Debussy was inspired to compose *L'isle joyeuse (The Joyful Island)* by Antoine Watteau's (1684–1721) famous painting, *Pèlerinage à Cythère (The Pilgrimage to Cythera)*. Commencing with a brilliantly conceived cadenza, *L'isle joyeuse* is not for the faint-hearted pianist. With his customary self-deprecation, Debussy wrote of the work: "This piece seems to embrace every possible manner of treating the piano, combining strength with grace, if I may presume to say so."

Ravel borrowed the title for *Gaspard de la nuit* from an eponymous collection by Aloysius Louis Bertrand (1807–1841), an exponent of chimerical poetry who was held in awe by Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Bertrand attributed the poems in the collection to the devil, alias Gaspard. Ravel creates in this music the satanic elements inherent in all three poems: *Ondine*, a water nymph with her contemptuous laughter; *Le gibet*, a bell tolling at sunset as a corpse hangs from the gallows (Ravel's paraphrase); and *Scarbo*, a goblin appearing as a frightening apparition. Ravel's stated intention was to "write a piano piece that is even harder to play than Mily Balakirev's oriental fantasy, *Islamey*." Each of the three pieces teems with Herculean requirements: double notes that are effervescent and unrelenting (*Ondine*); repeated bell-like notes, requiring extraordinary control (*Le gibet*); and forward-surging runs, creating an inexorable charge (*Scarbo*).

Program notes by Elmer Booze

The use of cameras or recording equipment during the performance is not allowed.

For the convenience of concertgoers the Garden Café remains open until 6:30 p.m.

Selections from concerts at the Gallery can be heard on the second Sunday of each month at 9:00 p.m. on WGMS, 103.5 FM.

The Sixtieth Season of

THE WILLIAM NELSON CROMWELL and
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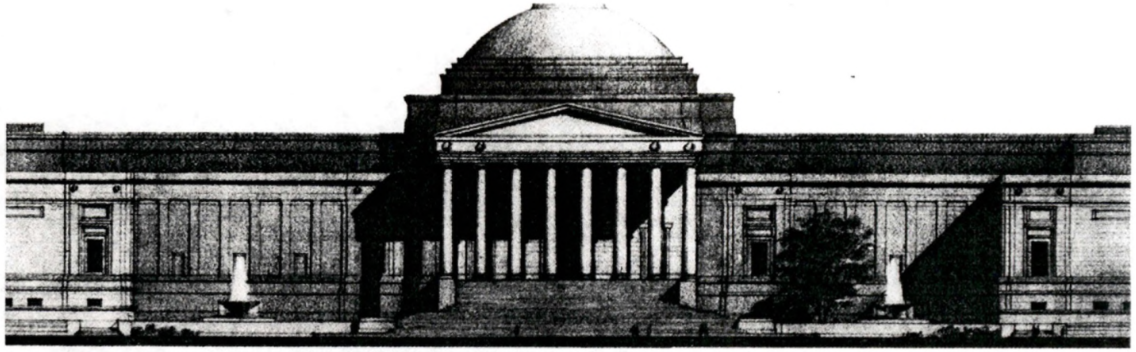
National Gallery of Art



2395th Concert

ALAIN JACQUON, *pianist*

Sunday Evening, 4 November 2001
Seven O'clock
West Building, West Garden Court

Admission free

PROGRAM

Franz Liszt (1811–1886)

Valse caprice No. 6 (d'après Schubert) from Soirées de Vienne (1852)

Venezia e Napoli, from Années de pèlerinage

No. 1: Gondoliera
No. 3: Tarantella

Isoldes Liebestod from Tristan und Isolde (1867)

Mephisto Waltz No. 1 (1860)

INTERMISSION

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Reflets dans l'eau, from Images, Book One (1905)

L'isle joyeuse (1904)

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

Ondine
Gibet
Scarbo

"[**Alain**] **Jacquon** played [the] *Mephisto Waltz* like the devil: dancers whirled to a satanic fiddle, innocent girls were compromised, stars fell, nightingales sang in the bushes, lovers sank into the ocean of their own lust…and everybody went home happy" (Susan Larson, *The Boston Globe*). "[He] knows how to go into the score to highlight every precious detail of the music with clarity and accuracy. A major discovery in the French music domain" (Jean Hamon, *Repertoire*). "[He] has made a strong impression on the public with his transcendent technique and his affirming temperament: we will have to remember his name" (*l'Express*). Such accolades have been the standard for French pianist Alain Jacquon, who was born in Lyons in 1959. He began the study of piano at age four at the conservatory of his native city and was admitted to the Paris Conservatory at a young age. In addition to being awarded a first prize in the class of Lucette Descaves at the Conservatory at age sixteen, he won first prizes for chamber music, harmony, counterpoint, fugue, orchestration, analysis, and accompaniment.

