



# FÊTES GALANTES

Songs of Claude Debussy



WALTER HALL

Sunday, January 17, 1993

2:30 p.m.

# Fêtes Galantes

Songs of Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

ANN MONOYIOS, soprano    MARIANNE BINDIG, mezzo

BRETT POLEGATO, baritone

STEPHEN RALLS and BRUCE UBUKATA, piano

28

Our concert today might be considered a companion piece to our Fauré celebration of last year; for that programme, *Clair de Lune*, we used the title of a Verlaine poem heard today in Debussy's setting. The title of *today's* programme seems to have appeared first in descriptions of entertainments enjoyed by Louis XIV and his court at Versailles. Some plays written around 1700 were also called *fêtes galantes*. But the term gained lasting significance as the designation, first used in 1717, of some of Watteau's most famous paintings — pictures with titles like *Le Concert*, *Plaisirs d'amour*, *Assemblée dans un parc* or *Divertissements champêtres*.

A feature common to all *fêtes galantes*, be they court entertainments, plays or paintings, seems to have been that they were set out of doors; a ravishing natural setting encouraged the amorous proclivities of the characters involved and gave ample opportunity for their fulfilment. Here is a description from Donald Posner's monograph on Watteau (1984): "The place is a fabric of dreams, and so too is the scene . . . We hear the sound of music rising above the murmured words of a company that has arranged itself, almost wholly, in pairs. At the right couples flirt, testing each other. At the left, where Pierrot smiles and Harlequin makes his triumphant salute, men and women begin to embrace. The dance is the promise of fulfilment, signalled by the fountain that surges high behind the dancers, at the entry to the sheltering woods awaiting lovers who descend the terrace."

That passage could almost be a prose translation of one of Paul Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*. This slim volume of poems (produced in 1869 and undoubtedly influenced by the writings of the Goncourt brothers on French eighteenth century painting) was a catalyst to a whole host of composers, notably Fauré and Debussy. The latter's *Ariettes oubliées* and *Fêtes galantes* cycles are among the greatest in the repertoire of French song.

It could be argued, however, that it was in his last cycle, *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, that Debussy achieved the most nearly perfect synthesis of words and music. The poetry of Mallarmé had already inspired the orchestral *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune* and Debussy identified closely



with the Symbolist style of writing (as witness his own texts for his *Proses lyriques*). Mallarmé's complex yet crystalline poems, often using themes and ideas from the *fêtes galantes*, are matched in Debussy's economical yet intensely expressive music — once more showing how a composer often loosely classed as 'Impressionist' achieved his powerful effects through the utmost clarity and precision.



Please reserve your applause until after the items marked with the symbol ❖

## EARLY SONGS

Before the age of twenty-one, Debussy had written some thirty songs. His natural flair in writing for the voice is obvious, as is a certain influence from Massenet (a leading teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, although Debussy did not study with him). Earning money by playing for singing lessons, he met Marie-Blanche Vasnier, a beautiful young amateur singer (and wife of a civil servant), with whom he had an affair for several years. Most of these songs were written for her.

### Mandoline (Paul Verlaine) (1882)

*Serenaders and their lovely listeners exchange sweet nothings beneath the singing branches.*

*Tircis, Aminte, the eternal Clitandre, and Damis, who writes tender verses for many a cruel mistress.*

*Their short silken doublets, their long trailing dresses, their elegance, their joy and their soft blue shadows whirl in the ecstasy of a pink and grey moon, and the mandoline twangs in the quivering breeze.* ❖

### Fête galante (Théodore de Banville) (1882)

*There is Sylvandre and Lycas and Myrtil, for this evening is Cydalise's party. Everywhere, a delicate perfume floats through the air.*

*In the great park, Aminte rivals the rose; Phillis and Eglé follow their lovers into the shadows. In the bright sunshine, proudly rivalling diamonds, the white peacock spreads wide its tail.* ❖

### Souhait (Banville) (1880)

For several years, Debussy was employed through the summers by Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patroness. He taught her children the piano and played Tchaikovsky's works with her in four-hand arrangements. This song was composed in Florence on one of their extended excursions.

