

Total performance time: approximately 95 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Magdalena Kožená and Mitsuko Uchida

[Magdalena Kožená](#) mezzo-soprano

[Mitsuko Uchida](#) piano

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Chansons de Bilitis (1897–8)

10'

text: Pierre Louÿs (1870–1925)

- 1 *La flûte de Pan*
- 2 *La chevelure*
- 3 *Le tombeau des Naïades*

Ariettes oubliées (1885–7)

17'

text: Paul Verlaine (1844–1896)

- 1 *C'est l'extase langoureuse*
- 2 *Il pleure dans mon coeur*
- 3 *L'ombre des arbres*
- 4 *Chevaux de bois*
- 5 *Aquarelles I. Green*
- 6 *Aquarelles II. Spleen*

INTERVAL

Claude Debussy

Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire (1889)

25'

text: Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867)

- 1 *Le balcon*
- 2 *Harmonie du soir*
- 3 *Le jet d'eau*
- 4 *Recueillement*
- 5 *La mort des amants*

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992)

Poèmes pour Mi (book 2, 1936)

17'

text: Olivier Messiaen

- 5 *L'épouse*
- 6 *Ta voix*
- 7 *Les deux guerriers*
- 8 *Le collier*
- 9 *Prière exaucée*

Debussy and Messiaen occupy unusual positions in musical history. Debussy, an enigmatic character, was considered in his lifetime (and for a while after) something of a 'weak' composer, without the intellectual rigour of his contemporaries, his music somehow resisting analysis. In the later 20th century – and certainly today – his free-flowing rhythms, shifting harmonies, diverse range of influences, and magical instrumental colour have become increasingly re-evaluated as bold and experimental. As for Messiaen, Nadia Boulanger once remarked that he was 'a poor composer, for he wears collars which are far from being fresh' – implying a lack of innovation, and a reliance on 'far from fresh' influences. However, the cross-cultural borrowing of both composers, their mingling of 'high' and 'low' culture is considerably more appealing to contemporary audiences. The sensual qualities of their music – strongly to the fore in their songs – adds to the potent brew.

Debussy's musical trajectory is played out across these three sets of songs, with the most experimental **Chansons de Bilitis** ('Songs of Bilitis') first, followed by *Ariettes oubliées* to poems by Verlaine – that most *belle* of the *belle époque* poets – and ending with the Wagner-influenced *Cinq poèmes*. Louÿs' Bilitis texts are highly-charged and erotic but the poet managed not to scandalise his audiences by claiming, falsely, they were translations of classical Greek verse. They are characterised by memories, the older Bilitis looking back over her life. 'La flûte de Pan' recalls an erotically-charged music lesson with a shepherd, the first bars resembling the opening flute line of *L'après midi d'un faune* (Debussy gave a copy of the score to Louÿs with the dedication 'Some airs of the flute to charm Bilitis'). 'La chevelure' (The tresses of hair) has an intense, sinuous chromaticism and is, as Julie MacQuin has put it, the 'memory of a memory of a dream'. The 'rêve' recounted to Bilitis by her lover is of an 'entwining', with the vocal and piano lines similarly wrapped around each other. A chillier scene is portrayed in 'Le tombeau des Naïades' (The tomb of the Naiads) but the music is nostalgically warm, as if bathed in golden recollection.

There is ecstasy to be found in **Ariettes oubliées** ('Forgotten airs'). A falling figure in the piano sets the sighing tone of the first song, with delicate touches of word-painting (such as the sound of pebbles (cailloux) in the 'l'eau qui vire': the turning water). 'Il pleure dans mon coeur' (Tears fall in my heart), with its oscillating semiquavers, evokes the rain in the city and in the poet's heart; while the bleached, shadowy world of 'L'ombre des arbres' (The shadow of trees) is a kind of melancholy coda. The opening vocal line of 'Chevaux des bois' – merry-go-round – may remind listeners of the theme tune to *The Magic Roundabout*. The hectic atmosphere of the funfair has a somewhat manic edge, as if about to burst out of control – something its sober conclusion acknowledges. The two 'Aquarelles' (watercolours) were giving English rhyming titles by Verlaine: 'Green', with its touching, light-touch evocation of nature; 'Spleen' (meaning 'sadness' rather than bad-temper in French) is melancholy indeed, with an initially lonely vocal line that builds in emotional temperature towards the highest note of the cycle on 'tout' (all).

Moving slightly forward in time we enter Debussy's 'Wagnerian' phase, and a group of songs also shot through with memory. Debussy had made a pilgrimage to Bayreuth to see several Wagner operas, and shared with Baudelaire a fascination for Wagner's endlessly evolving melodies and perpetually climbing phrases. This is most strongly felt in 'Le balcon,' the first of **Cinq poèmes**, a deeply evocative text, with the first line repeated as the fourth in every verse. Debussy keeps the vocal line more or less the same in each repetition, while the piano accompaniment suggests the transformation of experience through memory. In 'Harmonie du soir' (Evening harmony) Debussy looks ahead to the sinuous lines of Bilitis, and back to the cascading chords of 'Ecstase' in the earlier *Ariettes*. The central song, 'Le jet d'eau' is simpler, stripped back, its oscillating, light-touch chords atmospherically evoking the fountain and its melancholy associations with 'falling tears'. 'Recueillement' is a 'meditation' on night, and begins with a gentle vocal line exchanging melodies with a free-wheeling accompaniment, as if responding in real-time to the words. The final song opens with a figure resembling the famous piano work *Clair de lune* (1890), a piece that travels from suspended stillness to surging passion to exhausted resolution – not unlike 'La mort des amants,' in which the 'death' of the lovers is not literal but of sexual exhaustion.

Messiaen's songs are at least as ecstatic as Debussy's but with a slightly different motivation. **Poèmes pour Mi** are bursting with love for his first wife Claire Delbos (the Mi of the title), to whom the cycle is dedicated. Yet their intensity is given further fuel by religious fervour – the devoutly catholic Messiaen wrote the texts himself – and a profound belief in marriage as a sacred, not just romantic union. The effect is highly-charged throughout, with powerfully dramatic lines for the soprano and a rich chromaticism for the piano.

In 'L'épouse', with its tolling refrain 'go where the spirit leads you', the bride is compared to the church – the latter an extension of God, she an extension of her husband. The sentiment might sit uncomfortably for some, but the musical treatment of the text – as it is throughout this cycle – is both joyful and sublime. In 'Ta voix' (Your voice), shimmering chords underpin a profoundly beautiful vocal line, celebrating its own 'voix fraîche'. In an intriguing coda, the piano has an improvisatory line, before the final 'Tu chanterais' – you will sing. The voice takes on some of this loose-limbed quality in the assertive 'Les deux guerriers' (The two warriors), the marital couple forged into a powerful unit. In 'Le collier,' a 'necklace' is compared to the beloved's arms – the circling chords resembling those in 'La chevelure,' and with similar intent. The muscular, military atmosphere of 'Les deux guerriers' returns in the final song, 'Prière exaucée' (A prayer granted), with its repeated demands for 'grace', its 'striking', knocking' and 'smiting' for God, and its fireworks of melisma and sparkling piano part, often in fervent unison. It ends with a return of 'bliss' – and a magical concluding peal of chords for the piano.