

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Olivier Latry Plays Wagner

Wednesday 31 May 2023, 7.30pm

Royal Festival Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Messiaen Apparition de l'église éternelle

Liszt St François d'Assise (La prédication aux oiseaux)
(Légende, S.175 No.1)

Saint-Saëns Aquarium, Volière & Le cygne from
Le carnaval des animaux arr. Shin-Young Lee

Franck Pièce héroïque in B minor from
3 Pièces pour grand orgue

Interval

Wagner Overture, Der fliegende Holländer arr. Edwin Lemare 10'

Wagner Allmächt'ger Vater from Rienzi arr. Sigfrid Karg-Elert 8'

Wagner Overture, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg
arr. Edwin Lemare 10'

Performer

Olivier Latry organ

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour 35 mins
and there is a 20-minute interval.

Olivier Messiaen (1908-92)

Apparition de l'église éternelle

As organist at Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral, and professor of his instrument at the Paris Conservatoire, tonight's soloist Olivier Latry follows a long line of esteemed forebears in both church and academic realms. In the first half of this evening's concert, he pays musical homage to three of them.

Olivier Messiaen was professor of harmony and composition at the Conservatoire, and organist at Paris' Eglise de la Sainte-Trinité from 1931 until his death in 1992, although he's better known to listeners as a composer. He wrote his monumental

Apparition de l'église éternelle in 1932, when he was just 24, fresh from his own studies at the Conservatoire. The piece is an enormous arch of colour and power, as the immortal church emerges from the quiet gloom of the piece's opening to reveal itself in all its glories – depicted in a blazing, brilliant C major chord (marked *fffff*) at the piece's climax – only to recede again into darkness and silence. The effect is a fleeting glimpse of divinity, shot through with awe and wonder – an early taste of the overwhelming musical bedazzlement that would mark out much of Messiaen's later music.

Franz Liszt (1811-86) (arr. Camille Saint-Saëns, 1835-1921) St François d'Assise (La prédication aux oiseaux)

Messiaen was deeply inspired by birdsong right across his music, and created one of his most lavish tapestries of avian music in his 1983 opera *St François d'Assise*. More than a century earlier, Franz Liszt recounted the same Saint's sermon to the birds in tonight's next piece, the first of the two Legends from 1863 that he dedicated to his daughter Cosima (who would later marry Richard Wagner).

Liszt was in deep mourning at the time, following the death of Cosima's sister Blandine the previous year, and retreated in spiritual contemplation to Monte Mario near Rome. There, he's known to have taken solace in the birds he saw and heard, and incorporated their trilling, chirruping songs into this delicate, airborne music.

Liszt's friend and admirer Camille Saint-Saëns premiered his organ arrangement of the piece in Paris in 1878, later performing it in Weimar in front of its original composer. 'I am still struck with wonder at your "St Francis' Sermon to the Birds",' Liszt wrote to him four years later. 'You use your organ as an orchestra in an incredible way, as only a great composer and a great performer, like yourself, could do.' Liszt's music remains at a stratospheric register for much of the piece – accentuated in Saint-Saëns' buoyant organ arrangement – before a slower, deeper theme may indicate the Saint's arrival. The piece ends with the birds and holy man in conversation and communion.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

(arr. Shin-Young Lee, b.1982)

Le carnaval des animaux

Aquarium, Volière & Le cygne

Saint-Saëns was himself organist at La Madeleine in Paris from 1857 until 1877 (Liszt hailed him as the world's greatest organist when he heard his improvisations there). If he'd had his way, however, what's undeniably his most popular work might never have reached the ears of concert-goers.

Saint-Saëns wrote the 14 poignantly humorous miniatures of *The Carnival of the Animals* in February 1886 as light relief following a difficult concert tour of Germany, but banned public performance lest the piece should damage his reputation as a serious composer. An early, private airing took place at a soirée hosted by legendary singer Pauline Viardot, one of whose guests was none other than Liszt, but the work wasn't published until 1922, the year after Saint-Saëns' death.

South Korea-born, Paris-based organist Shin-Young Lee (who also happens to be Olivier Latry's wife) has made a brilliantly witty arrangement for Saint-Saëns' own instrument. We hear three movements: the magical, watery evocations of 'Aquarium'; Saint-Saëns' own birdsong tribute in 'Volière'; and the long, arching melody of 'Le cygne'.

