

Classics



28 Oct 2023, Sat, 7.30pm Esplanade Concert Hall Esplanade is Singapore's national performing arts centre. It hosts a year-round line-up of about 3,500 live performances and activities presented by Esplanade, its partners and hirers. As an arts centre for everyone, Esplanade also creates opportunities for seniors, youth, children and underserved communities to experience the arts. More than 70% of the shows that take place each year at the centre are free for all to enjoy.

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RAMEAU

Suite en la (extraits)
Allemande, Sarabande, Fanfarinette, Gavotte et six doubles

DEBUSSY

Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (transcription Alexandre Tharaud) Six Préludes (Livre I)

Danseuses de Delphes, Le Vent dans la plaine, Pas sur la neige, La Fille aux cheveux de lin, Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest, La Cathédrale engloutie,

- intermission -

SATIE

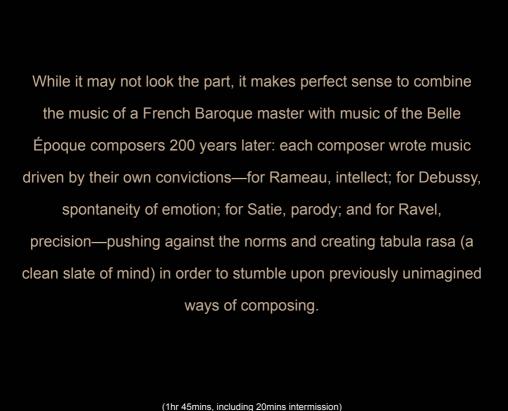
Gymnopédie n°1
Avant-dernières pensées
La Diva de l'Empire
Gnossiennes n°1, 3 et 4
Je te veux (valse)

RAVEL

À la manière de Chabrier

Pavane pour une infante défunte

La Valse (transcription Alexandre Tharaud)



Part I -

Jean-Philippe Rameau

Where other composers of his time considered their works 'disposable', written for one-off occasions and not paying much attention to them after their premieres or performances, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683 – 1764) was said to have revised his works extensively, responding to audiences' critiques with an attitude of wanting to 'get it right'. Because of this attitude, Rameau took risks in his compositions, and was rewarded for it when his works dominated French opera for a period of 50 years, until years past his death.

Rameau lived during the reign of Louis XV, and apart from his operas, was famous for his early harpsichord works as well as his contributions to music theory. He considered his study of music theory as important as his composing; his main goal was to organise knowledge about music into a system: he regarded music not only as an art, but also a science, on par with mathematics. Believing that the rules of harmony were derived from nature and 'the vibrating world', he laid out the basis of chord theory that students of music still use today.

The extracts from *Suite en la (Suite in A minor)* come from Rameau's third and final collection of harpsichord music—the *Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin (New suites and pieces for harpsichord)*—mark the epitome of the 'international style', with

influences from Händel and Scarlatti as well as Couperin and Marchand. Beginning with a moving German *Allemande*, Rameau adds in chains of thirds and sixths in the accompaniment, giving the dance an air of nobility. The *Sarabande* establishes Rameau as the king of the dance, the intricate gestures of the dancers heard in the arpeggiation and decoration of chords. The *Fanfarinette* is a character piece about a braggart (*'fanfaron'*), evoked through the fanciful runs in the right hand part. The dance suite closes with the *Gavotte et six doubles*, where the stately 17th century dance tune (that *Castle on the Clouds* from *Les Miserables* is based on) proceeds through six variations of increasing intensity and virtuosity, its initial theme transformed into a celebratory and victorious proclamation by the final variation.



Part II -

Claude Debussy

1889, Paris. Preparations for the *Exposition Universelle* were underway, and the whole of Paris, no, France was getting ready to open their doors to the world. This World's Fair, which marked the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution, was to take place between May to October, showing off the best in arts, science and technology. France pulled out all the stops, spending over two years constructing the Eiffel Tower (the tallest structure in the world until it was overtaken by the Empire State Building in 1931) specially for the event.

Among the most popular exhibits was a *kampung* of Java, its entrance marked by two pagoda-like structures. Tents sheltered a village where its Javanese inhabitants lived and carried on their daily activities, such as cooking, weaving, making *batik* and carving bamboo utensils. The heart of that *kampung* was an open-air pavilion where performances of traditional music and dance occurred daily.

Frélude à l'après-midi d'un faune (transcription Alexandre Tharaud)

Twenty-seven year old Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918) was said to have spent 'many fruitful hours...listening to the percussive rhythm complexities of the *gamelan* with its inexhaustible combinations of ethereal, flashing timbres, while with the amazing *Bedayas* [dancers] the music came visually alive'. In the days before modern recording technology, Debussy spent the hours analysing the layers, interlocking rhythmic patterns and exotic scales, and his compositional style, whether consciously or not, was changed forever.

