



St James's Church Piccadilly

PICCADILLY PIANO PLUS
Thursday 17th June 2021, 6 & 8.30pm

Melvyn Tan, piano

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) Suite Bergamesque, L.75 (1905)

Prélude – Menuet – Clair de lune – Passepied

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91) Piano Sonata No.18 in D major, K576 (1789)

Allegro – Adagio – Allegretto

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) Le tombeau de Couperin (1917)

Prélude – Fugue – Forlane – Rigaudon – Menuet – Toccata

Some thoughts from the artist on today's recital programme...

Marrying the Old and the New in devising a recital programme is hardly a novel idea, but it does continue to fascinate. This blending of repertoire keeps us performers on our toes (well not literally!) and it gives the listener some variety, and further interest in other connections between the pieces, if any.

Mozart's Sonata in D K576 was one of the last piano sonatas he composed. Often referred to as The Hunt, recalling hunting horns right at the beginning of the first movement, it is a bright, airy, and to my mind a very optimistic vision of a piece. Sometimes the 'simplicity' in Mozart's piano music is just unbearable...one frequently asks oneself how on earth does one play such a sparse and apparently simple succession of notes. Indeed I have been asking myself this very question time and time again when performing Mozart's piano music and I have come to the conclusion that one just has to let the music speak for itself, and never try to impose anything too much of one's self on it. Mozart's ability to frequently change mood within the music and within the phrasing, is one of the joys of his writing. Rather like a singer leaning on certain expressive phrases (something singers do naturally) the pianist is able to turn phrases at once expressive, happy or in despair. This is particularly poignant in the second movement which could well be a kind of pianistic transcription of an Opera aria.

Both the Debussy and the Ravel in today's programme were composed almost two centuries after the Mozart, but in a certain musical twist, both the *Suite Bergamasque* and *Le tombeau de Couperin* are themselves referring back to the past...in the case of these pieces it is recalling the elegance and courtliness of the French Baroque. The Couperin referred to by Ravel probably were the two great, great Couperins: Louis and François. The two French pieces in this programme were conceived like French Baroque Suites. Ravel even precedes the Suite with a Prelude, very much the practice in Louis Couperin's time....his wonderful spellbinding 'free' Preludes... on the page they are written mostly in semi-breves, and in a certain harmonic and melodic order. How you play them is entirely at your discretion and whatever timing you decide. It makes for this notion of 'Fantasy', something free and boundless and something for which the performer can relish all his imagination as if he were improvising. Ravel's Prelude is definitely written out note for note but it still has very much the lilting phrasing and meter which recalls his great French predecessors.

In the Debussy Suite, the title *Bergamasque* still poses a little question mark. I recall playing this once at a concert when a very dear friend of mine in the audience, who actually came from the city of Bergamo and speaks Bergamasque, asked me after the concert what and why was it called such?? Nothing very Bergamasque about it she rightly claimed! Perhaps the title could have been a reference to the movements in the Suite; Prelude/Menue/Clair de Lune/ Passepied, which were taken from extracts of poems by Paul Verlaine whose poetry Debussy adored and who time and time again would use his Stanzas as an inspiration for his Music. It is in its way a perfect Suite, but more's the pity that Clair de Lune has been so over popularised, even being used for the advertising of a very famous French perfume!

Ravel's *Tombeau* as I referred to earlier also pays homage to the French Baroque in its movements and much of its writing. But there is another little twist: all the movements are dedicated to various war heroes who fought in the First World War, all of whom were personal friends of Ravel. Indeed Ravel himself was very keen to be part of the war effort but was considered not quite robust enough for front line battle. Instead he got to drive an ambulance truck for some of the time which rather disillusioned him and his ambitious efforts. Ravel cheekily calls the last movement *Toccata* (which of course means 'touched') but gives the poor player a whirlwind tour de force *perpetuum mobile* of endless semi-quavers recalling the final movement of his great Violin Sonata or the Finale of his other great work for violin *Tzigane*. I have many a time accompanied violinists for both works and have often taken slight joy in sitting back being as precise as possible with my crochet downbeats while watching them gradually getting blue in the face with approaching elbow ache. Today it is my turn to face that agony except there will be no-one to accompany me or help me fill in the harmonies! Or to help me with my elbow ache!

© Melvyn Tan

Melvyn Tan has established his international reputation in the 1980s with pioneering performances on fortepiano and continues to cast fresh light on music conceived for the piano's early and modern forms.

Tan's work as recitalist, chamber musician and concerto soloist has been heard at many of the world's leading concert halls, from the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Konzerthaus AMUZ in Belgium, London's Wigmore Hall and Royal Festival Hall and New York's Lincoln

Center, and at major festivals including Salzburg, Edinburgh, La Roque d'Anthéron as well as Bath's Mozartfest, City of London festival and Hatfield House Chamber Music Festival.

As a concerto soloist Tan has performed with such prestigious ensembles as the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Academy of St Martin's in the Fields, the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra, Salzburg's Camerata and Mozarteum orchestras, Bruckner Orchester Linz, Melbourne Symphony, Singapore Symphony Orchestra, London Chamber Orchestra, and Australian Chamber Orchestra.

Recent and forthcoming appearances include performances with MDR Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra and Dennis Russell Davies, the Orchester Wiener Akademie in Vienna, a return to Wigmore Hall and St Martin in the Fields, National Gallery Singapore, a Beethoven Marathon in Belgium, Hatfield House Chamber Music Festival, Oundle International Festival, South Downs Summer Music Festival, as well as recitals/tours in Singapore, France, Italy and South Africa. Regularly appearing in venues across the UK his recent Wigmore Hall performance as part of Kevin Volan's 70th Birthday celebrations was described by The Telegraph as a "triumph for him as much as Volan's". Melvyn was privileged to perform as part of the Wigmore Hall and Radio 3 special series of concerts, livestreamed during the COVID-19 pandemic with cellist Guy Johnston. With violinist Paul Boucher, he has also continued his role in devising Music and Word at Charleston, a combination of music and readings in the unique setting of the East Sussex Farmhouse made famous by artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant.



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