

Sunday, October 1, 2023, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Tom Borrow, *piano*

PROGRAM

Claude DEBUSSY (1862–1918) *Images*, Book 1, L. 110 (1903–1905)
“Reflets dans l’eau” in D-flat major
 (“Reflections in the Water”)
“Hommage à Rameau” in G-sharp minor
 (“Tribute to Rameau”)
Mouvement in C major

Frédéric CHOPIN (1810–1849) Selections from *Études*, Op. 25 (1832–1836)
No. 1 in A-flat major, *Aeolian Harp*
No. 6 in G-sharp minor, *Double Thirds*
No. 10 in B minor, *Octaves*
No. 11 in A minor, *Winter Wind*
No. 12 in C minor, *Ocean*

Sergei RACHMANINOFF (1873–1943) Selections from *Preludes*, Op. 23 & Op. 32
Prelude in D major, Op. 23, No. 4 (1903)
Prelude in G minor, Op. 23, No. 5 (1903)
Prelude in B minor, Op. 32, No. 10 (1910)
Prelude in B-flat major, Op. 23, No. 2 (1903)

INTERMISSION

Sergei PROKOFIEV (1891–1953) Piano Sonata No. 6 in A major, Op. 82 (1840)
Allegro moderato
Allegretto
Tempo di valzer lentissimo
Vivace



Images, Book 1, L. 110

Claude Debussy

In Claude Debussy's friendship circle, there were as many painters, sculptors, poets, and writers as there were musicians, all providing stimulus to his creativity. As he once wrote to a friend, "I am almost as fond of pictures as I am of music." Therefore, it is not surprising that he should emerge as a master of tonal colors in his music, able to paint in sound what others might attempt with a brush or chisel. In three different works, he chose the word "images" as his title: the well-known *Images for Orchestra* of 1913 and the two books of *Images* for the piano, composed in 1903–05 and 1907 respectively.

Debussy had just finished *La Mer* in 1905 when he finally returned to the commission for piano works for which his publisher Jacques Durand had been impatiently waiting since 1903. Other major distractions also delayed completion of *Images*, Book 1. In 1904, Debussy abruptly left his first wife, Lily Texier, to elope with Emma Bardac, the wife of a family friend, who would become his second wife. This marital mess created a scandal in French artistic circles that proved uncondusive to composing. And when Book 1 seemed almost completed, another delay ensued when Debussy rejected his first version of the opening piece "Reflets dans l'eau." He decided he must completely rewrite it "based on new ideas and the latest discoveries of harmonic chemistry."

By this time, Debussy had created a sound world for the piano never heard before, both delicate and powerful and perfectly suited to his pictorial imagination. Biographer Oscar Thompson summarizes some of its key components: "His new concepts of sonority, his skillful adjustments of dynamics, his subtle employment of the pedal, his ambiguous treatment of tonalities, his block-like chord formulas, his quest of unobtrusive dissonance," which hinted at moods that could never be captured in

words. Tiny, fleeting melodies coursed through his music, but were rarely given the grand treatment. Though a product of the traditional Paris Conservatoire, Debussy dispensed with most of the rigid rules he'd been taught and chose to follow his own instincts, especially in matters of harmony.

Portraying water in all its aspects was a creative obsession, as *La Mer* had just demonstrated. "Reflets dans l'eau," ("Reflections in the Water"), writes pianist Christine Stevenson, "is almost a lesson in how to translate water into music, not in the sense of fountains or the sea, but rather swirling eddies, sparkling ripples, glistening droplets. It is about shades of color, nuance, and the play of light." Debussy describes its opening gesture—a low-pitched D-flat chord in open fifths—as "a little circle in water, with a little pebble falling into it." Under the right hand's sparkling arpeggios, a descending three-note melodic motive—the theme of this music—modestly emerges in the middle range. This theme will return much more prominently in the movement's final moments, leading to an uncanny finish with pianissimo D-flat chords stretching from bottom to top of the keyboard as the reflections subside.

"Hommage à Rameau" is a tribute to Debussy's favorite French Baroque composer, Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764). But even though Debussy terms it a *sarabande*, a favorite Baroque dance in three beats, this gravely beautiful slow movement shows no trace of Rameau's style. It opens with a gentle chant-like melody, graced with triplet figures and played in simple unison. As scholar Stephen Walsh writes, "Debussy progressively intensifies the procession of chords and harmonies to a level of subtlety and richness even he had not achieved before. The music is in effect a study in soft, transparent, plangent sonorities."

"Mouvement" is an intricate perpetual-motion piece in C major, in which the pianist must keep high-speed conflicting

rhythmic patterns perfectly coordinated. Debussy's instruction, "animated, with a fantastic lightness but precise," sets out the challenge. The left hand establishes a strongly accented two beats to which the right hand responds with whirring triplets that dominate most of the piece; these patterns shift relentlessly back and forth between the hands. The stunning conclusion sends the triplets swirling upward on a Debussian whole-tone scale to the very top of the piano's range, anchored by deep pedal notes at the other end of the keyboard.

