

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

Claude Debussy (1862-1918): Première Rhapsodie for Clarinet & Piano (1910)

This short piece (c.7') was composed soon after Fauré, who had been Director of the Paris Conservatoire since *l'affaire Ravel* (see below), nominated Debussy to its Conseil Supérieur. Over the previous few years Debussy's music had finally achieved the success which had previously eluded him with triumphant performances of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *La mer* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'une faune*.

The *Première Rhapsodie* is one of two mandatory pieces Debussy was asked to write for the conservatory's clarinet competition. The *Rhapsodie* was given to candidates to study before the competition, Debussy also wrote a shorter second piece which was for sight-reading. The *Rhapsodie* is designed to expose any technical inadequacies in the performer: for example, one rapid passage exercises all 7 keys played by the little fingers. Despite these technical demands the piece is a thing of great beauty and has become a standard part of the clarinet repertoire. Debussy's colleagues liked it too: '*The clarinet competition went extremely well and, to judge by the expressions on the faces of my colleagues, the rhapsody was a success.*' After the public première by its dedicatee Prosper Mimart, Debussy declared it one of the most pleasing pieces he had ever written, and subsequently re-arranged it for clarinet and orchestra.

Like his much earlier *String Quartet No 1*, the *Rhapsodie* is entitled the first, but each is from a series of just one: he had planned a second rhapsody (for saxophone), but it never happened.