*Wish: Oh! when death, which nothing can appease, will take us both in a final kiss and throw the mantle of its wings over us:*

*May we rest under twin stones! May perfumed roses blossom from our two bodies, which loved each other so much, and our souls flower together and doves gaze at each other above our tombs!* ❖

## Apparition (Stéphane Mallarmé) (1884)

*Apparition: The moon grew sad. Weeping seraphs, dreaming among hazy flowers, drew from their viols white sobs which glided over the blue petals.*

*It was the blessed day of your first kiss. I became drunk with the sad perfume which is left behind, without regret or disappointment, when a dream vanishes from the heart.*

*So I wandered, eyes downcast, when, with sun in your golden hair, in the street and in the evening, you appeared to me, laughing, and I thought I saw the fairy crowned with brightness who once passed through my childish slumbers, dropping white bouquets of scented stars like snow from her hands.*



## Chevaux de bois (Ariettes oubliées) (Verlaine) (1885)

*Merry-go-round: Turn, turn, fine wooden horses turn a thousand times, turn often and go on turning, turn to the sound of the oboes.*

*The ruddy child and the pale mother, the lad in black and the girl in pink, the one matter-of-fact, the other showing off, each one has his Sunday pennyworth.*

*Turn, turn, horses of their choice, while around all your whirling squints the eye of the crafty pickpocket, turn to the sound of the triumphant cornet.*

*It is amazing how intoxicating it is to ride this in this stupid circle, with a sinking stomach and a dizzy head, heaps of discomfort and plenty of fun.*

*Turn, hobbies, without any need ever to use spurs to keep you at a gallop, turn, turn without hope of hay.*

*And hurry, horses of their fancy, already the supper bell is ringing, night falls and disperses the troop of gay drinkers famished by thirst.*

*Turn, turn! The velvet sky is slowly pricked with golden stars. The church bell tolls a mournful knell, turn to the merry beating of the drums.*



## FIN DE SIÈCLE

## Fêtes galantes I (Verlaine) (1891)

With this cycle, Debussy further refined his considerable experience of setting Verlaine. (An early version of *Fantoches*, in fact, dates from 1882.)

## 1. En sourdine

*Muted: Calm in the half-light cast by the high branches, let our love be filled with this profound silence. Let our souls, our hearts and our enraptured senses mingle with the hazy languors of the pines and arbutus.*

*Half close your eyes, cross your arms upon your breast and banish forever all purpose from your sleeping heart. Let us be coaxed by the soft, lulling breeze that comes to ripple the waves of russet grass at your feet.*

*And when, solemnly, evening falls from the black oaks, the voice of our despair, the nightingale, will sing.*



## 2. Fantoches

*Marionettes: Scaramouche and Pulcinella, brought together by a wicked plan, are gesticulating, black against the moon.*

*Meanwhile the excellent doctor from Bologna slowly gathers herbs in the brown grass.*

*Then his daughter, enticing and pretty, under the bower, stealthily, slips half naked, looking for her fine Spanish pirate whose distress is loudly proclaimed by an amorous nightingale.*

## 3. Clair de lune

*Moonlight: Your soul is an exquisite landscape enchanted by masques and bergamasques, playing the lute and dancing, yet almost sad beneath their fantastic disguises.*

*Singing in a minor key of love triumphant and of life's pleasures, they seem not to believe in their happiness, and their song mingles with the moonlight! — with the calm, sad, beautiful moonlight which makes the birds dream in the trees and the fountains sob in ecstasy, the tall slender fountains among the marbles.*



## De rêve (Proses lyriques) (1892)

The cycle of four *Proses lyriques* was a kind of experiment for Debussy. He wrote his own texts in an attempt to emulate the most extravagant styles of Baudelaire or Mallarmé, full of allusions and symbols. The music is a similar synthesis of influences from Wagner, Borodin, Massenet — but a unique and valuable example of Debussy's style, nonetheless. The close of this, the first song, shows the paradox of Debussy's finding hope and a promise of rebirth in the midst of apparent decay and death (a theme found also in Mallarmé).

