

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Tiffany Poon: Alkan, Debussy, Rameau & Ravel

Sunday 9 November 2025, 2pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

Some of the world's most exciting artists, including our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, join us to shine a light on this incredible art form. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2025/26.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Ravel Valses nobles et sentimentales	16'
Rameau Les tendres plaintes from Suite in D, RCT.3; Les sauvages & La poule from Suite in G major/minor, RCT.6; Le rappel des oiseaux from Suite in E minor, RCT.2	12'
Alkan Le festin d'Esopé (Etude, Op.39 No.12)	9'
<i>Interval</i>	
Debussy 2 Arabesques	7'
Debussy Bruyères (Préludes, Bk.2 No.5)	3'
Debussy Images, Set 1	15'
Ravel Une barque sur l'océan from Miroirs	7'
Debussy L'isle joyeuse	6'

Performer

Tiffany Poon *piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

Hello Londoners! Let's dance into nature, shall we? (If you were at my London debut last year, you'd know exactly why I'm opening Nature tour with Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales*.)

I'll let you in on a little secret... I was testing an album concept last time I was on this very stage. It turns out... I was more intoxicated by the colors of French music (and your reactions to them) than I was by my original concept.

So, I hope you will revel in the vivid feelings and memories of nature from all the French music today, with all her beauty, humor (ahem, humour), and marvel.

Cheerio!

Tiffany Poon

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Valses nobles et sentimentales

Maurice Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* carries a quotation from the poet Henri de Régnier: '... le plaisir délicieux et toujours nouveau d'une occupation inutile' (...the pleasure, delicious and always new, of a useless pursuit). It well suits these eight languid salon waltzes, composed in 1911 when Ravel was about 36. Later he orchestrated the set and considered turning it into a ballet, even writing a scenario, *Adélaïde, ou le langage des fleurs* (Adelaide, or the language of flowers).

After an opening full of sensual rhythm and extravagant harmonies, the waltzes alternate inward-looking moments with lively and playful music, culminating in the seventh with truly Viennese 'schwung'. The final number casts an ear back over the past – perhaps treasuring the memories.

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764)

Les tendres plaintes from Suite in D, RCT.3

Les sauvages & La poule from Suite in G major/minor, RCT.6

Le rappel des oiseaux from Suite in E minor, RCT.2

In the late 19th century, Camille Saint-Saëns, Claude Debussy and their colleagues turned to the 18th century, especially Jean-Philippe Rameau and François Couperin, for inspiration in creating a new type of music with authentically French roots. Following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, they wanted to shake off German influence; since opera had dominated French music in the 19th century, they looked further back for instrumental models. Debussy wrote that he loved Rameau's 'delicate and charming tenderness... without that German affectation of profundity, without the need to underline or explain everything'.

Rameau's keyboard pieces are usually arranged in suites and often bear allusive titles. Today's selections all date from the mid-1720s. 'Les tendres plaintes' is an elegant aria over a purling accompaniment. The dance 'Les sauvages' (literally 'the savages'), though included in his Suite in G major/minor, also appears in his opera *Les Indes galantes* (The Gallant Indians)

– in which the daughter of a Native American chief rejects European suitors in favour of her local beloved. 'La poule' – the hen – is a substantial and brilliant toccata in which the principal theme imitates the clucking, pecking and squawking of a chicken, while also displaying the performer's clear staccato touch. Finally, in 'Le rappel des oiseaux' (The call of birds) two delicate musical lines seem to exchange the sounds of avian twittering and trilling.

Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813–88)

Le festin d'Esopé (Etude, Op.39 No.12)

Charles-Valentin Alkan entered the Paris Conservatoire as a child prodigy pianist, auditioning aged five. Through his 20s he was a musical luminary, counting Chopin, Liszt and Victor Hugo among his friends. Personal blows – including the birth of an alleged 'natural' son (the spectacular pianist, Élie-Miriam Delaborde), Chopin's death, and his own rejection as potential head of piano at the conservatoire – led him to retreat from performing in 1849 for some 25 years.