After earning laureate recognition at the Busoni Competition in 1980 and winning the Long-Thibaud Competition in 1981, Jacquon went on to win awards in other international events, including the Viotti, the Pozzoli, and the Pretoria Competitions. Alain Jacquon has performed in some of the world's leading festivals, among them The Yokohama Piano Festival, The Hawaii International Festival, The Chopin Festival in Paris, The Chopin Gesellschaft in Vienna, The Festival of the Hamptons, and The Newport Music Festival, where he has performed every summer since 1994. His orchestral engagements have included performances with The Philharmonic Orchestra of Radio-France, The Johannesburg Symphony, The Pretoria Symphony, The Brittany Orchestra, The Kiev Radio-TV Orchestra, The Pasdeloup Orchestra, and l'Orchestre Jean-François Paillard. Alain Jacquon was assistant director of the Paris National Conservatory from 1987 until 2000, when he was appointed director of the Montpellier National Conservatory, a position he currently holds.

Franz Liszt included the *Soirées de Vienne* in his last concert in July 1886. According to the eminent Liszt scholar Alan Walker, "This was not only the last time that Liszt played [publicly], but it may also have been he last time that he ever touched the keys of a piano." Illness overcame the composer a few days later and he died on 31 July 1886. With his characteristic genius for improvising in a highly distinctive manner, Liszt transformed Schubert's once forgotten dances into a memorable experience that prompted writer David Wright to state: "Some…may prefer to listen to Schubert's waltzes as he composed them in the 1820s; but if you want to hear 'authentic performance practice' circa 1850, [listen to] the *Soirées de Vienne*."

Gondoliera and *Tarantella* are the first and third, respectively, of the compositions that make up the 1859 revised version of *Venezia e Napoli*, a supplement to the second (Italian) volume of Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* (1837–1849). Based on a popular Venetian song identified as *Canzone del Cavaliere Peruchini*, *Gondoliera* is a typical Italian barcarolle, the melody and rhythm of which Liszt renders in his colorful manner. The *Tarantella* paints an elaborate canvas that centers on the theme from *Canzona napolitana* by Guglielmo Cottrau (1797–1847). It effervescent, vacillating mood swings give an indication of Liszt's inexhaustible supply of musical ideas. True to its origins in folk dance, the Tarantella is a highly spirited dance in perpetual motion.

Among the dozens of transcriptions Liszt made from Wagner's operas, *Isoldes Liebestod (Isolde's Death)*, from *Tristan und Isolde*, is one of the most luxuriant and impassioned. A brief passage extracted from the duet of the second act leads into a reiteration of Isolde's aria that "manages to convey not just Wagner, but Liszt's total admiration of the music which he thought to be the greatest of its time" (Leslie Howard). In spite of the pianistic elaboration, Wagner's historic masterpiece retains its enchantment in Liszt's arrangement.

The popularity among composers of the legend of Faust as a musical subject is well documented. Among the many examples are the opera *Mefistofele* by Arrigo Boito (1842–1918), the *Eighth Symphony* of Gustav Mahler (1860–1911), the opera *Faust* by Charles Gounod (1818–1893), and Liszt's own *Faust Symphony*, which is based on Goethe's *chef d'oeuvre*. Moreover, Liszt went so far as to compose four *Mephisto Waltzes* for solo piano at four different times in his life. Alain Jacquon plays the first of the four, which is the most popular and the most often performed. Liszt wrote it initially for orchestra and later transcribed it brilliantly for solo piano. The *Mephisto Waltz*, also known as *The Dance in the Village Inn*, is based on the first of two episodes in Nicolaus Lenau's (1802–1850) poem, *Faust*. Liszt calls forth the image of Faust and Mephistopheles, disguised as a hunter, arriving at a village inn where a wedding is in progress. Faust is preoccupied with the beauty of a lovely maiden, but too timorous to ask her for a dance. Mephistopheles, laughing at Faust's timidity, snatches a fiddle from one of the musicians and, in a seductive and intoxicating manner, inspires everyone to dance wildly. Taking advantage of the moment, Mephistopheles dances with the maiden out of the village and into the forest. We hear the sound of the fiddle growing fainter and fainter, as it mixes with the songs of the nightingales. In his description of the *Mephisto Waltz*, the American musicologist James Huneker (1857–1921) wrote: "In addition to its biting, broad humor and satanic suggestiveness, [it] contains one of the most voluptuous episodes outside of [Wagner's] *Tristan* score."

Debussy wrote two books of *Images*, each containing three pieces. "*Reflets dans l'eau*" is from *Book I*. In his essay, *An Introduction to the Piano Music of Claude Debussy*, James Goodfriend says: "A symbol is something that is there not to be translated, but to point out or suggest something that perhaps cannot be put into words." He continues by surmising what Debussy might be telling us: "There is a certain musical quality in the reflection of a tree in the water, in the inverted mirroring of the chateau in the lake, in the distortions of vision by the ripples in the pool, not an evanescent thing…an essential characteristic, non-verbal and visual, but expressible in music, and that expression is this music." Debussy, who was devotedly attached to both books of *Images*, wrote to his publisher about *Book I*, saying: "I think I may say, without undue pride, that I believe these three pieces will live and will take their place in piano literature…either to the left of Schumann…or to the right of Chopin…."