



STRAVINSKY

The Rite of Spring

arr. for solo piano by Vladimir Leyetchkiss

DEBUSSY

La Mer

arr. for solo piano by Lucien Garban

Ralph van Raat

Claude Debussy (1862–1918): *La Mer*

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971): *The Rite of Spring*

'I still preserve the memory of the performance of your *The Rite of Spring* at Laloy's ... It haunts me like a beautiful nightmare and I try, in vain, to retrieve the terrifying impression it made. For which reason I look forward to its production like a greedy child who has been promised sweets.' These are the words that Claude Debussy wrote in a letter to his younger colleague Igor Stravinsky in 1912, a few months after the two composers had sat next to each other on the piano bench, playing through the latter's ground-breaking orchestral work in its very first version for piano duet. Earlier on, Stravinsky had admitted to writing some works with a signed photograph of Debussy in front of him. The oxymoron that Debussy uses is very telling of the similarities, yet striking differences, between the two men's creative output.

After his first breakthrough as a composer with his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* in 1902, Debussy himself surprised the world three years later with his revolutionary three 'symphonic sketches' which comprised *La Mer*. The composer had started writing the work in 1903, and he adopted a completely new approach to the overall form, use of harmony, orchestration, and very importantly, rhythm. All these elements were liberated in comparison to the strict rules of the past; *La Mer* was the first composition of Debussy's 'Impressionist' period in which he markedly found his own style. Instead of a literal imitation of the sounds of the sea, Debussy was interested in recreating 'the inner, subjective experience' of his depicted scenes: the changing shades from dark to light at sea (featured especially in *I. De l'aube à midi sur la mer*, 'From dawn to midday on the sea'), the flow and movement of the waves (*II. Jeux de vagues*, 'Play of the waves'), and the power of wind and water, the struggle of the elements (*III. Dialogue du vent et de la mer*, 'Dialogue between wind and waves'). Possibly, these themes can be interpreted on a deeper, more personal level as well: about halfway through writing the composition, Debussy was dealing with the struggles of his divorce from the former model Rosalie 'Lilly' Texier

and the start of a new relationship with the accomplished singer, Emma Bardac. The first performance of *La Mer* did not have a positive reception, both because music critics perceived Debussy's divorce as a scandal and therefore harboured some ill will, and because the novelties of the piece resulted in a less than ideal performance.

It is hard to say how well the musicians performed Stravinsky's third ballet *The Rite of Spring* during its first performance in Paris in 1913. Stravinsky had just enjoyed two consecutive successes with his first two ballets, *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrouchka* (1912). However, the riot that started after only the first opening notes of *The Rite of Spring* was so tumultuous that even the on-stage dancers of Sergey Diaghilev's highly popular Ballets Russes could not hear the orchestra any longer. The original Russian title can be translated most closely as 'Sacred Spring', with its subtitle as 'Scenes of Pagan Russia'. The plot is set in prehistoric Russia, where a young virgin girl is chosen by a group of elders to be sacrificed to the gods of spring, ensuring the end of winter. In the first part of the two-movement work, *The Adoration of the Earth*, the listener experiences the celebrations of the spring festival: games guided by the elders involving soothsaying young men, groups of dancing young girls, the game of the abduction of a bride, games of attacking tribes, and the interruption of these festivities by the eldest and wisest of the men, who blesses the spring soil by kissing the earth, followed by euphoric ritualistic dancing. The second part, *The Sacrifice*, is set at night, during which time the young girls mysteriously walk in circles. Twice in a row, fate determines one girl to be the victim. She is subsequently honoured by an ecstatic dance, evoking the ancestors, and handed over to the wise old men, in whose presence she sacrifices herself in a delirious, holy dance.

Like Debussy's *La Mer*, *The Rite of Spring* has become one of the most influential pieces of the 20th century. However, the two composers accomplished this feat in almost entirely opposite ways. While the course of

the music in *La Mer* is propelled forward by a seemingly improvisatory natural development of a handful of themes and motifs, *The Rite of Spring* seeks its power partially out of the harsh confrontation of musical opposites. The latter could be explained through its origin as a ballet piece which tells a story through diverse scenes; however, the fact that Stravinsky did not adapt the composition for performance as a concert piece, as was his usual practice in these cases, seems to confirm that these choices were purely musical as well. Although both Debussy and Stravinsky abandoned traditional functional harmony, Debussy focused on the most subtle shades of pastel colours, emancipating them to such a degree that tonal colour became more essential than melody. In contrast, Stravinsky based much of his material on pre-existing folk tunes, whose melodies brought forth driving rhythms and punching harmonies. Instead of concealing and liberating traditional notions of pulse as Debussy did, Stravinsky sought the opposite: the complete emancipation of ecstatic driving pulses as a temporary goal in and of itself. Debussy effectively summarised this by his remark: 'it is primitive music with all its modern convenience'.