César Franck (1822-90)

Pièce héroïque in B minor

Liège-born César Franck – organist at Paris' Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde, and professor of organ at the Paris Conservatoire – was a close contemporary of Saint-Saëns, though the two men didn't see eye to eye. Where Saint-Saëns was garrulous, opinionated and effusive about his achievements, Franck was reserved, unfailingly polite and modest to a fault. Nonetheless, Franck maintained a great respect for his eminent colleague, even dedicating his 1879 Piano Quintet to Saint-Saëns (though the latter stalked off the stage after performing in its Paris premiere, ignoring the audience's applause, and barely concealing his disdain for the music).

Franck wrote his *Pièce héroïque* in 1878, as the last of three pieces celebrating the opening of the Paris' Trocadéro, a grand, Moorish-style edifice constructed specially for that year's World Exhibition (on a site now occupied by the Palais de Chaillot). In its 5,000-seat concert hall, the Trocadéro boasted a grand organ constructed by legendary maker Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, an instrument whose magnificent capabilities Franck exploited in this imposing, sonorous music. The piece's heroic main theme begins darkly in the left hand, propelled along by shifting harmonies surely inspired by Wagner. A fresher, more lyrical theme later emerges, and the two ideas join battle before the piece's hymn-like close.

Find out more

- ▶ Olivier Latry
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

Richard Wagner (1813-83)

(arr. Edwin Lemare, 1865-1934)

Overture, Der fliegende Holländer

Wagner poses a fundamental problem for audiences outside the opera house. His music is deeply loved and held in high esteem, but he wrote so little for the concert hall that it's rarely heard – bar operatic overtures and interludes, that is. The problem is even worse for organists, especially those – like Edwin Lemare at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – who held a particular passion for the great German opera composer's music.

It was in 1905 that Lemare made his brilliantly coloured, exuberant organ arrangement of the Overture from *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman), just one of dozens of Wagner transcriptions he created across his glittering international career. Premiered in Dresden in 1843, *Der fliegende Holländer* probably counts as Wagner's earliest mature opera, a tale of a phantom vessel riding the wild seas, and a ghostly seafarer's quest for redemption through the love of a woman. The Dutchman's own bounding theme opens the Overture, over a surging accompaniment on the organ pedals that captures the swelling power of the ocean, and a far gentler, more lyrical later theme introduces the woman he prays will save his soul.

Richard Wagner

(arr. Sigfrid Karg-Elert, 1877-1933)

Allmächt'ger Vater (Reinzi's Prayer) from Rienzi

Almost an exact contemporary of Lemare, German composer and organist Sigfrid Karg-Elert was another passionate Wagnerian, and even suggested he might embark on transcribing Wagner's entire operatic output for organ. He quickly backtracked, but nonetheless managed more than 100 Wagner transcriptions in total. His original adaptation of the aria 'Allmächt'ger Vater' from Wagner's *Rienzi* was for the smaller harmonium, although Karg-Elert later reworked the piece for the richer sonic canvas of the organ. It's nonetheless music of hushed wonder and radiant simplicity, as, excommunicated and increasingly unpopular, the medieval Roman leader in Wagner's 1842 opera prays for divine support to continue his work.

Richard Wagner

(arr. Edwin Lemare, 1865-1934)

Overture, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

Olivier Latry concludes his recital with what surely counts as Lemare's grandest, most exuberant Wagner transcription for organ. Lemare first encountered Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as a 13-year-old boy, accompanying his mother to a Covent Garden performance. It was an experience that established Lemare's deep love for Wagner's music – in, fittingly, an opera that itself celebrates the power of music. Premiered in 1868, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is Wagner's only comic work, a good-natured tale of a historic song contest and the surprise victory of raw, untrained talent over fusty tradition. Wagner wrote his Overture long before he completed the opera itself, but nonetheless laid down in it the larger work's main themes: a grand, ceremonial opening depicting the procession of Nuremberg's ancient Guilds, followed by the lyrical winning song itself, which returns to bring Lemare's transcription to a resplendent, sonorous close.