

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Pierre-Laurent Aimard & Mathieu Amalric: Ravel

Thursday 27 March 2025, 7pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

However you choose to experience the endlessly inventive world of classical music, we're so glad that you're doing it here with us. Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2025.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Musical content (interspersed with readings)

Maurice Ravel (1875 – 1937)

Excerpts from *Jeux d'eau* & *Valses nobles et sentimentales* 7'

Le tombeau de Couperin

I. Prélude 3'

III. Forlane 6'

VI. Toccata 4'

Miroirs

I. Noctuelles 5'

IV. Alborada del gracioso 6'

V. La vallée des cloches 6'

Gaspard de la nuit 22'

I. Ondine

II. Le Gibet

III. Scarbo

Of course, we had first thought of alternating Ravel pieces played on the piano with his written words, read aloud. Each in turn, Ravel's music and thoughts would try to enlighten each other.

Then, during the rehearsals and meetings around a piano, the conversations became richer and the resonance between musics and words seemed, in this informal way, so much more alive to us. Questions were raised, instantly, scores drawn, suddenly, words would come out of Ravel's correspondence, leafed through on a table. Pierre-Laurent would mention while playing 'more yellow', 'less blue'... It became obvious, it was this open form we wanted to share, which seemed to capture on the spot the movement, the richness and the shimmer of Ravel's music in the making. So, there will be a grand piano on stage, but maybe also an upright one. So, there will be the readings, but maybe also a light camera, held live. A concert in the colours of the workshop.

Text by Pierre-Laurent Aimard & Mathieu Amalric

Performers

Pierre-Laurent Aimard *piano*

Mathieu Amalric *speaker*

Good evening! I must thank you for coming. One never knows... But please, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Maurice Ravel. It was once a silly hope of mine that I might become known just by my surname, like the august Beethoven, like the divine Mozart.

Ravel!

Foolishness, as I say.

They did ask me if I would say a few words, just a few words, from the stage, to open the proceedings. But I asked to be excused. Speaking in public was always a torment to me. Even more so now. I would rather just slip in and take my place in the auditorium. If you should find that I happen to be sitting next to you, I beg you to ignore me. Just as you would anyone else. Pretend I am not here. Thank you.

*This performance lasts approximately 75 minutes.
There is no interval.*

Now. We have come here to witness not only a musical performance but also a kind of enactment, in which my excellent friend Pierre-Laurent Aimard is to play himself as he prepares for a concert of my music. We see, as it were, behind the scenes. Pierre-Laurent is in his studio, wondering what to play alongside my *Gaspard de la nuit*.

Keep that thought in your mind, if you will, while I tell you just a little about this work of mine. I wrote it well over a century ago, in 1908 – not for myself, for I could certainly never have played it, and not for Monsieur Aimard, whom I did not know at the time, but – this will interest you – for an English virtuoso, Mr Harold Bauer. It is a set of three pieces, on subjects from a book of poems in prose by Aloysius Bertrand, a poet from the time of the young Baudelaire. These texts are fantastic! And I dare to say that my music is a little fantastic, too.

In the first piece, 'Ondine', a siren lures a young man to join her in the deep. Her singing grows in passion, but her intended victim rejects her, and her song disintegrates into tears and laughter.

We turn to 'Le Gibet', The Gallows. A bell is tolling in the distance; we hear also the wind, the swinging of the hanged man, the buzz of insects, the sunset glow on his skull. At first dismal, the music becomes heady, even glamorous in its contemplation of death and decay. Contradictions, you see, entice me.

The finale is 'Scarbo', the portrait of a shape-shifting gnome – an ideal subject for music, because a small motif, no more than three notes, can sweep from sinisterness to splendour and turn this obnoxious character into a fairy-tale prince.

But enough. Back to our show. Pierre-Laurent is joined on stage by Mathieu Amalric, who has come to drive him to the concert hall, where Amalric will also take part by reading the poems on which I based the pieces I have just described to you. This is something I always dreamed of: that the poetry and the music could disport themselves as near as possible in conjunction.

No matter. Pierre-Laurent and Mathieu discuss the evening to come, which will include other compositions of mine.

From my *Miroirs*, which I wrote shortly before *Gaspard*, in 1904–05, Pierre-Laurent chooses three of the five pieces. In 'Noctuelles', or Nocturnal Moths, I hope you will hear the fluttering of dusty wings, dismissed for a middle section and then reassembled. 'Alborada del gracioso' – The Comic's Aubade, you might say – is one of my Spanish caprices, all high colour and castanets, giving way to the lumbering but heartfelt song indicated by the title. After the first music has come back, the song reappears, but gets lost in the excitement. 'Vallée des cloches' – Valley of Bells – is full of bell sounds of every kind, as many as I can have the piano muster.

As I understand it, the programme also includes selections from two other sets of pieces by me, each more homogeneous. *Valses nobles et sentimentales* is a suite of, yes, waltzes, in the diverse tones I purloined from the inestimable Schubert. *Le tombeau de Couperin* was my homage to another colleague, if I may call him such: François Couperin, Couperin Le Grand. It was music I made in imitation of the grandeur and the liveliness, the glory and the gaiety of another age. It was what I did to face away from the war of 1914–18 and to excuse myself to my lost friends.

So that's it. I hope you will tolerate these modest examples of my modest talent.

Oh, I almost forgot. *Jeux d'eau*, from 1901. Fountains, I called it, stealing unashamedly from the magnificent Liszt. I was still a student. I knew nothing. But I knew how to make a splash.

Imagined words of Ravel © Paul Griffiths, 2025

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