

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

*Sonata for Cello and Piano*

Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto

Sérénade: Modérément animé

Finale: Animé, léger et nerveux

The last years of Debussy's life were dominated by a preoccupation with the unprecedented violence of the First World War. At first, Debussy was keen to enlist in the French army, but his age and physical condition disqualified him, and for a time he sank into melancholy at how France was being physically and spiritually crushed. Much of Debussy's compositional thought was the result of a desire to establish a viable musical language that formed an alternative to the hegemonic might exerted by the Austro-German symphonic tradition. Debussy, who explored non-diatonic scale systems, the music of the Far East (including the music of the gamelan), and ideas adopted from the 'morbid Romanticism' of French symbolist art and poetry to create an inimitable musical language, has now come to define our perceptions of *fin de siècle* French music. He has been inextricably associated with the 'Impressionist Movement', and to an extent this association is correct as he moved away from 'direct representation of form' by crafting new formal structures and instrumental colours, just as the Impressionist artists sought to take their painting into what Odilon Redon called 'the ambiguous world of the indeterminate'. Debussy's music does communicate a great sweep of sound impressions, evoking strange and exotic worlds, but to place too much emphasis on these aspects of his work can equally detract from the meticulous craft required to infuse coherence into his music. That he held J.M.W. Turner in the highest regard reveals more about Debussy's aesthetics than many of the more obvious (but equally valid) associations with Gauguin and Toulouse Lautrec – although these names (like those of Mallarmé and Verlaine) are important in our attempts to gain an 'impression' of the world in which Debussy was working.

However, that extraordinary world of *fin de siècle* Paris was changed forever by the outbreak of war in 1914, and Debussy's final years were blighted not only by his terminal cancer but also by the crushing presence of the enemy forces just outside Paris. Having spent his life resisting the musical manifestation of these forces, to see the 'same' people seemingly try to subsume his country must have been agonising for Debussy. His last compositions were a form of the most passionate yet rarefied patriotism: 'I want to work not so much for myself, but to give proof, however small it may be, that not even 30 million "boches" can destroy French thought.'

The set of three works that comprise the uncompleted ‘Six sonates pour divers instruments’ – the Cello Sonata, the Violin Sonata (1917), and the Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp (1915) – reflect a rich heritage of French musical life, stretching back to the seventeenth century.

The Cello Sonata was one of two Sonatas written in the summer of 1915, whilst Debussy stayed in a villa in coastal Pourville. He described the work as a piece whose ‘proportions are almost classical in form, [and] that in the best sense of the word’. The Prologue is almost symmetrical, with three main themes, and has its roots in the *commedia dell’arte* with the cello taking the multi-faceted role of Pierrot. With this in mind, it is easy to imagine a theatrical narrative for this movement. The Sérénade is also loosely programmatic, but is representative of the inner self of the Pierrot figure. The tortured psychology of this character is akin to the tragically conflicted Petrouchka in Stravinsky’s ballet. The Finale, which has four main theme groups is more disjointed and more virtuosic than the previous movements, but is a profound and noble statement of the ‘French thought’ which Debussy sought to preserve. In this way it is clear how Debussy used his music as an intellectual and emotional weapon against everything that threatened his country and culture – and this music has continued to animate his world for musicians and audiences in the 93 years since Debussy’s death.

**W.A. Mozart (1756-1791)**  
***Fantasia in C minor, K.475***

Until the mid 1780s, Mozart generally wrote his sonatas and independent keyboard pieces for teaching purposes, or for another person to play: it is likely that in solo performance Mozart simply improvised ‘in the moment’ and unless special circumstances demanded it, he did not commit this music to paper. A concert career had been one of Mozart’s primary interests in his early Vienna years, but from 1784 the increased publication of his keyboard and orchestral works (by Torricella, Lausch and Traug) meant that Mozart could see that the wider dissemination of his piano music, via publication, was a viable and hopefully remunerative concern. 1785 was particularly positive, as it marked Artaria’s publication of the six “Haydn” Quartets in September, following the same company’s publication of the Concerti in F, A, and C major (K.413-415) in March. Mozart finished the C minor *Fantasia* on 20 May 1785, and it was published as a form of prelude to the K457 C minor Piano Sonata in December. These publications, combined with the beginnings of Mozart’s collaboration with Lorenzo da Ponte and the resulting operatic

masterpieces, made the years 1784-87 some of Mozart's most successful; it is all too easy to regard the 1788-91 period – erroneously – as an irrevocable trajectory towards an untimely death.

But, it is vital to look beyond the hardships of his final three years, and recall that Mozart's fertility of imagination would likely have enabled him to reverse the struggle. By the same token, it is all too easy to subscribe to the 'tyranny of biography' and to read intimations of mortality into such works as the C minor *Fantasie*. C minor is a key redolent of darkness and noble tragedy, but it is therefore the ideal key for a work of great rhetorical eloquence – and this dramatic eloquence is part of the very essence of the *Fantasie* aesthetic. As an 'independent' form, the *Fantasie* allows for an exploratory approach, removed from the conventions of the sonata. Despite this, the C minor *Fantasie* conforms to many of the requirements of what we now call 'sonata form', but it is also a theatrical piece, reflecting Mozart's constant preoccupation with opera, and it contains more violent contrasts of mood and character than we might expect from a sonata movement. The improvisatory element is always present in this *Fantasie*; it has that extraordinary immediacy and unfathomable 'naturalness' that is unique to Mozart, and which Albert Einstein captured exactly when he said: 'Mozart is the greatest composer of all. Beethoven created his music, but the music of Mozart is of such purity and beauty that one feels he merely found it – that it has always existed as part of the inner beauty of the universe, waiting to be revealed.'

