

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Katia & Marielle Labèque: Two Pianos

Sunday 28 January 2024, 7pm

Royal Festival Hall

Classical music is an incredible, centuries-long story. As we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – share that story with the world today, we're creating as many ways for as many different people as possible to experience this wonderful art form.

Whether this is your first encounter with classical music or one of many, I'm absolutely thrilled that you're joining us for more powerful human experiences. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2023/24.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

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### Repertoire

Debussy 6 Epigraphes antiques for 2 pianos	15'
Schubert Fantasia in F minor for piano duet, D.940	19'
<i>Interval</i>	
Ravel Ma mère l'Oye (Mother Goose) Suite for piano duet	15'
Philip Glass 4 Movements for 2 pianos	25'

### Performers

Katia Labèque *piano*

Marielle Labèque *piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes with one 20-minute interval.*

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### Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

#### 6 Epigraphes antiques for 2 pianos (1894)

*Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été (To invoke Pan, god of the summer wind)*

*Pour un tombeau sans nom (For a nameless tomb)*

*Pour que la nuit soit propice (So that the night is propitious)*

*Pour la danseuse aux crotales (For the dancer with crotales)*

*Pour l'égyptienne (For the Egyptian woman)*

*Pour remercier la pluie au matin (To thank the morning rain)*

In 1894, 24-year-old Belgian-born Pierre Louÿs published a remarkable translation of verse by the little-known ancient Greek writer Bilitis, a friend of revered poet Sappho. Bilitis' strange collection, discovered scrawled on the walls of a tomb in Cyprus, described a world of sensual communions with nature, of erotic adventures, of beauty and of violence.

Louÿs' volume shocked and titillated Parisian readers. But the whole endeavour was quickly exposed as an elaborate literary hoax. Bilitis had never existed, and the texts had been written by Louÿs himself – though that revelation did little to dent the work's popularity, nor appreciation of its sexual audacity.

Claude Debussy was in on the joke when he set three of the texts as his *Chansons de Bilitis* in 1898: he was a close friend of Louÿs, and admired the poems' sensual themes. When Louÿs planned a live recitation in Paris in 1901, complete with semi-naked *tableaux vivants*, Debussy again supplied the music, written for the otherworldly combination of two flutes, two harps and celesta.

Jump forward to 1914, and a somewhat cash-strapped Debussy, nagged by his publisher for new material, dug out those unusually scored pieces and reworked them for two pianos, creating his *Six épigraphes antiques*. Though shorn of their original texts, these new pieces still bear the imprint of their origins in an imaginary ancient Greece – as heard in the deity's airy piping that begins the first, 'Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été' – while also drawing on Debussy's uncanny knack for suggestion and evocation. Despite its apparently airborne harmonies, there's something appropriately granitic about 'Pour un tombeau sans nom'. Debussy captures the silence and expectation of the hours of darkness in 'Pour que la nuit soit propice', while rapid keyboard figurations evoke chiming handheld percussion in the elegant 'Pour la danseuse aux crotales'. A winding melody contrasts with an impacable bassline in the sultry 'Pour l'égyptienne', while the fresh pattering of precipitation ends the set in 'Pour remercier la pluie au matin' – complete with a brief memory of those opening panpipes.

### Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

#### Fantasia in F minor for piano duet, D.940

*Allegro molto moderato – Largo – Allegro vivace – Tempo I*

Piano duets were all the rage among well-heeled Viennese families in the first decades of the 19th century. Franz Schubert was well aware of the craze: he'd written more than 50 generally lightweight but likeable piano duets himself. It's another question entirely, however, whether the profound emotions of a piece like Schubert's F minor Fantasia were what those affluent households would have been accustomed to tackling.

He wrote the piece in 1828, the final year of his brief life, for himself to play with his former pupil Countess Caroline Esterházy, with whom he was almost certainly infatuated.

And it seems that Schubert had pioneering ambitions – both formally and emotionally – for his new piece even when he began work in January that year. The Fantasia essentially compresses the four movements of a traditional piano sonata into a single span of music. But in doing that, Schubert made a significant move towards the freer-flowing forms of later works by Liszt and others, pieces that would ultimately loosen the ties of traditional structures in favour of storytelling power.

