

Piano Landscape



Nicholas Ashton

Tuesday 20 August 2019 2.30pm
St Andrew's and St George's West,
George St, Edinburgh

Programme

W. A. Mozart:	Fantasia, C minor, Kv.475
Louis-Claude Daquin:	<i>Le Coucou</i> , E Minor
Jean Philippe Rameau:	<i>La Poule</i> , G minor
Robert Schumann:	<i>Vogel als Prophet</i> , G minor, op 82/6
Maurice Ravel:	<i>Oiseaux Tristes</i> (<i>Miroirs</i> no 2)
Olivier Messiaen:	<i>La Colombe</i> (<i>Prelude</i> no 1, 1928)
Olivier Messiaen:	<i>Plainte Calme</i> (<i>Prelude</i> no 6, 1928)
Claude Debussy:	<i>Clair de Lune</i> (<i>Suite Bergamasque</i> no 3)
Franz Liszt:	<i>Vision</i> , G minor, (<i>Etude d'exécution transcendante</i> no 6)
Carl Maria von Weber:	Rondo, C major, op 24/4

I have attempted to theme my programme both in the concrete and abstract; each work presents either a direct evocation of either birds or landscapes, or points to something less tangible. N.A. 2019

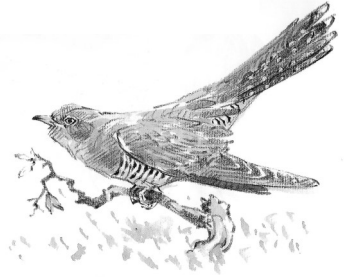
Programme Notes

W. A. Mozart: Fantasia, C minor, Kv.475

This work was composed in a single day, in June, 1785 in Vienna and was published later in the year alongside his sonata, also in C Minor, Kv.457, which has a similarity of dramatic intent and also actual material. Many pianists have chosen to present both works together on the concert platform to highlight this. However, such is the power and directness of expression in the Fantasia, it can easily stand alone. A monumental, dark quality is immediately established with the opening *motif*, a rising diminished 7th, which progresses in a downward semi-tonal stepwise motion, producing an extraordinary sense of unease and dislocation; the composer seems to be searching, in a sense of abandonment, for some form of solace. It can be compared, in its magisterial and strange beauty, to the section of *The Magic Flute*, in which Tamino is lost (both literally and existentially) in the dark forest, wondering if Pamina is still alive. The great film director, Ingmar Bergman, stated that this passage in the opera is perhaps the most disturbing music ever written, and this Fantasia matches it note for note. In terms of reference to a landscape, the work's exceptionally dramatic and swiftly-shifting tempo changes seem to evoke the vertiginous peaks and valleys of the Alpine countryside surrounding Mozart's birth-city of Salzburg.

Louis-Claude Daquin: *Le Coucou*, E Minor

Louis-Claude Daquin was, along with the Couperins (father and son) and Rameau, one of the most prominent composers of the so-called French *Clavecin* School of the early 1700s, producing a quantity of exceptionally beautiful keyboard music that exploits both the virtuosic skills of the performer and in lyrical and expressive intensity. Much of the references are pictorial or directly referential, drawing from the influence of nature, myth and fantasy. This short work, possibly one of the most well-known and much beloved by young students and professionals alike, depicts the incessant, uniquely recognizable call of the cuckoo – both in the bird's actual sound and in its recreation in mechanical form as a clock-work reveille. It was composed in 1735 and is taken from Daquin's *troisieme livre* of pieces for the harpsichord.



Jean Philippe Rameau: *La Poule*, G minor



Taking the cue from Daquin, his near contemporary, Jean Phillippe Rameau, delights in the musical evocation of the clucking of a hen, with its staccato rhythmic crow forming the perfect source for the percussive brilliance inherent in the keyboard technique of striking a rapid repetition of single notes on a harpsichord; this has attracted composers as diverse as Domenico Scarlatti, Haydn and Mozart, through to Manuel de Falla and Gyorgy Ligeti. This piece is taken from Rameau's Third Suite, composed between 1726 - 27. The crisp rhythms, intricate ornamentation, and, towards the end, the satisfying crunch of bass chords all translate extremely well to the modern piano, and explains the increasing frequency of pianists programming works of this genre and

period in their recitals, having survived the resurgence of the authenticity movement of the 1960s and 70s.



Robert Schumann: *Vogel als Prophet*, G minor, op 82/6

Although Schumann, like Chopin, was critical of audiences who expected to find concrete, programmatic depictions in his music, he was not averse to supplying specific titles, particularly in sets of later works, such as the *Album für die Jugend* op 68, *Bilder aus Ostern* op 56 and *Waldszenen*, op 82 (1849). Concerning this latter set, Schumann wrote:

"The titles for pieces of music, since they again have come into favour in our day, have been censured here and there, and it has been said that 'good music needs no sign-post.'"