Although all the elements of *gamelan* were explicitly evoked in Debussy's composition *Pagodes* fourteen years later, some of them can also be found in his other works following the *Exposition Universelle*, such as the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, conceptualised in from as early as 1890.

Debussy had been inspired by the symbolist poetry of a group of French poets, who wrote freestyle poetry based on associations and impressions rather than logic or narrative. He was particularly intrigued by Stephane Mallarmé's *L'après-midi d'un faune*, whose text about the erotic experiences of a randy half-man, half-goat trying to woo passing nymphs in the sweltering heat of the

afternoon had courted controversy with the French public when it was published in 1876.

Debussy loved the way Mallarmé's poem rejected the conventions of normal poetry, and put emphasis on sound over sense, appealing directly to the reader's emotions—exactly what Debussy was trying to do with his music.

A single C-sharp starts off the *Prelude*, dribbling chromatically down and stopping mid-way before going back up to the C-sharp: the faun, improvising on his flute. The improvisation sounds foreign, exotic even, and a mildly discordant arpeggio interjects. And then, silence. These are repeated, and the chords underneath seem to be suspended from the melody rather than drive it forward.

The music moves on, layered, shimmering, its harmonies changing as if in a kaleidoscope, and serving no purpose other than to be a fleeting delight to the senses, putting the listener in a hazy, humid landscape. One hears the faun, moving among the rushes and reeds; a frog call here, birdsong there. The nymphs appear: we see their different characters in the music, some shy, others more flirty. The faun tries to seduce them with his music, and the music swells and throbs, setting the scene for a passionate encounter, real or imagined.

Debussy originally intended to write a huge, three-movement work starting with a prelude to accompany a reading of the poem, but forsook the idea as he progressed with the composition, in favour of a more concise work that led conductor and composer Pierre Boulez to call the prelude a 'miracle of proportion, balance and transparency: the awakening of modern music'. The result was a 110-bar work, reflecting exactly the same number of lines in Mallarmé's poem.

Throughout the music, there is no sense of pulse or beat, just scenes melding into one another; the captivated audience is led on a journey, not knowing where they are headed. The nymphs disappear, and the faun, tired from his pursuit, lays down to rest, wondering if it was all but a dream.

Mallarme, who initially had reservations about a composer writing something based on his masterpiece, attended the premiere ready to heckle and boo loudly if he didn't like what he heard. Instead, he walked away from the performance thoroughly changed; and wrote to Debussy shortly after:

"I have just come out of the concert, deeply moved.

The marvel! Your illustration of the Afternoon of a

Faun, which presents no dissonance with my text, but
goes much further, really, into nostalgia and into light,
with finesse, with sensuality, with richness. I press
your hand admiringly, Debussy.

Yours, Mallarmé."



More than a decade passed since the premiere of the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, Debussy returned to his first love—the piano—and was busy working on preludes of another sort: short pieces for piano. Composers before such as Bach and Chopin had written sets of preludes, one in each key and as technical exercises of sorts; but Debussy had other ideas.

Organised in two books of twelve preludes each, the preludes were free-form, indulgent and brief ambient pieces as if the impressionist (oh, how he hated being labelled that) paintings of Monet and Pissaro, painting scenes and different angles of light and shade with sound into some of his most visionary and poetic writing for piano. Debussy drew inspiration from art, nature, poetry and architecture, constructing these intricate scenes with his palette of exotic harmonies and scales that he had been collecting since the *Exposition Universelle*. Not wanting the performer to have preconceived ideas of the work before playing it, Debussy gave names to each prelude, but only after the last bar of the score.

The *Six Préludes* in today's performance are all taken from Book I, written between 1909 and 1910. *Danseuses de Delphes (Dancers of Delphi)* open the set: Delphi was the location of the temple of Apollo, the god of the arts and music among other things. A slow

dance in triple time and in three parts, Debussy was said to have been inspired by a sculpture (of the three dancers that support a larger structure) seen at the Louvre.

Le vent dans la plaine (The wind on the plains), the first of the two wind-inspired pieces in this book, takes its title from 18th century dramatist Favert's writings, "Le vent dans la plaine suspend son haleine (The wind on the plain holds its breath)", that was later incorporated into Verlaine's Ariette's Oubilees. Beginning delicately, the wind goes about in a circular fashion building up to a climax and then dying away on a final long note.

Debussy gives the instruction that **Des pas sur la neige** (**Footsteps in the snow**) should be played with a tender and sad sense of regret or resignation, marking the tempo as sad and slow. Bringing to mind **Der Leiermann** of Schubert's own **Winterreise**, one imagines a wanderer treading ever so carefully in the snow in the sad and frozen countryside.

La fille aux cheveaux de lin (The girl with the flaxen hair) takes its title from a poem by Leconte de Lisle describing the naive and innocent love for a young girl with flaxen hair. The music is wistful and sometimes playful, a gentle, expressive portrait of the young girl in the poem.

