

Pappano Conducts Chausson, a Foccroulle Premiere and Scriabin's Poem of Ecstasy

Thursday, May 6, 2027 · 19:00 · Barbican

Antonio Pappano, conductor · Sasha Cooke, mezzo-soprano · Stéphane Degout, baritone

	TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME	MIN
1	CHAUSSON 1855–1899 <i>Poème de l'amour et de la mer, Op. 19</i>	26'
2	FOCCROULLE b. 1953 <i>UIESH</i>	22'
3	SCRIABIN 1872–1915 <i>The Poem of Ecstasy (Le Poème de l'extase), Op. 54</i>	24'
	TOTAL MUSIC	72'

Ernest Chausson

1855–1899

Poème de l'amour et de la mer, Op. 19

THE COMPOSER

Ernest Chausson (1855–1899) was a French composer, born in Paris into a wealthy family. He qualified as a lawyer before turning to music, and studied at the Paris Conservatoire with Jules Massenet and with César Franck, who became a close friend. A devoted Wagnerian, he travelled to Bayreuth more than once. He served for years as secretary of the Société Nationale de Musique and kept a salon that drew many of the leading musicians, writers and painters of Paris. He wrote slowly and left a small output that includes the Symphony in B-flat, the Poème for violin and orchestra, songs, chamber music and the opera Le Roi Arthus. He died at 44 in a bicycle accident at Limay.

ABOUT THE WORK

Ernest Chausson began the Poème de l'amour et de la mer in 1882, while he was still taking lessons from César Franck, and it stayed on his desk for the best part of a decade: the usual dating is 1882 to 1892. That was also the year he travelled to Bayreuth for the first production of Parsifal, and the two facts belong together. The Poème is

26 minutes

what a French composer of fine, rather private sensibility made of Wagner: long spans of orchestral song, harmony that keeps shifting underfoot, and a handful of themes that return changed, all at the scale of a salon rather than a festival theatre.

The words are by Maurice Bouchor, a friend and exact contemporary whose verse Chausson set in many of his songs. He took two groups of poems, 'La Fleur des eaux' (The Flower of the Waters) and 'La Mort de l'amour' (The Death of Love), and placed a short orchestral interlude between them. The first part is all arrival: lilacs in flower, a blazing sea, a beloved who is described before she is named. The second finds the same shore in autumn, with dead leaves, a pale moon and the knowledge that she has forgotten him. The closing verses also exist as a separate song, 'Le Temps des lilas', which has always been the best known page of the score.

Chausson dedicated the work to Henri Duparc. It was first heard on 21 February 1893 in Brussels, with the tenor Désiré Demest and the composer at the piano; the orchestral version followed in Paris on 8 April, at the Société Nationale de Musique, sung by the soprano Éléonore Blanc under Gabriel Marie. It has been sung by high and middle voices, women and men, ever since. In this concert the singer is a mezzo-soprano.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece lasts a little under half an hour and is closer to a symphony with a voice in it than to a set of songs. Listen for the caressing theme the orchestra plays at the very start. It becomes the work's main idea, takes a firmer shape when the beloved is first named, and comes back throughout as an image of her and of the singer's feeling for her.

The interlude, which opens with solos for bassoon and violin, turns that theme over quietly before the second part begins in a brighter, more open mood that does not last. The emotional hinge is the word 'l'oubli' (being forgotten): the orchestra brings the main theme forward again, a solo cello takes it up, and then, for the first time, so does the voice. From there the music moves into 'Le Temps des lilas' and its refrain, 'the time of lilacs and the time of roses will not return this spring', set to a melody of plain, folk-like sadness after so much chromatic richness.

Bernard Foccroulle

b. 1953

UIESH

THE COMPOSER

Bernard Foccroulle, born in Liège in 1953, is a Belgian organist, composer and opera director. He trained at the Liège Conservatoire and built an international career as an organist from the 1970s, playing music from the Renaissance to the present day and recording extensively. He was director of La Monnaie in Brussels from 1992 to 2007 and of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence from 2007 to 2018. Since then he has concentrated on composition and the organ. His own music is mostly for organ or for voice with orchestra or ensemble.

ABOUT THE WORK

UIESH is new: this is its first performance. The title is a word in Innu-aimun, the language of the Innu people of eastern Quebec and Labrador, and means 'somewhere'. Bernard Foccroulle has set poems by Joséphine Bacon, an Innu poet born in 1947 at Pessamit on the north shore of the St Lawrence, who writes in both Innu-aimun and French. 'Uiesh / Quelque part' is also the title of a collection she published in Montreal in 2018. The concert uses English translations by Jessica Moore.

The London Symphony Orchestra and the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence commissioned the piece; the orchestra's season announcement names a Frankfurt radio orchestra as a third partner. The connections are old ones. Foccroulle directed the Aix festival from 2007 to 2018, years in which the LSO was one of its resident orchestras, and before that he ran La Monnaie in Brussels, where Antonio Pappano was his music director. Since leaving Aix he has given most of his time to composing, and most of what he writes is for voice with orchestra or ensemble, or for his own instrument, the organ.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Nobody outside the rehearsal room has heard this music yet, so there is little that can honestly be promised. What is known is the scale, about 22 minutes, the forces, solo voices with full orchestra, and the source: short, spare poems by an elder who spent her earliest years on the land with her family and has written much of her life in a city. Bacon's verse deals in few words and wide spaces, a long way from the perfumed abundance of Bouchor's lilacs in the Chausson. It will be worth noti-

cing how a composer steeped in the organ repertoire, and in decades of running opera houses, handles that plainness, and how the words carry in English.