Selections from *Études*, Op. 25 Frédéric Chopin

In Robert Collet's definition, an *étude* is "a short, or at most a medium-length piece, embodying *one* principal technical problem (perhaps with some other secondary difficulty) and homogeneous in texture and musical character." A concert *étude*, however, is not intended to be merely a didactic exercise for practicing, but rather a composition suitable for public performance in which the musical content is at least equal to the technical challenge. Many composers contributed to this hybrid genre, but none quite equaled the variety and majesty of Chopin's 24 *Études*, Opp. 10 and 25.

Chopin began writing the 12 *études* of Op. 25 in 1832, hard on the heels of finishing Op. 10, and completed them in 1836. By now, he had little need to prove himself to the musical world, and so most of this second set—except for its spectacular final three *études*—is quieter and less obviously attention-grabbing. Robert Schumann compared the hushed, beautiful No. 1 in A-flat

major to an Aeolian harp. Its haunting melody emerges atop a continuous flow of arpeggios. No. 6 in G-sharp minor is devoted to playing in thirds. This is a sweetly consonant interval that became a signature Chopin sound.

In B minor, No. 10 opens the final series of three highly dramatic *études*, all in the minor, that form Op. 25's grand finale. It is a ferociously taxing study in octaves-playing in both hands and must have thrilled Liszt, its dedicatee. Known as the *Winter Wind*, No. 11 in A minor is a military march with the left hand hammering out the heroic theme under the right hand's fiery filigree. A friend suggested that Chopin add the quiet opening that allows the march to explode into life. In C minor, No. 12 relates back to the first *étude* of Op. 10. It takes that piece's huge, geyser-like arpeggios and gives them now to both hands. A deep, tolling melody also issues from the left hand.

Selections from *Preludes*, Op. 23 & Op. 32 Sergei Rachmaninoff

Sergei Rachmaninoff had the highest reverence for Frédéric Chopin and his contributions to the modern piano. "From the age of 19, I felt his greatness; and marvel at it still," he told an interviewer. "He remains for me one of the greatest of the giants."

Chopin had written a marvelous sequence of 24 preludes covering all the major and minor keys. Although he had not originally set out to do so, Rachmaninoff over several years followed suit, creating his own 24 Preludes including the 10 of Op. 23 (1903) and the 13 of Op. 32 (1910). But his preludes were longer and more developed

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than Chopin's: short mood pieces of diverse and well-defined character that could easily stand on their own. There often seemed to be specific visual stimuli behind his preludes, making them miniature tone poems.

This seems to be the case with the Prelude in B minor, the tenth of the Op. 32 set, which is generally considered the finest of all. Rachmaninoff revealed that, like his orchestral tone poem *The Isle of the Dead*, it had been inspired by a painting by Arnold Böcklin, in this case "The Return," in which an old man gazes pensively back from his cottage. The music is built up from two brief elements: a rocking rhythmic motive representing the funeral chant and a mourning bell tolling throughout.

From the earlier Op. 23 preludes, Tom Borrow has chosen No. 4 in D major, a limpid, romantic song that lives up to its "Andante cantabile" marking. Arpeggios in triplets, migrating between the hands, conflict gently with the song's two-beat meter, which is often syncopated as well. The most famous of the Op. 23 set, No. 5 in G minor, is a march in dashing polonaise style, emphasizing staccato crispness; its central section explores the rich lyrical style of the composer's recently premiered Second Piano Concerto. No. 2 in B-flat major is an ecstatic, torrent-of-sound piece that revels in the sheer beauty of the modern concert grand, but is also clearly inspired by the peals of Russian church bells, a major influence on the composer's music.

Piano Sonata No. 6 in A major, Op. 82 Sergei Prokofiev

In 1936, Sergei Prokofiev returned to the USSR after spending nearly two decades in the West. Seductive offers from the Soviets promised a more glorious career for him in his homeland, where his creativity would receive greater rewards than in Europe and America. But by 1939, his rosy hopes were being extinguished as he found he could no

longer perform outside the USSR and that his works would have to follow rules dictated by the Soviet bureaucracy. The precariousness of his situation was revealed in June, when his friend, the famed stage director Vsevolod Meyerhold—with whom he was about to mount the premiere of his latest opera, *Semyon Kotko*—was suddenly seized by the KGB and subsequently shot. Prokofiev now could no longer ignore the cruelty of Stalin's regime. And about that time, he was also ordered to write a cantata in praise of Stalin on his 60th birthday!

More personal pressures also overwhelmed Prokofiev. In a parallel to Debussy's situation, his marriage to his first wife, Lena, collapsed as he fell in love with Mira Mendelson, a young Russian poetess half his age. His passion for Mira, nevertheless, stimulated his composing, for that summer he returned to a genre that had already inspired five major works—the piano sonata. He began composing three of them simultaneously: the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth sonatas, which became known as the "War Sonatas" and are today ranked as his greatest. Also influential was his recent reading of Romain Rolland's *Vie de Beethoven* and Rolland's commentary on Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata. Prokofiev especially noted Rolland's words: "No other of [Beethoven's] sonatas shows to the same degree the union of unrestrained passion and rigid logic." In his Sixth Sonata, he determined to combine passion with formal rigor as Beethoven had done.