*Of dreams: The night has the sweetness of woman, and the old trees under the golden moon are dreaming! To her, who has just passed with head bepearled, now and forever heartbroken, they did not know how to give her a sign...*

*All! they have passed: the Frail Ones, the Foolish Ones, casting their laughter to the thin grass, and to the fondling breezes the bewitching caress of hips in the fullness of their beauty. Alas! of all this, nothing is left but a pale tremor...*

*The old trees under the golden moon are weeping their beautiful golden leaves! None will again dedicate to them the pride of the golden helmets now tarnished, tarnished forever. The knights are dead on the way to the Grail!*

*The night has the sweetness of woman, hands seem to caress the souls, hands so foolish, so frail, in the days when the swords sang for them! Strange sighs rise under the trees. My soul you are gripped by a dream of long ago!*



Chansons de Bilitis (*Pierre Louÿs*) (1892)

Pierre Louÿs was a close friend of Debussy. His poems are purportedly by Bilitis, an imaginary female poet in ancient Greece. Their imagery has links with the Mallarmé of *L'Après-midi d'un faune*: the faun's flute reappears in the hands of Pan. There are musical parallels, especially in the second song, with *Pelléas et Melisande*, on which Debussy was working at this time.

## 1. La Flûte de Pan

*Pan's flute: For the day of the Hyacinthia feast, he has given me a syrinx made from well-cut reeds, held together with white wax which is sweet as honey to my lips. He is teaching me to play it, seated on his knees; but I am trembling a little. He plays it after me, so softly that I can scarcely hear him.*

*We have nothing to say to one another so close together are we; but our songs wish to answer each other and in turn our mouths meet on the flute.*

*It is late; here is the song of the green frogs which begins with the night.*

*My mother will never believe that I have stayed so long looking for my lost girdle.*

## 2. La Chevelure

*The tresses: He said to me 'Last night I dreamed I had your tresses around my neck. I had your locks like a black necklace round my neck and on my chest. I caressed them and they were mine; and we were bound together forever in this way, by the same hair, mouth against mouth, just as two laurel trees often have only one root. And gradually it seemed to me, so much were our limbs entwined, that I was becoming you or that you were entering into me like my dream.'*

*When he had finished, he gently placed his hands on my shoulders and looked at me so tenderly that I lowered my eyes with a shiver.*

## 3. Le Tombeau des Naiades

*The tomb of the Naiads: Through the frost-covered woods I walked; in front of my mouth my hair blossomed with little icicles, and my sandals were heavy with packed muddy snow.*

*He said to me: 'What are you looking for?' 'I am following the tracks of the satyr. The prints of his little cloven hooves alternate like holes in a white cloak.' He said to me: 'The satyrs are dead. The satyrs and the nymphs too. Not for thirty years has there been such a terrible winter. The tracks you see are those of a goat. But let us stop here, where their tomb is.'*

*And with the iron of his hoe, he broke the ice of the spring where formerly the Naiads used to laugh. He picked up large cold pieces and, raising them towards the pale sky, he looked through them.* ❖



## INTERMISSION

during which tea will be served in the Toler Room

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### Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune (1892-3)

In the drowsy heat of a Sicilian afternoon, the faun recalls two beautiful nymphs whom he pursued and who ultimately escaped his clutches. Were they, in fact, imaginary beings conjured up by the notes of his flute? Unable to assuage his yearnings, he seeks refreshment in wine and sleep.

The Prélude — 'a very free interpretation of Mallarmé's poem' (Debussy) — was the composer's first major orchestral work. He himself produced this two piano version at the same time as the full score.



## A TWENTIETH CENTURY MASTER

### Fêtes galantes II (Verlaine) (1904)

We perform the second and third songs of Debussy's final Verlaine cycle. In these poems, irony and bitter disillusion gain predominance over sentiment and nostalgia.

#### 2. Le Faune

*The faun: An old terra-cotta faun is laughing in the middle of the lawns foretelling, no doubt, an ill sequel to these serene moments which have led me and you, melancholy pilgrims, to this hour whose flight spins to the sound of the tambourines.*

#### 3. Colloque sentimental

With great poignancy, Debussy reintroduces the nightingale's song from *En sourdine* (Fêtes galantes I) as even the distant memory of love is coldly denied.

*Sentimental dialogue: In the old park, deserted and frozen, two shades have just passed by. Their eyes are dead, their lips feeble, and their words can scarcely be heard:*

*'Do you remember our former ecstasy?'*

*'Why would you wish me to remember it?'*

*'Does your heart still beat at my very name? Do you still see my soul in your dreams?' '—No.'*

*'Oh, the wonderful days of unspeakable happiness when our lips were joined!' '—Perhaps.'*

*'How blue was the sky, how great our hope!'*

*'Hope has fled, defeated, toward the black sky.'*

*So they walked on amid the wild oatgrass, and only night heard their words.*



The next three songs show Debussy finding new inspiration in poets of the fifteenth century.