This beautiful - and very strange - piece is taken from this set. The title itself - *Vogel als Prophet* - is mysterious, and Schumann does not attempt to explain it, although the opening and closing sections, based on a hypnotically insistent rhythm, drawing an arpeggio from a dissonant starting note, are reminiscent of the calls of some exotic, lonely bird calling in the depths of the night. (Ravel may have had this motif in mind when composing his *Oiseaux Tristes* in 1905.) A brief middle section, like a chorale in its extremely regular rhythm and vertical block four-part harmonies, attempts to dissipate the melancholy stillness.



The Heart of the Wood

Maurice Ravel: *Oiseaux Tristes* (*Miroirs* no 2)

Oiseaux Tristes is the second piece from Ravel's five-movement work of 1905, entitled *Miroirs*. It was the first to be composed (in 1902) and, in its hypnotic repeated note rhythm and gently lilting triplet accompaniment, it resembles Ravel's *Le Gibet* from *Gaspard de la Nuit* (1908) in evoking an intensely melancholic atmosphere. As with Debussy, Ravel is quite content with the idea of a specific theme, and although he is normally careful not to suggest a title without adding much detail, he did state of the piece: "birds lost in the torpor of a very dark forest during the hottest hours of summer."

The opening, plaintive melodic motif is vaguely reminiscent of Schumann's own theme in *Vogel als Prophet*, although here there is much greater ambiguity of underlying harmony and the rhythm is extremely subtle, pointing ahead to Messiaen.

Olivier Messiaen: *La Colombe* (*Prelude* no 1, 1928)

Olivier Messiaen: *Plainte Calme* (*Prelude* no 6, 1928)

Messiaen composed his set of Preludes in 1930, very much under the influence of Ravel and Debussy and his mentor, Paul Dukas, but infused with elements of both Schoenberg and Stravinsky. The influences notwithstanding, Messiaen, in these pieces, is already in possession of what is termed a 'voice'; that is, a distinctly individual compositional approach to tonality, timbre, rhythm and dynam-

ic. The first piece, entitled *La Colombe*/ The Dove, presents an artistically conceived representation of bird-song (which was to become a central source of inspiration) in combination with an intensely Christian devotion, the dove representing the physical manifestation of Holy Spirit. The second piece, *Plainte Calme*, is more abstract in character, and there is a trace of the influence of Scriabin in its delicate, yet rich harmonies and elastic approach to phrasing.

Claude Debussy: *Clair de Lune* (Suite *Bergamasque* no 3)

Debussy composed an early version of *Clair de Lune* in 1890, much taken with the poem of the same title 1869 by Verlaine, which depicts the soul as “a chosen landscape” where dancers and masqueraders dance in the “sad and beautiful” moonlight. Debussy didn’t think much of the composition, and substantially revised it in 1905 when composing the *suite bergamasque* and including it as the third movement.

The work has become his most well-known composition and one of the most beloved in the entire piano repertoire, and quite justly; an opening melody of extraordinary delicacy and plasticity is moulded around a sequence of rich, complex harmonies made up of augmented intervals, 6th chords derived from the pentatonic scale. A brief, more hymn-like passage leads to a fluid central section involving an arpeggiated accompaniment, which reaches a central climax before returning to the rapt stillness of the opening.



Little Night Vision I

Franz Liszt: *Vision*, G minor, (Etude d’execution transcendante no 6)

This etude, the sixth in the series of Franz Liszt’s twelve *Etudes d’execution transcendante* and given the title *Vision* by the composer, is passionately dramatic and contains the seeds of a much larger work; it could almost stand as an introduction to an opera, with the same sweep of expression as the *Bacchanal* of Wagner’s *Tannhauser*, the Prelude to Act 1 of *Lohengrin*, or the marvellous Eb major horn-call arpeggios at the start of *Das Rheingold*.

A majestic melody richly situated in the bass register of the keyboard is accompanied by arpeggio flourishes and underpinned by a tolling, bell-like bass. This is gradually opened out, modulating chromatically from the dark tonic key of G minor through D major, Bb major and Eb minor to a glorious climax in the tonic major, exploiting the full range of the keyboard in cascades of brilliant arpeggios

and broken chords. In these techniques, Liszt is painting colours and textures in much the same manner as in his more overtly programmatic works, such as *Orage/Storm*, *Vallee d'Obermann*, or *Funeraillles/Funeral Procession*.

Carl Maria von Weber: Rondo, C major, op 24/4

Despite that fact that Carl Maria von Weber was considered to be one of the most impressive virtuoso pianists of his generation, his compositions for the instrument extend only to four complete sonatas, the wonderful *Konzertstück* for piano and orchestra, and a few show-pieces, which include the famous *Invitation to the Dance*. Although this Rondo has no programmatic reference, it can be compared to this latter work in its elegance and sophisticated polish.

