

PROGRAMME NOTES

Claude Debussy, Préludes Book II: VIII. Ondine

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and his music was often described as *impressionist*, a term the composer famously disliked. The term *impressionism* in visual arts refers to painters who used starkly dissimilar colours, contrasts in light accentuating a change in time, and an inclusion of movement as a crucial element of human experience.

Both Debussy and fellow impressionist composer Maurice Ravel had composed music for solo piano with the title “Ondine”, inspired by the namesake water sprite who places a deadly curse on a mortal who had betrayed her love. While Ravel’s more famous work, completed in 1908, tells of the sprite seducing a mortal, Debussy’s depiction portrays her as a playful character, splashing about in the water where she calls home.

This piece, written with a tempo marking of *Scherzo* to emphasise the whimsical nature of the piece, opens in an ethereal mood. It quickly turns mischievous, with two key musical ideas: a *scintillant* figure that swirls about, and a melody of repeated notes that evokes mystery, which reappears in the higher register, and is subsequently heard in a more menacing, darker hue in the bass. A final splash marks the departure of the water sprite, as well as the conclusion of the piece.

Franz Schubert, Piano Sonata in A minor, Op. 143, D. 784: III. Allegro vivace

In early-1823, Franz Schubert (1797-1828), the man behind the “Unfinished” Symphony, was in terrible health. He had suffered from anaemia, fever, headaches, a rash and a nervous disorder resulting from syphilis; his symptoms became so severe that he was admitted to the Vienna General Hospital in May that year. In addition, Schubert was constantly penniless, living largely on donations from devoted friends, and the occasional pittance from some performance or publication. In a letter to Leopold Kupelweiser, his close friend, he laments: “In a word, I feel myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and whose sheer despair over this makes things constantly worse instead of better; imagine a man whose most brilliant hopes have perished, to whom the felicity of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain; whom enthusiasm (at least of the stimulating kind) for all things beautiful threatens to forsake, and I ask you, is he not a miserable, unhappy being?”

The result of Schubert’s miserable state of health was this A minor piano sonata, composed in the February of 1823– one of his darkest and most desolate pieces. The third movement, a rondo, is characterised by a frenzied leading theme, reminiscent of the Italian *tarantella* dance whose exertions were said to rid the body of the poison of the tarantula spider’s deadly bite. These frantic passages lead to violent climaxes of arpeggios that move in contrary motion, as though breaking off. Lyrical moments offer little respite, always overwhelmed by the frantic music. The Sonata ends with furious, soaring scales followed by four hammered chords.