The opening of the first movement assaults us with fortissimo violence and aggression. In the left hand, the notes A and D-sharp—the harsh tritone interval—toll ominously while the right hand introduces a brittle, syncopated descending motive that establishes a battle between A major and A minor; this motto motive will reappear throughout the sonata. Lyrical relief eventually arrives with a lovely, soaring sec-

and theme reminiscent of Prokofiev's music for Juliet in his recently completed *Romeo and Juliet*.

Both the motto and the lyrical theme are active in the extensive development section. A passage of tolling bells prepares us for the recapitulation of the pulverizing opening music. This music takes on an epic, almost heroic power until a last high-register cry of the motto brings everything to a halt.

Of the second movement's spiky E-major scherzo, famed pianist Boris Berman writes: "The movement's main tone is ironic mockery. This is one of very few examples among Prokofiev's last works of irony playing an important role; we know that in Stalinist Russia this was not an encouraged form of artistic expression." Stubbornly persistent quarter notes set the pace. Berman: "A simple diatonic melody is accompanied by dissonant harmonies, creating a peculiar combination of steadiness and instability." The slower middle section is airily melodious, once again recalling music from Prokofiev's storybook ballets.

Movement three is a luxuriant slow-tempo waltz in C major, from which it is prone to wander. Undoubtedly expressing Prokofiev's love for Mira, its leisurely, romantic melody rises to a peak of passion in high register. Full-bodied chords often tinged with dissonance and dense counterpoint give this music a dark, weighty quality. The tempo increases slightly for a middle section that begins softly but gradually crescendos in volume and agitation until it reaches a hammering repeated-note climax. The movement's close is soft and eerily beautiful.

Set in an elaborate sonata-rondo form, the finale returns to the fierce energy and dissonant key battles of the first movement, though it initially sounds somewhat light and virtuosic. The buzzing perpetual motion grows wilder and more obsessive, and eventually the A and D-sharp tritones of the

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first movement reappear in the bass. And in a calmer Andante section, we hear the first movement's little descending motto, now less strident.

Boris Berman describes the closing coda section as "all hell breaks loose. The feeling of tonality is gone; alarming repeated notes echo one another in all registers in a desperate frenzy. ... The willful repetitions of the motto motive that opened the sonata bring the work to a violently assertive close." But Prokofiev has finally won the battle between A major and A minor and awarded the victory to the former.

—Janet E. Bedell © 2023

Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.

In January 2019, and with only 36 hours' notice, **Tom Borrow** was called on to replace renowned pianist Khatia Buniatishvili in a series of 12 concerts, performing Ravel's Piano Concerto in G with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra to sensational public and critical acclaim. *International Piano* magazine named him their "One To Watch" and soon afterwards, *Gramophone* gave him the same accolade. After his highly praised US debut with the Cleveland Orchestra, *Musical America* named Borrow their "New Artist Of The Month." The pianist has been named a BBC New Generation Artist, an honor that includes performances with all the BBC orchestras—at Wigmore Hall and elsewhere—during the two-year tenure, including multiple BBC broadcasts. In July 2022, Borrow made his debut at the BBC Proms and at the Royal Albert Hall with the BBC Symphony, and he was recently presented with the prestigious Terence Judd-Hallé Orchestra Award.

Born in Tel Aviv in 2000, Borrow has performed as soloist with all major orchestras of his native country. He began studying piano at age five with Dr. Michal Tal at the Givatayim Music Conservatory, and continued with Prof. Tomer Lev of the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music at Tel Aviv University. Borrow has been regularly mentored by Murray Perahia, through the Jerusalem Music Centre's program for out-

standing young musicians. He also participated in masterclasses under the instruction of Sir András Schiff, Christoph Eschenbach, Richard Goode, Menahem Pressler, and Tatiana Zelikman, among many others.

Borrow has been invited to perform with major orchestras including the Cleveland Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony, Atlanta Symphony, St. Louis Symphony, London Philharmonic, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Santa Cecilia Orchestra, Berlin Konzerthaus Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic, Sao Paulo Symphony, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, and Orchestra Sinfonica di Milan, and with leading conductors including Bychkov, Luisi, Eschenbach, Oramo, Fischer, Zhang, Trevino, Oundjian, and Emelyanychev.

Equally in-demand with chamber music and in recital, he has been invited to appear at the Verbier Festival, Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Konzerthaus, Berlin Konzerthaus, Ruhr Piano Festival, Alte Oper Frankfurt, Hamburg Laeiszhalle, Beethoven Haus Bonn, Vancouver Recital Society, Festival Piano aux Jacobins (Toulouse), and the Aldeburgh and Cheltenham festivals.

Tom Borrow is represented by Sheldon Artists LLC/R. Douglas Sheldon, Managing Partner.