This 'primitive music' lent itself perfectly to the piano. Indeed, Stravinsky composed it at the instrument, stating that he could play many passages on the piano before he worked out how to write them down. The percussive nature of the piece, which Stravinsky tried to highlight through the use of heavy brass and percussive instruments, and heavily accented playing in the strings, seems to stem directly from the composer's hands finding their way on the piano keys. On top of that, since Stravinsky called the orchestration of pieces 'decoration', coming only after elements such as melody, harmony and rhythm, it is not surprising that the composition also sounds so native to the piano, without the enhancement

of orchestral colouration. The urge for pianist Vladimir Leyetchkiss (1934–2016) to re-arrange Stravinsky's official piano duet version for solo piano is understandable for these reasons. Furthermore, many technically difficult and complex passages are shared between the four hands of two pianists, taking away to some degree the charm of the initial technical challenges which Stravinsky deliberately created for the orchestral musicians. This excitement and physical labour is re-introduced by Leyetchkiss's notoriously difficult solo piano score, resulting in the relatively rare approval for official publication of this arrangement.

Since instrumentation forms the essence in so much of Debussy's orchestral scores, it seems a lot harder to justify a piano solo rendition of *La Mer*. However, only two days after finishing the orchestral score, Debussy insisted to his publisher, Durand, on writing a version for piano duet. In 1938, Lucien Garban (1877–1959), a composer, Durand's director, and a friend of Debussy and Ravel, started to write a version for piano solo, as he was well aware of the relationship between the orchestral, colourful way in which Debussy wrote for the piano, and the subtlety and often chamber music-like approach in which he wrote for an otherwise large-scale orchestra. Taking piano works such as *Images*, from the same period, as a model, Garban did not simply reduce the orchestral score to a piano score; he took the essence of the work and re-wrote it instead, taking into account the specific sonorities and delicate colourful possibilities of a single piano. As such, *La Mer* has been given a re-interpretation from the perspective of Debussy's unique piano output, thereby shedding a new orchestral light on his existing piano *oeuvre*.

Ralph van Raat

Ralph van Raat



Photo: Simon van Boxtel

Pianist and musicologist Ralph van Raat studied piano at the Conservatory of Amsterdam with Ton Hartsuiker and Willem Brons. As part of the advanced programme of the Conservatory, Van Raat also studied with Claude Helffer in Paris, Ursula Oppens at Chicago's Northwestern University, Pierre-Laurent Aimard at the Musikhochschule in Cologne, and Liisa Pohjola in Helsinki. He also studied musicology at the University of Amsterdam, graduating with distinction in both disciplines. He has won multiple prizes, such as the First Prize of the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition, the Stipend-Prize Darmstadt during the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt, the Philip Morris

Arts Award, the Prijs Klassiek of the Dutch national radio and TV broadcaster NTR, a Borletti-Buitoni Fellowship, and the Fortis MeesPierson Award of the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam. Van Raat has performed as a soloist with orchestras such as the Royal Concertgebouw, the BBC Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the China National Symphony Orchestra, and the London Sinfonietta, and has worked with conductors Valery Gergiev, David Robertson, Tan Dun and Peter Eötvös, among others. In addition, he regularly collaborates with composers, many of whom have dedicated their piano compositions to him. Van Raat teaches contemporary piano music at the Conservatory of Amsterdam, and can often be seen and heard speaking about and playing contemporary classical music on various TV and radio programmes. He has been a Steinway Artist since 2003, and has recorded exclusively for Naxos since 2006.

Both *La Mer* by Debussy and *The Rite of Spring* by his friend Stravinsky are now regarded as two of the most influential pieces of the 20th century, although these achievements were accomplished in entirely different ways. The notoriously difficult solo piano re-arrangement of Stravinsky's own piano duet version of *The Rite of Spring* by the Russian pianist Vladimir Leyetchkiss (1934–2016) met with the composer's approval. The solo piano version of *La Mer* by Lucien Garban (1877–1959) re-interprets the work from the perspective of Debussy's piano output, taking works such as *Images*, from the same period, as a model.

Claude
DEBUSSY
(1862–1918)

La Mer (1905) (arr. Lucien Garban, 1938) 23:16

- | | |
|---|-------------|
| 1 I. De l'aube à midi sur la mer | 7:34 |
| 2 II. Jeux de vagues | 7:16 |
| 3 III. Dialogue du vent et de la mer | 8:26 |

Igor
STRAVINSKY
(1882–1971)

The Rite of Spring (1911–13) (arr. Vladimir Leyetchkiss, 1985) 34:32

- | Part One: The Adoration of the Earth | | Part Two: The Sacrifice | |
|---|-------------|--|-------------|
| 4 Introduction | 3:11 | 11 Introduction | 4:38 |
| 5 Auguries of Spring
– Dances of the Young Girls | 3:32 | 12 Mystical Circles of
the Young Girls | 3:33 |
| 6 The Mock Abduction | 1:23 | 13 Glorification of the
Chosen Victim | 1:32 |
| 7 Spring Round Dance | 3:14 | 14 The Summoning of the Ancients | 0:39 |
| 8 Games of the Rival Clans | 1:51 | 15 Ritual Dance of the Ancients | 4:00 |
| 9 Procession of the Wise Elder | 0:37 | 16 Sacrificial Dance
– The Chosen Victim | 4:52 |
| 10 Adoration of the Earth (The Wise One)
– Dance of the Earth | 1:30 | | |

Ralph van Raat, Piano

Recorded: 16–18 August 2016 at Sweelinckzaal, Conservatorium van Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Producer and engineer: Rawyn Productions • Special thanks to the Conservatorium van Amsterdam

Publishers: Éditions Durand **1–3**; G. Schirmer, Inc. **4–16**

Booklet notes: Ralph van Raat • Cover painting by Madalina Costin (Dreamstime.com)