Deux rondels de Charles d'Orléans (1904)

1. Le Temps a laissé son manteau

*The season has cast its cloak of wind and cold and rain and is dressed in embroidery of shining sun, clear and lovely.*

*There is not a beast nor a bird that does not sing or cry in its own tongue. River, fountain and stream wear as a charming livery drops of silver jewellery. Each one is newly clad. The season has cast its cloak.*

2. Pour ce que Plaisance est morte

*Because pleasure is dead this May, I am attired in black; it is pitiful to see my heart which is so discomfited. I dress in the manner that is befitting, because pleasure is dead this May, I am attired in black.*

*The elements proclaim the news and will allow no diversion; but by means of the rain close the door of the meadows. Because pleasure is dead.*



Ballade des femmes de Paris (Trois ballades de François Villon) (1910)

*Ballad of the women of Paris: Although people regard as fine speakers the women of Florence and Venice, enough for them to be messengers, and especially the old ones; but be they Lombards or Romans, Genevans (at my peril), Piedmontese or Savoyards, there are no talkers like the Parisians.*

*The Neapolitan women have chairs, so it is said, of fine speech, and the Germans and the Prussians are very good chatterers; but be they Greeks or Egyptians, from Hungary or some other country, Spaniards or Castilians, there are no talkers like the Parisians.*

*Bretons, Swiss, know nothing about it, nor the Gascons and the women of Toulouse; two fish-wives from the Petit Pont would shut them up; and the Lorrainers, the English and the women of Calais, (have I included enough places?) of Picardy, or of Valenciennes, there are no talkers like the Parisians.*

*Prince, give the prize for fine speech to the ladies of Paris; whatever they say about Italians, there are no talkers like the Parisians.*





## Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé (1913)

For his last cycle, Debussy returned to the poems of Mallarmé and captured their essence in what Edward Lockspeiser called "an endless succession of tiny musical images — some no more than a trill, an arpeggio, or an unexpected change of rhythm." *Motifs* from the *fêtes galantes* recur (fountains, fans, princesses . . .). Mallarmé's poems, because of his exotic yet precise use of French syntax, are almost impossible to translate satisfactorily.

## 1. Soupir

*Sigh: my soul rises towards your brow, O calm sister, where dreams a russet-stained autumn, and towards the fleeting sky of your angelic eye, just as in a melancholy garden a white fountain faithfully sighs towards the azure..!*

*..Towards the compassionate azure of pale, pure October that mirrors its infinite languor in great pools and lets — over the still water where tawny leaves wildly wander in the wind, carving a cold furrow — the yellow sun draw its long ray.*

## 2. Placet futile

The imagery, drawn from eighteenth century porcelain, gives rise to a slow minuet.

*Futile petition: Princess! envying the fate of Hebe who appears on this cup at the kiss of your lips, I try my best but have only the sober rank of abbé and cannot be a naked figure on the Sèvres porcelain.*

*Since I am not your bearded lap-dog, nor your lozenge, nor your rouge, nor the idle game you toy with, and since I know your glance has fallen on me, blonde whose divine hairdressers are goldsmiths!..*

*Name us ... you whose raspberry laughter is like a flock of tame sheep, cropping everywhere and bleating deliriously...*

*Name us ... so that Love winged with a fan may paint me there, flute in my fingers, lulling this sheepfold, Princess, name us shepherd of your smiles.*

## 3. Eventail

This extraordinary, miraculous poem encompasses a whole world of feeling in the simple opening, fluttering and closing of a woman's fan.

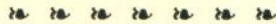
*Fan: O dreamer, so that I can plunge into pure, pathless delight, know by a cunning trick how to keep my wing in your hand.*

*The cool of evening comes to you at each fluttering, the captive stroke delicately pushing back the horizon.*

*Dizziness! behold how space shivers like a vast kiss which, mad through having been born for no-one, can neither gush forth nor calm itself.*

*Do you know of the savage paradise which flows like hidden laughter from the corner of your mouth to the bottom of the double fold!*

*It is a sceptre, like rose-coloured shores against a golden sunset, this white closed flight which you place against a bracelet's fire.* ❖