Alexander Scriabin

24 minutes

1872–1915

The Poem of Ecstasy (Le Poème de l'extase), Op. 54

THE COMPOSER

Alexander Nikolayevich Scriabin was born on Christmas Day 1871 (January 6, 1872, by the modern calendar) in Moscow. His mother, a gifted pianist who performed her own compositions, died of tuberculosis when he was an infant; he was raised by his grandmother and aunt, who nurtured his extraordinary musical talent. As a boy he developed a fascination with piano mechanisms and even built instruments himself.

At the Moscow Conservatory, where Sergei Rachmaninoff was a fellow student, Scriabin proved a brilliant pianist and graduated in 1892 with the Small Gold Medal, though an injury from overpracticing Liszt and Balakirev left him with a weakened right hand. His early compositions, mainly for piano, show the influence of Chopin. But as his career progressed, Scriabin developed an increasingly personal harmonic language that pushed toward the boundaries of tonality.

After 1900, Scriabin became consumed by mystical philosophy, believing that music could serve as a portal to cosmic consciousness. He planned a grandiose work called *Mysterium*, a week-long multimedia spectacle to be performed in the Himalayas, after which the world would dissolve in bliss. This work remained unfinished at his death from septicemia on April 27, 1915, caused by an infected sore on his lip. He was forty-three.

Scriabin's reputation faded after his death. In later decades, however, his music has been increasingly championed, and his importance as a pioneer of early modernism is now recognized.

ABOUT THE WORK

Alexander Scriabin worked on *The Poem of Ecstasy* between 1905 and early 1908, years he spent mostly outside Russia, and he sometimes referred to it as his fourth symphony. The name has stuck as a subtitle, though the piece is a single movement of about twenty minutes with no breaks. It was first performed in New York on 10 December 1908 by the Russian Symphony Orchestra under Modest Altschuler, a friend of the composer.

By this point Scriabin, who had begun as a pianist writing preludes and mazurkas in Chopin's manner, believed that music could change human consciousness, and his own art was the instrument. Alongside the score he wrote a long poem with the same title, some three hun-

dred lines about a spirit that struggles, plays, desires and finally recognises its own creative power; the same text lies behind his Fifth Piano Sonata. He did not want it recited, and it is not printed in the score. The note he approved for the premiere begins: 'The Poem of Ecstasy is the joy of liberated action.'

None of that needs to be believed for the music to work. What Scriabin had actually found was a way of writing harmony that leans forward without ever settling, so that twenty minutes can pass in a state of expectation. The orchestra is huge: eight horns, five trumpets, two harps, celesta, bells and organ besides full woodwind and strings.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The opening is slow and languid. A flute has the first idea, which the composer associated with longing, and a clarinet answers over hazy strings with what he called a dream. Then a trumpet enters with a figure of short rising phrases. That trumpet theme is the one to hold on to: it stands for the will asserting itself, and it returns again and again, each time more insistent, against faster music full of trills and darting leaps.

The piece builds twice. The first climax, around the middle, collapses back into the languor of the opening. The second does not. The trumpets take over, the horns join them, bells and the organ are added underneath, and after pages of harmony that refuses to resolve the whole orchestra finally arrives on a blazing chord of C major. The LSO's own guide to the composer quotes markings from the score such as 'ever-increasing drunkenness' and 'almost deliriously'. Whether the ending sounds like transcendence or like a very loud chord is each listener's own business, but in the hall it is physically overwhelming.

Tonight's artists

Sasha Cooke *mezzo-soprano*

Sasha Cooke sings the Chausson, which the LSO's season announcement gives to her, and her own published schedule lists the Focroulle premiere as well. The Poème is more often heard from a soprano; a mezzo brings a darker middle register to music that spends much of its time there. This is a single Barbican concert on 6 May 2027. The evening before, Pappano and the orchestra play the Scriabin alone in a Half Six Fix concert.

Sasha Cooke is an American mezzo-soprano. Born in Riverside, California, and raised in College Station, Texas, she studied at Rice University and the Juilliard School. She has sung at the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Houston Grand Opera and English National Opera, and appears widely in concert, particularly in the music of Mahler. She has given many first performances of new works and has won two Grammy Awards for opera recordings, John Adams's Doctor Atomic and Mason Bates's The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs. Since 2022 she has been co-director of the Lehrer Vocal Institute at the Music Academy of the West.

Stéphane Degout *baritone*

Stéphane Degout is billed alongside Sasha Cooke for this concert. Since the Chausson is hers and the Scriabin has no voices, he is here for the first performance of Bernard Focroulle's UIESH. He returns to the Barbican at the end of the month as Giorgio Germont in Pappano's concert performances of La traviata.

Stéphane Degout, born in Bourg-en-Bresse in 1975, is one of the foremost French baritones of his generation. A graduate of the Lyon Conservatoire, he came to international attention as Papageno at the Aix-en-Provence Festival and has since sung at the world's leading houses, admired for the beauty of his voice, his refined musicianship and his command of the French repertoire in particular. He has recorded with Raphaël Pichon and Pygmalion, which makes him an ideal partner in this French Baroque and Classical programme.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Scriabin: A Biography**

Faubion Bowers, Dover Publications 1996

Still the fullest life of Scriabin in English, and frank about both the music and the mysticism; the chapters on the years abroad cover the writing of The Poem of Ecstasy and its New York premiere.

ACCESSIBLE **Debussy: A Painter in Sound**

Stephen Walsh, Vintage 2019

Chausson appears here as the older friend who helped the young Debussy, and Walsh's picture of Wagner-struck Paris in the 1880s and 1890s is the world the *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* came out of.

DEEPER **A History of Russian Music: From Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar**

Francis Maes, University of California Press 2006

Maes places Scriabin among the Russian Symbolists and their idea of art as a means of transformation, which is the serious background to a piece that is easy to treat as an eccentricity.

SOURCES

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