Compared to the range and diversity of Beethoven, Haydn and Mozart, Weber's piano works - despite their many qualities – have not endured as central repertoire. This is a great pity, as they demonstrate many aspects of contemporary approaches to the piano; a concentration on technical virtuosity and brilliance (much admired and developed further by Chopin, Liszt, Mendelssohn and Schumann), and also a keen sense of drama, lyricism and sheer wit. This movement is the finale from his first Sonata, op 24, written in 1812, and it is a brilliant example of the kind of clever note-spinning, rhythmically alert and joyous sense of humour in piano-playing in which Weber delighted, and which demonstrates his gifts as an improviser.



Rainbow Landscape

Biography



Nicholas Ashton was educated at Chetham's School, RNCM, at the Hochschule für Musik und darstellende Kunst, Frankfurt and the Conservatoire supérieur de musique, Geneva. His teachers were Renna Kellaway and Joachim Volkmann and he received coaching from Vlado Perlemuter, Jorge Bolet and Joaquin Achucarro, Pierre Laurent Aimard; and chamber music coaching from Roger Raphael, Emmanuel Hurwitz, Cecil Aronowitz and Lamar Crowson.

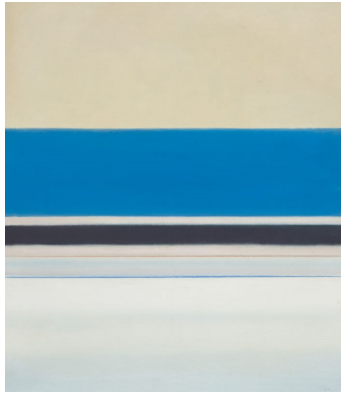
Following a successful early career as a soloist, he worked as a teacher, translator and in artist management before resuming performing after encouragement from Murray Perahia, for whom he played at the Centre for Advanced Studies Aldeburgh in 1993, and Menahem Pressler at Banff Center for the Arts, Canada, in 1996.

A critically acclaimed debut at Edinburgh's Queen's Hall led to a commercial live disc of the recital in 1996 and increasing offers to play both in the UK and in Germany, where he has been a regular guest artist of the Hamburg Chamber Music Society for fifteen years since 2000. Examples of recitals and masterclasses include: in the USA (Central Washington University, 2005; University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2009), Finland (Tampere University of the Applied Sciences 2009, 2010), Italy (the *Amice della Musica* Series in Udine, 2013) at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow (2000 to 2015), RNCM and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

Nicholas has recorded many times for the BBC, on West German NDR 4, Bayern 4, Radio Suisse Romande, Radio New Zealand and in the USA. His repertoire extends to some 25 concerti, solo repertoire ranging from the early French *Clavecin* School to the contemporary, a wide range of chamber music and as an accompanist.

In 2008, a première recording of the complete piano works by Robert Crawford which also included the Piano Quintet, received international praise in the media.

Nicholas has an increasing interest in performing contemporary and rare repertoire and a recording for Meridian Records, sequenced around the form of the chaconne including a commissioned work for three pianists at one piano by Kenneth Dempster is in preparation; a recording of contemporary two piano repertoire (including works by Edward Harper, Lyell Cresswell, Nigel Osborne, Robert Crawford, Kenneth Leighton, Drew Hammond, Jane Stanley, Stephen Pratt); a recording of the complete works for two pianos and piano duet by Mozart with the German pianist Franck-Thomas Link (2020); and a vinyl recording, entitled *Waserklavier*, of solo repertoire by Ravel, Debussy, Ligeti and Berio (*Copperfly*), 2019.



Ensign for Winter

The inspiration for this concert has been drawn from the striking landscapes and wonderful wildlife drawings of

John Busby, RSA RSW SWLA 1928-2015.

Landscape was at the centre of his art. His love of the natural world and his long acquaintance with the surrounding environment allowed deep connections to take root - the land, clouds and seas transformed into metaphors for an inner state of being.

The landscape paintings explore the relationship between form and content; the shape, colour and compositional energy of these works expressing a much deeper level of contemplation.

Internationally acclaimed as a wildlife artist, John wrote eight books on bird drawing and art as well as illustrating many more. In 2009 he was declared Master Wildlife Artist by the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wisconsin USA. As a lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art for three decades he influenced very many contemporary artists.

This year the Open Eye Gallery, in Edinburgh, is showing a major exhibition of John's pictures, both landscape and wildlife. We do hope you will be able to go and see it.



John Busby : Silent Landscape

29 July to 2nd September

www.openeyegallery.co.uk/