

Total performance time: approximately 95 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Alim Beisembayev

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Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Impromptus, D.935 (1827)

33'

1. *F minor: Allegro moderato*
2. *A flat major: Allegretto*
3. *B flat major: Andante*
4. *F minor: Allegro scherzando*

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Images, Book II (1907)

14'

- Cloches à travers les feuilles*
(Bells through the leaves)
- Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut*
(And the moon descends on the temple that was)
- Poissons d'or*
(Golden fish)

INTERVAL

Fryderyk Chopin (1810–1849)

Etudes Op.25 (1832–5)

30'

1. *A flat major: Allegro sostenuto*
2. *F minor: Presto*
3. *F major: Allegro*
4. *A minor: Agitato*
5. *E minor: Vivace*
6. *G sharp minor: Allegro*
7. *C sharp minor: Lento*
8. *D flat major: Vivace legato*
9. *G flat major: Allegro vivace*
10. *B minor: Allegro con fuoco*
11. *A minor: Lento*
12. *C minor: Allegro molto con fuoco*

An 'impromptu' is supposedly a work of spontaneity, something plucked out of the air. But listen to **Schubert's** two sets (D.899 and D.935) and there's a seriousness of intent that belies their frivolous title: in effect, he does for the impromptu what Beethoven did for the bagatelle in creating something new from something apparently innocuous. Alim Beisembayev launches his recital with the second set.

The first, in F minor, sets the tone with its brooding main theme; this is pitted against sunnier, major-key secondary ideas and deft Hungarianisms, a style that was very much in vogue at the time. Schubert demonstrates his superlative ability to develop apparently simple musical ideas, unerringly leading the listener into uncharted harmonic territories and onto distant musical plains. The second Impromptu is a minuet and trio that in both mood and key seems to take something from the composer's *Sixth Moment musical*. Its wistful demeanour is briefly interrupted by ringing chords and its halting movement forms a potent contrast with the flowing central trio. The third of the set, in B flat, is a theme with five variations on one of Schubert's best-known melodies, a theme of which he was understandably fond, using it first in his *Rosamunde* incidental music and then in his A minor String Quartet, D.804. In this Impromptu he proceeds to vary it in ways that charm as much for their melodic invention as for their scintillating pianism. The darting, dancing final Impromptu is, like the first, a Hungarian-infused affair, abounding in offbeat accents and brilliant scalic figures that evoke a cimbalom. Schubert develops these scales in the middle section, and with the return of the opening comes a gradual increase in tension, culminating in a brief coda that resoundingly crowns the entire set.

'There is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law.' So **Debussy** famously told his long-suffering composition teacher. But such a pronouncement gives little idea of the meticulousness with which he composed, of the effort that went into creating music that sounds so effortless. The title he adopts for his two sets of *Images* is deliberately vague, and also a reminder of how vital the visual arts were to Debussy. The second set contains some of the composer's wildest musical experiments. All three pieces are written on three staves, which gives an inkling of the complexity of the textures and lines.

The bells evoked in the first number are muffled, heard through leaves, and the effect is at once distant and hypnotic. It's noticeably quiet too – there are just two loud chords in the entire piece, though there are many shadings marked *piano* and below. The opening whole-tone scalic pattern sets up an ambiguity in terms of tonality that is maintained throughout the piece, which simply comes to rest, rather than ending conclusively.

There's a palpable chill in the air in 'Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut'. In it, Debussy weaves a melody from the still, cool chordal textures that seem to take

the stillness of 'Pagodes', the second of his *Estampes*, as a starting point. He warms the temperature subtly in a singing, more animated central section. The challenge for the pianist is that of balancing the lines and conveying the myriad highly nuanced colourings.

Virtuosity becomes more overt in the final number. Debussy had long been seduced by the Orient, and among his prized possessions was a Japanese plaque made of black lacquer embellished with mother-of-pearl and gold that depicted two carp. Debussy conveys the imagined movements of the fish deliquescently, and at times seems to exceed the bounds of what's physically possible in terms of pianistic colour, closing the *Images* with a piece of seductively glistening spectacle.

Alim Beisembayev ends his concert with **Chopin's** second set of Etudes, which were published in 1837. They continue what he had started in Op.10 four years earlier in creating music of the highest quality while each study is designed to address a particular technical issue (or issues). Indeed, they are works of such genius that the name 'study' is in danger of diminishing them. Chopin was the first composer truly to take the genre out of the practice room and put it squarely in the concert hall, with others as varied as Alkan, Skryabin, Debussy and Ligeti following gloriously in his wake.

It's easy to understand why the first of Op.25, with its constant flow of semiquavers, should have gained the nickname 'Aeolian Harp'; yet the real challenge is for the pianist to create a true singing melody – an obsession of Chopin's – which is made still more difficult by giving that line to the weakest finger of the right hand. No.2 proceeds at a fearsome whispered pace, full of awkward cross-rhythms, while suppleness of the wrists is demanded in No.3, with its obsessive rhythmic tic. There's no respite for the hard-working left hand in No.4, with its leaping detached figuration. No.5, by contrast, is initially all about dissonance, with crunching grace notes setting it in motion, though this contrasts with a slower-moving middle section with a melody straight out of the opera house – another obsession of Chopin's. No.6 transforms the simple concept of a study in 3rds into music of whirring beauty, though its *allegro* tempo and hushed dynamic makes it a dangerous beauty indeed; in No.7 it's the balancing of the two voices in a sustained duet that is the challenge. Of No.8 the great 19th-century conductor/pianist Hans von Bülow wrote 'Playing it six times through is recommended ... but I warn, not six times at top speed.' No.9, sometimes known as the 'Butterfly' Etude, is another number in which a supple wrist is vital. Nos.10 and 12 may both be fearsome exercises in velocity, but they're so much more than that, with melodic beauty to the fore. In between them is another perilously difficult challenge: No.11, unsurprisingly nicknamed 'Winter Wind', is set in motion by a brief *lento* introduction before the storms begin.