'Le festin d'Esopé' (Aesop's Feast), written about a decade into this seclusion, is the 12th of his Op.39 Etudes. An eight-bar theme with 25 variations, it is more a passacaglia than a classic variation set; Alkan exploits a full range of the piano's multitudinous capabilities, from spiky octaves and high-speed figuration to hushed lyricism and deep tremolando mystery. The title is thought to refer to Aesop's challenge to create two feasts – one from the finest dishes, one from the basest. Perhaps Alkan imagined that first banquet, transformed into music.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Arabesques

Bruyères (from Preludes II)

Images, Set 1

For many piano students, Claude Debussy's *Arabesques* (1891) – his first published piano works – are their introduction to his supple, seductive sound-world. The term originally described the intricate ornamental patterns of Islamic art; Debussy also applied it to Baroque music, referring to its 'delicate intertwinings' and 'that free, ever fresh fantasy which still amazes us today'. The first Arabesque is full of such intertwinings; the second, capricious and filigree, is dominated by a skittering triplet figure.

'Bruyères' (heather), from the second book of Preludes, suggests a pastoral idyll, with a calm, open-hearted melody; Debussy's wife, Emma, described it as a 'visual evocation of the simple flowers' of heather.

In 1904 the self-willed composer had left his first wife to abscond with Emma Bardac, a singer, wife of a banker, and a former mistress of Gabriel Fauré. The couple eventually enjoyed a happy marriage. The first of Debussy's two sets of piano pieces entitled *Images* dates from 1905, by which time he was benefitting from this new stability. 'With no

false vanity,' Debussy told his publisher, 'I believe that these pieces are a success and that they will take their place in the literature of the piano, on the left hand of Schumann or the right hand of Chopin...'

Debussy thoroughly disliked being considered an Impressionist. The first piece of *Images I*, 'Reflets dans l'eau', is not so much a picture as an excuse to explore the piano's potential for texture and colour: often its motifs shine up from lower registers through watery cascades above. The central sarabande, 'Homage à Rameau', displays the poise and elegance that the composer admired in his long-ago forerunner. Finally, 'Mouvement' is an abstract perpetuum mobile, travelling at speed through startling adventures in sonority.

Maurice Ravel

Une barque sur l'océan from Miroirs

Ravel was not a top-flight virtuoso, but found the ideal exponent for his music in the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes. The two met at the Paris Conservatoire and shared some Spanish heritage: Ravel was from the Basque area of France and had a passion for the region's complex folk music.

On 6 January 1906, Viñes premiered *Miroirs*, a set of six pieces each bearing a pictorial title. Ravel did not mind it being considered 'Impressionist', though he noted also that 'Impressionism does not seem to have any precise meaning outside the domain of painting'.

The third piece, 'Une barque sur l'océan' (A boat on the ocean), conjures a vast seascape with uneven rhythmic swells and surging waves, capturing both its beauty and its danger.

Claude Debussy

L'isle joyeuse

L'isle joyeuse (The Joyful Island, 1904) is a celebration of sensual joy, inspired by Watteau's painting (again, an 18th-century influence) *L'embarquement pour Cythère*, depicting lovers sailing to the island where Venus, goddess of love, first emerged from the sea. That same year Debussy eloped with Emma Bardac, travelling to Britain – notably Eastbourne – where he worked on revisions of both his orchestral work *La mer* and this piece, an ecstatic bacchanale.

It opens with a trill-laden cadenza before settling into a hypnotic dance, its melody based on the whole-tone scale. In contrast, a passionate, sensual theme surges over a wave-like accompaniment. The dance intensifies and the coda concludes in a surge of Dionysian celebration. The pianist Marguerite Long described it as 'a gorgeous vision, inspired with joy and prodigious exuberance.'

Programme notes © Jessica Duchon, 2025

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