**Valentin Silvestrov (b. 1937)**

*28 July 1750 . . . J.S.B. in memoriam* (solo cello)

*Muendliche Musik* (solo piano)

*Der Bote* (solo piano)

*Sonata* (cello and piano)

Valentin Silvestrov is an enigmatic figure. Despite the breadth and great quality of his *oeuvre*, the fact that he has lived through remarkable epochs, and reached maturity in the midst of one of the most turbulent and potentially dangerous artistic regimes in the history of Western Art Music, it is strange that Silvestrov has not yet been installed in the musical Parnassus that is the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. However, performances by his music by exceptional musicians are a vital part of bringing such composers as Silvestrov to a wider public consciousness, and tonight's concert will make a significant contribution to such a process.

Silvestrov was born in Kiev in 1937. He was not a child prodigy, and his formal musical training did not begin until he was 15 years old and became a student at the Kiev Stetsenko

Evening Music School. At the age of 18 he enrolled at the Institute of Construction Engineering, but after three years he decided to pursue a musical career and took up a place at the National Academy of Music (Kiev Conservatory), where he studied with two of the Ukraine's most significant composers, Levko Revuts'ky and Borys Lyatoshys'ky. Both men had spearheaded the establishment of a Ukrainian national musical voice in the 1920s, incorporating folkloric musical traditions with fully-fledged symphonic styles. Lyatoshys'ky in particular had initiated the modernist movement in the Ukraine with his 'Romantic vitalism', but the terrible crises of the 1930s and 40s, and the cultural censorship which condemned such composers as Shostakovich for their decadent 'formalism' also had a significant impact in the Ukraine and required composers throughout the USSR to conform to the accepted styles of 'Socialist Realism'. With the gradual, post-Stalinist 'thaw' came a certain amount of liberation, but despite the greater freedom of artistic interaction between the USSR and the West, it was difficult for such figures as Revuts'ky and Lyatoshys'ky to take up where they had left off and Ukrainian music suffered immeasurably.

However, this conflict between liberty and limitation gave new composers, such as Silvestrov freedom to establish their own voices, utilising a plethora of post-modernist approaches. Silvestrov's approach quickly brought him to prominence – in 1967 he received a prestigious Koussevitsky Award in Washington DC, which placed him on a par with his most prominent contemporaries in the West. Silvestrov's style has since evolved into something which approaches 'cosmic' – embracing all of existence, and a musical heritage that stretches back over the centuries to the earliest forms of plainchant: 'Music is still song, even if one cannot literally sing it: it is not a philosophy, not a world-view. It is, above all, a chant, a song the world sings about itself, it is the musical testimony to life.' is just one of the statements that Silvestrov has made to explain his aesthetics. As a composer, much of his inspiration evolves from the wider musical world, and this reflects his grasp of history and style. Such a response is evident in today's juxtaposition of the Prelude to Bach's 3<sup>rd</sup> Suite for Solo Cello (BWV1009) and Silvestrov's *28 July 1750 . . . J.S.B. in memoriam*. For some composers, the utilisation of revenants in this way could have the effect of appearing derivative, or unimaginative, but it is impossible for any artist – composer, writer, painter etc – to escape what has come before them. Silvestrov has embraced, rather than fought, what could become an oppressive 'anxiety of influence' by stating that:

'With our advanced artistic awareness, fewer and fewer texts are possible which, figuratively speaking, begin 'at the beginning'... What this means is not the end of music as art, but the end of music, an end in which it can linger for a long time. It is very much in the area of the coda that immense life is possible.'

Despite the apparent strangeness of Silvestrov's music, links can be found between his four pieces in today's programme and the music by Debussy, Mozart, and Bach. Silvestrov has said that 'What I deal with might be termed poetry in music', and this reflects Debussy's desire to evoke the worlds of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine in his compositions. Meanwhile, the 1996 piece *Der Bote* ('The Herald') is a direct response to Mozart, and the keyboard genres of the eighteenth century – it is in this piece that the idea of the musical 'revenant' is strongest – and the effect of the piece is mesmeric. The turbulence of *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano* (1983, rev. 2000) is a fascinating contrast with Debussy's equally passionate work, and the improvisational *Muendeliche Musik* (which translates as 'verbal' or 'oral' music) can also be linked with the rhetorical oratory found in Mozart's *Fantasie* and Bach's *Prelude*. The power of Silvestrov's music resides in one of his most important artistic statements: 'I do not write new music. My music is a response to, and an echo of what already exists.' However, these echoes and responses are themselves a glorious form of transcendence.

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