

## Programme note by Chris Darwin. Use freely for non-commercial purposes

### Claude Debussy (1862-1918) Sonata for cello and piano (1915)

*Prologue: Lent, sostenuto e molto risoluto*

*Sérénade: Modérément animé*

*Finale: Animé, léger et nerveux*

Given the popularity and influence of his 1893 string quartet, it is surprising that Debussy wrote so very little chamber music. A second quartet and a violin sonata were started around that time but not completed, and then almost no chamber music for 20 or so years. By 1914 things did not look good. A recent diagnosis of colorectal cancer together with depression at the outbreak of war had stopped him composing. But hearing a Septet with trumpet by Saint-Saëns stimulated an ambitious project: six sonatas each for a different combination of instruments. inspired by French baroque composers including Couperin. Tonight's cello sonata was the first to be completed (1915) followed by one for flute, viola & harp (1916) and one for violin & piano (1917); but three others were not finished before his death in March 1918: oboe, horn & harpsichord; clarinet, bassoon, trumpet & piano; and the sixth 'combining the previously used instruments'. The novel combination of oboe, horn & harpsichord subsequently inspired the *Sonata da Caccia* by 20-year-old Couperin fan Thomas Adès.

The cello sonata was written in a few weeks in July 1915 at the Normandy seaside town of Pourville, just west of Dieppe. It is a relatively short work (c. 10m) but, as so often with Debussy, draws a dazzling variety of sounds from the two instruments; it is technically demanding for both players. Structurally the work refers to classical French styles – Couperin was a favourite of Debussy – with just three movements, and without the clear exposition, development, recapitulation of the German tradition. The principal theme is heard as a lyrical, descending line in the cello (*illustrated*).



The mood changes dramatically for the episodically quirky *Sérénade* with lots of pizzicato from the cello. It leads without a break into the *Finale* which combines elements of the two preceding movements. For instance, the next illustrated passage is perhaps a crazy tumbling version of the opening principal theme, but analysing Debussy is beyond my pay grade! Just enjoy it.