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We regret that **Marcia Swanston** is unable to appear in our March 7 concert, owing to operatic engagements; however, we are very pleased to announce that **Linda Maguire** will be joining **Wendy Neilsen** and **Russell Braun**, in a programme entitled *The Lonely Heart*, a Tchaikovsky celebration. We end the season on May 2 with *Liebeslieder* – a program based on Brahms' *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, and Schumann's *Spanische Liebeslieder*, with **Kathleen Brett**, **Catherine Robbin**, **Benoit Boutet** and **Daniel Lichti**. Tickets are available from our Box Office:

The Aldeburgh Connection, 56 Fulton Avenue  
 Toronto, M4K 1X5 (telephone 423-9318)

If you enjoyed today's programme, we invite you to join us for more *fêtes galantes*. At 8 pm on Wednesday February 17 we will perform the first of two special recitals in collaboration with CBC's *Arts National*. These concerts will take place in the CBC's new Glenn Gould Studio (250 Front Street West). The programme on February 17, entitled *Song Cycles by Francis Poulenc*, features **Rosemarie Landry** and **Brett Polegato**. On April 13 we will present Hugo Wolf's *Italienisches Liederbuch*, with **Monica Whicher** and **Russell Braun**. Tickets are \$16 (\$12 students/seniors) and may be ordered from The Glenn Gould Studio Box Office: Tel. 205-5555. There is a reduced rate to these concerts (\$14/10) for subscribers to our Sunday Series.

Box office revenues cover only a portion of our operating budget; the rest must be raised through donations, grants and corporate funding. You may become a **Patron** by donating \$100 or more; \$35 or more (\$50 or more for dual membership) will qualify you to become a **Friend**. You will receive information on our activities, and all donations will be acknowledged with a receipt for income tax purposes. Other donations and suggestions for corporate sponsorship will also be gratefully received. Your support is vital in helping to ensure the continuation of these Sunday concerts.



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We gratefully acknowledge assistance from:

- The Ontario Arts Council, The City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council and The Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto - Cultural Affairs Division
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**Aldeburgh** is the small town on the east coast of England where Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears and Eric Crozier founded the Festival of Music which flourishes to this day. Artistic directors **Stephen Ralls** and **Bruce Ubukata** have visited and worked there for many summers, together with many of the singers appearing with The Aldeburgh Connection.

**Ann Monoyios** enjoys an international career, specializing in the Baroque repertoire. She has performed extensively in Europe, both on stage and in the recording studio. Recent engagements in North America have included Mozart's *Il re pastore* in Los Angeles, Rameau's *Castor and Pollux* and Handel's *Saul* in New York, and Bach's *B minor Mass*, and she has toured the Far East as guest soloist with Tafelmusik. This season she recreated the role of Sangaride in Lully's *Atys* for the Opéra Comique in Paris and on tour in France, Spain and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Recording credits include Gluck's *Iphigenie en Aulide*, the Bach *St. Matthew Passion* and Monteverdi *Vespers* with John Eliot Gardiner (Erato and DG/Archiv), and De Falla's *Siete Canciones Populares* with Manuel Barrueco for EMI.

**Marianne Bindig** is a graduate of the University of Toronto where she specialized in both operatic performance and the art song repertoire. She has appeared at Banff, Tanglewood, and Aldeburgh, where she was heard recently in the *Johannes Passion* under the direction of Anthony Rolfe-Johnson. Ms Bindig has a special interest in early music, performing for the past four years with lutenist John Edwards. In the field of contemporary music, she has sung in Harrison Birtwistle's *Meridian* under conductor Oliver Knussen, and in *Last Tryst*, which was rescored for her by composer Nag Bhushan. Her most recent operatic appearance was in the new Canadian opera *Into the Light*, in Regina this past November.

Brett Polegato was heard as Figaro in the recent production of *The Marriage of Figaro* with Opera Atelier and Tafelmusik. He has appeared with Opera in Concert in performances of *Der Freischütz* and *Vanessa*; upcoming performances include Masetto in *Don Giovanni* with Opera Atelier, and *The Magic Flute* and *Die Fledermaus* with Vancouver Opera. He has sung extensively in oratorio, and has appeared as featured soloist in Debussy's *Trois ballades de François Villon* with the University of Toronto Symphony, and with the North York Symphony in a concert of Mozart arias and ensembles. He has also appeared recently on CBC Radio in a recital of French Baroque music, as well as in the world premiere of Scott Wilkinson's *Three Songs of Love*.

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