Ce qu'a vu le vent d'ouest (What the West Wind has seen) is the more violent of the wind preludes in this book, considered the most technically demanding of Debussy's preludes. From a low rumble, Debussy uses running arpeggios and the sounds of tritones to build up a perfect storm, menacing and turbulent.

Calm is restored in *La cathédral engloutie (The sunken cathedral)* where the strains of monks' plainchant and tolling bells of the ancient cathedral of Ys on the coast of Brittany can be heard. Legend has it that the cathedral was swallowed up by the ocean, but at times would rise out of the sea mist. At the end, the cathedral slips back calmly beneath the waves.



Erik Gatie

On a hill in the northern part of Paris, a community of artists thrived in a small town called Montmartre. The 'respectable folk' shunned the area because of the number of brothels and cabarets that opened in the area, the Moulin Rouge one of them. With more affordable housing and the draw of bohemian life, artists flocked there for inspiration and to experience the pleasures of life.

The likes of Henri Matisse, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Vincent van Gogh, and Pablo Picasso all stayed in Montmartre for varying lengths of time, frequenting the cabarets and cafes to capture the essence of the scenes, later on recreating these on canvas in their own styles.

Montmartre's culture was driven by its critique of decadent society. Its raucous café-concerts and cabarets featured satires and crude, often subversive, performances that mocked the Third Republic's bourgeois morality and increasingly corrupt politics. Cabarets and café-concerts were favourite spots for avant-garde artists such as Edgar Degas, who sought to capture their celebrated performers, hazy atmospheres, and artificial stage lighting in his paintings, pastels, and prints.

In the cafés, a new type of music flourished. Known as the *chansons de la belle époque*, the music went against romanticism

and impressionism, taking on more simple forms that were tuneful and witty, often with parody.

Erik Satie (1866 – 1925) spent his 20s in Montmartre, living in a small room (what he called his 'placard', or cupboard) that was close to the famous Chat Noir cabaret. He spent a considerable amount of time in there, from being a frequent visitor to resident pianist.

As much as he was close friends with Debussy, he was against Impressionism and often wrote eccentric or flippantly-titled works such as *Desiccated Embryos* or *Three pieces in the shape of a pear*. These works also included performance directions such as 'light as an egg' or 'with much illness', intended as a mockery of Debussy's preludes.

In 1888, Satie wrote a set of three *Gymnopédies*, the first of which will be played in today's concert. The *gymnopedia* in ancient Greece was a festival of naked youth celebrated in Sparta to honour Apollo and the other gods, concluding with gymnastic exhibitions and frenzied dancing offered to Dionysius. Typical Satie satire, *Gymnopédie* n°1, like the others, is slow, dignified and devoid of passion. Fashioned in the style of a placid, lilting waltz, a melody in the treble soars over a rocking accompaniment of major seventh chords, coming to end as if unresolved and abandoned.

Written in 1915 during the First World War, *Avant-dernières pensées (Penultimate Thoughts)* comprises three atmospheric miniature pieces—*Idyll, Aubade* and *Méditation*—devoid of barlines,

and each dedicated to a prominent contemporary of Satie's:
Debussy, Dukas, and Albert Roussel. Satie gives curious
performance instructions (the one in *Aubade* requests the performer
to 'sing seriously, very down to earth: without being shiny') and
includes a whimsical storyline of text in the music. The music is in
two different keys at the same time; one hand plays a repeated
figure while the other 'tells' the story in music. If it sounds ridiculous,
perhaps Satie meant to convey exactly that, making a parody of the
Romantic ideals.

La Diva de l'Empire (The Diva of the Empire) and Je te veux (I want you) showcase Satie at his cabaret best, and would have been the type of music that Satie played at the café-concerts, accompanying the French cabaret star Paulette Darty. While Je te veux was written in the style of a standard Belle Époque waltz-chanson, La Diva de l'Empire makes use of the African-American cakewalk style that had come over from America and taken Paris by storm.

The *Gnossiennes* are brief piano pieces written shortly after the *Gymnopédies* between 1889-91, its title 'Gnossiennes' also a reference to the 'Knossos', the slow dances of the Ancient Greeks. There are a number of similarities with the *Gymnopédies*: repeated bass figures and experimental harmonies and rhythms, but even more radical: they were written in free form without time signatures or barlines. Unlike the calm and stoicism of the *Gymnopédies*, the *Gnossiennes* are imbued with a haunting air of melancholy, giving the listener a slight sense of unease.

