage marked by a long sequence of trills, before the tender conclusion.

The finale is the longest movement and the most complex structurally, though dominated by the dark, whirling energy established at the start. A new theme, beginning in the bass, contains hints of the Dies Irae chant from the Catholic requiem mass, a tune that haunted the imagination of composers such as Berlioz and Liszt, and runs through so much of Rachmaninov's other music. A quiet episode brings reminiscences of the theme from the second movement, punctuated by snatches of the Dies Irae idea, which propels the music forwards to a more extended interlude. It then steadily regains impetus, with more reminders of the Dies Irae, leading to the final bars, in which the first movement's chant theme rings out, harmonised in a sequence of weighty, sonorous chords, before the emphatic ending.

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Steven Osborne

Winner of the Royal Philharmonic Society's Instrumentalist of the Year in 2013, pianist Steven Osborne is one of Britain's most treasured musicians. Celebrated for his insightful interpretations, his musicality and technique, Osborne is much sought after as soloist, chamber musician and recitalist. His residencies at London's Wigmore Hall, Antwerp's deSingel, the Bath International Music Festival, the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and, this season, at the Royal Scottish National Orchestra are a testament to the respect with which he is held.

Described by *The Observer* as "always a player in absolute service to the composer", Steven Osborne recently released a much-praised recording of Beethoven's last three piano sonatas for Hyperion. During the Beethoven anniversary year, Osborne will present his illuminating take on these late works across the UK, the Far East, and North America as well as part of his RSNO residency for which he'll also play Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto and Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 27. Other orchestral highlights during the new season include more Beethoven and Mozart with the Finnish Radio Symphony and BBC National Orchestra of Wales, as well as Ravel with the BBC Philharmonic and Brahms with the Antwerp Symphony Orchestra.

Steven Osborne has given recitals in all the UK's most prestigious venues as well as internationally at the Musikverein and Wiener Konzerthaus, Royal Concertgebouw, Berlin Philharmonie, Tokyo's Suntory Hall and Carnegie Hall. His carefully devised programmes this season juxtapose Schubert and Rachmaninov for solo recitals across the UK including a performance at the Wigmore Hall; and Fauré, Poulenc, Debussy, Stravinsky and Ravel for joint recitals with Paul Lewis with whom he tours the UK – including a second appearance at the Wigmore Hall - Europe and North America. For his fourth International Piano Series concert at the Royal Festival Hall, Osborne plays *Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* by Messiaen, another composer who he has been closely associated with since the release of his 2002 recording.

In 2020, Steven Osborne will release Prokofiev's War Sonatas marking his 30th recording for Hyperion. A label artist since 1998, Osborne's 29 recordings have accumulated numerous awards in the UK, France, Germany and the USA including two Gramophone Awards, three Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik Awards and a clutch of Recordings of the Year from The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Times and The Sunday Times.

Steven Osborne studied with Richard Beauchamp at St. Mary's Music School in Edinburgh and Renna Kellaway at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. He won first prize at

the prestigious Clara Haskil International Piano Competition (1991) and the Naumburg International Competition (1997), and was one of the first BBC New Generation Artists. Steven Osborne is Visiting Professor at the Royal Academy of Music, Patron of the Lammermuir Festival and as of 2014, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.