Schubert's first movement opens with a quiet, haunting, somewhat hypnotic theme, later contrasted with a violent, stormier idea. A sudden shift in harmony leads us into Schubert's slow but tense second movement, and his third builds powerful momentum as a fast-moving waltz. His opening material returns in the final movement: after a gritted-teeth fugue, it veers towards the light, only to retreat back into darkness.

## **Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)**

### **Ma mère l'Oye (Mother Goose) Suite for piano duet**

*Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant (Sleeping Beauty's Pavane)*

*Petit Poucet (Tom Thumb)*

*Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodes (Little Ugly Girl, Empress of the Pagodas)*

*Les entretiens de la belle et de la bête (Conversation of Beauty and the Beast)*

*Le jardin féerique (The Fairy Garden)*

Friends of Maurice Ravel would remark on the childlike sense of wonder he retained even into adulthood, and he'd notoriously slip away from the grown-up repartee at sophisticated Parisian soirées to play games with his hosts' children.

Two of those kids were Mimi and Jean Godebski (aged eight and ten respectively), whose parents, Cipa and Ida, were close friends of the composer. Ravel wrote his *Ma mère l'Oye* as a suite of five fairytale-inspired piano duet pieces for the Godebski children in 1910, and hoped that the young siblings might even give the piece's premiere. In the end, it proved too stressful for them, and that honour went to the equally youthful pairing of Jeanne Leleu and Geneviève Durony, in Paris on 20 April 1910.

'My intention of awaking the poetry of childhood in these pieces naturally led me to simplify my style and thin out my writing,' the composer explained. *Ma mère l'Oye's* five short movements are disarmingly direct, but they lack nothing in harmonic or emotional sophistication.

The 'Pavane de la Belle au bois dormant' is a graceful dance of attendants around the sleeping princess. 'Petit Poucet' opens with irregular rising figures evoking the lost boy's wanderings, and also includes the gleeful squawking and twittering of the birds that have eaten the crumbs left to guide him home.

Inspired by a story by Madame d'Aulnoy, a rival of Charles Perrault, 'Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodes' is a princess

made unsightly by a spell, evoked in Ravel's vigorous, percussive orientalist fantasy. In 'Les entretiens de la belle et de la bête', Ravel nimbly contrasts a waltzing Beauty with a grumbling Beast, though their musics eventually merge after the Beast's magical transformation.

'Le jardin féerique' is the most enigmatic of the five pieces. It's not hard to imagine discovering the spectacle of fairyland at its glittering conclusion. But Ravel embedded another, more human reference. The falling two-note bell-like idea, heard six times as the movement approaches its climax, is indelibly associated throughout Ravel's music with his mother, to whom he was devoted. The same two notes reappear again and again setting the word 'Maman' (or 'Mother') in his children's opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, for example. It might not be too far-fetched to suggest that the world of joy and wonder Ravel is describing lies more in maternal love than in fairy magic.

## **Philip Glass (b.1937)**

### **4 Movements for 2 pianos**

We come right up to date – or to 2008, at least – with tonight's closing piece. US minimalist composer Philip Glass has composed prolifically for the piano (and made several solo piano recordings) right across his long career – that's despite only starting on the instrument aged 15 (he was a flautist originally). But by the time he came to write his 4 Movements – for pianists Maki Namekawa and close collaborator Dennis Russell Davies to unveil at Germany's Ruhr Piano Festival – that 'minimalist' descriptor was sounding increasingly past its use-by date. Not only does Glass exploit the fullest range of piano sounds and textures in the piece – right across the two instruments' ranges, from bell-like chimes to bassy grumbles – but he also finds new meanings in traditional ideas such as themes and melodies, musical narratives, and restless changes in harmony. That's all without turning his back on the repetitions and rippling cross-rhythms that have made his music so distinctive.

After its urgent opening, the first movement is percussive and assertive, eventually slumping to an exhausted close. Chiming figures pass back and forth between pianos in the slower, more delicate second movement. The vigorous third is the longest and most complex of the movements, with layered rhythms, interlocking figurations, even moments of otherworldly beauty. Glass' brief fourth movement begins in rumination, but soon builds to a glittering and outspoken ending.

**Programme notes © David Kettle, 2023**

#### **Find out more**

- ▶ [Katia & Marielle Labèque](#)
- ▶ [southbankcentre.co.uk](https://southbankcentre.co.uk)

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Saturday 23 March, 5pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

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