

Total performance time: approximately 110' including an interval of 20 minutes

Labèque Sisters: Debussy, Ravel and Glass

Labèque Sisters:

Katia Labèque piano

Marielle Labèque piano

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Six épigraphes antiques (1901/1914) 16'

1. *Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été*
(To invoke Pan, god of the summer wind)
2. *Pour un tombeau sans nom*
(For a tomb without name)
3. *Pour que la nuit soit propice*
(In order that the night be propitious)
4. *Pour la danseuse aux crotales*
(For the dancer with crotales)
5. *Pour l'égyptienne*
(For the Egyptian girl)
6. *Pour remercier la pluie au matin*
(To thank the morning rain)

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Ma mère l'oye ('Mother Goose', 1908–10) 16'

1. *Pavane de la belle au bois dormant*
(Pavan of the Sleeping Beauty)
2. *Petit poucet (Tom Thumb)*
3. *Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodes*
(Laideronnette, empress of the pagodas)
4. *Les entretiens de la belle et de la bête*
(Conversation between Beauty and the Beast)
5. *Le jardin féerique (The fairy garden)*

Philip Glass (b.1937)

Les enfants terribles (1996):

Suite, arr. Michael Riesman (2020) 45'

1. *Overture* 3'
2. *Paul is dying* 5'
3. *The somnambulist* 4'
4. *She slapped me* 4'
5. *They lived their dream* 2'
6. *Terrible interlude* 8'
7. *Cocoon of shawls* 4'
8. *Lost* 5'
9. *Are you in love, Agathe?* 3'
10. *She took the path* 2'
11. *Paul's end* 4'

INTERVAL

The remarkable Labèque Sisters have energized and popularized the piano duet for decades, commissioning and inspiring new works, and bringing older repertoire to the attention of the public. Their vivacious performance style emphasizes the sense of 'play' as well as the conversational quality often to be found in music for four hands; and like the sisters themselves, a great deal of their repertoire is French. The late 19th and early 20th century saw a rich tradition of piano writing emerging among French composers, due at least in part to the legacy of the two famous pianist-composers Liszt and Chopin who resided in Paris. Their virtuosic style, and their expansion of the expressive possibilities of the piano were a particular influence on both Debussy and Ravel.

Debussy's **Épigraphes antiques** were originally composed in 1900–1 to accompany a private recital of Pierre Louÿs' *Chansons de Bilitis* poems, and scored for two harps, two flutes and celeste. Debussy recomposed six movements of the piece years later, retaining the poetic headlines of the Louÿs poems. (The texts are highly-charged and erotic, but Louÿs managed not to scandalize his audiences by claiming, falsely, they were translations of classical Greek verse.) The suite is exquisitely written, austere at times – hinting at its *faux*-classical associations – but more often imbued with the sensuality of the poetry. It begins with a simple theme, rising and then falling, and this wave-like melodic line is elaborated on throughout this first section. The pure-sounding harmony of this first movement is contrasted with the more disturbing timbre of No.2 – 'for a tomb without name', which is characterized by dense cluster-chords. In No.3, the 'primo' and 'secondo' piano lines entwine and entangle, while repetitions of individual notes suggest the anticipatory nature of the 'propitious' night. No.4 is suitably dance-like; while No.5 – 'for the Egyptian girl' – has a strong 'exotic' flavour. (This was common enough among works of this period, yet from today's perspective appears more problematically as kind of fetish, or cultural appropriation.) The repetitions and non-directional harmony in this movement and in the finale (with its onomatopoeic evocation of rainfall) sound like precursors to Philip Glass's minimalist style decades later. Yet the suite ends with a conventional return to the thematic material of the beginning, emphasizing a unity of conception and poetic sensibility across the entire piece.

Debussy's layering of repeated figures (or 'ostinato') on top of each other was at least partly inspired by his first exposure to Javanese gamelan music at the Paris Exposition of 1889. The teenage Ravel had the same encounter, remarking years later in 1931 that he considered 'Javanese music the most sophisticated music of the Far East' and that "Laideronnette" from **Ma mère l'oye**, with the tolling of its temple bells, was derived from Java both harmonically and melodically'.

Ravel composed *Ma mère l'oye*, based on fairy-tales, in 1910 for two young children – Mimi and Jean Godebski, who were aged only 8 and 9 at the time. Despite the relative simplicity of the suite, the children must have had a formidable technique, particularly to tackle the third

movement. Much of the music deploys a 'pentatonic' scale (characteristic in particular of Chinese music, comprising a five-note scale). The opening 'pavane' for Sleeping Beauty, is melancholy but with a stately, dance-like quality. 'Petit Poucet' (Tom Thumb) is on a melancholy journey in the second movement, encountering birdsong on the way. Only at the end – as fellow composer Messiaen puts it – does a 'major 3rd at last [put] a smile on Tom's face.' The third movement is the more virtuosic, gamelan-inspired 'Laideronnette'; while the fourth is a waltz-like dialogue between Beauty and the Beast – the themes of each heard individually at first, then gradually forming a tender partnership by the end. The final movement ('Le jardin féerique') is largely in a restrained C major, quiet for the most part other than some atmospheric *glissandi* (drawing the hand or finger rapidly across the keys). Messiaen wrote poetically of this movement: 'All the fairyness of childhood is in this music, which is like finding an old toy that brings tears to one's eyes, like the past which might break if one touched it.'

American composer Philip Glass was born in 1937, the year Ravel died, sharing with the earlier composer an attraction to non-Western musical influences (especially Indian *ragas*), fusing them with his own, more traditionally harmonic language to create a style that has become instantly recognisable. **Les enfants terribles** (1996) began life as a 'danced chamber opera', and was part of his Cocteau trilogy (the others are the opera *Orphée*, and the extraordinary film-opera *La Belle et la Bête*, synchronized to the soundtrack of Cocteau's film). By the time these works were composed, Glass had moved on from, or expanded, his 'minimalist' music of the early 1970s, and was creating large-scale, formally experimental stageworks, as well as composing innumerable film scores. The two-piano suite from *Les enfants terribles* was arranged especially for the Labèque sisters, with Glass's blessing, by Michael Riesman during the first lockdown in 2020.

Les enfants terribles is the disturbing story of two siblings (Agatha and Paul) isolated together after the deaths of their parents, who create their own fantasy life and develop an ultimately fatal obsession with each other. The music has an appropriately 'obsessive' quality, with repetitive phrases gradually evolving through subtle shifts – notably in No.2, but also in the 'sommambulist' No.3 where a melody starts to emerge over the top of the lilting figures underneath (heard again in No.7). The first and last movements are more dramatic, setting the scene and concluding the dark, emotionally violent story; No.4 is jazzy; while No.9 ('Are you in love Agatha?') has the character of a more conventional operatic aria. The suite as a whole has a dreamlike quality, made explicit in No.5 ('They lived their dream'), which resembles the fantastical music of *La Belle et la Bête*. But it also has a poignancy and powerful sense of loss. Film-maker Ronan Day-Lewis, who produced a beautiful visual response to the suite, remarked that he 'connected deeply with the subject matter of these two lost souls isolated in a world of their creation.'

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