

Programme Note by Chris Darwin: please use freely for non-commercial purposes

**Claude Debussy (1862-1918)**

*Poissons d'or* (from *Images Book 2*, 1907)

*Jardins sous la pluie* (from *Estampes*, 1903)

*Reflets dans l'eau* (from *Images Book 1* 1905)

*L'isle joyeuse* (1904)

These four pieces date from a turbulent but productive period in Debussy's life, not unlike the early 1780s for Mozart. He had had success in 1902 with his opera based on the symbolist Maeterlink's play *Pélléas et Mélisande*. In June 1904 Debussy deserted his wife Lily Texier for Emma Bardac; the unmarried couple honeymooned in Jersey and Dieppe while Debussy wrote *L'isle joyeuse* (partly inspired by the Turner paintings that he had seen in London the previous year). In August 1905 they fled scandalised Paris for a month in Suite 200 of Eastbourne's Grand Hotel, where Debussy put the finishing touches to *La Mer* and commented: '*A little English seaside town, as ridiculous as these sorts of places always are... too many draughts and too much music.*'

Debussy's own music was moving away from the influence of Wagner, developing a style in a more French tradition. It incorporated "the colourful directness of Russian music, the discreet grace of Massenet and the vocal inflections of the French language... avoidance or softening [after Chabrier] of obvious cadences". Debussy also created "sophisticated proportional structures based on symmetry and the golden section (often following the numbers of the Fibonacci series)... How consciously this came about is unproven... its main interest lies in linking different aspects of the structure into a naturally balanced dramatic flow. All that said, Debussy was ever suspicious of systems and formulas and, in his own words, '*would rather devote myself to cultivating pineapples*' than lapse into repeating what he had already achieved".

Debussy's piano writing shows the influence of Chopin – his first piano teacher claimed to have been taught by him. It was also substantially influenced by Debussy's revelatory exposure to the Javanese Gamelan at the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris. In *L'isle joyeuse* he explores "a variety of different scales on A: major, whole-tone, Lydian, and a combination of Lydian and Mixolydian with sharpened fourth and flattened seventh, somewhat like an overtone series".

The newness of his music, despite his punctilious care in annotating his scores, seems to have flummoxed many contemporary pianists: '*Pianists are bad musicians and chop the music into unequal portions, like a chicken*'; '*It's impossible to imagine how my piano music has been distorted, so much that I often can hardly recognize it*' (to Varèse, 1910). [All quotations from Roy Howat on Debussy in the New Grove Dictionary].