Part IV -

Maurice Ravel

While Debussy was busy spending time at the Javanese *kampung* of the *Exposition Universelle* and Satie was living the bohemian life in Montmartre, a fourteen-year-old Maurice Ravel, student at the Paris Conservatoire, was rummaging through the bins of music scores at the shop of Durand and Lerolle. He came across some of Satie's published scores and was so impressed with them that he introduced Satie's music to all his friends at the Conservatoire, and asked his father, the inventor, engineer and progressive thinker Joseph Ravel, to take him to meet with Satie. The meeting took place at the Café Nouvelle Athènes, where Satie's remarkable personality, wit and eccentricities left Ravel with a deep impression and lifelong admiration of him.

Another life-changing experience was to take place five years later, at the premiere of Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. Upon hearing the music, Ravel was reportedly reduced to tears, saying that he only then 'understood what music is'.

À la manière de Chabrier

Apart from Satie and Debussy, Ravel was also a huge fanboy of Emmanuel Chabrier, whom he declared was 'one of the truly great musicians of our country' and yet 'has not been granted the place he deserves, for it is from him that all modern French music stems'. It is a pity that Chabrier still remains an underrated composer, who is often mislabelled as one who wrote light, frivolous music.

And so, when asked to write some pastiches by his friend the pianist Alfredo Casella, he naturally turned to Chabrier's style. The tune from À la manière de Chabrier (In the style of Chabrier) is Siebel's aria 'Faites-lui mes aveux' from Gounod's Faust reworked to include Chabrier's innovative harmonies, and the result was a brilliant and witty piece that was an expression of affection as well as an exercise in style.

Pavane pour une infante défunte

The 'glaring influence of Chabrier' (in Ravel's own words) extends to the next piece on today's programnme. Mystery surrounds the title *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (*Pavane for a dead princess*): Ravel himself described it as 'an evocation of a pavane that a little princess (infanta) might, in former times, have danced at the Spanish court', but also remarked that 'the title has nothing to do with the composition, I simply liked the sound of those words and put them there, *c'est tout'*. The dedication of this miniature went to the Princesse de Polignac, an American heiress to the Singer sewing machine fortune whose birth name was Winnaretta Singer. She was a patron who frequently organised music salons, and had

commissioned this piece from Ravel in 1899. Regardless of whatever the title really meant, this piece is a solemn processional court dance with almost-jazz harmonies.

(Ravel playing the *Pavane pour une infante défunte*, recorded in 1922 on piano roll)

La Valse (transcription Alexandre Tharaud)

The idea of writing a grand waltz in tribute to the Viennese tradition of waltzes and the waltz king Johann Strauss II came to Ravel as early as 1906. However, he later remarked to his student Manuel Rosenthal that 'Unfortunately it's very difficult [to write a proper waltz]. Therefore I have tried to write a symphonic waltz as a tribute to the genius of Johann Strauss.'

This seed of an idea remained at the back of Ravel's mind until 1919, when he received a commission from the impresario Sergei Diaghilev to write a new ballet score for the *Ballets Russes*, his Russian ballet company based in Paris. In those thirteen years that separated the idea from the commission, French society had been rocked to its core by the First World War (Ravel had witnessed its horrors firsthand while serving as an ambulance driver and lost multiple friends in the trenches), and Vienna was now seen as an enemy capital, and he could not, in good conscience, write a work that he intended to name *Wien* or Vienna. Ravel's own view of Vienna had changed too, and when he had begun writing this commission, it was no longer a tribute to the society filled with the decadent beauty, but a work that was 'an apotheosis of the

Viennese waltz, mingled with, in my mind, the impression of an eerie and fatal whirling'.

La Valse opens innocently enough: we hear lilting waltz rhythms through the haze, growing into a gentle dance. The music grows into a glorious *fortissimo*, placing us in the middle of a grand ball taking place, with magnificent chandeliers overhead and couples whirling all around. Soon, subtle shadows begin to show, but are swept away by other charming distractions.

Darker undertones appear, and however the music tries to restore itself to the grand elegance of the opening, it becomes apparent that the waltz seems to be self-destructing, collapsing into a terrifying and violent conclusion.

Although the ballet did not materialise (Diaghilev called it 'a masterpiece.... But it's not a ballet... it's a portrait of a ballet') it became a popular work played by orchestras in concert halls, and was the score for two excellent ballets by George Balanchine and Frederick Ashton in the 1950s.

Programme notes by Natalie Ng.



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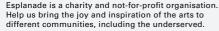
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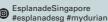
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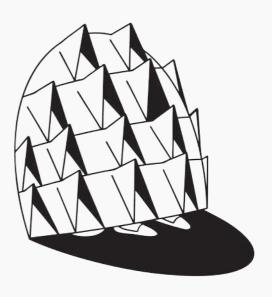
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I could just scroll through IG or TikTok but I thought why should I when I can do the same on Offstage? It makes me feel like I know more things. Great arts content, anytime, anywhere.

Highly recommend.

"

Totally Anonymous Person (who is not related to www.esplanade.com/offstage)



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